SELECTED WRITINGS OF

Regi Siriwardena

VOLUME 1

Literature & The Arts

Edited by: A.J. Canagaratna

Regi Siriwardena

Regi Siriwardena has been, in the course of a long and varied life, teacher, journalist, literary and film critic, script-writer, translator, poet, playwright and fiction-writer.

His publications include Poems and Selected Translations (1993), Octet: Collected Plays (1995), The Lost Lenore (1996), Among My Souvenirs (1997), The Pure Water of Poetry (1999) and The Protean Life of Language (2001).

Regi was no ivory-tower intellectual; although he had withdrawn from party politics, he helped to found the Civil Rights Movement of Sri Lanka in 1971 in the aftermath of the massacre of the JVP insurgents.

Regi served as Editor of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) for fifteen years, which was perhaps his most fruitful period.

Though he practised several different forms of writing during his career, he himself observed "I hope that some future obituarist will say of me 'He found his true vocation only towards the end of his life - as a playwright'."

(Continued on back flap)

Selected Writings of Regi Siriwardena

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Literature and the Arts

Volume I

Edited by

A.J. Canagaratna

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

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Preface

When a friend in Colombo telephoned to inform me on the morning of 15th December 2004 that Regi Siriwardena had passed away, I couldn't help recalling Regi's poignant poem *Lying Awake, Thinking of Dead Friends*, which is short enough to be quoted in full:

Lying Awake, Thinking of Dead Friends

(Serena Tennakoon, who died of cancer, 2 January 1989;
Rajini Thiranagama, shot dead, 21 September 1989)

The gunman's hand is as blind as the virus. How strange
That I, smouldering on time's slow pyre,
Should live to write this, when your two young lives
Are gone- snuffed out, your minds' bright fire!

(Composed in Jaffna, 21 November 1989,
at 4 o'clock in the morning)

On 15 December, 2004, snuffed out was his mind's bright fire.

The news of his death led me to recall how I had first known him through his writings since 1950, when as a SSC student (there was no GCE (O/L) then), I avidly read his reviews in the coloured pages of the *Ceylon Daily News* (if I can remember right, they were light blue). Of course I knew only his initials (RS) then, as that was the way he signed his reviews of books, film and theatre.

It was the heyday of the *Ceylon Daily News* then: apart from RS, there were GJP (Jayantha Padmanabha) and later M de S (Mervyn de Silva). They were a formidable trio and their writings were heady stuff for a provincial student like me, who was interested in English Literature, in particular, and the arts, in general.

A little over a quarter of a century later (May 1976, to be precise). I first met Regi in person. I had joined the staff of the University of Jaffna as an English Instructor and Regi was a Visiting Lecturer in English. It was a fellow English Instructor, Harasha Gunawardene, who introduced me to him.

Though he appeared reserved and rather withdrawn at first, he became quite friendly and willing to share his vast erudition without reserve.

Then I suggested to him that he should consider publishing in book form his articles and reviews which had appeared in the *Ceylon Daily News*. He told me that Ms Ranjini Obeysekere had suggested the same thing to him too. He seemed reluctant to accept this suggestion, implicitly implying that he considered them *juvenilia* and that he had moved on. On a subsequent occasion, he told me that he considered his stay at Lake House as "eleven wasted years". Subjectively it might have been so for him but his readers (including me) don't accept his assessment.

I followed his lectures on Russian poets, especially Blok and Essenin, which were a revelation to me. As he knew Russian, he used to quote from the original Russian and make a comparison with the English translation. This proved very illuminating. A spill-over effect was that I wrote on Blok's *The Twelve*, in a local Tamil magazine, based on his lecture; this article was included in a volume later. At this point, I must recall an occasion in Peradeniya when in 1955, the late Doric de Souza – who had a reputation for being parsimonious with praise, especially of others- told our batch of four which was following an English Honours Course that

Regi Siriwardena was the most brilliant student who had passed through their hands but failed to get a class as he didn't answer the specified number of questions within the stipulated time.

Subsequently, some students following an English Honours Course, prepared for their exams by writing at length on an author and then condensing what they had written so that they could answer the stipulated number of questions within the specified time. It became such a mechanical exercise so much so that I can now ironically recall a senior male student (now dead), who shall remain nameless, who had not attained a B grade at the GAQ but was allowed to follow an English Honours Course, on a successful appeal to the then Professor of English and Head. He ended up with a First and, having proved a point, proclaimed, to all and sundry, that hereafter he would devote his time to reading detective stories and pulp fiction!

Regi was interested not only in literature and the arts. He was multifaceted: a human rights activist, one of the founders of the Civil Rights Movement, a keen and knowledgeable student of politics, especially of the Soviet bloc, a perceptive and witty lobby correspondent, a keen student of astronomy and a champion of the equality of all races, multiculturalism and pluralism.

This volume confines itself to his writings on Literature and the Arts. The second volume will bring together his writings on Politics and Society.

Anyone who reads carefully the essays in this volume will discern that the assumptions underlying the pieces he wrote in the fifties are no longer those of the articles he wrote in the eighties and nineties. This was inevitable as recent developments in literary theory could not but affect his theoretical perspectives.

A reader of these pieces cannot but be struck by the pellucidity of his style which is closely intertwined with the clarity of his mind. Quite a few friends of mine who are not

that proficient in English have told me that they could grasp the meaning of what he is saying without much difficulty. This I consider a tribute to the clarity of his mind reflected in the pellucidity of his style.

For Regi, George Orwell was a model of what a critic writing for the average intelligent reader in a democratic society should be. He eschewed jargon of all kinds; Regi once remarked that he had spent a lifetime freeing himself from the *Scrutiny* jargon and he was not prepared to substitute for it the jargon of modernism and post-modernism.

If one looks at the articles grouped under *Theoretical Perspectives*, one can see how, without oversimplifying the theoretical issues involved in the Marxist approach to literature and the arts, he has presented them lucidly and built on them *sans* a dogmatic, reductive Marxism.

He rightly critiques traditional Marxist literary criticism for its emphasis on the social and historical genesis of literary works of the past. He perceptively points out that this emphasis on the past significance, though legitimate and valid, renders it impotent to account for the **present** meaning of literary works of the past.

My grouping of the articles is aimed at presenting the material in a coherent manner and is not, and not meant to be, a kind of water-tight compartment.

Overviews, the next section, presents original, persuasive and stimulating general surveys of their chosen field.

Regi's original insights were not confined only to literature. As far back as 1949, he questioned the reputation of Eisenstein and Pudovkin – **the sacred cows** –(*The Film and its Critics*) and deconstructed the famous Odessa steps sequence in *The Battleship Potemkin*.

Writers, the section which follows, gives us an acute insight into the work of Russian poets and novelists particularly. Not that he is oblivious to the achievements of English poets and novelists: but he thinks (rightly, I believe) that there is something provincial about the achievements of

even the greatest English novelists of the 19th century, compared to their Russian counterparts.

A comparative approach to literature is one of the strengths of Regi as a literary critic.

He estimates James Joyce too highly, I think. He thinks Joyce's *Ulysses and Finnegans Wake*, derive their power from the comic vitality they exhibit. These two works have been described by David Craig as 'the two great freaks of modern literature' (*The Real Foundations*). While one can agree with Regi about the comic vitality of *Ulysses*, I feel that F.R. Leavis got it right about *Finnegans Wake* (which was then provisionally titled *Work in Progress*): "Mr. Joyce's liberties with English are essentially unlike Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's were not the product of a desire to "develop his medium to the fullest", but of a pressure of something to be conveyed. One insists, it can hardly be insisted too much, that the study of a Shakespeare play may start with the words; but it was not there that Shakespeare-the great Shakespeare- started : the words matter because they lead down to where they came from. He was in the early wanton period, it is true, an amateur of verbal fancies and ingenuities but in the mature plays, and especially in the late plays stressed above, it is the burden to be delivered, the precise and urgent command from within, that determines expression – tyrannically. That is Shakespeare's greatness: the complete subjection – subjugation – of the medium to the uncompromising, complex and delicate need that uses it. These miraculous intricacies of expression could have come only to one whose medium for him was strictly a medium, an object of interest only as something that, under the creative compulsion, identified itself with what insisted on being expressed : the linguistic audacities are derivative ... Joyce's development has been the other way." *Finnegans Wake*, despite the occasional felicities cited by Regi, is so cerebral in its word play that it'll remain a closed book to the majority of readers; only myth hunters will maintain its cult status. In

effect it is an esoteric work meant only for the initiated. The well-known American mythographer Joseph Campbell has, I believe, written a book titled *A Key to Finnegans Wake.*

I found Regi's *Dark Lady, Black Man : Ethnicity, Gender and Shakespeare* more illuminating than the chapter in Howard Felperin's *Beyond Deconstruction,* titled *Towards a Poststructuralist Practice : A reading of Shakespeare's Sonnets,* with a section (vi) titled categorically *The Dark Lady Identified.* Felperin's learned – not to say laboured – disquisition left me in a state of 'enlightened mystification' (to borrow a phrase from Eliot).

One should note here that Regi's literary and artistic preferences are distinctly and understandably Western. In that sense he was a child of the colonial era into which he was born.

In the section on *Critics,* I have included two pieces on F.R. Leavis: the first rightly points out that, as a critic, Leavis moved from rebellion to tyranny. The second, titled *F.R. Leavis and the Novel,* while paying tribute to the originality of his approach simultaneously points out the limitations of his approach and ends by mimicking Leavis's authoritarian manner but omitting some of the novelists (notably Jane Austen and Henry James) and substituting instead Emily Bronte and Thomas Hardy. The most incisive critique in this section is that titled *Said, The European Novel and Imperialism,* a critique of Said's *Culture and Imperialism.* In the course of this critique, he comments on Tolstoy's *Does a man need much land*? (he prefers to use the original Russian title instead of the English *How much land does a man need*?). He shows convincingly how this story can be read as a parable of colonialism, a point I can't recall having been made before.

He has always been consistent in his view that W.B. Yeats is a greater poet than T.S. Eliot whose poetry he considers life-denying and *The Waste Land* as 'the personal grouse against life of a Boston Brahmin'. He thus cleverly turns Eliot's own phrase against him by adding 'of a Boston

Brahmin'. Somewhere in the late forties or early fifties, Regi wrote an article titled *Antinomies in the poetry of W.B. Yeats.* This was published in *Harvest.* Unfortunately I have misplaced my copy and since it was not available anywhere else I couldn't include it in this volume : its inclusion would have made for an interesting comparison with the piece on Yeats (written much later) published here.

Section 2 of this volume brings together a selection of his uncollected poems, fiction, and drama; this is by no means comprehensive or representative or meant to be. He has published two works of fiction, *Many Voices,* a collection of his translations of poems from French, Spanish etc., two collections of plays (*Octet* and *Alms Giving and Other Plays,* a collection of verse (*To the Muse of Insomnia*) and a translation of two plays by Pushkin.

Regi admired Robert Graves for his impeccable craftsmanship (as evidenced by the note he wrote on Graves after the poet's death, which is included in this volume.) He sought perhaps to emulate him; at first sight, Regi's poems might seem polished verbal exercises in regular metrical forms, lacking in feeling. But reading them again, you get a different impression. *Waiting for the Soldier,* for instance, might seem slight but there is a lurking menace (which is also prophetic) in the last two lines: 'I know - the Roman Soldier in one shape or another — is on the way'. The Roman Soldier becomes a symbol of all the oppression and authoritarianism that have been unleashed (and are to be unleashed) on the world. *Lying Awake, Thinking of Dead Friends* is a moving poem despite the tight rein on the feelings. There's a striking line, where referring to himself, he says 'And I smouldering on Time's slow pyre'. After reading his poems on the early death of Rajini Thiranagama, Serena Tennakoon and Richard de Zoysa no can say his poems are lacking in feeling. Like Graves, Regi, as a poet, was an Apollonian rather than Dionysian. *Not playing Tennis With the Net Down* (reproduced here) sets forth the rationale for his preference for metrical verse.

Regi's play on Bukharin, *A Long Day's Task*, seems to me more successful as a play than Raymond Williams's more ambitious Koba (about Stalin), which was written in 1957 and is Part 3 of his *Modern Tragedy*. Though the interplay of ideas in *Koba* is interesting it seems to me that *Koba* is essentially a closet drama.

It is fitting that as one of the two who originally suggested the idea of bringing out a collection of his writings, I should be editing it. I was faced with such an embarrassment of riches, that I was reluctantly forced to leave out some of the pieces of one of the foremost, if not *the* foremost, critics of literature and the arts in this country.

As far as possible the sources and dates of the first appearance of these pieces have been given, with the exception of a few.

A.J. Canagaratna

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Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank the *International Centre for Ethnic Studies* (ICES) for initiating this project to publish Regi Siriwardena's *Selected Writings* in two volumes and for inviting me to edit them. I consider Regi my literary mentor, as I learnt more about literature from him than in the four years I spent in the University.

I should also like to thank *Lake House, Lanka Guardian, Community, The Thatched Patio, Nethra, and Daily Mirror* for kind permission to reprint material which first appeared in them.

My thanks are also due to Gayani Sylva, Sanayi Marcelline, Tharumini Wijekoon for their help in gathering material which appears in this book from the archives.

Finally, I would like to thank B.M. Mowsil of the ICES and Tony Hallaldeen for typing the material and Rina Upadhaya for the cover design and the printers Kumaran Press for their patience and forbearance.

A.J. Canagaratna

Introduction

Regi Siriwardena: Returning to Ithaca of the Heart

- Radhika Coomaraswamy -

Your body, battered by water, consumed by fire,
Rises as smoke in the air. A mercy it won't lie
mouldering in the long corruption of earth's kiss.
That in one year three friends should die
Is the measure of life's insanity. Please, no more-
a voice inside me cries over the flame's roar.
- *Regi Siriwardena,* **At Richard's Funeral**

Regi Siriwardena, poet, political activist, linguist, scholar, critic, author, scriptwriter, fabric designer, artist, political commentator, social activist and friend is no more. One cannot analyse the political and creative intellectual currents of twentieth century Sri Lanka without giving him a central role. In many ways he signified the creative imagination of Sri Lanka for much of the latter half of the twentieth century, an imagination, rooted in the national but universal in aspiration; an imagination that was openly political but also deeply spiritual.

Regi Siriwardena was one of a special generation of Sri Lankans who were created during the encounter with colonialism. In his poem "Colonial Cameo", he speaks of a father who made him read Macaulay and admire Napoleon and a mother who only spoke Sinhala. He remembers the day she took him to school and leaving she said "Gihing Enang" to a peal of giggles from his classmates. Reggie writes:-

> My mother pretended not to hear that insult.
> The snobbish little bastards! But how can I blame
> them? That day I was deeply ashamed of my mother.
> Now, whenever I remember, I am ashamed of my
> shame.
>
> - *Regi Siriwardena,* Colonial Cameo

Regi, like the great nationalist heroes of his era, was caught between the horizons set by their westernized fathers and the emotional attachment to their eastern, spiritual mothers. This tension was the source of a great deal of creativity. Regi was part of that bilingual generation that was equally at home (and not at home) with Shakespeare and the poetry of Parakrama Kodituwakku. Their knowledge of English gave them access to world literature, to Marx, to Akhmatova, to Pablo Neruda and to Tolstoy. Their attachment to the Sinhala mother tongue made them pioneers in modern Sinhala prose and poetry. This creative tension, present in Martin Wickremesinghe, Sarathchandra, Tissa Abeyesekere and other great cultural figures of the south of Sri Lanka and in the work of people like Professor Kailasapathy in the North of Sri lanka, produced some of the best literature and creative work Sri Lanka has ever seen. Searching for the authentic self, they enriched the local imagination. Tormented by national humiliation but aspiring to universal truths, this "colonial" generation resurrected national self-respect and yearning,

However, the nationalist cultural revival that inspired Regi in the 40s and 50s was always tempered and conditioned by the intellectual traditions of Marxism. Regi had no time for sentimental ethnic attachments that result in an excess of nationalist and ethnic chauvinism. He was anti-imperialist and he was for the poor and the underprivileged. They were always his first priority. Regi was a pioneer in the South against ethnic chauvinism and majoritarianism. He was often attacked and mauled in the press for his brave stands against ethnic chauvinism. He did not hesitate to attack sacred cows and he was brave and unrelenting in his assertions.

In many ways Regi represented the best in a Marxist, Trotskyist tradition. He inherited the internationalism and the global reach of the intellect that guided the early Trotsky and he developed a critical intellectual tradition that was deeply suspicious of structures of power and privilege, always subjecting them to close examination. In the 40s, 50s, and 60s Regi was convinced that Marxism was the correct alternative for Sri Lanka and so were the best sensitive minds of that generation. Later on Regi began to be critical of Marxist sacred cows for despite his ideological leanings, he always believed in confronting and criticizing falsehoods and untruths. I was with him when he heard news about Gorbachev and he was greatly moved. He wrote

> Now a liberal Tsar reigns in the Kremlin
> And the fair Raisa dispenses both charm
> And the Cultural Fund bounties. Pray
> With us that perestroika may come to no harm.
>
> - *Regi Siriwardena,* To Pushkin:
> A 150th Anniversary Letter

He was a fiery polemicist, never mincing his words, and he ripped into people, Stalinists, ethnic chauvinists, teachers of English, with equal fervour. He hated hypocrites and fools and stripped away social pretensions. He was motivated by a desire for social justice and never

compromised his principles. His years underground and his attachment to left politics made him adopt an ascetic lifestyle. Till the day he died he never possessed a suit, the pompous artifact of colonized generations. He lived simply. His only luxuries were his books and his music. This principled, ascetic lifestyle as a role model for young people is no longer as fashionable as it used to be. Regi was an ascetic to the end, a manifestation of his identification with the marginalized and the oppressed and a symbol of his spiritual disdain for material attachments. And yet, like good wine, Regi mellowed with age. In his poem "The Wisdom of Age" he recounts how he has moved away from port, Donne, Yeats, and Beethoven to a dry martini, Frost, Pushkin and Bach. He never gave up his principles but he softened to others and began to enjoy close friendships.

> Is this the fruit of experience?
> Declining years? Maturity?
> Wisdom? Or blood run cold
> Who is to say? Not me

Despite his insightful political tracts, Regi will be remembered as the greatest literary and artistic critic that Sri Lanka has ever produced. He will be remembered for his literary and creative imagination. Regi was a self taught linguist who was fluent in seven languages. His translations of the work of Anna Akhmatova have an international reputation. He also wrote poetry and novels. He was a foremost critic and every author, poet, artist or film maker lived in dread of his analysis as he was deeply influential and conditioned the way the public regarded important works of art. He was also a lover of music, spending hours taping and recording cassettes for close friends of important works of classical music and jazz. He worked with Ena De Silva and Lucky Senanyake in resurrecting local cottage industries and local handicraft. He was a pioneer in this field and every time we look at a batik we should remember both Ena and

Regi for bringing back these age old traditions. His artistic sensibility was so respected that no one dared disagree with his views. When Regi made an artistic pronouncement, it was the ultimate word.

Regi's love of the arts, never took away from his essentially scientific temperament. In his youth Regi was regarded as a mathematical genius. Despite his disdain for colonialism, Regi was a child of the Enlightenment and had very little time for the anti-rational, moral vacuum of post modernism. He had his sharpest words for this newer and younger generation. Regi was an amateur astronomer and he loved playing chess, especially with the computer since human beings were too fallible. He always felt that his love for music was linked to his love for mathematics, that science and music were closely linked. Regi hated superstition, religion and irrationality. He believed in science, progress and dialectical materialism. He felt that mankind was always moving forward and that science and reason were keys to that progress. His desire to resurrect native traditions was never at the expense of losing sight of the important role of science. It was Regi who cajoled me to buy the first computer for ICES in the 1980s and when I became a specialist in word processing he was delighted. He mastered the computer, the hardware and the software, in no time and taught everyone how to access modern technology.

For all of us left behind, Regi will always be remembered as the great mentor. Regi was a truly extraordinary teacher. He would sit patiently for hours and teach young people. He would engage them, discuss issues with them, provoke them and cajole them into thinking differently, into asking the important questions and finding innovative answers. He made all of us question the world as we found it. He taught us how to see joy and beauty in simple things. He would describe the stars and on office trips, he would recite poetry at the edge of reservoirs and lakes. He would intellectually challenge our political assumptions and

show disdain for our slackness of mind. We would vie to spend time with him. Regi Siriwardena and Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam made ICES a special place where the best minds discarded old truths and searched for new answers together. So we grieve, but will never forget.

> And that heart will no longer answer
> My voice in rejoicing and grieving
> All's over...And into the empty night,
> Where you are no more, my song will go sounding.
>
> - *Reggie Siriwardena translating Anna Akhmatova*

I

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1

Art, Media, Communication

Most of us take for granted that some human products are art and others are not, and that the difference between these two categories corresponds to some intrinsic difference in the properties of the two types of subjects. **Beethoven** is art and **baila** is not: **Kaliyugaya** is art and **Kavuda Raja** is not – these and other such oppositions would be accepted by a great many people without questioning. It's when we try to infer from these pairs of opposites a coherent theory about just what is believed to make the difference between art and non-art that we find ourselves in trouble.

To take another such pair: a Chinese porcelain vase in the drawing room is, presumably, art and a clay pot from Kelaniya in the kitchen isn't. That would suggest that the line of distinction is between the utilitarian function of one and the ornamental but useless character of the other. But apart from the ticklish questions this differentiation might provoke (is a Richard Pieris rubber vase a work of art or not?), the same kind of pot that a suburban Sri Lankan housewife relegates to the kitchen might be picked up by an American tourist and taken back home to adorn his living-room. This seems to point to the fact that the difference between what is taken to be 'art' and what isn't has to do, not with intrinsic properties of objects, but with different uses to which people put things. The same object, as we have seen, may be treated as 'art' or as non-art in different social contexts.

I want to support this point from another set of examples. Many of the objects created in the past that are admired as 'great art' today wouldn't have been looked on, at the time they were produced, with detached aesthetic pleasure but put to active social use. The Gal Vihara Buddhas and the Sistine Chapel frescos were accessories to acts of worship in the communities in which they belonged. There is no reason to think that in the courts where the **Mahabarata** and the **Iliad** were chanted, they were listened to as expressions of literary sensibility rather than as celebrations of the heroic deeds of the ancestors of the ruling class who constituted their first audiences.

In fact, the construction of a separate realm of 'aesthetic experience' in which to situate a special category of objects marked out as 'works of art' is no older than the nineteenth century. It arose in a particular phase of European bourgeois civilization, and has been disseminated globally, together with the spread of the social relations and world-view generated by that civilization. In other words, the opposition between 'art' and 'non-art' is the product not only of specific social practices but also of practices originating in a specific ideology. Pre-bourgeois societies did have a concept of art – but art as technique or skill – a concept which applies equally to carving a stone image for worship or a wooden spoon for the kitchen. Ironically, the spoons made by Kandyan craftsmen in the pre-colonial period are admired as 'objects of art' in the museums of today.

It's quite easy to see why the opposition between 'art' and 'non-art' should have been constructed in a bourgeois industrial civilization. The opposition was between objects produced by alienated human labour as commodities to be exchanged for private profit and those produced by the devoted labour of the artists for no purpose other than self-expression: that anyway, is how the ideological construct represented it. It was a construct that could accommodate

both the tired businessman sweetening his leisure with a little culture and the rebel artists shutting the doors of the studio, music-room or writer's study on the noises of the factory sirens and the steam-engines. This opposition between the production of art and that of non-art could be sustained with some plausibility in the nineteenth century; even Marx could share it to the extent of making an economic distinction between piano-makers and piano-players. But it has grown increasingly out of tune with twentieth-century reality. Nowhere is the divergence between myth and reality in this field more evident than in the differentiation commonly made between 'art' and 'media', in the face of the fact that both categories consist of cultural commodities entering into the prevailing relations of production, distribution and exchange.

Attempts might be made to claim an 'objective' basis for this distinction: novels, plays, poems, paintings, works of music are 'art'; newspapers, radio, cinema and TV are 'media'. But this won't do: clearly, in critical usage, some novels, some films, some pieces of music, are claimed to be art and some aren't. There are, of course, discernible differences between, say, the novels of Virginia Woolf and those of Rosemary Rogers, and they are connected with the fact that many more people read the latter than the former. That doesn't, however necessarily put Virginia Woolf in a class superior to that of Rosemary Rogers, as the 'mass civilization vs. minority culture' thesis of the Leavisites would suggest. Bestsellers, advertisements, the popular press, cinema and TV are, according to this thesis, debasing and destructive of the finer human values, which are sustained by minority art. This position ignores the fact that some of the most admired minority art can be a vehicle of retrogressive values – the snobbery and anti-semitism in T.S. Eliot's poetry, or the fascist leader-cult and ideology of male dominance in D.H. Lawrence's novels. Nor can Leavis's simple equation between artistic and moral discrimination stand up to the

test of experience. It's possible to find people who thrill to channel 2 of the SLBC or TV soap opera but behaved humanely or courageously in the last week of July 1983, and people of superior aesthetic cultivation who didn't (I know some particular cases).

I suppose some reader will say at this point: 'But surely the distinction between art and non-art is a simple one; art belongs to the realm of the fictional, the imaginative: non-art to the scientific, the informative, the recording of actuality. However, it's impossible to draw this line between the factual and the imaginative with any consistency. One reader may read Marx's **Capital** as a work of economic theory and economic history, and therefore as 'scientific', another may read it as a work of literary art (essays have been written on the stylistic power and metaphorical imagination of **Capital**). On the other hand, the 'actuality' presented by the morning newspaper and the TV news programme is often just as much a fictional construct, a piece of myth-making produced by devices of selection, juxtaposition, emphasis and exaggeration, which **produce** the 'reality' they seem to mirror. The most extreme example in the history of documentary cinema is Leni Riefenstahl's film of one of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies, **Triumph of the Will**, where the rally itself was staged to suit the camera set-ups.

The Russian Formalists and the Prague structural linguists in the first half of this century made an attempt to distinguish art and non art from each other on the basis of formal criteria; actually, they were concerned with literature, and especially with poetry, but the approach is potentially applicable to other forms. Using the Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified (the word and the concept with which it is linked), these theorists found the essentially poetic element in the foregrounding of signifiers: in a poem a word isn't merely a transparent vehicle of meaning, a counter to be exchanged for the signified. The material reality

of the word – its phonic shape and texture – and the criss-crossing between the metrical, rhythmic, syntactic and semantic structures in a poem are what the Formalists and their successors found to be intrinsic to the poetic level of language. It would be easy to construct a general theory of art by extending these principles to other sign systems in visual and auditory media. But once again, we are dealing not with inherent properties of an artistic object but with particular ways of reading, viewing or listening that we may adopt or not, depending on the social practice we are engaged in. Moreover, these possibilities present themselves to us quite often even in the case of objects that are not normally called 'art'. For instance, one viewer of a Singapore Airlines commercial may find a pure visual pleasure in the composition and editing of images in the filmlet, so that in his experience of it the signifiers are indeed foregrounded. Another may respond to the surface message by picking up the telephone and booking his next flight on this airline. A third may penetrate beneath the visual appearances to the myth they project and see the commercial as an exploitation of the image of feminity. We confront again here the fact of the varying uses to which cultural artifacts can be put in the social process. This goes not only for Singapore Airlines commercials but also for Shakespeare. The American researcher who some years ago, scanned some seventy copies of the First Folio, page by page, in order to establish how the book was printed and proof-read, wasn't approaching the plays as 'art'. We should, therefore, stop talking about 'art' and 'non-art' as mutually exclusive categories and instead speak of modes of communication, between which we can establish relations and distinctions of various kinds, depending on the activity in which we are engaged and the purposes for which we are dealing with one cultural product or another. We must remember, too, that a product created and used in one social context can be put to very different uses when transposed

into another: a ballad sung by Scottish peasants at harvesting-time centuries ago might be dissected on the printed page as an exercise in practical criticism by students in a Peradeniya classroom. Of course, academic establishments which put literature in one department, fine arts in another and mass communication in a third, find it essential to maintain these distinctions as if they were objectively real. But we must recognize this too as an ideological construction which serves the practices of particular social institutions.

Lanka Guardian, October 1983

2

Marx and Literature

Marx had a solid traditional literary education in his youth and remained all his life a ceaseless and avid reader of creative literature, extending from the Greek classics through Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Goethe, to the work of his contemporaries, Heine, Balzac and Dickens. Even a casual reader of his writings cannot fail to be struck by the range and felicity of his literary quotations and allusions, and ample confirmation can be found in S.S. Prawer's comprehensive study, **Marx and World Literature**. (However, as Prawer acknowledges, there is a certain inaccuracy in the title of his book: Marx's literary acquaintanceship – except for the **Arabian Nights** he read to his children – was confined predominantly to European, and secondarily to American, literature.)

In spite of his active literary interests, Marx left no explicit theory of literature, nor any extended work of literary criticism. (He is reported to have contemplated writing a study of Balzac's novels.) What he bequeathed to later Marxist critics of literature was a general model of the relations between mode of production and ideological 'superstructure', which was adopted by them as a framework for the construction of a Marxist critical practice.

Thus, mainstream Marxist literary criticism, confronted with a particular literary work, has been principally concerned with situating its representation of life, literary

styles and forms in the ideological superstructure of the social formation (based on a dominant mode of production) in which it was created. However, this critical practice can be engaged in with greater or lesser sophistication. Thus, where one Marxist critic may read a literary work as a simple expression of the ideology of the class to which the writer belonged, another may find a more complex and contradictory relationship between the work and the ideology out of which it was born. (The varying Marxist critical judgments on Dickens or Dostoevsky exemplify these different possibilities.) Again, some Marxist critics pay more attention than others to the specificity of literature as a particular form of ideological expression, recognizing that the content of a work of literature cannot be identified with the ideas that can extracted from it.

However, these differences – obvious and important as they are – are differences within a single model of critical practice, based ultimately on situating literature and ideology in a base-superstructure model. What I am concerned with in this article is to discuss some of the crucial problems that arise as a result of the adoption of this model as a basis for Marxist literary criticism. One of these problems was raised by Marx himself in the 1857 introduction to the **Grundrisse,** where he wrote:

'In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation, the skeletal structure as it were, of its organization.'

Marx went on to discuss the particular case of Greek art. Having demonstrated the relationship between this art and the mythological view of the world, which was dependent in turn on an archaic mode of production, he continued:

'But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social

development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.'

Marx was right in raising this question, which is in fact the most intractable of problems for any Marxist methodology of criticism which starts from the base-superstructure model. If the meaning of a literary work is determined by the ideology of the social formation in which it was created (and that in turn by its material base), why should the work continue to have significance for us when mode of production, and with it the ideology which was part of its superstructure, have vanished into history? However indirect and complex we may conceive the relations between base and superstructure, or between ideology and literature, to be, the problem remains. True, we may still read Homer or Aeschylus as documents of the classical age, but that obviously doesn't solve Marx's problem: the difficulty is that they still afford us **artistic** pleasure...

We recall the answer Marx offered for the problem he raised. As adults find joy in the naivety of childhood, so we find pleasure in the products of the childhood of the race. 'Why,' asked Marx, 'should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?'

The question that Marx raised was real: the answer he gave was erroneous, indeed (I would say) un-Marxist. Though Greet art and literature have continued to give pleasure to many human generations, there is no such thing as the 'eternal charm' of Greek art. Each culture has created, in accordance with its social practice and its ideology, its own image of Greek art, has in fact produced the meanings it finds in these works.

A ready proof of this fact lies in the value that Marx himself found in Greet art – as an embodiment of the naivety and innocence of the childhood of humanity. The terms in which Marx praises Greek art are those characteristic of a

thinker living in the shadow of the Romantic movement, with its idealisation both of childhood and of the primitive, equated with spontaneity and the state of nature, and opposed to a perverting and dehumanizing civilization.

Though Marx wouldn't in his mature thinking, have accepted this simple anthesis, there is more than a trace of Romantic nostalgia in the passage from the 1857 Introduction: "Its most beautiful unfolding ... never to return.' The essential point, however, is that these are not the terms in which an eighteenth-century classicist (for whom the ancients were the norm of reason, sobriety and intellectual discipline) would have praised Greek art. Nor are they the terms in which most historians of art would describe Greek art today. Marx was in some respects a child of his age, and where he thought he saw the 'eternal charm' of Greek art, he was really seeing that charm which was visible to Western European intellectuals of his day.

It cannot be supposed that the original audiences of Greek art or Greek drama and the meaning they found in these works coincided with those of later generations. Greek tragedy, for instance, was performed as a communal religious rite, in which the audience were not spectators but believing participants, so that their relationship to the work was very different from that of modern audiences who watch the plays as 'art.' In a very real sense, therefore, the **Oedipus** (say) in which Marx found 'artistic pleasure' or we find pleasure today is a different work from that which existed for the Greek community – as different as the gleaming white marble statues which form our present store of Greek art are from the brightly painted objects which archaeologists describe them as having originally been. As different, and as much a product of time and history.

It is relevant also that where Marx found pleasure in the 'naivety' of Greek art and mythology, he didn't respond to the same way to the corresponding periods of culture of other peoples. In the same passage in the 1857 Introduction

he says: 'There are unruly children and precocious children. Many of the old peoples belong in this category. The Greeks were normal children.' In making this contrast too, Marx was constricted by the culture of his age – its Eurocentrism. What the passage recalls is the judgment made by him on Indian religion and mythology in his **Letters on India**: 'Man the sovereign of nature fell on his knees before Hanuman the monkey and Sabbala the cow.' Perhaps Marx would have thought of the Hindus as not being 'normal children.'

It is interesting that the English novelist, L.H. Myers, who was fascinated by Eastern religion and philosophy, put into the mouth of his character, Rajah Amar, in **The Near and the Far**, a contrast of a very different kind between the Greeks and the Indians, though again in terms of childhood. For him, the Indians, confronted by a relentless nature, were like people whom 'an unhappy childhood' had compelled to grow up, and who thus looked overhead into the immensities and deep down into abysses which the Greeks, with their more benevolent view of the universe, ignored. What I am pointing out is not that Myers was right and Marx was wrong. What I suggest is that such a judgment on another culture is necessarily involved with the structure of values of the observer himself and that of the culture and the age to which he belongs.

But to return to the problems of Marxist literary criticism. What is curious is that Marx could have found in his own formulations in another part of the 1857 introduction to the **Grundrisse** – the section on consumption and production – the answer to the problems he raised about art, if only he had seen that these formulations were of relevance to the production and consumption, not only of objects of utility, but also of works of art.

The assumption that a literary text has a single invariant meaning defined by its author's intention has been deep-rooted in the tradition of academic literary criticism: even though two American critics, Wimsatt and Beardsley, wrote

an influential essay several decades ago challenging what they called 'the intentional fallacy,' their argument only disposed of the tendency to look outside the text (to author's commentary, letters or diaries) for a statement of its meaning. Wimsatt and Beardsley, however, left intact the view that the text itself defines authorial meaning. 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale': D.H. Lawrence's dictum has become one of the most quoted of modern critical commonplaces. What it implies is that the real meaning of a text is to be found inscribed in its own words – even if the author has contradicted it elsewhere. It thus appeals from author as commentator to author as creator, sometimes, maybe, from author's conscious intentions to author's deeper drives and motivations – but always with the implication that the text carries in its own substance the authentication of its single, fixed, true meaning. That also is the basis of the creed of practical criticism – the words on the page as the final arbiter.

This assumption is pervasive in academic criticism because it is part of bourgeois ideology which regards the individual artist as the source of creation. Mainstream Marxist criticism has called this ideology in question to the extent that it has shifted the focus of creation away from the individual artist to the social and ideological structures mediated by his work. But it has left unquestioned the assumption that a literary text has a fixed invariant meaning. In fact, the adoption of the base-superstructure model in Marxist criticism implies that the meaning of a literary text is single because it is determined for all time by the structures of the social formation in which it was produced.

As we have seen, Marx too shared this assumption and could not successfully resolve the problems it posed. However, we can find in Marx's own writing the intellectual weapons to contest it. In the 1857 Introduction to the **Grundrisse**, Marx wrote as follows on the relation between production and consumption:

'Without production no consumption: but also, without consumption, no production: since production would then be purposeless. Consumption produces production in a double way, because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. For example, a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house; thus the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through consumption.'

Marx is here writing of objects of economic production and consumption, but his statements are equally true of the production and consumption of objects of art (which in modern societies enter into economic exchange anyway). A novel becomes a real novel only when it is consumed by being read; a play becomes a real play only when it is consumed by being performed before an audience. The creative process is complete only in the act of consumption. Mainstream Marxist criticism, like the dominant tradition of bourgeois academic criticism, has erred by taking the activity of production as the source of meaning and ignoring the activity of consumption. Yet meaning exists for reader or audience only in so far as they have produced it in the practice of reading, watching, listening. Mainstream Marxist criticism, analyzing a text in terms of the social processes which determined how it was made, has divorced itself from the activity of the production of meaning by readers and spectators in which the text is continually renewed and recreated.

The essential point has been well stated recently by Bernard Sharratt in a stimulating (if sometimes maddening) book, **Reading Relations**:

'Yesterday I read **Wuthering Heights**. If I treat **Wuthering Heights** as written in 1847, I can indeed connect it in a variety of ways to that date, that period. But, always I am reading the novel now. My having read it yesterday, or ten years ago, means that **Wuthering Heights** is a memory

for me. But the act of reading **Wuthering Heights** is a process that occurs in a present, not as memory ... but as activity. That activity cannot occur, for me, in 1847. To treat **Wuthering Heights** as written in 1847, I have to distance myself from the activity of reading now, yet the novel can only exist for me as an act of reading now or as a memory of reading, of having-been-read. A novel can be assigned to its date of writing only by a peculiar attempt at objectifying it, treating it as a thing, an object distinct from the process whereby I know it as a novel.'

There are two things that flow from what Bernard Sharrat says. One is that the activity of treating literature in the mode of historiography that is, from the standpoint of historical genesis (which is what mainstream Marxist criticism does) is indeed possible, but is a different activity from that of literary criticism which engages literature as a living presence. The first asks: 'How did the text come to be (in 1847 or whenever)?'The second asks: 'What does the text mean to us, here and now?' To suppose that the first question alone is real is to imply that works of art, once created, remain unchanging objects, unaffected by the flow of history – which should be a strange premise for Marxists.

The second thing that follows from Bernard Sharratt's argument is that the notion that there is a single and fixed meaning of a text is a myth. Literary meaning is inescapably plural. **Wuthering Heights** cannot mean to us what it did to readers of 1847 because we read it in the perspective of the century and a quarter of history that has elapsed since then, of our contemporary experience, of the critical views that have been expressed about the novel from Emily Bronte's time to ours, of all the novels that have been written between then and now, of Marx and Freud and D.H. Lawrence, and of a great deal else that is too numerous to recount. It must not be supposed that this plurality of meaning applies only to texts separated from us by the lapse of a century or more. Does **Maname** mean for us today what it meant for audiences

in 1956? However, the plurality of meaning is most obvious in the case of texts which have been transmitted over many eras and diffused among many cultures, as with Greek epic and tragedy or the plays of Shakespeare. Bourgeois academic criticism supposes that their 'permanence' is due to the fact they are in some way expressive of the 'timeless human condition'. On the contrary, it is because these texts have been most susceptible to continual transformation of meaning that they have survived – and that is the answer to Marx's problem about Greek art as well.

The shift in the focus of meaning from writer to reader has been effected in the last two decades by those critics who have assimilated semiology and Marxism. Thus Roland Barthes has announced 'the death of the author', and Jacques Derrida has affirmed that the essential characteristic of writing is that 'it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed'. I should like to conclude by quoting Tony Bennet's definition of the tasks of a contemporary Marxist criticism:

'A condition of any text's continuing to exert long-term cultural effects within any society must be that it is constantly brought into connection or articulated with new texts, socially and politically mobilized in different ways within different class practices, differentially inscribed within the practices of educational, cultural and linguistic institutions and so on ... It is only in the light of such historically concrete, variable and incessantly changing determinations which so press in upon the text as fundamentally to modify its very mode of being – that is possible to assess, at any given moment, the effects that might be attributed to any given text or set of texts'.

Lanka Guardian, May 1983

3

Fiction and the Marxist Critic

In his book **Tolstoy or Dostoevsky** (1959) George Steiner commented on the paradox that, while the aristocratic Tolstoy had been honoured by the Soviet regime as 'the mirror of the Russian revolution', Dostoevsky, 'the injured and humbled artisan of letters, the condemned radical and survivor of Siberia, the man who had been familiar with every species of economic and social degradation, was posthumously exiled from the "homeland of the proletariat".' Steiner was writing in the shadow of the Stalin era, when some of Dostoevsky's books – **The Devils**, for instance – were taboo because of his right-wing political beliefs in his later years.

Things have changed since then in the Soviet Union. Whatever the restrictions on contemporary literature, the wraps are off as far as the classic writers of the 19th century are concerned. In anticipation of the 1981 centenary of Dostoevsky's death, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR has been producing over the last few years a monumental thirty-volume edition of his **Complete Works** in Russian. When the Russians honour one of their great writers, they do him proud: this edition includes not only all of Dostoevsky's novels and short stories (in a variorum text) but also the surviving manuscript drafts and notebooks for the novels, as well as articles, diaries and letters – all

accompanied by editorial commentary and notes. Nothing even remotely comparable has been produced in English for, say, Dickens; and no student of Dostoevsky will ever need anything more by way of text.

But the 'rehabilitation' (so to speak) of Dostoevsky's fiction in the Soviet Union raises afresh the question of what meaning his work has for the contemporary reader. Marxist criticism has never been quite at home with Dostoevsky – understandably, since the novelist, in his years of artistic maturity, was also, in his public life, the champion of Tsarism and the Orthodox Church. Steiner draws attention to the fact that George Lukacs, who wrote voluminously and admiringly on Tolstoy, devoted only one 'indecisive and superficial' essay to Dostoevsky. The great 20th-century vogue of Dostoevsky has been in the West, where he has been hailed as the explorer of the tragic and timeless realities of existence, as the forerunner of existentialism and the philosophy of the absurd.

Yet, as I shall try to show in this article, Doestoevsky can well be brought within Lukacs's concept of 'critical realism' that is, to quote Arnold Kettle's definition, 'literature written in the era of class society from a point of view which is sufficiently critical of class society to reveal important truths about the society and to contribute to the freeing of the human consciousness from the limitations which class society has imposed on it.' If Lukacs didn't see Dostoevsky in these terms, it was, I think, for two reasons: that he was, like most Marxist critics, put off by Dostoevsky's reactionary political ideology, and that Lukacs's conception of 'realism' was too narrow and mechanistic. Dostoevsky's realism isn't of the photographic kind: as he said in a famous letter to Strakhov, 'I have my own idea of reality in art; and what most people will call almost fantastic and an exception sometimes constitutes for me the very essence of reality. The ordinariness of events and the conventional view of them is not realism in my opinion but, indeed, the very opposite of it.'

The question of the relation between ideology and art which has bedeviled much Marxist criticism of literature is a large and complex one to which no complete answers can be offered in a brief article; but I would suggest that in literature – at least, in good literature – ideology never exists, as it were, in the raw. It is incarnated, or modified, or sometimes even completely transformed, in the writer's imaginative vision of his world, which is the mode through which creative literature (as distinct from intellectual discourse) communicates. And that is why critics who read a novel in the same way that they would read a political pamphlet are wrong..

There are cases of a false ideology distorting the writer's vision (this, perhaps, is what happens in Dostoevsky's **The Devils**). But there are also cases where the artistic imagination runs counter to the writer's ideological intention and corrects its bias. In **The Brothers Karamazov**, for instance, Dostoevsky no doubt wanted the spiritual faith of Alyosha and Father Zosima to carry the greatest weight in the novel, but artistically it is the skepticism and rebellion of Ivan that win the day. (Dostoevsky in a letter written after his religious conversion described himself as 'a child of the age, a child of disbelief and doubt up to this time and even – I know this – to the end of my life.')

There is another fact that is overlooked in simplified Marxist approaches to literature – that relationships of class and power are not limited to the narrowly political or economic sphere. Social formations reflect themselves in inter-personal, sexual and family relations, and the characteristic strength of the great 19th-century novelists, of whom Dostoevsky is one, is in bringing together the social and the personal.

If we approach Dostoevsky with these considerations in mind, we shall find that there is an underlying unity in his work which transcends the changes in his beliefs. Whether

early or late, whether in his secular-radical or his religious-conservative period, his fiction is marked by the recurrent themes of power and money.

In the first volume of Professor Joseph Frank's projected four-volume biography – **Dostoevsky, the Seeds of Revolt: 1821-1849** there is a story of Dostoevsky's encounter, during his first journey to St. Petersburg, with a government courier who beat his young peasant coachman with his fist, impelling the driver in turn to lash the horses to a swifter gallop. It is easy enough to relate the young Dostoevsky's moral nausea at this sight to the impulses which were to take him a few years later into the radical sect known as the Petrashevsky circle, and ultimately to involvement in the ill-conceived conspiracy that led to his arrest and imprisonment.

But Dostoevsky was to remember and write about this incident nearly forty years later, when his political beliefs were very different, and to imagine 'the young peasant, on returning to his village, being ridiculed because of his sore neck', and then beating his wife to revenge his own humiliation. This flash of insight is in keeping with the way in which Dostoevsky sees his world in his fiction – in terms of power-relationships. And these relationships of domination and submission are more than political: they extend to the personal relationships between man and man and between man and woman.

What Dostoevsky the thinker believed was that these sado-masochistic elements (to use the language of modern psychology) were a permanent feature of human nature. But we don't have to accept this view in order to respond to Dostoevsky the artist. We are entitled to see in his art a revelation (one of the most perceptive in modern literature) of the fact that, in a society based on coercion and exploitation, relationships at every level are moulded in terms of power, and that the serf in one relationship might become the tyrant in another. 'A base spirit which has

emerged from oppression,' wrote Dostoevsky of his character Opiskin in **Stepanchikovo Village**, 'is itself an oppressor.' But in his mature work we see that not only base spirits but even finer natures like Natasya Filippovna in **The Idiot** can be distorted by being dominated and exploited.

Behind the character-structures of the people in Dostoevsky's novels lies a society with a tradition of serfdom and bureaucratized autocracy. But, by the mid-19th century, this society was deeply permeated by capitalist relations, and the reflection of the social process can be found in Dostoevsky's intimate interest in money and its power over human beings. From his maiden novel, **Poor Folk**, to his last masterpiece, **The Brothers Karamazov**, money is a pervasive ruling force in his fiction; and the attempt to control other people's lives through money is seen in his work as the greatest violation of human integrity. When, in the great scene that closes the first part of **The Idiot**, Natasya Filippovna taunts the guests at her birthday party by casting a hundred thousand roubles into the fire, she is asserting her moral independence against a world that has reduced human relations to the cash-nexus, that has transformed human beings themselves into a commodity.

Power and money – these recurrent themes of Dostoevsky are those which dominate the mature fiction of the English novelist from whom he learnt a great deal – Dickens. Yet, to compare their work is to realize that the politically right-wing Dostoevsky was , in his art, a more acute social critic than the populist Dickens. (One recalls Engels's preference for the reactionary Balzac over the progressive Zola.) Even in his best novels, **Little Dorrit** and **Great Expectations**, Dickens ultimately evades the implications of his social criticism by escaping into the happy ending which ensures hero and heroine a personal fulfillment in isolation from the rest of society: 'They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed...' 'In all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.'

For Dostoevsky no such evasion was possible: Myshkin and Rogozhin have to lie down at the end beside the body of the woman they have destroyed. The difference is not merely in the greater genius of Dostoevsky, but also in the fact that the deepening crisis of Russian society sharpened his tragic insight and his apocalyptic vision.

Lanka Guardian, February 1979

4

Form, Content and Marxist Criticism

I am unable, owing to my ignorance of the language, to comment on the specific issues relating to contemporary Tamil literature that Samudran discusses in his article, 'The Tamil literary scene' (LG. Sept. 15). However, some of the questions that the article raises are of broader relevance, and merit discussion not only within the Tamil literary context. In particular, I should like to examine Samudran's assertion that the Marxist critic is committed to upholding 'the primacy of content over form'.

Let us put Samudran's view to a simple practical test. I offer him two stanzas from Shelley's **Song to the Men of England** (I have deliberately chosen a poem whose radical ideas he will no doubt approve of):

> The seed ye sow, another reaps;
> The wealth ye find, another keeps
> The robes ye weave, another wears;
> The arms ye forge, another bears
> Sow seed – but let no tyrant reap
> Find wealth – let no impostor heap;
> Weave robes – let not the idle wear;
> Forge arms – in your defence to bear.

I invite Samudran to say how he would apply his principle of 'the primacy of content over form' to these lines. Would he maintain – as I think he must if he is to be consistent – that what makes these two stanzas powerful and memorable poetry is their content, and that their form is of secondary importance? But the content of these eight lines – the reality of exploitation, the fact that the product of the labour of the many is appropriated by a few, and the exhortation to change this state of things – though valid and meaningful, is something we are by now familiar with from hundreds of treatises, pamphlets, platform speeches, etc, and in itself it can't move the sympathetic reader to anything more than a nod of recognition of the obvious and the commonplace. Yet Shelley's lines retain all the freshness and force that they had when they were written over a hundred and fifty years ago, and even the reader who know Marx's **Capital** by heart will still find in them the strength that comes from something perceived and expressed with a new and original power.

What is it that gives the lines this quality and raises them above the level of everyday political pamphleteering? Surely the **perfect fusion in them of content and form** – the epigrammatic conciseness of the words, the charged energy of their rhythm, the hammer-blows of the rhymes, the balancing of the first half of each line against the second, enforcing the contradiction of the alienation of the worker from the fruits of his own labour, the sequence of 'seed', 'wealth', 'robes' and 'arms', progressing from the harsh reality of exploitation in the present to the vision of potential power in the future.

Against Samudran's tenet of the primacy of content over form, therefore, I want to urge that in creative literature content and form are inter-dependent. This – and not the aesthete's cult of beauty of pure form against which Samudran inveighs – is the real alternative to Samudran's position, and to my mind it is the only valid one. There can be no perfection of form in a work of literature except in relation to the

content it articulates and there can be no significant content beyond what is embodied and realized in the medium of form. It is only in regard to the unsuccessful work that we are prompted to point to cleavages and disparities between content and form, to say that the work might have come off if the writer had found a better relation between them.

The inter-dependence of content and form is what distinguishes imaginative or creative literature from political, philosophical or scientific writing that is concerned solely with the communication of ideas. (I am not referring here to those rare political, philosophical or scientific works that share the qualities of creative literature). A work of discursive thought can be paraphrased in other words and its substance kept intact, because words in such a work are only the vehicle of concepts, and can be substituted for by other words which are their semantic equivalents. But you can't do that with a poem or a novel – not if it is truly alive as creative literature. If Samudran doubts this, I invite him to try paraphrasing Shelley's **Song to the Men of England** in his own words, keeping the sense unchanged, and see how much of the power of the original survives.

It seems to me that a recognition of the inter-dependence of content and form is a necessary qualification for anybody who deals with creative literature – in Tamil, Sinhala, English or any other language. Why then does Samudran insist on 'the primacy of content over form'? I suspect that what lies behind his assertion is the orthodoxy of 'socialist realism', whose practice consists of extracting: from works of literature their ideological content, for approval or condemnation, regardless of the specific imaginative form in which that content is realized. This is a critical approach that has resulted in a mechanistic and distorting reduction of art to ideology, treating form and style, not as an organic element of the work, determining meaning, but as a mere sugar-coating for the ideological pill, whether that pill is regarded as beneficial or pernicious. Unfortunately, the greater part of what passes for Marxist

literary (and theatre and film) criticism in Sri Lanka (in Sinhala, English, and perhaps in Tamil too, though I can't pronounce on this last) belongs to this mode.

Samudran says: 'Art is time-conditioned: so are aesthetic values.'I agree. But in working out the implications of this position, one is compelled to recognize the vital inter-dependence of content and form. Form is really the means by which the writer structures his experience. In periods when there are common assumptions, shared by writer and reader, about the categories in terms of which experience is to be structured, form tends to solidify into conventions. In periods when there are no such definite and stable assumptions, or when established assumptions are being challenged by new ones, literary forms tend to become dynamic, to undergo radical changes. These periods of revolution in literary form are associated with periods of social crisis or social revolution. It is for this reason that, for instance, the rise of bourgeois social reaction was accompanied by the rise to dominance of realism as a literary form, while the twentieth-century crisis in bourgeois society has been accompanied by the growth of non-realist and anti-realist forms of various kinds – expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, Brechtian 'alienation', etc. One can't understand such developments if one treats form merely as a secondary element in literature. In eras of literary revolution, the new content of experience is inseparable from new forms. Brecht – one of the writers Samudran refers to with approval – offers a good example. Samudran should consider why Brecht attributed so much importance to the form of the 'epic theatre' as the essential means of communicating what he had to say; it is possible to imagine a production of, say, **Galileo** or **Mother Courage** that keeps the plot, the characters and the dialogue but translates the theatrical mode of the performance into traditional naturalist forms: would that leave unaltered Brecht's essential meaning?

Finally, a word about the opposition Samudran sets up between Marxists and formalists – an opposition which is a throw-back to the literary controversies of the first decades after the Russian Revolution. Looking back at these controversies in historical perspective, I think the formalists were wrong in dissociating form from the social meanings of literature – but no more wrong than the theorists of 'socialist realism' were in reducing art to ideology. There were however in the 1920s in the Soviet Union a group of critics who, while relating literature clearly to its social context, profited from the methods of literary analysis evolved by the Russian formalists to clarify the specific qualities of a literary work that distinguish it from political or philosophical discourse. In the work of these critics what is positive and valuable in the formalist tradition is assimilated into Marxist criticism, and the opposition Samudran maintains is transcended. I have written earlier in the LG on the major work (a study of Dostoevky) by the outstanding critic of this group – M. Bakhtin.

The restoration of Bakhtin's work to favour in the post-Stalin period is a welcome sign that the Soviet Union is outgrowing the crudities and rigidities of the aesthetics of 'socialist realism' and regaining contact with the more creative period of Marxist literary criticism in the twenties. Bakhtin seems to me a finer Marxist critic than either Lunacharsky on the one hand or Trotsky on the other (the best that can be said about both of them is that writing as critics-cum-commissars, they didn't do so badly!)

Lanka Guardian, November 1980

5

Form, Content, Art, Ideology

While thanking Samudran for his painstaking and courteous reply to me (LG, December 1), I wish to conclude my share of this discussion by summing up what seem to me the main points of agreement and disagreement between us. But first, a word about my purposes in intervening in this discussion.

If I understand him correctly, Samudran says his first article was provoked by a conflict between Marxists and formalists in the Tamil literary world and what he sees as a tendency towards the isolation and over-valuation of form by certain Tamil literary critics. I am, of course, unable to comment on this. But I should like to say that in writing my rejoinder to Samudran, I too was influenced by a current literary context. Too often in contemporary Sinhala literature we have had plays, poetry and fiction in which a progressive ideology has been offered as if it were a guarantee of artistic excellence, without either the substance of lived experience or the writer's command of his chosen literary form to support it. Whether there is any parallel in the Tamil literary situation I can't say, but I did have this Sinhala literary context in mind when I objected to what seemed to me Samudran's over-simplified opposition between Marxism and formalism.

Now to sum up, I am glad Samudran agrees that literary form and content are inter-dependent, and that 'the practice of extracting the ideological content alone for approval or condemnation is not a valid method of criticism'. But when he goes on to say that the assertion of primacy of content over form is not relegating form to a less important place but identifying the more decisive of the inseparables in determining meaning and artistic quality, I am frankly unable to understand what he means. To me it seems obvious that if you hold content to be 'more decisive' in determining meaning and artistic quality, then you must hold form to be 'less important'.

In what way does Samudran believe content to be 'more decisive' than form: in the process of literary creation or in the finished work as apprehended by the reader? Neither of these positions seems to me tenable. For it is simply not true that in creating a work of literature, the writer began by conceiving 'what he wants to say' and then working out 'the way in which he is going to say it'. Only inferior and unsuccessful works – products of pure will and cerebration – are written in that way. Everything we know about the psychology of literary creation from the records left behind by great poets and novelists suggests that in the act of conception and production there is a continuous interaction between content and form so that to ask which of them is more decisive is like asking which came first, the chicken or the egg. And if this is true of the process of literary creation, it is equally true of the act of literary apprehension. The reader, if he is at all sensitive to literature, doesn't go through form to content, as if the form were only an outer covering to be discarded once the content has been reached. In responding to the literary work, he grasps content as embodied in a particular form, in a single act of imaginative apprehension.

I think Samudran's own statement that content itself is 'a product of artistic reflection of reality' points to the fact that we can separate form and content only as abstractions for the purpose of analytical convenience. For if, as Samudran says, 'the content of a creative work .. is the result of a consciously pursued process of artistic reflection of particular phenomena through the "prism of the inner world" of the artist,' (and I agree, except that I would question whether this process is always 'consciously pursued'), then at no stage does the artist conceive content, as it were, in the raw but always incarnated in form.

Samudran has misunderstood me when he claims that in describing the content of Shelley's **Song to the Men of England**, as I did, I was adopting the method of the socialist realist critics, whom I criticized. Samudran has, I think failed to take account of the fact that Shelley's theme is a general social observation and exhortation (not for instance, the suffering of an individual worker). But what makes the poem more than intellectual statement is Shelley's imaginative and emotional response to his social perception, organized and articulated through poetic form.

Finally, about Brecht, Samudran says: 'My position is that Brecht was a great socialist realist'. He is, of course, entitled to give the term his own meaning in using it in this way. But Samudran should consider the significance of the fact that in his lifetime Brecht was stigmatised by the high priests of socialist realism for the 'formalist' elements they found in his plays. I am ready to take Samudran's word for it that Lukacs in his later writings accepted Brecht as 'the greatest realist playwright of his time', but when Brecht was living and working, Lukacs failed to see his importance, nor did he pay to him a fraction of the attention he devoted to traditional realists like Thomas Mann. I have just been looking at a critical work written in conformity with the doctrines of socialist realism – Boris Suchkov's **A History of Realism**. I have failed to find in it any reference to Brecht, though it

devotes several pages to Mann, Hemingway and even Steinbeck. These examples point to the dangers of setting up realism as the only literary form that can be sanctioned by a Marxist ideology. Samudran's stretching of the socialist realist form to include Brecht is no doubt a lesser evil as compared with the dogmatic exclusion of his work, but if we are to call Brecht 'realist', then why not Marquez or Carpentier? Does the term have any definition or utility at this point?

Lanka Guardian, January 1981

6

Ideology and Materialism

The Ghost in the Attic

In the two-storeyed house with base and superstructure that classical Marxism built, there was a ghost in the attic. That ghost was ideology. The metaphor comes straight out of Marx and Engels in **The German Ideology**: 'We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process...' **Phantoms, echoes, sublimates, reflexes, reflections** – the effect of this body of metaphors in classical Marxism was to disembody and dematerialize ideology. It is one of the creative achievements of the new currents of Marxism of the last two decades that they have given the phantom of ideology a flesh-and-blood presence. And in the light of this development, we can now see that what was fundamentally inadequate about the way in which classical Marxism saw ideology was simply that it was not materialist enough.

What was regarded as the 'base' of a social formation – referred to alternatively as 'the material base' and 'the economic base' – in classical Marxism? The mode of production of material life was the answer given in Marx's

1859 Preface to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.** Base 'determined' superstructure; the mode of production 'determined' the ideological forms which were located in the superstructure. But ideology doesn't come into existence simply as a passive reflection of external reality in men's minds. Ideology is **produced** through the labour of armies of writers, media-men, artists, scientists, teachers, priests, politicians and also through the activities of millions of other people in family and social relations. (It will be clear from this that the reach of ideology extends far beyond the realm of the overtly political.)

Let us first consider the forms of ideological production represented by the specialized activity of the professional makers who are reproducers of ideology referred to in the last paragraph. Classical Marxism situated their activity in the superstructure as opposed to that of producers of, say, steel or textiles which entered into the economic base. This suggests that the separation between base and superstructure in the classical Marxist scheme corresponded to the division between mental and physical labour in capitalist societies. That division is real, though never absolute (for, as Marx himself recognized in **Capital**, all human labour is conscious labour). The error lies, however, in supposing that the division between physical and mental labour is also a division between the material and the immaterial.

Ideological production and consumption (which together constitute 'communication') cannot take place except by means of acts of speech, words written and printed, movements of the human body, drawn and painted images, carved and moulded forms in stone and metal, images and sounds imprinted on and reproduced from celluloid film and tape or transmitted through electromagnetic waves – all of which are material productions.

Perhaps the objection will be raised that these material entitles and processes are only the vehicles for the transmission of ideology, and that the substance of ideology

consists of the concepts or ideas conceived by the communicator and received by reader, viewer or listener. I shall return to this objection (whose fallacies derive from certain idealist preconceptions) later when I discuss the role of sign-systems in the formation of ideology. For the present I shall say merely that one could just as well argue that what a potter produces is not the material pot that he moulds but the pot he saw in his mind's eye when he designed it. Potters produce pots, weavers produce textiles, artists produce paintings, film makers produce films, journalists produce newspapers, writers produce books – none of these productions can be substituted for by a subjective entity in the mind of the producer.

I must now point out that not only is the productive activity of all professional makers of ideology a form of material production, but also that an important part of it (that of media-men, writers and many artists) is situated, as far as capitalist societies are concerned, within economic relations of production, distribution and exchange. In a footnote in the **Grundrisse** (Penguin edition, p.305), Marx came to the conclusion that a piano-maker was 'a productive worker', but a piano-player was not. Presumably, Marx would have assigned the piano-maker's labour to the 'base', and the piano-player's to 'superstructure'. This may have seemed plausible in Victorian Britain, where pianists were often gentlemen and lady amateurs. But a corresponding distinction would be impossible to maintain today, when information, culture, and entertainment are commodities dealt in by giant capitalist industries.

Marginally, of course, we have what might be called artisan modes of production surviving in cultural activity (intellectuals producing little magazines on duplicating machines or hand-presses, for instance), and a good deal of visual art in the traditional forms of painting and sculpture is still produced in this way. However, even these products usually enter into the capitalist economy at the point of

distribution and exchange. But the dominant forms of ideological communication in contemporary capitalist societies – books, newspapers, films, radio, TV – are produced by capitalist industries, and this makes the traditional Marxist distinction between base and superstructure all the more difficult to sustain. For these industries are contained within the mode of economic production, but what they are engaged in producing is simply – ideology.

What I have been discussing so far is the production of ideology by specialists – those whose professional activity and working life are subsumed in this activity. I turn now to the second mode of production of ideology to which I referred: the activity of the broad mass of people in family and social relations.

In **Capital** (Vol. 1, Ch. 23) Marx wrote:

'The capital given in exchange for labour power is converted into necessaries, by the consumption of which the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing labourers are reproduced, and new labourers are begotten... The maintenance of reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation.'

The maintenance of existing workers and reproduction of a new generation of workers takes place primarily within the institution of the family. However, the family does more than reproduce the bodies and labour-power of workers. It is in the family that the child first learns to act within certain relations of subordination and obedience and to conduct himself in appropriate ways towards authority – especially, in patriarchal societies, that of the father. He is thus prepared for the position in which he will be placed later in relation to employer, state and church. It is also in the family that the child is first adapted for the distinct gender roles of a patriarchal society, through the different ways in which he

is brought to relate himself to father and mother and to conduct himself as 'boy' or 'girl'.

What is often described as the 'socialising' function of the family, is therefore, in fact a process of ideological reproduction, which is just as vital for the maintenance of the existing relations and practices of the social formation as the physical reproduction of which Marx spoke in **Capital.**

This ideological reproduction, begun in the family, is continued and extended in school, place of worship, workplace and other sites of various social practices. Thus we see that a dominant ideology is not just a set of ideas in people's heads but is, in one of its most important aspects, a body of material practices and activities through which people are brought to relate themselves to each other and to the conditions of their existence in the specific ways that are necessary for the reproduction of the social formation.

Schooling does not consist only of the ideas that are transmitted through texts and lessons: it includes the relationships of command and obedience between teacher and pupil, competitive activity in the classroom and the playing field, and training in modes of behaviour that are prescribed as appropriate for 'well-conducted' children. Religion does not consist only of theologies and other doctrines (whose intricacies are accessible only to a minority of believers): it means people going to temple, offering flowers, praying in church etc. The factory, too, is not only a place where economic production takes place: the daily work relations into which the worker enters are also modes of ideological reproduction. As Althusser said: 'When we speak of ideology, we must realize that ideology seeps through all human activity and that it is identical with the very "lived experience" of human existence'.

The Sign: arena of struggle

'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being', wrote Marx in a famous passage 'but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'. The first half of that sentence represents Marx's negation of the idealist position, according to which human consciousness is the free, autonomous source of being ('I think, therefore I am.') However, the second half of the sentence preserves the dichotomy between 'social being' and 'consciousness' inherent in idealism, but inverting the relationship between the two terms. 'Consciousness' remains, in Marx's formulation here, something distinct from 'social being' while being determined by it. How then does 'determination' take place?

Classical Marxism never provided a clear answer to this question, though Marx and Engels trembled on the verge of it in a passage in **The German Ideology** in which they spoke of language: 'From the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, of language. Language is as old as consciouisness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well ... Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.'

What this remarkable passage points to is the fact that the dichotomy between 'consciousness' and 'social being' is false: consciousness is itself a socially constituted form of being, and it is constituted primarily (as Marx and Engels correctly saw here) through language, which is a social creation. However, Marx and Engels were unable to develop these insights further, for a very good historical reason – that the science of linguistics was insufficiently developed in their time to permit them to do so. Today, the structural

linguistics of Saussure and the theory of sign-systems (semiology or semiotics) that has grown out of make it possible to unravel the social process of the formation of human subjectivity – a problem that classical Marxism was unable to resolve.

Marx's account of human, as opposed to animal, labour in **Capital** implies that man is a sign-making animal: 'A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.' (Vol. 1, Ch. 7) This 'structure raised in imagination', whether in the form of words, or a drawing or blueprint, is a complex of signs. Modifying Marx and Engel's formulation in **The German Ideology**, we can say that consciousness cannot exist except in and through socially created sign-systems – language, spoken and written, visual representations, gestures, rituals and other forms of communicative behaviours, all of which (as we have already seen) are material practices. Language, is the most comprehensive and the most complex of all these sign-systems, and for convenience I shall base my analysis of sign-systems in this article on language.

Since a child doesn't invent language for himself, his original induction into language within the institution of the family represents a process of insertion in a pre-existing order. In refutation of the idealist assertion of the primacy of human subjectivity (the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am') it may be said that the very consciousness of subjectivity reaches definition only when the child grows into language and is able to speak and think of himself as 'I'. It is dependent, in other words, on his incorporation into a socially constructed sign-system.

It was the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in the first half of this century who made possible a correct understanding of sign-systems by characterizing the sign as

a union of a **signifier** and a **signified** (in the case of language the ordered set of sounds constituting a word and the concept linked with it, respectively). Saussure stressed that, in actual language use, the signifier doesn't exist without the signified, and vice versa. Though Saussure himself didn't realize the full implication of his intellectual discovery, this position serves at one stroke to dispel the fallacies of idealism, since thought is seen to exist always in inter-dependence with the materiality of the sign. Marx and Engels affirmed the material character of language in terms of its – 'agitated layers of sir' – but it is necessary to go further and point out that the primary form of language is the act of speech, which is a material **activity**.

Verbal thinking is derivative from speech, as the Soviet psycholinguist L.S. Vygotsky demonstrated in his studies of the growth of the child's linguistic faculties, which progress from external speech to egocentric speech to inner speech. Having acquired language through social interaction in the first stage, the child in the intermediate stage begins to talk to himself, aloud, because he has not yet dissociated thinking in words from articulating them. In the final stage, this dissociation has been made. However, the medium of verbal thinking ('inner speech') consists of signs of signs, whose source-form is the spoken word. It is the inter-dependence of the material signifier and the mental signified that serves to answer idealist objections to the argument that ideological communication is a form of material production. No communication can take place without and outside the material media of sounds, shapes, colours and movements.

Though Saussure recognized the inter-dependence of a signifier and signified in the unity of the sign, he also described the relation between them as 'arbitrary' – which doesn't mean that it is random or haphazard. What it does mean is that the relation is not naturally given, but socially determined by the usage of a particular apeech community at a particular time. Also, according to Saussure, no sign in a

sign-system, no word in a language, has meaning as an independent entity; it acquires meaning only by virtue of its place in the structure of the sign-system as a whole. There is, therefore, a certain distortion involved in speaking of 'the meaning of a sign': actually, meaning is a property of the relations between signs.

These two principles of Saussure have been criticized by some orthodox Marxists (notably by Sebastiano Timpanaro) on the ground that they represent an idealist tendency 'to detach signs from any relationship with extra-linguistic reality' (Timpanaro, **On Materialism**, p. 151). It is true that Saussure, in some aspects of his thought, was prone to the danger, common to structuralists, of thinking in terms of self-contained, self-regulating and static structures. However, it is possible for a Marxist semiology to correct these tendencies, while utilizing and re-interpreting what was valid in his thinking. It does seem to me that, re-interpreted in this way, the two principles I have just enuniciated can serve as the cornerstones of a Marxist semiotics.

Against Timpanaro and other critics, it must be pointed out that there is no simple correspondence between 'extra-linguistic reality' and the semiotic structures of a language. What a linguistic system does is to carve out a set of semiotic spaces in the world as represented by it, and the boundaries of these spaces and their relations with each other are determined not by external reality in itself but by the refraction of that reality through the social practice of a particular speech community at a particular time. This is true even of denotative meaning: there is no one-to-one correspondence between one language and another in respect of their vocabularies of reference to things and qualities in the world. However, the divergences between languages, as well as between different states of the same language in time, are even greater in respect of connotative meaning, which includes the emotional associations, attitudes and values carried by language.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to the English word **black**. Denotatively, the word seems to refer to an objective physical phenomenon which is constant for all human beings with normal faculties of perception. However, it is well iknown that the structure of colour-terminology varies considerably between languages, so it is possible that there are languages in which there is no exact equivalent for the denotative use of the English **black**. Whether this is so or not, however, the word **black** has connotative meanings which are peculiar to English-speaking cultures in a particular phase of their history.

In dominant usages in English there is a polar opposition between **black** and **white** (a good example of the relational character of the meaning of signs in a sign-system). White is good and black is evil: White is pure and black is impure; white is superior and black is inferior; white is beautiful and black is ugly; white is clean and black is dirty; white is the colour of angels and black is the colour of devils. These connotative meanings are not given naturally by extra-linguistic reality: they are products created by specific social practices, and are part of specific, historically originated ideologies, which serve to reproduce specific social relations.

The great importance of the two principles of Saussurean linguistics under discussion is that they help us to see that ideological practice (which is always mediated by signs) is ceaselessly open to change, and this recognition is of profound value for a Marxist theory of ideology. If the relation between a signifier and its signified was not arbitrary, if a signifier was necessarily tied to a constant signified, if this relation was determined not by social practice but by an independent and external reality, the structure of language (and therefore of our conceptual and ideological practices) would be fixed and eternal. But what one set of

social practices has created, new social practices can transform. This is what makes it possible, for instance, for Black American liberation movements to evacuate the word **black** of the meanings given it by the oppressors and to invest it with new significations through the slogan 'Black is beautiful!'

The Soviet theoretician of language of the 'twenties, V.N. Voloshinov, wrote in his book **Marxism and the Philosophy of Language**: 'Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle.' I would qualify this only to the extent of saying that emergent signifying practices, challenging those which are dominant, may come not only from subjected classes but also from oppressed ethnic groups, dissident cultural movements, and other rebellious social elements such as women and youth. A sign-system, therefore, is neither static nor unitary even at a given point of time: it is always both diverse and dynamic.

Lanka Guardian, May 1983

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Marxism, Literature and Time

Most Marxist critics of literature have thought within the framework of the concepts of economic base and ideological superstructure, where literature is taken to be part of the super-structure. There are problems inherent in these concepts, as we shall see if we take a look at one of Marx's most famous sentences: It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.

What did Marx mean by 'determines'? If we give the word the kind of meaning it has in the physical sciences, we shall be in trouble. The pressure and temperature of a gas determine its volume, in the sense that given the first two, we can predict the third. But given a knowledge of the social relations of Elizabethan times, could we predict **King Lear?** Raymond Williams has suggested that what Marx meant by 'determines' was 'sets limits to', which makes for a more flexible relationship between existence and consciousness.

However, this isn't the problem I want to discuss here. What I want to ask is how far the body of Marxist critical writing that is concerned with explaining literature in terms of the base-superstructure relationship – whether this is done badly, as by Christopher Caudwell, or well, as by George Thomson – meets the central problems of literary criticism, and whether this is the only Marxist approach to literature that is possible.

In what has deservedly become a classic work of Marxist criticism, George Thomson says of Aeschylus's **Oresteia** that it is a stratified piece of social history embodying the accumulated deposits of the primitive tribe, the early monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Thomson's analysis of the plays in **Aeschylus and Athens** elaborates this view with great depth and cogency. But it leaves certain fundamental problems unanswered.

The experience and the frame of mind of a reader or spectator approaching the **Oresteia** as a piece of social history of ancient Greece are very different from those of a reader or spectator responding to it, moved by it, involved with it as a living work of literature **in the present.** The readers or spectators I am talking about may often be the same person regarding the work in different ways, but the two experiences will still be divergent. In fact, as I shall show, they are really two different works – two different **Oresteia** – that are being read or seen in the two cases.

In fact, nothing in **Aeschylus and Athens** (and in other Marxist criticism of the same kind) answers the questions which seem to me central to literary criticism: What is our response to this work, written, maybe, centuries ago? What does it mean to us here and now? Why should we take the trouble to read it if we aren't social or literary historians?

There is, of course, one simple answer possible to these questions which has actually been given by some Marxists – and that is, that we **shouldn't** bother; instead, we should throw all the literature of the past into the dustbin as products of feudal or bourgeois culture. This was the position taken up by some of the more militant exponents of **Proletkult** in the early years after the Russian Revolution, and again by similar groups during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, (now, one understands, both Shakespeare and Li Po have been rehabilitated). It is amusing to read today, in a Soviet Communist Party debate in 1924 on party policy towards literature, that Sosnovsky, taking a liberal position on the

question, pleaded that Pushkin 'would undoubtedly last another fifty years'. The fifty years have come and gone, and Pushkin seems as indestructible as ever – which wouldn't have surprised Lenin. Krupskaya describes how, on a visit to a Youth Commune, he asked the young people, 'What do you read? Do you read Pushkin?' "Oh, no!" someone blurted out. He was a bourgeois. Mayakovsky for us,' Ilyich smiled. 'I think Pushkin is better.'

However, when it comes to explaining why Aeschylus or Shakespeare or Pushkin is still alive, there is little illumination to be found in Marxist literary criticism. In fact, it is striking how often Marxists, faced with this problem, have fallen back on something similar to the traditional bourgeois conception of an 'unchanging human nature' (which one would have thought was both unreal and un-Marxist). Thus, David Craig, in seeking to explain the persistence of certain themes and motifs in the literature of different societies, speaks of 'the comparative continuity of human nature', which is an adulterated version of the academic critic's concept of 'timeless human experience'. Again, in the same essay he says: 'What exists in society is an organism, an animal, a species, named **homo sapiens**, which over millennia has scarcely changed. So we can respond with delight to the bulls of Lascaux or of Picasso, the stories of Homer or Lawrence.' **(Towards Laws of Literary Development in *Marxists on Literature*,** ed. Craig.) If that is so, the whole Marxist analysis of literature and culture falls to the ground. In reality, however, I don't think the fact that the biological equipment of man as a species has scarcely changed in historical time does anything to explain our response to the literature of past ages, because literature is based not on man's biological drives but on our social and cultural experience, which is constantly changing in time.

The other way in which Marxist critics have tried to meet the problem of the longevity of literature is by having recourse to aesthetic properties of literature, unrelated to their social analysis. Even Lenin, in his essays on Tolstoy, never resolves his paradox of the reactionary ideologue and 'the great artist, the genius who has not only drawn incomparable pen pictures of Russian life, but has made first-class contributions to world literature' (and what is it that distinguishes a 'first-class contribution to world literature', anyway?).

I must make it clear that I consider the mode of Marxist criticism represented by George Thomson on Greek drama or George Lukacs on the 19th-century realists as a valid and legitimate activity, and, within its limits, illuminating. But if we regard literature of the past **solely** in terms of its social genesis – that is, in terms of the mode of production and the social relations within which it arose, our approach to literature ends by becoming, strange as it may seem, anti-historical. **For we are then conceiving of a work of literature as being a static entity, having a fixed, immutable meaning given to it by the society within which it was created. The truth, however, is that a work of literature has existence only in a relationship between itself and its audience, and since the audience is constantly changing with time and history, its relationship to a particular literary work too changes, and with it, the meaning of the work itself.**

Let me clarify this further by taking a particular example. What do we refer to when we talk about 'Shakespeare's **'King Lear'**? We refer, of course, in the first instances to a literary text, contained, say, in certain pages of an edition of Shakespeare's Works, and realizable in performance. Even at this stage there is a problem: since we have no manuscript of the play in Shakespeare's hand, and since the original printed texts are defective and vary one from the other, **King Lear**, as we know it today, is really a

text evolved by successive generations of editors, and there are various versions of it. Significantly, some 18th and 19th-century readings differ from modern ones, so that already, even at the stage of establishing a text, we see that we are confronted by a literary object which changes in time. But our edited version, when we have chosen it, does not read itself: we have to face the task of interpreting it, of giving it meaning. What then do we refer to when we speak of the 'meaning' of **King Lear**? We may mean any one of three things:

1. The meaning that Shakespeare intended to convey by the play.
2. The meaning that the play had for the Elizabethian audience.
3. The meaning that the play has for contemporary readers and audiences.

(1) is strictly unknowable, and even if somebody were to unearth a diary of Shakespeare revealing what he 'intended' to convey by **Lear**, that wouldn't solve the problem. Firstly, there can be a gap between intention and performance: secondly, we can't assume that what a writer **consciously** believes he is conveying by his work is equivalent to what is actually conveyed; and thirdly, once a work has been written, it has an objective existence independent of what its author intended.

(2) is also unknown, though we may try to approximate to it by delving into knowledge about Elizabethan social history, ideas and beliefs, the nature of the audience, etc. (With, say, a 19th-century novel, we would have fuller evidence from reviews and comments of the time.)

Only (3) is directly accessible to us. But not only are there different versions of (3), so that we can talk about Wilson Knight's **Lear**, Jan Kott's **Lear** etc: it should also be

evident that a contemporary reader or spectator of the play inevitably interprets it in the light of his understanding of the world given him by his contemporary social experience, so that the **Lear** we read or see today is a work transformed by time and history.

In a later article I shall consider the practical implications of this situation for the Marxist literary critic.

Lanka Guardian, October 1979

8

In the Guts of the Living

As I tried to show in my article 'Marxism, literature and time' (LG, Oct. 15), the customary Marxist approach to a work of literature – of interpreting it in terms of the productive and social relations of the time in which it was written – is illuminating for the sociology of literature but inadequate as a basis for literary criticism. It needs to be complemented by a recognition on the part of the Marxist critic that the meaning of a literary work changes with the developing experience in time and history of its readers and audience. As Auden wrote in his memorial poem for Yeats:

> "The words of a dead man
> Are modified in the guts of the living.'

Accordingly, I think the right answer to the bourgeois academic view of great literature as that which expresses what is 'timeless and unchanging' in human experience should be to assert that, on the contrary, **great literature is that which has the greatest capacity to change and renew its meaning with evolving human experience**. I should like to demonstrate this from the plays of Shakespeare, not because they are unique in this respect but because they have been performed and read continually from his time to ours, and therefore afford the clearest example of the fact that each generation reinterprets the literature of the past in terms of its own experience, derived from its own social relations.

For this purpose, it is useful to look at the task of a theatre (or film) director in presenting a play of Shakespeare on stage (or screen) today. The academic scholar-critic may approach a Shakespeare play through his understanding of the 'Elizabethan world picture', the orthodox Marxist critic may interpret it in the light of Elizabethan social relations; but for the director involved in performing Shakespeare such an approach would be deadening. If the play doesn't come alive to the audience in the theatre today as much as if it were a contemporary work, the director has failed. Hence, it is in the theatre rather than in the scholar's or critic's study that the contemporary meaning of Shakespeare's plays has been brought most fully to life. When Jan Kott called Shakespeare 'our contemporary', he startled many academic circles, but the phrase should be a truism in the light of the modern theatre, where **Coriolanus** has been presented as an anti-fascist play, **The Tempest** as a parable of decolonization, **Timon of Athens** as an exposure of the affluent society of waste, and **Othello** as a tragedy of black-white racial relations.

Does this impose on Shakespeare a meaning extraneous to the original work? On the contrary, as Ralph Berry writes in **On Directing Shakespeare:**

> 'It is a complete naivete to speak of the "meaning" of a Shakespeare play as an entity that can be defined, established and placed on record in perpetuity. The play is changed by the act of selection, which implies the social context of the new production. In selecting the play, the director undertakes to guide his audience to an area of contemporary consciousness and enlarge its understanding.'

It seems to me that the essential function of the critic, and of the Marxist critic in particular, in dealing with the literature of the past is the same: 'to guide his audience to an area of contemporary consciousness and enlarge its

understanding.' If the function of criticism is to explore more deeply and to illuminate the responses we make in the act of reading or watching a performance, the critic should start from the recognition that in reading or seeing Shakespeare today, we inevitably react to him as people living in the third quarter of the twentieth century. We can amass knowledge about what Elizabethans may have thought and felt. We can engage in intellectual efforts of historical reconstruction, but we cannot get into their skins, we cannot respond as Elizabethans. What the critic can do is to bring fully to consciousness how our reactions to Shakespeare are related to our contemporary social experience and to bring to light hidden connections between the work and that experience.

Let us take the case of **King Lear**. Many critics and readers today regard it as the supreme Shakespearean masterpiece. But far from this being self-evident, the widespread acceptance of this view is very recent. G.K. Hunter in the New Penguin Shakespeare edition of the play dates it at "some time during the Second World War'. In the eighteenth century, in fact, the play was considered shocking because its ending flouted the principles of poetic justice (even the greatest English critic of the day, Dr.Johnson, agreed), and in stage performance Shakespeare's Lear was displaced by Tate's 'adaptation' where Cordelia lived happily ever after. (The critical and stage history of the play would be a good practical demonstration of the falsity of the belief in a single, unchanging meaning of a Shakespeare play.)

But if we admire **Lear** where the eighteenth century rejected it, that isn't because we have restored the **Lear** that existed for the Elizabethan audience. It seems reasonable to suppose that Elizabethans would have been strongly moved by the situation of a king, with the sanctity associated with such a personage, reduced to destitution and homelessness. This element survives in some of the words of the play ('a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch, past speaking of in a king'), but for most of us, when we read or see the play

today, it recedes into the background or is overlooked. What emerges for us is the situation of a man who finds the world he has taken for granted disintegrating around him and who is therefore compelled to question his own identity: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" — a situation that we recognize as real and immediate to us. We are similarly affected by the spectacle in the play of men who are subjected to the extremities of violence and cruelty (if Hunter is right, it was the generation of Auschwitz and Hiroshima which accepted **Lear** as Shakespeare's greatest play); of Lear's recognition of the sufferings of 'poor, naked wretches' and its part in his own moral growth; of the breakdown of his false social self in madness and his regeneration through this very process of a universe in which the gods have ceased to exist and in which man has therefore to create his values for himself.

I suggest, therefore, that the essential task of the Marxist critic is to see literary meaning as a phenomenon changing with history, to confront the question of the significance of every work in terms of our social relations and experience, to recognize that great literary works are not objects stored in a museum of antiquities but organisms living and moving in the perpetual flux of (to use another phrase of the young Auden) 'Time, the refreshing river'.

Lanka Guardian, November 1979

OVERVIEWS

1

Revaluing Contemporary Literature

Mr. Mervyn de Silva's memorial article on Ezra Pound sounded an elegiac note – not only for the dead master but also for a vanished cultural era in our own country. While conceding that it would be foolish to try to affect today "the hushed reverence and uncritical adulation" with which we once read Pound, Eliot and Joyce, he regretted the fact that in the face of 'the anti-Western backlash of nationalism" the English-educated had shamefacedly rejected "even the finest things they have assimilated from another culture. And some of that culture is also universal."

I too belong to the generation whose literary taste was formed on the work of the dominant Anglo-American writers of the era between the two wars – Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence. But how far can one today see these writers and the culture they represented as "universal"? In asking this question I am not really influenced by "the anti-Western backlash of nationalism". What I want to question is how far these writers were representative of what was most significant in the experience of the West itself in their time.

Britain and America between the wars, it must be recalled, were islands of relative stability in a period of great social and political turbulence. While Continental Europe underwent the profound crises of the victorious Russian

Revolution and the defeated European revolutions, the rise of Stalinism and Fascism and the Spanish Civil War, Britain and America remained largely insulated from these shocks. Not even the great depression seriously undermined their stability.

Is not this contrast between the social experience of Britain and America in the period between the wars and that of Continental Europe reflected in their literatures? **The Waste Land, The Cantos, Ulysses and Finnegans Wake** all make claims to a universality of experience; they all attempt to project a total vision of human history and their claims have often been upheld by critics and admiring readers. But it is only necessary to read Eliot, Pound and Joyce side by side with their most important European contemporaries to realize that there were whole areas of contemporary human experience that were beyond the range of comprehension of the great Anglo-American writers.

Eliot, Pound and Joyce were great technicians, great literary engineers, but their vision was limited. Of the forces and movements that were changing their world they understood nothing. Eliot, for instance, saw the Russian Revolution in terms of "hooded hordes swarming over endless plains"; in the notes to **The Waste Land** he naively referred to it as "the present decay of eastern Europe"!

Measure the leading Anglo-American writers between the wars against their European contemporaries – Brecht, the young Silone and Malraux, Machado, Hernandez, Vallejo, Blok, Essenin and Akhmatova (Vallejo was Peruvian by birth but European by experience, and looked forward in some of his last writings to a Nazi-dominated New Order in Europe. Eliot voiced anti-Semitic attitudes both in prose and poetry, made sympathetic reference to the Fascist states in his **Criterion** commentary, and acknowledged as his political mentor Charles Maurras, who ended as a collaborator with the Nazis during the second World War. Another of the

founders of the Anglo-American modern movement in literature, Wyndham Lewis wrote a book in praise of Hitler.

I am not trying to make a simple equation between a writer's political views and the merits of his work – an equation of the kind commonly made at one time by Stalinist critics and now by the Maoists. (The best Marxist thinkers about literature – Marx, Engels, Trotsky, Lukacs – did not indulge in such crude simplifications). But at the same time I want to insist that a writer's social awareness, as incarnated in the work, cannot be divorced from the rest of his experience, and that his political beliefs are not irrelevant to the quality of his imaginative life. The degree of such relevance varies, of course, with the nature of the work.

When I read Pound's **Cathay** or Yeats's love lyrics, I am not disturbed by memories of their authors' Fascist opinions. But consider Yeats's extravagant idealization in his poetry of hereditary elites as well as of strong-willed men of action; or Pound's arrogant, brutal invectives in **The Cantos**; or Eliot's and Wyndham Lewis's disgust with common humanity; or Lawrence's glorification of violence and of male power (not only in **The Plumed Serpent**, which everyone agrees is bad, but also in stories like **The Woman who Rode Away**, which are generally regarded as Lawrentian masterpieces). Here, I think, it is impossible to separate the writer and the thinker; the Fascist strains are there in the work.

It is not, I think, merely under the pressure of "the anti-Western backlash of nationalism" but in the light of our whole social experience today that we need to revalue those writers whom we once (in Mr. Mervyn de Silva's phrase) "read on our knees". Especially after 1971, do we not, for instance, find Anna Akhmatova's **Requiem** (a sequence of poems about her son imprisoned during the Stalinist purges) more immediate to us than **The Waste Land?**

I am not appealing to a simple and ephemeral criterion of topicality. What we need to recognize is that the groves

of academe where we formed our literary values were also provinces of a genteel and insular English culture. To realize this is also to be brought to question those values themselves – to be brought, for instance to the recognition that **Requiem** is a poem of immensely richer human significance and therefore (even in translation) a greater poem than **The Waste Land.** Especially after 1971, do we not find Anna Akhmatova's **Requiem**) a sequence of poems about her son imprisoned during the Stalinist purges) more immediate to us than **The Waste Land?**

Daily News, Nov. 15, 1972

2

The Excess of Language Over Linguistics

System, Creativity and Linguistic Science

My trusty writing-desk,
Thank you for surrendering
your tree-trunk to me, to become a table
yet remaining a trunk alive!

With the play of the young leaves
above the brow, with living bark,
with tears of living resin,
and roots down to the earth's depths!

This is my translation of a poem of Marina Tsvetaeva. I hare chosen to begin my discussion of language in this paper with a translated text instead of one originally written in English because the translation process often helps. to focus sharply some of the central issues concerning language and meaning.

What Tsvetaeva celebrates in the poem is creativity. The desk is the poet's other self, her creative persona, and therefore in it is revived the life of the tree-trunk that it was, with the play of leaves, the tough surface of bark, the tears of resin, and roots implanted deep down in the earth – in the very sources of life.

What comes through in the translation, I believe, is the metaphorical structure of the poem, which brings together poet, desk and tree. Yet there is another dimension of the poem that disappears in the translation – and that, too, something not marginal but central to it. I comfort myself with the thought that no other English version has captured it or can capture it. Confronted with such a poem as this, the translator is in fact in the situation of a lover impotent to possess the object of his desire.

The Russian word for 'table' is *stol* (when combined with the adjective *pis'mennyi,* it becomes a 'writing-table' or 'desk'), and the word for 'tree-trunk' is *stvol. Stol* and *stvol* - two words differing phonetically in a single phoneme, and graphically in a single letter. Moreover, this similarity between them is underlined by the form of the poem. In the first two lines *stol* and *stvol* are end-rhymes; in the third and fourth lines they are again end-rhymes, but in the instrumental case (Russian is a highly inflected language) – *stolom* and *stvolom* (pronounced 'stalOM' and 'stValOM' because Russian o's become a's before an accented syllable). It's thus throuh the near-identity between the sounds of the two words that the table regains the life of the tree-trunk in the poet's imagination. That *stol* and *stvol* are one is apprehended not only in terms of poetic metaphor but through the very physical substance of the words. But there's a further consonance to be found in the poem: 'resin' is *smoly* (here in the genitive case, and pronounced 'smalY'.). So we have a complex pattern of phonic resemblances - 'stol' / 'stvol'; 'stalom' *I* 'stvalom' *I* 'smoly' - while all these words are linked to each other graphically, in their appearance on the page: *stol...stvol...stolom...stvolom...smoly.*

We are accustomed to talk glibly of form and content in poetry as if they were different things, but where does form end and content begin in Tsvetaeva's poems? Let's concentrate on the desk and the tree-trunk. It's true that desks are made from the trunk of the tree rather than any

other part of it. But if you look only at the metaphors, as in the English version, then tree would have served just as well as *tree-trunk.* But the Russian for tree is *derevo,* and if this was what Tsvetaeva had written, we wouldn't have had the tight unity of form and meaning that the poem presents. Not that I am saying that the poet thought of the metaphor, then selected *stol* and *stvol* for their phonic resemblance. No, what I am suggesting is that her auditory imagination threw up the correspondences in sound, and that these played the leading role in the creative act, generating the metaphors, generating meaning.

This conjecture is confirmed if we look at the poem in its place in the larger literary unit of which it is a part. The poem I have quoted in translation is actually the fifth in a sequence titled 'Desk'. By the time the reader comes to it, s/he has already witnessed several metamorphoses of the desk, all effected through the medium of rhyme, assonance and consonance. In the first poem of the sequence, the desk is a mule that has walked with the poet down every path, and 'mule' is *mul,* while 'walked' is *shol,* and it is a loaded mule which has 'carried and carried': *nyos i nyos.* Later the desk becomes a 'pillar' *(stolp),* both a pillar like that on which the ascetic saint stood, figuring the discipline of the poetic vocation, and a 'burning pillar', like that which preceded the Jews in their exodus, and thus a portent of the poet's mission. So, in *stol...mul...shol..nyos...stolp...stvol,* we have a series of monosyllables linked sometimes by the initial consonants, sometimes by the medial vowel, sometimes by the final consonant, or by more than one of these. And it's these phonic resemblances that transform the desk into mule, pillar and tree.

Let's go back to the poem I quoted at the beginning of the paper. Supposing we were beginners in Russian and were trying to grapple with the Tsvetaeva poem, but didn't know what *stol* and *stvol* meant. We look them up in the *Oxford Russian-English Dictionary,*[1] and against *stol* we read (I have

quoted only the main heads in the dictionary entry and omitted the definitions of phrases in which *stol* is combined with other words):

1. table...
2. board; cooking; cuisine...
3. department; office, bureau...
4. *(hist.)* throne.

And under *stvol* we read:

1. *(of tree)* trunk; stem; bole.
2. *(of firearm)* barrel.
3. *(anat.)* tube, pipe. 4. *(mining)* shaft.

In accordance with normal processes of the decipherment of meaning, we select from these definitions those that seem relevant to the occurrences of the words in our text. We decide that head 1 in the case of both words is what we want, and the dictionary gives a definition of *pis'mennyi stol* – the phrase that actually occurs in the first line of the poem - as 'writing-table, desk'. So we conclude that what we are dealing with here is a writing-table and a tree-trunk. The native Russian speaker or the foreigner who is familiar with Russian doesn't, of course, have to look the words up in the dictionary, but s/he has still to select from the range of meanings they can bear, learnt by encountering them in varying contexts, those that are relevant to this particular text.

What the dictionary charts are the meanings that words[2] have in the language system to which they belong - in this case, Russian.[3] But, as we have already seen, the phonic correspondences between *stol* and *stvol* - which should be apparent even to our beginner on reading the poem aloud - are one of the sources of meaning in the poem, but they are outside any account of the meanings of the two words that could be contained within a dictionary definition. And quite

naturally so, because while these correspondences are undoubtedly linguistic features, they are not part of the system of the language. They exist only in the context of this poem. For instance, if *stol* and *stvol* appeared in a Russian carpenters' manual about how to saw tree trunks for the making of tables, their interactions in terms of meaning would be very different, and what they share in their sound structures would be irrelevant to the meaning of the text. And so with the further relationships set up through the phonic patterns of the poem with *mul, shol, stolp*... All these relationships are context-bound, they don't derive from any general interconnection between these words in the language system.

So far, we have been looking at the relationships of meaning between some of the words in Tsvetaeva's poem created by their linguistic contexts – the context of the eight-line poem with which I began as well as the larger context of the whole sequence. But there is a still broader context in which we should place this linguistic creation, and that is the extra-linguistic situation in which it was written. This context is necessarily open-ended: it isn't possible to specify, in advance of interpretation, what facts or circumstances may or may not be relevant to the reading of the text. But one can set out at least some of the more prominent of these. Tsvetaeva wrote 'Desk' between 1933 and 1935: she had left Russia after the Civil War, and moved first to Prague and then to Paris. The desk had no doubt accompanied her on these wanderings. But in the poetry the travels aren't merely geographical: the desk has gone with her on her creative journeys, sharing their labour like a beast of burden. Not only was Tsvetaeva an exile when the sequence was written, like the Israelites following their pillar of fire: she was also isolated. Cut off from her natural audience back in Russia by the hostility of the Soviet regime to emigre writers, she was also cold-shouldered by émigré literary circles in Western Europe, immersed in their petty sectarian politics. At the time

Tsvetaeva wrote 'Desk' she was unable to publish any of her poems. In a letter written about the same time, she said: 'And no one, anywhere - they forget I am a poet - will publish my poems. Not a line.'[4] And yet, as her daughter, Ariadna Efron, has recorded, Tsvetaeva went to her 'desk' every day of her life, like a worker to his bench, with the same feeling of responsibility, inescapability, impossibility to do otherwise... She was deaf and blind to everything other than her manuscript, in which she was involved by the sharp edge of her thought and her pen.'[5] 'Desk' is shaped by this dedication to the integrity and absorption of a lonely vocation – like that of the saint on his pillar - by the awareness of being an exile, not only from homeland but also from other human beings, and yet with the conviction that through the creative act she serves a mission for which she has been marked out. It is only by placing the poem in this total context that we can grasp the significance of its enactment of that creativity which is its subject. 'Roots down to the earth's depths' - this line gets its force from Tsvetaeva's uprootedness at the time she wrote it; yet against that fact she not only asserts but manifests in the very physical being of the poem its rootedness in the teeming substance of language, whose full body nourishes its poetic life.

II

I have chosen Tsvetaeva's poem in order to lead into the reflections on language, creativity and linguistics that are the subject of this paper. I shall begin these reflections with two aspects of linguistic theory. One is the distinction between signifier and signified; the other is the principle that in the linguistic sign the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. I'm using here, and elsewhere in this paper, the terms *signifier* and *signified* introduced by Saussure, which have the advantage that they can be applied to other sign-systems as well as to language. But in relation to language, one can understand the terms as denoting the form

of a word, whether spoken or written, and what it means. The relation between the two, linguistics maintains, is arbitrary. There is, for instance, no reason in the nature of things why *dog* or *balla* or *chien* or *perro* or *sobaka* should represent a particular four-footed animal: this has been determined only by the convention of a particular linguistic community. However, this relationship, though arbitrary and not naturally given, is the right one within the particular linguistic system - English, Sinhala, French, Spanish or Russian, as the case may be. What I want to question is not the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship but the inferences that linguists draw from it. Let us ask: Can one signifier have a relationship in respect of meaning with another signifier? The usual answer would be: Only in ways that are recognised by the system. For instance, the signifiers *topic, topical* and *topicality* are related in ways that are determined by the regularities of the English language. But the fact that *topic, top* and *topple* happen to begin with the same set of sounds would be regarded by linguists as a fortuitous circumstance that has no effects in terms of meaning.

But to take this position is to forget the materiality of the signifier, to treat it as simply a token, a counter, whose only function in the linguistic transaction is to be exchanged for a signified. It is to ignore the fact that linguistic communication can take place only through spoken sounds and written or printed shapes which have their own material form, and which can enter into relationships with each other quite apart from those defined by the rules of the language system. We have just observed this in the case of the Tsvetaeva sequence. The phonic and graphic relationships between *stol, stvol, stolp, shol* and so on in the poem and the ways in which they combine to create meaning can't be accommodated within the uniformities of a language system as those of *topic, topical* and *topicality* can. In the case of these last three words, we would say, for instance, that the

addition to *topic* of the morpheme *al* transforms the noun into an adjective, and we would point to other parallel cases such as *statistic, statistical; logic, logical,* and so on. Similarly, we can say that by adding the morpheme *ity* to *topical* we transform it into an abstract noun, as with *practical, practicality;* or *whimsical, whimsicality.* But the relationships between signifiers in *stol, stvol, stolp, shol* and so on have nothing to do with the morphological rules of a language system, unlike those of *topic, topical* and *topicality.* And this difference can't be effaced by constructing another set of rules, because there's a fundamental difference between the two sets of relationships. The relationships of the first set are, as we have seen, context-bound, tied to that particular poem, and are incapable of being generalised and systematised by rules as the second set can. Even if some of the same words as those that I have been discussing in Tsvetaeva's poem occurred in another text, as I have shown, the relations between them would be very different.

In the language of Tsvetaeva's poem, therefore, there are elements of the systematic as well as the non-systematic. What belongs to the language system includes the orthography of the words in the poem and the syntax of its sentences, which are both reguar (I am speaking of the original Russian text), as well as those aspects of its meaning which could be contained within a prose paraphrase.[6] But the phonic patterns of the poem and the relationships of meaning set up by them in this specific verbal context, as well as the significances the poem acquires from its extra-linguistic context - these lie beyond the language system and aren't open to definition by its rules.

The theorists who tried to cope with the distinctiveness of poetic language at the very beginning of the rise of modern linguistics were the Russian Formalists - Roman Jakobson and his associates. The extra-linguistic contexts of literature weren't significant for the Formalists, but they were intensely concerned with the differences between poetic and ordinary

language. It's pertinent to observe that in Russia several of the Formalists had close links with the group of experimental poets who called themselves 'Futurists', and of whom the most gifted was Mayakovsky. The Formalists pointed out that in everyday utterances where language is used as an instrument for getting things done, our attention isn't focused on the character of the utterance itself. If I tell you, 'Please knock off the fan,' you don't stop to speculate why I said 'knock off' instead of 'switch off. Language is here just a transparent medium of reference to things and people in the world, and of acting on them. But in the poetic or literary function of language, the Formalists said, attention is drawn to the properties of the utterance itself, through the parallelisms and oppositions between signifiers, through rhythm, rhyme, similarities of sound, connotations, metaphors and other devices. You can see how Tsvetaeva's *stol* and *stvol* would fit into this analysis. According to the Formalists, literature was to be defined precisely by its practice of what they called in Russian *ostranenie* - that is, 'making it strange', or, as it has sometimes been translated, 'de-familiarisation'. Ordinary language, in other words, is like a set of worn coins with which we transact business without being conscious of the medium of our transactions. Literature, on the other hand, by the linguistic devices at its command, deprives language of that familiarity, sharpens our sensitivity to it by, as it were, minting it anew.[7]

The Formalists wanted in this way to identify the specificities of literary language, making 'de-familiarisation' a criterion of 'literariness', but it's important to clarify for ourselves what we mean by 'literary language' here. Let's go now not to a poem but a joke. A few weeks ago, I heard somebody dropping this remark in connection with a trip that a group of people were arranging. 'Married people can bring their spouses, and others can bring their spices.' We greet such a remark with a smile because we recognise it as witty. But as far as the sense-content of the utterance is

concerned, we could say exactly the same thing in other ways; for instance, 'Married people can bring their spouses, and others can bring their boy- friends or girl-friends,' and nobody would smile. Why this difference? I know that analysing jokes is the least funny of exercises, but since it's necessary for my purposes, I'll say that in talking of *spouses* and *spices,* we are enlisting the material properties of the two signifiers, those combinations of sounds that they have in common, to highlight the contrast between their meanings. And in using *spices* to mean what it does here, we are wrenching the word from what it normally signifies, we are breaking the established semantic rules of the linguistic system, so we achieve the surprise-effect of innovation. And finally, the remark is perhaps witty because of what it hints at but doesn't say – that 'spices' may be more interesting than boringly familiar spouses.

Now I think that Jakobson and the Formalists would have had to agree that this joke could be brought within their formulation of the poetic or literary use of language. After all, it draws attention to the character of the utterance itself, and does so by enlisting certain properties of the two signifiers *spouses* and *spices,* and yoking the latter with an unusual signified. But once this is conceded, then we have to recognise that ordinary everyday discourse is shot through with ways of using language that foreground the material properties of the signifier, or undermine the relation between a signifier and its 'proper' .signified as given by the linguistic system. Not only poets and creative writers, not only sub-editors writing newspaper headlines, advertising people writing copy, and political propagandists putting out slogans (who are all professional wordsmiths of a kind), but also ordinary people often use language in ways that could be brought within the description of literary language by the Formalists. They crack verbal jokes, make puns, invent metaphors, enlist, consciously or unconsciously, the phonic qualities of signifiers to create meaning. Thus, creative

language in literature isn't a separate thing from non-literary language: it's a special case of the creativity that's inherent in all language. It's necessary to underline this because the general practice of twentieth century linguistic science has been been to fence off the poets and creative writers – those wild men and women – in a special reservation where they can be given licences to deviate from the laws of language so that linguists can get on undisturbed with their work in the normal territory where those laws are said to be upheld.

It's likely that an academic linguist will at this point complain of unfairness and ask: 'But what about stylistics?' Certainly, stylistics is now an acknowledged branch of linguistics, is taught as such by university departments, and its material is often drawn from literary and other texts where the extra-referential functions of language are important. But stylistics is actually one kind of applied linguistics. What it addresses itself to is the same kind of activity that was engaged in by literary departments in traditional practical criticism, only with more precise and sophisticated tools for dealing with the linguistic features of the text.[8] An exponent of stylistics could examine, for instance, the Tsvetaeva poem, and s/he could provide exact descriptions of the phonetic correspondences and contrasts on which the structure of the poem rests. What s/he couldn't do would be to relate this to a systematic generalising theory, in the way that a theorist of syntax, examining the sentence, 'You're going home, aren't you?' would relate it to a general analysis of the form of English interrogative sentences. 1'm not implying that the exponent of stylistics is to blame for that inability: I'm saying that in the very nature of the case there can't be such a systematisation. But where the limitation does lie is in the model of language which has been inherited by linguistics - a model that recognising the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified, takes this as a warrant for ignoring the materiality of the signifier and its role in meaning, and for ignoring also the relationships

between signifiers that arise out of that materiality. It seems to me that the emergence of a branch of linguistics called stylistics is an inadequate attempt to compensate for that deficiency by setting up a kind of kitchen department to deal with those aspects of language that the dominant model has ignored. It's a parallel phenomenon to the recent emergence of another branch of linguistics called sociolinguistics. Again, this is an outcome of the fact that the structural linguistics that in one form or another is still dominant in university departments tries to theorise language in terms of structures that are independent of the social context of discourse. So as a concession to what it has excluded, it tolerates a separate sub-discipline of sociolinguistics, though I can't conceive of any worthwhile linguistics that isn't 'socio-' because language is a social creation and a social activity. Any linguistic expression, from a spoken utterance to a literary text, is articulated in a context that's broader than the linguistic, and this, as I have already argued with respect to the Tsvetaeva sequence, is a necessary constituent of its meaning. In a spoken utterance or dialogue the extra-linguistic context is shared in an immediate way by speaker and hearer. In the case of a literary text, particularly one which is transmitted across places and times, the context can be very variable, with concomitant changes in the interpretation of the text.

III

Of the three planes or levels of language that have been distinguished by linguists – the phonological, the syntactical and semantic – it's the first two that have played the leading role in the construction of twentieth century linguistic theory. What's common to the two levels, as conceived by linguistics, is the linear succession of elements, such that each element has a syntagmatic relationship with others with which it can be combined, and a paradigmatic relationship with others that can be substituted for it. For instance, the word *cat* is phonologically a sequence (or what linguists call a 'string')

of three phonemes which stand in syntagmatic relationship with each other. And each of these phonemes is in paradigmatic relationship with others that can be substituted for it to form an English word: for instance, making substitutions in the first, second and third positions respectively, we can produce *hat, cot* and *cap*. Similarly, at the syntactic level, *cat* enters into syntagmatic relations with other words in the sentence *The cat sat on the mat,* and into paradigmatic relations with words that can be substituted for it to make an acceptable sentence: for instance, *The girl sat on the mat.* Thus, the idea of *difference* is at the heart of modern linguistic science, treating each word as a distinct entity, which enters into combinations with other words in ways that are regulated by the system. That's why poetic language, where words enter into unauthorised combinations or even melt into each other, is a challenge to this rule-governed order. If *stol* is also, in some sense, *stvol* is also *mul* is also *stolp,* then for the scientific linguist, chaos is come again. So poetic language has to be marked off as separate territory. But, as I have shown, this linguistic apartheid can't be sustained, because what has been excluded keeps breaking into the language of ordinary people, in jokes, in puns, in proverbs, in riddles, in slips of the tongue, in dreams.[9]

The most influential development in academic linguistics during the last few decades has been Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar. Chomsky first became famous by contesting B.F. Skinner's behaviourist view of language, and asserting against it the 'creativity' or 'innovativeness' of language which couldn't be reduced to behaviorist stimulus and response. But all that Chomsky means by 'creativity' is that we can both produce and understand sentences that we never heard before – and this shows we have internalized the rules of the language. There is, moreover, a strong element of biological determinism in Chomskyan linguistics. The grammar of every language is

claimed to embody underlying features of a universal grammar that are inherited genetically. I can't see the pursuit of a universal grammar as anything other than a wildgoose chase which can never produce results verifiable for every language. [10]

Nor, in spite of the play Chomsky makes with the term 'creativity' is there a place in his system for the more important kinds of creativity in language that we have been looking at. Let's consider the analogy of the game of chess (an analogy that, as it happens, Saussure was fond of using for purposes that were different). In any chess game, other than those of raw beginners, the player is likely to encounter dispositions of the pieces never before experienced and to make moves never made before. Indeed, the number of possible moves in a game of chess is just as 'astronomical' as Chomsky declares 'the number of sentences in one's native language that one will immediately understand with no feeling of difficulty or strangeness' [11] to be. However, in a game of chess it's always possible to determine whether a move is legitimate or not because there's a fixed code of rules by which that question can be decided. Chomsky's view of language is very similar: 'the use of language in the ordinary free and creative fashion'[12] that he speaks of means simply the ability to produce sentences that may be new but stay within the rules of the system: otherwise Chomsky would pronounce them to be deviant. What he has no conception of is creativity that goes beyond or against the system.

The declared aim of Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar is to formulate a set of rules that can, in principle, generate all and only the acceptable sentences of the language. And how is the acceptability or non--acceptability of a sentence to be determined? By the intuitions of native speakers of the language. There are large conservative social assumptions that lie concealed here, in spite of Chomsky's dissenting role in relation to the American political establishment. The very aim of constructing a single

grammar is a denial of the *heteroglossia* that, as Mikhail Bakhtin argued so eloquently, is intrinsic to language. How exclusionary Chomsky's conception of language is can be demonstrated from the distinction he draws between 'pure' and 'impure' languages.[13] Chomsky's theory of language is concerned only with 'pure' languages. As an example of an 'impure' language he offers the mixture of French and Russian spoken by the 19th century French aristocracy. On this basis he would have to exclude many language varieties in the contemporary world: for instance, the English spoken by many middle class Sri Lankans with its frequent admixture of Sinhala or Tamil words and phrases.

Chomsky's theory of syntax is directed towards creating an idealised, rationalised model of linguistic structure. The differences between that model and observable language use are taken care of by Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance*. The latter consists of the diverse, variable, phenomena of actual language use, open to idiosyncracy and error, that are excluded as not the proper object of linguistics. What linguistics has to concern itself with, according to Chomsky, is *competence*, the ordered, rule-governed system of a language, assumed by him to be internalised by native speakers. Indeed, for Chomsky the spoken utterances of people are like surface froth in the sea of language; underneath is the bedrock of the deep structures that are assumed to underlie every sentence, though below the level of awareness of the speaker. These deep structures are thought of as generating through transformations the surface structures that are realised phonetically in spoken sentences.

Chomsky's linguistics represents indeed the most thoroughgoing attempt to depreciate the material body of language that has been made in the history of this science. It is no accident that the pre-twentieth century tradition of linguistics that Chomsky values most highly is that of the Port-Royal grammarians of the Cartesian school. 'Pursuing

the fundamental distinction between body and mind,' writes Chomsky, 'Cartesian linguistics characteristically assumes that language has two aspects.' Chomsky goes on to define these two as an inner and an outer aspect. A sentence can be studied from the point of view of how it expresses a thought or from the point of view of its physical shape, that is, from the point of view of either semantic interpretation or phonetic interpretation.[14] Thus the Cartesian mind--body dualism is related by Chomsky to the distinction between semantics and phonetics, and this in turn is correlated with the difference between deep structure and surface structure. Where Skinner had tried to explain language in terms of a crude behaviourist materialism, Chomsky's linguistics treats the mentalist aspect of language as its inner real essence, and speech as only its outer, superficial materialisation. Against this it is necessary to assert that language is one of the most palpable manifestations of the interdependence of body and mind. This is true not only of spoken language but also of unspoken thought, since we think (for the most part)[15] in mental images of speech. Further, intonation is an important aspect of speech that affects meaning: the same sentence, spoken with two different intonations, can mean very different things; but by regarding the phonetic form of the sentence as of the surface only, Chomsky's system can't accommodate this fact. Moreover, other bodily aspect that accompany speech – facial expressions, gestures and stances of the body – can make a difference in meaning too, but these phenomena are excluded by the Chomskyan conceptualization of language. Since deep structures, by the very nature attributed to them are a theoretical construct, not accessible to direct observation, what evidence is there that they exist at all? The strongest claim made for their reality is that through them ambiguous sentences can be rid of ambiguity. Thus, Chomsky resolves the ambiguities of a sentence such as *Visiting relatives can be a nuisance* ('to visit relatives' or 'relatives who visit'?) by constructing two different 'deep structures' from which the

surface structure is generated by transformations. On the other hand, the fact that the sentences *John is easy to please* and *John is eager to please* appear to be similar in their surface structures is shown to be misleading ('It is easy to please John' but not 'It is eager to please John'), because the deep structures that generate the sentences are again taken to be different. So Chomsky's endeavour has been to unearth beneath the anomalous, inconsistent, disordered appearances of the surface structures of language - what is actually said or written - a set of tidied-up, orderly, rational deep structures that are perceptible only to linguistic science. What's important is to ask: What are the motivations behind these constructs, what view of language do they serve? If you want to be convinced that the ambiguities and inconsistencies of language are only surface phenomena, that in its underlying essence language really is a perfectly logical system, then you'll find the construction of deep structures very reassuring. But then, it's also possible to cope with linguistic ambiguity in quite a different way - by saying: 'Like many other human creations, language is full of inexactnesses and anomalies, and this is a curse or a blessing, depending on what you want from it. If you desire a completely rational system, then of course ambiguity is a curse; but if you are at home with paradox, contradiction, ambivalence, then ambiguity can be a blessing, it can be another expressive linguistic resource. And poets and wits found this to be true, not only of the kind of syntactical ambiguity I have just been talking about, but also of puns and other forms of wordplay, long before Wilham Empson wrote his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* sixty years ago.

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Feste, the clown, says: 'A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit; how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!' Feste's metaphor implies that there is a hidden side of language, like the inside of a glove, that an ingenious speaker may expose to view. In calling it 'the wrong side' he seems to be invoking a standard

of linguistic correctness. But in using that phrase he's really speaking with his tongue in his cheek, because he's a master of wordplay who continually indulges in the creative art of turning language inside out. Feste's view is the direct opposite of Chomsky's. For Feste, what is under the surface of language is its irregular, rule-defying face. For Chomsky, on the other hand, the hidden essence of language is in rule-governed 'competence', that isn't apparent in the flux of linguistic events but has to be inferred by the theorising linguist, and it's the deep structures of sentences that embody their true form. No wonder Chomsky places himself consciously in the Cartesian logical, rationalising tradition of thinking about language. But it seems to me that Feste the clown is closer to the actuality of language than Descartes the philosopher or Chomsky the scientific linguist. In sixteenth and early seventeenth century England the Feste view of language as flexible in the hands of a good wit is borne out by the proliferation of puns and other forms of wordplay in the literature. But by the eigthteenth century, when rationality had been accepted as the norm, Dr. Johnson could criticise Shakespeare for sacrificing 'reason, propriety and truth' through his addiction to puns. The reaction of Johnson, the stern moralist, was, I suspect, all the stronger because a large number - perhaps the majority - of these puns were sexual.

But let me return to Chomsky's analysis of syntactical ambiguity in terms of deep structures. It's necessary to remember that for Chomsky deep structures aren't simply a mechanism for sentence analysis, but real entities which are believed to exist in the mind of the speaker, though s/he isn't aware of them. With these considerations in mind, let us look at a case where ambiguity enriches meaning, as Empson showed so extensively in his book. However, I am using an example that, as far as I can remember, wasn't picked out by Empson. In A *Midsummer Night's Dream,* Lysander speaks of the brevity and vulnerability of love by comparing it to a flash of lightning:

> Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
> That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,
> And – ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!' -
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up.
> So quick bright things come to confusion.

The last line is ambiguous, syntactically and semantically. *Quick* can be an adverb modifying *come:* 'bright things come to confusion so quickly'. Alternatively, *quick* can be an adjective, meaning 'living, lively' and going together with *bright* in modifying *things*: 'In the same way things which are alive and bright come to confusion'. (The syntactical function and meaning of *so* also differ as between the first interpretation and the second.) Was Shakespeare conscious of the ambiguity? The question is a naive one, deriving from a Cartesian, rationalist view of the mind that is archaic in the century of Freud.[16] What is apparent is that the flickering of meaning here is peculiarly appropriate to the feeling of the line and its sense of instability and impermanence. At some level, then, both meanings must have been present to Shakespeare's imagination (and, of course, this is only one of many syntactical ambiguities that we can find in the plays and the sonnets). How then would Chomsky fit this into his theoretical construction? The case is very different from *Visiting relatives can be* a *nuisance,* where, whichever meaning was intended by the speaker or received by the hearer, each of the two hypothesised deep structures excludes the other. In the Shakespeare line, however, we would have to say, if we use Chomsky's method of analysis, that two deep structures were simultaneously present, at whatever level of awareness or non-awareness, in Shakespeare's mind. But that would contradict the distinction that Chomsky maintains between ambiguous surface structures and unambiguous deep structures. Since one function of deep structure in Chomsky's theory is to explain and dispel ambiguity, the theory breaks down as soon as ambiguity isn't an error in communication but an additional resource.

At the third level of language – semantics – the attempts made to apply to the study of meaning procedures similar to those that have been worked out for phonology and syntax have produced only monumental triviality. Consider the componential analysis favoured by transformational-generative grammarians. Componential analysis is directed towards identifying and representing in schematic form the atomic constituents of the meaning of words.[17] Thus *spinster* can be broken down into [+ human], [+ adultJ, [- male], [--married], where the plus and minus signs indicate the presence or absence of the relevant property. The method is based on binary oppositions, to which structural linguists are addicted, so that [+ female] would do as well as [-male], but I have assumed that there are more male componential analysts than female and that the male category would more often be treated as basic. This enterprise is, of course, restricted to denotative meaning. It can't capture, for instance, what D.H. Lawrence meant when he referred to 'the spinsterly Jane Austen', since he wasn't talking about her civil status. It's an interesting example of gender bias in language that *bachelor* doesn't carry similar connotations.[18] Thus, whole areas of language use have to be left out in componential analysis; but even in the denotative field, the air of scientific precision given by the method and the notation is spurious. In the above analysis of *spinster*, the component *adult* has been added because it would otherwise have appeared that a four-year old girl could be called a *spinster*, which would be contrary to normal English usage. But as soon as *adult* is admitted as a component, the question of what is the boundary of adulthood arises. Do we reckon it from the age of puberty, the legal age of consent to marriage in a particular society, the average of marrigeability or what? Even though *spinster* may have been at one time a precise legal term, today it's used in common language only in restricted contexts. It's applied to a woman who is beyond

what the speaker regards as the normal time of marriage – itself indeterminate – and who, by choice or otherwise, has remained unmarried. The componential analysis of *spinster*, therefore presents enormous difficulties even in relation to British usage. It would break down completely if one tried to use the word in describing, say, women in Indian rural society, where child-marriage exists. What componential analysis excludes in its show of scientific analytical precision is that even denotatively, meaning isn't so fixed and clear-cut as to be amenable to this kind of categorisation. The meaning and appropriate usage of a word often vary with extra-linguistic contexts that can't be contained by componential analysis at all. It seems incredible that there are practitioners of componential analysis who believe that the fundamental categories they use are universals that extend across all languages: and for some of Chomsky's disciples they are even innate. It must require extraordinary cultural insularity to swallow either of these assumptions.[19]

What prevails then in the academies of linguistics is a model of language as rule-governed, systematic, and ordered by fixed codes of meaning – a conception in keeping with the very nature of the enterprise that linguistic science set itself. Both of the most influential thinkers on language of the century - Saussure and Chomsky - by making a distinction between *langue* and *parole* in the one case and between *competence* and *performance* in the other, conceded that this well-policed state of language was an abstraction. Nevertheless it is that abstraction that they chose to study. Outside that idealised state lay the anarchy of heterogeneous language use, whether by pub keepers or by poets.

In the first two parts of this paper I focussed on two types of linguistic practice that are anomalous in relation to the ordered model of language to which I have just referred. One is the combination of signifiers to create meaning in ways that aren't legitimised by the rules of the system; the other is the displacement of signifiers from what is, again by the

rules of that system, their proper signified. In the third part I have looked at ambiguity as a recurring feature of language. All these linguistic phenomena occur not just in the writing of extraordinary original geniuses but in common speech. So in actual language use there is, as I have already suggested, both system and non-system. What linguistic science attempts to identify and explicate are the rules of the system. What is outside its province is the non-systematic, the non-rule governed, in language use. When Saussure and Chomsky excluded *parole* and *performance*, respectively, from their theoretical purview, they were following these lines of segregation. But in casting *parole* and *performance* out of the privileged territory of linguistic science, Saussure and Chomsky must have seen what they were excluding as merely the erroneous, deviant, irregular phenomena of language use. It has been the main purpose of this paper to show that in doing so they were also eliminating everything genuinely creative and innovative in language. We need, therefore, to invert the semantic model that has been given us by orthodox linguistic science. We should recognise that under normal conditions meaning is always open to instability, flux, innovation and diversity. It's only after that recognition that we should grant that there are special, sanitized areas where meaning is put on a slimming diet and thinned down for regulated and strictly defined referential purposes, and there the systematizing linguist will feel fully at home.

It's significant that as against the intellectual sterility of academic semantics, the last few decades have been a period when new and exciting ideas about meaning have come, not from formal linguistics, but from literary theory and literary criticism, semiotics, anthropology, philosophy, history, psychoanalysis and feminism. Nor can these new insights be accommodated within the model of language in the schools of linguistics. There seems to me no alternative, however painful this may be for professional linguists, but

to acknowledge that linguistics is only a partial science of language - that it copes only with those aspects of language that can be contained within rule and system. But language in use exceeds linguistics. To understand a text or a spoken utterance, we need to take into account not only those of its internal linguistic relationships that lie outside the language system but also the extra--linguistic context of what is written or spoken.[20] In practice, as users of language, we are constantly doing both these without benefit of a theory. But if we want theory to justify our practice, we shall have to go beyond the bounds mapped by linguistics, and draw on the insights afforded by those other disciplines and intellectual movements that I have enumerated. It's not surprising that the study of language should ultimately turn out to be a multi-faceted undertaking since language interpenetrates all human activity, thought and knowledge.

IV

In post-structuralist writing there has been much use of the concept of *play* in relation to language. The ambiguity of the word, as used in this context, is intentional. *Play*, on the one hand, suggests freedom or room for movement, as in the turning of a wheel, so that it points to the fact that language isn't a rigidly deterministic system, that there is room in it for innovation and variety. On the other hand, *play* also implies that the exercise of that freedom is pleasurable, that it partakes of the satisfaction to be found in playing a game. But since dominant linguistic practices are often bound up with structures of power - whether of class, gender or ethnicity -there has also been much discussion of the way in which linguistic innovation by subordinated social groups of any kind can be a form of criticism or protest or struggle against prevailing power structures. I think there are connections between these two sets of ideas. It's because there's room to be found within language for innovation that it can be transformed into an

arena for the contestation of power. It's also because there's pleasure to be found in linguistic creativity that that pleasure can be made to serve the joy of emancipating oneself, at least in spirit, from oppressive institutions. As an example that comes readily to hand, I refer to the discussion in Professor Valentine E. Daniel's lecture in June - the Punitham Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture - of the creative originity of language animated by social rebelliousness in the outburst of rage of a Tamil woman estate worker.[21] But I want to make a qualification here. Though creativity in language is always an escape from the rigidity of a linguistic system, not all such creativity is liberating in the larger, social sense. Let me take an example of what I am driving at. It comes from the George E. de Silva jokes[22] that were at one time popular among the English-educated classes in Sri Lanka. Many of them would be relevant to my argument, but I shall make use of just one. The story says that a proposal was made in the Kandy Municipal Council for the building of a public urinal, and George E. de Silva is supposed to have said, 'Why only a urinal? Why not an arsenal as well?' It's now well known that this and other such jokes weren't ignorant linguistic errors by the mythicised George E. de Silva but inventions by Cox Sproule, a Kandy lawyer, well-known wit and writer of light verse of the time. I suggest that there are at least three different elements that went into the humour of this story. In the first place, in inventing it Cox Sproule was deliberately exploiting the possibility of making connections between signifiers against the system of language. He was seizing on the resemblance, phonetic and graphic, between the two crucial signifiers to transfer *arsenal* from the semantic field of warfare to that of the excretory functions (not that Cox Sproule could have described what he was doing in that way). In that respect the story was a flight of linguistic creativity on the part of the joke's inventor: and the pleasure it gives the hearer comes partly from the shock of unexpected innovation. Secondly, the joke is scatological: it uses in

disguise a word, *arse,* that is tabooed in polite discourse. It circumvents this taboo through the breaking of a linguistic rule, by disengaging *arsenal* from its proper signification, and the satisfaction to be found in the release from a social prohibition enhances our pleasure in the joke's creative ingenuity. But there's a third source of its humour that can be identified only by restoring the joke to the social, extra-linguistic context in which it was first circulated. At this distance of time it's difficult to identify with certainty the motivations for Cox Sproule's invention of the George E. de Silva jokes. But George E. de Silva's nephew, L.O. de Silva, says in his memoirs that his uncle 'was the first Sinhalese lawyer to practice at the Kandy Police Court and the entrenched Dutch Burgher lawyers did not take kindly to his cavalier intrusion'.[23] It seems to me, however, that there must have been, both in the creation of the jokes and in their reception and popularity another socio--political factor at work.[24] George E. de Silva came from what was regarded as a lower caste: his political ascent had to be made against the Kandyan Sinhala feudal classes, who regarded him as a social upstart, and he remained a maverick member of the political establishment who often espoused radical causes. The jokes about his supposed malapropisms must, therefore, have been a way of putting him down in the eyes of the English-speaking classes, for whom 'errors' in English were always laughable when committed by those who were deemed to be social inferiors. Thus, the linguistic creativity of Cox Sproule's jokes served, in the social domain, the conservative purpose of ridiculing a figure regarded as an upstart outsider who was making his way in the professional and political worlds.

But if a popular joke can combine the creative and the retrogressive, so can a literary text. Just as I would say of a Cox Sproule joke about George E. de Silva, 'This was very funny and very clever, but it served the interests of those who wanted to keep George E. de Silva down,' so I would say of Eliot's *The Waste Land,* 'This was a highly innovative

work, full of creative power in the way it renewed the language of poetry, and yet it was also snobbish, misogynist, and morbidly puritan in its sex-horror.' I would be prepared to support this claim from the text, but perhaps it would be more satisfying to end with something that offers both the delight of linguistic originality and the joy of living. It comes from a book that was published in the same year as *The Waste Land*, but was in every respect except its literary inventiveness the antithesis of Eliot's poem.

In the penultimate chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom returns, after his day's wanderings in Dublin, to his home. No faithful Penelope awaits him, unlike his Homeric prototype; his wife, Molly, has had adulterous sex that day in his marital bed. Bloom himself has ceased for many years to have intercourse with his wife, but he has his own mode of satisfaction, and he now enacts it:

> He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation.

I recall that when in 1933 Judge Woolsey delivered his famous judgment lifting the ban on *Ulysses* in the United States, he said:

'...whilst in many places the effect of *Ulysses* undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac.' I suppose it's symptomatic of American public morality at that time that even a liberal judge, delivering an opinion that has been held to be a landmark in the freedom of artistic expression, could imply that an emetic was to be preferred to an aphrodisiac. One wonders what Judge Woolsey thought of the passage I have just quoted: did he find it 'emetic' too? And perhaps there may still be readers to whom the rendering of Bloom's act may seem only abnormal, perverse, masochistic, even disgusting. But one can give way to that negative reaction only if one is wholly

deaf to the vitality of the language. Though I would hardly call the passage an 'aphrodisiac', its power is certainly erotic. It's comic, too, of course: it's part of the strength of Joyce's treatment of sexuality that he doesn't have to regard it, like Lawrence, with religious reverence, but the comedy isn't that of mockery or denigration. Life, in spite of its discordances and contradictions, is felt to be delightful, its energies pulsating in the flow of the rhythms, in the dance of the signifiers weaving their polyphonic patterns of sound. Bloom may be sexually unproductive, but the language in which his non-intercourse is represented is supremely fertile, the signifiers mating in defiance of all the laws of linguistic exogamy. In its carnivalesque celebration of the sensual life and desires of the body, even in a seemingly degraded aspect, the language affirms the powers of its own body, its material substance. The joyous outpouring of creative power in the independent life taken on by the signifiers reaches its highest point in the origination of the word *smellow*. It contains within itself *smell* and *mellow*, links through its first syllable with *melons*, through its last with *furrow*, and through both with *yellow*. It thus brings together the colour and the shape and the feel and the smell of Molly's buttocks, and Bloom's desire as well. It's a portmanteau word, in the way that Humpty-Dumpty defined the term for Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*: 'You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word' – except that here, of course, there aren't two but multiple meanings. But the whole passage is a remarkable example of the capacity of signifiers in their extra-logical, sensuous life to create meaning across the barriers of rigid linguistic structures. Already here, near the end of *Ulysses*, Joyce is looking ahead to the continually recreated, limitlessly polysemous language of *Finnegans Wake*: 'But by writing thithaways end to end and turning, turning and end to end hithaways writing and with lines of litters slittering up and louds of latters slettering down...'[25] Long before contemporary literary theorists discovered the

instability of meaning and the sliding of signifiers, Joyce had found the language in which to describe them and act them out at the same time.

Before Babel and After

A myth for Noam Chomsky

Before Babel, they say, words were always
well-behaved. Each word meant one thing,
and one only. (Polygamy flourished, but not
polysemy.) So if anybody anywhere spoke of a ring,

you knew she meant something on her finger, not
a gang or a halo round the moon. And words
kept good order when joined in a sentence,
with patterns as changeless and clear as the song of birds,

and meaning as transparent as the water of a mountain stream.
But when the Lord God, fearful that men would be able
to reach heaven by the tall tower they were building,
confused their single language into a polyglot babel,

he sowed disorder also in each of their new tongues.
You weren't sure what anybody meant now. So how
could you trust anything if truth wasn't single,
if speech was less reliable than a dog's bow-wow?

Some sighed for the lost world where everything
was certain. But others found they could play with the torn
fragments of truth, making mosaics of words
that moved and changed with the light. So poetry was born.

NOTE A : Shakespeare's Classical Howler

It's relevant to draw attention here to a case of ambiguity in Shakespeare – in this case, not syntactic but lexical -, which was certainly unconscious, but must be taken to enhance meaning and therefore to be part of the working of the poetic imagination. In *Troilus and Cressida,* Troilus is separated from his beloved Cressida, who has been sent as a hostage to the Greek camp. On a mission to the Greek army, Troilus discovers that Cressida is unfaithful to him and that she is about to become the mistress of Diomedes. Troilus is an idealising lover, and finds himself unable to reconcile his former image of Cressida with the present reality: 'This is, and is not, Cressid.' There follow these six lines:

Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of such strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth;
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.

'Ariachne's broken woof'? The text itself is here, from the scholarly point of view, a kind of 'broken woof', for Greek mythology, to which Shakespeare was obviously alluding, knows no 'Ariachne'. The learned Ben Jonson, who said that Shakespeare had 'small Latin and less Greek', might have smiled if he had been in the audience at the Globe Theatre: in Greek myth there is Arachne, who made Athene jealous by her fine weaving, and the goddess tore up her tapestry and turned her into a spider. It's quite likely that regularising editors of the 18th or 19th century would have tried to save Shakespeare's reputation by attributing the blunder to a compositor, but the obstacles in the way of that were too great..[26] There are two original texts of *Troilus and Cressida* - a Quarto and the First Folio - and one of them reads *Ariachna's* and the other *Ariachne's.* Moreover, to emend *Ariachne's* to

Arachne's would have meant throwing the metre out of gear, so editors have been forced to conclude that Shakespeare committed here what in lesser mortals would have been called a 'howler'.

But we can guess what happened. There's another woman in Greek myth called Ariadne, who gave Theseus the thread with which he was to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. In other words, Shakespeare's memory conflated *Arachne* and *Ariadne* and produced *Ariachne.* Or we can say that the text is a woof, in which *Arachne* and *Ariadne* are warp and weft.

The error, however, was creative. For Troilus the difference between his imagination of Cressida and the reality of her, on the one hand, gaped wider than sky and earth. On the other hand, that difference couldn't admit a space in which a thread (Arachne's or Ariadne's) could enter, because both Cressidas were one and the same person. However, the shadowy figure of Ariadne brings in another set of associations - that of the labyrinth, in which Troilus is hopelessly trapped between illusion and reality. Several commentators have gone so far, but I don't know whether anybody has remarked that there are other associations that may have contributed to the intrusion of Ariadne into Shakespeare's imagination. There's more than one version of the Theseus legend, and in some of them Ariadne deserts Theseus on the island of Naxos because she is courted by the god Dionysus. So the theme of infidelity and separation may have helped to bring Ariadne to mind for Shakespeare, and her new lover was *Dionysus* while Cressida's was *Diomedes.*

Shakespeare's *Ariachne* was a 'portmanteau word', as defined in the body of the paper in the discussion of Joyce.[27] The term, as explained there, comes from Humpty-Dumpty's explication, for Alice's benefit, of the words in 'Jabberwocky'. Shakespeare couldn't have got away with his 'portmanteau' if Ben Jonson had been breathing down his neck, and Lewis

Carroll's linguistic innovations occurred in a children's book which grammarians wouldn't have felt obliged to take seriously. No constraints, however, operated for Joyce in his linguistic creativity.

NOTE B: Multiple Meanings in *Finnegans Wake*

The first part of the sentence quoted from *Finnegans Wake* can be read as a description of the form of writing known as *boustrephedon,* used by early scribes in Greece and elsewhere, which consisted of writing from left to right and from right to left in alternate lines. (It's interesting that this has been revived in computer printing, though Joyce didn't live to see it.) Joyce not only describes but, in a sense, mimics *boustrephedon* here, since the order of the words in the first phrase is inverted in the second. That part of the passage can also be read as an allusion to Joyce's own method of composing *Finnegans Wake,* writing forwards and backwards in the book. However, *boustrephedon (turning, turning)* may be taken in a broader sense as a metaphor of the periodical shifts and revolutions in literary practice. In the rest of the quotation the horizontal movement is paralleled by a vertical one. We can, if we wish, take these as representing the different dimensions of language – synchronic and diachronic, syntagmatic and paradigmatic; but what's more important is that there is a strong suggestion of the instability of language, like that of the letters *(litters)* of type in a printer's forme, *slittering* and *slettering* (slithering), so that the accumulation of writing, literature, may in the end be *litter. Louds* brings in the phonic component of language to complement the graphic. It also suggests loads, and since *latters* may be associated with *ladders,* there is present in the background the main mythical figure of the book, the Tim Finnegan of the Irish ballad who climbed up a ladder with a load of bricks and fell off because he was drunk. *Slittering* carries an echo

of the 'Aeolus' episode of the newspaper office in *Ulysses*, where Bloom hears the sound of the flyboard in the printing machine as 'sllt'. 'Everything speaks in its own way. Sllt.'

The Thatched Patio, May 1994

Footnotes

1 Marcus Wheeler, *The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary* (1972: Oxford University Press). Strictly speaking *lexemes*.

2 There's an ambiguity in the use of the term word in this context: are table and tables one word or two? Lexemes are 'dictionary words' – units in the vocabulary of a language, whether spoken or written. Thus table and tables would be different forms of a single lexeme.

3 Actually, Russian, English or any other language isn't a single linguistic system but a complex of different varieties, differentiated by the class, regional distribution, ethnic character, age-group etc. of their speakers. Dictionaries, in listing meanings, follow 'standard' usage, which in practice is that of socially or culturally privileged speakers, while sometimes including 'sub-standard ' usages, listed as 'dialectal ', 'slang','vulgar' etc. Where in the rest of this paper I speak of 'the system of the language ', this must be understood as meaning 'the system of a particular variety of the language'.

4 Quoted from Elaine Feinstein, *A Captive Lion: The Life of Marina Tsvetaeva* (1987: Hutchinson), p.211.

5 Translated from Marina Tsvetaeva, *Sti hotvoreniya I poemy* , ed. V.A. Rozhdestvensky (1979: Sovetskiy Pisastel '), p.539.

6 My verse translation will provide an indication of what these are, though it isn't a literal paraphrase, and carries its own rhythms and other phonic effects which may, I hope, make it pleasing as a poem in its own right. For instance, in the alliteration of 'tree-trunk' and 'table' there may be a shadow of the linking that Tsvetaeva achieves more strongly with *stol* and *stvol*.

7 The Formalists, in fact, went further: they believed that the literary language itself tended to lose its 'strangeness' when a particular style became familiar by usage; it then needed to be renewed by literary revolution. There 's a close parallel here with the endeavour of the Anglo-American modernists around the same time to regenerate the poetic idiom, summed up in Ezra Pound 's slogan 'Make it new!

8 Practitioners of stylistics, however, are concerned with analysis and not usually with literary judgment.

9 The last two manifestations of language (in the case of dreams I am thinking not of their visual imagery but of the verbal forms that are often heard in dream-states) were, of course, illuminated by Freud. Chomsky would presumably treat both as examples of the deviant phenomena to be observed in language 'performance ', and therefore as lying outside the proper material of linguistic study as conceived by him.

10 There are estimated to be about 5000 living languages, and even if we ignore the unknown number that have become extinct (many of them leaving no records), how is it possible to test any conjectured linguistic universals for all these languages? Verification of Chomsky's hypothesis has necessarily to be made for every single case because of the far-reaching conclusion he wishes to draw from the supposed existence of linguistic universals: that the elements of a universal deep grammar are innate.

11 Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (1972: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p. 12.

12 Ibid, p. viii.

13 Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use* (1986: Praeger), p. 17.

14 Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966: Harper and Row), pp. 32-33.

15 I make this qualification to take account of visual or other sense-imagery that may accompany thinking.

16 I'm not suggesting that the specifically Freudian unconscious is beneath this line. I'm making the more general point that after Freud, we can't take for granted that only what is consciously apprehended by the mind of a writer enters into the act of creation. See also Note A: 'Shakespeare's Classical Howler'.

17 Once again, more strictly, of lexemes.

18 If one thought, for instance, that Henry James was sexless, one could convey this very sharply by calling him a 'spinster', but it would hardly do for this purpose to say: 'the bachelor Henry James'.

19 It's relevant also to recall Wittgenstein's famous demons tration that you can't define the word game in terms of common characteristics that are shared by all games and only by games: there is, as he showed, only a set of 'family resemblances', some (but only some) of which are to be found in any particular game.

20 It's true that some theories of linguistics (e.g. Halliday's systemic linguistics) take account of context in their analysis of meaning, but the only thoroughgoing endeavour in this direction that I know is Roy Harris's project for an 'integra tionalist model' of language (see Roy Harris, 'On Redefining Linguistics' in Hayley G. Davis and Talbot J.Taylor (eds.), *Redefining Linguistics* (1990: Routledge), pp.45-52.

21 Valentine E. Daniel, 'Tea Talk: Violent Measures in the Discourse of Sri Lankan Estate Tamils', in *The Thatched Patio*, May/June 1994.

22 George E.de Silva was a politician of pre-independence Sri Lanka, who was the local equivalent of Sam Goldwyn in that many anecdotes were circulated about his alleged misuses of language.

23 Lloyd Oscar de Silva, *Echoes in the Memory*(1992: Lantana, Melbourne), p. 251.

24 L.O.de Silva seems to confirm this by saying that George E. de Silva 'ignored or overcame the personal ridicule heaped on him by Kandyan and Burgher alike.' (*op.cit.*, p.139.)

25 See Note B: 'Multiple Meanings in *Finnegans Wake*.'

26 According to John Munro (ed.), The London Shakespeare (1957: Eyre and Spottiswoode), Vol. V, p. 698, there was at least one editor (Keightley), who attempted this by rewriting the lines:As subtle as Arachne's broken woof, Admits no orifice for a point to enter.

27 Cf. Derek Attridge, 'Unpacking the Portmanteau, or Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?' in Jonathan Culler (ed.), *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (1988: Basil Blackwell).

3

Visual Language and Mass Media*

For Saussure the central fact about language as a sign-system was the arbitrary character of linguistic signs. What does this mean? In the first place, there is no inherent or natural reason to be found in the sounds of *cat* making them necessarily the signifier of a particular kind of animal. If English had developed differently, another set of sounds would have done just as well for the same purpose, as in fact the sounds of *balla* do in Sinhala and the sounds *koshka* in Russian. It's because of the arbitrary nature of the sign that language has what is called *double articulation*. This means that language has two levels of structural organization – phonological and grammatical. The lower level is constituted by the sounds which make up word-forms, and the upper level by the word-forms and their syntactical relations in a sentence. Meaning doesn't exist at the lower, phonological level; it can arise only at the upper level.

However, there is a more important and less obvious sense in which Saussure spoke of the linguistic sign as arbitrary, and one which runs counter to popular, intuitively felt notions about language. People tend to think of language as attaching labels to things and ideas which have their own existence in the world, independently of language and they suppose that all that different languages do is to attach

different labels in the same things. However, the truth is that different languages structure the world in different ways, related to the different structural environments, cultures and social formations in which they are used.

If languages merely attached labels to pre-existing and universal concepts, there should be a one-to-one correspondence between the words and expressions of one language and those of another. But as one soon discovers through the act of translation, this isn't so. It's quite obvious why Russian should have an abundance of words to describe various phenomena connected with the freezing of water, while Sinhala has only the word *hima* and the borrowed word *ice*. But more interesting are those differences between the vocabularies of one language and another.

To begin with, I must say that part of this paper will be theoretical because it will be concerned with setting out a theory of semiotics. However, I'm not presenting the theory as an end in itself but as a means towards understanding the ways in which visual mass media work.

My title raises the question: Do visual images in mass media constitute a language, or are we merely using an analogy or metaphor when we talk of 'visual language'? To answer this question we must first be clear about what language is. I shall therefore begin by discussing the fundamental characteristics of language. The analysis I'm going to make is based mainly on that of Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structural linguistics and the author of one of the great revolutions of contemporary thought.[1]

Language, as Saussure showed, is a system of signs. Spoken sounds and written marks on paper makes sense, become language, only as part of a socially accepted convention within a particular community, and this convention is that of a sign-system. Saussure went on to analyse the *sign* as the union of a *signifier* and a *signified*. The spoken sounds *cat* constitute a signifier, whose signified is the concept of a particular kind of four-footed animal.

While we can separate the signifier from the signified in the process of analysis, in the actual use of language the two are indivisible: the word doesn't exist without the concept, or the concept without the word, Saussure expressed this interdependence of a signifier and signified by comparing language to a sheet of paper, where you can't have the front of the sheet without the back. In language-use, in the same way, signifier and signified are inseparable constituents of their union, which is the sign, which reveal culturally and socially created differences between the concepts. The English word *boredom* is usually used to translate French *ennui* and Russian *skuka*. But both *ennui* and *skuka*, while corresponding to *boredom* in some contexts, have a broader spread of meanings, can cover more intense emotional states, like the sense of meaninglessness in Baudelaire. And Sinhala has no proper equivalent for *boredom*, probably because boredom is a phenomenon of urban, alienated living still insufficiently experienced in our country.

Because linguistic signs are arbitrary, they can signify only by virtue of a socially accepted *code*. Language and language use are abundant in such codes. At the lowest level we have the basic semantic code determining the meanings of each word and expression current in a language. We can regard the dictionary of a language as an attempt to define that basic code. We then have a variety of higher-order codes, sometimes called *discourses*. These are domains of language use, established ways of using the language for specific purposes. Such higher-order codes include stylistic conventions, journalistic clichés, political rhetoric, scientific terminologies, poetic forms, narrative forms in fiction, and many others.

Before finishing my account of language, I need to introduce two more concepts – those of *denotation* and *connotation*.

Consider the well-known line of English poetry: 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.' I want to direct your attention

to the word *rosebuds*. Acquaintance with the lexicon of the English language tells us that the word refers to the immature unopened flowers of the rose tree. We can say that this is the *denotation* of the word – the class of objects to which it refers. But clearly that isn't all that the word means in the context of Herrick's line. In poetic tradition roses are associated with passion: through this association, as well as the implied comparison between the pink of rosebuds and the pink of young girls' cheeks, we take *rosebuds* here as a metaphor for young love. We can say that these metaphorical and emotive associations constitute the *connotation* of the word. We can say, then that here there are two different codes at work: a denotative code which gives us the literal meaning of the word, and a connotative code which gives us its metaphorical meaning.

I have been talking of language as a sign-system. But language, spoken and written, is only one of many sign-systems used by human beings for representation and communication. We have, for instance, the use of gestures and bodily movements, traffic signs and road signs, military signals, rituals, forms of etiquette, and many others. Saussure held therefore that there was a need for a general science of signs embracing all sign-systems. He looked forward to the day when such a science would be developed, and he called it in advance *semiology*. (The word is derived from Greek *semeion*, a sign). Linguistics, he thought, would then provide a model for this larger science of semiology, while becoming a branch of it.

Saussure died in 1913, and it took nearly half a century after his death for his expectations to start becoming a reality. Within the last two decades, however, semiology – or semiotics, as it is also called – has been a growing field of investigation.

This brings me to the fundamental question of this paper: Do visual images in the mass media – press, film, television – constitute sign-systems of the kind I have

described? To answer this question, I need to make use of the ideas of another thinker, the American logician, C.S. Peirce, who classified signs into three types. The first type he called the *symbolic* sign. The sense of the word *symbolic* here is not that usually given to it in literary or art criticism. By *symbolic signs* Peirce meant what we have called *arbitrary signs*, where the connection between signifier and signified exists purely by virtue of social agreement. Language signs, therefore, are symbolic. The second type of signs that Peirce distinguished was what he called *iconic*. In iconic signs there's a perceptible similarity between signifier and signified. A picture of a cat looks like a cat – as we shall see later, this statement is not as unproblematic as it looks. But without going into that question now, let's agree for the present that a picture of a cat resembles it in a way that the sounds *cat* or the letters c-a-t don't. So we'll call the picture an iconic sign. I shan't say anything for the present about the third type of sign that Peirce distinguished – the indexical sign. We'll stick for the moment to the difference between symbolic and iconic signs. But there is one further point that needs to be made here. A sign-system needn't be wholly symbolic or wholly iconic in the character of its signs. In language there's an element of iconicity in onomatopoeic words, where – as is often said – 'sound suggests sense'. But this is true only of a small part of the language. And even in onomatopoeic words, the element of the arbitrary and conventional is still there. *Cuckoo* in English and *koha* in Sinhala are names for the same bird, onomatopoeically suggestive of the bird-call, but the sounds of the two words aren't identical, as they should be if they were simply iconic signs.

Now Saussure thought that the arbitrary nature of the sign was an essential feature of a sign-system. That's why he considered that linguistics should be a model for semiology. This would imply that any sign-system would have its own code or codes determining its meanings. Was he right as far as visual signs are concerned? Do such signs fall into coded systems?

Let's look at a simple system of visual signs: I'm taking the set of road signs. In this system a pair of intersecting lines signifies a crossroad. This is an iconic sign. Suppose, however, that the authority in charge decided instead to use a circle for the same purpose. This wouldn't be an iconic sign, and it would certainly be less convenient – less easy to learn or remember. But once accepted by road-users, it would serve its function without any ambiguity. Iconicity, therefore, isn't essential to the functioning of the system of road-signs: what matters is the social convention, the code determining its meanings, and the signs could be completely arbitrary without contradicting the purpose of the system.

But now think of some very different examples of visual signs. A passport photograph, a police picture of a wanted man, a drawing of a kingfisher in a manual of bird recognition, a colour sample of emerald green in a dye book, a star map of the constellation Orion – all these are examples of signs used in matching, identification and recognition. In all these cases the iconicity of the sign, the perceptible resemblance between signifier and signified, is essential to its function.

I do now contrast a spoken language as a system of signs with a body of visually iconic signs: the example I'll take is a set of drawings identifying the different species of birds in Sri Lanka. In the case of language we have a structure which is composed of discrete units. In an utterance we have sentences which are constituted of word-forms, and these word-forms in turn are constituted of phonological units, which are called phonemes. This structure of language – the fact that it is composed of discrete units – is expressed by saying that language is a *digital* system, and it follows from the digital character of language that there is in general no resemblance between signifier and signified. Now contrast the set of drawings of the birds of Sri Lanka. Here each signifier, each drawing, bears its signification as a continuous whole, and this makes possible a mimetic relationship

between signifier and signified. We say therefore that such a set of signs belongs to an *analogue* system of representation.

What I have been stating so far is based on the way in which spoken and written language has been contrasted with visually iconic sign-systems in semiological literature. However, the question of the relationship between signifier and signified in such systems has become one of the controversial issues in semiology in recent times – particularly in relation to film and television. What I am now going to offer is not a set of final answers to these questions but a statement of a tentative position which may serve as a basis for discussion.

Let's look again at language. I made the point a little while ago that there was in language an element of iconicity, but that it was very subordinate. Once you know that *koha* is the name of a particular species of bird, you can see that the sound is suggestive of the bird-call; but no foreigner who was unacquainted with Sinhala could tell from the sound of the word alone what it denoted. So iconicity in language exists as an incidental element within the generally symbolic character of the sign-system. The question that arises now is whether the iconic character of the visual sign depends on a direct apprehension of resemblance between signifier and signified, between a picture and object, outside any conventional or symbolic system. Is a picture simply a copy of nature, unmediated by culturally created and culturally learned modes of representation?

A moment ago I remarked that to say a picture of a cat looks like a cat is not as unproblematic as it seems. A picture of a cat, in fact, may be anything from a photograph on a calendar to a Picasso drawing. Can we say that the expression 'looks like' means the same thing in all these contexts?

Think of the very different ways in which a picture that we call representational can be so – the difference between, say, a line drawing of an animal by a graphic artist, a news-paper cartoon of a politician, and a diagram of a

human organ in a book of medicine. We may consider all of them recognizable representations, but their fidelity to the object varies from one example to the other. The first may give us only an outline of the animal's body, the second may exaggerate or distort certain features of the man, and the third may stylize or simplify the form of the organ. What we consider acceptable as representation in each case depends on the function the drawing serves and the conventions we have come to associate with these different types of representations.

If visually iconic signs and our response to them were a product of nature and not of culture, it would be impossible to explain why certain techniques of representation developed only at certain points of time in the history of art. Naturalistic perspective, for instance, doesn't appear in European art until the early Renaissance. It would be absurd to suppose that the great artists of earlier epochs were incapable of mastering techniques that any junior art student can learn today. No, their art lacked naturalistic perspective because they had a different conception of the relation between a picture and the world. The significant thing about naturalistic perspective is that it represents a scene from a single, fixed point of view, as seen by one individual.[2] Can it be an accident, therefore that naturalistic perspective emerged in European art just at the time that individualism was asserting itself in social, economic and political relationships? It is noteworthy also that perspective was unknown to Asian art in pre-colonial times. What was, behind this technical innovation in art, therefore, was a way of seeing that was not naturally but socially determined. To earlier civilizations naturalistic perspective was simply not 'natural' because they didn't assume that a picture should depict the viewpoint of a single, privileged spectator. Significantly, too, with the disintegration of the individualistic world-view of the last few centuries, modern art has moved away from naturalistic perspective. We have to conclude, therefore, that

naturalistic representation is not a natural, eternal phenomenon but one dependent on certain conventions and codes which are socially created.

So far I have been discussing visually iconic signs only in relation to drawn images. I come now to the case of photography: I'll discuss still photography first, before going on to film and TV. At first sight it may appear to you that photographic images are different from drawings in respect of their relationship to the natural object. Surely, you may say, nothing could be more like an object than a good photograph of it, so surely we don't have to be schooled in any code to understand what is represented in a photograph.

This is the appropriate point at which to introduce Peirce's third class of signs: the *indexical* sign. An indexical sign is one in which we assume a causal relationship between signifier and signified. A good example of an indexical sign is a black cloud that you see in the sky and understand as a sign of approaching rain; the cloud is an indexical sign because the relationship between it and the rain is in fact a causal one. Another example would be a rash on your body which a doctor interprets as a sign of an allergy: here again the relationship between signifier and signified is taken to be causal.

Now there's clearly an indexical element in photographic images because it is the light from the object affecting the photographic emulsion that causes the image to appear on the film. This seems to strengthen the case for treating photographic images as direct reflections of reality rather than as coded signs.

However, I'm going to contest this seemingly self-evident view. In doing so, I'm disagreeing not only with the 'commonsense' viewpoint but also with the opinion expressed by the most influential of modern semiologists, Roland Barthes. In two of his essays Barthes argued that the photographic image was 'a message without a code.'[3] However, this view has been questioned by some other

semiologists – for instance, the Italian semiologist Umberto Eco and the British writer Stuart Hall.[4]

Contrary to the commonsense assumption that recognizing an object from a photograph is an ability that comes naturally, there is anthropological evidence of people living in communities where photography was unknown failing to see what was in a photograph. They hadn't learned as we may say to *read* photographs.

I suggest, in fact, that the invention of photography brought with it a new set of denotative visual codes, new ways of perception, new ways of looking at and recognizing phenomena. This is clearest, I think, in respect of the phenomenon of movement.

The camera introduced people to a radically new set of images of arrested movement. This is not to say that visual art before the era of photography had never depicted motion frozen into immobility. Hundreds of baroque canvases and sculptures (to confine oneself to this era of European art alone) do precisely this. But it's only necessary to think of a characteristic painting of El Greco or Titian, where movement is beautifully composed into ordered patterns, to realize the difference between them and the signs of movement we have become familiar with from photography. Of course, the codes of stylized representation of movement which painters in the past followed weren't purely denotative: they had an important connotative function in suggesting grace, lightness, vigour or energy. However, this isn't the whole story. Until the coming of photography, it was impossible for people to know in many cases what exactly a movement would look like if arrested in mid-course. The most celebrated example is that of the motion of a running horse, where the actual positions of legs were established only by slow-motion and stop-frame cinematography: only one of the four ways of representing these motions which had been current in traditional art turned out to be correct. So that it's very likely that the images, with which we are all now familiar from

photography, of people caught instantaneously in the act of running, jumping, throwing, fighting, dancing, crying or laughing, would have seemed unexpected, strange or grotesque to our ancestors. These signs, created by the split-second freezing of reality, can rightly be regarded as part of a new denotation code. The comprehension of them that we have acquired is not one that has simply come from the interaction of genetically inherent capacities of perception with the physical environment. On the contrary, it's a socially learned response to a cultural artifact. But the camera hasn't only caught flashes of reality that the eye of man would never have known without it: it has also invented new forms of representation that we have come to accept as a new visual code although they don't in fact correspond literally to what the eye sees. When the camera captures in its own way the blurred glow of city lights seen through a windscreen, or the cloudy whirl of a dancer's body in movement, we accept these photographic representations of light and motion and we don't question their actuality, although in fact they are as much part of a created style, a code, as the blobs of colour in a Seurat painting or the iridiscent forms in a Degas.

Film and TV have their own denotative codes in terms of which the information content of their communication is structured, and one needs to be acquainted with these codes in order to comprehend what happens on the screen. You can't master a foreign language merely by learning all the words in the dictionary: you need to know also the grammar of the language. In the same way a spectator who can recognize the objects on the screen will still be unable to follow the narrative of a film unless he is familiar with the grammar of cinema – with the meaning of a camera movement within the shot, or the relations of shot to shot. In our own lifetime we have seen the Sinhala film audience grow in sophistication in understanding this grammar: where in the early films every phase of an action had to be spelt out for them, they can now take the elliptical narrative of a film like *Hansa Vilak*.

However, some theorists of film have questioned the propriety of speaking of a 'grammar' of film, on the ground that language has a grammar which precedes the utterance but film doesn't. A film sequence, it has been argued, can be described as unorthodox or unconventional, but not as ungrammatical. This, however, is a position I would contest.

Take one of the elementary rules of film editing that every beginner learns. If you have, say, a man walking up a staircase, you can't cut directly from a shot of him at the bottom of the stairs to one of him at the top. Now what would we say about a sequence that violated this rule? We would say it was wrongly edited – in other words, that it was contrary to the grammar of cinema. However, it's conceivable that a film director may violate this rule for a particular purpose – for instance, if he is using the discontinuity of movement to enact a dream. In this case we would accept the 'ungrammaticality' of the editing as purposive. But is film different from spoken or written language in this respect? When Joyce ends *Finnegans Wake* with the line, 'A way a lone a last a loved a long the,' don't we accept its ungrammaticality in precisely the same way?

I would take the view, therefore, that even on the denotative level, visual images in photography, film and TV are coded sign-systems, constitute languages – though we mustn't expect to find in them parallels to all the features that can be distinguished in spoken languages.[5]

At this stage I want to turn to the connotative visual codes that affect meaning in journalism, film and TV. Let's consider a press photograph – a picture of a type that you may have seen dozens of times during the Presidential election campaign. In the particular picture I'm talking about I find President Jayawardene in the foreground of the shot – a single, towering figure – while the rest of the picture space is occupied by masses of people, small and indistinguishable as individuals. Denotatively, the photograph is a sign in which the signifier consists of the visually perceived shapes,

and the signified is the event of the President speaking to a crowd at such-and-such a place the previous day. But the photograph as a sign obviously means more than this piece of information. On the level of denotation the figure looming in the foreground only tells you that the person closest to the camera was the President. But connotatively the lone, towering figure signifies for the appropriate reader of the paper the dominating leader, while the juxtaposition with the anonymous mass of the crowd signifies a relationship between leader and people led.

When we come to film and TV, we have to consider not single visual signs but whole sequences of signs. I should like to take an illustration from an advertising filmlet belonging to a series that is one of the most successful achievements of the ad-man's craft. I refer to the Singapore Airlines ads. One of the recent filmlets, which you may have seen on cinema screen or TV, begins with an impressive image of a part of the body of a jet plane, taken from below, against a yellow sunset sky. It cuts then to the interior of the plane, where a bevy of air-hostesses are serving an old lady birthday cake; then there is the customary freeze on the smile of one of the glamorous hostesses – shot in soft-focus – with the tagline spoken in a man's voice, 'Singapore girl, you're a great way to fly.' What I have just described are the signs on the level of denotation. But connotatively these signs signify much more. The first image of the plane, enormous on a big cinema screen, connotes a sense of the power of modern technology, which is associated with male power. Even if we don't go as far as seeing a phallic symbol in the shape of the plane's body, the implied figures of pilots and mechanics controlling this immense machine, are sufficient to convey this signification. The cut from this is to a sign with a very different connotation – a warm, intimate, affectionate femininity; yet the shots are visually linked one to the other by the fact that they are both suffused with a similar yellow light. The final shot creates a romantic fantasy: the filmic code which

associates soft-focus photography with romantic situations is enlisted here. But why is the shot frozen? Because it offers woman, immobile and passive, yielding herself to male contemplation, and – as the tagline hints – to a fantasy of male possession. Behind this shot is a long tradition of visual representations of women offering themselves to the gaze of male desire. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger juxtaposes two pictures: a reproduction of a painting of a woman by the French artist Ingres, and a nude photograph from a girlie magazine. He asks:

> 'Is not the expression remarkably similar in each case? It is the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her – although she doesn't know him. She is offering up her femininity as the surveyed.[6]

One could say exactly the same thing about the look of the girl in the Singapore Airlines filmlet. Taken as a whole, the sequence conveys a message that has a verbal counterpart in one of the airline's ads: 'The airline with the most modern fleet in the world still believes in the romance of travel.' There is an implied opposition between the male and female worlds, identified respectively with technology and romance, but what links and reconciles them is the concept of power – male power – in relation to which both planes and women are objects. It is noteworthy that the traditional stereotype of docile Oriental womanhood is frequently used by airlines based in eastern countries to flatter the ego of the male Western travelers. In the October 11, 1982 issue of *Newsweek* there's an ad by Air India with a picture in the style of the Rajput miniatures showing a Maharaj-like figure being carried in a palanquin by a group of women. The text below says: 'Sari-clad hostesses welcome you with the Namaster – a gesture which says: my guest is as my god..[7]

From the examples I have taken you'll see that the connotative codes underlying the use of visual images in mass

media are among the means through which ideologies are transmitted. When I speak of ideology, I don't mean only the overtly formulated political or other beliefs that are offered to people for their assent. Much more powerful that these, because much more imperceptible in the ways they work, are the widely shared unthinking assumptions – what are usually called commonsense notions – about human beings and their relations to each other and to their conditions of existence. These appear to be natural, self-evident and eternal, but in fact they are no more than the unquestioned bedrock presuppositions created by dominant ideology of particular social formations. Thus, as I have shown, the Singapore Airlines and Air India ads work through certain presuppositions about male and female. In this sense ideology, in its most important aspect, is 'what goes without saying'; or, as Althusser put it: "When we speak of ideology, we must realize that ideology seeps through all human activity and that it is identical with the very 'lived experience' of human existence." Althusser's reference here to the liberal individualist concept of 'lived experience' is very significant. What he is pointing out is that we don't live experience as isolated, free individuals; our experience comes to us through the categories in which we perceive it, and these categories are socially created, institutionalized by the linguistic and other modes of representation in which we are immersed.

As Catherine Belsey has put it:

> "Meaning is public and conventional, the result not of individual intention but of inter-individual intelligibility. In other words, meaning is socially constructed, and the social construction of the signifying system is intimately related, therefore, to the social formation itself. On the basis of Saussure's work it is possible to argue that in so far as language is a way of articulating experience, it necessarily participates in ideology, the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence. Ideology is inscribed in signifying practices – in discourse, myths, presentations and re-presentations of the way "things are" – and to this extent it is inscribed in a language.'[8]

Saussurean linguistics and post-Saussurean semiology therefore involve a decentering of the individual as the source of meaning; instead, it is the ensemble of socially created signifying practices which is seen as that source. The subject – the individual human consciousness – is itself constituted by the discourses in which it participates. The very consciousness of subjectivity reaches definition only when the child has grown into language and is able to think of himself as 'I'. Becoming a subject, therefore, involves insertion into a pre-existing signifying order, which fixes the position of the individual as subject for socially defined meanings. As Rosalind Coward and John Ellis describe this process:

> 'This is simultaneously to provide individuals with a subjectivity, and to subject them to the social structure with its existing contradictory relations and powers.....The individual thus lives his subjection to social structures as a consistent subjectivity, an imaginary wholeness. Ideologies set in place the individual as though he were this subject; the individual produces himself in this imaginary wholeness, this imaginary reflection of himself as the author of his actions.'[9]

Coward and Ellis in this passage hyphenate both words *subjectivity* and *subjection* in order to underline the fact that the two roles of the individual as subject are interdependent: his consciousness of his subjective existence is made possible by those very modes of representation through which he is subjected, subordinated, to the social formation and its

ideology. But Coward and Ellis also bring out the fact that the concept of the autonomous individual, freely responding to 'lived experience,' and freely determining his actions, is itself part of that ideology which ensures his subjection because it conceals from him his dependence on that ideology. The technological sophistication of mass media today has brought into being new means of strengthening that illusion. The invention of photography in the 19th century, and its application later to film and TV, brought into existence a medium which seemed to present a simple, undistorted reflection of the world, an unmediated transmission of reality: hence, such dicta as 'the camera doesn't lie.' In practice, the illusion created by the camera that it is a transparent medium through which one is in direct contact with actuality with plain 'lived experience', had given dominant ideologies a new weapon. As the French semiologist Roland Barthes has said: 'The more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning.'[10]

This doesn't mean that I'm preaching an inescapable linguistic or semiotic determinism. The codes and discourses created by the dominant ideology are inconsistent and contradictory because the society which projects that ideology is riven by contradictions. These contradictions are internalized in the subject from the moment of its induction into the symbolic order and are a potential source of conflict and change. Language and other signifying practices incorporate the subject into social formation, but at the cost of drawing a boundary line between 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not', thus creating within the subject a realm of what is forbidden and repressed and cannot be given recognition in socially sanctioned discourse. This is the realm of the Freudian unconscious. There's an essay by the semiologist Julia Kristeva which discussed this question illuminatingly. Before I set out Kristeva's argument, there are two things I must

say about the essay, which is called 'Signifying Practice and Mode of Production.' Kristeva's essay though extremely important, is very difficult reading: fortunately, there's a summary and explication of it by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith that is easier to follow and it's from this summary that I shall quote. The other point I must make is that Kristeva in the essay uses the term *semiotic* in a special sense to refer to the pre-linguistic and sub-linguistic levels of mind; one mustn't confuse this term with the more familiar *semiotics* as an equivalent of *semiology* – the theory of sign-systems. I quote now from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's summary:

> 'In Kristeva's account the formation of a subject which finds its identity in social and symbolic institutions necessitates a division between a "symbolic" area proper and another area to which she gives the name "semiotic." This semiotic area, analogous to the Freudian unconscious, is the site of those signifying and pre-signifying practices which do not take the form of signification in the linguistic sense and which language, so to speak, represses so that they can only emerge into the symbolic area in the form of interruptions of ordered discourse.'

These interruptions of ordered discourse manifest themselves, in Kristeva's words, in 'madness, holiness and poetry.' Kristeva goes on to relate the repressive role of the symbolic order to the privileged position given to language and the Word in the mainstream cultural tradition. She also points out that since this tradition is patriarchal, division between male and female elements of human nature.[11] I quote again from the summary: 'The coincidence of language and patriarchy as foundations of sociality and identity makes woman literally the unnameable and the unsaid. As such the feminine – in so far as it can be spoken – has a profoundly subversion function. The danger of course is that the power of division is such that it can only be breached at the risk of psychotic breakdown.'

It is extremely instructive to read Kristeva's essay side by side with Professor Gananath Obeyesekere's recent book, *Medusa's Hair*. Professor Obeyesekere's book is a study of certain new and heterodox ecstatic cults in Sri Lanka, and I find it particularly significant for its insights into the metamorphoses of female sexuality in a patriarchal and puritanical culture. Significantly, too, for the female devotees of these cults, dreams and visions performed a crucial role in bringing to consciousness 'the unnameable and the unsaid.' The experiences explored in the book aren't purely personal; what they reveal is a crisis in social relations which is necessarily also a crisis in signifying practice. As Professor Obeyesekere says: 'The new class of ecstatic priests and the new rituals that are developing in urban centers are attempts to meet the needs of educated Sinhala Buddhist people cut off from their traditional moorings and faced with a series of new socio-economic tensions and the personal problems that arise from them.'[12]

The relevance of this for our immediate purpose is that there's an intimate connection between the dream-life and people's responses to cinema. In an important article titled 'The fascination of the family melodrama' published in the *Lanka Guardian* (1.3.82), Dr. Laleen Jayamanne said: 'it is arguable that the cinema as a medium has an especially close relation to unconscious processes like dreams and phantasy.' Discussing this relation in the context of the popular Sinhala cinema, she went on to say: 'If voyeurism is a perverse development of the pleasures we have in seeing, then the dominant cinema as a whole feeds our perverse desires and produces pleasures which could not have been possible prior to the invention of the movie camera and the development of the narrative cinema. Women play a pivotal role in the sexualisation of vision via the cinema, woman becomes the object of vision or the look, while man becomes the controller of the look.'

While the popular cinema serves this profoundly conservative function of buttressing the social formation by fulfilling imaginary gratifications, it has also the capacity, through its power to tap the 'semiotic area' of the mind that Kristeva spoke of, to subvert the socially enforced discourses. Just as dreams themselves can be regressive and compulsive or enrichingly self-revelatory and liberating, cinema too has this potential duality. In Vasantha Obeyesekere's remarkable new film *Dadayama* (not yet released), we have an example of a film-maker using material that could be the stuff of popular melodrama for purposes that are creative and socially critical. The final confrontation of the film – a confrontation both of class and of gender – works through means which condense a wealth of meanings, some of which may be apprehended by the audience only unconsciously.

Honouring E.F.C. Ludowyk: Felicitation Essays edited by Percy Colin-Thome and Ashley Halpe, 1984.

Footnotes

* This is a revised and slightly expanded version of a paper originally read at the Marga Institute, notes and references have also been added.

1 The best simple introduction to Saussure's ideas is Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (Fontana Modern Masters).

2 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin), pp. 16-18.

3 Barthes's two essays, 'The Photographic Message' and 'The Rhetoric of the Image', are found in his book, *Image-Music-Text* (Fontana/Collins).

4 Umberto Eco, 'Articulations of the Cinematic Code', in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods* (University of California Press), Stuart Hall, "Television as a Medium and its Relation to Culture" (stencilled occasional paper of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham).

5 The non-digital character of visually iconic sign-systems means, for instance, that they cannot have anything corresponding to the double articulation of spoken languages.

6 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 55.

7 I'm not implying, of course, that the meanings of these two advertisements, as I have analysed them, are consciously apprehended by the generality of viewers. The power of connotative codes is often in their unconscious character.

8 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Methuen), p. 42. This little book is an excellent introduction to the implications of Saussurean linguistics and semiology for criticism.

9 Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 76. This book re-states Marxist concepts of ideology in the light of semiology and psychoanalysis.

10 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p. 46.

11 Hence the customary opposition between "male rationality" and "female irrationality".

12 Gananath Obeysekere, *Medusa's Hair* (University of Chicago Press), p. 164.

4

Shakespeare's Language of Sexuality

This is an expanded version of a lecture delivered to the English Association of Sri Lanka on Shakespeare Day, 1997.

The most challenging statement about Shakespeare's language of sexuality was made by a cockroach. His name was archy, and he figured in Don Marquis's *archy and mehitabel*, which, several decades after it was published, I still consider the finest book of American light verse ever written. But since I am probably the last survivor of the generation of Sri Lankan readers who grew up with archy, I had better explain about him. This is the story Don Marquis tells. In his apartment, he used to find poems written on his typewriter by an unknown person. So he kept watch, and found that a cockroach visited the apartment every night and laboriously typed out the poems by jumping up and down on the keys. The cockroach turned out to be the reincarnated soul of a poet. Since he couldn't operate the shift key while jumping up and down on the letter keys, there were no capital letters in his poems; and whenever archy wanted a question mark or a mark of exclamation, he had to spell them out. Here then is archy's poem, 'archy confesses', about Shakespeare and sexual language:

coarse
jocosity
catches the crowd
shakespeare and i
are often
low browed
the fish wife
curse
and the laugh
of the horse
shakespeare
and i
are frequently coarse

aesthetic
excuses
in bill s behalf
are adduced
to refine
big bill s coarse laugh

but bill
he would chuckle
to hear such guff
he pulled
rough stuff
and he liked
rough stuff
hoping you
are the same
archy[1]

Was archy right about Shakespeare and sexual language? The modern enlightened liberal attitude assumes that when artistic necessity justifies sex-talk of the kind that's considered improper in polite society, then it's permissible; otherwise it's obscene. That, for instance, is the principle underlying such landmark documents in the sexual liberation

of literature as Judge Woolsey's judgment on *Ulysses* in the United States, or the British court's decision in the *Lady Chatterley* trial in the 'sixties. But what archy is saying is that these 'aesthetic excuses' are so much guff when it comes to Shakespeare: he was a popular entertainer who pulled rough stuff because he liked rough stuff. Was archy right? That's the first question I want to try to answer. For this purpose, I shall use two passages from two plays of Shakespeare as test-cases.

The first passage is from the lesson scene in Act 4 Scene I of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson, examines the small boy William on his Latin grammar in the presence of his mother and Mistress Quickly. Part of the humour of the scene comes from the parson's Welsh accent and verbal mannerisms. Making fun of the linguistic habits of minority speakers is a familiar source of popular comedy: the English stage has for a long time been laughing at Scottish, Irish or Welsh speakers, just as Tamils and Muslims speaking Sinhala are often laughed at in Sinhala theatre and cinema. But the main source of comedy in this scene is in the bawdy jokes made possible by a combination of Sir Hugh's Welsh accent and the illiterate Mistress Quickly's misunderstandings of what is being said. After some preliminary questions, the parson puts William through the declension of the Latin pronoun *hic, haec, hoc*. 'What is the focative case, William?' he asks. William is stumped by this question, and stammers, '0 – vocative, 0-' which serves as another unintended sexual pun (unintended, that is, by the character) since *0* was in Elizabethan slang one of the ways of referring to the female genitals. Sir Hugh, says, 'Remember, William, focative is *caret*,' which is the Latin for 'it's missing' – that is, there is no vocative. But in the context of 'focative' the word *caret* calls up in the minds of the audience the carrot as an image of the penis. Mistress Quickly, in her verbal confusion, underlines that by saying, 'And that's a good root."

Now what are we to say about this scene in testing archy's claim? The scene has no bearing at all on the rest of the plot. In fact, in the Quarto text of the play, it's omitted entirely, and that's because that text was probably an abridged one made for a provincial performance. We can't find any 'aesthetic excuse' for the scene on the basis of plot or theme or character. It's just a piece of extraneous funny business, and the comedy, apart from the ethnic humour, comes from the bawdy puns. So here, in archy's terms, is Shakespeare pulling 'rough stuff' either because he likes it or because he knows the audience will like it.

Before I pass on from this scene I want to recall something that throws light on Sri Lankan norms of linguistic propriety. In 1940 Lyn Ludowyk produced *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with the University Dramsoc. He played the Welsh parson himself, and he brought the house down with the line about the 'focative case'. But later in the scene Sir Hugh asks William for the genitive cases of the pronoun. William answers, 'Genitive –, *horum, harum, horum'*, and Mistress Quickly bursts out: 'Vengeance of Jenny's case! Fie on her! Never name her, child, if she be a whore.' But in the Dramsoc production, the actress didn't speak the word *whore,* she replaced it with a wave of the hand. So I want to offer this footnote to Sri Lankan social history - that on the Colombo stage in 1940 a male actor, and the university Professor of English at that, could play on the word *fuck,* but a well-brought up upper-middle class young lady couldn't be required to say *whore.*

Now let's look at the other passage from Shakespeare I want to use as a test for archy' s claim. This is from *Hamlet,* Act 3 Scene 2, the scene where Hamlet stages the play within the play in order to determine Claudius's guilt. In this part of the scene Hamlet goes up to Ophelia, who is seated among the assembled court audience, and settling himself at her feet, says: 'Lady, shall I lie in your lap?' In the Elizabethan language of sex, this could mean only: 'Shall I sleep with

you?' Ophelia, no doubt embarrassed and blushing, says, 'No, my lord,' whereupon Hamlet pretends to correct himself: 'I mean, my head upon your lap?' Ophelia replies, 'Ay, my lord.' Hamlet then asks her, 'Do you think I meant country matters?' *Country matters* would mean 'something coarse, vulgar, obscene', but it contains a hidden pun, in the first syllable of *country,* which the actor might stress in speaking; *'country* matters'. Ophelia, probably outraged again, says: 'I think nothing, my lord,' to which Hamlet responds: 'That's a fair thought – to lie between maids' legs;' Ophelia, perhaps uncertain what he means, asks: 'What is, my lord?' and Hamlet says, 'Nothing'. This seems to be a dismissive answer, as if saying, 'Never mind,' but it actually carries on the sexual allusions of the previous lines. To understand this we have to know the sexual meanings of *thing* and *nothing* in Elizabethan speech. There were actually two sets of usages, both of which can be found in Shakespeare. In one usage *thing* is used undifferentiatedly of both the male and the female sexual organ. In the other usage, *thing,* as representing the penis,[2] is contrasted with *nothing,* which Elizabethans pronounced as 'no thing'.[3] Hence it is that Shakespeare is able to rhyme 'doting' with 'nothing' in Sonnet 20. The sonnet is of particular interest in relation to what is said later in this essay about the sexual ambivalence of the poet's feelings for the young man to whom it is addressed:

> And for a woman wert thou first created,

In this second usage *nothing* represents the female genitals; this implies a markedly patriarchal conception of femaleness, as defined by the absence of a penis. It is this latter usage that explains the line from *Hamlet.* What Hamlet is saying is, 'If you think nothing, that is the proper thing between a woman's legs.' Incidentally, knowing the sexual meaning of *nothing* gives us an understanding of one point of the title of another Shakespeare play, *Much Ado about Nothing.* Part of that play turns on the suspicion that Hero

has lost her virginity before marriage, and this false accusation against her almost leads to tragedy. But through the pun in the title Shakespeare is mocking his own plot: his first audience would have understood him as covertly saying: 'All this fuss about a vagina.'

But to return to the *Hamlet* scene. Hamlet had been in love with Ophelia, but by this scene his bitterness against his mother's adultery has blackened the whole of womankind in his eyes. He vents his misogyny and his revulsion against women. and against sexuality itself, by a sadistic verbal assault on Ophelia, tormenting her, with coarse sex-talk. The scene is painful, but I think we have to say that unlike the passage from *The Merry Wives* we looked at earlier, it isn't just indulgence in bawdy language for its own sake. The dialogue has undoubtedly a dramatic point and purpose, within the scene and within the play as a whole, in articulating Hamlet's disgust with sexuality, with womanhood, with life itself, that is part of his malaise. But it can be suggested that the sexual puns have a further significance in relation to the play's theme. The world of *Hamlet* is one of deceptive appearances. Behind the pomp and splendour of the Danish court is the ugly reality of murder and adultery. So, to Hamlet there is falsity in language itself: seemingly innocent words conceal obscene meanings.

So, as far as the passage from *Hamlet* is concerned, I don't think archy's description applies. It's conceivable that there were spectators who were titillated by it, but it isn't funny: if we admit an element of humour in it, we have to say that the humour is bitter, horrific or black. But elsewhere in the plays one may find sexual language that is different in tone from the *Hamlet* passage but equally organic to the drama – as with the bawdy humour of Mercutio and the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet,* the obscenities of Iago in *Othello,* or the sexual allusions of the Fool in *King Lear.* Or that wonderful description by the Hostess in *Henry V* of Falstaff's death, which brings together sexual frankness, folk piety and

folk practicality, tenderness and pathos: I need to read the whole passage:

> 'A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child; 'a parted e'en just between twelve and one, e'en at the turning o'th'tide; for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, 'a babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir John?' quoth I, 'be o'good cheer!' So 'a cried out, 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God - I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet; I put my hand into the bed, and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and all was as cold as any stone.

The Hostess putting her hand on Falstaff s genitals and feeling them 'as cold as any stone' has to be the final mark of death: if that vital centre of Falstaff is cold, he must be dead indeed. But this intimacy with his body also comes naturally to her, so that what might elsewhere have been bawdy humour is transformed into a maternal tenderness and loving sadness that are very moving.

In making a contrast between the passage from *The Merry Wives* on the one hand and those from *Hamlet* and *Henry V* on the other, I run the risk of leaving you with a wrong impression. You may suppose that in the lesser plays there are sexual jokes thrown in for their own sake, but not in the greater ones. But that wouldn't be true. Let me offer a passage from one of the tragedies that's purely exploitation of bawdy language with no 'aesthetic excuses', as archy calls them. In *Othello* the Clown is talking to the musicians who have come to serenade Othello and Desdemona after their nuptial night:

CLOWN Are these, I pray you, wind instruments?

FIRST MUSICIAN Ay marry are they, sir.

CLOWN O, thereby hangs a tale.

FIRST MUSICIAN Whereby hangs a tale, sir?

CLOWN Marry, Sir, by many a wind instrument that I know.

This is a joke created by a rather laboured and not very funny play on words, and it doesn't add anything essential to the scene. *Tale:tail* in Elizabethan slang was an expression for the penis, and it hangs by, or close to, a wind-instrument, that is, the anus. So Shakespeare, as a popular writer for the theatre, could, even in one of the great tragedies, strain to make a dramatically extraneous sexual joke for the delectation of the audience.

By comparing the abundance of sexual language in Shakespeare's plays with its paucity in the theatre of the eighteenth, or nineteenth, or the first half of the twentieth century, some people may be led to suppose that Shakespeare had total freedom in this respect. But that wouldn't be true, although censorship in his time didn't concern itself with sexual morality as much as with politics and religion (and religion, as regarded by the state, was a dimension of politics). Outside the censorship of individual plays to keep out political and religious subversion, the only state regulation of the language of the theatre that we know of was an Act of Parliament in 1606. Under this Act profanity in the theatre – that is, the taking of God's name in oaths – was prohibited. We know that this regulation affected those plays of Shakespeare that were produced or revived after that date. But consider the fact that neither the word *fuck* nor the word *cunt* appear, in those naked forms, in the passages we have looked at, nor do they in any other play of Shakespeare or in any Elizabethan play I know. They appear in disguise, as it were, in the form of a pun. But the pun

implies that there is a taboo on speaking the words openly – perhaps not so much as a rule of censorship but as a consensus on what could be said and couldn't be said on the public stage. The function of the pun is to enable the taboo to be circumvented, so that the forbidden word can be said without fully speaking it out. But the resultant effect of defeating the taboo in this way varies with the situation. In the passage from *The Merry Wives*, if we are amused by it, we can admire the writer's ingenuity in manipulating the language so as to make a sexual allusion by covert means. But since there is no further dramatic point to the passage, we don't find that the puns have illuminated character or situation. The effect of the *Hamlet* passage is much more complex. When we listen to it, what we are immediately aware of is Hamlet's sardonic wit; we see the lines as Hamlet's releasing of his bitterness by disguising it through the puns; it's only secondarily that we think of Shakespeare securing this effect through his control of language.

But it's not only with tabooed words that these possibilities arise, but also with seemingly chaste ones, underneath which a pun may conceal a hidden sexual meaning. There's a good example at the very end of *The Merchant of Venice* – the last two lines, in fact.

In the last scene of the play the two women, Portia and Nerissa, have teased their husbands, first, by accusing them of giving away their betrothal rings to women; later, by producing the rings and claiming that they had them from the lawyer and his clerk with whom they themselves went to bed. After the truth has finally been sorted out, Gratiano speaks the last couplet of the play:

Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

On the surface these lines seem to say that he'll take good care not to lose her betrothal ring; but, *ring*, like *circle* and *O*, was used in Elizabethan slang to mean a woman's

sexual organ. After all the teasing about Portia's and Nerissa's fictional infidelity, Gratiano is hinting that he will see that his wife doesn't really cheat him sexually, so that he rings down the play with a burst of guffaws from the audience. Especially, I suppose from the men, because it's a male joke about the sexual unreliability of wives.

I haven't counted, but it is likely that the majority of Shakespeare's puns have to do with sexual language, and without doubt most of his comic puns do. In the witty exchanges between a pair of characters that are so common in the comedies, we often have a string of puns turning on sexual allusions, or one that is climaxed by a bawdy joke. These passages have mostly lost their saltiness today, partly because the sexual puns have become linguistically obscure, and most people need to consult glossaries or annotated editions is order to unravel them. It's well known that the great Dr. Johnson disliked Shakespeare's fondness for puns, and described a quibble – that is, a pun – as 'the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it'. It's normally supposed that Johnson's hostility to puns was due to his neo-classic opposition to ambiguity of language. To me it seems likely that the stern moralist in him was also offended by the sexual content of many of the puns; or that correctness of language for him went hand in hand with correctness of morals.

The Elizabethan theatres were situated on the periphery of London, so as to be out of the reach of the city authorities who, dominated by Puritan views, were hostile to the theatre. The theatre therefore belonged to the less regulated fringe of city life, and it shared this territory with the brothel quarter. Not only did the brothels jostle with the theatres for building space, but the prostitutes and pimps contacted customers at the entrances and exits to the theatres and even within the auditorium itself. In 1597 the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London presented a petition asking that the theatres be pulled down because they corrupted

youth with 'unchaste matters and ungodly practices' , they were places of resort for vagrants, whoremongers and criminals, they distracted working people from their occupations and from the practice of religion, and they spread disease. In other words the theatre was said to be a source of social, moral and physical infection. Nothing happened then because the theatre had the protection of the monarchy and powerful aristocrats, but in 1642, with the outbreak of the Civil War, the Puritans had their revenge. The theatres were closed and remained so till the restoration of the monarchy eighteen years later.

The sexual language of the Elizabethan theatre was in keeping with the relative freedom of the territory in which it flourished. But it was also a heavily male-dominated theatre. There were women among the spectators but the theatrical profession – whether of writers or actors – was exclusively male since women's parts were played by boys. One of the grounds for Puritan attacks on the theatre was this practice of males dressing and acting as women, which as a Puritan theologian complained, 'may kindle sparks of lust in unclean affections'. This fear of homosexuality was perhaps grounded on more than theory. Where boy actors were apprenticed to grown-up men in the company, and often lived with them in the same lodgings, sexual relations between them were always a possibility.

There are very few and fleeting references in Shakespeare's plays to sexual relations between males, and he never confronted the subject openly in any of the plots or main relationships of his plays. It was, of course, a relationship forbidden by both church and state; but Marlowe, who was reputed to be both gay and unbeliever, did in *Edward II* make a tragedy out of the situation of a king who loses his throne and his life because of his love for his favourite Gaveston. There is no direct representation on stage of the physical relationship between the king and his lover, but we can be in no doubt about what these were. At the climax of the

tragedy we see enacted on the stage the murder of Edward by a redhot poker being thrust up his anus in a horrible caricature of the act of sodomy. Shakespeare never confronted these unlawful relationships with that degree of openness. What we do have in his plays are, on the one hand, the flickering sexual ambivalence of some of the roles played by the boy actors, and on the other the unexplained intensity of the attachments of the two Antonios, in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night,* to people of their own sex.

Shakespeare was particularly fond of the situation in which the boy actor playing the heroine dresses up as a young man, When, within the fictive world of *As You Like It,* the character Rosalind, disguised as the boy Ganymede, offers to pretend to be Rosalind so that Orlando can try out.his love for her, what Elizabethans, would have seen on the stage was a boy-actor, resuming his real boy-self to play a love scene with another, probably young, male actor, The maze of sexual identities here was deeply subversive of fixed gender distinctions (one can understand.the Puritan fears). ,

It has been said that in the Sonnets the feelings expressed by the poet for the young man to whom the first sequence is addressed are more than friendship and less than homosexual desire. The same might be said of Antonio's feelings for Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice,* with his willingness to risk his life for his friend by signing the fatal bond, his equal willingness to die for him if he can see him at his death, his unexplained melancholy and his description of himself which confesses an unspecified guilt:

> I am a tainted wether of the flock,
> Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit
> Drops earliest to the ground and so let me.

In Richard de Zoysa's imaginative production of the play a decade ago, he highlighted Antonio's position as the odd man out, leaving him alone and silent on the stage at the end, when the three happy couples have gone in.

The other Antiono, in *Twelfth Night,* has even less to say of himself than his namesake in The *Merchant of Venice,* but he too risks personal danger to follow Sebastian into the city:

> But come what may, I do adore thee so
> That danger shall seem sport, and I will go!

He is cut to the heart later when, as a consequence of the mistaken identity between the two twins, he thinks Sebastian has ungratefully disowned him. But these are the only enigmatic shadows in Shakespeare's plays of those unlawful passions forbidden by both state and church.

The polite eighteenth century, the age of Johnson, thought of Shakespeare's sexual language as one mark of the barbarous age in which he lived. But by the nineteenth century there was an even stronger reaction to it from readers, critics and theatre directors alike. In Shakespeare's plays women could talk, or joke, about sex almost as freely and unashamedly as the male characters. And not only lower class women like Juliet's Nurse and the Hostess but also women of gentility such as Beatrice or Helena. There is no assumption in the plays that a woman's freedom of sexual talk goes with looseness of behaviour. When Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing* is accused of sexual relations with a man other than the one she is betrothed to, all her friends treat it as a foul slander, but the same Hero, with her maid Margaret and with Beatrice, could indulge in uninhibited sex-jokes only two scenes previously. Shakespeare even represents the fourteen-year old Juliet as waiting impatiently and eagerly for the coming of night to consummate her marriage. It' s the most physically passionate speech in the play: Romeo's love poetry is ethereal and bodiless in comparison. But nineteenth-century, especially Victorian, norms about female modesty were very different.

In 1807 there appeared a book titled *The Family Shakespeare,* in which twenty plays were reprinted in versions

purified of all improper language. The book had no great success immediately, but its popularity boomed in the Victorian period. Within seventy years it went through thirty editions. The first edition had been anonymous, but later editions named the purging hand as that of Thomas Bowdler, a doctor of medicine. Bowdler was thus to contribute a word to the English language, *bowdlerise*. Actually, it was discovered a few decades ago that the task had been initiated and for the most part carried out by his sister Henrietta Bowdler. She didn't put her name on the title-page because to have done so would have been to admit that she had read those same offending passages that she had purged. And the Victorian audience to which *The Family Shakespeare* appealed was especially one of women and young girls. They could now enjoy the beauties and wisdom of Shakespeare without tainting their minds. In one of Dickens's novels there is the character of Mr. Podsnap, for whom 'the question about everything was, would it bring a blush to the cheek of the young person'. The young person was, of course, feminine in gender, and was personified by Mr. Podsnap's daughter. Though Dickens laughed at Victorian prudery there, he wasn't free of Podsnappery in writing his own novels. Shakespeare too had, therefore, to be expurgated to keep out everything that might bring a blush to the cheek of the young person. In Henrietta Bowdler's hands Shakespeare had gone through two stages of sanitisation. First, she had selected twenty of what she called 'the most unexceptionable of Shakespeare's plays'; then she aimed 'to remove every thing that could give just offence to the 'religious and virtuous mind' , and the end result was a book that could be 'placed in the hands of young persons of both sexes'. However, not everybody was satisfied even with Bowdler. Lewis Carroll, a life-long celibate, whose only female friends were little girls, whom he sometime photographed in the nude, at one time thought of producing an edition of Shakespeare that would out-bowdlerise Bowdler. Nor did

the spirit of Bowdler die with the Victorian age. The institutionalization of English literature as an examination subject in the latter part of the nineteenth century required the production of school editions of Shakespeare which were carefully purged on the principles of Bowdler, and these continued in force throughout the first half of the present century. I remember that the edition of *Julius Caesar* in which I studied the play at fourteen didn't even allow Portia to say that if Brutus didn't trust her, 'Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife'. The word harlot was replaced by *plaything*. This continuation of the Bowdler tradition was breached here only in 1943, when for the first time admission to the University of Ceylon was restricted by a competitive examination, the forerunner of the present A-level. Lyn Ludowyk, in what seemed to be a conscious act of daring, prescribed as the set Shakespeare text *Measure for Measure*, a play about a Vienna seething with prostitution and venereal disease. There were no expurgated school editions of *Measure for Measure*, because it had never been considered a fit play for schoolchildren, so students just had to read it in the *Complete Works*. Ludowyk got a plaintive letter from a nun who had to teach the play in class, and who asked why, when there were so many beautiful things in Shakespeare, he should have prescribed something ugly and unpleasant.

But even in more exalted scholarly milieux inhibitions about the recognition of Shakespeare's interest in sexuality persisted until comparatively recently. Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1930), which pioneered the practice of interpreting Shakespeare's plays through their image structures and was enormously influential for at least three decades, was based on a comprehensive card--indexing and classification of the playwright' s images – those drawn from food, clothing, animals, disease, and so on. But when Spurgeon categorized an image, she did so on the basis not of its tenor (what was represented) but of its vehicle (the object or activity through which it was represented). Thus,

when Cleopatra says of herself, 'I was/A morsel for a monarch', or when Antony says of her: 'I found you as a morsel cold upon/Dead Caesar's trencher', both images would have been categorized as images of food: sex didn't have to come into the picture at all. Indeed, as Gary Taylor has observed, 'sex' didn't even appear in Spurgeon's analytical index.[4] Not that sexual activity or the sex organs never appeared as the vehicle in Shakespeare's images. Thus, when Mercutio protests against Benvolio interrupting him and the latter pleads, 'Thou would else have made the tale large', Mercutio retorts: 'O, thou art deceived; I would have made it short: for I was come to the whole depth of my tale; and meant, indeed, to occupy the argument no longer.' We can be pretty sure that Miss Spurgeon didn't detect a sexual metaphor or a bawdy joke in this, though *tale* carries the double meaning to which reference has already been made, *(w)hole* is another sexual pun, and *occupy* has the hidden meaning of 'to copulate'. But supposing we were to reverse Spurgeon's method and analyse and categorise the variety of metaphorical vehicles through which Shakespeare represented the sexual act or sex organs as tenor, we would get a very different result from Spurgeon's, as is shown by the several pages in which Eric Partridge in his book *Shakespeare's Bawdy* listed the extraordinary diversity and fertility of the images through which Shakespeare represented the sexual.[5] But Miss Spurgeon, who sought to elicit from Shakespeare's imagery not only thematic elements in the plays but also an impression of his mind and personality, concluded that 'he was healthy in body as in mind', and, of the five terms she found to sum up the sense of his character conveyed by his imagery, one was 'wholesomeness'. In the mouth.of a genteel English woman scholar in 1930, these attributes unmistakably connoted 'sexual modesty'. One is tempted to say that Shakespeare, if he could have read her, might have found in 'wholesomeness' an incitement to a bawdy pun.

It was only as late as 1947 that Eric Partridge, the distinguished lexicographer, made the first attempt ever at a comprehensive study of Shakespeare's language of sexuality, though it can be seen now to have been in some respects incomplete. This was in the book titled *Shakespeare's Bawdy* that I have already cited. Even so, the first edition was limited to a thousand copies and high-priced, so that it must have sold more to collectors of erotica than to Shakespeare scholars. Later popular editions, perhaps for fear of censorship, contained in the glossary such period curiosities as c**t and fu*k. Not surprising, since the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, when first published in thirteen volumes in 1928, didn't list these and comparable words. There is a story of a group of Australian undergraduates who at that time wrote a letter to the Oxford University Press in some such words as these: 'We have bought the *Oxford English Dictionary* after reading your advertisement., which said that it was the most comprehensive dictionary of the English language ever produced. We have looked in it, and have failed to find the word *fuck*. Will you please refund our money?'

But there was one place where bowdlerisation of Shakespeare survived much longer: that was in the former Soviet Union, down to .the end of its days. This was in keeping with official sexual morality in the Soviet Union, which was quite Victorian. The Soviets' treatment of the texts of the classic Russian writers was something that Miss Bowdler mighthave been proud of. Even in scholarly editions, the bawdy poems of Pushkin and Lermontov were cut to ribbons, and the personal letters of the great nineteenth-century writers, when reprinted, were peppered with little figleaves denoting material that was 'unsuitable for publication'. So it's hardly strange that Shakespeare got similar treatment. There's a translation into Russian, of six of Shakespeare's tragedies by Boris Pasternak that may be the greatest version of him in another language – such a

translation as only a poet of genius could have produced. But in rendering Shakespeare's sexual language poor Pasternak had to conform to the Soviet norms: otherwise his translation wouldn't have got past the Soviet censor. Of many examples that could be offered, one will have to suffice here. In *Othello* there is a scene where the hero, agonised by the uncertainty of not knowing whether Desdemona is or isn't unfaithful, demands from Iago proof. Iago answers:

> Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,
> Behold her topped?

The coarseness and nastiness of that 'topped' is dramatically vital: Iago finds a sadistic delight in torturing Othello with the fantasy it conjures up. But Pasternak has to translate feebly, ineffectually:

> Do you want to look on in secret
> While he and she embrace?[6]

And now to return for the last time to archy's claim, I have already indicated that he was right part of the time, and wrong at others. But he was essentially correct in emphasizing that Shakespeare was a man of the popular theatre, susceptible to its pressures and demands – a fact that is too often ignored by those who venerate him as the supreme dramatic and poetic genius. He was, of course, a great dramatist, but he was also a popular entertainer, and only those who think these two roles are mutually exclusive will find them contradictory. I don't. Actually, Shakespeare would have been a less fullblooded dramatist if he hadn't been writing out of and for that popular theatre. If I ask myself why I prefer Shakespeare to Aeschylus, Racine or Pinter, the answer is that there's one kind of theatrical and literary vitality to be found in a popular theatre that's absent in a ritualistic, courtly or intellectual one; and if so, one must take it with the total dramatic substance in which it comes

embedded. The sometimes tasteless sexual jokes, like the sometimes ham-handed melodrama, the sometimes creaking plots, and the sometimes bombastic rhetoric, were bound up with the conditions which also made possible what in Shakespeare we admire and delight in. So let us not on this anniversary make a fetish of that William Shakespeare to whom mountains of learned treatises and critical disquisitions have been erected, and whom the dramatist himself would have found unrecognizable. How fantastic Shakespeare would have thought it that his plays should be studied as school and university texts when he wasn't even interested in publishing them, because for him their existence was in the theatre! Let us then celebrate instead the man who was the most successful playwright of his time because in his heights, his flats and his depths he was always with his audience – archy's 'big bill', often lowbrowed and frequently coarse.

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Footnotes

1 Don Marquis, *archy and mehitabel* (London, 1934: Faber and Faber), pp. 100-101.

2 Knowing this usage illuminates many passages in Shakespeare: for instance, the first stanza of Feste 's last song in *Twelfth Night*:

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

The 'foolish thing' as a 'toy' belongs to childhood mastur bation, as contrasted with the adult sexuality of stanza 3:

> 'But when I came, alas, to wive.
> 'Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
> And by addition me of thee defeated,

By adding one thing to my purpose nothing,
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

4 Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London, 1991: Vintage), p.261.

5 Eric Partridge, Shakespeare's Bawdy (London, 1955: Routledge and Kegal Paul), pp.40-49

6 Translated from Boris Pasternak, *Vilyam Shekspir*: Tragedii (Moscow, 1968: Hudozhestvennaya Literatura), p.306.

5

The Film and its Critics

Some decades ago only the boldest would have claimed for the film a place among the arts. Today few persons will deny it that status, and, in the words of an American writer, "more and more people, including a growing number of young folks, have begun to take the motion picture seriously and there is a very definite trend towards studying it as one would study, say, music or the drama." Here in Ceylon this trend can be seen in the formation of a Film Society and the serious interest taken in films by students in schools and at the University. It appears worthwhile therefore to try to examine the state of film criticism at the present time and to consider what guidance is available in existing critical literature for the serious student of the film. I will begin by saying that it is my own feeling that in no field of art criticism (not even in that of music) is there such confusion and lack of adequate standards as exists among the film critics. Perhaps this isn't surprising in view of the fact that, as we are often told, the film is 'the youngest of the arts'. Moreover the critic of the film is handicapped by difficulties which are inherent in the medium itself. A painting, a poem or a novel is the creation of an individual artist, it exists objectively on the canvas or the printed page, and the critic knows exactly what he is dealing with in these art-forms. Even the critic of a play or a musical composition has little difficulty in separating the work itself, the play or sonata as Shakespeare

or Mozart wrote it, from its existence in a particular performance by Olivier or Menuhin. A film however (particularly under the conditions under which it is produced at present) isn't in the same way the product of an individual, it is rather the aggregate of the work of a large number of artists and technicians. It is true that the best films derive their excellence primarily from the inspiration of a single person – the director; but even so, the meaning of the film as the director conceived it comes to life only as it is interpreted for the audience by a host of actors, cameramen, scriptwriters, composers, etc. (I shall consider later the exceptional cases of Chaplin and the Russian directors in whose work the subordination of the film to the inspiration of a single individual seems to have been achieved to the fullest extent that is possible). From this arises the temptation for the film critic to lose himself in a consideration of acting, photography, musical scores, etc. – although even the best talents in each of these fields can be added together to make a film that is artistically worthless. The exploitation of distinguished talents and infinite material resources for the most trivial or undesirable ends has become typical of the film – the art of an age of mass-production. It seems to me that a complementary fact is to be found in the pre-occupation of most critics with film technique, considered as an end in itself. Not even the academicians of music are guilty so often as the professional film critics of divorcing form from content – as a glance at any of the "standard" works on the film will show. Manvell's popular "Film" (Pelican Books) is a typical example; it discusses "The Art of the Film" – that is, camera-angles, lighting, sound effects, and the other devices of the director's bag of tricks – in one chapter, and "The Social Achievement of the Film" – that is, films in terms of their 'messages' – in another. Lewis Jacob's exhaustive study "The Rise of the American Film" reveals the same confusion of standards. Discussing Griffith's "*Birth of a Nation*" he can pass from such statements as –

"The film was a passionate and persuasive avowal of the inferiority of the Negro. In viewpoint it was surely narrow and prejudiced. Griffith's Southern upbringing made him completely sympathetic towards Dixon's exaggerated ideas . . . The necessity of the separation of Negro from white, with the while as the ruler, is passionately maintained throughout the film," to a reference on the next page to "the picture's artistry, its rich imagery and powerful construction," and the final appraisal –

" '*The Birth of a Nation*' propelled the film into a new artistic level . . . So rich and profound in organization was this picture that for years thereafter it directly and indirectly influenced film makers everywhere, and much of the subsequent filmic progress owes its inspiration to this masterly achievement." It is clear that for Lewis Jacob "art" and "technique" are equivalent terms. At the other extreme we have writers like the author of "From Caligari to Hitler" and Parker Tyler, the film critic of "Kenyon Review," in whose criticism the film as such disappears and is replaced by a socio-psychological complex of which it is presumed to be the expression; so that for the former "*Caligari*" reflects the mass-neurosis of the German people in the post-1918 period, and the latter sees "*Dead of Night*" as an allegory of the schizophrenia of the film audience. Considering phenomena such as these, I think it would be more relevant to talk of the schizophrenia of the film critic himself. It is refreshing to turn from this laboured jargon to, say, the informal reviewing of Caroline Lejeune, who merely puts down the responses of an intelligent person to the films she sees – a more objective starting-point, one feels, than the technicalities of the academic film critics. John Grierson's writings on the film seem to me to have the same value – reading them one feels that here is an intelligent and sensitive mind reacting to films at first-hand and not blinkered by any pre-suppositions about technique.

What I wish to do in the succeeding part of this article is briefly to raise some questions regarding the medium of the film which I feel are too often lost sight of in current film criticism – in particular I wish to examine the confusion apparent in the use of terms like "film art" and "film technique." I shall then attempt, in the light of this discussion, to suggest a critical estimate of *"The Battleship Potemkin,"* which I have chosen as being in general acceptance a film "classic."

II

A history of the film like Lewis Jacob's is valuable, particularly to those of us whose acquaintance with films does not extend beyond the last decade or decade and a half, in helping us to understand the stages by which the mechanics of the film developed. In particular, it is important to realize that the emancipation of the film from the mode of presentation of the stage-play was slow and difficult. We are told that when Griffith first attempted to cut from one scene to another before either was finished, he had to face complaints like, "It's jerky and distracting! How can you tell a story jumping about like that? People won't know what it's all about." Let us take an actual piece of 'cutting' which some of us will remember from the films of our childhood. In the 'last-minute rescue' which was a frequent episode in these films, the camera would cut backwards and forwards in succession from the helpless heroine on the railway line or in the burning house, with death approaching nearer and nearer, to the hero who was galloping desperately to her rescue. This was a simple form of the device; it could be developed further by continually increasing the tempo of the alternation of shots so as to intensify the stimulation of the audience's nerves. To us now this device will appear so simple as to seem obvious; however it appeared so unusual to directors whose films had been photographed stage-plays that when Griffith first used it, it was considered

revolutionary. Now one can, if one wishes, dignify such a device by the term "technique," as long as we don't forget that the technique we are referring to here is of a strictly mechanical kind. It is true that without such discoveries as this, the development of the medium of the film and its genuine artistic achievements would not have been possible, but what must be remembered is that such a device cannot in itself raise its material to the level of art (the emotional content of Griffith's films seems to have been that of sentimental melodrama). Perhaps it required genius of a kind to make Griffith's discovery, but the genius involved was not that of a great artist. Griffith seems certainly to have done a great deal in helping the film to realize the conditions of its own medium, which, as critics today rightly insist, are primarily visual – but to follow Griffith's dictum. "Above all, I am trying to make you see," is not all that is necessary to make a good film. What has been said about Griffith's 'cutting' can, I think, be said with equal truth about all the other technical devices which are the primary concern of most film critics – right up to the most sacrosanct of them all, 'montage'. In spite of Eisenstein's attempt, on the basis of Marxist 'dialectics,' to attribute an intrinsic virtue to montage, it should surely be obvious that like other techniques of the director it is merely a means of organization, which can be applied equally to the poorest as well as the richest material. Most film critics however are ready to describe a film like *"Birth of a Nation"* as a classic of the cinema because of its place in the development of film 'technique', although its emotional (and technical) level was probably not different from that of the popular 'Western' of today. We have not yet been able to see Griffith's films here, but many of us will remember the sense of disappointment we have often experienced on seeing at a Film Society revival, a film which we had earlier read of as a 'classic.' A standard "History of the Film" says of a film shown recently by the Film Society (I quote this from the programme note). " *'The*

Stroke of Midnight' seems rather old-fashioned to us today... partly because technically it was at the time so very important and so new. It seemed literally too dazzling then, now it seems almost obvious." One might well be surprised at the aesthetics involved in the elevation of a film to the status of a classic on such grounds. An equally objectionable tendency is that of the critic who praises a film for some isolated effect – e.g., for the "brilliant shots" it contains. A film is not, merely a series of animated pictures to be judged by the criteria which one would apply at an Exhibition of Photography. One has seen only too often the depressing spectacle of brilliant single shots in films which regarded as a whole were bad art – the Mexican film *"The Pearl"* and John Ford's *"The Fugitive"* and *"Fort Apache"* are examples from films seen recently in Colombo. The film critic who attaches a disproportionate importance to this kind of technique might well consider the place of technique in the other arts. I think it will be agreed that in literature, music or painting the only technical developments that are significant are those which have been evolved in the course of an artist's struggle to extend his experience, to digest new material. Such a technical discovery cannot be "outdated" at any time because the experience it embodies remains of permanent significance. Of how many of the achievements of the "classics" of the cinema can this be said? To exalt a "technical" discovery which was important in 1915 and has ceased to be so today to the level of "film art" is to blur important distinctions, and the critic here reinforces the tendency of the film itself to set up as an end that perfection of the mechanisms of entertainment which is really the death of art.

III

"Potemkin" is undoubtedly a film which deserves serious attention; together with the other contemporary Russian films, it attempted almost for the first time to treat a serious and socially significant theme on the screen. Moreover it was made by a team of craftsmen working under the control of a single director, Eisenstein, who took his art very seriously, and, we are told, "planned, constructed and analysed every element of the picture according to its probable effect on the audience." The result is a work which (like very few other films) can be seen several times; and one has the impression that with each viewing one comes to understand more clearly the details of the film in their inter-relations. This impression can be confirmed by looking at the analysis of the structure of the film made by Lewis Jacob in his book or Manvell's commentary on a single sequence. It seems to me important however to realize that what one arrives at in this way is a fuller understanding of the intricacies of the film's technique – an intensification perhaps, but not a deepening, of one's first emotional response to the film. This is so because the experience the film has to offer, in spite of its complex technique, is relatively simple, even superficial. The limits within which the action is to be viewed are severely restricted by Eisenstein's method: the characters are seen as one mass against another, in simple black-and-white contrast, and even the few persons who stand out are presented as types and not as individuals. Eisenstein's conception of the film is at an opposite extreme from that of Chaplin, whose work derives all its life from the individual personality of the hero. I have said before that the films of both Eisenstein and Chaplin are controlled at every point by the director's conception; at the same time it must be pointed out that while Chaplin offers us an individual view of life and society, the organizing ideas in Eisenstein are limited to a few political commonplaces. It seems to me that Chaplin's is unquestionably the richer art, what he attempts is more important, judged

by its artistic, that is, its human content; and "*Potemkin*" is therefore a lesser film than "*Modern Times*," "*The Gold Rush*," or even "*Monsieur Verdoux*." (I should add, to anticipate objections, that I am not referring to the kind of technical difference which can be explained by the fact that "*Potemkin*" was produced a decade before "*Modern Times*." On the contrary, the interest which an intelligent audience, unaffected by political partisanship, can take in "*Potemkin*" today seems to me to be of a strictly technical kind). Within these limits Eisenstein's method would have been completely successful if he had adopted an impersonal documentary technique. Unfortunately the film is vitiated by the forcing of its effects which is made at several points in order to subserve its overriding propagandist intention. In making this criticism one is not advocating a creed of "art for art's sake," nor does one ask that the action of the film should not have been treated from the standpoint of certain values. What is necessary however is that these values should be seen to emerge inevitably from the action; Eisenstein might well have left the events of the meeting to speak for themselves. Instead there is an unpleasant attempt to arouse illegitimate emotional responses; this is apparent in the caricaturing of some of the figures "on the other side" on board ship, and the sentimentality of some effects in the Odessa steps sequence. While there is no doubt that this sequence was a technical tour-de-force, it might be asked whether its emotional level was very different from that of the average Hollywood film about Nazi atrocities. In the use of the mother and child and the baby in the perambulator the film made an irrelevant emotional appeal to values which were not within the scope of the film's conception; consequently these effects can only be called sensational. The association of simplified ideas and responses with technique consciously planned to influence the audience and operated with considerable talent is an ominous one; and Eisenstein seems to me to have been one of the creators of the form of totalitarian art which since

then has been increasingly employed in several countries. A quotation from a lecture given by him in 1930 will confirm this account –

"We have discovered how to force the spectator to think in a certain direction. By mounting our films in a way scientifically calculated to create a given impression on an audience, we have developed a powerful weapon for the propagation of the ideas upon which our new social system is based."

Symposium, Feb. 1949

6

The French Revolution and the English Romantics

In the summer of 1952, in London, I had a long conversation with Isaac Deutscher, the great biographer-historian of the Russian Revolution. I had sought him out because two years earlier, I had read with admiration and illumination his political biography of Stalin. I told him I had been completely convinced by his analysis of Stalin's "half-conservative, half-revolutionary" role, but there was one question about which I remained uncertain. "What would you have done," I asked him, "if you had been present at the scene of events, say, in your native Poland at the end of the war?" "Well, as you know," Deutscher answered,

"I believe this is an age of revolution from above, and in such an era people trained in a tradition of revolution from below have nothing to do but to wait till that wave exhausts itself. After all, such a situation isn't new in history. What would you have done if you were an ex-Jacobin living under Napoleon? You couldn't have supported Napoleon, but you couldn't have supported the Holy Alliance either." A few years after my conversation with him, Deutscher developed this historical analogy in an essay to which I shall return. Meanwhile, I want to approach the same analogy by another route.

In 1940, the English poet W.H. Auden, wrote a long poem, **New Year Letter**. In it there occur these lines about Wordsworth and the French Revolution:

Thus Wordsworth fell into temptation
in France during a long vacation

("Fell into temptation", you will observe, cleverly combines Wordsworth's initial ardour for the Revolution and his love affair with Anncite Vallon.)

Saw in the fall of the Bastille
The Parousia of liberty,
And weaving a platonic dream
Round a provisional regime
That sloganised the Rights of Man
A liberal fellow-traveller ran
With Sans-culotte and Jacobin,
Nor guessed what circles he was in,
But ended as the devil knew
An earnest Englishman would do
Left by Napoleon in the lurch,
Supporting the Established Curch,
The Congress of Vienna, and
The Squire's paternalistic hand.

When Auden wrote these lines on Wordsworth's political renegacy, he, as well as his friends Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis, were engaged in sloughing off their youthful Marxism. The parallel was evident by very much on Auden's mind, perhaps as a cautionary example. **New Year Letter** continues, immediately after the Wordsworth passage, with this:

Like his, our lives have been coeval
With a political upheaval,
Like him, we had the luck to see
A rare discontinuity,
Old Russia suddenly mutate
Into a proletarian state....

It must be said that Auden didn't quite complete the circuit from left to extreme right that Wordsworth had traversed a century and a half earlier. But there were others who did so, especially in the United States. There, from the 'fifties onwards, several of the leading right wing ideologues and anti-Communist crusaders were intellectuals who had been Communist or Trotskyist adherents or sympathizers in the 'thirties – people like James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, Max Eastman, Franz Borkenau and John dos Passos. What is it that makes a one-time supporter or fellow-traveller of the Revolution turn into a fervent conservative? For answer, I want to go to those familiar lines in which Wordsworth, looking back later, remembered his youthful enthusiasm in 1789:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
> in which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
> of custom, law, and statute, took at once
> *The attraction of a country in romance*

Later in that same passage Wordsworth asserts the substantial reality of his sense of a world transformed:

> Not in Utopia, subterranean fields
> Or some secreted Island, Heaven knows where!
> But in the very world, which is the world
> Of all of us – the place where in the end
> We find our happiness, or not at all!

In spite of that disclaimer, there is in the rapture of these lines a strong element of the utopian and the idealizing. "A country in romance" – that glamourising vision could not have survived the harsh actualities of the Revolution that were to follow. And the ruder the shock of disillusionment, the stronger the recoil was bound to be. But before tracing the course of Wordsworth's political evolution, I must first place it in the context of general English responses to the Revolution.

In the first stage of the events in Paris, sympathy for the Revolution was widespread in England among all classes of the population – from liberal aristocrats and gentry, to manufacturers and tradesmen, to artisans. Many moderate Englishmen saw the French developments as a parallel to their own Glorious Revolution whose centenary had just been celebrated; and it was widely expected that the outcome would be similar – the supersession of an absolute monarchy by a constitutional one. During this phase Edmund Burke was almost alone among significant commentators in seeing the Revolution already, in the early months of 1790, as a dire threat to property and order. When his **Reflections on the Revolution in France** (which a contemporary called "the manifesto of a counter-revolution") came out in that year, it was thought by many of its first readers to be too extreme a reaction. But then, from mid-1791 onwards, occurred those decisive events which transformed the character of the Revolution – the forced return of the King and Queen to Paris after their attempted escape, the September massacres, the shift of power from the moderate Girondins to the militant Jacobins, the execution of the King and Queen, and the Reign of Terror. By 1793 England had joined the counter-revolutionary military intervention of the European powers. The war years had begun.

The shifts of feeling and opinion that Wordsworth, as well as his future friend Coleridge, experienced in these years must be seen in this context. From sympathy and enthusiasm through disillusionment to fear and hostility, strengthened by patriotic sentiment once the war commenced – the gamut of emotions that the two poets underwent paralleled the general movement in the reactions of the upper and middle classes in England. I have no desire to be unjust to Wordsworth and Coleridge. The events that appalled them were all too real – the Revolutionary Terror, and in course of time, the rise of Napoleon to crowned dictatorship and the expansionism of Napoleonic France. Just so in our time,

left intellectuals, genuinely horrified by Stalin's dictatorship, the purges and trials, the Hitler-Stalin pact, or the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, moved rightwards in the political spectrum. But was there no alternative – for either set? At this point I want to return Deutscher and his essay **"The Ex-Communist's Conscience"**. This was a review of **The God that Failed,** the book brought out by a group of ex-Communists in the 1950s. It was not their abandonment of their earlier uncritical loyalty to the Stalinist regime that Deutscher criticised but the refuge they found in the equally simplistic anti-Communism of the cold war. Recalling the nineteenth century parallel, he regretted that these intellectuals had turned renegades like Wordsworth and Coleridge instead of finding the independence and courage to be heretics like Shelley and Byron.

The idealism that led Wordsworth and Coleridge to be revolted by the Revolutionary Terror or the crowning of Napoleon compels our sympathy. What is less defensible is the reaction of uncomprehending panic that brought them ultimately to make their peace with a reactionary and repressive oligarchy at home. The Britain of the wars was a society in which the ruling classes were haunted by a deep-seated fear that the revolution in France would spread to their own people. Hence, in these years of freedom of the press, freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of public meeting, of trade union and political organization, were all suspended or curtailed. Parliamentary reform, for which there had been an active popular agitation before the war, was blocked till 1832. Yet in the war years Wordsworth could write his jingoistic sonnets celebrating British liberty:

> In our halls is hung
> Armoury of the invincible knights of old:
> We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
> That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
> That Milton held – in every thing we are sprung
> Of Earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

Milton, whom Wordsworth appeal to, is an example of precisely that kind of independence and steadfastness of conviction that Wordsworth lacked. The memory of Milton should have reminded Wordsworth that British liberties were won by a revolution which also cut off a king's head and underwent Cromwellian dictatorship as well as Stuart restoration. France, in Wordsworth's lifetime, was to succumb to Napoleon's absolutism and to experience, after defeat in war, the Bourbon restoration. Revolutionary Russia was similarly to fall under Stalin's tyranny, though no Romanov restoration was possible there. But the ultimate verdict on a great revolution is not possible until the historical process has run its course, until a more normal and humane order is built on the foundations of the enduring gains of the revolution. One must have the patience, the wisdom and the conviction to wait for 1688, for 1830, and for 1986.

This Wordsworth and Coleridge didn't possess the historical insight to do. In the period of his retreat from radicalism, Wordsworth became the poet of the traditional way of life of small farmers and shepherds, rooted in their hereditary land and tied by intimate family bonds. It is this pattern of life, surviving in the Lake District but threatened even there, that Wordsworth clung to against both political revolution in France and industrial revolution in England. His deep sympathy for the stoical endurance of these marginalized and disappearing people makes for great poetry in **Michael** and in **The Brothers**. But the Wordsworth of these years could not afford to contemplate human suffering too closely: it was dangerous because associated with the impulses that had led him to the radical indiscretions of his youth. In **The Prelude** he recalled a girl stricken by poverty whom he had seen in France during the Revolution:

> And when we chanced
> One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
> Who crept along fitting her languid gait
> Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord

Tied to her own, and picking thus from the lane
its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, "Tis against that
That we are fighting," I with him believed
That a benignant spirit was abroad
Which might not be withstood, that poverty
Abject as this would in a little time
Be found no more

But it is a different Wordsworth who tells the story of Margaret in Book I of **The Excursion**. Margaret's husband, with no means of livelihood, had joined the army and never returned. She carries on her lonely struggle for existence and dies. Yet the poem turns away at the end from this socially conditioned tragedy to find a consoling tranquility in nature:

She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
I well remember that those very plumes,
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er
As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
So still an image of tranquility,
So clam and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin, and from change, and all the grief
That passing shows of being leave hind,
Appeared an idle dream....

This frame of mind has a great deal to do with the decline of Wordsworth's poetic gifts. The quest for tranquility ultimately became a confirmed inertia, an inability to feel, and with that the poet in Wordsworth died. There are no great poems after 1807, though Wordsworth lived till 1850, and unfortunately never stopped writing, producing such incredible monstrosities as his cycle of 132 sonnets on the history of the English Church.

II

William Blake belongs to the same generation as Wordsworth and Coleridge, fired by the fall of the Bastille. But with him we enter a different social milieu. Blake was an artisan making his living by the skilled manual work of engraving. His social affiliations were with the world of the Nonconformist sects and the artisan following of the Corresponding Societies – a world that has been brought vividly alive by E.P. Thompson in his classic history **The Making of the English Working Class.** As Thompson makes clear, the urban craftsmen of the seventeen- eighties and nineties had behind them their indigenous traditions of religious and political dissent. But these acquired a new energy under the stimulus of the revolutionary impulses from France. It is this conjuncture we need to remember when we read Blake. It explains the coexistence in him of revolutionary and religious vision that we would otherwise find extraordinary. The elements that went into the making of Blake's world-view can be traced to their sources in the traditions he inherited. But these don't account for the unique quality of his penetrating and transforming insight. It is the response of a man of genius to a great historical moment when it seems possible that everything can be shaped anew:

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out of the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The wat'ry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

For Blake the imprisoning institutions are not only those of State and Church but also those of the family, and ultimately the internalized forces of repression within the self – "the mind-forged manacles". While affirming social and political liberation he looks beyond these to the liberation of desire. Indeed, it would be true to say that as Blake sees it, the seeds of future oppression are latent in those psychological structures which remain unaltered when external socio-political change is effected. The adult denizen of "the chartered streets" of London begins to be formed at the moment of birth, when the child already confronts authority in the person of the father:

Struggling in my father's hands
Striving against my swaddling bands;
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

The father foreshadows the authorities whom the child will face in later life – king, priest, and the patriarchal God whom Blake called "Nobodaddy". Thus, in his fusion of political and psychological insights, Blake seems to us now a post-Marxist and post-Freudian thinker. That is what makes him, to my mind, not just the greatest poet of the entire modern epoch that began with the French Revolution. It's not surprising that in 1968 lines of Blake were chalked up on the walls of Paris alongside the political slogans of the rebelling students.

But though we rightly see Blake's poetry as speaking to our immediate concerns across the gap of two centuries, we need also to remember how much of it is rooted in the historical moment. I offer an illuminating example from one of his greatest but less well known poems:

I saw a chapel all of gold
That none did dare to enter in
And many weeping stood without
Weeping mourning worshipping

I saw a serpent rise between
The white pillars of the door
And he forced and forced and forced
Down the golden hinges fore

And along the pavement sweet
Set with pearls and rubies bright
All his slimy length he drew
Till upon the altar white

Vomiting his poison out
On the bread and on the wine
So I turned into a sty
And laid me down among the swine

Like many other of Blake's lyrics, this dream-like poem undermines the social appearance to disclose the hidden reality. The gorgeous church with the white purity of its pillars and altar is a mockery of religion, alienating the worshippers with its splendour. The phallic serpent who desecrates it can be seen as "the return of the repressed" – desire inhibited, and therefore turned corrupt and destructive. But why does the narrator who experiences this lay himself "down among the swine"? We can interpret this as an affirmation of the superior holiness of the bodily desires against puritanical chastity. That is valid, but there is also a contemporary association to the metaphor. Nothing had infuriated radical readers of Edmund Burke's counter-revolutionary pamphlet more than one phrase of his – "the swinish multitude". Thompson's history shows it was taken up and parodied over and over again by popular pamphleteers in the 'nineties.*(1)* Thus Blake's swine are both the desires of the body and the common people – both psychological and political symbol.*(2)*

Blake's finest work – **the Songs of Innocence and of Experience** and the best of the other short lyrics – was done in that brief period between 1789 and 1793 when it did look as if the morn was rising "from the slumberous mass". The

terse, incisive quality of this poetry holds in language and verse form of apparent simplicity a complex and profoundly dialectical view of the contradictions of existence. But that moment of lucid vision, made possible by the historical situation was not to last. Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake never recanted his revolutionary beliefs. But the long twilight of repression in England, imperial power in France, and post-Waterloo reaction throughout Europe, had its effects on Blake too. The Blake of 1789-93 had been able to hold together his highly personal religious view of life and his revolutionary social critique. With the decline of revolution, Blake withdrew into the private imaginary world of the symbolic beings who people his **Prophetic Books**. Auden once said that "Blake went dotty as he sang", and wrestling with the cloudy and esoteric pages of the **Prophetic Books**, I feel this wasn't unfair. These works are more interesting to those concerned with Blake the mystic than to the reader of poetry. Blake had once written:

> "The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art."

Though this was said in relation to visual art, it was equally true of the "distinct, sharp and wiry" line of Blake's great lyrics. What we miss in the **Prophetic Books**, on the other hand, is "the bounding line": there Blake is the forerunner of Whitman, Hart Crane, Lawrence, Mayakovsky and Neruda – all those diffuse, expansive poet-prophets. "Careless hectorers in proud, bad verse" – to use a Keatsian phrase.

III

When the Bastille fell, Byron was only a year and a half old and Shelley not yet born. Thus this second generation of Romantic poets reached their intellectual and poetic maturity in the years of reaction after Waterloo. Conservative

critics like T.S. Eliot have dismissed Shelley's radicalism as adolescent emotional posturing. But, writing in 1817, Shelley was capable of understanding in historical perspective both the Revolutionary Terror and the pessimism of the ex-radicals that it had inspired. This is from the preface to **The Revolt of Islam**:

"The panic which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution, is gradually giving place to sanity. It has ceased to be believed that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom of tranquility of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened. That their conduct could not have been marked by any other characters than ferocity and thoughtlessness is the historical fact from which liberty derives all its recommendations, and falsehood the worst features of its deformity...

"But on the first reverses of hope in the progress of French liberty, the sanguine eagerness for good overleaped the solution of these questions, and for a time extinguished itself in the unexpectedness of their result. Thus, many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored appeared to show as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes. Hence, gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the willful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows...Our works of fiction and poetry have been overshadowed by the same infectious gloom. But mankind appear to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change."

That is extraordinarily mature in its historical and political understanding as well as in its confidence in human beings and in the future. It's all the more extraordinary because it was written by a young man of 25 in a discouraging time of reaction.

Just as the decisive question for the international left between the late 1920s and today has been the evaluation of Stalinism, so in the first decades of the nineteenth century it was important for radicals to determine how they were to orient themselves towards the Napoleonic phenomenon. Like Stalin, Napoleon had made himself the tyrannical master of a society emerging from a popular revolution. Yet he had also carried revolution abroad through conquest, liquidating feudalism in the lands he conquered.*(3)* But social revolution imposed from above by the bayonet bore with it its own contradictions and evoked nationalist resistances, just as in our own time Stalin's conquests provoked, after his death, nationalist upheavals in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Both Shelley and Byron saw the two-faced character of Napoleon's role in Europe – progressive and retrogressive – with impressive independence of political judgment. Shelley received the events of 1815 with his sonnet **"Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte"**. It's too rhetorical to be a good poem, but it is admirable for its political understanding. It begins:

> I hated thee, fallen tyrant!

But it ends:

> I know
> Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,
> That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
> Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,
> And bloody Faith, the foulest birth of Time.

In other words, for Shelley as a good republican, Napoleon was odious, but not as odious as the old feudal despotisms of State and Church that had again been fastened on Europe since his fall. It is interesting to compare this poem

with Byron's reaction to the same events. When Napoleon was first exiled, to Elba, Byron wrote an ode to him. At this point of time Byron's imagination was evidently caught more by the man's personal fate – the drama of his meteoric rise and fall – than by his political role. But near the end of the poem Byron seems to be suggesting that Napoleon betrayed the Revolution's republican tradition through his vanity for empire:

> But thou forsooth must be a king,
> And don the purple vest,
> As if that foolish robe could wring
> Remembrance from thy breast.
> Where is that faded garment? Where
> The gewgaws thou wart fond to wear,
> The star, the string, the crest?
> Vain forward child of empire! say
> Are all thy playthings snatched away?

The poem goes on to contrast Napoleon unfavourably with the republican Washington. But Byron's most considered responses to the post-Waterloo world are in **Don Juan** – for instance, in the fierce indictment of Wellington:

> Never had mortal man more opportunity,
> Except Napoleon, or abused it more,
> You might have freed fallen Europe from the unity
> Of tyrants and been blast from shore to shore,
> And now what is your fame? Shall the muse tune it ye?
> Now that the rabble's first vain shouts are o'er?
> Go, hear it in your famished country's cries!
> Behold the world and curse your victories!

To return to Shelley, his greatest political poetry shows an alternation between optimistic faith in the historical process and troubled misgivings arising out of the ebbs and flows of the revolutionary era. At one pole we have the **Ode to the West Wind** – a political and more than political poem.

The natural cycle of destruction and new growth, of death and rebirth, so powerfully evoked at the beginning of the poem, becomes by its end also an expression of recurring processes in human society. In the political winter after Waterloo, it is a reassurance that the spring will come.

Out of the identification with the new life ahead the poet regains energy for his revivifying missions:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth
>
> The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind
> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The other pole of Shelley's political poetry is represented by the last chorus of **Hellas,** which begins by singing the return of the Golden Age.

> The world's great age begins anew,
> The golden years return.

But soon Shelley finds in the classical myths the symbol of the perplexing vicissitudes of his age:

> Oh, write no more the tale of Troy,
> If earth Death's scroll must be!
> Nor mix with Laian rage the joy
> Which dawns upon the free:
> Although a subtler Sphinx renew
> Riddles of death Thebes never knew.

The "subtler Sphinx" is the spirit of history, confounding human aspirations to freedom and happiness with conflict and death. By the end of the poem the prophetic vision has darkened completely:

> Oh cease! must hate and death return?
> Cease! must men kill and die?
> Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
> Of bitter prophecy.
> The world is weary of the past,
> Oh, might it die or rest at least!

From the joyous celebration of the Golden Age in its first stanza to the despair and weariness of the last, Shelley's poem traverses the whole range of political experience of the age.

Shelley composed **Hellas** in 1821; in the same year Byron wrote in his diary:

"The king-times are fast finishing; there will be blood shed like water, and tears like mist, but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it."

Like Shelley, Byron wrote his greatest poetry in the years after Waterloo, in an Europe dominated by the Holy Alliance. In these years, he did what he could as a man of action to assist the new stirrings of the people. He helped the Italian Carbonari in their efforts to promote an uprising against Austrian rule, and he lost his life in joining the Greek revolt against the Turks. But between the time he left England, ostracized and disgraced, and his final Greek adventure, it was poetry which was his most important mode of action. From his place of exile he waged a lonely war against European reaction. It has often been said that Byron had no consistent political ideology. William Parry, who had known him personally, said in a memoir:

"His hatred of any particular form of government arose not from any deduction of reasoning, but from some palpable evidence of injustice, cruelty, and oppression. His opinions were the results of his feelings, and were what rigid logicians call prejudices. They were formed, as I have often heard him say, though my experience fell short of his vigorous language, from what he had seen and felt, and not from any theory."

That is true, but what might have been a weakness for a political theorist was an advantage for a poet. Byron's

generous and humane passions – his spontaneous hatred of tyranny and injustice and his abiding sympathy with their victims – were more sustaining for a political poet than an intellectual theory. Domination by an ideology can make, and too often has made, political poets partial and blinkered in their vision. As I see it, it was one of Byron's sources of strength that he had no commitment except to human freedom. He was the great 'heretic' (to adopt Deutscher's term), who retained his independence of judgment and his critical ironic spirit even in relation to the causes with which he allied himself:

> And I will war at least in words (and should
> My chance so happen – deeds) with all who war
> With thought; and of thought's foes by far most rude,
> Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
> I know not who may conquer. If I could
> Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
> To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
> Of every despotism in every nation.

> It is not that I adulate the people.
> Without me there are demagogues enough
> And infidels to pull down every steeple
> And set up in their stead some proper stuff.
> Whether they may sow skepticism to reap hell,
> As is the Christian dogma rather rough,
> I do not know. I wish men to be free
> As much from mobs as kings – from you as me.

The fact that Byron was in his maturest years an exile helped in his growth both politically and poetically. Had he stayed in England, he might have been incorporated into Whit politics, or submerged by the outlook and interests of his class. In Italy, he was able to cast a detached eye,, as a cosmopolitan citizen of Europe, on the post-Waterloo world of revived despotism, and to see clearly his country's role in sustaining them:

> Would she be proud to boast herself the free,
> Who is but first of slaves? The nations are
> in prison, but the jailor – what is he?
> No less a victim to the bolt and bar,
> Is the poor privilege to turn the key
> Upon the captive, freedom? He's as far
> From the enjoyment of the earth and air
> Who watches o'er the chain, as they who wear.

This is the kind of insight proper to a great political poet. Byron's reaction to despotism goes beyond simple political partisanship. It comes from a broad humane recognition that tyranny corrupts all those who participate in it – the jailor no less than the prisoner, the master no less than the slave.

Don Juan, with all its unevennesses, is the richest poem of the post-Revolutionary era. In the mode of high-spirited comedy and ironic banter it writes an enduring epitaph on that age of falling regimes and dissolving social relations:

> "Where is the world?" cries Young at eight, "where
> The world in which a man was born?" Alas!
> Where is the world of eight years past? 'Twas there
> I look for it – 'tis gone, a globe of glass,
> Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, are
> A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.
> Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,
> And dandies, all are gone on the wind's wings.
> Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows,
> Where little Castlereagh? The devil can tell.

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Notes

1. E.P. Thomson, **The Making of the English Working Class** (Penguin), p.98.
2. "I saw a chapel all of gold" (written down in Blake's notebook) has not been definitely dated, but the internal evidence points to the period of the **Songs of experience** – hence a date later than Burke's **Reflections**.
3. Readers of Isaac Deutscher's **Stalin** will recognize my indebtedness to him for this historical parallel too.

7

Not Playing Tennis with the Net Down

"I'd as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down."

— Robert Frost

"Freedom, in fact, is most significant against a background of known and established order."

— Graham Hough: 'Free Verse'

"A poem should not mean but be"

— Archibald MacLeish

It sometimes happens in life that certain things that are discarded on the rubbish heap in the fervour of a revolution have later to be salvaged because they are found to be precious. In Eastern Europe parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, once dismissed as bourgeois illusions, are now being tenderly nurtured anew. The Anglo-American modernist poetic revolution offers a literary parallel.

The leaders of this revolution, which began around seventy-five years ago, were two Americans by birth who had migrated across the Atlantic – T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

In theory and in practice, the revolution they inaugurated was based on three principles. One was the breaking down of the barriers their immediate predecessors had erected between what was accepted as 'poetic' in subject-matter and imagery and what was excluded as 'unpoetic'. This distinction had to be overthrown in order to open poetry to the whole range of contemporary experience. Eliot and Pound achieved this; it still remains the most fruitful and lasting effect of the modernist revolution, and anyone writing poetry today in any part of the English-speaking world is indebted to it.

The second principle of modernism was much more limited in scope and more ephemeral. Eliot and Pound, who had read French symbolist poetry, tried to substitute for the traditional forms of poetic discourse an elliptical structure based on the juxtaposition of images and symbols, with few connecting links of an expository or narrative kind. As somebody whose name I have forgotten once described the symbolist method, "Images or symbols are ranged about, and the meaning flowers out of the space between them." A good example would be Eliot's **'Marina'**, where you can't make sense of the poem by trying to construct out of it a story or an argument. Here the form seems to be justified by the peculiarly indefinite nature of the experience. However, for one successful **'Marina'**, there are dozens of failures in modernist poetry – including **The Waste Land**, which has to be held together by its notes, and **The Cantos**, a good deal of which stutters into gibberish. Worse still, after Eliot had pronounced that "poets in our civilization...must be **difficult**", the common reader was intimidated into submitting to poetry that was arcane, tortuous and obscure because to have complained would have been regarded as a confession of his inadequacy.

However, this aspect of the modernist revolution has happily left little mark on Sri Lankan English-language poetry. Hardly anybody here has attempted to adopt

symbolist structures in his or her writing, and difficulty and obscurity are not in general faults of Sri Lankan poetry.

The third element of the modernist revolution leads me to the subject proper of this essay – that is, verse form. It is crucial because poetic form can have many elements, but most of them are shared with creative prose, though poetry can exhibit them in greater intensity. Although not everything that is written in verse is poetry, it remains true that verse form is the distinguishing feature that sets poetry apart from prose of any kind.

It was part of the purpose of Eliot and Pound to bring poetry closer to the rhythms of contemporary speech, and for this reason they wanted to move away from inherited metrical forms. Free verse had already been written by Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, but it was fundamentally the influences of Eliot and Pound that were responsible for the vogue of free verse in this century.

Looking back on this innovation today, one can argue that it was misguided. No doubt, Victorian and Georgian poetry had tended to lose contact with speech rhythms, and the vitality of poetry needed to be renewed from this source. But was it necessary for this purpose to dispense with metrical verse? In English there had been a long tradition of poetry based on living speech, running through (to mention only some of the outstanding names) Chaucer, the poet of **Sir Gawain**, Wyatt, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Burns, Byron. Even though in the Victorian period, it was submerged by the Tennysonian bent towards mellifluousness and sonority of rhythm and nobility of diction, the colloquial tradition was still kept alive by Browning, by Clough in **'Amours de Voyage'** and by Kipling in the best of his poems written in the dialect of workingmen and common soldiers. (No wonder Brecht admired, and was influenced by, Kipling's poetry – a fact that should be pondered by left-wing intellectuals who despise Kipling). It can be shown that in this tradition metrical form doesn't detract from the natural

rhythms of speech, it rather heightens them and gives them greater energy. A brilliant example would be the flood of talk by Byron's Laura in **'Beppo'**, stanzas 91-93, written in the intricate stanza form of **ottava rima**, and not only marvellously faithful to the woman's tones of voice but raising the colloquial to a higher power through the verse form. I sometimes think that every free verse poet should be sentenced to a term of penal servitude, with the task of rewriting this passage so as to keep its wit and vigour while taking out the metrical beat and the rhymes, and released only on confession of incapacity to do so.

To do Eliot justice, he always had reservations about free verse. I must say that although I am deeply antipathetic to Eliot's poetry on account of its misogyny, its horror of life and its anti-semitism, I have to recognize that he was always a skilful and devoted craftsman. In one of his early essays he foresaw the danger that free verse would lead to formless writing and warned, " No **vers** is **libre** for the man who wants to do a good job." Eliot's early poetry in **'Prufrock'** and **'Portrait of a Lady'** has in fact an underlying suggestion of a metrical pulse, and also uses rhyme. The **Sweeney** poems are in regular quatrains. Later, in **Four Quartets**, he moved towards stricter forms – tight lyrical stanzas, and meditative passages in accentual verse. In an essay, 'The Music of Poetry', written around the time he was composing the **Quartets**, Eliot suggested that now that the modern idiom had been established, a period of formal versification could follow – a view that was in keeping not only with his later practice but also with his change of mind in the same years regarding Milton. However, in his early and middle years Eliot did write poems that can be described without reservation as being in free verse – poems such as **'Gerontion"**, sections of **'The Waste Land'**, **'Marina'** and **'Journey of the Magi'**, and these, together with the work of Pound, helped to strengthen the movement away from metrical form.

The other important poet writing in the 'twenties who adopted free verse was Lawrence, who found in it "the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment". This is a false aesthetic (poetry can never give the moment of experience or sensation itself, only its subsequent shaping and ordering by the poet), but it does help to explain why much of Lawrence's poetry reads like drafts for poems that have not yet been written.

However, there never was a time when free verse completely displaced traditional metrical forms. There were four major poets of the century whose beginnings predated the modernist revolution and who were unaffected by it – W.B. Yeats, Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and Robert Graves. In staying with metrical form, they proved that this wasn't incompatible with the rhythms of contemporary speech. Moreover, the new generation of poets who emerged in Britain in the 'thirties, though influenced by modernism in diction and imagery, didn't, for the most part, write in free verse. Pre-eminent among them was W.H. Auden, to my mind the century's greatest master of the full range and variety of English metrical verse. His editor Edward Mendelson rightly speaks of "his revival of the poetic forms and meters that modernism had pronounced dead a few years earlier. Auden was able to find them still alive and well, and as effective as they had always been."

Auden's considerable influence has helped to accentuate the marked return in British poetry (as distinguished from American) of the last few decades to stricter forms. It can be said, in fact, that what recent British poetry has shown is a reassertion of the native tradition against the modernism imposed by Eliot and Pound. Already by 1957, Graham Hough, lecturing to the British Academy on free verse, was treating its ascendancy as a brief chapter of English poetical history: "We find comparatively little written in free verse before this century, and we find little now."

In the U.S. free verse has had a longer dominance, perhaps because of the obsession with newness that is characteristic of American culture. But even there things are changing. I have only a minimal acquaintance with the most recent American poetry, but an article by Alan Shapiro in **Critical Inquiry** (Autumn 1987) says:

> "In the late sixties and early seventies....free verse was by far the dominant form....In the mid-eighties, however, an opposite movement seems to be taking place. Open the pages of almost any national journal or magazine, and where ten years ago you found only one or another kind of free verse lyric, one now finds well rhymed quatrains, sestinas, villanelles, sonnets, and blank verse dramatic monologues or meditations."

This reaction – whether in Britain or in the U.S. – is due, I suggest, to a growing recognition that free verse is a thinner, more limited medium than traditional metrical form (defined as syllabic-accentual verse). The latter owes much of its strength to the continual tension in it between metre and rhythm, between the fixed metrical beat and the varying speech stresses, but also between sentence structure on the one hand and line and stanza divisions on the other.

Let me illustrate these potentialities of English metrical verse with a familiar quotation. In **'Ulysses'** Tennyson writes:

> The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
> The long day wanes, the slow moon climbs, the deep
> Moans round with many voices.

The crowding of stresses in the second line, slowing down the rhythm, wouldn't be as effective but for our awareness of its deviation from the standard iambic line (seven stresses against the metrically regular five), while the breaking up of the syntactical unit, "the deep moans round", by the line-division throws a strong emphasis on "moans" – all the stronger because the speech rhythm again departs here

from the metrical pattern. An excellent example of what Graham Hough means when he says that "freedom...is most significant against a background of known and established order".

These animating tensions are eliminated in free verse, where (as Hough has said) a line is a line "only because it is a rhythmical unit, and it is only a rhythmical unit because it is a unit of sense, a unit of syntax." The line divisions in a free verse poem tend, in other words, to duplicate the natural pauses that the sense requires, so that the pull between syntax and metrical form disappears.

It is possible for a free verse poet deliberately to override this tendency: I have seen lines in some free verse poems ending, say, with the word "the". But such practices seem merely eccentric and arbitrary without any compensating gain in expressiveness.

The tug of war between metre and speech rhythm also disappears in free verse because there is in it no underlying metrical norm. And at the same time the free verse poet throws away all the expressive possibilities that rhyme affords – for emphasis, parallelism, ironic contrast; effects of colloquial ease or humour open to rhymes on two or more syllables; and the different tonalities of rhymes with vowel endings as against those with consonant endings.

Even the most accomplished of free verse poems seem to me to suffer from these self-circumscribing limitations. Ezra Pound was perhaps the most skilled practitioner of free verse, but even where his craftsmanship is most perfect, as in that lovely poem, **"The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"**, I feel that the resources of verse form are not being stretched to their fullest extent because the tensions I spoke of are absent – that this is, in short, a minor mode of poetic expression.

And this is what I think free verse will remain: a subsidiary current to the mainstream. Not, of course, that any poem written in metrical verse is better than any poem

in free verse, or that metrical verse can't be written dully and mechanically; but that free verse, even at its best, can utilize only a smaller range of the expressive resources open to metrical verse. These considerations are as relevant to Sri Lankan poetry as to poetry written in English elsewhere.

The most damaging effect of free verse on Sri Lankan English-language poetry is that it has encouraged the notion that many of our young writers (and some older ones) seem to share – that poetry can be written without any acquisition of the skills of a craft. There is something seriously wrong when a writer who is beginning to write poetry adopts free verse not because he or she has chosen that form as the most appropriate to his or her subject, but because he or she has never learned to handle any other. It is as if an artist were to try to draw like Picasso because of inability to produce a likeness.

We need to recognize that poetry can never be merely "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Poetry is experience ordered and shaped in words, and a good poem must be at least as well made as a good pot or mat. It should, of course, be much more, but if it doesn't possess the minimal quality of sound craftsmanship, it can't be a good poem.

One reason why young writers seem to believe that free verse is the only kind of verse that should be written today is that they think of metrical and rhymed verse as an artificial and restrictive form which one has to struggle with and labour over, while free verse "comes naturally". These assumptions are, however, belied by the real experience of writing poetry.

As any poet competent in handling a metrical form knows, lines of poetry can emerge into consciousness in the act of composition already clothed in a metrical pattern; an initial line formed in this way can determine the shape of the rest of the poem; a rhyme need not have to be searched for laboriously but can turn up, seemingly, of its own will; and even where a rhyme has to be found, the very quest, by a

fortunate serendipity, may direct the poem into an unforeseen and fruitful direction. The ways of the imagination are more diverse than a simple antithesis between spontaneity and imposed form would indicate. And there is more than one kind of metrical form open to the poet and more than one kind of rhyme.

To the Muse of Insomnia (1990)

WRITERS

1

The Two Lears

(This paper is based on a talk given to the English Association of Sri Lanka.)[1]

In the 1960s, Peter Brook directed a famous production of *King Lear* on both stage and screen. I never had an opportunity to see the stage version, but I did see the film. What was pervasive in Peter Brook's production was a sense of the meaninglessness of the human condition and the ferocity of the destructive impulses of human beings. There was a lot of controversy at the time about whether Brook had been, as they say, 'true to Shakespeare'. In one scene, Gloucester is blinded before the audience. But in what had become the standard text of the play, two of the servants, even though they assist in the binding, are, when left alone, full of compassion for the old man. At the end of the scene they want to put eggwhite on his bleeding eyesockets and have him escorted to Dover. Peter Brook cut out that conversation between the servants, and for this he was roundly rebuked by some critics who said he had changed Shakespeare's humane view of people to suit his own pessimism.

This gave me one of the starting-points for my play *The Blinding*, performed in Colombo in April and June 1995. There the director Ajith also wants to cut the conversation between the servants after the blinding of Gloucester – but

not for Peter Brook's philosophical reasons. Ajith rejects what he calls the 'moral consolation' that Shakespeare offers because he thinks it contrary to the actual behaviour of people during the Sri Lankan violence of 1988-89. He says: "I want to rub the noses of the audience in the blood and the guilt, and not let them get away with a little soothing eggwhite." But he is talking not in the 'sixties but in 1995. So on stage there's a scholar, Premila, who to begin with defends Ajith's right to do whatever he wants with the text. But near the end of the argument she discloses, to Ajith's surprise and delight, that Shakespeare had probably made the same cut himself in a later, revised version of the play.

My talk today is really a kind of postscript to that part of *The Blinding*. I shall try to answer the following questions. Is it likely that Shakespeare revised *King Lear* after its first performance? If he did, in what ways did he change the play? And further, what can we learn from the case of *King Lear* about Shakespeare's methods of work as a playwright?

But before I can answer these questions, I must first offer you some facts. As in the case of his other plays, we have no manuscripts of *King Lear* in Shakespeare's hand. All we have are the earliest printed editions. There are two of them. One is a separate book of this play, published while Shakespeare was living – that is, in 1608. This is known as the First Quarto. The other is the text of *King Lear* found in the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, known as the First Folio. This was brought out by his fellow-actors seven years after his death – that is, in 1623. I must explain that Quarto and Folio are just printers' terms for different page-sizes; a Folio page has a standard sheet of printing paper folded once, and a Quarto folded twice. Every later edition of *King Lear* derives in one way or another from these two earliest printed texts.

The Quarto text and the Folio text of *King Lear* differ vastly from each other. The Folio cuts out nearly 300 lines that are in the Quarto, but it also adds about a hundred that

are not found in the earlier edition. In addition, some speeches are assigned to different characters as between Quarto and Folio, and there are hundreds of variations in individual words.

How do we explain these differences? Until 1986 all editors of Shakespeare assumed that there was a single original manuscript of *King Lear* written by Shakespeare – now lost, of course. The cuts in the Folio were explained as mutilations made in the theatre, to save time in performance. But then, how reconcile this with the fact that the Folio added a hundred lines not found in the Quarto? Editors answered this by conjecturing that those hundred lines had been there in Shakespeare's manuscripts but had been dropped out of the Quarto by mistake. There were various theories constructed to try to explain how such an error could have occurred, but I don't intend to spend time on them. What's more important is to realize that behind the practice of editors, there were certain assumptions about the ways in which Shakespeare's plays were transmitted from manuscript to theatre to printing-house.

In particular, two assumptions. First, that behind the printed texts there was one and only one authentic manuscript in the author's hand. It was the task of the editor to reconstruct as far as possible the text of this manuscript. In the case of *King Lear* it was believed that this could be done by conflating the two original editions – in effect, adding from the Quarto the lines cut from the Folio and making choices between other variants.

The second assumption made by editors was that once the supposed authentic manuscripts left Shakespeare's hand, any changes it underwent could only have been a process of corruption. Its virginal purity was thought of as violated by the rough hands of actors and theatre-managers, cutting, interpolating and altering, and of semi-literate compositors in the printing-house misreading the manuscript they were working from.

Editors were right about Elizabethan printers, but their picture of the fate of Shakespeare's plays in the playhouse came from nothing more solid than the scholar's prejudice against the popular theatre. To illustrate this, I shall read you a passage from G.H. Hunter, a distinguished scholar, editing *King Lear* for the New Penguin Shakespeare. About the cuts in the First Folio, Hunter says:

> *These cuts have an extraordinary persistence in the stage tradition, and one must presume that they preserve fabric to the satisfaction of the stage, however abhorrent they are to literary connoisseurs.*[2]

To contrast the play as it existed 'to the satisfaction of the stage' with the play as perceived by 'literary connoisseurs' is surely entirely wrong for Shakespeare. Shakespeare didn't write for literary connoisseurs. All the evidence we have suggests that he took no interest even in the publication of his plays because he was content to communicate with his audience through the medium for which the plays were created – the theatre. It's the academic and critical industry that has turned Shakespeare into a book, a set of printed texts for study in the classroom and for the weaving of critical webs round them. Shakespeare would have found this metamorphosis of his work bizarre. He was a complete man of the theatre who began life as an actor and continued to be one, while becoming the most popular playwright of the most successful theatre company of his time. He was a shareholder of that company and made a lot of money out of it. Like Charles Dickens, Charlie Chaplin or Louis Armstrong, Shakespeare was a popular entertainer who was also a great artist, and like them, he is a permanent reminder that the two roles aren't at all incompatible.

As anybody familiar with theatre knows, plays often undergo changes in rehearsal or after first performance. If the scholars rejected this possibility in the case of Shakespeare, it was because they must have felt that it detracted from

Shakespeare's genius if one suggested that he couldn't get it right first time. But if we see Shakespeare not as the lonely genius but as a man working in the collaborative art of the theatre, there's nothing improbable in the image of him trying out his creations in rehearsal or performance and modifying them, when necessary. Whether a particular change was initiated by Shakespeare himself or by an actor is irrelevant. What matters is that all such changes would have emerged from the theatre as part of a collective process of production in which Shakespeare participated.

These are the fundamental ideas behind the textual revolution launched in 1986 by the Oxford Shakespeare – that is, the *Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor.[3] The formidable-looking volume sitting on this table is the Oxford Shakespeare, in the form in which it was published in 1986 – large, heavy and expensive. It has since been reprinted also in a three-volume paperback, which is cheaper and more manageable.

In contrast with all earlier editors of Shakespeare, the Oxford editors took the view that their business was to get as close as possible to the texts *as performed* in the theatre of his time. This obliged them to take seriously the possibility of post-composition or post-production revision. The Oxford editors found that in all, there were six plays which have come down in two original printed versions differing substantially from each other. In all these cases, they concluded, one version came from an author's manuscript and the other has behind it a playhouse transcript representing the play in performance. The Oxford editors regarded the latter as closer to the Shakespeare of the theatre. But most striking of all was their treatment of *King Lear*. Here the Quarto and Folio versions differ so widely that Wells and Taylor took them to be two distinct versions written and performed at different times. Accordingly, the Oxford Shakespeare prints not one but two separate texts of the play. While challenging the editorial orthodoxy that there was one

and only one Shakespearean text of *King Lear*, the Oxford editors have in the same breath democratized the discussion of this question. Earlier the textual problems of the play could be discussed only by scholars who not only had the necessary expertise but also had access to facsimiles of the Quarto and the Folio, which were not only expensive but also difficult for the ordinary person to read because of the misprints in the original editions, the old spelling and other such obstacles as the long s's which look like f's. Now we have in the Oxford Shakespeare the two texts, with the misprints corrected and the spelling modernized, so that any of us, if we are interested, can read them and make up our own minds.

If it can be shown that Folio *Lear* – with cuts, additions, substitutions and all – is a better play than Quarto *Lear*, then the case for saying that it is the product of a revision that Shakespeare carried out, or in which he participated, is greatly strengthened. But I am now in the same position as Premila in *The Blinding*, who says of the two versions of *King Lear*: 'There are lots of differences between them. I can't talk about all of them now.' There is in fact a 500-page book titled *The Division of the Kingdoms*, written by a group of scholars about these differences,[4] as well as several other learned papers published elsewhere. I can't even try therefore to cover this ground in the time I have. What I have decided to do is to concentrate on two scenes and to demonstrate from them how Shakespeare worked as a reviser. The two scenes are, in what was until 1986 the standard text, numbered Act IV Scene 3 and Act IV Scene 7. In the first of these scenes Kent and a Gentleman discuss the condition of Lear and Cordelia's emotional state before their reunion. In the second of these scenes that reunion itself and Lear's restoration from his madness are enacted.

The first thing to say about the differences between the two versions in respect of these scenes is that the Folio drops entirely the first of them – that is, the conversation between Kent and the Gentleman. For earlier editors, this

was an unauthorized cut in the theatre that had to be compensated for by restoring it from the Quarto. If we accept, like Wells and Taylor, the hypothesis that Shakespeare revised the play for later performances, then we can try to think of reasons why Shakespeare dropped it while rethinking the play. I suggest that he may have found this scene both superfluous and inferior.

In that scene, as I have already indicated, Kent and the Gentleman talk about Lear's shame and guilt about his earlier rejection of Cordelia, and her continuing love and devotion to him. But in the latter of the two scenes that I am discussing, these feelings of Lear and Cordelia are enacted on the stage by father and daughter themselves, in action and dialogue. Isn't it likely that Shakespeare, on returning to the scene as a reviser, felt that the earlier scene – a scene of reporting and not of dramatic enactment – was unnecessary and should be eliminated?

But it's not only because of the less dramatic quality of Act IV Scene 3 that it may have been dropped in revision. I would argue that the quality of its writing is inferior to the general level of the poetry in *King Lear*. Take, for instance, the passage in which Kent talks about Lear's recollection of the wrongs he had done Cordelia:

> *these things sting*
> *His mind so venomously that burning shame*
> *Detains him from Cordelia.*

Guilt as stinging and shame as burning – these are well-worn and unremarkable images. Very different is the effect of the lines given to Lear in the reunion scene:

> *I am bound*
> *Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears*
> *Do scald like molten lead.*

This too is derived from a traditional image of the purgatorial fire, both punishing and purifying, but renewed in poetic power in its dramatic context.

In the scene between Kent and the Gentleman let's look also at the latter's account of the way in which Cordelia received the news of Lear's sufferings:

> *...patience and sorrow strove*
> *Who should express her goodliest. You have seen*
> *Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears*
> *Were like a better way; those happy smiles*
> *That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know*
> *What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence*
> *As pearls from diamonds dropped.*

The imagery here is pretty, decorative and full of artifice, especially in the pearls and diamonds at the end. So the scene as a whole falls short, both in dramatic and in poetic power, of the best things in the play; and Shakespeare probably decided on these grounds to drop the entire scene in revision.

Let's consider now what he did to the reunion of Lear and Cordelia (Act IV Scene 7) in the hitherto standard texts) in reshaping it the second time round. Several years ago I discussed this scene in an essay, 'The Pure Water of Poetry', that has been reprinted in *Navasilu 11 and 12*. I should like to begin by reading what I said then, at a time when I hadn't studied the hypothesis of revision:

> *'When Lear emerges from the dark night of the spirit, woken from his restoring sleep by music, Cordelia at first addresses him with ceremonial reverence as King and father:*
>
> How does my royal lord? How fares Your Majesty?

For Lear, however, the hierarchies of power and even of age no longer have meaning: later in the scene he appalls Cordelia by kneeling to her. He has died and has been reborn ('You do me wrong to take me out of the grave'), and his

first utterances are like those of a child groping to make sense of an unfamiliar world... The blank verse is halting and broken, as if language itself has to be reconstituted; yet it follows in those very tentative rhythms the movements of the seeking and exploring consciousness. And the movement is in the opposite direction from that of the mad speeches: here the language marks the striving towards purgation of hatred and pride and towards a humbling self-knowledge. Never before had Shakespeare written on such a scale and with such intensity poetry so austere in its simplicity and yet so masterly in its emotional truth;

LEAR : Pray do not mock me.
I am a very foolish, fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or loss;
And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

CORDELIA : And so I am, I am.

As Lear had abrogated the passion, so Shakespeare, in his own act of renunciation, has cast off complexity, verbal richness, metaphor, all the common appurtenances of poetry. All that remains is the pure, transparent, pellucid water of the barest, most elemental wellsprings of human utterance. 'And so I am, I am' – what could be seemingly more commonplace than Cordelia's line? But it is part of its strength

that she speaks to him in the tones of a mother soothing a troubled child, so that the parent-child relationship is reversed. And its very simplicity, its avoidance of all emotional ostentation, is the mark of the purity of Cordelia's love. Bearing as it does all the selfless generosity of her nature, and with the whole weight of the play, which has been moving towards this moment, behind it, the line is in fact one of the peaks of Shakespearean poetry. One definition of poetry is that it is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. If so, then surely Cordelia's line is great poetry.'

In revising the scene Shakespeare did very little to its words, which in their perfection indeed demanded few changes. He did cut the concluding prose dialogue between Kent and the Gentleman, which is merely informative, so that in the Folio the scene ends on Lear's closing lines:

Pray you now, forget
And forgive, I am old and foolish.

With this cut Shakespeare ended the scene on an emotional highpoint, avoiding the drop in intensity which the original conclusion involved.

But the main changes that Shakespeare seems to have made to this scene in revision concern its staging. To match the powerful simplicity of the language, he apparently decided to give the stage action an equally expressive simplicity.

Modern editions of *Lear* have in Act IV Scene 7[5] some such stage direction as this: 'Enter Lear in a chair carried by servants.' This direction derives from the Folio, and therefore presumably belongs to the revision. There is no corresponding direction in the Quarto. What has therefore been conjectured is that when Shakespeare wrote his first version of the play, what he envisaged was that Lear should be revealed (or, to use the technical language of the Elizabethan stage) 'discovered', asleep in bed by the drawing

apart of curtains. The change in the Folio to him being brought on stage in a chair is more effective because the chair reminds us of his throne, from which he started the tragedy in the first scene by his division of the kingdom.

In the Quarto, and in modern conflated texts, the Doctor says to Cordelia, 'Please you draw near' – that is, to Lear in bed. This goes out in the Folio because when Lear is brought in a chair, it could be set down where Cordelia was.In the Quarto version of this scene we have on stage, besides Lear and Cordelia, Kent, a Doctor and a Gentleman. The Doctor manages the awakening of Lear from his restorative sleep with the command 'Louder the music there!' Music is, of course, often in Shakespeare a symbol of restored harmony; it is used in this way in the stage action in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. No doubt Shakespeare provided for a similar use of music for Lear's awaking in the first productions of the play. But in revision he seems to have abandoned this for a simpler effect. In the Folio version the Doctor disappears, so that attention is wholly concentrated on Cordelia as the agent of Lear's recovery. And there is no music, so that there is nothing to distract the audience from the words in their unadorned, austere strength. It's very likely, too, that Shakespeare revised *King Lear* after he had written *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, so that when he came back to Lear, he didn't want to repeat a theatrical effect he had already used in the other plays.

An interesting point arises here with regard to Peter Brook's production of the play, to which I have already referred. In this production the Doctor and the music were both excluded in the reunion scene, and as already mentioned, the conversation between the two servants at the end of Act IV Scene 3 was cut. All these cuts correspond to excisions in the Folio, but it's unlikely that Brook made them on textual grounds, since in the 'sixties there was no school of textual scholars arguing that the Folio incorporated Shakespeare's last known revision of the play. However, it's possible that

Brook looked at the Folio text and took ideas from it for his production. Of course, Brook introduced innovations of his own: in the scene of the blinding of Gloucester, he had the servants at the end of the scene moving the furniture, indifferent to the plight of the blinded man. But this, seen by some critics in the 'sixties, basing themselves on the conflated text, as a violation of Shakespeare, can now be claimed as a creative development of the scene in the Folio version. This raises the general question of what text a director should use in producing *King Lear* on the stage. When the play passes into the hands of a director today, it becomes part of a new creative act, and the director's freedom of interpretation – in fact, of re-creation – can't be circumscribed by any text. But there remains the question of what text he should *start from*. Why begin with the conflated text, which, as now seems likely, is nothing more than a construct by generations of scholars suffering from a misapprehension?[6] Brook's example shows that a director may find the Folio text theatrically more fruitful, which isn't surprising since it was probably evolved in the theatre under Shakespeare's own direction[7], though Brook was unaware of this.

I have been able only to demonstrate from a small part of the play that Quarto and Folio *Lears* must be treated as two distinct versions. There are many other differences between them that I have no time to discuss – for instance, the fact that the Folio diminishes the roles of Albany and Kent and enhances that of Edgar; that it cuts a number of moralizing speeches; and that, in general, the Folio version is darker in tone. But I want to end with some comments on the impact of the new Oxford Shakespeare text on the present and future image of Shakespeare's methods of work as a playwright. I must make it clear at this point that it's not only in respect of *King Lear* that the Oxford Shakespeare gives us a text very different from that to which we have been accustomed. As I mentioned earlier, there are six plays of Shakespeare for which we have two original printed texts

which differ substantially from each other. In all these cases, one text seems to derive from an author's manuscript, and in the other there is the presence of a playhouse transcript. What editors before 1986 did with each of these plays was to conflate the two versions. It is arguable that in doing so, they produced a text that never existed in Shakespeare's time, either in manuscript or in stage production. In all such cases the Oxford editors gives us texts that can be taken to approximate as closely as possible to the text as acted in its latest stage of revision.[8] They carry through this principle even if it means relegating to an appendix some famous lines, as, for instance, one soliloquy of Hamlet.

At this point I wish to anticipate a question that may occur to some listeners. In the first collected edition, the First Folio, there are 36 plays. To these we have to add two plays that are partly by Shakespeare – *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – making 38 in all. So you may feel like objecting, 'You say Shakespeare probably revised six plays after he finished their original manuscripts. Six out of 38 – that isn't a large proportion. So revision couldn't have been so frequent or so important in his work as a playwright.' But such an argument wouldn't be sound. To decide whether or not a play was revised after first composition was completed, we need to have two original printed texts that we can compare with each other. But this condition is satisfied only with 18 of the plays; for the other twenty we have only one text. In the case of these twenty, Shakespeare may have revised none, or some, or all of them – there's no way of telling. So the real proportion is that among the 18 plays where we can judge, Shakespeare seems to have revised six of them. And among these six, there are three where the revisions were very extensive, and these are among Shakespeare's acknowledged masterpieces – *Lear, Hamlet and Othello.* So the process of revision appears to have played a more significant role in the making of his art than the simple arithmetic would indicate.

When the Oxford Shakespeare appeared nine years ago, orthodox scholars were shocked by the novelty of its conclusions and the unfamiliarity of several features of its text. But in these nine years, there has been a noticeable shift in favour of its argument that Shakespeare did revise some of his plays. To some extent, I believe, that shift was due to the essential soundness of the case made out by the Oxford editors. However, there are probably also other factors that have helped. In the intellectual climate of post-modernist literary theory and literary criticism, people like to think of a text as not being fixed or finally defined. Of course, the process of what Gary Taylor called 'reinventing Shakespeare' in his witty and penetrating book of that name has gone on ever since his time. We know that the plays have been subject to continual transformation and re-interpretations by editors, critics, directors and actors. But now there is evidence that even in Shakespeare's own time and in his own hands the plays existed in a process of flux. As Gary Taylor writes:

> What happened when Shakespeare finished *King Lear*? According to the traditional story, he never revised his work, and so after he had written the last page of *King Lear* he closed the book – and that was that. But fewer and fewer critics believe in closure. Shakespeare may at some point have closed the book, but he could reopen it again whenever he wanted. There is no Last Judgment anymore.[9]

There is, however, another fact that has helped in the ascendancy of the theory of Shakespearean revision, and that is the financial power and academic prestige of the Oxford University Press through whose imprints the new image of Shakespeare is being disseminated. Certainly, if Wells and Taylor had edited their Shakespeare for a less prestigious publisher, their innovations would have had much less impact. And the texts of the Oxford Shakespeare are now being distributed also through cheap paperbacks – a book to a play

– in the World's Classics series. It seems safe to say that these editions are already strong rivals throughout the English-speaking world to the New Penguin Shakespeare, hitherto the most popular versions used in schools and universities. As Gary Taylor himself admits.

> Like IBM and the Berliner Ensemble and the RSC, OUP can afford to experiment, because its risky innovations are subsidized by its safe market leaders. The Oxford editors, too, can afford to experiment, because they know that the global power and prestige of OUP will be mobilized in support of their experiment. Their shocking edition is empowered by, and in turn empowers, the multinational business interests of Oxford University Press.[10]

Another sign that Wells and Taylor have begun to change academic thinking about Shakespeare's plays is that the fresh series of the Arden Shakespeare is going to fall in line with their view. You may know that in the first half of this century there was the original Arden Shakespeare; then, beginning in the 'fifties, there was the New Arden Shakespeare. Now we are to have a re-editing of the series under the title Arden 3. The general editor, Jonathan Bate, has announced that he strongly endorses the view that some of Shakespeare's plays existed in more than one version, and that Arden 3 will take account of this fact. So I am inclined to think that by the first decade of the 21st century the hypothesis of Shakespearean revision will be well established in scholarly favour, and that editions of Shakespeare prepared on this basis will become generally acceptable. As often, the heresies of one time will probably become the orthodoxies of another.

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Footnotes

1 I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare and other scholars who have promoted the textual revolution in Shakespeare for many of the leading ideas in this paper.

2 G.K. Hunter (ed.), Shakespeare: King Lear (1972): Penguin Books), pp. 45-46.

3 Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds), William Shakespeare, The Complete Works (1986: Oxford University Press).

4 Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (eds.), *The Division of the Kingdoms* (1983): Oxford University Press.

5 Act IV Scene 6 in the Oxford Shakespeare's editing of the Folio text.

6 The misapprehension, as indicated in the earlier argument, is that the integrity of a Shakespeare's play, once it left his hands, would have been violated in the theatre by actors doing what they liked with it without reference to him.

7 The Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre didn't have a recognized institution of a theatre director, but somebody would have had to instruct the actors and decide on matters of stage business, etc. In the case of Shakespeare's plays, who would have been better suited to do this than the playwright-actor-member of the company who, it is plausible to suppose, would normally, until his retirement to Stratford, have been there on the spot?

8 The six plays are *King Lear, Hamlet, Othello, Richard II, King Henry IV and Troilus and Cressida*. It's only in the first three, however, that the revisions are so substantial as to make a difference to the general structure of the play, and in *King Lear* they are so extensive and so far-reaching as to justify the Oxford editors in speaking of two distinct versions.

Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1991; Vintage), p.361.

10 Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1991; Vintage), p.321.

2

Dark Lady, Black Man

Ethnicity, Gender and Shakespeare

I

In 1933, the Shakespearean scholar G.B. Harrison suggested that the Dark Lady of the Sonnets was a black prostitute in London whose name was Lucy Negro, and who was jestingly referred to as 'Abbess de Clerkenwell'. (A 'nunnery' in Elizabethan slang could mean a brothel.) Harrison really had no solid evidence for his supposition, but the idea was taken up by Anthony Burgess in his novel of Shakespeare's love-live, *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), probably because it was an interesting fictional device to play with. In Burgess's novel the Dark Lady is known as Lucy Negro to Londoners but, had been brought to England by Drake on his return from his voyage round the world, and her real name was Fatimah because she was Malay.

As I have already remarked, there is no real evidence for Harrison's theory that the Dark Lady was literally black, nor is it a necessary assumption. There is precedent in Elizabethan literature, both within and outside Shakespeare's writing, for describing a person of a somewhat darker colour than the English norm as 'black'. In any case, to readers of poetry, as distinct from biographers, the question of who the Dark Lady was, or even whether she existed at all, should be irrelevant. Even it could be proved that there was in fact

no Dark Lady in Shakespeare's life, the sonnets wouldn't be any the less interesting, for what a poet imagines can be even more significant than what he creates out of his personal experience.

So this first part of my essay, where I discuss the sonnets to the Dark Lady, will be concerned not with trying to track down her personal identity, but with exploring the gender identities that are projected in the sonnets. A convenient starting-point is Sonnet 130.

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head,
> I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare,
> As any she belied with false compare.

This sonnet has often been seen as a refusal on the part of the Poet to indulge in the conventional language of love poetry, idealising the beloved.[1] A characteristic example of the way in which the sonnet is usually read can be found in John Kerrigan's commentary on it. 'The poet,' says Kerrigan, 'mocks the stock comparisons of Elizabethan love poetry, and flouts the reader's expectation that the blazon of a mistress will involve hyperbolic praise.'[2] Sonnet 130 has therefore been compared with Sonnet 21 in the sequence to the Young Man, where also the Poet refuses to liken him to sun, moon and stars:

> So it is not with me as with that Muse,
> Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse,
> Who heaven itself for ornament doth use,
> And every fair with his fair doth rehearse,
> Making a complement of proud compare
> With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems,
> With April's first-born flowers, and all things rare
> That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems.
> O, let me, true in love, but truly write,
> And then, believe me, my love is as fair
> As any mother's child, though not so bright
> As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air,
> Let them say more that like of hearsay well;
> I will not praise that purpose not to sell.

However, for all their surface similarity, I think there is a great difference in tone between the two sonnets. Sonnet 21 can, indeed, be regarded as a display of poetic honesty; there is nothing disparaging, after all, in declining to see the Young Man as a celestial object. The Poet's protestation, 'O, let me, true in love, but truly write,' seems fairly to represent the aspiration of that sonnet. But Sonnet 130 goes beyond sober realism: it isn't just a stripping of the pretences of flattering love poetry but also an unillusioned look at the Lady's bodily presence, for which there is no parallel in Sonnet 21:

> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

But that isn't the only respect in which Sonnet 130 speaks in a voice that is startlingly unfamiliar in Elizabethan love poetry. There is nothing in Sonnet 21 at all comparable with the astonishing reversal of feeling in the final couplet of the other. He has just denied that the Dark Lady is any kind of goddess, has brought her down to earth –

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground

-and then, he invokes heaven to affirm that she is indeed as beautiful as any of those paragons sung by others.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

What is the force of this conclusion, which seems to invert the clear-eyed unromantic vision of what has gone before? I suggest that its effect is that of a wry, self-critical irony, as if the Poet is saying, 'I can't help it, I don't understand how I can be captivated by somebody so unattractive, but there it is: reason and intelligence are no defence against the fantastic tricks your feelings play on you.'

In Sonnet 130 what is insinuated is only that the Dark Lady is very ordinary in her looks. But in the sequence as a whole, it isn't just her appearance but her character that becomes the subject of derogation. And here we confront the meaning of the Lady's 'blackness' which is the central motif of the sequence. Whatever shade of darkness of skin we may imagine her to have had, her blackness isn't merely a matter of her complexion. Shakespeare enlists in the sequence the related sets of polarities in the English language of black/white, dark/fair, ugly/beautiful, evil/good, hell/heaven. But the correspondences between each of these binary oppositions turn out in the Dark Lady sequence to be unstable: the problem of the Poet is precisely that in his consciousness some of the terms change places. Let us consider Sonnet 131:

Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art,
As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel;
For well thou know'st to my dear doting heart
Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel.
Yet in good faith some say that thee behold
Thy face hath not the power to make love groan;

To say they err I dare not be so bold,
Although I swear it to myself alone.
And to be sure that is not false I swear,
A thousand groans, but thinking on thy face,
One on another's neck, do witness bear
Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds,
And thence this slander, as I think, proceeds.

The sonnet overturns the normal correspondences beyond each of the pairs black/white, dark/fair (in the physical senses) and ugly/beautiful in the eyes of the Poet, in love with an unfashionable dark woman, 'thy black is fairest in my judgment's place'. However, while the sonnet questions the equation between 'black' and 'ugly', it reaffirms that between 'black' and 'evil': 'in nothing art thou black save in thy deeds.' This is, in fact, the tormenting problem of the Poet in the Dark Lady sequence – that his emotions and desires are bent on one who (his reason and his judgment tell him) is morally corrupt. The contradiction appears in its sharpest form in Sonnet 138:

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies.

Not, it should be noted, 'I pretend to believe her', but 'I do believe her, and that in spite of the fact that 'I know she lies'. Sonnet 138 ends in the bitter pun contained in the final couplet:

Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

The pun brings to a focus the inherent falsity of the relationship: the pair can lie with each other only because they lie to each other. In Sonnet 138 the wit, however sardonic it is, suggests still a capacity in the Poet to look critically at himself and appreciate, with a kind of self-mockery, the contradictions of his situation. But in Sonnet 147, the most

intense of the sequence, the confession the Poet makes is of the total impotence of his reason, in the face of the perversity of the emotions. Reading this sonnet, I am reminded of the greatest modern explorer of the pathology of love, the French novelist Marcel Proust. Of Swann in love, for instance:

> ....this malady, which was Swann's love, had so far multiplied, was so closely interwoven with all his habits, with all his actions, with his thoughts, his health, his sleep, his life, even with what he hoped for after his death, was so entirely one with him that it would have been impossible to wrest it away without almost entirely destroying him; as surgeons say, his case was past operation.

What Shakespeare speaks of it in Sonnet 147 is also a love-malady that is so deepseated that it is beyond cure:

> My love is as a fever, longing still
> For that which longer nurseth the disease
> Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
> Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
> My reason, the physician to my love,
> Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
> Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
> Desire is death, which physic did except.
> Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
> And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
> My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
> At random from the truth, vainly expressed:
> For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
> Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

We should, I think, reflect on this sonnet (and others of a related strain of feeling in the sequence) when we are inclined to regard Shakespeare as the supreme poet of the health and sanity of the spirit. The most intense of the sonnets in the Dark Lady sequence have an undeniable power

(surpassing anything in the Young Man sequence), but their power doesn't come from a mind in secure command of its experience but one driven by insoluble contradictions. I am moved to say that I admire the sometimes brilliant, sometimes somber quality of these sonnets, but I am at the same time repelled by their disturbing, almost Swiftian, energy of negation and destruction. Whether any personal relationship lies behind the state of mind out of which this sequence was written is, as I have already suggested, a futile question. It is more profitable to look at these sonnets in terms of a context that is more than personal – in terms, that is, of the image of woman that they project and its affiliations with a whole male culture.

In patriarchal cultures the two antithetical male phantasies of woman are of her as Virgin and as Harlot, the former idealizing and the latter degrading. The image of the Virgin includes not only the untouched maiden but also the chaste and virtuous wife who conforms to the patriarchal moral code – such a one as the Valeria who is eloquently praised by Coriolanus:

> The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle
> That's curded by the frost from purest snow
> And hangs on Dian's temple.[3]

The image of the Harlot, on the other hand, includes not only the woman who sells her body for money but also one who offends the patriarchal code by having sexual relations outside the permitted confines of marriage and who is therefore stigmatized as whore. Freud analysed these two male phantasies of woman and related them to the child's two images of the mother – one, the good, idealized mother towards whom erotic feeling is tabooed, and the other, the bad mother who is the object of forbidden and unconscious desire.[4] This may explain the genesis of the phantasies of the Virgin and the Harlot within the patriarchal nuclear family, but I shall suggest later that one has to go beyond the conflicts

of childhood to explain their persistence and power. Meanwhile, however, in the light of the Freudian theory, it is interesting to look at Sonnet 143:

> Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
> One of her feathered creatures broke away,
> Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch
> In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;
> Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
> Tries to catch her whose busy care is bent
> To follow that which flies before her face,
> Not prizing her poor infant's discontent;
> So runn'st thou after that which flies from thee,
> Whilst I, my babe, chase thee afar behind;
> But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me
> And play the mother's part – kiss me, be kind.
> So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will,
> If thou turn back and my loud crying still.

In this sonnet the Poet represents himself as being in the situation of the child neglected by his mother who runs to catch a chicken who has escaped. In this case, however, the bird whom the Dark Lady is chasing is another lover who is fleeing from her and whom she is anxious to keep. The line, 'So will I pray that thou may'st have thy Will', carries a pun: 'thy Will has the sense of 'your desire' but also that of 'your William' (the text of the 1609 Quarto italicizes the word and gives it a capital W.). This is one of several indications in the sequence that the rival lover (or possibly, more than one lover) shares a Christian name with the Poet. Thus the Dark Lady as Harlot is cast in the image of the bad mother, and the Poet is pleading with her to play the good mother to him once she as had her desire:

> But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me
> And play the mother's part – kiss me, be kind
> So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will,
> If thou turn back and my loud crying still.

As I have already indicated, the images of good and bad mother, derived from the child's ambivalent feelings, may explain the psychological archetypes in terms of which the images of Virgin and Harlot are originally formed. But their reproduction and transmission take place not only within the family but also on the social scale through the ideological forms of patriarchal society. This is because patriarchy needs to control and restrain female sexuality, and the idealization of the Virgin and the stigmatization of the Harlot serve this function. In the Dark Lady sequence uncontrolled female sexual desire is seen as dangerous and subversive. In Sonnet 144, where it is feared that the Dark Lady has seduced the Young Man, the oppositions of dark/fair and evil/good are extended into those of devil/angel, hell/heaven and damnation/salvation:

> Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
> Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
> The better angel is a man right fair,
> The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
> To win me soon to hell, my female evil
> Tempteth my better angel from my side,
> And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
> Wooing her purity with her foul pride.
> And whether that my angel be turned fiend
> Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
> But being both from me, both to each friend,
> I guess one angel in another's hell.
> Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt
> Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

The religious associations of the language in this sonnet begin with the very first line, 'Two loves I have of comfort and despair', where 'comfort' and despair' are not only opposite emotional states but also carry the theological meanings of 'salvation' and 'damnation'. This opposition is maintained in the antitheses of angel/devil and heaven/ hell,

and related to the fair/dark contrast: 'a man right fair' against 'a woman coloured ill'. The situation then is that the Poet suspects that his male friend (generally assumed to be identical with the Young Man of the first sonnet sequence) has been seduced by the Dark Lady, and is in danger of being brought by her to moral perdition, of becoming a fallen angel. But, as John Kerrigan points out, 'hell' in the sonnet is not only the seat of the damned but also, by the Elizabethan slang use of the word, the lady's sexual organ. So the line, 'I guess one angel in another's hell', includes among its meanings, 'I suspect that my friend is caught in her vagina.' In the concluding couplet the metaphor makes the Lady's vagina a burrow from which the Young Man has to be smoked out, like a fox, but 'fire' is also the burning touch of the syphilis he may have caught from her, which would be the proof that he has been in her 'hell'.[5]

I have already pointed to the Dark Lady as the embodiment of woman as Harlot. Some readers may be inclined to object that the Lady is just one woman, and that it is wrong to see her as standing for a general image of womankind. To say this would be to forget the effect of the two contrasting sequences in the Sonnets. The first, to the Young Man, is predominantly lyrical idealizing, deferential, voicing a platonic, unpossessive and self-renouncing love.[6] Even where in this sequence, the Young Man's neglect of the Poet or disloyalty to him provokes complaint, it is expressed nearly always in oblique and veiled irony rather than in forthright protest. The second sequence, to the Dark Lady, is in contrast earthy, often bawdy as well as bitter in tone, and divided between sensual lust and moral loathing. But apart from the fact that the juxtaposition of the two sequences tends to suggest a gender opposition, there is the explicit contrast made in Sonnet 20. Here, the Young Man is described as having a feminine-like beauty and the softness of a woman's heart, but not acquainted With shifting change, as is false women's fashion; An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling.

Moreover, the image of woman as Harlot is at the centre of two plays which many scholars have concluded were written around the same time as the later Sonnets, and which have many verbal links with them – *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. In the first of these plays, Hamlet is obsessed with the thought of his mother's infidelity which makes the whole world – and, in particular, womankind – corrupt in his eyes: 'Frailty, thy name is woman.' For Hamlet the springs of life themselves have been poisoned, and his moral horror grows in the course of the play into a disgust and nausea with the act of sex itself:

> Nay, but to live
> In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
> Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty –

Here the moral indignation against his mother's infidelity seems only the occasion for a more deep-seated revulsion against sexuality itself. 'Enseamed' means 'larded with grease', so that 'the rank sweat of an enseamed bed' combines the imagined touch and smell of sweat to induce revulsion. 'Stewed' carries on these physical sensations, but joins them to the Elizabethan use of 'stews' to mean 'brothel', and therefore places Gertrude as the Harlot. Finally, 'the nasty sty' brings it all down to the level of bestiality.

Gertrude, no doubt, has committed adultery; but Hamlet's revulsion with life spreads out to engulf even the innocent Ophelia. In his first confrontation with her in the play, he tells her, 'Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' Here the weight seems to fall on the Virgin image and the preservation of purity. But the word 'nunnery' carries an ambiguity in Elizabethan English: in popular usage it also meant a brothel. So, when Hamlet reiterates the command and couples it with his disgust against painted faces, the image of Ophelia as Virgin is transformed into that of the Harlot :

> I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance... To a nunnery, go.

In *Troilus and Cressida,* Troilus experiences a similar transformation of the Virgin image into that of the Harlot when Cressida proves unfaithful to him :

> Instance, O instance, strong as Pluto's gates,
> Cressid is mine, tied with bonds of heaven.
> Instance, O instance, strong as heaven itself;
> The bonds of heaven are slipped, dissolved and loosed;
> And with another knot, five-finger-tied,
> The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
> The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics
> Of her o'er eaten faith, are bound to Diomed.

In these two plays the reaction against woman is that of the hero – Hamlet or Troilus – and we cannot simply identify their emotion with that of the dramatist. But in both plays it is the negative feeling that dominates: we may see Hamlet's and Troilus's vision as partial or morbid, but there is no other voice in either play to affirm anything to set against them. This fact, coupled with the evidence of the Dark Lady sequence, makes me conclude that in this phase Shakespeare was grappling with a dark view of sexuality – and of female sexuality, in particular – that he could not master.[7] The release comes with *Measure for Measure,* where Isabella is the Virgin in the most literal sense. She is aspiring to be a nun, taking the vow of chastity; but in the course of the play she has to be schooled by experience to come to terms with human love, human desire and human frailty. In the Vienna of the play, Shakespeare with profound insight links sexual repression and tyrannical State authority, and sets against the latter the low-life world, with its carnivalesque assertion (in the Bakhtin sense) of the freedom

of desire. Significantly, it is in the same play that we have one of Shakespeare's strongest, most lyrical celebrations of the naturalness of sexuality and fertility:

> Your brother and his lover have embraced;
> As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
> That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
> To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
> Expresses his full tilth and husbandry.

Measure for Measure is a play of great wisdom and sanity, and clearly, in writing it, Shakespeare had transcended the negative vision of the Dark Lady sonnets, *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida.*

II

It is common to refer to *Othello* as a 'domestic tragedy', and one can understand why this should be so. With the fate of Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear or Antony and Cleopatra are bound up the fortunes of a whole kingdom or society, Othello's tragedy doesn't carry with it those larger consequences. Yet the term 'domestic tragedy' can be misleading if it induces us to suppose that the drama of *Othello* is merely 'personal'. *Othello* shares with the other mature tragedies of Shakespeare a strong concern with relations of power. There are two sets of power relationships involved in the play: those of black and white, and those of male and female – relations of race and relations of gender.[8] What makes the play peculiarly interesting, to my mind, is that the hero is differently situated in respect of power in these two social structures.

There is a problem about Othello's ethnic identity that has haunted the theatrical and critical history of the play. Othello is described in the title and in the body of the text as a 'Moor': what does this mean? Although the root meaning of the term is 'a native of Morocco', it was used much more broadly by Europeans at that time to refer to a person

belonging to the Islamic peoples of North Africa and the Middle East.[9] Further, there is evidence that the English were aware of differences in shades of skin colour between North African peoples of Negro origin and the generally lighter-skinned Arabs who had conquered them. An African scholar, Professor Eldred Jones, who has studied the representation of Africans in Elizabethan and seventeenth century drama, observes that there were two stage stereotypes of Africans:

> By the time that Shakespeare's *Othello* appeared on the London stage in 1604, African characters of varying colours had become a familiar part of the London stage traditions. They were generally called Moors. Two broad types are distinguishable, although they share some common characteristics. The first type, whose blackness was generally emphasized in the text, was the villainous Moor, Muly Hamet in *The Battle of Alcazar*, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion*, are notable examples of this type. The other type was the Moor whose blackness was not emphasized in the text, or who was specifically referred to as a 'White Moor' or a 'tawny Moor'. Usually he was portrayed as a dignified oriental ruler, still capable of the cruelty credited to all Moors, but also capable of noble conduct.[10]

Shakespeare had himself used these two stereotypes in Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* respectively. Now in *Othello* he sets out to portray a Moor in different terms from either of these two stage conventions.

It is possible for a reader of the play to imagine Othello without being definite about his ethnic identity, taking him as simply an alien of non-European origin, though a Christian convert, in the white society of Venice. Although from the dialogue of the play one receives an overwhelming impression of Othello's 'blackness', this is not conclusive as regards the

precise shade of his colour because, as was brought out in the first part of this paper, Elizabethans did use the term 'black' to describe anyone darker than the English norm. However, for theatrical directors and actors from the eighteenth century onwards the question whether Othello was to be represented as 'fair' Arab or as 'black' African became crucial because of the practice of using make-up and costume to support stage realism. But apart from the necessities of stage presentation, there were also ideological reasons why this question became a matter of so much concern. With the slave trade, colonial conquest and the technological superiority of the West following the Industrial Revolution, British attitudes to Africans had become markedly more contemptuous. Since Othello was a character of manifest nobility (and no important critic questioned this till Leavis's essay[11]), it became a problem for critics to reconcile this with his blackness and possible African identity. Hence, both Coleridge and Bradley were agreed that Othello should be regarded as 'sunburnt' rather than literally black. Bradley's footnote on this point is openly racist:

> Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would overpower our imagination....[12]

Let us consider how the text of the play represents race relations in Venice. Othello's black skin hasn't prevented him from rising to high office in the state of Venice and being honoured as 'the noble Moor'. Yet Othello discovers at the very beginning of the play's events that the race barrier he has crossed so easily as a soldier serving the Venetian state becomes much more difficult to surmount when it comes to marriage with a white woman – a fact which is true to race relations in many societies. Brabantio who has treated Othello as a friend and welcomed him in his house draws the line at accepting him as the husband of his daughter. One of Iago's

functions in the play is to serve as the most articulate voice of the race prejudices that polite Venice would probably refrain from expressing openly. Iago, Brabantio and Emilia in the last scene, make the traditional equation of blackness with evil and the devil that has already been observed in relation to the language of the Sonnets. Yet it is evident that the blatant racism of these three characters is more widely shared underneath the surface of Venetian society.[13] The Duke, in trying to persuade Brabantio to reconcile himself to Desdemona's marriage, offers what seems superficially a compliment to Othello, but which implies the superiority of white to black :

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
> Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

But what is most significant is that Othello, as a convert serving the state, has himself internalized some of the values of white Venice. When he has come half to believe Iago's slanders against her, he says:

> My name, that was as fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
> As mine own face.[14]

Like Iago, Brabantio and the Duke, Othello accepts here (perhaps unthinkingly) the identification of black with evil. Throughout the latter part of the play he is tormented by the difference he imagines between the outward appearance of the 'fair' Desdemona, seemingly a thing of heaven, and what he is convinced is her hidden reality as a dark creature of hell.

Othello is in fact a figure who, uprooted from his original society and transplanted into another, is deeply uncertain of his identity and, therefore, insecure. In the early part of the play his selfconscious grandeur of personality and his magniloquence conceal that insecurity from us, but these are actually an attempt to compensate for his inner lack of

stability. The insecurity comes to the surface as soon as his personality is assailed by Iago's promptings. The first reason he gives for believing in the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity is 'Haply, for I am black.' At the end of the play the hopeless division in Othello between the black outsider and the high officer of the Venetian state is expressed in what are almost the last words he speaks:

> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him, thus.

Here Othello sees himself both as the foreign offender against the state of Venice, whose badge of alienness is his circumcision, and the executor of Venetian justice on himself as criminal.

It is likely that many readers and spectators of the play today – especially in the Third World – will approach it with a predisposition to be sympathetic to the hero, taking him as a kind of racial underdog. But an exclusive concentration on the racial aspect of the play can lead to a sentimentalisation of Othello. In 1964 a Marxist critic, G.M. Matthews, wrote an essay which presented the tragedy as essentially that of a black man in a white society.[15] Matthews ended his essay by saying of the final tableau:

> All that Iago's poison has achieved is an object that 'poisons sight': a bed on which a black man and a white girl, although they are dead, are embracing. Human dignity, the play says, is indivisible.[16]

One's ideological preconceptions must be strong indeed to see *that* as the final effect of the play, and to ignore the fact that there are not two embracing figures on the bed: it is the murderer who is embracing the victim in a vain act of atonement. I suggest, therefore, that in reading or

witnessing the play, we should give as much attention to gender as to ethnicity. Ethnically, Othello occupies what is in some ways a disadvantaged position in the society of Venice; but he wields male marital power. Before I develop this last point, I need to discuss Othello's particular bent of mind in relation to sexuality.

Othello, by his own account in his speech to the Senate, had known little of life beyond the battlefield. With this inexperience of ordinary human relations goes a peculiar defensiveness against sexuality. Where Desdemona frankly appeals to the Senate to let her go with her husband to Cyprus lest she be deprived of the 'rites' of love, Othello, even in seconding her request, is anxious to make it clear that he isn't doing so to satisfy his own desires. 'The young affects/ In me defunct,'[17] he calls them, and refers depreciatingly to 'light-wing'd toys/ Of feathered Cupid'.

This distrust of sexuality doesn't yet come out as a fear of female sexuality in particular: it requires the catalyst of Iago's slanders to achieve that. When Othello soliloquises after Iago has initially poisoned his mind, he says:

> If I do prove her haggard,
> Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,
> I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind
> To prey at fortune.

The metaphor is drawn from falconry, and 'haggard' is a technical term used in that sport to refer to a wild hawk which proves untameable in spite of the efforts of its master. Othello is facing the thought that he may have to turn Desdemona away if she proves a wild, untameable creature – that is, in respect of her sexual desires. Within five lines he adds:

> O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
> And not their appetites!

Female sexuality now, in Othello's imagination, confronts him as an unknown, uncontrollable and threatening quantity. Othello's state of mind, torn between love and suspicion, is comparable with that of the Poet in the Dark Lady sonnets. 'I do believe her, though I know she lies,' the Poet had said, and Othello says, 'I think my wife be honest and think she is not.' However, where the Poet's self-torment had been seen entirely from within,[18] Othello's is dramatically objectified, and perceived by audience or reader as springing from delusion.

What the classic critiques of the play have failed to note is that Othello's response to Iago's insinuations runs far ahead of them.[19] It is evident that Iago, who has a cynical attitude to women, finds a perverse pleasure in denigrating Desdemona, for whom he confesses in soliloquy to have cherished a secret desire. When he spins his obscene imaginings about Cassio and Desdemona, he is probably not only taking a sadistic delight in torturing Othello, but also savouring the satisfaction of smearing a woman he has lusted for but cannot possess. But even Iago, when he imputes to her 'a will most rank,/ Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural', doesn't dare to allege anything more than that Cassio is her lover; he doesn't charge her with promiscuity. For Othello, however, the loss of faith in Desdemona as chaste wife is provocation enough to see her as the Harlot. Already, in the first scene of temptation, he says:

> I had been happy if the general camp,
> Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
> So I had nothing known.

It is, of course, the anguish of Othello in believing that Desdemona has a lover that makes him think even promiscuity on her part would be acceptable, so long as he was ignorant of it. However, the indulgence in this phantasy involves the degradation of her image in his mind, imagining her as the common prostitute shared by the camp, even by

the 'pioners' or lowest labourers. So far this is expressed in hypothetical terms. But within twelve lines he can demand of Iago, 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore' – which even Iago hadn't accused her of being, in the strict sense of the word. But the word indicates that the image of the faithless wife as Harlot has taken over in Othello's mind. Three scenes later, the phantasy has assumed such complete possession of him that he can not only revile her to her face as 'public commoner', 'strumpet' and 'whore' but also act out his imagination in an act of brutal mockery. After his tirade against Desdemona, he calls to Emilia who is outside the door and flings money at her, as if she were the brothel madam, and he the customer who had made use of a prostitute.

> We have done our course; there's money for your pains;
> I pray you, turn the key, and keep our counsel.

The appalling cruelty of this scene is a manifestation of what responds in Othello's mind to Iago's inventions. What finds expression here is a deep-rooted assumption of patriarchal cultures. Such cultures have taken it for granted that any woman who deviates from the marital code (as Othello believes Desdemona to have done) can properly be called a whore.

There has been some discussion in recent *Othello* criticism of race relations in the play, but very little of gender. There are three women in the play – Desdemona, Bianca and Emilia – and they have to be seen in comparison and in contrast with each other.

Desdemona is not to be regarded merely as the poor wet rag she is sometimes represented on stage to be: in her defiance of her father and her bold stance before the Senate she shows capacities for strength. But her attitude to Othello is deferential: as an older man, he is something of a father figure, idolized too as a warrior and a glamorous figure from

the larger world beyond her sheltered life. I have elsewhere pointed out the significance of the fact that though reciprocal *thou* is the language of lovers, Desdemona never once uses this pronoun to Othello.[20] It is true that by 3.3, she has, in cajoling Othello to restore Cassio to his place, assumed a stance of pert independence that tends to run counter to the role of the submissive wife she outwardly adopts. We seem to catch a glimpse here of a Desdemona who might in time stand on her own feet. However, Iago's plot and Othello's jealous suspicions forestall those possibilities. In the face of Othello's jealousy, Desdemona tries at first to explain his behaviour away as due to worries over affairs of state. But once she realizes what he believes about her, she sinks into helpless passivity and seems resigned to death. Even with her dying breath, however, she exculpates and protects him.

Desdemona has been much praised in Shakespeare criticism as a model of wifely submission and loyalty, even in the face of insults, violence, and, ultimately, murder. But is Desdemona's unquestioning devotion to her husband to be idealized, any more than the submissiveness of Bianca to Cassio? Bianca is hopelessly dependent emotionally on Cassio, though he despises her and laughs at her. She does rebel once (with much less provocation than Desdemona has) – that is, over the handkerchief; but even then Cassio is soon able to turn her around. To compare the pure Desdemona with the courtesan Bianca may seem shocking to some people who regard the former as the model of the virtuous wife. But by setting Desdemona side by side with Bianca, Shakespeare undermines the Virgin-Harlot dichotomy.[21] In the power relationships between Othello and Desdemona on the one hand and between Cassio and Bianca on the other we have the dominant norms of female subordination. That we don't have to regard these uncritically will be evident if we recognize that in Emilia Shakespeare offers us the alternative case.

Emilia is the strongest character in the latter part of the play, though this has hardly been recognized in *Othello* criticism.[22] The Emilia of the last two Acts is a very different woman from the wife who steals Desdemona's handkerchief merely to please her husband. I must say in passing that the handkerchief plot seems to me the only blemish on a great play. It helps Shakespeare to create a theatrically powerful situation, but only at the cost of slipping into the devices of melodrama. In no other of the great tragedies does Shakespeare use a situation that depends so much on chance and accident – Desdemona dropping the handkerchief without realizing it, or Bianca quarrelling with Cassio over it just when Othello is there to overhear. Moreover, it is implausible that Emilia, devoted to Desdemona as she is, and aware that her mistress prizes the handkerchief dearly, would steal it for Iago without even knowing what he means to do with it.

The fact is that the Emilia of the first three Acts is only what Leavis (wrongly) called Iago – 'a dramatic mechanism'; but in Acts 4 and 5 she comes into her own.[23] In these last two acts she becomes not only the voice of ordinary humanity and robust common sense against the perverted phantasies of Othello, she displays a rare independence of judgment, a loyalty to the mistress she has come to love, and courage in standing up for the truth. In the bedroom scene just before the murder, where Desdemona and Emilia talk about marital infidelity, Emilia's attitude may appear merely cynical in comparison with Desdemona's devotion and idealism. To Desdemona's question, 'Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?' (what is in question is adultery) Emilia answers, 'The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice.' That may seem an expression of moral frivolity and self-interested calculation. However, Emilia is talking here hypothetically, and also half provocatively because she is irritated by Desdemona's total submission to her husband. We aren't entitled to conclude from these remarks of hers

that she would necessarily have acted in that spirit, given the choice. The proof of this is in her actual behaviour when she is faced with the test on her of the last scene. She doesn't act at all with moral indifference or calculating self-interest. She defies Othello, calls out for help and refuses to be intimidated by his sword. Out of both female solidarity and moral indignation, she rebels against her husband when she learns he has slandered Desdemona: 'Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.' She finally cries out the truth about the handkerchief in the face of Iago's threats, and ultimately, at the cost of her life.

However, before that, at the end of the bedroom scene with Desdemona, she has also spoken out her mind about the relations between husbands and wives.[24] It is a speech that has not been given the importance it deserves. It establishes the fact that Emilia's stand in the last two Acts is due not just to a servant's loyalty to her mistress or even to the bond with someone she genuinely loves, but also to a recognition of the injustice done to women in a male-dominated society.[25]

> But I do think it is their husbands' faults
> If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties
> And pour our treasures into foreign laps;
> Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
> Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
> Or scant our former having in despite –
> Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace,
> Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is it frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

This is Shakespeare's transformation of the speech he had written earlier for Shylock to vindicate the right of a Jew to equal humanity with a Gentile: 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions....?' Now in Emilia's mouth a closely similar argument is made not for ethnic but for gender equality – against what would today be called 'the double standard', and for the right of women to their own bodily desires. 'Let husbands know! Their wives have sense like them.' *Sense* here includes, as often in Elizabethan English, the meaning of sexual desire. So many liberal humanist critics have praised Shylock's speech as an expression of the sentiments of an oppressed Jew; but Emilia's is usually dismissed as the utterance of a worldly woman who is incapable of the high idealism of Desdemona.

Emilia's speech is ostensibly delivered to Desdemona, who makes no real response to it, but in fact is almost direct address to the audience. The position on the stage and posture of the speaker in uttering it could have brought this out. Almost at the beginning of his career Shakespeare had given Katherine at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* a speech which was also spoken straight at the audience (though ostensibly spoken to the other women on the stage) exhorting wives to be submissive to their husbands. One can imagine the male part of the audience perhaps applauding the reformed shrew's sentiments. It would have been interesting to know how the Jacobean audience of both sexes related to Emilia's speech of a very different tenor. After the extravagances of Othello, trapped between his fevered phantasies and his self-deceiving rhetoric, the searching realism of Emilia is as refreshing as a draught of cool water.

Emilia, the proto-feminist, is not, however, free of racial prejudice. In the last scene, once she knows of the murder, she calls Othello 'devil', 'cruel Moor', 'dull Moor', 'fool', 'gull' and 'dolt'.[26] She even says of Desdemona, 'She was too fond of her most filthy bargain.' Perhaps her view of blacks wasn't very different from that of her husband, and she must always have thought Othello unworthy of Desdemona, even though loyalty to her mistress had kept her silent until the end. If we could have been present at the scene of events, we might have rebuked her for her racism and applauded her for her feminism. As it is, we can only congratulate Shakespeare on understanding the contradictions of human nature.

The Thatched Patio, March/April 1992

Footnotes

1 I have capitalized the initial letters of Poet, Dark Lady and Young Man in my account of the sonnets, in order to make it clear that these characters of the sequence are not necessarily equivalent to those of the real life Shakespeare and the actual woman and young man he may have known.

2 John Kerrigan (ed). The Sonnets and a Lover's Complaint (1986: Penguin), p. 359.

3 It is revealing that this praise of female chastity, with its imagery of cold virtue, should come from the warrior Corialanus, who, perhaps more than any other character in Shakespeare, is wholly devoted to the aggressive male life, and on whom the suppressed gentler feelings that the culture regards as 'feminine' ultimately take their revenge.

4 Sigmund Freud, 'A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men' and 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love', reprinted in Freud, *On Sexuality* (Penguin).

5 John Kerrigan, op. cit., p. 60; Martin Seymour-Smith (ed), Shakespeare's Sonnets (1963: Heinemann), p.187.

6 On the question of the Poet's love for the Young Man being platonic, there may be dissent on the part of those who see in the Sonnets evidence of homosexual feeling. It is striking that while in the nineteenth century most scholars and critics were shamefaced, anxious or evasive about the question of the Poet's feelings for the Young Man, there is in some quarters today a tendency to praise these sonnets for their subversion of gender identities. However, if we are concerned not with the unanswerable question of any supposed 'real-life' relationship between Shakespeare and 'Mr. W.H.', but with the relationship represented in the poems (which is all that is real for us), then we must take for granted the Poet's assertion in Sonnet 20 that he has no interest in a physically sexual relationship with the Young Man. We may, nevertheless find in the poems evidence of a homoerotic response to the Young man's beauty but not of homosexual desire.

7 I would agree with T.S. Eliot's judgment, in his essay 'The Problem of Hamlet', that in that play (and I would add, also in the Dark Lady sonnets and Troilus and Cressida) the disgust points to the intractability of the emotional material that Shakespeare was dealing with.

8 To be comprehensive, we should also take into account the aspect of status as it concerns Iago. He is a character marginalized by social hierarchy, driven by a strong animus against the more fortunately placed, and compensating for his inferior position by indulging his own malevolent propensities for power.

9 It may be remarked that the Sri Lankan usage of the term 'Moor' is derived from the practice of the Portuguese referring to the Islamic adherents whom they encountered in South India and Sri Lanka as 'Moros'.

10 Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen* (1963: Oxford), p.86

11 F.R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero' in *The Common Pursuit* (1976: Penguin). Eliot had indeed preceded Leavis in making some observations on the *bovarysme* of Othello's speech before his suicide in the essay 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca'. However, Eliot saw in this a revelation of 'universal human weakness and not of a failing peculiar to Othello.

12 A.C. Bradley: Shakespearean Tragedy (1904: Macmillan, p.202).

13 It must also be noted that Brabantio's intemperate feelings about Othello's race find expression only under the pressure of his anger regarding the elopement, and that Emilia is silent on this subject until her horror of the murder breaks her reticence.

14 'My name' is the First Folio reading: the Quarto has 'her name'. This difference between the two texts doesn't affect my point here.

15 G.M. Matthews, 'Othello and the Dignity of Man' repr. in David Craig (ed.) *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology* (1975: Penguin).

16 *Ibid.*, p.133.

17 The passage in which this phrase occurs is a well-known textual crux, but whichever of the many emendations proposed by editors one adopts, the general sense remains an assertion by Othello that as a mature man he isn't subject to uncontrollable sexual desire.

18 This can be said, in my opinion, without accepting a simple identification between Shakespeare the man and the Poet in whose voice he speaks in the sonnets. What is pertinent is that in the Dark Lady sonnets there is no other value implied against which the Poet's jealousy, bitterness and disgust can be placed.

19 Leavis is an exception: 'And it is plain that what we should see in Iago's prompt success is not so much Iago's diabolic intellect as Othello's readiness to respond. Iago's power, in fact, in the temptation-scene is that he represents something that is in Othello – in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates.' (Leavis, op.cit., pp.140-141). Leavis, however, sees this 'readiness to respond' as part of Othello's egotism: he doesn't relate it to a deeper patriarchal image of woman.

20 Reggie Siriwardena, *Addressing the Other* (1992: ICES), P.49.

21 It is interesting that Bianca's name, which means 'white', links her with the chaste Desdemona.

22 There are some perceptive comments on Emilia in Gamini and Fenella Salgado, Othello (1985, Penguin) and Jane Adamson, Othello as Tragedy (1980: Cambridge), but they don't go far enough.

23 I conjecture that by the time Shakespeare came to write the last two Acts, he felt the need for a stronger Emilia as a foil to Desdemona and Bianca, and therefore changed his conception of the character, at the cost of some dramatic inconsistency. The handkerchief plot had by then become perhaps too integral a part of the action for Shakespeare to eliminate it (and in theatrical performance it was no doubt extremely popular, as it has been ever since). What Shakespeare did do in revising the play (as it believed he did between Quarto and Folia texts) was to strengthen Emilia's role in Act 4 by writing in new lines.

24 These lines, occurring only in the Folio and not in the Quarto, are almost certainly a later addition after the play had been originally performed, and are, as I see it, designed to strengthen Emilia's role as the critical voice in respect of gender relations.

25 Anyone who questions this reading as an imposition of modern ideas on a Shakespeare text should consult Juliet Dusinberre's study Shakespeare and the Nature of Woman (1975: Macmillan). Ms. Dusinberre makes out an impressive case in favour of her view that Protestant moralists in the sixteenth century had, while strongly upholding monogamy, argued for complete equality of the sexes within the marriage relationship; and that their writings amount in fact to a first wave of feminist ideas before the better known one represented by Mary Wollstonecraft and her successors.

26 In my study, *Addressing the Other* (p.46) I have drawn attention to the sudden shift during the last scene in Emilia's pronouns of address, from the neutral you to thou, insulting from servant to master. It is also significant that this shift is triggered by Othello's use of the word 'whore' in talking at Desdemona.

3

Pushkin at 200

The bicentenary of the birth of Aleksandr Pushkin, the greatest of Russian poets, falls this year. UNESCO has declared 1999 *the Year of Pushkin.*

1

It is commonplace to say that Pushkin is to Russians what Shakespeare is to the British. Commonplace, and misleading. For in spite of the lip-service paid to the image of Shakespeare as the great English poet and dramatist, how real a presence is Shakespeare in the lives of most British people, even of educated British people, today? In a recent public opinion poll in Britain, Shakespeare was elected 'Man of the Millennium', but one wonders how many of those who cast their votes in his favour had read or seen any of his plays since their schooldays.

The relation of educated Russians to Pushkin is very different. I remember an evening I spent with a Russian acquaintance at his flat in the outskirts of what was then Leningrad. When I was leaving, he insisted on presenting me with a book from his own shelves; and what he picked out was a scholarly two-volume selection of documents on Pushkin and his friends. My acquaintance was an industrial manager, and it seems hardly likely that if I had been visiting a man with a similar position in London, he would have found

a copy of E.K. Chambers' or Schoenbaum's documentation of Shakespeare on his bookshelf.

But the industrial manager in Leningrad wasn't an exceptional figure. Many educated Russians - and regardless of whether they have specialised in the humanities or the sciences - are familiar with Pushkin and know long stretches of his poetry by heart. Of course, Pushkin is as institutionalised in the Russian educational system as Shakespeare is in the British, but one has still to explain why the effect of this conditioning should be more lasting and stronger in the former case than in the latter.

One relevant fact is that the division between what Charles Snow once called 'the two cultures' - the humanist and the scientific - has never been as great in Russia as it is in Britain (and in the countries of her former empire). In Russia university students of the sciences also study Russian literature. But one should take note, too, of the important differences between the relations of Pushkin and Shakespeare to the modern reader.

In spite of the enormous energy that goes into the cultural industry of keeping Shakespeare alive, including the perpetual efforts of both theatre directors and critics to reinterpret him in the light of contemporary experience, there are elements in his plays that are irreducibly of Tudor/Stuart England - even though we may ignore or slur them in reading or performing him. But Pushkin was a writer of the post-French revolutionary era - the era that in many ways marked the birth of modernity. That modernity is there in his work, even though he was writing in a Russia which abolished serfdom only a quarter-century after his death, and was still, in decisive social, economic and political relations, feudal and medieval.

Actually, much of the life of Russian literature in the nineteenth century - the period of its great creative flowering - came from the impact of the modern on a society that was, by Western European standards, archaic. Marxist writers on

Russia have spoken of the phenomenon, in the economic and political spheres, of what they call 'combined development' -the co-existence of and the interaction between older and newer socio-political forms and relations. There was a similar 'combined development' in culture and ideas in nineteenth-century Russia. It was the encounter between two worlds, medieval and modern, native Russian and Western European, that made possible the great achievements of nineteenth -century Russian fiction - Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov —, but its first significant appearance was in the work of Pushkin.

Pushkin naturalised several of the genres of Western European literature into Russian, but he also brought into literature the original life and vigour of native Russian speech. There were Russian poets before Pushkin, but it was he who created poetry out of the whole range of Russian linguistic expression - from the formal to the colloquial. And it is the quality of Pushkin's language that offers another explanation why he is more immediately present to the ordinary non--specialist Russian reader than Shakespeare is to his British counterpart.

Teachers of Shakespeare, scholars, critics, may underplay the distance of Shakespeare's language from the common reader and playgoer today, but it is a reality that becomes all the more inescapable with each passing year. Already most modern readers of Shakespeare are dependent part of the time on annotations and glossaries in order to fully comprehend his texts, and it is possible to foresee a time when, in the eyes of most English-speaking people, his language will be as obsolescent as Chaucer's is for them today. For his countrymen and women, Pushkin's Russian is still a modern and living language, even though there are elements of his poetic idiom that derive from forms and literary traditions of the time of its creation.

2

Around the period of the First World War, classic Russian literature took the British intelligentsia by storm. Constance Garnett's translations of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Chekhov opened for them new literary horizons. It is demonstrable that in this way nineteenth-century Russian fiction had a liberating influence in breaking down the limiting conventions of the Victorian novel, thus making possible the new directions in English fiction of D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf.[1]

But it was the translations from the novelists that created the image of Russian literature in Britain (and elsewhere in the English-speaking world). Even after these developments, Pushkin remained hardly more than a name to the English--speaking reader. In the Victorian period Matthew Arnold had written, 'The crown of literature is poetry, and the Russians have not yet had a great poet' Pushkin had been dead for half a century, but Arnold obviously knew nothing of him. And even fifty years later T.S. Eliot could say slightingly, with the Russians in mind, that a few great novelists weren't enough to make a culture, so one must presume that Eliot was as ignorant as Arnold about Pushkin.

There is thus a paradox – one that Edmund Wilson felt obliged to grapple with at the beginning of his 1937 essay on Pushkin and John Bayley in the opening pages of his book--length study of the poet in 1971.[2] On the one hand, Russians have no doubt, not only that Pushkin made possible the later masterpieces of their literature (without him, no Tolstoy, no Dostoevsky), but also that he remains the summit of that literature. And this valuation has persisted, virtually unchallenged, for over a century and a half. Ever since Belinsky wrote his pioneering essays on Pushkin in the 1840s, only a few years after the poet's death, critics and creative writers of all schools have agreed in recognising his

supremacy. In the 1920s the Futurists did, in the interests of renovating literature, raise the slogan, 'Throw Pushkin overboard from the ship of modernity!' There is a story that Lenin at that time asked a group of young students, 'What do you read? Do you read Pushkin?' 'Oh, no,' came the answer. 'Mayakovsky for us!' Lenin smiled: 'I think Pushkin is better.' But the Futurist revolt against the supremacy of Pushkin was shortlived. Throughout the Soviet period Pushkin was officially canonised as the patron saint of Russian literature, while at the same time the heretical poets – Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva - were equally insistent on his greatness and absorbed his influence.

How do we square the Russian consensus on Pushkin's status as the greatest writer of the language with the fact that he has made virtually no impact on English-speaking readers? Pushkin once said that translators were 'the posthorses of civilisation', but in the case of his own poetry, the carriage turns out to have been held up by irremovable obstacles on the road.

The explanation must be sought in the nature of the Russian language and the problems it presents to poetic translation. Russian is a highly inflected language, it has no articles, and it has a variable word order that the inflections make possible. These are the resources inherent in the grammatical structure of the language for expressive purposes. But the relation between a great poet and his language is not just that he draws on the reservoir of possibilities it offers; he discovers, stretches and enlarges them. Indeed, a language comes to full realisation of its potentialities only in the work of a great poet.[3] Russia was, therefore, fortunate that so early in the development of its literary tradition it was blessed with the creative genius of Pushkin;[4] and when Russians speak of him as the initiator and pathfinder for the writers who came after, they are referring not only to themes and forms but to the very shaping of the language that he effected. Pushkin set his stamp on

the literary language by bringing to fulfillment its potential brevity and concentration, its capacity to contain a rich density of meaning beneath the clarity and simplicity of its surface.

It may appear, on first thought, that the poets who are most difficult to translate are those who depend on artifices of style or flamboyant images that seem impossible to mimic in another language. But this is an illusion: such difficulties aren't insuperable if a translator of sufficient intrepidity and ingenuity can be found. One would have thought that there was no way to render the verbal contortions and mannerisms of Hopkins in another language:

> How to keep - is there any any, is there none such,
> nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or
> brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep
> Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty...
> from vanishing away?

Yet, incredible as it may seem, Pierre Leyris has translated 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' into French, replacing with brilliant success each turn of phrase, each rhyme and assonance, by an equivalent, and has performed similar feats of virtuosity on other poems of Hopkins. But the problems of translating Pushkin are more intrinsic, and offer no hold for the literary acrobat. The chastity of his language, its freedom from affectation and extravagance, its severe brevity and economy of expression, when deprived of the nuances of rhythm and the linguistic structures that give it sensuous and emotional fullness in the original, may appear only vacuous in translation.[5] When Turgenev, in his anxiety to convince Flaubert of the greatness of Pushkin, translated some passages into French for him, Flaubert's reaction was to say. 'He's flat - your poet.' It's all too likely that many readers of English, knowing Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, and learning that Pushkin was held to be the greatest of the Russian masters, have turned to an English

translation of one or the other of his poems, to react as Flaubert did.

Consider the poem that I consider to be Pushkin's greatest achievement – *The Bronze Horseman.* The prologue celebrates the creative moment in which Peter the Great conceived the idea of building a capital on what had till then been waste marshland, and then, after the dream has become reality, the splendour of the new city, St. Petersburg. *'Lyublyu tebya, Petra tvoren'e* (I love you, Peter's creation), Pushkin says in that part of the poem, and he means it, for sharing the elegance and the refinements of Petersburg civilisation. Pushkin wasn't minded to depreciate them. But the narrative that follows is the story of Evgeny, a clerk who looks forward to a life of quiet married happiness with the girl with whom he is in love, Parasha. Then follows the disastrous flooding of the city by the rising of the river Neva, a direct consequence of Peter's decision to build his capital on its banks. Parasha's little house is on the other side of the river from where Evgeny lives, and after days of anxiety when the river is impassable, he makes his way to her house, or rather, to where her house had been, for there is nothing there now except the familiar willow tree. Evgeny stares, then suddenly bursts into laughter. It's the beginning of his madness, which turns him into a vagrant of the city. One night, he finds himself before the celebrated bronze statue of Peter, astride on a horse with its reared forelegs, Peter's right arm stretched in a commanding gesture. Evgeny shakes his fist at the bronze idol: 'Just you wait, you wonder-worker!' The next moment he begins to run away in terror, because it seems to him that the tsar's face has turned angrily towards him, and as he flees, he hears the horse's hooves clattering after him. Some time later, on a little island off the shore, is found the ruins of a ramshackle house, washed there by the flood, and on its threshold the body of the madman.

From a translation, and perhaps even from my brief summary, it's possible to comprehend the poem's theme -

the counterpoise between state and individual, between the magnitude of political achievement and the human sacrifices that are its price. Generations of Russian readers have felt the immediacy of its subject — a mirror of the central motif of Russian history, the dialectic of the dynamic and the destructive, whether under an Ivan or a Peter, a Lenin or a Stalin. But the meaningfulness of that subject alone wouldn't have made the poem what it is - the greatest work, I think, in the whole of Russian literature. Pushkin renders the contrast between the two parts of the poem with the economy and reticence characteristic of his art: the two constituents are set side by side, and left to speak for themselves. There is no authorial judgment, which is neither necessary nor possible, for the tragedy of Evgeny is as undeniable as the graces of Petersburg culture, of which the poem is both the expression and the critique. But the triumph of *The Bronze Horseman* is, above all, a triumph of language. It's not a very long poem, compared to other nineteenth-century long poems: about 480 lines, in contrast with the prolixity of *The Prelude or Prometheus Unbound* or *Don Juan*. Yet, it surpasses all these and other Romantic and Victorian long poems in English because of the brevity and concentrated power that Pushkin's language achieves. It's natural that some of those who have responded to the poem's greatness should have felt tempted to try to communicate it to others through translation. But they have all come a cropper: *The Bronze Horseman* is simply not capable of translation into English.

So, unfortunately, there are no shortcuts for the English--speaking reader who wishes to read Pushkin. Seventy-five years ago, Maurice Baring, one of the earliest English critics to write on Russian literature with a knowledge of the original language, said in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Russian Verse:*

> ... Since his expression is inseparable from his thought, his work is. . . untranslatable.
> To appreciate Pushkin it is necessary to learn Russian.

Vladimir Nabokov, who in his edition of *Eugene Onegin* poured scorn on previous English translators of the work, prudently confined himself to a version whose aims were to be literal and exact — in effect, only an aid to readers of the original -and, addressing Pushkin, described his own edition as Dove-droppings on your monument.

3

Pushkin was the younger contemporary of the English Romantics, born in the same decade as Shelley and Keats, but his poetry is in many ways antithetical to theirs. Byron was the only one of the Romantics whose work Pushkin knew -and his too through the medium of what were apparently abominable prose translations into French. In his early youth Pushkin, like many other European intellectuals of the time, was, in his own words, 'mad about Byron', and in his early narrative poems he borrowed the Orientalist trappings of Byron's verse tales. The mature *Evgeny Onegin* owes part of the stimulus for the concept of a 'novel in verse' and for its digressions to *Don Juan*. But while *Evgeny Onegin* grew in the course of its writing, like *Don Juan*, the unity and perfection of the finished poem is way beyond Byron's brilliant series of improvised performances.

Where Pushkin differs most from all his English contemporaries is that he doesn't seek either to create a self--sufficient poetic world or to project an image of a unique personality. No poem, perhaps, manifests the first of these differences better than his 'Autumn', whose subject invites, for us as readers of English, a comparison with Keats's ode. The semi-mythologised figure of Autumn in Keats's poem, the confinement of the poem within the sights and sounds of the natural, the style that implies a certain selectivity of images and diction as properly poetic, all maintain a dividing line between the world of poetry and what lies outside it. There is no such distinction in Pushkin's poem, which in its movement of thought and its tone has the sociable manner

of a man conversing about his tastes and pleasures, as he might with a friend. It moves with ease between the everyday and the imagined, the colloquial and the lyrical, with no sense of any discrepancy between them. The artist who, at the end of the poem, feels the awakening of poetic creation within him is not a special self, different from the one who, at the beginning, had observed his neighbour making with his pack of hounds for the hunting fields and ravaging the crops — the kind of detail that would have shattered the Keatsian boundaries of the poetic.

Only the later Byron, among the English Romantics, approaches Pushkin in this conception of poetry as omnivorous, as an expression of the whole social being. When Auden edited *The Oxford Book of Light Verse,* he gave his own meaning to the term, bringing within it 'poetry... having as its subject--matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being'; he offered as examples the poems of Chaucer, Pope and Byron. Auden was, of course, confining himself to English poetry. He didn't know Pushkin; otherwise, he should have included the Russian master, who could write without any sense of condescension about the popping of a wine-cork or the pleasure of a sleigh--ride with a pretty woman on a miraculous day of frost and sun together. Like Pushkin, Byron alone of the English Romantics,[6] in his three masterpieces, *The Vision of Judgment, Beppo* and *Don Juan,* can accommodate wit and comedy in poetry that isn't simply 'light verse' in the ordinary sense of the term. The doctrine that great poetry must be characterised by 'high seriousness', propounded by Arnold in the Victorian era, was already implicit in the practice of most of the English Romantics. But it's alien to Chaucer, Burns or Byron, and so it is to Pushkin.

But while sharing with the later Byron a freedom from the crippling burden of poetic solemnity, Pushkin is very different from him, not only in his greater perfection of form, but also in the fact that his poetry isn't centered in his own

personality. The drama of Pushkin's life - the love affairs and friendships, the vicissitudes of his existence under the Tsarist autocracy, the intrigues that drove him to the fatal duel at the age of 37 - is as fascinating as the Byron story. But with Byron the life seems continuous with the work because both are an assertion of a unique personality, by which he is as much engrossed as he wants us to be. With Pushkin, even when we know, as we often do, the personal circumstances behind the creation of a particular poem, these seem ultimately irrelevant to the art. As I have compared Pushkin's and Keats's poems on autumn, let me suggest a contrast between Byron's *Beppo* and Pushkin's *Count Nulin.* They both have some virtues in common, especially in the co-existence of levity and seriousness. But *Beppo* is Byron's celebration of the freedom of Italian sexual morality at the expense of English prudery and hypocrisy. The satire is written from a standpoint of close personal involvement (down to the ironic glance at his wife). Pushkin's poem is, at one level, a take-off on Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece:* his heroine routs her would-be seducer with two hearty slaps (although the ironic twist at the end hints she is no model of chastity). Pushkin regards his created world with a cool detachment that invites the reader to share in his delight in the human comedy, but with no vested interest on the part of the poet.

This is to say, in effect, that Pushkin was not a Romantic, but then he wasn't a classicist either. He wrote in an era when Romantics advanced under the banner of Shakespeare to do battle against classicism, but like Shakespeare, who lived before such categories were invented, he transcended them.

Nethra, June 1999

Footnotes

1 The other major English novelist of that period, Conrad, was a Polish émigré in whose fiction, especially *Under Western Eves* and *The Secret Agent*, Dostoevsky was a significant presence. Conrad probably read him in French translations.

2 Edmund Wilson, 'In Honour of Pushkin', reprinted in his *The Triple Thinkers*; John Bayley, *Pushkin: A Comparative Commentary*.

3 After reading Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*, Baratynsky, a poet contemporary with Pushkin, wrote to him to say, 'Our wonderful language is capable of everything; I feel that, although I can't bring it to fulfillment. It was created for Pushkin, and Pushkin for it.

4 Of course, as I have indicated in the earlier section of this essay, the cultural situation was ripe for the emergence of a Pushkin. But there is no fatality about literary creation: the great work is made possible by its age, but it still requires genius to produce it.

5 In English translation, that is, and perhaps French, in the light of Flaubert's case, referred to above. But all of Pushkin has been translated into German, and he is said to be widely appreciated by German readers. Perhaps the fact that the structures of the German language bear some similarity to those of Russian may have helped, but, knowing no German, I can't judge.

6 An exception has to be made for the best parts of Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*, but Byron's example and influence are pervasive there.

4

The Bronze Horseman – Some Currents of Russian Nationalism

I want to begin by outlining the scope and structure of this paper. What I am attempting is to establish certain continuities in Russian nationalism of the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. The paper consists of three sections. In the first section I examine the views of certain nineteenth-century Russian thinkers regarding Russia's future, and relate these views to the peculiarities of Russia's future, and to the peculiarities of Russia's historical development. In the second section I elicit certain themes from three works of Russian literature, and interpret them through the socio-political tendencies which find articulation in them. For drawing this material from literature I have three justifications. The first is that this is the intellectual terrain with which I am most familiar. The second is that the creative imagination can sometimes reach down to attitudes, conceptions, motivations, which may find no direct expression in overtly political discourse, but nevertheless form part of the national currents of thought and feeling which affect political policies and actions. The third justification is that while the political controversies of the pre-revolutionary era are remembered only by historians and students of history, the creative literature of the past is in its major works still alive for Russian readers of today and

continues to affect contemporary consciousness. The evidence of literature is particularly significant for my purpose since I am trying to unearth some underlying continuities which persist beneath the far-reaching political and social changes of modern Russian history. Finally, in the third section of the paper I examine certain ideological developments of the post-revolutionary era as a new expression, in changed forms and under different historical circumstances of issues which had already arisen in the nineteenth century.

I

In the opening chapter of his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky wrote: 'Russia stood not only geographically, but also socially and historically, between Europe and Asia. She was marked off from the European West, but also from the Asiatic East, approaching at different periods and in different features now one, now the other.' This duality of Russian society, in its European and Asian characteristics, has been a recurrent theme of historical writing on Russia. Marx, for his part, referred to Russia as an 'Oriental despotism' – a phrase which was taken up in the title and argument of a book by Karl A. Wittfogel which achieved notoriety in the cold war intellectual propaganda of the fifties. In using the phrase Marx was assimilating Russia with the kind of society he described in his *Letters on India* – a society organized on the basis of scattered and self-sufficient peasant communities, with a centralized bureaucratic and despotic state imposed on them. To discuss this view fully would involve an examination of the validity of Marx's concept of the 'Asiatic mode of production' – a thorny and controversial question which I don't propose to go into. Whatever characterization one may adopt of medieval India or China, there seems to me no doubt that serf-owning Russia can properly be described as feudal, but that its feudalism was of a different type from that of

England or France. The difference lay in the much greater power of the central imperial state, which regimented the feudal classes while it also inhibited the growth of a merchant bourgeoisie. Russia's was then a bureaucratized feudalism. These specificities of Russian society were at the root of the ideological debates about its future which animated its intellectual life in the nineteenth century. Was Russia to catch up with Western Europe by taking the same path of industrialization, capitalist growth and democracy, or was she to persist in her own historic course? This was the question which was at issue in the debate between right and left, reactionaries and progressives. It is true of the Slavophiles and Westerners in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. One must be wary of seeing this opposition in terms of a simple division between right and left, reactionaries and progressives. It is true that the Slavophiles were often conservative upholders of the monarchy, the authoritarian state and the institution of the Russian Orthodox Church. But Slavophilism, in some of its adherents, took the form also of a kind of 'conservative populism' – exalting not the state but the people as the incarnation of social and moral virtues. In Dostoevsky's thinking, for instance, Slavophilism was bound up with a nationalist Christianity: Russia's messianic destiny was to redeem Western Europe by bringing her the authentic spirituality which was alive in the Russian people. 'That star will rise in the East,' says Father Paisy in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The idealization of native popular tradition as a response to material inferiority or political subordination to stronger foreign powers is a phenomenon familiar to us from the later experience of third world societies. But what I want to make clear here is that part of the outlook underlying the Slavophile positions was shared across the political spectrum by thinkers and ideologues whom one would describe as liberals or radicals. For instance, not only right-wing Slavophiles but also figures like Herzen and Chernshevsky

saw in the Russian peasant commune – the *mir* – an institution which embodied certain collective ways of life, and with it a cooperative spirit and fraternity, which made it superior to the atomisation of Western Europe. The idealisation of the *mir* was inherited by the Narodniks, who believed that through it Russia could by-pass capitalism so that the village commune would become the nucleus of the socialist society of the future. It was Lenin's role, early in his political career to dispel this Narodnik utopia by demonstrating that, particularly since the abolition of serfdom in 1861, the disintegration of and the differentiation of the peasantry and the growth of capitalist relations in the village were already dominant realities.

II

I turn now to my three literary examples. The first is Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*, which takes its title and central motif from the equestrian statue of Peter the Great, which still stands in Decembrists' Square in Leningrad. It is a piece of monumental heroic sculpture, erected in the eighteenth century, and it depicts the Tsar on a rearing horse, with his right hand raised in a commanding or menacing gesture. Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* is not only the masterpiece of the greatest of Russian poets: it is also, to my mind, the greatest single work of Russian literature. Unfortunately, I can't present the text of the poem here, not only because it is 481 lines long, but also because I know of no acceptable translation. In fact, I doubt whether *The Bronze Horseman*, which enlists to the utmost the density and concentration of expression that the Russian language makes possible as well as its distinctive sonorities, can be translated adequately into English. Maurice Baring said long ago that it was "worthwhile learning Russian simply for the sake of reading Pushkin', and I agree, but I am inclined to refine this statement further and say that it is worthwhile learning Russian for the sake of reading *The Bronze Horseman* alone.

However, this paper isn't an essay in literary criticism, so it will be sufficient for my purpose to paraphrase and summarise the content of the poem.

The Bronze Horseman consists of a prologue and tale. In the prologue Pushkin begins by re-enacting the historic moment when Peter the Great, standing on the banks of the Neva amidst primeval swamp and forest, conceived the idea of building a city there which would 'cut a window through to Europe'. Pushkin then makes a transition to his own time: Peter's dream has been realized, and the poet goes on to celebrate the grandeur of the city and the elegance and refinement of St. Petersburg civilization. The tale which follows has a very different tenor. It is the story of a clerk in the city, Evgeny, who has his own simple dream of personal domestic happiness with the girl he loves. But during the disastrous flood of 1824, when the city is inundated by the Neva, his beloved Parasha's house is swept away by the waters, and there is no trace of her. Evgeny goes mad and becomes a vagabond roaming the city. One night he wakes from sleep and finds himself in the public square beneath the towering figure of the bronze horseman. He grits his teeth and shakes his fist at the statue, with an angry whisper: 'All right, you wonder-workers! Just you wait!' Terrified immediately after by the fact that the Tsar seems to turn his face menacingly towards him, he turns to run, and as he does so, he believes that he hears the rider and horse, with its bronze hooves, clattering in pursuit of him through the square. A few days later he is found dead on a little island by the shore, his body fallen on the threshold of a ruined cottage which has been washed there by the flood.

The Bronze Horseman has been read most often as a dramatization of the conflict between individual and state. But it is important to see this confrontation in its specifically Russian context in the poem. Evgeny shakes his fist at Peter's statue because the Tsar, in his pursuit of imperial grandeur, had built his city where it was exposed to the threat of flood,

and is therefore responsible for the shattering of Evgeny's dream. Evgeny's loss can be taken to stand for the human price that had to be paid for the forced development of Russia by the great modernizing and Westernising Tsar. There is an opposition in the poem between the granite and iron of the city and the water which invades it: it is as if primeval Russia is taking its revenge on the Tsar who sought to transform her. However, the dialectic between prologue and the tale mustn't be forgotten. Pushkin cherishes the achievements of St. Petersburg civilization of which he was a part ('I love you, Peter's creation,' says a line in the prologue) much as he shares the rebellious impulse of the mad Evgeny. (It is worth noting that the square which is the setting of Evgeny's act of defiance was that in which the Decembrists had gathered eight years before the writing of the poem to stage their abortive uprising against the Tsar.)

It is the ambivalence between Pushkin's prologue and tale that makes the poem still immediately meaningful to Russian readers. It has often seemed to me that many Russian intellectuals today would probably feel a similar ambivalence in regarding the figure of Stalin, unable either to deny his constructive achievement in modernizing Russia and raising her to the status of a great power, or to forget the cost of this achievement, both in lives and in liberties. Stalin was, in fact often compared with Peter the Great by his laureates, and his most objective biographer, Isaac Deutscher, has applied to him what was said of Peter, that he 'drove barbarism out of Russia by barbarous means'.

It is perhaps a characteristic of great literature that it lends itself to being interpreted in different ways, even in ways of which the writer may not have been cognizant. John Bayley has said of *The Bronze Horseman*: 'The poem has an enduring fascination for intellectuals and theorists, and interest and subtlety – feed on its art and produce interpretations which the very perfection and inclusiveness of that art make quite compatible with one another.'

Accordingly, my second example concerns the use that Dostoevsky made of the figure of the bronze horseman. This passage comes from one of his last novels. *The Adolescent* (that's what the Russian title means, though Constance Garnett retitled the book *A Raw Youth* in translating it into English). It expresses one of the reflections of the young hero of the book, Arkady, and the occasion is a typical St. Petersburg misty morning:

'A hundred times amidst this mist, a strange but insistent dream has occurred to me: "What if this mist were to thin and float upwards, wouldn't this whole rotten, slimy city fly up with it too, rise with the mist and vanish like smoke, and the former Finnish swamp would remain, and in the middle of it, perhaps, for effect, a bronze horseman on his hotly breathing, overridden horse?'

The allusion to Pushkin's poem is clear, but equally explicit is Dostoevsky's transformation of it: the great imperial capital whose spendour Pushkin celebrated in his prologue has become the 'rotten slimy city'. In Arkady's fantasy, after the city has vanished with the mist, the figure of the brone horseman stands, as if in mockery of Peter's achievement, in the midst of a landscape regressed to the virgin swamp amidst which he conceived his dream.

The two variations on the theme of the bronze horseman convey somewhat differing visions of Russia's history and destiny. Pushkin shares the elan of Peter's modernizing imperial drive even while he recognizes the cost it involves and has apprehensions of the enduring resistance of old Russia. But in Dostoevsky's variant, what comes through is a single-minded questioning of the solidity and permanence of the Petrine legacy, to him as insubstantial as mist. The voice that speaks through Arkady's vision is that of Dostoevsky the Slavophile. It must be remembered that St. Petersburg had always been (and still is, as Leningrad) the cosmopolitan city, the 'window on Europe' that Peter intended it to be, as contrasted with old traditional Moscow.

For the Slavophiles Russia had taken a wrong turning under Peter the Great, and it was time for her to return to her Muscovite roots.

My third example from literature will serve also as a bridge to the post-revolutionary era. It is the poem *The Scythians*, written in January 1918 by Aleksandr Blok, the greatest Russian poet then living. Blok's symbolist and profoundly prophetic poem adopts as a persona the figure of an ancient Scythian chief. The Scythians were a nomad people who occupied in the days of the Roman Empire the territory that is now southern Russia. They were hemmed in between the Romans to the west and the barbarian tribes to the east. In Blok's poem the Scythian addresses the Romans: 'There are millions of you: of us, there are swarms, and swarms, and swarms.' The chief identifies himself and his fellow-Scythians as 'Asiatics'. He goes on:

> 'Russia is a Sphinx. Rejoicing and grieving,
> and pouring out black blood,
> she gazes, gazes, gazes at you,
> with hate, and with love!

Blok's poem returns afresh to the old dilemma of Russian identity, and the two faces of Russia – turned west and east. His Scythian symbolism recalls a favourite image of Herzen, who in Western exile, became disillusioned with Western liberalism after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, and looked to Russia to regenerate Europe as the barbarians had reinvigorated decadent Rome. But the crucial element in Blok's poem is the dual attitude to Europe – of love and hate. The Scythian chief holds out to the westerners his last offer of peace and fraternity: if it is rejected, he says, 'we will turn to you our Asiatic face.' In Blok's vision, the Russian revolution is appealing to old Europe to comprehend and come to terms with it before it is too late. The poem reads:

> For the last time – think well,
> old world!
> To the fraternal feast of
> Toil and peace,
> For the last time to the
> Bright fraternal feast
> The barbarian lyre summons you.'

Blok's poem, written only a few months after the October Revolution, when the interventionist armies of the West were poised to invade Russia, is a work of extraordinary historical insight. Though, as Blok makes evident in the poem, he clung to the hope that Europe would treat the Russian Revolution pacifically, he seems to have sensed the more likely outcome. In his diary he wrote at the same time: 'We will open our gates wide to the east.' To apprehend the far-seeing nature of Blok's vision, we must recall that at this time, it was to the European proletariat that the leaders of the Revolution, in their beleagured fortress, were looking for aid. Blok, in a flash of premonitory understanding, anticipated by several decades the shift of the revolutionary centre to Asia and the third world.

Lanka Guardian, October 1985

5

Pushkin and the Tree of Power

Pushkin's poem **The Upas Tree**, which I have translated here, was written by him in 1828, in one of the darkest periods of reaction in Tsarist Russia, following the crushing of the Decembrist revolt of 1825, in which aristocratic radicals in the army attempted to overthrow the despotic regime. Pushkin was a friend of several of the Decembrists, and his early poems, in which he attacked tyranny and serfdom, and for which he was exiled to the South of Russia by Tsar Aleksandr I, are believed to have played a part in propagating the Decembristis' ideals of freedom. Pushkin is reported to have told Tsar Nikolai I later that if he had been in St. Petersburg on the day of the uprising, he would have taken his place with his friends.

In **The Upas Tree** Pushkin has found a poetic symbol for an authoritarian society that was not only immediately relevant to Tsarist Russia but transcends particularities of time and place and carries a profound resonance even today. In its spare and austere strength, which comes from the stripping of the poetry to bare essentials, **The Upas Tree** reminds one of the greatest poems of Blake. And like many of Blake's, **The Upas Tree** is about the inhumanity of power. To the prince the slave is only an instrument to be used, as much as the arrows with which he visits death on neighbouring lands. That is why the upas tree is the terrifying symbol of anti-human power: prince and upas tree are in the end identified.

Like all great artists, Pushkin sees political power in terms of the relationships between human beings. In the prince's imperious glance, in the slave dying humbly on a mat at the lord's feet, is focused the whole quality of life of a society whose relationships are based on absolute power, on domination and submission. Like Blake who spoke of 'the mind-forged manacles', Pushkin sees the character-structures of a repressive society to be based on the internalization of oppression: the inhuman power of the prince finds its reflection in the total submission of the slave, as docile as the prince's arrows.

In measuring one language against another, the translator often comes face to face with the inherent differences between them. Stanza 6 of the poem begins in the original Russian: **No cheloveka chelovek posial** (literally, 'But man sent man'). In the Russian **man** and **man** are set side by side in the sentence, as object and subject – **cheloveka chelovek**. Russian grammar makes this position because it is an inflected language, and can therefore make use of a flexible and variable word – order. Man-subject and man-object, both the natural equality of the two men as human beings and the denial of that equality in the relationship of power – all this is summed up in the juxtaposition of those two Russian words with an economy and concentrated force that English can't parallel.

The French writer Prosper Merimee, in writing on Pushkin a century ago, commented that only Latin and Russian could achieve the concise syntax of these lines in **The Upas Tree**, and he actually translated them into Latin to prove his point. Of a great poet it can be said that he brings to realization the expressive resources latent in his native language. That is what Pushkin, who virtually created the Russian literary language, does in his poetry.

The Upas Tree

In a desert parched and barren,
Rare for human eye to see,
Like a fearful sentinel
Stands a single upas tree.

Thirsting nature gave it birth
On a day of wrath, and fed
Roots and boughs with poisonous life,
Quickening its foliage dead.

Through the bark the poison oozes,
Melting in the noonday sun,
Hardening in the evening chill
To a thick transparent gum.

Never flies a bird towards it,
Never tiger wanders there;
Only black whirlwinds sweep past,
Touching, turn to deadly air.

Straying rain-clouds water it;
From the thick leaves trickle down
Streams of poisoned water-drops
To the sun-scorched desert brown.

With imperious glance one man
Sent another to the tree;
He set out, and the next dawn
Poison brought, obediently.

Deadly resin and dry leaves
Low before the prince he set;
From his whitened brow there streamed
Rivulets of icy sweat.

His strength ebbing, on a mat
Under the tent's roof he lay;
At the invincible lord's feet
Humbly passed the slave away.

In that poison the prince steeped
Docile arrows for his bands,
Death and terror ceaselessly
Spread throughout the neighbouring lands.

Lanka Guardian, May 1980

6

Blok, Christ and the Red Guards

Blok's **The Twelve** is not only the major poem to have come out of the Russian Revolution: it is also one of the peaks of modern European poetry. When Blok wrote it in 1918, he consummated an extraordinary process of poetic development for which there is no parallel in the work of his European contemporaries except in that of W.B. Yeats. Like Yeats, Blok developed out of the late Romantic twilight, through an eccentric personal cult expressed in symbolist terms (in which the poet was the high priest of a truth revealed only to the initiated), towards a visionary and prophetic poetry that was deeply engaged with the realities of the contemporary world. **Blok's** major poems – **On the Field of Kulikovo, The Twelve** and **The Scythians** – are the counterpart in this process of development of Yeats's **Easter 1916, Meditations in Time of Civil War** and **The Second Coming**.

Just as the Irish Easter uprising and Civil War compelled Yeats to come to terms with the turbulence and violence of the age, so the much larger convulsions of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 exerted a similar influence on Blok. In making this comparison, however, there are two differences between the Russian and the Irish poet that must be noted.

The first is a difference in social outlook. Yeats had a strong allegiance to the way of life and values of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry, and his response to the national upsurge in Ireland (in poetry as in life) was, profoundly, ambiguous. Moreover in the post-Civil War period, he moved steadily to the right, and ended in the last decade of his life as a sympathizer of the Irish fascist movement and an admirer of German and Italian fascism. Blok, an aristocrat by birth where Yeats was only pro-aristocrat by association, was nevertheless deeply stirred by the events of 1905, and found his greatest poetic inspiration in the revolutionary storm of 1917. The response evoked in him by October was the climax of his life and his poetry; in his last years he sank into a political despair which found expression only in the self-chosen silencing of his poetic genius.

The second difference between Blok and Yeats is in the tempo of their poetic development. Blok wrote his masterpiece at the age of 37, and died three years later. If Yeats had died at the same age, we would have remembered him only as a minor Victorian poet who would have earned a footnote in the literary histories. (Dying young has, of course, been the fate of many of the greatest Russian poets, from Pushkin and Lermontov to Blok, Yesenin and Mayakovsky). Moreover, **The Twelve** is, to my mind, a greater achievement than any one of Yeat's poems. The Christ-symbol which crowns the poem facilitates a comparison with **The Second Coming**; Blok's poem surpasses Yeats's not only in its greater technical originality but also in its profounder historical vision.

The Twelve is a long narrative poem set in the Petrograd of January 1918, when the poem was written. It opens with wintry images of black night, white snow and wind in the Petrograd streets. The violence of the wind, whipping up the snow, knocking people off their feet, tearing away the banner with the words, "All power to the Constituent Assembly', is caught in the whirling rhythms of

the opening part of the poem. The energy of the wind and the snowstorm is the elemental energy of the revolution itself. Just as the wind blows away the banner with its slogan of the bourgeois parliamentarians, so the workers' and peasants' Soviets had swept aside the Constituent Assembly only a few days before Blok began to write his poem.

Blok's personal diary records his preoccupations during these days. The Constituent Assembly met for the first and last time on January 5-6, before being dissolved. On January 5, Blok recorded in his diary, 'instinctive hatred for parliaments, constituent assemblies and so on.' On January 7, he jotted down fragmentary thoughts about Christ, linked with the conception of the poem. On January 8 the diary says. 'The whole day – **Twelve**', and the next day, 'The article "The intelligentsia and the Revolution" completed.' This was the article which Blok ended with words addressed to the intelligentsia:

'The demon once commanded Socrates to listen to the spirit of music.

'With your whole body, with your whole heart, with your whole consciousness, listen to the Revolution.'

'The spirit of music' was the phrase through which Blok habitually referred in his writings to the natural and primal energies which he conceived to be at the heart of life. It was the release of these energies which he responded to in the Revolution, and which he incarnated in the dynamic rhythms of wind and storm in the opening part of **The Twelve**.

Against the backdrop of the storm appear the twelve – Red Guards on patrol, marching through the streets of Petrograd. They are vigilant because the enemy is wide awake and active, they are also imbued with the revolutionary atheism of the Bolsheviks:

> "Freedom, freedom,
> Hey, hey, without a cross!'

But one of them, Petrukha, is troubled by the infidelity of his girl, Katka, who has become the mistress of a bourgeois officer, Vanka. In the course of their march the twelve run into Katka and Vanka speeding in a cab, and Petrukha shoots at Vanka and unintentionally hits Katka, who is killed. When the twelve continue the march, Petrukha is haunted by guilt and remorse for the dead girl, and even murmurs a traditional prayer for the dead, although his comrades urge him to forget what has happened: this is no time for personal preoccupations. As they march on, keeping 'in revolutionary step', they see ahead of them a figure with a red flag. Suspecting a trick, they call out, 'Who goes there?' Receiving no answer, they fire, but they lose sight of the figure and never discover who it is. But the poet does, in the startling conclusion of the poem. In front of the twelve, carrying a red flag, walking through the snow, unharmed by the bullets, is Christ:

> 'White roses garlanding his head,
> Jesus Christ goes on ahead.'

The conclusion confirms the significance of the title: the twelve Red Guards who disown Christ are, unwittingly, his new Apostles.

Blok's **The Twelve** is as innovative a poem as **The Waste Land** which it preceded by four years. Though Blok's poem narrates the events of one night in Petrograd, while Eliot's moves between many different times and places. Blok's mode of narrative is also discontinuous. The opening section of the poem is a montage of images of the city in the storm that is cinematic in quality (though Blok was writing before Eisenstein and Pudovkin), while later there are abrupt shifts between different voices and different consciousnesses, articulated through a dazzling variety of forms and styles.

Just as Eliot was to bring together fragments of other poets, snatches of jazz songs, working-class and middle-class conversation and echoes of the Buddha and the Upanishads,

so Blok draws on the slang of the Petrograd streets, political slogans, popular song and Christian litany. (Not all these styles come through in translation: Section 8, with the folk-quality and the music of the Russian diminutives, is, to my mind, untranslatable into English.)

There is, however, a great disparity between Eliot's and Blok's uses of their medley of styles. The echoes of lower middle-class and working-class speech and popular song in **The Waste Land** – the woman talking in the pub. 'Mrs. Porter and her daughter', the three Thames-daughters – are used by Eliot with mocking effect, reinforcing the puritanical and snobbish revulsion against common life of a Boston Brahmin. Blok's use of his sources in the life of Petrograd is very different: **The Twelve** gains its vitality from Blok's immersion in and sympathetic identification with the life of a people involved in the throes of a great revolution. (Eliot was to see in that same revolution nothing more than collapse and disintegration – 'the present decay of eastern Europe', as he obtusely put it in the notes to **The Waste Land**.) It is appropriate that Eliot's and Blok's poems should have had very different destinies too: the former, an esoteric work prized by academic annotators: the latter, read by Blok's wife shortly after its composition to crowds of workers and Red Army soldiers who as Blok's aunt and biographer, M.A. Beketova, testifies, 'rapturously welcomed the poem, the author and the reader. The impression made by it was shattering, many were moved to tears, and A1.A1. (Blok) himself, present at the reading, was powerfully stirred.'

Bolshevik circles, however, while gratified by the endorsement of the revolution by Russia's greatest living poet, had reservations about some aspects of **The Twelve** – especially, the climactic vision of Christ. While orthodox Christians thought the conclusion shocking and blasphemous, orthodox Marxists found it no less disturbing that the Red Guards should be led, even unawares, by Christ. Both Lunacharsky and Trotsky in their criticisms of the poem

treated its conclusion as evidence of Blok's imperfect understanding of the significance of the revolution. A certain Shulgin in an article entitled 'Memories of Lenin', published in 1957, has left on record Lenin's reactions. Having quoted the last two lines of the poem (the image of Christ), Lenin asked, 'Do you understand? Explain.' And without letting Shulgin answer, Lenin added, 'I don't understand.'

It seems to me that sixty years later, we are in a better position to comprehend Blok's intentions in the conclusion of **The Twelve** and its profound historical meaning. The Christ of **The Twelve** was not the Christ of the Orthodox Church, which had buttressed the tyranny of the Tsars and itself been part of the serf-owning economy – the Church typified in **The Twelve** by the priest glimpsed in the first section of the poem:

> 'Why so unhappy now,
> Comrade priest?
> Remember how you strutted –
> Your belly going on before
> And the cross upon your belly
> Gleaming – among the poor?'

Blok's Christ was the original Christ of the Gospels, the Christ also of several generations of religious dissenters and social and political rebels. Sergei Hackel in his study of the poem has drawn attention to the significant fact that in the last line of the poem the name Jesus is spelt not, as customarily in modern Russian, **Iisus** but **isus**. The form that Blok uses was that adopted by the Old Believers, the dissenters who broke away from the Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century, and were thereafter persecuted. The importance of this detail is that many of the Old Believers were not only religious sectarians but also rebels against the established social order: from their ranks had come a number of the followers of Pugachev and Stenka Razin, the leaders of the eighteenth-century peasant revolts. (Pugachev's

manifesto had promised both land to the peasants, and freedom of worship to the dissenters.) It seems to me that there are associations with Pugachev also in the images of the snow-storm in the first section of the poem: the twelve make their appearance together with the violence of the storm, just as Pugachev, in Pushkin's novel **The Captain's Daughter**, is first encountered by the narrator in a snow-storm, which becomes a symbol of the violence of the peasant revolt to come.

Blok's Christ carries a flag which is described as 'blood-red' – the colour both of revolution and of his sacrificial blood – he marches at the head of the revolutionary guards, he bears a name used of him by the dissenters and evoking the memories of peasant wars, and his apocalyptic Second Coming is identified with the Revolution. Thus Blok brought together, in a flash of poetic insight, the events of October and a historical tradition of religious and social rebellion. That he was fully conscious of what he had done is confirmed by an entry in his diary for 10 March 1918.

'If there had existed in Russia, a genuine priesthood, and not merely a class of morally obtuse persons of ecclesiastical profession, they would long ago have sensed this circumstance – that 'Christ is with the Red Guards'. One can hardly dispute this truth – a simple one for people who have read the Gospels and thought about them... I only established a fact: if one looked into the snow-clouds of the storm on that road, one saw Jesus Christ (**Isus Khristos**.)

That last sentence indicates that the vision of Christ came as unbidden to Blok as 'the vast image out of Spiritus Mundi' did to Yeats in **The Second Coming** (Kornel Chukovsky has said that Blok told him, 'When I finished I was surprised myself: Why Christ? IK is it really Christ? But the more I looked into it, the clearer I saw Christ.') However there is a profound divergence between the meaning of Blok's Second Coming of Christ and that of Yeats. In an essay written in 1923, Eliot described the use of myth as 'a way of

controlling, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy, which is contemporary history, and he referred to Yeats as the first writer to have been conscious of this need. Eliot's view of contemporary history here may well recall to us Yeat's words in **The Second Coming**:

> 'Things fall apart; the centre
> cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon
> the world.'

Both Yeats and Eliot found in myth a means of expressing the horror and despair with the present and the regret for a vanished order of the past which they shared. Yeats in **The Second Coming** transformed his Christ – symbol into a 'rough beast' – the god of an age of anarchic violence to be born. The power of **The Second Coming** should not blind us to the fact that it remains a cry of fear and despair, a denial, of any positive direction in contemporary history which is an abdication of the intelligence. (Is not its great appeal to literary intellectuals due at least partly to the fact that it lends itself to an indulgence of the sense of meaninglessness and impotence?) Yeat's idealization of the aristocratic past and his eccentric theory of history could afford him no deeper comprehension of the present, and in spite of the horror of violence expressed in **The Second Coming**, he ended by embracing the 'rough beast' incarnated then in Fascism. Blok's Christ-symbol, on the other hand, was created out of an insight which brought together past and present – the drama of the Petrograd streets, the Russian past and the Christ of the Gospels – in a unifying and mutually enriching significance. Sixty years after, it is possible to say that Blok, neither Marxist nor Christian, has left us a work which is the most memorable union in literature of these two traditions of thought.

Note on Translations

The translations from Blok's poetry and prose quoted in this article are my own. The formidable difficulties of rendering **The Twelve** into English have not deterred several translators from trying. The two most recent versions that I have read are also those I can recommend most strongly: those by Sergei Hackel in **The Poet and the Revolution** (Oxford) and by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France in **Alexsandr Blok Selected Poems** (Penguin).

Hackel's translation is a scholarly rendering which stays as close as possible to the original in form and sense, but is at the same time creative. The commentary which makes up the greater part of the book is the most extensive and illuminating study of the poem to be found in English: it is by a writer who, as scholar of Russian, priest and radical Christian, is admirably equipped to write it. The book is, however, expensive. The Penguin paperback is cheaper and more easily accessible; it contains a free rendering of **The Twelve** by a student of Russian and an English poet working in collaboration.

Lanka Guardian, Nov. 1980 and Dec. 1980

7

The Resurrection of Requiem

'Akhmatova never ceased to be astonished at the resurrection of poetry once trampled underfoot, wiped out, it has seemed, once and for all. "We never realized that poetry has such a long life", she was always saying, and "poetry isn't what we thought it was when we were young."'

Nadezhda Mandel'shtam: **Hope abandoned**

In March this year in Moscow the literary journal **Oktyabr** published the complete text of **Requiem**, the sequence of poems which constitutes the major work of the greatest Russian woman poet, Anna Akhmatova. What made the publication an extraordinary event was that this work was appearing openly for the first time in the Soviet Union, half a century after it was created and over twenty years after the death of its author. Akhmatova produced **Requiem** between the years 1935 and 1940 during the period of Stalin's great purges. The work was born out of her terror and anguish after the arrest of her son, Lev Gumilyov, and of Nikolai Punin, with whom she had been living for nine years. The arrests of both Gumilyov and Punin were part of the general attack on the non-party intelligentsia, but Akhmatova's son was especially vulnerable because of his

paternity. He was the son of the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, to whom Akhmatova had been married in 1910 and from whom she was separated six years later. In 1921 Gumilyov was shot on a charge of involvement in a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. (Incidentally, a substantial selection of Gumilyov's poems was published in Moscow last year – an extraordinary rehabilitation for a figure executed as a counter-revolutionary not in Stalin's but in Lenin's time.) Lev Gumilyov's crime, for which he spent over eight years in prison camps and six years in internal exile, was that he was the son of his father.

Though **Requiem** came out of Akhmatova's agony of those years, it is more than an articulation of personal suffering. Several times in the sequence Akhmatova returns to the long months she spent in the prison queue with hundreds of other women, waiting to hand over a parcel or to inquire about the fate of their sons, husbands, brothers and fathers. **Requiem** is, to use Akhmatova's own metaphor, the mouth through which the cry of all these anonymous women is heard; it is a work in which the poet's personal agony is transcended by being identified with the collective experience of suffering. In 1957, Akhmatova prefixed to the work a prose passage, titled 'Instead of a Preface':

> 'In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months
> waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody
> in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with
> lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called
> by name before. Now she started out of the numbness common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):
>
> "Can you describe this?"
> And I said: "I can."

> Then something resembling a smile slipped over what had once been her face.'

The sequence keeps faith with that promise.

Requiem is, therefore, a work which speaks for an era and a generation: its text is tied to the historical moment out of which it was created, as declared patently on the printed page by its full title - **Requiem, 1935-40** and by the dates – year, month, and sometimes day – appended to each part of the sequence. Yet in its first open publication within the Soviet Union last month the work comes to Soviet readers not as a historical document of half-a-century ago but as an utterance of contemporary and immediate force. The Soviet people have never had the opportunity to confront clearly and fully the experience of the purges because of the secrecy and silence with which the subject has been shrouded. Yet the nation's conscience needs to face and judge those events, not only because there are still many individuals and families who bear their scars, but because Soviet society as a whole is involved in the great contradiction at the heart of its evolution. That contradiction is the fact that the modernization and development of the Soviet Union, of which her people unquestionably enjoy the fruits today, was achieved at an enormous price in human lives and liberties.

This is not the occasion to attempt an assessment of the reforms through which the Gorbachev regime is seeking to dismantle what is crippling in the legacy of the Stalinist era. But in relation to my subject, there is one aspect on which I need to comment – that the liberalization of literature and the arts has been a high priority in the reforms. Several Western commentators have related this to Gorbachev's need to carry with him the intelligentsia, who have been the focal points of dissent in the Soviet Union. This is not untrue; and it is noteworthy that the demand for the publication of the complete works of Akhmatova (that is, including **Requiem**) was pressed strongly at the congress of the Writers' Union last year. But Western comment on the present cultural

liberalization in the Soviet Union suffers from the assumption that this is of importance only to the intelligentsia. Of course, in Western Europe or America poetry is a minority and, often, esoteric art; one couldn't imagine President Reagan losing any sleep if John Ashbery were to write a poem criticizing his administration. This has never been the situation of poetry in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, the poet Osip Mandel'shtam (who was to die later in Siberia) told his wife: 'Poetry is respected only in this country – people are killed for it.' But not only has the Soviet State always recognized the social force of poetry; in Soviet society it remains a popular art. It's a country where new or much sought-after volumes of poetry are sold out on the day of publication, where poets are mobbed at public readings like pop-singers elsewhere, and where dissident poems (**Requiem** among them up to now) are circulated clandestinely in **samizdat**.

The resurrection of **Requiem** is therefore an important political act – more so, I think, than the impending publication in the Soviet Union of **Dr. Zhivago**. Pasternak's novel has come to be a symbol of artistic freedom because of its banning by the State and the furore over the Nobel Prize. But in its intrinsic content it doesn't confront the experience of the Stalin era as Akhmatova does. There is a paragraph in **Dr. Zhivago** which glances at the purges in relation to Lara's fate; but what the novel is about, essentially, is the situation of a man who wishes to opt out, to preserve his personal and spiritual integrity uncontaminated by revolution and civil war. It's not so much an anti-Soviet as an anti-political novel (which, of course, in 1957 meant that it was regarded as anti-Soviet). But by its very a-political stance, it has, I think, less to say to Soviet readers today than Akhmatova's **Requiem**, which I would regard as the most powerful and enduring literary work to come out of the Stalin era.

Rarely, if ever, has great literature been produced under such incredible conditions as attended the making of **Requiem**. (I have avoided saying, 'its writing' because, as

we shall see, that wasn't how it was composed). Akhmatova was at the time living in dire privation; she was, of course, unable to publish her writing, and survived only with the help of friends. Her biographer, Amanda Haight, says at that time she was 'living mainly on a diet of black bread and sugarless tea'. But even more oppressive than her material hardships was the atmosphere of terror that weighed on her. The poems of **Requiem** were not written down because to be in possession of such a manuscript would have been fatal in the event of a search of her apartment. Her younger friend, Lidia Chukovskaya, says in her memoir:

> 'Anna Andreevna, visiting me, used to recite to me verses from **Requiem**
> in a whisper, but in her own room in Fontannyy Dom she didn't dare even
> to whisper. Suddenly, in the middle of a conversation she would fall silent;
> and signaling to me with her eyes at the ceiling and walls, would take a
> piece of paper and pencil, then loudly saying something very much in the
> manner of social intercourse, "Will you have some tea?" or "You are very
> sunburnt", she would scribble hastily on the paper and pass it to me. I would
> read the lines, and having memorized them, silently return it to her. "It's a
> very early autumn this year," Anna Andreevna would say loudly, and striking
> a match, would burn the paper in the ashtray.'

Whether the hidden microphones that Akhmatova feared were there or not is less important than the terror the possibility inspired. Chukovskaya also 'remembers going out late at night into the empty streets repeating a poem to herself over and over again, terrified she would forget a word or

get something wrong'. There were other friends too whose memories were enlisted as repositories of the poetry in case some did not survive. Akhmatova used to say to Nadezhda Mandel'shtam (who was also part of her chain of memory), 'We live in the pre-Gutenberg era.' In the case of **Requiem** she had gone back beyond the scribes and their hand-made copies to the era of oral composition and transmission.

Requiem was composed as a poetic sequence – which in Russian is a distinctively modern creative mode, where unity and form are not imposed by a preconceived design but achieved through an organic process emerging out of experience itself. Apart from Akhmatova, Blok and Tsvetaeva produced memorable works in this form. The main body of the work consists of the poems written between 1935 and 1940, but in 1957 Akhmatova added the prefatory prose passage to which I have already referred; and in 1961 – shortly before the work was first published abroad, in Russian – she placed at the head of the text four lines which express her pride that she never emigrated, that she was with her people during their most tragic years. She couldn't, of course, have emigrated at that point of time, but what she meant was that during the years of revolution and civil war, when many Russian intellectuals did emigrate, she rejected that option.

> 'No, not under the vault of another sky,
> not under the shelter of other wings.
> I was with my people then,
> there where my people were doomed to be.'

This attachment to Russia was one of the many differences between her and the other great woman poet who was her contemporary, Marina Tsvetaeva. You may recall her poem written in exile titled **Homesickness**, (which I have translated for **The Thatched Patio**) where Tsvetaeva says that it is all one to her where not to feel at home. That's a poem Akhmatova could never have written because to her Russia was ineradicably home; hence, her identification in

an early poem with Lot's wife, who couldn't help look back when she had to leave her native Sodom:

> 'But in my heart she will never be forgotten
> Who for a single glance surrendered her life.'

Requiem is cast in a poetic language – bare, terse, lucid and austere – which was not only Akhmatova's personal style but since Pushkin has been the greatest glory of Russian poetry. In **Requiem** it is the perfect verbal equivalent of the strength of spirit and fortitude with which Akhmatova endured her ordeal, even when driven, as she records, to the edge of madness. This quality is evident, for instance, in the section titled 'The Sentence', written after the news of the verdict in her son's case:

> 'The word dropped like a stone
> on my still living breast.
> Confess: I was prepared,
> am somehow ready for the test.
>
> So much to do today;
> kill memory, kill pain,
> turn heart into a stone,
> and yet prepare to live again.
>
> Or else...Hot summer's feast
> brings rumours of carouse.
> How long have I foreseen
> this brilliant day, this empty house.

Some Western interpreters of the work have found its innermost meaning in its Christian symbolism. Akhmatova was a believing and practicing member of the Russian Orthodox Church, but I don't agree with those commentators on the work who have seen in it an acceptance of suffering as necessary and redeeming. That there is a pervasive Christian symbolism in the sequence is undeniable. The Leningrad prison which was known as 'Crosses' because of

its shape serves as a starting-point for the symbols of crucifixion which run through the sequence, culminating in the poem which recalls the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross. However, to my mind, these Christian symbols acquire in the sequence a broader human significance: the Virgin becomes here the prototype of all suffering mothers, like those with Akhmatova in the prison queue. The Virgin has, like Akhmatova, the strength to endure silently, where Mary Magdalene beats her breast and weeps. But in Akhmatova that strength seems to come not so much from a religious resignation to suffering as from an identification with a shared collective experience of it. That is why the affirmation in the poem, 'Not to forget!' is so crucial. It is first uttered early in the poem after Punin's arrest; it is reiterated in the superb epilogue, where she insists that she does not want even beyond the grave to forget what she has witnessed.

'If they ever think of building
a memorial to me in this country

I solemnly give my consent,
only with this condition; not to build it

near the sea where I was born;
my last tie with the sea is broken;

nor in Tsarsky Sad by the hallowed stump
where an inconsolable shadow seeks me,

but here, where I stood three hundred hours,
and they never unbolted the door for me.

Since even in blessed death I am terrified
that I will forget the thundering of the Black Marias,

forget how the hateful door is slammed,
how an old woman howled like a wounded beast.

And let the melting snow stream
like tears from my motionless bronze eyelids,

let the prison dove call in the distance
and the boats go quietly on the Neva.'

But **Requiem** itself is that monument – an act of recollection and preservation of historical memory – and it comes today to a new Soviet generation as a weapon against oblivion.

(The text of **Requiem** quoted here is one constructed by conflating three different published translations of the work into English; I have selected the best passages from each, checking them against the original, sometimes even combining in the same passage lines and phrases from different translators. The three translations are those by Richard McKane, Amanda Haight and Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward.)

The Thatched Patio, June 1987

8

My Name is Marina

There have been two great women poets in the Russian language: one of them was Anna Akhmatova, and the other was Marina Tsvetaeva. In her memoir, translated as **Hope Abandoned**, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam tells us that there was a long dispute among Russian readers about who was the 'first' woman poet, and (writing in the seventies) she adds that 'the violent arguments between Akhmatova's and Tsvetaeva's "fans" are only just beginning to die down.' I am not going to offer any judgements on this question, being aware that, when it comes to poets of this order of greatness, any preference must depend largely on the personal affinity the reader feels with one or the other poet. But what is very evident is the great difference between Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva in their temperaments and personalities, as well as in the qualities of their poetry. Mrs. Mandel'shtam makes the contrast exactly: 'the open turbulence of Tsvetaeva and the tightly controlled passion of Akhmatova.' Even if one knows nothing about their lives, the difference is obvious when one reads their work. Akhmatova's poetry is austere and disciplined, and has a classic perfection of form. These qualities can be regarded as the embodiment in poetry of the resources of the spirit that enabled her to survive adversity with fortitude. Marina Tsvetaeva's poems, on the other hand, are the vehement and impassioned utterance of a stormy and rebellious personality. Perhaps I can underline the contrast with a poem by each of them.

This is an early poem of Akhmatova, in which she contemplates a fallen statue in a park:

...There lies my marble twin,
by the old maple fallen;
his face turned to the lake,
he hears the green rustle.

His wound, when the blood has caked,
Is washed by the bright showers...
Cold one, white one, wait,
I too will turn to marble.

Compare that with a poem of Tsvetaeva (1920), in which she uses her name as the symbol of her nature and her destiny:

Some are made of stone, some of clay,
I sparkle in silver!
My nature is change, my name is Marina,
I'm the sea's foam – transitory!

Some are made of clay, some of flesh –
Theirs the coffin and gravestones!
- I am christened in the sea's font, and in flight
broken ceaselessly!

Every heart, every net,
my wilfulness pierces through.
You won't – you see these dissolute curls? –
make of me the salt of the earth.

Shattered against your granite knees,
I'm reborn with each wave!
Long live the foam – the joyous foam –
The sea's high-flying foam!

The monumentality of marble and the vibrant flux of the sea – these are appropriate contrasting symbols for these two divergent geniuses.

Russian poetry, whether in the Tsarist or in the Soviet era, has had no lack of tragic figures, but Marina Tsvetaeva was probably the most tragic of them all. This, in spite of the fact that she had an abundant vitality and a great love of life. But the very intensity with which she lived her life was an invitation to suffering. Mrs. Mandel'shtam comments with great perceptiveness: '... what she always needed was to experience every emotion to the very utmost, seeking ecstasy not only in love, but also in abandonment, loneliness and disaster.' Yet it must also be said that if her poetry came out of deep inner turbulence, it would be wrong to compare her with later Western poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell or John Berryman, who also lived on the edge of disaster. There is no morbidity in her poetry: the elements of neurosis are mastered and transformed in the act of creation. The energy and vital flow of the poetry testify to the great creative self-satisfaction she found in it. I shall quote later a group of poems to substantiate this. What I want to emphasise now is that although, with her defiant and uncompromising personality, she could not have led a calm life in any age, what ultimately destroyed her was the violent and tragic era in whose toils she was caught.

Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva was born on 26 September 1892 (Old Style) into a family of the Russian intelligentsia: her father was a professor of the history of art at Moscow University, and her mother an accomplished pianist whoc came from a Polish princely family. In an early poem (1916) she sees her time of birth as significant:

With a red bunch of berries
the rowan was on fire.
The leaves were falling.
I came into the world.

Hundreds of bells
were in debate.
It was a Saturday of
St. John the Apostle.

Down to this day
I love to nibble
the bitter berries
of the flaming rowan.

Another early poem (1914), written before she was twenty two, on a picture of her grandmother, shows Tsvetaeva's awareness already of the bent of her nature:

To Grandmother

An oval face, elongated, rigid,
a black dress like a bell...
Who kissed those arrogant
lips of yours, young grandmother?

Hands, that played Chopin's
waltzes in the palace halls...
Ringlets, spiral-shaped
at the borders of the frozen face.

A look, dark, straight and searching.
A look prepared for defence.
Not the look of a young woman.
Young grandmother, who were you?

Twenty-year Polish girl,
how many possibilities went down with you
into the greedy maw of the earth –
and impossibilities – how many?

The day was innocent, the wind fresh,
the dark stars went out.
- Grandmother! – this harsh rebellion
in my heart – doesn't it come from you?

In 1911 Marina Tsvetaeva met Sergei Efron and married him in the following year, and had her first child, Ariadna (Alya) the same year. Tsvetaeva wrote about her husband in a poem of 1914:

Such men – in fateful times –
Compose stanzas – and mount the scaffold!

Tsvetaeva was to be proved right about the nature both of the times and of Sergei; and her tie with him was to survive her several later love-relationships.

When the October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks into power, Efron became an officer in the army of the counter-revolution, and Tsvetaeva herself wrote poems in praise of the White resistance. The best of her Civil War poems, however, rise above partisanship into a sense of the tragic waste of the struggle:

This man was White, now he's red:
Blood has reddened him.
That man was Red, now he's white:
Death has whitened him.

In 1922 Tsvetaeva emigrated, with her daughter Alya, to join her husband, who was already in the West. They spent three years in Prague, where their son Georgy (Mur) was born in 1925, and where also Tsvetaeva had an intense and, ultimately, disastrous love-affair: its collapse led to the writing of two of her greatest cycles of poems, **Poem of the Mountain** and **Poem of the End**. Tsvetaeva and her family moved to Paris in 1925.

In Western Europe Tsvetaeva found herself increasingly out of sympathy with Russian émigré circles. She remained emotionally bound to a Russia she had politically rejected, and her literary judgments ran counter to émigré antipathies: for instance, she recognized and praised Mayakovsky's poetic gifts. For a poet to be exiled from the language community to which she belongs is always painful, and for Tsvetaeva it was particularly hard because there was no other she could identify herself with. The émigré press ceased to welcome her work: a volume entitled **After Russia**, containing her poems of the years 1922-25, was the last published in her lifetime, although poetry continued

to pour from her pen even under the conditions of poverty and hardship in which she lived. 'My reader remains in Russia,' she wrote sadly, 'where my poems don't reach.'

The course of her life was changed by a new situation: in the 'thirties, her husband, the ex-White officer, became a Soviet sympathizer, and influenced Alya and Mur in the same direction. Efron's change of allegiance was not entirely strange: his family had been radicals of the Narodnaya Volya movement. As Marina Tsvetaeva wrote in her **Autobiography**, 'How did he, the son of People's Will parents, find himself in the ranks of the White Army, and not the Red? My husband considered this the fatal mistake of his life. I must add that it wasn't only he, then a very young man, who made this error, but many, many fully matured people. In the White Army he saw the salvation of Russia and the truth, and when he became disillusioned, he left them, entirely – and never looked back in that direction.'

But the most fateful development was that, unknown to Tsvetaeva, Efron became an agent of the GPU in Paris. He was suspected of having been involved in the murder of Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, and of Ignaty Reis, a former GPU officer who had defected to Trotsky. Tsvetaeva refused to believe that Efron could be guilty of murder. As a result of his activities, however, his position in France became untenable, and he left for Spain, and thence returned to the Soviet Union, taking Alya with him.

Living on in povery and loneliness in Paris, Tsvetaeva felt the tug back to Russia all the more strongly. War-clouds were gathering over Europe: in March 1939 the Nazis overran her beloved Prague. But the decisive force was her bond with Sergei Efron. Two decades earlier, in 1917, when she had been temporarily cut off from him and was uncertain of his fate, she had written in her diary. 'If God performs this miracle – leaves you among the living – I shall follow you like a dog.' Now, in June 1938, she wrote in the margin: 'And now I am going – like a dog.'

She returned in 1939 to a Soviet Union still under the shadow of Stalin's Great Purges. Soon after her arrival, Efron was arrested and shot, perhaps because of his dangerous knowledge, and Alya sent to a camp. Tsvetaeva struggled on with her young son, shunned and unbefriended, and finding it virtually impossible to obtain work: not even influential writers who had known her in the days of her youth would help her. A diary entry two months before the end suggests the struggle that went on in her: 'I don't want to die, I don't want to exist.' When war came to the Soviet Union, she and Mur were evacuated to a small town, Elabuga, in the Tatar Autonomous Republic, where her struggle for existence became desperate. Mur was unsympathetic and worsened her difficulties by his exacting demands. Finally the day came – 31 August 1941 – when they had money left only for two loaves of bread. She waited till her son was out of the house, and hanged herself. (She was in her forty-ninth year.) Nobody came to her funeral, she was buried in an unmarked grave, and for twenty years her name went unmentioned and her poetry unpublished in the Soviet Union.

Mur was killed in the Second World War, but Alya survived the camps and preserved her mother's poetry. In the 'sixties, during the post-Stalin thaw, Marina Tsvetaeva's work began to be reprinted. Today she is again read and acclaimed by her countrymen as one of the great poets of the Russian language.

From a Translator's Workshop

As English translator and critic, Peter France, has remarked that 'it is hard to say who is the most untranslatable of Russian poets'. What I do know, having wrestled with the work of both of them is that Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva present directly opposite problems to the translator. With her reticent and astringent poetry, which, in its pellucid clarity and simplicity, holds profound depths of feeling beneath its calm surface. Akhmatova taxes to the utmost the

translator's capacity for delicate nuances of language and subtleties of rhythm. With Tsvetaeva, on the other hand, the translator is strained to match her wrenching of verse form and syntax, to find an equivalent for the jagged edges of a language that has been driven by intense emotion. Reading her, one rediscovers the fact that in poetry content and form are inseparable (a truth that only the poetically deaf will contest), that language in a great poem is not a set of counters that can be exchanged for a meaning expressible in other terms. One is deterred from even attempting to translate some of her greatest poems by the conviction that the soul of her experience in them cannot be divorced from the very body of her words, their texture and movement. Akhmatova is a poet of extraordinary personal genius writing within a tradition, bending inherited verse forms and language to the contours of her feeling. Tsvetaeva shatters them by setting syntax and speech rhythms in sharp collision with metre and line and stanza divisions. It is revealing that while Tsvetaeva admired Akhmatova's work and wrote a cycle of poems in homage to her ('Anna / Akhmatova! That name, a great sigh,' says one of them). Akhmatova was much more reserved in her attitude to Tsvetaeva's poetry. Commenting on this fact in a letter to N. Ilyina, Tsvetaeva's daughter, Ariadna Sergeevna Efron, has said justly: 'Marina Tsvetaeva was unmetrical, Anna Akhmatova harmonious: hence the difference in their (creative) relations with each other. The unmetricality of the one accepted (and loved) the harmoniousness of the other, but harmony is not capable of apprehending unmetricality, which in its view is something not quite **comme il faut**.'

What has been said here about 'unmetricality' should not be taken to mean that Tsvetaeva's poetry was formless. She was, on the contrary, one of the great masters and innovators of poetic form of the twentieth century. Nor does she, in her mature poetry, vent her rebelliousness of spirit in loose rhetoric. What is characteristic of her best poetry is

instead a great economy and tightness of expression – almost, as the poet V.A. Rozhdestvensky has said 'telegraphic' in its exclusion of purely structural words and its elliptical leapings from thought to thought. Of the poem **Love** (1924) that follows, I feel inclined to say that rarely has so much been said in five lines (and, in the original, because of the greater concentration that Russian makes possible, in only sixteen words). The temptations of rhetoric are pushed aside in the first two lines (a yataghan is a Turkish saber), and the quiet voice of the last three speaks from the intense depths of suffering felt and endured:

Love

A yataghan? A flame?
Lower your voice – it's too loud!
A pain, familiar: as the palm of one's hand to the eyes;
or to the lips,
The name of one's own child.

I wish to set side by side with **Love** a poem (1921) that reveals Tsvetseva's capacity to contemplate a personal emotion impersonally:

Chin impaled with such strength
on hand that mouth twists convulsedly,
parting grasped with such strength
that it seems even death can be no divorce, -

so a standard-bearer forsakes his banner,
so on the scaffold one says to a mother, 'It's time',
so the concubine of the last king
gazes with the last look into the night.

Returning to Peter France's statement, I must say that whether or not the most difficult, Tsvetaeva is undoubtedly one of the most exacting of poets to translate, and the strategies needed to cope with her work often vary from poem to poem. I have not, in general, in the poems translated

here, attempted to use rhyme or set metres which would have imposed excessive constraints on translation. I have departed sometimes from the original setting-out of the poem on the page, varied punctuation, or broken a line into halves or thirds to emphasise pauses or changes in intonation, where these liberties seemed to make for greater expressiveness in the translated version. I believe that the ultimate test of a translation is to be capable of being read as if it were a poem in its own language, and that the resemblance between poetic original and translation is not like that between a face and its mirror-image but rather like that between a mother's face and her daughter's.

I wish to set down here two poems as exemplifications of the translator's problems. The first is **Dialogue of Hamlet with his conscience** (1923) – a poem prompted by Hamlet's outburst to Laertes at Ophelia's graveside:

Dialogue of Hamlet with His Conscience

- She's at the bottom, with the slime
and the waterweeds... She has gone to sleep
in them – but there's no sleep there either!
- But I loved her.
As forty thousand brothers
couldn't love.

- Hamlet

She's at the bottom, with the slime:
Slime!... And the last garland
swam up on the riverside logs...
- But I loved her,
as forty thousand...

- Yet less

than one lover.
She's at the bottom, with the slime.
- But I -
loved her?

The debate between the two voices, one self-flatteringly insistent on the depth of Hamlet's love, the other bringing him back to the reality of the dead girl at the bottom of the river, survives, I hope, rendering into another language. But one dimension of the original has necessarily to be sacrificed: in the Russian the dialogue is punctuated by the cut and thrust of the rhymes **il** (slime) and **lyubil** (loved), as here, in the conclusion:

Na dne ona, gde il.
- No ya yeyo -
lyubil??

It is as if the words alternately metamorphose, one into the other, in his mind.

A poem from the cycle **Insomnia** (1916) requires, it seems to me, a different strategy. Here the deceptive air of a lullaby or nursery rhyme is indispensable to the effect, and regular metre and rhyme seem essential, even at the cost of some license with sense:

Gently, gently, thinly, thinly,
Something whistled in the pine.
In my sleep it seemed I saw
The black eyes of an infant shine.

From the red-boled pine there drip
Drops of resin warm and raw,
And throughout this splendid night
Through my heart there goes a saw.

The **Insomnia** cycle, from which I have just quoted one poem, came out of Tsvetseva's inner tensions, but it isn't purely self-regarding. Let me quote another poem from the cycle which brings out the way in which her own suffering has schooled her in empathy with that of others:

There's a window again
where again they are awake.
Maybe – they're drinking wine,
or may be – they just sit.
Or it's simply that two
hands aren't unknit.
In every house, friend,
there's a window like this.

Window in the night,
you are a cry
of meeting and parting:
maybe – hundreds of candles,
or maybe – three lit...
For me there's no quiet
at all in my mind.
In my house too
this has begun to happen.

Pray, friend, for the house without sleep,
for the window with a light!

It is appropriate to place side by side with these two poems from **Insomnia** a short poem (1917) outside the cycle but related to it in feeling. Here too the concern for the other comes out of the speaker's knowledge of such states of stress, and, as often in Tsvetaeva's poetry of this kind, the poem seems almost a ritual or a spell to charm away unrest:

To kiss the forehead is to erase anxiety.
I kiss your forehead.

To kiss the eyes is to lift off sleeplessness.
I kiss your eyes.

To kiss the lips is to quench thirst.
I kiss your lips.

To kiss the forehead is to erase memory.
I kiss your forehead.

However numerous the poems written out of disturbance, distress and anguish are in the body of her work, it would be wrong to leave the final stress on them. For me, Tsvetaeva's richest poems are those on her own creativity, where her strongest feelings for life are engaged. I should like to end, therefore, with four poems written at different periods of her life exemplifying this aspect of her poetry. Firstly, an early poem (1913) written before she was twenty-one, full of youthful and buoyant self-confidence in her gift and of defiance of the world:

For my poems
- written so early
I didn't even know I was a poet –
bursting out
like spurts from a fountain,
like sparks from a rocket,

bursting in
like little devils
into a sleepy incense-smelling sanctuary,
for my poems of youth and death
- unread poems! -

lying fusty in bookshops
(where nobody bought them
and nobody buys!)
for my poems too
as for vintage wines
the time
will
come.

Next, a poem which is perhaps unusual for Tsvetaeva in its tranquility. In reading it we have to remember the Russian connotations of the 'black earth', with its associations of the fertile steppes. Who the 'you' and 'I' of the poem are is a matter for interpretation. The Russian critic Efin Etkind

has suggested that they could be variously taken as man and woman, lover and Tsvetaeva, the world and the poet, God and man, or spirit and body. What matters anyway is the duality of the speaker, both passive, accepting and self-surrendering, as well as active, fecund and creative – both white paper and black earth:

I'm the page for your pen to write on.
I'll take everything. I'm the white page.
I'm the repository for your goodness:
I'll raise and return a hundredfold.

I'm the village, the black soil.
To me you're light and the rain's moisture.
You're lord and master, and I
am black earth – and white paper!

In the following poem from the cycle **Desk** (1933) there is a marvellous fusion of the poet's **persona**, the act of writing and the natural life of the tree, bringing out again the way in which, through her creativity, Tsvetaeva was able to transcend the limits of the suffering self:

My trusty writing-desk!
Thank you for surrendering
your tree-trunk to me
to become a table.
yet remaining a trunk alive!

With the play of the young leaves
above the brow,
with living bark,
with tears of living resin,
and roots down to the earth's depths!

Finally, another poem on the act of creation (1934) which, with its image of poetry as life-blood, self-consuming but enriching, may provide the appropriate note on which to end. It points to the heart of Tsvetaeva's poetic experience:

the miraculous transformation, in the practice of her art, of pain into the fulness of life:

I've opened the veins. Not to be stayed,
not to be restored, life gushes.
Bring basins and dishes!
All dishes will be too small,
all basins too shallow.
To the brim – and over,
into the black earth, to nourish the rushes.
Incredible! Not to be stayed,
not to be restored, verse gushes.

Sources : The Russian text of Tsvetaeva's poems I have used is that in Marina Tsvetaeva, **Stikhotvoreniya i poemy**, ed. A.A. Saakyants (Leningrad: Sovetskiy Pisatel', 1979). The Civil War poems are not found in Soviet editions, and the stanza I have translated from one of them comes from Peter France, **Poets of Modern Russia** (Cambridge University Press, 1982). For the facts of Tsvetaeva's life I am indebted mainly to Ellendea Proffer, **Tsvetaeva, A Pictorial Biography** (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980).

1985

9

Blake, Religion and Revolution : in Memory of E.P. Thompson

(This paper was read at ICES in December 1993 as a memorial tribute to the great British socialist historian, E.P. Thompson)

I

For many years now, whenever I have had occasion to teach the poetry of William Blake, I have been accustomed to ask my students to read Part One of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class.* This, in spite of the fact that that classic work of subaltern history had only a few brief, though tantalizingly suggestive, references to Blake. But it wasn't so much for anything that Thompson's book said directly on the poet that I used to refer students to it: it was because more than any other book it illuminated the social, political and religious context in which Blake's work had to be situated. However, Thompson spent a good part of the last third of his life in researching more thoroughly Blake's thought and writings and his political and religious affiliations The book which came out of this study, *Witness Against the Beast,* was still in the press when Thompson died in October 1993. It has now been published[1] – the last intellectual legacy of a man who was not merely a great scholar but a tireless upholder of human liberation.

There is a sentence in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* that has been much quoted. It reads: 'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.'[2] There is something in common between that enterprise and Thompson's undertaking in his last book. The time is gone, of course, when Blake could be treated with simple condescension, though he was for long its object. He was hardly read in his own time by the world of polite letters and produced his books by a kind of nineteenth-century version of *samizdat*. His real stature as the earliest, most original and greatest of the English Romantics remained unrecognized by scholars and critics throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. That wasn't surprising, considering the fact that Blake was the son of a tradesman, never went to a university, worked with his hands as an engraver (neither his poetry nor his painting made any money), was associated both with pro-Jacobins and with dissenting and eccentric religious sects, was once charged with sedition because an informer accused him of saying 'Damn the King', and in addition to all this, was reputed to be a madman who saw visions. Hardly a figure with whom respectable Victorian or Edwardian scholars could identify themselves. Even T.S. Eliot writing in 1920, found it necessary, like a schoolmaster writing an end of term report, to qualify his high praise of Blake's poetry, by passing strictures on his thinking: 'We have the same respect for Blake's philosophy... that we have for an ingenious piece of home-made furniture: the man who has put it together out of the odds and ends about the house.'[3] The patronizing tone of the Harvard and Oxford graduate towards the self-taught artisan is unmistakable: Blake becomes here the intellectual equivalent of an amateur carpenter. And it has been said that till after the Second World War it was possible to do a

specialist course on the Romantics in British universities without having to read Blake. Academic histories of literature and university courses then used to periodise Romanticism by starting with Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 and not from the earlier and greater *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Here in Sri Lanka, as late as the 1970s, an older don once expressed to me his astonishment that as a university teacher I had prescribed Blake as a special subject when, according to him, there were 'only ten of his poems worth reading'.

Today, of course, it is no longer possible for any academic to deny Blake's greatness. But the nature of that greatness can still be misrepresented. At one time Blake used to be regarded as an isolated figure, with a purely personal and idiosyncratic vision. 'Blake in his successful work' wrote F.R. Leavis, says implicitly "it is I who see and feel. I see only what I see and feel only what I feel. My experience is mine, and in its specific quality lies its significance."'[4] This emphasis on Blake as the individual with a unique way of seeing and feeling could go with a depreciation of him on the ground that he lacked the intellectual and literary support of a tradition. Eliot, in the same essay to which I have referred, said, 'About Blake's supernatural territories, as about the supposed ideas that dwell there, we cannot help commenting on a certain meanness of culture.'[5] Here, I think, it was not only the gentleman scholar but also the devout adherent of Anglican orthodoxy who was talking. But by the time Kathleen Raine and others of the same intellectual persuasion got to work on Blake, this picture had been completely transformed. Raine's erudite study was titled *Blake and Tradition*, and in it the one-time amateur of intellectual carpentry becomes the heir of a Great Tradition, of an esoteric, hermetic, neo-Platonist philosophy. The politically radical Blake disappears completely from sight, as does the receptor of a tradition of plebeian dissenting religious sects.

I won't attempt to follow through Thompson's arguments against Kathleen Raine's efforts to affiliate Blake to the enterprise of an elite minority of spiritual initiates. To make an independent judgment between Raine and Thompson on questions of sources and influences would require learning in philosophical and religious fields that are beyond my acquaintance. My ground for rejecting Raine's supposed neo-Platonist Blake is much simpler – that such a figure couldn't have written those pieces of his that we most admire – poems such as 'London' or 'Infant Sorrow' or 'The Garden of Love', rooted as they are in substantial material and social realities. Thompson's Blake is wholly consonant with them, and that is sufficient reason for endorsing his account.

The fundamental problem for the interpreter of Blake is to explain the union within him of a revolutionary critic of society and a visionary who saw life in terms of his religious illumination. Or, to put the question in another form, how is it that the ardent enthusiast for the political upheaval of the French Revolution could reject wholly the Enlightenment – not only Newton and Locke but even Voltaire and Rousseau, supposedly the intellectual fathers of the Revolution? It is the great merit of Thompson's work that it gives us coherent answers to these questions. It is true that he is not the first writer on Blake to have confronted them (A.L. Morton, for instance, has been there before), but Thompson has brought to bear on his undertaking a depth of knowledge of the social and intellectual milieu that outpasses that of previous explorers. And also, may I add, a command of a lucid and vigorous prose that greatly enhances not only one's understanding but also one's pleasure in reading his book. It's a pleasure of a kind that is increasingly rarer in a post-modernist world where the language of cultural and literary criticism is becoming almost as esoteric as that of nuclear physics, and where radical intellectuals often cultivate a mandarin mode of writing that excludes the common readers

whom they are professedly concerned to liberate.[6] Thompson is a true democrat: the style of his scholarly writing is not different from that of his political argumentation.

As in *The Making of the English Working Class*, so in *Witness Against the Beast*, Thompson takes us at the outset back to the seventeenth century, to the period of the English Civil War when, in that memorable phrase, 'the world was turned upside down'. In the aftermath of the fall of the monarchy, factions and sects contested the issue of what were to be the new political and religious dispensations – and for them the two were inseparable. A host of radical sects with a social base among tradesmen and artisans – Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Fifth Monarchy Men and many others – voiced in the language of religion their revolutionary and millenarian vision. At the height of the social ferment Gerard Winstanley, leader of the Diggers, took his followers out to cultivate a piece of State land in common because, he argued, the Fall of Man has taken place when the earth that God had intended should be shared by all had been parceled out as a private property. But the radicals were defeated, and with the restoration of monarchy and Church their beliefs and aspirations were submerged, or redefined in purely other-worldly terms. As Thompson puts it: 'The hopes which were dashed in this world were projected into an inner world of the spirit. Here the old rhetoric lived on, but the stance of the sect towards all temporal things might now be quietist.' (p.52)

But nearly a century and a half after Cromwell's crushing of the radicals, it must have seemed to the plebeian dissenting sects of the late eighteenth century – once more, with a membership of small tradesmen and artisans – that the world was being turned upside down again. In the 1780s and 1790s the revolutionary upsurge brought fresh life and meaning to old strivings, and the political language of Jacobinism, drifting across the Channel, blended with the religious accents of the radical dissenting sects. Blake stood

at the confluence of these two currents of thought and feeling, and gave them clarity, power and depth by his genius.

There are two fundamental questions that Thompson poses in the first part of his book. One: What did Blake inherit from the dissenting, and sometimes heretical, Christian tradition? Two: What was the channel through which Blake received its influence? To the first question he offers a definite answer; to the second only a conjecture.

Thompson defines the main legacy to Blake of the dissenters as that of antinomian thought – that is, repudiation of the Law, whether the law of the State or the moral law of the Church. The sects whose history and thought he traces in the first half of his book maintained that it was not observance of such a moral code as the Ten Commandments that would bring people to salvation but only Faith and Love. This belief was known in the antinomian tradition as 'the Everlasting Gospel'. To quote Thompson on the central tenets of that tradition:

> The Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Jesus stand directly opposed to each other: the first is a code of repression and prohibition, the second a gospel of forgiveness and love... And if this is married...to political radicalism and to the outlook of the oppressed, then the doctrine acquires a new force again. For the Moral Law is *their* law, the law of 'God and his Priest and King/Who make up a heaven of our misery', while the Gospel is the affirmation, in the face of all the Schools and Orthodoxies, of the truths of the pure-in-heart and the oppressed.' (p.14)

Blake was at one with the antinomian tradition in rejecting rigid and abstract rules and codes, whether of the State or of religious morality. This is the thrust of some of the pregnant aphorisms in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: for instance, 'One Law for the Lion and Ox is Oppression.'

Like many other Blake's utterances, it can be read in more than one way: as an exposure of the fiction of equality before the law, which conceals the real inequality of people in their social situation; or as an argument against abstract and universalized rules of morality which ignore the specificities of individual people and situations, without which no real moral judgment is possible. In either case, the Lion suggests the powerful, the rich and the predatory, the Ox the poor, the humble and the defenceless; the pretence of dealing equally with them by the same law, whether of State or Church, can only be part of an oppressive order. Or take one of Blake's proverbs from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.' Here the emphasis is on the repressive character of the penal law of the State and the sexual morality enjoined by the Church, and both are seen as actually promoting what they profess to root out – crime and lust. But the stamp of antinomian thinking is to be felt everywhere in Blake's work. He wrote a long poem 'The Everlasting Gospel', expressing his heterodox view of Christ and taking his title from the dissenting tradition. But even where antinomianism is not given utterance by way of explicit statement, the antinomian view of life and the world finds embodiment in imaginative forms. The rebellious figures in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* – the Little Vagabond, the chimney-sweeper in *Experience*, the newborn child in 'Infant Sorrow' – these through the naked perception of the child penetrate beneath the rigid moral categories of adult thinking. And it is the Moral Law, 'Thou shall not' that is written over the door of the chapel which has displaced the Garden of Love.

Given this intellectual inheritance of Blake from the seventeenth-century revolutionary groups, what was the medium through which it was transmitted? Or, as Thompson says, what was the 'vector' between the 1650s and Blake's time? Thompson has concerned himself with this question too, and he has unearthed a sect that might have been the

link, though he admits that this is only a hypothesis. The sect is that of the Muggletonian, called by that name because one of its two co-founders in the seventeenth century was Ludowick Muggleton, a working tailor. Thompson has traced several similarities between the imagery and symbolism of Muggletonian literature and Blake's. Blake in adult life was never a member of the Muggletonian Church, but Thompson has made some discoveries which point to the possibility that Blake's mother was a Muggletonian, and he may therefore have been brought up in childhood as one. Thompson, however, is careful to say that his general argument doesn't stand or fall by the correctness or otherwise of this conjecture. But what is most interesting in this regard is that in the course of his researches Thompson encountered the last surviving Muggletonian – an old man by the name of Philip Noakes, who was a believing Muggletonian but had no disciples or associates; even his wife wasn't a believer. He had, however, in his possession the archives of the sect from the end of the seventeenth century to the present, and Thompson, after studying them, persuaded the British Library to buy them in 1978. This was fortunate because Mr. Noakes, the Last Muggletonian, died less than two years later.

We can now try to answer the question that may have seemed an enigma: how could Blake have been so supportive of the French Revolution (at one time he wore the Jacobin red cap) and yet scorned Voltaire and Rousseau? The answer is that he belonged to that current of antinomian thought that stood against the whole project of the Enlightenment - the polite eighteenth-century culture that produced, in Thompson's words, 'rationalism, political economy, utilitarianism, science, liberalism'. This may cause a certain unease in those readers of Thompson's book who are accustomed to see in the Enlightenment the very fountain of human progress, and their doubts may be confirmed when they find in the tracts, pamphlets and sermons that Thompson quotes from the antinomian sects evidence of crankiness,

irrationality and mystification. Thompson's reply to these objections is worth quoting at length because it stands at the heart of his enterprise in this book – to rescue from the 'condescension of posterity' the lower middle class dissenting sects just as he rescued the Luddites and the handloom weavers in his earlier historical classic:

> If we read this as a simple opposition between reason and unreason (or blind faith) then this is self-convicted irrationalism. But if we consider the *actual* assumptions of the 'Age of Reason' then the antinomian stance acquires a new force, even a rationality. For it struck very precisely at critical positions of the hegemonic culture, the 'common sense' of the ruling groups, which today can be seen to be intellectually unsound and sometimes to be no more than ideological apologetics In particular, the dominant mechanistic (environ mentalist or associationist) psychology with its set of stepping-stones from self-interest to rational benevolence (whose evidence is useful works) is challenged by the antinomian doctrine of faith and love. The increasingly remote and impersonal image of God, the Newtonian Prime Mover of 'Natural Religion' is challenged by the personal embodied image of God/ Christ. The profoundly paternalist character of the dominant social thought and moral sensibility is curtly challenged by the antinomian vocabulary of the humble saints persecuted by the temporal powers. Above all, antinomianism offered a central challenge to the Moral Law in a society whose legitimating ideology was precisely that of Law. And when we recall that this same polite and rule-governed society multiplied new prohibitions and capital offences on every side, placing the altar of Tyburn at the centre of its institutions, can we decide so easily on which side 'reason' is to be found? (pp. 110-111)

That is eloquent and humane, but I feel in Thompson's discussion at this point a certain limitation which was characteristic of his thinking. That limitation was a kind of insularity, an Anglocentrism, which comes out in the fact that his range of reference rarely goes beyond English culture and English history. In his combination of a lucid and independent intellect with interests that are wholly English, Thompson had something in common, in fact, with George Orwell. In the passage I have just quoted, for instance, the issue of whether a non-rational outlook could be socially more liberating than a rational one is discussed solely in relation to the specificities of a period of English history: there is no examination of it in the context of other cultures, no attempt at a theoretical generalization. The limitations of Thompson's Englishness will, I think, stand out if I set this passage side by side with one from a great scholar confronting a similar problem in relation to a very different culture. In the course of his massive work on Chinese science and civilization, Joseph Needham faces the seeming paradox that the Confucian rationalists were the upholders of the established order of feudal-bureaucratic society, while Taoist mystics were often its radical critics. Needham writes:

> The question may then be asked, under what social conditions do mysticism and rationalism have respectively the role of progressive social forces? We usually think of rationalism as the characteristically progressive element, fighting against superstition and irrationalism where the latter has become the habitual bulwark of entrenched irrational privilege. This was presumably the state of affairs in western Europe before the French Revolution....

I interrupt the quotation to remark that while rationalism was without doubt a liberating social force in pre-revolutionary France, it does not appear to have played the same role, as Thompson shows, in England. Needham continues:

> Bu there have perhaps existed quite other situations, in which mysticism has played the part of a progressive social force. When a certain body of rationalist thought has become irrevocably tied to a rigid and outdated system of society, and has become associated with the social controls and sanctions which it imposes, then mysticism may become revolutionary. Law as a whole might be considered a special case of this association of rationalism with reaction; for often esoteric, authoritarian and inaccessible, its function has generally been to act as a brake upon inevitable change. The converse association of mysticism with revolutionary social movements has been constantly seen in European history, as, for example, in the apocalyptic, milleniarist or chiliastic tendencies in early Christianity, the Donatists and other schisms, the Hussites and Taborites in Bohemia, the Anabaptists of the German peasant wars, the Levellers and Diggers of seventeenth-century England, and so on.[77]

Needham's standpoint isn't very different from Thompson's, but in comparison with his multicultural breadth of awareness, Thompson does seem a little provincial. It is perhaps for similar reasons that I find Thompson's treatment of Blake himself disappointing in one respect. Those of us who come to Blake from a non-Christian background may be struck by the fact that he transcends the rigid dichotomies of body and soul, God and the devil, good and evil, by which the orthodox Christian tradition is confined. In this respect Blake, with his doctrine, 'Without contraries is no progression', and the continual ambiguities of his oppositions between innocence and experience, angels and devils, seems a figure close to some non-Christian traditions. Arthur Waley, the distinguished translator of Chinese literature, once wrote an essay on 'Blake the Taoist'; and reading Blake's poem 'The Tyger' with its resonant question, 'Did he who made the

Lamb make thee?', one may recall the dual aspects of some Hindu deities, benevolent and destructive. I had hoped for some discussion of these cross-cultural affinities in Thompson's book, but I suspect that to him Blake remains significant, above all, as the most creative of *English* radical intellects.[8] But there was nothing parochial about Blake's culture. In spite of Eliot's ignorant remark about his 'meanness of culture', he was probably better educated than if he had gone to a university of his time. His contemporary Frederick Tatham, in an account quoted by Thompson, testified that he 'had a most consummate knowledge of all the great writers in all languages...I have possessed books well thumbed and dirtied by his graving hands, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Italian.' (p.xvi) And his interests extended much beyond those usually cultivated by English scholars of his time. He had, for instance, read the *Bhagavad Gita* in translation, and Joseph Needham thinks it possible that he may have even known one of the early European translations of the *Tao Te Ching*.[9]

II

I now go on to discuss Blake's poetry in the light of the second part of Thompson's book, which is devoted to this subject. Thompson rightly concentrates on the work of the years 1788 to 1794 – the years of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the related notebook poems, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, written in prose but with an imaginative intensity comparable to that of poetry. These are indeed the highwater mark of Blake's creative achievement. In comparison with them the *Prophetic Books* of the later years mark a creative decline. I think this decline is associated with the loss by Blake of the revolutionary hopes and expectations of the great years, as France was engulfed by Bonapartism and England by repressive Toryism. Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake never made his peace with reaction, but he withdrew into a world of private symbolic vision which is mirrored in the obscurities and turgidities of the later work.[10]

In the second part of his book Thompson shows himself a literary critic of a high order. In particular, the splendid chapter, twenty pages long, on Blake's greatest poem, 'London', is a model of what close reading should be. It gives equal attention to the words on the page, the interrelations with other texts and the historical and political situation in which the poem was written. I shall not attempt to quote from it: the chapter must be read entire. But I wish to devote some time to two poems on which I find myself disagreeing with Thompson. There is involved here a question of what one takes interpreting Blake to be. More than any other poetry, Blake's is open to a plurality of readings: the very structure of his thought, based on 'the contrary states of human soul', ensures that. Where a poem may be read in more than one way, none of which can be said to be categorically right or wrong, one is entitled, I think, to express a preference for a reading that makes the poem richer and more meaningful. It is on this basis that I wish to disagree with Thompson's reading of two poems. They are generally less well known than those in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* because they were written down in his notebook and never published in his time. But they seem to me among his greatest, and I have used them for many years in teaching Blake. Here is the first:

I saw a chapel all of gold
That none did dare to enter in
And many weeping stood without
Weeping mourning worshipping

I saw a serpent rise between
The white pillars of the door
And he forced and forced and forced
Down the gold hinges tore

And along the pavement sweet
Set with pearls and rubies bright
All his slimy length he drew
Till upon the altar white

Vomiting his poison out
On the bread and on the wine
So I turned into a sty
And laid me down among the swine

Thompson's comment on this poem is especially illuminating in respect of the swine, who bring together both moral and political significances. The animality of the swine is to be preferred to the hypocritical and ostentatious purity of the golden chapel with its white altar On the other hand, there is a contemporary reference behind the metaphor because Burke, in his celebrated counter-revolutionary tract, had spoken of 'the swinish multitude', and radical pamphleteers had taken up the phrase and thrown it back at him with pride. But where I differ from Thompson is in the way he takes the serpent. Thompson writes: 'Experience did not cancel out Innocence, for if innocence had been polluted by the serpent, it remained in its purity as emblematic of human potential.' (p.171) My question is whether the serpent is to be regarded as only 'polluting'. It is impossible to read the poem without, in some ways, taking the side of the serpent when he tears down the white pillars and golden hinges and desecrates the pearl and ruby-studded pavement, and even, finally, the sacrament. The serpent has obvious phallic associations, so that in its destructive and yet vital energy, it represents the return of the repressed – of everything that the purity of the church is intended to exclude. But why is it also associated with slime and poison? I should like to suggest that these come from Blake's sense that desire repressed turns corrupt, which finds expression in some of the proverbs in *The Marriage of Heave and Hell:* 'Expect poison from the standing water', and again, 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.'

The other poem to which I referred reads as follows:

I heard an Angel singing
When the day was springing
Mercy Pity Peace
Is the world's release

Thus he sang all day
Over the new mown hay
Till the sun went down
And haycocks looked brown

I heard a Devil curse
Over the heath and the furze
Mercy could be no more
If there was nobody poor

And pity no more could be
If all were as happy as we
At his curse the sun went down
And the heavens gave a frown

Down poured the heavy rain
Over the new reaped grain
And misery's increase
Is Mercity Pity Peace

Thompson commenting, says This 'Angel' is not just a hypocrite: Mercy, Pity, Peace *could* be 'the world's release': about these virtues Blake was never cynical. And this 'Devil' is not a devil of energy or of antinomian wisdom (as in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*): he is a real devil and no doubt Gibbon would have found him to be a man 'of polished manners and liberal education...conversant with the precepts of philosophy.'(p. 207)

But this, I think, is to simplify. Of course, Blake wouldn't have been cynical about the virtues of genuine 'Mercy, Pity, Peace'. But the praises of them sung by the Angel could also be complacent and hypocritical utterances, like those of society ladies disbursing charity that doesn't

touch the stark realities of poverty and hunger among the heath and the furze. So I take the Devil here, as in any other places, as the voice of disturbing, unpalatable truth, exposing the selfishness hidden behind acts of charity and the dependence of Mercy and Pity – in their comfortable social versions – on continuing poverty and misery in order to gratify the egoism of the giver.

III

I conclude with some remarks on the nature of Thompson's Marxism, if that is indeed the appropriate term for his political position in his last phase. Long ago, Engels made a distinction between socialism, 'utopian and scientific': before Marx, thinkers had conceived of socialism as a morally desirable goal, but Marx, according to Engels, was the first to establish socialism on the basis of an understanding of historical laws, as the outcome to which the historical process would lead. Since 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe and in 1991 in Russian this belief in socialism as the necessary consummation of progress has been rightly under a cloud because what seemed the irresistible course of historical development has been shown to be reversible. Looking back, we can now see that this belief, even in its most vigorous days, didn't really work as a scientifically established conclusion (no prediction about the future of society could possibly have that status): its function was quite another – to give emotional sustenance to action in that the revolutionary could have the confidence that history was on his side. But within the Marxist tradition there has often been a tension between the moral impulse towards socialism as a desirable goal of human endeavour to liberate people from poverty, oppression and injustice on the one hand and the acceptance on the other of the necessities of what was believed to be an objective historical process which might involve horrendous violence and inhumanity. This tension can be felt in Marx himself, as when he denounces the

brutalities of British rule in India and yet concludes that 'whatever the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history' in bringing about social progress. Marx's way of reconciling this contradiction was to look forward to the future when human history would no longer resemble 'that hideous pagan idol who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.[11] Unfortunately, this consummation was never achieved: in the crushing of the peasantry in Soviet Russia or of the middle class in Cambodia it was still sought to drink the nectar from the skulls of the slain. However, the nectar has proved more elusive than those who saw themselves as no longer the unconscious but the conscious tools of history must have believed. There can be no doubt where Thompson stood on this opposition between the compulsions of historical progress and the costs in human suffering. At the end of his chapter on the handloom weavers in *The Making of the English Working Class,* he wrote:

> There is of course a 'futurist' argument which deserves attention...But this is an argument which discounts the suffering of one generation against the gains of the future. For those who suffered, this retrospective comfort is cold.[12]

The 'condescension of posterity' from which he had to rescue the Luddites and the handloom weavers included not only that of academic historians but also that of orthodox Marxists. For Thompson was less concerned with the onward march of the forces of production than with human freedom and dignity and resistance to injustice. There is in general in Thompson's writing little evidence of the Marxist tendency to apotheosise historical law; in reading him, it is always the hopes, strivings and pains of flesh-and- blood human beings rather than the workings of impersonal forces that we are in contact with. Giving therefore a new application to his own term, I should like to describe him as an antinomian Marxist - antinomian in relation to the exaltation of historical law as

the final court of judgment. What was clearest in his work was his generous indignation against domination, oppression and exploitation and his humane sympathy with those who were its victims, and it didn't matter to him that some of those who evoked that sympathy were labelled by other Marxists as retrogressive or utopian. He had little truck with projections of theoretical analysis divorced from tangible human experience (hence his blast against Althusser), and his work always had a sturdy empirical base – perhaps, one more mark of his Englishness. But I shouldn't like to place the stress on the intellectual limitations that this may have involved. Rather, I would say that any political thinking that loses the empathy with the weak, the oppressed and the suffering that Thompson possessed in such abundant measure will end, at best, in a cerebral aridity and sterility and, at worst, in the perpetration of such horrors as we have witnessed in several socialist states.

I have called Thompson an antinomian Marxist, but in the preface to *Witness Against the Beast* he offers his own self-description, which perhaps means very much the same thing. Referring to a lecture he gave on an American campus, he says: 'I startled the audience by acclaiming William Blake as "the founder of the obscure sect to which I myself belong, the Muggletonian Marxists". Instantly I found that many fellow-sectaries were in the room. As the years have gone by I have become less certain of both parts of the combination.' (p.xxi) Considering his sympathetic identification with Blake, and remembering that this book was probably finished in the twilight of socialism in the late '80s or early '90s, there seems to be a certain personal poignancy in its last paragraph:

> ...when the revolutionary fires burned low in the early 1800s, Blake had his own way of 'keeping the divine vision in time of trouble'. This way had been prepared long before by the Ranters and the Diggers in their defeat, who had retired from activist strife to Gerard Winstanley's 'kingdom within, which moth and rust does not corrupt'. And so Blake also took the characteristic antinomian retreat into more esoteric ways, handing on to the initiates 'The Everlasting Gospel'. There is obscurity and perhaps even some oddity in this. But there is never the least sign of submission to 'Satan's Kingdom'.[13] Never, on any page of Blake, is there the least complicity with the kingdom of the Beast. (p.229)

The Thatched Patio, Jan/Feb, 1994

Footnotes

1 E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast* (1993): Cambridge University Press). Page references in the body of the paper are to this book.

2 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968: Penguin), p.13.

3 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 321.

4 F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (1960: Penguin), p.186. This conception of Blake was developed earlier and at greater length in the pages on him in Leavis's *Revaluation*. However, in the same essay in *The Common Pursuit* from which I have quoted, Leavis says:

> 'It is one of the manifestations of Blake's genius that he, unique in this, can – the evidence is apparent here and there in *Poetical Sketches* (1783) – be genuinely, in verse that has nothing Augustan about it, of the people.' (op.cit., p.192) It is revealing that Leavis, rightly finding a link with popular culture in Blake could trace it only in the early and immature *Poetical Sketches*, whereas it is more powerfully manifested in some of the finest of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

5 Eliot, op.cit., p.321. It may be remarked that in the British critical tradition there was a long-standing practice of depreciating the 'auto-didact', as he or she used to be called: not only Blake but Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy and D.H. Lawrence all in turn suffered from it.

6 Perhaps Thompson's proposal in respect of scholarly writing which lacks a sense of humour, made in LRB shortly before his death, should also cover these cases: 'Indeed, I am arranging for a private member's bill to be introduced in the next session of Parliament which will penalize offenders with the confiscation of their word processors.'

7 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (1956: Cambridge University Press), Vol.2, p.97.

8 Thompson's Anglocentrism is evident in his historical writing in *The Making of the English Working Class,* for instance, empire is a significant absence. (I am grateful to Darini Rajasingham for pointing this out to me.) Thompson 's lack of interest in other histories and other cultures is all the more surprising because his father, Edward Thompson, was a historian and novelist of Indian life, a sympathizer with the Indian national movement and a friend of Tagore and Nehru.

9 Needham, op.cit. p.163.

10 Revewing Jon Mee's book *Dangerous Enthusiasm* a few months before his death, Thompson agreed with a critic of a very different intellectual outlook, F.R. Leavis, that (in the latter's words) "none of the elaborated prophetic works is a successful work of art". (*London Review of Books*), 28 January 1993, p.12).

11 Since this quotation, like the previous one, comes from the *Letters of India,* it is likely that Marx was thinking of Kali, perceived through the British stereotypes of Hindu religion. The same distorting influence is to be found in his remark that in India 'man, the sovereign of nature, fell on his knees before Hanuman the monkey and Sabbala the cow'.

12 Thompson, op.cit., p.346.

13 'Satan's Kingdom' is a Blakean phrase: in his copy of Bacon's *Essays,* Blake wrote: 'Good advice for Satan's Kingdom.' 'The Beast', derived from the mythology of the *Book of Revelation,* was often identified by the dissenting sects with the State, and Blake followed them in this.

10

Thomas Hardy: 25 Years After

Hardy's distinction as a poet lies in the extreme poignancy of personal emotion in his greatest poems. In this he is unequalled by any other contemporary poet, except Yeats in some of his poems of love and old age. Yeats' poetry, of course, has another dimension besides the personal; out of his own struggle with passionate heart and decaying body he reached a metaphysical awareness of "all those antinomies of day and night". This unique combination of personal intensity and a sense of realities beyond the individual makes Yeats a richer poet than Hardy – indeed, the supreme poet of the twentieth century. Although in some of the poetry of his middle years, we may feel that Yeats is too narrowly obsessed with his own situation, the poems of his final period – particularly in such dramatic creations as Crazy Jane, the "wild old wicked man," and the lady, the chambermaid and the lover of the "Three Bushes" sequence – achieve a deep understanding of the eternal destiny of man, his struggle with his own divided nature and with God. Consider, for instance, the aphoristic poem, "The Four Ages of Man":

> "He with body waged a fight,
> But body won; it walks upright.
>
> Then he struggled with the heart;
> Innocence and peace depart.

Then he struggled with the mind;
His proud heart he left behind.

Now his wars on God begin;
At stroke of midnight God shall win.

The experience of Hardy's poetry, in contrast, is confined to the personal and the human. But it is Hardy's greatness that he gave utterance to certain emotions – the pain of loss or disappointment in personal relationships, the alienation of love, the poignancy of memory – more movingly, perhaps, than any other poet in the English language. Take the first stanza of "A Broken Appointment":

"You did not come,
And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb,
Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
Than that I thus found lacking in your make
That high compassion which can overbear
Reluctance for pure loving kindness sake
Grieved I, when as the hope-hour stroked its sum,
You did not come."

Here, as in all Hardy's best poems, one notice the spareness of the language. But beneath the apparently neutral statement lie troubled emotions – the pain of unfulfilled expectation, the greater pang of disillusionment, the partial relief of subtle reproach. This ability to charge the simplest and most colourless words with powerful feelings is a gift which Hardy shares with the very greatest English poets – Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats. It is the highest quality of poetic art, the mastery of a poetic idiom of the greatest naturalness and inevitability. Look, for instance, at the concluding lines of the stanza. In the slow, painful movement of:

"Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum"

is felt the weariness of futile waiting; and, thrown into relief by the rhythm and the slight unusualness of the language of this line, comes the short, simple phrase,

"You did not come" – into which is concentrated at once the shock of final realization, the hurt reproach, and the bowing to the unalterable.

"You love not me,
And love alone can lend you loyalty;
I know and knew it. But, unto the store
Of human deeds divine in all but name
Was it not worth a little hour or more
To add yet this: once you, a woman, came
To soothe a time-torn man, even though it be
You love not me."

The stress here on "you a woman," "a time-torn man," brings out Hardy's central concern – for the value of personal relationships. One gets the same feeling in "Beyond the Last Lamp," a poem which is remarkable for the way in which the poet's imaginative sympathy transforms the two figures seen on a London street into timeless symbols of human tragedy. Parted as lovers, they are yet linked in suffering – "comrades there at tryst" – and it is this which gives them the quality of immortality:

"And yet
To me, when nights are weird and wet,
Without those comrades there at tryst
Creeping slowly, creeping sadly
That lone lane does not exist
There they sit brooding on their pain
And will, while such a lane remain."

Hardy's poems on "the cruelty of time" spring from an intensely personal preoccupation with the plight of old age. In "I look into My Glass" one notices again the tension between the quietness of the tone and the powerfully disturbing emotions which it holds in restraint – the stirrings of the passionate spirit within the withered body, the conflict

between regret for vanished youth and longing for the relief which the calm emptiness of age would bring:

"I look into my glass
And view my wasting skin,
And say, 'Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!'

For then, I undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But time, to make me grieve
Part steals lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide."

It is interesting to compare this poem with the passage in Eliot's "East Coker" whose theme is also the disturbance of old age by the intrusion of passion – the lines beginning "What is the late November doing."

Hardy's poem is directly and intensely personal: Eliot's lines are not merely impersonalized – he seems to shy away from any open expression of personal emotion ("That was a way of putting it, not very satisfactory"). It is customary today to consider Eliot's impersonality a measure of his poetic greatness and a sign of the strength he derives from his religious faith. I wonder whether the fact that Eliot is one of the few poets professing a traditional belief in an age of doubt may have led his contemporaries to see in his poetry a greater assurance than it possesses. In spite of Eliot's careful cultivation of the impersonal mode, it seems to me that his poetry is strongest when it breaks into a personal utterance. Perhaps future generations of readers may find in the weariness, say, of the sestina in "The Dry Salvages" a truer expression of the poet than in the hortatory exaltation of "Little Gidding."

In any case, I do not think the poise of feeling which Hardy achieves in poems like "I Look into My Glass" or "In Tenebris" less significant as a discipline of the spirit than anything to be found in Eliot. It is appropriate to conclude this study of Hardy with four stanzas from "In Tenebris" which may serve to exemplify the remarkable fortitude of his character, which, in its complete acceptance of the "dark cold and the empty desolation," seems to turn its very "unhope" into a source of sustenance:

"Wintertime nights;
But my bereavement pain
It cannot bring again;
Twice no one dies.

Birds fain in dread;
I shall not lose old strength
In the lone frost's black length;
Strength long since fled!

Tempests may scath;
But love can not make smart
Again this year his heart
Who no heart hath.

Black is night's cope;
But death will not appal
One who past doubtings all,
Waits in unhope."

The Ceylon Daily News, January 1951

11

Nationalism, Class and Culture: The Strange Case of W.B. Yeats

I

'To me,' wrote Yeats in a letter almost at the end of his life, 'all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death.'[1] At least one reason for his belief that reality was founded on oppositions must have been his awareness of the contradictions within himself and his positions towards his society. These contradictions make his work a challenging test for anyone who wants to theorise about the relations between politics and literature. An Irish nationalist who admired the way of life of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy; a hater of the English who was the greatest poet writing in English in this century[2], a defender of intellectual liberty whose politics was pro-Fascist – how are these paradoxes to be explained and how do they affect our reading of his work? Few people, I suppose, will take the simple way out of saying he was a Fascist bastard whose poetry should be put in the dustbin. But it seems to me that equally unsatisfactory is the easy alternative that has been adopted by most academics – that of smiling indulgently at his reactionary politics as one of the eccentricities of a great poet

which we should take no more seriously than his belief in spiritualism or magic. On the other hand, there has been Edward Said's recent extraordinary claim for Yeats as a 'poet of decolonisation' in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said's sub-chapter on Yeats seems to me the most confused part of a generally rather confused book, and I'm not going to discuss it, except incidentally. But I hope my paper will help to show how wrong he is when he describes Yeats as 'the indisputably great national poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations and the restorative vision of people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power.[3]

Perhaps an admirer of Yeas would want to say to me, 'Why should I bother about Yeat's politics? It's the great love poet who matters.' There are two things I could say in reply. Firstly, Yeats himself was vitally concerned with his public role and the impact of his writings, including his poetry, on his society.[4] Secondly, it's not possible to make an absolute separation between his 'personal' and his 'public' poetry. To demonstrate this, let me present two poems. Both of them were written about Maud Gonne, the great love of Yeat's life, whom he pursued for many years without winning her. She was reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Ireland of her time, but she was also a militant nationalist agitator and organizer. The first poem I shall quote, which is titled 'Memory', looks back at this unfulfilled love and the mark it left on his life:

> One had a lovely face,
> And two or three had charm,
> But charm and face were in vain
> Because the mountain grass
> Cannot but keep the form
> Where the mountain hare has lain.[5]

Yeats is saying that the continuing impress of Maud Gonne on his memory stands in the way of his responding to the beauty or the charm of other women. His love remained unfulfilled in physical terms (Yeats elsewhere calls it 'a barren passion'). But here what was a purely emotional relationship is translated into the image of the mountain hare and the imprint it leaves on the grass – a physical, even sensual, image with the feel of the weight and warmth of the hare's body. This is striking: equally so is the way in which Yeats reverses the gender stereotypes of male activity and female passivity. Here it is the woman who is the dominant force, and the man the recipient of her lasting pressure on his life and personality. And the poem recognizes both the waste and denial that the relationship involved and a kind of enrichment that is nevertheless afforded. So much is said and so memorably in just six lines which have a surface simplicity and a bare economy of utterance. This is the kind of poem which I think makes Yeas, at this best, unequalled among English poets of the century. And reading it, we don't of course feel any need to remember Yeat's positions on Irish or European politics. Can we say in general, then, that his politics are irrelevant to his love poetry? No, we can't; for consider now the second poem I want to quote – 'No Second Troy', also written about the same woman:

> Why should I blame her that she filled my days
> With misery, or that she would of late
> Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
> Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
> Had they but courage equal to desire?
> What could have made her peaceful with a mind
> That nobleness made simple as a fire,
> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?
> Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
> Was there another Troy for her to burn.[6]

The personal impulses behind the poem represent Yeats's need to cope with his disappointment and bitterness, which he does by mythologizing Maud Gonne. She was a figure naturally fitted to be a Helen, but it was her misfortune that she had no Troy to burn, so she had, among other things, to torment William Butler Yeats. But while his submergence of the real woman in a myth offers him a way of escape from his personal conflicts, the poem also affirms a romanticized view of the past as a more spacious and heroic age. This goes with the attitude to Maud's political activity as a demeaning activity of stirring up the 'ignorant' masses (Yeats would probably have said 'mob'), and to the present – 'an age like this' – as banal and restrictive. I postpone judgment on 'No Second Troy' till I have looked at Yeats's attitudes to aristocracy, but it should be evident already that the poem is not merely personal but political, and that we can't think of these categories as mutually exclusive.

Before I go further, I should like to indicate the scope and structure of this paper. The next section will be devoted to characterizing the nature of Yeats's nationalism in relation to the social forces in the Ireland of his time, his attachment to the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and the significance of these matters for an understanding of his poetry. In the third section I examine his concepts of culture, of theatre and of the spiritual life and their relationship to his socio-political outlook. In the fourth section I consider his ambivalent attitudes towards political violence, and this will lead to a discussion of the pro-Fascist sympathies of Yeats's latter years. I end in the fifth section with a political reading of the poem 'Leda and the Swan', which is normally not regarded as a political poem at all. One last word by way of introduction: my undertaking compels me to look at the least attractive sides of Yeats's thinking and writing, so I should like to reiterate that in other aspects of his work I still regard him as a great poet.

II

First, a few facts that will help to situate Yeats in relation to Irish society and politics. Yeats was born in 1865 into an Ireland that had long been divided in consciousness into two nations – a Catholic majority and a Protestant minority. Moreover, this religious cleavage corresponded to a class division, for the hereditary ruling class, known as the Ascendancy, were the Anglo-Irish Protestant landed aristocracy. The term 'Ascendancy' referred to the Protestant supremacy over the mass of Irish Catholics, but, as R.F. Foster underlines in his excellent history of modern Ireland, the Ascendancy were not merely Protestant but specifically Anglican.[7] The discriminatory laws and practices which ensured their privileged position had weighed almost as heavily against Protestant dissenters as against Catholics.

Yeats was Protestant by birth: he lost his inherited religion, by his own account, in adolescence, and in adult life his beliefs were a mishmash of theosophy, Hinduism, Christian mysticism and spiritualism. But throughout his life he saw his social identity as defined by Protestant Ireland. His family belonged not to the aristocracy but to the professional middle class (his father was a painter), but he identified himself with the Anglo-Irish landed aristocracy whose way of life he admired intensely. In his poetic play *Purgatory* he puts into the mouth of a character an elegiac backward look at one of their great houses:

> Great people lived and died in this house;
> Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,
> Captains and Governors, and long ago
> Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne,
> Some that had gone on government work
> To London or to India came home to die,
> Or came from London every spring
> To look at the may-blossom in the park.
> But he killed the house; to kill a house

> Where great men grew up, married, died,
> I here declare a capital offence.[8]

This is, of course, a character speaking and not the poet in his own person; but there are many other places in his work which confirm that Yeats shared these sentiments. And this can serve as a pointer to the contradictions in Yeats's politics. He was, as we shall see, an Irish nationalist, but the class he admired was a creation of Ireland's colonial history, and many of its members, as the passage itself indicates, had been faithful servants of the imperial regime. 'Long ago/ Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne' – the two battles of 1690 that had decisively guaranteed English supremacy over Ireland. The anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne is still celebrated annually in Ulster as part of Protestant political mythology.

The great house that Yeats knew best and which had an intimate emotional significance for him was Coole Park, the mansion and estate of Lady Gregory, the widow of Sir William Gregory, whose statue stands outside the Colombo Museum.[9] It inspired several celebratory poems, one of which, written in 1909, is titled 'Upon A House Shaken by the Land Agitation':

> How should the world be luckier if this house,
> Where passion and precision have been one
> Time out of mind, became too ruinous
> To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
> And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
> Where wings have memory of wings, and all
> That comes of the best knit to the best? Although
> Mean roof-trees were sturdier for its fall,
> How should their luck run high enough to reach
> The gifts that govern men, and after these
> To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech
> Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease[10]

It should be of particular interest to us Sri Lankans that 'the gifts that govern men' refers to Sir William's record as Governor of Ceylon: this is made clearer by the prose draft preceding the writing of the poem, which speaks of power that 'gave to a far people beneficent rule'.[11] Yeats's nationalism, in other words, didn't prevent him from regarding Coole Park admiringly as a nursery of the talents of a colonial administrator. The political judgment that one may make of these lines as an idealized and unreal image of aristocracy isn't at odds with the literary judgment that their language invites: its glamourising and sentimentalizing quality is evident in every line. From the title of the poem ('a house *shaken* by the land agitation') and the fears of fall and ruin that the poem voices, one would suppose that Coole Park was threatened by a peasant revolt. Actually, the occasion of the poem is that fifteen tenants of Coole Park had applied to the Land Courts to have their rent reduced, and the Land Commissioner had granted a reduction of twenty per cent![12] So, in effect, what Yeats is saying is that the gracious way of life of Coole Park can't be sustained unless the full quantum of rent is extracted from its tenants.

'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' is, admittedly, a relatively early poem, but its kind of weakness persists in Yeats's poetry down to his most mature period whenever he dwells on the glories of aristocracy. Thus, in the poem 'Coole Park and Ballylee' of 1931:

> A spot whereon the founders lived and died
> Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees,
> Or gardens rich in memory glorified
> Marriages, alliances and families,
> And every bride's ambition satisfied.
> Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
> We shift about – all that great glory spent –
> Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.[13]

Could *every* bride's ambition, one may ask, indeed have been satisfied at Coole Park? That exaggeration is as revealing as the vague glamourising phrase 'all that great glory'. One may recall that in 'No Second Troy' the language is for the most part hard and precise, but when Yeats thinks of the beauty of Maud Gonne as belonging to a vanished aristocratic world there is a blur, an indefinite emotive gesture – 'being high and solitary and most stern'.

But the most damaging criticism to be made of Yeats's idealizing poetry of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy is that it forgets the history out of which they were born. Reading Yeats's poetry of the great houses, with phrases like 'time out of mind' and 'rich in memory', one may get the impression that this was a class with an immemorial tradition behind it. The truth is that the ennoblement and estates of most of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy didn't go back beyond the mid-seventeenth century. Their lands and wealth were made possible by the despoliation of rebel Catholic landowners after Cromwell's reconquest of Ireland and, again, after the crushing of Jacobite resistance in 1690.[14] How drastically this expropriation changed the distribution of landed property in Ireland is shown by the estimate of an English observer, Arthur Young, a century after the Glorious Revolution, that Irish Catholics, who were 75 per cent of the population, owned 5 per cent of the land.[15] This violence is erased in Yeats's glorification of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy[16], and most literary people, brought up on the cult of ceremony, order and tradition in 'A Prayer for My Daughter' and the Coole Park poems, won't even be aware of it. Sir William and Lady Gregory themselves belonged to families whose ancestors had come over as adventurers with Cromwell and acquired their wealth and status in consequence.

How did Yeats square his cult of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy with his Irish nationalism? The answer is that the Ascendancy had itself, by the eighteenth century, produced a settler nationalism that aimed at securing for the privileged

Anglo-Irish greater political and economic rights. In time some of its leaders, without wishing to forego the hegemony of their class, found it politically necessary to take up issues affecting the mass of the Irish people – first, Catholic emancipation, and later, land reform, which under Parnell went with the agitation for Home Rule. It was this Anglo-Irish elite nationalism that Yeats attached himself to in spirit. The great names he frequently cited came out of this tradition – Swift and Burke as intellectuals and Grattan and Parnell as politicians. He defined what he saw as the position common to them and him succinctly in 'The Tower':

> The pride of people that were
> Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
> Neither to slaves that were spat on,
> Nor to the tyrants that spat –[17]

the Cause being that of popular Irish nationalism, of the 'slaves that were spat on', the State that of the English rulers who were 'the tyrants that spat'.

In identifying himself nevertheless with the objective of political freedom for Ireland, Yeats, never a democrat, would have hoped for an Ireland that would preserve the privileged position of the educated and affluent Anglo-Irish Protestants. That dream never materialized, and in the post-1921 Irish Free State after the Anglo-Irish Treaty and partition, Yeats saw himself as a member of a beleaguered minority. When in 1925 he opposed in the Irish Senate the banning of divorce, which the Government was enacting under the pressure of the Catholic Church, he spoke of it not as an infringement of a general human right but as an incursion on the rights of the superior Protestant minority:

> We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.[18]

III

Among many subject nations, nationalist political mobilization has been preceded by the emergence of a cultural nationalism, which has prepared the way for the former. The cultural movement that Yeats and Lady Gregory sponsored in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth can't be assimilated to this model. Even if we put aside the rebellions of the seventeenth century and the attempts at insurrection at the turn of the eighteenth, the intensive Parnellite agitation for land reform and Home Rule in the latter decades of the nineteenth century had come before the foundation of the Irish Literary Society, the National Literary Society and the Abbey Theatre. Yeats once gave his own account of the relation between political and cultural movements at the time when he first became active; he attributed the new cultural consciousness that emerged then to the lull in political activity following the fall and death of Parnell. 'A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics.'[19] This account has been widely accepted; but the view expressed by R.F. Foster seems sounder:

> 'There is a tendency to see the twenty-five years between Parnell's death in 1891 and the Easter rising of 1916 as a vacuum in politics: political 'energy' being diverted mystically (and mechanically) into the channels of 'culture'. But it may be asked whether given the circumstances of the time, the activities of the intelligentsia were really more significant than the actions of the politicians and 'agitators'... To see this (cultural) activity as an 'alternative' to politics is....questionable: it might as logically be seen as another facet of a maturing and sophisticated society.'[20]

When Yeats entered the Irish cultural movements of the 1890s, his conception of culture might be called populist, at least in its valuation of the culture of the peasantry. As he described later the convictions of his youth: 'I thought that all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs.[21] He believed then that in making the 'imaginative stories which the uneducated classes knew and even sang' current among the educated classes, he and his fellow-creators could restore a national unity of culture, so that 'all artists and poets, craftsmen and day-labourers, would accept a common design'.[22] But in later life Yeats was to see these youthful beliefs as illusions: 'The dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false.'[23] Between his original peasant-oriented populism and his later rejection of it lay what was for him the disillusioning years of work in trying to build up an Irish national theatre through the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Yeats's annual pamphlets summing up the experience of the Abbey Theatre have been collected and published under the title of 'The Irish Dramatic Movement: 1901-1919'[24], and from them it is clear that Yeats and his collaborators were engaged in constant controversy and conflict with the spokesmen of majority Irish Nationalist and Catholic opinion. Nationalists wanted the Abbey to continue putting on politically propagandist plays like Yeats's early *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, while both Catholics and Nationalists objected to any depiction of Irish life that ran counter to their idealized image of the Irish nation. Neither Yeats, Lady Gregory nor Synge were willing to conform to either of these demands. The culmination of this conflict was in the celebrated riot in the theatre on the first night of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Literary historians have for the most part treated this riot as a simple confrontation between middle-class narrow-mindedness and individual artistic freedom. But one doesn't need to endorse the prudery of those who protested against the word *shift* (in the sense of a woman's

undergarment) being spoken from the stage to recognize that the clash involved a wider social confrontation. The Abbey Theatre was launched by members of the superior Anglo-Irish Protestant caste (to which Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge all belonged); they were attempting to create a national culture from a position of patronage, and it isn't surprising that this endeavour should have aroused both suspicion and resistance. Moreover, if the rioters and others who protested against the representation of the village community in Synge's play were trying to uphold a moralizing myth of Irish rural life, it can be suggested that Synge and his sponsors were themselves engaged in using the Irish peasantry as material for an artistic myth.

It is evident that the battle with middle-class opinion over the theatre, climaxing in the *Playboy* affair, worked together with Yeats's pro-aristocratic social outlook to reverse completely his original populist view of culture. By 1909 he had recognized that the enterprise in which he and Lady Gregory had been engaged was a mistake, blaming this failure, however, on the inadequacies of the Irish people: '.... I saw that our movement would have to give up the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, a Holy Sepulchre, as it were, or Holy Grail for the Irish mind, and saw that we must be content to express the individual. The Irish people were not educated enough to accept as an image of Ireland anything more profound, more true of human nature as a whole, than the schoolboy thought of Young Ireland.'[25]

A document of crucial importance in respect of the reversal in Yeats's view of culture is the open letter to Lady Gregory titled 'A People's Theatre' that he published in 1919. At the opening of the letter he said: 'We set out to make a "People's Theatre", and in that we have succeeded. But I did not know until very lately that there are certain things, dear to both our hearts, which no "People's Theatre" can accomplish.'[26] Later in the letter Yeats declares: 'I want to

create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many... and besides I want so much – an audience of fifty, a room worthy of it (some great dining-room or drawing-room), half a dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither.'[27] It was to be a non-realist theatre because, as Yeats asserted in another essay: 'Realism is created for the common people and was always their peculiar delight, and it is the delight today of all those whose minds, educated alone by schoolmasters and newspapers, are without the memory of beauty and emotional subtlety.'[28] It was this stylized, non-realist theatre bringing together poetry, music and dance that Yeats went on to create in his later plays from *At the Hawk's Well* onwards, performed before small elite audiences in the studio of Edmund Dulac or the drawing-room of Lady Cunard.

In these plays Yeats took consciously at his model the aristocratic or courtly tradition of Japanese theatre known as the Noh. In his introduction to Pound's *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, he said that with the help of this model he had 'invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way – an aristocratic form.'[29] Yeats's (and Pound's) use of the word 'noble' in this context is interesting. Anybody who has read Yeats's prose extensively will be aware that 'noble' and 'nobility' are perhaps his most recurrent terms of praise, whether for style, a face, a gesture, a speech or an artistic work. We may sometimes wonder whether these terms refer to a moral quality or that of a social class, but the question is really irrelevant, since for Yeats the two are equivalent: nobility of spirit is the quality of a hereditary nobility.

There is a significant entry in his 1909 diary that brings out the relationship for Yeats between a nobility of style and the aristocratic stance of disdain for the middle classes:

> Style, personality – deliberately adopted and therefore a mask – is the only escape from the hot-faced bargainers and the money-changers.[30]

This laconic statement casts a revealing light on Yeats's cultivation of a rhetorical manner ('deliberately adopted and therefore a mask'), even into his most mature years (or perhaps one should say that it is the mark of a continuing element of immaturity). The pose, the self-regarding gesture, going with the mask of the aristocrat, are there blatantly in the lines he wrote for his epitaph, now carved on his grave.

> Cast a cold eye
> On life, on death.
> Horseman, pass by![31]

But in spite of his well-known aphorism, 'We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry', the rhetorical gesture and accent manifest themselves even in many of what are regarded as his greatest poems, as in 'Sailing to Byzantium':

> ... unless
> Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
> For every tatter in its mortal dress. [32]

On the last section of 'The Tower', with its hammering, self-assertive rhythms. To compare these poems with Hardy's poetry of old age ('I Look into My Glass' and 'In Tenebris' are the poems which probably best bring out the contrast) is to be aware of the greater discipline of sincerity and humility of Hardy; but the difference is not only one of personal temperament, for Yeats's 'pride' (as he terms it in 'The Tower') is bound up with his aristocratic cult.

It may be less obvious that Yeats's spirituality is also linked with his social commitment to a class. Yet Yeats's involvement with esoteric religious sects is summed up by a competent scholar in this field in the following terms:

He began by attaching himself to the Theosophical Society, and then to the rituals and investigations of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded by McGregor Mathers...and remained a member of the Order, and its successor, the Stella Matutina, for thirty-two years...He hoped, by means of the techniques transmitted in such bodies, to become an Adept, a Mage, capable of supernatural experiences and of creating a channel of supernatural power.[33]

In other words, Yeats's endeavour in these directions was to make himself one of a spiritual elite, paralleling the aristocratic elite he identified himself with socially.[34]

Nor should we lose sight of the fact that in the 'Byzantium' poems Yeats's spiritual and social ideals meet. The golden bird on a gold bough whose form the poet aspires to take on when he is out of nature is a work of courtly art from a hierarchical society of the past. Moreover, in the second of the 'Byzantium' poems the opposition between soul and body replicates at another level the contrast between aristocracy and common people in the socio-political poems:

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities.

The fury and the mire of human veins...

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can, like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.[35]

It should be evident that Yeats's heaven, or nirvana, represents a spiritual height from which the 'disdain' and 'scorn' for the common life that characterizes the aristocrat can be sustained in the life beyond this one; the escape from 'the fury and the mire of human veins' involves apparently no purgation of the pride that in religious traditions has been recognized as a barrier to spiritual liberation. The 'glory of changeless metal', which is the symbol in the poem of the enduring life of the soul, recalls 'that great glory' of the aristocratic society celebrated in 'Coole Park and Ballylee'. On the other hand, the 'golden handiwork' is seen as scorning 'common bird or petal', while the body is associated with 'mire' – an image that elsewhere goes with Yeats's contempt for mass politics:

Blind and leader of the blind
Drinking the foul ditch where they lie.[36]

Particularly in the second 'Byzantium' the poetry has a hard, inflexible, almost metallic, quality, like that of the golden bird it celebrates, that to me suggests not a richness of the spirit but an impoverishment.

IV

Yeats's perceptions after Irish independence of the situation of the ethnic group and class with which he identified himself accentuated his movement towards pro-Fascism. But before I trace this aspect of his thinking and activity, it is necessary to discuss his attitudes towards political violence.

One of the poems of Yeats which every literary person will know is 'The Second Coming' It's a poem that has been found congenial by liberals because it seems to express a horror of violence. In the last decade in Sri Lanka many people have quoted it: indeed, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' has become something of a journalistic cliché. That kind of appropriation of poetry in contexts other than

that in which it was created goes on all the time, and it would be pointless to object to it. But for my present purpose, I must say that 'The Second Coming' was written in 1920 and was a response to the violence of the Anglo-Irish War – violence of which Yeats politically disapproved. He disapproved also of the rebel violence in the Civil War that followed, and this engendered the apocalyptic images in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'. Yeats, however, was no pacifist, nor was he a particularly gentle person by temperament. He didn't have any difficulty in supporting the repressive measures of the Government of the Irish Free State against rebels after 1921 (including executions and flogging), because they were in the interests of a regime that he approved of.[37] Also, in these years, he wholeheartedly admired Kevin O'Higgins, the strong man of that government, whom he called 'its sole statesman'.[38]

O'Higgins, however, was assassinated in 1927; and in 1932 a general election brought the former anti-Treaty party to power under the leadership of de Valera. Some of the upper classes in Ireland took this as a turn to the left and (quite mistakenly) feared tht it would be a precursor to Communism. Whether Yeats seriously shared this bogey or not, he was unhappy in an Ireland dominated by what he thought of as a 'mob' – the Catholic middle class. In 1907 he had defied them when they protested against Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*; in 1913 he had mocked their mercenary spirit and narrow priest-ridden piety in a poem.[39] But now, in free Ireland, 'the base',[40] as he was accustomed to call them, were more threatening because they, and the Church to which they belonged, could pressurize the State. It was necessary, he wrote in 1934, 'to break the reign of the mob', and this would need 'force, marching men'.[41] Since Mussolini's March on Rome he had admired the Fascist movement and regime, but Mussolini was no longer alone: Hitler had recently come to power in Germany. Sympathy for Fascism was not uncommon among the Anglo-Irish upper

classes, as among their counterparts in England. However for the the former there was, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has pointed out in an essay on Yeats's politics, a dampening factor – their traditional loyalty to Britain. No such restraint on pro-Fascism operated for Yeats as an Irish nationalist.[42] He had recoiled from the 'rough beast' in 'The Second Coming'; he was now prepared to embrace it as the only alternative to the 'mere anarchy' that he thought was 'loosed upon the world'.

In July 1933 Yeats wrote to one of his longest-standing and most intimate friends, Olivia Shakespear:

> Politics are growing heroic. De Valera has forced political thought to face the most fundamental issues. A Fascist opposition is forming behind the scenes to be ready should some tragic situation develop. I find myself constantly urging the despotic rule of the educated classes as the only end to our troubles...There is so little in our stocking that we are ready at any moment to turn it inside out, and how can we not feel emulous when we see Hitler juggling with his sausage of stocking.[43]

This was the beginning of Yeats's association with the Blueshirt movement led by General O'Duffy, for which he wrote three marching songs, including such lines as 'What's equality? – muck in the yard./Historic Nations grow/From above to below.'[44] However, O'Duffy's projected March through Dublin, which was intended to prepare the way for a Fascist coup, proved abortive, the Blueshirt movement showed itself to be a damp squib, and Yeats distanced himself from it. This, however, didn't affect his fundamental sympathies with European Fascism. In the last political pamphlet he wrote, *On the Boiler* (1939), his political hopes for 'the despotic rule of the educated classes' were built on the impending European war:

> The drilled and docile masses may submit, but a prolonged civil war seems more likely, with the victory of the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses... The danger is that there will be no war, that the skilled will attempt nothing, that the European civilization, like those older civilistions that saw the triumph of their gangrel stocks, will accept decay.[45]

It is in keeping with these fears that in the poem he wrote soon after at his last testament, 'Under Ben Bulben', he voiced the prayer, 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'[46]

In the context of Yeats's relations with Fascism, I need to clarify an episode of these years which Edward Said has recently misinterpreted in his book *Culture and Imperialism.* Said quotes Pablo Neruda as saying in his memoirs that during the Spanish Civil War he invited Yeats to a writers' congress in Madrid in 1937 held in defence of the Republican cause. Yeats, says Said, was 'too old to travel to a beleaguered city like Madrid...but...rallied to the defence of the Spanish Republic...Yeats responded positively to that unmistakably anti-fascist call, despite his frequently cited dispositions towards European fascism.[47]

It is clear that Said regards this as a plus-mark in favour of Yeats. However, if he had done his homework and read Yeats's published letters of that period, he would have realized that Yeats's positive response to Neruda's invitation had nothing to do with any 'anti-Fascist call'. In Ireland the Catholic Church was earnestly hoping for, and, no doubt, literally praying for, a Fascist victory in Spain. General O'Duffy, Yeats's former Fascist leader, had taken a contingent of Irish volunteers to fight on Franco's side. Yeats, however, was caught in a conflict of hopes and fears. As he wrote to Ethel Mannin on 11 February 1937, 'I think the old Fenian in me would rejoice if a Fascist nation or government controlled Spain, because that would weaken the British empire...'[48] But, on the other hand, as a member of the Protestant minority

which felt itself threatened within Ireland, he did not, as he said in the same letter, want 'to see General O'Duffy back in Ireland with enhanced fame helping "the Catholic front"'.[49] The 'Catholic Front' (its name, in fact, was 'the Christian Front')were the successors to the failed Blueshirts. What Yeats feared in them wasn't their Fascism but their middle-class Catholic fervour. He failed to realize that any viable Fascist movement in Ireland would have had to be Catholic. Yeats returned to this subject in another letter to Ethel Mannin of 1 March 1937; 'I am convinced that if the Spanish war goes on, or if [it] ceases and O'Duffy's volunteers return heroes, my "pagan" institutions, the Theatre, the Academy, will be fighting for their lives against combined Catholic and Gaelic bigotry. A friar or monk has already threatened us with mob violence.'[50] Consequently, he told Ethel Mannin that he didn't know where his sympathies lay in the Spanish conflict.[51] The response to Neruda is explained by the fact that in relation to the Spanish Civil War, by the evidence of the letters, Yeats's domestic anti-Catholic hostility had the upper hand over his international pro-Fascist sympathies.

V

I end this paper with a political reading of 'Leda and the Swan', one of Yeats's most celebrated poems and one which, as I said before, is not usually regarded as political at all. Here is the poem:

> A sudden blow; the great wings beating still
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the webs, her nape caught in his bill,
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
>
> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
> And how can body, laid in that white rush,
> But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?[52]

There are two contexts in which I wish to place this poem. The first is Yeats's personal myth of history, in which the Greek story of Zeus/Jupiter coming down to earth to mate with Leda has a special significance. For Yeats history moved in cycles and the end of one age and the beginning of another was always marked by the coming of a god, an annunciation. (In the first draft, 'Leda and the Swan' was in fact called 'Annunciation'). In the Greek myth two children were born from the mating of the god-swan with Leda – Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. Hence the lines in the poem which see the 'shudder in the loins' – the convulsive movement of the orgasm – as engendering already the future violence of the fall of Troy and the murder of Agamemnon.

The second context comes from a prose note in which Yeats recorded the genesis of the poem:

> I wrote 'Leda and the Swan' because the editor of a political review asked me for a poem. I thought, 'After the individualist, demagogic movement founded by Hobbes[53] and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French revolution,we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries'. Then I thought 'Nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation'. My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but, as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells me that his 'conservative readers would misunderstand the poem.'[54]

Cruise O'Brien, in his brillian essay on Yeats's politics to which I have already referred, is only marginally concerned with the relation between the politics and the poetry. But addressing himself to this subject in the last six pages of a seventy-two page essay, he takes up 'Leda and the Swan' as a problem for the critic. Having quoted Yeats's prose note, he asks:

> How can that patter of Mussolini prose 'produce' such a poem? How can that political ugly duckling be turned into this glorious Swan?[55]

His answer runs:

> The impurities of this long and extraordinary life (Yeats's) went into its devious and sometimes sinister political theories and activities. The purity and integrity – including the truth about politics as Yeats apprehended it – are in the poetry concentrated in metaphors of such power that they thrust aside all calculated intent: bird and lady take possession of the scene.[56]

Cruise O'Brien thus accepts Yeats's suggestion of a fundamental cleavage between the idea with which Yeats began and the poem as ultimately produced. This is what I want to question.

When Yeats said that 'all politics went out' of the poem, he was not thinking, of course, of sexual politics – a term that would have been meaningless to him. But in the poem the relations of sexual power between male and female are very clear – the emphasis on the terror and helplessness of the girl, the brute strength and physical mastery of the swan. A feminist reading of the poem today would probably foreground the fact that what is being enacted with so much poetic force is a rape. I would agree that this is a significant aspect of the reality of the poem, but I would prefer to take it not in isolation but as part of what I see as the total political meaning of the poem.

Most of the poetic power of 'Leda and the Swan' goes into the imaginative recreation of the sexual violence, which is felt with great erotic intensity. If anybody were to say that this was an expression of the 'lust and rage' that Yeats confessed was a poetic spur in his old age[57], I wouldn't disagree. But I suggest there is more to the poem than that. In his prose note Yeats says that at the beginning his 'fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor'. Metaphor of what? Clearly, of the violent change he had been thinking of – a 'movement from above', as he said, which would end the democratic era which was exhausted. Yeats thought that by the time the poem was finished, all politics had gone out of it, but I would argue that this, even in Yeats's sense of the term 'politics', was true only of the text and not of the sub-text. 'Leda and the Swan' was written in 1923, ten years before Hitler, but in the year after Mussolini's March on Rome. Even before Mussolini's victory Yeats had expressed himself strongly as standing for autocratic government in Ireland; writing to Olivia Shakespear in May 1922, he said: 'Out of all this murder and rapine will come not a demagogic[58] but an authoritarian government.[59] His enthusiasm for Mussolini made him still more confident of the ideas expressed in the prose note on 'Leda and the Swan'. It would, of course, be naïve to say that the Swan was Mussolini, but there seems to me a definite connection between Yeats's expectation of a strong force imposing itself on society and the annunciation that the poem enacts. The Swan is both god and animal: as god he represents that intervention from above which is for Yeats the shaping power in human history; as male animal, he personifies physical force, which is again decisive for Yeats at the historical turning-points. Cruise O'Brien thought the poem conveyed 'the dimension of the tragedy'[60] because of its evocation of the violence of the fall of Troy and the death of Agamemnon. But why does the poem respond with such concentrated intensity to the violence of the sexual encounter which

contains within it the political violence to come? The tone of the poem seems to me ecstatic rather than tragic, and that is because for Yeats the violence is creative: it is the necessary process by which an old world is destroyed and a new one created. In his book *A Vision* Yeats had put into the mouth of his *alter ego*, Michael Robartes, words that he would repeat in his last political pamphlet: 'Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilization renewed.[61] That acceptance of violence as fruitful, I would claim, is the significance of the last lines of the poem:

> Did she put on his knowledge with his power
> Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Just as the myth as a whole serves as a metaphor for the historical process, so Leda acts as a metaphorical figure for ordinary humanity – helpless, bewildered, passive, overwhelmed by change wrought from above. The 'indifference' with which the Swan casts Leda aside after he has used her is the image of the historical will in relation to human beings. A feminist reading would be relevant here: humanity is imaged in the passivity of the female as the object and not the subject of history. But if Leda could rise at all to a moment of higher consciousness, it should be to take from the Swan that superior knowledge of the historical cycle that would induce an acceptance of the violence needed to engender it – that knowledge that goes with power. The lines leave open whether Leda did or didn't achieve it, but it implies that is what is desirable for human beings – that is the best they can do.

'Leda and the Swan', I suggest, remains therefore a poetic metaphor for the same Fascist view of history that Yeats was contemplating before he wrote it. It therefore poses a more disturbing question than the one Cruise O'Brien wanted to resolve. For him, the question was: How does a sinister political doctrine get transformed into a great poem that is quite different? The real question, I think, is: How do

we come to terms with the fact that a poem with a sinister political meaning can command such great poetic power?

If I may draw an analogy with a work in another medium, let us consider the case of Leni Riefenstahl, the gifted German film-maker who worked for the Nazis, and her film, *Triumph of the Will*, about a Nuremberg rally with Hitler and a mass audience. The film is a masterpiece of cinematic composition and editing, but the end to which the art is directed is that of dramatizing with the most compelling visual force the spectacle of Nazi power. I am not, of course, equating 'Leda and the Swan' with *Triumph of the Will* (though 'Triumph of the Will' might indeed have been a god alternative title for the poem). Yeats's relation to Fascism was much less direct than Riefenstahl's, and it is known that the Nuremberg rally was arranged and staged taking into account the placing of her cameras and the effects she wanted. Yet Yeats, staging the myth of Leda and the Swan in the arena of his own mind, is complicit with the Fascist design: his imagination, no less than Riefenstahl's, creates dynamic figures, images, rhythms, for a Fascist view of history. The fact that Yeats was unconscious, or less than fully conscious, of this doesn't, to my mind, significantly alter the case. I think of Yeats himself, in the process of composing the poem, as being, like Leda, 'caught up and 'mastered' by something of which he was not entirely in control.[62] but which was very real, both in the world to which he belonged and in the hinterland of his mind.

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The Thatched Patio, July/August 1993

Footnotes

1 Yeats (1954), p.918.

2 To hate the English or English rule but to use or love the English language wasn't a problem for many nationalists in different parts of the former empire. But Yeats found it one: of this conflict he said:
'my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.' (Yeats, 1961. p.519).

3 Said (1993), pp.265-266.

4 At the end of his life he asked himself a troubled question about his early nationalist play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and its possible effect on the people who were executed after the Easter Uprising:
Did that play of mine send out Certain men the English shot? (Yeats 1950. p.193).

5 Yeats (1950), p.168.

6 Yeats (1950), p.101.

7 Foster (1988), p.170.

8 Yeats (1977), p.683.

9 De Silva (1973) brings out Gregory's desire, as Governor of Ceylon, to strengthen the position of the Kandyan chiefs and relates this to his own aristocratic identity (p.244).

10 Yeats (1950), p.106.

11 Yeats (1972), p.225.

12 Yeats (1972), p.226.

13 Yeats (1950), p.276.

14 John Fitzgibbon, himself a member of the Ascendancy, acknowledged bluntly the illegality of the means by which the members of his class had acquired their estates, in a speech in the Irish Parliament in 1789:
'The Act by which most of us hold our estates was an Act of violence – a Act subverting the first principles of the Common Law in England and Ireland.' (Quoted from Foster, 1988. p.257).

15 Foster (1988), p.211.

16 The only poem where there appears to be an oblique recognition of it is 'ancestral Houses' in the sequence, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (Yeats, 1950, p.225). This poem is unique also for Yeat's uneasy awareness in it of a discrepancy between his ideal of aristocracy and the actuality.

Yeats (1950), pp.222-223.

18 Quoted from Tuohy (1976), p.188.

19 Yeats (1955), p. 559.

20 Foster (1988), p.431-432.

21 Yeats (1955), p.191.

22 Yeats (1955), p.194.

23 Yeats (1955), p.295.

24 In Yeats (1962), pp.73-259.

25 Yeats (1972), p.184.

26 Yeats (1962), p.244.

27 Yeats (1962). pp.254-255.

28 Yeats (1961), p.227.

29 Yeats (1961), p.221.

30 Yeats (1955), p.461.

31 Yeats (1950), p.401.

32 Yeats (1950), p.217.

33 Harper (1975), pp.xv-xvi.

34 It will be recalled that when Yeats described the ideal theatre audience he wanted, he thought again in terms of a 'secret society'.

35 Yeats (1950), pp.280-281.

36 Yeats (1950), p.207. These lines from 'On A Political Prisoner' were written about Constance Markiewics (nee Gore-Booth) when she was imprisoned for her role in the Easter Rising of1916. Yeat's horror of what he considered her degradation in allying herself with the 'mob' is all the greater because she came from one of the Ascendancy families; and in 'Easter 1916' and 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markewicz' he nostalgically recalls her aristocratic youth.

37 Of his general statement on the subject of state violence in On the Boiler:
'if human violence is not embodied in our institutions the young will not give them their affection, nor the young and old their loyalty. A government is legitimate because some instinct has compelled us to give it the right to take life in defence of its laws and its shores.' (Yeats, 1962, p.441).

38 Yeats (1950), p.320.

39 'September 1913', in Yeats (1950), pp.120-121.

40 'Base-born products of base beds' is a line from one of his very last poems (Yeats, 1950, p.400). I am a stonished that Said quotes the passage in which this line occurs approvingly and sets it side by side with an observation by Frantz Fanon with which it has nothing in common (Said, 1993, pp.286-287).

41 Quoted from Cruise O'Brien, p.253.

42 Cruise O'Brien (1965), p.259.

43 Yeats (1954), pp.811-812.

44 Quoted from Tuohy (1976), p.204.

45 Yeats (1962), p.425.

46 Teats (1950), p.398.

47 Said (1993), p.281.

48 Yeats (1954), p.881. Yeats's letter went on:
'... force England to be civil to Indians, perhaps to see them free and loosen the hand of English finance in the far East of which I hear occasionally.'
Ethel Mannin was left-wing, and in writing to her Yeats would have wanted to put his hopes for a Franco victory in the best possible, anti-imperialist light; he wouldn't have wanted to dwell on his pro-Fascist sympathies for Franco.

49 Ibid.

50 Yeats (1954), p.885.

51 Yeats (1954), p.881.

52 Yeats (1950), p.241.

53 This seems to be an error of Yeats, since Hobbes as a supporter of absolute government, was hardly 'demagogic'. Yeats may have confused him with Locks as a theorist of representative government.

54 Quoted from Cruise O'Brien (1965), pp.273-274.

55 Ibid, p.274.

56 Ibid, p. 278.

57 Yeats (1950), p.359.

58 The words Yeats frequently preferred to 'democratic'.

59 Yeats (1954), p.682.

60 Cruise O'Brien (1965), p.278.

61 Yeats (1962), p.425.

62 Cruise O 'Brien (1965, p.278) makes a similar analogy between the poet and Leda, but for a different purpose: to imply that the poem carries a meaning that is *contrary* to Yeats's conscious beliefs.

12

Robert Graves: An Individual Voice

It is likely that many more people know Robert Graves (who died this month at the age of 90) as a novelist than as a poet. Graves, however, regarded himself essentially as a poet; his novels he dismissed as pot-boiling.

'The fact is,' he said, 'that I could never say, "Funds are low, I must write a dozen poems." But I might well say: "Funds are low, it's time I wrote another novel."

Graves perhaps underestimated his prose fiction, because he virtually created the modern historical novel in his Claudius books and the novels that followed. I mean the kind of historical novel where the characters don't dress up in fancy dress and talk Wardour Street English but are flesh-and-blood people like characters in any good novel set in the present.

But Graves was right in believing that his greatest achievement was in his poetry, and it is as a poet that he will be remembered in the future. Throughout his life he stood apart from poetic schools and movements.

In his youth he was as different from the Georgians who were his older contemporaries as he was from Eliot, Pound and others who were the leaders of poetic fashion in his later years.

Some years ago, a New York critical weekly said of him: *'Robert Graves, the British veteran, is no longer in the poetic swim. He still resorts to traditional metres and rhyme, and to such out-dated words as tilth: withholding his 100% approbation also from contemporary poems that favour sexual freedom.'*

Graves responded with these five lines:

'Gone are the drab monosyllabic days
When 'agricultural labour' still was tilth;
And '100% approbation', praise;
And 'pornographic modernism', filth –
Yet still I stand by tilth and filth and praise.'

Like Hardy and Yeats and Frost, Graves was a poet of major stature who spoke with a personal accent the language of an inherited poetic tradition. He never joined in the poetic revolution led by Eliot and Pound.

His work belonged to the main tradition of English poetry from which theirs was a deviation. There were two things that made Graves a traditional poet: he used regular, and often highly intricate verse-forms, and he preserved in his poetry the underlying skeleton of prose meaning that traditional poetry has always had.

His poetry was often complex but always lucid: he never stammered into incoherence like Dylan Thomas; he never left you, as Eliot and Pound did at their worst, with disjointed fragments that you had to piece into a poem for yourself. Graves was always an impeccable craftsman, with assured control over his medium. This was in a way unexpected, because he believed so much in the necessity of poetic inspiration; he thought that in writing poetry you had to wait for the visitations of the Muse.

So you might have expected him to be a Dionysian rather than an Apollonian poet – the poet who writes out of spontaneous poetic frenzy rather than the poet who subjects his writing to conscious disciplined control.

But no: however Dionysian Grave's sources of inspiration might have been, he was the Apollonian when he actually wrote. Emotion was never over-insistent in his poetry: in fact, if you read poetry, superficially, you might have thought it rather flat and tepid.

But what makes his poetry so exciting to me is that there really is a great intensity of feeling beneath the unruffled surface of his language.

Love was the most frequently recurring theme of Graves's poetry, and he belonged with Yeats and Hardy as one of the greatest love-poets of the century. His love poetry was bound up with an extraordinary personal myth that he cultivated – though Graves would have resented it being called a personal myth: he believed it was the central myth of the human race.

This was his belief in the White Goddess, the figure whom he identified with the Mother Goddesses of various ancient religions and with the Muse of poetry. It may be hard to accept this fact, but Graves did believe quite literally in the reality of the White Goddess and her power.

Like Yeats again, Graves was an example of a major poet whose beliefs were highly idiosyncratic, though some feminist movements have found Graves's cult of the White Goddess significant.

There is no doubt, in any case, that as a poet he found in it a source of strength, because it was linked with the experience out of which he wrote some of his best poems – an experience that demanded the total surrender of the personal self to some other and larger reality – it may have been in love or in the state of numinous feeling or in the moment of poetic inspiration.

Sometimes in a poem of Graves it is difficult to make out whether it is addressed to the White Goddess or to an actual woman that the poet loved: Graves would have said this didn't really matter because the White Goddess was incarnate in every woman.

Graves's poetry matured steadily, and in his sixties and seventies he wrote some of his most intense poetry, on the themes of love, woman, the White Goddess and the magical state of poetic inspiration that were intertwined in his poetry. Yeats towards the end of his life prayed that he would die 'a foolish passionate man.'

Graves's belief may have seemed to some people foolish, but there is no doubt that in old age he remained a passionate man and a passionate poet, though he was always the perfect craftsman who could bring to the most powerful experience the greatest discipline and control in expressing it.

I should like to end this article with the concluding lines of *The Face in the Mirror* – an ironic self-portrait:

'I pause with razor poised, scowling derision
At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,
And once more ask him why
He still stands ready with a boy's presumption
To court the queen in her high silk pavilion.'

Ceylon Daily News, December 1985

13

The Gay and Tender Anarchist

In writing of E.E. Cummings (whose work over three decades has been brought together in a volume comme morating his sixtieth birthday)[1] one should begin, perhaps, by countering a prejudice. To the common reader, Cummings – together with, say, Gertrude Stein, *Finnegans Wake* and *The Cantos* – is likely to be associated with the obscure, the affected and the cult-ridden in contemporary writing. Even some serious readers of poetry probably share this impression of him as (in Cummings's own phrase) 'Mr. Lowercase Highbrow' – as e.e. cummings, the arty mountebank playing inexplicable and irritating tricks with syntax and typography. I shall offer later in this essay my personal judgments on Cummings's experiments with language, but I must first suggest that whether successful or not, these experiments are an attempt to fulfil the perpetual task of the poet of renewing his language. Perpetual, because the good poet must at all times give a new sharpness to words worn and blunted by the daily process of common use. He may resolve this problem by minting words of his own – as Shakespeare did in 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine' – or by forcing familiar words into new and unexpected combinations – like Donne's 'the spider love'; or he may even like Yeats, give fresh power to the simplest and most commonplace phrases by the slightest turns of tone and rhythm:

When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.

I am not suggesting, of course, that Cummings is as great a poet as these masters of language, but what I do want to maintain is that he is not an aberrant outsider to the poetic tradition but an experimenter engaged in a common pursuit. If his innovations are more daring and radical than those of any poet before him, if they sometimes seem to be destructive of the very fabric of poetic language, it must be remembered that he began writing in the nineteen-twenties and that he was writing in America. At a time when the inherited poetic language was a stale romantic idiom, every poet of original talent writing in English had to make an entirely fresh start. The task was both more urgent and more difficult in America, which had never up to the twentieth century possessed a stable poetic tradition. The sprawling amorphous verse in which Whitman diffused his energies, Emily Dickinson's tortuous privacies of idiom, and the fragmentary brilliance of Hart Crane alike bear witness to the cost which the American environment imposed on even the most splendid talents. It is against this background that one should set the apparent eccentricities of Cumming's poetic experiments. He began, like every important poet of his generation, by rejecting a language blunted by literary convention; in the satirical *Poe, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal* he wrote:

i would
suggest that certain ideas gestures
rhymes, like Gilette Razor Blades
having been used and reused
to the mystical moment of dullness
emphatically are
Not To Be Resharpened.

To recognize that Cummings had to create his language anew is not necessarily, of course, to justify his innovations,

his departures from normal punctuation and typographical arrangement. They are the features of Cummings' poetry which immediately strike the casual reader, usually leaving him disconcerted; but since they are also the most external and the least successful of his literary experiments, the attention they have received has been out of all proportion to their significance. Though even here, I think we should make distinctions: not all Cummings's typographical idiosyncracies are mere tricks to dazzle the eye. In the last lines of that charming piece, the first *Chanson Innocente*, for instance, (they should be looked at in the context of the poem for full understanding)—

and
the
goat-footed
balloonman whistles
far
and
wee

the arrangement of the words on the page is intended to guide not so much the eye as the ear. It indicates, I take it, that at the end of the poem the speaker's voice sinks *rallentando e diminuendo*, reinforcing the imitative effect of the words 'far and wee.' On the other hand, when Cummings writes:

a star's
nibbling in—
fin
_i_
tes—
i
__mal__
ly devours
darkness

the arrangement *is* purely a visual trick, because it gives a superficial novelty to what is really a commonplace observation. That these devices of typography and punctuation are relatively unimportant in Cummings's work is confirmed by the fact that in his poems, cited later, they are usually absent, except for his customary mannerism of eschewing the capital letter.

With Cummings's transformation of syntax, however, we come to something which is nearer the heart of his poetry. Do his innovations need to be justified when he writes:

my father moved through dooms of love
through sames of am through haves of give

or:

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

If defence is needed of their literary propriety, it may be pointed out to the present-day academic (though not, of course, to his *confrere* of a generation ago) that they have their parallel in Hopkins:

This to hoard unheard,
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began

As for the popular reader, isn't it strange that while he is tickled by Ogden Nash's outrageous rhymes, he should dismiss Cummings's liberties with language as a highbrow eccentricity? It is all the stranger because in one part of his work Cummings is of the company of the brilliant writers of light verse whom America has produced in such abundance in this century – the peer (in this aspect of himself alone) of Don Marquis, Ogden Nash, Dorothy Parker and Phyllis McKinley. And his anarchism in verse-form has been, like that of Nash and Don Marquis (though in a deeper and more serious way than theirs) the expression of an individual

reaction against American institutions, manners and attitudes. For three decades he has been a critic and satirist of those forces of mass-civilisation which he described in one of his poems as 'a peopleshaped toomany-ness far too'. His war against the conventions of language has been part of his general refusal to conform. In the best of his satirical poems it is always the shock of words made new which is the instrument of his satire: the wry irony of the war poem, *my sweet old etcetera,* is clinched by the play on the key word:

> meanwhile my
> self etcetera lay quietly
> in the deep mud et
> cetera
> (dreaming,
> et
> cetera, of
> Your smile
> eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

Cummings's satire has sometimes been, as here, delicately ironic: elsewhere it is bitter and indignant:

> *obey says tock, submit says tic,*
> *Eternity's a Five Year Plan :*
> *if joy with Pain shall hang in hock*
> *who dares to call himself a man ?*

But in his most characteristic mood it blows up the walls of social convention and tyranny with a gay, almost Lear-like fantasy, where the normal order of things as well as words is turned topsy-turvy:

> *Worms are the words but joy's the voice*
> *down shall go which and up come who*
> *breasts will be breasts thighs will be thighs*
> *deeds cannot dream what dreams can do*
> *— time is a tree (this life one leaf)*
> *but love is the sky and i am for you*
> *just so long and long enough*

For all his technical sophistication, what is deepest in Cummings is really the simplicity of heart of these lines which makes him the very opposite of 'Mr. Lowercase Highbrow'. It is this essential innocence which finds expression in some of his most satisfying poems – the nostalgia for childhood of *Chansons Innocentes,* in the simple pieties of *my father moved through dooms of love,* in the love-idyll of *anyone lived in a pretty how town,* or in the tender lyricism of *somewhere I have never traveled,* with its exquisite final line:

> *nobody, not even the rain, has such small*
> *hands*

The sensibility that finds expression in these poems may not be profound; but in a world in which

> *Gadgets murder squawk and add,*
> *the cult of Same is all the chic ;*

Community

Footnotes

1 *Poems: 1923 – 1954,* by E.E. Cummings (H rt, Brace and Co.) $ 6-75.

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Onegin's Child: Vikram Seth and the Novel in Verse

A week ago, when I had finished
Writing the chapter you've just read
And with avidity undiminished
Was charting out the course ahead,
An editor – at a plush party
(Well-wined, provisioned, speechy, hearty)
Hosted by (long live!) Thomas Cook
Where my Tibetan travel book
Was honoured – seized my arm: "Dear fellow,
What's your next work?" "A novel..." "Great!
We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth –"
"...In verse," I added. He turned yellow.
"How marvelously quaint," he said
And subsequently cut me dead.

Vikram Seth is a 34-year old Indian post-graduate student at Stanford University, presently working for a Ph.D on the economic demography of China. He has had published earlier a travel book and a book of poems, neither of which I have seen. **The Golden Gate**, in the few months since its publication, has been both a critical and popular success; it has had more acclaim in the Western press than any book by

an Indian writer since **Midnight's Children**. However, the editor who turned yellow on learning that it was written in verse can't be blamed, for the novel in verse has been effete for over a century. Moreover, even in the nineteenth century, there were only two major works produced in this genre – in English, Byron's brilliantly improvised but uneven and unfinished **Don Juan**, and in Russian, Pushkin's **Evgeny Onegin** (or Englished, **Eugene Onegin**), a work of consummate, disciplined and sustained artistry. It is the latter of these works that Vikram Seth takes as his model, and I shall say something later about the links between Pushkin's masterpiece and Seth's novel. But first, I should like to suggest why the novel in verse has been so rarely attempted and even more rarely carried through with success. I must make it clear that when I speak of novels in verse, I am not referring to works which are simply long narrative poems. I mean fiction of novelistic scale and complexity, exploring (as the prose novel has done) characters and human relations in their social environment, but using the medium of verse.

It's interesting to recall the dates of **Don Juan** and **Eugene Onegin**, the former written between 1818 and 1823, the latter between 1823 and 1831. That is to say, they were produced in the period when the European novel was on the way to becoming the dominant form of literature – a position it reached, indisputably, in both English and Russian, by the second half of the century. Byron's and Pushkin's novels in verse were, in effect, attempts to marry the rising form of the novel to poetry, which was still, in the first half of the century, the most esteemed mode of creative expression. Byron wasn't conscious that this was what his enterprise amounted to, since he called **Don Juan** an 'epic', although its structure is much closer to the episodic picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. Pushkin, however, subtitled **Eugene Onegin** 'a novel in verse', and thought of **Don Juan** in the same terms. If many other poets had followed Byron's and Pushkin's example in writing large-scale fiction in verse,

what would have resulted would have been something comparable to the fruitful union that had been effected in the seventeenth century, in English, French and Spanish literatures, between poetry and the popular form of the drama. However, in spite of their individual achievement, neither Byron nor Pushkin succeeded in establishing a tradition of novel-writing in verse. The fundamental reason for this failure was that the poetic current which flowed throughout the nineteenth century was that of Romanticism. And Romanticism was strongly oriented towards the poet's subjective experience: its predominant bent was entirely at variance with the broad interest in the variety of human life and experience and the delineation of the objective world that the novel requires. Moreover, Romantic poetry excluded from its subject-matter, diction and imagery every aspect of contemporary life that the poets considered banal, prosaic or sordid, while the novelist has to be omnivorous in his aesthetic appetite. Finally, in keeping with its conception of poetry as the distinctive utterance of the visionary imagination, Romantic poetry tended towards incantation rather than natural speech, and this again unfitted it as a medium for the novel.

Though Pushkin was incomparably the greater poet, he shared with the mature Byron the capacity to rise above these limitations of the Romantics. They were both men of the world, with a lively interest in social mores and the multifariousness of human character; their best poetry was free of any sense that certain subjects were being fended off as inappropriate for poetry; they could move without strain between the commonplace and the intense, between levity and seriousness; and they both brought into poetry the ease, naturalness and vigour of the speaking voice. But Byron's poetic merits were not absorbed into Victorian poetry, and no Russian poet in the rest of the nineteenth century had anything like the protean genius of Pushkin and his generous response to life's varied phenomena. No wonder that in the

latter half of the century the creative vigour of both literary traditions went into prose fiction rather than into poetry.

Between Romanticism and our time lies, of course the modernist movement. But modernism, though it tried to broaden the subject-matter of poetry, to root its imagery in contemporary life, and to bring its rhythms close to natural speech, was – like Romanticism – essentially subjective in its focus. Just as much as the Romantics, the modernists thought of poetry as the expression of the special vision of the isolated artist. Even though Eliot took the dramatic monologue as his chosen form at the beginning of his career, it is obvious that the dramatic **persona** is only a transparent mask for his own emotions. That is why Eliot failed so badly when at the latter part of his life he tried to write poetic drama, which requires that the poet should be able to project himself into a diversity of characters. Of the great Anglo-American moderns, only Auden, I think, could have sustained a novel in verse if he had tried. I may support this from a sentence by George MacBeth about Auden: 'His main concern appears as a warm, unbuttoned response to life in all its variety and richness.'I should like to stress the **unbuttoned** response. Auden was a committed opponent of the notion that poetry must be the expression solely of high visionary intensity. As he said once, 'Those who try to put poetry on a pedestal only succeed in putting it on the shelf.' When he edited **The Oxford Book of Light Verse** in 1938, Auden used the term 'light verse' to cover several categories of poetry besides those to which it is normally applied. One of them was: 'Poetry...having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of the period or the experience of the poet as an ordinary human being (e.g. the poetry of Chaucer, Pope, Byron). Auden went on to say :

> Light verse can be serious. It has only come to mean **vers de societe,** triolets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or

less, ever since, it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-robes.

Auden is actually on record as holding that 'novel writing is/A higher art than poetry altogether', but in his own work these interests of his found expression not in the novel but in dramatic forms – in **The Sea and the Mirror** and in his opera libretti.

Now comes Vikram Seth, an outsider to the English literary tradition, though obviously closely acquainted with it, as is evident from the literary allusions and parodies that lie so thick in the pages of **The Golden Gate**. However, as I have already indicated, the stimulus to the writing of his novel in verse came from Pushkin's **Eugene Onegin**. Seth knows no Russian, but he was inspired by reading what he calls the 'luminous translation' by Charles Johnston. In translating **Eugene Onegin** it is an impossible feat both to preserve its intricate stanza form and to stay close to its letter and spirit: of all the English translators who have attempted this, Johnston has certainly been the most nearly successful. Before I go into what Seth has absorbed from Pushkin **via** Johnston, I must say that anybody who looks for any distinctively Indian element in his work will be disappointed. The novel is set in San Francisco, the characters are all American, and Seth seems to have fully immersed himself in his present social and cultural habitat. In fact, it seems to me that although **The Golden Gate** will be found accessible and entertaining by any intelligent reader of fiction, the ideal reader would be somebody who knows the Pushkin original, has a broad enough knowledge of English literature to recognize Seth's allusions, and is familiar with the cityscape, society and idiom of San Francisco.

I can't claim the last qualification, but I hope I may say something that concerns the first aspect. Like **Eugene Onegin**, **The Golden Gate** is a tragicomedy of love, though Seth's cast is more numerous than Pushkin's two couples.

Seth's principal character, John, is a modern Onegin who has cut himself off from the fuller possibilities of living, not like Pushkin's hero through cultivating a Childe Harold personality, but through his pursuit of electronic circuitry and career; but even when he strives to break out of his isolation through a love-relationship, his self-centredness results in failures. In the rest of this review I will concentrate on what I find most interesting in **The Golden Gate:** Seth's use of the Pushkin stanza that he has taken over through Johnston's translation. This leads me to suggest another reason why Anglo-American modernism failed to generate a novel in verse. The heyday of modernism saw the enthronement of free verse; and why should anybody want to write a novel in free verse? The case for free verse that the modernists made out was that it made possible greater variety and flexibility than the inherited verse forms. Now that free verse is no longer dominant in British poetry (though it still is in American) one may with good reason question this notion; but in any case, if the virtues of free verse were supposed to be its variety and flexibility, there was no point in adopting it as the vehicle of a novel, which already had the infinitely various and flexible medium of prose. In the mainstream of the realist novel, from Defoe to Tolstoy, there was an endeavour to make the prose medium as unobtrusive and transparent as possible, to conceal artifice, to make it appear that life was being directly transposed on to the page, as if without the author's intervention. If that is the effect the novelist wants to achieve, verse would be totally alien to his purpose. But there is another tradition even within the prose novel, of which some examples are **Tristram Shandy, Ulysses, To the Lighthouse, The French Lieutenant's Woman, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Midnight's Children,** where the reader is always reminded that the novel is a construct, an artifact – and this not by any failure of the novelist to preserve the novelistic illusion but because he has chosen to dispel it. A novel in verse has to fall into

this latter mode, because verse always draws attention to itself. So the novelist who takes verse as his medium may as well make a virtue of this fact and adopt a highly complex verse form that will proclaim on every page that this isn't life in the raw, this is life ordered and shaped by art. Of course, the choice of an intricate verse form may seem restrictive for a poet-novelist who has to accommodate a variety of discursive modes – expository, descriptive, narrative, dialogic. But this is exactly where he can rise to the challenge of the form by satisfying the limitations he has imposed on himself and yet retaining freedom and variety of expression. Moreover – and this is what the proponents of free verse failed to realize – the more complex a verse form is, the greater the possibilities it offers, in the hands of a master, for counterpointing speech rhythms against metrical pattern, syntactical structures against line and stanza divisions, and exploiting the numerous opportunities rhyme affords for emphasis or contrast. Thus metrical verse for a skilled poet makes possible effects, powerful or delicate, that are denied to free verse. This is probably what Robert Frost meant when he said, 'I would no more write free verse than I would play tennis without a net.'

Byron in **Don Juan** used the **ottava rima**, Pushkin invented in **Eugene Onegin** an even more exacting stanza form. It's like the sonnet in having fourteen lines, but in iambic tetrameter instead of iambic pentameter (that is, four beats to the line instead of five), and it has a rhyme scheme that is all its own. First, a quatrain, **abab**, then two couplets, **eecc**, then another quatrain, but with a different rhyming pattern from the first, **iddi**, and a final couplet, **ff**. Why some of the rhymes are indicated by vowels and some by consonants is that the former represent feminine rhymes and the latter masculine rhymes. Given this tightly woven net (to use Frost's analogy), Pushkin displays the maximum freedom in achieving an endless diversity of rhythmic effects and in maintaining tension between the metrical form and

the natural accents of speech. **Eugene Onegin** is, as John Bayley has described it, 'the most glitteringly poetic of poems, and yet as full of "felt life" as the most richly conceived work of fiction.'

Seth has adopted in **The Golden Gate** the Pushkin stanza in all its specifications, and what he has set himself to attain is a union of freedom and form, of speech and metre, of naturalness and artifice, like that of his model. It is a sign of his sure poetic instinct that he has been able to discern these elements of Pushkin's verse novel through the shadow of Johnston's translation, where they appear, in my opinion, only intermittently. Seth is certainly a greater poetic virtuoso and stylist than Johnston in his translation, the technical versatility that he displays in securing varying rhythms and tonalities from his adopted stanza-form is dazzling, and **The Golden Gate** is worthy to be regarded as no illegitimate offspring of **Onegin.** Seth's novel fits perfectly Auden's definition of 'light verse' that I quoted earlier – that is, not in the sense of being merely amusing (though it is in fact high witty and entertaining) but in making poetry out of familiar human experience. Many common readers who find most contemporary poetry obscure and esoteric will be refreshed and delighted by **The Golden Gate**, and I think this is not the least of its merits. It is too often forgotten today that the poet is, or should be, - in the Wordsworthian phrase – 'a man speaking to men', though any gender connotations would be inappropriate here.

The Thatched Patio, December 1986

The Golden Gate by Vikram Seth (Faber and Faber, 307 pp.)

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Dostoevsky's Purgatory: The Making of a Novelist

A hundred years ago Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist, was condemned to death on a political charge, and reprieved just before execution. The article below attempts to discuss the relation between this event and the work of the novelist.

In the year 1849 the Czarist police in St. Petersburg arrested a group of forty-four young men who had formed themselves into a secret group to conduct socialist propaganda – an act which was considered a crime under the autocratic rule of Nicholas I. The young men were tried and half of them were condemned to death. Among those on whom this sentence was passed was a student, twenty-eight years of age, who had already attracted some attention by a novel he had published three years earlier, and whose name was Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky and his fellow-prisoners were led to Semenov Square, the place of execution, and three of them had already been tied to their stakes and the firing-squad given the order to load, when an officer suddenly appeared with a reprieve. The death sentence had only been intended, the prisoners were told, as a "a lesson never to be forgotten," and it was commuted to penal servitude in Siberia.

The lesson was indeed never forgotten by at least two of the prisoners. One of the men who had been tied to the stake had gone mad through fear while waiting for the shot, and never regained his sanity. On Dostoevsky the experience had different but equally lasting consequences. Already before his arrest he had suffered from a nervous disorder, and the trauma of this experience together with the years of imprisonment which followed brought on fits of epilepsy, which afflicted him for the rest of his life. Moreover, he never forgot the intense terror and anguish of those moments on the verge of death and eternity, and later he was often to live them over again imaginatively, in his art. In his novel "The Idiot" there is a passage in which Prince Myshkin speaks of the sensations of a condemned man awaiting execution on the scaffold:

"It's strange that people rarely faint at these last moments. On the contrary, the brain is extraordinarily lively and must be working at a tremendous rate – at a tremendous rate, like a machine at full speed. I fancy that there is a continual throbbing of ideas of all sorts, always unfinished and perhaps absurd too, quite irrelevant ideas: "That man is looking at me. He has a wart on his forehead. One of the executioners' buttons is rusty."... and yet all the while one knows and remembers everything. There is one point which can never be forgotten, and one can't faint, and everything moves and turns about it, about that point. And only think that it must be like that up to the last quarter of a second, when his head lies on the block and he waits and knows, and suddenly hears above him the clang of the iron! He must hear that! If I were lying there I should listen on purpose and hear. It may last only the tenth part of a second but one would be sure to hear it. And only fancy, it's still disputed whether, when the head is cut off, it knows for a second after, that it has been cut off! What an idea! And what if it knows it for five seconds!"

In this passage one sees how Dostoevsky was still haunted nearly twenty years after the event by the agonizing moments in Semenov Square: but what makes it remarkable is the gift of the artist – Dostoevsky's marvelous ability to grasp in words states of mind which have rarely been explored, to extend, as it were, the limits of consciousness. On the edge of death the natural order of the mind is displaced, to the tautened senses a second is as long as eternity, and we are on the frontiers of the unknown country from whose bourne no traveler returns.

Often in his novels Dostoevsky returns to these unexplored regions of feeling and sensation of which he had first obtained a glimpse in the place of execution. He is fascinated by experiences like these – the moments before death, the seizure of an epileptic fit, dreams and nightmares – all states in which the normal consciousness is suspended and the human mind trembles on the verge of the unknown. There is a passage in "The Idiot" in which Dostoevsky comments on the mental processes of a dream; I have space here only for the last few sentences:

".....And why, on waking up and fully returning to reality, do you feel almost every time, and sometimes with extraordinary intensity, that you have left something unexplained behind with the dream? You laugh at the absurdities of your dream, and at the same time you feel that interwoven with those absurdities some thought lies hidden, and a thought that is real, something belonging to your actual life, something that exists and has always existed in your heart. It's as though something new, prophetic, that you were awaiting, has been told you in your dream. Your impression is vivid, it may be joyful or agonizing, but what it is, and what was said to you, you cannot understand or recall."

With the insight of a great artist Dostoevsky expresses here the knowledge of the unconscious which Freud was later to state in scientific terms. Of course, Dostoevsky's purposes

were those of a novelist and not of a scientist. T.S. Eliot has said that the writer of poetic drama must disclose a reality deeper than that of our normal living but, what he discloses must be "not the psychologist's intellectualization of that reality, but the reality itself." Dostoevsky (whose art reaches to the same levels of life as the poetic drama of Shakespeare) said too: "They call me a psychologist; it is not true. I am merely a realist in the highest sense of the word, that is, I depict all the depths of the human soul." So in his novels he often uses the dream, not to analyse but to expose the hidden unconscious motives of his characters, to bring to light the submerged depths of their souls. In "Crime and Punishment", for instance, when Raskolnikov is meditating the murder of the old woman whom he wishes to rob, he has a dream in which he sees himself as a child, watching some brutal peasants flogging an old mare to death and finally beating her head to pieces with hatchets and crowbars. In the dream the feelings of pity and horror which he had suppressed in waking life come to the surface, so that he wakes now to reflect in fear:

"God! Am I to stand beating her skull with a hatchet or something, wade in warm blood, break open the lock and rob and tremble, blood flowing all around, and hide myself with the hatchet? O God! Is this indeed possible, and must it be?"

The fear of death and eternity which Dostoevsky had himself experienced on Semenov Square is a recurrent motif in the novels. Svidrigallov in "Crime and Punishment" is obsessed by the possibility of the pitiful smallness of eternity:

"Men always represent eternity as an incomprehensible idea, as a something immense – immense! But why should this necessarily be the case? Imagine, on the contrary, a small room – a bathroom, if you will – blackened by smoke, with spiders in every corner. Supposing that to be eternity! I often conceive it to be so."

It is this terrifying sense of ultimate meaninglessness which drives him later in the novel to suicide. And, contrariwise, Kirilov in "The Possessed" commits suicide in a desperate attempt to assert his individuality in the face of the unknown, by deliberately choosing death to deny its fear. To Dostoevsky, who had in his own life known the burden of this fear, sanity lay only through the human relation with the eternal made possible by religious faith.

In his later years, Dostoevsky often expressed his gratitude for the punishment he had endured on Semenov Square and in a Siberian prison. The suffering and redemption which is the pattern of the lives of several of his characters was his own: to him too suffering was purgatorial. There are psychologists who try to explain away Dostoevsky's art as merely the projection of a morbid personality. Morbid and diseased Dostoevsky was as a man, but perhaps this was the necessary condition of his insight as an artist – an insight into realities unperceived by the ordinary person. Or, to state the answer in Dostoevsky's own words, put into the mouth of Svidrigallov:

"I admit that apparitions only happen to the sick; but that proves that, in order to see them, one must be sick, and not that they do not exist".

The Thatched Patir, April 1989

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Literature and Philosophy : The Case of 'The Grand Inquisitor'

(This is a re-written version of a paper read at ICES under another title in 1986)

I

One of the distinctive qualities of the major nineteenth-century Russian novels is the way in which they challenge and confound the tidy separations we like to preserve between imaginative writing, on the one hand, and philosophical, historical and political writing on the other. The breaking down of these distinctions is especially characteristic of the two books which are, at least in largeness of conception and scope, the most considerable works of Russian fiction – *War and Peace* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. If one were to apply to them the canons of Jane Austen, Flaubert or Henry James, one would have to describe them as impure art, but I would suggest that this very impurity was an essential condition of their greatness. Tolstoy went so far as to say of *War and Peace* that it was 'not a novel'[1] and added, *'War and Peace'* is what the author wanted and was able to express in that form in which it was expressed.[2] If this statement seems tautologous, it has at least the merit of

drawing attention to the difficulty of placing the book in any convenient literary category, and I would say much the same of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The comparison I have made between *War and Peace* and the *Brothers Karamazov* stands if we set them beside nineteenth-century Western European fiction: there is nevertheless a distinction to be made between Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's masterpieces in respect of the relations between imaginative and philosophical discourse in them. Although the philosophy of history expounded in *War and Peace* is consistent with that projected in the dramatic sections of the work,[3] the two modes – the dramatic and the philosophical – are kept apart in the book. Tolstoy's reflections on history occupy certain chapters of Book Three and of the First Epilogue and the whole of the Second Epilogue, thus being marked off from the main, the fictional bulk of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy, in fact, in the third edition of the work (1873) dropped discussion of the philosophy of history from the text; it was restored in the fifth edition (1886) which his wife supervised.[4] Thus, in spite of the consistency between the philosophical argument and the imaginative vision of *War and Peace*, these two modes of apprehending experience co-exist without interpenetrating each other. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, in *The Brothers Karmazov*, pursues the ends of a philosophical inquiry through means that are essentially those of imaginative fiction. While, as I have already indicated, the author's exposition of his philosophy and his fictional enactment of life are physically separated in the structure of *War and Peace*, there is in *The Brothers Karamazov* no philosophical exposition or argument that is not articulated through one of the other of its characters. To this extent, then, there is a greater degree of symbiosis between creative literature and philosophy in *The Brothers Karamazov* than in *War and Peace*. However, in describing Dostoevsky's form, it is not enough to say that ideas are voiced through characters, or even to go further and say that in a

Dostoevskyan character, theory and belief are inseparable from personality and emotional life. What is characteristic of the *Brothers Karamazov* is that ideas emerge in the critical episodes of the book through dialogue, argument and debate – the debate in Father Zosima's cell (Book II, Chapter 5-6), the dialogue between Dmitri and Alyosha (Book III, Chapters 3-5), the argument between Ivan and Alyosha (Book V, Chapters 4-5) and the dialogue between Ivan and the Devil (Book XI, Chapter 9). This essential characteristic of Dostoevskyan fiction has been well defined by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who, having said that in Dostoevsky's novel, the image of the idea is inseparable from the image of the person – the bearer of the idea',[5] goes on to state (also in relation to Dostoevsky):

> *The idea begins to live, that is, to form, to develop, to find and to renew its verbal expression, to beget new ideas, only by entering into essential dialogic relations with other and alien ideas. A thought becomes a genuine thought – that is, an idea – only in the conditions of living contact with an alien thought, incarnated in an alien voice, that is, in an alien consciousness expressed in words. At the point of that contact of voices/consciousness the idea is born and begins to live.*[6]

The very dialectical nature of this form (Bakhtin called it that of 'the polyphonic novel'[7]) implies a relationship between philosophy and literature, between belief and art, in Dostoevsky's work that is much more complex than that in *War and Peace*. To explore this relationship adequately in relation to the whole of *The Brothers Karamazov* would be impossible in a short paper. I shall therefore confine myself to an examination of the chapter 'The Grand Inquisitor' (Book V, Chapter 5), which, though an integral part of the totality of the work, can for my purpose be detached for separate consideration.

II

The story of 'The Grand Inquisitor' is told by Ivan Karamazov in the course of a disputation with his brother Alyosha which I have already mentioned as one of the focal points of the novel. Alyosha is a religious believer, and at this stage in the novel he is a novice in his hometown monastery. Ivan has the reputation of being an atheist, and his brother too is convinced that he is one. But in the argument with Alyosha (which is the first discussion the two brothers have had on problems of belief) Ivan tells his brother that it isn't God who has created. Ivan relates several painful stories of the tortures and sufferings to which little children have been subjected; he declares that not even in eternity can these sufferings be atoned for, and that there is no being in the world who has the right to forgive the tormentor. Alyosha answers that 'there is such a being, and he can forgive everything, he can forgive everyone for everything, because he gave his innocent blood for the sake of all and on account of all things'.[8] It is in answer that Ivan relates the story of 'The Grand Inquisitor' that he has composed.

In Ivan's story Christ returns to earth, in Spain, 'in the most terrible time of the Inquisition.'[9] He goes about the streets of Seville, followed by a crowd of ordinary people who recognize him spontaneously. He heals the sick, cures a blind man, and under the porch of the cathedral he restores to life a dead child who had been brought there for burial. At this very moment the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor happens to be passing the cathedral. He is an old man of almost ninety, but tall and straight, and his sunken eyes still glow with an inner fire. He sees the dead girl brought back to life, and he frowns, his eyes flash ominously, and he orders his guards to seize Christ. The crowd makes way very docilely, and Christ is taken away to the dungeons of the Inquisition. Late that night the Grand Inquisitor enters the cell in which Christ is confined, gazes a long time into his face, and then speaks:

'Is it you? Indeed you?... But don't answer, be silent. And what could you say? Too well I know what you will say. And you have no right to add anything to what you have said before. Why have you come to hinder us?'

The Grand Inquisitor then makes a lengthy indictment of Christ, in the course of which, in the secrecy of the prison, he discloses the hidden philosophy that actuates the ruling powers of the Church. His main charge is that Christ had wished human beings to be free, and therefore had rejected the three 'temptations' of the devil – but the Grand Inquisitor refuses to call them 'temptations' and describes Satan as 'the terrible and wise spirit'. 'There are three powers, the only three powers on earth, capable of conquering and taking captive for ever the consciences of these infirm rebels for their own happiness – these powers are miracle, mystery and authority'. (By 'infirm rebels' the Grand Inquisitor means the common run of humanity). It was on these three powers that Satan had invited Christ to found his kingdom, and Christ had rejected his offer because he wanted humanity to follow him in freedom – and this was his grave error. 'I swear to you,' says the Grand Inquisitor, 'man has been created weaker and baser than you supposed.' 'But we,' he goes on, 'have corrected your enterprise, and founded it on miracle, mystery and authority. And men were glad that there had been lifted from their hearts so terrible a gift, which had brought them so much suffering'. That 'terrible gift' is the gift of freedom, for, as the Grand Inquisitor had said earlier 'there is nothing more enticing to man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting.' The Grand Inquisitor at this stage defiantly discloses to Christ the inner secret of the Church. 'Perhaps,' he says, 'you wish particularly to hear it from my lips: listen, we are not with you, but with him, not with you, for eight centuries now. Exactly eight centuries ago we took from him what you indignantly rejected, all the kingdom of the earth: we took from him Rome and Caesar's sword, and declared ourselves

alone the rulers of the earth, the only kings, though until now we have not been able to bring our purpose to full completion.' 'Why,' the Grand Inquisitor asks Christ, 'did you reject that last gift? Accepting the third counsel of the mighty spirit, you would have fulfilled everything that man seeks on earth: that is, before whom to bow down, to whom to entrust his conscience, and in what manner to unite everybody finally into an incontestable, common and harmonious anthill, for the need for universal union is the third and last torment of human beings... O, we shall convince them that they will be free only when they renounce their freedom in our favour and subject themselves to us.'

'You will see tomorrow,' concludes the Grand Inquisitor, 'that obedient herd, which at the first signal from us will rush to rake up the burning coals for your bonfire, in which I shall burn you because you have come to hinder us. For if there is anybody who has deserved our fire, it is you. I have spoken.'

Throughout the Grand Inquisitor's indictment, Christ listens to him in complete silence. 'The old man would wish that the other would say something to him, even something bitter, something terrible. But now Christ silently approaches the old man and gently kisses him on his bloodless ninety-year old lips. That is all his answer. The old man shudders. Something quivers at the end of his lips; he goes to the door, opens it and says. 'Go, and never come back... never come at all... never, never!" And he lets Christ out into the dark streets of the city. The prisoner goes.'

'And the old man?' asks Alyosha.

'The kiss glows in his heart,' answers Ivan 'but the old man remains of his former opinion.'

III

When we seek to interpret 'The Grand Inquisitor', we are confronted by the fact that Dostoevsky himself left behind several comments on and elucidations of the story. At the time of the writing of this section of the novel and its publication (the novel originally appeared in instalments), Dostoevsky commented on it in letters to two correspondents. We have also a report by an acquaintance with Dostoevsky who discussed the story, and there have been preserved the prefatory words he spoke when he read the chapter to the students of the University of St. Petersburg in 1879.

In his letters to N.A. Lyubimov, the editor of *The Russian Messenger* (the journal in which the novel was serialized), what Doestoevsky highlights are the political implications of the story. The Grand Inquisitor had reminded Christ of the devil's first invitation to him to turn the stones in the wilderness into bread. 'Change them into bread,' the devil had said, 'and humanity will follow after you like a herd, grateful and obedient, though always trembling lest you remove your hand and cut them off from your bread.' But because of Christ's answer, 'Man does not live by bread alone,' says the Grand Inquisitor, others would arise to offer to fulfil this primal human need, proclaiming that there was no crime and no sin, but only hunger. "Feed them, then ask of them virtue" – that is what will be written on the banners which will be raised against you and by which your church will be shattered.' So says the Grand Inquisitor to Christ. In a letter to Lyubimov, Dostoevsky makes it clear that this and related passages are directed against contemporary socialism. '...Our socialists', he writes, 'are conscious Jesuits and liars, not admitting that their ideal is the ideal of violence against the human conscience and the degradation of humankind to a herd of cattle, but my socialist (Ivan Karamazov) is an honest man, and allows frankly that he is

in agreement with the view of the Grand Inquisitor on humankind, and that Christ's belief (according to him) placed man much higher than he stands in reality.'[10] So also in a letter to K.P. Pobedonostsev, the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod and principal exponent of right-wing politico-religious thought in the Russia of the time, Dostoevsky defines his subject in Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov* (which contains 'The Grand Inquisitor') as blasphemy and the refutation of blasphemy', and goes on to say that among Russian youth of the upper class, 'the scientific and philosophical refutation of the existence of God is already abandoned, active socialists today no longer concern themselves with it at all (the last century and the first half of the present). On the other hand, the divine creation, God's world and its meaning are denied with all force.'[11]

However, Dostoevsky is reported by V.P. Putsykovich as having told him in a conversation in the summer of 1879 that the story was 'against Catholicism and the Papacy, and precisely the most dreadful period of Catholicism, that is, the Inquisitional period which had such a terrible impact on Christianity and on all humanity.'[12] The same exclusive emphasis on the anti-Catholic aspect of the story is to be found in the prefatory words Dostoevsky spoke at his reading to the students of the University of St. Petersburg:

An atheist suffering on account of disbelief, in one of his moments of torment, composes a wild and fantastic narrative, in which he brings Christ into conversation with one of the Catholic prelates – the Grand Inquisitor. The anguish of the narrative's author comes precisely from the fact that in the image of the prelate with a Catholic world-view, so distant from ancient apostolic orthodoxy, he sees the real contemporary follower of Christ. However, the Grand Inquisitor is, in actuality, an atheist. The significance is this, that if you distort Christ's belief, joining it to the aims of the world, the entire meaning of Christianity is lost at once, the mind necessarily falls into unbelief, and instead of the great ideal of Christ is erected a new tower of Babel. The lofty view of Christianity regarding humankind is reduced to one of a herd of animals, as it were, and under the appearance of social love for humankind there appears an already unmasked contempt for it.[13]

Reviewing these diverse interpretations of the story by its author, one has to agree with the editors of the USSR Academy edition of Dostoevsky's Complete Works. 'It is evident,' they say in their commentary, 'that in the letters to Lyubimov and Pobedonostsev, on the one hand, and in the conversation with Putsykovich on the other, Dostoevsky accented different aspects of his design in accordance with the character of his interlocutor or correspondent and with the aim he was pursuing in each case.'[14]

But this isn't all that is necessary to say. What is even more important is that these comments and interpretations of the author simplify and reduce the story. Characteristic of this process is the way in which, in his address to the St. Petersburg students, Dostoevsky describes Ivan flatly as an 'athiest', ironing out the spiritual struggle that goes on in the character. And in general the letters and other sources I have cited bring the story down to the level of a didactic tract. These interpretations come from the polemicist and propagandist in Dostoevsky: what is missing in them is the tension that we actually experience in reading the story between two opposing world-views – between Alyosha's confident faith and Ivan's intellectual skepticism, between the Grand Inquisitor's relentlessly critical view of humanity and Christ's all-enfolding compassion, a conflict of ideas and attitudes which, as often in Dostoevsky, is felt with an almost physical force.

There is a famous remark by D.H. Lawrence which is often cited in contemporary criticism: 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.'[15] In other words, don't believe what the author may have said about the work in letters or diaries or conversation, go by what the text itself says. Lawrence went on to add. 'The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.' Dostoevsky's comments on

'The Grand Inquisitor' could serve as a textbook illustration of Lawrence's point. But Lawrence's dictum is misleading if it is taken as implying that the meaning of a literary text is necessarily transparent and unambiguous. Texts don't read themselves, they have to be read, and every reading involves an interpretation, and is therefore open to disagreement and controversy. All the more so with a text of such complexity as 'The Grand Inquisitor', whose multiplicities of meaning are inherent in its very narrative structure. This structure has been excellently described by Mikhail Bakhtin when he says that Ivan's 'ideological utterance' is 'developed in a double dialogue, so to speak. Into the dialogue of Ivan with Alyosha is inserted the dialogue, composed by Ivan, of the Grand Inquisitor with Christ (or more exactly, the dialogised monologue'.[16] I must draw attention here to the fact that from time to time during Ivan's narration of the story Alyosha interrupts to question, to disagree or to protest, and Ivan responds to him. So what we have in the novel is very different from the monolithic interpretations given in Dostoevsky's letters and other comments: we have the meaning Ivan gives to the story and the counter-meaning Alyosha finds in it, and both mediating and divided between them, the meaning of the implied narrator. Bakhtin is right in speaking of the encounter between the Grand Inquisitor and Christ as a 'dialogised monologue', for not only is the Grand Inquisitor's indictment an answer to Christ, so that the latter's Gospel teaching is throughout a presence during the monologue, but Christ's final response is in the silent but eloquent kiss with which the story ends. We shall have to return to the significance of this kiss.

Alyosha's interpretation of the story is simple. Towards the end of Ivan's narration he protests: 'Your narrative is in praise of Christ and not a criticism... as you wished it to be. And who believe you regarding freedom? Is that, is that really how one has to understand it? Is that the conception of it in the Orthodox Church?... That's Rome, and not even

the whole of Rome, that would be untrue – that's the worst of Catholicism, the Inquisition, the Jesuits.' Speaking of the Jesuits he says: "They are simply a Roman army for the future universal earthly kingdom, with an emperor, the Roman Pope, at the head ... that is their ideal.' And in the light of this conviction he questions the actuality of the character of the Grand Inquisitor: 'Your suffering Grand Inquisitor is only a fantasy.'

Alyosha's view of the Roman Church as devoted to temporal power as the ultimate end is very close to that asserted by Dostoevsky in his journalistic writings and in some of his comments on 'The Grand Inquisitor'. But in the story, Alyosha is answered by Ivan, who sees the Grand Inquisitor as a tragic figure, actuated by love of humanity and desiring their happiness, but convinced equally of their frailties and weaknesses, and therefore driven to wield power, to deploy 'miracle, mystery and authority', so that human beings might be led for their own good. 'In the sunset of his days,' says Ivan of the Grand Inquisitor, 'he becomes convinced that only the counsel of the great and terrible spirit can even to some degree shape into tolerable order the infirm rebels, 'the unfinished experimental creatures, fashioned for mockery"'.

It is in this dimension of the story that "The Grand Inquisitor' acquires its disturbing political resonances for twentieth-century readers. Ivan's conception of the Grand Inquisitor foreshadows with prophetic insight the tragedy of revolutionary elites in our era who assumed absolute power because they wished to use it for the welfare and happiness of human beings, and later discovered that uncontrolled power has its own dynamic (or failed to discover this because they had themselves been transformed by then). It is not surprising that "The Grand Inqiusitor' has been used as a parable by writers on the Stalinist phenomenon, and that the story is read with an acute awareness of its contemporary meaning in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union of today.[17]

The debate between Ivan and Alyosha strikes two different chords, both of which have answering resonances in the Dostoevskyan universe. Christ's assertion of the supreme value of human freedom corresponds to a deeply held conviction of Dostoevsky. Professor Joseph Frank, the author of a massive critical biography of the Russian novelist which has yet to be completed, has drawn attention to the significance Dostoevsky found during his Siberian years in the fact that sometimes prisoners who had been regarded as models of good behaviour would suddenly break out in an orgy of drunkenness and violence, and others would squander extravagantly money they had saved by long periods of hard work. In *Notes from the House of the Dead* Dostoevsky attributed this to the fact that in such orgies the convict was, even illusorily, asserting his freedom.[18] As Professor Frank comments, 'the need of the human personality to exercise its will, and hence to experience a sense of autonomy while doing so, is seen as the strongest drive of the psyche.[19] But equally, in reading Dostoevsky's novels, we are over and over again confronted by his sense of the deeprootedness of power relations, not only in society but also in the personal and inter-sexual realm. Dostoevsky is, in fact, the most persistent explorer in all literature of relations of domination and subordination between human beings, and especially between men and women. These relations are seen as springing from fundamental psychic needs. This suggests to me that Professor Frank's statement that for Dostoevsky autonomy of the will was 'the strongest drive of the psyche' needs to be qualified. I see the human personality in Dostoevsky's work rather as the battleground of opposing forces. 'The need of the human personality to exercise its will,' as Professor Frank calls it, reaches its extreme form in the impulse to dominate, but in Dostoevsky's eyes this finds its counterpart in the desire to be dominated, to sacrifice oneself, to accept suffering or to inflict it on oneself. Dostoevsky's view of the self is not very

far from that in Blake's poem '*The Clod and the Pebble*', where both Clod and Pebble represent opposite but equally fundamental realities of love. This being so, the Grand Inquisitor's view of ordinary humanity as 'the obedient herd', and his argument that Christ failed to satisfy the human need for somebody before whom to bow down, could not have been wholly alien to Dostoevsky. There is thus the expression of an unresolved dualism in Dostoevsky's own mind in the conflict between freedom and authority in 'The Grand Inquisitor'.

IV

We come now to the enigmatic kiss that Christ bestows on the Grand Inquisitor.

Both D.H. Lawrence and Isaac Deutscher, who approached the story in very different ways and for very different purposes, regarded the kiss as an acquiescence on Christ's part in the position of the Grand Inquisitor. In his preface to 'The Grand Inquisitor' Lawrence wrote:

And we cannot doubt that the Inquisitor speaks Dostoevsky's own final opinion about Jesus. This opinion is, baldly, this: Jesus, you are inadequate. Men must correct you. And Jesus in the end gives the kiss of acquiescence to the Inquisitor, as Alyosha does to Ivan.[20]

Similarly, Isaac Deutscher interprets the kiss as a hint that Christ himself 'had acquiesced in the conversion of His Church from freedom and respect for Man to Miracle, Mystery and Authority.[21]

These readings cannot be sustained from the text. The kiss makes the old man shudder; it is as an attempt to protect himself from its awesome power that he opens the cell door and commands Christ to go and never to return. Moreover, Ivan says that 'the kiss glows in his heart, but the old man remains of his former opinion' (my emphasis) – a clear indication that the kiss stands for something entirely alien to the Grand Inquisitor's world-view. It is noteworthy that

at the end of the debate between Ivan and Alyosha, the latter, on parting from his brother, imitates the action of Christ:

> *Alyosha stood up, went up to him and in silence, kissed him quietly on the lips.*
> *'A literary plagiarism!' cried Ivan, suddenly passing into a kind of rapture. 'You stole that from my narrative!'*

Alyosha's kiss (which is a response to Ivan's question, 'Do you disown me?') expresses a compassionate understanding of Ivan, in spite of their philosophical disagreement, paralleling that of Christ in relation to the Grand Inquisitor. But why is Christ silent and why is the kiss his only answer?

I should like to cast light on these questions by citing a letter of Dostoevsky written to his friend Natalya Fonvizina only a few days after his discharge from the Siberian prison-camp and a quarter of a century before 'The Grand Inquisitor'. In this letter Dostoevsky said:

> *I am a child of the age, a child of unbelief and doubt, until now, and even (I know this) to the grave. What terrible torments this thirst for belief has cost me and costs me now; the more opposing arguments there are, the stronger it is in my soul. And yet God sends me sometimes moments in which I am perfectly at rest; at these moments I love, and find that I am loved by others, and at such moments I have composed within me a symbol of faith, in which symbol everything is for me clear and holy. That symbol is very simple; here it is: that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more intelligent, more manly and more perfect than Christ, and not only is there nothing, but I say to myself with a jealous love, that there cannot be. Moreover, if somebody were to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and if it were so in reality, that the truth was outside Christ, I would wish rather to remain with Christ than with the truth.*[22]

This last assertion is one that Dostoevsky made more than once in his life, so that the fact that the letter to Natalya Fonvizina was written many years before 'The Grand Inquisitor' should not deter us from using it to interpret the story. Commenting on this same letter, Professor Joseph Frank has said that, like Kierkegaard's belief, Dostoevsky's was based on the 'leap of faith', which implied a total separation between the rational intellect and the non-rationality of religious belief: he goes on to speak of Dostoevsky's faith as 'perilously poised in 'dialectical hovering" above the abyss of doubt.'[23]

What is the relevance of this to Christ's kiss at the end of 'The Grand Inquisitor'? I suggest that Dostoevsky's intellect is haunted by the possibility that truth – the truth of reason – may be on the side of the Grand Inquisitor, that he may be right about human beings and their weaknesses, their need to submit to the strong, but his imagination creates an answering counter-image in Christ's kiss. The kiss (in opposition to the Grand Inquisitor's discourse) suggests a mode of responding to the world that is outside the reason, and in that sense outside the 'truth' or belongs to a different, non-rational, realm of truth: it is the expression of an all-forgiving and all-compassionate love that embraces not only frail humanity but also – why not? – the Grand Inquisitor himself. It is significant that at the end of the story Ivan says of the Grand Inquisitor, 'The kiss glows in his heart, but the old man remains of his former opinion' (note the opposition between 'heart' and 'opinion'). With the kiss Dostoevsky makes his 'leap of faith' and takes his stand with Christ, even though he may be 'outside the truth'. It is startling that this recognition of the non-rational should be put into the mouth of Ivan, the intellectual sceptic, and this suggests again that the dichotomies of the novel are not as neat and simple as they are sometimes taken to be. But obviously this conclusion offers no intellectual answer to the argument of the Grand Inquisitor. This fact troubled many contemporary readers of

the story, including Pobedonstsev and other persons of religious orthodoxy, who felt that Christ's silence had left the Grand Inquisitor with the best of the argument. Meanwhile Dostoevsky, at another level of his thinking, was preparing a different answer to the Grand Inquisitor. He assured his correspondents that Father Zosima's discourse to his friends before his death, which would occupy the next instalment of the novel, would be the answer to the doubts raised by Ivan. But in the letter to Lyubimov where he indicates this design, he reiterates, 'if it is successful...'; I pray to God that it should be successful; it would be a pathetic affair if inspiration alone were lacking'; and again, 'The whole novel is written for this, if only it is successful – that is what troubles me now.'[24] Dostoevsky's anxieties were well-founded. Father Zosima's affirmation of faith is the dullest portion of the novel, indeed, the only part of it which fails to waken into dramatic life. The discourse comes from a different region of his mind, from the didactic preacher and propagandist; and it is evident that the monologic exposition of Father Zosima could not enlist Dostoevsky's creative imagination as the dialogic encounter between Ivan and the Alyosha, the Grand Inquisitor and Christ, did.

My reading of 'The Grand Inquisitor' confirms the general judgment of D.S. Mirsky who, many years ago, in answer to those Dostoevskyans who 'accepted the novels as a revelation of a new Christianity in which ultimate problems of good and evil were discussed and played out with ultimate decisiveness'.[25] said:

But the truth is (and here lies the exceptional significance of Dostoyevsky as a spiritual case) that the tragedies of Dostoyevsky are irreducible tragedies that cannot be solved or pacified. His harmonies and his solutions are all on a lower or shallower level than his conflicts and his tragedies. To understand Dostoyevsky is to accept his tragedies as irreducible and not to try to shirk them by the contrivances of his smaller self.[26]

Passages Notes

Passages quoted from Dostoevsky's writings have been translated from the Russian by me. The abbreviation PSS refers to F.M. Dostoevsky, Polnoe sobranie sochineniy v tridsati tomakh (Leningrad: Nauka), the USSR Academy of Sciences' 30-volume edition of Dostoevsky's Complete Works.

The Thatched Patio, March 1989

Footnotes

1 Quoted from Henry Gifford (ed.), Leo Tolstoy (Harmonds worth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 39.

2 Ibid.

3 This consistency has been denied by Isaiah Berlin. The Hedgehog and the Fox (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953). To my mind, the contradiction that Berlin sees between Tolstoy's conception of historical necessity and his representation of the inner life of his characters is dependent on the fact that Berlin understands these characters in terms of his own liberal individualist world-view – one that Tolstoy didn't share, either as philosopher or as novelist.

4 Boris Eikhenbaum, Tolstoy in the Sixties, translated by Duffield White (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), pp. 239-242.

5 Translated from M. Bakhtin, Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics), (Moscow: Sovetskaya Russia, 1979), p.97.

6 Bakhtin, op.cit., p. 100.

7 Ibid, p.7.

8 The Brothers Karamazov, Book V, Chapter 4.

9 Ibid, Book V, Chapter 5. All succeeding references to the story are to this chapter.

10 Letter to N.A. Lyubimov, 11 June 1879.

11 Letter to K.P. Pobedonostsev, 19 May 1879.

12 PSS, Vol. 15, p. 482.

13 PSS, Vol. 15, p. 198.

14 PSS, Vol. 15, p. 482.

15 D.H. Lawrence, Selected Literary Criticism ed. Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann), p. 297.

16 Bakhtin, op.cit., p.290.

17 Interesting comments on the contemporary political implications of the story are to be found in Isaac Deutscher, Stalin (Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 361-362, and George Steiner, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 307. For an example of contemporary Soviet understanding of'The Grand Inquisitor', see the article by Oleg Mikhaylovsky, 'Yevgeny Zamyatin's Anti-Utopia', translated in The Thatched Patio, No. 19: June 1988.

18 Dostoevsky, Notes from the House of the Dead, Book - I Chapter 5.

19 Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859 (London: Robson Books, 1983), p. 153.

20 Lawrence, op.cit, p. 234.

21 Deutscher, op.cit, p. 362.

22 Letter to Natalya Fonvizina, 20 February 1854.

23 Frank, op.cit., p. 162.

24 Letter to N A Lyubimov, 11 June 1879.

25 D.S. Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature from its Beginnings to 1900 (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p.287.

26 Mirsky, op.cit., p. 288.

17

Tolstoy – The Novelist

I think I cannot begin this account of Tolstoy better than by contrasting his art with that of Dostoevsky, the other great Russian novelist who was his contemporary. Reading Dostoevsky, one often feels that while he has the ability to explore the heights and depths of the human soul as no other novelist has done, his vision of life is yet a partial one. Dostoevsky was an abnormal personality, and the strength of his art too is in its understanding of the abnormal. I do not mean by this, of course, that his novels are merely studies in the pathological, as so much of the fashionable writing of recent times has been; for what Dostoevsky brings to light are the dreadful possibilities of experience that lie concealed within even the most 'normal' individual. Like the poet Hopkins, he too might have said:

"O the mind, mind has mountains,
cliffs of fall,
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed,
Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there."

By his unusual genius Dostoevsky carries us often to these remote and terrifying landscapes of the soul – to the peaks of religious ecstasy and the gigantic abysses of sin and suffering, but in his novels we visit only too rarely the level plains of ordinary life. Expressing his strong distaste for

Dostoevsky's novels, D.H. Lawrence said once in a letter, "All his characters, even the dirtiest grubs, are fallen angels." Lawrence adds that he can't stomach this, and goes on to remark, "People are not fallen angels – they are just people." One might perhaps comment with justice that this kind of complaint could be made even more strongly against Lawrence himself. Still, if we allow for Lawrence's habitual exaggeration, his remarks might help in making clear the difference between the atmosphere of Dostoevsky's and that of Tolstoy's novels. Reading Dostoevsky, we have always to begin by adjusting ourselves to a world peopled by characters whose dimensions are larger than the people we know in everyday life. We have no such difficulty in finding our bearings in the world of Tolstoy, for its centre is the most familiar level of our own lives – the ordinary social and personal relationships. Yet in his depiction of this familiar world, Tolstoy is himself concerned with the same question which Dostoevsky explores in his novels – the question of the meaning of life, with all its perplexing contradictions of good and evil.

Tolstoy is one of the great masters of social realism in the novel. In **War and Peace** and **Anna Karenina** he gives us a picture of the whole range of nineteenth-century Russian society, from the court down to the peasants – a depiction of a whole society which for vividness and completeness is unrivalled in any novelist. Yet Tolstoy is not merely a novelist of society in the way that Jane Austen, for instance, is: he is not concerned merely with the relationships of human beings on the social plane. Like Dostoevsky or Emily Bronte or Herman Melville or Lawrence, he can penetrate beneath this social level to the deeper roots of life – to the hidden life of the individual personality and to man's relations with the universe outside himself.

It is this many-sided awareness which makes Tolstoy's art fuller and more satisfying. I think, than that of any of any other novelist. It seems to me, in fact, that an

understanding of life which is as comprehensive and universal cannot be found anywhere else in the literature I have read outside the pages of Chaucer and Shakespeare. It is indeed of these great dramatic poets that Tolstoy constantly reminds us – in his breadth and sanity, in his feeling for the rich variety of life, in his ability to enter with understanding into the minds and hearts of so many different characters, which reflects, one feels, an all-embracing human sympathy.

With a novelist whose work is so varied, I cannot hope to do more in the space of an article than examine some of the more important aspects of his art. It will be convenient for me to begin not with the epic novels **War and Peace** and **Anna Karenina** but with one of the short stories. I refer to the story **The Death of Ivan Ilych**. It is one of Tolstoy's masterpieces, and it offers us, within its limits, the same elements of great art which are displayed at fuller length in the novels. The **Death of Ivan Ilych** is about a man who dies slowly of a painful disease. As Ivan Ilych lies on his sick-bed, we see, in retrospect, his past life. It is a life which is summed up by Tolstoy in one sentence: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." Ivan Ilych had been rich and successful, he had risen to a high official position in the Courts of Justice, he had made what is called "a good match," although his married life was a succession of petty quarrels, and in the eyes of the world he was an important person. Yet now, in the face of the agonizing pain of his illness and the overwhelming terror of death, Ivan Ilych becomes gradually aware of the complete meaninglessness and triviality of all his past life, and he begins to ask questions which he had never been seriously concerned with before.

"Then what do you want now? To live? Live how? Live as you lived in the law courts when the usher proclaimed "The judge is coming. The judge is coming, the judge!" he repeated to himself. "Here he is, the judge. But I am not guilty!" he exclaimed angrily. "What is it for?" And he ceased

crying, but turning his face to the wall continued to ponder on the same question: Why, and for what purpose, is there all this horror? But however much he pondered he found no answer.'

Here we see the theme of the story – the collision between the two planes of human life, the ephemeral and the eternal. Confronted with death, with the terrifying unknown which surrounds human life, the social personality Ivan Ilych disintegrates, and another Ivan Ilych emerges – the deeper, the more real self, which had been hidden even from himself, under the trivialities of everyday life. At the moment of death, it seems to Ivan Ilych that he finds the answer to the questions of the meaning of life and death which had become an overwhelming reality for him as he lay on his sick-bed:

"And suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. "How good and how simple!' he thought, "and the pain?' he asked himself. "What has become of it? Where are you, pain?"

He turned his attention to it.

"Yes, here it is. Well, what of it? Let the pain be.'

'And death .... Where is it?'

He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death.

In place of death there was light.

'So that's what it is!' he suddenly exclaimed aloud. "What joy!'"

The awareness of the eternal which is felt throughout in **The Death of Ivan Ilych** is present as one dimension of Tolstoy's art in the novels. In them too we often meet with these moments of illumination, in which an individual for whom the veils of ordinary life are parted has a glimpse of

the unknown which can be both awe – inspiring and sustaining. For Ivan Ilych this revelation comes on his death-bed, to Prince Andrew in **War and Peace** it comes with complete unexpectedness on the battle-field of Austerlitz;

"What's this? I am falling? My legs are giving way under me," he thought, and fell on his back. He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the struggle of the French soldiers with the artilleryman was ending and eager to know whether the red-haired artilleryman was killed or not, whether the cannons had been taken or saved. But he saw nothing of all that. Above him there was nothing but the sky – the lofty sky, not clear, but still immeasurably lofty, with grey clouds creeping quietly over it. "How quietly, peacefully, and triumphantly, and not like us running, shouting and fighting, not like the Frenchman and artilleryman dragging the mop from one another with frightened and frantic faces, how differently are those clouds creeping over that lofty limitless sky. How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last. Yes! All is vanity, all is a cheat, except that infinite sky. But even that is not, there is nothing but peace and stillness. And thank God!..."

Ceylon Daily News

18

Tolstoy as Artist

In 1935 James Joyce while sending his daughter Lucia some volumes of Tolstoy's stories, said in a letter: 'In my opinion *How much Land Does a Man need*? is the greatest story that the literature of the world knows.' One wonders whether Joyce realized fully what he was acknowledging. For Tolstoy's story has a bare simplicity in its telling, almost like that of a fable: yet it is the highest kind of art. Just as the boundless steppes, untouched by man, mock the greed of the landgrabber in Tolstoy's story, so does the elemental naturalness of his art dwarf the elaborate artifices and contrivances of Joycean fiction.

The supremacy of Tolstoy among the world's novelists in the range and fullness of his experience has often been recognized, but full justice has not yet been done – at least in the English speaking world – to his mastery as artist and craftsman. Of course, Tolstoy is one of those writers in whom the division between form and content is very difficult to draw. In Flaubert, Turgenev, James, Proust, Joyce, one is always conscious of skilful labour with which the work of art has been shaped and perfected: one sees the marks of the chisel. Of both Flaubert and Joyce very nearly the same story is told of the writer spending a whole day refining the rhythms of two sentences. One can scarcely imagine Tolstoy doing that: he was too great a novelist and too great a man to be obsessed by the word as an end in itself.

On the other hand, Tolstoy was not like Dickens, Dostoevsky or Hardy – novelists in whom the largeness and profundity of the creative imagination are accompanied, even at their best, by lapses for a page or chapter – by faults of style, construction or taste. The immensity and diversity of the Tolstoyan imagination are supported, in his masterpieces, by a rare discipline and fineness of touch in the details of his execution.

Reading Tolstoy, one is not at first conscious of his mastery of craftsmanship. One is only aware of an art as natural as breathing (as Isaac Babel said, 'You feel that the world is writing, the world in all its variety'). There is an impression even among some critics who place him highest among novelists that he managed without style: Dwight Macdonald once said that Tolstoy wrote 'like an Olympian recording angel'. This impression does not survive a reading of him in his own language.

Tolstoy is probably the greatest writer of creative prose. He achieved in his own medium what Pushkin had done in poetry – to bring to perfection the natural genius of the Russian language for the bare purity, laconic power and wiry energy of spare and concentrated expression – something very different from the Shakespearean or Dickensian prodigality and rich exuberance of phrase.

At the end of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* a man dying in an agony of pain has a sudden moral illumination:

'He searched for his former habitual fear of death but he didn't find it. Where was it? What fear? There was no fear, because there was no death either. Instead of death there was light.

The probing repetitive rhythms of the first paragraph are succeeded by the sudden discovery in the last sentence, whose brevity, stronger in the original because Russian takes only four words (Vmesto smerti byl svet) to say it, comes like a lightning-flash. And the key words (*smerti and svet*) by their likeness of sound create the unexpected transformation of death into light.

Tolstoy is as great a master of the form of prose fiction as he is of prose style. The structure of the 19th-century English novel was held together by the novelist's central interests – what an English critic has called 'manners, morals and money' – and was designed usually to lead up to a marriage. This pattern reflected the outlook of a stable bourgeois society, where individual happiness through love and marriage seemed ideally a realizable and desirable goal. None of the great 19th-century Russian works of fiction shows a similar form, because Russia was a society moving towards revolution.

Tolstoy's predecessors in Russian fiction – Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol – had already begun exploring freer, more open ended forms of fiction, whose characteristic mark was the broken plot-structure and the inconclusive ending. In 1868, in a comment on *War and Peace*. Tolstoy wrote: 'The history of Russian literature from Pushkin's time not only furnishes many examples of such a departure from European form, but does not even give one example of the opposite.' Tolstoy's art was the consummation of this development. The unfamiliarity of his forms to English readers at the time led Arnold to call *Anna Karenina* 'a piece of life' rather than a work of art, and Henry James to describe Tolstoy's novels as 'fluid pudding'.

But Tolstoy's form is the appropriate medium of his experience: an experience of quest, illumination (tragic as with Anna or redeeming as with Levin), and the continuing flow of life which transcends the fortunes of the individual character. In this form is reflected a society in crisis at its moral roots. Though Anna dies Levin lives on , what they have in common is that neither of them can live in the old way, within the established social relationships and values. Tolstoy was justly proud of the 'architectonics' of *Anna Karenina*. As he says 'The structural links do not rest on the plot or on the relationship; (the acquaintance) of the characters, but on internal linking.'

What is true of the large-scale form of *Anna Karaneina* is also true of the smaller (but not minor) masterpieces – *The Death of Ivan Ilych, How Much Land Does a Man Need?, After the Ball and Hadji Murad.* They are all directed towards a transforming moral revelation, and the plot is only its instrument.

After the Ball, for instance (I consider it one of his very greatest works), concentrate into less than ten pages the moral anatomy of a whole society. The narrator, Ivan Vasilyevich, goes out into the fields one morning, deliriously happy after dancing a whole night with the girl with whom he is in love. By chance he sees a company of soldiers flogging a Tartar, whose back is a bleeding mass of flesh; and watching them impassively is the colonel, in whom the narrator recognizes the girl's father. This experience changes his whole life: he can never bring himself to enter the army, as he had hoped; and it is the end also of his love, because when he meets his girl-friend and she smiles her enchanting smile, he thinks of the expression with which her father had watched the flogging.

The irony of the story is that Ivan Vasilyevich tells it in order to prove that not environment but chance determines men's lives. And yet to the reader it is apparent that Ivan's discovery had nothing to do with chance – that it was the revelation of the social environment, of inhuman and arbitrary power.

Lanka Guardian, Sept. 1978

19

Madness and Society

In 1890 Anton Chekhov made a journey to the island of Sakhalin, lying off the coast of Siberia. Sakhalin was then the Russian 'Devil's Island,' a penal colony in which the tsarist regime confined about 14,000 prisoners and exiles. Chekhov returned from Sakhalin with his mind and heart filled with impressions of the brutality and human degradation that were the everyday routine of life in the colony. Ironically, however, the governor of the island was a humane but ineffectual idealist who frowned on corporal punishment, but in spite of his views, the prison officers regularly used the birch and the whip, extorting money from the richer convicts as the price of exempting them.

Chekhov's indignant observations on the penal colony went into a travel book, **Sakhalin Island**, but the creative expression of what he had experienced and observed on the island was his masterpiece, the novella **Ward No. 6**. It is a mark of Chekhov's social insight that the story is not about a prison but about a ward for the insane in the hospital of a small provincial Russian town. But the identification between prison and asylum is made in the very first paragraph of the story in an observation whose perceptiveness will strike anybody who knows our own mental institution at Angoda. Of the grey fence with its nails enclosing the annexe that constitutes Ward No.6, Chekhov writes: 'These nails, with their sharp points sticking up, and the fence, and the annexe

itself have that particular gloomy accursed look that among us is to be found only in hospital prison buildings.' And Ward No. 6, like Sakhalin (or like Angoda) is ruled by brutality, of which the mental patients are the daily victims. In the hall leading to the ward sits the warder Nikita a retired soldier, 'one of those simple-minded, positive, dependable and stupid individuals who love order more than anything else in the world and are therefore convinced that it is necessary to beat **them**. He beats on the face, on the chest, on the back, or anywhere at all, and is certain that without it there would be no order in this place'.

The head doctor in this hospital is Dr. Ragin – like the governor of Sakhalin, a sympathetic but ineffectual character, who is well aware that the mental ward is ruled by Nikita's brutal fists, but has reconciled himself to the corruption and suffering in the hospital by persuading himself that this is part of the general irrationality of things and an insignificant part of the sum of human suffering. In the ward one day is brought a young man, Gromov, intelligent and educated but suffering from persecution mania. He denounces Ragin, when he visits the ward, as a quack and a hangman. Ragin engages him in conversation and tries to convince him that it is all a matter of chance whether one is a doctor or a mental patient; that in any case the wise man must, like the stoics, despise suffering and be happy and free in his mind. Gromov replies angrily that to despise suffering is to despise life, and that it is possible for the doctor to be so complacent because he has lived a comfortable life and never known what suffering was. Ragin comes to discover that Gromov is the most interesting person he has met in that dreary provincial town, and tells him that the differences in their beliefs are unimportant compared with the fact that they are the only two people in the town capable of intelligent and serious conversation. The doctor's careerist assistant takes advantage of Ragin's friendship with Gromov to create suspicions regarding the doctor's own sanity. Ultimately, by his assistant's intrigues,

Ragin is himself locked up in Ward No. 6. Here he recognizes his guilt for his former indifference when he learns at first hand what suffering is. He is beaten up by Nikita, has a stroke and dies.

It is a part of the strength of classic Russian fiction that it treats the life of the intellect, of philosophical, religious and political belief, as equally valid and significant material for the imaginative artist as the life of the emotions. Where Dickens, for instance, never convincingly created a character who reflects the intellectual life, Tolstoy Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Chekhov mirror in their work the turbulent conflicts of ideas and ideologies in 19th-century Russia. What is at issue in the debate between Ragin and Gromov is the soundness and truth of the Tolstoyan gospel of quietism and non-resistance to evil. Yet Chekhov's story is not a disembodied argument of ideas; the debate is bound up with the experience of the characters and the way they live, and the final refutation of the Tolstoyan view comes from Ragin's tragic schooling by life itself. Incidentally, **Ward No.6** is the best answer to those English critics who have tried to assimilate Chekhov's work to the contemporary Western European cult of the absurd. If anything, **Ward No. 6** brings home to us the fact that the philosophy of the absurd (of which Ragin professes a near-variant) is an evasion of human and social responsibility.

But where Chekhov's masterpiece seems most enduring in its meaning for us is in its remarkable understanding of the social relations of madness. Gromov had been a university student until his father was charged with forgery and embezzlement and died in prison; Gromov was forced to interrupt his education and make a living in ill-paid jobs. His paranoia was brought on by the sight one day of two prisoners in chains being led along the streets by four soldiers armed with rifles. He develops then a morbid fear that he too might be arrested and thrown into prison for a crime he has not committed: after all, he thinks, nothing is more likely

in the state of the law than a miscarriage of justice, and judges, policemen and doctors are so callous to human suffering that they are no different from the peasant slaughtering sheep and calves in his backyard.

It has taken nearly three-quarters of a century after Chekhov's story was written for psychiatry, in the persons of some its more radical exponents, to catch up with Chekhov's insights, to recognize that madness is a reaction to authoritarian and repressive pressures of the family and of society, and that mental hospitals are among the institutions through which the social structure is reinforced and maintained. Chekov's story confronts us with the disturbing question whose counterparts we should face in regarding the life around us: Who is mad – Gromov or the society that has put him in Ward No. 6?

Chekhov's story first appeared in a magazine in November 1892, and that same winter in Samara (just such a provincial town as the setting of the story) it was read by a young man, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (later to be known as Lenin). On Lenin the story made a profound impression. As he told his sister who has recorded his remarks, 'When I read that story last evening, I began to feel just terrified; I couldn't stay in my room, and I got up and went out. I felt a sensation as if I had been shut up in Ward No. 6.'

Lanka Guardian, July 1979

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The Split World of Edgar Allan Poe A Notable Centenary

Today is the centenary of the death of Edgar Allan Poe, the author of "Tales of Mystery and Imagination" and many famous poems, who died in Baltimore on October 7th, 1849

There are men who seem throughout their lives to draw suffering upon themselves – so that we are never sure whether it is by an inner attraction of their own selves or by that mysterious combination of circumstances that we call destiny. Edgar Allan Poe was such a man. He was marked out for unhappiness while still a child; his parents quarrelled and separated when he was only two years old and the orphan was taken into the house of a benefactor, John Allan. Young Edgar grew up as a sensitive imaginative child, with a strong need for affection, while his foster-father was a cold, hard-headed Scottish business-man. Poe's later life was to be a continual search for the love and security which he did not find in the Allan home, and which was associated in his mind with the idealised image of his dead mother.

It is difficult enough for a neurotic character of this kind to find fulfillment in the love of a woman. Poe was thwarted in his love life not only by himself but also by a seemingly malignant fate. His first love, Jane Stanard, to

whom he addressed the famous lyric, "To Helen", died soon after he met her: his second, Sarah Elmira Royster, married another man. When he was twenty-six Poe married his cousin Virginia, who was then only half his age. For six years Poe seems to have been happy with his child-wife: then fate struck again. Virginia ruptured a blood-vessel while singing, and after five years of illness she died.

The agony of this long illness and death finally broke Poe's character. While still a youth he had taken to alcohol as a means of escape from his melancholy. Drinking had become with him a neurotic habit against which he struggled but which his will was often too weak to resist. It was always his refuge from the intolerable stress of circumstances, and during Virginia's illness he drank continually. Poe's writing was unpopular and ill-paid and except for a brief period during his married life he had always been poor. Virginia's death left him utterly derelict. What followed were three years of dissoluteness, anguish and near-insanity, during which Poe once attempted suicide. After several unsuccessful love affairs, he met in 1849 his former love, Sarah Elmira Royster, now a widow, and planned to marry her. On September 27, he set out from Richmond to New York to make preparations for his wedding. What happened during the next few days remains a mystery: all that is known is that on October 3, he was found in Baltimore, unconscious, and was removed to a hospital where he died four days later.

There is a short story of Poe, "William Wilson", in which the narrator is pursued from childhood by a rival who bears his own name, and with time grows more and more like him in appearance. As the narrator grows up to be a dissolute and vicious criminal, his rival becomes an avenging instrument of good. Finally, Wilson murders his namesake, only to be told in his dying words, "In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself."

"William Wilson" is obviously an allegory of conscience, and we see in it Poe's awareness of the division in his own self – the conflict between the passionate urges which led him to drunkenness and disorder and the will by which he strove to restrain and discipline himself. As one of his editors has said, "There were two Poes. One was the hardworking editor, the intellectual critic, the respectable citizen who was interested in art and letters: the other was a disreputable fellow who frequented low dives and who often wound up literally in the gutter." It is the same division which is reflected in Poe's art. We are faced with the paradox that Poe was the author both of the Dupin stories, creations of the precise, analytical intellect, and of the tales of horror where we find ourselves in a visionary irrational world of the imagination.

In the three stories which feature the character Dupin, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "The Mystery of Marie Roget", and "The Purloined Letter", Poe fathered the modern detective story. To the reader of the "whodunits" of today, Poe's style would seem stodgy and his detective, with his pure ratiocination and his quotations from classical and French poetry, an unsympathetic figure. Yet Poe created many of the conventions of the detective story – for instance, the combination of superhumanly intelligent detective and mediocre companion of the Holmes-Watson kind, and the contrast between the superior imagination of the private detective and the routine methods of the police. What is more important however is the inner urge which made Poe write the Dupin stories. In the figure of his detective, Poe embodies just those qualities of character – the strong will and the cold, analyzing reason – which he desperately needed as a defence against the irrational. "Poe", said J.W. Krutch, "invented the detective story in order that he might not go mad."

When we pass from Poe's detective stories to his tales of horror, we descend from the intellect to the subterranean levels of the human mind – the depths which in ordinary

people erupt into consciousness only in the life of dreams. The atmosphere of these stories is in fact that of nightmare, and we find recurring in them objects such as under-ground passages, vaults and cellars, pits, whirlpools – symbols which are familiar in our dreams, and which the psychologists of our century have striven to explain.

Not all Poe's horror stories have worn well. In some of them he relies too much on the artifices of the nineteenth-century terror novel; even so fine a story as "The Fall of the House of Usher" is, I think, marred by these literary trappings. Sometimes too Poe dissipates and weakens his effects by piling on his horrors; his constant use of adjectives like "unutterable" and "inexpressible" makes the sense of mystery dissolve into mere vagueness. At his best, however, as in "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" – the two stories which seem to me his masterpieces – the prose has a sharp clarity, tightness and economy. The precision which he exercises for purely logical purposes in the Dupin stories he applies here to the inner world of the imagination. This is the highest triumph of Poe's art: in these stories the shadowy terror is fixed and defined; as imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown, Poe's pen turns them to shapes and gives them a local habitation and a name. Look for instance at his rendering of the sensations of the sailor in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" as he gazes into the whirlpool:

"Never shall I forget the sensations of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed about me. The boat appeared to be hanging, as if by magic, midway down upon the interior surface of a funnel vast in circumference, prodigious in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony, but for the bewildering rapidity with which they spun around, and for the gleaming and ghastly radiance they shot forth, as the rays of the full moon, from that circular rift amid the clouds which I have already described, streamed in a flood of golden glory along

the black walls, and far away down into the innermost recesses of the abyss."

Or take these reflections of the prisoner in the "The Pit and the Pendulum" as he watches the intolerably slow descent upon him of the pendulum with its crescent of sharp steel, while he lies fettered upon the floor of his cell:

"I saw that the crescent was designed to cross the region of the heart. It would fray the serge of my robe – it would return and repeat its operations – again – and again. And at this thought I paused, I dared not go further than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention – as if, in so dwelling, I could arrest here the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment – upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces upon the nerves."

What is symbolized in both stories is an extreme state of spiritual tension: the suffering of each of these characters is greater, because although his will is reduced to helplessness and passivity, his imagination and his senses are working at their keenest to intensify his agony. This is the final cleavage in the split world of Poe. To one of his stories Poe prefixed a quotation from Joseph Glanvil which says, "Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." Poe himself knew the yielding "unto death utterly", the unnatural strength of the morbid imagination which paralysed the feeble will. But there is a further development in the stories. In them it is ultimately this very heightened awareness of his own situation which brings help to the victim by suggesting to his mind a way of escape and so releasing the paralysed will into action. For Poe himself the release was through this intense consciousness – not in reality, but in the world of the imagination. For him the only way out was in studying his own suffering and recreating it into his strange art.

Ceylon Daily News, October 1949

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Virginia Woolf: A Fresh Look

The English novelist Virginia Woolf, whose 50th death anniversary fell in March this year, was the wife of Leonard Woolf, British civil servant and author of "The Village in the Jungle." She herself was never in Ceylon; Leonard Woolf fell in love with her when he was on home leave in England, and resigned from the Civil Service when his leave ran out while he was still uncertain whether she would marry him. This article is based on a presentation made at a British Council commemoration of the death anniversary.

If we are to look at literary reputations like shares on the stock market, there is no doubt that Viriginia Woolf's has boomed during the last two decades. Every scrap of paper she left behind has been edited and published – all her letters and diaries and every fragment of creative or critical writing. There has been a continuing spate of memoirs and critical studies, and now comes the announcement of a definitive collected edition of the novels by the Hogarth Press.

I can't help connecting this cult of her, and indeed of the whole Bloomsbury group, with the English nostalgia for the era between the two wars – the years when Britannia ruled the waves and Bloomsbury ruled British intellectual life. But what the literary critic has to ask is whether her work actually merits all this fuss.

I admit to having been fascinated by her novels in my youth, but when I look back on them now, what I find is a great personal intensity, but within a narrow range of experience. They seem to me the product of an isolated self locked away in a room of its own. In the most extreme example, **"The Waves"**, what we have are a few centres of subjectivity – we can hardly call them people – quivering in a social void. But even in the novels which attempt to capture fuller human relationships, there is a damaging limitation of values. What is there in the heroines she adores, and holds up for adoration by the reader – what is there in Mrs. Dalloway or Mrs. Ramsay except a refined emotional sensitivity that holds so much of life at arm's length?

Virginia Woolf has, of course, an undeniable place in literary history – in the emergence of what was then the new novel in the period around the First World War. Her enterprise was to develop a prose and a novel form that would enable the exploration of interior consciousness beyond the confines of the traditional realist novel. In her lesser way, she was moving in the same direction that Joyce and Proust were taking at the same time. But in comparison with the prodigious and original genius of Joyce, hers was a minor talent. Joyce is a continuing presence in the international novel, from Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Salman Rushdie, while the taste for Virginia Woolf seems to me an English and anglophile affair.

Virginia Woolf's own reactions to Joyce offer a test case. In 1916 she wrote an essay titled 'Modern Fiction' in which she expressed her dissatisfaction with the established novelists of the day – Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy. "Is life like this?" she asked, contemplating their work, and went on:

> *"Look within, and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel.*

> *From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . Life is not a series of big-lamps, symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."*

Virginia Woolf then pointed to Joyce's work – to the **"Portrait of the Artist"** which had been published as a whole, and to the early chapters of **"Ulysses"**, which were then being serialized in "The Little Review". She conjectured that a reader of these works would have "hazarded some theory of this nature as to Mr. Joyce's intention".

It is evident that Virginia Woolf was discerning enough to see one part of what was radically new in Joyce's writing, and this must have been helped by the affinity she shared with this aspect of it. Nevertheless, the representation of the fluidity of mental processes which she picked out for praise in Joyce's work is not, in my view, the most important thing in it – particularly in **"Ulysses"**. I would put the emphasis rather on the creative vitality of language, the comic vigour and the ability to respond richly and joyously to life's diversities.

In the same essay Viriginal Woolf went on to say that where Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy were "materialists", Joyce was "spiritual", and by this she meant that he was concerned with the inner mental life and not with the external reality which occupied the older novelists. The dichotomy she tried to imply between the "inner" and the "outer" realities is consistent with her way of representing life in her own novels. There indeed the interior life of the characters is often severed from their surroundings – physical or moral – and the outer world appears an alien intrusion on the autonomy of the character's consciousness. But she was wrong to project this dichotomy on to Joyce – certainly as

far as **"Ulysses"** was concerned. While the interior monologues of Stephen or Bloom or Molly are the medium through which we engage with the world of **"Ulysses"**, Dublin in all its multifariousness is fully present in the work, not only in its physical reality but also in the rich variety of its speech. To the sensitive character in Virginia Woolf everyday life often seems alien or repelling, but while the aesthete Stephen may share something of this fastidious distaste, that isn't the response of Bloom or Molly, and the weight of the book falls on the final "yes" rather than on Stephen's "no". Joyce's spirit is that which is summed up in the pun in **"Finnegans Wake"**, "joyicity" – a pun which brings together himself, the comic sense of life and Dublin.

When the manuscript of **"Ulysses"** was complete, Joyce's patron, Harriet Shaw Weaver, brought it to Virginia and Leonard Woolf to ask whether they would publish it as owners of the Hogarth Press. Reminiscing about this episode after Joyce's death, Virginia Woolf recalled in her diary, "The indecent pages looked so incongruous; she was spinsterly, buttoned up. And the pages reeked with indecency, put it in the drawer of the inlaid cabinet." An earlier portion of the diary records her first reactions to the book after it had been published – not, of course, by the Hogarth Press but by a Paris publisher:

"And Tom, great Tom, thinks this on a par with **"War and Peace"**. (Note: "Tom was T.S. Eliot. – RS). An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, and we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, stinking and ultimately nauseating. When one can have the cooked flesh, why have the raw?" I am not sure what is more glaring in that judgment – the social snobbery (misplaced, for Joyce wasn't "a self-taught working man": he was better educated than Virginia Woolf) or the prudery, which suggests that the celebrated sexual emancipation of Bloomsbury had its boundaries.

There is another comparison I want to make for the purpose of placing Virginia Woolf, and that is with the great women novelists in English of the nineteenth century. I will approach this comparison through some discussion of Virginia Woolf's book on women and fiction – **"A Room of One's Own"**.

Let me acknowledge that **"A Room of One's Own"** was in its own time a landmark in the history of literary feminism. To have said in 1929 what she did about the barriers faced by the gifted woman was an important contribution. And yet, it seems to me that the way in which she argued the case is another revelation of her circumscribed experience.

There is an interesting contradiction in **"A Room of One's Own"**. On the one hand Virginia Woolf says that what a woman needs in order to be a writer is 500 pounds a year and a room of her own. She herself had these things – if not quite 500 pounds, 400 (as I learn from Leonard Woolf's autobiography) – and she certainly had the privacy she wanted as well as the security and support offered by the most devoted of husbands. But while she rightly stresses a woman's need for economic independence, the ideal she imagines is that of a genteel and leisured life very far removed from what has been possible for the great majority of women down to the present day.

To quote: "A private income to release me from the daily grind; and the privacy and peace of a study to work in" – her norm was that of the modest affluence and cultivated comfort of Bloomsbury. When I read these lines of hers, I think of the Bronte sisters walking two hours every night round their cramped parlour at Haworth, "like restless wild animals", talking about their projected novels; I think of George Eliot, sitting down to write her first stories in the single room she shared with George Lewes after a lunch of plain bread and butter – and I wonder what they would have thought of Virginia Woolf's desiderata. Would **"Wuthering**

Heights" and **"Middlemarch"** have been greater novels if their creators had enjoyed Virginia Woolf's gentility? Or, rather, wasn't it part of the very condition of their genius that they should have shared with many lesser women the problems of physical and emotional hunger, of congested living in small households and cramped lodgings, of collision with the barriers of class and male superiority? There is behind their writing a whole world of work and want and aspiration and struggle that is quite beyond Virginia Woolf.

But not merely would Virginia Woolf have been out of her depth in such an experience; she even reacts with disapproval to any sign in the woman writer of struggling, through her art, against the very circumstances, that she herself claims to be against. Talking of Charlotte Bronte, she says:

> *"One might say . . . that the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in her, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted?"*

What that recalls to me is Matthew Arnold's dismissal of Charlotte Bronte's **"Villette"** when he said that her mind contained "nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage". That was a characteristic piece of Victorian male complacency, but how incongruously a similar sentiment comes from a woman writer who claims to be concerned with the creative independence of her sex!

This is a pointer to Virginia Woolf's notion of what art is. It is very clearly articulated in a passage of her diary, written after she has been reading Aldous Huxley's edition of D.H. Lawrence's letters:

> *"And why does Aldous say he was an 'artist'? Art is being rid of all preaching: things in themselves: the sentence in itself is beautiful: multitudinous seas, daffodils that come before the swallow dares: whereas Lawrence would only say what proved something."*

I hold no brief for didactic art, nor do I wish to deny that Lawrence was sometimes guilty of preaching. But it is hardly a satisfactory alternative to hold up an ideal of pure aestheticism – "the sentence in itself beautiful" – and it is a very impoverishing response to Shakespeare to suppose that that is what Macbeth's "multitudinous seas" was there for. To read such a passage is to be reminded that Virginia Woolf belonged to the circle of Roger Fry and Clive Bell and Lytton Strachey for whom art was an elegant luxury. The ethos of Bloomsbury is very well summed up in four lines of a poem by one of its children, Julian Bell – the son of Clive Bell and Virginia's sister, Vanessa. This is how Julian Bell, who wasn't unsympathetic to his Bloomsbury elders, saw them.

> "People intent
> To follow mind's feeling and sense
> Where they might lead, and
> for the world, content
> To let it run along its
> toppling course."

That Virginia Woolf's conception of art is of a realm of cultivated sensibility held against the disorder of the outer world is confirmed by the quality of her writing. For all its fine style, its exquisite handling of phrase and rhythm and cadence, it is a prose of artifice, and therefore, so bloodless and ultimately to me so boring. Even in Charlotte Bronte, with all her sentimentality, there is a more genuine and a broader life; and when it comes to her greater sister and to George Eliot, there is no question for me that they are incomparably superior to Virginia Woolf. Mrs. Woolf couldn't

have created the passion of Catherine Earnshaw beating against the cages of class and family, or the moral drama of the shallow Hetty Sorrel discovering unknown depths in herself with her infanticide, or Maggie Tulliver's struggle to assert herself in a society that has no use for an intelligent woman, or Gwendolen Harleth's compromises under the pressures of economic adversity. To do that she would have to go beyond that room of her own.

Lanka Guardian, May 1990

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"The Village in the Jungle"

Woolf's Fine Novel of Ceylon Life

In an article in this year's "Observer Annual" Dr. E.F.C. Ludowyk says, while speaking of Knox's "Historical Relation of Ceylon",

"Of all records of Ceylon in English – whether one thinks of novels or documents – the most impressive is Knox's book. What have we to place beside it? Only Tennent's omniscience and Leonard Woolf's sensitiveness."

By his article and his edition of Knox, Dr. Ludowyk has done valuable work in recalling this little-read classic of Ceylon history to the attention of readers in this country. It seems worthwhile to attempt to rescue from the danger of a similar oblivion another of the books that Dr. Ludowyk mentions – Leonard Woolf's novel about the life of a village community in the dry zone of the south of Ceylon "**The Village in the Jungle**."

Woolf's novel, published in 1913, was fairly well-known until recently among the English reading public in Ceylon. But the book is now not easily available and may soon cease to be current – I have in my own experience come across many younger readers and students of literature who had not read Woolf's novel. In 1947 an excellent translation of the novel in Sinhalese was brought out by Mr. A.P. Gunaratna. This translation should have been an event of

the first importance in Sinhalese literature – not only in making available a fine novel to the Sinhalese reading public, but also as a stimulus to creative writing in Sinhalese. As far as I am aware, however, the translation has passed almost unnoticed by the pundits. It might be useful, therefore, to attempt to establish "**The Village in the Jungle**" as a work which should be known by every person in Ceylon who is seriously interested in literature.

By introducing the novel in this way, however, I do not mean to suggest that its interest is purely documentary or that its appeal is only to readers who are familiar with the particular environment and life which it treats. In fact, it has always surprised me that Woolf's novel does not seem to have received from readers and critics in England the serious attention which its artistic achievement deserves. "**The Village in the Jungle**" certainly does show a very close and sensitive observation, remarkable for a foreigner, of the natural environment, the ways of living, and the modes of thinking and feeling of the Ceylon peasant. Its dialogue has a great naturalness and vivid realism because it is rooted in the idiom of rural Sinhalese speech: its fidelity to this idiom is brought out very well by Mr. Gunaratna's translation. But while having this intimate relation to a particular place and community, "**The Village in the Jungle**", like every good novel, has a meaning that is more universal. Through the drama of this community in a remote village in the jungles of Ceylon, Leonard Woolf communicates an experience which seems to me not limited in its relevance by place or social circumstance. From the novel there emerges what can be called in general terms a view of life which is tragic, which has depth and seriousness, and is given a fine coherence by the art of the novelist. To try to demonstrate this will be the main purpose of this article.

The quality of Woolf's awareness and his gifts as a novelist are indicated already by the first few pages of the novel, in the finely sustained passage of prose in which he

describes the jungle which surrounds and dominates the village of Beddagama. Here is the opening paragraph:

> "The village was called Beddagama, which means the village in the jungle. It lay in the low-country or plains, midway between the sea and the great mountains which seem, far away to the north, to rise like a long wall straight up from the sea of trees. It was in, and of, the jungle, the air and smell of the jungle lay heavy upon it – the smell of hot air, of dust, and of dry and powdered leaves and sticks. Its beginning and end was in the jungle, which stretched away from it on all sides unbroken, north and south and east and west, to the blue line of hills and to the sea. The jungle surrounded it, overhung it, continually pressed in upon it. It stood at the door of the houses, always ready to press in upon the compounds and open spaces, to break through the mud huts and to choke up the tracks and paths. It was only by yearly cleaning with axe and katty that it could be kept out. It was a living wall about the village, a wall which if the axe were spared, would creep in and smother and blot out the village itself".

Here, at the opening of the novel, is sounded its dominant theme. In "**The Village in the Jungle**" as much as, say, in a novel of D.H. Lawrence, is present the awareness of a life in nature which is stronger and more permanent than the human; yet obviously the way in which nature is viewed here could not be better defined than by opposing it to the vision of Lawrence. The life of the village is bound up with and dependent on that of nature – "it was in, and of, the jungle" – but instead of the Lawrentian nature, with the passionate intimacy and sympathy which it evokes, we have here the sense of an alien, hostile and inhuman presence. Through the accumulation of a number of vividly actualized details Woolf creates in these opening pages the feeling of the evil and sinister life of the jungle – the "enormous cactuses, evil looking and obscene, with their great fleshy

green slabs..." "the great leafless trees, which look like a tangle of gigantic spiders' legs – smooth, bright green, jointed together – from which, when they are broken, oozes out a milky, viscous fluid." The life of the jungle is tenacious and persistent: "all the bushes and trees seem to be perpetually dying for ten months of the year... And yet, when the rains come, the whole jungle bursts out again into green; and it forces its way forward into any open space, upon the tracks into villages and compounds, striving to blot out everything in its path." It is a world of cruelty, terror and suffering – Woolf enforces this very effectively by his picture of the merciless struggle for existence between the animals during the season of drought in the jungle.

It is in this setting that Leonard Woolf places the life of the village community of Beddagama, which as much as that of the deer and the jackal and the leopard, is everywhere permeated and dominated by the surrounding jungle. The human world of "**The Village in the Jungle**" is close to the elemental realities of existence, unmitigated by the accidents of civilization: this elemental quality is felt in the violence and suffering which predominate in the action of the novel.

The human action of the novel, the relations of the characters, the tragedy of Silindu and Hinnihamy and Punchi Menika, is seen always against the background of the jungle. The jungle is felt as a presence throughout Woolf's novel, entering into the action to give it a wider significance. At the crises of the novel, the moments of most acute realization, the characters themselves are aware of it as intimately related to the evil and suffering of their world. When Fernando threatens Punchi Menika that he will ruin her and her husband if she does not give herself to him, her answer is:

> "What is there to say, aiya? I cannot do it. If this thing must come to us, what can we do? Always evil is coming into this house – from the jungle, my father says. At first there was no food. Then the devil entered into my father. Then more evil, upon my sister and her child, and upon my child. The children died, they killed Punchi Appu; they killed my sister. And now evil again."

It is in this sense of dread, of a nameless evil to which no response is possible but fatalistic resignation – "if this thing must come to us, what can we do?" – which is at the heart of the novel. It finds expression in the myths of the villagers, the worship of devils, the primitive terror of the jungle. On the pilgrimage to Beragama Dewala the villagers feel that this strange god "was very near their own lives, far more than they had felt with the Buddha of dagobas and viharas," and in the rites of this primitive god they feel a revelation of the mysterious power which dominates their lives.

"Hinnihami felt the power of the god in her and over them all; she felt how near he was to them, mysteriously hidden beneath the great cloth which lay upon the elephant's back. She felt again the awe which great trees in darkness and the shadows of the jungle at nightfall roused in her, the mystery of darkness and power which no one can see."

We are reminded continually in the novel that human habitations are only a temporary conquest from the jungle and its unknown power, which alone endure. We hear of former villages now covered by jungle; "the last house," says Silindu, speaking of the village of Bogama, "was abandoned when I was a boy, but the devil still dances beneath the nuga-trees." Beddagama itself is a dying community; from time to time in the novel is heard the ominous note of the invasion of the village by the jungle, the gradual abandonment of one house after another, until at the end the jungle closes over the whole of the former village, blotting out indifferently the memory of its hates and loves.

The impersonality of the jungle, set against the spectacle of human suffering, gives to the novel its particular tone. What all the characters who are most significant in the novel have in common is a quality of resignation; it is expressed

continually in their speech; "August is the month in which the children die. What can I do?....."Evils come upon a man; it is fate. What can I do?"... "If this thing must come to us, what can we do?" Here one feels the way in which the novel is pervaded by an attitude to life which is very close to the Buddhist. Leonard Woolf seems to have a very sensitive understanding of and a deep sympathy for the popular Buddhist consciousness, with its sense of fatalism and its resignation. In the reflections of Silindu, for instance, after the murder, when he thinks of himself as a hunted animal – hunted first by Fernando and the headman, hunted then by the law, and hunted finally into his next birth by the evil of his act, and longing only for rest and peace – the feeling seems analogous to that conveyed by the Buddhist symbol of the Wheel of Samsara. The melancholy fatalism of popular Buddhism, the sense of the burden of life and suffering, and the desire for release, are conveyed again with great poignancy by the symbolism and the weary rhythm of the lullaby which Karlinahami sings to Hinnihamy and Punchi Menika; within its lines, one feels, is summed up the whole vision of life in the novel:

> "Sleep, child, sleep against my side,
> Aiyo! Aiyo! The weary way you've cried;
> Hush, child, hush, pressed closed against my side,
> Aiyo! Aiyo! Will the trees never end?
> Our women's feet are weary: O Great One, send
> Night on us, that our wanderings may end,
> Hush, child, hush, thy father leads the way,
> Thy mother's feet are weary, but the day
> Will end somewhere for followers in the way,
> Aiyo! Aiyo! The way is rough and steep,
> Aiyo! The thorns are sharp, the rivers deep,
> But the night comes at last. So sleep, child, sleep.

At its most complete this attitude to life is expressed by the crazed old beggar, with his uncompromising spirit of

negation and rejection, in his exhortations to Silindu on the way to his trial:

> "I see many different men on the path. Strange men, and they do strange things. Thieving, stabbing, killing, cultivating paddy. I do not cultivate paddy, nor do I thieve or kill. I am mad perhaps. But very often it is they who seem to me to want but a little to be mad. All this doing and doing – running round and round like the red ants – thieving, stabbing, killing, cultivating this and that. Is there much good or wisdom in such a life? It seems to me full of evil – nothing but evil and trouble. Do they ever sit down and rest, do they ever meditate? Desire and desire again, and no fulfillment ever. Is such a life sane or mad?"

It is not possible however to take this without qualification as the "criticism of life" which the novel offers; for in ironic contrast we have the comments of the peon which follow:-

> "This is fool's talk," said the peon impatiently. "We cannot all beg upon the road. I have heard the priests themselves say that every one cannot reach Nirvana. Nor are we all mad. There are the women and the children. Are they too to become holy men? It is hard enough to live on the eleven rupees which the Government gives us."

Certainly the attitude which emerges from the novel as a whole is very different from the simple indifference to life of the old beggar. "**The Village in the Jungle**" is genuinely tragic in feeling because while we are aware of the helplessness of the individual in the face of the mystery of evil and suffering, we have at the same time as strong a sense of the vitality of what has been defeated. The main characters of the novel, Silindu and Hinnihamy and Punchi Menika, have the dignity of characters who feel and suffer strongly: this quality of their lives might be typified by the

fierce attachment with which Punchi Menika at the end of the novel clings to her home in the jungle:

> "She was alone in the world, the only thing left to her was the compound and the jungle which she knew. She clung to it passionately, blindly. The love which she had felt for Silindu and Babun who were lost to her for ever, whose very memories began to fade from her in the struggle to keep alive – was transferred to the miserable hut, the bare compound and the parched jungle."

From this point of view these characters contrast strongly with those people who belong to the outer social, civilized world– Fernando, the headman, the Ratemahatmaya. Against the attachment of Punchi Menika and Babun to each other and to their village we have set the superficiality and rootlessness of Fernando's way of living.

"You see, I have no village. I live always among strangers, but no evil has come. I left Colombo without a cent, and now I have become rich. What folly to starve where one was born when there are riches to be got in the neighbouring village!"

These remarks help to throw into relief the dignity and strength of the lives of Silindu and his family. Unlike Fernando, they "belong." In the very quality of their suffering one feels that they are in contact with the roots of life. That suffering is caused not merely by social circumstances {"I am not blaming you, Ratemahatmaya," says the sympathetic white official in the novel, "I am not blaming anybody.") In the fate of these characters we see a symbol of the common human situation, of the mystery of evil and suffering, and the cry, "Aiyo!", which is heard so often in their speech becomes an expression of the primal pain:

> "Aiyo! Aiyo! The way is rough and steep,
> Aiyo! The thorns are sharp, the rivers deep,
> But the night comes at last. So sleep, child, sleep."

23

Joyce : The Writer as Exile

To the writer who is rooted in a particular language and in a particular community, separation from them often seems a kind of living death. I think of the two greatest Russian women poets of this century: Anna Akhmatova, who after the Russian Revolution refused to emigrate, in spite of her lack of sympathy for the regime, because the land was still the place where the 'great Russian word' belonged; and the opposite case of Marina Tsvetaeva, writing in Paris her great poems that she was unable to publish and lamenting that her audience was in Russia and beyond reach. Yet in this century where displacement and exile have been a frequent condition, there are writers who have confronted this predicament through bi- or multi-lingualism. There was, for instance, Arthur Koestler, migrating from Hungary to Germany to England, writing his early novels in German (which wasn't his native tongue) and his later books in English. There was Vladimir Nabokov, another displaced person, who wrote creatively in three languages, and who translated his early novels from Russian into English and some of his later English novels into Russian. There was Samuel Beckett, Irish-born, living for the most part in Paris, who wrote several of his works twice over – once in English and once in French. And there is Salman Rushdie, now suffering the ultimate exile, virtually from human society itself, who has drawn the life-blood of his imagination from

the *Mahabharata* and the Bombay cinema as much as from Rabelais, Cervantes and Joyce. It isn't an accident that of the four writers whom I have mentioned, the last three were drawn powerfully to the magnet of Joyce's art. Beckett, of course, most directly of all: he was Joyce's secretary at the age of 21, and parts of *Finnegans Wake* were dictated to him. And his first published work was an essay on *Work in Progress*, as Joyce's unfinished book was then called.

Where does Joyce himself stand in this spectrum of the exile's relationship to language? His response to the language of the imperial rulers was not to reject it, as did the sentimentalists of the Gaelic revival, but to make it his own by transforming it. The extraordinary linguistic innovativeness of *Ulysses* has behind it both his problematic relationship to an alien tongue and the sense of creative freedom that comes from his extra-territoriality. (I borrow this term from George Steiner's book *Extraterritorial*.) And though Joyce didn't write a whole work in a language to which he wasn't born, like Nabokov or Beckett, his polyglot European personality finally found expression in the multi-lingual texture of *Finnegans Wake*. Here English is enriched, subverted and transcended by the weaving of many other tongues into its polysemous fabric. A voice in the book asks: 'Are we speaching d'anglas landge or are you spraking sea Djoytsch?' It's a question that may well mirror the perplexity of the reader, transported from the solidity of a familiar 'landge' to one where he is at 'sea', uncertain whether s/he is 'speaching' or 'spraking' English or French or German or Dutch, or that tongue which is Joyce's individual creation, 'Djoytsch'.

I shall now take a fresh look at the three major works of Joyce in order to see where they stand more than half a century after his death. Of the three books, it's *A Portrait of the Artist* which has been diminished with the passage of time. Its technical originality, which was dazzling in 1916, has been dimmed not only by the further advances made by *Ulysses*

but also by the fact that later novelists have absorbed its innovations. But there's a more intrinsic limitation in *A Portrait*. If both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* can be called polyphonic novels,[1] where different voices are counterpointed against each other. *A Portrait* is wholly monophonic. Everything in it is centred in the consciousness of Stephen Dedalus. And since the Stephen of the *Portrait* seems a priggish, humourless young man who takes himself all too seriously, the novel carries, in spite of the courage and honesty of the hero's rebellion, a sense of claustrophobia. Most of its original readers took it that Stephen was a faithful representation of the author. Though the narrative was fairly closely based on the events of Joyce's childhood and youth, we have it on the testimony of his younger brother Stanislaus that 'it is not an autobiography, it is an artistic creation.'[2] Even of the later Stephen of *Ulysses* Stanislaus Joyce said: 'In temperament he (that is Joyce) was as unlike that figure, mourning under the incubus of remorse, as he could well be. He had a lively sense of humour and a ready laugh.[3]

It's true equally of the Stephen of the *Portrait* that there's a distance between the character and the author, and that the self-portrait is deliberately selective. In Zurich Joyce complained to his friend Frank Budgen that people who read the book forgot that its title was *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[4] That title shares in the ambiguity that is so pervasive in Joyce's work. In one sense, it means a self-portrait, but a portrait of the author in an earlier, immature phase of himself. In another sense, it means a portrait of a character who wants to be the artist, who has chosen this as his vocation, but who is unformed, undeveloped, who in fact is less artist than aesthete. It's easy enough to see this now, but it would have been hard for the book's original readers to do so because there was no other point of view within the book from which Stephen could be seen. Joyce had to write the book to exorcise his younger self; and we have to read it in order to measure the great act of self-transcendence that

Ulysses represents. But if we know only the *Portrait*, we get a very partial and misleading picture of Joyce's work.

The first thing to be said about the two later works – *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* – is that they confound all distinctions of genres. Is *Ulysses* a novel? The only possible answer to that question is, 'Y-e-e-es, but...' It has characters who are recognizable as individual people; it has a kind of plot, in that events take place in sequence between 8 o'clock in the morning of the 16th June 1904 and 2 o'clock in the morning of the next day. But there are other features of the book's form that make it difficult to fit it into the category of novels, as they had been known up to 1922. One chapter of *Ulysses* – and that the longest as well as, I think, the most creatively original – is cast in dramatic form, where the real, the remembered and the imagined, people and things, have equal status as actors. Another chapter is cast in the form of a series of impersonations of prose style in English, from Anglo-Saxon to the performance of a modern American hotgospeller. While you can work out what is happening by way of plot while these parodies are being unrolled, it's quite clear that the narrative has been submerged by another interest – that language and its metamorphoses have upstaged the characters and their doings. Yet another chapter is constituted of a series of questions and answers, a kind of catechism, and who asks and who answers isn't evident. So one can only say that the text is interrogating itself, and often getting hilariously inappropriate answers.

Attempts have been made – and will continue to be made – to minimize the disturbing originality of Joyce's last two books by interpreting them in less radical terms. In the case of *Ulysses*, critics who were so disposed clutched at the interior monologue as a stay against confusion. Joyce, it was said, was trying to give a faithful picture of what went on in the mind; he was attempting to complete the external realism that the novel had already achieved by extending it into an inner, psychological realism. If you read the essay titled

'Modern Fiction'[5] that Virginia Woolf wrote when *A Portrait* had been published and the early chapters of *Ulysses* were being serialized in the *Little Review*, you will find what a sensitive critic of the time thought was Joyce's intention:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, and as they fall, and as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

Virginia Woolf went on to suggest that this aim was what animated Joyce in *A Portrait* and in *Ulysses*. The trouble with this account is that it throws a lot of light on what Mrs. Woolf was trying to do in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, but it will hardly do for Joyce. I don't think it's adequate even for those parts of *Ulysses* where Joyce uses the interior monologue, but, as I have already indicated, the interior monologue is only one of the narrative and stylistic modes in Joyce's armoury.[6]

All realist fiction rests on the premise that the reader will grant the supposition of a real world – real people, real places, real events – which the text is recording. In fact, of course, the people, places and events are illusions created by the verbal structures of the novelist. Joyce is the first modern novelist to foreground the activity of writing itself as the substantial reality that the reader experiences; and under 'writing' here I subsume also reading, since the reader is 'writing' her/his own text while going on. However, the relation between that activity and the imagined world of the novel, in the old realist sense, is itself shifting and changing

in *Ulysses*. I think, for instance, that you can in the first chapter get along with reading the text in the realist fashion and not come to grief; in many of the other episodes, however, on the other hand, the relationship between text and reality is much more indeterminate.

Let's take a specific example from the text – what is known as the 'Nausicaa' episode – the voyeuristic encounter between Leopold Bloom and Gerty MacDowell on the seashore. The episode is rendered in a continuing parody of the style of women's romantic novelettes. In keeping with the frequent tendency to assume that Joyce's main concern is to render the inner consciousness of his characters, this episode has usually been read as a rendering of the consciousness of Gerty MacDowell, with the implication that she sees life in terms of the clichés of the fiction she reads. Accordingly, at least one critic, S.L. Goldberg, has accused Joyce of 'cruelty' in this chapter. 'Joyce's ironic parody,' he says, 'is breaking a butterfly upon a wheel.'[7] But there is no warrant for this construction except the critical tendency to see Joyce's main aim as that of psychological representation. As for his alleged 'cruelty', the Joyce who chose as his life's companion Nora Barnacle, who was entirely non-intellectual (she was a chambermaid in a Dublin hotel when Joyce met her, and she never read his books, but Joyce remained devoted to her for the rest of his life), wouldn't have been guilty of that kind of snobbery. Nor would he have made the error, to which literary intellectuals are so prone, of assuming that the quality of a person's emotional life is to be judged by what s/he reads.[8] Just as Joyce impersonates Malory or Pepys or Gibbon or Dickens in the 'Oxen of the Sun', here he impersonates the authors of romantic novelettes and how they would represent Gerty MacDowell, and the laugh is on that representation, not on Gerty. It is possible that in a different way Joyce is also parodying himself, since the girl seen on the seashore in *A Portrait of the Artist* was the occasion of Stephen's recognition of his artistic vocation and

his rhetorical outburst: 'A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory'. If the prose of 'Nausicaa' is steeped in the clichés of popular romance and magazine stories, so is Stephen's revelation in the *Portrait* derivative from the language of Walter Pater and Lionel Johnson. But in the latter case, the language is a mirror of Stephen's consciousness at the time, since *A Portrait* is really a 'psychological novel' of the kind that *Ulysses* has wrongly been taken to be. Breaking with the monophonic narrative of *A Portrait, Ulysses* opens itself not only to the differently constituted interior monologues of Stephen, Bloom and Molly, but also to the varieties of discourse in Dublin – middle-class conversation, popular slang and humour, the idioms of journalism and advertising, political rhetoric – as well as to the languages of literary tradition which it alternately exploits, undermines, caricatures and transforms. *Ulysses* is a rich example of that 'heteroglossia' which Bakhtin regarded as representing the possibilities open to the novel more than to any other form.

Finnegans Wake has even less links with the traditional novel than *Ulysses*. *Ulysses* does move towards a kind of conclusion: it's evident that the ending of the 'Penelope' episode – Molly Bloom's soliloquy – represents an affirmation of life:

> ... and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yet to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.[9]

Joyce told one of his French translators, 'The book must end with yes. It must end with the most positive word in the human language'.[10] But *Finnegans Wake* doesn't really have a

beginning, a middle and an end, since the last sentence without a fullstop flows directly into the first sentence without a capital letter. And the last word of that unfinished sentence is the undefined 'the', which Joyce described as 'the most slippery, the least accented, the weakest word in English, a word which is not even a word, which is scarcely sounded between the teeth, a breath, a nothing...[11] It's possible to start reading *Finnegans Wake* anywhere in the book because its structure isn't linear but cyclical. As for characters, if you mean people designated by proper names, there's no lack of them, but you may find it difficult to assimilate them to the figures of the traditional novel when you discover that Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker is also Finnegan, is also Humpty-Dumpty, is also Adam, is also Parnell...and I could go on.

With *Finnegans Wake*, too, there are critics who have tried to psychologise it, to explain the whole book in terms of the fantasies of a single dreaming mind. It would take too much time to demonstrate that a great deal in the book can't be interpreted in this way without distortion. But what I do want to suggest is that Joyce wasn't trying to give a literal, faithful picture of a mind dreaming. He was using the dream-form as a convenience because we do know that in dreams one place turns into another without warning, people change shapes and identities, even words metamorphose and coalesce. Joyce must have recognized that readers would find similar phenomena at least a little easier to accept if he situated them in the night-world than if he had planted them in daylight reality. But ultimately, what *Finnegans Wake* does is to carry to its limit the radical exploration of language that he began in *A Portrait* and took further in *Ulysses*. It's the terminus of the journey on which the little boy started when he discovered that he was 'baby tuckoo' and that the world revealed itself to him through names and words. But at the end of the journey the identities arent't simple and certain but multiple, shifting and problematic because that is

the very nature of language, and therefore of the reality that we know through language. 'He was baby tuckoo,' Joyce had written on the first page of *A Portrait*. In *Finnegans Wake*, he writes: 'So This is Dyoublong?' Instead of the statement, an unanswered question: and 'Dyoublong' is a multiple entity, combining Dublin, the doubt whether he belongs, and the French-sounding termination, which is eloquent of exile.

I want at this stage to make a personal reference. I first wrestled with *Ulysses* at the age of seventeen, and I have re-read it many times since. When I began there was hardly any guidance available for the reader who was making his first acquaintance with the book; and besides, the whole tradition of literary history, practical criticism and pre-conceptions about novel form that were then in force were the very reverse of helpful. As for *Finnegans Wake*, it came out soon after I entered the university, and I never dared even to touch it till many many years later because it was taken for granted that it was incomprehensible gibberish. I want to say that the young reader who starts on Joyce now is in a much better position. In the intervening years a whole library of commentary has grown up around Joyce, as around Shakespeare or the Bible. Not all of it is useful; some of it may even deepen confusion, but at least the reader today can't complain of lack of guides. As far as *Ulysses* is concerned, I should like to recommend just one book – the recent annotated edition in the World's Classics series. It provides all the help with literary, historical and mythological allusions that the common reader may need; it's relatively cheap, in an Oxford University Press paperback, and the introduction is one of the best critical essays I know on Joyce.[12] But quite apart from commentaries and explications, the general critical climate of today is much more favourable for the reception of Joyce. That language doesn't reflect an invariant meaning that it is unstable and plural, that the reader is as much a participant in the production of meaning as the writer – these ideas that are so relevant to the reading

of Joyce are by now part of the common resources of contemporary literary theory. In fact, it can be said that their evolution took place partly under the challenge that Joyce's texts represented.

But I am anxious not to leave the impression that reading Joyce is an esoteric activity that involves only difficulty, though I don't want to claim that *Ulysses* – still less, *Finnegans Wake* – is easy reading either. Of the latter book Joyce himself sounded a kind of warning within the text itself:

> ...and look at this prepronominal *funferal*, engraved and retouched and edge-wiped and puddenpadded, very like a whale's egg farced with pemmican, as were it sentenced to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for ever and a night till his noddle sink or swim by that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia...

'Sentenced': a characteristic Joycean pun, because the book is constructed out of sentences, but also because the reader has to serve her/his term of hard labour with it. But notice that even while saying this, Joyce describes the book as a *funferal* – that is, a funeral and fun-for-all at the same time – a real Irish wake. And as Joyce said to Ezra Pound soon after *Ulysses* was published, 'If only someone would say the book was so damn funny'. Nobody would have gone through the effort of reading either of Joyce's last two books if they weren't richly entertaining, captivating in their fertility of language, but above all, great comic works. I want therefore to end by quoting a passage from *Finnegans Wake* that affirms the comic spirit. It's from that section of the book which offers Joyce's last portrait of the Stephen Dedalus aspect of himself, here personified as Shem. It's to him that the passage is addressed. In reading it you must remember that *Finnegans Wake* was written between the two world wars. In *Ulysses*, begun on the eve of the first of these wars, Stephen had said: 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'. In this passage from *Finnegans Wake* the nightmare

of history and of its violence is behind the omens and signs which accumulate in the first part of the passage. Yet the paragraph – it's all one continuous sentence – moves from that menacing vision of a gloomy prophet to the joyous celebration of the creative act in the 'new Irish stew' that Joyce is cooking – the rich, diverse and comic art of the book itself. I have chosen this passage also because it is relatively lucid, in comparison with most of *Finnegans Wake:*

> Sniffer of carrion, premature gravedigger, seeker of the nest of evil in the bosom of a good word, you, who sleep at our vigil and fast for our feast, you with your dislocated reason, have cutely foretold, a jophet in your own absence, by blind poring upon your many scalds and burns and blisters, impetiginous sore and pustules, by the auspices of that raven cloud, your shade, and by the auguries of rooks in parliament, death with every disaster, the dynamitisation of colleagues, the reducing of records to ashes, the leveling of all customs by blazes, the return of a lot of sweettempered gunpowered didst unto dudst but it never stphruck your mudhead's obtundity (O hell, here comes our funeral! O pest, I'll miss the post!) that the more carrots you chop, the more turnips you slit, the more murphies you peel, the more onions you cry over, the more bullbeef you butch, the more mutton you crackerhack, the more potherbs you pound, the fiercer the fire and the longer your spoon and the harder you gruel with more grease to your elbow the merrier fumes your new Irish stew.

Footnotes

1 The term 'polyphonic novel' was created by the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, and used in his studies of Rabelais and Dostoevsky. It seems strange at first sight that Bakhtin never discussed Joyce, although both the concept of polyphony and that of the carnivalesque which Bakhtin developed are very relevant to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. However, the explanation seems to be that in the Soviet political climate of the time Bakhtin wasn 't free to write of Joyce.

2 Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper* (1968: Faber and Faber, p. 39).

3 Stanislaus Joyce, op. cit. p. 189.

4 Frank Budgen *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (1972: Oxford University Press), p.61

5 Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (1st Series), 1938: Penguin, pp. 148-51.

6 It must be conceded that Virginia Woolf didn't have the later episodes of *Ulysses* before her when she wrote the essay. However, her *Diaries* show that her reaction to the completed book was distinctly more unfavourable than her first responses in *'Modern Fiction'*. In spite of the professed emancipation of Bloomsbury, she was put off by Joyce's treatment of sexuality :

'And the pages reeked with indecency (Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 1953: Hogarth Press, p.363). Ulysse was altogether too earthy for her: 'When one can have the cooked flesh, why have the raw?'

(Ibid., p. 47). What must have seemed to her the 'refined sensibility' of Proust was more attractive to her.

7 S.L. Goldberg: *The Classical Temper* (1961: Chatto and Windus), p. 141. It must be said that here and in his shorter study, *Joyce* (1962: Oliver and Boyd), Goldberg, while deserving full marks for his recognition of the comic vitality of Joyce's art and its 'sane and joyful spirit', takes too little account of Joyce's break with the forms and purposes of the realist novel. It is revealing that he is dismissive of *Finnegans Wake*.

8 Or by what s/he writes. The letters that Nora Joyce wrote to her husband which are preserved in *Letters of James Joyce* are of such evident banality that many readers must have asked themselves what one of the subtlest and most original intellects of the century could have seen in so commonplace a mind. Such a question, however, would point to the questioner's simplified view of life rather than to the limitations of Nora Joyce.

9 In his letter to Frank Budgen after writing the 'Penelope' episode, Joyce said of Molly Bloom in German; 'Ich bien das Fleisch das stets bejabt' (I am the flesh that affirms). (Stuart Gilbert, *Letters of James Joyce*, Vol. 1, 1957: Faber and Faber, p. 170). This seems to imply a contrast with a line in Goethe's Faust where Mephistopheles says of himself, 'I am the spirit and denies.'

10 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (1959: Oxford University Press, P. 536).

11 Quoted from Suzette A. Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire* (1990: Routledge), p.264.

12 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited with an introduction by Jeri Johnson 91993: Oxford University Press). Perhaps for copyright reasons, it is the 1922 text that is reprinted, but all identifiable misprints are corrected in the notes. Because of the circumstances in which it was written and first published, there is in any case no singly definitive text of Ulysses (any more than there is of Shakespeare). Even the so-called text edited by Hans Walter Gabler and published in 1984, has been the subject of much scholarly controversy.

24

Wells After 50 Years: Science and the Faust Theme

An offering to Ashis Nandy

In the course of an essay on Satyajit Ray included in his book *The Savage Freud,*[1] Ashis Nandy draws a certain comparison between Wells, Ray and Rushdie. In all of them he finds 'a partitioning of the self' in their intellectual and creative work. I am not concerned in this paper to discuss Ray or Rushdie, so I will quote only what Nandy says about Wells as a starting-point for my own comments. Having recalled his discovery of Wells's science fiction as an adolescent in Calcutta in the '40s and '50s (he mentions in particular *The Time Machine, The Island of Dr. Moreau, The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds),* Nandy goes on:

> While all four novels intrigued me, two did something more; they jolted me out of conventionality. They made me aware that everyone in the world did not look at science the way my school teachers and parents did, or said they did. The criticism of science in *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was so direct and impassioned that it could not be ignored even by a teenager being constantly exposed to the then-new slogans about scientific rationality, being vended systematically by India's brand-new. youthful PrimeMinister. It was therefore a surprise when, more than a decade later, I began to read Wells on history and society. For I discovered that there was not a whiff of the criticism of modern science that I had confronted in my teens in his novels; there were criticisms only of the social relations of modern science. When Wells wrote on the political sociology of science self-consciously, as for instance in his *Outline of History* (1929), he was prim, predictable, and just like some of my teachers and relatives. This was disappointing at the time but also consoling in strange ways, for his criticisms of science *had* shaken me. [2]

Like Ashis Nandy, I was fascinated in adolescence by Wells's early scientific romances, and I am still fascinated by them. But my experience with them was different from his. I seem to remember that in my teens I read Wells's scientific romances around the same time as I read his expository writing. I probably got both out of the Colombo Public Library, where, rather than in any school, I have always insisted I was educated. But I was probably less acute than Nandy, and I don't think I was struck then by the contradiction between the imaginative and the didactic sides of Wells. It was only when in my forties I returned to reading Wells's scientific romances that I realised that here was an altogether different personality from the preacher of rational enlightenment in the expository works. But while agreeing with Nandy's finding of 'a partitioning of the self' in Wells's work, there's a qualification I want to make to it. This duality corresponded not only to the distinction between two genres of writing but also to a shift between one period of Wells's career and another. [3] All Wells's best scientific romances were written within just ten years. He was 28 when he burst on the reading public with the novelette *The Time Machine* in 1894, and 38 when he wrote the short story *The Country of the Blind* in 1904. And between them came four novels, *The*

Island of Dr. Moreau, The Invisible Man, The War of the Worlds and *The First Men in the Moon.*. Not only are these six works, to my mind, the finest things Wells wrote in any literary form; in them he was, as I shall try to establish, a considerable artist to whom critical justice has rarely been done.

In popular usage the term 'Wellsian' connotes a naïve optimistic faith in the possibility of human perfectibility through applied science, technological progress and the efficient organisation of society. Of course, there were several decades of his life when Wells devoted himself to the propagation of just such ideas. But not in his first creative decade - the decade of his early scientific romances. The paradoxical fact is that though the plot-mechanics of these romances are given a scientific garb, Wells is deeply sceptical, as the adolescent Nandy found, of the promise of applied science and the rational enlightenment to better the world and reorganise it so as to enthrone sanity and reason. The other paradox of Wells's writing is that in these writings of his first decade he is not only a more imaginative artist but also a maturer one than in his elder years. In the later Wells there is a rationalist impatience with human beings as they are, a desire to replace them as quickly as possible with a more acceptable, less fallible breed. And Wells in his utopias conjures too easily out of existence the fears, greeds and hatreds that are part of life as we know it, as if all human evil and suffering could be eliminated merely by the more intelligent administration of things. Of course, Wells was not the only figure of that time to look at life so simplistically. One finds the same naivety in many Marxist intellectuals of the period, even in so powerful an intellect as Trotsky, whose messianic vision of the future in his Copenhagen speech and the conclusion to his *Literature and Revolution* are truly Wellsian, in the ordinary usage of the term. The final sentences of *Literature and Revolution,* which climax Trotsky's vision of the classless society of the future, will indicate what I mean: 'The average human type will rise to the heights of

an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx. And beyond them new peaks will rise.' It doesn't seem to have occurred to Trotsky that there are other human qualities no less valuable than the intellectual, or that a world in which every human being was an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx would probably be quite intolerable.

But in Wells's youthful novels and stories there is no facile optimism, no simplified rationalistic view of human nature, no planned earthly paradises. His first work, *The Time Machine,* is a journey into the future, but not into any utopia. Never in his later years did Wells equal the fantastic and melancholy poetry of the last pages of *The Time Machine,* where the time-traveller looks out on the twilight of our planet from which sentient life has completely vanished:

> The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives -all that was over.
>
> As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after another, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black. A horror of this great darkness came on me...

It is no doubt only a coincidence that that last sentence should contain the two keywords of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* which was published eight years later. But the verbal

similarity is a reminder that Wells's vision in the early scientific romances was closer to the bleak mental landscape of *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* than to Wells's later utopian constructs. It's striking that his scientific romances were written in the heyday of Victorian and Edwardian complacency. Their effect is to uncover the disturbing and tragic possibilities concealed beneath the apparent security of things. Wells said later that at the time he was writing *The War of the Worlds* what most interested him was 'the vivid realisation of some disregarded possibility in such a way as to comment on the false securities and fatuous self--satisfaction of everyday life - as we knew it then. Because in those days the conviction that history had settled down to a sort of jog-trot comedy was very widespread indeed. Tragedy, people thought, had gone out of human life for ever'.

The apocalyptic scenes of the burning and destruction of London by the Martians and the mass panic of millions fleeing from the city must have seemed merely a bizarre fantasy to Wells's original readers. As Bernard Bergonzi has pointed out, Wells's imaginings were to become all too real in several great European cities forty years later - during the Second World War.

I should now like to follow through a recurrent theme in three of Wells's scientific romances - *The First Men in the Moon, The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau.* All these novels are variations on the age-old theme of Faust. The traditional Faust-figure sold his soul to the devil in return for the knowledge and power that magic would bring him, and was damned for transgressing the divine law. The central figures of Wells's three creations also pursue knowledge, divorced from social and moral ends, or directed towards command over their fellow-beings, and this pursuit dooms them to alienation and ultimately to destruction. Of course, it is science, not magic, that is the instrument of knowledge and power for Wells's characters; but the difference is less

fundamental than may appear at first sight. The Faust-legend was born out of the proto-science of the magi of Renaissance Europe, and in that era the line of distinction between magic and scientific experimentation was often unclear.[4] And even today the activities and operations of the contemporary scientist often carry a magical aura in the eyes of the layman. What the Renaissance magus and the modern scientist have in common is the will to mastery over nature, which has formed so crucial a part or the modern mythology of progress. In bringing the Faust legend up to date, Wells was confronting one of the most representative forces of contemporary civilisation.

Of the three books I have mentioned as exemplifying Wells's Faust-theme, *The First Men in the Moon* is the most limited, but it offers an unusual twist to the traditional pattern. In the original forms of the Faust-story the tragic hero seeks knowledge as the means by which to amass both power and wealth. In *The First Men in the Moon* Cavor, the discoverer of the anti-gravity substance he names Cavorite, is an unworldly scientist driven by the desire for knowledge as an end in itself. On the other hand his companion, Bedford, the narrator, is the practical man who is fired with enthusiasm for the project only when a tremendous possibility comes into his head:

> Suddenly I saw, as in a vision, the whole solar system threaded with Cavorite liners and spheres *de luxe.* "Rights of pre-emption" came floating into my head - planetary rights of pre-emption. I recalled the old Spanish monopoly in American gold. It wasn't as though it was just this planet or that - it was all of them. I stared at Cavor's rubicund face, and suddenly my imagination was leaping and dancing.

It's the fact that the Faustian desires for infinite knowledge, wealth and power have been split between Cavor and Bedford that makes the tragi-comedy of the book.

It culminates in the great moment when Bedford broaches to Cavor the idea he has just had:

> 'Here's gold knocking about like cast iron at home. If only we can get some of it back, if only we can find our sphere again before they do. and get back, then – '
> Yes?'
> We might put the thing on a sounder footing. Come back in a bigger sphere with guns.'
> Good Lord!' cried Cavor, as though that was horrible.

It's clear that in Bedford Wells was creating an image of the colonial conqueror; when he is intoxicated by the lunar mushroom, he even drools about 'The White Man's Burden' . But the drama of Cavor and Bedford has an even larger dimension of meaning. Cavor, disillusioned by Bedford's talk of guns and gold, reflects that he should have come to the moon alone. But the tragedy of Cavor is not merely that of the scientific idealist exploited by the ruthless man of action. Wells makes it clear that Cavor's obsession with knowledge as an end in itself, his complete ignorance and inexperience of the ways of the world. makes him the inevitable victim of Bedford. We are moved to reflect that that is the tragedy of all Cavors: they always become the tools of the Bedfords.

The Invisible Man is another variation on the Faust theme. Griffin pursues the secret of invisibility in the belief that it will bring him absolute power and unlimited freedom. To satisfy his thirst for knowledge, he steals and drives his father to suicide; but the secret, once discovered, only isolates him from his fellow human beings and makes him a hunted fugitive. The tragedy in the book is two-fold. There is the perversion of the hero, the exceptional genius, who becomes in the end an insane being driven by the spirit of hatred and revenge. There is also the transformation that the village of Burdock undergoes as a result of the coming of the Invisible Man, when the emotions of mass panic, hysteria and violence erupt above the surface of everyday normality. When I recall

these chapters today, they become associated in my mind with the memory of the panic and hysteria, also issuing in violence, in Colombo on Black Friday, July 1983.

In *The Invisible Man* the tragedy reaches its conclusion when Griffin is beaten to death by a mob of frightened people. When his body returns to visibility after death, it is only the reality of his naked, broken corpse that brings with it compassion:

> When at last the crowd made way for Kemp to stand erect, there lay, naked and pitiful on the ground, the bruised and broken body of a young man about thirty. His hair and brow were white – not grey with age, but white with the whiteness of albinism – and his eyes were like garnets. His hands were clenched, his eyes wide open, and his expression was one of anger and dismay.
> 'Cover his face!' cried a man. 'For Gawd's sake cover that face!'

In *The Island of' Dr. Moreau,* the hero is another figure who suffers the nemesis of the scientist's hubris, his pursuit of knowledge divorced from social and ethical ends. Dr. Moreau applies his knowledge of biology and plastic surgery to the aim of trying to transform the animals on his island into humans, regardless of the intense physical pain and suffering that the operation costs. He declares to the narrator Prendick:

> I tell you, pleasure and pain have nothing to do with heaven or hell... This store men and women set on pleasure and pain is the mark of the beast upon them, the mark of the beast from which they came... Pain and pleasure – they are for us, only so long as we wriggle in the dust.

Moreau is driven by an intellectual curiosity that has cast out every other emotion in him:

You cannot imagine what this means to an investigator, what an intellectual passion grows upon him. You cannot imagine the strange colourless delight of these intellectual desires. The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem.

But Moreau who idealises the pure intellect is also actuated by a hatred of the body and its passions, which he wishes to erase and destroy:

Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say: This time I will bum out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own.

But life takes its revenge on Dr. Moreau. In order to maintain his mastery over his half-animal, half-human creatures, Moreau is forced to rely on their lowest instincts of fear and servility. He has taught them a litany, which they chant in an ecstasy of mass fervour:

> Not to go on All-Fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?
> Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?
> Not to eat Flesh nor Fish; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?
> Not to claw Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?

Wells was obviously echoing the chants of Kipling's *Jungle Books,* but the litany of Dr. Moreau's subjects seems also a prophetic anticipation of the mass rituals of the totalitarian states. The similarity is not accidental, since Kipling's cult of blood and leadership in the more militaristic of his works has an affinity with the spirit of latter-day Nazism. Like the crowd in the stadium at Nuremberg, the Beast--People of Dr. Moreau chant their hymn to their deified leader:

> *His* is the House of Pain.
> *His* is the Hand that makes.
> *His* is the Hand that wounds.
> *His* is the Hand that heals.

Some admirers of Wells's scientific romances have claimed for him the status of a prophet because of his anticipation of certain technological inventions, but I think the more important kind of prophecy is his foreshadowing of Nazism and Stalinism in *The Island of Dr. Moreau.* Particularly striking, in relation to Stalinism, is the fact that Dr. Moreau, starting out with a vision of betterment, justified in rational terms, is then impelled to enforce it by coercion and irrationality.

The Island of Dr. Moreau is a powerful and sombre masterpiece, with disturbing resonances that become stronger as the book proceeds. When Dr. Moreau's experiment collapses and he himself becomes a victim of the surviving animal-instincts of one of his Beast-People, the inhabitants of the island, men and beasts alike, regress to animality. Prendick, the narrator, is rescued, and returns to the normal human world. But, like Gulliver returning from the country of the Houyhnhnms, he has been transformed by his experience: as Gulliver sees humans as Yahoos, so Prendick sees them as Beast-People. This haunting passage is the culmination of the book:

> I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast-People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that... I could not get away from men; their voices came through the windows; locked doors were flimsy safeguards. I would go out into the streets to fight with my delusion, and prowling women would mew after me, furtive craving men glance jealously after me, weary pale workers go coughing by me, with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood, old people, bent and dull, pass murmuring to themselves, and all unheeding a ragged tail of gibing children. Then I would turn aside into some chapel,

and even there, such was my disturbance, it seemed that the preacher gibbered Big Thanks even as the Ape Man had done; or into some library, and there the intent faces over the books seemed but patient creatures waiting for prey. Particularly nauseous were the blank expressionless faces of people in trains and omnibuses; they seemed no more my fellow-creatures than dead bodies would be, so that I did not dare to travel unless I was assured of being alone.

The short story *The Country of the Blind* doesn't turn on the Faust theme, but it does present the nemesis of the aspiration towards absolute power. The central character is a traveller who finds himself in a valley surrounded by high mountains which cut it off from the outside world. Perhaps through inbreeding, the people of the valley are all hereditarily blind. The traveller is elated: he thinks of the proverb, 'In the country of the blind the one-eyed is king', and confidently looks forward to making himself master of the place. The story works towards the ironic reversal of this expectation: through the pressure of collective opinion in the valley, which regards his possession of eyes as a deformity, he is brought to consent to being blinded. Only, on the eve of his prospective blinding, his spirit rebels, and he dies on the mountains in an effort to escape. As in *The Invisible Man,* we are confronted with the terrifying intolerance of mass opinion towards deviation from the ordinary .

Why is it that Wells's remarkable literary achievement in his first decade has gone largely unrecognised? The principal reason is that in Britain and the countries of the former Empire that have been influenced by British culture, literary intellectuals in general don't read science fiction, which they assume is stuff for boys and lowbrows.[5] Associated with this prejudice is the tendency to assume that Wells was the same kind of writer as Jules Verne, weaving plausible narratives out of actual possibilities of scientific

reality. Wells always strenuously objected to those who called him 'the English Jules Verne', and in the preface to a collected edition of his scientific romances he drew the line of distinction between them and Verne's fiction precisely. Of Verne Wells said that 'the interest he invoked was a practical one; he wrote and believed and told that this or that thing could be done, which was not at that time done.' But of his own stories Wells said: 'They do not pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination in quite a different field'.

Throughout this paper I have used the term 'scientific romances' to describe Wells's works in this genre, and that was Wells's own preferred term for them. In using it, he was quite accurately characterising their genre. 'Romance' is the word that Nathaniel Hawthorne employed in the preface to his *Blithesdale Romance* to describe a fictional work which created a world ruled not by everyday laws of plausibility but by an imaginative logic of its own. By adding the word 'scientific' Wells pointed to his own unique contribution to this form - the fact that he created his imaginary world out of some of the raw materials of modem science instead of the stuff of folklore, fable or mythology. Where Wells's imaginative invention runs counter to scientific law, it isn't because he has tried, like Verne, to get things right and failed but because that wasn't his real concern at all. Nobody needed to tell him that getting to the moon wasn't a simple matter of finding a substance that was opaque to gravity and covering the space-ship with it. Nor was he ignorant of the fact that if Griffin had swallowed a liquid that altered the refractive index of his body, he would not only have been transparent and therefore invisible, he would have become blind too.

In 1905, with *Kipps,* Wells turned to fiction of a different kind - the novel of lower middle-class social comedy, and he continued this vein in *Tono Bungay* and *The History of Mr.Polly.* These novels are minor work in the line of English comic

fiction that stems from Fielding, Smollett and Dickens, though they do acquire a certain personal quality from Wells's first-hand experience in childhood and youth of the level of social life he is writing about. It is by virtue of these three novels that Wells was admitted into the literary histories as an Edwardian novelist by critics who had ignored his scientific romances. It was also these novels that Virginia Woolf was thinking of when she downgraded Wells, together with Bennett and Galsworthy, in a famous essay on *'Modern Fiction'* in 1916. It's unlikely that Mrs. Woolf had read the scientific romances, or that she would have been impressed by them if she had. But there was a third phase to come in Wells's literary career. Through his involvement in the Fabian Society and with other causes such as world government, he was converting himself into a publicist and propagandist. His fiction then became an extension of his interest in the propagation and promotion of ideas. This shift was announced in an essay he wrote in 1911 on *'The Contemporary Novel'*:

> And this is where the value and opportunity of the modern novel comes in. So far as I can see, it is the only medium through which we can discuss the great majority of the problems which are being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development.
>
> You see now the scope of the claim I am making for the novel: it is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas.

Four years later he aggressively declared this view of literature to Henry James:

> To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use. I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it.

It was this conception of the novel as a means towards a social end, as a vehicle for the communication of ideas, that Wells put into practice in books like *The New Machiavelli* and *The World of William Clissold.* This trend in his work was associated with a progressive dessication of his art.[6] The last word on the later Wells as a novelist was said by D.H. Lawrence in reviewing *The World of William Clissold* for *The Calendar of Modern Letters.* Lawrence thought it was not a novel at all because it had 'none of the passionate and emotional reactions proper to a novel'; it was, he continued, 'all chewed-up newspapers and chewed-up scientific reports, like a mouse's nest.'

In 1900, during the great decade of his scientific romances, Wells had written to Arnold Bennett, in response to an inquiry about what he was engaged on:

> But that other stuff which you would have me doing day by day is no more to be done day by day than repartee or lyric poetry. The imagination moves in a mysterious way its wonders to perform. I can assure you that I am *not* doing anything long and weird and strong in the vein of *The Time Machine*, and I never intend to. I would as soon take hat and stick and start out into the street to begin a passionate love. If it comes – well and good.

'The imagination moves in a mysterious way its wonders to perform' – from that to 'I had rather be called a journalist than an artist' fifteen years later – that is the measure of the difference between the early and the later Wells. It seems to me that when in *The First Men in the Moon* Wells created his grotesque Selenites, with their over-

developed brains and shrunken bodies, he was unwittingly caricaturing his future development as a novelist.

Wells did intermittently return to science fiction in his later years, but these books lacked the life and depth of his earlier work, because they too were an expression of the didactic purpose.

Characteristic of his later writing in this form is *The Shape of Things to Come,* which served as a basis for a British film of the 'thirties. In it civilisation is devastated by a second world war but then rebuilt by a group of rational technocrats. In the last sections of the film the first manned spacecraft is launched; significantly, the opposition to this new triumph of technology comes from an artist impelled by a Luddite spirit. The last words of the film are: 'All the universe or nothingness? Which shall it be?'

But there was to be yet another shift to come in Wells's thinking. By the end of the Second World War, under the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he reached a state of despair with humanity and of disillusionment with the hopes of a rational society. It must have seemed to him that human history had taken a dark turning which brought to life the apprehensive imaginings of his early scientific romances. In the last year of his life he wrote a book titled *Mind at the End of its Tether* – in effect, a rejection of his earlier faith in the rational intellect. The wheel had come full circle. Yet, ironically, in popular parlance the term 'Wellsian' still stands for a creed that Wells didn't uphold at the beginning of his literary life and that he repudiated at its end.

Footnotes

1 Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism and the Partitioning of the Self, in Ashis Nandy, *The Savage Freud* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

2 Op. cit., p. 237.

3 I made some brief remarks on the lines of this paper to Ashis Nandy a few months ago, and he expressed a wish that I should write on Wells: this paper is a response to that wish. In writing it, I have cannibalised some parts of an unpublished paper read by me in 1966 at a symposium organised in Colombo to celebrate the centenary of Wells's birth. I should like to acknowledge the stimulus I have received in my critical thinking about Wells from Bernard Bergonzi's *The Early H.G. Wells* (1961). It was Bergonzi's book that sent me back in the 'sixties to re-read Wells's scientific romances.

4 This was also true of the proto-science of the Taoist sages of medieval China: see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation* in *China,* Vol. 2, especially pp. 83, 86.

5 Confirmation of this can be found in an observation recently made by John Sutherland regarding the Booker Prize: 'In the twenty-five years it has been running, no SF title, as I recall, has even been shortlisted.' (*London Review of Books,* 14 December 1995)

6 This is why I am inclined to dissent from Ashis Nandy's observation that 'the Wells of science fiction is not conceivable without the Wells of *The Outline of History,* (op. cit., p. 259)'. I think rather that one Wells was the reversal and impoverish ment of the other.

25

The Ugly Duckling

In an aside on the nineteenth-century poets in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Mr. William Empson remarks that "almost all of them exploited a sort of tap-root in the world of their childhood, where they were able to conceive things poetically." This remark can be applied with even more truth to the great writers of children's literature of the century. All of them suffered from some kind of abnormality which arrested their emotional growth and turned them back on their own childhood. Think of Edward Lear, the lonely and peevish old bachelor with his childish dependence on his man-servant; of Lewis Carroll, with his extraordinary fondness for little girls; of Stevenson, the life-long invalid, satisfying an unfulfilled desire for action by writing adventure stories; and finally, of Hans Christian Andersen, the subject of this article.

One may wonder, however, whether their aberrations were not a condition for the peculiar genius of these writers. If there had not been something of the child in Lear and Carroll and Stevenson, it is unlikely that they would have turned to children's literature as a means of self-expression. And of Andersen, too, it may be said that in some ways his fairy-tales were both an expression of and a compensation for the inadequacies of his real life.

"My life often seemed to me like a fairy-tale, so rich, so wonderfully varied as it had been," wrote Andersen in his autobiography;* and so, if we wish, we can read the story of his life. The poor shoemaker's son, who set out at the age of fourteen for the big city with ten rigadalers in his pocket and the ambition of becoming a great actor in his heart, who ended, after many struggles, by finding both fame and wealth as a writer, may well seem a figure out of one of his own tales.

But this fairy-tale hero does not represent the whole truth about Andersen the man. We don't need to read very deeply into his life to recognize that there was in it a great deal of frustration and melancholy. Andersen was an only child of poor parents; but his father came from well-to-do peasant stock. The older Andersen could remember the time when his family had come down in the world; misfortunes – cattle dying of sickness, a fire which burnt down the farm buildings – had ruined them, and driven his own father mad. Hans' father had then been apprenticed to a shoemaker, and though he grew up to make his living by this trade, he seems to have permanently suffered from the feeling that it was an occupation beneath him. We are told by Hans Andersen that when a boy from the grammar school once came into the shop for a pair of boots and talked about his studies, the shoemaker turned away with tears in his yes and the exclamation, "That is the way I should have gone!" There was Hans' old grandmother, too, who still preserved something of the lady, and told the boy stories of his family origins; while, in contrast – a visible reminder of the calamity that had overtaken their fortunes – there was the mad grandfather who terrified Hans as a child Then, when Andersen was eleven, a second blow struck the family; his father died, and his mother had to make her living as a washerwoman. Later, she took to drink.

The picture that we have from Andersen's depiction of his childhood is of a lonely and sensitive child in an

uncongenial environment, from which he took refuge in his own fantasies. "I was a strangely dreamy child," he says, "and when I walked about it was often as not with closed eyes." He mixed little with the other boys in school; at home, he withdrew into a little world of his own where he played with his toy theatre and made dolls' clothes. Even at sixteen, after he had gone to Copenhagen (he tells us), he was still playing with his dolls. It is not unnatural that in some of his daydreams he should have imagined himself to be a changeling, as so many lonely or unhappy children do. In Andersen's case, the fantasy must have derived further strength from his feeling that, but for his family's misfortunes, he should have been the child of richer parents. There was a girl in his school whose ambition was to become a dairymaid on a big estate. "You shall be that in my castle, when I become famous," he used to tell her though she only laughed at him. One day he drew a picture of his castle, and told her that he was a changeling, that he was in reality of noble birth, and that God's angels came and talked with him. The girl's response was unexpected and disconcerting: she told her schoolfellows, "He's mad, like his grandfather!" Again, there was an old woman who told him that the Chinese Empire lay straight below Odense, "and so I held it quite possible that on some moonlight night a Chinese prince might dig his way through the earth to us, and he would then hear me sing and take me back to his empire and make me rich and distinguished, and after that I should be allowed to visit Odense where I would live and build a castle; I spent evenings making drawings and plans of that castle."

It is easy to see the relation between these childhood castles-in-the-air and some of the stories Andersen wrote in later life. "In the folk-tale," he once said, "it is always Simple Simon who is victorious in the end." No wonder that the one-time shoemaker's son turned out many variations on this theme. Whether consciously or not, Andersen could readily have identified himself with the soldier in *The Tinder Box*,

with the tin soldier with one leg, with Little Claus, or with John in *The Travelling Companion.*

But the handicaps of his early life left some other and more disabling marks, too, on Andersen. In some way he never quite grew up. Like Lear and Carroll, again, he did not marry, though he had several intimate women friends. The great love of his life was a woman who did not return his feelings – the Swedish singer, Jenny Lind; and in his relations with her as well as with other women Andersen gave ample evidence of his emotional immaturity. The story which Andersen tells in his autobiography of his disappointment when Jenny Lind did not come to spend Christmas Eve with him is characteristic:

" 'You child!' she said, and smoothed my forehead with her hand. 'It never occurred to me, and besides, I was asked out. But now we will have a second Christmas Eve, the child shall have its tree lit up'."

If we study the records of Andersen's life, we shall find that he was abnormally sensitive and touchy; he had a childish desire for praise, but he was also quick to take offence when his writing was criticized. Dickens, who was a great admirer of his work, was exasperated by the man when Andersen came to stay with him in England; one day Mrs. Dickens had found him lying sobbing on the grass, clutching a newspaper containing a hostile review of one of his novels.

"In a little country", Andersen once wrote, "the poet is necessarily always a poor man, therefore honours is the golden bird he tries to catch." No doubt the disabilities of his early years strengthened Andersen's need to assert himself, to reassure himself continually that he was liked and that his work was admired. There is a story of Andersen called *The Shadow* about a scholar whose shadow gradually usurps his place, ending by marrying a princess and having the scholar executed. Behind the tale is, of course, the old folk-lore motif of the *Doppelganger*, but does it not also reflect the division in Andersen's own personality? He was both

the shy, retiring scholar of the story and the aggressive, vain climber who is his Shadow.

But not even fame and popularity as a writer could entirely assuage Andersen's deep-seated sense of emotional unfulfilment. It is significant that in one of his plays. *The Flower of Happiness,* he wanted to show (in his own words) "that it isn't the artist's immortal name, the glory of a crown that makes a person happy, but that happiness is found where you love and are loved in return." And beneath the immaturity of his relations with women, we sometimes have glimpses of normal feelings which have been violently repressed. "My blood is in a strong commotion," he wrote in his diary during a visit to Naples, where he was greatly excited by a girl who gave him flowers. "I feel a tremendous sensuality, and fight with myself. Is it really a sin to satisfy this powerful lust? Then may I fight it."

This fear and rejection of sex has probably something to do with the unpleasant streak of morbidity that is found in Andersen's writings. The world of Andersen is not as innocent as sentimentalists would like to think; in stories like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Girl who Trod on the Loaf* he dwells on cruelty, suffering and humiliation in a way that is unmistakably perverse. The autobiography suggests that his imagination, even in his childhood, was powerfully influenced by the morbid – by the frightening scenes in the lunatic asylum which he visited with his grandmother or by the public execution he saw as a boy. When he acted Shakespeare's tragedies in his toy theatre, he tells us, the more people died in a play the more interesting he thought it. But it is not only in the element of the horrific in his stories that there is evidence of a perversion of normal feelings. The mawkish sentimentality of *The Little Match-Girl, The Little Mermaid* and many other tales is the expression of an emotional hunger in Andersen's own life. One is reminded here of Dickens, in whose work, too, there is the same combination of the morbid and the sentimental. Dickens, like

Andersen, was psychologically maimed in childhood and never appears to have found any personal relationship which permanently satisfied him.

One of the marks of Andersen's failure to find a stable centre in his life was the compulsion he felt to travel. The autobiography is full of long and not very interesting accounts of his journeys abroad. One reason why Andersen was fond of traveling was undoubtedly the feeling he had for a long time that he was not sufficiently honoured in his own country. The praise he won from artists and public men outside Denmark soothed his hurt pride. But, apart from this, we may probably say of Andersen what Mr. Ray Murphy has said of Edward Lear, another great traveler: "Thwarted in his attempts to become a man, thrown back on childish things, he sought through travel to find the fulfillment of maturity that had been promised him in childhood, symbolized in a perfect relationship with another human being. Travelling for him was at once an escape from his inadequacy in relating himself to others and a search for another person who could bring himself to a mature happiness at last."

* * * *

I have already compared Andersen with Dickens; and it is no more possible to dismiss Andersen the writer as a psychological curiosity than it would be to treat Dickens in the same way. The remarks on Andersen the man in the first part of this article are not offered in any Hugh Kingsmill-like spirit; they are intended to suggest that not only Andersen's weaknesses as a writer but also his genius were intimately related to his personal disabilities.

It has often been noted by writers on Andersen that the tale of *The Ugly Duckling* is a perfect parable of his own life. When we read, for instance, about the companions of his early life who sneered at him because he was "different", we are reminded of the prosaic hen who laughed at the supposed duckling's strange longing to float on the water:

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "You've nothing to do, that's why you get these fancies; you just lay some eggs, or purr, and they'll pass off."

But there is an even deeper psychological truth contained in the story. Andersen was not only the ugly duckling who turned out to be a swan; he was also the swan who could not have been what he was unless he had first been an ugly duckling. The childhood fantasies of Andersen, the disappointments and frustrations of his later life which drove him back on this level of experience – these were the impulses behind his art, and without them he would not have been the same writer.

Andersen's greatness as a writer of children's stories is inseparable from his quality of style. It is a quality which is obscured in the inferior English translations of his tales and the innumerable adaptations of them which take, often silently, unwarranted liberties with his text. The right way to read Andersen is in a version by a competent translator made directly from the Danish (and not, as is common, at second-hand from a German translation). You can hear the real tones of Andersen's voice in the selection of forty-two stories by Dr. M.R. James and the English translation by Mr. R.P. Keigwin, published in Andersen's own hometown of Odense. It is good news that two volumes of the latter translation have now been made by an English publishing house, Messrs. Edmund Ward of Leicester. (Perhaps I should add that both these translations are beautifully illustrated, though in very different styles – Mr. Robin Jacques' drawings for the James version are full of lovingly worked detail, while the Keigwin volumes contain the original illustrations by Vilhelm Pedersen, which are spare and impressionistic.

From these translations you can see that to talk of "Andersen's voice" is not inexact, for his style is that of the narrator talking aloud. Andersen often used to try out his stories by reading them to some group of children or adults before he finally committed them to the printer. "It is easy,"

he said of his art of story-telling. "It is just as you would talk to a child." A pedantic contemporary critic complained about his work: "It's not writing, it's talking"; but that, of course, is one of the greatest virtues of Andersen's tales. Take some sentences from the first story that comes to hand, *The Tinder Box*, and you will hear the natural tones of the speaking voice:

Well, he met an old witch on the high road. She was ugly! Her lower lip hung right down on her chest.

Then he opened the first door. Lor', there sat the dog with eyes as big as teacups, and stared at him.

Then he went into the third room. No, now, that was awful!

The second point I wish to make about the stories as literature is that Andersen's distinctive genius is to be found not in the adaptions of folk-tales nor in the offspring of nineteenth-century romanticism like *The Little Mermaid*, but in the stories in which he expends his imaginative powers on the everyday objects of the middle class household. Tin soldiers and tops and tongs and tea kettles – all these and many other inanimate things acquire an abundant life in his tales. Here again is the child-like imagination at work, peopling the non-human world with human feelings and desires. And the fantasy is unusually vivid because Andersen can make us feel exactly what it would be like to see the world, say, through the eyes of a tin soldier:

Think of it! At the end of the culvert the gutter ran straight into a huge canal. For him it was as dreadful as for us to go down a great waterfall in a boat.

But Andersen's device of humanizing the inanimate can also be the instrument of satire. Here again Andersen has something of the quality of the child in his disconcerting ability to strip social shams and pretensions and expose the reality. He is the child who cries: "But he hasn't got anything on!" Andersen's melodrama and pathos are often heavy and excessive; but how sure and delicate, in contrast, is his

satirical touch when he deflates human vanity and pomposity by transferring them to something small and insignificant, like the Darning-needle, or the Beetle in the story called after him:

"You have, I suppose never been in the Emperor's stable?" asked the Beetle. "There there is both moisture and fragrance. That is what I am accustomed to; that is the climate for me, but it is impossible to take it with one on a journey. Is there no dung-heap in this garden, in which persons of quality like myself could lodge and feel themselves at home?"

The method is not very different from that of Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, and the comparison should suggest that Andersen's tales should not be consigned entirely to the nursery any more than *Gulliver*. It is a startling sometimes to return to a story of Andersen's which one imagines to be familiar from one's childhood and to discover in it entirely fresh meanings. What could most children make, for instance of the conclusion of *The Dauntless Tin Soldier?*

Then a door opened, the wind caught the dancer, and she flew like a sylph into the stove to the Tin Soldier, blazed up into flame, and was gone. The Tin Soldier melted down into a lump, and when next day the maid took out the ashes, she found him in the shape of a little tin heart.

From a passage such as this, it should be clear that Andersen is not merely a writer for children but, in some of the most interesting of his stories, an artist using the children's story as a form for the expression of his own themes and feelings. Andersen himself explained his method when he said: "Now I tell stories with all my heart, get hold of an idea for the older folks, and then tell a story for the young folk, remembering all the time that father and mother often listen, and we must give them something to think about, too!" To this genre belong such pieces as *The Lovers*, with its conclusion, beautifully poised between pathos and irony at the expense of romantic love:

So the Top got back into the house, and enjoyed great honour and attention; but nobody heard anything of the Ball, and the Top never said a word more of his old attachment. That's apt to disappear when the beloved object has lain for five years in a gutter and soaked; indeed, if one meets her in the dustbin, one doesn't attempt to recognize her."

Perhaps the most personal and most moving of all Andersen's stories is *The Fir Tree*, which seems to express the lack of fulfillment in his own life. The theme of the story is that happiness lies always in the past and the future; the Fir Tree is never happy, but it continually looks forward hopefully to the future and looks back regretfully at the past:

I heard it on the happiest evening of my life; but at the time I didn't think how happy I was.

Does this mean that happiness is an illusion, or would the Fir Tree have been really happy if it could have been content with the present? The Tree never has time to answer this question, and we may hazard the guess that for Andersen himself there was no certain answer. The conclusion of the story, with its melancholy refrain, reads like a wistful comment by the great teller of stories on his own life:

It was past and gone now: the tree was past and gone, and the story too. Past and gone! – it's the same with all stories.[1]

Community , November 1955

Footnotes

1 The extracts from Hans Andersen's autobiography are taken from the translation by Maurice Michael, published under the title of *The Mermaid Man* (Arthur Barker, 16s.) The quotations from the stories are given in the words of Dr. M.R. James' translation of *Forty-Two Stories* by Hans Andersen (Faber and Faber, 15s.)

MISCELLANEOUS

1

'Literature and Revolution': A Reassessment

Trotsky's literary criticism has undergone the same fate as his strictly political writings. Buried in unmerited oblivion or obloquy by his antagonists, it has been turned into an object of uncritical reverence by his adherents. Even Isaac Deutscher, though not an orthodox Trotskyist, was over-adulatory in the chapter on Trotsky as literary critic in **The Prophet Unarmed**.

Literature was certainly one of Trotsky's life-long and central interests. When, in the 1920's, a Soviet literary group complained that there were 'no Soviet Belinskys' (Belinsky was the great Russian critic of the mid-nineteenth century), Trotsky answered: 'If Vissarion Belinsky could be transported alive into our times, he would probably be ... a member of the Politbureau.' It is possible that Trotsky was thinking of himself in writing this sentence. He undoubtedly had some of the equipment for a 'Soviet Belinsky' – a keen sensitivity towards literature, a Marxist awareness of the interrelations between literature and society, and a rich and incisive prose style. But not only was his literary criticism fragmentary and occasional, as a marginal activity engaged in during moments of respite from his political life; it seems to me also a blend of brilliant and penetrating insights, blind spots and partialities of vision.

All the more reason why an objective and impartial assessment should be made of Trotsky as literary critic, and the present centenary would be an appropriate occasion. Writing in Sri Lanka, however, one cannot attempt this in a comprehensive manner, not having access to some of the essential material – for instance, the rare volumes of Trotsky's Collected Works published in Moscow in the twenties, of which two were devoted to his writings on literature and culture. That is why I have confined this article for the most part to his book on post-revolutionary Soviet literature – **Literature and Revolution** – which was his most sustained work of literary criticism.

In **Literature and Revolution** (1924) Trotsky was still writing as a member of the ruling group in the Soviet Union, and both non-Marxists and non-Stalinist Marxists have been favourably impressed by the liberalism of his stand on the question of party policy towards literature.

'The party exercises leadership in the working class but not over the entire historical process. There are some fields in which it leads directly and imperiously. There are other fields in which it supervises and still others where it can only offer its cooperation. There are finally fields where it can only orientate itself and keep abreast with what is going on. The field of art is not one in which the party is called on to command.'

While this pronouncement is still as valid as when it was made, Trotsky's estimate of the Soviet literature of the immediate post-revolutionary years appears now surprisingly wide of the mark: 'The arts have revealed a terrible helplessness, as they always do at the beginning of a great epoch.' Trotsky argued that the absorption of energies in political action had spared little for the arts, and drew an analogy with the barrenness of literature in the years of the French Revolution (an analogy adopted also by Deutscher).

I think, on the contrary, that in the Soviet Union the first decade after the revolution can be seen in perspective

to have been a brilliant period in the arts-certainly in literature, also perhaps (as qualified critics of these media have suggested) in the theatre and painting, while the cinema was about to blossom when Trotsky wrote of the 'helplessness of the arts' (**The Battleship Potemkin** belongs to the next year). Trotsky's analogy between the French and Russian Revolution is misleading. The immediate impact of the Russian Revolution on the arts was vivifying: the decline didn't come till the bureaucratic regimentation of the arts at the end of the twenties.

Why was Trotsky so depreciating in his view of post-revolutionary Soviet literature? A re-reading of **Literature and Revolution** suggests that this was due to a combination of different factors. However liberal his approach to literature may have been in comparison with that of his successors of the Stalin era, his judgments on some of the non-Marxist writers reflected the limitations of a political activist in the range of his sympathies and responses. Hence, perhaps, Mayakovsky's epigram on Trotsky: adapting the Russian proverb. **Pervyi blin komon** (The first pancake is a lump), he wittily turned it to **Pervyi blin narkomom** (The first pancake is a people's commissar), implying that even as a critic Trotsky couldn't help remaining a commissar.

On the other hand, Trotsky was too good a judge of literature not to look critically at some of the extravagant claims made for the pro-revolutionary writers in his own camp. Thus, on different grounds he tended to find both the revolutionary and the non-revolutionary artists unsatisfying. Specifically, as I shall suggest, he was wrong about Blok and Akhmatova, he was both right and wrong about Essenin, he was right about Mayakovsky, and he failed to take notice of Isaac Babel, perhaps the finest writer of prose fiction of the early Soviet period.

Trotsky devoted a whole chapter of his book to Aleksandr Blok (the only writer so honoured). Dismissing all Blok's pre-revolutionary poetry (a rejection which is too

sweeping), he hailed '**The Twelve** – that astonishing work written a few months after October, and drawing its life from the stormy life of the streets of post-revolutionary Petrograd. 'But nonetheless,' wrote Trotsky, "**The Twelve**" is not a poem of the Revolution. It is the swan-song of the individualistic art that went over to the Revolution.'

Trotsky found justification for this view in two elements of the poem. The killing of Katka by Petrukha, the Red Guard (Trotsky said 'Vanka', but that was an error: Vanka was the bourgeois officer) seemed to him an act of individual hooliganism which revealed Blok's failure to understand the sobriety and ascetic character of the revolution. And of the apparition of Christ carrying a red flag and marching ahead of the Red Guards, which climaxes the poem, Trotsky wrote: 'Christ belongs in no way to the Revolution, only to Blok's past.'

It seems to me that time has vindicated Blok's poem against Trotsky's criticisms. To Blok, who responded enthusiastically to October, a naïve idealization of the revolution was as alien as it must be to any genuine artist. In celebrating the heroism and self-sacrifice of the revolution in spite of the fact that Petrukha uses his rifle to settle a personal vendetta, Blok was conveying a realization of the fact that revolutions are made not by angels or supermen but by human beings with their imperfections and weaknesses.

Trotsky's reaction to the Christ figure at the end of Blok's poem reveals a similar incomprehension. He could see Christ only in terms of the exploiting character of organized religion and of the oppressive and reactionary political role of the Russian Church. But it is perfectly clear from Blok's poem that he set Christ **against** the Church: Christ at the head of the Red Guards (who don't see him and disown him) against the well-fed priest of the early part of the poem.

Perhaps today, in the light of the theology of liberation, we can appreciate Blok's insight better than Trotsky could.

But Blok's Christ-figure has behind him several centuries of Christian – and specifically, Russian Christian-history. Sergei Hackel's recent study of the poem has shown how consciously Blok underlined the fact that his Christ was the Christ not of the Orthodox Church but of many generations of Russian heretics, dissenters and rebels. Blok, neither Marxist nor Christian, effected in his poem the most significant literary confluence in modern literature between the two traditions.

In fairness it must be said that on Blok's poem Trotsky erred in the company of other early Soviet critics (e.g. Lunacharsky). Lenin too remarked rather ironically to an acquaintance that he couldn't understand the last two lines of **The Twelve** (the apparition of Christ). But on both critical points raised by Trotsky Soviet criticism of the post-Stalin era has shown a more just appreciation of the significance of Blok's masterpiece. On the eve of Blok's birth-centenary next year, **The Twelve** doesn't appear the 'swan-song' that Trotsky took it to be. A comment by Sergei Hackel, who calls it 'the poem of the Russian revolution', may be contrasted with Trotsky's analogy, in the literary sphere, between the French and Russian revolutions. 'The French revolution,' says Hackel, 'found no comparable spokesman: out of its throes no comparable masterpiece was born.'

Trotsky's account of post-revolutionary Russian literature assumes that the old culture of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie died with the revolution, while the rise of a new culture must be prepared for by the building of the material and social foundations for it: hence the contemporary hiatus in literature. (Unlike some other Soviet theorists, Trotsky contended that the new culture when it came into being would be 'classless' rather than 'proletarian').

Trotsky's view of the relations between class, individual literary genius and historical circumstances seems altogether too mechanistic, particularly when applied to a time of revolution and its immediate aftermath. It is characteristic of a revolutionary era that by rendering social

institutions and ideologies suddenly fluid, it creates the conditions under which the writer of genius can take a startling imaginative leap of thought, out-distancing his time. (Blake's poetry, written during one such revolutionary era, is a striking example.)

It can be suggested that Blok's **The Twelve**, as a visionary poem fusing past, present and future, was just such an inspired imaginative act made possible by the revolution. **The Twelve** was not, however, Blok's last word: at the end of the same month, January 1918, to which **The Twelve** belongs, he wrote **The Scythians** – a poem on which Trotsky was silent.

I have no space here to write about this extraordinary work in detail, but **The Scythians**, through symbol and historical analogy, in effect holds out to the 'old world' of Western Europe for the last time, the opportunity to embrace fraternally the Russian Revolution. But the poem also foreshadows in the event of this opportunity being missed, the withdrawal of the revolution into its national shell and the ascendancy of its Asian component over the European. ('We shall open wide our gates to the East,' wrote Blok in his diary at the same time.)

One can see why Trotsky ignored **The Scythians:** to his Eurocentric vision the poem must have seemed either meaningless or alien. Yet Blok the poet in a prophetic moment of insight saw more clearly the actual course of the revolution for the next few decades than the political theorist and man of action who was to be crushed by the very forces that Blok foresaw in his poem. A proof that the writer's imagination can run ahead of material reality!

In writing about the poet of peasant origin, Serget Essenin, Trotsky himself was to recognize that literature need not necessarily be limited in significance by the class and social context in which it is produced. In a memorial article in **Pravda** in 1926, shortly after Essenin's suicide, Trotsky did attribute the poet's weakness to his class background:

"he was uprooted from the past, and had not been able to sink his roots into the new times.' But, self-contradictorily, he went on to give a broader human value to Essenin's lyricism, suggesting that the suicide was the outcome of the thwarting of these lyrical impulses which Soviet society could not yet afford:

'His lyric spring could have unwound to the end only under conditions when life was harmonious, happy, full of songs, a period when there ruled as master not rough combat, but friendship love and tenderness.'

Trotsky looked forward to a fuller humanity of the future for whom these feelings would come into their own: 'The revolution, above all, will in lofty struggle win for every individual the right not only to bread but to Poetry'.

It is not easy to reconcile the limiting class analysis with the broader human value given to Essenin's work: what Trotsky was saying, in effect, was that Essenin would be fully appreciated only in the classless society of the future. What he was willing to claim for Essenin, however, he was not ready to concede to Anna Akhmatova (because the former was peasant and the latter bourgeois by birth?), though there seems to me no doubt that she was the greater poet. Trotsky referred to her as 'very gifted', but treated her poetry (at this time, mainly personal poetry of love) disparagingly as a survival of the past.

Trotsky couldn't in 1924 have foreseen the remarkable development that Akhmatova's writing would undergo in the 'thirties, especially in **Requiem**, where it became 'the mouth through which, a hundred million 'cry'. However already in 1923 Aleksandra Kollontai, feminist and Bolshevik, was more sympathetic to Akhmatova's work, recognizing that in her love poetry there was expressed the suffering of a woman over man's refusal to love her as an autonomous person. Kollontai found in this an explanation of Akhmatova's popularity with working-class women readers in spite of the fact that she was not a Marxist.

At the time of **Literature and Revolution** the most vigorous literary avant-garde consisted of the Futurists, whose most brilliant poet, Mayakovsky, was being boosted by some circles close to the ruling party as the laureate of the revolution, Lenin, whose literary tastes were strongly traditional, found the literary experimentation and iconoclasm of the Futurists uncongenial. Trotsky more modern in his tastes, was willing to recognize the merits of the Futurists' struggle against the old poetic vocabulary and forms. But he was not willing to accept Mayakovsky, as some other Soviet critics did, as the authentic voice of the revolution, because he saw in his work the expression of a flamboyant individualist who had insufficiently merged his personality with the collective struggle.

Trotsky's twelve pages on Mayakovsky represent his best writing as a literary critic. A few sentences must serve to indicate here their direction and their quality:

'The poet is too conspicuous – he allows too little autonomy to events and facts. It is not the revolution which wrestles with obstacles but Mayakovsky who displays his athletics in the arena of words, sometimes performing genuine miracles, but frequently lifting with heroic effort notoriously empty weights... It is impossible to out-clamour war and revolution, but it is easy to get hoarse in the attempt – Mayakavsky shouts too often where one should speak; and so his cry, where cry is needed, sounds inadequate.'

In their original context these observations are supported by what was being called at the same time in England 'practical criticism'. However, for Trotsky the words on the page are not the end of criticism: the examination of style and form is linked with the social analysis, the first being treated as illustration and confirmation of the second.

But Trotsky, who took an independent view of Mayakovsky, was more uncritical in dealing with the popular versifier Demyan Bedny, whom he described as 'the poet who, more than anyone else, has the right to be called the

poet of revolutionary Russia.' In Trotsky's praise of him the commissar overshadows the critic:

'Not only in those rare cases when Apollo calls him to the holy sacrifice does Demyan Bedny create, but day in and day out as the events and the Central Committee of the Party demand.'

The words were retrospectively to acquire a historical irony: in a few years, with Trotsky out of power, other versifiers were to write as the Central Committee of the Party demanded, and the results were to be much less to Trotsky's taste.

Lanka Guardian, November 1979

2

A Soviet Critic of Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky, so long under a cloud during the Stalin era, is today recognized in the Soviet Union as the great novelist he was. His approaching death-centenary in 1981 has been heralded not only by the massive scholarly enterprise of the 30-volume Academy of Sciences edition of his **Complete Works** but also by a number of critical studies which has come from Soviet publishing houses. One of the most significant of these – M. Bakhtin's **Problems of Dostoevky's Poetics**, of which a new edition appeared last year – is actually a reprint of a book which was first published in 1929 but became taboo shortly after.

Bakhtin was one of a group of young Soviet critics in the 'twenties who developed a more intelligent and fruitful Marxist approach to literary criticism than that of the later Stalinist school. One member of Bakhtin's group, V.N. Voloshinov, devoted a chapter of his main work, **Marxism and the Philosophy of Language**, to an examination of the Marxist theory of 'base and superstructure'. Voloshinov argued against the tendency to derive literary tendencies mechanically from the economic base (e.g. 'the gentry class degenerates, hence the "superfluous man" in literature'). **Marxism and the Philosophy of Language** also fell foul of Stalinist orthodoxy and disappeared from sight in the 'thirties, as did its author.

Another member of the Bakhtin group, P.N. Medvedev, criticized the practice of interpreting and judging works of literature by the ideological content which could be abstracted from them (the artistic elements being treated merely as a sweetening of the ideological pill). He emphasized that creative literature has its own specificity which could not be reduced to other forms of ideological expression. As he said:

'Literature enters into the milieu of ideological activity as one of its autonomous branches, occupying a special place in it as a set of distinctively organized verbal productions with structures of a kind specific and peculiar to such productions alone... In its content, literature reflects the ideological purview, i.e. other non-artistic (ethical, cognitive, etc.) ideological formations. But in reflecting these other signs, literature itself creates new forms, new signs of ideological communication; and these signs – works of literature – become a functioning part of the surrounding social reality. At the same time as reflecting something outside of themselves, works of literature constitute in and of themselves phenomena of the ideological mileu with autonomous value and distinctive character. Their functionality does not amount merely to the auxiliary-technical role of reflecting other ideologies. They have an autonomous ideological role and a type of refraction of socio-economic existence entirely their own.'

What Medvedev states in general theoretical terms is enforced in relation to particular works of literature by Bakhtin in his study of Dostoevsky – a writer who, more than any other of the great Russians, has been a controversial figure in Marxist eyes because of his reactionary political beliefs. It seems worthwhile to draw attention to Bakhtin's work because for too many Sri Lankan readers Marxist literary criticism is still synonymous with the crudely reductive theories of 'socialist realism'. Bakhtin was 'rehabilitated' during the post-Stalin thaw, and his book has

again been available in the Soviet Union since 1963; it is frequently cited in the Academy edition of Dostoevsky. An American edition in English translation appeared in 1973, but I haven't seen this, and my quotations from the book are rendered from the Russian text of the 1979 edition.

In a preface first written for the 1963 edition, Bakhtin clearly distinguished his approach from that of the Stalinist critics by an allusive reference to the latter:

'The literature about Dostoevsky has been predominantly devoted to the ideological problematic of his creative work. The transient acuteness of this problematic has concealed the deeper and more enduring structural elements of his artistic vision. It has often been almost completely forgotten that Dostoevsky was above all an artist (true, of a special kind) and not a philosopher or a publicist.' Bakhtin's claim for Dostoevsky is that he was 'one of the greatest innovators in the sphere of artistic form.' He distinguishes Dostoevsky's originality by calling him 'the creator of the polyphonic novel,' and he finds this polyphonic quality in the independent life of his characters:

'Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not submissive slaves (as Zeus does) but free beings, capable of standing up side by side with their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of revolting against him. The multitude of independent and disparate voices and consciousnesses, the genuine polyphony of voices, each given their full value, is indeed the fundamental distinguishing quality of Dostoevsky's novels.'

It followes from Bakhtin's characterization of Dostovesky's novels that to read them in the same fashion as we would his expression of his ideology in his propagandist or polemical works would be a serious error. Bakhtin demonstrates that the ideas that Dostovesky believed in as a thinker undergo a metamorphosis when they enter the world of his imaginative fiction:

'In fact, the ideas of Dostoevsky the thinker, entering into his polyphonic novel, change the form of their existence, are transformed into the artistic images of ideas: they combine in an inseparable unity with the images of people (Sonya, Myshkin, Zosima), are liberated from their monologic self-enclosed finality .. and enter into the great dialogue of the novel on completely equal terms with other images of ideas (the ideas of Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov and others).. Dostoevsky the artist, always gains the victory over Dostoevsky the publicist.'

Related to the independent life of Dostoevsky's characters, Bakhtin finds, is their 'incompleteness' – the fact that they do not appear before us as creations fully defined and limited by the author, but as beings containing within themselves the possibility of unfolding unexpected and hidden aspects of their existence :

'All of them feel keenly their inner incompleteness, their capacity, as it were, to grow afresh from within and render untrue any externalizing finalizing definition of them. As long as a man is still alive, he lives by virtue of the fact that he is still incomplete and has still not spoken his last word.. A man never coincides with himself. To him one cannot apply the law of identity: A is A.'

In this connection, Bakhtin quotes a remark from one of Dostoevsky's notebooks:

'To discover with full realism man in man .. I am called a psychologist: this is untrue, I am only a realist in the highest sense, i.e. I depict the depths of the human soul.'

Bakhtin points out that Dostoevsky's rejection of the term 'psychologist' for himself – a rejection that is at first sight surprising – must be related to the narrow and simplifying view of man offered by the psychology of his time. In reacting against this psychology Dostoevsky was also reacting against 'the impersonalisation of man, of human relations and of all human values under capitalism'; Bakhtin goes on:

'Dostoevsky, it is true, did not understand with full clarity the deep economic roots of impersonalisation; he nowhere, as far as we know, used the term itself; but it is precisely this term which better than any other expresses the profound significance of his struggle for man. Dostoevsky with great perspicacity was able to see the penetration of that impersonalizing devaluation of man into all the pores of contemporary life and into the very foundations of human thought.'

Lanka Guardian, May 1980

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New Light on Pasternak

I suppose to most people the name 'Lara' calls up the image of Julie Christie's face and the strains of that nostalgic melody that accounted for most of the popularity of David Lean's film. The real life Lara was, however, Boris Pasternak's long-standing mistress. Olga Ivinskaya, whose memoirs have now been translated and published in English as A CAPTIVE OF TIME: MY YEARS WITH PASTERNAK (Collins). The effect, as a TLS reviewer puts it, is rather as if Beatrice had done an exposé of Dante.

Mme. Ivinskaya shows Pasternak up as vain, lacking in moral courage and anxious to preserve his social position and his personal comforts. When he was around sixty, he underwent an operation for facial surgery in order to preserve his good looks. Moreover, when Mme. Ivinskaya was about to be discharged from a forced labour camp (a fate Pasternak never shared because he was too careful), he sent her a message saying that he couldn't retain her as his mistress if she had lost her beauty during her years of imprisonment!

There has been a long-standing story that Pasternak 'let down' his fellow-poet Osip Mandel'shtam when the latter was arrested, in 1934, for writing and circulating privately a satirical poem about Stalin (Mandel'shtam is believed to have died in Siberia in 1938). In her remarkable memoir of her husband's last years (translated into English as HOPE

AGAINST HOPE), Nadezhda Mandel'shtam exculpated Pasternak of this charge. Mme. Ivinskaya now gives us her own version of the story.

According to her, a fortnight or so before his arrest, Mandel'shtam ran into Pasternak on the street and recited to him the 'Stalin' poem. Pasternak reacted with panic: 'I didn't hear this. You didn't recite to me... Let us make out that I heard nothing'. When Mandel'shtam was arrested and Bukharin interceded on his behalf, Stalin 'phoned Pasternak to consult him on Mandel'shtam's literary standing. According to Mme. Ivinskaya, Pasternak's reaction was such that Stalin put down the phone, saying, 'I see, you just aren't able to stick up for a comrade.'

All in all, the West a couple of decades ago made a bad choice when it picked Pasternak as an anti Soviet hero (Solzhenitsyn later had the greater courage of his convictions, however obscurantist some of them were). Mme. Ivinskaya holds it against Pasternak that in the 'Zhivago' affair, he acted 'spinelessly' in recanting, though she admits that she and others helped to prevail on him to do so. She is convinced that he acted as he did in order to preserve his literary contracts which were needed to maintain the comfortable life-style to which he was addicted.

I think, however, that DR. ZHIVAGO was, in any case, not worth being martyred for. Twenty years ago, at the height of the Nobel Prize furore, I read the novel in order to find out what all the fuss was about. I rather congratulate myself on my endurance and tenacity in having stuck through it to the end, because DR. ZHIVAGO seems to me one of the world's most unreadable novels. It is one of the twentieth-century Russian novels unfortunately inspired by the ambition to produce an epic on the WAR AND PEACE scale which the writer has neither the social experience nor the sense of novel-structure to sustain.

In a recent critical study entitled PASTERNAK (Cambridge University Press) Professor Henry Gifford admits the imperfections of DR ZHIVAGO as a novel, but makes larger claims for Pasternak as a poet. To me these claims too appear largely unfounded. Pasternak seems to me a good minor lyric poet, but nothing he wrote has the breadth, the penetration into the central experiences of his society, that characterize Blok's THE TWELVE or Anna Akhmatova's REQUIEM – the two peaks, for me, of twentieth-century Russian poetry. Nor does Pasternak's work have the personal heroic strength of the last poems of Mandel'shtam, because Pasternak simply did not have that kind of courage and resilience. He could not have written, as Mandel'shtam did, this poem to Stalin, with death staring him in the face (I quote Clarence Brown's translation):

> You took away all the oceans and all the room.
> You gave me my shoe-space in earth, with bars round it.
>
> Where did it get you? Nowhere.
> You left me my lips and they shape words, even in silence.

Where I do agree with Professor Gifford is that Pasternak was a great translator of poetry. As with Ezra Pound, his technical gifts and his feeling for language showed themselves to best advantage in acting as the transmitting medium for a content already given by a greater poet. Pasternak's versions of six of Shakespeare's tragedies will probably survive among the world's great translations (his HAMLET and LEAR were used by Grigory Kozintsev in the two finest Shakespeare films made anywhere). I must confess that I sometimes find myself even preferring some of Pasternak's lines, in their Pushkin-like brevity and pregnant simplicity, to the Shakespearean originals. As when he renders Cleopatra's words on the verge of death:

I am fire and air; my other
elements
I give to baser life –
as (I translate literally back from the Russian):
I am air and fire, All else
I leave to dust.

Lanka Guardian, January 1979

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Neruda and the Coup

And one morning everything blazed:
one morning bonfires
sprang out of earth
and devoured the living:
since then, fire,
since then, gunpowder,
and since then, blood

Those lines come from a poem of Pablo Neruda about the military insurrection of Franco which overthrew the Spanish Republic, an event which Neruda saw at first hand as Chilean Ambassador in Madrid. The experience of the Spanish Civil War changed Neruda's outlook, converted him to Communism, and transformed his poetry from the subjective aestheticism of his early years to the social and political commitment of his later work. Neruda's best poetry is not merely ideological: his identification with the working-class goes with his respect for and intimate feeling for human toil, for the beauty and creativity of labour, in such poems as *To Wash a Child* or *Ode on Ironing* or the lines in one of the tenderest of his love sonnets:

My girl, you have kept your heart of the poor,
your feet of the poor is accustomed to stones,
your mouth which did not always know sweets or bread.
You are of the poor South, where my soul came from,

In her heaven, your mother still washes clothes,
together with mine. That's why I chose you, comrade.

There was a dramatic and tragic appropriateness in the fact that Neruda should have died in the lurid light cast by another 'bonfire' – the military coup in his own country which overthrew the Salvador Allende regime. Neruda was already ill when the coup took place, but the national tragedy undoubtedly hastened his death. What follows is a translation of an extract from a letter written in Spanish by Allende's sister, Isabel Allende de Soto, describing Neruda's death and funeral – an event which became in effect the last political demonstration possible in Pinochet's Chile.

The military leveled to the ground the house of Isla Negra and overturned everything. His collection of shells, conches, of butterflies and bottles, his books. The only thing they respected was the room where he lay. A hundred and fifty soldiers turning over the things he loved so much, which had been his inspiration. When they left, Pablo Neruda was seriously ill. In the night Matilde took him in an ambulance to Santiago. He was in his death agony for more or less four days while continuing to write and the last words of the man who had sung of life and love were: 'They are going to shoot you!' He was in delirium. None of his friends could reach him, for they were all outlawed, hunted, fugitives or prisoners. Matilde and some intellectuals carried him to the house on the San Christobal hill to watch over his body. The house had been literally destroyed. The neighbours said it was the military. The army denied the news and said that it could have been done by extremists who wanted to project an unfavourable image to the outside world. The blue house stood with its interior burnt, its furniture broken, the floor shattered, the glass panes in fragments. Amidst the debris and the dust, the coffin of the laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature was watched over by those few who dared to come, while cameramen from all parts of the world filmed and photographed it all.

At the door were armed soldiers whom Matilde fiercely refused to allow to enter the house. The Swedish ambassador, tall, aristocratic, dressed in severe mourning, and deeply moved, mounted guard beside the coffin. People were weeping. There were wreaths of red carnations, for it was already spring and these flowers were in bloom. The next day too dawned grey, as if the sky also was in mourning. Many cars arrived with people who had a certain immunity, distinguished writers, intellectuals, Professor Lipchuts, some diplomats and many journalists, especially foreigners.

The cortege passed slowly down the street to the General Cemetery. A little before arriving there, people got off their cars and walked several blocks at a slow pace. Apart from those, only a few people were to be seen; I calculated that at the most there were three hundred people or less. Soldiers with machine-guns cordoned off the street and the square, and surrounded the cemetery.

People were walking in silence. Suddenly somebody shouted, 'Comrade Pablo Neruda'! and everybody answered in a hoarse cry. 'He is here: now and always!' It was as if a valve had been opened. The cries swelled in tone. From Pablo Neruda's name they went on to shout 'Comrade Salvador Allende!' and a single terrible voice, like that of a man crying, shook the crowd which was walking. 'He is here!' step by step the funeral of Neruda was converted into a symbol. Beside me the cameramen from Swedish Television were filming everything – the machine-guns, the faces of the people, the hearse, the people who appeared in the windows of houses, the crowd near the morgue who were reading the lists of their dead. 'Comrade Victor Jara!' and everybody answered 'He is here!' Then they shouted: 'The united left will never be defeated!' and other slogans. With fists raised high they sang the Internationale loudly with their eyes full of tears, with the machine-guns pointed, trembling, in the hands of the soldiers who seemed as much images of death, although they too have a heart which feels, fears and admires.

I have never felt more fear. My stomach contracted in pain, but I could not have left the crowd and escaped from danger. I suppose that they would not have opened fire on the flower of the Chilean intelligentsia and on the diplomatic corps, but a single conscript who lost his head and fired would have been fatal. As we passed by one building, the workers stood in line and solemnly removed their caps. At the J.J. Aguirre Hospital many doctors and nurses also stood beside the cortege. An old lady who came up to me said:

'No, I have seen him only once in my life, but I came to his funeral because with him we are burying the last cry of freedom.'

A man, old and poor, who seemed a trade-union leader, with several teeth missing, recited loudly the most revolutionary verses of the poet, with tears streaming down his cheeks. I was crying with all the anguish and the fear accumulated for so many days, and I understood one thing: if Neruda had died three weeks earlier, he would have received the homage of the whole people, a mausoleum, national mourning, and flags at half-mast. But Neruda knew to die just as he knew to live. He died at the time when his death became a symbol, a cry. No homage, absolutely none, could have had the solemnity and the grandeur of that small procession, on a grey morning, in which a few men and women went to bury him in a temporary grave, calling out for the last time before the barrels of the machine-guns, his poems of liberty and justice.

Lanka Guardian, 1978

5

A Borrowed Tongue

In 1935 the poet W.B. Yeats (who had in an earlier period of his life written an admiring preface for Tagore's **Gitanjali**) began a letter to William Rothenstein with: 'Damn Tagore ... Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought.' Yeats's generalization seems plausible until one realizes that Tagore, born into a privileged family in Calcutta, probably learned a good deal of English in childhood.

Certainly for English-educated Sri Lankans of my generation, the language 'learned in childhood and ever since the language of their thought' was English. Indeed, Sri Lankans brought up in this way used to pride themselves on their superior mastery of English, as compared with that of Indians, Pakistanis or Africans. Yet this proficiency and inwardness with the English language were not matched by anything like the comparable achievement in creative writing in English that Yeats' observation would have led one to expect. Why?

I have recently been reading a good deal of contemporary Indian poetry in English, and have been struck by the fact that some of the most original and accomplished work is by poets who also write in their native languages – for instance, Arun Kolatkar, who is a poet in both Marathi and English, or Kamala Das (Malayalam and English). This

is a phenomenon that has hardly been paralleled in Sri Lanka. The late Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, one of the rare exceptions, wrote poetry in two languages – but less convincingly, I think, in Sinhala. (I used to think that what seemed to me the dense fog of his Sinhala poetry was due to my own inadequacies as a reader until I found Prof. Wimal Dissanayake saying, in a recent number of **Navasilu**, that he couldn't understand some of it too.) On the other hand, Dr. Sarachchandra's recent attempts at writing fiction in English don't seem to be characterized even by the verbal grace which is the redeeming feature of his Sinhala novels.

The question, 'Why write in English?', has had a simple answer for most Sri Lankan writers in English because they had no choice anyway: it was the only language they could write in. The other answer that has sometimes been offered – that through English one can communicate with an international audience – seems to me at best a rationalisation, for the more normal mode through which a national creative literature communicates itself to an international readership is through translation. It is noteworthy that Arun Kolatkar or Kamala Das would probably have a different answer to give to the question, 'Why write in English?' One could work out the answer if one could compare their English poetry with their writing in Marathi and Malayalam. As it is, I can only speculate that the sophisticated ironies of Kolatkar's **Jejuri** or Kamala Das's frank expression of passion and sensuality go more readily into the borrowed tongue, but I may be wrong.

But returning to our own situation, we have the paradox that Sri Lankans of the privileged classes in the colonial and immediate post-colonial era could make their mark on the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, could use the English language with assurance, elegance and expressive force in parliamentary debate, the law courts, administration, journalism and academic life, but produced no outstanding creative writer in English. I should like to suggest that the seeming paradox was not a paradox at all.

It seems to me that the linguistic mastery of English-educated Sri Lankans went with a complete induction into English culture which was disabling when they attempted to use the language as a creative instrument to deal with the life around them. It is revealing that the better Sri Lankan creative writers in English have been lyric poets – Patrick Fernando, Yasmine Gooneratne, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha – because it is possible for a lyric poet to evolve a personal language and to maintain an individual relationship with a tradition of poetry in a foreign language. But a novelist needs more than that: his language has to be capable of reflecting the inner life and the social and personal relations of characters very different from himself.

Even in a monolingual culture, the novelist may fail to transcend the barriers of class dialect and linguistic usage, and in such a case unfamiliarity with or incomprehension of a way of using a language is in effect a failure in knowing a way of life. Think, for instance, of the inadequacies shown even by great novelists like Dickens or George Eliot in presenting working-class life (in **Hard Times** and **Felix Holt**), where the failure is revealed most manifestly in the unreality of the speech. But the problems are all the greater for an English-educated writer of fiction in Sri Lanka where all but a small segment of the population speak, in the most complete sense, a different language from his/her own.

The barriers are most evident when Sri Lankan novelists in English try to write about the village (and many of them have sought to do so, perhaps in an effort to overcome their own sense of uprootedness). Even in the most highly praised of these writers, Punyakante Wijenaike, I find in the prose a betraying quaintness and false poeticality when it seeks to express the thoughts and feelings of peasant characters. This, for instance, is a woman talking in **The Waiting Earth:**

'And then yet again at times he would come in the night and fall upon me with the strength of two men who had been starved of a woman for many years. And yet while he

used me thus I knew his mind was elsewhere, on another woman, for he would stroke my face tenderly and whisper soft words he had never before whispered to me... Time after time it was my poor bruised body that lay suffering in silence in the dark.'

Neither idiom nor image nor rhythm is true to real speech, and the contrived literariness of it would be even clearer if one translated it into Sinhala. Strangely (or not so strangely perhaps) the peasant dialogue in **The Village in the Jungle** by the foreigner Woolf stands up much better to this test.

Whether one can expect to create a tradition or a substantial body of fiction in a foreign language seems to me doubtful. The West Indian case is not relevant to our own because English in the West Indies has become the language of the whole community and has been transmuted into the linguistic expression of another culture. Even the Indian and African successes in English-language fiction are fewer than is often claimed (Narayan seems to me very slight – the English habit of describing him as 'Chekhovian' is proof of how little the English have understood Chekhov – while Raja Rao is downright bad, precious and self-consciously manipulated).

A parallel with the situation of the English-speaking strata in Sri Lanka is that of 19th- century Russia; which was not a colony but whose aristocracy and upper classes spoke French. Readers of **War and Peace** will remember that the upper-class characters speak to each other in French and even pronounce Russian names with a French accent, just as their counterparts here anglicized Sinhala and Tamil names; and Tolstoy even said once that there were Russian who would be incapable of feeling the emotion of love if they were forbidden to think about it in French. Nevertheless, the great creative flowering of Russian literature in the same century was in the native language and not in French.

I am not trying to identify the position of Sinhala or even Tamil with that of 19th-century Russian – the language of a great empire and a vast nation – but it seems to me obvious that the mainstream of creative expression of the life of our country will continue to be in the national languages – just as in India, where there is nothing written in English that can compare with the best short stories of Premchand or with Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara*. There is a handful of Sri Lankan poetry in English and a smaller handful of short stories that I have read with pleasure (Sita Kulatunge's story, *The High Chair*, is the newest addition to their number), and I should be happy to greet the unlikely miracle; of a great Sri Lankan novelist in English if he/she were to appear.

Lanka Guardian, July 1979

6

Maname, Rekava and 1956

Maname and Rekava – works whose twenty-fifth anniversaries were recently celebrated – have generally been accepted as turning-points in the Sinhala theatre and Sinhala cinema respectively. I should like to take another look in this article at the reasons which gave these productions their special significance at the time they first appeared. **Maname, Rekava** and 1956: this dual coincidence prompts speculation. Is it only a coincidence that these two works which marked a new departure, each in its own field, should have been produced in the same year, and that a year which was important in the political and social history of the country? I have no doubt that Professor Sarathchandra and Lester James Peries did not intend consciously to respond to the changes of 1956 but were following their personal creative impulses. I don't know when the conception and composition of **Maname** began, but work on **Rekava** must certainly have started before the political overturn of April 1956. However, it is not to this political event as such that I am trying to relate **Maname** and **Rekava** but rather to the broader cultural and social forces which lie behind the political change of 1956. Moreover, whatever the time of their conception, **Maname** and **Rekava** in the last months of 1956 reached audiences whose consciousness had already been affected by the socio-political changes of that year.

Contemporaneous critical responses to the two works (I was myself among the first-night reviewers) concentrated

on the significance of their revolution in form. **Maname** was praised for its success in adapting a traditional form of the folk drama to the contemporary theatre, **Rekava** for the actuality with which it captured the indigenous rural landscape and life on celluloid. Looking back over a quarter-century, I think it is possible to see that the formal innovations of **Maname** and **Rekava** acquired significance for their original audiences and critics because they corresponded to the quest for national roots that was an important motive force in the Sinhala nationalism of 1956.

In the first part of this article, I want to discuss Lester's **Rekava** in the light of of this general proposition.

Realism is a notoriously indeterminate and therefore critically perilous word, and when the early critics of **Rekava** praised it for its realism, they may not have been very clear about what they meant by this term. Seeing **Rekava** today, however, when much more has happened in the tradition of Sinhala cinema that the film made possible, one can see both the scope and the limits of the film's 'realism'. The realism of **Rekava** is not in any important sense a social realism, as is evident if one compares the film with what its maker was to achieve seven years later in **Gamperaliya**. Its representation of rural life does not probe deeply the social relations of the village: it does not relate the personal drama of its characters to wider realities as **Gamperaliya** does. There is an unexamined notion of village 'superstition' as that which makes possible the acceptance of Sena as a healer, his later rejection and revilement by the village, and the final reconciliation: that is all.

I have just been looking at what I wrote about **Rekava** in the **Sunday Observer** after the first screening, and I note that this is what I found important in the film.

'And so, in the very first few moments of **Rekava**, you realise that you are in an entirely different world from that of the Sinhalese film upto now. We are no longer watching preposterous puppets animated by synthetic emotions: this

is life itself... What Lester Peries has done is to tear down the artificial barriers that the Sinhalese film industry has erected between the screen and the real life of our own people.'

In 1956 I was probably unaware of the large assumption I was making in that facile phrase, 'life itself'. However, the response behind that statement was real and, as far as it went, legitimate. For what I was responding to was the formal realism of the film, which in 1956 contrasted so startingly with the established current of Sinhala film derived from commercial Indian cinema. Instead of painted sets there were real locations; instead of heavy make-up, declamatory dialogue and extravagant gestures there were ordinary faces and naturalistic acting. This was the necessary first condition for the growth of Sinhala cinema as art, for before the film could attempt to grapple with social actuality, it had to be established that the material of cinema was the real world and not one of melodramatic fantasy.

Why was it significant that this cinematic revolution should have taken place in 1956? Looking again at my first review of **Rekava**, I find that I said there:

The story of **Rekava** is a village story (it is significant that, with only one exception, as far as I know), our "national" film-makers, have hitherto ignored the setting in which the great majority of the people of this land live.'

My reference to 'one exception' must have been to Sirisena Wimalaweera's **Podi Putha.** In later years there was a tendency among some 'nationalist' Sinhala critics to claim that **Podi Putha**, and not **Rekava**, should be accorded the title of the first authentically Sinhala film. (This estimate of **Podi Putha** will not survive a fresh viewing of the film; in spite of its village story, Wimalaweera was still addicted to the larger-than-life styles of acting and even to the studio sets of the Madras cinema. (I remember a conversation with him when he was interviewed by the Film Commission of 1962: asked why he used painted sets, he said that even a

flower artificially made in a studio could be more beautiful than a natural flower).

The formal realism of **Rekava** as a film made in village locations did not make it immune to questions about the authenticity of its portrayal of village life, particularly by Sinhala-speaking critics, in 1956 and after. It was evident that what upset them (apart from unimportant details) was the unflattering portrayal of the village in its persecution of Sena. I have seen critics saying that **Rekava** inaugurated the idyllic picture of village life in the cinema. That isn't true, in spite of the visual loveliness of the landscapes in **Rekava**, and some of the original reactions to **Rekava** confirm this. Three years later, **Kurulubedde** – a film clearly stimulated by the innovations of Rekava – presented a view of the village much more in keeping with the idealizations of the Colombo poets. Whatever the original reservations of some Sinhala nationalist critics, **Rekava** soon came to be accepted as the prototype of realist Sinhala cinema. I remember that at the sittings of the Film Commission in 1962-63, many witnesses cited **Rekava** (often, rather incongruously, in the same breath with **Podi Putha** and **Kurulubedde**) as a model of the better Sinhala cinema they wanted in opposition to the dominant Madras-Bombay influenced current. These were, of course, the years in which the reaction against the commercial Indian cinema was expressing itself. In retrospect it seems to me that this movement was one in which film - goers and film critics concerned with developing the Sinhala cinema as artistic expression, commercial producers of Sinhala films anxious to increase their takings, and anti-Tamil and anti-Indian ideologists joined forces: nor were the artistic, financial and racist considerations always clearly distinguished from each other.

To those filmgoers and critics who were oblivious of the cinematic differences between **Rekava** on the one hand and **Podi Putha, Kurulubedde** and (later) **Sikuru Tharuva** on the other, the village subject of **Rekava** and its lyrical

pastoral images may have recommended themselves as being in consonance with the post-1956 quest for roots in a traditional Sinhala way of life, of which the pristine simplicity of the village was, of course, the central myth. The fact that **Rekava** (as I have already pointed out in the first part of this article) did not, in its picture of human relations in the village, really endorse this myth may not have prevented some people from projecting their own nostalgic impulses on to the film.

However, it seems to me that there is another element in **Rekava** – actually the strongest in the film – which would have lent itself more readily to identification with the traditional quest. The emotional centre of **Rekava** lies really in the mother-son relationship: the villagers are swept by varying currents of feeling – sometimes kindly, sometimes brutal – but the human centre remains constant in the bond between mother and son. That this is the most powerful element of the film is due not only to the strong performance of Iranganie Serasinghe and the spontaneity of the boy's playing but also to the fact that the film touches here what is clearly closest to Lester James Peries's own artistic sensibility. The traditional relations of the family were in fact to be the mainsprings of Lester's cinema throughout his career. It is here, and not where some critics have tried to locate it – in the pastoral theme – that I see what Lester is most strongly attached to and what he can do best. The warm, intimate attachments of the family, 'rooted in one dear, familiar place' that is the heart of his cinema. Of course, the tensions and contradictions of family life are not absent in his work, but it is characteristic of his art that the family bonds usually survive and reassert themselves, whatever the strains to which they are subjected. Perhaps the most representative and the most moving example is that moment in **Gamperaliya** when as Nanda sadly watches Jinadasa going away, Anula (who had by her quarrelling precipitated the departure) comes up to her sister and puts an arm round her in a silent caressing gesture of sympathy.

It may be that in the recently completed (and not yet released) **Kali Yugaya** Lester has explored for the first time the total disintegration of family relations under the impact of money, but the theme acquires all the more poignancy in the film because of the continuing reminder of the traditional relations and values of the family, which continue to be alive in the memory and conscience of the characters. The difference is clear if one looks, for instance, at the work of Dharmasena Pathiraja, to whose characters family life is either alienating and repelling (as in **Ahas Gawwa**) or non-existent or meaningless (as in **Para Digey** and **Soldadu Unnehe**).

But to return to **Rekava**, I think the deeply rooted emotional bond between mother and son represents that elements in the film where Lester is closest to the traditionalist elements in Sinhala culture, and it would have played an important part in making the film acceptable as 'authentically Sinhala' in the post 1956 years. One sees, in fact, how close **Rekava** in this respect is in its values to the popular Sinhala cinema against which Lester was reacting in his cinematic form, style, setting and plot. Part of Lester's achievement in **Rekava** was to strip the melodrama, the ham-acting and the operatic extravaganza away from the reality of the mother-son relationship in the Sinhala peasant family and present it in its emotional purity. That is why, though **Rekava** was in advance of popular taste in 1956 in its stylistic and cinematic elements, it was not too far ahead of it in emotional content to be the beginning of a new tradition of Sinhala cinema.

Looking back on my first night responses to **Maname** twenty-five years ago (I articulated them a few days later in a review in the *Ceylon Daily News*), I recall that what struck me most forcefully in the play was Prof. Sarathchandra's breakthrough in theatrical form. This was not only my reaction: it was also that of several other early critics of the play.

The University Sinhala Dramatic Society had in the forties and early fifties presented adaptations of European dramatists–Moliere, Gogol–as well as Prof. Sarathchandra's original play, **Pabavati**. The mode of these plays was that of light domestic comedy, and the linguistic idiom that of urban middle-class speech. This was true even of **Pabavati**: although its subject was legendary, the tone and idiom were such as to make the characters seem to have come out of a Colombo middle-class household. In these plays what the stage presented was a mildly caricatured version of the social world of the audience, for the playgoers who came to Sinhala drama and King George's Hall were a bilingual urban middle-class group – a subset, so to speak, of the audience which went to the same hall to watch the productions of Prof. Ludowyk.

It has often been said that through **Maname** Prof. Sarathchandra was able to appeal successfully to every class of theatergoer and to bring a new audience into the Sinhala theatre. But I think it is necessary to define more exactly the social composition of this new audience and the precise extent to which **Maname** broke down the class distinctions in audience tastes.

Nobody thought twenty-five years ago of making a sociological study of the theatre audience. But from my impressions of the spectators who came to performances of **Maname** in its early years at the Borella YMBA and Lumbini, I would hazard the guess that the new audience of 1956 and immediately succeeding years was composed predominantly of urban lower middle-class Sinhala speaking people. It seems to me unlikely that, in those years at any rate, the Sinhala theatre was able to reach out to any significant extent to social groups beyond the middle class. However, the broadening of the theatre audience by **Maname** in 1956 was a significant phenomenon, for while the Sinhala speaking lower middle class may in previous decades have gone to Tower Hall or Jayamanne plays, they hardly came to King George's Hall.

What **Maname** effected then was to give the bilingual artists working in the theatre – Prof. Sarathchandra and those who came in his wake: Gunasena Galappaththi, Dayananda Gunawardena and Henry Jayasena – an opening to the Sinhala-speaking lower middle class. In the socio-cultural climate of 1956 this process was assisted by the fact that **Maname** and the form it brought to the contemporary stage was a renewal of a traditional form of the Sinhala folk drama. Apart from the intrinsic dramatic achievement of **Maname** – its undoubted success in fusing action, words and music – part of the appeal that the play had to audiences and critics was in its rediscovery of an indigenous folk tradition; it was in consonance with the climate of Sinhala cultural revivalism in and after 1956.

It is significant that in much of the critical writing of the period **Maname** was contrasted with the 'hybrid form' of the **nurtiya**. 'Hybrid', perhaps, in its incongruous mixture of different theatrical conventions: but underlying the use of the word, there was also probably an allusion to the fact that the origins of the **nurtiya** were foreign – the Parsi theatre and, behind it, a debased transmission of the influences of European opera. **Maname**, in contrast, was felt to be a growth out of the native soil, and this facilitated its acceptance in 1956.

The fortunes of what came to be called the 'stylised theatre' after **Maname** and its viability today are large questions which I don't propose to discuss here. What I have tried to show in these articles is that, even though Prof. Sarathchandra and Lester James Peries were following their personal creative impulses in **Maname** and **Rekava**, they were also in resonance, whether consciously or not, with wider cultural urges and strivings, and that the relation of these two works to the general social and cultural context of 1956 helps to explain why they were to able to serve as turning-points in the Sinhala theatre and cinema.

Lanka Guardian, Jan.1982

7

For Voyeurs Only

From the fact that several Sinhala films have recently been given 'Adults only' certificates by the Public Performances Board one may get the impression that our cinema is growing up. Though one can't equate adulthood in the cinema with adultery, the readiness of film-makers to explore hitherto forbidden themes, and the willingness of censors to permit them would be a welcome sign of the growing maturity of the Sri Lankan cinema – provided certain conditions were satisfied. For genuine moral emancipation in the cinema is not merely a matter of daring in the choice of subject-matter.

The film-maker who takes up the tabooed subject but hasn't the intelligence and courage to question the repressive moral norms of our society is not liberating his audience but indulging in a titillating sensationalism which is (to use a phrase of Lawrence) 'all the more vicious because it is always ostensibly on the side of the angels.' This kind of work is ultimately conservative in its effects. While making gestures in the direction of enlightenment and emancipation by choosing unconventional themes (and earning box-office dividends in doing so) it serves actually to reinforce entrenched prejudices and dominant social values.

Tissa Abeysekera's two films, *Karumakkarayo* and *Mahagedera*, are good examples of the kind of cinema I am talking about: superficially daring in their content, they are so strongly pervaded by a fear and hatred of female sexuality

that what they do in fact is to strengthen the ideology of male domination which is deep-rooted in our culture. (In the case of *Mahagedera*, the anti-female intention of the film was explicitly confirmed by an advertisement for the film, which used a Buddhist text to underline its message of the deceitfulness of women.)

The immediate subject of this review, however, is a new film, *Malate Noena Bambaru*, which has received much advance publicity as the first Sinhala film to take as its subject a homosexual relationship. A truly honest and courageous film on this subject would have been something to be welcomed, because of the wide gap between conventional moralistic attitudes in Sri Lanka towards adult homosexuality and the understanding that contemporary psychology has brought to such relationships. We can no longer, in the light of the knowledge we have today, treat homosexual relationships as 'abnormal' or 'perverse', since it has been shown that an element of bisexuality is to be found in the sexual emotions and behaviour of most 'normal' people, so that instead of thinking in terms of heterosexuality and homosexuality as being rigorously exclusive, we should rather speak of a cline in which one shades into the other.

What is possible, at least in the more liberal-minded sections of the Western mass media, to combat moralistic biases against homosexuality, was exemplified by a TV programme shown here a few months ago – one of the 'Crown Court' series from British TV. (In passing, I should like to say that this series is among the rare good imports from foreign TV that we have had: it is admirable in the intelligence and critical sense with which it treats the law and human relations.) The particular programme to which I am referring presented a lesbian relationship not only frankly but also sympathetically: on the other hand, it gave an unfavourable picture of the domineering male (the husband of one of the two women) who was trying to coerce his wife into coming back to him.

One doesn't expect that kind of liberated morality from a Sri Lankan film on homosexuality at present. (nor would it get past the censors if it took such an attitude). But we have at least the right to ask that a film-maker who chooses this subject shouldn't reinforce the traditional irrational biases of his audience towards it. Alas, this is just what *Malate Noena Bambaru* does. One's misgivings are aroused in advance by the title: the metaphor, as a friend remarked to me, already suggests a preconception that homosexuality is unnatural, just as a *bambara* who refused to go to a flower would be. The film bears out these anticipations. The central character is an ageing homosexual who is involved in a relationship with a young man: his neglected wife meanwhile tries to satisfy her desires by seducing a young male servant. When the young man in the homosexual relationship decides to marry a girl, his male lover is left in isolation and loneliness, and his deepening despair leads to a bloody climax.

The great majority of the audience of *Malate Noena Bambaru* will come to the film with the assumption in their minds that homosexuality is unnatural, depraved and evil, and they will go back with these assumptions fully confirmed. The ageing homosexual's relationship with the young man is from the beginning presented as morbid, gloomy and guilt-ridden, though he is rich, free from social constraints, and not shown as in any way suffering from ostracism or moral condemnation. Clearly, therefore, the guilt and gloom under which the character labours is a projection of the script-writer's and director's own conviction that homosexuality is wrong, which have made them load the moral dice.

The cinematic treatment of the two unorthodox sexual relationships in the film creates perpetually a sense of something unhealthy, furtive and dirty: it is significant that the director several times cuts away from the shots of the characters in physical intimacy to a peeping, voyeuristic figure, putting the audience themselves in the position of being voyeurs. Set against these two relationships is the idealized figure of the young man's wife – loving, dutiful

and submissive, and thus redeeming her husband – a glorification of the 'normal' marital relationship. In the homosexual relationship, on the other hand, there is no love but only lust, power, domination and cruelty (though we know in fact that there can be homosexual love and there can be domination and cruelty in the married life).

This contrast is further underlined by the enlistment of the customary populist values of the Sinhala cinema (the morally depraved rich vs. the virtuous poor). The homosexual and adulterous scenes are set in the mansion of the older man, the relationship between him and the young man being played out in its dark and gloomy interiors, while the wife's seduction of the servant takes place in the garden, thickly overgrown with trees and plants: both interior and exterior settings create a morbid, claustrophobic effect. On the other hand, the marital relationship between the young man and his wife is placed in a modest lower middle-class environment (the young man's family has been financially dependent on the elderly homosexual), and the young wife's constant preoccupation is with her father-in-law's *kasaya*. In terms of the stereotypes of the Sinhala cinema, the audience's responses are predictable: homosexuality and adultery are depravities of the rich alien to good, kasaya-drinking ordinary folk.

Malate Noena Bambaru, in short is an unbalanced film which betrays its own pretensions. One other aspect of the film intrigued me: the story is set in a Christian milieu and the film is pervaded by the sound of church-bells, though nothing inherent in the story compelled such a setting. Are we to take it that such 'abominations' as the film presents would be impossible in a Buddhist setting? Whether intentionally or not, the film will lend itself to this interpretation, and thus alienate the majority of its audience further from sympathy towards its main characters.

Lanka Guardian, January 1983

8

Race in Cinema – a Note on Sinhala Responses

The most valuable piece of writing that could be done about **Sarungale** would be, not a film review, but a survey of responses to it by the Sinhala mass audience. Since I don't have the resources to attempt this, I have done the next best thing: I have tried to gauge from published criticism and from the reactions of Sinhala friends and acquaintances some indication of the range of responses that the film has elicited. Neither the critics nor those with whom I have personally discussed the film are, of course, representative of the Sinhala mass audience, but that makes some of the reactions I encountered all the more revealing and significant. Not all responses were adverse by any means, but I shall deal with those that were, and offer my own comments on them.

One of the depreciating remarks about the film that I came across (particularly among critics of a 'progressive' persuasion) was that it didn't probe the socio-economic causes of racialism. This is, of course, true as a simple statement of fact. The nearest **Sarungale** gets to a comment on the general problem of racial conflict is in Nadarajah's remark that people are good, and it is only 'third-class politics' that has corrupted them. This is the character talking, not the director or script-writer, but it seems to be consistent with the film's own presentation of racial politics as an alien intrusion into the

otherwise harmonious relations between Nadarajah and his Sinhala neighbours.

To think of people as good and politics as bad is, of course, naïve (where did the bad people who created the bad politics come from, and how did they corrupt the good?). But should one reject **Sarungale** because it doesn't offer a penetrating political study of racialism? I, for one, am glad that Sunil Ariyaratne and Gamini Fonseka (it seems safe to assume that the latter had more to do with the film that even the credits suggest) didn't even attempt to treat racialism in its economic or political dimensions. Not only because a film which did this with real understanding couldn't have got past the censors, but also because I don't think Sunil and Gamini could have brought such an endeavour off anyway. That doesn't mean that I underestimate the significance and importance of what they have done. Any honest discussion of **Sarungale** has to start from the recognition that it is a humane and courageous film, and that in daring to tackle the hitherto tabooed subject of racial relations its makers have set an example that should be both a reproach and a stimulus to other artists of the cinema.

But more disturbing than the devaluing of **Sarungale** on political grounds is the fact that some people – among them, even some middle-class intellectuals-thought that the film was 'unbalanced' in its treatment of racial conflict. Where was this unbalance to be found? In the fact that we saw Sinhala racialists on the screen but no Tamil ones. On the level of film criticism, this argument may be met by saying that it is based on the application to a feature film of criteria that are really relevant to a documentary.

If Sunil Ariyaratne had been making a political documentary about racialism in Sri Lanka, he should, of course, have juxtaposed Sinhala and Tamil racialists, and his film would have been unbalanced and partial without this. But in a film whose central character is a Tamil clerk who becomes a victim of Sinhala racialism, and whose action in

present time is all in Colombo (I shall come to the Jaffna flashbacks in a moment) it would have ruined the unity and narrative structure of the film to cut away from the Colombo scenes of communal tension to racialists on the rampage in Jaffna (which is presumably what the objectors wanted). Does one demand of a feature film about Nazi persecution of Jews that it should also depict reactionary Zionists to be 'balanced'?

I said this was the answer I would give in terms of film criticism, but it seems to me that something more important than aesthetics is involved here. I suspect that the criticism of **Sarungale** as 'unbalanced' conceals a real if unconscious sense of wounded chauvinism, and shows how deep these feelings can run, even among middle-class intellectuals. For what else can explain the fact that these critics failed to see the real and admirable balance the film maintained between the Colombo scenes in present time and the Jaffna scenes in flash-back – the balance between the racial violence that Nadarajah suffers and the caste violence that he has already inflicted on his sister and her lover?

This juxtaposition not only prevents the film from turning into a black-and-white study (without it Nadarajah would have been the saint or god the kasippu dealer and his wife see him as). It also sets one kind of inhumanity of man to man against another, and greatly broadens the scope and social awareness of the film. Against the view of those who chauvinistically reacted against **Sarungale** as 'pro-Tamil'. I should like to point out that the strongest moral reaction the film evokes is against the behaviour of a man, gentle and peace-loving by nature, believing in racial amity, who not only defends caste discrimination on religious grounds, but beats his sister's lover brutally and drives her to suicide. In fact, the film's portrayal of this situation is neither pro-Tamil nor anti-Tamil: it is a revelation, full of insight, into the complexities of human behaviour under the distortions of social conditioning.

I find equally admirable in its perceptiveness the portraits of the kasippu-dealer's wife, full of goodwill towards Nadarajah in normal times but at the crisis only concerned that her husband should keep out of trouble, as well as of Nadarajah's friend and fellow-clerk who shamefacedly avoids him so as not to run any personal risk. These characterizations are disturbingly real in their depiction of the way in which simple 'good' people can and do behave in times of racial conflict.

I don't maintain that **Sarungale** is free of artistic faults (to mention only the most serious, Nadarajah's meeting with his former love in the café at the time of the riots is a contrived coincidence, rendered even more unconvincing by its stagey dialogue). But any criticism of **Sarungale** seems to me niggling if it doesn't recognize that the film's failings are greatly out-weighed both by the intrinsic significance of its subject and its measure of actual cinematic achievement. Its greatest asset is, of course, Gamini Fonseka's splendid performance, whose virtuosity is much more than a matter of speaking Sinhala with a Tamil accent and Tamil (I am told) fluently and accurately. He has transformed his whole personality and bearing for the part, and he creates with marvellous consistency and reality the slow speech and movements of an ageing and lonely man whom life has passed by. But here again, it is not only of artistic achievement that I would speak, but also of the healthy shock for the Sinhala mass audience of seeing their most popular screen male idol playing the part of a Tamil. When the time comes to draw up a balance-sheet of Mr. Gamini Fonseka's career, his role in this film as well as his part in conceiving its story and theme will have to be set strongly on the credit side against all the bad films in which he has played and his right-wing politics.

Lanka Guardian, May 1979

BOOK REVIEWS

1

The Flavour of Nut and Apple

The appearance of *Twenty Years A-Growing* in the World's Classics[1] seems a good occasion to introduce readers who do not already know it to this remarkable and, indeed, unique book. First published in 1933, it is the autobiography of a man who – let Maurice O'Sullivan speak for himself in his own idiom:

> *I am a boy who was born and bred in the Great Blasket, a small truly Gaelic island which lies north-west of the coast of Kerry, where the storms of the sky and the wild sea beat without ceasing from end to end of the year and from generation to generation against the wrinkled rocks which stand above the waves that wash in and out of the coves where the seals make their homes.*

Maurice O'Sullivan (or Muiris O Suileabhain, in his own language) wrote his book in Irish: it was translated into English by two people who knew him personally and figure in his narrative. Moya Llewelyn Davies is described by Mr. E.M. Forster in his introductory note as having been "in close and delicate touch with the instincts of her countryside"; Professor George Thomson is well known as a scholar of Greek and the author of a notable study of the social origins of Greek drama, *Aeschylus and Athens.*

I have described *Twenty Years A-Growing* as an autobiography, but it is much more: it is an expression (perhaps the last) of a whole way of life, recreated with such vividness that it comes alive for us, thousands of miles away, as we read these pages. We already know something of the Irish folk culture from the plays of Synge; but Synge, however, sympathetically he regarded this way of life, was a conscious artist, looking at it from outside. Here, in *Twenty Years A-Growing*, is the same civilization making itself articulate in its own voice. We have elsewhere, in song, poetry and tale, the anonymous expression of many folk communities, but *Twenty Years A-Growing* is the creation of an individual belonging to such a community, and that is why it is unique. Of course, in saying that Maurice O'Sullivan belonged to a folk community, I am implying that his book is more than the work of an individual merely: behind it is the experience "not of one life only, but of many generations." Nor can *Twenty Years A-Growing* be called a literary creation in the same way as the work of a writer in a modern community. Maurice O'Sullivan wrote for his own amusement and that of his friends, and without the slightest trace of conscious artifice. To compare the prose of his narrative with his own conversation and that of his fellow-islanders recorded in the book is to see that he wrote just as he spoke. In the cadences of his prose we hear the rhythms of living speech; it is a style which comes as naturally to him as breathing:

> *It was growing late. The sun was sinking on the horizon, the dew falling heavily as the air cooled, the dock-leaves closing up for the night, sea-birds crying as they came back to their young, rabbits rushing through the fern as they left their warrens, the sparkle gone out of the Kerry diamonds and a lonesome look coming over the ravines.*

The freshness of his writing comes from a man whose senses are keenly alive, who responds intimately and without any self-consciousness to the natural world around him. With

all its simplicity the prose has the richness and metaphorical life of folk speech, the quality which Synge described in a memorable phrase when he spoke of a language "as fully-flavoured as a nut or an apple".

> *Away we went down the roads, leaping now as light as goats, we were so fresh after the meal. The sun had gone down in the west after bidding farewell to the big world, sheep-shearings in the sky overhead, the old men of the parish stretched out on the top of the cliff giving their breasts to the fragrant sea air and talking together after the day, a heat haze here and there in the bosom of the hills moving slowly among the valleys, a colt whinnying now and then and asses braying.*

In such writing we can surely savour the quality of the culture of which it is the fruit. I think Mr. Forster is very misleading when he says in his interesting introductory note *that the book is "an account of Neolithic civilization from the inside." The Great Blasket may have been technologically not much more than "Neolithic", but it would be wrong to think of it as "primitive" in any other sense. In the quality of its living, it was clearly superior to many societies which are economically more advanced. Even without Professor Thomson's statement in his preface, we can discern from the book itself that it was a community which had a rich tradition of folklore, poetry, song and dance, and in which these arts were a part of daily living. Maurice O'Sullivan's description of his grandfather's singing which he heard as a child is worth quoting:*

> *Leaning his cheek on his hand, he struck up 'Eamonn Magaine', and there is no doubt but he was a fine singer in those days. Listening to him as he came to the end of each verse, I felt a shiver of delight in my blood, and it is no wonder, with the sweetness of the song and the tremor of his voice. Every word came out clearly. I did not understand the meaning of the words, but the other part of the song was*

plain to me – the voice, the tremor, the sweetness. There was not a sound from anyone, only the cricket which had not ceased its own music in the hearth.

The common speech of the islanders is a repository of traditional wisdom, handed down from generation to generation – like the tag which gives the book its title:

Did you never hear how the life of man is divided? Twenty years a growing, twenty years in blossom, twenty years a-stooping and twenty years a-declining. Look now, I have a saying you have never heard.

It is this heritage of oral tradition which has gone into the making of the book. Professor Thomson tells us that O'Sullivan was subject to only literary influence: "When he was a boy, a copy of Gorky's *My Childhood* found its way into the Island. He read it, and it made a deep impression on him." That is easy to understand, for not only was the world of Gorky's childhood not very different in many respects from the society of the Blasket, but there is in Gorky's great book a sensitive observation and a warm humanity which must have gone straight to O'Sullivan's heart.

In *Twenty Years A-Growing* there is no sentimentalizing over the life of the Island: such an attitude would have been possible only for a literary man coming to it from outside. There is coarseness and brutality, too, in O'Sullivan's picture of the Great Blasket (as there is in the world of Synge's plays); but the main impression we are left with is of the strength of a life "rooted in one, dear, perpetual place."

The Great Blasket was a small community (it numbered only a hundred and fifty people at the time the book was published) and, therefore, a genuine community. The reactions of one of O'Sullivan's childhood friends when he first crossed over to the mainland and saw the crowds going to the Ventry races is illuminating:

"Oh, mo leir, aren't there many people in the world!" 'When we came in sight of the parish of Ventry, Tomas was lost in astonishment.

"Oh, Maurice, isn't Ireland wide and spacious?"

When the narrator himself leaves the Island as a grown-up man and makes a railway journey to Connetaara, his feelings are of bewilderment at the confusion and bustle of this unfamiliar world:

"Oh, the confusion on the platform, my head split with the terrible roar throughout the place, boxes thrown out of the train without pity or tenderness, big cans, full of milk as I heard, hurled out to the hard cement. Very good, said I to myself, isn't it often I was complaining of the fishermen at home making a rush to leave the quay when there would be a heavy sea, but, indeed, there is the same rush on them here though there is neither swell nor breakers. Why all the haste or where is the tide coming on them? Great God of Virtues, the chatter and gabble of the people!

The attitude of a rooted community to the world outside is summed up in a phrase which recurs twice in the book (it is quite clearly another scrap of folk wisdom). It is the phrase used both by the Wanderer speaking of himself and by the grandfather in greeting O'Sullivan on his return to the Island.

"Musha, my heart," said he at last, laughing "it is many a savage dog and bad housewife you have met since".

Even while Maurice O'Sullivan was recording its final phase, this small localized community was dying. We hear continually in the book of emigrations to America forced by poverty – America which to the Irish peasant was almost a fairytale world:

I looked at the edge of the sky where America should be lying, and I slipped back on the paths of thought. It seemed to me now that the New Island was before me with its fine streets and great high houses, some of them so tall that they scratched the sky; gold and silver out on the ditches and nothing to do but to gather it.

It was George Thomson who pointed out to the narrator the illusoriness of this notion:

If you want the history of America look at the Yank who comes homes; think of his appearance. Not a drop of blood in his body but he has left it beyond. Look at the girl who goes over with her fine comely face! When she comes home she is pale and the skin is furrowed on her brow. If you noticed that Maurice, you would never go to that place.

But the process of emigration goes on, and when the author returns to the island from the Irish mainland at the end of the book, he finds a decaying community:

There was a great change in two years – green grass growing on the paths for lack of walking; five or six houses shut up and the people gone out to the mainland; fields which had once had fine stone walls around them left to ruin; the big red patches on the Sandhills made by the feet of the boys and girls dancing – there was not a trace of them now.

In his preface Professor Thomson tells us of his own hopes for the regeneration of this community:

The creeping paralysis of depopulation and decay is liable to be overtaken by other changes that are sweeping across the world today; and in that event there will arise out of the infinite suffering involved in the dispersal of this fine people a new Ireland replenished by her exiles and their children returning from overseas.

Others may not be able to share Professor Thomson's Marxist faith that the "changes that are sweeping across the world today" will necessarily be for the good. But that should not diminish our gratitude to him for having helped to preserve, in this translation, so fine a monument to a vanished civilization.

Community, October 1954

Footnotes

1 *Twenty Years A-Growing*, by Maurice O'Sullivan, rendered from the original Irish by Moya Llewelyn Davies and George Thomson with an introductory note by E.M. Forster (Oxford : World's Classics).

2

Poetry in Performance

One reason why poetry has become a minority and elitist art in industrialized and urbanized capitalist cultures is that it has become entirely dependent on the printed page. For in all earlier cultures, wherever poetry was a living and popular art, it was closely bound up with oral communication and performance. When poetry ceases to be recited, chanted or sung to an audience, and is read only by the solitary reader in his study, when performance is entirely superseded by silent reading, the sense of rhythm – which is so vital for poetic communication – ceases to be alive for the common reader, and often for the poet himself. Hence, in Britain, Western Europe and America today, poetry has tended to become an esoteric and specialized art through which the poet communicates to a small circle of initiates.

That these processes have not taken place to anything like the same extent in the Soviet Union – in spite of urbanization and industrialization – I attribute to the fact that communal participation in cultural activity has been kept alive by the new social institutions. Poetry readings are a popular occasion in the Soviet Union in a way that they are not in the West, while the absence of a cleavage between a serious elite culture and a commercialized mass culture means that ordinary Soviet readers are more likely to develop a response to poetry than their counterparts in the West.

To those readers who think of poetry only in terms of the printed page and of individualist expression, **The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry** is a valuable reminder that the greater part of the poetry written during human history the world over has been different. Moreover, it serves to exemplify the truth that (in the words of the editor of this anthology) "unwritten poetry can offer much that, at its best, can parallel the written poetic forms so much more familiar to those brought up in a literate culture."

The anthology offers a selection of oral poetry from thirteen cultures ranging from Gond, Mongol and Malay in Asia, Somali, Yoruba and Zulu in Africa, to Pueblo and Eskimo in America; also included are Irish and English oral poetry. To us in Sri Lanka this anthology should be particularly valuable in offering a rich store of material that can be used in the classroom to introduce young students to poetry. The value of the popular ballad means of acquainting young people with the elements of poetic structure and language in simple and easily recognizable form has long been established. But why should we in Sri Lanka, in the English classroom, confine ourselves to **Lord Randal** or **The Wife of Usher's Well** merely because these are regarded as appropriate material for British students? In our own context, the Scots ballads offer both linguistic and cultural obstacles which sometimes detract from their simplicity of form as a means of introducing poetry.

I think some of the folk poems reprinted in this anthology would be much better suited to the backgrounds of Sri Lankan students beginning to read poetry in English. The striking selection of Gond folk poetry from India placed at the beginning of the book not only comes from a culture which has a natural and social background not remote from our own but is also very moving and powerful poetry even when read on the printed page. The best of it, in fact, is like the classical Chinese poetry translated by Arthur Waley and others in its simple profundity and clarity. I quote one example:

'The ever-touring Englishmen have built their bungalows
All over our sweet forest
O look at them, how they talk on wires to one another
With their wires they have bound the whole world together for themselves.'

As this quotation shows, one useful feature of this anthology is that it does not encourage the common assumption that oral poetry belongs only to 'primitive' or isolated cultures. While the anthology includes much poetry that reflects the reaction of traditional cultures, like the Gond, to the impact of colonialism and Westernisation, it also represents particularly in its English section, the new folk poetry that has come from workers, prisoners, tramps, soldiers and other such groups in modern urbanized cultures under conditions where communal creation and oral performance were facilitated. This should help to correct the imbalance that comes from school and university study of the ballad exclusively as a product of traditional rural societies. The last section of the book also includes selections from epic and heroic poems – sophisticated poems which have behind them a tradition of popular poetry and were composed for performance. From Homer to Woody Guthrie – the book enables us to see better the relations between individual creativity and popular tradition.

Lanka Guardian, February 1980

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF ORAL POETRY, edited by Ruth Finnegan (Allen Lane Penguin Books Ltd.)

3
Pocket Periodical

NEW World Writing is a periodical publication which attempts to be a kind of American counterpart of the now defunct "Penguin New Writing." The majority of its contributors are American, but it includes work by writers from a wide range of countries, including India and Pakistan.

As might be expected in a collection of this kind, the quality of the writing in it is uneven. But there are at least two pieces in this second volume which make it well worth acquiring. One is an essay by the poet W.H. Auden entitled "Some Notes on Grimm and Andersen" (it was originally written as an introduction for a new Modern Library Giant containing these fairy tales). Auden's essay is the best piece of writing on the fairy tale that I have come across. He treats the popular folk tales of Grimm as a form of myth, and makes a penetrating distinction between them and the tales of Andersen – the work of a conscious artist – which are parables rather than myths.

The other piece in this volume which I wish to commend strongly is a short story by Normal Mailer called "The Paper House." It is a story about American soldiers and Japanese geisha girls which reveals an unexpected vein of pure humour in the author of **The Naked and the Dead**; but it is also, by implication, a comment on the encounter between two cultures.

As a curiosity, the collection contains a play by Pablo Picasso, "Desire Caught by the Tail". It is as good as I suppose, a painting by T.S. Eliot would be.

Ceylon Daily News, 30 April 1953

NEW WORLD WRITING: Second Mentor Selection (New American Library, 50c.).

4

The Anatomy of Terror

Victor Serge's posthumously published novel about the Soviet Union is not just another of the books by ex-Communist intellectuals which now flow so abundantly from the presses; it is one of the most remarkable political novels of this century and the finest, in my opinion, since *Darkness at Noon*. Before examining *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, it would perhaps be as well to state Serge's qualifications for writing it.

Victor Serge was a child of two Russian political exiles; born in Brussels in 1890, he spent his childhood in Belgium and England. In 1914 he was sent to prison for anarchist activities; on his release he participated in the uprising in Catalonia in 1917. Two years later he was arrested in France, and was subsequently exchanged for a French officer who had been arrested in Russia. Thus in 1919 Serge found himself in the new Soviet State. From then until his deportation from Russian in 1936 Serge was a Soviet citizen and a leading member of the Communist International, of whose journal he was managing editor.

When the internal factional struggle broke out in the Russian Communist Party, Serge supported the Trotskyist Opposition. As a result he was expelled from the Party in 1928 and twice sentenced to prison. In 1936, after three years of deportation in Siberia, he was released after sympathizers in the West had protested on his behalf. Banished from the

US.S.R. , he found asylum in France, and, after the Nazi invasion of that country, in Mexico where he died in 1947. Meanwhile, he had broken with Trotskyism; his political position during his last years appears to have been close to that of Rosa Luxemburg.

The Case of Comrade Tulayev as Serge states in an introductory note, "belongs entirely to the domain of fiction," but its plot bears some similarity to the historical event of the Kirov assassination. An obscure young Communist on a sudden impulse shoots Comrade Tulayev, a high party official whom he accidentally runs into on the street. The assassin remains undiscovered, but the party high command assumes as always the existence of a plot and sets the customary machinery of arrests, confessions and executions in operation. Among those affected by the purge are such widely different persons as the High Commissar for Security, an old Trotskyist deportee in Siberia, a provincial bureaucrat of peasant origin who had been steadily climbing towards power, and a former comrade of Stalin who has been sent on a mission to Spain but is secretly dissatisfied with the party regime.

The plot of Serge's novel has prompted many reviewers to compare it with ***Darkness At Noon***. But in spite of the superficial similarity in their material, the two books seem to me quite different in their aims. In Koestler's novel, in my opinion, the question of historical accuracy or documentary realism is unimportant; it is the moral debate in the mind of Rubashov which is the centre of the novel. I wouldn't claim that judged purely as a work of art, ***The Case of Comrade Tulayev*** can compare with Koestler's masterpiece; it lacks, above all, the form the severe concentration of effect which gives ***Darkness At Noon*** most of its strength. But ***The Case of Comrade Tulayev*** should properly be regarded as a documentary novel; through its several episodes and varied characters it creates a picture of life in the Soviet Union which in its breadth and vivid realism is almost Tolstoyan in quality. Reading it, one feels that while ***Darkness At Noon*** was a

superb imaginative feat, it did not spring from the kind of close first-hand knowledge of the setting which Serge shows. (I don't think this affects the merits of ***Darkness At Noon*** as a novel, but this limitation may help to explain the increasing thinness of Koestler's later novels). Indeed, I am not aware of any other work, fictional or otherwise, which gives in human terms a view of life in the Soviet Union so comprehensive and actual as that of ***The Case of Comrade Tulayev*** – unless it is Serge's own *Memoirs* (of which, unfortunately, only fragments are as yet available in English).

Serge's writing in this novel, though marred by occasional clumsiness, (one doesn't know whether this is to be attributed to the translator or not) is on the whole marked by a fine clarity and sensuous strength which often rises to the level of poetry. As an example of the quality of his writing, I would like to quote an extended passage from the novel. Kondratiev, the old comrade of Stalin, is in Spain, where he has been sent on an official mission, and he has just helped to carry out the arrest of Stefan Stern, a young oppositionist. He is riding in a launch at night, troubled by his own conscience:

".....At this point in his meditation, Kondratiev remembered Stefan Stern's contorted face, seemed to see it borne along on the great wings of foam...'Forgive me,' Kondratiev said to him fraternally. "There is nothing more I can do for you, comrade. I understand you very well. I was like you once, we were all like you...And I am still like you, since I am certainly done for, like you...' He had not expected his thought to arrive at this conclusion, it surprised him. The phantom of Stefan, with his sweating forehead, his curly copper-red hair, his grimacing mouth, the steady flame of his eyes, mingled as in a dream with another phantom. And it was Bukharin, with his big bulging forehead, his intelligent blue eyes, his ravaged face, still able to smile, questioning himself before the microphone of the Supreme Tribunal, a few days before the death — and Death was there already,

almost visible, close to him, one hand on his shoulder, the other holding the pistol; it was not the Death Albrecht Durer had seen and engraved, a skeleton with a grinning skull, wrapped in the homespun and armed with the scythe of the Middle Ages—no: it was death up-to-date, dressed as an officer of the Special Section for Secret Operations, with the Order of Lenin on his coat and his well-fed cheeks close-shaven...'For what reason am I to die' Bukharin asked himself aloud, then spoke of the degeneration of the proletarian party...Kondratiev made an effort to shake off the nightmare."

What is most noteworthy about **The Case of Comrade Tulayev** is that it is free from the rancour, the uneasy conscience, the breast-beatings which distort most books by ex-Communists. Its study of human beings under terror is made all the more impressive by the lack of any forcing of tone in the novel. Serge even puts Stalin as a character into the novel and portrays him not as a mere political brigand but as a much more interesting, tragic and terrible figure—a lonely old man, isolated from everyone by the lying and fear he has engendered, a victim of his own twisted fanaticism. The dialogues between Kondratiev and "the Chief" are in fact the most impressive portions of the novel. It is not only because we remember that Serge had probably known Stalin personally that this portrait seems convincing; with a few words put into the mouth of his character Serge delineates the personality of Stalin as vividly as Isaac Deutscher did in his monumental biography. The comparison is appropriate also because the impression created by a passage like the following is of a character not unlike the Dostoevskyan Grand Inquisitor to whom Deutscher compared the Soviet dictator:

"I'd like to see you in my place, old man—yes, that's something I'd like to see. Old Russia is a swamp—the farther you go, the more the ground gives, you sink in just when you least expect to...And then, the human rubbish!....To

remake the hopeless human animal will take centuries. I haven't got centuries to work with, not I."

That rings true: one feels that it is indeed this kind of character who could have perpetrated the liquidation of the kulaks and the Moscow Trials with a complete conviction that he was accomplishing a historical mission.

I cannot conclude this review without some reference to the shocking neglect of this book by the Press in England. It is a lamentable sign of the insularity of English criticism that while Orwell's ***Nineteen Eighty Four*** enjoys an inflated reputation, Serge's novel, which has much better claims to be regarded as a classic study of totalitarianism, should have been almost completely ignored by the reviewers.

Ceylon Daily News

The Case of Comrade Tulayev by Victor Serge (Hamish Hamilton, 12s. 6d)

5

Not by Bread Alone

On the dust-jacket of this book, Mr. Arthur Koestler is quoted as saying: "To get an idea of the significance of **Niki** when it appeared in Hungary in 1956, one would have to visualize Winston Smith writing **Animal Farm** under the conditions of **Nineteen-Eighty-Four.**" This is nonsense. One remembers that the only literature in **1984** was the synthetic popular fiction turned out by novel-writing machines, and that even the rebel Winston Smith, goes no further in his reaction against the system than a cheap little love affair – depicted in prose of so nauseating a quality that it might almost have been written by one of the machines themselves.

Niki was not the work of any isolated Winston Smith. It was written during the period of popular resurgence in Eastern Europe that culminated in the triumphant Polish October and the tragically divided and abortive Hungarian Revolution. In this revolution Tibor Dery (himself a long-standing Communist) participated, and paid the price with a nine-year jail sentence. What a far cry from the atomized and dehumanized inhabitants of the world of **1984**!

But this is to go outside the book. It surprises me that anyone who can read what is on the page, anyone who is not blinkered by his own preconceptions should compare Tibor Dery's novel with Orwell's stupid and hysterical tract. **Nineteen-Eighty-Four** was the work of a man who had

committed the ultimate sin for a liberal and humanist – that of losing faith in human nature. The world which **Niki** presents is grim enough, but the novel is a splendid affirmation of life. Orwell neither knew nor understood the totalitarianism he was satirising, all he did was to shriek at the monstrous shadows cast by his own uncomprehending fears. Dery has known intimately what it is to be deprived of liberty, and has yet not lost his balance. Finally, there seems to me all the difference in the world between the artistic crudity, the schematized figures like puppets from a political cartoon, in Orwell's book and the warm reality of **Niki**.

Niki is the story of a dog, a fox-terrier who comes into the life of a Hungarian engineer and his wife. They are an only couple whose only son had been killed in the War, but this loss has left them with a reluctance to assume any responsibilities, any fresh burden of feelings, so that they are at first disinclined to adopt the dog. Yet Niki is so insistent in her affection that they finally buy her off the owner. But this is Rakosi's Hungary, and the life of this household of three is suddenly disrupted when the engineer is one day arrested by the secret police for no specified reason. The wife is cast into the depths of poverty; yet she does not want to give up Niki who represents her only remaining attachment. But Niki herself gradually pines away and finally dies just before the engineer is released and returns home.

There is in **Niki** nothing of the Anglo-Saxon sentimentality about dogs; no smuggling in of human feelings to invest Niki with a false sympathy. Yet this story of a dog is essentially a novel about the human condition. The very gulf between Niki and her master and mistress is a measure of human nature:

"For even if we admit that Niki's rather rudimentary mental equipment enabled her to compare past and present, yet what did she know of the future? What could she know

of the things which were going to happen to her no later than the very next day? True, we may wonder what we ourselves, human beings, can know of these things, in the troubled times we live in...In her total dependence on man, Niki was like those detainees who have no idea why they have been put into prison nor how long they will stay there; or like those heads of State undertakings who, when appointed have no idea of how long they will remain in their new post; or the assistants in the nationalized Kozert food shops who are completely ignorant of why, from one day to the next, they have been transferred to a branch at the other end of the city, an hour and a half by tram from their home; or like those writers who do not know why they are writing, what they are writing; or again, like their readers, who don't know why they are reading it."

And yet, even a dog has feelings, even a dog has an instinct for life. Niki joyfully capering round her master, Niki hunting hares in the sun, is as much a symbol of life as Niki languishing in a city flat or Niki pining in grief. Or can that be? Dery ironically reflects:

> *"Why after all should a female of five years old, robust and blooming, endowed with considerable physical resources grow lean and lose her hair simply because the man with the nice smell whom she had accepted as her master had disappeared some time ago? Niki needed more animation, a diet richer in vitamins and more cheerful surroundings."*

But vitamins don't save Niki. If a dog does not live by bread alone, what about men? Dery's novel lead us to the same realization as Dudintsev's, though with the power and subtlety of a superior artist. In both books we hear the voice of a generation which, compelled to sacrifice liberty for economic necessity, is reasserting the human need for freedom. The Western propagandist will see in **Niki**, as in

Not by Bread Alone, only an "exposure of Communism." To me the hopeful fact is that the new opposition which is growing up in the Communist parties themselves in Eastern Europe should be imbued with a spirit so life-giving and humane.

Ceylon Daily News

NIKI–THE STORY OF A DOG By Tibor Dery (Secker and Warburg, 10s. 6d.)

6

Corridors of Power

Aleksandr Bek's novel belongs to the number of literary works suppressed in earlier years which have become available to the Soviet reader in the era of *glasnost*. A note at the end of the book describes the novel's publishing history, with extracts from the author's own notebook. Bek himself described the account of his long ordeal in attempting to secure the book's publication as a 'novel about the novel'. He had worked on his book between 1960 and 1964 - that is, in the Khrushchev years. His notebook records an extraordinary coincidence. On the evening of the same day that he took the completed manuscript to the journal *Novy Mir* and offered it to them for publication, Khrushchev fell from power. Bek perhaps didn't realise at that point of time the fateful influence this event would have on his novel's destiny. About a month later he was told that the widow of a former Soviet official had raised an objection that the central character was based on her husband - which Bek denied. Five years passed in which the novel was held up, ostensibly so that this issue might be resolved. However, in 1969 Bek received a letter from a powerful figure of the literary establishment, the editor-in-chief of *Moskva*, M. Alekseev:

> Its fundamental conception appears to us categorically unacceptable.
> The essence of the novel is this: that those who worked with Stalin and believed in him were historically doomed, all of them were as if stricken by an incurable disease. This idea is embodied in the figure of Onisimov.
> On the other hand, those who were more remote from the leader and inwardly doubted him, contained within themselves the future of the country (Chelyshev, the younger Golovnya).

This letter let the cat out of the bag: Bek's novel was a casualty of the reversal of de-Stalinisation. In 1971 the manuscript found its way abroad and was published in the West. Bek died in 1972. In 1986, under the new dispensation, the novel was serialised in the journal *Znamya* and has now been published in book form.

Inevitably, the book's history disposes one to approach it with both sympathy and expectation. However, I can't say that **Novoe Naznachenie** is an outstanding novel: it is not distinguished either stylistically or by any great depth in its treatment of human relationships. But its virtues are those of a work of revelatory documentary fiction. I can perhaps best indicate both the genre and the literary level to which it belongs by comparing it with the fiction of C.P. Snow. Bek has the same kind of interest as Snow in the functioning of the bureaucratic machine and in the intrigues and struggles that go on in the corridors of power, and his imaginative and literary talents are fairly comparable with Snow's. However, it has to be recognised that writing a novel of this sort in the Soviet Union of the '60s required more courage than was necessary in the sheltered world of Cambridge.

Bek's central figure, Onisimov, is an engineer – conscientious, devoted to his work, loyal to his masters - who rises to be a People's Commissar. One of the most interesting features of the novel is that Stalin is introduced as a character, seen through Onisimov's encounters and relations with him. Onisimov has been a protege of Ordzhonikidze, Stalin's fellow-Georgian in the seats of

power, and to the end of his days he has hanging in his apartment a photograph of Stalin and Ordzhonikidze together. There is some subtlety in the portrayal of Stalin in the novel. Onisimov remains loyal to Stalin, in spite of the fact that his brother and sister-in-law perished in prison during the purges. He feels indebted to Stalin because the leader protects him against a grudge that Beria, the powerful head of the secret police, has against him - in a much earlier period, when Beria was still an obscure figure, Onisimov had denied him a party card while carrying out an assignment in one of the provinces. However, through the actuality of Onisimov's contacts with Stalin, the reader is induced to form an image of the dictator different from that which Onisimov holds. In 1938, returning to Moscow from a tour of the factories under his command, Onisimov goes to call on Ordzhonikidze at his apartment. The conversation between them is interrupted: Onisimov hears outside the study Ordzhonikidze's wife receiving another visitor. Ordzhonikidze excuses himself and goes out. Soon, from the sound of the other voice beyond the door, Onisimov realises who the caller is: Stalin. He also becomes aware that there is an argument going on because Ordzhonikidze is talking loudly and heatedly, while Stalin's tone remains calm and as if deliberately measured. Onisimov cannot understand what is being said because the conversation is in Georgian, but he feels increasingly embarrassed. He opens the door and, goes out. The two men are talking in the corridor:

> Onisimov wanted to pass by silently, but Stalin stopped him:
> "Good evening, Comrade Onisimov. I suppose you happened to hear what we were saying here?"
> "Pardon me, I wasn't aware..."
> "Never mind, these things happen ... But with whom did you agree? With Comrade Sergo or with me?"
> "Comrade Stalin, I don't understand a word of Georgian."

> Stalin let that phrase pass, as if it hadn't been spoken at all. Looking hard at Onisimov from under his narrow brow, in no way raising his voice, he repeated still more slowly:
> Still, with whom do you agree? With him?" Stalin sustained the pause. "Or with me?"

Onisimov answers, "With you, Iosif Vissarionovich." Less than a fortnight later, at the Party Congress, he hears that Ordzhonikidze has committed suicide.

Alekseev, in his adverse report on the manuscript of the novel, thought that Bek had intended Onisimov's illness, with which the novel ends, to be a symbolic representation of the disease of Stalinism. That is not, however, the way the novel works. Bek uses Onisimov's cancer, like his heavy smoking and the twitching of his hands, as a symptom of the stresses set up by the psychological conflict between his loyalty to the system and his inarticulate reaction against its oppressiveness.

Novoe Naznachenie has a further documentary value in its representation of the gulf between the way of life of the Stalinist bureaucracy and that of the ordinary Soviet citizen. There is an interesting episode early in the novel which illustrates this dimension of the novel. In Stalin's last years he suffers from insomnia, and therefore has a habit of summoning official conferences which begin around midnight. Onisimov and his deputy are familiar with this practice, and they have a regular arrangement with their official chauffeurs: they are driven to the place of the conference in their separate cars, and then one of the chauffeurs goes home to sleep and the other stays on to take the two officials home in the morning (both of them live in the same block of apartments reserved for higher functionaries). Once, however, emerging at dawn from such a conference, Onisimov and his deputy find that the chauffeurs have made a mistake and both have gone home. They stand on the pavement for a moment wondering what

to do, and then the deputy points to an "M" sign across the street. "Let's take the Metro," he says. They descend the stairs to the station amidst a crowd of jostling factory workers going to their morning shift. Having joined the queue to the ticket-counter, they are suddenly struck by a doubt: do they have money on them (they don't normally carry money to work because they don't need it). Extricating themselves from the queue with difficulty, they search their pockets, and one of them finds a three-rouble note. When they finally reach the ticket counter, Onisimov asks the cashier for the fare to their destination.

The cashier stared at this formally dressed passenger:

"Citizen, all tickets with us carry the same fare."
Behind them people were making a fuss, pressing.
"And how much is it?"
The cashier didn't believe that this was a serious question.
"Are you joking?"

The two officials go through the unfamiliar experience of boarding a crowded train, reach their destination and begin walking towards their block of flats. Suddenly they hear whistles blowing, and a posse of militiamen descend on them. "Stop! Where are you going?" The point of the situation is that the sight of two people walking towards this block of flats is entirely unfamiliar.

"Who are you? Moscovites?"
"Yes."
"And you don't know where to cross? Is this the first time you have been out on the street?"
The answer was an embarrassed silence.
"Let's see your papers."

Neither of them has on him the normal "passport" carried by Soviet citizens. Onisimov produces instead his document of identity as a member of the Government. The militiamen look at it, then draw themselves up to attention, salute, and stop the traffic so that the two men can cross.

The Thatched Patio, May 1989

Novoe Naznachenie *(The New Appointment) by Aleksandr Bek (Sovetskiy Pisatel', Moscow, 1988) 3r.*

7

An Engrossing Though Flawed Novel

When Memory Dies is a novel about this country by a man who chose to leave it forty years ago. Perhaps 'chose' is the wrong word, for Sivanandan's decision to go into exile wasn't exactly voluntary. He belonged to the first generation of Sri Lankan Tamil emigres who left after the ethnic riots of 1958. As the blurb on the back cover of his book reminds us, it was his ironic fate to go from the violence in Sri Lanka to the violence of Notting Hill, London. Both experiences fed into his later vocation as Director of the Institute of Race Relations in London, and editor of the journal *Race and Class.* Much of Sivanandan's activism and writing over the last four decades has been involved with the problems of black and brown immigrants and their descendants in Britain. Yet he has never lost his concern with, and, indeed, attachment to, the country of his origin. That is certainly attested by this first novel written in his late years – an engrossing, though flawed, novel which seems to be offered as a summing up of both a life's experience and the contemporary history of a country.

It's a long novel, telling the story of three generations of a middle class Jaffna Tamil family, though the scene of the action shifts between the peninsula, Colombo and other parts of the Sinhala-majority south to which the principal male

characters migrate. One could describe the novel in terms of its three parts as the story of Sahadevan, the father of Rajan, his son, and of Vijay, his grandson. But it's a mark of the essentially political character of the novel that one could also identify the three parts by saying that Part One is set in the time of colonial rule in the 'twenties and the heyday of A.E. Goonesinha; that Part Two sees the rise of the revolutionary left and then its decline as it is submerged by ethnic mobilisations; and that Part Three brings us to the time of guerilla movements in Jaffna.

There's a problem raised by the method of narrative in the three parts of the novel that remained unresolved in my mind when I finished the book. It opens with a page in whicb Rajan, the son in the second generation, remembers a time in his childhood, in Kandy. The recollected moment is one of sadness, looking out on the rain beating against the walls of the post office building, because his friend, Sanji, who comes from an estate Tamil family, has had to leave school because he can't get a pair of shoes. This page is first-person narrative:

Other seasons I would come to know – spring and autumn and winter – and other countries where shoes abounded. But the things that crowded in on me that day in the rain, and in many rains after, and made me an exile for the better part of my life, were also the things that connected me to my country and made me want to tell its story.

The first-person voice becomes less prominent after the end of that page, as we go into the past, though there are still references in the first few pages to 'my grandfather' and 'my father'. But the rest of Part One is essentially the story of Rajan' s father, Sahadevan, his boyhood in the village of Sandilipay, his being sent to St. Benedict's College in Colombo at the insistence of his headmaster, his life in Colombo, his experiences as a public servant, and above all, his contact with the working class movement led by Goonesinha. Part One ends dramatically with Goonesinha during the Bousteads

tram strike announcing a settlement just after a worker has been shot - a scene which is clearly intended to mark his transition from militant to compromiser. All that – the bulk of Part One – is really third-person narrative, though viewed through the eyes of Sahadevan. But then, with Part Two we return to Rajan in the second generation, and his first-person voice takes up the narrative and sustains it to the end of Part Two. Then oddly, in terms of the form of the novel, we go back into third-person narrative for the story of Vijay in the concluding part. A kind of prologue in the first person, and then third person, first person, third person – that's the structure of the novel.

I may be wrong, but I can see no explanation for this structure except to suppose that the novelist originally conceived the novel as the story of two and not three generations. In that case the novel would have been framed by the first-person narrative of Rajan, and ended soon after 1958 with the death of his wife (raped and murdered because, as his wife, she is taken to be a Tamil although she is in fact Sinhalese). Her violent death precipitates his going into exile, already foreshadowed in the opening page, as the passage I quoted from it will show. The novel in this hypothetical original conception may have ended with an epilogue, with Rajan as exile in England looking back on his past. It would then have had some parallels with the author's own life-experience, and this may explain the emotional resonances of the voice of the exile in the opening page. That opening, in the quality of its writing, is never quite equalled in the rest of the book. There are isolated moments of imaginative intensity later, but the greater part of the writing is flatter.

If my hypothesis is correct, then Part Three would have been an afterthought, perhaps written out of the desire to bring the novel more nearly abreast of contemporary events. Perhaps the author felt that after all the shattering events of the last decade and a half, a novel that was strongly political in its orientation would be incomplete if it stopped in the

late 'fifties. But since my account is conjectural, let me make the point in another way. In the novel as it stands, there's no reason inherent in the narrative why Rajan alone should be privileged with a first-person voice, and all the more awkwardly when it's in the middle of the book. And it's a pity that Sivanandan didn't end the book with the first two parts because those are the best portions of the novel. That's not only because they come directly from a period and a social environment personally experienced, but also because Sivanandan's heart is in the easy friendships of another time between middle class Sinhalese and Tamils and in the beliefs and solidarities of the militant and revolutionary left, even though its shortcomings and failures and the disillusion it left behind are voiced through the person of the critical Doctor Lal. Sivanandan is recapturing the memory and imagination of the time when it was less rare than it would be today for a young Tamil government servant to find lodgings with the uncle and aunt of his Sinhala office friend. It was also a time when, as he brings out, radicals and Marxists stood shoulder to shoulder across the ethnic barriers. In fact, in this aspect the novel can even be thought of as an effort to preserve the memory of that time from threatened oblivion - the fate hinted at by the title.

'When memory dies, a people die.' Uncle Para broke into his reverie, and Vijay had the eerie feeling that the old man was privy to his thoughts before he was. But, remembering his experiences of the past few days, he asked, 'What if we make up false memories?'

'That is worse,' replied the old man, 'that is murder.'

And perhaps, whatever the imperfections of the novel, Sivanandan has rendered a service to a new generation in reviving the memory of another time.

Before I come to the problems raised by Part Three, I want to pose a general question that often arises in this particular genre of the novel, straddling the frontiers between the fictional and the documentary. It must be remembered

that Sivanandan hasn't written, like Rajiva Wijesinha among Sri Lankan novelists, a political novel that belongs to the form of fantastic or magical realism; his book is solidly in a tradition of straight social realism, and was even praised by one British reviewer for returning to that tradition. I don't think that even in this kind of novel we are entitled to demand the same accuracy or fidelity to factual truth that we would in a work of history or biography. I don't really know whether or not Goonesinha appeared together with the Colonial Secretary to announce a settlement in the tramway strike the moment after a police shooting, but even if he didn't, the scene seems to convey an imaginative truth that condenses in dramatic form an essentially real process. And when, in Part Two, Sivanandan makes the Prime Minister resign the day after some people are killed in the 1953 hartal, it would be pedantic to object that, in reality, Dudley Senanayake hesitated and dithered for some weeks.

In general, readers are more tolerant about departures from factuality, the further away the events are in time and place. Who, except historians, cares any longer about Shakespeare's or Tolstoy's manipulations of history? But when the subject-matter of a novel is drawn from contemporary political history that readers have lived through, they are naturally more exacting in their demands for 'truth'. The aesthetic theorist may object that an imaginative writer should have the same freedom in dealing with the present as with the past, but the difference is a reality of the reader's response and can't be ignored.

When a novelist departs from historical fact, we are entitled to ask not 'Does he have the right to do so?' but 'What is the purpose of his deviations?' and 'Do they strengthen or weaken his historical picture?' It is in these terms that some of the liberties that Sivanandan takes in Part Three with the historical record are open to question. I think, in particular, of three sets of events in this part of the novel.

On pp. 358-360 the President announces simultaneously, and fights successively, a presidential election and a referendum to postpone parliamentary elections. Vijay and his political friends oppose him in both. The President is named, transparently, Dickie Perera, and is represented as a machiavellian and authoritarian figure. But how much less machiavellian he looks than the real figure of whom he is a shadow when, before he fights a presidential election, he indicates that he is going to follow it with a referendum! J.R. would have faced a much stiffer fight in the 1982 presidential election if he had given a forewarning that there would be a referendum to follow: as it was, he sprang the referendum on the country only after his presidential office was secure.

Secondly, Vijay is arrested because of his activity during the referendum, and is detained in Welikade jail. During his incarceration there, he becomes a witness of the jail riot where Tamil political prisoners are massacred. It is evident that the author has arranged for Vijay's presence in Welikade so that the jail killings can be observed through his eyes. Later, after he has been set free, he describes to his friends, Sarath and Dhana, what he had witnessed, and they are astonished to learn that these were deliberate killings because they had believed that the prisoners died in an attempted break-out. Now these friends are oppositional political activists. Can we believe that they would have been so naive? Actually, in 1983, even people who approved of the killing of those who were believed to be 'terrorists' didn't doubt that they had been killed in the course of the general attack on Tamils in Colombo; nobody thought it was the result of a failed escape. Once again, Sivanandan has deviated from history in such a way that his own political meaning is weakened.

Thirdly, the event of the thirteen soldiers killed in Jaffna. I quote the relevant passage of dialogue from the novel:

'What's happened in Colombo then, Mother Know-all?' inquired Vijay.

'I don't quite know. But somebody high-up put out the rumour that Buddhist priests had been killed in Jaffna, and Sinhalese mobs went on the rampage, killing Tamils.'

'And was it true, the story about the priests?'

'Oh no. It turns out they were soldiers, young recruits, volunteers probably, some thirteen of them, killed in a guerilla ambush. But the government is bringing their bodies home for a state funeral. '

In the historical actuality of July 1983 there was no rumour of Buddhist priests being killed in Jaffna; the public knew that thirteen soldiers had been ambushed and killed, and the fact was so reported and headlined prominently in the papers. And the rioting followed, not preceded, the aborted arrangements for the bodies to be given a funeral under state sponsorship. Of course, it could have happened the way the novel describes it in some imaginary fictional world. But why use the detail about thirteen soldiers (a figure that is etched indelibly in our contemporary memory) if you are going to play about with the facts in this way? And why construct a version that unintentionally, no doubt, softens the reality? A slaughter resulting from a mass misconception that Buddhist monks had been killed would have been, though not defensible, mitigated by being an outburst of outraged religious emotion. The reality, with its planned pogrom and state connivance, was much more horrible. Isn't Sivanandan guilty, in his own way, of 'making up false memories', since some foreign readers, if not Sri Lankans, will assume: 'Ah, so that's what happened in Sri Lanka in 1983'? It's pertinent to observe that a few years later there was a large-scale killing of Buddhist monks in Aranthalawa, and there was no counterviolence in the Sinhala south because by then the state had every reason for not promoting it.

The most obvious departure from history is in the ambiguous and evasive character of the novel's conclusion. But before I discuss this, it's first necessary to characterise Vijay, through whose eyes, as the central figure in Part Three, the new political developments of the 'seventies and 'eighties are viewed. In one aspect Vijay is an appropriate character through whom the fissured history of contemporary Sri Lanka can be focussed because he contains within himself these ambivalent divisions. His putative father is Rajan who is Tamil, and his mother is Lali, who is Sinhala. But his real biological father was Sinhala, because Vijay was actually the son of Sena, Lali's lover who was killed in the hartal. Rajan married Lali after her lover's death, and brought up Vijay when he was born as his own son. Then Rajan emigrates after the murder of Lali, and Vijay is brought up among Sinhalese, but still preserving the sense of his half-Tamil identity.

Vijay, during one visit to Jaffna, is repelled by the intellectuals he meets at the Jaffna university, who spout the obverse of the racist myths Vijay has heard from their counterparts in the south. He is more favourably struck by some of the young militants he meets. Meanwhile his marriage to Manel gradually disintegrates; she is both bent on worldly success and hardening in her anti-Tamil attitudes. In the last sections of the novel, set in some unspecified time in the mid-eighties, Vijay moves to Jaffna together with Meena, the estate Tamil young woman he has loved for a long time and who comes finally to accept him. But since Vijay was last in Jaffna the internecine struggles between the militant groups have begun; the euphoria and pride which even older people felt in the 'boys' has faded. Uncle Para, the old man who has lived through all three parts of the book, and is in some ways a choric commentator, articulates the despair of the elders:

They have all grown old before their time, our boys, all grown old. They trust only the gun and the cynaide capsule they carry round their necks. Isn't that terrible, that they cannot trust even themselves? What hope for Eelam now?

Vijay has an argument with Yogi, the young militant whom he had found so sympathetic on his previous visit to Jaffna. Vijay is sceptical of the militants' professions of socialism, and asks what evidence there is of their moving towards it in practice. Yogi's answer is that all that must wait for 'liberation'. Then, in the last episode of the book, the guerilla commander, Ravi, who is adored and unquestioningly obeyed by his followers appears. He is described as 'a portly figure in battle fatigues and side-arms, flanked by two armed men'. He orders the immediate hanging from a lamp-post of a young man, Kugan, as an informer – on grounds that Vijay has reason to believe are mistaken.

By the time Vijay got to Kugan, he was already hanging from the lamp-post. Sobbing uncontrollably, Vijay shinned up the lamp-post to untie the rope.

'Leave him,' thundered the Commander, pulling out his pistol. Yogi jumped to intervene, shouting, 'No, don't, Ravi, don't. He's Vijay. Your cousin, Vijay. Don't.'

Ravi lifted his pistol and shot Vijay down. Meena ran to where Vijay lay and cradled him in her arms. There was not a tear in her eye. The crowd fell silent. She looked up at Ravi.

'You have killed the only decent thing left in the land,' she said. 'We'll never be whole again.'

Ravi reached for his pistol. Yogi knocked it out of his hand.

'That's enough,' he said. '1 am taking over.'

What does this conclusion mean? How are we to take Yogi's '1 am taking over' – the last words of the book? Even if we don't identify Commander Ravi with a particular known individual, it's clear that he stands for a ruthlessness that believes in solving everything by the gun. Then does Yogi knocking the gun out of his hand mark the end of that ruthlessness? Is this another alternative history we are expected to credit, though we already know the bloody and

appalling record of the next twelve years? Or is the conclusion just an escape from the author's own uncertainties and dilemmas: does the novel stop where it does because he can't resolve them?

Nethra, July-September 1997

A. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies* London: Arcadia Books, 411 pp.,1997.

8

Only One Thing in Common

The two books I am reviewing have only one thing in common –that each of them is a volume of short stories by a Sri Lankan writer. In every other respect, the two are as different as chalk from cheese. Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning* is much the more ambitious of the two books, as its very title, taken from the Buddha's Fire Sermon, indicates. Six of her nineteen stories derive their themes from the violence of recent history – ethnic conflict and war, youth insurrection, State counter – terror, and political assassination. However, violence in some form rears its head even in two of the other stories in the collection. Rajiva Wijesinha's book is intentionally more narrowly focused in scope. It's located in the relationships of an upper middle class family and social world, at one time seemingly stable and unchanging but within the lifetime of the narrator acted on by the transformation of the outer landscape. There is, too, a great difference between the styles and forms of the two writers. Jean Arasanayagam writes in a language that moves between sensuous and lyrical colour and febrile intensity. Rajiva Wijesinha's idiom is that of a conversationalist reminiscing with a quiet, affectionate irony at the quirks and foibles of human behaviour.

How far does Jean succeed in bringing off her more extensive and daring endeavour? It's the prose I want to look at first – a prose in which we are constantly reminded

that this is the writing of a poet and painter. Thus, in the story 'I am An Innocent Man' set in the neighbourhood of a prawn farm that becomes the site of a murderous confrontation:

> A subtle movement seemed to stir the expanses of water, breaking the slivers of light, scattering them on the ponds. I was not able to observe these forms of life minutely but there was this feeling that the ponds were seething, alive, and that the prawns were trapped in their aquatic prisons from which they could not escape until they grew large enough to be caught, netted, packed and sent away to titillate the appetites of the wealthy gourmets who could afford them.
> The great expanses of water, reflected the stark white light of these arid regions, silvery, sky-reflecting mirrors that trapped the clouds. Light and dark changed the images that floated on the surface. At night the moon, stirred by the wind, shivered fragmented like the segmented petals of a waterplant... Sometimes the horrible image of death appeared in my mind - the opaque covering on the prawns like the polythene shrouds which hide the remains of those killed in battle, or in landmine explosions. Those who ate them would not have such disturbing reflections.

The sequence of death-haunted thoughts and images here is appropriate to the mind of the narrator – a sensitive schoolteacher, whose constant concern is to preserve his innocence and to avoid involvement with any of the violent forces ravaging the village. But Jean's touch as a fiction-writer isn't always as assured. In the title – story we have a village woman setting out by night to try to trace the body of her daughter's lover who has been taken away in a raid on the village by security men during the youth insurrection. The narrative is ostensibly filtered through the consciousness of Alice, the mother. But often it seems to me to betray a

literary artifice in which the voice of the writer submerges that of the character. For instance:

> The sky began to lighten very faintly. Pale innocent streaks of colour appeared before darker, reddened contusions that bruised the clouds.

Here it's the poet in Jean rather than Alice the village woman who thinks in those contrasting images. What is a strength in her poetry in the fertility of metaphor too often in the stories detracts from their dramatic reality. But there is a limitation of another kind that these stories share with her lesser and weaker poems – and that is the tendency towards prolixity, repetitiveness, diffuseness. Even in 'I am an Innocent Man', which, as I have already indicated, is one of the best of the stories, the narrator tells us in four places that in times of trouble the villagers take refuge in the jungle in spite of its being infested with poisonous snakes . Reading many of the stories I have felt the wish for a greater economy, for the exercise of a pruning blue pencil which would have given them greater force. In 'Time the Destroyer', for instance, one of the stories unrelated to the theme of violence. It's about a decaying old family mansion and the memories it holds for the woman who has come back to it. What it has to say – the feeling for a way of life crumbling and vanishing – could have been created in a quarter of its length, but the story goes on for 31 pages, accumulating detail after detail, sensation after sensation, to the point of tedium.

Finally, I think it's significant that there's a recurring concern in these stories with innocence – an innocence that is recognized as precarious and vulnerable but is nevertheless cherished, or remembered with nostalgia, in a time of destruction and collapsing values. The meaning of that lost innocence comes out most clearly in the story 'Bali". There the woman remembering the security of her childhood in the protected garden, when she was looked after by the village woman Mungo, has hanging over her at the end an

unspecified but terrible doom. In spite of Jean's desire to confront the harsh realities of violence and death in the present, there is a part of her that looks back regressively to a lost comfort, innocence and peace. I can't help relating this yearning also to the end of the last story, set in a refugee camp –the last words, in fact of the book:

> Here, in this camp, within its narrowest confines, it was perhaps possible to take the path that would lead to the end of all illusion, craving, pain and sorrow.

Enlightenment, I am impelled to ask, or a turning away?

Rajiva Wijesinha's more modestly conceived volume is subtitled "A cycle', which, I take it, is intended to signal the fact that it isn't just a collection of stories, each of which can be read singly. They are linked by a unity of milieu, interconnections between the stories in characters who recur, and a single first-person narrator. In a preliminary note the author says:

> Except for some background material about my immediate family, the incidents and characters in this book are fictional. I hope that it will in particular be understood that this applies to the narrator too.

I wonder whether Rajiva wrote this with his tongue in his cheek or simply as a protective device, since the narrator's 'immediate family'isn't just 'background material' but the main focus of the stories, with quite easily recognizable characters figuring in them. As for the narrator, not only is he Oxford –educated and Henry James-reading, but his tone and stance strike me as very familiar indeed. The book is in fact a cross between two different genres – a sequence of short stories on the one hand and a family memoir on the other, making possible a mélange of fact and fiction that the author must have found attractive. But he shouldn't be surprised if readers find it difficult to distinguish between the two, or if there are speculations about the identity of the

Aunt Ella who ran away with a coachman from the drunkard upper-class husband to whom she had been married off.

That story, 'Loose Connections', is one of the best executed things in the book. In the stories as a whole the 'servants' of the title are usually figures in the middle distance , whose labour is essential in sustaining the way of life of houses with names like 'Shalimar' and 'Palm Court" but is taken for granted by their social betters. This fact may project objections that the title is a misnomer and may lead (or has already led) to charges of snobbery. (Even the Gratiaen Prize judges, while awarding the prize to the book, thought it fit to make this criticism). But I would think 'snobbery' the wrong term. The relationship between master/mistress and servant, however much some individuals may try to mitigate it, is inherently a relationship of power, and the social and cultural gulf between the two, particularly under Sri Lankan conditions, is so wide as to make a more human involvement very difficult indeed. It may fairly be said that Rajiva doesn't attempt any fundamental criticism of this social structure; on the other hand, it's a virtue of the book that he doesn't pretend that the position of the servants in the upper middle class household is anything other than what it is. There is a honesty and lack of pretension in this that I respect. All the more so because I couldn't imagine some of those who (in private conversation) were critical of the book's 'snobbery' treating their own servants with any great camaraderie.

In two stories – the one about Aunt Ella and 'Substitutions' – where the class lines do become confused, with consequent embarrassments and perplexities, the author's handling of the delicate social nuances involved shows a deftness of touch and awareness of the complexities of people's behaviour in relation to class distinctions.

Rajiva has wisely limited himself to the world he has lived in and known, regarding it both critically and sympathetically, and I found the subdued humour and irony

of his writing quite engaging. There are only two stories that are out of key with the rest of the book. One is the dramatic – not to say melodramatic – final story in which a cousin Prime Minister is almost poisoned; the other is about the queer goings-on of a British Council official, where the normal poise of tone in the book gives way to the mode of the cartoon.

Nethra, Oct-Dec 1996

Jean Arasanayagam, *All is Burning*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1956

Rajiva Wijesinha, *Servants*. Colombo, McCallum Books, 1995

9

A Bilingual Writer

The bilingual writer has been a rare phenomenon in Sri Lankan culture. As far as I know, there has been nobody at all who has written creatively in both Sinhala and Tamil. But even the number of people who have written with any distinction in either Sinhala or Tamil and English can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Ayathurai Santhan is a recent newcomer to this select group. The Jaffna-based literary critic, A.J. Canagaratna says of him in the introduction he has contributed to the new collection: 'He began writing short stories in his mother tongue, Tamil, and then later transcreated them into English. Now he writes both in Tamil and in English.' Distinguishing Santhan from previous Tamil writers in English such as Alagu Subramaniam and Rajah Proctor, Canagaratna says, 'The latter were educated in the English medium during the heyday of British rule. Santhan is a product of the post-independence era when the mother tongue was the medium of education.'

Since I was myself brought up under the linguistic apartheid that has divided our two communities, I can't attempt any comparison between Santhan's writing in Tamil and in English. But his new collection shows that he's a writer who uses the genre of the short story in an individual way. Nearly all the stories are very short indeed, as will be evident from the fact that in this slim volume of 80 pages there are

24 stories. In length, these stories are comparable to the popular magazine or newspaper story, but that's all they have in common with that mode of writing. Santhan doesn't build his stories on the surprising twist as the final resolution of the plot – the stock-in-trade of the popular magazine-story writer – nor is there any element of sensationalism in his writing. Where, as in some of his stories, the ending is unexpected, it isn't because the writer has held back some secret element of the plot in order to spring it on us at the end. Instead, the effect of many of his endings is to reveal some facet of human character or behaviour that we have probably not foreseen. Thus, in 'Fellow Traveller' Ragu, taking a train journey with his wife, is disturbed by the fact that the old man in the corner isn't eating breakfast, as everybody else in the compartment is doing. Ragu even puts off having his own breakfast although he is hungry. When the old man takes a parcel out of his bag, Ragu is momentarily satisfied, but it turns out to be only some betel and lime paste. But it's the concluding sentence of the story that rounds it off in a way that is unexpected. When the old man ultimately gets off the train, what Ragu feels is relief.

There's a sharper edge to the conclusion of the story titled 'The Worry'. Siva feels guilty because it's four days since he heard that Sella was in hospital and he hasn't been to see him, although he's a good man to whom Siva is much obliged. He finally makes it to the ward, carrying a kilo of grapes and a packet of biscuits, goes to bed 14, where he has been told Sella should be, but he isn't. Then he tries the other section of the ward, but Sella isn't there either. Finally the patient in the next bed tells him,

'Oh, he? ...yes, he was on that bed. But he was alright and he was discharged yesterday. He has gone home.'

'Alright? Gone home? What a pity! said Siva.

As one may see from these two examples, what is characteristic of Santhan's writing is the quiet, sympathetic, but often gently ironic, contemplation of life and human

behaviour. The characters who are in the foreground of these stories have no major villainies or heroisms; it's their small egoisms but also the little expressions of empathy or compassion of some of them that engage his attention. Like that of Vasu paying seven rupees for the small globe he buys at a pavement stall when he could have had it for six, because he is touched by the child 'who must have come straight from school to look after this shop'. But there's no oversweetening sentimentality in the story; Vasu's friend Giri who accompanies him bursts out laughing in the last line.

As is natural in the work of a Tamil writer today, several of the stories are set in contemporary war-ravaged Jaffna. Reading them, I was reminded of the title of a book that the English poet Edmund Blunden wrote about his experiences in the First World War, *Undertones of War*. In Santhan's book too, war is present in undertones and not in fortissimos and crescendos. However, this doesn't make them any the less effective in bringing home to the reader the quality of life in a place where the risks of destruction and death are constantly present. Rather, his very indirection and his avoidance of any forcing of the emotional tone enhance the strength of these stories.

In 'The Cuckoos' House', the unnamed character, anxious about the fate of his house under the continual shelling, bursts into sobbing when the tree that had been 'a multi-storied house' for the cuckoos is being felled. In 'An Endless Journey', the lonely rider on the motor-bike, looking forward to reunion with his friends and relations, is terrified by a helicopter which he believes is closing in on him. In 'Health is a Luxury', Siva starts laughing when his friend Bala, who has been an expatriate for ten years, tells him that he shouldn't have roofed his house with asbestos because it's bad for the health. In "Life's like that' there's a sudden wave of panic, and people start vanishing off the street and shops put up their shutters, and then by the time Mani finds a bus, the alarm is over and life starts moving again. In these

stories, like all of Santhan's, the narrative makes its point without obtruding authorial judgment.

The collection could, however, have benefited from some editorial care in production. There are occasional roughnesses in the text that should have been smoothed out; the introduction in several places has 'form' for 'from' and 'from' for 'form', which seems to be the outcome of typesetting from a handwritten manuscript; and there are throughout oddities in the setting out of matter on the page. I make these points not for the sake of nitpicking, but because I think the book was worthy of more attention in production.

Nethra, Jan-March 2002

Ayathurai Santhan, ***In Their Own Worlds*** **(S. Godage and Brothers).**

10

The Sovereignty of Words

"IN 1850, a play named 'Catalina', advertised as by Brynjolf Bjarme, was published in Christiania. It was the first play, a three-act tragedy in verse, of Henrik Ibsen. In 1950, in London, there appeared another verse play, a comedy: T.S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party". Mr. Raymond Williams' purpose in this book is not so much to write a history of the drama of these hundred years as to give "a critical account and revaluation" of it. He indicates his critical method clearly enough in the introduction:

". . . . literary criticism . . . . which in its major part is of the kind based on demonstrated judgments from texts....of the kind that is to say which is known in England as practical criticism. Practical criticism began, in the work of Eliot, Richards, Leavis, Empson and Murray, mainly in relation to poetry. It has since been developed notably by both F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, in relation to the novel".

Of these names, it is Dr. Leavis and the "Scrutiny" group who show the strongest influence on Mr. Williams' critical vocabulary. This kind of thing, for instance:

> *"The moral activity of the artist can also be an individual perception of pattern, or structure in experience, a process which involves the most intense and conscious response to new elements of substantial living, so that by this very consciousness new patterns of evaluation are created or former patterns reaffirmed".*

This critical jargon has become so tediously familiar (particularly in Ceylon, where almost anyone who has read English at the University must make a mental effort to avoid slipping into it) that I was tempted to abandon the book after the first few pages. But I was glad I resisted the temptation, for Mr. Williams, for all his heavy writing, has produced the best book on modern drama that I know. His argument is that the modern drama has reached a dead end by following the aims of naturalism. By limiting himself to modern conversational speech the dramatist has deprived his language of the resources of the greatest drama, which tends towards poetry. The result is that the dramatist has been reduced to the position of a script-writer, the producer has usurped his place as the presiding spirit of drama, and words have become merely one of the ingredients of a play together with sets, lighting and all the other paraphernalia of the theatre.

In the first part of the book, Mr. Williams discusses the prose dramatists of the last hundred years who, like Ibsen or Strindberg have with varying degrees of success and failure tried to overcome the limitations of the naturalist theatre, or, like Shaw, have succumbed to them. Mr. Williams' chapter on Shaw is the best thing in the book: in fifteen incisive and (for once) lucidly written pages he shows up the sentimentality which is concealed in the professedly anti-romantic drama of Shaw. From this first part of the book Synge emerges as the dramatist who, writing in prose, was most completely free from the difficulties of the modern playwright because his idiom was the speech of the Irish peasantry, 'as fully flavoured as a nut or apple'.

The second half of the book is devoted to the contemporary poetic drama. Mr. Williams is the only critic I have read who has done justice to the plays of Yeats, which are usually regarded as important only for their part in the creation of the Abbey Theatre or in the development of Yeats' non-dramatic poetry. But Yeats' greatest significance as a

dramatist is in his recognition that the theatre (to quote the words which Mr. Williams takes as the epigraph for this chapter) "cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty". Nor did this remain merely an intention: In "Deidre", "The Resurrection", "Purgatory", "The Words Upon the Window-Pane", and some of the Cuchulain plays Yeats produced a body of drama which to my mind is not inferior to the plays of Synge.

If Mr. Williams does very necessary justice to Yeats, he is more than kind to Eliot. He is, I think, right to saying that "Murder in the Cathedral" is Eliot's most assured dramatic success", but he does not seem to appreciate that the very conditions of its success – the remote and almost ritualistic quality of the play – explain Eliot's failure when he tried in "The Family Reunion" and "The Cocktail Party" to make poetic drama out of contemporary life. The signs of the failure are in the watered-down verse of the later plays and their uneasiness of tone (particularly in "The Cocktail Party", which falls between the two stools of drawing-room comedy and spiritual drama).

My most serious complaint against Mr. Williams, however, concerns his penultimate chapter. He rightly passes over in silence O'Neill, Tennesse Williams, Arthur Miller and all the other American dramatists with established reputations. But what ground is there for giving a whole chapter to the English "poetic dramatists" – Auden and Isherwood, Ronald Duncan, Norman Nicholson and Christopher Fry? Mr. Williams, on the whole, is judicious in his comments on particular plays by this group. But taken together with his remark in the last chapter:

> *"The rise of the modern poetic drama presents a case of a body of successful criticism preceding, and largely assisting, the creation of a body of successful drama".*

his discussion tends to encourage the fashionable notion that poetic drama is at last being revived in England. I should have thought that a critic as independent as Mr. Williams should have recognized this myth for what it is – a product of the insularity of critical opinion in England.

Ceylon Daily News, 27 February 1953

DRAMA FROM IBSEN TO ELIOT by Raymond Williams (Chatto and Windus, 18s.)

11

Poets, Critics and Elites

When Rajiva Wijesinha produced his anthology of Sri Lankan poetry in English, he came to the conclusion that there was no poetry written before the mid-sixties that was worth preserving: the only exception he made was for Patrick Fernando. I think his judgment was right. On the other hand, if you look at the contents of the present symposium of essays, you'll get the impression that the most important Sri Lankan poets who have written in English are George Keyt, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, Yasmine Gooneratne, Anne Ranasinghe, Patrick Fernando and Jean Arasanayagam. To put George Keyt in that company seems to me manifestly unfair to the other five. I'm sorry that Ashley Halpe has allowed himself to believe that the diffuseness, verbosity and incoherence of Keyt's poetry are marks of transcendent and ineffable mysteries. Nothing he says, and none of the poems he quotes from, convince me that Keyt's poetry is much better than my painting would be, if I were to attempt to paint.

But my criticism concerns mainly the editorial decision to include in the book this essay, a promotional exercise written for a volume published by the George Keyt Foundation. In a book where so many contributors strike anti-elitist postures, this pandering to a cult made fashionable by an upper-class elite is an abdication of critical responsibility. I am very unhappy with the double standards in this book, where Jean Arasanayagam or Yasmine

Gooneratne are subjected to relentless criticism, but Keyt is a sacred cow to be treated with reverence.

The rest of my review will be concerned with five younger critics. I want to concentrate on them because they presumably represent the growing trends in academic criticism and teaching of literature in Sri Lanka. First, Arjuna Parakrama, whose salvo of heavy artillery is strategically placed at the beginning of the book. In a single paragraph, Sri Lankan poetry in English is dismissed as perversely preoccupied with the petty and the personal, narrow, insular, self-righteous, individualistic, parochial, escapist, esoteric, and so on. Every one of these generalizations, Parakrama asserts, can be substantiated, but that isn't his purpose; instead, he invites writers who disagree to refute him. How, I wonder, can one respond to such a challenge? It's rather like being put in the dock, charged with a dozen different offences under the Penal Code, for which the prosecutor says there is plenty of evidence though he hasn't time to produce it, then being called upon to defend oneself. I could think of one possible refutation: I could quote a poem by Jean Arasanayagam or Anne Ranasinghe to which the indictment wouldn't stick. But Parakrama has foreclosed even that possibility. On the second page, he admits that there are a few remarkable, memorable or interesting poems by... (he names eight poets), so he could easily say the poem I cited was one of these. But what surprises me most is the charge of being esoteric. In general, Sri Lankan poetry hasn't been either recondite in its subject-matter or obscure in its expression, and one would think that a writer whose poetry as well as prose have often been difficult would think twice before tossing the word 'esoteric' at others.

Lilamani de Silva critiques Yasmine Gooneratne's poetry in the context of a discussion of the English-educated elite. Her account of this social group is seriously flawed by black-and-white simplifications. To her the changes of 1956 and after involved only a dislodgment of that elite from

power: the anti-Tamil and generally anti-minorities thrust of Sinhala nationalism is wholly erased. And though in her preface to her reading of Yasmine's poems she speaks of 'differential reading of texts', in practice this seems to mean only 'different from that of the author'. Her tone is so authoritarian that the possibility of an alternative reading by other readers is excluded. A case in point is that of the poem 'Peradeniya Landscape'. Here I would suggest that the poet is aware that the enjoyment of the landscape's beauty is a luxury not open to the students for whom 'the future dawns less brightly', so that the 'well-kept lawns' are now incongruous. It's a perception for which Yasmine Gooneratne deserves a little credit instead of being rapped on the knuckles.

The other three critics I'm concerned with are Neloufer de Mel, Suresh Canagarajah and Ruvani Ranasinha. Though they share certain ideological positions with the other two, their essays aren't marked by the same dogmatism and arrogance; they are more aware of complexities and nuances; and they also pay more attention to the medium they are writing about. And, unlike Lilamani de Silva, they aren't ethnically blind.

All this is true, but there is nevertheless a contradiction that is common to these five critics. All of them are critical of the English-educated elite, but it doesn't seem to trouble them that they are not only part of that elite by their education and social position, but also belong to an even smaller sub-group by virtue of their particular intellectual stance and the critical language they use. Their ideology is radical but their writing is for initiates. It would be interesting, for instance, to take a poll among readers, and ask how many people know the meaning of the word 'imbrications' found in the book. But this, of course, is only one item from the post-modernist vocabulary currently in vogue that is cultivated in these five essays. Another contradiction: Parakrama, Canagarajah and Lilamani de Silva

are very critical of Sri Lankan creative writers who stick to standard English or near-standard English. But they, as well as the other two, deploy standard English in their essays with great competence: this apparently is a privilege of the critic that shouldn't be extended to the creative writer. But actually, both Parakrama and Cangarajah – the only two of these five who, to my knowledge, have published poems – have also written *poetry* in a fundamentally standard English idiom. Indeed, Canagarajah in his poem "Dirge for Corporal Premaratne' does exactly what he blames Jean Arasanayagam for doing – inserting single words from the vernacular into a poem written essentially in standard English.

I'm sorry, incidentally, that Canagarajah misquotes and seriously misrepresents what I have said in an article titled 'Which English?' on the question of the Sri Lankan writer and the English language. I shall be dealing with this elsewhere, in print, so I don't want to take up space discussing it now. But I would like to respond to what Ruvani Ranasinha says about one poem of mine – 'Lying Awake, Thinking of Dead Friends'. She writes quite generously about it, but says that in joining Serena's death with those of Richard and Rajini, the barbarity of the two killings is under-played, "thus muting their political significance'. In the first place, she has confused two poems: Richard's death doesn't figure in 'Lying Awake...', he wasn't even dead when that poem was written. Secondly, doesn't the first half-line, 'The gunman's hand is as blind as the virus', carry a political judgment? Thirdly, there is another poem about the killing of Rajini which brings out its barbarity: 'They shot you like a dog in the street'. Fourthly, 'Lying Awake...' was written in Jaffna a few hours before joining in a peace march and meeting at which I spoke, expressing opposition to every kind of political violence. Had I no right before participating in that political act, to express my personal grief at the tragic waste of youth and talent, which is what ties together in the poem the deaths of Rajini and Serena? I would like to say to Ruvani what Macduff says

to Ross when the latter urges him to action after the murder of his wife and children: 'I shall do so. But I must also feel it as a man'.

The five essays I have been discussing are in line with an international academic trend (call it 'post-modernist' if you like as a piece of shorthand) which is dedicated to questioning established hierarchies and canons of literature and dislodging authority and power. That's fine, but in the way the operation is practiced, it isn't as liberating as it seems. For the trend of the contemporary literary academy is to overthrow the authority of the creative writer and replace it by that of the critic. Literary theory and critical practice have come to acquire the prestige once possessed by creative writing. And when that theory and practice are articulated in a language that's accessible only to a minority educated in a special way, then power is again a monopoly. That's why this kind of discussion is so unfair to at least some of the poets, because to engage in it you need to have gone through a particular kind of academic training, to be able to cope with a certain critical language. And poets who haven't acquired that equipment may well feel intimidated, but that doesn't mean they are necessarily inferior as poets – not unless you think criticism is the master discourse to which everything else must yield.

I think criticism should be democratised. We should write literary criticism in the way George Orwell wrote it, so that it's open to any intelligent and generally educated person. Of course, that would be the end of academic criticism as we know it and have always known it, but then, all the better.

Lanka Guardian, 1996

ESSAYS ON SRI LANKAN POETRY IN ENGLISH, edited by Neloufer de Mel (English Association of Sri Lanka, Rs.150).

12

Rotha and Griffith on film

THE FILM TILL NOW: A Survey of World Cinema, by Paul Rotha; with an additional section by Richard Griffith (Vision Press, 42s.)

Paul Rotha's **The Film Till Now**, originally written in 1929, has taken its place among the standard works on the film. This new edition brings the book up to date with addition of a new part, **The Film Since then**, written by Richard Griffith under Rotha's editorship – the whole making a large volume, lavishly illustrated with stills. Rotha's 1929 survey is retained intact, and although he explains that some of his opinions have changed over the last twenty years, he has resisted the temptation to modify the body of the text, confining himself to the addition of new footnotes and a long new preface in which the divergences are indicated.

It is good that Rotha has left his original work unaltered, for the 1929 version of **The Film Till Now** is an interesting document of a crucial period of the film. At the time it was written the invention of sound film had just hit the industry, as Rotha says, "like a bombshell". The novelty of sound had completely captured the audience, and every other element of the film was sacrificed to providing them with the sensation of hearing characters talk and sing on the screen.

The immediate result was a retrogression in the art of the film. Over several decades the film had emancipated itself from the stage and had discovered its expressive possibilities

as a visual medium. Now, when dialogue came to be regarded as all-important, the film became, more than it had been at any time before, a photographed stage-play, and the mobility which the camera had acquired in the hands of Griffith and the Russian directors was lost in the long uninterrupted sequences of dialogue.

It is not surprising that many intelligent critics considered the invention of the sound film a disaster and looked back nostalgically to the great days of the silent screen. Others sought a possible way in which this new element of the medium might be reconciled with the qualities of the classic silent film.

In The Film Till Now Rotha found this reconciliation in the 'sound and visual cinema' as opposed to the 'dialogue film'. Dialogue, he thought, could never be absorbed into the film without destroying its freedom of visual movement, for "illumination of the mind by **visual** impression is practically instantaneous, whilst the **literary** meaning of speech requires an appreciable amount of time to produce its effect." Again, "the reproduction of dialogue demands almost stationary action in its accompanying visual image, which prevents freedom in the development of the action during any sequence." The fruitful possibilities of sound for the film, he argued, lay rather in the synchronization of music and natural sound with the flow of visual images. Examples of this kind of synchronization in practice Rotha was unable to find at the time he wrote, except in the Disney cartoons, but he was confident that the offending dialogue would pass "as soon as its showmanship possibilities became exhausted, and the way....be left open for the great sound and visual cinema of the future."

As Rotha admits in the preface to the new edition, his prophecies about the dialogue film have been "largely disproved". This does not mean that the opinions he expressed in 1929 are of no relevance today. Apart from its interest as a historical document, Rotha's protest in **The Film Till Now** against the swamping of the screen by dialogue is still valuable. Even today the popular cinema has not completely digested the innovation of sound. It is only in the work of a handful of the best directors that the cinema has proved its capacity to contain dialogue as a part of the unity of the film.

Moreover, Rotha's criticism of the dialogue film was a most valuable reaction against the tendency of the film to sacrifice its genuine creative and imaginative possibilities for a mechanical realism. In a passage rich in insight he writes:

> "The power of the camera to record the actual on the screen fooled the audience into believing that its sole pleasure lay in the recognition of familiar things. Thus, at the outset of the story-picture, the film began its career on a false basis and it hardly need be stated, has continued along these wrong lines (with a few notable exceptions) until the present day, when the dialogue film is further extending the desire for realism, as are also the stereoscopic screen and the colour film. The exact replica of an object...cannot give the same emotions of pleasure as the real object....It lies in the hands of the creator to utilize his imaginative powers in the creation of the replica, which is his impression, expression or mental rendering of the subject. Because a picture is 'lifelike', it is not necessarily an exact rendering of the original. It is rather the artist's interpretation of the original, in which he has emphasized the salient characteristics...This is particularly applicable to the film, with its power of emphasis by the close-up. The very presence of commonplace objects takes on a fresh meaning when shown enlarged on the screen, when emphasized as playing a part in the whole pattern of life."

Every part of this passage is still as true and important as it was when written twenty years ago. It should be read

particularly by those who think that the mere extension of the mechanical techniques of the screen – stereoscopy, colour, etc., — will automatically mean an advance in its artistic achievement.

Richard Griffith's approach to the film in the second part of this book, covering the last two decades, is indicated by his statement: "This addendum to **The Film Till Now** will concern itself principally with the relationship between a film and its world audience, and what was happening to that audience in the past eighteen years. The original edition of this book, written at the end of the experimental period, logically devoted itself to the developing grammar of the film. Now that the medium itself has matured, it is the uses to which this powerful instrument is put that require analysis."

Griffith, in other words, is concerned mainly with the social context of films. He is at his best in exposing the sham profound: he brilliantly debunks the muddled and sentimental messianism of Capra, and gives us some incisive pages on Orson Welles, in which the theme of **Citizen Kane** is described as "tinpot Freud, if not crackpot Freud." But Griffith's overriding concern with social values sometimes shows its narrowness:

> Thus, he overestimates **The Stars Look Down** and seriously underestimates **Brief Encounter** (in both cases Rotha dissents in a footnote). But on the credit side again one must set the excellent discussions of Disney and the later Chaplin. In the face of those "to whom the signet of film art is fancy camerawork," he convincingly vindicates Chaplin as an artist whose work is conceived essentially in the medium of the film.

The Ceylon Daily News, August 1950

13

Tragic Clown

Chaplin is without doubt the greatest genius of the film: he is also probably the most universal artist in any medium of the twentieth century. It is good to have a full-length study of the man and his work, particularly when it is illuminating as the one Mr. Cotes and Miss Niklaus have given us. The authors divide the book into two parts, headed "Chaplin's Life" and "Chaplin's Work", but the book is genuinely a whole. The biographical section isn't a mere assembly of facts or discursive anecdotage: Mr. Cotes and Miss Niklaus do succeed in achieving what every biographer of an artist should do – to show how the life helped to make the work possible.

As in the case of Dickens (to whose art, as the authors point out, Chaplin's bears a close affinity), it is likely that Chaplin's genius was nourished by what at first sight appears to have been the unpromising circumstances of his childhood. The son of two music-hall artistes (his father died when he was still a child), Chaplin knew from his childhood what poverty and suffering meant. Brought up in cheap lodgings and on the streets, with a spell in a workhouse, he could neither read nor write even at the age of eleven. Yet the experience of these years was to be the rich source of the material and the spirit of his future art.

In their study of Chaplin the man Mr. Cotes and Miss Niklaus bring out very well the paradoxes of his personality which find expression in the mingled pathos and comedy of his art – a character alternating between high-spirited effusiveness and deep melancholy, a popular hero who has yet often met with widespread hostility and whose personal life has been for the most part full of loneliness. The authors even succeed in discussing Chaplin's disastrous experiments in marriage with good taste and understanding. It is interesting, when one thinks of Mildred Harris, Lita Grey and Paulette Goddard, to remember the dream-girl whom Charlie the tramp pursued throughout his early films; it is interesting too to learn from the authors of this biography that in the eighteen-year-old Oona O'Neil the dream at last found realization.

The book contains a large number of quotations from Chaplin and anecdotes which throw light on his art. When Chaplin returned to England after his first successes in Holywood, already a world-famous figure, one of the first things he did was to revisit Kensington Park where in his poverty-stricken youth he had been accustomed to go to court a girl. Talking of this in his book, **My Wonderful Visit** , he says:

> *"How depressing to me are all parks! The loneliness of them. One never goes to a park unless one is lonesome and lonesomeness is sad. The symbol of sadness, that's a park."*

The conviction of most of his admirers that Chaplin's art is essentially an art of the silent film finds confirmation in this remark made by him to a reporter in 1929:

> *"Talkies? You can say I detest them! They have come to ruin the world's most ancient art, the art of pantomime. They annihilate the great beauty of silence."*

Side by side with this remark, it is most appropriate to quote a story about what happened when Chaplin was asked to make an after-dinner speech during a visit to Germany:

"He rose to his feet, a very small man at a very large banquet, licking dry lips, and praying for speedy death. Suddenly, he caught sight of Pola Negri further down the vast table, her large dark eyes fixed upon him in understanding and amusement, her mouth curved in the slightest smile. As though she had opened the way for him, he began to mime his speech. Not a single word came from him; there was a profound silence in the vast hall, until at a signal from him, the Russian musicians launched themselves into wildest Cossack music. Chaplin, bringing his mimed speech to its silent peroration, left his seat and danced. He danced to his hostess, his host, the bethrothed couple for whom the dinner was given, and finished his dance on his knees to Pola Negri, kissing her outstretched hand. Sober Teutons shouted and clapped and clamoured for more; a society famous for its rigidly conventional behaviour, its unbreakable shibboleths, took to its suddenly illuminated bosom the little man who had made, through mime and dancing, the most eloquent and brilliant after-dinner speech they had ever heard."

It is difficult not to believe that this wordless speech must have been more eloquent than the oration at the end of **The Great Dictator**, the praise of which by the authors is the only point I can find to disagree with in their discussion of Chaplin's films. I liked in particular their admirable analysis of **Monsieur Verdoux;** the authors' approach is indicated by the following quotation:

"The dualism of Charlie is at its most subtle in this film, for it lies within Verdoux himself, where good and evil are united. In its earliest form this dualism was simply another demonstration of the waif motif, with evil an exterior force. But Charlie, growing older and wiser realized the evil that lies within. Charlie and the Kid, Charlie and the girl waif,

were against Society...Now, in **Monsieur Verdoux** he has united the antagonists in one person."

Regarding Chaplin's "politics" the authors quote this remark of Chaplin himself in 1947, "For pity's sake, let's stop mixing up art with the shady political intrigues which go on all over the world." It is ironical that an artist who is one of the few eloquent voices of individualism today should have been denounced as a Communist in America and that **Monsieur Verdoux** should have met with an organized boycott on this ground. May one find yet another symbolic expression of Chaplin's personal situation in his forthcoming film, **Limelight** – the story of an ageing clown at whom the public have ceased to laugh?

Ceylon Daily News, December 1951

THE LITTLE FELLOW: The Life and Work of Charles Spencer Chaplin, by Peter Cotes and Thelma Niklaus (Paul Elek, 15s.).

CRITICS

1

Death of a Great Critic

The suicide of F.O. Mathiessen, Harvard Professor of English, early last month is a human tragedy as well as a great loss to literature. Mathiessen was one of the finest critics of our time: he combined qualities which are rarely found in one critic-scholarship, sensitiveness and a wide breadth of interest. Mathiessen's writing on literature, like that of every great critic, proceeded from an active social and moral concern. His book on the classic American writers, **American Renaissance**, is one of the best studies of "literature and society" quite different from the crude simplification made by most writers who try to relate them.

Mathiessen did not regiment his thinking to fit a dogma: in **American Renaissance** he showed a remarkable sympathy equally with the social concern of Whitman and the tragic vision of Hawthorne and Melville. In a preface to the 1947 edition of his **Achievement of T.S. Eliot** (also, I think, the best book on its subject) he said: "My growing divergence from his (Eliot's view of life) is that I believe that it is possible to accept the 'radical imperfection' of man and yet to be a political radical as well, to be aware that no human society can be perfect, and yet to hold that the proposition that "all men are created equal" demands dynamic adherence from a Christian no less than from a democrat."

Mathiessen's writing shows that he had a personal understanding of the somber view of life of writers like Eliot, Hawthorne and Melville. Of Eliot's Christianity he wrote: "he has not increased the popularity of his choice by his reiterated awareness that our crisis may be a collapse and a return to the dark ages.... But Eliot has faced the dark necessity of what he believes to be true. He has known long since that in the realm of religious and cultural values 'we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph."

Mathiessen continued to fight himself – although he could not accept the Communist dogmas, he supported several Communist sponsored organizations, because he felt that "brutalized as much of its practice may have been, it (Russia) still points towards a goal that gives the dispossessed their only hope". Three weeks ago, Mathiessen took a room on the twelfth floor of a Boston Hotel, and threw himself down from the window to his death. He left behind a note: "How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a Socialist, believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions."

Ceylon Daily News

2

From Rebellion to Tyranny

F.R. Leavis (who died last month at the age of 82) began as a rebel against the English critical establishment of his day. For this offence, compounded as it was by his middle-class origin (his father was a Cambridge shopkeeper), he was at first snubbed, cold-shouldered and deprived of academic advancement at Cambridge. He never forgot these early slights, and even when he was already celebrated he would erupt from time to time in a letter to some periodical recalling an injustice suffered at the hands of the literary establishment thirty or forty years previously. His pupil and admirer Ronald Hayman says that in the course of his lectures Leavis would relate to his class 'lengthy anecdotes that demonstrated how he had been the victim of misinterpretation and deliberate misrepresentation'.

Yet what has happened to many rebels in many other spheres happened to Leavis: he ended as the head of an orthodoxy no less rigid and tyrannical than the one he had overthrown. This was all the more inevitable because he was a markedly authoritarian figure who did not tolerate dissent easily. That is why *Scrutiny*, so lively and stimulating in its early years, became later so depressingly predictable: you knew beforehand what the faithful Leavisites, echoing the Master, would say on a given writer or work.

In Sri Lanka's small world of Eng.Lit. the tyranny of Leavisism has been perhaps even stronger than in its original home. Take just one example: the case of Dickens. It used to be taken for granted that at A Level or at University there was only one novel of Dickens fit to be prescribed as a text: *Hard Times.* There was a simple reason for this: in *The Great Tradition* Leavis had pronounced that this was Dicken's one great novel. I remember an academic being shocked in the mid-sixties by the fact that on one of the campuses I had prescribed *Great Expectations* (a much richer novel than *Hard Times*, to my mind). Then, in 1970 Leavis (together with his wife) brought out a book on Dickens in which he went back on what he had said earlier and admitted no less than six novels of Dickens to the canon.

It was, of course, to Leavis's credit that, unlike many of his disciples, he was capable of growth and change, and that he kept developing as a critic to the end (though he rarely liked to admit that he had ever been wrong). His attitude to Eliot as poet and critic is a striking example of this development. Leavis's assessment of Eliot, which began with the early idolatry of *New Bearings in English Poetry*, went through a steady downgrading, culminating in the 1967 essay on the critic and the 1975 study of the poetry. To those of us who had already concluded that Eliot's work was life-denying and pervaded by snobbery, Leavis's last thoughts were less than startling, but the controversy in *Universities Quarterly* that followed showed what a shock they had been to some of his own critical following.

Yet Leavis, for all his devotion to the integrity of criticism and his incisiveness and rigour, was limited in several ways. With an almost aggressive insistence on the Englishness of English literature, he refused to concern himself as a critic with literature in other languages (except for one essay on *Anna Karenina* and another on Montale). This seriously constricted his critical horizons, particularly in dealing with the novel, since even the best English

novelists seem provincial and insular, in comparison with the nineteenth century Russian and French masters. Leavis's perpetuation of the English myth of Jane Austen as a great novelist, for instance, would have been impossible if he had looked at her in a wider European perspective (what does she mean to a Russian or French reader ?).

Even more limiting was his critical method of close verbal analysis. He tended to rate most highly those poets in whom he found the kind of sensuous particularity and verbal complexity that lent itself most readily to his method. Hence, for instance, his marked preference for Keats over Shelley, in whom he found a 'weak grasp of the actual'. One can agree that Keats was the superior artist, that he had a surer feeling for language than Shelley, without conceding that this makes him the greater poet in every sense. Keats showed a fine sensitiveness within a relatively narrow range of experience, largely aesthetic, where Shelley was a poet responsive to the central social and political experiences of his age, and we cannot compare him with Keats without giving due weight to his greater range of awareness.

Leavis's method was an even more inadequate tool in criticism of the novel. The essential concern of the great novelists is with man in his social environment, and the scope and depth of a novelist's understanding of his characters in their social relations is crucial to a judgement of his work. Leavis admitted Jane Austen and Henry James to his 'great tradition' though their novelistic imagination works within very narrow limitations of class and milieu. On the other hand, he relegated Emily Bronte to a footnote (although *Wuthering Heights* is the most powerful treatment in the English language of the conflict between class and natural human feeling), and was extremely patronizing to Hardy. Hardy's prose is uneven in quality, but his social world is much more substantial than that of James whose characters are often disembodied sensitive intelligences quivering in a void.

In his book on Leavis, Ronald Hayman claims that he is 'the most important critic of this century'. I don't accept this view. Without going any further afield, I would say that Raymond Williams, who was educated at Leavis's Cambridge but has developed and matured in an independent way, is a much more important critic for his ability to relate literature illuminatingly to its wider social context – *Modern Tragedy, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* and *The Country and the City* are works in which the social judgments are not 'added on' to the literary analysis – as in the simplified 'Marxist' studies of literature against which Leavis used to protest in the thirties. Williams is able to show how moral values and literary forms are inextricably interwoven with the social context from which they arise.

Lanka Guardian, Vol.1, No.2, May 1978

3

F.R. Leavis and the Novel

What I hope to do in this essay is to assess F.R. Leavis's criticism of the novel and to offer an alternative view of the tradition of the English novel. This aspect of Leavis's work is both the most original part of his criticism and that which reveals most clearly the limitations of his critical outlook and methods. When Leavis attempted in **The Great Tradition** to establish what he called the essential discriminations in the field of English fiction, the critical situation he faced was very different from what he had confronted earlier as a critic of poetry. In **New Bearings in English Poetry** Leavis had offered a critical orientation towards the contemporary situation in poetry, in which the decisive landmark for him, was the work of T.S. Eliot as poet. In **Revaluation** what he tried to do was largely to develop and organize into a coherent historical retrospect the innovating ideas thrown out by Eliot the critic regarding the tradition of English poetry. So Leavis's critical writing on poetry was undertaken in the shadow of Eliot as poet and as critic. It's true that Leavis's view of Eliot's stature, both as poet and as critic, changed drastically in later years, but he didn't depart to any fundamental extent from the view of the English poetic traditions that he had derived from Eliot.

As critic of the novel, however, Leavis began as a lone explorer. Here Eliot had charted no tracks for him, since Eliot had never shown either any great interests in the novel

or any critical insights into it. In fact, criticism of the novel in Britain was largely a barren field before Leavis. He himself wrote in 1932 (the year of **New Bearings in English Poetry**), 'Criticism of the novel has hardly yet begun.' Although the Victorian era was the great age of the English novel, it had not given rise to any appreciable body of intelligent novel-criticism. The superior prestige that poetry enjoyed in the scholarly world was a barrier against serious critical attention being devoted to the new and popular form of the novel. The English situation in this respect was in marked contrast to that which obtained in Russia during the same period, where the great age of Russian fiction was accompanied by a vigorous and perceptive critical movement focusing attention on the new form. Vissarion Belinsky's observation of 1847 is symptomatic: "The novel and the short story stand today at the head of all the genres of poetry". Notice that Belinsky not only gave precedence to prose fiction as the most important form of contemporary literature; he also broke down the distinction between prose fiction and poetry. There was no comparable critical development in Britain in the Victorian age, or indeed at any time up to the Second World War. We may appropriately contrast Belinsky's dictum with Arnold's: 'The crown of literature is poetry,' following which he went on to refer to the novel merely as 'that form of imaginative literature which in our day is the most popular and the most possible.' (Strikingly, Arnold made these remarks while writing about Tolstoy!)

In English, the outstanding critics of poetry in every age had been themselves practicing poets: Eliot had his predecessors in Arnold, Coleridge, Dr. Johnson, Dryden and Ben Jonson. However, there had been only two novelists in English who were also serious critics of the novel – Henry James and D.H. Lawrence – and both were too limited in their view of the novel to serve as a starting-point for a critical tradition. James's approach to the novel was a generalization of his own practice – remember his notorious

description of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as 'fluid pudding' while Lawrence, though full of brilliant fitful insights, was highly erratic and idiosyncratic as a critic. The pioneers of practical criticism – people like I.A. Richards and William Empson – concentrated on poetry. So Leavis as a critic of the novel had to start virtually from scratch and it is revealing that he brought out his first substantial book of novel-criticism only in 1948, or sixteen years after **New Bearings in English Poetry**.

So much for Leavis's originality as a critic of the novel. About the limitations I shall have a great deal to say as I go on, but I want to make one general point at this stage. Apart from one essay on Anna Karenina late in his life. Leavis confined himself as a critic of the novel to fiction written in the English language. No doubt this was due to his conviction that criticism must concentrate on 'the words on the page,' and therefore he must have considered it necessary to limit himself to novels written in his native language with which he had the greatest inwardness. But this was an unfortunate self-limitation. One of the most significant things about the novel is that it is the most international of literary forms and lends itself to translation more readily than any other. It is true that some nuances and subtleties are lost in the process of translation, but the gain for the reader and the critic in the broadening of his experience of fiction greatly outweighs the loss. Can one really evaluate the tradition of English fiction without comparing it with the work of the Russian and French masters? I agree with the judgment of Marvin Mudrick:

> There is, in fact, no English novel that registers a whole society; and in the balance with Continental fiction, there is almost no English novel that cannot fairly be described as provincial... The point is that for the English novelist a provincialism of tempera ment is likely to go along with his provincialism of subject.[1]

Leavis's reluctance to deal with fiction in translation was regrettable because experience shows that the power of a great novelist can convey itself through translation, even sometimes through imperfect translation. The English generation of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster were strongly affected by the great Russian novelists, whom they read in the translations of Constance Garnett, which in spite of their readability and fluency, were teeming with errors. The example of George Steiner, a critic who knows no Russian but has written one of the finest critical works on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, shows that a critic of the novel isn't disabled by working from translations. I can't go into this question fully here, but what the cases I have cited point to is the fact that a novel is much less bound than a lyric poem to the verbal structures of which its text is composed. The novel makes its impact on the reader through larger patterns of character, dramatic situation and human relationships. This is something that Leavis didn't sufficiently appreciate, because he came to novel criticism through the tradition of practical criticism and close verbal analysis of poetry. Measure Hardy against Henry James through analysis of sample passages of prose, and you will no doubt prefer James – at least the early James (as Leavis does) – because Hardy's language is often gauche and stilted. But take into account the novelist's range of experience, the extent of mileux in which his imagination is at home, the depth of his comprehension of social relationships, and Hardy proves the superior novelist. Hardy is more substantially rooted in the real world of work and want and aspiration, while James's world is one of exquisite – I might almost say, precious – sensibilities nurtured in a country-house environment of leisure and privilege.

I turn now to the **The Great Tradition**. Recall that provocative sentence with which Leavis concludes his introductory chapter: 'Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Conrad and D.H. Lawrence: the great tradition of

the English novel is **there**.'[2] The notion of a tradition of the English novel that runs from Jane Austen to Conrad and Lawrence is startling. Certainly Conrad and Lawrence themselves would have been stupefied to be told that Jane Austen was their ancestor. We have it on the authority of H.G. Wells in his autobiography that Conrad used to ask him "wringing his hands and wrinkling his forehead, "What is all this about Jane Austen? What is there in her?" As for Lawrence, he referred to Jane Austen as 'spinsterish', and said, 'She seems to me thoroughly unpleasant, English in the bad, mean, snobbish sense of the word.' Of course, when Lawrence called Jane Austen 'spinterish', he wasn't thinking merely of her civil status. Emily Bronte wasn't married either, but Lawrence would hardly have called her 'spinterish', since he described **Wuthering Heights** as 'a great book'. And long before Lawrence, Charlotte Bronte had offered the essential criticism to be made of Jane Austen. Leavis holds it against Charlotte Bronte that 'she couldn't see why any value should be attached to Jane Austen'.[3] To me it seems that her comments are a classic of criticism: they say, briefly and incisively, everything that has to be said about Jane Austen's narrowness of social comprehension, her incapacity for passionate experience, the lack of poetic life in her language. Here is Charlotte Bronte on Jane Austen in a letter to W.S. Williams:

> She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well... Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death – this Miss Austen ignores. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not senseless) woman.[4]

And again, in a letter to G.H. Lewes:

Can there be a great artist without poetry?.... Miss Austen being, as you say, without 'sentiment', without **Poetry**, maybe is sensible, real (more **real** than **true**) but she cannot be great.[5]

That is the essential answer to Leavis's placing of Jane Austen in 'the great tradition'.

Does George Eliot belong in the same tradition as Jane Austen, as Leavis would have us believe? She learnt from Jane Austen a certain ironic tone, but as a whole she's a very different kind of novelist. Consider **Adam Bede**. It's not a very good novel – it's George Eliot's first – and it lapses into melodrama at the end. But it's startling to remember that it's set in the rural England of Jane Austen's day, and yet what a difference there is in George Eliot's social canvas! The painfully disturbing experience of Hetty Sorel's seduction and her infanticide represents both a social and a moral reality that are quite outside Jane Austen's range. We may set against the Hetty Sorel episode Emma's primly snobbish comment on Harriet Smith's illegitimacy, undoubtedly endorsed by the novelist, for this is after Emma's moral reformation.

"What a connection had she been preparing for Mr. Knightley, or for the Churchills, or even for Mr. Elton! The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed."

But the great revolution in the English novel had already occurred between Jane Austen and George Eliot. What lies between them is not, as Leavis thinks, a continuity, but the end of one tradition and the beginning of another. And we can date with precision the year that marks that second beginning – 1847, the year that saw the publication of '**Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre**, and the first instalments of **Dombey and Son**. Charlotte Bronte did not herself have the imaginative genius to bring to realization the conception of the novel that is implied in her criticism of Jane Austen. But it is there, triumphantly fulfilled, in the solitary

masterpiece of her sister, Emily. And yet Leavis relegated Emily Bronte and **Wuthering Heights** to a footnote in **The Great Tradition**, and called the novel 'a kind of sport.'[6] Leavis's metaphor is biological, and means an organism that shows an unusual or singular deviation from the normal or parent type. Of course, we must agree that **Wuthering Heights** is without precedent in anything that had gone before in the English novel. But this doesn't make it some kind of inexplicable freak, because the revolution it marks in the novel is related to the changes in consciousness between Jane Austen's time and Emily Bronte's. And the new awareness demanded a new form.

How could Leavis not have seen that, together with Dickens's first mature novel, **Dombey and Son**, **Wuthering Heights** marked a new beginning in the English novel? These two works broke with the tradition of eighteenth-century fiction and Jane Austen; they brought into the novel the consciousness and the poetic life of the best Romantic poetry. And how could Leavis not have recognized that the finest achievements of Lawrence had affinities with **Wuthering Heights**, so that it is with Emily Bronte and not with Jane Austen that he should have begun his 'great tradition'? Writing about **Daughters of the Vicar**, Leavis speaks of Lawrence's sense of the deep spontaneous life over which the conscious mind and will have no dominion, and which they cannot control or replace, though they can thwart it. And its frustration and impoverishment entail the frustration and impoverishment of life at what are thought of as the higher levels.[7]

Isn't it precisely this awareness that we have in the great scene in **Wuthering Heights** in which Catherine Earnshaw talks to Nelly Dean before her marriage? The dream – the voice of 'the deep spontaneous life' – is wiser than Catherine's conscious self: it says to her that she has 'no more business to marry Edgar Linton than to be in heaven. And it is this contrast between the deeper life and the conscious mind and will that is expressed in the superb poetic imagery:

> My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath – a source of little visible delight, but necessary.

We can see why Lawrence called **Wuthering Heights** 'a great book,' and we can recall Charlotte Bronte's phrase about what Jane Austen ignores: 'what throbs fast and full, though hidden... the unseen seat of life.' And of Emily Bronte, as of any other great novelist, we can say that her insight into the human personality is bound up with her understanding of social relations. The first part of **Wuthering Heights** is about the thwarting of natural feeling by class, just as much as the second part is about the triumph of personal love over it.

Like Emily Bronte, Dickens – except for **Hard Times** – was relegated by Leavis to the margins of 'the great tradition.' His genius, said Leavis, 'was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist that this description suggests.'[8] It has always astonished me that so many academics and critics were prepared to accept this judgment on Dickens, which seemed to me even in 1948 preposterous, on the strength of Leavis's authority. In 1970 Leavis, together with his wife, produced **Dickens the Novelist**, in which he changed his mind while obscuring the fact that he had done so. I'm all for critics re-examining their opinions, but remembering Leavis's judgment twenty-two years earlier, I find it extraordinary that he and Q.D. Leavis should have written in the preface to their 1970 book 'We should like to make it impossible ... for any intellectual ... to tell us with the familiar easy assurance that Dickens was of course a genius, but that his line was entertainment.'[9]

Leavis's essays on Dickens in the later book are, however, more mature criticism than the earlier piece on **Hard Times**. But it seems to me that, as compensate for his earlier under-rating of Dickens, Leavis was now inflating him. 'One of the very greatest of creative writers', of **Little Dorrit**: 'one of the very greatest of novels; its omission from any brief list of the great European novels would be critically indefensible'[10] – when I encounter such superlatives. I feel badly the need for a comparative standard, I feel it necessary to underline the fact that Dickens was not Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. What is strong in **Little Dorrit** is its revelation of the harsh dehumanisation of Victorian civilization – everything that is brought out by Mr. Dorrit, Mrs. Clennam, Merdle. What is weak, idealizing and sentimental is the figure of Little Dorrit herself. She just isn't capable of bearing the kind of positive significance Leavis attributes to her: 'Her genius is to be always beyond question genuine – real'.[11] It's not only that Little Dorrit is too good to be true; it's as if in reaction against the aggressive predatoriness of Victorian society Dickens has a compulsion to attach himself to the ideal of sexless, submissive, self-renouncing feminine personality. The comparison I should like to make is with Dostoevsky's **The Idiot**, whose St.Petersburg is not dissimilar in its money lust, selfishness and falsity to Dickens's London. But Dostoevsky's world contains not only the innocent, Christian and self-sacrificing Myshkin (whose innocence is bound up with his epilepsy), but also the suffering, rebellious and passionate figure of Nastasya Filippovna and that is a character quite beyond Dickens's comprehension. He could have seen her only as somebody morbid and perverse, like Miss Wade.

On George Eliot Leavis is at his best as a critic of the novel since her kind of moral earnestness is very close to him. The pages in **The Great Tradition** on **Felix Holt**, **Middlemarch**, **Daniel Deronda** are a genuinely new and valuable illumination of her work. But to go from George Eliot to Henry James, as Leavis does, is to experience a narrowing of the conception of the novel. George Eliot's moral intensity is displaced in James by an aesthetic

absorption. Nor does Conrad the expatriate, whose strongest sense is of rootlessness and alienation, seem to me to be central to the tradition of the English novel; and what does he have in common with George Eliot, strongly rooted in her moral certainties? The important line runs from George Eliot through Hardy to the early Lawrence, and we have here a real tradition linked by affinities and formative influences. George Eliot's rural novels were Hardy's starting point, and the two greatest novelistic influences on the young Lawrence were George Eliot and Hardy.

It would require at least a whole essay to deal at all adequately with Leavis's work on Lawrence, to whom so much of his critical energy was devoted in his latter years. I can only say here that I applaud the spirit in which Leavis opposes Lawrence, as the greater creative genius to Eliot's life-denying puritanism. But I can't see Lawrence as the transcendent modern creative genius that Leavis makes him out to be. For there seems to me no doubt that after the splendid beginning of **Sons and Lovers**, **The Rainbow** and the best of the early tales, something went very wrong with Lawrence's genius. It has to be said in extenuation that his persecution by English society, the forced exile and the nomadic life he led thereafter had a good deal to do with the uprooting of his art, with the hysterical overinsistence and the obsessive cults that we find in the later work. **Women in Love** seems to me not the achieved masterpiece that Leavis assesses it to be, but the beginning of the decline that culminates in **The Plumed Serpent** and **Lady Chatterley's Lover**. Leavis does acknowledge these last works to be bad, but then he praises highly that horrible story – **The Woman who Rode Away**. You remember, it's the story of an American woman who, dissatisfied with her marriage and with civilized existence, rides out into the wilderness, and is there captured by an Indian tribe, who finally offer her up as a sacrifice to their gods. All the stress of the story at the end is on the passivity, the total surrender, with which the woman awaits

the moment when the sun will strike through into the cave where she lies prostrate, and the stone knife (a patently phallic symbol) will pierce her heart. 'An astonishing feat of imagination,'[12] Leavis calls it. I prefer the description by the feminist critic Kate Millett, 'demented fantasies.' It's not this kind of regresstion to primitivism that can offer an alternative to contemporary decadence, as Leavis seems to think when he finds in the story 'an earnestness and profundity of response to the problems of modern civilization'.[13] Nor does the sadism at the expense of the female and the glorification of male power in the story strike me as anything but perverse. The early Lawrence was very different: A great writer who, in his own words, 'spoke for life', and a fitting heir to the tradition that began with Emily Bronte. Indeed, if I may end by mimicking Leavis's authoritarian manner let me say: "Emily Bronte, Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Lawrence: the great tradition of the English novel is **there**'.

(Kailasapathy Commemoration Volume Jaffna, 1988 – Editors: M. Chitralega, K. Shanmugalingam, S. Maunaguru)

Footnotes

1 Marvin Mudrick, '**The Originality of The Rainbow**,' in Harry T. Moore (ed.), **A.D.H. Lawrence Miscellany**, p.55.

2 Leavis, **The Great Tradition** (Peregrine ed.) p. 37.

3. Ibid.

4 Quoted from B.C. Southam (ed.), **Jane Austen: The Critical heritage**, pp. 127– 128.

5 Quoted from Elizabeth Gaskell, **The Life of Charlotte Bronte** (Everyman ed.), p. 241.

6 **The Great Tradition**, p.38.

7 Leavis, **D.H. Lawrence** (Pelican ed.), p. 92.
8 The Great Tradition, p. 29.
9 F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, **Dickens The Novelist**, p. ix.
10 **Dickens the Novelist**, p. 213.
11 **Dickens the Novelist**, p. 226.
12 **D.H. Lawrence**,p. 332.
13 **Ibid**.

4

Said, the European Novel & Imperialism

My critique of Edward Said's new book *Culture and Imperialism*[1] will be directed essentially to its first two chapters, whose main concern is to argue that there is a close relation between imperialism and the European, and most particularly, the English novel. These two chapters are in fact the most substantial and original part of the book. Said's undertaking can be seen as, in some ways, a continuation and extension of his earlier book *Orientalism*[2], since both works seek to explore the significance of modes of representation as a source of power. In this book he is concerned to show that imperialism isn't sustained only by armies or policemen but also by the structures of acceptance induced through culture and especially for his purpose, through literature.

In his introduction to the new book, Said notes that what he had left out of *Orientalism* was "that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World" (xii). The third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* is headed 'Resistance and Opposition' as if to make up for that earlier lack. However, there is a curious dichotomy between material and method between the two parts of the book. In the first two chapters the general argument about the significance of culture in

sustaining and securing consent to the imperialist enterprise is supported by interpretations of several novels, and also of one opera – Verdi's *Aida*. We expect, therefore, that in the third chapter Said will similarly exemplify his account of the resistance of the colonized through a reading of Third World texts by creative artists. Instead, the texts he chooses for extended treatment in Chapter Three are five works of historical and sociological writing, and such references as there are to Third World poetry or fiction are extremely brief and perfunctory. It isn't my purpose to suggest that there are watertight compartments between different fields of writing; but Said's method is unfortunate, because it may give the impression that Marquez, Rushdie, Walcott or Achebe don't deserve the kind of detailed treatment that Jane Austen, Kipling, Conrad or Camus get in the first part of the book. It's all the more odd that there is one poet who gets fuller treatment in the chapter on "Resistance and Opposition", and that isn't an Asian, African or Latin-American writer but W.B. Yeats, discussed here as a poet of Irish decolonization. It's a strange choice because Yeats' relations with Irish nationalism on the one hand and the Anglo-Irish ruling class on the other were very ambivalent. It's not that Said is unaware of this fact, but to my mind it doesn't get clearly focused in his discussion of the poetry. There are many things in this sub-chapter on Yeats that I should have liked to quarrel with, but I am leaving them out because they are outside the scope of this paper. The fourth chapter is devoted to America's imperial role in the post-Cold War world as the last superpower and the heir to the Western empires of the past. I have no disagreement with Said's political position in this chapter, but he doesn't seem to me to say more than has been said already by other radical political writers.

So to get back to my real subject – **Said, the European Novel and Imperialism**, Said says early in his book: "I have deliberately abstained from advancing a completely worked

out theory of the connection between literature and culture on the one hand, and imperialism on the other. Instead, I hope the connections emerge from their explicit places in the various texts" (14). He also says in his introduction, "My method is to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire" (xxii). Reading that last sentence, one may be inclined to raise a querying eyebrow. To read the works first as great literature *and then* to see them in their relationship with empire? Shouldn't these acts of reading and judgment, one may ask, be more integrated? If the involvement with empire in a novel matters at all, shouldn't the evidence be there in the very literary fabric of the work itself? Later in the book Said inveighs against the academic tendency to sanitize culture as a "realm of unchanging intellectual monuments, free from worldly affiliations," (13) or to see novels as "the product of lonely genius" or "manifestations of unconditioned creativity" (73). Although he says, "My principal aim is not to separate but to connect," (15) isn't Said, in defining his method as he does, making a kind of separation too? Of course, at first reading one treats that sentence as a carelessly imperfect formulation. But it turns out that the misgivings it arouses are justified, for there is, as I shall try to establish, a certain hiatus between Said's literary or aesthetic judgments and his political analysis.

For all Said's insistence that he is less concerned with theory than with demonstrating his conclusions from specific texts, he does have a theory of the novel and its relations with empire – and a pretty explicit one too. "The novel," he says, "is fundamentally tied to bourgeois society; in Charles Moraze's phrase, it accompanies, and is indeed a part of the conquest of Western society by what he calls *les bourgeois conquerants*. No less significantly, the novel is inaugurated in England by *Robinson Crusoe*, a work whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for

Christianity and England (70). Said has been preceded by other theorists in characterizing the novel as a bourgeois literary form; what he adds is the link with imperialism. In his words, "the novel, as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other" (71).

Said's examination of the European novel is very English-centred; of the five novelists discussed in some detail in the first two chapters, four – Austen, Kipling, Conrad and Forster – are English. Said's defense of this selectivity is based partly on a belief in the literary supremacy of the English novel and partly on a historical view of the character of British imperialism. In his introduction Said says, "since narrative plays such a remarkable part in the imperial quest, it is therefore not surprising that France and (especially) England have an unbroken tradition of novel-writing, unparalleled elsewhere" (xxii). However, in the body of the book the claim for the uniqueness of the English novel is still more strongly asserted, even in comparison with France: "Britain... produced and sustained a novelistic institution with no real European competitor or equivalent" (71). And for Said the literary dominance of the English novel and the political dominance of British imperialism are not coincidental developments but essentially interconnected, because "imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible to read one without in some way dealing with the other" (71).

Said also argues that British imperialism was unique in the degree of centrality it occupied in relation to national life. Of Russian imperialism he says: "Russia...acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other continents, Russia moved to swallow whatever lands or peoples stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving further east and south. But in the English and French cases, the sheer distance of

attractive territories summoned the projection of far-flung interests" (10). However, in Said's view, even France offers no real parallel to the pervasive presence of imperialism in British society. "The reverses of policy, losses of colonies, insecurity of possession, and shifts in philosophy that France suffered during the Revolution and the Napoleonic era meant that its empire had a less secure identity and presence in French culture... In the culture at large – until after the middle of the [19th] century – there is rarely that weighty, almost philosophical sense of imperial mission that one finds in Britain" (63).

I have been at pains to present this complex of ideas rather fully, and as far as possible in Said's own words, because I want to look at them critically. First, I wish to look at the view that the novel was the cultural product of the bourgeoisie. This is a proposition that has been much favoured by Marxist literary historians, but it was also advanced by a British scholar in a book published in 1957 that has been academically very influential – Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*[3] (though Watt said 'middle class' and not 'bourgeoisie'). And as long as one looks at the novel-form through the prism of the English novel, this view may seem unquestionable. Ian Watt's book, in spite of its title, turns out in fact to be about the rise of the *English* novel. Like Said, Watt claimed *Robinson Crusoe* as the first novel in English, one which is virtually a celebration of the new bourgeois hero, his adventurousness, his self-reliance, his conviction that Providence is with him, and his single-handed inauguration of what amounts to a colonial enterprise.

But does the notion that the novel was the creation of the bourgeoisie stand up when one goes beyond England? It is of course true that novels, as distinct from older European forms of narrative, were produced as printed books, and therefore required some elements of what has been called 'print capitalism,' the establishment of the printing press and

the growth of the book market. But once these conditions had come into existence, the novel could flourish in societies where the bourgeoisie were not the dominant class such as 17th and 18th century France, and 19th century Russia. In the major French novels of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Mme. De La Fayette's, *La Princesse de Cleves* and de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the social milieu and the values are aristocratic and not bourgeois, as were the authors themselves. The very opening words of *La Princesse de Cleves* are 'magnificence and gallantry' – describing the atmosphere of the court of Henry II. The theme of the novel is the conflict between love and duty or honour in a highly elegant courtly society, outside of which the novel never moves. Laclos' novel is set in an aristocratic world seething with sexual intrigue, in which the conflict is between men and women in their struggle for sexual power. In 19th century Russia the novels of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Goncharov, and the early work of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were produced in a society that had still not been emancipated from serfdom. And all these novelists came from the class that was known as *dvoryane* – that is nobility or gentry, and enjoyed legal rights and privileges by virtue of this fact. It is not till the last two decades of the 19th century that there was a major writer of Russian fiction who was not born into this class – that is Chekhov, whose family belonged to the petit-bourgeoisie.

The generalization about the 'bourgeois' character of the novel is, therefore, an illegitimate extension from the English case. It's not that the novel is inherently a bourgeois literary form, but that in England, which was already a bourgeois society, the novel became a vehicle for bourgeois values. It's worth remarking that Ian Watt, in trying to establish that the novel is characterized by middle-class realism and in giving primacy to Defoe as the creator of the novel, says that "French fiction *La Princesse de Cleves* to *Liaisons Dangereuses* stands outside the main tradition of the

novel. For all its psychological penetration and literary skill, we feel it is too stylish to be authentic."[4] It's a circular process of reasoning; you first eliminate from the category of novels everything that doesn't fit the attributes you want to find in them, and then you define the novel in terms of what you have sieved out.

What of the supposed literary predominance of the English novel over its European rivals? It can reasonably be argued that the French novel has just as unbroken a tradition as the English (and even older if *Robinson Crusoe* is taken to be the first English novel), and one that it is in no way inferior. There is in the Said of this book an unhappy mixture of the pamphleteer and the scholar, as I shall bring out more fully later,[5] but it already comes out in the way he slants his case about the novel and imperialism. Because he wants to demonstrate the interdependence between these two, which by his own account is less evident in the French case, he has to depreciate the French novel. Of course, the Russian novel was of later provenance than the English simply because printed literature itself emerged in Russia later than in Western Europe. But, in the 19th century is the achievement of the Russian novel inferior to the English? Many English critics and novelists themselves have thought very differently. One may recall that the generation of young English novelists around the time of the First World War (Lawrence, Forster, Virginia Woolf) was fascinated by the Russian novel, to which they had been introduced by the translations of Constance Garnett, because they thought it superior to anything in their own language.

One observation of Said can serve as a reminder of how different the 19th century Russian novel was from the English. He writes:

> The novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the restlessness and energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeois, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can

> aspire to, where they can go, what they can become. Novels therefore end either with the death of a hero or heroine (Julien Sorel, Emma Bovary, Bezarov [sic], Jude the Obscure) who by virtue of overflowing energy does not fit into the orderly scheme of things, or with the protagonist's accession to stability (usually in the form of marriage or confirmed identity, as is the case with novels of Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot) (71).

Said doesn't seem to have thought it worth noting that in the first pattern of endings he distinguishes in the novel, all but one of the four he refers to are French or Russian, while the novels he mentions in the second group are those of English writers. The incorporation into society and achieved stability of the hero (usually through marriage, with property often in the background) is in fact the normal ending of the 19th century English novel. Hardy, the creator of Jude whom Said mentions in his first group is in this respect an exception, and he comes late in the century, when the order of Victorian society was being questioned by new intellectual currents. It's worth remarking that in *Wuthering Heights*, which in many ways is deviant from the mainstream Victorian novel, the tragic outcome of the relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw in the first half of the book is balanced by the achieved harmony of the younger pair, Hareton Earnshaw and Catherine Linton, in the second half. It's also noteworthy that on the one occasion when Dickens tried to break with the pattern of resolution through marriage – in the original ending of *Great Expectations* – he was persuaded by his friend Bulwer Lytton to conform to the established norm. But the most important point I want to make is that not a single major Russian novel of the 19th century resembles the English novel in this respect, nor would it be possible to fit *War and Peace* or any of the novels of Dostoevsky into either of the structural types distinguished

by Said. If the 19th century English novel was directed towards the hero's successful incorporation into the stable order of bourgeois society, the Russian novel wasn't.

It seems to me, therefore, that Said's argument for basing a general case regarding culture and imperialism on the English novel is built on questionable literary foundations. I shall return later to the political contrasts he makes between British, French and Russian imperialisms, but now I want to look at one of his literary case-studies based on English texts. The case is that of Jan Austen's *Mansfield Park*. I must be honest and say that I haven't chosen it as the best piece of criticism in the book for he does much better with Conrad and Kipling. But I want to focus on the example of *Mansfield Park* because it brings out particularly sharply some of the problems raised by Said's critical method.

Said is perhaps the first critic of the novel to underline the fact that the affluence and gentility of the Bertram family at Mansfield Park is derived from a property in Antigua in the West Indies. Readers, if they take note of this fact at all, would generally treat it as a mechanism of the plot. It is Sir Thomas Bertram's absence in Antigua that permits the intrigues that go on round the projected domestic theatricals, thrown into confusion later by his unexpected return. But Said discovers in the Antiguan element a historical phenomenon that is an important part of the social reality that the novel presents:

> According to Austen we are to conclude that no matter how isolated and insulated the English place (e.g. Mansfield Park), it requires overseas sustenance. Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour (not abolished until the 1830s). These are not dead historical facts, but, as Austen evidently knew, evident historical realities (89).

Said's inference from the text that the comfortable world of Mansfield Park was sustained by slave labour will probably outrage some literary critics, but I think his point is incontrovertible and he is right to make it. The real question, however, is that once we have made this discovery, how does it affect our response to the novel? Said considers one possible reaction only to reject it. "Yes, Austen belonged to a slave-owning society, but do we therefore jettison her novels as so many trivial exercises in aesthetic frumpery? Not at all I would argue..." (96)

One can readily imagine exponents of vulgar Marxist literary criticism, so common in Sri Lanka, adopting just the position that Said rejects. It has often struck me that critics of this kind don't need even to read the novel, see the play or watch the film they are damning; they could as well work from a synopsis, because all that's necessary for them is to extract from the work a social message and then measure it as 'progressive' or 'reactionary.'

But what is Said's alternative? "Having read *Mansfield Park* as part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture, one cannot simply restore it to the canon of 'great literary masterpieces' – to which it most certainly belongs- and leave it at that" (95). What Said wants to emphasise is the contradiction between Austen's civilized values and the reality of slavery which is part of that civilisation's economic underpinnings. "There is a paradox here in reading Jane Austen which I have been impressed by but can in no way resolve. All the evidence says that even the most routine aspects of holding slaves on a West Indian sugar plantation were cruel stuff. And everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery (96).

Although I don't share the position of the naïve Marxist critics, I can't go along with Said either. In reading these passages I have quoted, there is a point at which I feel inclined to rub my eyes. This is the point at which he says – in a parenthesis, as if it were self evident – that *Mansfield Park* belongs "most certainly" to the canon of "great literary masterpieces." Shouldn't a critic as good as Said be less acquiescent about this canon? And nothing is offered to justify the literary valuation of *Mansfield Park*, which stands unrelated to the political critique that Said has just made of it.

It can't be that Said has simply accepted inertly the conventional academic estimation of Jane Austen: he is too independent and perceptive a critic for that. No, I suggest that what he is indulging in are the shock-tactics of the pamphleteer. He seems in effect to be saying, 'Here is this great humane literary masterpiece, and look at the skeleton in the cupboard, the worm in the apple that it conceals – slavery!' The shock would be much diminished if one were to say (as I would) that *Mansfield Park* isn't a great novel at all but perhaps Austen's worst, with her most unpleasant heroine, Fanny Price, a prudish and priggish Cinderella (Said himself calls her 'the neglected, demure and upright Wallflower').

But the question at issue concerns more than our opinion of this one novel. The fact is that Austen's art, in spite of its feline sharpness within its chosen bounds, is based on the exclusion of any realities that would disturb her confidence in the order and stability and fundamental rightness of her world. Fanny Price, the poor relation, ends as the destined mistress of Mansfield Park. Not because any criticism of the hierarchical class structure is implied, but because Fanny is in spirit a better embodiment and guardian of the ideal values of the traditional order than her upper-class rival Mary Crawford. "Everything we know about Austen and her values," says Said, "is at odds with the cruelty of slavery" (96). Is it? What matters is not whether she would have approved of slavery if a direct question were put to her, but 'everything we know about Austen and her values' suggests that she would have been quite happy to turn a blind eye to it. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such

odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest."[6] That is how the last chapter of *Mansfield Park* opens. If Austen could have been indifferent to so much 'guilt and misery' nearer home, taking a slave plantation for granted as the source of the order and civilization she valued would hardly have been problematic to her.

Surely the great works of literature are those which, in some degree or other, question, disturb, challenge established certainties and not those which reinforce them. "A book," said Kafka, "should be the axe to break the frozen sea within us." I can't see how Said reconciles his valuation of Jane Austen with the terms in which he assesses Conrad. For what he values in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* is their critical insight into the processes of colonialism, the way in which they lay bare the pretensions and delusions of imperialism. But the contradictions that Said finds in Conrad are situated at a much deeper level than that in Austen. It lies in the fact that Conrad was incapable of seeing any potential human alternative in the colonized – the Africans, the Latin Americans or the American Indians – who are depicted as existing only to be enslaved, tyrannized over, manipulated. "He writes as a man whose Western view of the non-Western world is so ingrained as to blind him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations. All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West in which every opposition to the West only confirms the West's wicked power." (xviii). And again: "As a creature of his time" writes Said, "Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them". (30)

Excellent as Said's discussion of Conrad is, I want now to dissent in some degree from that last sentence, with its partially exculpating phrase, 'as a creature of his time.' What it implies is that until the decolonizing movements later in

the twentieth century, a Western artist couldn't have been expected to see the colonized in their full humanity. But there was always resistance of some kind to imperialism in the colonial world. I am not a believer in 'unconditioned creativity', but Conrad's failure to achieve the moral independence and courage to transcend the impasse in which he found himself is as much a criticism of his own limitations as of the British imperialist milieu in which he lived and wrote. No doubt the independence and courage required were of a rare order. But that they weren't humanly impossible of attainment is shown by the case of another novelist who was writing around the same time that Conrad was producing *Nostromo* and *Heart of Darkness*. As a prelude to this comparison, I need to go back to the contrasts that Said makes between the British, French and Russian empires.

You will recall my summary of Said's argument that the empire was less central to French and Russian national life than to the British. This seems the suitable place at which to observe that there is a certain gap between Said's large generalizations and the actual literary evidence he is able to produce. You can't understand the novel, he says, without understanding imperialism, but even in the British case on which he specially relies, how much is there in the book to support this challenging statement? Said is able to show quite convincingly that even 19th century British thinkers and writers who were critics of their society, like Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and Dickens were supportive of the imperialist enterprise; but how much evidence is there of this in the novel? After Crusoe what? Said is able to demonstrate the submerged presence of colonialism in Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, but the fact remains that for writers who treated the colonial experience frontally he has to fall back on the familiar trinity whom every chronicler of the colonial novel has written about: Kipling, Conrad, Forster. At the height of empire the theme was relegated to a sub-literary genre cultivated by the likes of Rider Haggard, Ballantyne and

Henty, belonging in fact to the province of boys' fiction. That being so, what meaning are we to give to Said's proposition that you can't understand the novel without understanding imperialism? As far as I can see, the only way in which one can support it in the British case is to say that imperialism was, by and large, a significant absence in the 18th and 19th century English novel, which of course tells us a great deal about the culture of the literate.[7] But one could construct other propositions for which the evidence can be found on nearly every page of the classic English novels – for instance, 'You can't understand the English novel without understanding the subordination of women', or 'you can't understand the English novel without understanding the hierarchical class character of English society.' What justifies privileging imperialism as the single overarching reality to which the novel has to be related?

It was the distinction of Conrad and Kipling to have brought the colonial theme into the established canon of English literature. Discussing Kipling and Conrad in relation to the genre of adventure-imperialism, Said says that their work, while belonging to it, claims "serious aesthetic and critical attention" (155). There are two points I want to make about this. One is that the recognition of their work in that light was posthumous – in fact, post-Second World War.[8] The other is that their writing was made possible by what were in their time exceptional circumstances. Conrad was a Pole by birth who had served in the British Merchant Marine, and Kipling had been born in India and therefore chose to go back there as a young journalist. Imperialism, however significant for British society, became more than marginal to English literature only after the empire had been lost in the aftermath of the Second World War.[9]

I now want to question Said's view that empire was less central to Russian life than to British (he may be right about the French case). Of course, there was a difference between British expansion overseas and Russian expansion

into neighbouring territories. This was a consequence both of the late and weak development of Russian sea-power and of the fact that Russia had a vast continental hinterland, inhabited mainly by tribal peoples, into which it could expand. But I don't see that this difference between sea-based and land-based empires made a fundamental difference to the importance of empire for each nation. One the other hand, as far as the literary consciousness of empire was concerned, I should like to offer a contrary argument. Most 19th century English novelists, even if they had wanted to treat imperialism imaginatively, would hardly have had the experience to do so. Contrast this with the Russian situation. On the one hand Russian literature was produced in the 19th century mainly by members of an aristocratic class, who often took to military service as part of their way of life and served on the frontier; on the other hand, the colonized territories were also places to which dissenting intellectuals were sent as exiles or political prisoners. In contrast with the English case, therefore, we have in 19th century Russia no less than four major writers who saw life on the frontier at first hand – Pushkin as an exile, Tolstoy as an army officer, Lermontov as both, and Dostoevsky as a convict and as a conscript serving a penal term in the army. Four who include the greatest Russian poet of the century and the two greatest novelists.

> However, precisely because 19th century Russian literature was written by an aristocratic intelligentsia, it doesn't share the sense of empire as the source of prosperity and the bourgeois advancement of the hero that Said finds in the English novel. Said points out, for instance, that Pip in *Great Expectations*, having lost one fortune made in Australia by Magwitch has, by the end of the novel, achieved another, though more modest one, through Herbert's trading business with the colonies- sugar, tobacco and rum from the West Indies and elephant tusks from Ceylon. This is hardly

what one would expect to find meaningful to the heroes of the Russian fiction of empire; and one doesn't. Instead, in Pushkin's early narrative poem "A Prisoner in the Caucasus" and in the first chapter of Lermontov's novel *A Hero of our Time*, the frontier is the exotic site of military adventures and romantic encounters. In these two stories the conquest, emotional or sexual, of a native woman by a man of the colonizing race presents a transformation in fantasy of the relationship of subjection and domination between conquerors and conquered. The woman gives her love generously, devotedly (which is what the colonizer would desire ideally of all the colonized), but since love between the sexes transgresses the racial barriers, she has in the end to die. One may think of the parallel in Kipling's story 'Without Benefit of Clergy.' In Pushkin's poem the love is one-sided, entirely on the woman's part; she finally helps the Russian, who has been taken prisoner by her people, to escape, and then kills herself. In Lermontov's novel the Russian officer Pechorin kidnaps Bela, wins her love, then tires of her as he tires of everything. She is finally killed by a young man of her own race who had desired her. In both stories the 'wild' life of the frontier is seen as more elemental and more natural than the civilized, but this in no way negates the imperial mission. It is quite striking, in fact, in Pushkin's poem that when the escaped captive finds his way back to the Russian camp, the return to normality is marked by his sight of the Russian bayonets shining through the mist; and this leads into the epilogue which celebrates quite unequivocally the triumph of Russian arms in the Caucasus. But let me now present in contrast the very different treatment of imperialism in the later work of Tolstoy.

Said expresses in more than one place in his book the need to transcend the cultural exclusiveness of many

Third World nationalisms and "the hostility between Western and non-Western cultures that leads to crises" (19). Given that aspiration, it is necessary that we should not only identify and expose the racist assumptions – open or concealed – in many manifestations of Western culture but that we should also recognize the rare alternative voices within the Western tradition itself. They include Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, but in the Western novel in the heyday of empire the supreme dissenting voice, supreme both in moral integrity and in creative power – is that of Tolstoy. I want to conclude with an account of three of his works which have a bearing on the imperial theme. I hope my account will bring out what has been excluded in Said's generalizations about the European novel and imperialism. It should surely be of relevance that the writer whom many readers would consider the greatest of Western novelists, was also the most searching and eloquent critic of imperialism through the medium of the novelist's art.

Tolstoy wrote his last novel *Hadji Murad*,[10] and his short story *After the Ball*[11] in the same opening decade of the twentieth century in which Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*, the short story "Does a Man Need Much Land?[12] was written even earlier in 1886. *Hadji Murad* was written in the teeth not only of Tolstoy's renunciation of art in his latter years but also of his pacifism. It takes as its hero a historical character, a Caucasian fighter against the Russians. At the beginning of the novel the narrator is reminded of him by the sight of a thistle in a ploughed field, which, half-crushed and mutilated, is still struggling for life; and that thistle becomes the image of Hadji Murad's courage, spirit and inexhaustible physical vitality. Hadji Murad, however, is a tragic figure: having fallen out

with Shamil, the political and religious leader of the Chechens, he deserts to the Russians. The local commander, Vorontsov, receives him well and wants to use him to pacify the Chechens. The strategy, however, is doomed to failure because the cold, ruthless and stupid despot Nicholas 1 wants to crush Chechen resistance by force.

There is no parallel in any earlier Western novel to the representation of imperialist violence in the middle chapters of *Hadji Murad*. The technique used is almost cinematic. First, we sit in on the conference between Nicholas and his Minister of War; then Tolstoy cuts to a Russian detachment raiding a defenceless Chechen village in pursuance of Nicholas's decision. This attack is seen through the eyes of Butler, a young Russian officer, experiencing all the tension and rapture of what he regards as the poetry of war. Then, in a complete reversal of angle, we are shifted to the Chechen village with men, women and children among the ruins of their smashed and burnt houses and their slain, divided between mourning and hatred and repulsion against the Russians, the desire to exterminate them "like rats, poisonous spiders or wolves." It's hardly surprising that the Tsarist censors refused to allow the greater part of these chapters when the novel was first published after Tolstoy's death.

Hadji Murad attempts to escape from the Russian camp because Shamil has branded him a traitor and has threatened terrible reprisals against his family. He wants to take to the mountains and continue the struggle against Shamil. His followers, who had been personally loyal to him, are glad of the chance to fight the Russians again: this indicates that they must have always thought him to be in error in joining the Russians. (Meanwhile, back at home, even Hadji Murad's own son, threatened

with blinding by Shamil as a punishment for his father's treason, doesn't share the latter's hostility to Shamil.) The novel ends with Hadji Murad's last stand against the Russian pursuers, hopelessly outnumbered and encircled. He is killed, his body hacked to pieces, and his head cut off and borne back as a trophy. When it is triumphantly displayed, Butler's mistress, Marya Dmitrievna, who had come to admire Hadji Murad when he was in the camp, turns away from her lover in anger and disgust: "You are cut-throats all."

In *After the Ball* the narrator, Ivan Vasilyevich goes out into the fields one morning, deliriously happy after dancing the whole night with the girl with whom he was in love. By chance he sees a Tatar conscript, who had tried to escape, being made to run the gauntlet of a company of soldiers. His back is a bleeding mass of flesh, and watching this brutal scene impassively is the colonel, in whom the narrator recognizes the girl's father. This experience changes his whole life. He can never bring himself now to enter the army, as he had hoped. It's the end also of his love, because when he meets his girlfriend and she smiles her enchanting smile, he thinks of the expression with which her father had watched the flogging of the Tatar.

In *Hadji Murad* and *After the Ball* the moral judgment on imperialism is very clear; in *Does a Man Need Much Land?* it's more oblique but perhaps even more powerful. Tolstoy is writing here at the height of his artistic powers, using a form that has the simplicity of a folk-tale but is yet enormously suggestive.[13] James Joyce once called it "the greatest story that the literature of the world knows."[14] It may be said that Tolstoy's desire in his latter years to write in such a way as to influence morally as large a public of ordinary readers as possible has borne fruit in the language and

form of *Does A Man Need Much Land?*; the stripping away of any stylistic or formal excrescences does result in an art of great purity and power. Countess Tolstoy, writing to her husband about the ovation given to the story by an audience mainly of students who heard it publicly read at Moscow University in April 1886, described the general impression regarding the story: "that the style is remarkably austere, concentrated, not a superfluous word, everything sure, precise, like a musical chord; much content, few words, and wholly satisfying."[15]

The story concerns a Russian, Pahom, who begins life as an ordinary peasant, but becomes gradually richer and richer by accumulating more and more land. However, he is never satisfied and always looks for more land. One day a merchant tells him that in the country of the Bashkirs there is any amount of fertile land to be got cheap. Pahom goes to that country of the Bashkirs and finds a nomad pastoral people, living in wagons, who don't plough the land, the open endless steppe. Pahom is told by their chief, after a long consultation among the Bashkirs, that they don't sell land by its area but by the day. He will be taken out at dawn to a place where they will set a mark; beginning there, he can walk in any direction, tracing as large a circle as he pleases, and provided he returns to the starting-point by sunset, all the land within the circle he has traced will be his. Pahom begins walking in the morning but is constantly tempted by his greed to enlarge his circle, and by the time he begins returning, it is late; the sun sinks lower and lower in the sky. Ultimately he desperately begins running back, with his mouth parched and his heart pounding; he finally makes it to the starting-point as the sun is sinking below the horizon, but collapses. Pahom's servant tries to revive him. The question in the title is answered. Six feet of earth, that's all the land Pahom needed.

Does a Man Need Much Land? in its structure resembles some folk-tales about people who come to grief because they are never satisfied (like *The Fisherman's Wife*), and it's usually read as a parable of individual greed. But the story acquires an altogether new dimension from the fact that its denouement is in the country of the Bashkirs, in the continental hinterland which was Russia's field of imperial expansion. When Pahom comes there looking for land, he comes as a colonizer. It's quite clear in the story that the idea of private property in land is alien to the Bashkirs: they do not even plough the land, let alone own it. The method by which Pahom is supposed to mark out his land is obviously quite fantastic. It might be supposed to be in keeping with the non-realistic, folk-tale atmosphere of the story. But, given the encounter between the Russian alien and the nomad people, it acquires another meaning. From the long consultation among the Bashkirs before the offer is made, it seems evident that they are trapping him. They have sensed his greed and they have devised a stratagem by which they can use it to destroy him.

The motive force of the whole story is the hard drive for land, territory – the main goal of colonial expansion. *Does a Man Need Much Land?* becomes therefore a parable not only about individual greed but also about colonial expansion. The Bashkirs are in the position of many colonized peoples who, unable to resist with force the superior power of the colonizer have to resort to devious strategies of resistance. And doesn't Pahom's end, imagined by Tolstoy a century ago, foreshadow the self-destructive course of colonialism – of the empires we have seen collapsing and those we may still see collapse because they have tried to possess too much?

The Thatched Patio

Footnotes

1 Edward, Said. *Culture and Imperialism.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). [modified citation]

2 Idem. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient.* (London: Penguin, 1978). [new citation]

3 Ian Watts. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1957). [modified citation]

4 Ibid., 30. [modified citation]

5 Saying this I am not referring to the passion and anger that often manifest themselves in the book, as I see no reason why scholars, even when moved in this way, should not have scrupulous respect for the facts.

6 Jane Austen,*Mansfield Park.* (London: Penguin, 1994), 466. [new citation] There is, to be sure, a note of something close to playful self-mockery here. But the purpose of the seemingly self-critical irony (the deliberate flaunting of her fastidious distaste, 'such odious subjects') is to disarm potential criticism, so that there isn't real self-criticism here: the irony is defensive and serves a strategy of exclusion.

7 Said recognizes this in his own way when he says that in the 19th century empire was a "marginally visible presence in fiction" (63). I find this admission difficult to reconcile with the sweeping claims made elsewhere in the book for its overriding importance for English fiction.

8 The great valuation today of Conrad as one of the great English novelists is principally due to F.R. Leavis's, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948; reprint New York: New York University Press, 1964), [modified citation], published twenty-five years after Conrad's death. Serious critical attention to Kipling is even more recent.

9 The popularity in Britain not only of novels such as those of Paul Scott, J.G. Farrell and Timothy Mo but also of TV serials, about the British Raj testifies to the retrospective interest today in empire. Another relevant phenomenon is the academic institution of the study of colonial fiction (which wasn't an academic subject when the empire was intact). Culturally, therefore, the empire has been more alive since it died.

10 The three Tolstoy stories that Siriwardena refers to are his own direct translations from Russian versions and are not referenced in the original version of the paper. Hence, we have only been able to cite the stories in general and have not traced the pages of some quotations. Leo Tolstoy. *Hadji Murad.* (Hesperus Press; London, 2003)

11 Idem. *The Penguin Book of Russian Short Stories, ed. David Richards* (London: Penguin Books, 1981).

12 It is usually translated as *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* but I see no reason not to keep the original Russian title. Idem. *How Much Land Does a Man Need? And Other Stories.* (London: Penguin, 1993).

13 An editorial note in L.N. Tolstoy, Sobranie Sochinenly v dvadtasati dvuh tomah 19 (1982); 532-533, states that the motif of a man staking a claim to a plot of land by walking or running around it, only to fall dead, is found in some Ukrainian folk-tales.

14 In a letter to his daughter Lucia on 27 April 1935, Stuart Gilbert, ed., Letters of James Joyce Vol.1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 364. It is interesting that Joyce, who in 1935 was engaged on the labyrinthine art of *Finnegans Wake*, should have responded so warmly to the simple elemental quality of storytelling in *Does a Man Need Much Land?*

15 Tolstoy. Sobranie Sochinenly v dvadtsati dvuh tomah 19: 533.

FILM

1

Rashomon: A Powerful and Somber Masterpiece

RASHOMON (New Olympia) is a film which comes to us from post-war Japan, and its story is set 1,200 years ago in a Japan—like the present—devastated by war. In a ruined building a priest and a woodcutter, who have taken shelter there from a storm, discuss with an old man the story of a recent trial at which two of them were witnesses. Death is for them a common sight; they have known wars, earthquakes and typhoons; but this tale of a murder of one man is more horrible, says the priest, than any of these larger calamities. And as this tempestuous story is told while the rain beats down incessantly, we realize that it is a story which is timeless—an exposure of human weakness and viciousness of man's perennial vanity, fear and lust.

A samurai and his wife riding through the forest were set upon by a bandit, and the husband was killed. But how did it happen? We watch the story told three times over by the persons involved. The bandit says he seduced the wife (a deed in which he takes pride) and killed the husband in fair fight; the wife claims she was raped and that her husband was killed by accident; the husband's spirit, speaking through a medium, says that he committed hara-kiri because of his wife's faithlessness. At this point, when it seems impossible to resolve the contradictions of the three versions, the

woodcutter confesses that unperceived, he was an eyewitness of the whole tragedy. And as he tells what really happened, we see stripped away the distortions of the truth which each character has made in order to present his motives and actions in the best possible light, and the weakness of human beings which makes it easier for them not to admit the truth even to themselves is relentlessly laid bare. And ironically enough, the woodcutter himself strives to conceal his own fault; he not only watched the murder and did nothing because he did not want to be involved, but he has also been guilty of an act of petty thievery.

The epilogue brings this disturbing film to a more tranquil conclusion: the storm has ceased, and as the three men prepare to leave the shelter, they find a baby abandoned by its parents. The woodcutter offers to adopt it; he has six children of his own, and one more mouth will make no difference. And as the priest says that his shattered faith in human nature has been restored, we too feel that we have reached some reconciliation with ourselves.

"RASHOMON" is made with the greatest economy of means (there are only nine actors, including the baby, and the backgrounds are the simplest possible) and with a severe concentration of form. The result is a film which has the classic simplicity of great art and which is often almost unbearably intense in its power. Its beauty is almost as great as its horror, and indeed the mingling of these opposites is one of the most remarkable qualities of the film. I think particularly of two moments in the film; one is the first glimpse by the bandit of the lady on her white horse, with her veil fluttering in the wind. 'I thought I had seen an angel,' he says, recalling it; and yet it is from this exquisite moment that all the evil and cruelty of the story follows. The other is the almost as beautiful picture of the wife washing her hands at the pool, which inflames the bandit to a frenzy of lust. In its depiction of human beings bewildered by their own passions and

twisted by their self-deception, the insight of "Rashomon" has never, as far as I know, been equaled on the screen. This powerful and somber masterpiece will undoubtedly remain one of the glories of the cinema.

Ceylon Daily News, February 1953

2

"Bicycle Thieves" & de Sica

A film of unique greatness

THINK of the experience of coming out of a theatre after seeing any average "good film". As you emerge into the light, the spell of those two hours of hypnosis in the dark (for it is there – that spell, however subtle and insidious – even in the "good film") is still working on you, and for a moment or two the emotional temperature of the world outside seems to have been slightly intensified. Then, the sight of ordinary faces and the sounds of traffic bring you back to everyday life, and the aura of the emotions of the screen fades as you walk to your bus. Since it was a good film it leaves behind, of course, its residue; but I cannot think of any film I have seen which did not compel this re-adjustment, however slight, to real life as one came out of the theatre.

Any film, that is, except "**Bicycle Thieves**". I have seen "**Bicycle Thieves**" twice, and on both occasions I left the cinema more deeply moved that I had been by any other film, but with no sense that what had affected me was "art" rather than life itself. One returns from "**Bicycle Thieves**" to one's daily living, indeed, with a heightened understanding of human suffering; but one is still in the same world, for the desperate and futile search of the worker Antonio Ricci for the stolen bicycle on which his livelihood depends is only one of the ordinary tragedies that are enacted every day

around us, even when we are unaware of them. That, for me, is the best measure of the greatness – the unique greatness as a film – of "**Bicycle Thieves**".

"**Bicycle Thieves**" was made by Vittorio de Sica in the only way such a film could have been made – not with professional actors but with ordinary people, many of them picked off the streets. One cannot, therefore, speak of "acting" in this film; the naturalness and completeness with which the two principal characters, Antonio and his son, are lived has never, as far as I know, been even approached on the screen, except in a rare film like Flaherty's **Louisiana Story**. The case of the film's naturalism may make us forget how much genius was required on the part of its creator to achieve an impression of real life which bears no trace of artifice. The selection of the two principals is admirable; Lamberto Maggiorani, a worker in real life (when the shooting of the film was concluded he went on the dole because he had no job) with a strong, sensitive face not unlike that of some Ceylon workers, and the child Enzo Staiola with his half-comic, half-pathetic expression.

There is not a single false note in the humanity and pity of this film, no artificial sentiment in the portrayal of the relationship between father and son. How crude the propagandist clichés of the Eisensteins and the Pudovkins and their sentimentalisation of the worker seem in comparison with the way in which "**Bicycle Thieves**," by its mere representation of life, leaves us with an overwhelming sense of the hopelessness of the poor!

Vittorio de Sica made "**Bicycle Thieves**" in 1949. He had, before the War, been well-known in Italy as an actor in light comedy and became a director only during the war. He first attained fame with **Shoeshine** (**Sciusela,** 1945), a film about juvenile delinquents. Its social realism is impressive and it gives us a vivid picture of the rootlessness of life in post-war Italy, but it cannot compare, I think, in emotional depth with "**Bicycle Thieves**", or with de Sica's later film **Miracle in Milan** (**Miracolo a Milano,** 1951). The latter film

seems to have been for de Sica a partial relief from the painful concern with poverty and suffering in his earlier work. Poverty and suffering are still there in **Miracle in Milan** (indeed the conflict between rich and poor is more directly represented here than in either **Shoeshine** or **Bicycle Thieves**), but realism mingles in this film with fairytale like fantasy (de Sica himself described it as a "fable").

The wonderful opening sequences of **Miracle in Milan** set its tone; the adoption by the old lady of the abandoned child she finds in her garden (itself a characteristic fairytale motif), the growing-up of Toto, the old lady's death and funeral – all seen through, as it were, the wondering eyes of a child. When Toto leaves the workhouse into which he is taken after his foster-mother's death, the familiar world begins to enter the film; Toto settles down with a community of poor people living in shanties on the outskirts of the city. When oil is discovered on the land they occupy and they are threatened with eviction, we would seem to be completely in the realm of "social realism". But the "class struggle" is transformed into fantasy; the wicked capitalists are deliberately and grotesquely caricatured like figures from a political cartoon; and there follow the fantastic sequences in which the old lady's spirit comes down from heaven to assist Toto and his friends with all kinds of miracles. Goodness, it would seem, is possible only for the poor, in material things as well as in heart. Yet there is no idealization of the poor; when they are offered with the magic dove, anything they want to have, their wishes take the form of the most monstrous dreams of wealth – chandeliers, fur coats and millions of lire. The film concludes with a remarkable ambivalent ending; when the stock of miracles looks like giving out the magic dove makes possible the last miracle of all: the poor fly up to heaven, as if to suggest that, that is the only place where perfect justice and happiness can be found. It is an ending which de Sica himself described as "desperate".

Ceylon Daily News, November 1952

3

Kozintsev's Shakespeare

At the Shakespeare Film Festival sponsored by the State Film Corporation last month. I renewed my acquaintance with Grigory Kozintsev's two masterpieces – **Hamlet** and **King Lear**. There has been no other cinematic interpreter of Shakespeare to compare with this Russian. Kozintsev's superiority is all the more manifest when we set his two films against the British film versions of the same plays – Olivier's **Hamlet** and Peter Brook's **Lear** (both screened in Colombo in previous years), the first, a traditional romantic view of **Hamlet** ('the tragedy of a man who couldn't make up his mind'), the second, a modish assimilation of **Lear** to the Theatre of Cruelty and the Theatre of the Absurd.

In contrast, Kozintsev never lets us forget in his renderings of Shakespearean tragedy that with the fortunes of the hero is bound up the fate of a community. Early in his **Hamlet** Claudius's first lines from the play are read by a herald as a proclamation to the assembled people, while his **Lear** begins with a sequence of the poor in their best shoes trudging towards the place where the ceremony of the division of the kingdom is to take place – a sequence that recalls the images of pre-revolutionary peasant life in 19th-century Russian literature. Neither scene in the literal sense is to be found in Shakespeare: yet both are Shakespearean in spirit – the first, in its emphasis on the public and political significance of the action; the second, in foreshadowing the

awakening of Lear's moral awareness to the suffering of 'poor naked wretches' in the storm. Here Kozintsev's social insight reaches across the centuries to touch Shakespeare's vision more closely than the more individualistic or alienated Western European artist of today is able to do.

Kozintsev is also the film-maker who has most completely translated Shakespeare into the medium of cinema. He stages his scenes to achieve the greatest mobility, and although he has the advantage of using Pasternak's superb translation (itself a triumph of creative transposition into another language), he is as economical as he can be with words. Where Olivier, both in **Henry V** and in **Hamlet,** lets Shakespearean poetry duplicate screen images (Ophelia's drowning is an obvious example). Kozintsev often offers instead a visual equivalent that stands alone without words. We don't, for instance, hear the great passage describing the mad Lear among 'the idle weeds that grow in our sustaining corn': what we do have is a shot of Lear's head emerging from a field, in which his tufts of grey hair seem at first indistinguishable from the downy grasses – an unforgettable image that is truly a transformation of Shakespearean poetry into the language of cinema.

Olivier's **Hamlet**, in keeping with his romantic approach, had set his hero not only spiritually but also physically alone; Olivier's castle, was a constructed set in which Hamlet was artificially isolated for the soliloquies. Kozintsev's castle, on the other hand, is a real habitation, the centre of a court and a kingdom, where life goes on all the time and where lackeys or spies may be encountered at every turn. With startling effect he has Innokenti Smoktunovsky render Hamlet's first soliloquy as unspoken thought while edging his way through a crowd of courtiers, giving a sharper edge to 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.' The king's questioning of Hamlet after Polonius's death is made a formal interrogation before the assembled council, and Hamlet's

riddling wit becomes more manifestly a rebellious defiance of authority ('a certain convocation of politic worms'). And when Hamlet has fulfilled his act of purification of the State, he walks out of the castle with its gloomy and claustrophobic corridors to die in open air and the sunlight.

Kozintsev's **Lear** is the greater of the two films, just as the original **Lear** is the profounder play, and Kozintsev's imagination rises fully to the challenge. Peter Brook's screen version equated the Shakespeare tragedy with the negative vision of a Beckett (Brook seems to have been greatly influenced by the brilliant but perverse essay of the Polish-born, now émigré, critic Jan Kott, titled **King Lear**, or **Endgame**.) That Brook has to distort Shakespeare in order to make the equation is evident from what he cuts: the servant who intervenes at the price of his life in an attempt to prevent the blinding of Gloucester, Edmund's repentance on the verge of death, 'some good I mean to do, despite of mine own nature'. These things clearly had to go because they would have been inconsistent with Brook's (and Kott's) reading of **Lear** as a Beckett-like dehumanization of man. Appropriately for him, he sets Lear in the final scene, with the dead Cordelia in his arms, isolated in the film-frame against a blank, featureless landscape – the visual symbol of man alone in an empty and meaningless universe.

How different Kozintsev's ending is – how much richer in its humanity, how truly Shakespearean in spirit, though original in invention! His Fool doesn't disappear after the mad scenes, as Shakespeare's does; he reappears (an inspired touch) to play on a wooden flute the simple melody that wakes Lear from his restoring sleep to his reunion with Cordelia. And the Fool is there at the end, weeping as the dead bodies of Lear and Cordelia are borne away by the soldiers; one of the soldiers edges him out of the way with his foot as the funeral procession passes.

The Fool continues to weep; then picks up his flute as if for comfort, and begins to play the same melody with which

he had woken Lear. And with this music continuing, the camera pans to peasant-folk returning to their houses ravaged by the battle, putting out the fires and beginning to rebuild. Tragedy has run its course; the time of regeneration has come. It is an ending that reminds us that Kozintsev was a fellow-countryman of Tolstoy (**War and Peace** doesn't end with the burning of Moscow, nor **Anna Karenina** with Anna's suicide). And a Tolstoyan humanism is closer to Shakespeare than a Beckettian alienation.

Lanka Guardian, May 1979

4

Welles' "Othello" Will Satisfy Everyone But The Purists

"Everything as I see it is against him before he starts, but his courage, like everything else about him, imagination, egotism, generosity, ruthlessness, forbearance, impatience, sensitivity, grossness and vision, are magnificently out of proportion. His position at the moment is grotesque in its lack of stability and even likelihood, but he will win through and all at the end will fall into his hands, the bright-winged old gorilla."

- **Micheal MacLiammoir on Orson Welles in "Put Money in thy Purse: The Diary of the Film of Othello."**

Orson Welles' **Othello** (Savoy) is the best piece of work by him that we have seen since **Citizen Kane** and fresh proof that the **enfant terrible** of the screen is not merely an egocentric showman of bad taste but – at his best – a film artist with a sure instinct for his medium which it is difficult to call anything other than genius.

Othello will, of course, outrage the purists and the bardolaters. For the letter of Shakespeare's play Welles has as little reverence as he would have for any screen-writer's script. As in his earlier **Macbeth**, he freely cuts the text, transports lines from one scene to another and contrives his

own locales. He can find in a single line in the play ("The time, the place, the torture, —O, enforce it!") a suggestion for a long wordless prologue in which Iago, hauled up in a cage over the sea, watches the body of Othello being borne to ceremonial burial – a prologue which seems to me to set the atmosphere very effectively. And he even has the hardihood (as we learn from Micheal MacLiammoir's brilliantly-written diary of the film) to meet an exigency caused by a delay in the arrival of costumes by setting the attempted murder of Cassio in a Turkish bath: most of the characters move around in towels. (The locale does at least help to reduce Roderigo to the undignified and ridiculous figure which Welles makes of him).

I don't doubt that many people will spend their time asking whether Welles' treatment of Shakespeare's text is permissible when the only question that matters is: "Does it come off?" In **Macbeth** it didn't, disastrously so; in **Othello**, for the most part, it does, and with striking success. Welles never forgets that he is making a film, not merely photographing a Shakespeare play for the screen. And his **Othello** is the most nearly successful answer to the prickly problem of bringing Shakespeare to the screen that we have had since that unique and necessarily unrepeatable triumph, Olivier's **Henry V.**

Welles' **Othello** achieves what is one of the greatest virtues equally in the contemporary film and in the Elizabethan drama – swiftness of movement. It is a virtue which is all the more precious in a film version of what is one of the most tightly constructed and tense of Shakespeare's plays. And visually it is always magnificently exciting. The locales – ranging from Venice and Rome to Mogador, French Morocco – have been chosen and used with great skills. In particular, the fortress-set where the greater part of the film is played offers a striking contrast between the sunlit open-air scenes with their suggestion of the "pride, pomp and

circumstance of glorious war" and the dark closed-in corridors and stairways down which Othello moves like a baited animal in the toils of his jealousy.

In these two qualities of his film Welles seems to me to capture admirably in his own medium something of the heart of the play. And they are backed by an excellent cast who render their roles with great intelligence. Welles himself, as Othello, has just the right presence and manner. And he hardly ever falls into the error which the actor who plays Othello must avoid most conscientiously – that of making pathetic a hero who should always retain tragic dignity. I say "hardly ever" because I think Welles does commit this fault in his final speech. (It is a pity that he cuts "I have done the state some service" and the final reference to the "turbaned Turk"; with them he loses the manner of Othello's leavetaking of the world – not as the man who has failed tragically in his private life but as the great warrior and public figure).

Welles makes too an unfortunate transposition in the last scene by transferring "Cold, cold, my girls..." (which should be spoken when he has discovered the truth) to a point immediately after the murder, thus making nonsense of it. My only other objection to his performance as Othello is that he mumbles some of the sonorous speeches ("Most potent, grave and reverend signors" and "Like to the Pontic sea...") as if he wanted to assure the audienc that he wasn't speaking poetry at all. On the other hand, his rendering of the "Othello's occupation's gone" speech is a memorable experience in its poignancy of feeling.

Welles' cutting of the part of Iago makes him more the scheming villain than the creature possessed, and Micheal MacLiammoir's performance gives a perfectly rounded impression of the character thus conceived. Suzanne Cloutler, a French-Canadian actress, plays Desdemona not as the languishing Victorian heroine whom she is too often

converted into but as a thing of remote beauty and almost unearthly grace – the perfect sacrificial victim for Othello's ritualistic murder. She moves wonderfully and has a face which looks as if it had come out of a Renaissance painting. And Fay Compton in a most robust piece of characterization makes the perfect foil to her as the earthy Emilia.

Ceylon Daily News, October 1953

5

The Last Flaherty

LOUISIANA STORY (at the Sapphire Theatre) is the finest film shown in Ceylon this year; it is also the last work we shall be privileged to see of Robert Flaherty, who died about two months ago. Flaherty has been described as "the man who has made the fewest films, the least noise and the least money"; he was also one of the greatest creative artists of the cinema. He helped to give to film language the word "documentary" (Grierson coined it in describing Nanook), but one cannot sum up his films by this or any other label. Except perhaps for Chaplin, he was the most individual genius of the film. **LOUISIANA STORY** is a reminder that there was only one Flaherty.

Flaherty made **LOUISIANA STORY** under what is probably the most unusual contract ever offered by a film sponsor. The Standard Oil Company wanted a film made about oil; with intelligence of a kind rare in the commercial world, they gave Flaherty all the money he needed, but left him a completely free hand as regards how the film was to be made as well as full ownership and distribution rights. It was typical of Flaherty that, given this freedom, he should have chosen to set his film in the wild swamp country of Louisiana, inhabited by a people who are almost primitive in their ways of living and beliefs.

What "story" there is in **LOUISIANA STORY** is of the simplest kind. Under the water of the bayou—where, as the Cajun people believe, live mermaids and were-wolves — lies oil, and an oil-drilling crew move in with their contraptions to tap it. A 12 year-old boy who is, like his pet raccoon, a creature of the swamps, watches them at their work with curiosity and incomprehension. So the two worlds of primitive nature and modern industry are brought together for a time, until their work completed, the oilmen sail away, while life in the bayou goes on just as it did before.

FLAHERTY made **LOUISIANA STORY**, like his other film, with ordinary people picked up on the spot as his cast and with no detailed script prepared in advance. Much of the material in it, as both he and his collaborator, Helen Van Dongen, have told us in their accounts of the film was shot as they happened to come across it. (The alligator sequence, for instance, was filmed by chance, and its tension heightened by editing). The result is a work of art which bears no trace of artifice, which seems as natural and inevitable as life itself. The boy lives on the screen – one can hardly say "acts" – with as much unaffectedness and spontaneity as his raccoon. He and his pet and the other animals and the plants and trees of the bayou all become part of a poem of nature. Flaherty reduces not only story but also dialogue to the barest minimum; instead, the flow of images on the screen is given form and meaning by the symphony of natural sound and music accompanying it. Flaherty himself said about the film:

"Here music has done more than words to motivate the story; **LOUISIANA STORY** has gone another step further in welding music and film together. And we feel that this is only the beginning of wonderful things that could be done in the future with composer and film-maker teaming up and working together. Because music and film have movement, whereas words tend to slow movement up. And movement, we still feel, is the essence of good film as a form of art."

There have been writers on the film who have maintained that film music should be felt and not heard, that the audience should be affected by it without being conscious of it as music. I have never been able to accept this dogma, and LOUISIANA STORY is a good reason for disagreeing with it. Virgil Thomson's score, which uses some adaptations of Louisiana folk tunes, is the loveliest I have heard in any film; one is always aware of it, but never as a separate entity from the rest of the film. I can hardly remember seeing before on the screen such a perfect organization of visual images round the patterns of music and sound. There are so many sequences which seem like some beautiful natural ballet – the movements of the raccoon and the tune accompanying them, the entrancing melody at the end of the film as the oil-drillers leave, the scenes under the overhanging swamp trees where the music seems to express the very qualities of stillness and silence. It is not too much to say that **LOUISIANA STORY** is as much Thomson's film as Flaherty's, and the whole is one of the most memorable visual and aural experiences one has had from the screen.

Ceylon Daily News, September 1951

6
Old Russia
(In Flesh and Blood)

THE CHILDHOOD OF MAXIM GORKI directed by Mark Donskoi (to be presented by the Film Society at the Central Y.M.C.A. on August 25 and 27).

Mark Donskoi made **The Childhood of Maxim Gorki** in 1938 as the first of a trilogy of films on the life of the Russian novelist based on Gorki's own autobiographies. It is a wonderfully rich and deeply moving film, impressive equally for its panorama of pre-revolutionary Russian life, its sensitive understanding of childhood and its portrayal of Gorki himself.

Donskoi's film seems to me a greater work than Eisenstein and Pudovkin "classics" which, for all their technical sophistication, deal in the simplified black-and-white contrasts of a political formula. In **The Childhood of Maxim Gorki** there is much more flesh and blood, a greater humanity and a wider range of sympathies.

Coming back from a pre-view of Donskoi's film, a friend remarked to me that it reminded him of Dickens – without his sentimentality; and that, I think, is exactly the quality of the film. Or else one might compare it with the art of the great realists of the Russian novel, of whom Gorki himself was the last.

Against the background of the great rivers and illimitable landscapes of Russia is unfolded a vivid picture of provincial life under the old order. This world of the past is portrayed here with an astonishing breadth of understanding; the film brings out all the narrowness, the brutality and the suffering of a serf-ridden society; but at the same time there is in it a fine sympathy for the rooted life and the traditional human relationships of the old rural order.

The film is dominated by the figure of the old grandmother (a magnificent piece of characterization) who typifies the humanity, the fortitude and the infinite resignation of the peasant woman. And moving through this rich pageant of life in rural Russia, drinking it all in with his eager, curious eyes, is the young Gorki, preparing himself unconsciously for the vocation that lies before him when at the end of the film he disappears down a long road into manhood and the larger world outside.

Ceylon Daily News, August 1953

7

Intruder In The Dust

The Book & The Film

INTRUDER IN THE DUST (at the Majestic Theatre) is undoubtedly the finest film to reach Ceylon for a good many months and the best of the recent cycle of films on racialism in America. It is also, I think, a more finished piece of work than the novel of William Faulkner on which it is based (the book, incidentally, is now available in an inexpensive Signet edition in some Colombo bookshops). Faulkner's novel narrates the events in a small town in the South which follow the arrest of an old Negro, Lucas Beauchamp, on the charge of having shot a white man. The action is seen through the eyes of a boy, because he owes Lucas an old debt of gratitude which weights on his conscience as well as his racial sense, who sets out, half-unwillingly, to try to discover the evidence that may vindicate the Negro.

Faulkner's novel has an excellent plot and much sensitiveness in its understanding of the complexities of a racial situation. What is weak in it, I think, is the fact that the novelist tries to work into the book several different interests which are scarcely integrated. The book attempts at one level to be a study of adolescence, and in addition Faulkner quite gratuitously intrudes into it an argument that the Negro problem should be solved by the Southerners themselves without interference by the Federal Government. The strength of the narrative is further impeded by Faulkner's

peculiarly mannered style. I must say that I find it difficult to understand the view of those who regard him as a great stylist. His prose is very heavily dependent on Joyce, but where the obscurity of Joyce's style is justified by its reflection of the shifts of consciousness, the involutions of Faulkner's prose seem to me purely an artificial and deliberate construction of the intellect.

Clarence Brown's production of **Intruder In The Dust** is one of the neatest pieces of adaptation for the screen that I have seen. He has taken all the meat out of the novel and discarded all the excrescences, so that the pace and tension of the narrative come through unhampered. The film is indeed as exciting as any whodunit; at the same time Faulkner's essential themes are put across with a much greater economy than in the novel. Clarence Brown wisely makes no attempt to provide any easy answers to the "Negro problem"; he concentrates instead on the reactions of individual characters. But **Intruder In The Dust** is more intelligent in its treatment of the racial situation than any previous film on this theme, and its very quietness is more impressive than a more sensational handling of the subject would have been.

There are some good performances in the film notably that of Juano Hernandez, the Puerto Rican actor, who portrays the old Negro with impassive dignity. David Brian as the lawyer is a shade too pontifical, but less so than his counterpart in the book. The most memorable thing in the film, from the point of view of its craft, is that it dispenses completely with background music. **Intruder In The Dust** could serve as an object lesson of the dramatic value of natural sounds on an otherwise silent sound track. How much less striking the scene where the boy and his companions open the grave of the murdered man would have been if we have been distracted by an intrusive musical score from the rasp of shovels, the thud of the earth, the bird-calls and the singing of cicadas in the lonely graveyard!

8

3-D: Passing Novelty or Film Revolution?

"I AM GOING TO GIVE THE PUBLIC WHAT THEY WANT – SENSATION, HORROR, SHOCK – AND SEND THEM OUT INTO THE STREETS TO TELL THEIR FRIENDS HOW WONDERFUL IT IS TO BE SCARED TO DEATH."

This is the mad sculptor talking in "House of Wax" – the first 3-D film to reach Ceylon – but it might well have been Warner Brothers explaining what they were going to do with their wonderful new toy.

There is little that is new in "House of Wax" – except the visual shock of the third dimension. For story Warner Brothers have dug into their archives and brought out the plot of an early talkie chiller (it was called "The Mystery of the Wax Museum" then).

It is the tale of a modeler in wax who loves his creations as if they were living people and who goes insane when his figures are destroyed and his own hands crippled in a fire staged by his crooked partner who wants to claim the insurance. Thereafter, since he can model no more, he begins a career of murder so that he can obtain bodies to be clothed in wax.

As a flat film, *"House of Wax"* would have been no more than a routine thriller (the situations are well-worn and even 3-D cannot save the acting – Vincent Price in the leading role is perhaps the only exception – from flatness). But, of course,

one is too busy taking in the new sensation of depth to think about plot or acting. And thanks to 3-D, even the most jaded thrills – a creaking door, for instance – seem to have acquired new sharpness. And there are 3-D's own peculiar thrills – an axe thrown straight at you, a ping-pong ball which threatens to hit you in the eye, a can-can dancer's back which looks solider than ever before.

What 3-D does to you in *"House of Wax"* is to take you back to the first primitive sensation you experienced when as a child you first saw a train or a motor-car on the screen – and it really moved! And, to judge from *"House of Wax"*, it looks as if 3-D is going to take the movies back to their own childhood. For a few years to come, the film will probably be so much engaged in showing off its physical depth that it will be even less concerned than ever with depth of mind or heart. We are clearly in for an era of throwing things at the audience which will be faster and more furious than all the custard-pie throwing of the silent screen.

Hollywood has taken much more readily to 3-D (and to its rival CinemaScope) than it did to the talkies a quarter of a century ago. The reason for this is that the new dimension is a weapon in the war against TV, which has led to diminishing audiences and falling profits for the U.S. movie industry. And 3-D is bringing the audiences back from their firesides. Already *"House of Wax"* is reported to be heading for a place alongside the biggest money-makers in the history of the industry.

But the question remains to be answered – is the third dimension merely a passing novelty? Or is it going to be as far-reaching a revolution in the film as sound was?

If 3-D depends for survival merely on its visual shock, there can be little doubt about the answer. The newness will wear off; audiences will soon come to take the third dimension for granted as much as they have taken the movies and the talkies.

If 3-D is to be more than a toy, it must show that it has possibilities, and possibilities which will be permanently interesting, which are denied to the ordinary flat screen. For that we must wait till an imaginative film-maker experiments with the new medium. So far the only hint of such possibilities has come from two abstract films made by Norman MacLaren for the Festival of Britain, in which stereoscopic patterns were beautifully synchronized with a musical score.

Meanwhile, 3-D has to face competition from CinemaScope, which tries to get closer to life by projecting images on to a huge panoramic screen and thus widening the angle of vision. It starts off with one obvious advantage over its competitor; the CinemaScope audience will not need to look at the screen through any special lens (3-D viewers are supplied with Polaroid lenses).

No full-length film has yet been made in CinemaScope, though several are under way. But in principle it is possible to envisage the consequences for the film if the process is widely adopted. As Rene Clair has already pointed out, the tempo of the film will have to be slowed down. Swift cutting will have to go, because the eye will be unable to take in a rapid succession of images on so large a scale. The intimacy of the close-up will probably have to be sacrificed too (although in *"The Robe"*, 20th Century-Fox's coming CinemaScope production, we are promised the monstrous phenomenon of a close-up of Victor Mature in which his upper lip is twelve feet high).

An optimistic prophecy about CinemaScope is that by slowing down the pace of the film, it will make it more literary: "Hollywood's actors," suggests **"Time,"** "will actually have to act". But is this a necessary or even a probable consequence? Might it not happen merely that CinemaScope will put the accent heavily on spectacle, blown up to larger proportions than ever before by the wide screen, and that *"Quo Vadis"* and *"Samson and Delilah"* will become merely the prototype for bigger and better sensation?

Will either 3-D or CinemaScope prevail, or will both survive side by side with the flat film, just as technicolor has not succeeded in superceding the black-and-white films? Whatever the ultimate answer, there can be no doubt that the screen has before it a period of violent convulsions which will probably leave the audience as dazed as Low's World Citizen. More than that it would be rash to prophesy at present. When a Hitchcock has made a thriller in one of the new media, or a Kelly a musical, we may be able to answer more surely. But it isn't time to fold up the flat screen – not yet.

Ceylon Daily News, July 1955

9

The Other Indian Cinema

In the nineteen-sixties, when the Sinhala cinema was striving to evolve a distinct national individuality, the Indian cinema was regarded by film-makers and critics concerned with this task as the main influence to be combated. That was right and necessary as it was for the emerging British cinema in the thirties and forties to resist the domination of the American film.

The campaign against the Indian cinema (which led, among other things, to the appointment of the Film Commission of 1962-64 and the establishment of the State Film Corporation) was, however, directed against the commercial products of the Bombay and Madras studios which flooded our screens and shaped our audience tastes with its formulas. But over the last twenty years a minority audience has become aware that there is another Indian cinema.

We first discovered this 'other cinema' in the work of Satyajit Ray. We saw *Pather Panchali* and *Apu Sansar* (I remember they reached us in that order) in the aftermath of *Rekava*, and the Apu trilogy moved us all the more because it was close to what our own better film-makers were striving towards. The Film Commission's Report (para 24), while asking for a diversification of the sources of import of film, regretted that very little of the Bengali cinema, which was so close in spirit to us, had been seen on our screens.

The Bengali cinema was the first Indian regional cinema to attain distinction, and all the creative life of Indian film-making is in the regional cinema. The commercial Bombay cinema has achieved its 'national' status and has also reached less sophisticated audiences the world over only by appealing to a certain common denominator of popular taste and in this process it has evolved a peculiarly hybrid and rootless character. On a smaller scale, this is also true of the Madras cinema.

The regional cinema, on the other hand, is the authentic expression of the local life, though, paradoxically, it is the regional cinema which can appeal to the intelligent filmgoer, internationally. That is because the best regional film-makers, while rooted in their particular local culture and way of life, also use an international cinematic language which is very different from the theatrical idiom of Bombay and Madras.

If in the fifties there was one Satyajit Ray and a host of peddlers of celluloid dreams, the situation in the Indian cinema is very different today. The new Indian cinema is actuated by a vigorous spirit of social criticism. In Bengal, Ray's gentle, humanist cinema of personal relations has been challenged by the fiercely political cinema of Mirinal Sen. But Bengal is far from being the most actively creative centre of the new cinema today (the Bengali industry is in fact in the throes of a financial crisis).

A few months ago, after the *Madras Filmotsav*, Mirinal Sen's opinion was quoted in an interview in *Screen* (3. 3. 78): "The new Indian cinema, in his view, was now flourishing in the State of Karnataka. To some extent it was also thriving in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Watching the larger number of films from these States this year than previously was a happy experience. One could safely predict that topping them all were the new films from the young film-makers of Karnataka who, he asserted, would in the course of the next few years dominate the Indian film perspective."

The judgment has just been confirmed by the National Film Awards in April, when the Golden Lotus was won by *Ghatashraddha*, a first film by a 27-year-old director from Karnataka. The rise of the Kannada-language cinema of Karnataka state to national creative pre-eminence is a phenomenon of the seventies. Its development is particularly interesting to us because it shows that the regional cinema in India has had to contend with the commercial Bombay and Madras cinema in order to achieve independent life, just as we have had to do.

The upsurge in Kannada cinema goes back to 1970, when Pattabhi Rama Reddy, a director who until then had been making commercial Telugu films, made *Samskara* from a famous Kannada novel by Ananthamurthy (there is an English translation available by A.K. Ramanujan). Associated with Reddy was his wife Snehalatha, a leading figure in the cultural life of Karnataka who later died as a martyr during the Emergency, and a remarkable young intellectual, Girish Karnad, who has worked in the Kannada theatre and headed the Poona Film Institute. Snehelatha Reddy played the female lead, and Girish Karnad both scripted and took the role of the central character (he has since become an important director himself). *Samskara* was made on a shoestring budget outside the structure of commercial film-making. But there is nothing tentative or amateurish about its cinematic quality. It is a film of assured mastery in its handling of the medium, and its content carries a powerful charge in its criticism of Brahmin mores and values. (It was banned by the censors for a year and released as a result of a national campaign). *Samskara* has become as important for the new cinema everywhere in India as *Pather Panchali* was in the fifties; and in the Kannada cinema it became the starting point for a whole creative movement.

The Kannada cinema today is centred in the vigorously active intellectual life of Bangalore, and its film-makers are predominantly young university teachers and graduates of

the Poona film school. But the remarkable growth of the movement over the last eight years would have been impossible without the enlightened policies adopted by the Karnataka State Government. Until recently Kannada film-making (like Sinhala film-making at one time) was confined to the Madras studios. In order to induce Kannada film-makers to come back home, the State Government decided to make an outright grant (one lakh for a black-and-white film and one and a half for colour) to any film-maker making a Kannada film within the State. Though this subsidy was adopted primarily for economic reasons, it has had the effect of promoting quality film-making because it gives the off-beat film-maker a certain cushion which encourages his creative independence.

The Kannada cinema has, interestingly enough, become an inspiration to the few Tamil film-makers in Madras who are striving to break out of the straitjacket of the commercial formula. And in Bombay too now there is a 'parallel' cinema, which has even made an impact on the commercial industry with the rise to popular success of one of its directors, Shyam Benegal. His *Bhumika* was sold out ahead for two weeks when first released in Bombay, and its leading lady, Smita Patel, has just won the National Award for best actress. Although the popularity of *Bhumika* is a great step forward for the Bombay industry and Smita Patel's performance is certainly remarkable. I find a more significant step towards the creation of an authentically regional cinema in Bombay in a film like Bhimsain's *Gharaonda*, an intimate story of an unfulfilled love relationship in the big city.

I have quoted the Film Commission's view in 1964 that the Bengali cinema needed to be brought to our audiences. Today I would say that there is no foreign cinema of greater relevance and potential appeal to our younger film-makers and film-goers than the best work of the new Indian regional cinema, with its strong social consciousness. It is unfortunate that in London or New York one can see more good Indian

cinema in a few weeks than one can in years in Colombo. Of course, it has worked the other way too, and Indian audiences have been totally cut off from our films. Now that we have for the first time broken into the Indian market, the State Film Corporation should bring to our audiences the better Indian cinema, addressing its publicity not to the standard Hindi and Tamil film audience but to the filmgoer who responds to good Western and Sinhala cinema – the kind of film-goer who made *Charulatha* a box-office success in Colombo a few years ago.

Lanka Guardian, June 1978

10

Sinhala Cinema, Class and Personal Relations

Writing in these columns several months ago about Pathiraja's *Bambaru Avith* on the eve of its release, I indicated that the film was likely to generate critical discussion about its 'social content'. The discussion did materialize, but what it revealed to me was the existence of a serious confusion about what is 'social' and what is 'personal'.

It would appear that for most left-wing critics in this country, economic exploitation is social, but sexual exploitation is not. That, at any rate, was the implication behind the criticism most frequently urged against *Bambaru Avith* from the left – that the theme of class conflict was overshadowed by the personal clash between Victor and Cyril over the girl Helen. But sexual relations don't exist in a social vacuum, nor did Pathiraja in *Bambaru Avith* present them as such: for Victor's readiness to use and to discard Helen was the clearest possible manifestation, within the realm of personal relations, of the class structure. The failure to realize this may be linked with the fact that the Marxist movement in this country has never caught up with Engels's *Origin of the Family*, let alone with more recent Marxist thinking about the relations between the sexes; but for the critic of film, theatre and literature, the dismissal of relations between men and women as purely 'personal' is disabling.

I suppose, too, that for most left-wing critics Lester James Peries' current film *Ahasin Polowata* is something to be rejected in the same terms as his earlier *Nidhanaya* – as both 'elitist', to use the favourite swear-word. But, for me, the two films are very different in character, though the fact that they were made by the same director and script-writer, working in both cases from a literary original, as well as the interest the films have in common in morbid psychology, make it interesting to compare them.

In *Nidhanaya* Lester and Tissa Abeysekera, working from a very insubstantial short story, succeeded in giving their material a much richer significance by rooting the abnormal psychology of the hero in the social milieu of a decadent class and in his declining economic fortunes. (The assumption of some local critics that you can illuminate the social structure only by making films about the lives of workers or peasants is one of the most elementary fallacies.)

In *Ahasin Polowata*, on the other hand, the abnormal jealousy of the hero remains an 'odd obsession', a purely personal quirk of character with no relation to anything outside itself. This limitation of the film no doubt derives from the thinness of the novel on which it is based, but the complexities of the narrative structure in the film and the intricacies of the flashes of memory don't, to my mind, compensate for it. Where in *Nidhanaya* the complexities of the film's form arose out of the density of its substance, in *Ahasin Polowata* the technical interest seems to me to have outpaced the experience.

To dismiss indiscriminately every film that is not directly concerned with an economic or political theme as 'elitist' betrays, I think, a very simplified notion of the relations between the economic and political structure and the rest of life. I fear that most 'committed' critics would like to see our cinema take the road of the political theatre of recent years – a prospect that fills me with the deepest gloom. For the political theatre is the creative counterpart of

the ideological formulas of the left-wing critics: it shares the same inability to relate the abstractions of political theory to the flesh-and-blood existence of real human beings.

That the political theatre deals so often in allegory may be partly due to the need to circumvent censorship. But it also has a good deal to do with the fact that the political playwrights have nearly always been working from concepts and slogans rather than from observation and experience of life, so that the characters on the stage become flat stereotypes of their social role – as 'capitalist' or 'bureaucrat' or 'worker' or 'revolutionary' – rather than the various and complex human beings (their class character refracted through their individual personalities) whom we know in real life.

Against this background I should like to salute Vasantha Obeysekere's new film *Palangetiyo* (screened in the current New Delhi International Film Festival and shortly to be released for local audiences). It not only marks Obeysekere's coming of age as a film-maker but is highly significant for the growth of our cinema. The strength of the film is grounded in the solidity and depth with which the characters and their relations have been conceived in the script (Obeysekere's own). The personal relations explored in *Palangetiyo* are firmly rooted in the realities of class and social environment, but the characters have the life of individual human beings, and aren't mere stereotypes of their class.

Palangetiyo is the story of a young man, Sarath, born into a peasant family who has risen with the help of his education to become manager of a printing press in Colombo owned by a well-to-do mudalali. A clandestine love-affair develops between him and the mudalali's daughter, Kusum; when the father creates trouble for them, they elope. Sarath takes Kusum to his village home, but Kusum, unused to such an environment, is bored and unhappy; and Sarath's mother and sister are irritated by the fact that she does no work about the house and expects to be waited on.

Recognising the frictions, Sarath takes Kusum back to the city, but since he still has to find a new job, he moves in with her into a shack in a tenement garden. The rest of the film presents the slow disintegration of the marriage under the stresses of poverty, Kusum's inability to adapt herself to her new situation, her longings for the old life of ease and comfort, and her romantic dreams, which she now comes to centre round another young man in the tenement garden. The film ends in a tragic denouement.

The film's greatest merit is that Obeysekere views all his main figures with a critical but compassionate sympathy; there is no attitude of complacent superiority to any of them, no black-and-white representation, whether in terms of morality or of class. It would have been fatally easy to portray Kusum as the stock figure of a spoilt rich girl, but Obeysekere avoids this error. While we realize the immaturity of her romanticism (formed on sentimental novelettes and films) as well as the unreality of her social values, we are still brought to recognize that, given her upbringing and her background, the strain of life in a tenement shack must inevitably be too strong for her. Nor is she, even in the second half of the film, heartless or callous: she oscillates between the romantic attraction she feels for her new lover and a lingering tenderness for Sarath and a guilty sense of responsibility to him. The character is conceived with so much depth that it comes through in spite of the inexperience of the fledgling actress playing the role.

Even the jealous spinster-cousin who creates problems for the lovers in the early part of the film isn't presented as the villainness of the piece. In one of the most powerful sequences of the film, Obeysekere intercuts between the clandestine love-making of Sarath and Kusum and the agonized contortions of body and face of the cousin as she lies awake in bed, tortured by her own desire and her jealous imaginings. The scene evokes in us a kind of horrified compassion. An equally admirable balance is maintained in

the sequences in Sarath's village home: we understand the irritation of Sarath's mother and sister at what they can only see as Kusum's pampered selfishness, and yet we are made to share Kusum's sense of isolation in this unfamiliar environment.

For some critics, no doubt, what I see as the virtues of *Palangetiyo* will be damning defects: if all you are interested in doing is in presenting cardboard cut-outs of the bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie and the proletariat as invariable types, then you will inevitably see *Palangetiyo* as seriously lacking. All I can say is that any caricature of life in these terms would not seem to me to promote either artistic or political enlightenment.

Lanka Guardian, January 1979

11

Pathiraja, Politics and Cinema

It is just over four years since Dharmasena Pathiraja made his first impact on the Sinhala cinema with *Ahas Gawwa*. Since that time he has completed four other films, the newest to reach the screen being *Bambaru Avith*, now running in the cinemas. In *Ahas Gawwa* Pathiraja showed himself to be a film-maker of strikingly fresh and original talent, with a genuine feeling for the medium that was not obscured by the inevitable technical roughnesses of a first film. But what most attracted the attention of younger filmgoers and critics to the film was that it brought into the Sinhala cinema a theme and an experience that had hitherto not been touched in it. *Ahas Gawwa* explored the lives of lower middle-class urban youth; unemployed , alienated from their family life and seeking a direction and purpose. It was right to recognize in the film's experience the voice of a new generation. But in critical interpretation the ending perhaps got more emphasis than it should have. Pathiraja left his central character marching and cheering in a May Day procession. The way in which he came to be there did not suggest that the director was offering this as a deeply considered political commitment. But critics who had been talking of the need for 'committed cinema' were all too ready to fit Pathiraja to this image, and perhaps some of his own statements at that time may have lent themselves to it.

The films themselves do not in fact bear out this view. What they do show, with one exception, is his concern to explore and illuminate contemporary social relationships. The exception was *Eyaden Loku Lamayek*, which seems to me a conscious compromise with the box office – when one has praised Malini Fonseka's performance in it, one has virtually exhausted its virtues. But the Tamil language film, *Ponmani* though not, I think, cinematically realized (except in a few striking scenes) was, in conception, a bold and searching examination of dowry and marriage in Jaffna society. *Para Digey* (which audiences won't see for quite some time) is about a young man trying to raise the money for his girl friend to have an abortion. Only in *Bambaru Avith* is there an explicit reference to political ideas, but neither in this film nor elsewhere in his work is Pathiraja a film maker concerned to offer political solutions to social problems.

In a radio interview last month, Pathiraja answered a question I asked him on this point by saying that it was not the task of the film-maker to offer solutions but to awaken the audience to an awareness of social realities they had ignored. When the audience has made this discovery, he suggested, they will decide for themselves how they should act. Pathiraja's explanation of his purpose as an artist (which one could have inferred from the films themselves) reminded me of the statement of the 19th-century Marxist who said in connection with the novel, that 'the more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art,' and that 'the author is not obliged to serve the reader on a platter the future historical resolution of the social conflicts which he describes.' The writer was Friedrich Engels, whom no one will suppose to have been indifferent to the social functions of art. This view is in marked contrast with that of some 'Marxist' critics who value literature or the cinema only so far as it is a vehicle for an overt political message.

Bambaru Avith, which was directed by Pathiraja from his own story and script, is set in a fishing village, and was

shot on location in Kalpitiya. The wasps who have come – in the words of the title – are a young man, Victor, and his friends from the city, who arrive in a jeep to muscle in on the fishing trade in the village. Although Victor has been brought up in the city, he is actually the son of a mudalali who dominated the village fishing business, until he grew old and ill and had to retire. In his absence a new boss has grown up – Anthony – who has risen from the ranks of the fishermen to become a mudalali. With Victor's arrival, there develops a conflict between him and Anthony – a conflict which represents a clash between an old-style patriarchal exploiter who is part of the village and the new, more impersonal money-power that Victor embodies. Into this conflict, which is both personal and social, the whole village is drawn until there is a violent denouement.

In *Bambaru Avith* Pathiraja shows a maturity as film-maker and a control over his medium beyond anything in his previous films. *Bambaru Avith* has a tense power, enhanced by its vigorous and salty dialogue, the strength of the playing (especially Joe Abeywickrema's dominating performance as Anthony). Premasiri Khemadasa's very imaginative score (the three background lyrics are a new departure in Sinhala film-music), and the brilliance with which Donald Karunaratne's camera has captured the sun-baked landscapes and faces in the film. But it is the social content of the film that has provoked most discussion and argument since last month's preview, and it is likely to trigger open critical controversy by the time this article appears in print.

There are two questions that I have raised in private discussion about the film over the last few weeks. One: Does Pathiraja reject the ideas of socialism in the person of the character played by Wimal Kumar de Costa, the young pseudo-intellectual who talks left-wing phrases? Two: is the ending without hope?

The first observation I want to make about these questions is that one doesn't really need Costa's speech in

the market-place to realize the fact of exploitation in the village, either before or after Victor's arrival. The words only give imperfect theoretical expression to the living reality that one sees brought out in the actual social human relationships in the film. The speech throws more light on Costa himself than on the social realities of the village.

In Costa's role Pathiraja suggests both a contradiction between beliefs and living, as well as a failure to reach the people he wants to communicate with. That failure is the result both of the contradiction in his own personality and of the abstractness of his theorizing. Hence his total isolation by the end of the film.

As for the view that the ending is defeatist, I think one is back here to the question whether art should portray reality as it is or as one would wish it to be. The gulf in communication between the alienated left-wing intellectual and the village fisherman is part of the reality that the film-maker sees. Within that situation and within the community that the film portrays, it would be unreal to smuggle in a hopeful resolution. No more than the novelist is the film-maker 'obliged to serve on a platter the future historical resolution of the social conflicts which he describes'.

While I don't mistake or fault Pathiraja's intentions here, I think both he and the actor have been led into error in guying Costa's role over-much, and this is part of the problem of the ending in its impact on the audience. There is, it seems to me, a certain shift in Costa's attitudes at this point: his anger over the death of Francis, Victor's servant, is real, and he stands apart from his friends at the end. This makes him a more sympathetic and somewhat more serious figure (there is both dignity and pathos in his lonely departure), but if the audience has by then been induced to treat him as a 'funny man', they may find it difficult to see him in any other light.

Lanka Guardian, August 1978

12

Soldadu Unnehe: Film and Ideology

Dharmasena Pathiraja's **Soldadu Unnehe** (Old Soldier) is a film which requires that its audience should adapt itself to a conception of cinema that is different from any to which it has been accustomed. The night I saw it, a group of spectators in the gallery left before the end, voicing their dissatisfaction loud and clear. One could understand their frustration with the severe austerity of the film: no songs, glamour, no love-story – in fact, no 'story' of any kind... However, if that was all, **Soldadu Unnehe** would have been merely a film taking further a trail already blazed in our cinema, and it would have been adequate to describe it, as one critic said, as ranking high with films such as Pathiraja's own **Ahas Gawwa**, Vasantha Obeysekere's **Palangetiyo** etc. as representing the evolution of realistic cinema in Sinhala. To me, **Soldadu Unnehe** is a more original and important achievement than that description suggests.

I take A.S.'s review of the film in the **Sunday Observer** (from which I have already quoted one sentence) as my starting-point because it raises some of the major questions that are likely to arise in the minds of many film-goers. It also shows that even an intelligent and sympathetic critic may fail to make the radical shift of vision demanded by the

film, and thus err though at a very different level – as much as the mass-audience.

A.S.'s praise of the film – 'a slice of life set against the grim backdrop of Colombo' – suggests that he saw in it a king of Gorkian realism of 'the lower depths'. It isn't surprising that, approaching the film in this way, he should have found it ultimately wanting, in spite of the virtues of boldness and honesty he recognized in it. His main criticism was that 'there has been no satisfactory synthesis between experience and ideology'. For him, 'the culmination, when it comes with the soldier realizing the real source of sovereignty, appears artificial and even forcibly imposed, even though the film is redeemed by that final poignant scene of the police coming to fetch the prodigals of the asphalt world.'

In Pathiraja's film, however, the significance of the scene where pickpocket and prostitute are taken away by the police is that it triggers the soldier's realization of what sovereignty is – the climax to which the whole film has been moving. If one finds that conclusion 'artificial' or 'forced', then the film must certainly appear a failure, any incidental virtues notwithstanding. But is the failure here really that of the director or that of the critic who has judged the film by criteria that are irrelevant to it?

Before deciding whether there is in **Soldadu Unnehe** a disparity between experience and ideology, we must first ask ourselves what the experience of the film is. I should like to suggest that the heart of the film is not where A.S. finds it – in the 'joys and sorrows, quarrels and despairs' of the four social outcasts, or in the 'poignancy' of the taking away of two of them at the end. If that was where the film had put the stress, it would have been a lesser work – an indulgence in easy compassion, exactly the kind of film that A.S. takes it to be when he describes it as 'a starkly honest film that should prick the middle-class conscience for a long time.' While respecting A.S.'s good intentions here one is

compelled to point out that kind of honesty has a limited value. The middle-class conscience that is pricked soon recovers, and returns, after its temporary emotional indulgence in the contemplation of suffering, to its normal complacency. What Pathiraja has attempted in **Soldadu Unnehe** is something much more important: not merely to move his audience's hearts but to convince their minds, to achieve intellectual illumination – not, however, through argumentation but through the imaginative means proper to art.

The central experience of **Soldadu Unnehe**, as I see it, is that which is already evoked by the pre-credit sequence and returned to with growing significance in the course of the film – the hallucinated vision of the old soldier for whom the guns and helicopters of the Independence Day parade revive in his haunted memory the horrors of World II. If one realizes that, one should recognize how wrong it is to speak of it as merely presenting 'a slice of life'. However realistic the cinematic rendering of the city's lower depths may be in its externals and incidentals, the film's original achievement is in enlisting resources of expression that go beyond the bounds of realism. By the logic of the everyday world, the old soldier is a madman, his vision is a demented hallucination, and the parade on Galle Face Green is nothing to be afraid of. And yet there is another and deeper sense in which the madman's vision is terribly true, stripping things of their appearances and exposing the naked power and violence underneath. The old soldier's final discovery about sovereignty is not, as A.S. suggests, an ideological abstraction forcibly imposed on the film's experience; it is what that experience, through the juxtaposition of past and present, has been working towards all the time.

What lies behind A.S.'s judgment of the film, I think, is the crippling influence of certain assumptions about the way in which cinema should work, confirmed by his placing of **Soldadu Unnehe**, together with **Ahas Gawwa** and **Palangetiyo**, in a tradition of 'realistic cinema'. If one judges the film by these canons, one will certainly find the conclusion 'forced' and 'artificial'. How can so small an event as the arrest of a pickpocket and a prostitute induce in the old soldier conclusions about the nature of sovereignty? That is the question that A.S. in effect asks. The answer is that the old soldier's conclusion only confirms what the audience, if sensitive, should have already grasped, and that the commonsense logic of plausible motivation is irrelevant to the consciousness of a madman through which the film works, and which brings with it an imaginative freedom that transcends the confines of realism. A.S. might as well ask how being exposed to a storm could reveal to Lear the nature of justice.

Instead of placing **Soldadu Unnehe** with **Ahas Gawwa** and **Palangetiyo**, it would be more to the point to recall that Pathiraja began his artistic career with the Beckettian drama of **Kora saha Andhaya**. It is in that line of descent rather than in that of Gorkian realism that I would put **Soldadu Unnehe**, though the form is here the vehicle of a matured political understanding. These artistic affiliations of the film's form may not recommend it to adherents of a simplistic socialist realism, who will no doubt also want to know why Pathiraja didn't take his characters from the working class. It is however, part of the film's achievement that it reaches its political illumination through the consciousness of characters who are themselves a-political.

I see **Soldadu Unnehe** not as a failure but as a new beginning – the first wholly political film we have had in the Sinhala cinema, uniting experience, form and ideology. And whatever its fate at the box-office, there are enough young people who have spoken to me enthusiastically of the film to convince me that the single-minded integrity with which Pathiraja has remained true to his vision cannot fail to make its impact, and to fertilise our cinema for many years to come.

Lanka Guardian, May 1981

13

Hansa Vilak: A Permanent Landmark

Hansa Vilak is a film of extraordinary daring and courage. It is astonishing that it should be the work of a director making his first film, with no previous experience of the cinema except as an actor. In our country, even experienced and established directors often play safe by making concessions to what they assume are the inherent limitations of the mass audience. Dharmasiri Bandaranayake in his first film, has made no such compromises; on the contrary he has taken the greatest possible risks that a new film-maker can take.

He has combined the roles of director and leading actor – a combination that makes the severest demands on the imagination and skill of the film-maker in the process of shooting. He has also made a film that is highly original and innovative in form and technique, that more than any other film in three decades of the Sinhala cinema uses to the full the distinctive qualities of the cinematic medium.

It follows that **Hansa Vilak** needs to be watched with unflagging attention with not only one's eyes but also one's mind fully alert. It repays seeing more than once as I have found in my own experience because like a good poem or novel or play, it becomes richer in meaning with each fresh

contact with it. I salute the enterprise and the audacity of this young film-maker who has dared to make such exacting demands on the Sinhala audience: and I am confident that his trust in their intelligence and responsiveness will not be disappointed.

What is there that is profoundly new and original in **Hansa Vilak**? What is the great contribution that it makes to the Sinhala cinema? I think it lies in the fact that Dharmasiri Bandaranayake has created in this film a form and style that go further than any Sinhala film before in taking us into the world of inner psychological experience. Throughout the film the camera is the means of projecting the sensations and feelings of Nissanka torn between love, suspicion, jealousy, duty and obligations.

Many of the images on the screen belong not to the world of external public reality but to the inner world of psychological reality. The Sinhala cinema has before this tried to portray this kind of reality in individual sequences of dreams or fantasies. For the first time now, we have a film-maker who has built a whole film out of this interior reality. That is what may well make the film difficult for some film-goers at a first seeing and may well provoke arguments about what 'really' happened.

Was the old lady in the dilapidated house really murdered, and did the police really come for Nissanka in the end? This is the kind of question that I know people have come out of the cinema arguing about. I have my own answers to these questions, but I am not going to try to impose them on readers. For I think what matters is that every member of the audience should grapple with the experience of the film himself, and make sense of it in his own way.

More important than providing answers to the problems of the plot, I think , is to suggest what seems to me the theme of the film. Although as I said in **Hansa Vilak** everything is seen through the inner experience of Nissanka,

that doesn't mean that the film retreats from the social world into a purely private and individual experience. The theme of **Hansa Vilak**, as I see it, is the conflict between the individual's desire for personal happiness through a love relationship based on personal choice and the demands of social living and family obligations on the other.

Nissanka's hope of finding personal fulfillment with Miranda is destroyed by the intrusion of the external world – the intervention of the Police, Douglas's anger, resentment and grief, Samanthi's reproaches, the children's continuing attachment to their father, the hostility of Samanthi's brother and mother – all these represent restraints bonds and obligations with which Nissanka cannot break. But they are not just external forces, they are mirrored in his own mind in his guilt, his fear and his jealous imaginings.

To have found the means of reflecting through the form and techniques of the film, the pressures of society and the family in the mind of a bewildered and tormented individual is Dharmasiri Bandaranayake's great achievement in the film. That achievement is sufficient to make **Hansa Vilak** a permanent landmark in the Sinhala cinema, just as **Rekava** or **Ahas Gawwa** were in their own time. But Dharmasiri Bandaranayake is still young, his talent has still time to grow and mature further, and – let us hope – to enrich the Sinhala cinema with even more significant creations.

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14

Obeyesekere's Cinema: from 'Palangetiyo' to 'Dadayama'

Dadayama (The Hunt) is recognizably a film by the director who gave us **Palangetiyo** a few years ago. Both are fundamentally anti-romantic films, and both exemplify Obeysekere's gift for transforming what might have been in other hands the material of popular melodrama into serious and meaningful cinema. But what a great leap forward for him, and for Sri Lankan cinema, **Dadayama** represents!

Palangetiyo was an honest and intelligent film that was nevertheless restricted to a simple theme – collision of romantic feeling with the realities of class and economic circumstances. **Dadayama**, on the other hand, is a rich and complex work; overwhelmingly immediate in its emotional and sheer physical force even on a first viewing (and I believe it will be so for popular audiences as well); it grows and deepens in meaning with further viewing and reflection, and demands to be seen and pondered so, for a full apprehension of the subtleties of its texture.

Superficially, **Palangetiyo** is the film with the broader social canvas and the wider range of characters, since **Dadayama** centres its plot on a single relationship between two people. Yet this structure means that the film gains in concentration and energy, while at the same time Obeyesekere has been able with great insight and penetration (as in **Palangetiyo**, he is his own script-writer) to focus within the

central relationship of the film meanings which go to the heart of our social life. Essentially, **Dadayama** is a film about woman – woman as victim and rebel. And where **Palangetiyo** suffered by the limitations of some of its playing, Obeyesekere has here in the lead an actress of enormous range, sensitivity and power (surely this performance will confirm the fact that there is no finer women player on our screen today than Swarna Mallawaratchi), supported by a solid, if less complex, character-portrait by Ravindra Randeniya.

The great advance that **Dadayama** represents over the earlier film comes out in the considerably greater creative freedom and imaginative depth with which Obeyesekere handles his medium here. **Palangetiyo** was tied down to a simple naturalism of style (that is perhaps why, when he departed from this mode in the romantic fantasy sequences conceived as a parody of popular cinema, the style seemed rather out of key with that of the rest of the film). In **Dadayama** Obeyesekere has opened out his cinematic form, giving it a new flexibility and multi-dimensionality.

The sharply cut memory flashes in the early sequences which take us into the heroine's inner consciousness and which strikingly juxtapose lost innocence and hopes with the disillusionment of present time are evidence of this new freedom. Obeyesekere's use of music is very different from the conventional employment of it as 'background'. There are probably only about ten minutes of music in the entire film, and the music serves a specific purposes: it is used throughout to represent the illusory and the falsely romantic. This is evident for instance, in the sequence leading up to the seduction. The sequence, in its visual images and its romantic mood – music, is again a critical parody of the conventions of popular Sinhala cinema: since this is flashback, and we already know the girl has been deserted, it is charged with irony; and what it leads up to is the shot in which Ravindra opens the door of the resthouse room, says to

Swarna. 'Come in', and shuts the door. The music abruptly stops: the dream has ended. Another and highly innovative element in the style of **Dadayama** is the dissociation, in some sequences, of dialogue from image – that is, where the dialogue that is heard over a particular sequence of images is taken from another context than that to which the images belong, making possible sharp effects of contrasts, irony or foreboding.

Dadayama borrows its basic situation from a real story of a quarter-century ago, but Obeyesekere has transposed it into present time, setting it in the more highly competitive and consumerist society of today. The characters are drawn from this social context: she, a village baker's daughter, educated and ambitious; he, a school-teacher, and adventurer bent on social climbing. She is dazzled by his flashy car and the atmosphere of affluence that surrounds him, and so, in spite of their original moral qualms, is her family. The traditional moral norms are seen in **Dadayama** as eroded by the new values of acquisitiveness and self-advancement, leaving only an empty shell behind. Once he has got what he wants from her, the man disappears, his sights already set on a marriage with a rich girl which will take him further up the social ladder. Yet with a child by him, she cannot let him go; and her hunt begins. At first she clings to her illusions of love; schooled then by the terrible experiences she suffers, she becomes locked in a deadly hatred and a determination not to let him go free, whatever the cost to herself. He meanwhile has only wanted to cast her off and escape; now, cornered and desperate, he turns round and begins hunting her. The action moves to its inevitable and dreadful denouement.

The last scene, created with a mastery of staging and cutting, is almost unbearable in its shocking power. Yet it isn't just a sensational climax: it concentrates within itself the central meanings of the film. The natural setting in which it is placed (the Wilpattu sanctuary) makes us think of her as

the wild animal at bay – an image that is deepened by the red talons with which she tears his face. As they face each other in the final confrontation, the car that had been the instrument of her seduction and is now the murderous weapon seems the embodiment of aggressive and predatory class and male power, and when she shatters its windscreen with the stick that is her only defence, she makes her last stand, as woman and exploited human, against her destroyer. It is part of the significance of **Dadayama** that the heroine grows with her experience, that by the end she is no longer the naive romantic of the early scenes, that she is no resigned victim, that she dies protesting and resisting in an assertion of her human dignity.

Lanka Guardian, January 1983

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Working with Lester

I still remember the emotion with which I came away from the first night of Lester James Peries' *Rekava*. There was no doubt that something decisive had happened: The Sinhala Cinema, in the proper sense of the term, had been born. In a review in the *Ceylon Observer* a few days later, I said that *Rekava* was "an act of faith in the Sinhala audience". That act of faith was not immediately vindicated: *Rekava* failed to win popularity with the mass audience of 1956. Fifteen years later the vindication is no longer in doubt, as is evident from the outstanding popular success of *Golu Hadawatha*. Behind this change lie perhaps many social forces- notably, free education. But Lester James Peries' films have themselves stimulated the growth of a new film audience in Ceylon with new values. Like every other artist who takes a new direction he has created the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.

That he effected this revolution in the Sinhala cinema is only one part- and perhaps ultimately the less important- of Lester's achievement. Its most enduring significance lies in the fact that he has made articulate (though often through the language of silence) the distinctive quality of life in his own country, especially as it is lived in personal and family relationships, and interpreted it for his countrymen and for the world. Phillip Coorey's book will help the reader to understand Lester's achievement in both respects. What I wish to do in this foreword is to supplement his account from my

personal observation of Lester as film-maker acquired in working with him.

There is one kind of film-director whose method is to impose his own personality totally on his collaborators (who become, indeed, not collaborators but executants), so that every element in his films is refracted through his own angle of vision. Lester as film-maker is not cast in this authoritarian mould. His films are undoubtedly marked by a personal idiom and style which are the vehicle of his kind of experience. But Lester achieves his unity of manner not by a dictatorial imposition of his vision on his fellow-workers but by eliciting from them a like way of thinking and feeling. Working with Lester, one realizes how false (particularly in the cinema) is the individualist notion that creation is purely a matter of personal inspiration; on the contrary, the best things often come out of discussion and exchange of ideas.

During the scripting of *Gamperaliya* and *Golu Hadawatha* I would often read to Lester my draft of a group of scenes, and out of the discussion with him would emerge new and fertile possibilities that I would take back with me to work on. I would be hard put to it now to say which ideas in the scripting of *Gamperaliya* or *Golu Hadawatha* I originated and which came from Lester- and, of course, when one works as we did, this kind of question is completely irrelevant. In writing the screen-play of *Delovak Athara* Gamini Gunewardena, Tissa Abeysekera and I worked in the same way with Lester, and I believe Tissa did so also in scripting *Akkara Paha*. *Ran Salu* was an exception: here Lester was given a finished screen-play, which he modified in some details while shooting but in whose shaping he had no essential share. It is interesting that Phillip Coorey finds this difference in the process of conception reflected in the nature of the film itself.

What I have said of Lester's mode of working with his scriptwriters is equally true of his collaboration with his actors, cameraman or editor. One feels, for instance, that Punya Heendeniya or Anula Karunatilleka have not only given their

best performances but have also been most completely themselves under Lester's direction: at the same time Punya's playing in *Gamperaliya* and *Ran Salu* or Anula's in *Golu Hadawatha* are performances completely in key with Lester's general cinematic style. The same thing could be said of the way in which Willie Blake's camera-work or Sumitra Gunewardena's editing style is used in Lester's films. An exhibitionist actor, a cameraman or editor with a weakness for visual pyrotechnics, could have destroyed the essential quality of Lester's cinema- "the cinema of contemplation," to quote from his interview with Phillip in this book. Part of Lester's success as a director has been in finding collaborators who were fundamentally in sympathy with this kind of cinema, and in blending their contributions harmoniously in the unity of his films.

There are directors who work out every shot on paper before making a film. Lester's mode of film-making, however, is not tied to a rigidly pre-conceived scheme. He has often quoted to me a remark of Hitchcock that when the script has been written, the film has been made: all that remains is to transfer it to celluloid. A nice quotation to offer a script writer! But Lester's own approach to film-making has been quite different. Although he worked out a detailed shooting script for *Gamperaliya*, he departed from it often in shooting and again at the editing stage. In the films after *Gamperaliya* he has done without a shooting script, working directly from the screen-play. This is partly the result of the conditions under which he has had to work : detailed camera movements are difficult to plan when locations are unknown. But it is also a method of shooting which makes possible a degree of improvisation and spontaneity that seem to be in keeping with the essential character of Lester's films.

Lester has a special gift for seizing on the features of a location and turning them to expressive effect in the scene he is shooting. So it is with the confrontation between Nissanka and Chitra in *Delovak Athara* the day after the accident, where the locale leads them to a dead end just as their argument does:

so it is with the library scene in *Golu Hadawatha,* where Sugath and Damayanthi talk through the wire mesh. The critic who examines these scenes may find in the use of the location, a symbolic intention, as Phillip does with the setting in *Golu Hadawatha* to which I have referred. These effects were certainly not premeditated before the shooting stage because the locations were unknown when the scenes were scripted. On the other hand, it would be wrong to dismiss these effects as merely fortuitous, because the director's hand shows itself precisely in his ability to use what is offered by chance and make it an instrument of what he has to communicate. There are occasions, too, when he is especially lucky and a location turns out to have just those features already imaged in the mind. So it was when the first scene of *Gamperaliya,* with Piyal teaching Nanda on an open verandah facing a long path down which the potter could be seen approaching in the distance, was scripted for such a location a whole year before Lester found the house where the film was ultimately shot.

In the interview with Phillip included in this book, Lester says : "I feel certain that film-makers of the future will be more subtle, more elliptical, more oblique in their narration, and that all traces of the literary and the theatrical will be banished from their work." This is, of course, the direction suggested by some of the newest work in the western cinema; but whether Lester himself will take such a direction at any time in the future is a matter on which one can only speculate. One consideration that is relevant is the inevitable limit on technical experimentation imposed on a film-maker producing films primarily for a Ceylon audience; and Lester, even though he was for long "the lonely artist", was always an artist trying to break out of his loneliness and to reach as wide an audience in his own country as possible.

But there is a further point that Lester's remark raises in my mind. Whether or not film-makers of the future will move towards the complete emancipation of the cinema from literature, Lester's own art has indubitable affinities with

literature- especially with the art of the classical novel. It is not an accident, I think, that three of his films have been based on well-known Sinhala novels, one of them the richest work of fiction, in variety and depth of characterization, in the language. Lester's special interests- the probing of inner feelings, the unravelling of intimate human relationships- have a close connection with the art of fiction. His most significant impact on the Sinhala audience has been to wean them away from an addiction to semi-operatic melodrama towards an appreciation of a cinema whose central interest is in character and personal relations.

If I may draw again on my own contact with Lester as film-maker, I have found that during the scripting of his films he is most intensely concerned with questions of character, motivation, plot structure-elements akin to the traditional art of the novel. Is so-and-so's character in danger of becoming two-dimensional, of losing the complexity of a real human being. Will it be plausible that so-and-so should behave in this way. Will such-and such an incident appear to depend on a contrived coincidence? That is the kind of question he continually raises in scripting sessions.

One must not of course carry too far this comparison between Lester's art and that of the novel, or ignore his command of the visual resources of the cinema. His films are even more sparing in words than those of many great European or American directors. His language is often, as I have already said, the language of silence. This accounts for the reaction of some spectators, both Ceylonese and foreign, to what they consider the excessive slowness of his films. I remember an irritated Mexican critic writing of *Gamperaliya* who said that every line spoken by the characters seems to be preceded and followed by a long silence. In this quality of his films, however, Lester is true to Sinhala life. While we are on the surface a garrulous people , it is equally true that at least among un-westernised Sinhalese, the deepest feelings are often left unexpressed, or expressed only in a look, a smile or a half hidden gesture- a quality captured so marvellously by the four principal

players in *Gamperaliya* or by Anula Karunatilleka in *Golu Hadawatha.*

It must be added that in my own collaborations a script-writer in Lester's films I have naturally been most conscious of his interest in problems of character-portrayal and plot-motivation. No doubt a different side of himself takes over on location or in the cutting room, and an account by Willie Blake or Sumitra Gunewardena of working with Lester would provide a different picture of his creative personality. For an example of what Lester can do by purely visual and intrinsically cinematic means, one need only think of the wordless sequence of Sujatha before the mirror in *Ran Salu* or the sequence of the halt during the pilgrimage in *Gamperaliya.*

A script-writer, when he sees his work translated to the screen by a gifted director may have one of two reactions. He may say: "This is exactly how I imagined it; I like it so much because it is just the way I hoped it would be." Or he may say: "I never imagined it could be like this: I like it so much because it goes beyond anything I could have dreamed of." The first represents my reaction to the lesson scene in *Gamperaliya;* the second, my reaction to the pilgrimage sequence to which I have just referred.

This sequence offered a particularly interesting problem of adaptation, because Nanda's feelings at this point of time-the struggle in her mind between her loyalty to her husband and the renewed attraction she feels for Piyal are conveyed in the novel by the author looking into Nanda's mind. We had to find a cinematic equivalent in incident and image that would reveal Nanda's inner feelings. During the scripting stage the elements of the solution were worked out: the desolate landscape recalling to Nanda her husband's letter, his voice on the sound track, the figure who looks like Jinadasa, the intrusion of Piyal's presence breaking the current of memory. These were the raw materials in the script that Lester had to work on. But the strength of the finished sequence lies essentially in the

compelling power of the cinematic images Lester has created-the bird soaring in the sky to which Nanda looks up as if in a trance, the strange figure glimpsed through the smoke, all giving the experience the quality of near hallucination. It was fitting that Martin Wickramasinghe in his article on the film should have paid Lester the greatest possible tribute when he said that his sequence was stronger than the corresponding episode in his novel.

Foreword to the book : *The Lonely Artist - A Critical Introduction to the Films of Lester James Peries,* by Phillip Coorey.

THEATRE

1

A Great Play Movingly Performed

From my memories of University productions over the last twelve years, I have no hesitation in saying that ANTIGONE (the first performance of which was given by the Ceylon University Dramatic Society last Saturday night) is the finest play I have seen on the University stage. There are productions I remember which were, perhaps, more polished, which achieved success more easily because they attempted less, but none which was so moving or had greater depth and seriousness.

Anouilh's ANTIGONE is a play which makes considerable demands of both its audience and its actors. It is sustained throughout on a level of great intensity, it depends less on action than on the spoken word, and it is so packed with meaning that it demands close attention to every word. For a group of amateur players to attempt such a play requires courage: to have carried it off as successfully as the University Dramatic Society actors did is an extraordinary achievement for which the Society and its producer, Lyn Ludowyk, deserve even larger bouquets than those they have received in previous years.

ANTIGONE was written in 1942 and produced in Paris under the German occupation: it has since been played in an English version in New York and London. Anouilh bases his

play on the ancient Greek story of the princess Antigone, who was put to death by King Creon because she buried the dead body of her brother, Polynices, against the king's orders (Creon had commanded that Polynices' body be left to rot outside the city because of his treachery). Anouilh treats this play in such a way as to give it meaning for a modern audience. The action of his play is divorced from any particular time or place, the setting is neutral, and in the dialogue modern references mingle with the classical.

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ANTIGONE has so far been available in English only in an adaptation by Lewis Galantiere. Galantiere interprets the play as an attempt to dramatise, in a necessarily disguised form, the situation of France under the Nazi occupation: as he sees it. Antigone stands for the democratic rights of the individual against Creon, the totalitarian ruler. To bring out what he thinks is implied in the play, Galantiere freely tampers with the text, omitting and interpolating passages. Thanks to Dr. Ludowyk (and to Dr. V. Reich, who helped with the text), we are able to see **ANTIGONE** in an English version which is true to the original play – a privilege which has been denied to audiences in London and New York. With Galantiere's accretions cut away, one can see that, whether Anouilh's audiences took the play in this way or not. **ANTIGONE** was not intended as sales-talk for democracy. Anouilh is not concerned merely with a temporary political conflict but with a timeless human situation and his play is much more meaningful and disturbing than the simple propaganda-piece of Galantiere.

The greatness of Anouilh's play is that he doesn't simplify the conflict between Creon and Antigone. Creon explained by a perverse lust for martyrdom; in her eyes it is the fulfillment of herself. Only the guards remain outside the tragic pattern – ordinary humanity, innocent and

indifferent: when the curtain falls, they are back where they were at the beginning, playing cards.

* * *

ANTIGONE was played by the University actors in simple costumes and against an almost bare stage. It was in marked contrast to the exotic glamour which captivated audiences in **Tobias and the Angel** and **The Good Woman of Setzuan**. To me, **ANTIGONE** seemed more exciting visually than anything I have seen before on the University stage. The austerely simple set threw the actors into relief and emphasized their grouping and movements. The production captured beautifully what, we are told, is one of the characteristics of Anouilh's theatre – its stylized, ballet-like quality. So many moments in the production remain in the mind's eye: the opening tableau, with the actors silhouetted against the blue background. Creon's appearances at the top of the steps. Creon and Antigone seated at each end of the stage with their faces clasped in their hands. Antigone and the guard alone on the darkened stage before she is led away to death.

Iranganie Dissanayake in the title-role had a part which was more difficult than any she had played on the Colombo stage before. It would have strained the capacities even of a professional actress, requiring, as it did, great emotional intensity at certain moment and severe restraint at others. Her rendering of this arduous role was a fresh triumph for this talented actress. Except, I felt, for occasional moments in the first Act, she showed remarkable flexibility, control and sensitiveness. It was the most moving performance I have yet seen on the Ceylon stage.

Cuthbert Amerasinghe, who shared with her the main burden of the play, gave a most dignified and restrained performance as Creon. The way in which he stood up to the

long speeches in the dialogue with Antigone and rendered them with ease and naturalness deserves the highest praise.

Of the supporting players, Johan Leembruggen brilliantly outshone the rest; his characterization of the First Guard was smooth and well-controlled, and that in a part which it would have been a natural temptation to overact. The scene between him and Antigone before her death was the best moment in the play, as far as the acting was concerned, in spite of the distraction caused by the unintelligent laughter of some members of the audience. Osmund Jayaratne's performance as Chorus was a refreshing change from him "hamming" in **Tobias and the Angel** and **The Good Woman of Setzuan;** it reminded one of the possibilities he showed as an actor many years ago in **Marco Millions** and **Right You Are**. Christobel Oorloff had just the right build and appearance for the Nurse, but her acting was too stiff, while Roland Sri Pathmanathan's playing of Haemon lacked warmth.

One hardly ventures to hope that ANTIGONE will be as roaring a box-office success as some of the pot-boilers put over by the University Dramatic Society in recent years. But one hopes, at least, that people will not be deterred from seeing it by the mistaken notion that it is a play for "highbrows." It is a play which will move anyone whose demands of the stage are not confined to light comedy. In their program note the University Dramatic Society explain their choice of the play by saying, "we should like to give the small public of Colombo interested in drama – amateur dramatics as it must be here – the best material we can put before it." If ANTIGONE can make even a section of its audience see possibilities in drama of which they had been unaware before, it will have served the purposes of a University theatre. The play will be repeated tomorrow and next Thursday at King George's Hall.

Ceylon Daily News, September 1950

2

A Producer's Triumph

THE INSECT PLAY by Karel and Josef Capek. Produced by Jubal, with the Peradeniya University students. At King George's Hall.

The Insect Play is, without a doubt, the finest production that Jubal has given us and a memorable experience for the Ceylon playgoer.

I think the best tribute I can offer to this triumph of the producer's art is to record my own acquisition from it. I went to last evening's performance with the feeling that Dr. E.F.C. Ludowyk (in a recent article in the "Daily News") had made too high a claim for the Capeks' play. I came away entirely convinced by the production that **The Insect Play** is a much more impressive achievement than it seems from the printed text (at any rate, in an English translation).

In his presentation of **The Insect Play** Jubal achieves what, to my mind, is the best test of a producer's excellence – to give his audience a heightened understanding of the play – and when the final curtain came down last evening I felt that I owed him a personal debt of gratitude.

Whatever might be said about the relation of **The Insect Play** to the time and place in which it was written, the best things in the play transcend these limitations.

On the stage it came over as a mordant satire on humanity, reduced to the petty dimensions of the insect

world – a satire which is no more merely "of its time" than **Gulliver's Travels**.

Indeed, Swift might have delighted both in the method and the purpose of the Capeks – in the two beetles gloating over their ball of dung, their "lovely little pile"; in the female butterfly sniffing the dusty and sweaty Vagrant with "Oh, how nice you smell!"; or in the great war between two ant-heaps for the "road between two blades of grass."

The Insect Play clearly depends for successful performance on uninterrupted and perfectly timed movement to create the sense of the teeming and multifarious life of the insect world, as well as on the sets and costumes to sustain the quality of fantasy.

Both these demands are fully satisfied in the present production. It flows with beautiful smoothness, and this achievement is all the more remarkable because the players (with the single exception, I believe, of Gehan Wijeyewardene) are all new to the stage.

Edith Ludowyk's costumes (together with the make-up) suggest the insect characters with a very neat economy. Her sets are most imaginatively conceived, from the fantastic butterfly bar, with its deliberate touch of garishness to the caricature of middleclass domesticity in the beetle-town and the bleak mechanical forms of the ant-factory.

The only flaw in this otherwise exemplary production is that not all the players were perfect in their diction. Occasionally a too obtrusively "Ceylonese" accent stuck out, and sometimes marred the performance of an otherwise competent player.

Senevi Ekanayake (Mr. Beetle) and Aloy Ratnayake are cases in point. The latter, in particular, was just right in his movements and facial expressions in the role of the Ichneumon Fly, and his performance would have been altogether admirable if his speaking had been faultless.

In a play which contains so large a cast and whose general level of acting was so high, it is impossible to mention every player who deserves commendation.

Gehan Wijeyewardene as the Vagrant carried the one big role of the play – an extraordinarily difficult part for so young an actor – with superb success. It was a performance of sustained intensity which yet never degenerated into hysteria, as it might so easily have with a less skilful performer.

Of the minor players, I must offer a special bouquet to Audrey Roberts for her brilliant characterization of Mrs. Beetle. Sidath Sri Nandalochana played his three very different roles with fine versatility, and Shelagh Pereira (Iris) and Frederick Ludowyk (Victor) were most successful in capturing the idle frivolity of the butterfly-world of the first act.

But it would be invidious to stress too much the merits of any individual actors in this play. The success of **The Insect Play** comes above all from its fine team-work which does credit to everybody associated with this production and is a triumph, above all, for the distinguished artist of the theatre who brought the team to this pitch of perfection.

Ceylon Daily News, September 1953

3

Liliom: A Fitting Farewell

The current University Dramatic Society production, which opened on Tuesday night, is something of a melancholy occasion since it is billed as the Society's "farewell performance" before their departure to Peradeniya. One cannot let this occasion pass without an expression of the debt of gratitude which the Colombo playgoer owes to the Society and, in particular, to its regular producer, Lyn Ludowyk. It is to state the obvious to say that Dr. Ludowyk's achievement as University producer has been remarkable, especially when one considers the fact that he had to work often with quite inexperienced actors and to contend with (to quote the program to **Liliom**) "the difficulties attendant upon what has been miscalled the 'stage' of King George Hall."

However regrettable might be the deprivation of almost the only opportunity the Colombo playgoer has had to see good drama, one could not perhaps justifiably complain if Colombo's loss were Kandy's gain. But it is astonishing that in a University which in every other respect seems to have been built in the most prodigal manner, there is as yet no theatre! One can only hope that the faint hope held out in the program of the Society returning to Colombo with a play will be fulfilled. **Liliom** is a fitting farewell in at least one respect: it is handled by a guest producer whose distinguished talent was amply evident in Tuesday night's performance. Jubal's production undoubtedly excels any

other play I have seen in Ceylon in its general finish and its careful attention to detail – the fruits I have no doubt, not only of the producer's insight but also of hard work and strenuous rehearsing. Jubal's distinction as a producer was reflected particularly in the quality of the acting in the minor roles – customarily the most ragged part of any amateur play on the Ceylon stage. (I must confess that even in Dr. Ludowyk's productions I have often been distressed by the too easy way in which the problem of the minor parts was solved by stereotyping each one of them with a repeated mannerism or idiosyncracy of speech). In **Liliom** hardly any even of the smallest parts fail to reach a tolerable standard of competence - a tribute, surely to the skill with which the producer has been able to bring out the potentialities of the youngest and rawest actors.

I could not help wishing (however ungrateful though this might seem), that all this talent had been expended on a more rewarding play. I am sure not only from the enthusiastic program note but also from the production itself that Jubal enjoyed putting **Liliom** on the stage, and I have no doubt too that it is a good play for amateurs. Nor – let me hasten to add, lest I be suspected of highbrow superciliousness – do I object to the naïve and simple sentiment of the play, except when it degenerates (as it does sometimes) into mawkishness, But my most serious grouse against the play is that it seems so unsure of what it wants to do. The University Dramatic Society program labels it a "parable" (Molnar, I am told, called it merely a legend), and the singer between the acts (also, I learn, an innovation of this production) tell us that its moral is that "all things pass, but Love remains." But the whole play seems too thin not merely to support this or any other "moral," but even to make convincing the human drama. There is nothing sharply drawn in the character of Liliom, on whom the whole play turns; I found his change of mood in the third scene quite inadequately and clumsily motivated. His relations with Mrs. Muskat are so sketchily drawn that her final scene with

Liliom's wife over his dead body loses the force it might otherwise have had. The wife herself, Julie, is on the other hand finely rendered until that disastrous moment when she makes a speech over her husband's body – a speech which is not merely utterly sloppy but which is quite out of character and ruins the impression which had been built up of her silent endurance and suffering.

I think two of the principal actors, Winston Serasinghe (Liliom) and Sheila Van Langenberg (Mrs. Muskat), were handicapped by the thinness of the roles created for them by the dramatist. Serasinghe's performance in particular, seemed quite colourless in comparison with what one has come to expect of him, but in my opinion that was entirely due to the fact that the role offered him very little opportunity to give it flesh and blood. The most satisfying performance of the evening came from Ranjani Ellepola, newcomer to the stage, who in spite of some traces of inexperience, rendered the role of Julie with a sensitiveness and dignity which were very impressive. As I have already indicated, it was not her fault if the corny sentiments of her speech over Liliom's dead body momentarily upset the poise she had maintained, but she did seem to be guilty of speaking the last lines of the play with an unnecessary unction. But this one serious lapse could not mar the general impression she left of a finely restrained performance.

I would have thoroughly enjoyed Sita Jayawardene's Marie as a comic foil to the heroine if the character had not been unduly caricatured. Johan Leembruggen as a figure of the Budapest underworld was as accomplished as usual. The minor players, as I have already stated, maintained a generally high level of excellence, but I should like to make special mention of Percy Colin Thome's delightful performance as an affianced porter, of Rowan de Costa in the role of the aged Mrs. Hollunder, and of Gehan Wijewardene's Carpenter.

Ceylon Daily News, September 1952

4

Twenty-Five Years of the 'Dramsoc'

Backward look towards vanished glories?

The Ceylon University Dramatic Society celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. This occasion is of more than parochial importance, for the "Dramsoc" (as it is popularly known in University parlance) has had a big part in Ceylon's cultural life. Whether it will continue to do so in the future is one of the questions which I want to ask in this article.

Perhaps it is true that even during the heyday of the Dramsoc, the real merits of its activity could not be measured by the audience who attended its shows. Dr. Ludowyk's productions came to be regarded as something of a social event to which everybody who mattered just had to go. There was always something disconcerting in the spectacle of Colombo laughing in the wrong places in an Anoulith play or going home from the Pirandello's **Right You Are**, busily arguing about what the truth really was.

Nevertheless, anybody who was genuinely interested in drama had to be grateful to the University Dramatic Society, and even to Colombo 7 for making its shows a box-office success. For the Dramsoc productions were the only opportunity that the playgoers in Ceylon had of experiencing at first hand the work of serious Western dramatists (as

distinguished from the more ephemeral pieces which have made up the repertory of the C.A.D.C). It was thanks to the Dramsoc that Ibsen, O'Neill, Pirandello, Anoulith and Brecht for the first time became more than names to many of us.

The achievement of the University Dramatic Society during the great days was, without doubt, the work primarily of one man – Dr. E.F.C. Ludowyk. Considering the limitations within which he worked – of young and generally inexperienced players, and an apology for a stage – his success as a producer was truly remarkable.

But the glory has departed from the Dramsoc – and I don't think the only reason is the departure of Dr. Ludowyk himself. The loss of its longstanding producer would in any event have been a big blow to the Dramsoc, but other changes have been taking place at the same time in the world outside the University which have rendered the Society effete.

Isn't it incongruous that a body which calls itself the Ceylon University Dramatic Society should confine itself exclusively to drama in the English language? The oddity of this situation was naturally less apparent in the past when, both within and without the University, the English-educated classes their culture reigned supreme. At that time it was natural that dramatic activity in the languages of the country should be relegated to the Sinhalese and Tamil societies of the University and should be looked upon as an inferior cultural pursuit.

This attitude may still be current in the Dramsoc, but it is no longer consonant with the general intellectual climate of the country. And today it is clear how sterile is the kind of interest in drama which pervades the work of the University Dramatic Society.

I have said before that what was valuable in the Dramsoc productions was that they enabled the Ceylon playgoers to come into contact with some of the better plays written in the West. But no dramatic tradition can be created merely on the basis of a passive enjoyment of foreign drama. One

can scarcely speak of theatre as being in a healthy state in any country unless there is original dramatic writing being done. And contact with the international theatre is valuable if it stimulates such original creation.

But obviously any living dramatic tradition in Ceylon must be in Sinhalese and Tamil. The Dramsoc's complete isolation from any activity in these languages has meant, therefore, that it shows have become merely the pastime of a clique which is rapidly contracting.

It must be recorded that Dr. Ludowyk in spite of the inevitable handicaps of his own background, did try to interest himself, as far as he could in the new world of Sinhalese theatre. His production **Kapuwa Kapothi** had a big influence on the Sinhalese theatre during a certain period introducing it to a new form of social drama: the influence of the pioneer production is to be felt in the early plays of Dr. Sarathchandra. Dr. Ludowyk helped too in the experiment of a Sinhalese adaptation of Moliere produced by Jubal; this was not a very happy experiment, perhaps, but the significant thing is that it was attempted.

But Dr. Ludowyk's initiative and interest have not been maintained by his successors at the head of the Dramsoc. Meanwhile, the really creative work in drama is being done within the University by the Sinhala Natya Mandalaya – and that I believe, with no encouragement or support from the men in the seats of power in the University. Dr. Sarathchandra's successive experiments have sought to assimilate into Sinhalese drama various influences from other dramatic traditions. This is the kind of work one should have expected of a body which calls itself a University Dramatic Society.

What one deplores is not merely the fact that this name is a misnomer or that dramatic activity in the University remains unreasonably divided among three societies on the basis of language. What is particularly regrettable is the continued aloofness and lack of interest of "Dramsoc" circles in the original work that is being done in indigenous drama.

The Dramsoc has had the valuable assets of a certain tradition of experience in acting and designing of sets, lighting and other aspects of the theatre. This experience could have served as a reservoir on which the national drama could have drawn. Yet how many of those trained by Dr. Ludowyk have taken any interest in Sinhalese theatre or film? One remembers only Iranganie Meedeniya's magnificent performance in **Rekawa** as well as the names of Winston Serasinghe, Sita Jayawardena (in **Pabavati**) and Ranjani Ellepola (in a University Sinhalese play). I am quite ignorant of Tamil drama, but I believe the situation there is the same.

With the departure of Dr. Ludowyk, the Dramsoc has lost even the glamour which used to attract audiences to its shows. Meanwhile, even within the University, the social groups from whom it used to recruit its membership are dwindling. This has become apparent, for instance, in the marked decline in the quality of the English diction in the Dramsoc productions of recent years. One does not look for a standard English accent or intonation on the Ceylon stage, but when a society attempts to produce a play like **Major Barbara** with actors who just cannot speak the lines smoothly or expressively, the result must be ludicrous. Isn't this a clear proof that the Dramsoc is clinging to the vanished glories of a past which can no longer return?

I understand that this year the Dramsoc intends to celebrate its anniversary with a production of Plautus. The choice when taken with everything else, one knows about the society is symptomatic. As long as those who are at the head of the University Dramatic Society regard themselves as the last defenders of civilization against the barbarian hordes, the Society will have no future. There are many things which are valuable in the Western tradition in Ceylon which should be preserved for the future. But they will not be preserved by an attitude of snobbish exclusiveness and superiority on the part of their declared champions.

Ceylon Daily News

5

A Breath Of Fresh Air

PABAVATI by E.R. Sarathchandra, produced by J.D. Dhirasekera for the University of Ceylon Sinhalese Drama Circle, at King George's Hall.

One of the few hopeful events in the Sinhalese artistic world in recent years has been the lone effort of Dr. Sarathchandra to breathe life into the Sinhalese drama. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that but for his plays the Sinhalese theatre would today be as dead as a doornail. The popular drama (which, in spite of its crudities and its absurd melodrama had some little vitality, at least in its comedy) has been killed by the cinema: and the garishly-produced revivals of John de Silva's mixtures of songs, spectacle and declamation (to call them "plays" would be to stretch the word) have not advanced the Sinhalese stage one whit beyond its condition at the end of the last century.

Dr. Sarathchandra's plays, it is true, have their own limitations and imperfections; and it seems to me that his adaptations of Western dramatists and, in the present instance, of a traditional tale have been more successful than his single attempt (**Bahina Kalava**) to write an entirely original play in a modern setting. But where his work is most fruitful for the future of the Sinhalese drama is in his abandonment of the stilted and unnatural idiom customary

on the Sinhalese stage and his use of contemporary and colloquial speech as a dramatic medium.

"**PABAVATI**" is, I think, the best of Dr. Sarathchandra's plays. Not merely has he succeeded by his selection of incidents in reducing to manageable dramatic proportions the rather unwieldy and episodic story of the *Kusa Jataka*; he has also filled out and individualized the generally flat characters of the traditional tale. And most refreshing of all, he has made them come alive for the contemporary audience by giving them the familiar language of today. (There is a delightful moment in the play when one of the heralds lapses into the ornate language of the John de Silva tradition, and the queen remarks: "We all know you're a poet.") The kings and queens of this play are brought down to earth; they have all the foibles and weaknesses of ordinary people. And there is no **deus ex machina** in the play, no miraculous transformation of Kusa at the end; instead Pabavati, schooled by experience, presumably settles down with Kusa, "kavun-muna" and all.

"**PABAVATI**" preserves two traditional features in the form of the play: the first of these, the introduction of each part of the play by the "pote-gurunnanse" or lector is appropriate, and these songs were well rendered by Deva Surya Sena. I was not as happy about the songs in the body of the play itself. Not that I think song objectionable in itself in a play, if it is used discreetly and relevantly. But if the actor who played Kusa couldn't render the songs written for him I think it would have been preferable to leave them out: their rendering by another voice, obviously reproduced by mechanical means, jarred badly; the very imaginatively conceived fade-out at the end of Part I, would, for this reason, have been more effective if instrumental music alone had been used.

If none of the players on Tuesday night was superlatively good, the general level of acting was competent and free from any gross faults. Sita Jayawardana in the title role, making her first appearance on the Sinhalese stage, gave what I thought was the best performance of her acting career. In spite of the fact that her enunciation of the Sinhalese wasn't perfect, she made a good job of portraying the changing feelings of the proud beauty tamed. L. Dingiri Banda, who was so brilliant in a minor role in **Bahina Kalava**, was disappointing as Kusa; although I take it that the playwright's intention was to shift the centre of interest from Kusa to Pabavati, I hardly think the play itself justified so colourless and neutral a portrayal of his character. Aileen Sarathchandra as the Humpback often outshone the rest of the cast, but as the play wore on I tended to find her mannerisms and gestures rather repetitious. Commendation is also due to Punya Senanayake for her portrayal of the shrewish queen Silavati and to the charming sisters of the heroine (Sirima Wickramasinghe and Nandita Sarathchandra). The sets by Herbert Keuneman were simple and elegant, and (it need hardly be said) in striking contrast to the tinsel and gold paint of the customary Sinhalese historical play. An inordinate delay in scene-changing between Scenes 1 and 2 as well as a few muffed lines were faults that, I hope, will be remedied on future nights.

Ceylon Daily News, September 1952

6

A Rut of Legends

On February 25 the Arts Council begins its Sinhala Drama Festival for this year. We shall be seeing as usual, plays both old and new – including a selection of those put on the stage since the last festival.

I am not going to say anything about the festival plays as a whole here. But looking back on the last twelve months, I can't say it has been a very encouraging year for Sinhala drama. True there was official encouragement from the National Theatre Trust, which tried hard to foster a regular play-going audience. The Arts Council continued its assistance to amateur bodies.

BUT ALL THESE BODIES CAN ONLY HELP : they can't create a drama themselves. And I am afraid during the last year there has been little worthwhile creation to speak of.

A few years ago, many of us thought that Dr. Sarathchandra's MANAME was going to give new life to Sinhala drama. I still think MANAME a fine play – the best thing I have seen on the Sinhala stage – and I have enjoyed some of Dr. Sarathchandra's productions which followed it.

But it seems to me to ask whether the tradition of stylized drama which MANAME began isn't in danger of dying of anemia.

I was moved to ask this question especially when I saw the last play which the National Theatre Trust put on before

it closed its season – Mr. Mahagama Sekera's **Kundala Kesl**. It was a play from which I expected a lot because, from other things by him that I had read, Mr. Sekera was obviously talented.

Kundala Kesl was a sad disappointment. But it was more than the failure of a single play. It seemed to show that the form of musical drama had reached a dead end. The chorus and the **potheguru** were there merely as an empty convention. They had no dramatic purpose: they just held up the play.

> **But most of all. Why, oh why, must the playwrights of this school turn only to legend and folk tale for their material? I am afraid that with a continued diet of this kind the Sinhala drama will die from lack of contact with contemporary life.**

Isn't it an odd thing that with a society in a state of feverish change, our drama is not reflecting any of the forces that are shaping our lives?

I don't mean that the Sinhala drama should be an instrument of political propaganda or even that it should merely hold up a mirror to society. But surely a drama must be sterile if it has nothing to do with contemporary life.

> **The playwrights who have followed Dr. Sarathchandra's lead seem to have been far more concerned with style than with content. And while Dr. Sarathchandra's great contribution to Sinhala drama has been his discovery of a form, it is perhaps his limitation too, that he is more interested in form than in experience.**

I think I hear at this point a cry of "I told you so." I know there are people who have always thought the stylized drama was inherently limited.

But I don't see why it should be. I don't see why it shouldn't be used as the instrument even of social comment or satire – if we had the dramatists with the ability to do so.

It has been done elsewhere. Brecht used opera and musical drama as the vehicle of a powerful social drama in Germany. Brendan Behan is using a similar form very vigorously in Britain today.

Of course, they weren't aesthetes. Brecht was active in the working-class movement of the time. Behan went to jail as an adolescent for IRA activity. Perhaps we shan't have a really live Sinhala drama until we have playwrights who are fully alive to their society.

> **The musical drama has the great advantage of being popular. Why can't this asset be used to make it a medium which can speak to the people not only of the remote and the legendary but also of the things that are most immediate to them?**

I shall live in hope. But meanwhile, I can agree with the opponents of musical drama to this extent – that it would be a pity if the dialogue drama were killed off entirely. It is a natural and necessary vehicle of expression in a modern society, and it must be developed – and popularized.

It's certainly a pity that the vogue for musical drama has made it difficult for writers of dialogue drama to reach an audience. A case in point is the fate of **Pushparagaya** – in my opinion, the best play since **MANAME** and the only Sinhala social comedy I know which had something serious to say. It was played last year to empty houses.

Ceylon Daily News, February 1961

7

Sinhabahu: Sarathchandra's Answer

Dr. Sarathchandra's **Sinhabahu** (presented last weekend at the Lionel Wendt Theatre) has met with varied reactions from the critics. Let me add my own voice: I thought it a splendid success and a triumphant vindication of the dramatic form he has chosen to work in.

I am talking of the play itself, not of the performance – which is another matter. One reason perhaps why **Sinhabahu** has not met with the same immediate and universal approval as **Maname** is that its performance is decidedly uneven.

The touchingly beautiful rendering by Malini de Silva of the tragic figure of Suppadevi, I count among the best things that have been done on the Ceylon stage. (I was at the play on the first night and have not seen Jeevalakshi Wickramaratne who took the role at a later performance). But the play suffered from the inadequacy of its male lead. Charlie Jayawardhana had the right figure for **Sinhabahu**, but his singing was rough and his movements tended towards an unfortunate stiffness.

But I don't think these and other weaknesses in the performance are the only reason why **Sinhabahu** did not make the same overwhelming impact on its audience as **Maname**. **Sinhabahu** is a richer and more complex play than Dr. Sarathchandra's old war-horse and perhaps it cannot, precisely for that reason, achieve the same immediate effect.

But **Sinhabahu** is an answer to anybody who has been asking: "Is it possible to treat a serious theme in the musical drama?" I can understand that the question might have seemed still open after **Maname**. Dr. Sarathchandra's pioneering nadagama was a powerful piece of theatre, yet it was possible to ask doubtfully: "But what does it have to say?"

The whole drama of **Maname** turned on the infidelity of a woman: **Sinhabahu** offers us a many-sided complex dramatic conflict which engages deeper and more varied emotions. **Sinhabahu** really does have something serious and important to say, even though what it says may be conveyed – and all the better so – through the indirections of drama rather than through direct statements.

Dr. Sarathchandra has realized wonderfully the dramatic possibilities which are inherent in the old legend. **Sinhabahu** is a tale which – like **Oedipus** or **Hamlet** – is based on a primal human situation and enlists certain universal feelings.

In Dr. Sarathchandra's hands, it became a drama of the relationships in the family and the complex web of emotions intertwined with them: the father with his possessive, tyrannical, all-demanding love, the son, who must break loose from the paternal bond in order to realize himself and who yet remains bound to it in an ambivalence of love and hate; and the mother, tragically divided between her emotional loyalties to the old life she has shared and the new life she has brought forth.

Sinhabahu seems to me a decisive answer too to those who have asked: "But doesn't the musical drama relegate language to an inferior place?" I must confess I could never understand why music should be supposed to be inherently incompatible with the life of the word (are the words negligible in a Mozart or a Verdi opera?)

The truth as **Sinhabahu** shows us – is that you can have great vitality of language in a musical play where the word

acquires a further depth through the musical context which supports it. The success of **Sinhabahu** is, in fact, a triumph, above all of language: it is a play which is obviously more thoroughly conceived as poetry than **Maname**.

It is impossible to respond to the play merely by letting oneself be carried along by the melody; the words have to be listened to. It is a play, therefore, which will probably require for many people (at any rate, for me) more than one hearing before it can all be taken in.

I have some sympathy for those people who have recently been reacting against what they call "the glut of musical plays". Certainly, it is a pity that the popularity of **Maname** should have induced many playwrights who have no talent for this form to take to it. And I fully agree that a musical play, badly written and badly performed, can be perhaps more depressing than any other.

Nor is there any reason why the dialogue-drama should be thrown overboard; there is a certain kind of dramatic content for which it is the obvious medium. Let us, by all means, have social comedy and topical satire, lest one good custom should corrupt our drama.

But I can see why Dr. Sarathchandra has chosen his own way – the form of the musical drama not only has natural Eastern roots, but also reaches (at its bet) a dimension of drama which is beyond the range of the naturalistic dialogue play. Those who see in Dr. Sarathchandra's return to poetry, song and dance only a regrettable regression to a popular mode had better look again into their dramatic histories.

In the light of two thousand years of Eastern and Western drama, it is the modern dialogue-drama of the West which is a temporary diversion from the main trend; the other is the most permanent and the most universal mode. **Sinhabahu** is a new, green sprig from the ancient trees.

Ceylon Daily Mirror, October 1961

8

Vessantara, Morality and Melodrama

A quarter-century after **Maname** Dr. Sarathchandra has returned to Tower Hall. That is the main impression I brought back from his new play, **Vessantara**. This is not the place to attempt a re-assessment, in the perspective of twenty-five years, of the achievement and the limitations of **Maname** and **Sinhabahu**, but I see no reason to alter one part of the judgement that I, in common with several other critics at the time, made of these plays that in creating a consistent poetic stylization Dr. Sarathchandra had made a fruitful departure from the hybrid and incoherent dramatic mode of the **nurthiya**. Now Dr. Sarathchandra had chosen to go back on his own theatrical innovation. Mercifully, there is no return to the high-flown rhetoric that he caricatured in **Pabavati**, but otherwise **Vessantara** follows the Tower Hall tradition in teetering between a heightened and formalized language in some episodes and an everyday middle-class idiom in others. Sanda Maha Raja and his queen might have been any suburban couple, and the ministers could have come out of a less brilliant version of **Subha saha Yasa**. I see that one Sunday critic has called the costumes 'gorgeous'. Gawdy, to my mind, is the more appropriate word – gawdy, and in plain bad taste.

In choosing the story for his new play, Dr. Sarathchandra was also seeking reconciliation with tradition. 'The absence of a Sinhala "Vessantara" which has either lasting literary qualities or which reflects the folk imagination,' says the programme note, 'appears to be an unaccountable fact, in view of the importance as well as the vast popularity of this Jataka in the context of our culture.' Dr. Sarachchandra goes on to say later in the same note: 'The ethics of the Vessantara Jataka is bound to trouble westerners because of their background of Christian ethical thinking that stresses the love of wife and children and kindred as a means towards the attainment of perfection. The ideal that Vessantara attempts to achieve is that of the submersion of one's personal love and attachments in the universal goal of the love of humanity.'

The problem posed by the Vessantara story for any writer who seeks to make drama of it is not in my opinion, that of the difference between Christian and Buddhist ethics, but one which is rooted in the dramatic material itself. What is the dramatic high point of the play – whether in the old John de Silva or in the new Sarathchandra? It is the giving away of the children, the spectacle of their physical suffering and emotional anguish, which unfailingly has the audience reaching for their handkerchiefs. But if one accepts the ethics which the play enforces – that the Bodhisattva is indeed justified in giving his children away into slavery and brutal torment in order to win spiritual deliverance – then the tears the playwright wrings from his audience are a total irrelevance. This fatal inner contradiction between the play's ethics and its emotional appeal – that it exploits feelings which are denied by its own morality – means that the climax – in Sarathchandra just as in John de Silva – remains pure sensationalism, melodrama. And the melodrama is crowned by the fact that the legend allows the playwright to have it both ways when the children are rescued in the happy

ending. Thus the collision between the audience's normal human reactions and the transcendental ethics which the play preaches is averted, and the audience is given the luxury of having had a good cry and feeling at the same time that they have been spiritually uplifted.

It seems to me that the only way in which a playwright can make tragedy rather than melodrama out of the Vessantara story is by taking a less idealizing attitude towards the central character. The motto for a good play on the Vessantara theme might come from George Orwell's remark in his 'Reflections on Gandhi'; 'Sainthood is a thing that human beings must avoid.' This, however, is very far from Dr. Sarathchandra's intention. No breath of criticism or questioning is allowed to disturb the idealization of Vessantara at the climax. As the playwright remarks in his programme note: 'Nor have I disturbed the image of Madri Devi, as the devoted wife who is prepared to make any sacrifice to help her husband to attain his ideal in which she herself believes.' Here again the play has it both ways, because Madri Devi can retain in the audience's eyes the image both of the loving mother and of the submissive wife who subordinates herself to her husband's spiritual goal only because she is never submitted to the test of knowing and witnessing the torments of her children.

In this evasion of the human conflicts which the play inevitably brings to mind but never honestly faces, Dr. Sarathchandra has come a long way from the poignant family drama of **Sinhabahu.** Looking back on that play, it seems to me now that its force lay in the communication of the pain and loss of the older generation rather than of the will to freedom of the young. But in the moments of greatest intensity in **Sinhabahu** – in the lion's cry of anguish over the loss of his children or the mother's lament over the parting from her son, — there was unmistakably a deep personal involvement on the part of the dramatist. (Dr. Sarathchandra's

touching dedication of the published text of the play to his daughter seemed a confirmation of what one might have concluded from the play itself.) The journey from **Sinhabahu** to **Vessantara** may be a spiritual progress, for those who are interested in such matters. I can see it only as a human and dramatic impoverishment. And the play prompts the same question that is raised by other dramatic attempts to portray on the stage complete sainthood – whether one can ever do this without making the hero seem a solemn, inhuman prig.

Finally, there is the claim made for the play by its author himself – that it is a 'Vessantara for our time'. He writes: 'I have chosen to dramatise this story afresh because I feel it to be singularly relevant to today, when we are witnessing rapid changes in our society which threaten traditional values. At a time when self-interest and hedonism are being recommended as values which would lead our country to prosperity, it is good to remind ourselves that the values that our culture has held in esteem over the centuries are the exact opposite of these.' Judged by this declared intention of the playwright too, the play is a failure.

In his attempt at contemporary significance, Dr. Sarathchandra has made the Vessantara of the first half of the play a welfarist gone mad, distributing the wealth of the state indiscriminately to all-comers in the conviction that only so can he alleviate the sufferings of the poor. In the play Vessantara's giving comes out not as a traditional ethic but as a personal aberration which shocks even other people in his own society, and the consequences of his random giving seem so chaotic that we cannot help agreeing with the worldly-wise judgements of the ministers. Even the giving away of the children is made to seem, in the first place, an act of distributive justice in favour of the childless Jajuka: it is only as an afterthought that Vessantara is made to voice the aspiration to deliverance through the casting off of all attachments. In his anxiety to create a contemporary

Vessantara Dr. Sarathchandra has destroyed whatever internal consistency the traditional character (single-mindedly moved by the aspiration to Buddhahood) had, and he has offered in his place a figure seeking social justice, yet so innocent of the realities of politics and economics that only the naivest of spectators will take him as a hero for our time.

Lanka Guardian, December 1980

II

CREATIVE WRITING

POETRY

1

Birthday Apology and Apologia

1

To have existed while the planet made
Eighty revolutions round the sun is no
Achievement, but I must confess I am
Rather surprised to find myself still here.
It's scandalous at eighty years to walk
The earth where younger, better people now
Are dust and ashes. Thinking only of those
Who died of violence and had much more
To give — Rajini, Richard, Neelan — makes it
Embarrassing to be alive. However,
I never hungered for longevity:
My mother's family's sturdy peasant genes
Must have prevailed, although my father left me
A diabetic legacy — a nuisance.
But I shouldn't complain: to compensate,
I have acquired immunity to some
Infections — post-modernism, for one,
And free verse, for another. I'm glad, too,
I never caught, as my late brother did,
The Sinhala nationalist flu. An early shot
Of Marxism, perhaps, took care of that.

2

When I was young, I said to my friend Herbert —
A fine designer of stage-sets, a cook
Of creative genius, a treasury of lore
Of all things Lankan — 'If you'd only stuck
To one thing, Herbert, you'd by now have been
The top of that tree.' 'But, putha, how boring
To stick to one thing!' Now, at eighty, I know
I've been, like him, a fickle butterfly
Flitting from field to field, from flower to flower.
The kindest word they'll find to say of me
Is *versatile*. But do I really wish
It had been different? What a bore to be
The sovereign of some scholarly half-acre,
Crowned for a thesis on 'Semiotics of
Consonant Clusters in Six George Keyt Poems'!

To change the entomological metaphor,
I'm Grasshopper, not Ant, in the old fable
(Or *Gracehoper*, in James Joyce's version).
Writing, I have enjoyed myself, laid up
No masterpieces to outlast the winter,
But hope I've pleased somebody now and then
With a poem here, or a play there, and if
My tombstone is a footnote in small print
In literary history, that's okay.

3

By time's mere flux, I'm called to play the part
Of patriarch I am unfitted for.
But not for long, I hope. When the time comes,
Ajith, Prince of Obituarists, will write,
I know, a graceful piece — measured, as always,
And free of flattery or fulsomeness.
(A pity I shan't be there to read it, though.)

I don't believe there's judgment after death,
Or penal court of Yama: if there were,
And I were called to account, what could I say
In mitigation of sentence, but stammer,
'P-please, sir, I tried not to be p-pompous ever,
P-pretentious, sir, incomprehensible,
Or b-boring.' Would the judge pronounce severely:
'A frivolous trifler! He deserves no mercy.
I sentence him to fifty years of torture
Translating into Serbo-Croat the texts
Of Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha!'

4

When you are old, you find that simple things
You took for granted are no longer simple.
Climbing the three steps to the office door
Is now an Everest-scaling feat; crossing
The street, a perilous odyssey. However,
Age has its compensations. You have grown,
Perhaps not wiser, but at least more prudent.
You can admire a woman's charm and beauty
With no possessive demons plaguing you.
Books and CDs that you once cherished dearly
Are burdens now you're glad to shed: even
The sight of the half-empty shelves is pleasing.
And so, to quote a poet I never liked,
'Port after stormy seas'. To all those friends —
Too many to be named — who've helped me past
The whirlpools and the rocks, my heartfelt thanks.
This makes eighty pentameters. THE END.

Nethra, April-June 2002

2
Colonial Cameo

In the evenings my father used to make me read
aloud (from Macaulay, or Abbot's **Napoleon** (he was short,
and Napoleon, his hero; I, his hope for the future).
My mother, born in a village, had never been taught

that superior tongue. When I was six, we were moving
house, she called at school to take me away.
She spoke to the teacher in Sinhala. I sensed the shock
of the class, hearing the servants' language; in dismay

followed her out as she said, "Gihing ennang."
I was glad it was my last day there. But then the bell
pealed; a gang of boys rushed out, sniggering,
and shouted in chorus, "Gihing vareng!", as my farewell.

My mother pretended not to hear the insult.
The snobbish little bastards! But how can I blame
them? That day I was deeply ashamed of my mother.
Now, whenever I remember, I am ashamed of my shame.

The Thatched Patio, May 1989

3
Returning to Roots

I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas: they've gone through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind. '-

- Emily Bronte: Wuthering Heights-

Returning — not to a sought Ithaca of the heart,
some virginal village, bathed in the rosy glow
of nostalgia. Only chance has brought me back
to this suburban spot, where sixty years ago

I lived not a stone's throw from here. The house,
of course, is. gone. What memory keeps of the place
is the garden; the hedge with small pink flowers;
beyond it, what seemed to me then a vast space,

open, empty, stretching to the church wall.
(Builders have left part of it still bare.)
And the girl next door, with whom I went to school
I remember her name, not face; hands or hair.

But it's that empty space that holds the clue
To my childhood's dark fatality. ...One day
I came out from the garden, walked past the hedge
towards that open ground, saw on the way

a man on a bike, and found a huge pit,
wide and deep. And sprawled in it were people, with despair
written on their faces. I knew at once it was the end
of the world; they were in hell. Standing there,

I shared their hopelessness. Then woke ... The house is gone,
the landscape all changed over sixty years – all
all but that remnant of ground, grown wild.
Yet, living here, I still recall the fears

and despairs of that dream, sense that there yet exists,
under the accretions of the years, that hopeless child.

The Thatched Patio, December 1989

4

Report from the Front

The subversives had come out, secretly, silently,
after their long waiting underground.
Already, they'd made their first destructive
strike in the dark, before I found

the tell-tale mark in the corner
between two walls - a long, brown
streak, which gave the show away.
Sure enough, in a bookcase, down

Under the bottom row, I discovered
a swarming mass of infiltrators. A spray-
gun spat *chus-chus,* and
several hundreds of wreckers lay

dead. I counted my losses - Steiner
After Babel) partly gone; still,
no great damage. My sister, however,
(a seasoned general) warned, "you *will*

have to be vigilant." A day passed,
two; on the third they struck again;
were repulsed; this time they got
a couple of volumes of Mark Twain

The war goes on. No negotiations
are possible. Of course, I'd like to howl
from the house-tops, "Culture, civilisation
threatened! Anarchy! Murder most foul!"

But the small voice of a termite whispers:
"Comrades, there's a bloated capitalist who keeps
shelvesful of food for himself, while westarve. Come,
let's get it while he sleeps."

The Thatched Patio, June 1988

5

Lying Awake, Thinking of Dead Friends

(Serena Tennekoon, who died of cancer, 2 January 1989;
Rajani Thiranagama, shot dead, 21 September 1989)

The gunman's hand is as blind as the virus. How strange
that I, smouldering on time's slow pyre,
should live to write this, when your two young lives
are gone — snuffed out, your minds' bright fire!

Composed in Jaffna.,
21 November 1989, at 4 o'clock in the morning,

The Thatched Patio, December 1989

6

Long Time Passing

"I can't recognise you. I have changed a great deal."
- Oscar Wilde

At twenty, he thought what a marvellous woman she was.
At twenty-five, she left him. In despair, he wanted *to* die.
At forty, she came.back into his life. After one evening,
"How uninteresting she is!" he said to himself with a sigh.
Yet, to be honest, he had to admit she looked very much the same; walked with the same shy demeanour that enchanted him once; thought the same;
was the same person, really. Is that, he wondered, why?

The Thatched Patio, April 1989

7

Garland for Rajini

You refused to eat the exile's bread, bounteous
and bitter; returned to live with the hot breath
of death pursuing you, yet held your head high.
They shot you like a dog in the street, but that
death
will be remembered as their shame, your pride.
I bring you no wreath, but flowers as for a bride.

The Thatched Patio, October 1989

8

Elegy for Serena

It's not your wasted face I want to remember,
Nor your hands and arms, pared down by death to
the bone,
But the light of life in your eyes: in them, the spirit
Resisting the invader to the end, unafraid, alone.

The Thatched Patio, February 1989.

9

To the Muse of Insomnia

Lying awake in the dark, while a poem forms
slowly in the spaces of the mind, like a crystal growing
molecule by molecule, I remember Akhmatova, who
bore
her poem within her for many years, knowing
it was too dangerous to betray to paper, nourished it
with heart's blood, agonies, terror, tears
(husband in the grave, son in prison), carried it
through the womb-dark silence of the terrible years,
till the first gleams showed of the approaching dawn,
the moment was come, her daughter ready to be born.

The Thatched Patio, December 1989

10

Insomnia and the Goldberg Variations

Thank you, Bach. How often I've blessed you
on sleepless nights! What has seen me through the black
hours isn't poppy nor mandragora but your music,
written, wasn't it, for another insomniac.

Through the earphones the hidden tide of sound
flows in me and out into the night's still-
ness. Your serene aria is a seed, from which
shoot after shoot will spring, until,

holding the whole world it has engendered,
it returns after its thirtieth variation.
Your music says nothing about anything
except music itself; that's why it's a purgation

of the spirit. You, Johann Sebastian,
are absent from the music. You take no pride
in your emotions – unlike the deaf one, who shook
his fist at the heavens before he died.

...The circle is complete. The tranquil song
returns. But out there on the railtrack
a train tears past, hooting and jangling.
- Disorder prowls, awaiting its comeback.

The Thatched Patio, August 1987

11

To White Knight (Mk 11)

Playing chess with you revives in me the fantasies
of diabolical machine vs. man. You grin
inwardly (so I imagine) as you fork
my rooks (damn! I missed that). Chagrin

is what I hear in your electronic cry
when you acknowledge checkmate. You're more
brash

than Bobby Fischer – boasting at each move
how you've thought four moves ahead in a flash,

analysed nine thousand position, while I
poor Homo Sapiens – struggle to pit
my wits against yours, and your silent clock
ticks on remorselessly. It's hard to admit

all this is merely the human kink
for anthropomorphizing. Your superior brain
has never known the feel of a knight
between the fingers. Loss and gain

are sensed as abstractly by your blind circuits
as by the remote airman his deadly rain
on the town below, or by the absent terrorist
his bomb's explosion of blood and pain.

The Thatched Patio, July 1987

12

Waiting for the Soldier

'I hope you'll find a more companionable person to play chess with than a computer.'

- Nirmala Salgado in a letter

After the Roman army took Syracuse,
a soldier, in the midst of the looting and raping,
stopped when he saw a Greek bent over
figures inscribed in the sand. Gaping,

the Roman watched his strange absorption
in that magic of lines and circles. He
(not looking up at the soldier), said, 'Move!
With your shadow there it's hard to see."

The soldier hit him on the head, and so
Archimedes died. If, then, today
I turn more and more to this ordered world
of sixty-four squares, the mimic play

of forces in a field where nobody bleeds;
where in the intervals of the game my silent friend
won't annoy me by spouting racist drivel
or Marxist simplicities; if the chief end

of life at present seems to be to find
an infallible answer to the French Defence
(my opponent's favourite opening), don't say
I am escaping. In a world without sense

one must look for meaning wherever one
can find it – if only, perhaps, for a day
or two. I know – in one shape
or another – the Roman soldier is on the way.

The Thatched Patio, 1988

13

'I am Not What I am'

- for Ruwanthie

You are the real Autolycus, the artful trickster
who's fooled us four centuries. Just when we think
we've pinned you down, you've wriggled smoothly
out of our clutches, .
changed your mask, shed your beard, and in a wink

switched sides. Are you with Hal or Falstaff? Shylock
or Antonio? Prospero or Caliban? That's just the trick:
to keep us guessing. Master of equivocation, tease,
flirting with your master-mistress but stopping at his
prick:

no wonder you could throw everything away on a
pun.
While the dons wrangle, the directors and critics
weave
their spiders' webs of interpretation, you, old rascal,
are somewhere laughing quietly and slyly up your
sleeve.

Nethra, April/September 2000

14

To Pushkin:
A 150th-Anniversary Letter

Pozdravlyayu vas, Aleksandr Sergeevich!
Of these hundred and fifty years, I've had the pleasure
of knowing you for just fifteen, since first
I schooled myself in that tongue whose treasure

of linguistic resources (at once, laconic
like a Latin inscription in granite, and rich
and earthy, like the Ukraine's black soil)
you mined, dorogoy Aleksandr Sergeevich.

Though in my green youth I demanded
strong stimulants from poetry, and followed where
wild-eyed wanderers had trod the peaks
and abysses – Donne, Blake, Baudelaire,
Coleridge, Yeats – now older and more modest,
I find it comfortable to evade the siren
Ecstasy-Despair, to walk the level
plains of common life with a Byron –

the Byron of the Italian years, I mean –
or Auden (American period, in this case) –
a poet companionable, civilized, ironic,
not asking too much of the human race;

but most of all, you: the supreme master
of everyday speech raised to a higher
power by subtle inflections of rhythm
and word order. You never tire

of familiar things (a housewife – your ideal),
but alchemist-like, transmute them. Tatyana's flight,
running across garden and stanza, will live
as long as Cleopatra's tragic height

of passion, taking the asp to her bosom.
Not that tragedy was beyond your view.
You loved Peter's city, with its duet
of stone and flowing water, but you knew
the price others had paid for it. Your clerk,
his dream of happiness shattered, shook
his fist at the bronze idol. Dull
imperial censors hacked you. You took,

like Anna Akhmatova and Pasternak, your portion
of toadies' insults and calumnies. Though spared
prison and psychiatric hospital, you died
with a bullet in your belly, still unscared.

Now a liberal Tsar reigns in the Kremlin,
and Empress Raisa dispenses both charm
and the Cultural Fund's bounties. Pray
with us that glasnost may come to no harm.

The Thatched Patio, April 1987

15
The Wisdom of Age?

I used to love the rich,
Sweet flavour of port, when young.
Now what delights me most
Is the tartness upon the tongue
Of a dry martini. In youth
I was drunk on the liquor of Donne,
On Yeats's beglamoured image
Of his grand passion, Maud Gonne.
Beethoven's Seventh and Ninth
Went to my head like wine.
Today I drink fresh water
At other fountains - the fine
Control of a Pushkin lyric,
The self-restraint of Frost,
A Bach partita's calm.
- And my heart's no longer tossed
(I'm glad) by living beauty.
The roar of its dangerous seas
Withdrawn, I turn to the quiet
Waters of friendship for ease.
Is this the fruit of experience?
Declining years? Maturity?
Wisdom? Or blood run cold?

The Thatched Patio, April 1989

16

The Cat in Me

As child I knew that moving house was sad;
It's still so in old age. The house you're leaving
May not have been so very nice, or one
Where you were happy. No matter: when the bags
Are packed, the tables, chairs and cupboards stacked
Inside the lorry (or the bullock-cart
In childhood), then the empty floors and walls
Regard you with the averted, silent look
Of a face you once loved that is now estranged.
I know what exiles feel, leaning over
The ship's rail as the shores of home recede;
Why cats return, trekking for miles, back to
A place that once was home, but never more.

Nethra, April-June 2002

FICTION

1

Maya

An Old Story Turned Upside Down

1

The night air was perfectly still. It seemed to Narada, as he sat cross-legged before the fire he had lit, that there was not a breath of wind to make even a branch creak or a leaf flutter in the forest. The fire was to protect himself both from the chill of the night and from insects. It could even keep wild beasts away, but Narada had no fear of those: he believed the ascetic's inner peace and calm could cast its spell of tranquility on them too.

The tongues of fire danced before his eyes, the burning branches and leaves crackled, the smoke rose and drifted in clouds, stinging his eyes. He closed them. It was then he heard a footfall. The tread of an animal? He opened his eyes again. In the darkness of the moonless night it was hard to make out anything against the black silhouettes of the trees. But yes, something or somebody was moving out there. The next moment a figure stepped out from between the trees into the small clearing that Narada had made as the place of his habitation. In the faint glow that the firelight cast on it Narada could make out that it was a human form.

'Who is it?' he called.

'A traveller,' came the soft answer.

'Strange. No traveller ever comes this way, to this wilderness. If you are a bandit, let me tell you I have no worldly possessions, no silver or gold.'

'I'm not a bandit. I'm a traveller who has lost his way.' The figure advanced, until the light, shining more fully on him, revealed an old man, his back half-stooped with age. Narada could now see he was dressed in dirty and tattered clothes, and that he carried a small bundle in his hand.

With an effort the old man lowered himself to the ground, and squatted on the other side of the fire.

'And what do you do in this wilderness?' he asked, again in a low voice.

'I came here to seek deliverance from the fetters of earthly existence.'

'And have you succeeded?' asked the old man, a smile wrinkling his leathery face.

'Not yet. I know that what ties us to existence is the power of maya, the power of illusion. My gurus have taught me this, and the sacred books say so. But I feel I know this truth only as a man knows the sea who has heard it described but never seen it. What is the secret of this great power of maya? That is the mystery that torments me.'

The old man laughed, his nearly toothless mouth gaping open. 'You are lucky,' he said. 'Some of us are tormented by things that are no illusion at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'Like me just now. I've walked so long that I'm weary and faint, and, most of all, thirsty. Perhaps I shall die if I don't have a cup of water.'

'I have no water,' said Narada. 'I finished the last drop some hours ago, and I'd made up my mind I would go without water the rest of this night. But don't worry. I'll go to the stream nearby and fetch you some.'

Narada rose, and twisting some of the branches he had collected to feed the fire, made a torch, lit it in the flames, took his clay jug and walked away from the clearing.

2

Narada was making his way through the forest in the direction of the stream from which he customarily drew his water, when a sudden gust of wind suddenly blew out his torch. Strange! he thought, on such a windless night. The extinction of his light left him in pitch darkness. The sky was overcast, and while there was no moon anyway, not even starlight penetrated through the thick clouds. Still, Narada felt he would be able, through his sense of direction, to make his way to the stream. He felt no fear even in the darkness. Manfully he struggled on, groping his way through overhanging branches, once colliding against a tree trunk. After that he walked with one arm outstretched before him. But a few minutes later he stumbled over the large root of a tree, and fell flat on the ground. He had lost his jug; by feeling the ground with his hands, he was able to retrieve it, but it seemed to have been broken in the fall.

What was he to do? He could go back, of course, find another vessel, get a torch and again attempt to reach the stream. But Narada had now to admit to himself what he had pushed away from the edge of his mind for some time. The truth was that he was lost, and that finding his way back to his dwelling-place would be just as difficult as locating the stream. He could only go on and see where his footsteps took him. Groping his way as before, he must have walked another ten minutes, when unexpectedly, he found himself at what seemed to be one edge of the forest. Or at least, the trees thinned out, until he came to an open space, and in the distance he could see faintly a glow that probably came from a human settlement.

He walked in that direction. The trees had now given way to low bushes, and as he approached the village, dim

lights shone from what must be peasant homes. Walking on, he made his way towards the first mud hut that stood in his path. The door was shut, but a light shone through a small window. In that light he examined his jug, and found that it was indeed broken, useless. He dropped it, and knocked at the door.

A woman's voice from within called, in a tone that suggested she was alarmed:

'Who is it?'

Narada answered:

'I'm an ascetic who lives in the forest. I've come in search of water.'

The woman's head peered out through the window. Narada took a few steps in that direction so that she might see him more closely and, he hoped, be reassured. She had brought the lamp in her hand, and as she held it up, he could see her face, and was filled with wonder at its delicate beauty. But in the same moment she drew a sharp inward breath and seemed to recoil from what she saw. Then she spoke:

'But, sir, how can I give you water?'

'Why not?'

'We are among the lowest of the low, sir. My family lives by skinning and tanning animal hides. How can I give you water? '

'Why not?" Narada repeated.

'It would pollute you, sir.'

Narada smiled.

'To me who has renounced the world, there are no differences of pure and impure as those living in the world imagine them. Please bring me water.'

She gazed at him doubtfully, then seemed to make up her mind, stepped to the door and opened it. Narada entered the hut. She went in, and returned with a small clay jug of water. Narada had meanwhile squatted on the floor, and she put the jug before him. He could now see that she was young and still girlish — eighteen, he guessed — and her

tall and slender body seemed to him a completion of that beauty the sight of her face had promised.

'Are you alone in the house?' he asked.

'My parents have gone to the next village because they had work to do there,' she said. 'They should be back any time now.' 'And you're not afraid to stay here alone?'

The girl hesitated to answer, but when she spoke, it was with a kind of pride.

'I *am* afraid, sir. But it often happens, and it can't be helped. And there's so much to do in the house, I forget my fears when I am working.'

'You're all the children your parents have?'

'Yes, sir. I had an older sister, but she died of fever when she was very young.'

'What's your name?' Narada asked.

'Mayavati.'

'It's a beautiful name.'

'But you aren't drinking your water,' Mayavati said, pointing to the jug before him.

Narada looked at the jug, as if seeing it for the first time. 'Did I ask for water? I had forgotten. But since it's here, I'll drink it.'

He had indeed forgotten the quest on which he came, his meeting with the old man, and even his tormenting problem of the power of illusion. All these seemed to have been obliterated from his mind as a wet cloth wipes out the marks on a slate when passed over it. Nothing existed except the calm loveliness of Mayavati's face, the grace of her long body and her gentle voice. He raised the jug above his lips, and a stream of water poured, cool and comforting, into his mouth.

3

When Mayavati's father and mother returned that night, they too were concerned that he was exposing himself to pollution. He explained that this was irrelevant; when he adopted the way of life of an ascetic he had also renounced

all the social distinctions of the world. The parents were friendly in a deferential way, and at the same time they were evidently bewildered by his presence. But when he asked for permission to stay the night, their respect for him made it impossible that they should refuse his request, all the more since they could hardly expect that he should make his way back through the forest at that time of night. He shared their simple meal; they regretted that they couldn't offer him comfortable conditions for sleep, but he said this was of no consequence since he had been accustomed to sleep on a cave-floor in the forest. He lay down on one of their mats. The events of the evening seemed to come back to his memory in bits and pieces, like fragments remembered from a dream. He recalled standing outside the window of the hut and looking at his broken jug. That stirred another memory: yes, he had fallen somewhere in the dark and broken his jug. But there was an old man he had met sometime that evening: he could recall a toothless mouth cracked wide open in laughter, but try as he might, Narada couldn't identify him or say where he had seen him. And now the old man's face was transformed into the face of Mayavati, which floated in the darkness before his closed eyelids, even while he was conscious of her sleeping presence on the other side of the hut: he followed her face into the dark forests of sleep, and pursued it through the long, densely woven dreams that came to him that night...

In the morning, Narada woke, feeling that his mind had already taken a decision for him while he was asleep. He got up; he could see the father in the compound behind the house, cleaning his teeth with a twig. He went up to him and squatted by his side.

'I have another request to make of you,' he said.

The father looked at him inquiringly.

'As I told you last night, I've been living in the forest, seeking the understanding that will free me from the cycle of existence. But now I feel that I am not ready for that wisdom because I know too little of life.'

The father waited silently.

'What do I know of it? Only the comfort of a pampered son in a rich family, which made me so weary that I retired to the forest, choosing for myself the austerity of the ascetic's life. But both are different from the ordinary lot of the mass of the people, the hardship and suffering that they haven't chosen but which they have to endure.'

The father continued to fix his eyes on Narada, waiting.

'I want to know that other life to which I am a stranger. Let me, I beg you, stay with you and your family in this house, living as you do, joining you in your work, sharing whatever befalls you --whether happiness or sorrow.'

The father now spoke:

'You said you wanted to join us in our work. What work?' 'Mayavati told me you lived by skinning and tanning the hides of animals. I want to learn and to share that work.'

The father's face showed amazement.

'How can you possibly do that? It's unclean, ugly work. 'See,' he said, stretching out his hands. 'The filth and the stains get under my fingernails; my whole body smells of what I handle; even if I were to bathe many times a day 1 couldn't wash it away. How can you, brought up so gently, accustom yourself to that kind of work?'

'I can accustom myself to anything, just as 1 have got used to living in the forest.'

'The forest is clean; it's not like the filthy, foul-smelling pits in which the animal skins are soaked.'

In spite of all Narada's attempts at persuasion, the father refused to allow him to participate in his work. But he was welcome to stay. Narada objected that he couldn't live in their home and eat their food as an idler. Finally, they compromised: the family had a very small piece of land adjoining their hut, Narada could cultivate it if he wished.

After this agreement, Narada was happy, but he wondered whether he had been completely truthful. He did want to know and to share the life of the poor: that was no

invention, but would that alone have been a strong enough motive for him to join that household? Or was it really the allure of Mayavati's beauty and sweetness that had made him take that step? And had the father come to that same conclusion? Had he been accepted because he had unthinkingly let it be known that he came from a rich family? If so, he must disabuse the father at the earliest opportunity of any expectation that he would bring wealth into their lives. He had severed his ties with his family and had no intention of re-establishing them in any circumstances.

4

So Narada stayed on in the hut, and prepared himself to cultivate the piece of land belonging to the family. He had no knowledge of farming, but on the father's suggestion, he sought advice and instruction from a neighbour who had much experience of it. Narada wanted to grow grain, but the neighbour laughed and said he must learn to walk before he tried to run. 'To cultivate grain you have to think of so many things — the time of rain and the time of drought, the best times to sow and to reap. Why don't you start with something simpler — planting gourds? They don't need much attention, and you can get used that way to looking after growing things.'

So Narada planted seeds and watched them sprouting and the plants growing from day to day. There wasn't much to do in those early days as a farmer, and he spent much of his time either silently watching Mayavati as she busied herself in the house, or talking to her when she was free. He spoke to her of his earlier life, and the way in which he had become alienated from his family because their ostentation of wealth and their harsh treatment of the peasants whose labour produced that wealth were so much at odds with the moral pretensions of their Brahminical religion. Mayavati listened to him attentively, bending her large eyes on him, but rarely spoke unless he asked her a question.

But the fascination he felt for her grew, and so did his conviction of her loving nature — her care of a wounded squirrel, her anxiety over a neighbour's child who was ill, or her generosity towards those who were poorer than her own family. Often he thought that he wanted to share the rest of his life with her, but sometimes wondered whether he knew enough about her to trust his feelings. At such moments his old preoccupation with illusion returned to trouble him, and he asked himself whether his image of Mayavati as a person was a creation of his own desire awakened by her beauty. In the end he decided he could resolve these doubts only by living them through. He went to her and said:

'I want to join my life with yours, if you will have me.'

She smiled with great sweetness.

'You could have asked me long ago, and 1 would have agreed. Of course 1 have to ask my parents, but they like you.'

There was no marriage ceremony: Narada knew the parents had consented when the next night Mayavati moved her mat from the other side of the hut to where he lay and slept with him. How simple and honest! he thought, and inwardly contrasted it with his elder brother's marriage, which had been preceded by long haggling over money and land, making a mockery of the solemn religious ritual that followed. The rest of the village had expected long ago that Narada and Mayavati would be man and wife, and took his new status for granted. One year later a daughter was born.

Often Narada lay awake in the night and asked himself why he wasn't completely happy, even though he had gained Mayavati and fathered a child. He felt that there was still a distance between them: Mayavati treated him as a superior person, she never spoke to him as other women in the village did to their husbands, whether lovingly or angrily.

It was the rainy season; there had been heavy rains during the previous few days, and no work out of doors

was possible. The perpetually gloomy and dripping skies and the frequent peals of thunder made Narada irritable, and when Mayavati unthinkingly addressed him once as 'sir', as she had done during the early days of their relationship, he flared up.

'Am I a landlord or the village headman that you call me sir?' Mayavati bowed her head. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I made a mistake. It was an old habit.'

Narada waited for his temper to cool. Then he spoke again, more calmly.

'But it isn't just a mistake,' he said. 'It happens because you still treat me as if I were somebody above you, not your equaL'

'How can l be your equal when you are my husband?' she said quietly but confidently. 'A woman has to respect and obey her husband.'

'That's one of the illusions of the world I shed long ago.'

'But I'm not intelligent or learned like you,' Mayavati persisted. 'How can I be your equal?'

'Learned, no. But intelligent? Didn't you show me yesterday how stupid I was when I failed to make a knot in that rope that wouldn't come out when you pulled it?'

'But that isn't intelligence.'

'What is it then?'

'It's just that I'm used to doing that kind of thing.'

'Yes. Just as you're used to finding the right herb to stop the baby's bad stomach. Or used to telling by the bird-cries that a storm is coming. Or by the look in the eye of the woman next door that she's lying to you.'

Mayavati was greatly amused.

'Yes. So what?'

'But I can't do any of these things, so I'm unintelligent and stupid.'

'But you know so many more important things that I don't know. So I have to respect and obey you.'

'If that is so, then you'll obey me now when I tell you what to do.'

'Yes. What do you want?'

'That you treat me as an equal.'

She gazed at him bewildered for a moment, then burst into laughter. But just then the father and mother came running in, with panic written on their faces.

'Children! The river has broken its banks. They say there'll be a huge flood. Take the baby, take some food, and hurry. We have to flee, there's no time to be lost!'

They made all haste, and left the hut. Other people were pouring out of their homes, too, and they made for the high ground that lay a few miles to the north. But the flood caught up with them before they had covered half the distance. A huge mass of water moved relentlessly towards them, sweeping with it the people in its path. Narada struggled in the water in the hope of rescuing Mayavati and the baby, but the current carried him away, his head struck a boulder, and he lost consciousness.

When Narada came to his senses, he was lying on a flat rock where the flood-water had borne him. He raised himself, and looked around. All he could see was an endless waste of water, with no trace of his wife and child. He collapsed on the rock, and fell to weeping bitterly.

Then he heard a low voice, which seemed strangely familiar, like that of somebody from one's past:

'Child! Where have you been all this time? I've been waiting here for that water you promised me — half an hour ago.'

Narada looked amazed into the eyes of the old man. He was facing him across the fire, which had sunk low to its last embers. He looked round. There was no flood water; there was only the clearing in the forest that he knew. He looked again, bewildered, at the other. But the old man had stood up, and his stooped back had straightened; he had grown tall, and his face had shed the marks of old age. Now he towered over Narada, a majestic figure, recognisable.

'Vishnu!' breathed Narada. 'Lord!'

He prostrated himself.

The god's lips curved in a gently ironic smile.

'Now do you understand the power of maya?'

5

It was daytime, and Narada sat in the clearing before the ashes of the fire, slumped before them in a posture of dejection. It was in this attitude that Vishnu found him when he appeared again, in his own person, in the clearing.

'What's wrong with you?' asked the god.

Narada looked at him accusingly.

'Why did you play that trick on me?'

'But I did what you wished. You wanted to understand the power of maya, and I gave you an object-lesson to reveal it to you.'

'Yes, you revealed it only too well.'

'What do you mean by that? And what do you want now?'

'I want Mayavati.'

Vishnu smiled, half-disdainfully, half-pityingly.

'But she doesn't exist. I created her only to show you the power of illusion.'

'I can't believe that she was only an illusion. She couldn't have been more real to me, from that night when I first saw her to the moment I saw her disappear into the water. I lived with her a whole year, I made love to her, she had a child. How can you tell me all that was an illusion?'

The god shrugged his shoulders, as if impatient with Narada's folly.

'Listen, Narada. Have you never had a dream in which you made love to a woman?'

'Yes, I have. What of it?'

'While you were dreaming, wasn't the woman as real to you as any woman of flesh and blood? Even when you woke up and found that the warm body you had been

embracing was only your pillow, perhaps in your still drowsy state she was half-real for a few moments. But then daylight comes, the waking world returns, and the dream dissolves completely. Doesn't it?'

'So?'

'Well, it's the same thing with Mayavati. Just think you have had a dream, though of a different kind from the dreams of sleep. But Mayavati was just as illusory as a woman seen in one of those dreams. And you say you loved her for a whole year. Let me tell you I was sitting here by the fireside all that time, and only half an hour passed. At least, as human beings reckon time, it was half an hour. For us gods, of course, that's meaningless.'

'Why?'

'We live in an eternity in which no time passes. But I don't think you are yet ready to understand that.'

'And why do you, living in that eternity, play tricks on mortals like me?'

'But I was only trying to satisfy your own wish — to understand the power of illusion. And don't blame your falling in love with Mayavati all on me. When you make love to a woman in a dream, it's because your hidden, or not so hidden, desires have created her. In the same way Mayavati was the image of your still unmastered desires. '

'And still is. I want her,' Narada said stubbornly.

'You're being childish. Haven't I told you over and over again she was an illusion?'

'But isn't that what the sacred books say about all earthly things? That they're all an illusion?'

'So?'

'So why shouldn't I have that one illusion that makes me happier than any other?'

Vishnu looked at him, as if baffled.

'I said you had done your work only too well, Lord. I loved her not just because she was beautiful but because she was gentle and kind, because she had an understanding of

life that was worth more than all the wisdom of the sages. Give me Mayavati back, Lord.'

Vishnu looked at him again, still doubtful.

'Last time you wiped out my memory of my meeting with you. So now do that again, Lord. Let me forget that Mayavati has died, let me forget that she's an illusion, and let me love her and live with her as I did.'

Vishnu pondered some moments in silence.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I'll bring Mayavati back into existence. Return to her. She will be there, waiting for you, in the same hut in that same village.'

Narada prostrated himself.

'Oh thank you, Lord.'

6

Traversing the forest by day was, of course, easier and quicker than by night; but by the time Narada came out at the other end and saw the village in the distance, many memories had been erased in his mind. He knew he had been away from the village for some time, but he believed that he had been on a journey to try to find possibilities of selling hides. There was, however, a lack of clarity in his mind about some things he had experienced, or thought he had. How long had he been away? He couldn't be quite sure. 'It must be because I'm tired after this long journey,' said Narada to himself, 'or because of this heat.'

As he entered the hut, he was greeted warmly by the father with an embrace.

'Son! How glad I am to see you back! What a long time it has been!'

'Has it been so long?' Narada asked.

'Why, don't you remember? You went away before the spring rains, and now it's summer. Good rains too they were, people will have a fine harvest.'

'But I vaguely seem to remember a flood...' Narada said.

'Flood? What are you talking about? There has been no flood in these parts since I was a small boy.'

'I must have dreamed it,' Narada said.

Mayavati's mother came in from the kitchen, and hugged him too.

'But where's Mayavati?' Narada asked, looking round.

'She's here,' the mother said, with a tone of anxiety in her voice.

Mayavati appeared. She had the end of her sari over her head, and she was holding it so as to cover part of her face.

'Mayavati!' Narada exclaimed. 'How much I have longed for you and waited for you, all the time I was away.'

She gazed at him, but said nothing.

'But why are you covering your face? It's the face I have dreamed about every night. Now let me see it, more beautiful than any dream.'

Mayavati sat down on the floor, but still said nothing.

'Why are you sitting there? Come here, Mayavati, let me touch you and hold your hand.' /

'You mustn't,' Mayavati said sadly.

'Why not?'

There was a long silence, which was broken by the mother. 'She has leprosy.'

'When did it happen?' Narada asked.

'The first signs appeared about a month after you went away,' Mayavati said. 'The village physician said I might give it to other people if I touched them, or they touched me. I don't even feed or wash or dress the child now. Mother does all that. So I mustn't touch you either.'

'No!' Narada cried out.

He moved towards her, but she leapt up and withdrew from him. He stopped helpless, and said beseechingly:

'Let me at least see your face.'

'No. It's disfigured and ugly. It will disgust you. You will loathe me, you will hate me.'

'Let me see your face,' Narada repeated.

She slowly and fearfully drew the end of her sari away from her face.

'You are still beautiful to me, Mayavati,' Narada said. 'I will never cease to love you. You are everything in the world that I love.'

She slowly sank to the floor, hid her face and broke down weeping.

7

Narada stayed at home for two days, but Mayavati wouldn't come near him, and slept in the night in the kitchen at the back of the hut. The situation was intolerably painful to Narada, and at the end of the two days he decided to go away in search of a cure. And so he did.

After long wanderings from village to village and town to town, beguiled often by rumours of a possible cure that turned out on investigation to be illusory, he heard that there was in a neighbouring town a famous doctor who had cured many people of the dreadful disease. This time the stories seemed to have some substance of truth. He found his way to the doctor's house and was shown into his chamber.

The old doctor listened to Narada's story.

'I still love my wife even as she is,' Narada confided. 'I'm willing even to wash her sores, even to contract the disease and to die for her sake. But she's ashamed and full of contempt for herself and fearful on my account. Is it possible that you can cure her, doctor?'

The doctor poured some oil into a clay lamp that was on his table. Then he lit the wick, and began saying a mantra over it. He turned back to Narada.

'By the time this lamp burns out,' he said, 'your wife will be healed. Go back to her.'

Narada thanked him profusely, and left.

As Narada approached the hut after a two-day journey, the father and mother came out to meet him, but their faces as they greeted him were haggard and care-worn.

'You look weary, my son,' the father said.

'Yes, I've walked twenty miles since yesterday. 'But that's of no importance. Where's Mayavati?'

The father and mother were silent.

'Where is she? Isn't she healed of her disease?'

The parents were still silent.

'Where is she?' Narada cried, staring into their ominous faces. 'Not... not dead, I hope?'

'Not dead,' the father said, 'but I wish she were.'

'You mustn't say such things,' the mother spoke in a tone of quiet rebuke.

'What has happened?' Narada asked.

'About two months after you went away,' the mother explained, 'the leprosy suddenly vanished. The physician couldn't understand it; it was like a kind of miracle. She was happy, she was waiting for you to return. But then a young man came from the next village to live in our neighbour's house.'

The mother paused, evidently finding it hard to tell this part of the story.

'Yes?' Narada urged.

'I don't understand myself what happened,' the mother went on, 'but she fell in love with him. It was as if she had been given a love-potion, or some spell had been cast on her: there are such things, you know.'

'And then?'

'She wanted to live here with him, but her father wouldn't hear of that. So she went away with him.'

'And the child?' Narada asked.

'She wouldn't leave the child. They took the child with them.'

'It would have been better if she had never been cured of the leprosy,' the father said bitterly. 'If she had remained ugly and foul, then she wouldn't have lost her virtue.'

'Don't say such things,' Narada replied. 'It isn't her fault. Although I loved her so much, there was still a barrier of strangeness between us. Perhaps she found it easier with this man.'

He picked up the bundle of clothes he had brought back with him.

'I will ask the people next door whether they know where they might have gone.'

'You're not going to do anything rash, are you son?' the mother said anxiously. 'If you find her, you won't fight him, or... kill her, will you, my son?'

'You don't have to be afraid of that, Mother,' Narada said. 'If 1 do find her, I'll try to persuade her to come back with me, but even if 1 fail, I'll do her no harm. 1 would die rather than do that, Mother.'

'You must be so tired after all this walking, son,' the mother said. 'At least rest for some time and have a meal.'

'No, thank you, Mother. 1 must go at once.'

8

Narada took the road leading away from the village, but he didn't get very far. As he reached the bend where a tall, spreading banyan tree came in sight, he saw a figure standing under the tree.

When he got closer he recognised him. It was Vishnu, and with the recognition, understanding flooded him like a tide.

'Now I know that it's you who have done this to me,' Narada said as he came up to the tree. 'But why? First you killed her, then you destroyed her beauty, then you made her unfaithful. Why did you have to do all that? Why did you deal me blow after blow when all I wanted was simple ordinary happiness with her?'

'Listen, Narada,' said the god. 'You know I created Mayavati in order to satisfy your own wish, to help you to understand the power of illusion.'

'Yes.'

'But having created her and let you love her, I had to kill her in order to show you that what you loved was an illusion, nothing more. But by then you were too deeply entangled in the illusion. You wanted her back.'

'And you gave her back to me. Why couldn't you leave it at that?'

'Because I wanted to try again to rid you of the illusion. I let leprosy consume her beauty in the hope that it would kill your love as well. But then you proved to me that what you loved wasn't her surface beauty but the beauty of her inner self. So I had to try again, this time to destroy your love for the person she was, by making her unfaithful. But I failed.'

'And now what do you want to do with me?'

'I've given up. I've given up because I now know the kind of man you are.'

'What am I'?

'A romantic.'

'And what does that mean?'

Vishnu's voice took on the tone of a teacher.

'There are various sorts of people who love one earthly object wholly and unceasingly, and pursue it beyond measure, against reason and at the cost of any sacrifice. Some men love wealth in that way, others power; yet others knowledge or fame. But there's also the kind of person — man or woman -- who loves another human being, and continues to do in spite of all discouragement, disappointment and unhappiness. You are that kind of man.'

'But then, Lord,' Narada objected, 'I believed at first that what 1 wanted was to renounce all earthly attachments.'

'That's what you supposed. But that's because you couldn't be satisfied with the compromises and makeshifts that most people are content with on this earth. What you were really seeking was something you could surrender yourself to with complete devotion. The one thing to be loved

absolutely - that's what you wanted. But you didn't find it until you met Mayavati.'

'And what will you do with me in the future, Lord?' Narada asked apprehensively.

'Nothing. Don't be afraid, 1 have no further shocks for you. Mayavati's lover has left her, she has returned home with the child, and she's waiting in the hope that you'll come back. 1 won't disturb you in the simple and ordinary happiness you wanted. Or — let me add,' and an ironic smile again curved the god's lips, 'in the simple and ordinary unhappinesses that await all those who are tied to the wheel of existence.'

'That I'm willing to face. 1 no longer seek deliverance from that wheel. Mayavati has taught me to be content with the joys and pains of human living, to embrace life with all its imperfections and its frailty.'

'Every man, and every woman, get what they truly seek. So go your way, Narada, and may you find contentment in it.'

'I will, Lord, have no fear of that.'

He prostrated himself for the last time.

Nethra, April/June 1997

2

Fire and Ashes

1

I stopped outside the tailor's shop. Yes, the notice was still there, hanging from a nail on the door; the untidy lettering, scrawled on a piece of cardboard, said in Sinhala: 'Room to let.' I went in, and the old tailor looked up from where he sat at his sewing-machine, flanked by his two assistants at theirs, and peered through his glasses. The whirring of the machine stopped as the old man said,

'Ah, mahattaya!'

He smiled faintly, showing his few surviving teeth, browned by tobacco. The tailor knew me: I lived down the adjoining lane, and I had from time to time got him to sew a sarong or two, and Minoli had once had a set of serviettes hemmed by him.

'I came to inquire about the room,' I said.

The tailor stared at me.

'For whom is it, mahattaya?

'For myself.'

'It's not suitable for a gentleman like you,' the old man said.

He looked up at the ceiling as he spoke, as if this movement of his head and his eyes, taking in the surroundings, would explain his remark. The shop wasn't really anything more than a part of the bottom floor of his cramped dwelling, squeezed between an eating-house on the

right and a small *kade* on the left. A worn and stained curtain separated the shop from a kitchen at the back, from which cooking smells wafted through. The shopfloor was littered with the debris of the tailor's working day – odds and ends of cloth, snippets of thread and cigarette butts. A narrow staircase on one side led to the upper storey, where, 1 supposed, the room to let was to be found. Outside on the street a lorry rumbled past, leaving behind it a cloud of smoke that blew into the shop. The old man's wizened frame was shaken by a hacking cough, and 1 waited till it subsided to answer his last remark.

'I can't pick and choose where 1 live now,' 1 said.

The tailor's watery eyes looked at me inquiringly.

'I have no job,' 1 said. 'I have given notice to quit my flat at the end of the month - that's only a week from now - because 1 can't afford to pay the rent. 1 have to find somewhere to live.'

'And your lady?' asked the old man.

'She has left me,' 1 said. 'Because 1 can't support her.'

There was a hint of compassion in the old man's look now, but he evidently felt cautious about giving way to this emotion. He reflected for some moments, self-interest perhaps struggling with sympathy. Finally, he dropped his eyes and asked, embarrassed by his own question:

'Then, mahattaya, if you have no job, how can you pay the room rent here?'

'I said 1 had no job, baas unnehe, not that 1 had no income. 1 live now by giving private tuition to pupils. I'll have enough to pay your room rent and meet my other needs, which are very few.'

The tailor reflected again, then asked:

'Would you first like to see the room?'

'Yes.'

The old man rose and led the way up the narrow stairway. On the landing at the top a small girl, about four

years old, dressed in a dirty pair of rompers, gazed curiously at me as 1 came up the steps. 1 stopped to stroke her head, but she, in a sudden access of shyness, avoided the movement of my hand and ran into a room which faced the landing. Through the open door 1 could see a young woman, dark, plump, in a frock with a pattern of large pink flowers; she had a garment in her hand she was probably darning. 1 had seen her once before on one of my earlier visits to the shop and conjectured she must be the tailor's daughter. The child ran up to her knees and put her head on her lap, for protection from the stranger, and 1 could hear the young woman murmuring something reassuring as 1 went past. The old man led me down a short corridor to another room, even smaller than the one I had glimpsed. It was empty.

'There's no furniture,' the tailor said. 'If you want to take it, you'll have to bring your own. But there must be things in your house.'

'I have got rid of most of them,' I said, 'but there are a few things I kept. Anyway, there's room here for a bed, a table and chair, perhaps, but not much more. What about the bathroom and toilet?'

'There's only one for the whole house,' said the old man, 'it's downstairs. I know it's inconvenient, but it can't be helped. I'll show it to you when we go down.'

'And the rent?'

'Two hundred and fifty.'

It was too much for a small cubby-hole, but I didn't feel inclined to haggle. Anyway, I thought, the family probably needed the money. As if in confirmation, the old man said:

'We are letting the room only because we have to find more money. Business is bad, and after my daughter came to live with her child, we have two more mouths to feed.'

'I'1I take it,' I said.

We went downstairs, and the tailor showed me the toilet and bathroom in the backyard, detached from the

house. From the rear door of the kitchen, a middle-aged woman in a housecoat watched us; her heavy, dark face and her ample body were more elderly variations on those of the young woman upstairs. The toilet was smelly, but I had already decided I wasn't going to be fastidious about such things. I gave the tailor a month's rent, and arranged to move in within the week.

2

I was a casualty of the 1980 public servants' strike. I had been a teacher at a state school, and a member of a teachers' trade union led by a particularly cranky left party that committed itself heart and soul to the strike, believing it was a prelude to revolution. I didn't share these extravagant illusions, but when the union backed the strike, I felt obliged to join it out of solidarity. Even when by the second day it was clear that the strike was collapsing, I didn't go back to work because my friends on the staff, who were devoted members of the party, were staying out, and I considered it dishonourable to desert them.

That, at least, was what I said to Minoli when she pleaded with me – the first instance, not to strike at all, and later, to heed the Government's threats of dismissal and return to work. After the event I wondered whether in my intransigence there had been a hidden desire to break with that life – with the school and with marriage alike – which had become stale and tedious. Just as when, after two years of difficulties and privations, Minoli decided to leave me, I wondered whether behind her legitimate anger and resentment, there was a degree of relief at the breakup of the marriage. It had been a relationship... but no, it was hardly that, it was a connection built on insubstantial foundations: on my side, I thought, on nothing more solid than the attractions of a bright pair of eyes, a dimpled chin, long slender fingers and a ringing laugh. And on the expectations of an escape from loneliness that turned out to be illusory.

But what induced her to accept me? It was a measure of the gulf between us that had never been bridged that I had not enough knowledge of her even for speculation on that question. At the time I made my declaration of love and she said yes, I was too happy to want to scrutinise her feelings for me. But even after four years of marriage, I knew little of her, except for the foods she loved and hated, the colours she chose for her saris, the shades of nail polish she preferred, her affection for dogs and abhorrence of cats (she took her pet dog with her when she left me). I couldn't even have said anything specific about her sexual desires: our love-making had soon become another routine, like the morning bed-tea or the Saturday evening stroll on Galle Face.

Minoli had a just grievance (I could now admit it) that after my dismissal I didn't bestir myself to find another vocation and to earn a steady income. I floated indolently along, finding comfort in my freedom from the morning rush to get to work and in the fact that I had the flat all to myself once Minoli left for her office. I found a few private pupils and made enough to get by and to have a self-defence in answer to Minoli's reproaches, but it wasn't enough to make up for my lost salary or to appease her conviction that I wasn't really trying. Many dismissed strikers were in more desperate straits, but there were a few who had made good, taking advantage of that same open economy that politically they reviled. Ironically, among them were two of the activist fellow-teachers who had been dismissed with me and were now running a hugely successful tutory, making three or four times what they had earned as schoolteachers. They invited me to join them, but I declined, preferring the freedom of making my own arrangements and times with my pupils to submission to another set of duties that would probably be no less restrictive than that of my former school.

I didn't feel guilty about my failure with Minoli: we had both made an error of judgment in entering into the marriage, the outcome of shared inexperience and immaturity.

Minoli would have been happier with somebody more extroverted, more easy-going, a good mixer and good companion. Perhaps she might find one now. How fortunate it was that we had decided not to have a child in the first years of marriage!

3

Four days later I moved into the room, with such bits of furniture from my flat as I could accommodate in it; the rest I delivered to a small auctioneer's. Once I had completed this operation, locked the flat and handed the keys to the landlord, I felt that one phase of my life, with its mistakes, was finally over, and, for better or worse, I could begin again.

When I moved in, I intended to have my meals out, at the neighbouring small eating-house, but after a few days the inconvenience of this arrangement began to weigh on me. Already within these days there had been occasions when I had felt disinclined to make the effort to change from sarong into trousers and go down the stairs and next door, and I had therefore done without breakfast on two mornings, and once without dinner. It was particularly irksome not to have a cup of tea on waking in the morning unless I went to this trouble to get it. I therefore asked the tailor whether I could come to an arrangement to have my meals supplied by the family. The old man was again hesitant at first, wondering whether their simple food would be acceptable to me, until I assured him that I was no more exacting in this respect than in that of the room.

So every morning now the mother brought me a cup of tea, and three meals in the course of the day, which I ate in my room. Except for the times when I went out to give lessons to my pupils, I stayed for the most part in that room, lying in bed or sitting in the one chair I had. I had brought a few books with me, and sometimes I re-read one or the other of these, but I never bought a newspaper or looked at one. I felt I was a kind of hermit, and why should I concern myself with the affairs of the word outside my cell?

Sometimes I encountered the daughter on the stairway or on the landing, and on these occasions she passed me with lowered eyes. Even when I once stopped halfway on the narrow stairs and pressed my body sideways against the wall so as to give her free passage, she didn't acknowledge my gesture, or even my presence, with a word or a look. Another time I halted on the landing, seeing her about to make her way up, and she, seemingly embarrassed by a courtesy to which she was unused, stopped too and called out: 'No, come down.' Those were the first words she spoke to me. I knew her name was Lalita because I had heard her mother call her so. But of her husband, of the father of the child, there was no sign. I remembered what the tailor had said on that first day: that she had come with the child to stay with her parents. That seemed to imply that the husband was dead, or that she had left him, or he had left her. I sometimes wondered which of these was true, but I felt it would be improper to show any inquisitiveness on this point by asking the father a direct question. I even reprimanded myself inwardly for my curiosity. What was it to me? Even in my solitary state, there was no danger of any kind of involvement with Lalita (not that I wanted one at that time with any woman), but with her, I reassured myself, it wouldn't arise at all. She wasn't pretty or even attractive, and I had no contact with her beyond the occasional passages on the stairs and the odour of her body, with a slight whiff of sweat, that I caught as she went past in such proximity. Nevertheless, when I heard her quiet voice from the room opposite the landing as I came up the stairs, or heard it drifting from the backyard through the window of my room, most often talking to the child, whether tenderly or rebukingly, I told myself that if the woman matched the voice, she must be a gentle person.

But the child, having overcome her original shyness and impelled by curiosity, often wandered into my room. I used to talk to her or play little improvised games with her

until Lalita's voice called to her from the corridor and she ran out. On the first of these occasions I heard Lalita say, as she led the child away: 'Don't go there and worry that uncle.' But the child wasn't to be deterred, and often, when her mother was busy in the kitchen downstairs or out of the house, she would come. I now bought a small bottle of sweets, and gave her a couple on each of her daily visits.

Then one morning I heard the customary tap at my door that announced the arrival of my morning cup of tea, and opening the door, I found Lalita standing there.

'Amma is ill,' she explained, 'so I made the tea and brought it.'

'What's wrong with your mother?' I asked, taking the cup.

'She has a cold and fever. There's a bad flu going round.'

She came back later with my breakfast, and then looked disapprovingly at the unswept floor.

'Aiyo! how dusty it is! Don't you sweep it?' she asked.

'I don't have a broom,' I said.

'If you asked, we would have given you one. But perhaps you don't even know how to sweep.'

'It's true I've never swept a floor, but I could have learnt if I had a broom.'

'You leave the door of your room open when you go out today, and I'll sweep it.'

'Thank you,' I said, 'if it isn't too much trouble.'

'Better than having you falling ill because of the dust.

When I came back from my lesson that afternoon, I found her standing in the doorway with a broom in her hand.

'I've finished,' she said, 'but I want to ask you one thing. That bottle of sweets on the window-sill: did you get them for yourself?'

'No, for Nandini.'

'I asked because I know you give her sweets. But I didn't know you had a whole bottle. Don't give her too many at a time. It's bad, she'll get worms.'

'No, I never give her more than two, even when she shouts for them.'

'That's good.'

As she went away, I was struck by the fact that she hadn't called me *mahattaya,* as her parents did, but had said *oya.* This assertion of equality pleased me.

4

Her mother resumed bringing me meals after two days, but Lalita continued to sweep my room daily. I rarely met her on these occasions because she always came when I was out. But she now acknowledged my existence, when she passed me on the stairs or the landing, with a smile. I discovered that her smile lit up and lightened her heavy features. Also, whenever she came to take Nandini away from my room, she didn't call from the corridor but came up to the doorway, and sometimes 1 had a brief conversation with her. 1 found that as in the case of the unswept room, she treated me as somebody who needed to be managed because 1 was unused to practical affairs, and did things for me without asking me when she felt they needed to be done. One day 1 missed a shirt that had been hanging in my room and wondered what could have happened because I couldn't suppose that anybody had stolen it. The mystery was solved the next day when Lalita brought it back to me; there was a tear in it that she had darned. Another time she stopped me on the landing when 1 was taking my dirty clothes to the laundry nearby: 1 carried them in a small open cane basket that was one of the few things 1 had brought from my old house.

'Let me see what you're taking to be washed.'

I obeyed her, even though 1 didn't understand what she wanted, and emptied the things from the basket onto the floor.

'You can give the shirts and trousers there: maybe they have to be starched and ironed. But why waste money on

having your sarongs washed? Or have you never washed anything?'

'I could wash the sarongs myself,' I stammered, 'but it's difficult, I have to take them to the bathroom downstairs, and I'm never sure when it's free -' .

'I'll wash them for you,' she said, picking them up. 'And these handkerchiefs! Isn't it a shame to pay the laundry to wash your handkerchiefs?'

'But those are very dirty,' 1 protested, 'I don't like your handling them.'

'It won't bother me,' she said. 'I'm not a lady.' And she walked away with the sarongs and the handkerchiefs.

She treated me very much in the same way that she treated her child – both protective and commanding. Perhaps she was used to looking after her husband's creature-comforts, and was now performing the same role for me. This brought me back to the problem of the absent husband. One day I plucked up courage, and asked her:

'Where is Nandini's father?'

She frowned, as if the question was displeasing to her: but whether she was annoyed with me for asking it, or whether the reminder of her husband was unpleasant, I couldn't tell. But she answered simply enough:

'He has left me.'

I wanted to ask 'Why?' but that would have been presumptuous. Instead I said:

'Where is he?'

'Far away, in Weligama. He's staying with his sister's family.' 'Does he send you money for the child?'

'No. And I don't want to ask him.'

'It must be difficult for you.'

'Difficult or not, we'll live somehow.'

I had learnt that she did a few hours' work as domestic help for a lady across the street, but from what her father had said, I gathered this didn't bring enough to maintain her and the child. I thought I should do something for her in

return for her sweeping and darning and washing, but a tentative feeler in the direction of offering her money was firmly resisted. Then I had an idea when I went to the toilet and glimpsed her, through the open backdoor of the kitchen, squatting on an old fashioned *hiramane* and scraping coconut. I bought one of the modem coconut-scrapers with a handle that can be operated while standing up. When I presented it to her, her first reaction was one of dismay:

'Aney! It must have cost you a lot of money! Why did you buy it?'

'Because it'll be easier for you than sitting on that *hiramane*. And for your mother too.'

'But I don't want you to spend money on us. You pay a lot anyway for the room.'

'What about all the things you do for me?'

'But those things don't cost me anything.'

'What about your time, your effort?'

She shrugged her shoulders dismissively. But she did take the coconut-scraper away, and the next day I was gratified to see her working at it, fixed to the kitchen table.

5

The bad flu that Lalita had spoken of got me two weeks later. I had it worse than her mother, with severe headaches and body pains. Both the mother and Lalita nursed me through the illness, bringing me regular cups of *koththamalli* and Panadol tablets to bring the fever down and *Siddhalepa* to ease my pains.

My temperature returned to normal after all these ministrations, but I still felt too weak to resume my lessons, and I had a continuing cough and sore throat. One morning Lalita came into my room and handed me a cup of hot water.

'I've stirred some balm into it,' she said. 'Drink it, it'll be good for that throat of yours.'

I did as I was told, and as I put the cup down and she reached out to take it, I felt a sudden rush of tenderness

towards her, and on the impulse, I grasped her hand and kissed it.

She laughed.

'If you play those games while you're ill, it might make you worse. '

Strange! I thought, after she had gone. I had loved Minoli's hands, with their long fingers and long shapely nails that she cut so that they tapered to a point, and painted so that they went with the shade of the sari she was wearing that day. Nothing could have been less like them than the hand I had just kissed. Lalita's fingers were short and stubby, and her nails looked as if they had never fully emerged from the flesh in which they were embedded.

She said nothing further about the incident, but there seemed to be now an unspoken question behind the way she looked at me when she came into the room. A few days later I felt fit enough to go back to my pupils. That night I had put out the light and retired to bed; the rest of the house was evidently dark too.

A few minutes later I opened my eyes and sat up: I had heard a footfall. A figure approached my bed. I heard Lalita's voice whisper:

'Are you awake?'

'Yes,' 1 said.

She sat down beside me and began stroking my face and caressing my arms and chest. 1 responded by embracing her and pressing my cheeks against hers, and my mouth sought her lips; but then she stood up, and in the vestiges of light that came through the window 1 saw she was taking off her clothes. My heart leapt, but I felt I had a duty to her to be sensible.

'I don't want you to fall into any trouble,' I said.

'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'I took a Preethi.'

She lay down alongside me. She made love with an intensity that astonished me, in the gentle person 1 had taken her to be. She nuzzled my face continually, cried out in an

overflow of pleasure when 1 pressed her nipples, and her body throbbed and quivered at the climax of the act. After it, she clung to me and drew my mouth down to hers repeatedly. 1 wanted to start from there again, but she stood up and began putting on her clothes.

'I would like to sleep here the whole night,' she said, 'but 1 must go.'

She gave me a last kiss, and left.

6

After that she came to my bed most nights, except when, as she hinted, she had her periods. Once the child cried out when we were in the middle of the act itself, and she hastily disengaged herself, snatched up her clothee and ran out of the room without even waiting to put them on.

It was impossible that her parents didn't know what was going on. At night they occupied the room opposite the landing, while Lalita slept with the child on a mat in the space between that room and the stairs. Her comings and goings couldn't very well have remained unnoticed by them. Was it that they didn't want to interfere? Or could it even be that since she was husbandless, they welcomed the prospect of a man who, they might hope, would look after her and the child, and perhaps ease them of their financial burdens? I didn't trouble myself with further thought on this subject, and didn't even ask Lalita about it, but was grateful that there seemed no likelihood of intervention.

One day I felt a desire to draw. That had been the main interest of my life at one time: when I was a university student, I even had an exhibition of my pictures together with those of three other young artists. I had never taken to oils, but I had been fond of pen and ink, charcoal and pastel drawings, specialising in faces and bodies of people. I even sold some pictures at the exhibition, and there were people who said encouraging things about my work, and one newspaper review picked me out among the four for special

commendation. But after I graduated and began to teach, I had drawn less and less often, and stopped completely after my marriage. Now I wanted to unearth my talents, such as they were, again. But I had nothing to draw with.

I went into the backyard where I had noticed the remnants of a wood fire, and picked up some pieces of charcoal. They weren't as good, of course, as the specially prepared charcoal sticks that professional artists use, but I had worked with such things before, and I thought these would do. I took them up to my room and tried one of them out on a piece of paper, after making a kind of point with a blade. Yes, good enough. But I had nothing to draw on. I went out and found a shop where I was able to buy a roll of cheap brown wrapping paper. I came back with it, cut it up into rectangular pieces, spread one out on the table and began to draw.

What I drew was Lalita, as I had glimpsed her through the backdoor of the kitchen, working at the coconut-scraper I had given her, in a characteristic posture of hers that I had noticed, balancing the weight of her body between one foot planted on the floor and the other resting on a horizontal strut that joined two of the table legs. Lalita wasn't pretty, but her ample, earthy, full-bosomed body was better material for an artist than that of many conventional beauties. 1 worked for the rest of the morning on the picture, and was rather satisfied with it. At least I was getting my hand in.

When Lalita came in to sweep, 1 held up the picture for her. She looked at it, expressionless.

'Do you like it?' 1 asked.

'I don't know about such things,' she said.

'I'm not asking what you know. Just look at it, do you like it or not?'

'1 don't know,' she repeated.

It struck me that perhaps she would have been more impressed if I had painted something like the gaudy calendar picture of a girl with a bird that hung above the space where

she slept. I didn't pursue the subject, but I went on drawing, producing more pictures, day by day, but always of her in different situations, actions, postures. Sometimes of her and the child, but with the focus of interest again on her and on what she was doing, on the movement of her body arrested in time, or its still weight and gravity.

7

I couldn't conceal from myself that while I was grateful for Lalita's... what was it – love? affection? desire?.. I craved a more complete relationship that I didn't have. I had discovered that she had an inflexible code of behaviour that she wouldn't relax to please me. She seemed determined to confine our links with each other to the nightly moments of passion, except for the trivialities of our daytime dealings and conversations. If she ran into me on the street outside, as sometimes happened when I was going to a lesson or returning from it and she was going out to work or on one of her marketing errands, she passed me, let alone without a smile, without even a look or nod of recognition. I made one or two attempts to push the relationship into the open, only to be rebuffed. There was a film by Tissa Abeysekera that I wanted to see, and I thought she too might find it interesting, and I invited her to come. She turned down the invitation with a forthrightness that suggested I had tried to transgress the rules.

'But why, Lalita?' I asked.

'All these people around know I'm a married woman. I don't want them to see me going about with another man. And they know you're married too.'

'But your husband has left you. And my wife has left me.'

'That won't make other people think it's alright'

'It's strange. You don't want to go with me to the pictures, but you don't mind coming to my bed.'

'That's different. They don't see that.'

I recognised it was futile trying to persuade her. But my need to deepen the relationship kept pushing me into other fruitless attempts – for instance, to give her a pair of bangles I had bought for her.

'I won't take presents,' she said.

'But you took the coconut-scraper,' I objected.

'That was different. That was for the house. Mother uses it as well as me.'

The bangles continued to lie uselessly among my clothes. What was behind her inflexibility? I continually turned over this problem in my mind. If her refusal to go out with me was due to a shame about what the neighbours might say, why should she refuse to take from me a present whose source they couldn't know? Was it a concern not to place herself in the position of a mistress, a kept woman, who benefits materially from the surrender of her body? Was it that whatever she gave me, she wanted to give freely, without a recompense that would degrade the act and herself in her eyes? Or was it that she didn't want finally to close the possibility of a reconciliation with her husband, if he were to come back? That line of thinking led to the questions that nagged me from time to time and tantalised me in my ignorance: Why had her husband left her? What were her real feelings about him? Would she accept him if he returned? She never spoke about him, and my few attempts to learn something of him and of their relationship had been rebuffed either by silence or by a direct refusal to say anything.

These questions that troubled me were unanswerable. Thinking about them, I could imagine a dialogue with one of my old friends if I were to confide in him (not that I could or wanted to confide in anybody):

'She's probably just a calculating woman, who decided to entice you for what she could get out of it.'

'But a calculating woman would have encouraged me to spend money on her. She refuses to take money, or anything else from me.'

'She gets sex.'

'Well, so do I, so what's wrong with that?'

'Is that all there is in it? You're not in love with her?'

'In love? Can all the infinite possibilities of feeling of a man for a woman be contained in a four-letter word? All I know is that I'm absolutely dependent on her and I can't do without her.' 'But you told me yourself you didn't even find her attractive.'

'No, I don't, if I compare her with a pretty woman passing on the street. But that doesn't seem to matter when I make love to her in the dark.'

'But you don't even get any real companionship out of her.'

'That's true. That can't be helped.'

But that dialogue would have been incomplete because it would have left out what reconciled me to the imperfection of my relationship with Lalita - my intense involvement with her double that I knew through charcoal and paper. I sensed that my pictures fed on both the experienced sensations and emotions of the passionate encounters of the night and on the unfulfilled desires for a deeper engagement with her self that I could enjoy only in the imagination, in the activity of drawing.

One day I decided to draw a nude of her. I had never actually seen her body fully unclothed because she bared it only in the dark; and once, when I had wanted to switch on the light just after our love-making, she had refused to allow me to do that until she put on her clothes. So, in drawing the nude, I had to try to translate into lines and forms on paper the perceptions of my hands and limbs that knew her naked body, of which my eyes were ignorant, eked out by the imagination that comes to supply the imperfections of all the senses. I rather enjoyed attempting this, and when I finished, I was pleased. My skills had grown since that first day with the charcoal and brown paper, and precisely because this picture was harder to bring off than anything I had done before, I inwardly congratulated myself on it.

I wondered what Lalita would say if I showed her the picture. It was hardly likely she would approve of it, considering all her reticences and restrictions; but once the idea of displaying it to her had occurred to me, my curiosity about exactly how she would react was too strong to be mastered. That she might be embarrassed, or even annoyed, I could have predicted: what she actually did was something I hadn't foreseen.

'Chee! A dirty picture!' she exclaimed, and, before I could stop her, she tore it in four, and flung the pieces on the floor before flouncing out of the room.

I regretted the loss of the picture, on which I had expended so much thought and labour, but I was even more worried that she might be so deeply offended as not to come back to me; but she came that night as usual, and said not a word about the unfortunate nude. In an unexplainable way, however, this incident marked a turning-point in my drawing. I had for some time been growing dissatisfied with simple charcoal and brown paper. I felt the need for some colour: not that I wanted to move entirely out of the medium of line in which I was convinced my strength lay, but I thought an occasional touch of colour – some spots of earth-brown, some patches of dull yellow or even a shade of dark green – would help to give substance and solidity to my shapes. Also, I missed the possibilities of contrast between a white surface and black lines. Lalita's destruction of my nude fortuitously seemed to bring these dissatisfactions to a head, and to mark the appropriate time for a change of medium. So I bought a drawing-book with white pages such as schoolchildren use and a child's box of pastel crayons – a medium I had worked with in the past. I thought the switch had helped my drawings, and though I never dared to draw a nude again, even secretly, I looked forward to extending my visual territory more and more.

8

One day the tailor came upstairs and said to me:

'There's a gentleman down there asking for you.'

I wondered who it could be. Since the breakup of my marriage I hadn't kept in touch with my former friends, and it was unlikely that any of them knew where I lived. Halfway down the stairs, I recognised the visitor. It was Serasinghe, a journalist who worked for an English -language paper, and often covered current activities in the arts. It was he who had written that review many years earlier in which my pictures. had been favourably noticed. Since then I had met him and spoken to him often at exhibitions, plays and concerts.

After we greeted each other, I asked:

'How did you find out where I stayed?'

'You thought you had successfully gone into hiding, did you?'

'But tell me how.' It turned out that one of my pupils was a cousin of Serasinghe, and at the time I was ill with flu I had sent him a note to excuse myself from a lesson, and to this note I had unwarily appended my address.

'I ferreted you out because I have something to discuss with you.'

I turned to the tailor, who had resumed his usual place at the sewing-machine.

'Is it all right, baas unnehe, if I take my friend to my room?'

'No problem, mahattaya.'

I led the way up the stairs, and only halfway up did I remember my drawings were piled up on my table, because I had no other space for them. Serasinghe was bound to notice them. But it was too late to turn back. Sure enough: the drawings were the first things Serasinghe paid attention to. He picked up the drawing book and leafed through it; then he went through the drawings on the sheets of brown paper

that lay under the book. Having silently completed his inspection, Serasinghe asked:

'How long have you been doing this kind of thing?'

'Only a few months.'

'These are good. They remind me of Degas' drawings of women.'

I laughed.

'That's just like you critics. Everything reminds you of something else. Can't you ever look at anything in its own right?'

'Don't be upset. I wasn't saying you were imitating Degas. I just said some things in these drawings reminded me of him. Most people would have taken that as a compliment.'

'I didn't care two hoots about Degas or anybody else when I drew them. I just drew what I saw.'

Serasinghe abandoned that line of conversation.

'As I said, they're good, very good. You should exhibit some of them.'

'I don't give a damn about exhibiting them. I didn't do them for anybody else to see. I did them just for myself.'

'And for that woman I saw as I came up the stairs?'

'She's just the subject. She couldn 't care less about my pictures.'

I knew that Serasinghe was burning with curiosity, wanting to ask me what my relations were with my 'subject'. By now my friends must be aware that Minoli and I had parted. But Serasinghe must have felt the atmosphere wasn't favourable for such a question. Instead he said:

'I told you the drawings were good, and I meant it, but they could have been better.' He looked through the drawing-book again, and found a picture I had done of Lalita feeding her child. 'There you are, that particular green isn't quite right with that brown.'

'Maybe, but that's all I had.'

'I thought so.' He nodded towards the box of pastels on the table. 'Are those all the colours you have to work with?"

'Yes.'

'And what's the charcoal you used?"

'Bits from the backyard fire.'

'That leads me to what I came for. I didn't know you had all these pictures done, but it's quite a coincidence because I came to talk to you about a project.'

'What project?'

'Some people I know want to get up an exhibition of the work of talented but lesser-known artists. I've promised to help in getting the people and the stuff together. So will you come in?'

'I told you. I don't want to exhibit.'

'Listen. We aren't just going to collect a lot of pictures and hang them at the Wendt, or wherever. The idea is to take about a year and stimulate artists to create before we put the exhibition on. People like you who have the talent but who don't have the means. We'll get funding for it. We'll get you the proper materials you're starved without. At the exhibition, I'm sure you'll be able to sell a lot of pictures. You'll get known. It could be the beginning of an entirely new career.'

'I don't want a career. I just want to exist.'

'But are you happy, living like this?'

Serasinghe waved his arms as he said this to take in the room and the surroundings, and I knew he meant, 'In this hellhole', and probably also, 'with that slut who can't appreciate your art.' 1 replied:

'When could 1 honestly say 1 was happy? But 1 don't want to change this existence for any other, not by my choice, anyway.'

9

It was only a week after Serasinghe's visit that the blow fell. Lalita had come to me as usual and we had made love. Soon after it was over, she said quietly:

'I'm going away tomorrow.'

'Where?' I asked.

'To Weligama. My sister-in-law has written to say my husband is ill with T.B. She begs me to come and help to look after him. He has also said he wants to see me - and the child.'

'But are you coming back?'

'That I can't decide now. It doesn 't depend only on what I want.'

If Lalita had hit me on the head, I would have felt less pain. I wanted to go down on my knees and beg her not to leave me, but I knew that wouldn't change her mind. After a silence, I said:

'But you don't have an obligation to him. He left you, and he hasn't even supported you.'

'Still, he's the father of my child.'

I couldn't bring myself to ask: 'If he gets well and wants you back, will you agree?', still less: 'If he dies, what will you do?' I knew that to any such questions Lalita would respond only with 'I don't know.' I asked only: 'When are you going?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

In the morning she, and not her mother, brought me, first, my bed-tea, and then, my breakfast, as if these were a farewell gesture. I wanted to offer her money for her needs, but I knew she would refuse it. When she had packed and changed into a sari for the journey, she came to the doorway of the room with Nandini and said simply:

'I'm going.'

In silence I gave Nandini a whole bottle of sweets – a new one I had bought for her and hadn't yet opened.

'Thank you, Uncle,' she beamed.

'You'll break it,' Lalita said, took it from her, and put it in her bag.

After they had gone, I lay in bed the whole morning, numb with grief. What could I do? The thought of waiting in the uncertain hope of her return was intolerable to me. Nor could I bear the prospect of living on there, in a place saturated with so many memories. I would have to find somewhere else to stay and move on again.

I didn't get out of bed until the mother brought me lunch. She looked searchingly at me, perhaps to ascertain how I was taking Lalita's departure, but she had never discussed my relations with her daughter, and she evidently wasn't going to start now.

After I had eaten I thought I would go out and start looking for other lodgings at once. But first, there was a funeral rite to be performed. I took the drawing book and the pile of pictures on the table. The pieces of the picture Lalita had torn up were still there, at the bottom of the pile. I bundled them all together. Taking them with me, I bought a box of matches at the *kade* next door. I knew there was a plot of empty ground down the adjoining lane, where the boys of the neighbourhood played cricket in the evenings.

When I got to that waste ground, nobody was there in the hot afternoon. I squatted on the ground, and tore the pages from the drawing book. Then I lit a match and held up the first page to the flame. There was a breeze blowing from the sea, so it took some time to get a fire started, but once the first two pages were alight, there was no difficulty in sustaining it.

By the time I finished with the drawing book a small boy, followed by a dog, wandered across from one of the neighbouring houses, and watched me curiously, while meditatively sucking his thumb. I now took the drawings on brown paper and fed them one by one to the fire. The ashes of the drawing book had remained in a compact pile, but the thinner sheets of brown paper, as they burnt, were carried

by the wind, and the remnants of ash blown and scattered across the waste plot.

Finally I reached the fragments of the torn nude and gave them to the fire. The pieces twisted and curled, face or hand or breast lit up momentarily by the flame before they were consumed.

As I picked up the box of matches before going, the small boy began jumping up and down on the pile of ashes that was left, turning it all to dust.

Nethra, January/March 1997

3

There Ain't No Sanity Claus

1

Tilak got off the three-wheeler. He walked in through the gate and was about to put his forefinger on the doorbell when the door opened. Suresh stood there, hand outstretched, his dark, chubby face grinning.

'Hi! Merry Christmas!' Suresh said.

'Merry Christmas,' Tilak echoed, accepting the proferred hand.

'Come right in,' Suresh added, putting an arm round Tilak's shoulders.

'I only came to collect the stuff,' Tilak said, not yielding to the pressure of Suresh's arm nudging him into the sitting-room. 'Ramani will be waiting.'

'Just come in for a minute. That won't make a difference to Ramani, surely.'

'I have a three-wheeler waiting.'

'Pay it off,' Suresh said. 'You can easily get another at the top of the road.'

Tilak gave in, went back to the gate and paid the driver, then entered the sitting-room.

'Sit down and have a drink,' Suresh commanded.

'No, no, Suresh,' Tilak said quickly, while lowering himself onto the armchair. 'I don't want to stay so long.'

'It's Christmas Eve, you bugger. You can't leave without a drink, this night of all nights. What'll you have — beer or gin or arrack?'

Tilak thought for a moment. He wasn't very fond of either gin or arrack, but beer would mean a long drink, and it would make him later still in getting home to Ramani. 'Okay, arrack,' he said.

As Suresh went in to get the drinks, Chandani came out of the bedroom.

'Hullo, Tilak. Merry Christmas!'

'Same to you, Chandani.' He had stood up to greet her, and now shook hands. 'You look tired. Not your usual brilliant self.'

'Yes, it's been a long day.' She dropped her large body heavily on the sofa. 'Baking my cake, and then the last of the Christmas shopping. And did my loving husband help?' she added as Suresh came back with a bottle of arrack and two glasses. 'He didn't lift a finger.'

'Cake-making and shopping are women's business,' said Suresh, grinning again. 'Besides, it was the last working day: I had a lot of work to get through at the Corporation. What'll you have it with, Tilak? Soda, water, ice, Sprite...?'

'Water would be fine.'

'Chandani, can you get some iced water?'

'Get it yourself — that's men's business.'

Suresh's grin turned to a scowl before he went to the frig and returned with the ice. 'Say when,' he told Tilak as he splashed the arrack into the other's glass. 'When!' Tilak shouted, but he had got more arrack than he wanted.

'What's all this about not keeping Ramani waiting?' Suresh asked as soon as they had raised their glasses to each other, and Tilak had accepted one of his host's cigarettes. 'I thought you journalists work late hours and Ramani must be used to it by now.'

'That's only on the news side,' Tilak explained. 'I'm on features, we can set our own pace. Today was exceptional: I had to see the page-proofs of the Christmas supplement before I left.'

'But don't you guys finish the day with a booze at the Press Club?'

'That's what I try to avoid doing.'

'Ah! A non-boozing journalist!' Suresh's grin had returned, with a hint of superior mockery. 'Must be as rare as a white crow.' 'He's a good husband, not like you,' Chandani intervened.

'Well, well! There's more to being a good husband than keeping early hours and lugging parcels for the wife.' Suresh's expression became a leer as he cuddled up to Chandani on the sofa. 'Want some?' he asked her, and held out his glass to her.

'Just a sip.' She lowered her lips to the glass, and Suresh tilted it. 'Mm! that's enough!' she cried, and disengaged her mouth as some drops spilt on her lap.

Tilak took a large gulp from his drink: he had decided he would finish it as soon as possible and go. But Suresh turned the conversation in a new direction. 'What's this rubbish your paper is writing about corporation executives' perks?'

Tilak was jolted: he had himself written the article Suresh was talking about, though under the anonymous by-line of 'a staff writer'. 'What makes you say it was rubbish?' he asked, tensely.

'Because it *was* rubbish. A lot of wrong details, figures and so on. But more than that, a total lack of understanding that the corporations have to compete with the private sector to attract the best men.'

Twenty minutes later they were still arguing. In the middle of the argument Suresh had tipped another two fingers of arrack into Tilak's glass, and Tilak, lost in the heat of the argument, realised this only when it was too late. When

they suspended the debate, agreeing to disagree, Tilak had to wait another ten minutes to finish his second drink. Suresh would have forced a third on him, but Chandani came to his rescue: 'No, no, Suresh, he has to get home now.'

Tilak emptied his glass with his last gulp and stood up. 'Now can I take the toys please, Suresh?'

'I'll get them,' Chandani said, and went in.

2

Tilak's small daughter, Aroshi, had written to Santa Claus a fortnight earlier, in a large straggly hand:

Dear Santa Clors

I am a gud girl, so plees bring me a sleeping dorl and a big tedi bare.

Thank yu veri much.

With luv from
Aroshi

She had put the letter in an envelope and, after consulting Tilak, had addressed it, 'Santa Clors, North Poal', and put a stamp on it. Tilak had taken her to the postbox at the top of the road and watched her drop the letter into it.

He had bought the sleeping doll and the teddy bear four days before Christmas, and had wondered how to conceal them from Aroshi until the day. It was then that he had thought of leaving the parcels at Suresh's house: it would be convenient to pick them up there on Christmas Eve because it was on the way home. Suresh and he were old schoolfriends, though they didn't meet very often now because they tended to move in different circles.

Chandani came back with the parcels in the plastic bag, gaily decorated for Christmas, that he had been given by the shop.

'It's a wonder Aroshi still believes in Santa,' she said. 'Now that she's going to school, I 'd have thought more

worldly-wise kids would have exploded the myth for her by now.'

'But that's because she trusts us so much. Actually, one girl in her class had told her it was all lies. She came home and asked Ramani and me. We said, "No, no, he's real", and she believed us.'

'Well, it's in the interests of kids to keep up the myth.' Suresh said. 'Or to pretend to believe it, even if they don't. Santa Claus is a conspiracy between the kids and the toyshops.'

'No, I'm sure Aroshi is a true believer,' Tilak replied.

It took him a short walk and another ten minutes to pick up a three-wheeler. He looked at his watch: a quarter to ten. He felt a little guilty because Ramani must have begun to worry quite some time ago. But they had no phone, so he couldn't have rung her; and Ramani knew he had to pick the toys up on the way. He felt another small twinge of guilt about something else. Aroshi had asked for a big teddy bear, but he had already spent so much on the doll — it was a really pretty one — that he had decided to economise on the teddy and bought a smaller one. He wondered whether she would be disappointed. But he could say in the morning that Santa had explained that the big teddy bears had already been set aside for children who had asked for them earlier. Perhaps it was a good thing for Aroshi to learn to put up with little disappointments of this kind. As their only child still, she was being spoilt (he sometimes feared) by getting almost anything she asked for — more, in fact, than they could really afford. Was the Santa myth a good thing after all, when it kept children ignorant of the sacrifices their parents had to make to satisfy their wishes? Perhaps Suresh was right, and it was perpetuated for good commercial reasons.

'There ain't no Sanity Claus.' The line drifted into his mind, from... where was it...? A Marx Brothers film, of course, but which one? *A Night at the Opera*, was it? He wasn't sure,

but he could remember the scene. Groucho reading to Chico a legal contract: '"The party of the first part shall be known as the party of the first part." Do we need that? No.' And Groucho tore the first clause out. The joke was still funny when he got to 'the party of the third part', each time tearing a strip of paper off, until he was left only with the last clause. 'What's that?' asked Chico. 'Oh, that's what's called a sanity clause.' Chico looked puzzled, then his face cracked in a grin. 'Ho ho, you can't fool me, there ain't no Sanity Claus.' The audience in the cinema had laughed uproariously throughout the scene, but on the last line, the solitary chuckle was Tilak's: nobody else got the joke. He smiled, self-satisfied at the recollection, as the three-wheeler turned into the lane where his house was.

3

Ramani had been sitting up, waiting, two hours after she had put Aroshi to bed and read her a story. The TV was on in the sitting-room, but she was hardly watching it: she was divided between anxiety about what could have happened to Tilak, fear at being alone in the house, except for the sleeping child and an old servant-woman, and rancour against Tilak for keeping her waiting. As the minutes wore on and frayed her patience more and more, it was the rancour that grew stronger.

When Tilak walked in as she opened the door for him, she caught a whiff of arrack, and her feelings exploded into anger.

'Where have you been all this time?' she asked.

'I had to work late to see the Christmas supplement through,' he explained.

'And I suppose there was a Christmas party after that.'

'Party? What nonsense!'

'You smell of it.'

'You know I had to go to Suresh's to pick up the toys. He insisted on my staying for a drink.'

She looked at him with cold silent resentment. He walked into the bedroom, carrying the parcels. He exchanged his shoes for slippers, his trousers for a sarong, then went to the dining-table where his dinner was waiting, and served himself. The dinner, naturally, was cold. Usually, on those rare occasions when he came home late, Ramani would warm the food for him, but there was no question of her doing that tonight. He began to eat.

Ramani came up to the table and stood watching him silently for a few moments.

'Where did you get that measly teddy bear?' she asked. 'Aroshi wanted a big one.'

'I'd already spent so much on the doll, I decided we couldn't afford a big teddy bear.'

'To think you grudge your daughter a little money — and at Christmas! When you spend so much on your cigarettes.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' he said defensively, looking away from her quivering eyes. 'We shouldn't pamper her.'

'If you had asked me, I would have given you the money for a big teddy bear.'

'If you don't like that one, you can put it in the dustbin.'

'And then? What am I to tell Aroshi in the morning?'

'Tell her what you like,' he said, assuming a tone of indifference and serving himself a spoonful of gravy from the fish curry.

'That's how much you care for us,' she said in a tone of cutting reproach.

'You don't even allow me to eat my dinner in peace,' he said, bitterly. He pushed his plate away and washed his fingers in the finger-bowl. Then he rose and went to the bedroom. He changed back into trousers and shoes, then took the doll and teddy bear out of the plastic bag, and went with them into the adjoining small room. Aroshi was lying in her cot; she had fallen asleep, sucking her thumb. He gently

took the thumb out of her mouth. He put the doll and the teddy bear at the foot of the cot where Aroshi might find them in the morning.

As he turned away, he found himself face to face with Ramani.

'Where do you think you are trying to go?' she asked.

'Anywhere. Out of this house,' he said, brushing past her into the bedroom.

Ramani followed him. There was a silence as they faced each other.

'Tilak,' she said, dropping her eyes. 'Tilak, Aroshi had some pain again today when she made water.'

Aroshi had had a urinary infection a month earlier, which was supposed to have been cured, but occasionally the pain returned. Was Ramani speaking the truth, or was she making up a story to prevent him from walking out? He didn't know, but it angered him that she didn't say straight out, 'I am sorry. Please don't go,' so he hardened his heart.

'I don't care,' he said, and walked to the front door. On the TV a children's choir was singing 'Silent Night'. Ramani followed him to the door, but said nothing, only stood there and heard his footsteps crunching on the gravel, and then receding down the road into the night.

4

Tilak had walked out of the house not knowing where he was going, only out of a blind feeling that Ramani had wronged him and that he wouldn't tolerate it. Now that he was on the road, he had to ask himself the question: Where could he go? And with no clothes for the night? He had several friends at whose doorsteps he could turn up and ask for lodgings for that night, but most of them lived too far away: only Suresh was close enough. At a pinch, he could even walk there if he didn't get a three-wheeler. And after all, Suresh was partly responsible for the trouble he was in, not just holding him up but making him drink. Let Suresh put him up then for the night.

He walked on more than half a mile, finding a gloomy satisfaction in the effort. The first three-wheeler that passed him ignored his wave and his shouts and drove on. Five minutes later, another, approaching him from the opposite direction, stopped when he hailed it, and he got in. The driver was garrulous and inquisitive: Tilak suspected that he was tight, and his reckless driving seemed to confirm the suspicion. 'If we were to crash,' Tilak thought, 'it would serve Ramani right.'

But they arrived without mishap at Suresh's house, which was dark. Suresh sent the three-wheeler away and rang the doorbell. After some time the light above the door came on, and he heard slippered footsteps approach the door: then Suresh's voice said: 'Who is it?'

'It's me, Tilak.'

A key turned in the lock, and Suresh peered out. 'What's wrong, Tilak?'

'Suresh,' Tilak said hesitantly, 'can you put me up tonight?'

'Well, well. Yes, of course. But tell me: have you walked out or been thrown out?'

Tilak was silent. Then he said: 'I walked out, but I had to.'

'Come in, come in anyway.'

Tilak woke up the next morning in Suresh's spare room and wearing a sarong of Suresh. Suresh had asked no further questions after the brief inquiry at the front door, for which Tilak was grateful. Waking in a strange bed, it took him a few moments before the recollection of the night's events returned. He had no time for reflection on them before Suresh put his head in from behind the door-curtain.

'Good morning. Christ is born, but I won't say, "Merry Christmas", it would be a bit incongruous, don't you think? I've brought your bedtea. I'm sorry I can't lend you a spare tooth-brush, but there's a towel in the bathroom there, and breakfast is ready when you feel like it.'

'Thank you, Suresh.'

At breakfast Suresh and Chandani kept up their customary banter between themselves, but he was silent most of the time. After breakfast he retreated to the spare room and lay in bed the greater part of the morning, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He thought of Aroshi, who must by now have had her toys: what, he wondered, did she feel about the teddy bear? He hoped that she would find enough pleasure in the doll to compensate for any disappointment. Tears of vexation filled his eyes as he thought how much he would have liked to see her expression when she discovered the doll at the foot of the cot. About Ramani he still thought with bitterness: why couldn't she overcome her pride and say she was sorry instead of pushing him into leaving the house — on Christmas Eve!

Later in the morning he felt bored and looked around for something to read. In the spare room there was only a pile of old *Readers' Digests*, and in the first one he opened, he found an article on the origins of Santa Claus. He read it, but it irritated him. He was now inclined to think not only Santa Claus but the whole institution of Christmas was a commercial conspiracy.

Lunch was another nearly silent meal, as far as he was concerned. Suresh and Chandani refrained from asking what exactly had happened the previous night, or what his plans were. He was again grateful for this, but by the end of the meal, he decided he had no alternative but to go home.

He went back to the spare room and changed into his trousers and shoes. When he came out, Suresh and Chandani were watching TV in the sitting-room.

'Thank you very much for putting me up,' he said.

'That was nothing,' Suresh said. 'Where are you going?'

'Home. Where else can I go?'

'Come and see us if you need any help,' Chandani said.

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When Tilak rang the bell outside his house, it was the servant who opened the door for him. When he walked into the bedroom, Ramani was sitting on the bed with Aroshi, who had the doll on her lap, and Ramani was teaching her to lull the doll to sleep with 'Doyi, doyi...' Ramani looked up at him with a tortured expression in her eyes, but Aroshi burst into a cry of 'Thaththi!'

Ramani rose and left the room. He sat down on the bed, and Aroshi settled herself on his lap.

'Thaththi,' she began chattering, 'Santa brought me this doll, such a sweet doll, it looks just like Princess Diana. And he brought me a teddy bear also, but not a big one, because he had said all the big ones were finished. Thaththi, next year I must write early and ask for a really big one...'

Something seemed to crack inside Tilak's head. He felt he wanted to puke.

'What's this nonsense you're talking?' he said, harshly breaking into Aroshi's flow of talk. 'There's nobody called Santa Claus.'

'Nobody? But he came last night, Thaththi, and he brought this doll.'

'It's all lies,' he said relentlessly. 'There's nobody called Santa Claus.'

'But you said, Thaththi. You and Ammi said...'

She was looking up at him with bewildered, yes, and frightened, eyes, and he already felt half-contrite, but another emotion pushed him on.

'It was all lies. I brought you that doll, and that teddy bear too.'

She looked at him again, as if he was a stranger, jumped off his lap, dropped the doll, and ran out of the room.

Nethra, January-March 1998

DRAMA

1

The Long Day's Task : A New Version

To the memory of

NIKOLAI IVANOVICH BUKHARIN*

in the centenary year of his birth
and in the 50th year since his execution
and in honour of the love, fidelity and fortitude of

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA LARINA

That was the original dedication of the play when first written and published in 1988.
I reaffirm its spirit in presenting this revised version.

Preface

In these, perhaps the last, days of my life I am certain that sooner or later, the filter of history will inescapably wash the filth off my head.

- Nikolai Bukharin: Letter to the future generation of the leaders of the party.

Nikolai Bukharin, who had been one of the leading figures in the Soviet state since the Revolution of 1917, was the principal accused in the Moscow Trial of 1938. He and

twenty others were charged with espionage in the service of foreign powers, treason, wrecking, political assassination and conspiracy to overthrow the State. He and most of his co-accused were sentenced to death and executed.

In February 1988 - fifty years after his execution - Bukharin and other defendants were fully exonerated of these charges by the Supreme Court of the USSR and rehabilitated. My play, *The Long Day's Task*, was written soon after this event. I found in the tragic and at the same time inspiring story of Bukharin's life and death an appropriate subject for a documentary play. Bukharin had opposed the forced collectivisation of the land by Stalin; he had advocated a less feverish tempo of development and a less centralised economy which would have made possible also greater political freedom. In the democratisation of the Soviet Union under perestroika at the time I was writing, the policies that Bukharin advocated seemed to be vindicated. But what attracted me to the Bukharin story as subject for drama was that this political conflict was interwoven with the personal story of Bukharin and his wife. To her, on the eve of his arrest, he entrusted a letter addressed to posterity vindicating himself, which she kept in memory all through the years of her imprisonment until she was able to transmit it in the autumn of 1987 to Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev.

I have not tried to present Bukhatin as an ideal hero: I have represented him as he was, with his errors, his weaknesses and his vacillations, which do not detract from the significance of what he stood for. However, I must emphasise that what I tried to write was a documentary play, in which the characters and their relationships were developed only sufficiently to make the play actable. My fundamental interest was in using drama as a vehicle to present a perspective on Soviet history as seen in retrospect from the vantage point of 1988 and the changes that were then taking place in the Soviet Union. The structure of the

play, framed within an interview, was also determined by the fact that I couldn't assume the general audience would be familiar with the course of Soviet history and its principal figures, so that it was necessary to give them some help through the device which the interview provides. The intercutting between past and present may seem a device that is more cinematic than theatrical. It is quite true that if I had been free to choose my medium, I would have opted for cinema or TV rather than the theatre, but financially either of the former media would have been impossible. However, the form did seem to work on stage in Richard de Zoysa's production of the play.

In writing the original version of the play I based myself principally on the reminiscences of Bukharin's widow, Anna Mikhaylovna Larina, published in the Soviet journal *Ogonyok* (28 November - 5 December 1987). The play was produced on stage in a dramatised reading by Richard de Zoysa (who played Bukharin) in September 1988. Apart from his powerful playing in the lead role, Richard brought to his production many imaginative touches which filled out my text, opening up possibilities some of which I hadn't foreseen. It is a melancholy fact that this was Richard's last stage performance, and one whose tragic role foreshadowed his own end.

Meanwhile I had sent Bukharin's widow who was living in Moscow a copy of my play. Not knowing whether she could read English, I accompanied it with a letter in Russian. It was as I thought: she wrote back saying she was unable to read the play but she thanked me for my endeavour. (Translations of the two letters are reproduced in an appendix.) She also sent me a copy of her memoirs which were being serialised in a Soviet journal, *Znamya* (1988: Nos. 10, 11 and 12): they were later published as a book under the title *Nezabyvaemoe* (The Unforgettable). Where her earlier reminiscences were about the years leading up to her

husband's arrest, the new memoirs dealt with the long years of her incarceration in prison camps after that time. In her letter Mme. Bukharin said, 'Here is supplementary material to fill out your play.'

Although Mme. Bukharin's book covered a period of her life that had been unknown to me (as to most people) when I wrote the first version of my play, and although reading it was a deeply moving experience, I had no intention at that time of acting on the suggestion in her letter. However, Ravindra Ranasinghe approached me recently with a proposal to translate and produce the play in Sinhala. Richard had always thought the play should be translated into Sinhala as he felt its theme was of immediate political relevance. I welcomed Ravindra Ranasinghe's project, but I thought I shouldn't miss the opportunity it offered to revise and expand the play in the light of Mme. Bukharin's memoirs. Hence this new version.

Nearly all the events in the play, both public and personal, are based on historical fact (even the episode of the fortune-teller in Scene 2). However, in representing some of the feelings, opinions and judgments of the characters, I have exercised the imaginative freedom of the playwright.

The episode of Bukharin's attempt at intervention in the case of the poet Osip Mandel'shtam is based on Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's memoir *Vospominan-iya,* translated into English as *Hope against Hope.* In quoting Mandel'shtam's poem on Stalin, I have used Clarence Brown's superb translation, which I could not have bettered.

Production Note

The framing structure of the play is conceived as an interview between Anna Mikhaylovna Larina, Bukharin's widow, and a journalist; the interview is supposed to take place in November 1987, about two months before Bukharin's rehabilitation.

The stage is divided into two acting areas. The left side of the stage (audience's left) represents a corner of the small Moscow apartment of Anna Mikhaylovna Larina in November 1987. Two chairs, a low table between them; behind, a writing desk with books and papers, and a large portrait of Bukharin on it.

The right side of the stage is the acting area in which the events of the past, as recalled in Anna Mikhaylovna's memories, are enacted. In the directions LS denotes the left-hand area and RS the right-hand area of the stage.

The stage properties in RS should be minimal — two chairs and a table. There should be no attempt at realism of scene in RS; this is a memory world.

Lighting is an important part of the stage effects of the play. The shifts between LS and RS are marked by changes in lighting. RS will always be dark when the action on the stage consists of conversation between Anna Mikhaylovna and the journalist in LS. However, when past events are enacted on RS, LS may be either blacked out or left dimly lit, depending on the nature of the action. In RS lighting will predominantly take the form of bright spots, surrounded by darkness.

There are two Anna Mikhaylovnas in the play — the old lady in her mid--seventies in present time, who appears only in LS, and her younger self in past time who appears only in RS. They will be distinguished in the directions by referring to the former as Anna Mikhaylovna and to the latter as Larina.

SCENE 1: LS

Anna Mikhaylovna comes in with the journalist, a young man. He carries a tape recorder.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Please sit down.

JOURNALIST : Thank you.

They both sit. He puts the tape recorder on the table between them, but doesn't yet switch it on.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : And now, what can I tell you?

JOURNALIST : Everything. About the days of your youth, your relationship with Comrade Bukharin, your marriage --

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : *(interrupting);* Comrade Bukharin! Do you know, it's almost the first time in fifty years I have heard anybody talk of him as 'comrade'!

JOURNALIST : *(in a rather public voice):* There's no doubt, Anna Mikhaylovna, that all that shameful history of the past will soon be wiped out. We're sure Comrade Bukharin will be restored to where he belongs - as one of.the great figures of our revolution -

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : It seems strange to me that you - a writer for a Soviet paper - should be interviewing me. *(Waving aside his incipient protest before he can utter it)* Oh yes, I know. Comrade Gorbachev's in the Kremlin and all's right with Russia.

But I still have to rub my eyes from time to time and make sure I'm not dreaming.

JOURNALIST : But you must always have had faith that change would come?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I wouldn't if Nikolasha - Bukharin, that is, — -hadn't breathed that faith into me. Do you know - those were almost his last words to me when he left home on that terrible day - when he knew he was going to his death? 'Things will change, they will have to change.' That's what he said. That's why he wanted to make sure I would go on living, so that I could clear his name. It's what sustained me through those twenty years in the prison camps - with my son taken away from me and put in an orphanage...

SCENE 2: RS

The lights on LS dim slowly on Anna Mikhaylovna's last speech, and as they black out, a bright spot comes on in RS, focussed on the young Larina as a prisoner in a forced labour camp. She is squatting on the floor of her prison cell.

VOICE *(outside the circle of light, roughly)* : Get up!

As Larina rises, the lights come on in RS, revealing her and another woman, a fellow prisoner in the cell, and confronting them, a jailer in uniform.

LARINA : What's the matter?

JAILER : Inspection. Go and stand against that wall.

The two women do as he orders. The jailer makes movements of searching and rummaging among the prisoners' meagre belongings in the cell. He comes up with a small photograph.

JAILER *(to Larina)* : Is this yours?

LARINA : Yes.

JAILER : Whose picture is it?

LARINA : My son's.

JAILER : Bitch! So you're still carting Bukharin's puppy around with you!

He tears up the picture, throws the pieces on the floor and stamps on them.

THE OTHER WOMAN *(aghast)* : What are you doing?

JAILER : Shut up, you scum! Don't you try to protect her, otherwise...

He shakes his fist at her threateningly. Blackout.

SCENE 3 : LS

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : My terror in those days was that I would die in prison. Not a fear of death, not a fear for myself, because at times it would have been a comfort to die rather than live through all that suffering and humiliation. But I had a mission to fulfil, I knew I must try to survive for that reason.

JOURNALIST : What a blessing it is that you did live on till the time when you could write to Comrade Gorbachev. May I ask you, Anna Mikhaylovna, can you give us the text of your letter?

Anna Mikhaylovna gets up, goes to the writing desk, and picks up a piece of paper.

JOURNALIST : Please read it.

He switches on the tape recorder, and she begins to read.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : "To the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev.

"In spite of the tense international situation, I wish to place before you the question of the posthumous rehabilitation of my husband (and the father of my son) - Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. In making this present declaration I am addressing you not only on my own behalf but also by virtue of the mission entrusted to me by Bukharin himself. Leaving for the last time for the February-March Plenum in the year 1937, Nikolai Ivanovich, foreseeing that he would never return, and taking into account my youth, begged me to struggle for his posthumous vindication. That intolerably oppressive moment will never perish in my memory. Tormented by the investigation, by the frightful confrontations with witnesses, inexplicable for him, weakened by the fast he had undertaken as a protest against the monstrous accusations, Bukharin fell on his knees before me, and with tears in his eyes begged that I would not forget even a single word of his letter, addressed 'To the future

generation of leaders of the party', and implored me to fight for his vindication. 'Swear that you will do this. Swear! Swear!' And I swore. To violate that oath would be contrary to my conscience."

JOURNALIST : And his letter to the future leaders of the party? He made you learn that by heart?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yes. You must remember that this was 1937. It would have been too dangerous to keep such a document anywhere. If our apartment had been searched - it was searched after his arrest - and such a letter had been found, I would have been shot too.

JOURNALIST : So you kept it in your memory all these fifty years?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I said it to myself in the prison camps night after night for twenty years, night after night here in this apartment. The way some women say their prayers before going to bed. I didn't really need to, after some time: the words were burnt into my brain. But I kept saying them because they gave me the hope and the courage I needed to go on living.

JOURNALIST : It never occurred to you earlier to try transmitting the message to the party leaders?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I did try – in 1961. By then I had been released from the prison camp, and Khrushchev had made his secret speech denouncing Stalin. I sent Bukharin's letter to the party, and for a time it seemed there was some hope of his name being cleared. But then Khrushchev grew politically weaker, and when he fell, even his partial break with Stalinism was undone. Under Brezhnev.

JOURNALIST : 'The era of stagnation', they call it now.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : The era of stagnation. That's a formula. What it really meant was me, and so many others like me, living on in a hope of change that seemed more desperate each year.

JOURNALIST : But now it's come. And you have spoken.

A pause.

JOURNALIST : There are people who argue that however terrible the Stalin years were, it was inevitable we should go through that phase, given the historical circumstances.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : 'Inevitable'! I know what you mean. You expect me to discuss that as a Marxist, as a good historical materialist. And I am one. But you'll be surprised, When you say 'inevitable', it brings back just one thing to my mind.

The lights on LS *begin to dim slowly. By the time Anna Mikhaylovna finishes her next few lines, they black out.*

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : It was in 1918 – in the first year after the Revolution. Nikolai Ivanovich had been sent to Germany on official business, to do with the Brest-Litovsk treaty. In Berlin he heard of an extraordinary fortune-teller – a woman. He didn't believe in such things, but out of curiosity he went to see her...

SCENE 4: RS

Two bright spots come on in RS. Nikolai Bukharin and the woman fortune-teller, seated at the table. Bukharin holds his right palm across the table, and she is studying it.

BUKHARIN : Well?

FORTUNE-TELLER *(after a pause)* : I can't see anything there.

BUKHAR.IN : That's not true.

FORTUNE-TELLER : No, I can't see anything.

BUKHARIN : It's not true. I was watching you, and your expression changed. I know you've seen something there you don't want to tell me. Come on, out with it! I don't believe in palmistry anyway. You may not know it, but I am a Marxist.

FORTUNE-TELLER : Then why did you come?

BUKHARIN : For a lark. I had a free evening. Besides, one must test everything. That's the scientific attitude. Come on, tell me.

FORTUNE-TELLER *(evidently riled by his scepticism, a tinge of malice in her voice)* : You will be executed in your own country.

BUKHARIN : Oh? So you think the Soviet state is going to collapse?

FORTUNE-TELLER : *(shrugging her shoulders):* I can't say under what kind of government you will die, but definitely in Russia...

Quick blackout on RS.

SCENE 5: LS

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I can't explain the prediction, but you do realise that at that time he was sure he could be executed only by a counter-revolutionary state?

JOURNALIST : It's a strange story. But 1918 — you were only a child then. He must have told you that many years later.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I knew him even in my childhood. You see, my father and mother were professional revolutionaries. Until the Revolution I saw little of them - they were so often in prison. When I was four, I asked my grandfather about them, and he said, "Your parents are social-democrats, they prefer to sit in prison or run away abroad to avoid arrest, not to sit by you and cook *kasha* for you." I didn't understand what

'social-democrats' were, but there was a prison near our home, and grandfather had once told me there were thieves and bandits there. I was crushed. I decided never to ask about my parents again. But after the February Revolution they came back home. I fell in love with my mother at once; she was beautiful; graceful, with long grey eyes, framed by long. downy eyelashes. I decided social-democrats weren't so bad after all. Then Bukharin began to visit our home - he was a great friend of my father. While I was still a child, I began calling him Nikolasha, I was so familiar with him. By the time I was fourteen, I was in love with him.

SCENE 6: RS

The young Larina is seated at the table with a book which she isn't reading. She gazes moodily into the distance. Larin, her father enters.

LARIN : Annushka.

LARINA : Yes, papa?

LARIN : I've been thinking, my child, that we must do something about your birthday.

LARINA : Oh, papa, I don't want a birthday party. I don't feel like a party at all.

LARIN : It wasn't of that I was thinking, Annushka. It's about the date of your birth.

LARINA : What about it?

LARIN : Don't you know? January 27th? Don't you remember what happened last year on your birthday, on January 27th?

LARINA : Oh yes. It was Lenin's funeral. That's why I didn't have a party last year either.

LARIN : But don't you realise? January 27th will be a day of mourning every year, as long as the Soviet state exists. So we can't have you born on January 27th.

LARINA *(laughing in spite of her sombre mood)* : But, papa, I am already born.

LARIN : But we can have you reborn. I have decided to register your birth afresh and get you a new birth certificate. Your birthday won't be January but *May* 27th -- the time when nature awakens and everything blooms. That'll suit you. .

LARINA : Oh, papa, I don't feel at all like May just now. It's January not only out there, but inside me. .

LARIN *(looking at her curiously)* : Shall I try to guess why?

LARINA : Why?

LARIN : Can it be because Nikolai Ivanovich hasn't been here for some time?

Larina,.embarrassed, hides her face in her hands. She stays in that position while Larin goes on talking.

LARIN : Annushka, you must remember that he's a man who holds an important position in the party, in the state. Now, after Vladimir Ilyich's death, his responsibilities are greater than ever. You can't expect him to spend all his time chatting with you.

Larina unveils her face, and seems to pull herself together. She then reaches into a pocket, brings out a piece of paper and reads from it.

LARINA : *Cold winds are howling through the city squares,But in my heart it's still more desolate Because you've stayed away.* I *long for you. When will you come. Each day* I *wait - and wait.*

LARIN : Yours?

LARINA : Mine.

LARIN : Splendid! Now that you've written it, take it yourself to your Nikolasha.

LARINA : Papa! I couldn't!

LARIN : Why not?

He gets up and goes to her, takes the piece of paper from her, picks up an envelope from the table and puts the poem in it. He writes on the outside of the envelope and hands it to her.

LARIN : I've written 'From Yuri Larin'. So there's no need for you to feel shy. Nikolai Ivanovich will think *I'm* longing to see him. Go – take it to him.

Larina gets up and walks to the door like a sleepwalker.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA *(from LS)* : I thought I would go to his flat, ring the bell, hand over the envelope and run away at once.

LARIN : Annushka!

Larina turns at the door.

LARIN : There's one thing I must tell you. I don't think you're too young to understand it. I have no doubt Nikolenka cares a great deal for you. Perhaps your poem will make that feeling stronger. But he's a sensitive, deeply emotional human being. Whatever you do, now or in the future, don't hurt him.

Blackout.

SCENE 7: LS

JOURNALIST : And did you give him the poem?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I had just mounted the stairs to the second floor of the block. Unexpectedly I ran into Stalin. I realised he was going to meet Bukharin. I held out the letter and asked whether he could deliver it, and Stalin consented. So it was through Stalin that my first childhood declaration of love to Nikolasha was made. What a malicious irony of fate!

Blackout.

SCENE 8: RS

Bukharin seated with Larin. Bukharin has a book in his hand.

BUKHARIN : Well, I'm writing a critique of the whole economic platform of the Left Opposition. This book is going to be my main target. Have you read it? *The New Economics* by Preobrazhensky, Trotsky's disciple.

LARIN : Read it, no. I've heard it discussed.

BUKHARIN : It seems to me a really monstrous position. He wants to industrialise the Soviet Union at a furious pace by exploiting the peasantry. According to him, the iron law of primitive accumulation makes it inevitable that we should squeeze the peasantry for the resources to invest in industry -just as the nineteenth century capitalists had to in the West.

LARIN : That seems to be going too far, doesn't it?

BUKHARIN : I think we have to be very wary of all this talk about iron laws, historical necessity and so on, because often they are a convenient rationalisation for the drive to power. But the good thing is that Preobrazhensky is so blatant about what he thinks. Trotsky has the same ideas at bottom, but he evades the issue, says the European revolution will come to our aid. But ultimately, these super-industrialisers all come down to the same thing. They want to sacrifice the peasantry.

LARIN : Well, Nikolenka, I remember the time when you yourself were all for Left Communism. Like Trotsky, you thought the militarisation of the peasantry during the Civil War was the model for the future socialist society – the proletarian state controlling and regimenting all resources.

BUKHARIN : Oh, Yuri Mikhaylovich, I was in diapers then. I've long outgrown those youthful illusions when we made a virtue out of necessity. Lenin was wiser: he knew when to call off war communism, encourage the free market to grow again, offer incentives to the peasantry. He realised we had to move forward to socialism with the peasantry, not against them. That's what we have to do now - preserve Lenin's New Economic Policy. Fortunately, Stalin agrees with me.

LARIN : So you're happy with Stalin, are you?

BUKHARIN : Oh yes, he's a splendid fellow. Not brilliant, mind you, no theoretician - but pragmatic, level-headed, a good practical organiser.

LARIN : But, Nikolenka, there's something shifty about him, don't you think? I have a suspicion he could be a dangerous intriguer.

BUKHARIN : Oh no, Yuri Mikhaylovich, you're letting your imagination run away with you. Stalin is too simple, too open, to be capable of intrigue.

LARIN : What about Vladimir Ilyich's last warning? Why did he say Stalin was 'too rude'? Why did he want him removed from the General Secretaryship?

BUKHARIN : Stalin's a rough diamond alright, but there's no real harm in him. Don't forget Vladimir Ilyich was a very sick man when he wrote that. And, after all, he criticised all of us in that Testament, as they call it. Remember what he said of me.

LARIN : As I remember, he said you were the favourite of the party.

BUKHARIN : Yes, but also - 'a most valuable and major theorist of the party'

LARIN : There you are.

BUKHARIN : Yes, but it goes on: "his theoretical views can be called fully Marxist only with very great reserve, because he has never understood dialectics. So there you have me, Yuri Mikhaylovich" – a major theoretician who is not really Marxist. Only a great mind like Lenin could have thought of that.

They both start laughing. Blackout.

SCENE 9: LS

JOURNALIST : Didn't Bukharin make a great error in allying himself with Stalin in those years?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : He didn't join Stalin in the pursuit of power. His alliance was on the basis of principles - preserving the NEP, safeguarding the worker-peasant alliance. When he fell out with Stalin after 1928, it wasn't he who had changed his position, it was Stalin.

JOURNALIST : Before we go into that, I'd like to know more about the growth of your relationship with Bukharin - what led up to your marriage.

Blackout.

SCENE 10: RS

Bukharin and Larina enter hand in hand on RS.

LARINA : I'm a little tired after this long walk. Shall we sit down here?

BUKHARIN : Yes, let's do that.

They sit.

BUKHARIN : I was wanting to have a serious conversation with you anyway-- the kind of conversation it's difficult to have while walking.

LARINA *(looking at him a little apprehensively)* : Yes?

BUKHARIN : Do you remember the poem you sent me once? Through Stalin?

LARINA *(shamefaced)* : Yes. If you want to call it poetry. It was dreadfully immature - such teenage sloppiness.

BUKHARIN : But that was four years ago. You were still a child then, Annushka, and I read it as the utterance of a child, and I was charmed - no, that isn't strong enough - I was enchanted by it. But now you're a young woman of eighteen, and more mature than your years. I must treat you as a woman, and I want to start by changing your diminutive.

LARINA : Why, Nikolasha?

BUKHARIN : Annushka - it's your father's name for you. It's a good petname for a child. Now that you're.a woman, I'm going to call you Anyutka. LARINA: Anyutka! I like that. It make me feel a flower - an *anyutina.* BUKHARIN: I'm so glad you like it.

A pause.

LARINA : So that was your serious conversation?

BUKHARIN *(his expression becoming troubled)* : No, that was only the prologue to it, Annushka. Well, since your poem, four years have passed, we've seen each other often in those years, and I've grown more and more deeply attached to you.

LARINA : Well?

BUKHARIN : So now we have to make a decision.

LARINA : What kind of decision?

BUKHARIN *(after a few moments' silence)* : I don't quite know how to say this, Annushka - I mean, Anyukta - well, the fact is - I have grown to love you, to be in love with you...

LARINA : I think I've always been in love with you.

BUKHARIN : Yes, but you're eighteen, and I'm forty-four. Am I justified in encouraging you to sacrifice your life for me?

LARINA : Sacrifice? You know there's no life for me without you.

BUKHARIN : Yes, that's so now. Twenty-six years' difference – it may not seem too much now to bridge. But think of it twenty years later. I'll be an old man in his mid-sixties, and you'll still be a woman in the prime of life...

LARINA : How can you talk like that, Nikolasha? Do you think I'm just an ordinary, selfish woman? Do you remember the story you once told me an ancient monk had written down — about a woman whose husband's hair had fallen because of an illness, and she cut off her hair so that they would be in the same situation? Do you think I'm incapable of acting like that?

BUKHARIN : No, Anyutka, I don't doubt you, but have I the right to accept such a sacrifice? I don't know the answer, but I think I must do one of two things: either I must decide to join our lives

together for ever, or I must go away, not see you for a long time and give you the opportunity to build your life independently of me. There's a third possibility - that of going mad - but...

Larina bursts into tears.

BUKHARIN : Annushka!

He clasps her hands in his. Blackout.

SCENE 11: LS

JOURNALIST : There are people who think Bukharin's emotionalism was a weakness in his political life.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : What they call his emotionalism was only one part of him. He had a profound and subtle intellect too. But it was true to the richness of his character that he was no cold thinker but a passionate humanist. You remember what Ehrenburg said of him, 'He wanted to remake life because he loved it.'

JOURNALIST : Would you say, then, that when he opposed forced collectivisation of the land, it was for him a matter of defending humane values?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yes. That's why he took an extra ordinary step in the summer of '28. By then he had realised that Stalin was going to crush the peasantry, crush every kind of opposition in the party, build a police state. Nikolasha was still a member of the Politburo, he was still

- ostensibly - a member of the ruling group. But he decided to arrange a secret meeting with one of the leaders of the defeated Left Opposition - Kamenev.

Blackout.

SCENE 12: RS

Kamenev is seated at the table, writing.
There is a ring at the door.

KAMENEV : Come in.

Bukharin comes in. Kamenev rises and shakes hands with him. Bukharin draws up a chair. Throughout this conversation he speaks with deep feeling but in low tones, as if afraid of being overheard.

BUKHARIN : So here we are, Lev Borisovich - old antagonists, brought together by our common opposition to *him*. But first I must make one request to you.

KAMENEV : What?

BUKHARIN : That you'll tell no one of our meeting. Either in conversation, or in writing or over the telephone, because we are both spied on by the secret police.

KAMENEV : I'll do as you ask. But have you realised your own share of responsibility for the present state of things? Only two years ago, Nikolai Ivanovich, you joined hands with Stalin to defeat the Joint Opposition. You even taunted us in a manner that was unworthy of you. For a boor like Stalin it would have been natural, but for you, Nikolai Ivanovich, an intellectual, a philosopher -

BUKHARIN : Yes, Lev Borisovich, I'm ashamed when I think of it. But I clung to him at that time because I was afraid you, Trotsky and Zinoviev would plunge us into a reckless collision with the peasantry. But now there is a much more immediate danger that confronts all of us.

KAMENEV : Yes, but what divided us is still as real as ever..

BUKHARIN : I recognise that your goals and ours are very different. We want to move forward to socialism with the peasantry, not against them. We want space for small retail trade, we want consumer rights upheld through an open market. And we don't want the socialist industrial revolution pushed forward at such a pace that it comes into the world – as Marx said of capitalism – bleeding -from head to foot at every pore. Yes, Lev Borisovich, I know everybody will say: you're on the left, we're on the right. But do these differences matter so much when confronted with the monstrosity that *he* represents? What unites you and us, Lev Borisovich, is far more important than what divides us.

KAMENEV : That's why I agreed to meet you.

BUKHARIN : What we have in common, Lev Borisovich, is that we both desire an end to the dictatorial regime *he* has imposed on the party. We want democracy within the party so that we can fight out our differences in free

debate. If we fail to obtain that, we and our differences will be wiped out - in blood. Make no mistake. *He* will stop at nothing. *He* will destroy us. *He* is the new Genghis Khan.

Blackout.

SCENE 13: RS

Larina is bustling about the room with a duster. Bukharin enters, looking worn out and distraught.

LARINA : Nikolasha, you're back! But what's the matter with you? You look so exhausted!

BUKHARIN : Oh, Anyutka, I've seen such things! I never expected that in the country that made the first proletarian revolution, I would see such things twelve years later!

LARINA : What is it, Nikolasha?

BUKHARIN *(walking restlessly up and down)* : Stalin is crushing the peasantry by brute force. I feared things would come to this when he changed his line, swung left, opted for super-industrialisation and forced collectivisation. But even I didn't realise what the full horror of it would be in practice!

LARINA : What's happening?

BUKHARIN : The muzhiks are being pushed into collective farms against their will. And

they're retaliating, striking back with the desperation of people who know they're doomed. They're slaughtering their cattle, burning their grain. It's a peasant war. And Stalin is fighting it like one of the old Tsars, branding everybody who resists a wrecker, and carting them off to die in the North. He says he's destroying the kulaks, but the truth is that by his policies he is driving the whole peasantry into supporting the kulaks.

LARINA : What can be done? Stalin has silenced all opposition within the party.

BUKHARIN : In the Ukraine there's famine raging. At a small railway station I saw small children with their stomachs swollen with hunger. I couldn't bear it. I gave them everything I had. Oh, Anyutka! That such things should happen here – in the country of the revolution!

He puts his head down on the table and bursts into sobs. She strokes his head gently. Blackout.

SCENE 14: LS

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Bukharin's appeal to Kamenev had come to nothing. The two factions were far too sundered ideologically to make common cause – even in the interests of their survival. At the beginning of the 'thirties they were all politically impotent. Bukharin was no longer in the Politburo, he had been demoted to

be Editor of *Izvestiya*. And now Stalin's terror was gathering strength.

SCENE 15: RS

Bukharin is seated at the table as Editor of 'Izvestiya'. His female secretary, Korotkova, enters. KOROTKOVA: Nadezhda Yakovlevna is here. Her husband has been arrested.

BUKHARIN : What, Mandelshtam! Ask her to come in.

Korotkova goes out, and comes back with Nadezhda Mandelshtam, the wife of the poet Osip Mandelshtam. Bukharin rises, shakes hands with her and motions her to a chair. He does not sit himself.

BUKHARIN : I'm shocked, Nadezhda Yakovlevna. How did it happen?

NADEZHDA MASNDELSHTAM : The secret police called last night and took him away.

Bukharin begins pacing rapidly up and down, stopping from time to time to ask questions.

BUKHARIN : What did they do? Did they search your apartment? Did they take anything away?

NADEZHDA MANDELSHTAM : They took a whole heap of papers - poems, essays, translations – lots of things.

BUKHARIN : He hasn't written anything rash, has he?

NADEZHDA MANDELSHTAM : No – just a few poems in his usual manner - nothing worse than what you know of already.

Bukharin has resumed his pacing. He stops again to ask another question..

BUKHARIN : Have you been to see him?

Nadezhda Mandelshtam smiles, with a slightly ironic air.

NADEZHDA MANDELSHTAM : You seem to be out of touch, Nikolai Ivanovich. Visits to family members in prison are no longer allowed. BUKHARIN *(rather discomfited):* Oh, I didn't know that.

NADEZHDA MANDELSHTAM : I know there isn't much you can do nowadays, but...

BUKHARIN : I'll do everything I can. I'll go and see Yagoda himself.

Blackout.

SCENE 16: LS

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yagoda was then head of the secret police, as you know. He was a tragic figure. He had begun as a genuine revolutionary, way back in his youth; but by this time he had become an instrument of Stalin's crimes. In the end he found himself in the same dock with my husband in 1938. Stalin, after using Yagoda to destroy other people, must have thought he knew too much and had to be shot too.

SCENE 17: RS

Yagoda is seated at the table, with Bukharin in front of him.

YAGODA : Do you know why Mandelshtam was arrested?

BUKHARIN : No.

YAGODA : He composed a poem. He was too frightened to write it down, but he was so proud of it he couldn't resist the temptation to recite it to some of his friends. One of them learnt it by heart and informed us.

BUKHARIN : What was the poem about?

YAGODA : I'll recite it to you. I've learned it by heart too.

We live, deaf to the land beneath us.

Ten steps away, no one hears our speeches.

All we hear is the Kremlin mountaineer,

The murderer and peasant-slayer.

His fingers are fat as grubs
And the words, final as lead weights, fall from his lips.

His cockroach whiskers leer
And his boot tops gleam.

Around him a rabble of thin-necked leaders
Fawning half-men for him to play with.

They whinny, purr or whine
As he prates and points a finger,

One by one forging his laws, to be flung
Like horseshoes at the head, the eye or the groin.

And every killing is a treat
For the broad-chested Ossete.

Bukharin has been listening with growing embarrassment and anxiety to the poem. Having finished. his recitation, Yagoda stares unwaveringly at him.

YAGODA : If I were you, I wouldn't get mixed up in this.

Blackout.

SCENE 18; LS

JOURNALIST : That was 1934, wasn't it? The year Kirov was assassinated. Many people now suggest Stalin arranged that because Kirov had become too popular.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I think that likely too. In any case, he used the assassination to dispose of the Opposition. He charged Zinoviev, Kamenev and others on the left with having plotted Kirov's murder as well as other crimes in the service of foreign powers. They were executed. Then, with Nikolasha Stalin played cat and mouse for six months before having him arrested.

Blackout.

SCENE 19: RS

Larina seated, a look of great anxiety and distress on her face. Bukharin enters.

LARINA *(embracing him)* : Oh, Nikolasha, you don't know how frightened I've been! Today it's been longer than ever before! Ten hours! And you, not having eaten anything...What happened today?

BUKHARIN : They confronted me with Karelin. He's an old member of the Social Revolutionaries, he has been in prison for years. And obviously they've tortured or intimidated him into giving false evidence against me.

LARINA : But an old Social Revolutionary? What could you have had to do with him?

BUKHARIN : It would be comic, Anyutka, if it wasn't such a nightmare. Karelin says I plotted with him in 1918 — just think, in 1918 - to kill Lenin.

LARINA : Kill Lenin!

BUKHARIN : Yes, you have to hand it to the NKVD, they really have the imagination of a Dostoevsky. There was this man, standing in front of the investigator, and saying with a straight face – actually his face was gray, like that of a corpse – saying that I plotted with him to kill Lenin. But that's not what matters, Anyutka. If they've come down to that level, it's quite clear they mean business. Stalin is building up for

another big show trial in which I'll be the prize exhibit.

LARINA : Oh, Nikolasha, I would die for you if only I could save you! But what can I do for you, what is there I can do to help you?

BUKHARIN : There's one thing, Anyutka. I've thought it all out on the way home.

LARINA : Tell me, tell me! I'll do anything!

BUKHARIN : Any time now, Anyutka, I'll be arrested. And when they bring me to trial, there's no doubt about it: I'll have to confess in open court.

LARINA *(shocked)* : Confess? Like Zinoviev and Kamenev? To drag yourself in the mire? You, Nikolasha! To say you're in the pay of the Gestapo, that you're a traitor, a wrecker, a murderer! Not that, not that, Nikolasha. Better to die in silence, at any cost.

BUKHARIN : That would be easy for me, Anyutka, even if they were to torture me. But it's not myself I'm thinking of. You know what they do to the wives and children of those who refuse to co-operate.

LARINA : For me — for my sake – it's me you're trying to save! Do you think I want to go on living at the price of your dishonour?

BUKHARIN : It's not just that, Anyutka. Supposing I refused to confess, I would be shot in the dungeons of the Lubyanka, you'd be shot too. Our bodies will be thrown

into a common limepit. Nobody will know, we'll be forgotten. What's the good of that kind of heroism?

LARINA : But what good will it be to confess, to steep yourself in that kind of filth?

BUKHARIN : Because I'll make it a condition of my confessing that your life should be spared. Oh, I know Stalin's word can't be trusted; but he may find it useful to keep that promise — it'll be an inducement to others to confess in the future.

LARINA : But I told you, Nikolasha, I don't want you to be branded a traitor so that I should live!

BUKHARIN : But you *must* live, Anyutka, because you'll be able to clear my name in the future.

LARINA : What future can there be, Nikolasha? When will we come out of this horror?

BUKHARIN : No, Anyutka. The revolution has run into a dark tunnel, but some day it'll emerge from it. And you're young, you'll survive to see that new time. And then you'll be able to clear my name, my honour.

LARINA : Is that all I can do for you?

BUKHARIN : Yes, Anyutka. I have decided to compose a letter to the future, to posterity, vindicating myself. It would be too dangerous to write it down -- too dangerous for you – so I'll recite it

to you sentence by sentence, and you must learn it. You must learn it and never forget it.

LARINA
(embracing him) : Nikolasha! Nikolasha!

She breaks down. Blackout.

SCENE 20: RS

Larina on stage. A telephone rings offstage, and is silenced by the receiver being picked up. Pause.

Bukharin comes in, and Larina looks at him in anguish.

BUKHARIN : That was Stalin's secretary. I'm summoned to the Plenum.

Larina rises in silence.

BUKHARIN : The moment has come.
Don't be embittered, Anyutka. In history there are black times. Things will change, they will have to change. The truth will triumph. Please bring up our son as a Bolshevik.

He falls on his knees before her.

Swear that you won't forget even a single word of my letter. Swear! Swear!

LARINA : I swear, Nikolasha.

Blackout.

While the stage is still totally dark, there are voices shrieking, DOWN WITH THE VILE OPPOSITIONIST SCUM! ERASE FROM THE FACE OF THE LAND THE TROTSKYIST-BUKHARINIST BANDITS! DEATH TO THE SPIES, TRAITORS AND WRECKERS! SHOOT THE FASCIST CRIMINALS!

The voices finally rise to a crescendo, repeating in unison: SHOOT THE MAD DOGS!

SCENE 21: LS

ANNA
MIKHAYLOVNA : I had been taken to a prison camp soon after Nikolasha was arrested, and it was there I learnt about the mass demonstrations of hatred against the accused that Stalin had organised. We weren't given newspapers in the prison, but the wardress took a delight in reading out the reports to the women prisoners as a group. She would look at me from time to time to see how I was reacting.

Blackout.

SCENE 22: RS

Larina sits on the floor of the prison, spotlit in a circle of light. We can dimly see other figures of women around her: The voice of the wardress reads from the dark.

WARDRESS : At yesterday's proceedings in the trial of the Trotskyist--Bukharinist bloc, the Public Prosecutor listed the crimes the accused are charged with: links with German fascist circles, with German intelligence, with Japanese intelligence, unsuccessful terrorist plots to kill Stalin, the terrorist act in 1918 against the life of Lenin, the murders of Kuyibishev and Gorky, and the attempted poisoning of Yezhov, as well as numerous acts of sabotage in the service of foreign powers...

Another woman prisoner moves into the circle of light beside Larina, and begins to wipe her face with a towel.

THE OTHER
WOMAN *(softly)* : Try to be indifferent, you must try to numb yourself. See what I have done, I no longer care, I'm a stone.

WARDRESS
(out of the dark) : The Public Prosecutor, in making his final address to the judges, reiterated the demand for the death penalty that has already been voiced by mass organisations throughout the country.

Vyshinsky, the Public Prosecutor, appears briliantly spotlit.

VYSHINSKY : I demand that dogs gone mad be shot, all of them!

Tumultuous applause

With every day and hour that has passed, as the court investigation has proceeded, it has brought to light even more of the horrors of the shameful, unparalleled, monstrous crimes committed by the accused, the entire abominable chain of heinous deeds before which the base deeds of the most inveterate, vile, unbridled and despicable criminals fade and grow dim.

Renewed applause.

Our people demand one thing: Crush the accursed reptiles! Time will pass. The graves of the hateful traitors will grow over with weeds and thistles. Over the road cleared of the last scum and filth of the past, we, our people, with our beloved leader and teacher, the great Stalin, at our head, will march as before, onwards and onwards, towards Communism!

Frenzied applause. The spotlight on Vyshinsky is *switched off, leaving Larina and the other woman prisoner illuminated.*

WARDRESS
(out of the dark) : Bukharina! Go and wash the corridor, it's your turn today.

THE OTHER
WOMAN : Please don't harass her. I'll do it instead of her.

Blackout.

SCENE 23: LS

ANNA
MIKHAYLOVNA : It was a few months after Nikolasha's execution that I was put on a train and brought to Moscow. I was taken to the headquarters of the NKVD, and there I learnt, to my surprise, that the People's Commissar for Internal Security himself wanted to see me. That meant, I thought, Yezhov, who had succeeded Yagoda when he was eliminated. It was Yezhov who had directed the Bukharin trial. I was led down long corridors in the inner sanctum of the NKVD and finally taken to an office. The door was opened and I was asked to go in.

Over the last words the lights have come on in RS, showing Beria seated at the table. Larina enters and stops, staring at Beria.

ANNA
MIKHAYLOVNA : In our prison world, cut off from the rest of society, I had never known till then, that Yezhov too had been disposed of and that Beria was now the boss of the secret police.

SCENE 24: RS

Larina is still staring at Beria, with her arms clasped before her in astonishment.

LARINA : Lavrenti Pavlovich! It's you! What has happened to the renowned People's Commissar who threatened to wipe out the nests of the enemies of the people? Has he perished too?

BERIA : Please be seated, Anna Mikhaylovna.

He motions her to a chair in front of him. She sits.

LARINA : What has happened to Yezhov?

BERIA : Why should that interest you so much?

He studies her intently.

I must tell you, Anna Mikhaylovna, that you have grown marvellously prettier than when I last saw you.

LARINA : Isn't that wonderful, Lavrenti Pavlovich? In that case, I only need to spend another ten years in prison, and you can send me to Paris to compete in a beauty contest.

Beria smiles.

BERIA : What work are you doing in the camp?

LARINA : I'm a sewage disposal worker.

BERIA
(as if shocked) : Sewage disposal!

LARINA : Yes.

BERIA : Couldn't they find any other work for you?

LARINA : But why? For the wife of the chief spy, the arch traitor, they have found the most appropriate work. And why should it upset you so much, Lavrenti Pavlovich? If the whole of life has been turned into a mass of shit, why should I be disgusted at shovelling small mounds of it?

BERIA : How improperly you talk, aren't you ashamed – a woman like you?

LARINA : I'm not ashamed of anything any longer.

A pause.

BERIA : Tell me, Anna Mikhaylovna, why did you love Nikolai Ivanovich so much?

LARINA : That's a personal matter. I don't intend to account for it to anybody.

BERIA : We know very well that you loved him a great deal.

LARINA : And you -- why did *you* love N.I?

BERIA : Love him? I couldn't stand him!

LARINA : But Lenin in his last Testament said that Bukharin was rightly the favourite of the party. If you didn't love him, then you were the only improper exception.

BERIA : Was it Bukharin who told you about that letter of Lenin?

LARINA : No, I read it myself.

BERIA : Lenin wrote that a long time ago. It's inappropriate to recall that now.

He rings a bell, and speaks to the orderly who appears.

BERIA : Bring some sandwiches, fruit and tea.

He turns over a file which is on the table, then looks up at Larina.

BERIA : Don't you really want to go on living, Anna Mikhaylowna? It's hard to believe - you are so young, and life lies ahead of you!

LARINA : And you will have me shot?

BERIA : Everything will depend on your future behaviour.

The orderly comes back with a tray of food and two plates which he sets before Beria and Larina, and begins serving. Larina turns her face away from the food.

BERIA : Won't you eat? But why not? And I so much wanted to have tea with you. And those are wonderful grapes. I'm sure you haven't eaten grapes for a long time. If you won't eat, I won't talk any more to you.

LARINA : That means there was no great necessity to talk to me anyway.

BERIA : Listen to me, Anna Mikhaylovna, I can make life a great deal easier for you, if you'll only co-operate with us. Whom are you trying to save? Forget Nikolai Ivanovich, he's gone. Save yourself!

LARINA : I'm saving my clear conscience.

Blackout.

SCENE 25: LS

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I was put back on the train without Beria having achieved anything. Except that when I was taken away he insisted on giving the officer who was accompanying me a paper bag with the grapes. For me. I did eat them too — on the train.

There were still to come the long years of prison – for no crime other than that of being the widow of an 'enemy of the people' and remaining loyal to his memory. But why speak of that now?

A pause.

JOURNALIST : May I ask you one more question, Anna Mikhaylovna?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yes, what is it?

JOURNALIST : You know there was a Western writer who wrote a novel about the Moscow trials. His name was Arthur Koestler. It's believed that he based his main character partly on your husband.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yes, I know.

JOURNALIST : It's also believed that he took the title of his book - *Darkness at Noon* - from one sentence in Bukharin's last address to the court. You'll recall the sentence. He said: "When you ask yourself, 'If you must die, what are you dying for?',

an absolutely black emptiness suddenly rises before you with startling vividness."

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Yes.

JOURNALIST : I wonder why he said that. Could it be that in his final moments he had reached a condition of complete pessimism?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : No, no. I have told you what he said to me at our last parting. He was totally confident of the future, his faith in the revolution was intact. And you know how he conducted himself at the trial. He confessed no more than was necessary to keep his bargain with the prosecution. He argued with the miserable prosecutor, Vyshinsky; he used the courtroom as far as he could, very subtly, to hint at the falsity of the charge. He even declared, 'The confession of the accused is a medieval principle of jurisprudence.'

JOURNALIST : Why then did he speak that sentence, Anna Mikhaylovna?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : Well, what was he dying for? He had to die so that Stalin's regime should live! That was the 'black emptiness' he was talking about.

JOURNALIST : You interpret it that way because you know what he thought and felt in his last days with you. But you can't know what he went through in the many months in the Lubyanka. You can't be sure.

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : I am sure.

A silence.

JOURNALIST : Is there anything more you want to say, Anna Mikhaylovna?

ANNA MIKHAYLOVNA : You know those lines of Shakespeare:

The long day's task is *done,*
And we must sleep.

Soon, I hope, my long day's task will be done. And then, perhaps, I'll be content to sleep.

Blackout.

APPENDIX : TWO LETTERS TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

To: Anna Mikhaylovna Larina

Esteemed Anna Mikhaylovna!

Please pardon me that I write badly in Russian, though I read a great deal in it. I have never lived in the Soviet Union, and all my knowledge of Russian I have acquired by myself.

I am sending you my play in the English language concerning the tragedy and posthumous triumph of Bukharin and your long and heroic endurance. The main inspiration for the play I drew from your moving reminiscences, published in *Ogonyok*. I have sometimes made use of your own words; but sometimes I have exercised the freedom of

the dramatist in the depiction of your feelings, opinions and judgments, as those of the other characters. And this too, I hope, you will excuse. Although I have based the play on historical facts, I have in a few scenes linked or arranged the events differently for structural considerations.

The title of the play, *The Long Day's Task*, is from some lines in Shakespeare's play, *Antony and Cleopatra:*

> The long day's task is done,
> And we must sleep.

Pasternak in his translation has rendered these lines as follows:

> Konchen trud
> Bol'shogo dnya. Pora na otdyh.

Not often is it possible for a dramatist to submit his play to the judgment of one of his characters. I send you this work with hope and trepidation, and with the affirmation of the same homage expressed in the dedication of the play.

With warm regards

Reggie Siriwardena

2

Esteemed Reggie Siriwardena!

It was with deep emotion that I read your letter. Unfortunately I don't read English and therefore couldn't read your play. But from your letter I understood that it was written on the basis of my reminiscences published in the journal *Ogonyok.*

I send you my sincere thanks for the feelings which those reminiscences have evoked in your heart, and for your sympathy with the tragic fate of Nikolai Ivanovich and my own.

At present the journal *Znamya* for 1988 is publishing my memoirs. The tenth number of *Znamya* has already appeared with (the first part of) these memoirs, which will be continued in the eleventh and twelfth.

You write well in Russian, and evidently read still better. Here is supplemen-tary material to fill out your play.

With respect

Larina, Anna Mikhaylovna

The Thatched Patio, January/ February 1992

(...continued)

Ajith Samaranayake, the Prince of Obituarists – summed up Regi's life and career neatly in his obituary column, "Regi Siriwardena was the last great man of letters in Sri Lanka in the mould of Edmund Wilson, who too was preoccupied with both politics and literature. Although a scholar, he was no pedant. Although an academic, he did not believe in intimidating the reader with the jargon of the trade."

Regi, who passed away on December 15, 2004, was conferred the Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to English letters in September 2004.

A.J. Canagaratna read English at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya (1954-58). After graduation, he taught for a short while in schools in the North. In 1961, he joined the Lake House and worked as a feature-writer on the Daily News. He reverted to teaching in a government school in the Eastern Province in 1963. In 1976, he taught in the English Language Teaching Centre of the University of Jaffna. He has translated Sri Lankan Tamil short stories into English since 1950s.

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This volume presents Regi Siriwardena's articles on literature and reviews of films, books and theatre during the 11 years he worked at Lake House in 1950s. They also include articles published in the "Lanka Guardian" and other journals like "Community", "Thatched Patio" and "Nethra". The articles and the reviews show the range of his interests and the sharpness of his critical mind.

Late in life, Regi the critic, took to creative writing. This volume carries a selection of his poems, fiction and drama.