

**“[T]he land yields nothing of its speech to us”: Re-  
Imagining the Nation in Wong Phui Nam’s *An Acre of  
Day’s Glass***

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By and large the poetic enterprise of Wong Phui Nam up till the 1990s rejected the burden of a single interpretation but was willing to delve into the possibility of presenting a vision of his homeland by way of imaginative flexibility. However, it seemed as if little meaning could emerge from such a terrain of an intellectual’s despairing vision. Redemption from the landscape often became muddled up with the dour strength of his imagination so much so that the idea of belonging itself was seen as inhabiting an impenetrable personal space which seemed, on the level of surface meaning at least, to be kept separate from the forces of external reality.

To confront then Wong’s early poetry is to confront a poetic self seeking validation in a landscape which yields little by way of meaning. His is a landscape that revels mostly in the power and meaning of the primal nature of things, where it would seem that the encroachment of human civilisation on the untamed order of nature has yet to take place. This sense of displacement, Wong himself asserts, gives rise to the Malaysian writer in English being unable to hinge on to any discernible socio-cultural tradition of his land. What a Malaysian writer in English brings to his work then is a confrontation with his own lack of understanding of the new land.

Except for his translations of the Chinese classics, his writing displays a propensity to pare down the fine particulars of the physical landscape and be re-made as being part of the temporal awareness of a speaking voice of the poems, a primitive and sometimes self-bewildering “persona-self”. In his famous poem “For a Birthday”, we are told:

This then is a country where one cannot wish  
to be. The spirit not given its features  
festers in the flesh, incites the year  
to come upon it like the tiger ... Thus in the flesh  
am I hunted out, creature of my days,  
vocal perhaps to seem some kind of Job

tending my sores to an emptiness,  
 the hoarse throat my psaltery to make such sounds  
 as may breed some hint for the soul's endurance. (27-28)

This persona-self is condemned to live along the margins of his troubled landscape. To disentangle oneself from such a socio-cultural landscape is, I feel, the outcome of meaning for the reader. With no originary space to ponder, or go back to, Wong's exilic poetry can either be seen as an ending in some kind of Modernist futility or the poet is then free to begin a reconstruction of cultural identity.

Midway through his career, with the publication of his first set of collected verse *Ways of Exile* (1993), he began to re-inscribe the old landscape by pointing to a new affirmation of life, a different type of liberational strategy altogether. In the short sequences "Temple Caves" and "A Night Easter", the poet finally strives towards perfecting the completion of his ultimate personality. In Part IV of the first sequence, the persona begins to avow that

If we have lost the way now, what names,  
 what guides can we call upon? What bright presences  
 who will see us through? Out of the memory

of a life out in this our makeshift city,  
 out of the ways of a borrowed tongue and myth,  
 what can be retrieved, what word given which will make manifest

one who would lead us across echoing wells, ravines,  
 black expanse of void? (92)

Wong continued to re-visit this idea of journey of the spirit in his next book of verse *Against the Wilderness* (2000) in poems such as "Lazarus Recumbent" and "A Fire Easter", where it is the affirmation of the risen spirit which actually transfigures the land to give it new hope and fresh insight. But discovering a stable postcolonial cultural identity in a new nation space is still fraught with its many dangers. Accepting the received identity of the land is as tenuous as deferring the moment while we lie in wait for another which might or might not arrive, or one that arrives incomplete, or misbegotten. Such a quest for identity could deliver us from the despair of deracination, but one which is to be mediated by the logic of religious enlightenment of the major religions of the world, according to the poet. Ultimately the descent of the soul ends when the realm of the human senses ceases to exist.

In this way Wong re-positions his readers within a narrative of the future, and so the Modernist Wong re-imagines a postmodern uncertainty. Within this

"makeshift city" (92), he transcends the immediate present to lead us to something as yet undiscovered. The rubric of the past thus has no name anymore, no landscape, once the psyche or spirit of such a new postcolonial denizen is empowered to search out new meaning. Such a search for knowledge becomes for each of us a personal journey of the soul. It is not dependent on the topographical landscape of a country but on the power of transformational language, whether in terms of transcendental religious language or otherwise. Therein lies the greatness of the poet and the importance of this new poetry collection.

If his earlier poetry seems to have had the themes of the displacement of identity and meaning at heart, his later sequences help re-site the dilemma within a socio-religious matrix of the imagination. The transcendent psyche then is able re-articulate a new-found freedom, even if its initial dilemmas of loss and the lack of cultural identity cannot be overcome altogether.