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ASIAN LITERATURE: SOME FIGURES IN THE LANDSCAPE *

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ABOUT ELEVEN YEARS AGO, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, in an issue devoted to the theme "America and the Challenge of Asia," published a reminder which even today needs repetition.

Bear in mind, it said, that—

1. Most people in Asia will go to bed hungry tonight.
2. Most people in Asia cannot read or write.
3. Most people in Asia live in grinding poverty.
4. Most people in Asia have never seen a doctor.
5. Most people in Asia have never heard of democracy.
6. Most people in Asia have never known civil liberties.
7. Most people in Asia believe anything different would be better than what they have, and they are determined to get it.
8. Most people in Asia believe that freedom or free enterprise means the freedom of Western colonial powers to exploit Asians.
9. Most people in Asia distrust people with white skins.
10. Most people in Asia are determined never again to be ruled by foreigners.

If it was at all possible to make these claims eleven years ago, they must have been pretty well borne out by the facts then available. Those facts, in turn, may well have found their way in the imaginative literature written by Asian writers. And if this again were so, how well or adequately have Asian writers made use of the material available?

To answer these questions, one must know contemporary Asian literature with perhaps as much if not so much more insight than one would use in reading English, American, or European. Unfortunately to all of us, Asian literature is an undiscovered territory.

This is a necessary limitation. If by Asian, we mean that which pertains to India and Ceylon, at one end, and at the other, that which per-

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tains to Korea and Japan and southwards to the Philippines and Indonesia, the immensity of the territory is not difficult to grasp. Within these points must be included Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam, along with Communist China, Malaysia, and the Republic of China.

To contemplate the truth of geography is immediately to wonder whether there is any person alive who knows the languages used by this not inconsiderable portion of mankind. There is no such person, and possibly there will never be. Reading Indian literature alone is a physical impossibility, since there are better than fourteen languages in which the imaginative life of that nation is recorded. Contemporary Sinhalese writing is done in three, including English; Chinese, in two, including English; that of the Philippines in at least three, including English, that of Japan in Niponggo, with some bits also in English—and, usually, that which is in English is not as well accepted as we might wish it to be. In other words, English is not an adequate window from which to view this landscape.

But for our purposes, it must serve. This emergency service has been tried before. Only last year, in fact, a conference of Asian writers was held in Manila. It was easily a linguistic impassé, for it was clear that the writers present had not read each other's work. All the same, there was considerable fellow-feeling, and one practical approach toward the future was adopted. The writers present agreed to produce an anthology of this or that form of literature, truly an ambitious effort considering the inherent difficulties.

It is with enthusiasm that we can approach our subject and make some acquaintance with Asian contemporary literature. It is as if with English as our window to the landscape, we might spot in the distance some awe-inspiring mountain peaks, some deserts and valleys, some rivers and plains.

Certainly Indian writing today makes up a veritable mountain range. It vies for our admiration with the Japanese, and, to a certain degree, with the Chinese. Because of the lack of translators and problems of publishing, there is a kind of mistiness all around, and clouds overhang the area corresponding to Indonesia, Thai, and Korean letters. Against these, however, we might surmise that that of the Philippines make up the foothills and valleys which, if verdant green in the sunshine, diminish into swampland in some places.

Unsystematic as my reading of Asian literature has been, among my books are a few titles which are veritable achievements in their genre. It would be no surprise, for example, if for his novel *The Makioka Sisters* (in Japanese *Sasame Yuki*) Junichiro Tanizaki will in the near future be

honored by the Nobel Prize committee. Here pride and over-refinement are evoked in a richly complex novel worthy of the highest international recognition. More recently, to cite a second example, Raja Rao published an equally long and impressive philosophical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, a fulfilment of twenty-five years of composition. I call it philosophical for want of a better term, because besides the story of a marriage between the Brahman, Rama, and the French history teacher Madaleine, it is actually an analysis, and a searching one, of the values of Eastern and Western societies. Raja Rao's novel comes to us straight in a remarkable English, in a style at once more eloquent than that produced by an Indian writing today, and this includes Narayan, Radhakrishnan, and Nehru; and in a style exhibiting as well an intellectual density which parallels that of *The Waste Land*. C. D. Narasimhaiah, of the University of Mysore, has described it as a book well worth waiting for adding that "Where others would have spread so much experience and learning over half-a-dozen, if not a dozen, novels (it is to them like putting all the eggs in one basket) depending on the gullibility of the reading public, Raja Rao, like Keats to whom poetry should surprise by a fine excess (to quote Keats again) loaded every rift with ore—it isn't, in this case, a cliché to say that there is God's plenty in this book."

Rama, Raja Rao's hero, says somewhere in the course of his autobiographical narrative: "We can only offer others what is ours, were it only a seed of tamarind, grandfather used to say." In this context, Asian writers have offered a good deal more than tamarind seeds. "Most people in Asia will go to bed hungry tonight." This bitter truth one encounters in Lau Shaw's *The Rickshaw Boy* as readily as in Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers* and Bhawani Bhattacharya's *Many Rivers*, an indictment of Britain's regime in India that remains long in a reader's memory. "Most people in Asia have never known civil liberties." And for verification we may well turn to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, to R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, even to the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya, where Indian politics are in the warp and woof, the design at times so elaborate as to be misleadingly dialectical, but very much a part of the fabric of human experience, ineluctable for its variety.

If these titles mean anything at all to the prospective explorer in Asian literature, they should at least suggest an intense literary activity among writers in this part of the world. Unknown, except to the cognoscenti, is indeed the energetic and purposeful work in which Asian writers have been engaged. Prof. C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* provides an example of how a knowledgeable literary historian can present the panorama of a national literature without shying

off universal values at one end and extreme particularity at the other, so that a dramatic narrative of a nation's urge toward documenting its changing sensibilities becomes available to the serious reader.

I had the wonderful experience, not too long ago, of discussing with an American Sinologist some of the writers described in Prof. Hsia's history. Lu Hsun, Mao Tun, Ting Ling, Eileen Chang, Hu Shih—as these names were mentioned, it was as if we were going over the careers of a James Joyce, a Sinclair Lewis, a John Steinbeck, a Katherine Mansfield; so vivid was his image of those Chinese literary figures and so intimate his knowledge of their work. Doubtless a similar experience awaits those who can talk of Akutagawa and Mishima and Kawabata, or Martin Wickremasinghe of Ceylon, Dot Mai Sod of Thailand, Achdiat K. Mihadja of Indonesia, and others.

With understandable rashness, we are almost led to say that we have read too much Western at the expense of Asian literature. The language handicap has always been there, naturally; but our avowed interest in Western literature must be regarded as doing a disservice by diverting us away from the Asian. Or, perhaps, another way of expressing it is to say that the success of our sustained interest in Western literature can best be judged by our gratification of a similar interest in Asian literature.

Unfortunately, we have had to depend on Western translations of literary works from our part of the world; and this has worked considerable disadvantages on a curiosity which might have developed more fruitfully, even to the point perhaps of encouraging our acquisition of the requisite linguistic tools for our own exploration. One wonders whether exposure to the romances of Chinese courtly life as described in, say, a popular book of the thirties, *Chinese Love Stories*, could have sufficed to inspire interest in Chinese, so that when, later, Chinese literature dropped *Wen Yen*, the formal language, for the *Pai Hua* of the Literary Revolution, one would indeed have become twice removed from so instructive and refreshing a source of insight into human experience.

It took Lafcadio Hearn to discover Japan for the popular taste of the literary West, and when upon this new awareness came the figure of Akutagawa, with his myth and terror—is it a wonder that translation of Japanese novels and short stories have become popular in the West? Tagore, of course, opened up to all the English-reading world, our part of it included, wide vistas of Indian literature. But for how long was it that only Tagore and his poetry dominated the view? Even today, Bengali literature, to which Tagore really belongs, is closed to us, despite the fact that of all Indian literatures, it was Bengali that responded most

promptly to the modern sensibility, it would be the literature with which we could have found the earliest and fondest kinship.

Self-pity over our having been put astray aside, it might be interesting to discover a few directions and trends. The Western influence on Asian literature is a much advertised fact. To read Desai's *The Setting Sun*, with all its gloom and despair, is indeed to affirm it. Or to be told that Tagore held that the short story is like a glimpse of life viewed from the window of a boat-house as it floats down a river is to place Western short story techniques of the thirties pretty close to his own.

It was the returned student, the late Dr. Hu Shih, that gave new direction, it is suggested, to present-day Chinese writing, even as translations of Steinbeck and Hemingway ushered Indonesia. It is held, therefore, by many that Asian literature is seeking a way to be on par with that of the West.

I do not believe that it is worth the effort, if any effort must be expended at all. If Dr. E. R. Saratchandra, writing about Sinhalese literature, tells us that "it is attempting to express new attitudes and new conceptions introduced into (our) society as the result of the contact with European culture," I am inclined to believe that the result will be as nearly Sinhalese as it will not be Western. When I am told that Chekhov and Maupassant have molded the Indian short story, I am apprehensive of the imitations. That the numerous translations of European literature into Japanese did not so much as provide specific models as encourage Japanese writers "to break away from sterile traditions and to describe in a more or less realistic way the brave new world that they saw growing up about them"—this perhaps is closer to the truth about Japanese as about any other Asian literature today.

The Icelandic writer, Haldor Laxness, writing about his encounter with Tagore's *Gitanjali* once remarked: "In my country, as elsewhere among Western readers, the form and flavour of the *Gitanjali* had the effect of a wonderful flower we had not seen or heard of before; its great attraction was a direct stimulus for many poets to undertake new experiments in lyrical prose. Even as far as the Scandinavian countries there was a vogue in lyrical prose directly originating from the newly acquired knowledge of Tagore. I, among others, tried my hand at this form in my youthful days, but without success, perhaps because I did not realize that *Gitanjali's* form is entirely secondary to its substance. I guess this was the common reason why most of Tagore's disciples in the West were bound to fail. The physical foundation of Tagore's poetry, the tropical warmth and growth, was lacking in our environment to make this kind of poetry imitable here. The manifestations of the Divine in *Gitanjali* could be admired

by us, but they were conditioned by a climate entirely different from ours, which also means that they were the products of a different culture. In India the all-embracing tropical God is nearest the soul in the shade: the naked beggar is sitting there with a transcendental stare that might just as well belong to Prince Gautama. In our country we shall freeze to death if we sit too long in the open pastures thinking about the attributes of God; or we shall be blown away by the storm which is normal weather with us."

It is after all with this sense of integrity that artists, wedded to their climate and culture, evolve the literary work that wells up from their imagination, and to say of the Asian writer he might serve his apprenticeship after Western models is to deny him that integrity. Indeed, it is with justice that Ivan Morris has remarked of the Japanese novel that while the modern novel and short story are essentially western forms as we know them today, as far as content goes, the Japanese writer, "can lean back on a tradition of his own." A blending is more readily expectable rather than a copy or an imitation, new vitality rather than borrowed life, new voices rather than echoes from somewhere.

Voices, however, suggest a language: and here we come full circle to what we originally remarked upon, except that we have forgotten a meaning to the term language which is more pertinent to art than to mere communication or non-art. Asia, one is tempted to say, has a common language. It is the language of experience, the language which says in different words the same meaning, as for example: "Most people will go to bed hungry tonight." That language, to me, is the essential factor that will continue to make Asian literature flourish: a common past under varied colonial cultures, a common prayer today for peace and progress, a common awareness of the great possibilities of the human person.

"He belongs little less to us than to his country." That was Robert Frost's view of Tagore's poetry for all its overflow beyond national boundaries. Asian literature, should it spill out more and more beyond Asia, in the language of experience that all humanity speaks, should indeed first belong little less outside than within Asia itself.