Introduction

Uns verwirrt es, die wir seien heißen
immer so zu leben: nur von Bildern;
und wir möchten manchesmal mit wildern
Griffen Wirklichkeiten in uns reißen, Stücke,
Abzufühlendes, ein Sein.
Rainer Maria Rilke
August 1907

'Malay literature is dead, faded away, since the glory of the Malay kingdoms has been eclipsed' (Die malaiische Literatur ist tot, dahingewelkt seit der Glanz der malaiischen Reiche verging). In 1925, when the German Malayist Hans Overbeck spoke this lapidary obituary, there were good reasons – at least for an observer in a colonial city such as Singapore – to consider the Malay textual heritage a thing of the past, dead and gone, without relevance for the ongoing discussion that was shaping Malay culture. What was taking place in the urban centres in Overbeck's day was the transmutation of traditional Malay oral-aural culture into a modern print-culture (Sweeney 1987:34).

Attracted by the cheap, easily readable printed and lithographed books and impressed by the challenging new Islamic and European forms of knowledge they contained, the Malays in the urban centres became increasingly critical of the knowledge offered by the stories of oral storytellers and the manuscripts.

Experiencing their oral-aural formulaic style as a hindrance to the new modes of thinking, they stopped visiting the oral performances and laid aside the manuscripts. The spoken word and the manuscript, excluded from contributing to Malay culture, began to lose their authority (Maier 1988:101-28).

If they were not simply left to moulder and decay in the tropical climate, the manuscripts with their tales, which had once provided amusement or guidance to Malay audiences, ended up in the museums of the colonial rulers as objects of scholarly curiosity rather than living components of culture. Those of their stories which fared worst were thenceforth only accessible in the desiccated and mummified form of summaries in manuscript
catalogues. The luckier ones were published in school editions, abridged and shorn as much as possible of formulaic repetitions. Only few were deemed to merit a complete scholarly edition. Fewer still were considered to bear translating.

Those texts that were published generated little enthusiasm among their readers. The Malay intellectuals, who had only recently stepped out of their oral-aural tradition and were now only interested in Western and Islamic literate forms of knowledge, found them still too close to that against which they had reacted. European readers, who had never tried to become insiders, found them too far removed from their own textual experiences to take more than an academic interest in them.

Separated from its potential readers by an ever more formidable barrier of historical and cultural distance, the Malay textual tradition became increasingly inaccessible, as the oral-aural experience and the network of rules which had implicitly or explicitly circumscribed and prescribed its production and reception sank more and more into oblivion. For the educated Malays their textual tradition was indeed to all practical purposes dead.

Since Overbeck spoke his obituary the Malay textual tradition has by and large remained what he declared it to be: a corpus of texts without an interested public, dead because no efforts are made to enter into a dialogue with it. As is the case with, for instance, Middle Dutch literature in the Netherlands – another relic from a defunct oral-aural manuscript culture – for the modern Malaysian or Indonesian to read its texts is either a chore performed in the name of academic learning, or it is a duty performed as part of the obligatory school curriculum. In spite of all efforts, both in Malaysia and Indonesia, as part of their respective cultural policies, to try and recycle the Malay textual heritage into their modern cultures by making an ever increasing number of its texts available in easily readable and cheap transcribed editions, a genuinely interested readership has thus far failed to develop (Sulastin 1986:126-7).

In this book a sustained effort is made to show how one may fruitfully enter into a dialogue with the Malay textual heritage, notably with that part of it that consists of narrative, so that its texts may shake off the torpor of their long deathlike sleep and may awaken to a new lease of life and a new relevance, radiant once again with their own peculiar beauty. The central part of this book therefore consists of a series of readings of narrative works, which may hopefully be instructive for other readers in their attempts to come to terms with Malay stories.

A dialogue implies the sharing of a common system of rules regulating our utterances and understanding. Therefore in Part II of this book, preceding the readings, a systematic description is given of the system of conventions that may be usefully presupposed as having once governed the
production of meaning in Malay narrative (Culler 1981:100-18). It is hoped that this presentation will help the readers of this book to follow the way the dialogue is carried on in the readings.

Dialogue is a matter of give and take. Although dialogic communication requires us to use a certain amount of commonly understood language, it necessarily also entails the use of terms that are entirely our own. In fact, there can be no dialogue where only the voice of the other is heard. The language in which this book speaks with and about Malay narratives is therefore ineluctably a hybrid form, in which now the voice of the one discussant, now that of the other may be heard to speak loudest (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:104-12).

For a model showing how one may define the field of Malay narrativity in terms of the conventions that may once have regulated the production of meaning within it, this book owes a great debt to an article on the system of narrative genres of the German High Middle Ages by Jauss (1977). In this article Jauss makes use of four coordinates to circumscribe the field of narrativity: 1. the mode of narration, that is, the way a narrator manifests himself in the act of story-telling; 2. the formal mode of representation, that is, the devices used for the construction of the story; 3. the contentual mode of representation, that is, the type of plot, type of protagonist and sort of universe represented; and, finally, 4. the mode of reception and social function (Jauss 1977:114-8).

Adapting the model of Jauss, in this book the description of the general conventions of Malay narrative has conveniently been ordered according to the following three points of view: 1. Mode of reception (Chapter I); 2. Mode of formal representation (Chapter II); 3. Mode of narration (Chapter III).

The discussion of the contentual mode of representation – the type of plot imposed on the narrative, the type of protagonist and type of universe represented – is postponed to the readings, where the different genres of narrative are characterized.

In Chapter I it is shown that in Malay oral-aural culture stories were expected to be either predominantly 'profitable' or principally 'soothing'. 'Profitable' stories were those which were felt to be concerned directly with upholding the Malay religious, political or social order. Stories were considered primarily 'soothing' if they were above all enjoyed for their beauty, rhetorical power and fantasy, which afforded momentary relief from the unpleasant realities of life. As an example of 'profitable' narrative a passage from the Sejarah Melayu (Genealogy of the Malay Rulers) is discussed. As examples of 'soothing' narrative some passages from the Panji romance Syair Ken Tambuhan (Poem of Lady-in-Waiting Tambuhan) are analysed.

In Chapter II the use of formulaic elements for the construction of
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narrative is examined in the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*. A distinction is made between verbatim repetitions (formulae), varied repetitions (formulaic expressions) and stock patterns of action and schemes for ornamental description (type-scenes). These units are shown to be used in a perpetual process of variation within identity. The principle of variation within identity is also shown to operate in the prosody of the verse form *syair*, of which a characterization is given. Finally, the sung performance of *syair* is discussed on the basis of a recording of a singing of part of the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*.

All narrative presupposes a story-teller. Matching the distinction between primarily 'soothing' and predominantly 'profitable' narrative, in Chapter III two types of narratorial roles are discerned, that are respectively dubbed *dalang* (puppeteer) and *dagang* (stranger/trader far from home) after the terms they most often use in self-characterization. The *dalang* appears in the epic *wayang*-stories and the Panji romances, whereas the sphere of the *dagang* is less clearly limited to a literary genre. Whereas the *dalang* is an embodiment of the force of orality, the *dagang* is a manifestation of that of literacy.

In different ways both narrators are expression of the commemorative nature of Malay poetics in that they are both agreed that for man in all his acts, reading and writing included, wisdom and divine guidance are indispensable. The *dagang* is a figure associated with remembrance of God and edification. Within the perspective of Islam the *dalang* as commemorator of a fallen religious order has come to be viewed as merely the purveyor of soothing, seductive beauty, and is associated with forgetfulness and illusions.

It is shown that the two conflicting forces of orality and literacy are pressed into coherence by what may be called the Idea of the Book: the notion that all production of meaning, if it is to be valid, must emphatically claim to point back to and to have been authorized by an already codified, unassailable truth or Origin. Consequently Malay poetics is one of repetition, recall, representation and copying. Finally it is shown that the place of fiction within the Books of Malay culture is a problematic one, because there is a strong tendency to equate it with feigned representation, with lying.

In all Malay narrative, no matter whether it is of the fictional or of the factual kind, there is a tension between the demand for the recall of what is and must be (*mengingat*) and the desire to give in to forgetfulness and dreams of how one would like things to be (*mengenangkan*), between representation of the proper (*mematutkan*) and giving in to the pleasures of amplification (*memanjangkan*). If a narrative is not seen to properly represent the culturally accepted orders (*mengadakan*) it is prone to come
under the suspicion that it merely mimics truth (mengada-ada) or leads away from it by its improprieties, fantasies and illusions. What connects the readings offered in Part 2 of this book is that in each text the conflict between the law and desire, recall and forgetfulness, representation and illusion is shown to be fought out in a different way, with the use of patterns of plot, such as those of comedy, romance and tragedy (Frye 1973, 1976).

Within the traditional Malay textual system there was a certain scope for forgetfulness, play and criticism. Even parody and stable forms of irony, persiflage and satire had their place in it as devices serving to point out the dynamic side of myth and preserve order from becoming rigid. But all disturbance or suspension of the mythical order by improprieties, by disjunctions between signifier and signified, were to be only temporary; in the end the order of the Books of Malay culture had to be reaffirmed.

Malay textuality was traditional so long as it remained tied to the repetition and confirmation of Origin and so long as the encyclopaedia of oral tradition and Islamic codified knowledge reigned over it alone and unchallenged. Change came in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, concomitant with the disintegration of the political order of the Malay kerajaan and the intrusion of new forms of knowledge, rivalling the old.

To question the authority of the Books is to challenge the priority of speech over writing, presence over absence, the Origin over that which merely repeats, reduplicates or inscribes the Origin. It also means to question the idea of a proper good writing – a stable permanent message – the meaning of which can be contained within bounds by the presence and intention of an author, unaffected by the aesthetic play of variation, amplification and stylistic ornament. Where it is permanently questioned, it entails a destabilization of signification, in which the authority for making sense is located not in the pages of the past, but in the hands of the reader.

Where the Idea of the Book is challenged, the notion that writing and reading are a matter of commemorating, reproducing, or copying is displaced by another notion which no longer validates meaning in an old book, a hallowed sequence of events or the voice of the speaker. A movement occurs from mirror to method: away from the reproduction of meaning by imitation to its production by interpretation (Gellrich 1985:224-7). It is this movement which is traced in the course of the readings in Part 2 of this book.

These readings are concerned with the two central and mutually complementary (Boon 1977:6-7) genres of narrative of the traditional Malay textual system, namely the heroic epic and the Panji romance, and with parodies of these two genres. The texts selected for interpretation are all written in the verse form syair. The advantage of syair is that they tend to have a covert narrator, whose comments provide useful clues.
As is shown in Chapters IV and V, the heroic epic is pre-eminently a discourse of the *patut*, as direct as possible a commemoration and confirmation of the order of the authoritative Books of Malay culture. Characteristically the heroic epic has a *dagang* as narrator. Its typical plot — its hallowed sequence of events — is that of comedy: it has to tell a success story about the courage of fighters for a just cause duly rewarded. As is argued in Chapter IV, its central motivation is provided by the heroic oath (*cakap*) sworn by both warring parties: the words of courage to be uttered by loyal vassals in the presence of their lord.

These oaths were a cornerstone of the *kerajaan* order. By uttering them one was honour-bound to perform what one had sworn to do, as much as if one had signed a written contract. The implicit assumption is that the validity of their meaning is guarantied by the voice of the speaker. They are an invocation, a formulaic recall, of noble origin and thus of identity, an effort at representation (*mengadakan*). A lasting disjunction between oath and action, signifier and signified was unacceptable; where it occurred it had to be set right in one way or another by poetic justice: the narrative punishment of cowards and traitors. The *kerajaan* order had to be maintained.

In such a mode of discourse a narrative ending in defeat forms a major problem; it amounts to a defeat of memory in the war against oblivion. The *Syair Perang Mengkasar* (Poem of the Macassar War), treating the war between Macassar and the VOC fought from December 1666 to July 1669, largely limits its efforts to solve this problem to obstinately trying to ignore it. Almost to the end it sticks as much as possible to an account of a 'frischer, fröhlicher Krieg' (a vigorous, merry war).

The problem of telling a heroic epic ending in defeat is solved in a rhetorically much more effective way by the *Syair Perang Siak* (Poem of the Siak War, SPS) (Chapter V). The poem tells of the war fought in 1761 by Raja Alam, in alliance with the Dutch, against his nephew, Sultan Ismail of Siak, and ends with the latter’s defeat and flight into exile. The poem was written — presumably in the last quarter of the 18th century — as a last-ditch attempt to bring about a reconciliation between the descendants in the two rival lines of Raja Alam and Raja Muhammad, lines who had opposed each other in the Siak War.

A reading of the SPS against the foil of inimical Malay and Dutch works of historiography makes clear that one reason why the *syair* must indeed have succeeded as a narrative of reconciliation is that it adroitly selects what it commemorates in order to keep all the skeletons of the dynasty’s history in the family closet. The representation of improprieties transgressing the Book of the Malay *Kerajaan* Order is avoided as much as possible; decorum is deftly maintained.

But no amount of selection can transform defeat into victory and for this
problem the syair has to offer another solution, which it finds in a clever juggling with plots. Against the failing plot of comedy in the heroic epic – the central story of the SPS – it pits the plot of tragedy and thus exonerates Ismail for his defeat. This tragedy is prepared for in the course of the long genealogical chronicle with which the SPS begins. To fall low one must first rise high. The genealogical chronicle first tells – in the form of a comedy, a story of ambitions effectively realized – of the glorious rise of the dynasty of Siak under its founder, Raja Kecik. It then dwells extensively on the stories of the tragic strife that broke out between his sons, Raja Alam and Raja Muhammad, a strife which ended in Alam being humiliatingly ousted by Ismail’s father Muhammad.

On one level this tragedy may be seen as a revenge-tragedy: Ismail is shown as the innocent victim of another law from the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order which contradicts that of family loyalty. This law is the rule of talio, that had descended upon him because his late father, Muhammad, had disgraced his uncle by ousting him from Siak. In this way the narrative does much to restore the kerajaan order. Yet the question of the impropriety of representing brother fighting brother and of Raja Kecik not doing very much to patch up their quarrel still remains.

These problems may be seen to be solved on another level of reading, which sees the tragedy as an Epiphany of yet another Law, one from the Book of God’s Writing. This higher law is God’s Will, overruling all human ambitions, the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order included. It overturns and exiles great rulers and thwarts all their earthly ambitions to remind them of their human lot as powerless dagang in exile in this transitory world.

If one reads a work as tragedy, one does not stop at reading it as a cautionary tale, reminding weak and powerless man of the powers-that-be. It also means allowing oneself to feel torn between two conflicting attitudes: to affirm the law or to give in to one’s desires; to accept the inevitable reality of catastrophe or to dream away in the vision of a lost paradise; to be resigned or to protest. Then there is not just the certainty of the Epiphany of law, there is also the doubt and the questioning. There is always the urge to interpret: what have we done wrong to deserve this fate?

This attitude is exemplified by the dagang-narrator of the SPS, who fluctuates between two forms of commemoration: mengingat (to mind, be heedful) and mengenangkan (to dwell on something in a mood of elegy or nostalgia). Here, and in its setting off of one plot against another, the SPS can be seen to solve its problems by mediation, a highly unusual procedure in the heroic epic.

Within the order of the Books, tragedy, too, is ultimately inadmissible as improper. Tragedy leaves us, like the sad dagang, gaping in a world of traces,
which we must try to decipher; lost in exile among the opaque signifiers, unable to regress beyond their inertness to signified Truth. From the confirmation of the order of the Books, tragedy leads to its disintegration in uncertain interpretation.

In an effort to restore mimesis, confirm the order of the Book of God’s Writing and escape from uncertain interpretation, the narrator ends his narrative in prayer, suggesting that the story of the Siak War, instead of being a tragedy, was really a Divine Comedy – the successful working of God’s Will in the world – for which man must render thanks unto Him. The SPS, thus, only just manages to reconfirm the traditional order.

Whereas mediation is a highly unusual phenomenon in the heroic epic, it is an essential characteristic of the Panji romance. In Chapter VI in a reading of the Syair Ken Tambuhan as a marriage story it is shown that this story of the love between Raden Inu and Lady-In-Waiting Tambuhan mediates between the demands of individual happiness vs the laws of social hierarchy; sexual desire vs social obligation; love for love’s sake vs love for the sake of status, power and property. On the one hand the aristocratic model of marriage is asserted and the belief is endorsed that worth and birth are synonymous. On the other it is suggested that, although a commoner, one may perhaps marry into the aristocracy after all, provided one can prove one’s worth.

On a deeper level the poem is read as a drama of signification, that is patterned on the generic plot of all romance. This plot mediates between remembrance and forgetfulness, the law and desire, identity and interpretation. The main protagonist is temporarily exiled from a state of clear fixed identity, which is a matter of commemoration by formulaic repetition, into a state of alienation, forgetfulness and opacity. Origin, royal identity and the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order are temporarily suspended, forgotten, as the dalang – typically the type of narrator prescribed for romance – spins out a narrative fraught with uncertain meaning and desire.

From a sign properly coinciding with meaning the main protagonist by a change in fortune and loss of memory is turned into a signifier-errant, whose meaning has been set adrift and is a matter for interpretation and conjecture. Thus proper (mematut) representation (mengadakan) is temporarily disrupted by a proliferation of meaning (memanjangkan) in a play of semblance (mengada-ada) and reality (mengadakan). The main protagonist connects these two orders of signification by making a circular movement of exile and return.

After a temporary carnivalesque suspension of the serious monological Voice of Accepted Truth the poem restores the identity of the main protagonist and returns to the proper order prescribed by the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order. Thus the poem both confirms and denies the
feasibility of invoking and commemorating noble origin and both confirms and denies the power of language to represent, another instance of its mediatory character.

The kerajaan order seems to be lastingly disturbed in the Syair Ikan Terubuk (Poem of the Terubuk-fish), of which I offer a reading in Chapter VII. This syair may well have been written in the second quarter or the middle of the 19th century. Its story is told by a dagang, a sign that it is to remain within the Books of Malay tradition. The poem, which parodies the genres of the heroic epic and the Panji romance, may be primarily regarded as a questioning of the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order as it is expressed in the heroic epic.

In my reading of the Syair Ikan Terubuk a prominent thread is to see it as a comical satire on the Siak War of 1761 between Raja Alam and Sultan Ismail. This satire is dressed in the guise of an animal-fable with fishes as protagonists: the story of the unrequited love of Prince Terubuk (Prince Shad) for Princess Puyu-Puyu (Princess Climbing Perch) and his unsuccessful efforts to make her his by military might. An important manifestation of its satirical purport is the incongruous, parodical description of the heroic oaths sworn by both parties.

In the syair the disjunction between these oaths and their meaning is thematized in a narrative which conspicuously parodies the heroic epic. Almost to the exclusion of all other action its text is almost entirely taken up by two disproportionally protracted councils of war, the first called by Prince Terubuk and the second by Princess Puyu-Puyu. In these councils, continually disturbed by incongruous references to motifs taken from romance, one fish after another declares his willingness to offer battle. However, the story fails to implement the pattern of the success story – a story about rewarded heroic courage – but ends in an utter anti-climax: not a single blow is struck.

The warning of the Sebahan-fish to Princess Puyu-Puyu not to believe the oaths of her courtiers because sekaliannya cakap tiada berguna (all their oaths have no use) and sekaliannya itu mengada-ada (all just pretend) are proven true. At first sight poetic justice seems to have its way: the perjurious fish-heroes, and with them the historical figures for whom they stand, are ridiculed. The disjunctions and improprieties seem to have been solved. Ultimately, however, the Book of the Malay Kerajaan Order is not reconfirmed, in that no party in the conflict is proved right: comical laughter is aimed at both parties.

Another playful questioning of the Idea of the Book – this time one by parody and the ironic foregrounding of fictionality – which does not resolve the disjunctions between sign and meaning and does not reconfirm the Books of Malay culture, is found in the writings of Muhammad Bakir, who
ran a manuscript lending library in Batavia in the late 19th century. His works may be seen both as looking back to traditional Malay literature and as preparing the way for modern Indonesian literature. A case in point is his *Sair Buah-Buahan* (Poem of the Fruits), a chain of stories, the first and longest of which is about fruits falling in love with each other.

As is shown in the reading of this *syair* in Chapter VIII, it is ostensibly a work of subservient fiction – a serious didactic fruit-fable warning the young in *dagang*-style against giving in to one’s desires and against reading the romances of the paper- *dalang* because these come from the Book of the Devil. On closer reading, however, it unfolds a playful narrative about reading and writing, authority and authorship. This narrative jestingly exceeds the limits of the Books of the Malay tradition without returning within them. Disturbing their mythical sacrality by its humorousness and unresolved improprieties, it asserts the rights of fictional writing.

One way in which the work betrays a non-serious intent is by its persistent parodying of the very genre the narrator ostensibly warns against. The other is that it pits an ironical unreliable writer/narrator (*pengarang*) against the truth-seeking *dagang*. This writer is clearly an avatar of the *dalang*. By the jocular comments of the narrator about the presumed *asal* (origin), *sebab* (cause) and *mula* (beginning) of the narrative and its events, all unquestioning assumptions of Origin and Truth are problematized. As one story follows another as ‘proof’ of the truth of its predecessor, the question about locating the authority of meaning in an origin or an authoritative text is postponed indefinitely.

The rise to new dignity of the amplifying *dalang* and his rebirth in the transformation of the fictionalizing *pengarang* is signalled when the narrator as the Origin of his story indicates: *Sebab pengarang mau panjangkan* (Because the writer wants to spin out his story). The writer is the Origin of the story and reigns over it like a god: *Dengan takdir orang yang mengarang* (By the will of the person who writes). Ultimately, however, this Origin, too, is spirited away: at the end of the last story in the chain, its hero the Green Beetle – obviously a portrait of the seductive writing author – is nowhere to be found. Authority is ultimately located where autonomous fiction lays it: in the hands of the reader.

Maka adalah diumpamakan fakir hikayat ini seperti suatu taman, yang amat permai lagi dengan indah-indah perbuatan-nya. Maka adalah dalamnya itu beberapa pohon buah-buahan yang amat lazat citrarasanya dan beberapa bunga-bungaan, yang amat harum baunya. (Abdullah 1919:5.)

(Now this beggar likens this *hikayat* to a garden which is exceedingly beautiful and has been laid out with great allure. In it there are several trees with fruits which are exceedingly delicious to the taste, and several kinds of flowers, the scents of which are exceedingly fragrant.)
Malay authors occasionally compare their work to a garden. They may do so by means of the title, as we see, for instance, in titles such as Bustan us-Salatin (Garden of the Rulers) or Bustan ul-Katibin (Garden of the Writers). Another way in which they may do so is by having their narrator make such a comparison in the prologue, as we see in the above example, which has been taken from the prologue of Abdullah ibn Abdulkadir al-Munysi’s Hikayat Panja Tanderan.

In both East and West gardens have always been fraught with symbolism. In Malay romance the garden, with its voluptuous princesses bathing in a pool, surrounded by the lush scenery of trees laden with fruit and shrubs full of flowers in bloom, has always been the locus of refreshment, amusement, forgetfulness, soothing one’s longing for the beloved and erotic wish-fulfilment.

In Sufi allegory the garden is understood in a spiritual sense, as a tiny microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic uncreated Heavenly Garden of Paradise mentioned in the Koran (*jannat al-Naim*, see e.g. Sura 18.107) (Schimmel 1980:82-3). In the microcosmic garden man’s longing for the Beloved, the Great Gardener, may temporarily be soothed because the splendours with which He has endowed His created garden, through their veil, grant a fleeting glimpse of His radiant beauty. Thus, in the Hikayat Gul Bakawali, that may be read both as a worldly and as a spiritual romance and tells of the quest by a prince for the Rose of Bakawali – significantly a flower that restores the faculty of sight – the narrator draws our attention to his story in the following words:

Bahwasanya dapatlah hikayat ini dinamakan Taman Penglipur Lara bagi sekalian mereka yang berdendam birahi (Siti Hawa Salleh 1986:1).

(Verily, this hikayat may be called the Garden that Soothes all Cares for those who are filled with longing.)

In these examples of the romantic and the spiritual vision of the garden in the Malay textual tradition attention is in different ways drawn to the garden’s sensuous beauty, that is, to the garden as a signifier.

What the use of garden imagery shows is that the Malays were very much aware that language is ever an instrument of seduction. It is from a growing awareness of how Malay narratives, as do all texts, try to seduce us, either by their beauty or by the apparent self-explanatoriness of their claims to truth, that this book was born.

The free play of signifiers is understandably feared and mistrusted. It can not be stopped, except by the power of our own will, which in turn is very much determined by the power of the community, the culture and the tradition to which we belong. In the Malay textual tradition this decision to end the play of the signifiers and return to representation is figured as the
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plucking of the fruits by the wise man, who does not abandon himself to the forgetfulness induced by the sensuous beauty of the garden (Abdullah 1919:6).

This book is a quest for the Flower of Malay narrative, that has long been thought to have forever faded away and died. On its way it roams through many gardens, one even more seductive than the other. No doubt the road that it follows is not always a straight one. Attracted by the lush beauty of fruits and flowers it often goes astray. Whether it succeeds in plucking the Flower of Malay narrative and obtaining a glimpse of beauty and truth, it is for others to say.