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Modern Indonesian literature abroad

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MODERN INDONESIAN LITERATURE ABROAD

In recent years a growing interest in modern Indonesian literature has become manifest outside Indonesia. It may be useful to give a short survey of such materials as have come to my notice, even though this survey is of necessity incomplete.

First of all it should be mentioned that literary, cultural and scholarly journals and magazines have discovered modern Indonesian literature and regularly or incidentally publish translations of poetry, short stories, essays etc. The well-known journal *INDONESIA*, issued half-yearly by the Modern Indonesia Project of Cornell University, has published a number of Indonesian stories in English translation, for example Idrus' stories *Fujinkai* and *Och . . . Och . . . Och* (vol. 2) and *Surabaya* (vol. 5), Ajip Rosidi's stories *Among the Family* (vol. 1) and *A Japanese* (vol. 6), while Heather Sutherland (vol. 6) and Harry Aveling (vol. 7) contributed essays on modern literature.

Another magazine which deserves to be mentioned as an interesting effort to make available to a wider audience modern literary and other cultural products from Southeast Asia including Indonesia is *TENGGERA* (*tenggara* means Southeast). So far five issues have come out, the latest one bearing the year 1969. Another volume, containing Southeast Asian plays, has been announced. Several short stories, poems and essays on Indonesian literature have been published so far. In vol. 5 there is an interesting section on traditional Malay music and drama, with papers by Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard, William P. Malm, Mohd. Taib Osman and Amin Sweeney, but it falls outside the scope of the present survey to go into these papers, all of which were read at the 1969 Conference on the Traditional Drama and Music of Southeast Asia in Kuala Lumpur.

As an example of a magazine devoting a special issue to modern Indonesian literature, the Australian quarterly *WESTERLY* should be mentioned. M. A. Jaspán acted as guest editor for the issue of October 1966 which was wholly devoted to this literature. It contains two

informative articles on Bahasa Indonesia and its development by Professor A. H. Johns and Dr. Soebardi, translations of nine poems by Chairil Anwar and others, and of four short stories, three of them by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Johns also contributed a substantial paper on the most important Indonesian poet after Chairil Anwar and before Rendra, i.e. Sitor Situmorang. The magazine is illustrated with some examples of contemporary Indonesian carving and painting. The translations, though not flawless, are sufficient to give the interested reader an adequate idea of the originals.

Another Australian magazine which more recently published a special Indonesian issue is *QUADRANT*. Here Ivan Kats was the guest editor, and although this issue is not exclusively devoted to literature, a substantial part of it is taken up by Indonesian writing and essays on Indonesian writing. Again Johns contributed an interesting paper under the title "Through Myth and Dream: the Indonesian Quest for Reality"; this paper is a plea for a kind of literary history, different from the one usual both in Indonesia and abroad; rather than "parcelling up literary history into a series of generations", and by doing so "failing to observe what authors of different 'generations' have in common", critics should emphasize the basic themes of all modern Indonesian writers, from Kartini in 1898 to Goenawan Muhammad in 1968, issues such as alienation (from one's traditional milieu, from one's public, as well as from literature abroad), and the "struggle to discover or build a new identity, a sense of purpose and a function". Furthermore a fragment from Mochtar Lubis' autobiography, essays by prominent intellectuals such as Goenawan Muhammad, Nono Anwar Makarim, St. Takdir Alishjahbana, Pramoedya's "Letter to a Friend from the Country" and a short story by Gerson Poyk, together with some poems by Taufiq Ismael and Rendra, give interesting glimpses of present-day Indonesian literary and cultural life. The remainder of the issue is taken up by a number of papers on politics and economics by Arief Budiman, the late Soe Hok-gie, Jacob Oetama, B. Dahm, J. M. van der Kroef and Soedjatnoko. Two remarkable papers dealing with the problems of economic development and aid in connection with cultural relations, specifically between Australia and Indonesia conclude the volume: one is by Lionel Landry who has been professionally involved with international cultural exchange for a long time, and the other by the Research Director of the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at Monash University, J. A. C. Mackie. Both papers are commendable reading for anyone having all too optimistic ideas about cross-cultural communication and

cultural cooperation between a "Western" country, whether Australia, the U.S.A., Japan or the Netherlands, and an Asian country such as Indonesia.

Separate books containing translations of modern Indonesian literature in Western languages have also appeared in recent years. After the excellent English translation, by the late Claire Holt, of Mochtar Lubis' *Twilight on Djakarta* (*Sendja di Djakarta*), more interesting for sociological and political than for literary reasons, his earlier and better novel *Djalan tak ada Ujung* (1952) has been successively translated into Italian by L. Santa Maria, into English by A. H. Johns, and into Dutch by C. H. Schaap. I cannot judge the Italian translation; the English one is quite accurate and adequate, while the Dutch one is also sufficiently reliable to give the reader a good impression of the original.

It is fortunate, and justifiable from various angles, that Mochtar Lubis' novels gradually reach an international audience; one must hope that others, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Achdiat K. Mihadja will follow soon.

Rufus Hendon published, in English translation, *Six Indonesian Short Stories*, by H. A. M. K. Amrullah (Hamka), Barus Siregar, Rusman Sutiamarga, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Armijn Pane and Bakri Siregar. From a purely literary point of view this combination of authors is a bit unusual, but the translator was apparently not primarily interested in literary values. He indicates that each of the stories illuminates some aspect of Indonesian life, and indeed as such it is an interesting collection, in a fully reliable and quite readable English translation. A similar collection of Indonesian stories in Dutch translation, compiled and translated by Beb Vuyk and the present author and containing thirteen stories by eleven authors of the generation of 1945, for obvious reasons cannot be discussed here in any detail.

Much more ambitious in scope and design than either of the last two books is a collection of Indonesian short stories in French translation which was edited by Denys Lombard with the collaboration of Winarsih Arifin and Minnie Wibisono. This collection contains altogether 68 short stories, by 46 different authors, covering the period from 1933—1965. On each author a short but extremely useful biographical and bibliographical note is added, while in six appendices some information useful for the reader who is not familiar with the Indonesian background and history is presented. The French trans-

lations seem quite adequate and the volume as a whole is a most interesting presentation of modern Indonesian literature to a French public. The only thing which is perhaps regrettable about this book is its appearance in a series the circulation of which is normally restricted to a scholarly public, whereas it deserves the attention of a much wider circle of general readers interested in literature.

Translating poetry for a non-scholarly, literary audience is of course incomparably more difficult than translating prose stories. Still, in recent years some major efforts to make modern Indonesian poetry accessible to Western readers have come to my notice. One was by the late lamented French scholar Louis-Charles Damais who published a collection of 102 poems from the period 1925-1950, with short but valuable notes on the authors. I feel incompetent to judge of the poetic adequacy of these renderings in French, but they are certainly reliable and accurate, which is more than one can say of the English translations of Indonesian poetry which now remain to be discussed in more detail.

Burton Raffel, now a professor of English, first came across Indonesian literature while teaching English in Indonesia in the early fifties. He developed a keen interest in Indonesian poetry, especially the work of Chairil Anwar. His two most recent and most ambitious books, after an earlier *Anthology of Modern Indonesian Poetry* (1964), are one on the *Development of Modern Indonesian Poetry*, and an edition of the complete poetry and prose of Chairil Anwar, with an English translation.

It is indeed a pity that Raffel's fascination with Indonesian literature is not equalled by his knowledge of the language in which this literature is written. There can be little doubt that in many cases Raffel has a true "feeling" for the "meaning" of the poems with which he is dealing. But it is also evident that in other cases this intuitive and approximate approach leads to misunderstanding and completely wrong translations of the originals, as it is not based on sound grammatical knowledge.

I am aware of the fact that this is a severe judgment, which stands in need of substantiation. I will therefore give a few examples. I want to emphasize that these examples are by no means exceptional cases, but are taken from a fairly large number of comparable mistranslations. Firstly, a very simple case. The last two lines of Sitor Situmorang's well-known poem *Lagu Gadis Itali: Abang lenjap hatiku hantjur / mendedjar bajang disaldju gugur* are translated by Raffel as follows: "I'll vanish, my heart cracked, Running from the reflection of falling

snow". Raffel has not understood that *abang* here is used by the girl to indicate her lover, and should be translated therefore as the pronoun "you"; moreover the meaning of *kedjar* ("to chase") is apparently not familiar to him. The actual meaning of the lines quoted is therefore: "You have vanished, and my heart is crushed; I run after a shadow in the fallen snow (or perhaps even better: Running after a shadow I collapse in the snow)."

A more complicated case is the following. In Chairil Anwar's well-known poem *Puntjak* the first part of the second sentence runs as follows: *Kederasan ramai kota jang terbawa/ tambah penjoal dalam diri — diputar atau memutar —/ terasa tertekan*. In Raffel's translation: "The excitement of the pushing, crowded city, heaping problems/ Onto problems — whether spinning or spun —/ Feels quieter, calmer." Now I agree that the basic structure of the sentence is: *Kederasan ... terasa tertekan*, although I do not admire his translation of these words: *kederasan* is "hurry, hecticness" rather than "excitement"; *terasa* means "is felt (to be)", and *tertekan* is "suppressed"; it is this inadequate rendering of certain shades of meaning which in my opinion gives the translation a flavour rather different from the original. However, there is more. *Kederasan ramai kota* in Indonesian cannot mean "the excitement of the pushing city", but rather "the hectic hurry of the town"; *jang terbawa*, whatever Raffel's interpretation, simply means: "which is brought", and that is exactly what the poet means: "the hurry which we (*kita* further on, here implied in *ter-*) had brought with us." For the next four Indonesian words I cannot even guess from Raffel's overall translation, how he has interpreted them individually, but in any case the result is completely wrong. *Tambah* in Chairil's language simply means "and also, in addition" (see, for example, his poem *Hampa*, where Raffel's translation in this respect is correct!). It coordinates syntactically the noun *kederasan* with the noun *penjoal*, which however does not mean "problem(s)". The translator has not recognized the form with *pe-* plus nasalization, which indicates "the person (or instrument) who (which) does, or has, what the basic word indicates." *Penjoal* therefore must mean "the man or thing who or which makes or has problems, puts questions, etc.", analogically to *penanja* "the asker of questions". Apparently the author wants to say that not only the external hectic hurry of the town below has been suppressed but also the question-asker within (*dalam diri*, *diri* is common with Chairil for "person", especially the person of the poet himself). The addition *diputar atau memutar* refers to the question which the

penjoal, the question-asker within, puts: "to be turned around or to turn around", that is the question! The *tanja* at the end of the poem refers back to this question put by the *penjoal*, within whom it is now temporarily suppressed. Altogether, as a translation we would get something like: "The hectic hurry of the town which we had brought with us as well as our inner self posing the everlasting problem — whether we are turned around or are ourselves turning things around — are felt to be suppressed." This of course is not a poetically adequate translation of Chairil's lines. I am happy to leave such a translation to people with more poetic intuition, like Raffel, but no translator should start working on such a poem without having grasped the meaning of the words, the function of the forms and the structure of the sentence.

It should be noted that such errors in the translations as have been pointed out cannot be explained away by the need for a poetic rendering of the original. This is also obvious from the sometimes elementary mistakes which occur in the translations of prose fragments, and for example in a mistranslated title such as "Night Stabs through the Day" for *Melalui Siang Menembus Malam* which actually means something like "Through Daylight Penetrating into Darkness."

All this does not go to say that Raffel's books are without value. The edition of Chairil's complete original works, in a handy volume (and the paperback edition at a reasonable price) is a most useful book, certainly while Indonesian editions are so difficult to obtain outside the country of origin. In general the edition of the poems is reliable; a few errors or misprints of some consequence which I noted may be pointed out: p. 6 l. 1 *Dimana* is incorrect for *Dimasa* (the translation is based on the correct text); p. 18 l. 6 *Barangkali* is one word, not two; p. 34, l. 1 the first edition of Kerikil Tadjam has *terpupus* which seems a better reading than *terputus*; p. 36 l. 9 *hantijur*, read *hantjur*; p. 48 l. 3 the first ed. of KT has *meningkat* instead of *mengikat*; p. 62 l. 6 the hyphen should be corrected into a dash; p. 68 l. 10 *segara*, although occurring in various editions, is wrong for *segera* as Raffel himself translates; p. 98 l. 12 read *beta punja nama* instead of *punja nama*; p. 126 l. 12 read *riba* instead of *rib*; p. 144 l. 11 read *djandji*; p. 146 l. 1 *puntjuk* should probably read *puntjak*; p. 148 l. 10 read *dengan*. The most important variant readings from different editions of the poems are given in an Appendix to the book.

The other book does not pretend to be a definitive work on Indonesian poetry as a whole, and it certainly is not. It can best be characterized as an anthology of poetry, mostly in chronological order and with

incidental, varied comments, some of them more to the point than others. Not only in the translations of the poems but also in some of the comments the author through lack of linguistic knowledge is sometimes led to strange conclusions, for example in his explanation of *berkedjar-kedjaran* which is certainly not a *ber*-form of *kedjar-kedjaran* but rather a regular reciprocal form, with prefix *ber-*, suffix *-an* and duplication of the base (p. 48); '*ndak* "no, not" is not correctly qualified as a corruption of *tidak* (p. 49), but is rather a dialect form; nor is '*nusia* a colloquial form of *manusia*, but rather a poetic abbreviation (p. 97). Linguistic comments on a poem by Tatengkeng are also inadequate (p. 113). Raffel's selection of poets and poems is in general justifiable, although it is somewhat out of proportion that Amir Hamzah should receive so little space and attention: only thirteen pages out of the total of 190 — four of the thirteen moreover being devoted to Tagore rather than to Amir Hamzah himself. A valuable part of the book is the *Appendix* consisting of 64 pages, containing twenty-two items of literary criticism in English translation; it should be remarked, though, that nine out of the twenty-two items reappear in the edition of Chairil's work. Anyone aiming at bringing together Raffel's collected works on Indonesian poetry will end up possessing the same items in some three or four different volumes!

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PUBLICATIONS REFERRED TO, IN ORDER OF DISCUSSION.

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