

TALKING WITH AGNES LAM

A. Soe Than

Dr. Agnes Lam is a well-known Hong Kong poet. Her poems have appeared in Singapore's *Singa* and *Commentary* and Australia's *Westerly*. Her first collection, *Woman to Woman and other poems* was published in 1997 and her second collection *Water wood pure splendour* was published in 2001. She is currently an Associate Professor at the English Centre, University of Hong Kong. She was interviewed recently by A. Soe Than about her work.

ST: *Let me begin with 'the obvious question', Why do you write poetry? In other words, why do you prefer to communicate with your readers in that particular literary form, and not the others?*

AL: I write poetry because I do. It is as much a part of me as breathing, eating, teaching, watching television, taking the bus, talking with my family and friends. When something happens to me or people around me touch me in some way, I have an inner response. I cannot stop this inner response just as I cannot stop thinking. And because I am affected, I need to express this inner response. Sometimes, I write for people. For example, 'My cat' was written to comfort a friend whose cat passed away. 'To Sonia' was written for a friend who lost her baby. Sometimes, I write for myself because I need to seek a resolution to a philosophical question as in 'My cerebral child'. There are also times when an image hits me with such impact that I must record it, for example, 'Writing in the middle of the road'; if not, it will just keep growing in me and I cannot focus on other work. In a way, I have not chosen to be a poet; the poetry has chosen me. If I have time, I would like to write stories too and I have done so a few times before. Other writers may disagree but, as far as I am concerned, poetry is my necessary response to life while writing in other genres involves more conscious planning and because I already have to plan a lot of other writing (teaching materials, research papers, administrative papers), writing fiction to me is, for the time being at least, a luxury I cannot afford.

ST: *Hong Kong poetry can be broadly defined as "poetry available in Hong Kong". But more specifically, how would you define 'the Hong Kongness' of poetry composed in English?*

AL: The 'Hong Kongness' of a poem from Hong Kong cannot be defined outside of the sub-culture of the poetry writing or the reader reading. The choice of topic, the images, the words and rhythms and the emotional colour are undefinable without reference to the personality or outlook of the poet or the reader. It has been said before that the writing is the person writing it. I would go so far as to say that the reading of a text is the person reading it. Having said that, the majority of Hong Kong people do have certain attitudes and beliefs common to that major sub-group, the Chinese in Hong

Kong. For example, ask any person on the street in Hong Kong in the last month and he or she will tell you that he or she does not believe in the recent war in Iraq. At the same time, most of the people in Hong Kong do not believe in expressions of antipathy to Americans or defacement of American property in Hong Kong in protest against the war. That is an example of a Hong Kong attitude. However, we cannot stop there because that is also the attitude of many peace-loving people in the world. I am not trying to avoid answering your very good question but it is one that does not have an answer in that even if you can define a Hong Kong voice, that voice itself can well be an international voice because Hong Kong is an international city. So if you want to look for ‘Hong Kongness’, you may find it only in references (in subject matter or imagery) to the city, its people, its food, its languages, its political sympathies and various other aspects of its life. But at the core of it, where you find the humanity, Hong Kong poetry is no different from poetry in English from other countries and that is as poetry should be.

ST: *In one of your poems entitled ‘To the teacher who cried’ you write:*

*“A poem is not a poem
until it is heard.*

*Some poems are not heard
If the soul is not listening.”*

And also in your article ‘Defining Hong Kong poetry in English: an answer from linguistics’, you state that “modern poems are rather amorphous” and in the absence of rhythm and rhyme “the boundaries between poetry and other types of writing are unclear”. And we also have U.K.-based academics and linguists such as Ronald Carter arguing that literariness is present in all types of human communication, and proposing to view texts as containing “clines of literariness”. In your view, then, if all language could be literary, how do we characterize poetry?

AL: I have tried many times to explain my position on this before but many times I have failed to be persuasive because of people’s preconceptions about poetry. Many people think that only special people can compose poetry. I do not. I think anyone can compose a poem just as anyone can write a letter though some people can write better poems than others just as some people can write better letters than others. As far as I am concerned, there is no difference between poetic language and ordinary everyday language, apart from the line breaks you see in poetry. A poem is a poem because the writer presents it as such. But there is a difference between good poetry and less good poetry. Good poetry leaves the reader with a clear impression of what the poet tries to convey and a heightened sense of human empathy or awareness of the value of life and the poet does so without wasting any word used in the poem. A good poem also evokes in the reader a greater appreciation of the expressiveness of the language. Incidentally, some of my colleagues have said as a joke that some of my memos are like poems. I cannot say I agree because I doubt if my memos can give them a heightened sense of being human.

ST: *You are an academic, a university professor, and a published poetess! How do you cope with all these responsibilities involved – teaching, grading papers, researching and conferences, ‘disciplining’ yourself to write poems, and on top of all these, a family woman!?*

AL: I just try my best. Most of the time, I am just barely managing. Time and emotional energy spent on one of my roles inevitably means less time for other roles. So balance is very important. I know my responsibilities well. First and foremost is my teaching; preparing well for my classes and giving attention to students and their assignments take top priority in my life; not to do so is immoral because I am paid for it. The second priority is people who need me. I do not turn up at parties and dinners frequently but the members in my extended family and my friends know that if they really need my help, I will make time for them, even if it means I have to stay up later to finish my work. Priority 3 is research and that is usually done during term breaks and holidays. I am very selective about going to conferences. I do so only once or twice a year. Poetry is Priority 4 – the writing of it and sharing it through poetry readings and interviews. Everything else (personal grooming, income tax forms, investment, any other necessary aspect of life) is attended to as it arises as simply as I can. As for household chores, during the week, most of them are done by my helper who knows how hard I have to work. Some days when I have an evening class on, I do not even reach home till 9:00 pm. On weekends, my husband and I share the cooking duties. I can organize my life like this because I have a very supportive and capable husband. Perhaps I should mention too that because I am a Christian, most of the time I am fairly peaceful. I know where my bearings are. That helps a lot in whatever I do.

ST: *This leads us on to another question on poetry composition. I said ‘composition’ – not ‘writing’ because poetry, like any other form of creative writing is deliberate, and also I personally feel that there is some sort of musical quality in a poem. So a poem is composed – not simply jotted down. We may also recall Wordsworth’s statement of poetry as “emotions recollected in tranquility”. I have said that you are a very busy poetess. Do you have the luxury of ‘tranquility’ to compose your poems? I observed that you managed to produce very good, very moving poetry even when you were riding a bus! (I saw at the end of some poems ‘Smiling eyes’ and ‘Tea leaves’ you wrote bus 33, bus 8 etc.). How did you actually do that? Please tell us a bit about how you go through the process of your craft.*

AL: My study at home is the place where I usually write my poetry though the idea may have occurred to me earlier while on a bus or on a plane or in a hotel. A poem usually starts with an emotion or a thought that must be articulated. If it is not articulated, I will keep thinking about it. A line or two may come while I am on the bus. One image follows another and I will have to record them. This can happen any time. It happens especially when I am by myself. Perhaps ideas often occur to me when I am traveling from one place to another because that is my idle time when my mind is not otherwise occupied. I have sometimes jotted down lines and thoughts on scraps of paper if I cannot get to my study soon enough. Sometimes at night when I am about to sleep, some lines may come and I will get up (in the dark so as not to wake up my husband) to find a piece of paper to jot down a few words to remind me of the images and thoughts. If I do not have time to write the poem the next day, I will transfer these slips of paper to my notebook where I write down these ideas. Sometimes, these notes do not result in a poem. Often they do. Sometimes, the poems that come out of these notes do not seem to say much about anything and I will not publish them. On the basis of the notes, I write directly on the computer. After writing, I rewrite, changing a word here and there or redoing line breaks. I read the draft poem to myself over and over again so that the rhythm will be natural and does not jar. When I have time, I work at a poem continuously, almost obsessively, for a few days, often late into the night,

before I am pleased with it. When I do not have time, then as long as the first draft is written down, I am emotionally free to get on with my life. And I leave it as it is until I have time to go back to it or an editor asks me for a poem and I have to revise it for submission. I am fairly relaxed about the publication of my poems because I cannot afford to take it more seriously. A lot of times, I submit poems on invitation to various journals or anthologies rather than submit them of my own accord, not because I do not want to but because there is already the academic writing I have to take care of more proactively. When I have written a lot, say fifty or sixty poems, then I will contact my publisher and tell him I am planning a collection. I then go on to organize the flow of the collection. If a poem is a song, then a collection is symphony. My first collection is organized on the structure of innocence-disturbance-disintegration-resolution-harmony. My second collection takes the reader from the social landscape, through the national country to a borderless land. I do not know what my third collection will be like because I do not know what lies ahead in my life.

ST: *Some would argue that no poet in his or her senses ever wrote for the examination syllabus or the academic dissection-table. What are your views on the use of English poetry in EFL/ESL classes? Do students in Hong Kong enjoy English poetry? How is English poetry taught in Hong Kong schools and universities? In this part of the world, students are readily put off when given English poetry! Can you suggest some ideas as to how we can sensitise students to English poetry?*

AL: Because poetry is like ordinary language, there is no reason for it not to be part of the English curriculum. The advantage of poetry is that it is usually a shorter self-contained text, which means it is more easily understood within a lesson of 35 or 40 minutes. The brevity of a poem can also enable students to focus their attention better. The musicality or rhythm of a poem can enhance students' awareness of the sounds and the natural intonation of English. The new Hong Kong English syllabus includes a component of language arts. The government gave special funding for a teaching programme to enable in-service teachers to learn how to use poetry, short stories, plays, songs and other artistic resources to teach English. I was one of the two key developers and teachers for the programme for secondary schoolteachers. We trained 120 teachers in 2001 and 280 teachers in 2002. I know there was a parallel programme for primary schoolteachers. As far as university teaching of poetry is concerned, I do not feel qualified to comment as I do not teach in the English department. I teach applied linguistics, dissertation writing and Legal English. I do not have any difficulty with helping students become more open to poetry. I just tell them it is no different from ordinary language. I also try to choose poems they can identify with. It is easy for me to do that because I am one of them. I am one of them because I am very much part of the fabric of Hong Kong society. I relate to a lot of people through my job and my extended family with members at different ages. I am also very media-conscious. I listen to the radio, watch television and read both the Chinese and English newspapers. In a poetry lesson, I use a systematic approach. There are three stages: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. At the pre-reading stage, I try to help students make the connection between their everyday life and the poem. At the while-reading stage, the aim is to help students understand the poem. The post-reading task is usually a response from the students in the form of an oral presentation, a writing task or an activity beyond the classroom such as looking for a newspaper article or song on the same topic, planning a field trip and so on. Often students write poems too in the post-reading part of the lesson individually or as a class.

ST: *In the same article that I mentioned in the beginning, you mention three characteristics of good poetry such as – communicativeness, empathic pleasure and the appropriateness of the language used, all of which need to be culturally articulated. I have read both your collections 'Woman to woman and other poems' and 'Water wood pure splendour' which I thoroughly enjoyed. My observation is that most of your poems are not 'opaque', but rather 'direct'. Is that 'directness' because of your cultural background or because of the people your poems are intended for? I am asking this because when we read some English poets such as Philip Larkin or Ted Hughes, very much in keeping with their English culture, they would prefer 'understatement' rather than 'directness'.*

AL: I am 'direct' in that I aim to be understood. I make it a point that the reader knows the context of my writing. I do not believe in esoteric poetry, the terms of reference being so private that the reader does not have a good chance of understanding exactly what the poet is trying to convey. I am not 'direct' in that the feelings are often understated; readers are taken through my experience but have to figure out the mood themselves from what I take them through. Incidentally, one newspaper reviewer once referred to me as 'an Asian Philip Larkin'. I have no idea what in my poetry prompted the reviewer to make that observation.

ST: *Who are your favourite poets writing in English? Do you have any model or mentor? Am I right in saying that there is some amount of influence on your work by poets such as Ezra Pound and Robert Frost?*

AL: There are too many poets I like for me to mention them. I studied the works of so many poets in Chinese and English that inevitably I must have been influenced by many of them. Ezra Pound probably did not make much impact on me because I did not study his works very carefully. I ran out of time before the exams. Robert Frost's effect is probably somewhere there but I cannot tell how much this was just because I happened to have written a poem 'The road taken' which echoed his 'The road not taken'. Similarly, another radio presenter once asked me whether I was thinking of Keats when I wrote 'The flowerpot' because it mentioned 'Grecian youths and maidens'. I remember liking the quiet poetry of Edward Thomas and that of the Japanese poet, Basho. All through my schooling, I enjoyed the Chinese poetry from the Tang Dynasty. Nowadays, I like reading the poetry written by Asian poets writing in English, such as that of Shirley Lim, or poetry translated into English such as that of Leung Pink Kwan. When I first started publishing my poems, I was teaching at the National University of Singapore (NUS). My colleagues, also poets, were all very supportive: Edwin Thumboo, Kirpal Singh, Arthur Yap, Leong Liew Geok and Lee Tzu Pheng. While it is hard to pinpoint anyone as my mentor specifically, I have enjoyed poetic fellowship both in Singapore and Hong Kong. To be very frank, I do not take my inspiration only from reading other poets. I do not really draw boundaries between poetry and other genres or between poetry and life itself. It is just as likely for me to be inspired by a television documentary as by a good poem.

ST: *I feel that most of your poetry is personal and also confessional – sometimes very confessional for an Asian writer. Is my observation shared in your part of the world?*

AL: The first collection is more personal and the second one is less so in terms of subject matter. A few readers have made that observation but most have not. In fact, a reader once said I was not 'confessional' enough in my first collection. Personally, I do not think I am really 'confessional'. If I am, then many poets are. Poetry is essentially a voice from within. How is that possible unless I speak from my soul, whatever that may mean? I also think that my personal feelings, thoughts or even circumstances are actually common to many people and my poetry, I hope, can help them to realize they are not alone, particularly if they are in pain. A young pastor once told me that 'To Sonia' spoke very much to him when he had to counsel a young couple who lost their baby. A colleague also said that she started crying in a bookstore when she read my poems about my mother's death because they reminded her of her grandmother's passing away.

ST: *I think a poem is essentially a private communication between a poet and a reader. The meaning of the poem is for the reader alone to 'interpret' in accordance with his or her individual experience in life and personal imagination. That could also create the 'danger' or the sheer fun of 'misinterpreting' a poem or getting the wrong end of the poet's pen as different readers will read differently into a poem due to their different schemata, especially so in EFL/ESL classrooms. I am being longwinded because I find one of your poems difficult to interpret. And here and now let me enjoy the privilege of asking you to explain the meaning of that poem. It's a very short poem entitled 'First draft'.*

*"My life is a first
draft printed on paper once
used for other drafts."*

Finally, as a poetess, how would you read and interpret the following short poem composed by a contemporary Burmese?

Rain

whenever
the Sky
peevishly
cries,
the earth
fears
Her
slapping
tears.

AL: 'First draft' is a haiku in form. It has double meanings. One meaning is 'My life is a first draft printed on paper once used for other drafts.' This means: 'My life can only be lived once. It is never going to be perfect just as first drafts are not perfect. My imperfect life is built on the lives of other people because other people have made sacrifices so that I can live. I think of my parents, my siblings,

my teachers, anyone who has given their time, their love, part of their lives to me.’ The other reading is: ‘My life is a first. My life is a draft printed on paper once. My life is used for other drafts.’ That means: ‘My life is always original because it is never repeated. It is never lived a second time. I only have one chance, one life, one draft to write. So I want to use my life to enrich the lives of other people living their lives only once.’ In either interpretation, there is a sense of continuity and connectedness between my life and the lives of other people. Everyone writes on everyone else’s life. That is a responsibility and also a privilege.

My interpretation of the Burmese poem entitled ‘Rain’: ‘The poet is not happy. The pain suffered by the poet comes as suddenly, as violently but as certainly as rain slapping on the earth. But the giver of this pain also suffers in the giving of pain, just as the slapping tears come from a sorrowful sky. The receiving and giving of pain are inevitable just as Sky and Earth have to co-exist and are defined with reference to each other; Rain is the natural connection between the two. Without Rain, Sky and Earth cannot meet. Perhaps this is a love poem saying that love that connects two people is by nature full of pain. Sky is the woman who is sometimes peevish and Earth is the man who is afraid of her periodic outbursts not only because it hurts him but also because it hurts her. One could also interpret the poem more philosophically as a depiction of the human condition; between Sky (Heaven) and Earth, there is only Rain or pain but without Rain, pain, we will never have a taste of heaven. The difficulty with the second interpretation is that one will have to postulate a peevish heaven, which is counter-intuitive to me, but which may be perfectly natural to someone who does not believe in a benevolent God.’

(This interview first appeared in *The English Teacher: An International Journal*, Vol 6, No 2, July 2003.)

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