Greetings from the ED

November 25 is National Teachers’ Day, when we commemorate the establishment of the Indonesian Teachers Association (PGRI) in 1945, following Indonesia’s historic declaration of independence. It is a time when we pay homage to the unsung heroes among us: the more than three million teachers who are entrusted with educating the future generation. Many must work with minimal tools in harsh conditions, especially those in remote and marginalized areas. The remote learning system forced on them by the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring them to have additional IT skills, has not made it easier for them. Contract teachers, those who are not civil servants and make up half the total, remain woefully underpaid. Little wonder the teaching profession has failed to attract qualified personnel. According to official statistics, the average number of teachers per school is a low 23. Additionally, according to the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Indonesian secondary school students have consistently lagged behind their counterparts in neighboring countries, scoring almost at the bottom of the list.

This is what has compelled Education Minister Nadiem Makarim to initiate radical reforms that he hopes will go a long way towards turning things around. The newly-launched Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) program introduces more adaptable curricula and provides an expanded education budget which, among other things, will give much-needed pay raises for teachers. This is surely a cause for wonder.

Ruminations

Dreamboys

Because of the size of the McGlynn brood—ten children in all when Luke was born in 1963—it’s unsurprising Santa Claus could include only one gift per child in his carry bag at Christmastime. The first gift I remember receiving was a set of wooden building blocks which, at the age of two or three, I could do little with except stack, whack, and restack (though the colored letters on their four sides did help me to learn how to spell my name). A box of Lincoln Logs the next year whet my appetite for building things but, due to the limited variety and shape of the notched logs, the end result was invariably a miniature log house. Not so with two toys in the years that followed. I did not yet know the names Buckminster Fuller or Louis Sullivan, but with the wooden Tinker Toys I constructed geodesic domes and with my metal Erector Set I built miniature skyscrapers—and it was then I began to dream of being an architect. These hands-on toys helped to improve my motor- and mechanical skills but I credit the Etch A Sketch Santa gave me a year later for the ripening of my imagination.

An Etch A Sketch is a small box-shaped instrument with a thick, flat gray screen in a red plastic frame. The toy is a kind of plotter, a machine used to produce vector graphics drawings. In its lower corners on the front are two white knobs. Twisting the knobs moves a stylus that displaces aluminum powder on the back of the screen, leaving solid lines and allowing one to create lineographic images. The left knob moves the stylus horizontally and the right one moves it vertically. By turning the two knobs simultaneously it is possible to create diagonal and even circular lines which enabled me to reproduce images of buildings I’d seen in magazines and, better still, to create structures of my own imagining.

A model of an Etch A Sketch
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5395785
celebration, particularly since Indonesia needs as many as one million more teachers if we are to attain quality human development.

If you happen to have missed the Lontar Literary Festival (LitFest) recently held in conjunction with Jakarta Content Week (JakTent), you can watch any or all of LitFest’s 30 events (and more than 150 other JakTent events) simply by registering at www.jaktent.com. Topics range from “Taboo,” featuring Booker Prize-winner, Marieke Lukas Rijneveld, to “In a State of Repression” with award winning authors Juan Pablo Villalobos and Leila S. Chudori.

Stay safe and healthy, and remember to support Lontar.

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

After completion of my M.A. in Indonesian literature at the University of Michigan in Spring 1981, the next two years was a peripatetic period, with me dividing my time between Indonesia, where I was seeking to find a paid job in the field of translation, and the U.S., where I worked for the U.S. Department of State as an escort-interpreter for visiting Indonesian VIPs. During that period, I escorted more than a dozen visitors on month-long tours of the country. New York was always one of our ports-of-call and the Broadway theater district in Manhattan was an essential stop where the most popular musical at the time was Dreamgirls, the story of a young female singing trio who rise from the backstreets of Chicago to become an international singing sensation. Opening in 1981 and starring Jennifer Holiday as Effie White, the musical won six Tony Awards for that year and, in 1982, the original cast recording then won two Grammy Awards, including Best Vocal Performance for Holiday’s rendition of "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going." At gay bars I visited throughout the country (after first making sure my Indonesian visitors had safely retired to their rooms), I witnessed voluptuous drag queens imitate Holiday-as-Effie-White belt out the ballad of her abortive love affair, telling her man “I’m not living without you; I don’t wanna be free.” I had no partner then but was definitely longing for one as I silently sang along, “No, no, no, no! I'm not waking up tomorrow morning and finding there's nobody there.” Thus it was, after near-constant travel for 24 months and sorely in need of companionship, I decided to return again to Indonesia; this time, to settle down.

In January 1983, I moved into Jalan Danau Maninjau No. 93 (DM-93), an address occupied by a fellow U.S. Midwesterner by the name of Jerry Chamberland whom I had met two years earlier. Jerry had first come to Indonesia in October of 1974 on the way to Australia after completion of his undergraduate degree. There, he had hoped to find a job—and he did, but in Darwin which Cyclone Tracy devastated in December not long after his arrival. He then returned to Indonesia where he taught English in Bandung for several years before moving to Singapore for a year and then returning again to Indonesia in 1980 to work at the British Council. As Jerry hailed from Menominee, Michigan, a city on the border with my home state of Wisconsin, we found ourselves to be likeminded in many ways and became fast friends.

Not long after my move to DM-93, I was invited to a party at the very modest home of Richard Howells, an English-language teacher at the time. Born and raised in Pontypridd, on the southern coast of Wales, Richard had first come to Indonesia in 1978 to work in Aceh with Voluntary Service Overseas. We, too, hit it off and, thereafter, he was a regular visitor to DM-93. Several months later, when the lease on his house expired, Jerry and I invited him to move into the previously-unoccupied guest room at DM-93.
In the months and years that followed, until mid-1986 when Jerry moved (temporarily) to Lancaster, U.K., to pursue a higher degree, the three of us were a constant cohort. There is no counting the number of after-dinner glasses of Ararat brandy we downed (bottles of which we surreptitiously purchased at the Diplomatic Duty Free store at Sarinah where kindly attendants ignored our non-diplomatic status) and there’s almost no telling the number of nights when, joined by other young foreigners and Indonesian friends, we lounged around a marble table in the sunken area of our living-dining area, a former fish pond we had transformed into a “conversation pit” lined with woven matting and numerous throw pillows, to share our dreams, hopes, and aspirations. Because of our closeness, comradery, our penchant for dreaming about the future and another commonality, friends facetiously dubbed the three of us the Dreamboys.

In regard to dreams, when Richard was a boy he hoped to become a vet while Jerry longed to be a librarian—though I had to laugh when he admitted that as a Catholic he, like me, had also secretly hoped for the vocation to become priest.

The “Dreamboys” in 1984 outside Paradiso Restaurant on Jalan Sabang: Richard Howells, Jerry Chamberland, and JHM.

Simple toy that it was, an Etch A Sketch had no image-saving feature, not like the graphics applications on computers today. After I had completed an image—whether it be the Taj Mahal or my own creation—in order to create something new, I had first to erase the older image. I turned the toy upside down, shook it, and as the polystyrene beards smoothed out and recoated the inside of the screen with aluminum power, the image disappeared—but not so its memory.

Now, close to 40 years first being called “the Dreamboys,” Jerry, Richard, and I remain close friends. As is evident from my career path, I did not become the architect I dreamed of being in my youth. Neither did Jerry become a librarian nor Richard a vet. But dreams, hopes, and aspirations forever change, don’t they? …And hopefully with no regrets.

John McGlynn [john_mcglynn@lontar.org]
Surat dari Pejompongan

Sirkus

Kawan Moer,


Gaya seperti ini setidaknya masih berlaku pada fiksi-fiksi Nukila Amal yang lebih pendek. Di sini kita berhadapkan dengan pentingnya amatan sang tokoh cerita. Ia semacam aktor yang darinya kita bisa mendapatkan semacam "lukisan suasana" —soal yang dalam puisi liris menjadi sangat penting. Dengan kata lain, dalam fiksi Nukila, kita mendapatkan kualitas puisi lirik yang diutubuhkan dalam rangkaian kalimat yang tidak sepenuhnya tunduk pada nalar prosa.

Apa yang kita terima sebagai kisah di sini adalah laporan pengindraan seorang narator-tokoh tentang dunia di sekitarnya: dunia yang ajaib tetapi juga menjemukan ("Singgah di Sirkus") atau dunia yang indah tetapi mengancam ("Laluba"). Seorang narator-tokoh bekerja dengan segenap indranya dalam membangun kisah dan itu tidak sepenuhnya linier—dan tidak akan pernah.

Tetapi, ia kadang menyentak dengan serangkaian jukstaposisi—suatu ciri penting dalam puisi modern—atau dengan letupan pikiran yang kerap diuarkan oleh seorang esais.

Pada kasus kedua ini, kita juga mendapatkan sebuah kualitas esai dari fiksi yang rata-rata ringkas itu. Itulah serangkaian ungkapan pikiran narator yang dalam kadar tertentu sudah menjadi bosan dengan paparan kisah yang melulu mengandalkan perasaan dan keharuan. Maka si narator akan berpikir, atau lebih tepatnya: menguraikan hasil penyulingan pikirannya, tentang dunia yang tengah ia hadapi.

Sebuah pemandangan dalam sirkus bukanlah melulu pameran pameran keajaiban yang sebenarnya terukur dan terumuskan melalui latihan yang terus-menerus, tetapi juga sebuah dunia yang tengah dirumuskan ulang, secara sangat berjarak, sehingga yang pemandangan yang
By A. A. Navis
Translated by
Kevin W. Fogg and Matthew G.B. Woolgar

To the Contrary contains seventeen of A.A. Navis’s most provocative and engaging stories. These are stories with staying-power which springs from their biting satire and insight into everyday situations familiar to any reader. Although the stories are rmly rooted in West Sumatra, they speak to common problems of the modern era.

Paperback: 156 pages


Memang, ada masanya Nukila memanfaatkan seni rupa, dalam hal ini seni grafis, sebagai sumber penciptaan. Itulah ketika ia menulis sejumlah cerita berdasarkan tatapannya pada sejumlah grafis M.C. Escher. Itulah ketika cerita menjadi semacam tafsir atas seni rupa. Arif Bagus Prasetyo menyebutnya “tamsil zaman citra”.

Tetapi kita harus memperlakukan itu sebagai semacam studi, yang dalam bidang seni apa pun dimungkinkan ketika seorang seniman menggarap tema tertentu sebagai semacam latihan dan kesenangan. Tetapi untuk selanjutnya, Nukila adalah seorang pencerita yang menempuh semacam disonansi dalam fiksi Indonesia mutakhir. Ia memberi kita pemandangan asing, sendatan dan letupan dari kisah yang tengah mengalir.

Fiksi-fiksinanya membentangkan dunia yang akrab dengan kita, dunia seorang pekerja kerah putih, misalnya, tetapi selanjutnya kita dibawa ke dalam pertualangan mimpi, yang duduk bukan lagi sebagai isyarat, tetapi sebagai dunia fiks terendiri, semacam sisi lain dari kehidupan yang terlihat normal-realisis. Bahkan, jika diikuti narnaryanya, ia akan mengambil alih sepenuhnya pengisahan dunia fiksonal Nukila.


Satu lagi yang tidak boleh kita lupa. Meski Nukila menulis dalam bahasa Indonesia—sesekali masih terbaca nalar bahasa Inggrisnya—sebenarnya ia menyerap begitu banyak kelisian. Bukan dari latar lokal tempat ia berasal, tetapi kehidupan urban yang ia hadirkan buat kita. Hasratnya kepada kata-kata baru, semacam neologisme, memperlihatkan upayanya untuk membuat bahasa Indonesia menjadi berdaya, teramat berdaya, sebagai bahasa sastra.

Seorang penulis fiksi—“penulis” dalam pengertian sepenuhnya—adalah seorang pencipta bahasa.

Demikian, Kawan.

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