Let’s hear it for over-worked and under-appreciated teachers. In Indonesia, educators have lately come under a barrage of criticism for not doing enough to improve the quality of their teaching methods. The findings of the 2021 National Assessment Board revealed that one out of two students failed to reach minimum literacy and numeracy levels, a figure that puts Indonesia among the lowest in the world. According to UNESCO, where the three fundamental subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics are concerned, Indonesia comes in at 65 out of 69 countries for which the organization has data. Furthermore, the percentage of low performers in science among disadvantaged students is among the highest in the world. The fact that Indonesia ranks second from the bottom in terms of world literacy means that Indonesian reading interest is worryingly low. In fact, according to UNESCO data, the reading interest of Indonesians is only 0.001%. That is, out of 1,000 Indonesians, only one person is an avid reader! This does not bode well for publishers and organizations like Lontar trying to promote Indonesian literature.

Are the teachers and the education system to blame for this poor performance? One big criticism against current teaching methods has to do with the lack of or insufficient push for students to be more critical and creative. After all the hoopla of improving teachers’ skills over the past two years, we still have not managed to improve students’ literacy and numeracy levels. Fingers point at the poor quality of teachers, particularly in the countryside where schools

Ruminations

A Graham of Insight

In the 1980s, when domestic air flights in Indonesia were less in number and pricey as well, few people in my income bracket would have considered “popping down to Bali” for a weekend—not even a long one. The more frequent choices for the likes of my kind were destinations within a few-hours driving distance from Jakarta: Puncak, Bandung, Pelabuhan Ratu, or one of the beach-side villages on the northwest coast of Java.

My own destination of choice was the sleepy village of Sambolo and, more particularly, Sambolo Beach Cottages, a double strand of thatched-roof bungalows skirting a crescent-shaped, white-sand cove and looking directly at Krakatoa volcano. Amenities were few but the rent was right, especially when divided among a group of friends. Leased to renters on an annual basis, demand for the bungalows was high. The complex was the brainchild of Graham James (December 1945–May 2023) whom I did not know on the first of my many visits to Sambolo in the latter half of the 1980s but who would later become a friend.

We had a long weekend this past month and it was to Sambolo I went for a trip down memory lane—but I did not stay at Sambolo Beach Cottages. The tsunami that followed Krakatoa’s eruption in December 2018 and killed close to 900 people, also destroyed five of the bungalows and left the rest in shabby condition, as yet to be restored to their former coziness due to the ensuing Covid pandemic.

Graham James first came to Indonesia from Melbourne in 1971, just at the time the New Order government had begun to encourage large-scale foreign investment which prompted a growing need for multi-lingual skills in the domestic workplace. Graham was a striking figure. More than six feet tall with chiseled features, an athletic build, a perfect set of teeth, and sparkling brown eyes, he also had a ready smile and quick sense of humor with which he could charm most anyone. On top of that, he possessed savvy business acumen.

Having worked at an English language school in Jakarta for number of months (but then fired for being constantly late to work, probably due to his nightly carousing for which he was well known) he recognized the country’s growing demand for English-language skills and, together with
lack the basic necessities that would lead to more of effective teaching methods. It could also be certain socio-cultural barriers that hamper students’ progress in schools. Some families still believe that only boys should go to school, and that being outspoken and critical can be seen as a sign of disrespect to parents or elders. Clearly, the process of education in diverse countries such as Indonesia means it may involve a broader spectrum of stakeholders.

Let’s begin by improving teaching methods and increasing the number of teachers, as the Government promised. So far, it has failed to deliver the one million teachers it had planned for 2023. In fact, there are concerns that the goal may not be reached by 2024 either. Whatever the bureaucratic reasons, this should be a priority if we are to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of our students.

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future wife, Kemala “Mala” Diniata, established the English Education Center (EEC) in 1972. The school was an immediate success, and throughout the 1980s and onward, EEC provided English language courses to middle-class Indonesian students as well as large corporations and government clients, turning out thousands of graduates in the process. A good job, well done! Some have said the school was second to none in Jakarta at that time.

Several friends of mine worked as teachers at EEC and they, along with teachers from other language schools in Jakarta, were the primary tenants of Sambolo Beach Cottages. Thanks to them, I was able to spend many a weekend there and to invite other friends of mine to join as well.

Leaving Jakarta on Friday at midday prayer time, after a nerve-wracking 4-to-5 hour drive with busses and trucks leapfrogging one another on the too-narrow two-lane road connecting Jakarta with Merak and beyond, the group I was with would arrive in Sambolo when the sun was just an inch or two above the horizon. At that point, not worrying which bedroom one would later occupy, my friends and I would hurriedly drag wicker chairs to the beach and, with G&Ts in hand, be ready to witness the Sunda Strait turn purple and the sky turn to fire as the sun set behind Krakatou.

Friday night’s repast generally consisted of prepared foods we’d brought from Jakarta—Even simple food stalls were few and far between in the area at that time—but the next morning fishermen’s wives would be waiting outside the bungalows, offering fresh catch from the sea, which they would cook or grill to our liking for a small fee. Saturday mornings and afternoons were spent in the water, on the sand, or in a lawn chair, just reading a book. Saturday nights were for the exchange of dreams, stories, and fantasies. On Sunday mornings, there was always a sense of wistfulness among the group, each of us knowing that after lunch we’d have to leave this little heaven behind and return to Jakarta and our daily grind.

Graham grew wealthy from his schools and real estate investments but he gave back as well. On a personal level, he was known for his beneficence with friends but it was at the city level he truly made his mark when he decided to
If you are in Bali this month, consider attending the fifth installment of the “Jani Bali Arts Festival” at the Widya Kusuma Library on Jalan Nusa Indah in Denpasar. The Festival will run July 16–30, every day from 10 AM to 6 PM, Eastern Indonesian time, and will include, in its list of events, a book sales and exhibition titled “Beranda Pustaka” in which more than 50 publishers, Lontar included, will participate. All kinds of books will be available for purchase, from academic to Indie, and from fiction to non-fiction.

Organized by the Swara Rupa Literary Community with funding from the Balinese provincial government, in addition to the book exhibition, there will be book discussions, book signings, on-the-spot cartoon events, and film screenings as well.

Free and open to the public, please attend! For additional information, send a WA query to Diah (+62 81999108164) or Vanesa (+62 85737495358).

With Tim Hudner at Sambolo in 1988, preparing hors d’oeuvres and G&Ts

restore a colonial-era building on Fatahillah Square in Jakarta’s Old Town and turn it into a restaurant and bar. The cost proved to be immense, far greater than he had expected because of the new inner steel structure he had to erect, but Café Batavia as it was named immediately became, upon its opening, one of Jakarta’s must-visit places. Graham had hoped his private investment would spur massive restoration of the Old Town, and it should have, but progress has to this day been very slow.

I remember what was supposed to have been the grand opening of Café Batavia on New Year’s Eve in 1993. Hundreds of invited guests and ticket holders showed up at Fatahillah Square, all dressed in their finery—I was in a tuxedo!—preening and ready to bring in 1994 with a bang. Minutes passed and soon an hour went by but still the doors hadn’t opened. Finally, Graham and Mala appeared to announce that the event was off; the city government had suspended the café’s license. They were truly sorry for the inconvenience but all ticket holders would be reimbursed. As the crowd began to disburse they told personal invitees to come into the café for a private party (which, in the end, resulted in a further three week ban on their license).

Inside, when asked why their license has been suspended, the couple shook their heads and explained that on Christmas Day in the previous week the restaurant had offered turkey on its menu for which, the government insisted, a special license was required. In addition, for the café to open on holidays, New Year’s eve included, another special license was required, this one from the tourism office, Who would have known!? Graham laughed the whole thing off. But he was always that way, ever ready to see the humor in absurdity.

In 1999, Graham and Mala moved to Bali where the couple continued to establish new ventures and thrive. I didn’t see them often after that time. I knew of Graham’s bout with throat cancer in 2008 and of its remission but this year, 12 years later, it came back again, this time fatally. Now thinking of Graham, if there’s a gram of insight to be gained from his satisfaction and success, I’d say it is to recognize opportunities, to do good things for friends and community, to laugh in the face of adversity, and, if possible, to yield a gain while doing so.

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)
MOCHTAR PABOTINGGI, writer, thinker, and democracy advocate died this past month, in the early morning of June 5. He had been in a coma since the past Idul Fitri.

Born in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi, in 1945, Mochtar obtained his undergraduate degree in English Literature at Gadjah Mada University and then an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Massachusetts in 1984. Finally, in 1989, he obtained a PhD Political Science from the University of Hawaii with a dissertation titled *Nationalism and Egalitarianism in Indonesia, 1908-1980: Probing the Problem of Discontinuity in Indonesian Political Discourses and Practices.*

His interest in literature began at a young age and though in later years he would be most well known as a Main Researcher in the field of national political development at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), throughout his life he wrote and published poetry, essays, and short stories.

Lontar’s first connection with Mochtar was in 1990 when we included one of his poems in the collection, *On Foreign Shores: American Images in Indonesian Poetry.* More recently, in 2017, Lontar included his poem “For My Father” (quoted below) in *The Lontar Anthology of Indonesian Poetry.* The sentiment expressed therein is a true reflection of this kind and gentle man’s heart.

Mochtar is buried at the Penggilingan Layur Public Cemetery in East Jakarta. R.I.P. Pak Mochtar.

**Surat dari Pejompongan**

**WING**

Kawan Moer,

Sikap Romantik yang sering kupersoalkan pada sejumlah penyair kita hari ini sebenarnya ada sebab-musababnya. Sejatinya, sejak semula, para penyair kita adalah kaum Romantik. Ketika para pemuda bumiputra—anak-anak Sumatra itu—pertama kali belajar menulis puisi, salah satu sumber mereka adalah buku pelajaran dan bacaan berbahasa Belanda yang beredar di sekolah dalam pelbagai tingkatan.


Itulah kenapa penyair seperti Roestam Effendi dan Sanoesi Pane memilih soneta sebagai bentuk baru dalam puisi berbahasa Melayu. Dari segi bentuk, soneta berkesesuaian dengan pantun yang menjadi cikal bakal puisi modern berbahasa Melayu—kelak disebut “Bahasa Indonesia”.

Meskipun pada saat itu telah berkembang bentuk syair, pilihan kepada soneta adalah sebenar kemajuan dan kebaruan, sebab bukan semata-mata diserap dari khazanah sastra Barat, tetapi juga karena menampung ekspresi modern yang tengah tumbuh. Salah satunya adalah semangat kebangkitan nasional—sebagaimana pada Muhammad Yamin—kesi Yamin sendiri lebih memilih puisi yang penuh dengan permainan bunyi pantun, dengan larik-larik yang lebih banyak dari yang dibutuhkan untuk sebuah soneta.


Chairil menyerap Amir Hamzah dalam mendayagunakan pantun Melayu dan hampir tidak ada perhatian pada soneta. Puisi-puisinya yang canggah terbit dalam bentuk dan melodius dalam bunyi lebih banyak berada dalam pantun. Selebihnya adalah sajak bebas, bentuk yang di luar sana menandai modernisme dan di Indonesia baru benar-
For My Father

*For my father, a man both principled and good, who now lives eternally on the straight path*

The arrow I shot, with a five centimeter needle-point head, just at the moment you chose to come down the ladder to the loft, buried itself all the way in your calf.

With blood spurting from the wound, I was horrified and probably pallid beyond belief.

I, little Mochtar, was so sorry for what I’d done, and frightened, too, certain that you would spank me. And such a punishment would have been most apt for what I’d done—though I knew you’d never think I would do such a thing intentionally to you.

Instead, you calmly pulled my arrow from your calf, which was still spurting blood, and gave it back to me, saying, “Be more careful with your arrows, son.” Only that. And then you left me, without another word.

Forty-two years ago that was, and you made the incident seem very ordinary. Yet for me, Father, it was an incredible event, one that I will never forget for the rest of my days, just as I will never forget you.

I thank you, Father. I thank you always and will forever hold dear your example. I will continue to love and to trust. In humanity.

I give my thanks to You, ever and always to You.

*Mochtar Paboringgi*

*Translated by John H McGlynn*

benar digarap secara paripurna oleh Chairil Anwar.


Puksi-puksi Wing Kardjo yang paling awal—pada kumpulan *Selembar Daun*, misalnya—sudah dengan jelas dan berketetapan memilih soneta sebagai bentuk ekspresi. Namun, jika kita periksa bentuk-bentuk itu, ternyata, hanyalah kedok untuk puisi bebas. Syarat minimal yang dipenuhi Wing untuk menamakan puisinya soneta adalah jumlah lariknya yang empat belas, dengan pembagian dua kuartin dan dua terzina.

Jika dalam soneta yang dikerjakan para penyair sebelumnya masih ada keselarasan dengan pantun, itu terlihat dari dua kuartin pertama yang berfungsi sebagai sampiran dan dua terzina berikutnya sebagai peryaraan isi atau maksud pengarang. Pada Wing, semuanya adalah puisi bebas yang memperkuda soneta sebagai bentuk luarnya.

Dengan kata lain, Wing sebenarnya tengah bermain-main dengan bentuk yang di masa lalu sempat menjadi dominan. Problemnya, kikira, ia terlampau kendor dalam menggarisbawak kata-kata. Kata-kata dalam puisinya kerap kali terlampau terang benderang atau terlalu banyak pretensi untuk memberi nasihat atau merenung-renung yang seakan-akan puisi menjadi sunyi dan penuh mutiara kebijakan.

Padahal yang terjadi sebaliknya. Kita berhadapan dengan sebuah disiplin pada kata-kata yang kendor dan saking kendornya kita sering kali tidak mendapatkan permainan bentuk yang mengasyikkan. Singkat kata, orang lain bisa mengerjakan apa dikerjakan Wing dengan sonet-sonetanya itu.


*Zen Hae* [zenhae@lontar.org]