INTRODUCTION

A poet now frequently included in anthologies and more or less routinely discussed in standard reference works such as Martin Seymour Smith’s Guide to Modern World Literature, the Ungar Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century, and the Dictionary of Oriental Literatures, Chairil Anwar no longer needs the same kind of introduction he required thirty-odd years ago when translations of his work began to appear in English. Without knowing much of Anwar’s personal history or the literary contexts in which he operated, many literate readers by now readily understand why a fine English-language poet such as Denise Levertov could say of him that he was “a major force in Indonesian poetry . . . a pure poet [who] . . . in his stripping away of flounces, his brilliant use of what he found in foreign poets, his searching candor and technical courage, . . . was ‘purifying the language of the tribe’ with special pertinence.”*

Anwar was born on 26 July 1922; he died less than twenty-seven years later. He left his birthplace, the city of Medan in Sumatra, at the age of about eighteen and came to Jakarta (then Batavia, the capital city of the Dutch East Indies, and now the capital of Indonesia). In a sense, for the remaining nine years of his life, he did nothing except read and talk and live wildly, furiously, and, of course, write. He was not prolific, though his enemies liked to say he was and thereby disparage his achievement. The total number of his poems (at least, those he neither destroyed nor lost) is about seventy. He seems to have written some prose fiction, but it has disappeared without a trace. He left a scattering of essays and speeches, which are translated, without their Indonesian originals, at the end of this book.

The art and literary critic H. B. Jassin, who befriended, advised, and, after Anwar's death, preserved and wrote about Anwar's poems and prose, has given us a clear portrait of Anwar's lifestyle in Jakarta.

Because he lived so restlessly, he could not endure working in an office, chained to a desk every day. When he was asked what he worked at, he answered, "I'm a Poet." His residence was not fixed, he moved from one place to another, from one friend's house to another, from one hotel to another. A typical remark: "When I die I don't want it to be in a bed. I want to die in the middle of the street." . . . [He was] a thin, pale youngster, careless of his appearance. His eyes were red, and very wild, but they always appeared thoughtful; his movements were slow, as if utterly indifferent. . . . In his ideals, in his movements, and in his actions, he stabbed, cut, and smashed old notions, leading some of his friends to think him ignorant, unaware of custom, a kind of bandit, characterizations he himself thought an honor and necessary in order to influence his slower friends into revolutionary ways.*

What Anwar was up to, though his friends did not know it, and he himself probably did not believe he had accomplished it, was the reinvention of the Indonesian language as a literary vehicle. Older, Malay forms of *Bahasa Indonesia* had centuries-old records of achievement but only in poetic and narrative forms which Anwar felt had lost their relevance. As he said in *Untitled Speech, 1943*, "Till now our art has been thin, superficial. No more of the old farts. No more gentle breezes of that kind."** I think we can crudely and yet accurately measure his success by juxtaposing against each other lines from a pair of poems by a poet fifteen years Anwar's senior, Johannes E. Tatenkeng. The first excerpt is from *My Feeling for Art*, written long before Anwar had begun his work; the second is from *Traveler First Class*, written after Anwar's poetry had burst decisively on the scene.


** See below, 160.
1. Whether you come as a giant demon
   Or sweep down like beauty's own face
   I'm ready
   To serve you:
   My whole body is yours,
   My soul is your throne!

2. Before I was thirty
   I was never more than a deck passenger.
   Thanks to the efforts of my friends
   And the transfer of sovereignty
   I'm now a traveler first class.*

Though carefully and professionally constructed, the first passage is bland and utterly conventional. The second is lit with a sardonic but powerful eloquence. There can be small question which is more relevant to our time.

The small but enormously influential body of poems Anwar wrought in Bahasa Indonesia burns with the incantatory fire found only in work of the very first order. It is not possible to document his achievement by reference only to translation: not only is a translation never the original, but the linguistic distance between English and Bahasa Indonesia is so great that without some grasp of Indonesian phonology and morphology, without some sense of the meanings of Indonesian words, and without some awareness of the cultural context in which Indonesian writers work, it is impossible to suggest the true nature of the poet's literary and cultural background.

Anwar is not only a very great poet, he is also, like Baudelaire's hypocrite lecteur, very much our contemporary. His poems, even in translation, seem to me remarkably accessible, even without full knowledge of where they came from or how they were meant to sound. We know, for example, that he sometimes plagiarized, particularly toward the end of his life, when he badly needed money for medicine. We know that he was emphatically not the stuff of which resistance fighters are made: when the Japanese police tortured him, he quickly and gladly told them everything he knew, which was not much. Given the distance and the perspective we now have, these are details:

interesting, perhaps even useful, but hardly dispositive. What matters are the poems and they are the farthest thing possible from mere details. I think they will never cease to speak, powerfully and passionately, to anyone who wants to listen.