

**A SECRET LITERATURE: THE LITERATURE OF ONG HWEI TENG AND THE
POSSIBILITIES OF DISAPPEARANCE**

*[Name withheld for submission]*¹

“In order to understand, I destroyed myself.”

Fernando Pessoa²

INTRODUCTION

The topics of erasure, nothingness, and disappearance have a long artistic and critical history in literature. From Sappho’s fragments to Beckett’s silences, Hegel to Derrida, our fascination with the void has survived both time and radical shifts in discourse, and, arguably, has only intensified in the past century.

In this essay, I present an overview of the work of Singaporean writer Ong Hwei Teng against a background of such topics. Ong can be considered to be a member of the recent New Singaporean Literature phenomenon, which has been described by Joanne Wee as “a term of convenience banding together writers who are mostly relatively new to the

¹ “No name, address or identifying marks other than the title and NRIC number should be indicated in the manuscript.”

² Fernando Pessoa (as Bernardo Soares), *The Book of Disquiet*, edited by Maria José de Lancastre, translated by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), p. 147.

Singaporean literature scene under a vague impression of similar ethos”³. New Singaporean Literature cannot be considered a literary movement, even if it bears a definite resemblance to one. Spontaneously formed and without a unified sense of purpose, characteristics of the group include: the work of its writers is typically in English, although notable exceptions exist; there is a preference for challenging literature, favouring a high degree of complexity in plot and form; the fiction produced by these writers tends to be fantastic rather than realistic; and there is a tendency to avoid interaction with the literary scene outside of New Singaporean Literature.

The main aim of this paper is to serve as an introduction to Ong’s work, as such an introduction has been lacking in existing literature. I will proceed by using the themes of erasure and nothingness that are prominent in her work. Specifically, I trace the development of Ong’s fascination with these themes in a chronological fashion based on her bibliography. At the same time, I hope to contribute to the slowly growing corpus of critical writing on New Singaporean Literature.

EARLY WORK

Ong’s first published work was an entry to the Golden Point Award competition in 2005 titled “The First Good Story”⁴. A short story about a writer who submits plagiarised entries to writing competitions on a regular basis using an imaginative variety of false names,

³ Joanne Wee, “‘There’s No Art’: Considering New Singaporean Literature as a Literary Movement” in Dennis Goh ed., *Critical Essays on New Singaporean Literature* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010), p. 39.

⁴ Perhaps a reference to Macedonio’s *The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (The First Good Novel)*.

it won third prize in its category. Unfortunately, her award was rescinded due to suspicions that it was not entirely original work.

Despite the allegations of plagiarism, however, Ong remained productive, publishing a novella, a short story, and an essay in the span of two years. Perhaps her most critically successful work, the farcical novella titled *The Inadequate Life of Wilson Wong* features a student who struggles with his studies in the day while working on the perfect love potion at night. Having finally concocted the potion, he organises a party in order to secretly administer it to the woman of his dreams—a former classmate who is soon to return to her native country. While receiving rejection after rejection, Wilson describes the history of his alchemical pursuits, detailing his numerous failed attempts in a monologue that is also a meditation on romance and time; the objectification of women and also of love; narratives and narrativity; and identity and individuality.

When the party struggles to come together because “everyone has boyfriends or better things to do”⁵, Wilson announces the cancellation of it repeatedly. It is clear that Wilson does not want to cancel the party. These repeated proclamations of cancellation are only attempts at registering his disappointment with his friends. This does not, however, succeed, because he cannot help but conceal the bitterness in each announcement with a veneer of courtesy. This is elaborated into a discourse of failure that dominates the latter half of the book.

In the final pages, the book takes an unexpectedly dark turn. On the night of “the inevitable party”⁶, Wilson is informed that his romantic interest has taken ill, and is thus unable to attend the party. A few weeks later, when she disappears “back to her native

⁵ Ong Hwee Teng, *The Inadequate Life of Wilson Wong* (Singapore: Idastradia Books, 2006), p. 30.

⁶ *Wilson Wong*, p. 47.

country, perhaps, or back to that invisible nothing”⁷, Wilson, overtaken by despair, imbibes the love potion himself. His last words in the book are: “I’ve made a poison”⁸. It is unclear if this is meant literally or simply as a rhetorical device.

Wilson Wong outlines the fascination with erasure that would come to characterise Ong’s entire body of work. Most notably, as Wilson contemplates the “vanishing act”⁹ of his romantic interest, he contemplates if he can truly know where she has left, or even if she still exists, using a variation of Berkeley’s famous tree in the forest. He asks: “Does it really matter where we have disappeared to when we already have? Can a person (or anything, for that matter) really disappear *to anywhere*?”¹⁰.

Similarly, Wilson’s final act, to drink his self-concocted poison, is a form of suicide, whether literal or abstract, and is said to be what he “wants most of all”¹¹. Wilson is tormented at this point, suggesting that he will “always leaves marks”¹² on the world around him. Perhaps he means that he will always find himself in love, or perhaps that his existence will never be truly wiped clean from reality even in death—it is not simply his life that is inadequate but also his death.

This obsession with erasure is coincident with Wilson’s desire for a confrontation with the void. One example of this is the frequent exposition on courtesy in the novella. Courtesy for *Wilson Wong* is a pretence, a form of theatre, a “somethingness”¹³ that enables people to

⁷ *Wilson Wong*, p. 80.

⁸ *Wilson Wong*, p. 88.

⁹ *Wilson Wong*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Wilson Wong*, p. 85, original emphasis.

¹¹ *Wilson Wong*, p. 87.

¹² *Wilson Wong*, p. 87.

¹³ *Wilson Wong*, p. 15.

conceal the void. For Wilson, the ease of accessing materiality—or the ease of pretence at access to materiality—disguises the underlying void and, indeed, removes us from it.

Ong's next work was the short story "(The Last Good Story)", which eschews the humour and seemingly improvised nature of the novella for complexity in plot and a precision in prose. Published in the short-lived literary journal *Species and Spaces*, it is an experimental and highly unusual literary fantasy about a writer (presumably the last on earth) attempting to find permanence in a world where the old systems of signification are on the verge of extinction. One of its central questions—the authentication of existence—is encapsulated by the narrator's declaration: "These words mean nothing if they only mean something to me"¹⁴. The story takes on an anachronistic bent (its format and language belong to a time past), as if to remind the reader of its confidence in the decay rather than the permanence of literature.

This fascination with time carries over to the startling essay that Ong produced in this period. Published independently and distributed at local independent bookstores, *The Flesh Eaters* is a meditation on death, writing, and romantic love positioned in between fiction and fact. The writing is allusive and references literature, philosophy, film, and music. Employing stereotypes that compare, individually, sleep ("To die, to sleep,/To sleep — perchance to dream"¹⁵) and writing ("The work is the death mask of its conception"¹⁶) to death, Ong repurposes these clichés in this essay to subvert common narratives of romance.

¹⁴ Ong Hwee Teng, "(The Last Good Story)" in *Species and Spaces*, 1.2 (2007), pp. 42-3.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by A. R. Braunmuller (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 3.1.64-5.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 459.

This essay exploits ambiguities between fiction and truth, a strategy that Ong would revisit later in her career. Considered relative to the trajectory of her work, however, it identifies an evolving approach to her thematic concerns that would come to define the second half of her bibliography.

THE TRILOGY

In Ong's early published work, we observe a fascination with erasure and cancellation premised upon failure. In the unusual trilogy that followed, Ong developed her ideas on the possibilities of erasure while also exhibiting an inclination towards formal experimentation. I want to suggest that it is possible to see these efforts at experimentation as a shift in Ong's approach to literature.

Ong's trilogy is set in a fictional Singapore that may be called a fantasy of exaggeration. It is a Singapore in which tropes and archetypes come to life—the city is populated by heroes, villains, detectives, bohemians, wastrels, and poets. In this sense, it is not dissimilar from the work of other New Singaporean Literature writers, who have often resorted to a fantastic Singapore that Joanne Wee has dubbed the “infra-structural nation”¹⁷.

The trilogy begins with the longest work by Ong, *Immolation*, a surrealistic novel which details the hunt for a scarred man suspected to be a serial murderer and whose marks are initially presented as attempts at self-erasure. The scarred man's battered body itself recalls the Beckettian body, unable to be reconciled with the abstraction of narrativisation, a mark of presence that cannot be erased or indeed flattened out by the act of storytelling. Indeed, there is a direct reference to Beckett in this variation of a line from *Texts for*

¹⁷ “There's No Art”, p. 41.

*Nothing*¹⁸: “So I say to the body, Get up, get up now, and it struggles, like a bag of old bones, this sack of scars, foundering in the street”¹⁹. This is juxtaposed against the image of an infant at the end of the novel, its “generic body [is] clean and unscarred, almost as if it wasn’t there”²⁰. The body is in excess—that is, it exceeds the narrative—and, like the scars that it bears, cannot be erased.

Even as the scarred man appears to seek a direct form of cancellation, the formal features of *Immolation* suggest that Ong is pursuing more abstract avenues in her search of the possibility of disappearance. Specifically, she tests the potential for disappearance via the loss of meaning. For instance, the novel’s unusual blend of genres—detective fiction, existentialist novel, essay, personal memoir, and so on—constitutes a rupture of categories that challenge the ability of genres to signal and signify.

At the same time, the multiplicity of overlapping and conflicting “truths” in *Immolation* serves to attenuate meaning in the narrative. In *Immolation*, the narrator begins with an arguably well-defined profile, despite an ambiguity of purpose. He has had a bad childhood, is engaged in a long-term project to release all of the blood inherited from his alcoholic father, is jobless, and concerned about the murders. As the novel progresses, however, these stable truths are constantly tested, with the narrator ceaselessly adjusting his story, retelling and reframing earlier statements. By the end of the book, we are uncertain even of the narrator’s gender. This diffraction of narratives is a diffusion of truths that contests the narrative’s facility to contain meaning.

¹⁸ “I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street” from Samuel Beckett, “Texts for Nothing”, translated by Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 75.

¹⁹ Ong Hwee Teng, *Immolation*, (Singapore: Scholastic Press, 2008), p. 55.

²⁰ *Immolation*, p. 304.

Another notable formal strategy employed by Ong in *Immolation* occurs throughout the book, when words—and later in the book, letters—are scattered or perhaps strewn across a number of pages, at first seemingly randomly. In fact, these words form whole sentences that simply progress at a different pace, stretched to the point that they eventually become simply sounds. Dispersed and isolated from their original context, they lose their ability to retain their intended meaning. This “expansion of time”²¹ is consistent with the scarred man’s self-aware narrative, which constantly makes reference to the limitations of storytelling in its ability to accurately create a sense of time. I am reminded of Borges’s proposition that “in the novel the consecutive is more noticeable”²². Here, the consecutive is no longer noticeable, and the novel’s—narrative’s—capacity for meaning crumbles.

In her next work, a novella titled *The Gospel of Goose*, Ong continues to examine the idea of disappearance without resorting to erasure. *The Gospel of Goose* deals with a very literal iconoclast who is obsessed with destroying all icons and iconography. In contrast to the scarred figure of *Immolation*, this iconoclast—the titular Goose—seeks to erase his “symbolic existence”²³ rather than his physical body. Goose, a deranged narrator also haunted by an apocalyptic vision in his dreams, sees his iconoclasm as a resistance, a last stand against his “unending subjectivisation”²⁴. His unfortunate curse, of course, is that he cannot actually erase his so-called symbolic existence, and he ultimately accepts, in an echo of Blanchot, that even his death cannot be his own.

²¹ *Immolation*, p. 129.

²² Jorge Luis Borges, interview with Fernando Sorrentino in *Seven Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, translated by Clark M. Zlotchew (New York: Whitston Publishing Co., 1982), p. 128.

²³ Ong Hwee Teng, *The Gospel of Goose* (Singapore: Idastradia Books, 2009), p. 5.

²⁴ *The Gospel of Goose*, p. 20.

Goose eventually recognises that the enterprise of cancellation is a futile one. Almost exactly in the literal middle of the novel, Goose realises that he has to do the opposite—to relentlessly pursue his subjectivisation—in order to disappear. This explicates the double bind of erasure in which freedom is coupled with a loss of identity.

Goose's frequent and often slightly inaccurate use of the expression "better late than never" and his use of various idioms in a casual and banal fashion constitute a strategy of linguistic repetition that reinforce the failure of meaning. In the world of Ong's trilogy, where even expressions with the most stable and seemingly well-defined of meanings become whitewashed into meaningless sounds, one disappears not into emptiness but into noise. This is the premise at the heart of Goose's apocalyptic dreams, that in the event of gross excess, discernibility and contrast become non-existent, and existence becomes imperceptible, and therefore nullified.

Thus, Goose's use of idioms—expressions which may be said to be relatively stable in meaning—causes them to lose their distinctiveness, expressive power, and ultimately their meaning. The words—scars on paper bodies, marks on reality—are not so much erased (as they are inerasable), but dispossessed of meaning and influence, lost in a sea of equally meaningless words and phrases, vanishing. Unlike Beckett, Goose tests the possibility of the void not in the use of silence, but in a sea of noise. If "[t]he words outlive me, because in a certain sense my existence is irrelevant to them"²⁵, nothing survives when the words turn to noise.

"The Cancellations" forms the last third of this unusual trilogy. A poem of 189 words in seventeen lines, it is an ambiguous piece describing an assortment of villains of literature. One of them, for instance, is a murderer of characters, whereas another secretly adjusts the meanings of words and alters reality much in the way a time traveller might by changing the past. Featuring numerous allusions, a generous amount of puns, and the prominent use of

²⁵ Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 13.

slant rhyme, “The Cancellations” challenges the sufficiency of words (as vectors of meaning). It is a brief record of a literary, linguistic, and semiotic history that exposes the realm of possibilities as a history of the nothing-there, the never-has-been and never-will-be—the vacant tragedy of our narrated lives.

A SECRET LITERATURE

The last of Ong’s published work (so far, one hopes) is *A Secret Literature*. Independently released on sheets of A5 paper stapled together, all known copies of *A Secret Literature* were placed in a stack housed in a box at one exit of Bishan – Ang Mo Kio Park. Exposed to a variety of hazards—including the birds, rain, and harsh sunlight—every known copy of the text is significantly damaged. (My own copy has turned brittle and yellow.) Combined with the specific and unorthodox location of its distribution, *A Secret Literature*’s unusual history as, arguably, art installation emphasises the temporal condition of the text²⁶.

The text itself is an ersatz essay in which an academic grows increasingly frustrated over the course of the composition of an essay with her inability to properly comment on the work of Shafiq Ishak. Shafiq Ishak is described as, most famously, the author of *Vanishing Man*, a novel about an illusionist who fails to reverse his vanishing effect, failing to bring a volunteer back onto the stage during a performance. As things rapidly get out of hand, the philosophical illusionist contemplates his own repertoire, magic history, the entertainment industry, theatre and spectacle, and a variety of existential ideas, while being forced to take increasingly desperate measures as his livelihood and eventually his life come under threat.

²⁶ The box containing the papers was removed by the police four days after the first reported sighting of it under the justification that it was a form of littering.

In *A Secret Literature*, the academic—one Ong Hwee Teng—almost preposterously proposes that the various missing characters in Shafiq Ishak’s work are in fact Shafiq himself. By drawing upon her personal background and dramatising the tension between the fictive and the real, Ong performs—through her academic persona—a number of fears that, unfortunately, I find familiar.

Ong’s revisiting of the porous separation between fiction and truth suggests that there is always some truth in fiction, as much as there is always fiction in truth. Reality—a term which I admittedly use loosely in this paper—is not simply constantly narrated in the world according to Shafiq Ishak (and one supposes the literature of Ong Hwee Teng as well), but constantly *fabricated*. For the tree in the forest to fall without anyone to hear it, it is first necessary to invent the plant, the forest, and the sound of falling trees. The academic’s great fear is not simply the possibility that she will not be believed, but also the way in which it reflects on her own falseness as fabrication and fiction.

Ong’s academic persona explicates this fear by using the fictional words of Shafiq Ishak, who declares: “Everything I write instantly becomes fictions”²⁷. Indeed, while Barthes’s *effet de réel* suggests that more often than not texts incorporate formal features that provide the impression of reality, this document encounters not the inevitable weight of the truth, but the pressure of fiction. That is to say, in the process of explaining the truth, Ong’s academic inevitably is complicit in the process of its fictionalisation.

This is what lies behind the academic’s apparent sense of discomfort throughout the mock essay. She betrays a fear of making unfortunate puns and pompous declarations, and is also unusually repetitive, circling around the same propositions in a manner that is (for Ong the Author) uncharacteristically untidy.

²⁷ Ong Hwee Teng, *A Secret Literature* (Singapore: Self-published, 2010), p. 3.

Yet, such a reading of this text is based upon an understanding that it is easy, or even possible, to differentiate between Ong the Author and Ong the Academic Persona. This is Ong's final gambit, that the contestation over her real and fictionalised selves will smear boundaries and affect her authorial authority. Like Goose and the scarred man, Ong herself chooses the void by surrendering her ability to speak.

A SECRET LITERATURE

In Borges's "The Secret Miracle", Jaromir Hladík, sentenced to die by firing squad, asks God for an entire year to finish his play *The Enemies*. God grants him his wish, with the miracle year occurring in the time "between the command to fire and its execution"²⁸. No one learns of this miracle (hence the title), and the play too remains a secret.

Ong's literary project—forgive my indulgence in terming it as such—is one in search of the possibilities of erasure. Ong's is a literature of effacement that seeks the void, echoing, of course, the Derridian/Heideggerian approach of *sous rature*. It is, if you will, a *literature*, or—pardon the indulgence—a *litasure*. By tracing the trajectory of Ong's development as an artist, we find an emphasis on the inadequacy of the form and the failure of the possibility of erasure in her earlier work. We can then understand the later emphases on thematic and formal approaches as an evolving strategy premised upon ideas of oversaturation and excess.

Ong Hwee Teng has faded from the public awareness since. Her books are no longer in print, and some of her shorter works are permanently lost. Curiously, it seems, even people extremely familiar with the local literary scene barely remember her name. Like

²⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Secret Miracle," translated by Anthony Kerrigan, *Ficciones* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 120.

Hladík, her work and her life has seemingly become little more than a story. Having rapidly fallen into obscurity, her biography, it seems, has contributed to her secret literature.

In the 1983 film *WarGames*, the computer learns the concept of futility after analysing various scenarios of nuclear war, and famously concludes that “the only winning move is not to play”²⁹. Like many of Ong’s characters, however, it is too late for me now. Having already written the first word, I also acknowledge that I will never have the last.

“By believing passionately in something that still does not exist, we create it. The nonexistent is whatever we have not sufficiently desired”³⁰. This is the paradox that confronts me as I write these words. For someone who is for all intents and purposes nonexistent, one can only hope that one’s account—one’s story—will leave its mark. Yet, it also participates in a project of fictionalisation that protects her disappearance. I am at odds with the authority of my own voice. It is the only thing I have, and I despise it.

POST-SCRIPT

This paper was first drafted in July 2012. Since then, I have submitted the paper to a number of journals only to be rejected time after time. This is submission, therefore, is something of a last resort—or perhaps a cry for help. I am uncertain if I should feel relief or despair that I cannot even put my name on this manuscript. Someone will hear of this story even if it survives only as fiction. (Are not all stories fiction after all?)

²⁹ *WarGames*, directed by John Badham, United Artists, 1983.

³⁰ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, translated by P. A. Bien (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1973), p. 434.

In that time, I have also received a note from Ong, who must have acquired a copy of my work while I was circulating drafts among my friends. I have deliberated over the inclusion of its contents for a considerable amount of time for reasons that should be obvious to any reader of this paper. I have ultimately decided to reproduce the note. While my memory is not what it used to be, I have found it easy to recall and believe the following transcript to be accurate:

Dear [*name withheld*],

Do you like magic? Each magic trick has an initial state and a final state. Everything in between is the process, the trick itself. In many cases, there is nothing fantastic about the initial or the final states. A vanishing act begins with a person's being there and ends with a nothingness. The magic is in the act, in the process, in change, in time, in memory.

As you well know, an act of disappearance is premised on the event of appearance. The word itself is a negation. This makes the ideal disappearance impossible, because every possible erasure is marked. The perfect effacement is undetectable. The only way to disappear completely is to erase the word itself.

When we are born—even before we are born—we make an imprint on the world around us. We add to this imprint as we grow and decay. Every single thing we do and don't is another branch on this spider's web. The reason we do not acknowledge the threads left by so many around us is because there are so many of them, and so much sameness. I have done all I can to hide my imprint. I have exploited its condition to my purpose. It is all I can do.

When I was a child, I was once accused of littering. I was in the National Stadium with the rest of my class waiting for a preview of the National Day Parade to begin. A teacher spotted a piece of litter near where I was sitting and did not hesitate to reproach me for it. I tried to explain that she was mistaken, but I only made things worse. Every attempt at explanation was interpreted as defensiveness or barefaced denial, much as in that Chinese saying.

You face the same problem. We all do. The more we speak, the further we project ourselves away from the authentic, or the true, or the truth—I'm not sure anymore. But people don't remember. "No, they forget and retain nothing in forgetting"³¹. They disremember. Having relinquished my ability to speak, I am lost to oblivion—and glad that I am.

I appreciate your effort to remember me, and to keep me remembered. While it is contrary to my efforts at writing my-self into the silence, it also draws an immaterial connection between the two of us. The void can get lonely—I am human after all. I'm afraid for you. This will only intensify your sense of the unreal because the real is derived from the inventions of others. Remember this: It's not so different from the plight of most people, who are stories and songs and fictions.

Cancel everything,

HT

Dec 2012

³¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Awaiting oblivion*, translated by John Gregg (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 31.

I feel that I should be more surprised than I really am at having lost the note. I did not compose it.

[4459 words, inclusive of footnotes]