

Singapore - Hub for a New Global Poetry?

By Umej Singh-Bhatia

Dead Poetry Society?

Is Singapore a dead poetry society? Poetry in Singapore has little history, a shallow presence and an uncertain future. Factors of history, culture and politics and the forces of technology have sidelined it. Yet walk into a bookstore in Singapore, head for the local or Asian collection section and you will find a hardcore still clinging to the form.

Singapore has produced two generations of committed and talented English-language poets. The luminaries include Lee Tzu Peng, Edwin Thumboo, Kirpal Singh, Goh Poh Seng and Arthur Yap, followed by Leong Liew Geok, Boey Kim Cheng and Desmond Sim and even more recently Alfian Saat, Alvin Pang and Alfie Lee. Small but innovative literary publishers like Ethos Books and Landmark continue to publish collections of poetry amidst Singapore's economic woes. Ethos Books

has recently produced impressive poetry anthologies like *No Other City: the Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*, which showcases a wide range of talent, and has reached beyond our shores with the Singapore-Philippines collaborative anthology of love poetry, *Love Gathers All*.

But does Singapore poetry matter? Can it make anything happen? Is it a luxury, a need or a longing? Does the future of Singapore poetry lie beyond the form of the poem? Can it be the hub for a new global poetry? These are big questions, and perhaps the best way to begin answering them is to recount the brief history of Singapore poetry in English.

Everytime someone mentions culture, reach for your mobile-phone

After its sudden separation from the Federation of Malaysia, the Republic of Singapore had to fend for itself in a volatile neighbourhood. The little city-state faced a set of nation-building challenges that had unraveled much bigger countries. With no natural resources except for its tiny population, Singapore had small margin for error. The leadership developed a pragmatic and utilitarian ethic. They encouraged thought and its expression in plain and functional terms. In 1969, Singapore's then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that poetry was "a luxury we cannot afford."

Poetry - the Last Futility

Writers in Singapore who thought and cared deeply about poetry felt that the form was therefore best harnessed to serve nation-building. Heading the pack was a talented National University lecturer named Edwin Thumboo. He envisioned a brand of poetry written in the "bridge language"¹ or common medium of English. In his view, such poetry could produce galvanising myths in service of nation-building. The new poetry would foster a sense of national identity. It could help to build a multi-racial, multi-cultural society.

Thumboo placed his faith in the power of articulate energy. He believed it could help Singaporeans define themselves and furnish a sense of historical continuity. It would do so by connecting the citizens of a fully independent nation to their immigrant past as colonial subjects.²

In his criticism, he promoted works that contained an element of wider significance. Dismissive of inward-looking literature, he shunned private poetry that focussed exclusively on the inner life. For example, judging the works of the lyrical poet Wong May overly subjective in theme and tone, Thumboo declared that he only trusted poems with a more normal focus and a larger share of ordinary reality.³

Leading by example, he championed and crafted a civic poetry that appealed to reasoned public sentiment. As Ee Tiang Hong observes in his aptly titled study of Thumboo's poetry, *Responsibility and Commitment*, by his third collection of poems, "Ulysses by the Merlion", Thumboo had "achieved a creative resolution of the critical ideas he had formulated." The title-poem, according to Ee was "a summative affirmation of the primary role he envisions for himself as chief bard of the tribe".⁴

Thumboo was a lucid and penetrating critic. But the programmatic aversion he had developed towards private and subjective poetry led him inevitably to some ambiguity-riddled interpretations. Readings of non-conforming verse were sometimes stretched to fit his critical framework. Two examples are worth highlighting.

In a preface to the saturnine poetry of Goh Poh Seng, he described the poet's melancholy voice as merely a "creative stance"⁵. Skimming over the sulking inwardness, pessimism and disenchantment with Singapore's material success evident in many of Goh's poems, Thumboo claimed that the brooding poet was "simultaneously immersed in and yet detached"⁶ from his highly personal poems. Beneath Thumboo's strategy of assimilation lay a simpler truth - Goh's haunted voice represented a different viewpoint. The project of nation-

building did have some detractors who chose to present their disquiet in verse, which could not be redeemed within Thumboo's critical framework.

And in his reading of Lee Tzu Peng's *My Country, My People*, he praised the poem for "straddling two worlds, by subsuming the public to the private (to) acquire both a wider frame of reference and intimacy that would otherwise be lacking."⁷ But Thumboo's understandable concern with the public-private dichotomy had tied his dualistic interpretation into a dead-knot. Reading *My Country, My People*, you will discern instead the repressed voice of an intelligent observer lamenting the irony of a young nation that makes the tourist feel more 'at home' than its citizens. Lee astringently captures the contradictions of the nation-building project and questions the poet's ability to make a difference. Her poem refuses to strike a public posture but responds honestly to the spirit of the times where:

Careful tending of the human heart
may make a hundred flowers bloom;
and perhaps, fence-sitting neighbour,
I claim citizenship in your recognition
of our kind.

Lee's attempt to reach out and touch a wider public was more a gesture of futility than of hope. As the poet-critic

Kirpal Singh wrote in an insightful preface to essays on the poetry of the region, the issue was "whether we are prepared to grant the writer a vision which transcends his private world and becomes meaningful to all."⁸ Ultimately, the vision transcended the private world, but eluded the public as well. The project of public poetry was doomed to not succeed. It rested on a fatal assumption - that poetry in English could have a popular resonance. However, economic circumstances made sure that poems would only ever remain the preserve of a small, privileged class of citizens. The smooth, seamless surface of public opinion expressed in Queen's English could never hope to capture the undercurrents of popular sentiment and the ragged anguish of the heartlander.

It's the economy, stupid

Judged by its ambitions, Thumboo's project of public poetry had missed its mark. A brutal gang of facts and statistics muscled out the beautiful theories of poetry. The use and value of poetry for a nation struggling to survive in a hostile environment had been over-estimated. Faced with some harsh economic decisions and a restless population, Singapore needed number-crunchers and simple slogans. In short, reason and not rhyme.

Nevertheless, Thumboo's efforts should not be dismissed outright. The astute professor and award-winning poet harboured

few illusions about the inherent ambivalence of his project. As he put it in his poem, *Gods Can Die*, it was a question of finding:

...a balance in the dark

To know the private from the public monument

To find our way between the private and public argument.

Thumboo must be recognized if only for his relentless drive to build a genuine literary tradition where none existed before. He created parameters and developed the broad outline for a socially responsible poetry to develop. The fact that his brand of poetry tried, but failed, demonstrates a larger truth.

United States of Television?

The decline of Singapore poetry in English is part of a wider phenomenon. A tiny island-city, Singapore is affected by broader currents. The engine of today's global economy hums to the tune of advertising jingles and the hook of pop songs.

A unique society, Singapore is a net importer of talent and human capital. Can we afford the diversion of articulate energy to economically 'unproductive' activities like poetry? Do we need (let alone read) packages of carefully sequenced, semantically charged words arranged on numbered pages awaiting information-overloaded readers?

It is not poetry's role to perform the socially-useful or "nation-building" function of spurring creativity. Thumboo's own project demonstrated that such an instrumental use of poetry would not work. Engineering a poetry of public relevance is neither realistic nor plausible. In her 1998 collection of essays, *Living in Hope and History*, the South African writer and Nobel-Prize winner for literature Nadine Gordimer makes this distinction very clearly, almost poetically:

The State has no imagination.

The State has no imagination because the State sees imagination as something that can be put into service.

The Writer is put into service by his imagination; he or she writes at its dictate.

Nor should we make the mistake of assuming that creativity is undifferentiated and all of a breed. Risk-taking innovation and profiteering creativity is of a different order from the handicraft skills used to compose sonnets, free verse, rhyming couplets or *pantuns*. Some may maintain that one can never really be too sure. Granted, the wellsprings of inventiveness are notoriously difficult to fathom. But it is merely common-sense to recognise the limits of the poem as an art-form and look beyond it.

In the same collection, Gordimer has asked a key question on the relationship between poetry and the new forces of communication:

...There is even a lyricism of international Internet jargon – its basic procedure is known by the poetic verbal imagery ‘surfing the Net’. Is this a globalisation of poetry on a scale previously unimaginable, or a sign of the global subsumption of arts in the unquestionable, already achieved globalisation of electronics?

Gordimer senses the co-opting of poetry by technology. But she neglects to distinguish between poetry’s likeness and its essence. The indisputable fact is that we live in a pulsating, electronic age where change is the only constant. Do we not need a form of expression that breathes apart from the hyperventilating hubbub and the helter-skelter? A string of unhurried questions and tentative answers, poetry will not offer us permanent shelter. As the contemporary American poet Mark Strand observed in “The Weather of Words”:

...poetry’s flirtation with erasure, contingency, even nonsense, are tough to take. And what may still be tougher to take is that poetry, in its figurativeness, its rhythms, endorses a state of verbal suspension.

Such suspensions may serve as the heart’s respite, as we catch our breath in bewildering times.

The Great Singapore poem

In Peter Weir’s 1989 film *Dead Poet’s Society*, the movie’s maverick star Professor Keating instructs his students to rip out the pages of an introductory essay to their poetry textbook. He ridicules its thesis that the greatness of a poem can be scientifically measured according to a mathematical formula plotted on a graph. Keating did not go so far as to tell the boys to tear out the pages of their mathematics and science textbooks. But he was wrong to emphasize only the poetry of literature.

The future of Singapore poetry lies beyond the form of the poem. An expanded definition of poetry would encompass a range of creative activities from movie-making images to a simple, coruscating phrase in a speech. As a hub-city positioned on the cross-roads of trade and the “cross-cables” of information, Singapore may someday produce a globalised poetry that transships the touchstones of humanity in our new century. To paraphrase the great American poet Wallace Stevens, the Great Singapore poem may spring from the fact that we live in a place that is not our own, and much more, not ourselves, and hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

—February 2002, New York

NOTES

¹ Thumboo, Edwin "The Search for Style and Theme: A Personal Account" in *The Writer's Sense of the Contemporary: Papers in Southeast Asian and Australian Literature*, ed. by Bruce Bennet et al, (The Center for Studies in Australian Literature: University of Western Australia, 1982).

² Thumboo, Edwin "Literature and Liberation – History, Language, Paradigms, Lacunae" in *Literature and Liberation, Five Essays from Southeast Asia*, ed. by Edwin Thumboo, (Philippines: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1988).

³ Thumboo, Edwin, ed. *The Second Tongue, An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Heinemann 1976).

⁴ Ee, Tiang Hong, *Responsibility and Commitment, The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo* (Singapore: Singapore University Press 1997).

⁵ Thumboo, Edwin, Preface to *Eyewitness* by Goh Poh Seng (Singapore: Heinemann, 1976).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ee, *Responsibility and Commitment*.

⁸ Singh Kirpal, ed. *The Writer's Sense of the Past: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Australian Literature* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1987).

About the Author

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