

POETRY IN ENGLISH FROM SINGAPORE

The history of the English and their language in Singapore goes back to the early nineteenth century, when the commercial interests of the East India Trading Company in the Malaya peninsula transformed the island first into trading outpost, then into settlement and colony. The history of poetry in English from Singapore, however, has a more recent provenance. The period from the 1830s to the 1940s provides little evidence for the use of English for purposes other than the pragmatic needs of everyday discourse, business, and trade. The first attempts at poetry in English were fostered by the opportunities represented by a university education in the late 1940s, and the university, along with the mentoring power of older poets and the canon they have fostered, has continued to play a decisive role in the development of talent in a country whose history has been synonymous with its growth as a small, rapidly modernizing metropolis, in which the community of readers and poets has always been fairly close, the collective commitment to material and technological betterment firm, and the paternal presence of the state ubiquitous.

The first book of poems in English to be published from the region was Wang Gungwu's *Pulse* (1950), followed by

collections from Lim Thean Soo (1951, 1953) and Edwin Thumboo (1956). The first anthologies of poetry in English, *Litmus One* (1958) and *30 Poems* (1958), followed soon after. Since then the corpus of Singapore poetry has grown to over a hundred volumes from more than fifty poets. (n1) The continued vitality of English as a creative language in a postnationalist era is indebted to the retention of English by the state, a significantly pragmatic choice for an island with four languages, a population of just over three million, and surrounded by countries which have reverted to their regional languages. During the 1950s and 1960s, despite the show of individual talent, the Singaporean interest in writing in English remained intermittent and isolated, finally coming into its own during the 1970s, when a number of poets emerged and matured and the interest in writing found a wider base, allied to relative ease in finding regional publishers willing to invest in poetry. During the last two decades this interest has grown exponentially, and the end of the century has seen lively poetic activity, especially from young writers, supported by sympathetic media and an audience within Singapore that continues to increase, in spite of the fact that writing from Singapore has yet to receive the international recognition it deserves.

The early poetry was preoccupied with learning how to incorporate indigenous elements of culture and language into an adopted idiom, persuading its preestablished conventions of form and style to make room for localized self-expression. At its most literal, this involved the forcing of English to accommodate expressions in Malay and Chinese into the poetic context. The result—Engmalchin—was largely unsatisfactory, as in the following example from Wang Gungwu (who was to give up writing in English):

Thoughts of Camford fading,
Contentment creeping in;
Allah had been kind;
Orang puteh has been kind.
Only yesterday his brother said,
'Can get lagi satu wife lah!' (n2)

The problem of how a local idiom might grow in relation to the language of the former colonizer has continued to remain a challenge for writers in Singapore, as elsewhere. The state retention of an idealized norm based on British English has had the effect of forcing all local variants into the category of Singlish, thus politicising any choice of idiom by a writer between the standard and the local. In contrast to the failure of Engmalchin, a poem like “Singapore” by Goh Sin Tub (b. 1927) can be taken as representative of the more moderate spirit that prevailed among poets of his generation.

(n3) It begins with an image which has an aura of the familiar: “Day here hurls its light.” The poet moves quickly from this evocative image to a more prosaic poetry of statement, which addresses his relation to the changes being undergone by his country in an earnest and self-preoccupied tone. The parental community is addressed from a position that bespeaks an isolation whose romanticism has been dispelled by the somber fear of social marginalisation. The poem enacts the process of developing an attitude to the nation while nursing palpable designs on the reader. The homeland is treated as a landscape and a seascape transformed from “fresh salt” and “simple hills” into “a commercial waterway / greased with waste.” The poem illustrates how Singapore poets are prone to address the nation in hortatory tones mingled with the anxiety that they speak helplessly in the wake of the national pursuit of a chimerical progress.

The poet who has mediated most successfully and the longest between the private and the public voices in Singapore poetry is Edwin Thumboo (b. 1933), with four collections spread over as many decades: *Rib of Earth* (1956), separated by a long gap from *Gods Can Die* (1977), followed by *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), and then, with another gap, by *A Third Map: New and Selected Poems* (1993). The series of anthologies he has edited — *The Flowering Tree* (1970), *Seven Poets* (1973), *The Second Tongue* (1976), *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* (1985), and *Journeys* (1995) — has also made him the most influential factor in the formation of the

Singapore canon. Thumboo's early poems are few and far between, making up in quality for what they lack in quantity. When he essays traditional forms, the stanzaic self-possession aspires to a Yeatsian assurance and poise.

Days squeeze my thoughts
And time transfigured lies
Orion dropped your captive hand
The merbak lonely cries (n4)

Images are used sparingly, but can be striking, as in "Lallang trimmed with fire" (95) or "Navel wet before the world was old" (96), or as in "Dregs":

Day loses its transparency,
The winds fold up and die;
Clouds grow distant in slow streaks
And shadows wither by. (109)

This fluency with traditional metre never deserts Thumboo's poetry, but is often held in abeyance by a preference for free verse, which enables an exorcism of literary ghosts through the flexibility of the irregular line and the sparing use of rhyme.

Thumboo's variations on the lyric mode are held together by an integrative vision focused on two themes: the interpenetration of the personal by the historical imagination,

and the role of friendship in the private and the public realms. Myth, symbol, allusion, fable, and anecdote all are harmonized by the overarching consistency of these twin concerns. History, for Thumboo, bridges the gap between the personal and the communal, just as friendship is the communion of the personal with that which it shares outside the self. History as a textual narrative and a sequential ordering of events in memory is harmonized into a knowledge lived in the body of one's thoughts and feelings. It exacts its measure of awareness as a form of re-membering (of the self in relation to other selves), and is inversely allied to the forgetting we know as indifference to or abandonment of the Other. Likewise, friendship is not treated merely as shared experiences, attitudes, and memories, but as the sublation of differences (of the kind that must be an immanent and imminent part of any alliance or friendship) in responsibility and care, as these are allied, inversely, to guilt (as in betrayal) or fear (not of death, but of being dead to one another). (n5)

Thus, "The Immigrant" acknowledges the migrant's choice as a form of gain-in-loss: "Days and Indian days stretch / Beyond the grasping of his hands" (115). "9th of August — II" recognizes the loss-in-gain of Singapore's enforced independence from Malaysia: "For us what then? / Make strangers out of friends / To face each other till the bitter end" (125). In the wake of the separation of Singapore from Malaysia (in the early 1960s), "Ibrahim Bin Ahmad" offers recognition of what is owed in knowledge and fellowship between communities:

... That Hang Jebat
Broke the selfishness of victory
To put such pride in giving
Was counted among us
These three hundred years or so.
We stood for much. (126)

In Nairobi, "A Brother" recognizes that "The African can be my brother / When he is most himself" (127). In "A Letter" friendship is retrievable even though friends forget to write, just as return to abandoned homelands is still possible in one of the other poems addressed to the same friend, "After the Leaving" (188). A poem like "Conversation with my friend Kwang Min at Loong Kwang of Outram Park" (161) dramatizes historical time through personalized locales, and the metonymic fragments of art that can shore up the self against time and its attritions. Later poems like "Grand Uncles: Kang to Sinnathamby at Monk's Hill Terrace" ironize self-reflexivity more thoroughly by refracting it through ventriloquised selves: "To Orchard Mall ... perturbed by the new, / Missing the old ... with reservations" (180).

Thumboo has come to represent the formative phase in Singapore's history, as the poet laureate of Singapore's growth into nationhood. His poems give poetic expression to the drive toward a progressive harmonization of the four ethnic components of Singapore (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian) into a single collectivity. At a specific time in the

historical development of his country, he understood the task of poetry in terms of explaining the formation of the nation to its people. Poets not inclined to take this path have felt that it entailed a preference for the public over the personal and the hortatory over the lyrical. The poem by Thumboo that gets the most attention, in this respect, is "Ulysses by the Merlion." It sets up an interaction between Western and local myth as a way of representing Singapore's aspiration for unity in diversity, and for the histories of migration and the struggle for economic prosperity to be sublated in an achieved identity. The poem has attracted considerable attention among subsequent poets, who have all felt obliged to write their own Merlion (or anti-Merlion) poems, illustrating their anxiety of influence, as well as the continuing local fascination with the dialectic between a public and a private role for poets, which Thumboo (as Yeats before him, in the Irish context) has wanted to sustain as a fruitful rather than a tense relation between the personal and the public.

Poets of the next generation, however, have generally taken up positions antithetical to what they perceive as the drives channeling the resources of their society. Here, for instance, is Robert Yeo (b. 1940):

Father prosperity dispenses
Priorities to his children.
Most things pragmatic prosper
But art (lower-case) has to defer.(n6)

Such an antithesis forces poetry into a corner, “as if being lonely / Is the alternative to living / In Singapore” (132). But the poet is honest enough to admit that

Yes, it feels good to be
Able to come back to
A still rather chaste
Absolutely safe
Absurdly clean
Incredibly green
Familiar and cosy
Home. (134)

Such honesty is scrupulous and characteristic of Yeo, who is well known locally as a playwright as well as a novelist. But such honesty also dissipates the sharpness of critique.

Yeo’s friend and slightly younger contemporary, Kirpal Singh (b. 1949), the author of three volumes of poetry, has been sharper and less ameliorative in his resistance. In a poem like “Making Omelettes” he plays up to the role of temperamental (and, in his case, also ethnic) insider-as-outsider, making a meal of a typecasting he cannot resist, thus giving new teeth to an old saw. The humor disguises no part of what is being treated allegorically as a fable of power and powerlessness in a multiracial society that has worked hard at making the ethnic pieces of the jigsaw hold together without cutting one another too obviously.

... and I begin now to think about the eggs we crack
and how sometimes the shell is so hard the egg refuses to
crack as if to say, not me, no me — get him, get her but
not me and so the story goes on about the eggs which are
small and big, brown and white, chickens and ducks and
eggs which invite cracking and make you feel very hungry
... (n7)

The temptations to which poets often succumb in Singapore are the romantic notion that one can achieve selfhood by separating oneself from the commonality, and its corollary belief that a self alienated from the drives of its society can subsist by making a value of that alienation. The most original and interesting such poet is Arthur Yap (b. 1943), whose poetic career stretches over more than a quarter-century, from *only lines* (1971), *through the collective five takes* (1974), *commonplace* (1977), and *Down the Line* (1980), to *Man Snake Apple & Other Poems* (1986).

On the surface, Yap’s poems can appear odd, weird, eccentric, or willfully obscure and oblique: they drop the upper case and, with it, many of the forms of syntax and cohesion by which the conventions of interpersonal communication are normally sustained. This e.e. cummings aspect of deliberately dressing as a private (a rebel in an army full of beribboned officers) makes the point that nonconformity is as much a matter of principle as of temperament. Beyond affect, what it accomplishes is a mimesis or correspondence between a fractured syntax and a newly and gingerly put-together sense

of the world, as if the shattered bits of what might once have been whole had been pieced together with care, wonder, pain, and amazement, into configurations which add up to meaning in a new way that revises our notions of how meaning is constituted in poems out of words arranged as lines. Here is a part of “things”:

chair
wall
window
desk
bed ...
in being hung up like a portrait, truly dead.
medium shot: window. Open it.
let the sun in, let suicide out.
before hitting the ground, frame it in slow motion.
Reverse repeat, pan it back to window, its source
... (n8)

But many Yap poems are not dependent on such a redrawing of the wheel. Their novelty resides not in telescopic syntax but in how metaphors merge in synesthesia. Here, for instance, is a traditional poetic motif transfigured by “dawn”:

dawn in the quiet key of light
utters a whole paragraph of hues
in the early mutter of an aviary. ...

The lively key to morning
is mysteriously sharp, already laden
with the still, angular mirrors of noon. (63)

Yap’s poems are alert to the nuances of the spoken idiom, making him particularly skillful in his delineation of the objects of implicit social satire. “2 mothers in a h b playground” has justifiably become a classic, immediately accessible, enormously funny, and devastating in its implicit critique. Yap has a keen and neutral ear for mimicry, and can ventriloquise intonation as fluently as he can disguise his own in studied ambiguity. The poem “an afternoon nap” castigates the mother castigating her child:

the ambitious mother across the road
is at it again. Proclaiming her goodness
she beats the boy. Shouting out his wrongs, with raps
she begins with his mediocre report-book grades. ...
Swift are all her contorted movements,
Apt for every need; no soft gradient
Of a consonant-vowel figure, she lumbers
& shrieks, a hit for every 2 notes missed. (60)

The resistance offered by Yap is directed not at national entities like State and Nation, but at the ordinary people whose lives conform to denials of faith in and responsiveness to what their conformity blinds them to. The poetry is full of

perceptiveness rather than anger or reproach, and leavened by a sharp verbal wit and wryly sardonic irony, alert to the treacherous aspects of the promise held forth by language that it can be adequate to every quirk of feeling, thought, and idea, and not simply leave us stranded with the feeling that “the word swallows up the world” (129). Yap also offers the honesty of a deep ambivalence about much that is reflected troublingly in the mirror of his sensibility, aware of the distortions to be found there, unwilling to resolve them into more clarity than honesty would live with.

Yap, Yeo, and Singh could be said to belong to the second generation of poets from Singapore, along with Chandran Nair (b. 1944) and a handful of others like Geraldine Heng, who was the first woman from Singapore to publish a volume of poetry in English (*whitedreams*, 1976). Wong May (b. 1943) grew up in Singapore, and published *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* earlier than Heng's volume, in 1969, but she is originally from New York. Nair and Heng practically abandoned poetry after the 1970s; but all of these poets began writing in the late 1960s, and all of them reinforced the dissident tradition of voicing anxieties about the poetic self in relation to the community and the cost of some of its aspirations. Lee Tzu Pheng (b. 1946) belongs to the same generation, but began publishing poems a decade later, rapidly achieving widespread recognition through four slim volumes: *Prospect of a Drowning* (1980), *Against the Next Wave* (1988), *The Brink of an Amen* (1991), and *Lambada by Galilee & Other Surprises* (1997). Lee

writes in a poetic idiom based loosely on the British poetic tradition, in the sense that her diction and syntax are chaste, and her progress through a poem is always decorous and well managed, enriching the reader's awareness without ruffling the poem's deportment, as in, say, Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti or Elizabeth Jennings.

The entire tradition of poetry in Singapore works within the conventions of the lyric poem, and Lee is its neatest exponent. Her poems yield richly to the literate reader accustomed to close reading, sympathetic to resonant images, sensitive emotions, and feelings delineated with clarity and precision, through a structured argument that pleases by not being obvious. In her early poems the poetic voice was always close to the poet's self, although in her most recent volume she has diversified the monologic effect of personal statement with the oblique ironies of dramatized voices.

Two poems stand out from the even tenor of subdued personal feelings that characterize Lee's first volume: “Bukit Timah, Singapore” and “My Country and My People.” Both offer memorable utterances on the public theme so dear to poets in Singapore: the changes that have rapidly transformed a sleepy kampong village culture into “the megapolitan appetite.” (n9) Both start a poet's quarrel with the country, commemorate a past that has vanished ineluctably, and gaze apprehensively on the future already unfolding steadily across the body politic. Both acknowledge a need to resist, but also a need to acknowledge the logic of what cannot simply be

resisted. Scrupulous, descriptive, and fair-minded, they resist resistance even as they access critique, without straining the resources of either.

Lee's second volume shows an expansion of scope. Her interest in children's literature and in the power of myth and fairy tale to animate human suffering, and the knowledge acquired through pain, finds expression in poems like "Grimm Story" and "Thorn-Rose: The Bad Fairy's Version." Here is the beginning of the latter poem:

Deep within the womb of sleep
Her innocence and beauty she surrenders
To no one; life breathes unhurried
In a peaceful deathlessness;
And who is free
As she is in seclusion
Where none can fall or weep
Because of her, whose enchantment keeps her
Inviolate, in that safehold of thorns
Her fate conjures? (n 10)

Lee's Christianity comes to the fore in her third volume, *The Brink of an Amen*, the reader encounters it as a process personal to the poet, shared without presumption. The language acquires a confidently quiet force considerably more effective than the somewhat subdued manner of the first two volumes. Here, for instance, is "Babel":

Deep within the womb of sleep
Her innocence and beauty she surrenders
To no one; life breathes unhurried
In a peaceful deathlessness;
And who is free
As she is in seclusion
Where none can fall or weep
Because of her, whose enchantment keeps her
Inviolate, in that safehold of thorns
Her fate conjures? (n 10)

The range of topics and techniques is considerably enlarged, giving us one of the most richly satisfying of volumes in English from Singapore. Irony makes a humorous and perceptive entry. The elegiac poems balance feeling with repose. The play on words is precise and resonant in an economical way, as in "Inventory":

headstern
heartstrong
fine-eyed
footlong
softmouthed
selfweaned
wakesome
wisemined
youngblood

youthsbane
lastfound
lifegain (60)

Lee's most recent volume consolidates the achievement of her third book, with sharper ironies and a keener sense of the feminine. Here is the ending of "Graffiti in the Ladies":

You wonder if it's shock or shame
that you feel. Or maybe both.
It's easy to say
someone hysterical did this.
Does violence have a gender?
Has woman been clapped so much in her place
she has no room to face her demons
but the public lavatory?
Surely this vandalizing speaks much more
than the writing on the wall? (n12)

Yeo, Singh, Nair, and Lee represent the second generation of poets writing in English from Singapore. Writers like Leong Liew Geok (b. 1947) and Hoh Poh Fun (b. 1946) have made their appearance on the stage of Singapore poetry in English at a later date. Leong is the author of two volumes, *Love Is Not Enough* (1991) and *Women Without Men* (1999). Despite the titles, Leong does not write on lesbian or feminist

themes, but works out a position from which men can be perceived in a more down-to-earth way and women can develop independent selves without becoming typecast in sexist roles. Hoh's *Katong and Other Poems* (1994) is the work of a person with a subdued yet refined sensibility, which is at its most pleasing when it deals with nature.

A third, younger generation, most of them born after 1960, is currently very active in Singapore, comprising Angeline Yap, Simon Tay, Desmond Sim, Koh Buck Song, Felix Cheong, Paul Tan, Gwee Li Sui, Aaron Lee Soon Yong, Yong Shu Hoong, and several others. Other poets of interest, who do not quite fit in within the otherwise plausible three-generation narrative, include Elangovan — primarily a writer in Tamil, though also the author of *Transcreations* (1988), a bilingual collection of poems in Tamil and English — and Robert Vaughan Jenkins (born in Singapore, and a Singapore citizen since 1992), the author of *From the Belly of the Carp: Singapore River Voices* (1996), which breaks free of the otherwise dominant local preference for the lyric form to give voice to a series of dramatized monologues which offer a discursive survey of local character types and several partly overlapping personalized histories centred on the Singapore River.

From the diverse group who began writing in the already affluent, technocratic, and efficient society of 1980s Singapore, Boey Kim Cheng (b. 1965) is perhaps the most interesting. The author of three volumes, he currently lives away from Singapore, in Australia. Boey's poetry is

characterized by three features: intensity, restlessness, and a prodigal gift for metaphor. The intensity with which he takes himself and his themes has something almost Rilkean in its self-absorbed introversion, its lack of irony, and its portentous striving for a larger significance to the life of things and persons, which would be religious were it less turbulent. Here is the brief "Sunset" from his first volume:

The house of man
sits on a quiet hill
and meditates,
absorbing the last words:
the hard membrane
of its windows
suddenly moistening. (n 13)

The poetry is sophisticated, capable of absorbing a broad cultural awareness into its fabric. The relation of the poet to his country has an abrasive element that can be sampled from "The Planners":

The country wears perfect rows
of shining teeth.
Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.
They have the means.
They have it all so it will not hurt,
so history is new again.

The piling will not stop.
The drilling goes right through
The fossils of last century. (n 14)

Beyond the animus against Singapore, there is the temperament of a wanderer: "I am swayed by an inner music / of irresolution. There will be a lot of pondering / up and down the length of this street, and other streets, / beyond this American dream, before the rolling stops / and I come home, wherever, whatever, that is." (n15) Boey is a gift that has yet to accommodate itself properly with the world.

Of the younger poets with one or more volumes to their credit, the most interesting are Alvin Pang (b. 1972) and Alfian Sa'at (b. 1977), whose second volume is to appear in late 2000. Pang's *Testing the Silence* (1997) is characterized by a sensitive restraint of feeling combined with tact and delicacy of expression. He handles the short irregular line in free verse with skill, and makes a virtue of understatement.

Light
like an Impressionist's brush
dapples
the glistening
fish-skin
of water
one bright scale
at a time.(n16)

The poetry stands close to silence, aware of the burden of words, as in "Sound and Fury": "We reach out / into the superfluity of words / Silence. And bring back / ourselves and our burdens emptied / of real value. Emptied" (27).

In contrast, Sa'at is more vigorous and energetic. His ear for language as sound is acute in respect of social nuance as well as poetic rhythm. He harnesses syntactic repetition as a principle of organization very effectively in a number of poems that use the technique of listing a catalogue to build up the momentum of poems into powerful litanies of expressiveness. His "Singapore You Are Not My Country" takes the tradition of the poet's engagement with his country to a new level of rhetorical excitement:

Singapore I am on trial.

These are the whites of my eyes and the reds of my wrists.

These are the deranged stars of my schizophrenia.

This is the milk latex gummy moon of my sedated smile.

I have lost a country to images, it is as simple as that.

Singapore you have a name on a map but no maps to your name.

This will not do... (n 17)

This is the final entry in one of the most exciting volumes of poetry to come out of Singapore. It bespeaks the health of what, in a Yeatsian frame of mind, one may speak of as a necessary lover's quarrel with the world, or, in a Marvellian frame of mind, as a dialogue between Created State and Resolved Soul.

(n1) *Celebrations: Singapore Creative Writing in English*, ed. Gene Tan, Singapore, National Library, 1994, pp. 44-67. Lists 84 volumes of poetry in English from 48 poets, and 34 anthologies and collections.

(n2) Quoted in Anne Brewster, *Towards a Semiotic of Post-Colonial Discourse: University Writing in Singapore and Malaysia 1949-1965*, Singapore, Heinemann Asia / Centre for Advanced Studies, 1989, p. 4.

(n3) Goh Sin Tub, "Singapore," in *Seven Poets: Singapore and Malaysia*, ed. Edwin Thumboo, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1973, pp. 97-99.

(n4) Edwin Thumboo, "Louise," in Ee Tiang Hong, *Responsibility and Commitment: The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo*, ed. Leong Liew Geok, Singapore, Centre for Advanced Studies / Singapore University Press, 1997, p. 107.

(n5) An entire thematic of care is alluded to in Martin Heidegger, "Care is being-toward-death," *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 303.

(n6) Robert Yeo, *Leaving Home, Mother: Selected Poems*, Singapore, Angsana Books, 1999, p.131.

(n7) Kirpal Singh, *Catwalking and the Games We Play*, Singapore, Ethos Books, 1998, p.31.

(n8) Arthur Yap, *the space of city trees: selected poems*, London, Skoob Books, 2000, p.67.

(n9) Lee Tzu Pheng, "Bukit Timah, Singapore," in *Prospect of a Drowning*, Singapore, Heinemann, 1980, p.50.

(n10) Lee Tzu Pheng, *Against the Next Wave*, Singapore, Times Books, 1988, p.47.

(n11) Lee Tzu Pheng, *The Brink of an Amen*, Singapore, Times Books, 1991, p.29.

(n12) Lee Tzu Pheng, *Lambada by Galilee & Other Surprises*, Singapore, Times Books, 1997, p.35.

(n13) Boey Kim Chang, *Somewhere-Bound*, Singapore, Times Books, 1989, p.40.

(n14) Boey Kim Chang, *Another Place*, Singapore, Times Books, 1993, p.63.

(n15) Boey Kim Chang, *Days of No Name*, Singapore, EPB, 1996, p.51.

(n16) Alvin Pang, *Testing the Silence*, Singapore, Ethos Books, 1997, p.53.

(n17) Alfian Sa'at, *One Fierce Hour*, Singapore, Landmark Books, 1998, p.41.

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