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ENGLISH AND THE INVENTING OF IDENTITY
IN SINGAPORE POETRY

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Pragmatics and Language Learning Conference
held at the University of Illinois, Urbana, USA, from April 1-3, 1992
The concern of my paper is not with the problems of English usage writers in Singapore have in fashioning a sense of identity. Such problems as those relating to the use of special features of Singapore English or localized references that lend a Singaporean "flavour" to a writer's work, I consider as superficial.

My concern is foremost with the problematics of discourse, with how textual configurations, the interstices within a text, raise issues about the problematic nature of identity itself.

I should like to begin by referring to Edwin Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion" as a historical document. As a historical document, it is a statement of the great myth of Singapore culture. This myth sees Singapore as made up of 3 great Asian traditions, Chinese, Indian and Malay, with long roots into the misty past but transplanted on the shallow soil "on this brief promontory" (Ulysses 18), somehow mutating towards an as yet to be realized "centre" through the discovering and encircling vision of an Anglo-Western consciousness. That the enabling consciousness in the poem is embodied in the figure of Ulysses is revealing since not only is the myth of Ulysses the radiating centre of Western culture but more importantly, through Tennysonian reincarnation, he becomes a symbol of a positive imperialist legacy - the English Language with its formative, universalizing power.

Elsewhere, Thumboo has said, in prose,
English is but one of four languages of education in Singapore ....One special feature marks our writing in English. Though decreasingly so, the literatures in the other languages were and still are confined largely to life within their speech communities. It is English, spoken and written by those coming from different communities that has taken up, that has drawn unto itself, experiences of the various communities....The whole content of life in each of the communities is within reach of the writer because English – and the users of English – cross communal boundaries. Until such time when the literatures in Malay, Chinese and Tamil move with vigour out of the communal compound the writing in English would be the only one likely to cope...with the broad life of our society....in this sense, English will probably be the first to produce a national literature. 2

This was in 1978. In 1988, under the anonymity of his position as Chairman of the Committee on the Literary Arts, formed by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, which itself was set up by the government as part of its National Agenda to develop excellence in every aspect of life in Singapore, Thumboo declared

The various ethnic strains in Singapore society define their identity as much through their creative writing as their other arts. The literature in all the four official languages must be given the appreciative yet critical environment that can further creation, thus strengthening the distinctive flavour of life that each language imparts....So far it would appear that creative writing in English best represents the Singaporean since our writers in English come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Given the right sensitive and supportive environment, writings in English could serve effectively as a bridge for the different groups and are likely to draw their Singaporean character from a rich, collective heritage. 3

Edwin Thumboo posits a multiracial culture which is an agglomerate, rather than a synthesis, a culture that in each case refers to a traditional, ethnically delimited heritage, a Golden Age to which each race can look back separately for inspiration, bridged
by an overriding medium of supra-ethnic, international status which, because it is culturally neutral in such a particular context, is culturally hegemonic.

It is interesting to observe that Thumboo's discourse is subsumed under a larger cultural discourse that includes many Ministerial pronouncements on the subject. Thus the Minister for Social Affairs expressed something of Thumboo's view in a speech he made in 1973 in which he said:

The objective of building one nation out of many races calls for an integrated national culture embodying the sentiments and values of the four great cultures that exist in our midst.4

The trouble with this view is that in order to demonstrate the distinctiveness of each of the four cultures, their differences tend to be heightened, their similarities underplayed, and expressive forms organized to develop their separate but equal status. The paradox of separate distinctiveness with integration is to be resolved by a bilingual policy in which English is to be used as the universal lingua franca and Chinese, Malay, Tamil as the inculcators of values within each language community. This was the view put forth by the Minister of Education in 1973:

The ideal education system is one in which every child is educated in the mother-tongue first...Our children have got to acquire in their formative years those traditional cultures, values and moral concepts which are valuable and worth preserving. It is difficult to pass on these values through a second language...If we want to use the existing traditional cultures as our base, we should use the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction for only in this way can the essence of such cultures be absorbed.5
The problem with this proposal is that the mother-tongue has become, in the Singapore education system, the second language and sometimes not even that, while English has become increasingly a first language. In more optimistic moments, this development is seen as something positive. The Prime Minister, commenting on the significance of English as a common language, pointed out that the 1986 National Day Parade was such a success because

The compere spoke in English, and the whole National Stadium [which could seat half a million people] understood and responded as one. And the spectators sang together, when once they could not even laugh 'at the same jokes, never mind singing the same songs. 6

A year later, Tay Eng Soon, the Minister of State for Education, confirmed the great advantage of English as a common language:

English has served not only in giving Singapore access to international trade and technology but also enabled the avoidance of racial tension. 7

But the dilemma is recognized to be there all the time. At a Chinese Press Club event on 6 July, 1988, for example, Lee Hsien Loong, the Minister for Trade and Industry, raised the issue of the deculturization of the English-educated in Singapore. And more than once over August and September of the same year, the Prime Minister himself warned that Singapore might be in danger of becoming a pseudo-western society because of its English-language school system. Unlike countries such as the UK, South Korea and Taiwan, he pointed out, there was a danger the original culture of the people in Singapore would be displaced and "we become a pseudo-western society. Not a real western society. That is another matter. But a fake one." To further confuse the discourse, "very serious doubts" have been expressed by S Rajaratnam, the Senior Minister, "as to whether such a thing as Asian values really exists":
If it has any meaning at all it is merely a convenient way of describing the heterogeneous, conflicting and complex network of beliefs, prejudices and values developed in the countries which for geographical purposes have been grouped as being in Asia.10

The importance of such discourse, whether in the realm of poetic mythmaking or the prosaic halls of national deliberations cannot be dismissed. And the importance lies in the process of identity-construction that this discourse generates. In an address to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, entitled "Minimal Selves", the British sociologist Stuart Hall contends that the discourse of the postmodern has bypassed the notion of the essential self and moved to the recognition that the self comes about when the need arises for us to define ourselves against other selves. Identity is therefore not something given and lost and to be recovered; it is something constructed, and constructed across difference by being constituted of the articulation of the self. The discourse we make, the perceptions we frame into discourse, invent the culture and identity which we in turn perceive and discourse about. The problem of meaning in cultural discourse in Singapore has to be seen in this light. Such discourse generates images of tradition and change, separateness and community, linguistic hegemony and dialectal ethnicity, that reify powerful paradoxes that destabilize the very mode of discourse. Public (official) discussion and pronouncements, for example, often reveal a split perspective stemming from a vivid awareness of living in several worlds, or rather, in what Muhammad Haji Salleh describes as an "interworld". This sense of a dicholomized world, split between meaning and medium, utterance and message, seems particularly acute in the poetry written in English. It can function to arrest meaning, even despite itself. This is what happens in "Ulysses by the
Merlion", a poem described in some quarters as a statement of cultural promise:

I have sailed many waters,  
Skirted islands of fire,  
Contended with Circe  
Who loved the squeal of pigs;  
Passed Scylla and Charybdis  
To seven years with Calypso,  
Heaved in battle against the gods,  
Beneath it all  
I kept faith with Ithaca, travelled,

Travelled and travelled,  
Suffering much, enjoying a little;  
Met strange people singing  
New myths; made myths myself.

But this lion of the sea  
Salt-maned, scaly, wondrous of tail,  
Touched with power, insistent  
On this brief promontory...  
    Puzzles.

------------------------

Despite unequal ways,  
Together they mutate,  
Explore the edges of harmony,  
Search for a centre;  
Have changed their gods,  
Kept some memory of their race  
In prayer, laughter, the way  
Their women dress and greet.  
They hold the bright, the beautiful,  
Good ancestral dreams  
Within new visions,  
So shining, urgent,  
Full of what is now.

Perhaps having dealt in things,  
Surfeited on them,  
Their spirits yearn again for images,  
Adding to the dragon, phoenix,  
Garuda, naga, those horses of the sun,  
This lion of the sea,  
This image of themselves.

(Ulysses 18-19)
What the text reveals is a series of disjunctions between what I would call its (positively) cognitive and its (negatively) performative dimensions. "Puzzles" at the end of stanza two, cuts the poem in half, dividing in a phenomenologically unbridgeable way the Western mythic vision and the Eastern mythic envisioning. The blank space that separates the two, indeed the blank spaces that separate the envisioned myth of the merlion and what it is to embody on the one hand, and the actuality and what it can become on the other, become themselves metonyms of an epistemological hiatus. The tone is eloquent, but the language is willed, and the images, particularly the icons of culture, are void of resonances. The rhetorical pattern reverberates with unrecovered connections and meaning.

"Ulysses by the Merlion" is perhaps a symptom of what I would call the anxiety of idealization, to adapt a term from Harold Bloom, resulting in a problematical hermeneutic of cultural ideation. Where the perspective is more ironical, that is to say, where the poet is more conscious of his dichotomized world, the result is more convincing. "A Boy Drowns", in this sense, is a complex exploration of the problem of meaning. The poem works, in a way, by denying the meaning of death. Death is usually the occasion, implicitly or explicitly, for celebrating or questioning the meaning of life, and the dead becomes such an occasion by focusing a common identity. In "A Boy Drowns", however, the drowned boy is finally "known" by the geography of his death rather than an achieved empathy of common fate, common destiny. The scene of death happens to be set at the crossroad
of history and time, in a pool built by the Japanese and from which
the boy is fished out, watched by old folks and the scientific young
man:

Today a big boy drowns.
Older folk who stand around feel the soldiers,
The Japanese with high honour,
Who had committed hara-kiri,
To be with the sun more quickly...
The old folks fear that perhaps
The spirits of the soldiers were lonely,
Wanting to share their co-prosperity
A second time
With new spirits, younger blood.
So a second boy drowns.

They fished him out.
Like the face of the pool,
When the wind turns and blows sorrowful,
His skin was wrinkled.
And I thought of Hanuman,
Monkey and god.
For the boy, the brown body
Was hugging himself,
His hands hugging himself.
As if he felt cold while dying,
As if the spirit leaving the body
Left it gracious, in prayer.
The old men nodded, knowingly,
Thinking of the dead soldiers.

A young man, perhaps undergraduate,
Replete with life,
Equipped with books, a modern mind,
A file of scientific notes,
Came from tea in the students' canteen.
He saw a body in the withdrawing sun
And looked at the body, speculatively
As if it were a scientific fact.

Perhaps we should fill up the pool
Because it breeds mosquitoes.  
(Gods 47-48)

The rich tropical weather finally "dismantles" everything and the
kaleidoscope of historical violence and aggression, of foreign
influence, of traditional institutions, beliefs, superstitions and
modern anonymity, progress and practicality (all of which are unquestioned), is melted into a location that is the only meaning of this death. All the structures of meaning in the poem become mere accidental dispositions of space, and the poem works through a deconstruction of meaning almost cubist in nature.

Edwin Thumboo's poetry is characterized by a strong foregrounding of localized presences and an undercurrent of absences: the tension is the tension of negotiation between conflicting worlds. This tension results in a much more tentative, provisional order in the poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap. For a poet like Lee Tzu Pheng who believes that the heart cannot "think/in the mind's language", 14 (Prospect 16), the availability of truth as knowledge cannot be charted:

coming into life
everything is going away,
going away from the first hope
to the last futility
the opening womb, the closing tomb

departure is arrival
at another place,
but there are no charts or provisions;
maybe youth or a failing mind,
inexpert in situations

now you have arrived,
have entered one human home,
time will move you
to seek lodgings in other places

......................... ....

everything goes away
and moving stays unaware
life is a boarding house,
doors open and shut,
a new tenant's poised on the stairs

(Prospect 2)
The only certainty of experience is its uncertainty, the only certainty of meaning is its deconstructed presence. "We live only in a voice / that trembles along our veins" and when that voice is articulated, like the blues singer pouring out her song, the "anguish seems more real than / the pain one drowns in". (Prospect, 9) feelings betray and are betrayed by the words that express them, sympathies expand in silence towards some unfathomable darkness. Even the happiest of her poems, like "After the Pain" (Prospect 6) where the freshness of the world is captured in all its tremulous details, ends in deferential inscrutability. Thus the large gesture that the poet makes in "My Country and My People" (Prospect 51-52), usually read as a poem in praise of Singaporean identity, is quite out of character, until we realize how every concept (of country, home, tradition, identity) in the poem becomes diminished or dispossessed of its conceptual substance, producing a discourse that expresses a poignant sense of incompleteness. Very much the same thing happens at the end of one of Lee Tzu Pheng's latest poems, "Reading the Fourth Movement, the Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony":

slowly, oh slowly I learn  
what I can be, and still there is more  
to be learned  

hard now to see how youth could have burned  
but a fire remains  
like the flame trapped in flint,  
deeply bound, the springing of light  
at the heart of the mountain  

and, coolly mysterious, the last swan is gliding  
out into the dark of the stream,  
glimmering stately and light, she turns  
her back to the sunset  
and sails serene to her night  

(Against 65)
The text, establishing the apotheosis of self-knowledge, is undermined by the textuality that weaves threads of dark night, of the back turned, of a last moving figure amidst a pattern of gliding, glimmering, serene motion, returning whatever hoped for meaning to the mysterious dark recesses of the mind. In such a poetry, the impenetrable barrier of language, language in the widest cultural sense of forms of expression, is not so much transcended as discarded. Truth lies with the unuttered and unutterable self:

What is unspoken
could write itself
in the script we rehearse
but never utter,
If I could see into you
and you into me,
would it matter then,
would it be the same
matter?

(Against 28)

One certainly doesn't argue in such poetry. The experience of truth can only be felt, if at all, intuited by a leap beyond concepts. For this reason, the fate that dictates that man is the being that uniquely brings truth to presence in language, also, in the end, draws us toward silence.

Silence of a more ironic, defensive kind, but arrived at over argument (or rather simulated argument, argument stood on its head as it were) or over a play of ideas and concepts that is both, astringent and expansive, punctuates Arthur Yap's poetry. Poems like "letter from a youth to his prospective employer", "things", "group dynamics" (Commonplace 10, 60, 64) are typical of the peculiar babble of Yap's monologue, its consistent dislocations and deflations, reflecting the
speaking voice's repeated attempt and failure to articulate what it perceives or imagines, to achieve coherence out of what is seen and said:

"sir: I refer to my interview & your salary offer: you said I would be given a commensurate salary: commensurate with what? the depth of the filing cabinet or the old bag sitting 3 desks & one right-hand corner away? I am reasonably qualified: quite handsome: my lack of experience compensated by my prodigal intelligence: I shall not expect to marry the typewriter: it's decision-making I am after: that's what I am: a leader of tomorrow: so why don't you make it today? my personality is personable: & all opportunities being equal: I am equal to any most opportune moment any most momentous opportunity: so take me to your highest superior: & spare nothing at my earliest convenience: yours faithfully

(Commonplace 10)

In this way, the rich social and cultural texture of poems like "a vicious circle", "fiscal ear" or "2 mothers in a HDB playground" (down 54-58) express a peculiar inexpressibility. The last mentioned poem is no mere comment on brash prosperity. Meaning is sealed within objects that are not to be denied:

ah beng is so smart, 
already he can watch tv & know the whole story. 
your kim cheong is also quite smart, 
what boy is he in the exam? 
this playground is not too bad, but I'm always so worried, car here, car there. 

at exam time, it's worse. 

because you know why? 

kim cheong eats so little. 

give him some complan. my ah beng was like that, 
now he's different, if you give him anything he's sure to finish it all up.
sure, sure. cheong's father buys him vitamins but he keeps it inside his mouth & later gives it to the cat. i scold like mad but what for? if i don't see it, how can i scold?

on saturday, tv showed a new type, special for children. why don't you call his father buy some? maybe they are better money's no problem. it's not that we want to save. if we buy it & he doesn't eat it, throwing money into the jamban is the same. ah beng's father spends so much, takes out the mosaic floor & wants to make terazzo or what.

The text keeps the psychic topography on the surface. The totally objective attitude does not support the reader's usual attitudinizing. In other words, the claim to any higher order of meaning, the order of values, is subverted by the ineluctable concreteness of the text. While the reader thinks he knows, the text continuously disputes it. This outwitting of significance subverts conventions of thought and serious communication and establishes a tone of comic futility, throwing doubt on the fact that the higher order of meaning the reader claims really exists.

In Arthur Yap's poetic world, the ability to know is itself in doubt. The grammar of human events has the same arbitrariness as the grammar of language:

lets's have chicken for dinner.

somewhere else, someone else utters:
let's have john for dinner.
we are alarmed by the latter but a dinner, too, has its own grammar & we are assured by grammarians both utterances are in order.
john, + animate, + human,
couldn't be passed off as repast.
chicken is + animate, - human,
& can end up in any oven.
if we combine the items of grammar
the way things in cooking are,
we would then have:
let's have chicken for john for dinner,

let's have chicken for dinner for john,
let's have for john chicken for dinner,
let's have for dinner for john chicken;
but probably not:
let's have john for chicken for dinner,
let's have for dinner john for chicken.

john is a noun holding knife & fork.
chicken collocates with the verb eat.
grammarians favour such words
as delicious & john eats happily,
but in a gastronomic dinner
taxonomic john isn't to eat deliciously.

The discourse makes both meaning and non-sense futile. What the
reader is left with is a problem of knowing. This structure of
questioning is sustained into Arthur Yap's latest volume of poems,
Man Snake Apple. The drive forwards Absolute Meaning, wholeness, is
at most an inarticulable intention:

stained glass
was awesome silence,
was such quiet it indicated paraphrases everywhere.
the branches outside were your fingers
held in benediction.

god was such stillness,
his stained-glass figures stretched
neither forward nor backward in himself.

& at this ruby-amber corner
i could only gaze & piece together
whatever i had want of. i was free
because i was free from myself;
a mere witness in whom arose a great need,
urging like silent desperation, prayer,
to be included. I could be a mote, kill glass,
a sunsteeped blob of blood. a nothingness.
god, such stillness was.
your fingers were there.
what do you hold up to bless?

(Man Snake Apple 2)

Meaning here is not so much achieved as questioned. The text operates
by a self-contained irony in which the images generate a language of
communication that is self-defeating. The language constantly
foregrounds the incongruities between words and meaning, the verbal
and the substantive, waiting.

It is the image of life as formed of "words rearranged by tired
fingers" (Chandran Nair, Hard Hours, 23) that is evoked in the work of
new young talents like Boey Kim Cheng. More poignantly than the
expressions of his contemporaries, Boey's poetry leaves a sense of
double entendre, the sense of coming to a cul-de-sac and the need to be
"somewhere bound". Remarkably, and characteristically, Boey's poetry
caries evocations of both premature aging and youthful promise, of "old
trees still shedding bright dreams" (Somewhere-Bound 48). It
experiments with a use of imagery without established associations but
extending into a wide field of connotation. It thus traces the arc of
epistemological uncertainty inscribed in the subtle work of Arthur Yap
and Lee Tzu Pheng but promises new directions:

So much remains unwritten,
The dark tales hide their faces
from the crevices of the pages,
'dreading the touch
of the few questioning rays.

(Somewhere-Bound 50)
The poetry in English therefore characterizes a literature not of arrival but of retreat, not of achieved meaning but of questioning, and not of certainty, but of doubt, even despite itself. Its figures construct a configuration of epistemological uncertainty inscribed in much of the discourse bearing on culture, language and identity in Singapore. The poetry traces a general movement of semantic impasse, a representation of the struggle to control thought and articulate meaning without ever quite finding a point of rest.

Earlier, Professor Peter Nazareth, one of the plenary speakers, has talked so complexly of the burden of memories that inscribe the massive and messy text of the African writer. Singapore writing carries a burden of a different design. Singapore poetry is resonant with the burden of memories that are not there, the black trunk (that Prof Nazareth mentioned) it lugs behind is the black trunk of absences, or the black trunk of alien exotic baubles too enticing to throw away.

As an epilogue, perhaps I should try to relate my paper to or justify it in a conference essentially on language issues. I am not sure I have to do it. But I would like to see my students able to relate their literature and indeed their own writing, the language that the writers use, the language that they themselves use, to the essential act of living, to their history and psyche. It is important that we mean them and ourselves from accepting the merely functional status of language which is well represented in the major texts of classical rhetoric and which express a main view of language and language teaching that the West has produced. One of the most
venerable teaching beliefs in this tradition is the emphasis on verbal skill and decorum, the practising of various forms of reading and writing as the best means of developing literacy, the need to master the "basics" of grammar first and other precepts later, the emphasis on formal propriety in discourse, -- which all reflect assumptions about the nature of language as a "dress" of thought. Philosophically, the argument presumes an absolute distinction between the concept of "language" and the concept of "reality", the second prior to the first and denoting an intrinsically coherent "world" to which language makes reference so as to enable human communication. "Writing and speech," Aristotle says, are "not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies" [On Interpretation, trans. H. P. Cooke & H. Tredennick, Harvard University Press, 1973, p.115]. In this view, language use is largely irrelevant to the substance of knowledge, although crucial for its transmission. But what I have tried to show in this brief space is the very opposite, that just as the end of thinking is not thought but thinking itself, the end of language is not meaning but the meaning-making act itself.

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Notes

1. Edwin Thumboo - Ulysses by the Merlion (Singapore, 1979). Reference to this book and to Thumboo's Gods Can Die (Singapore, 1977) will be indicated in the body of the text as Ulysses and Gods respectively.


14. Lee Tzu Pheng, "If", *Prospect of A Drowning* (Singapore, 1980). References to this book and to *Against The Next Wave* (Singapore, 1988) will be indicated in the body of the text as *Prospect* and *Against*.

15. Arthur Yap, *Commonplace* (Singapore, 1977). References to this text and to *down the line* (Singapore, 1980) and *Man Snake Apple and Other Poems* (Singapore, 1986), will be indicated in the body of the text as *Commonplace*, *Down* and *Man Snake Apple*.


17. *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures. The Poetry of Singapore*, eds. Edwin Thumboo et al (Asean Committee on Culture and Information, 1985). Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of the Chinese poems are drawn from this work, referred to in the body of the text as *Asean*.