

The "Second Tongue" Myth: English Poetry in Polylingual Singapore¹

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"It is unlikely that art forms indigenous to Singapore will be developed in the near future."

LEE KUAN YEW in interview with Agence French Presse, 22 June 1979.

"Every developing country has instituted some program, overtly or covertly, to repress minority languages in the guise of achieving unity."

R. GUNTHER KRESS and R. HODGE, *Language as Ideology* (London: 1979), p. 141.

"Poetry as we have known it can be defined as the individual refracted through social convention. The poetry of the New Faith can, on the contrary, be defined as social convention refracted through the individual temperament. That is why the poets most adapted to the situation are those endowed with dramatic talent. . . . He does not speak for himself, but for the ideal citizen."

CZESLAW MILOSZ, *The Captive Mind* (New York: 1980), p. 56.

IN 1956 A YOUNG OPPOSITION MEMBER of the legislative assembly of British-ruled Singapore lamented the fact that the use of English had repressed his own native tongue:

"There is a sense — I would not say of humiliation, but definitely of inadequacy — that I have not the same facility and control over my own language [as over English]. That is something you must understand, or you will not understand what is happening in Asia . . . when I read Nehru . . . I understood him when he said: 'I cry when I think that I cannot speak my own mother tongue as well as I can speak the English language.'"

The speaker was Lee Kuan Yew for whom the alleged interest in the revival of a “mother tongue” became a rally cry in the period immediately preceding the call for independence. Bilingualism was a kind of commonly accepted code-word for incipient anti-British sentiment. And these sentiments involving a renewed emotional commitment to Chinese language and education were further abetted with the opening in the same year of Nanyang University, a Chinese-medium private university, supported in large part by contributions from the Chinese community as an alternative to the University of Singapore administered and guided by a British-style syllabus. Because Chinese middle-school graduates could not find enough jobs in the English-administered civil service and in the international business community, discontent spread throughout the school system. Once Lee Kuan Yew and his PAP assumed power in 1959, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil were given equal status with the English. In the early 1960’s, with the PAP’s short-lived merger with the new Federation of Malaya, it began to emphasize the importance of Malay as a national language while simultaneously contending in the legislature with left-leaning parties dominated by Chinese speakers, whose cause was being played up in the Chinese-language press, always the benefactors of an appreciably larger circulation than the English-language *Straits Times*. Once Singapore was ousted from Malaysia in 1965 in the wake of rioting by leftist port workers, the clamour for a special place for the Chinese language in Singapore decreased. In order to defuse a showdown, Lee summoned the leaders of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to his office in October of 1966 and redefined bilingualism for the second time: although Malay would be de-emphasized, bilingualism — now defined peculiarly as English and a mother tongue — was to become educational policy. His rationale, according to the chafing members of the Chinese press who were present, was that Singapore could not do without English, the premier language of modern technology and international commerce. Ironically, that decision was being made in the very face of the Japanese experience, which would seemingly have suggested that quite advanced industrialization could be achieved without the knowledge of any English at all! The “mother tongue” was to be nurtured in order

to keep native cultural traditions alive, to provide what Foreign Minister Rajaratnam once termed, "cultural ballast in the winds of modernization."

This "bilingualism" was, needless to say, a curious phenomenon, increasingly the object of attention from linguists in Europe, Australia and the United States. In one sense the renewed emphasis upon English in the mid-seventies was a blatant political decision on the part of Prime Minister Lee and the People's Action Party. The man who as late as 1974 was saying

"I am convinced that if the price for knowing enough Chinese is a lower standard of English . . . it is still worth it"²

was by 1975 and 1976 urging an upgrading of the standard of English and employing phoneticists in English-language teaching at the University of Singapore. While Nanyang University continued to produce Chinese-educated graduates, those Singaporeans interested in careers rather than cultural ballast, preferred to send their children to English-medium schools and by late 1975, Nanyang's enrolment had shrunk so much that it decided to switch to English as the medium of instruction. Admission to the University of Singapore was to be guaranteed only to those who passed a sophisticated English Proficiency Examination. In 1980 Nanyang University ceased operations; the government's decision to close it was seen by many members of the Chinese community as a final blow to the Chinese language in Singapore.

It was accompanied, however, by other instances of government "guidance" during the period between 1980 and 1982. Rediffusion, a subscriber-sponsored closed circuit wireless network, was instructed to remove all soap operas in the Chinese dialects from its programming. These afternoon soaps in Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, or Hainanese, had very large audiences, particularly among the aged who spoke no English. Two popular Chinese tabloids were put under the management of the *Straits Times* Group which is partially British-owned. The government-administered monopoly, Radio Television Singapore (RTS) ceased transmission in the dialects altogether and hired announcers and script writers (for their own afternoon dramas)

from Taiwan to read and write in Mandarin and hourly news on the radio division of RTS was read by Hong Kong or Taiwanese announcers speaking Mandarin. In order to further improve the level of English, two British-born newsreaders were hired. All of this took place in a country whose population is seventy-four per cent Chinese. A census taken in 1980 showed that 87% of those Chinese still spoke one of the dialects at home, 5.2% spoke English, and 7.5% Mandarin which the government was attempting to graft onto the country through the use of "Speak Mandarin" campaigns and the compulsory teaching of Mandarin in schools. Presented as a means of consolidating the Chinese community, as a linguistic corollary to the disappearance of dialect-based neighbourhoods in favour of government-built high-density flats, the Mandarin campaign continues to be controversial and is mistrusted by many Singaporeans.

This new "bilingualism" of the eighties is really the adaptation of two languages neither of which is native to Singapore, where few of the southern Chinese are fluent in Mandarin or English. Linguistic chauvinism, as Prime Minister Lee branded the convictions of those struggling to maintain Chinese culture in the turbulent days of the mid-sixties, has been repressed in favour of two politically neutral languages which convey very little ballast to the native Singaporean. In order to strip the language issue of its emotion, Lee has come full circle: no one will have a mother tongue. And hence the Singapore poet writing in English faces a double burden. He is an elitist in the sense that he is highly educated and that he belongs to a very small sector of the population, that 5.2% who speak English well enough and with enough emotional comfort to use it at home. He has probably been sent abroad through one or the other bilateral exchange programs (Fulbright, Colombo Plan, Iowa Writer's Workshop, perhaps as a SEAMES representative), or through one of the bonding schemes offered by the Ministry of Education which demands government service in return for the bursary, from whence he returns to a respected position within one of the institutions where English is promoted as *the* necessary language of development.

But not only is he suspect because of his elitist association with the Ministry of Education who administers a controversial pro-

gram in "bilingualism," but he himself is likely not bilingual at all. Few of the Singapore poets writing in English have the ability to read or write other Singaporean languages, even those with Ph.D.'s, since under a British-style syllabus, there would be no second language requirement for an advanced degree. He writes for a highly restricted audience, of necessity in a country where less than 10% of the population speak English at home, much less the kind of English that makes for poetry! Hence there is some truth in a statement made on 15 March 1980 by the M.P. from Anson, the Hon. Devan Nair, that any criticism of Singapore poetry was conducted in an incestuous environment where matchsticks were being victimized by axes.⁸ The in-bred nature of poetic activity in Singapore where introductions to locally published volumes are not uncommonly written by the poet's colleagues, is really not so unusual in developing countries or for that matter, even in some developed countries, as the cosy relationship between Random House and *The New York Review of Books* might affirm. What is unusual is the lack of recognition on the part of the Singapore poet that his "situation" — the linguistic and hence political circumstances of creative activity — conspires to produce a very narrow audience and a limitation to the kind of formal experimentation that constitutes most contemporary poetry written in English.

In the mid-seventies, when the PAP government revised its blueprint for bilingualism, English was designated as the language of national development and the indigenous mother tongue — Tamil, Chinese dialect, or Malay — was to be the medium for the inculcation of cultural and moral values. This resulted of course in a kind of linguistic apartheid, a belief that one could use one language for one thing (science, medicine, commerce, engineering) and another language for culture and the arts. And again, the poet writing in English, which Edwin Thumboo has through his anthology termed "The Second Tongue," is at a disadvantage. For would he not be using the language designated as the language of national development, for cultural purposes? English then, and this is the irony of Thumboo's title, is not really a second tongue at all, but a first tongue for a politically defined purpose: the transmission of information and skills, but not of

“value.” But the indigenous “mother tongues” are equally handicapped; according to the mid-seventies game-plan, they were to convey moral and cultural values, but were apparently not sufficiently sophisticated (as if one could determine the sophistication quotient of a given language!) to serve as the media for development. This is of course not bilingualism at all, but its opposite: the privileging of one tongue over another for a specific purpose.

The notion that one can control the uses to which a given language is put is crucial to the government’s language policy in Singapore. At a conference on “Asian Values and Modernization” in Singapore in 1976, the then Foreign Minister (now Deputy Prime Minister) S. Rajaratnam concluded his paper with the hope that Singapore’s adaptation of the English language for upgrading its technology would not also bring into the country the extremes of “western decadence.”⁴ Although what kind of decadence were specifically western were never specified, Rajaratnam’s hope is easily discernible: that the mother tongues, the Asian equivalent of Yeats’s “The Statues,” might stave off western, “many headed” corruption. The mother tongues were in effect a kind of moral defence of the nation as it modernized, enabling the country to gain knowledge of microchip technology while at the same time resisting Culture Club. English bears a heavy burden of national development in Singapore, as revealed in a recent kitsch advertising “supplement” to the 4 June 1984, Asian edition of *Time Magazine*, designed to attract new high-tech industry to the modern city-state. Amidst all the graphs and charts in the “Special Advertising Section,” is the following sentence: “Singaporeans started with certain advantages: energy, English-language ability, and a general level of technical skill far above that of their neighbours.”

It is within this context that one must read poems like Edwin Thumboo’s “Ulysses at the Merlion,” an unabashed celebration of the legacy of those traders, the collective reincarnation of the epic wanderer who founded the city whose emblem, equally kitsch, is a mermaid sea-lion sited at the mouth of the Singapore River. Thumboo’s recollective emotional history of Singapore telescopes past and present. In spite of progress that is the envy of all of Asia, her founding fathers are her present: the allegedly

polyglot, impoverished schemers and con-men whose loves rarely extended beyond survival. To use the myth of Ulysses at all, to celebrate Singapore in the way that Joyce celebrated the "development" of Dublin by telescoping time, is to run enormous risks. One must somehow show Singapore as a deflected Dublin or show the extent to which western myths, like western ideas and maybe, western armaments, are not suited to the Asian context. The "wily" Odysseus was extremely curious in most of his incarnations (Browning, Tennyson, T. S. Eliot), and whereas Joyce plays a voyeuristic fugue upon that legacy, Thumboo does not take that risk. That is, he makes highly selective adaptations or borrowings from the myth at the most literal level: Singapore as, had it been developed in time, another potential port for yet another wanderer of history. The poem appears as merely derivative, rather than a variation or an extension of the myth. It takes someone of enormous ambition to write a twentieth-century poem about Ulysses, since the influence is substantially more overt than even Harold Bloom's anxious theory of anxiety would lead us to believe. And Thumboo does not succeed in constructing an Asian transformation of the myth (one wonders what that might in fact be?) or alternatively, in showing the inadequacy of that myth. Instead the myth becomes a mere literary frame for a landscape poem celebrating the "permanent values" amidst the rapid technological change that develops a nation.

Consequently, Thumboo's poems often appear derivative even when they are not; a certain "Anglo" quality seems grafted on in much the way that the English language itself is in Singapore. In "Ayer Biru" (Malay: Blue Water), Thumboo parodies the quest for location. A number of villages in Malaysia, usually near spring or water sources, have the word, "Ayer," in their place names, like Johore's Ayer Hitam (Black Water). Read another way, the title could also be "Beer Water," and indeed a landscape transformed into an oriental wasteland is at the thematic centre of the poem:

Weak showers of light
Drip through the thick foliage.
Knotted mangrove roots are grey.

One-day campsters all have left;
 Wind blows
 Cast-off papers, toffee wrappers.
 Dust shifts into the shed.
 Where laughter swayed
 Salt hums its song.

By the wishing-well
 Shadows crowd.
 Murmurs of an hour ago
 Have left their voices.
 Branches bend and leaf whispers
 Resolve into the foam-lips of the waves.

We leave.
 On a rock the hermit crab
 Shifts its clumsy shell but stops,
 Stilled by an unthought symphony,
 Wild magic,
 As ripples lick the shore.

Blue water, I mutter,
 Blue waters:
 A stray drop of sand
 In a mangrove pattern.

(*ST*, p. 111)

The poem is really a mere technical exercise: the gnarled roots characteristic of mangrove swamps are replicated in the knotty, hyphenated words of the second stanza. The “drop of sand / In a mangrove pattern” (l. 25) culminates a poem about a world where unique, individual discreteness is lost in some “wild magic” in which the various elements — sea, sun, sand, and shower — coalesce. As with the later “Ulysses at the Merlion,” there is an almost obsessive need to display one’s non-functional knowledge, perhaps a weakness of dons who double as poets. The blatant allusion to *The Waste Land* is grafted: only Eliot’s gashouse and king are absent. Even the muttered prayer beside an Asian version of the waters of Leman finds its way into the poem! The allusion is in fact like the shell of the hermit crab, a borrowed carapace defending the poem against the absence of its own frame. Poetic convention is being refracted against the individual consciousness rather than the other way around, so that allusions

are but appendices to narrative voice. Again, like the borrowed Ulysses myth, the literariness of the poem does not *inform* it, resulting in the obscuring of *deference* at the heart of metaphor. But the very weakness is symptomatic of the role of English in the culture itself and may in fact be paradigmatic: literary history is conveyed as technical information and not at all internalized as part of the country or the emotional life of the poem.

Thumboo is a much better poet when he forgets that he is a Professor of English Literature in a former colony — and hence heir to that expatriate Anglo tradition represented by the historical presence of D. J. Enright, the British poet and critic who was his mentor at the University of Singapore. One of his best poems is "Cremation":

That they should burn you
 And I on another journey;
 That the heat of your dying
 Was not for me —
 Who knew you like a son —
 Is surely the cry of a crow
 Leaving me no superstition
 But a stare at your bones
 Ash and shadowless . . .

Tears not to be shed were compelled:
 You were not dead, for an essence
 Noiseless you guide without pressure
 A voice I still hear.

Yet gradually will slip
 Your inroads made in me:
 I'll laugh at your strength
 At the most in two years or three.

(*ST*, p. 83)

As Singapore developed, old Chinese cemeteries were needed for widened roads and new quarters for enlarged administrative offices. Cremation at gray government chapels gradually came to replace the elaborate and noisy Chinese funeral and burial ceremonies. Thumboo adeptly combines the Buddhist notion of reincarnation and subsequent escape from the endless cycles of rebirth with the more modern, less "superstitious" notion of

immortality as an influence that must be “slipped.” There are no non-functional images and a paucity of the artificially poetic language that graces so much of the poetry in English in Singapore. If Singapore is a culture where influences and beliefs and languages are grafted on to one another without understanding or absorption, then “Cremation” captures that problem, the problem of how to be your own man in the Orient, even in death. The occasion of a cremation and the misunderstood myths of traditional Buddhism provide a mythic base that is itself a misunderstanding, and is hence very much alive rather than borrowed. The poem describes the world of shadows, and doubles, and yes, the *secondariness* of the borrowed in a remarkably fresh way. It deals with bi-whatever (lingualism, religion, culture, marriage) as a myth which makes temporary “inroads” only to escape into privilege once again. “Cremation” is a deadly serious poem, even with its Yeatsian pun on “stare” from “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” but it is deflected by a delightful irony.

Nonetheless, Lee Tzu Pheng’s voice is tonally more evocative, more willing to confront the struggle between “father” and “mother” tongues that is almost entirely repressed in Thumboo’s art. Her poem, “My Country and My People,” is probably the best poem in English in the country’s short literary history with its resigned, even weary opening lines:

My country and my people
are neither here nor there, nor
in the comfort of my preferences,
if I could even choose. . . .

(“My Country and My People,” *ST*, pp. 161-62)

Although she graduated from the University of Singapore with a First Class Honours Degree in English, poetic contrivance is kept at a minimum, and the elitism that Thumboo imports from the English literary canon is purged both structurally and thematically, but it is confronted first:

I came in the boom of babies, not guns,
a ‘daughter of a better age’;
I held a pencil in a school
while the ‘age’ was quelling riots

in the street, or cutting down
 those foreign 'devils'
 (whose books I was being taught to read).
 Thus privileged I entered early
 the Lion City's jaws.
 But they sent me back as fast
 to my shy, forbearing family.

("My Country and My People," ll. 10-20)

Coming of age during the non-struggle of independence from Great Britain, speaking a privileged tongue that is disguised within some bogus myth of a "second tongue," she is cast back into isolation, "neither here nor there." The theme of the poet trapped between two worlds, "one dead / The other powerless to be born" is of course not original with Lee Tzu Pheng. But "My Country and My People" suggests that the entrapment is in fact part of the process of decolonization when a poet grows up "in China's mighty shadow" but "keep[s] diaries in English" (l. 45). English is first persecuted as the "foreign devil's" tongue during independence, then privileged as the language of education, class comfort, and developmental necessity. But for the poet her own tongue remains privatized, hoarded as a diary. Amidst all the striving and incessant propagandistic call for hard work and discipline — a hallmark of the PAP government's policy of puritanical self-improvement — hers is a voice trying to find a quiet space for itself:

Then I learnt to drive instead
 and praise the highways till
 I saw them chop the great trees down,
 and plant the little ones.

"My Country and My People," ll. 28-31)

Singapore is a country where one "learns" to praise in the same way that one "learnt to drive," and the object of that praise is the abstraction of development which she allegedly assists with her tongue and teaching, while secretly resisting in the privacy of the diary. The poem has a kind of quiet courage: it is simultaneously an autobiography, a lament, and a celebration of home and the language of the heart that "may make a hundred flowers bloom" in exchange for a linguistically-dependent development policy

that replaces great trees with little ones. Chinese myths are reaffirmed against British privilege.

Alienation, when it appears as a theme in Singapore poetry written in English, assumes a dimension unlike that normally seen in say, British poetry of the thirties. There is seldom the fear of self-consciousness so apparent in J. Alfred Prufrock's "love song" or Auden's lament of the coming dark age of the mind. It instead appears as a manifestation of a schizoid split in tongues, allegiances, or personalities, which robs the individual of choices. Whereas Lee Tzu Pheng's "My Country and My People" is in the Singapore context a radical statement of a tongue immersed in the lion's jaws and its consequences for the country of "fence-sitting neighbour[s]" (l. 53), Thumboo imagines the schizoid split as a necessary, and even desirable internalization. In the title poem of a recent volume, *Gods Can Die*, which appeared earlier in *The Second Tongue* anthology, Thumboo, now with the assumed voice of an elder statesman, relates a vision:

I have seen powerful men
 Undo themselves, keep two realities
 One for minor friends, one for the powers that be,
 The really powerful. Such a people take a role
 Supporting managers of state,
 Accept an essential part in some minor project.
 But after a bit of duty,
 That makes them fester with intentions,
 They play the major figure to old friends.

("Gods Can Die," *ST*, pp. 172-73, ll. 1-9)

Again, Thumboo is intent upon lacing his craft with echoes to augment the inadequacies of his ear; it would seem as if he begins the process of versification only after mining a storehouse of literary images. In this instance, the source of the derivation is Yeats's "Easter 1916" which begins "I have seen them at close of day / Coming with vivid faces." And the thematics of the poem, the necessity of "polite meaningless words . . . / To please a companion" and its final appeal for compassion to assuage or to bridge violence, also is derivative of Yeats, perhaps strained through T. S. Eliot's Polonious, anxious to be of use, even if a bit obtuse, an infamous "supporting manager."

"Gods Can Die" derives a large part of its meaning and almost all of its tone from an obsessive referentiality that is not at all characteristic of Lee Tzu Pheng's craft. And this is perhaps to be expected; whereas Thumboo learned his poetic craft under a Singapore governed by the British, she is decidedly more Singaporean through the luck of later birth. But both poets are exploring existence itself as part of a life divided; whereas her narrator is "neither here nor there," and her audience "fence-sitters," Thumboo's narrator is forced to

... try to seek a balance in the dark
 To know the private from the public monument,
 To find our way between the private and the public argument.

(*"Gods Can Die,"* ll. 10-12)

In a country where the language spoken at home among friends and family members is, at least 80% of the time, different from either Mandarin or English (the two "public" tongues endorsed by the government in its drive for modernization and political neutralization) the barriers separating private from public are in fact very real. The compassion that Yeats had urged so as to nullify the threat of anarchy that is always just beneath the surface in his verse is not applicable at all, but appears as a kind of imported "frame" for the utterance. And the accusation against which Third World and Commonwealth writers are so often obliged to defend themselves — that their work is derivative and imitative — is not always misplaced nor always an example of western prejudice. The good younger poets in these countries, or at least those who write in English, even after independence, must wage a second battle, as it were, in which the privilege that accrues from speaking and writing in English is confronted not as a duty-free import carried by a British-style school syllabus, but as one's own, if problematic "first tongue." Although English was imposed by colonization, most people on this planet have, similarly, no choice about their first tongue. Since in any case few of the poets in Singapore who write in English can write in any other tongue, the sense that somehow "English is not my real language" is simply a *post facto* attempt at cultural protectionism that prevents innovative, formal experimentation. It is, of course,

easier to import tone, imagery, and syntax, and then adapt it to the "Singapore context." The result may be a poetry "neither here nor there."⁵

Occasionally, young poets do attempt formal experimentation with varying results. Arthur Yap is perhaps the most innovative. An accomplished abstract painter who has exhibited internationally, Yap adapts the minimalist techniques common to the abstract "combine" in order to produce poems in which tone functions like colour patches:

who plots, then, the words
talking, taking from the breath
the beat slow or fast?
among other things, a song
quick or slow: a testament
that is to be like monotony.
give it form, certainty
give it familiarity.
give it up.

afresh,
what it is are sounds
of the surroundings, near or far,
interweavings & interlacings
soundings, sounding
like what?

("who plots, then . . .", *Commonplace*, p. 48)

A failed poem is incorporated into the finished one as a functional fragment. One good example of Yap's irony is the poem, "everything's coming up numbers." In a country obsessed with national development and the ever improving income and trade figures that prove its success, a country in which people are "Lee's digits,"⁶ Yap pokes gentle fun at the local, usually Chinese custom, of choosing ominous numbers as guides upon which to entrust one's money at race tracks or in the national lottery, so that even death becomes a gamble:

do we add 3 to his age?
put 6 at the end, or as the third digit?
do we follow the same for him as well?

the betting booths displayed a list of numbers,
 numbers already oversubscribed by collective uncertainty.
 they were therefore not to be further abetted.
 someone's death, it was felt, need not
 incur one's corporate economic grief.

("everything's coming up numbers,"
Commonplace, p. 2, ll. 8-15)

With his short, staccato bursts, Yap's poetry in fact catches the ear of "Singlish," the colloquial mode of speaking in Singapore. In this particular poem, that conversational tone is buried and suppressed by a different kind of English, government or "official" *Strait Times* advice not to use death or birth times as omens for gambling. There is an official language — that which warns of "corporate economic grief" and belongs to imperial English, and another language that is deployed to count a film star's stab wounds and, against public advice, makes a bet in such a way that "abetted" is a linguistic variant of "a bet." The poem is like a Singapore lunchtime specialty, Hokkien Mee, in which a distinctive taste is obtained from slightly fermented prawns. Numbers put in an envelope to bring good luck at the track comes to define life lived as a fortune cookie. Two kinds of English, two kinds of authority, two different views of economics compete quite successfully with one another in Yap's poetry. The "here and there" have been combined poetically in a remarkable way; neither the thematics nor the form is in any way derivative.

And yet Yap, like most of the poets writing in English in Singapore, has difficulty obtaining professional, sensitive criticism of his work. Because the Singapore audience, even potentially, is only 10% of the population and because the publishers are either local publishers with poor international distribution networks or, as in his case, the "Writing in Asia Series" published by a special division of Heinemann Educational Books that publishes only Asian writers for whom there is a limited interest in the UK or Canada and even less in the United States, his situation of linguistic isolation becomes even more apparent. He is both privileged and not privileged (except by "special" divisions of publishers or "special issues" of journals which define his marginal status). When Britain was administering Singapore and

Malaysia, there was a kind of sympathetic, of often amateurish and condescending attitude toward local artists—a perverse *sympathy* that many Singapore critics welcome. Discounting the criticism of one's fellow poets and colleagues whose opinions are highly self-interested and who constitute the only educationally sophisticated audience, Yap must rely, if he is fortunate, on the chance remark of an Anthony Burgess who was prompted to comment, "up to the highest Anglophone standards," in a blurb cited approvingly in the introduction to a volume of short stories compiled and edited by George Fernandez and published by the Singapore Society of Writers, as evidence that Singapore literature had come of age. Although Yap may in fact have welcomed any favourable comment, how sad that the sympathies of a sophisticated modern British writer (with experience in Malaysia), should have praised his tome as being up to the highest "English standards," as if those were somehow the only or the best standards. And how much sadder that the Singapore Society of Writers, having assimilated entirely the myth of English as a "second language," should have viewed that comment as praise; it is as if one were told, "even though it is a 'second' language, by God it's just as good as we English." Why should it not be, since Yap was entirely educated in the English stream: first at St. Andrew's School, Singapore, then at the University of Singapore, and finally the University of Leeds where he obtained an M.A. in English linguistics? One suspects that Singapore poetry will become much better when it stops judging itself against another "purer" standard of English which is neither purer, nor better, nor worse, for creative purposes, only different. Paul Theroux and Blanche d'Alpuget have both written highly acclaimed novels set in Singapore and Malaysia which capture local customs, tones, and language, though their standards are not so Anglophone either, since they come from America and Australia, respectively.

All of this is to say that some kind of inferiority complex in which English is seen as a supplementary, second language, even though none of these writers have a different usable first language for creative purposes, is not only at the heart of the poetry, but re-enforced by "enlightened," sympathetic (?) critical judg-

ment. And with that comes a belief among these poets writing in English that the best poetry to come out of Singapore in the future will of necessity be in English, prompting a kind of speculation about what form that "classic poetry" will assume.⁷ But even if future poetic achievement could be predicted in the same way in which say, the weather, is, with greater or lesser accuracy, a minority poetry or a poetry whose production has been "guided" by the government as an adjunct to language policy, would reflect the aspirations, values, and fears of the minority who use it. Historically, when a minority poetry has achieved a truly international status, it has often been or has imagined itself as being some oppressed "mother" tongue attempting to preserve itself in a linguistically hostile environment to which it becomes a kind of hostage. Isaac Bashevis Singer's insistence upon writing in Yiddish may be a case in point. The achievement of the early Yeats, attempting to preserve the lilt of the Irish tongue or the Faulkner preserving Yoknapatawpha idiom, all may qualify. But the English tongue in Singapore represents the opposite impulse; it is the displacing tongue. In fact, once the myth of bilingualism and its progeny, the myth of the "second tongue," is laid to rest, one of the oppressed languages of Singapore — Tamil, Malay, or one of the Chinese "dialects" — could well become the medium for a classic.

At the heart of fashionable, post-structuralist theory is the notion that all writing is a self-constituting secondary activity, a supplement attempting to recover (in both senses in which we use that word) some pure condition or origin.⁸ In fact this origin is equally arbitrary, be it in the guise of Edward Said's *Beginnings* or Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* or just maybe, Burgess's unfortunate "highest Anglophone standards." My point is precisely this: the more a tongue invents for itself a second, supplementary status as a *Second Tongue* with a defined *ad hoc* use, the more it welcomes and must even posit some bogus "pure standard" from which it is irrecoverably descendant in order to explain its own marginality to its own culture. Linguistic imperialism combined with cultural protectionism enforces the paradoxical combination of privilege and marginality. Having no myth of its own origin, but borrowing "Ulysses myths," it, in

effect, accepts one that is British-dictated and judged, by default. Such a poetry is doubly isolated, from the notion of a "canon," and from its potential audience. In order to "approach" a literature, as with an airport runway, the limits of the canon must be visible. Only in a literature whose "frames" are borrowed is that ever possible. Such a literature is extremely vulnerable to being "directed."

For its future comes to be entirely tied to programmatic exercises, like that of the Poetry Corner column in the *Straits Times* which encourages students to compete for cash awards given weekly to the best poem — in English. Cash awards for productivity are thereby carried over into the arts. Yet another was a research project headed by Dr. Mary Tay of the National University of Singapore whose results were given first page coverage by the local press in April of 1981 under the bizarre headline: "The One-Parent One-Language Way to Bilingualism." According to research later delivered orally, children of those families where one parent spoke English and the other parent spoke another language became more effectively bilingual with less difficulty than did those children where one or both parents spoke dialect. When the paper was first delivered, some foreign academics thought it was a parody of social science research, but the coverage by the government-licensed press suggested otherwise. There was no effort at all to control the experiment, by selecting families of comparable economic means (dialect speakers tend to be less affluent in Singapore). In one sample cited, the "one-parent one-language" teacher was a university staff member! No attempt on the part of the authors was made to measure the time spent with each child in each learning environment. Nor was any attempt made to assess the contribution to language learning of extra-familial sources of vocabulary or syntax. What the research did achieve was a flimsy support for a government ploy to repress the use of dialects in Singapore — for the second time, since many linguists now feel that the designation "dialect," when applied to one of the varieties of Chinese regional speech, is discriminatory from the outset by suggesting its belated 'marginality' to a "source."⁹ "Effectively bilingual" was never defined by reference to a standardly administered test, and would of course

be nearly impossible to define anyway. In fact, it is not research at all, but its perversion, strangely reminiscent of the Third Reich's projects which defined the marginality of the Yiddish dialect in 1938,¹⁰ although the attempt to suppress the contribution of dialect parents to a developing Germany was perhaps more radical.

Little wonder then, that with this pattern of progressive de-emphasis and suppression of "mother tongues," the Ministry of Education should have warned in late 1982 that enrolments in schools of mediums other than English were continuing to fall. And, to be sure, there is some truth to government assertions that Singaporeans, looking for an insurance policy for future economic success rather than "cultural ballast," were opting for English education as a means to that end. A program to supplement "cultural ballast" was launched about the same time by making "moral education," presumably with a heavy Confucian base, a required subject in secondary schools, a tell-tale sign that an attempt was being made to recover the mother. The "situation" of the writer in English in Singapore reached a culmination of sorts in an announcement by the Ministry of Education in December 1983: from 1987 English would be the medium of instruction in all schools with Mandarin as the second language. Teachers in Tamil, the Chinese dialects, or Malay would be retrained. It is the culmination of a remarkable change-over unparalleled in peace time: schools teaching the home language of 80% of all Singaporeans would be closed or converted. The most astute comment came from the Chinese community in the form of a loaded lament by Pang Ceng Lian, a former journalist, in the daily *Lianhe Zaobao* of 31 December 1983: "Mandarin will be learned in schools, but it will be studied as Latin was in the past. . . ." In other words, as in nineteenth-century British public schools. Such a Gothic triumph for the return of the Monster, English, is assuredly beyond the wildest dreams, even those of Sir Stamford Raffles, who claimed the space for the British in 1819.

The last phase of any imperialist impulse, as the domino theory would have it, is the attempt to export it to countries perceived to be in similar straits. Although the method did not

work in Malaysia which elected to retain Bahasa Malay as its official language, de-privileging English in the attempt to preserve endemic cultural and religious values tied to the Muslim faith, and expelling Singapore in the process, there are suggestions that Singapore writers in English are setting their minds to the task again. The process is not dissimilar to that employed in trade. One borrows an imported literary form, adapts it to the Singapore context as a *Second Tongue* (which is in reality a euphemism for the derivative status of English poetry in Singapore), and then re-exports it to "less-developed" countries whose majority languages are less suitable for the exigencies of development. One creates a "market" for Singapore literature in English by reminding others that the sole road to successful development and national unity is by way of the English language (which includes her literature). Thus English is re-exported as the handmaiden of development, a linguistic reminder that the importer's "native" literature is not of the sort to produce self-sufficiency. Dr. Kirpal Singh, a visiting senior lecturer at the Department of English at the University of Papua, New Guinea, seconded from the National University of Singapore during the academic year 1982-83, began a public lecture in May of 1983, by advising his primitive hosts, in the best nineteenth-century fashion, that their English was not up to snuff:

"It may be true to say that more people speak Pidgin than they do English, but it is only a matter of time before the situation is drastically altered. . . . The pressures to adopt English as the main language of administration, justice, education, and the like cannot be ignored without regard to the expense involved."

What remains unstated is that there is also expense involved to those speakers of Pidgin who must forego the tongue which for the majority at least, carries the culture. Again, there is the now openly admitted conviction that the language which serves the needs of development will become the base of a new literature in English:

"Even countries outside of the Commonwealth of Nations are increasingly forced to recognize the international status of English. . . . In a world of growing technological complexity where com-

munications must of needs be immediate and precise, the significance of English as a world language cannot be over-stressed."

Although few would disagree with that statement (save the Japanese whose communications equipment is quite sophisticated), it remains true that there are few Dutch poets writing in English or French literary critics writing in English in spite of the success of those two countries in developing international markets and the rapid communication to service them. What is not at all broached in Singh's talk is the possibility that the use of an English adapted for development may in fact impede rather than abet its use in the creative arts. At the conclusion of the lecture, widely covered by the local press, the visiting Singaporean stated that he "cannot in all honesty see how Pidgin can achieve the ends served by a major world language," since it did not have a "ready vocabulary."

Although Singaporean literature in English, at its worst, makes use of a "ready" vocabulary and even "readier" images and allusions, most of the great literature of the world, in whatever language, tends to extend and to enlarge the vocabulary of its medium tongue as any reader of *The Sound and the Fury* or the recent work of Salman Rushdie must assuredly recognize. Literature "develops" only insofar as there is some impetus for pushing a medium of language into ever newer domains. To designate English as a special language of development and technology transfer may in fact restrict that movement. If the sciences only used a "ready" vocabulary, the new languages needed for sophisticated programming in microchip technology would have been more slowly developed.

The "ready" vocabulary which Singh sees as the special strength of the English language, one suspects, may be a euphemism for that long tradition to which so many Anglo literary critics pay homage: it is not merely words, but an ideology to which language defers. Whether one calls the Singapore government a "meritocracy," as do those leaders entrusted with its operation, or whether one sees them as part of that privileged 10% whose English qualifies them for a "track" that includes the English-medium National University of Singapore, a Statutory Board or the upper echelons of the Civil Service — depends

upon perspective. And the poets who write in English in Singapore, whom I am conceptually equating with English-medium poets who happen to live in Singapore, constitute part of that curious "meritocracy." They are not alas Chinese towkays with a vocabulary of three hundred words in English who constitute a verbal silent majority. "Merit," poetically or politically, includes the notion of mastering English; the so-called second tongue has a curiously imperialistic sound to it, as it often does in Singapore.

In *ARIEL* (April 1984), Singh has said, in rare candour, "a literature in English had to be created quickly so as to give the different races a sense of cultural identity" (p. 9). What kind of identity would that "instant identity" be that would proffer a privileged unity? Again, literature serves the developmental needs of the nation and hence the emotive tone is one of urgency. But what is even more disturbing is the suggestion that English is so important that it can provide cultural identity to those 80% who are being asked to give up the identity of their native tongue so as to receive its benefits. Ironically, the same point was made more elegantly in the "Grass-Roots" column of Papua New Guinea's *Post-Courier* which was published adjacent to the summary of Singh's controversial lecture, "Papua New Guinea Writing in English: Problems and Prospects." In that column a local wag pokes fun at the ideological content disguised at the heart of Singh's argument, in Pidgin, as a self-reflexive "Letter to the Editor":

Dear Sir DrSinghapung

Oyes, mybrata dr, yu right tracking for sure in your thinking. I'm write this my short notice to you about so. Yes.

Tok Inglis its the more better wan in long running. No good we everbody's not meking the progress staying ston edge for everanever amen, eh?

To my general point of view some pipels they not emouf applikesen to the learning good. No Sir. Some they wanting stop busanaka all the life, but not like you and me bro. No way. We shining the lighted pathway for improvement and a long living British Komonwelfare and wonderful Misis Kwin, Ruling the Britania. Keep it up your pecker Singh old chap. Your future advices will be appreciated.

Yours faithfully,
G. Roots esq.

Colonialism and its thinly disguised ideological heirs have always had difficulties with the poetics of the grass roots, which is precisely why the Republic of Singapore paved over those roots with the urgency of a neutral medium of development, quietly lamented by Lee Tzu Pheng. English has always been the dominant, privileged language in the country, first as the *lingua franca* of the British Empire and now as part of a developmental Empire that has the same strengths and weaknesses as its ideological model. One exchanges very rapid development and perhaps more than a fledgling fling at guided parliamentary democracy for first, linguistic apartheid masking as bilingualism and finally through the covert suppression of indigenous tongues by declaring the vocabulary inadequate, insufficiently sophisticated, not "ready," or a dialect.¹¹

One suspects that the bifurcation of the world, the separation of private from public, the lament of the loss of traditional values — all of which permeate Singapore poetry written in English are in part a confession by those poets of their own very real role in creating the myth of the second tongue. It was the progressive programmatic use of English as a companion to rapid development that enabled these poets to reap unduly lavish praises in the local, government-licensed press for helping to upgrade standards of English. Every English don and school teacher became, to borrow from Edwin Thumboo, a "supporting manager."

Was bilingualism a flop because it did not face the economic realities of the seventies, that English was already the dominant tongue? Was bilingualism the myth behind which English retained its dominance, tarnished by anti-British sentiment? Or was the form of bilingualism earlier envisaged by the PAP a ploy to sacrifice indigenous culture and the potentially subversive and divisive politics that accompany it to the altar of national development? The myth of the second tongue, like all myths, functions so as to appear as a necessary legacy when in fact it serves the very private needs of those who share it. The poets of *The Second Tongue* enjoy a privileged relationship with the government in power, while at the same time the very marginality of the language in the Singapore "living" context restrains any adversary political venturesomeness. By deconstructing what is in

effect their first tongue into an illusion of its secondariness, these poets create a special place for themselves as a small group with a small audience in a tiny country, which protects them from international class literary criticism that does focus relentlessly on figures like Achebe in Africa or Joy Kogawa in Canada whose works are informed by no such myth. It is a curious luxury, this "situation," perhaps best described by Robert Yeo, Singapore's most politically venturesome poet and playwright, in his volume, *And Napalm Does Not Help*:

Our education sometimes allows
 us an occasional extravagance,
 like terrazo tiles or a bash at shares.
 O we know what little we do would be
 appreciated but not received beyond
 the annual Chinese New Year angpow.

("The Other Side of the Seventies," p. 31, ll. 37-42)

NOTES

- ¹ In this article, citations from the poetry of Edwin Thumboo and Lee Tzu Pheng are taken from the collection edited by Edwin Thumboo, *The Second Tongue*, Singapore: Heinemann, 1976. Citations from the poetry of Arthur Yap are from Arthur Yap, *Commonplace*, Singapore: Heinemann, 1977. The citation from Robert Yeo is from Robert Yeo, *And Napalm Does Not Help*, Singapore: Heinemann, 1977.
- ² Cited in V. G. Kulkarni, "The Non-Chinese Syndrome," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 March 1984. Lee himself is an English-educated lawyer with a Cambridge Triple First who mastered Mandarin after becoming a political leader of the city-state.
- ³ C. Devan Nair, "An Address to Parliament on the Budget," cited in the *Straits Times* of 15 March 1980, p. 1. Nair's remarks on the floor of the Parliament were given widespread press coverage and indeed formed the basis of an auxiliary debate conducted in the press during the following weeks. Local dons and literary critics including Dr. Singh, Dr. Koh Tai Ann, and the writer of this essay were singled out for attacks as elitists. The following year Nair, who has a reputation for abrasiveness, was appointed to the largely ceremonial post of President of Singapore.
- ⁴ Seah Chee Meow, ed., *Asian Values and Modernization*, Singapore: Univ. of Singapore Press, 1977, pp. 94-96.
- ⁵ The poignant sense of being "neither here nor there" evoked in Lee Tzu Pheng's poetry has been given a more linguistically verifiable symptomatology by W. J. Crewe in *Singapore English and Standard English: Exercises in Awareness*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1978. In his attempt to locate a pattern in the Singapore digressions from so-called standard English, Crewe employs the notion of "linguistic anomie." Rather than confusions in competence determined by what linguists in polylingual

societies term "inference," the author believes there to be a kind of displacement as the result of fatigue.

- 6 Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's well-known penchant for using "computerese" and statistical parameters in his public statements has been commented upon by Kulkarni in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* article cited above.
- 7 Cultural forecasting, the use of projective techniques borrowed to predict trade and economic cycles, is a habit of any number of Singapore literary critics, but is perhaps best exemplified in Kirpal Singh, "Towards a Singapore Classic," *The Literary Criterion*, 15 (March 1980), 74-87.
- 8 The notion of the belatedness of writing is at the heart of much deconstructionist criticism, but probably looming behind the various attempts to describe the discontinuity between writing and speech is Derrida's attempt to posit a *Grammatology*. The deconstructionist impulse has not yet been used, as far as I know, to describe not merely the absence of utterance, but the absence of the collective utterance that brings "national" literatures into being.
- 9 R. Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge, *Language and Ideology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, Ch. 3 and 4. See also the policies for isolating "dialects" as political policy in John DeFrancis, *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam*, The Hague: Mouton, 1977.
- 10 Lucy Davidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1981.
- 11 The notion of linguistic privileging and how it is brought about is admittedly a complex topic. But a differential in living standards might be one way of describing the advantages that accrue from English-language proficiency in the Singapore context. While Tamil, Malay, and Chinese dialect teachers were being "retrained" because of the decline in enrolments, dons at tertiary institutions involved in English language or English literature teaching — including all the poets and critics discussed in this essay — had an average yearly salary cheque two and a half times the average yearly income of the Singapore citizen. In two fellow ASEAN states — Thailand and Indonesia — the salaries of teachers of English averaged 50% less than the yearly average national income in 1980. In the developed countries of Japan and the United States the average salaries of teachers of English was only marginally above the national average yearly income. One may well accomplish two highly desirable goals for national development simultaneously: enforce the benefits to be obtained from English in the public mind and "buy off" potential dissent from a highly verbal element of the population.