

The English Anthology in Singapore and Southeast Asia

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First, some history. Given its function after the end of colonialism, English was by far the most international language. Officially, it is the 4th of Singapore languages, the other 3 being Malay, Chinese and Tamil. These two have long histories, the former going back beyond 5,000 years. Their classical traditions are well-established. But their centres are outside Singapore, in China and Tamil Nadu. Moreover, the works of their major poets have been translated into English. But how they treat writers, according to the practise of their traditions, differ. We know the major Chinese poets easily. But we don't know similar Indian poets in the same way. There were other differences. The Chinese have one written script; the Indians as many as their languages. But they share Hinduism and Islam; have a strict, common caste system. Our Malay literature, covering a region, has a much shorter history. That in English, beginning with poetry, has the shortest. It has grown into our largest, and, when taken with its ex-colonial and older cousins, is globally unbeatable.

We are looking at anthologies in English. The first was Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes Written By the Ryght Honorable Lord Henry Howard, late Earle of Surrey, Thomas Wyatt the Elder and others*. In short *Tottel's Miscellany*, 1557. And of poetry only. In the period that immediately followed, both the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas were generally poetic. When the language moved years later towards prose, with Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe in the 18th Century, it was still variously marked by the spirit of poetry. But by then the English language had moved out of England, slowly, now without interruption, from 1620, with the Pilgrim Fathers, to North America.

As students, we were in touch with English traditions. We knew Philip Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry* (also known as *A Defence Poesie* and *The Defence of Poetry*). Those who planned to read for Honours in English knew more. For instance, I realised that William Shakespeare was the greatest poetic dramatist. But it was Ben Jonson, dramatist-poet-critic-teacher, who was the completer writer. I had read, and re-read, his *Timber* or *Discoveries* that dealt with most of the problems we too faced, in a tradition where the poetic language was also growing. For him

Speech is the only benefit man hath to express his excellency of mind above other creatures. It is the instrument of society.... In all speech, words and sense are as the body and the soul. The sense is as the life and soul of language, without which all words are dead. Sense is wrought out of

experience, the knowledge of human life and actions, or of the liberal arts.... Words are the people's, yet there is choice of them to be made.... They are to be chose according to the persons we make speak, or the things we speak of. Some are of the camp, some of the council-board, some of the shop, some of the sheepecote, some of the pulpit, some of the bar, etc.... All attempts that are new in this kind are dangerous, and somewhat hard, before they be softened with use. A man coins not a new word without some peril, and less fruit: for if it happen to be received, the praise is but moderate; if refused, the scorn is assured. Yet we must adventure, for things at first hard and rough are by use made tender and gentle.... Some words are to be culled out for ornament and colour, as we gather flowers to strew houses, or make garlands; but they are better when they grow to our style as in a meadow, where though the mere grass and greenness delights, yet the variety of flowers doth heighten and beautify.... Language most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form, or likeness, so true as his speech.³

Look at the difference for instance, between Jonson's

Drink to me only with thine eyes,

And I will pledge with mine;

Or leave a kiss within the cup,

And I'll not ask for wine.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise

Doth ask a drink divine;

But I might of Jove's nectar sup,

I would not change for thine.

and this from his *Giles and Joan*:

Who says that Giles and Joan at discord be?

Th' observing neighbours no such mood can see.

Indeed poor Giles repents he married ever,

But that his Joan doth too. And Giles would never

By his free will be in Joan's company;

No more would Joan he should. Giles riseth early,

³ Ben Jonson, *Timber: or, Discoveries: Made Upon Man and Matter: As they have flow'd out of his daily Readings; or had their reflexe to his peculiar Notion of the Times*. 1902, pp. 94-104.

And having got him out of doors is glad;
The like is Joan. But turning home is sad,
And so is Joan. Or that his long-yearned life
Were quit outspun. The like wish hath his wife.

Few of his contemporaries and successors wrote about their problems in the way Jonson did. He was particularly useful. He still is. His criticism touches the most delicate lines in his poetry and is therefore the most instructive in terms of service-offering.

How did the language spread? Broadly, it had, within Britain and Ireland (1); then further in America, then Canada-South Africa-Australia-New Zealand, known as Dominions (2); then the colonies, over the later years, from Aden to Zanzibar (3); then as the literature achieved maturity, moving from the vertical to the horizontal, (3a); then increasingly to other countries as a second, business, foreign or international language (4); and space (5), then under the oceans, provided we are driven there (6). Each phase is an age. From the 50s till today, this Singapore literary line moved one into the other gradually, as each shift took time to establish itself. You educated yourself into them.

It was in (1), (2), (3) and (3a) that significant changes occurred. My concern here is with (3) and (3a) to which all ex-colonies, including Singapore, belong. It was the extensive colonialism in this phase (3), which laid the foundations of the broader, larger, global literacy in English. But it is only recently that we, in the Commonwealth, know how it started first in the Philippines⁴, a US, non-British colony, almost three decades before English literature was begun in India by Mulk Raj Anand (*Untouchable*, 1935), R. K. Narayan (*Swami and Friends*, 1935) and Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*, 1938). Those of us who studied in British colonial universities took these three novelists as the first in English from the largest, non-Anglo-Saxon part of the British Empire. Now we know better.

Singapore joined later, about 10 years after Japan surrendered. The early flowering of Goh Sim Tub, Hedwig Aroozoo (later Hedwig Anuar), Lim Thean Soo, Wang Gungwu, Beda Lim and a few others such as James Peter Chin, between 1948-50, inspired the emergence of forces around 1955 in the Faculty of Arts, University of Malaya, Bukit Timah Campus, Singapore. Names need to be mentioned, and remembered. Ee Tiang Hong had joined the university as a student in 1951.

⁴ See for instance the earlier section of Gemino H. Abad's Introduction, 'Mapping Our Poetic Terrain: Filipino Poetry in English from 1905 to the Present', in his *A Habit of Shores: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, 60's to the 90's*, University of the Philippines Press, 1999.

I went up in September 1953. We became lifelong friends. When I left the university in May 1957, those with strong literary interest *in situ*, chiefly as poets and editors, added Wong Phui Nam, Tan Han Ho, Herman Hochstadt (who left at the same time as I did), Lloyd Fernando, Oliver Seet, Ho Wah Kam, and Daniel Kovilpillay. We wrote, we edited. Two journals are worth mentioning: the *New Cauldron* and, later, Fernando's *Write*. There were others: *The Undergrad*, *Pelandok*, and *The University of Malaya Students' Union Magazine*. By then, only Wang Gangwu (*Pulse*, 1950), and Edwin Thumboo (*Rib of Earth*, 1956) and later Ee Tiang Hong (*I of the Many Faces*, 1960) had individual volumes. While each was interesting, the vision they projected was naturally very personal. There was no national body of criticism that showed the thinking of the poets, as there was, for instance, when Elizabeth I was Queen of England, four to about four and a half centuries ago. We knew there was an English sense of poetry inspired by Greek and Latin teachers from Plato and Aristotle, later to Ovid and Suetonius, and centuries later, through medieval scholars in Europe, especially those in the monasteries and the 2 new universities, Oxbridge.

The making of a literature in English, in (3), was virtually a university affair. Almost all the first generation of poets in England and the Empire/Commonwealth were students of the English Language and Literature. Take the Commonwealth: Anand, Narayan, Rao, Ezekiel; Naipaul, Braithwaite; Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo; Halpe, Gunaratne; N'gugi, Theo Luzuka, Rubadiri; there are more. Some were moved to write, chiefly poetry and fiction, at reasonable pace. But hardly any criticism, except for their tutors on academic subjects. We worked with what resources we had. Literary traditions had yet to form, adopted and modified, from the Greek and Latin, as they had in England, and later, America and the whole Commonwealth, including Singapore.

I knew a little about anthologies before I went up to the university: Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury* had been a familiar volume at home. My father's beautiful leather-bound copy I read and treasured. And we had used Henry Newbolt's anthology of longer poems in 1951, whose '*Sobrab and Rustum*' I had to re-read in 1955. And I had in 1951 bought the *Oxford's Book of English Verse*. And the University library had about two dozen other anthologies. But a later favourite was Richard Aldington's *The Viking Book of Poetry of the English-Speaking World*. Some 375 pages, with nearly 1,300 poems by the better-known poets of the older, English-speaking world: Britain, Ireland and the USA. Aldington was a firm prisoner of his world, and remained in this main area where a few poets from the Commonwealth, like Roy Campbell from South Africa, had come to them. I had

to wait till the later 60s before reading poets from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Africa, India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, who wrote in English, their English, in World Englishes. It is worth recalling that Robin Williams, the American actor, used Aldington's anthology as his text in the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Great as this was, he was right to rip its introduction out. The idea behind was unique; the anthology was not. The non-Anglo-Saxon poetry in Englishes had yet to be composed. Aldington was, in some ways, too early in the line of global anthology development.

Back home, here, Phui Nam and Han Ho edited the first local anthology, *Litmus One*, for the Raffles Society. It brought together much of the university poetry published between 1949 -1957. The anthology was to select as much of the writing that had been done. Alas, the idea was ignored as each generation had its own ambitions. No *Litmus Two*. Both editors believed rightly that we had to know what had been written, how we were influenced, gradually, by poets from within; and what remained to be done. Moreover, they were unusual in having moved into modern American poetry and criticism, were influences by John Crow Ransom's idea that

a poem should be a fusion of a sensory embodiment of ideas (texture) and its equivalent in abstract terms holding the framework of the poem together (structure).⁵

This accounts for the two principles they adopted for selections:

- (i) to include any poem which we judge to be neither bad nor indifferent,
- (ii) to present a bird's-eye-view of University verses since 1949.⁶

The next anthology was Herman Hochstadt's collection of short stories: *The Compact: A Selection of University of Malaya Short Stories 1953–1959*. He was probably influenced by the 2 *Litmus One* editors as he noted the period he covered.

There was no further anthology in English in Singapore or Malaysia till *The Flowering Tree* (1970) which I put together within a fortnight, for the literary and cultural symposium I organised for our secondary school students. Students needed poems. I had at the same time, decided to do two other anthologies at a later date. These were *Seven Poets* (1973) and *The Second Tongue* (1976). Apart

⁵ *Litmus One: Selected University Verse, 1949- 1957*, Raffles Society, University of Malaya, Singapore, p 11.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11.

from settling down in the Dept of English to which I had returned in mid '66, I wanted time to cultivate Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., here, in Hong Kong and London. Leon Comber had started the Writing in Asia Series in 1966. He published my third anthology, *The Second Tongue*. No harm waiting as there would be more poems to select from!

The Flowering Tree took more doing than thinking. While the first thing that struck me was the unusual diversity of the poets. Apart from the few in schools, those who composed in English were all at the university. Those composing in Malay, and Tamil were not. The Chinese had Nanyang University. Wong Yoon Wah who returned with his Wisconsin Ph D in late 1973, was there. He organised the first multi-lingual reading of poetry at *Nanta* in 1975. I was invited. He started a vital, lasting trend that developed slowly, but surely. They are a strong part of our public reading scene.

Yoon Wah was twenty years in the future in 1955. Our few poets in the four languages had very modest contact. Those who did not use English kept to their Malay, Chinese and Tamil. There was no extensive sharing yet. The Ministry of Culture's literary committee was V T Arasu, Masuri S N Wong Meng Voon with me as chairman.

For those who, like me, spent their teens in the early 50s, this was a period of some 70 years. It bred the poets of my generation. Fictionist were rare; dramatist even rarer. Moreover, it is virtually impossible, as I implied earlier, to propose exact dates for these 6 phases. We felt them, individually. I can only identify and sequence them. Our mother tongues enter our English so that the Englishes, when taken together, are fantastically broad and deep. No other language in the world, together with its subgroups, is richer or more exciting than our Englishes, now a multiple language with more sub-varieties than any other. This will become clearer as we develop more of our own English linguists who will tell us more. It has many cultures, rhythms and sounds. We can then know more about its variations.

The space of (3a) is now open ended. It is no longer possible for individual anthologies to dominate lengthily. Aldington's was the last one. What we do have now, after 2,000 AD is something like Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems* (2002), *Good Poems for Hard Times* (2005) and *Good Poems American*

Places (2011). From Minnesota, America, his anthologies are in a series that may well grow. For him, his field is America and less of the older areas. But he takes his own interests as primary, and is very close to American poetry, especially young American poetry. Every one of the poems in these anthologies has been read over the radio in Minnesota. He believes that that is the best way of testing a poem. Yet his collection is intriguing for the poems it includes and the poems that are left out. It is phase (3a). For instance, of the Romantics, Wordsworth-Coleridge-Keats-Byron-Shelly, only Keats appears, once in the 3 volumes. The delicacy of Wordsworth's *Lucy* poems, a short, eminently instructive sequence, is not present. For what they can do, Keillor is able to find elsewhere in his American poems. I looked at the Anthology section in Kinokuniya. I could not find any of my favourite anthologies there. They belong to an earlier period we have moved away from and have entered into a new period, still dominated by literature from overseas.

So what of Singapore and South East Asia today?

Let me go through briefly what I did in each anthology. *The Flowering Tree* (1970) was merely to provide a collection of poems. It was a convenience for the secondary school students.

By the time I got to *Seven Poets* (1973), there were enough of us who had achieved a certain minimum standard, and promising to go beyond that. All seven – Ee Tiang Hong, Edwin Thumboo, Wong Phui Nam, Goh Poh Seng, Wong May, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Lee Tzu Pheng – continued to write. Muhammad Haji Salleh of Malaysia ended up as their National Treasure, the highest award for their writers. He is bilingual and composes poetry in Malay and English. The one other poet I could have included was Oliver Seet, whose only publication *Once* appeared in 2019. *Seven Poets* is a piece of history; it is dated. What was among their best poems is now seen as belonging to their early compositions.

My next anthology *The Second Tongue* (1976) belongs to the later part of (3), when writing had spread and developed from Aden to Zanzibar. We in Singapore and Malaysia had a body of poetry and I was therefore able to distribute them among different sections: (a) Growing Up, (b) Moods and Persons, (c) Folk Ways, (d) Kampong and Town, (e) My Country and My People, and (f) Words. Keith Sambrook who was with Heinemann London thought it was a well-planned anthology. Such

were the times that I looked for poets, and poems. For not all the poets I selected continued to write. A few wrote one, two or three poems of interest and then dropped out. It was an anthology of its time which I tried to make interesting, by arranging the poems the way I did.

Before the next small but important anthology, *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems* which I did with Yeow Kai Chai in 2009, I was General Editor for the ASEAN anthology for Singapore, a most expensive undertaking. Each of the 6 nation was allotted the same, enormous budget, and left free to shape its volumes. Singapore had 4. The first, of poetry in our official languages, appeared in 1985. Each nation had literary elements attracting strong politics. Malaysia would have only Malay writing; work in Chinese, Tamil and English, would be excluded. No Wong Phui Nam, sadly. Both Thailand and the Philippines had Malay writers in their southern parts. Unlike in Malaysia, they were included. For political reasons I asked that the Singapore volumes treat each language separately. Otherwise Malay would have a large beginning and then tail off, small. Our Editors for the project were specialists. The last 3 volumes appeared in 1980. An ASEAN project; a Singapore only experience. Nothing more, apart from observation.

The Merlion anthology, also of 2009, done with Kai Chai, had 3 other language editors, each a specialist. The Merlion is one of our very few symbols and will likely continue to inspire poems, which will form an interesting Singapore sub-theme. Coming poets will compose their poetry using it. It will gradually lose its early, poetically uncomfortable history.

Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond (2010) is perhaps my most serious anthology. It is meant to help students and teachers. The Introduction maps the development of stages (3) and (3a), taking in the whole of the British Empire. It examines key developments in the main phases of her imperial expansion over the globe, over the years, summed up in 3 fairly detailed diagrams, with arguments and explanations, and elaborate endnotes, I worked into the space allotted. I did not know Keillor's anthologies. Yet *Words* shared the principles we both applied in the selection of poems. We picked a combination of familiar, well-known ones, those middling, and young, new poems from home. Most of us would know 'Sailing to Byzantium', particularly the final stanza:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, is passing, or to come.

Each of the preceding 3 stanzas has the same, utterly unique neatness of thought-feeling argument built around it, taking the poem steadily, firmly further. A clear answer to ‘Those dying generations’. A poem that grows in you, even if you are firmly Christian.

I wanted short serious, *forms* popular among *all* our poets to balance the heavy, earlier part that taxed readers, and decided to have four: couplet, haiku, quatrain and pantun. It reminded readers that we could contribute to *our* English. The pantun was at the core of Malaya poetics in our part of the world; the haiku, borrowed from the Japanese, a form whose intricacies over seventeen syllables were subtle to monumental. And the Sa’adi couplet

The thirst now drying me I cannot ease
With spring water, though I empty seas.

Thirst

had another version:

The thirst that parches me I cannot ease
With limpid water, though I drank the seas.

that I hoped the reader would trace. And a 3-page recommended reading list. The anthology had enough to support a semester course.

There were other anthologies I did for the *Creative Arts Programme* I founded utilising funds from Yap Boh Tiong, and located with the gifted students’ programme of the Ministry of Education. I

recall doing 2 anthologies for them. Each annual volume carrying students' work was done by Anne Pakir.

I was the Chief Editor of *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation, Anthology of Singapore Poetry (1984-1995)* (1995), which had poems in our 4 languages. The Chinese, Malay and Tamil poems had English translations side by side. Tommy Koh, who contributed a *Foreword*, felt that poetry is special:

And of the arts, it is literature that gives the most comprehensive expression to both the individual and collective life-experience of a people. And of literature, it is poetry that makes a special contribution through its reach, intensity, resonance and ways of seeing, remembering and capturing.⁷

I did not have much to do. The selection of poems had my full approval.

In 2009 we celebrated the 25th anniversary of Singapore's internal self-government. I wanted control and therefore had the help of only 3 senior associated editors. Poems were arranged according to the age of the poets. English translations followed the poems which had beautiful illustrations. An interesting point about Lee Kuan Yew. Alfian Sa'at's piece was critical of him. I was asked to look at it again. This I had expected and asked whether Lee, whose so many achievements were massive and obvious, could not take it. *Nihil obstat*.

Finally, Southeast Asia. Rajeev Patke, Isabela Banzon, Philip Holden and Lily Rose Tope, edited *An Anthology of English Writing from Southeast Asia*, from the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. They left out the English writing of Hong Kong which Bolton and Shirley Lim did much to promote. Agnes Lam's poetry for instance. Hong Kong is at the northern edge of Southeast Asia with which she has close relations. It is normally a thriving centre and a major user of English.

There is no extensive organic intimacies between the poets and other writers of the region that would lead to a special sharing of literary intimacy. We have trade and social relations. Our Englishes are different, with the Philippines having theirs from America; the others from Britain.

⁷ *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation, Anthology of Singapore Poetry (1984-1995)*, UniPress, The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, p xxiii.

They have been changed, influenced by local languages. Our historical experience too, is unique. It is the only area globally with all the major colonial powers – Spanish, Portuguese, British, Dutch, French, American and Japanese – and over a long time. We could add the Russians and Germans before WWI. The editors' difficulties are mentioned or discussed in the introductions to the sections in the volume. They decided to present these literatures through a set of 10 themes, from 'Place, Religion and Folk Culture' to 'Travel and Diaspora'.

The anthology has so much material that it can provide texts for many different courses. We can combine its themes, or select from its texts to plan one. That is its great value.

Conclusions. First the Environment, the line of phases, especially (3) and (3a). They are basic. Next, the purpose of the anthology. Is it historical or contemporary, needed to establish its parameters? Do I need help, and what form should it take? As editors, consultants, or more casual, i.e. how to acknowledge it? How are the poems to be gathered? Do we go to the poets, their books, other anthologies, or to where the poems were first published? Has anything been done in in the area before? If there are, how would it influence the shape of the anthology? Should it be broad, middling or narrow?

These are questions that cross my mind. I am sure there are others. I am sure prospective anthologists among you would have them. The more the better. And they should be of your generation. In time Joshua Ip would tell us more in due course.

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