

## The sweet breath of words: Language as nuance in Diaspora creativity

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I. In K. S. Maniam's *In a Far Country*, which depicts the challenges facing different ethnic groups seeking a place in the sun, the tiger is the central symbol used to establish and network a number of basic themes. These include the historical position of the Malays, their identity, and their relationship with the land. In political and cultural terms, it sums up what the other races must recognize and negotiate with at various levels. This search for a balance between ethnic and national identities, to accommodate their traditions in a form satisfactory to all, is still ongoing in the continuum of experience from which the novel is drawn. Once introduced, the tiger remains a continuing presence, a silent but potent part of the narrative. Reasonably attentive readers will see that it stands for the land's immemorial spirit, making it a near permanent guardian. It is both a presence and a force that must be sought out and understood. The tiger's symbolic status allows Maniam to locate it at strategic points of the narrative to provide tactful, less overt, but nonetheless powerful comment on deeply sensitive issues. Time for a Tiger, in more ways than one. For the Malays it is a necessary part of their inheritance and identity; for the others—Chinese, Indians, and others—to be understood as part of the accommodations of living in a Malay-dominated society. The fundamental question is whether to integrate or to retain one's Chinese or Indian identity. That is Ravi's, the main protagonist's, dilemma. With his friend Zulkifli, who has inherited the promise and the demands of tradition as his guide, he makes a second attempt to discover the tiger:

Is it a miracle when after I dump my gun in a cachement of leaves my movements become more fluid? Some of the resistance to our advance seems to withdraw itself. As we go deeper and deeper some of my fatigue falls away. But I can't escape the vigilant eye. It is there on my head or back or legs. It is there in front, ahead of us, besides us but all the time disconcertingly near.

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“Any time now,” Zulkifli says at my side. “But we’ve to take on the character of the tiger first. We must see through its eyes. Feel through its body. We must become the tiger.”

“I’ll kill it first,” I say.

“With what?” he says.

“By surprising it,” I say.

“Nothing can surprise it,” he says. “We don’t have the intelligence.”

“You seem to know everything about it,” I say.

“Through the instinct that has traveled to me through the blood of my ancestors,” he says.

“Are you saying I can’t have such an instinct?”

“You don’t have ancestors here,” he says.

“You must be without purpose to come into its presence,” Zulkifli says as if reading my thoughts.

“Then I won’t.” I say.

“You have come this far,” he says. “You must surrender your self to be the other self.”

He went into a ritual on my behalf. All I remember of it is the incessant chanting that came from his lips. Though words poured from him, I only remember their sounds. . . . All the time the chant poured from Zulkifli’s throat like an ageless invitation to disown whatever I was and to merge with the tiger. I didn’t wait for that to happen. (Maniam, 1993: 100–101)

This passage raises a number of issues that frame my presentation. These include the distance that most of the new literatures have traveled since their beginnings about five decades ago; the ground they have had to cover, including the changing relationship with the major centres of the ex-colonial language; and the gradual emergence of an essential internal confidence in the new literatures.

As they write themselves into the language, the language is being written into them, turning into their idiolect. That is a process of domesticating, nativizing English, giving it a local habitation and a name.

*Making of the writer.* Writers and readers approach literature differently. This is especially the case with poets. For instance, Robert Graves had occasion to re-

mark that “I write poems for poets, and satires or grotesques for wits. For people in general I write prose, and am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else. To write poems for other than poets is wasteful” (Graves 1946: Foreword). This helps me make the point I want to with a useful, tangential vigour. And it is this. While the element of pleasure is there, the poet-reader’s exegetical, comparative, and judgmental interests are framed and hedged by his own practice. There is a special relationship with meaning. Unlike the reader who is not a poet, he constructs and re-constructs. Few other readers will engage in both processes of construction and re-construction as the poet would. He is in dialogue with the poem, comparing notes. The constant search to strengthen his idiolect, to refine and augment its power to incarnate experience, directs his attention to matters of creative energies, resources of imagery, metaphors, syntax, rhythmic strategies, and so on. Unlike the poet who lifts the paraphrase of what is read by tinkering with it to produce his version of the poem as poem, the reader-reader expands the paraphrase to put the poem into the language of a broader understanding. It is a matter of intention that distinguishes the critic reader who may try to enter the poem as fully as the poet-reader, one for explication, and the other for making.

Writers are generally serious, selective if not avid readers, especially of works in their chosen genre. They serve an apprenticeship, learning from predecessors and contemporaries, constantly seeking out and trying ways of broadening, deepening, and refining their discourse to articulate their subjects, themes, and vision. Such is a broadening that levels up, not down. That compound of thought-emotion-language, which searches out at random, free of apparent sequence, and with remarkable simultaneity, still remains a mystery. It is a supreme inventiveness. We recognize its best results, assign them names, seek them, and revise constantly, until, occasionally, there is the gift of some further magic. Occasionally, again, a slip as we type brings or suggests the metaphor, the adjective, the necessary rhythmic break, or variation that we know is needed, know after and not before. To learn from the strongest masters without being subjugated to their style, the whisper in their voice, that is the consummation devoutly to be wished. For a considerable period of his life, especially during its most active, creative part, his experience is likely to prove more subtle and larger than his language. Not the language at large, but what of it is actively at his disposal.

The works read, studied, re-read, and returned to while writing and re-writing a poem are what shapes a poet as he pursues his calling and its art. He is, no doubt, the product of some sector of the available, centrally planned, or independently constructed primary, secondary, and tertiary education that provides the linguistic tools, which are then developed and directed by the demands of his or her vocation. And behind them is their literature, which educates, bestows—all freely—as inclination and talent lead. Writers do not chose their language; the language chooses them. Exceptions to this rule are rare: Vladimir Nabokov,

Samuel Beckett, and the early Mohd. Hj. Salleh. Most of us find it hard enough to handle one language. But we choose the same genre, which in turn makes its own special, characteristic demands. Generally, do poetry, fiction, and drama use images, rhythm, or punctuation in the same way, and to the same degree?

*Starting point.* But we need to know that place of broad beginnings, at least its general whereabouts, and for cogent reasons. It involves beginnings in time, in place, in literary province, that is, genre, are viewed within the focus of literatures in English. *Time:* the contemporary. *Place:* post-independent “nations” of the Commonwealth, consisting of former British colonies. This immediately raises the question of whether they are ‘nations’ in the accepted sense or a collection of peoples occupying ex-colonial, at times externally imposed boundaries, or variations thereof. And more often than not, the new polity is multiracial and multilingual, thus challenged by the usual slew of problems in varying degrees of intensity.

*Realities, diversities.* These are among realities that bear directly on literary production through the history of peoples: the politics, economics, and languages and their literary, critical, and aesthetic traditions, ethnicities, style of government, and so on, all of which shape current societal experience and expectations. The human impact and variety of that experience, the calculus of fictional possibilities it allows, for instance, is suggested in novels as varied as Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974), C. J. Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Devil on the Cross* (1982), Raja Rao’s *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988), Brian Castro’s *After China* (1992), Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour* (1993), and K. S. Maniam’s *In a Far Country* (1993). Genre: poetry, fiction, and drama. While they share features of language ranging from image to length of sentence, each has its own space, management of subject/theme, voice, structure, disjunctions and continuities, and so on, and so on. These overlap, but notwithstanding, the writer prepares himself differently according to the genre he chooses, according to his history, place, and time. You cannot post-colonial the lot without overlooking their “national,” their individual creative contexts, occupations, and preoccupations.

Despite its obviousness, we tend to overlook the fact that every writer has a starting point that is, in practice, more the time from which he or she begins to release his or her work. For there is little, if ever, of anything abrupt in the way he is formed as a person, is apprenticed to the art, the ‘who’ who then begins to produce what is, on self-judgment, satisfactory literature. There are many reasons why we overlook beginnings. First and foremost is interest in the writer’s mature works. His development would engage those with a special or specialist interest. Second, we are familiar, at times overly so, with the language, its literary tradition, and the “age” in which the writer belongs. “Point of time” would be more

accurate and recognizing, because in newly independent countries or nations that are successful, the changes are fundamental and far-reaching. The most cursory acquaintance with the growth of Singapore in the last forty years, even when unsympathetic, cannot miss the range and depth of transformations, a significant number of which would normally take many generations. Third, with as massively widespread an international language as English, there will be those who are likely to approach the literatures in it from the perspective of its more established traditions—the British and the American—and current critical practices. They are not always aware that crucial differences exist that require if not insist on modifications in habitual critical stances, or that the methods of comparative literature are decidedly useful (see Thumboo 1985, 1996).

As GURT 99 reminds us, we cannot think of language in our time without being deeply aware of bilingualism spreading nationally and regionally. The facts vary; they have both a historical and contemporary force. Bilingualism involves the local and the regional—in both senses of the word, that is, within a nation, and a nation with its neighbors—and international languages. My concern is with English and bilingual creativity, with English forming one-half of the hyphen.

**II.** Three considerations form the frame of what I have to say. The first is that international languages are also national languages and ex-colonial languages. Herein lie problems and challenges, particularly in the case of English, whose strength derives from a diachronically powerful British literature, a synchronically powerful American literature, and an even more powerful and—in a sense—an overdeveloped mass media and the linguistic network left by the former British Empire. This leads to the second consideration, which is the retention of English as a main, auxiliary, bridge, official, national language, language of modernization, law, administration, education, and so on, in circumstances of such enormous practicality that it has flourished. The majority of non-Angelo-Saxon colonies have been independent for some four decades. During this time the attitude toward English changed significantly. The sense that it was a colonial language has receded. The third is the degree to which young writers and critics are unaware, and unconcerned if not ignorant, of its colonial history. They use it with little inhibition, and in some instances, with less care for the elements such as image, rhythm, the discipline of line and phrase, and organic form, that structure a poem.

*The journey begins.* The starting points for the writer, then, are different from what they are today. Changes range from matters of technique to matters that are nonliterary. The themes that engaged the first generation of post-independence writers have in some ways receded, according to the politics and history of the nation. But this is the gift of certain essential journeys, certain acts of recovery and self-definition, which had to be first undertaken.

The writing in English that grew after the political independence of nations of the British Commonwealth had its own distinct starting point. That point depended upon a number of factors. The British Empire consisted of nations such as India, with classical literatures at least as old as that in Greek, older than that in Latin, and far older than that in English. There were other new nations, especially in Africa, with equally immemorial oral literatures. In the West Indies, English must be the mother tongue as it is the only language. Finally, we have a place like Singapore where there are four official languages, namely Bahasa Melayu, Chinese (with at least a dozen languages of which four are dominant), Tamil (the main Indian language), and English, the language of administration, commerce, and industry, in addition to serving as a bridge between the various ethnic groups. The unique role English plays in Singapore is perhaps revealed when once I had to remind an audience in Hangzhou, China, that to concentrate on Singapore Chinese literature alone would neglect a considerable and significant amount of the Chinese experience to be discovered only in Singapore fiction, drama, and poetry in English. The starting point for the writer has to vary as his history varies. What then, are the political, economic, and social conditions of his nation? What cultural and specific literary traditions are there as resources to tap into and influence his creativity?

The second concerns the challenges the nation and the individual face; and what are the themes writers find significant? For Derek Walcott (1972: 9), the journey was long: "My generation had looked at life with black skins and blue eyes, but only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us, only our own strenuous hearing, the hearing of our hearing, could make sense of the sounds we made." Activate the senses. Let what they perceive, and perceive steadily and whole, of a necessary beginning. First the individuals, with each contributing to the accumulating perceptions of the state, the condition, of their society. Then the search for answers. "What would deliver him from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs and fables; this, not merely the debt of history was his proper claim to the New World" (Walcott 1972: 17).

*Making poetic selves.* This power of the imagination is something mysterious. We do not know its mode of operation except that it is unpredictable, its aptness validated by what it produces through a certain esemplastic power. In this process, where language stretches itself across the arc of thought and emotion, the judgment comes in as a different kind of laboring. It must not supersede the imagination. It does not generate; it decides. In an established literary tradition, the tutelage, while challenging, does not have the additional dimension of a series of acts toward self-definition. To belong to a multicultural society, to have two cul-

tures, one of which is acquired in another language, raises a number of sharp challenges. Here is Gabriel Okara (1963: 15): “In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first but I had to learn. I had to study each jaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.”

And there is the question of space, new space, defined by the facts and energies of a bipolar culture, the indigenous and the imported, reflecting a new combination of experience entering the English language. Among the complexities are those associated with the individual assertion for a personal identity defined by the two cultures, undertaken at a time, and in a context, of a society that is itself evolving. On the one hand, there is a search for fresh traditions that incorporate the indigenous and the imported as well as the development of individual talent. It is the equivalent, in spirit at least, of what T. S. Eliot wanted in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (Eliot 1975). But with a difference: that tradition assumed a high degree of homogeneity, connectedness, and literary lineage and descent. The dynamics of the framework he sketches are universal, but the content needs the addition of indigenous elements. For instance, the actual literary inheritance in terms of forms could involve the Pantun as well as Akam and Puram poetry, whose use of objects as correlatives is both instructive and revealing vis-à-vis Eliot’s formulation of the notion in his essay on *Hamlet*. A. K. Ramanujan’s *The Interior Landscape* offers examples of the poetry and an instructive afterword that comprehensively sets out details of the convention.

For Raja Rao, creativity in English meant certain re-orientations and adaptations:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language . . . yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up . . . but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect that will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. (Rao 1938: Foreword)

Rao’s was the challenge of fully locating a sensibility formed by and in one tradition in another with its life uncompromised to function at the highest possible

creative level. While the ambition is the same for Walcott and Okara, writing some thirty years later, the processes forming each of them as writers differ, each from the other, and from Rao. Put briefly, Walcott's colonially created society is moving in search of identity, definition, and articulation, through the instruments of social, linguistic, cultural, and other institutions. For Okara, it is chiefly of sensibility moving, but one out of an oral tradition. It is broadly the same language, English, orchestrated to each his own.

Here is the key point. You use English. You are hyphenated, bicultural, and bilingual. As a writer, one half of the creative-technical enterprise is taken from British or American and its or their literature(s), instruction in usage, and lessons on how to process thought and experience. The other half concerns the grammar of interests, the challenging uniqueness of your situation, that is, what the Walcotts, Okaras, and Raos do. While you have to map out new, national routes, there is the great tradition, from Geoffrey Chaucer down to W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Therein lies the authority of your language. You need its sustenance, yet have to move away. Not to do either, while simultaneously discarding and acquiring, is to wither or grow crippled from failure to move from under the banyan tree, which is the great tradition, into the soil and sunlight of your own.

The earlier pioneering writers had a great quantity of ground to cover. Those who are familiar with Chinua Achebe's and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's essays, for instance, would recall that part of the writer's function was to re-construct his society, retrieving as much as possible of the rhythms and the icons of life before the coming of colonizers. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* or Ngugi's pre-occupations with the effects of neocolonialism, the systematic abuse and the corruption that destroyed the high hopes of freedom, are both instructive and revealing. So the writing, the fiction especially, has a sociopolitical dimension as well as an artistic one. I have put it this way for emphasis. Although the former remains a theme, there has been a noticeable shift in the focus, which is now increasingly on the individual rather than the group. The 'we' has been converted into an 'I'. It is no longer a case of constructing or re-constructing the past and the immediate present. It is the present that now provides impulse and context. In such circumstances, a considerable part of the communal experience overlaps the individual's, and in a combination that is mutually strengthening, while reaching out with iconic power. There has been a period of national experience. Whatever the successes and failures of that experience, it contributes to and represents a unity of interests that is concurrently national and personal.

*Tradition as hegemony.* Up to the mid-1950s, the sense and practice of poetry had to take into account the presence of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, with Ezra Pound, their éminence grise at various removes. Directly and indirectly, that Trinitarian presence was defined by an authority that held for at least thirty years after the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Tower* (1928), both of

which were more influential than *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). Like other writers, poets discover and develop their interests and themes out of life around them. It is an ongoing discovery, a calculus that draws in, shifts, and rearranges. It is the same mind and sensibility that create the poems, that write the reviews and essays. There is an intimate linkage between the poetry and the criticism. We recall Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, S. T. Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, perhaps the last of them all.

No poetry can be said to be intellectual or emotional or whatever else. But it is possible for poetry to be classified as such on the basis of the thinking and the conceptualization that lies behind it. When we refer to metaphysical poetry we are encouraged to think of wit, a strong intellectual presence and toughness, the use of irony even in the most lyrical pieces, a boldness of phrase, rhythm as in Donne's "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," and the use of conceits. There is the courage to extract whatever possibilities metaphor can yield, a fact subtly demonstrated in George Herbert's "The Pulley." That is the kind of poetry that influenced Eliot. It accords in its technique, thrust, general atmosphere and sense of detail of how the human mind works in and through language that we find in the sixteenth and seventeenth century dramatists and prose writers whose work engaged Eliot in the 1920s. His essay on Philip Messenger appeared in 1920, that on Marvell in 1921; that on Lancelot Andrews in 1926, and on Thomas Middleton in 1927. The poetry arising from the dynamics of interaction with the writing of this historical period became orthodoxy. That orthodoxy exerted a considerable force both on the production of poetry and the criticism of poetry. Eliot's own criticism, first collected in *The Sacred Wood*, proved influential. F. R. Leavis, who would emerge as the major critic of the 1950s and 1960s, took *The Sacred Wood* as his critical bible.

While Pound was the early schoolmaster to both Yeats and Eliot, it was the latter who emerged as the most influential on the authority of his poetry, and his criticism. A substantial part of this was asserted through the work of those—chiefly critics—they attracted. For the first time in the history of English poetry, the dominant figures were not home grown. Pound was American with European longings, Eliot an American enlarging his English self, and Yeats remade himself with a mix of Irish history, myth, and nationalism.

What is interesting is that all three poets are, in a sense, outsiders, either inspecting that condition as a function of England-as-center or, for the two Americans at least, how they were to work from their position in the fringe back to England-as-center as in the case of Eliot. It is not a question of the empire writing back but the first and largest ex-colony, namely America, some of whose major literati were returning to the mother through a cultural umbilical cord. The point here is that they saw themselves as belonging to the same immediate tradition, a fully English one, behind which lay the sponsoring European tradition with its antecedents in a Greco-Hebraic civilization. Both Pound and Eliot could refer to,

and tap into, the whole literature of Europe. It is there in Pound's criticisms and his Cantos; it is there in Eliot's *The Wasteland* and his 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and in his interest in Dante, on whom he wrote in 1929.

*Against hegemony.* It is not the case that where the language goes the criticism follows in toto. That is something we are familiar with. It comes as a form of authority, built into both the creative and critical traditions, as Raymond Williams reminds us:

What is often being defended, it seems, is not just a body of writing but a major projection from this, in which the actually very diverse works of writers in English are composed into a national identity B the more potent because it is largely from the past B in which a mood, a temper, a style, or a set of immediate 'principles' (which can be contrasted not only with "theory" but with all other forms of reasoning) are being celebrated, taught and B where possible "administratively imposed." But among what can be called, with precision, traditional English literary intellectuals, it is not just a profession; it is and has sounded like a calling and a campaign. (Williams n.d.: 195)

This self-confident, deep-rooted hegemony is what T. S. Eliot asserts with uncharacteristic ardour in a 1924 letter to Ford Madox Ford: "I am all for empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and I deplore the outburst of artificial nationalities . . . all over the world. . . . There can only be one English literature . . . there cannot be British literature, or American literature" (quoted in Kermode, 1975: 15).

That Eliot subsequently changed his mind merely confirms the irreversible force of history. Given the obvious power of its language and literature, he felt able to talk on "American Literature and the American Language" (Eliot 1965). Furthermore, the artificial nationalities he objected to were legion when the majority of colonies received independence. That force of history should be recognized and constantly kept in mind. It is a force that the New Literatures share increasingly, as they gain their singular authority.

Eliot's desire for unity and oneness—it often hides hegemonic impulses—was central to his thinking. It was the locus of his great tradition. At the time of his assertion about empires, he had no hint that the British Empire would come to an end after World War II, and fairly rapidly at that, with India the first, on August 15, 1947. The British Empire was the greatest creator of artificial nationalities in all history. In the non-Anglo-Saxon parts especially, it compacted various races and their cultures in a single geography, creating a relatively peaceful, plural society under the control of British colonial masters. Malaysia and Singapore are

cases in point. At times colonial boundaries could have bizarre post-independent consequences. There was East Pakistan and West Pakistan, forming a polity whose artificiality was exposed when the former became Bangladesh. People do not create artificialities on this scale for themselves. They are constructs that cause nothing but trouble. There is Cameroon, divided between the British and the French, with the consequence that its post-independence literary journal, *Abbia*, had articles in both English and French. These artificial nationalities had to work out their own political, economic, ethnic, psychological, and literary salvation, at times under considerable racial and other tensions.

### III.

*The new authority.* The poet is both critic and creator but the critic in him aids the creator, refining what he produces, strengthening it by expansion and contraction. By achieving a density, one that is simultaneously a further clarity, it reaches out for cadence and rhythm; taking images into a pattern where they support each other, proceeding almost unconsciously; and free, for the moment, from the conscious critical faculty that will be exercised at a later stage when it stands further from the imagination's work. As Auden pointed out, the poetic faculty consists of knowing, making, and judging. The point here of course is that the making arises from the knowing, and the making owes much of its strengths to the judging. The act of revision is paradoxically an act of condensation, an intensification that is simultaneously a release.

*The diminution of English.* There is a considerable irony that as the pioneers of the new literatures sought and achieved the taught articulation of literary statement and discourse with a considerable measure of success, thus laying foundations, there are developments in the world of English usage that diminish that creativity. The English language has about 700,000 to 800,000 words. They include the archaic, the slangy, and the undesirable, judged on religious, social, and other grounds. That reduces the number actively used in any given epoch, especially if specialized vocabularies are excluded. The number of words used to define the limits and depth of feeling and intellection is somewhat diminished. The reasons for this impoverishment are doubtless familiar to you: the impatient pace of modern life, lowered expectations that become self-fulfilling as regards the quality of conversation, the various journalisms and other components of the mass media, and English for special purposes, administered even before there is English for ordinary purposes. Not that you cannot find the best words B at times provocatively configured B in the best order. And not merely in poetry. You can. The general level has declined. We read more, but far less of quality; with haste, with far less meditation.

The capacity to digest a complex diet is seriously diminished. This leads to a leveling down of subtlety and a consequent loss in sophisticated language

management. The syntax of our personalities is the syntax of our language, or languages. The vocabulary of our personalities is the vocabulary of our language or languages. And vice versa. Traditionally, high conversation, good literature, and the Bible, in the authorized version, were the main sources of developing and maintaining sophistications. The decline of its use on account of its difficult, unfamiliar language was met in part by various translations to make it more accessible and, in part again, to recover lost religious ground. But these translations have removed precisely those cruxes in the authorized version that were a constant learning experience. There could be something especially instructive when discussing in current English the fine points of basic theological doctrines formulated in Elizabethan English in the act of translating out of Alexandrine Greek. Two other points to seal this disquiet: the stress on openness, on transparency, especially when taken with accessibility, leads to the neglect, if not loss, of tact and tonal range; and the extent to—and speed at—which more of life and contacts are coming under the gross efficiency of formulaic language. This flattening of language is propelled by a dynamic that is virtually irresistible. It challenges even literary creativity, that bastion of what was often thought but never so well expressed. Language becomes literature when its life is intensified, expressive, heightened, develops direction and indirection, shifts perspectives, agitates, multifarious, cunning, innocent, striped, loaded, silent, tapping and re-arranging the meaning-potential, and meaning of the half-word, the word, phrase, sentence and paragraph, using all available means—image, metaphor, simile, symbol, punctuation—to articulate and construct. These are gestures of release, of multiplication, of unpacking, of generating that substance and spirit that synonyms gather within their boundaries, the calculus of potential which dictionaries hold between their covers. New permutations, new meanings. It is the immemorial promise of a language to its poets at any given moment, and those yet unborn.

Here is the escalating challenge. There was first the great tradition, British; then there emerged a second big tradition, the American, out of that great tradition, then about the middle of this century, the beginnings of an Indian tradition in English laid down by the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R. K. Narayan. And the yeast grew, re-colonizing the alphabet. The New Literatures, Contact Literatures, Post-Colonial Literature. One language with many literatures. One language? Yes, but only in their early, imitative phase, when the periphery studied English literature and their poetic spirit was moved to write pseudo Rupert Brooke, Eliottish lines and paragraphs. Literature is usually judged on grounds of style—of the particular work—and significance—such as the power and reach of the underlying vision. Bad style is relatively straightforward to judge. Imitative literature, especially when done well, can only be dismissed on the grounds of style. But what happens when each style, and the style of each poet from Antigua to Zimbabwe, is based on a distinct idiolect, when English has been reshaped and negotiated into the rhythms, the colors, the dictates of

their lives? This is a central question to which there are many answers, each of them unique for two main reasons. First, they will reflect particular colonial histories, religious, linguistic, philosophical, social differences we find from country to country, nation to nation. And there are other specific factors that set limits, hedge or energize a writer's vision and work. These include cultural disparities, nationalist sentiments, and linguistic chauvinism, the reach and implications of language planning, the number of languages that move culture and environment.

IV. One of the challenges of adapting English to the flux and curve of an experience generated, in part, by a culture not directly associated with it, is the opportunity we have to test and refine as well as shape the experience. In a sense, bending English to meet our experience is equally the sifting of that experience through English and to achieve a fresh statement both of language and of the experience. A fair example of this is the following image from Gabriel Okara's "One Night At Victoria Beach":

The wind comes rushing from the sea,  
 the waves curling like mambas strike  
 the sands and recoiling hiss in rage  
 washing the Aladuras' feet pressing hard  
 on the sand and with eyes fixed hard  
 on what only hearts can see, they shouting  
 pray, the Aladuras pray. (Okara, 1978: 28)

The image of the mamba striking is vivid because of both the sound of the waves and the hissing of the snake and the way the snake curls back like waves striking the shore. The image encodes a gesture that propels the language. The strength of poetry depends on the line, especially in the case of free verse, in which the bulk of current poetry is written. In what is perhaps the most extensive study of free verse, Hartman has suggested that verse is "language in lines." This distinguishes it from prose. It is through the line that a poet is able "to create and control attention," but perhaps the most important statement he makes concerns rhythm, which for him "in poetry generally, *seems* more highly organized than in other uses of language . . . *it is the system of rhythmic organization that governs the construction and reading of a poem*" (Hartman 1980: 14). Perhaps Pound and his friends formulated the most famous statement regarding the centrality of the image early this century: "In the spring or early summer of 1912, 'H. D.,' Richard Aldington and myself decided that we were agreed upon the three principles following: 1. Direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective. 2. To

use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound 1960: 3).

Where Raja Rao, Derek Walcott, Gabriel Okara, and others felt the need, or compulsion even, to shape a discourse, the younger writers, the poets especially, do not feel the same necessity. This is chiefly because a significant percentage of the population in most Commonwealth countries no longer see English as a foreign language. They use it freely, without inhibitions.

The finding of an idiolect is something every poet undertakes. For the younger writers, the passing of three to four decades makes this search a more direct one because the tasks that Rao and the others prescribed for themselves have either been successful and/or are no longer matters of any urgency. There is more space for writing. One area is the Internet, which enables anyone who wishes to create a site to post his or her poetry. In Singapore, we have a number of websites. There are those who feel that this freedom has affected the management of words. The rapidity with which poetry is made and released suggests that the computer tends to encourage the easy formulation of language. Poetry becomes more instant. The moving finger types and then moves on. Here are lines from “Outcast”:

Entertainment,  
 The way people treat you,  
 Causes you to react in different ways.  
 You go around people who are nice,  
 Smile, laugh, and have a good time,  
 But is there a group that,  
 Makes you cringe,  
 To go around and work with.  
 They are mean.  
 CyberPagesPoems poetry post:  
<http://www.cyberpages.com/dopoem/newones>

There is a certain ease in the reading, a high degree of relaxation that could be taken to suggest a similar ease in the act of composition. What we miss is the intensity, which is one of the marks of poetry. There is insufficient drive in the language, of rhetorical push and energy, of layering. One of the tests of poetry is that it should go beyond the reader’s expectations, whether it surprises by ‘fine excess,’ a ‘tough inventiveness,’ or ‘a powerful and passionate syntax’. There are a limited number of linguistic agencies at work. The language is free of that pressure and tensing which usually marks a search for accuracy and precision. The bulk of con-

temporary poetry is in free verse. As Eliot reminds us, no verse is free: “*Vers libre* has not even the excuse of a polemic; it is a battle-cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art. And as the so-called *vers libre* which is good is anything but ‘free,’ it can be better be defended under some other label” (Eliot 1975: 32).

Eliot makes a distinction between what he sees as free verse and what he sees as images, which from one point of view can be described as free verse subjected to special requirements based on a set of principles that can be found most conveniently in Michael Roberts’ *Faber Book of Modern Verse*. A section of a recent poem I wrote refers to the trial of Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister of Malaysia. Irrespective of the justness or otherwise of the various legal maneuvers, both the television and the press left viewers and readers uncertain as to where the truth possibly lay.

The dishes come and go.

We do not talk of Michael Angelo.

As light slips into the sunset, as stars compete.

Conversation

Drifts, casting its loose net, drawing in the insects in the hedge.

Singing the sagas of the land, unfolding Hikayatats,

Some bitterly gripping in their own way.

The Anwar trial;

Silat in the Court;

Tuah and Jebat locked in combat, moving

Through intricate legalities, wanting truth and cleansing.

There are sides and retractions in the sorry business of a trial that has political overtones, particularly in a relatively conservative culture. There is the setting of nature in which we think of such events. And Nature must surely have a capital “N.” There are sounds and images that condense the events, that link them on account of their import to any sense of the movements of history. For me, the problem here was how to employ a pair of terms that would resonate powerfully within the discourse of Malaysian history, especially that which deals with those in high places. I struck on two words, *sejara* and *hikayat*, which refer to history and story or legend respectively, for an essential working distinction. To call the proceedings *sejara* would be to suggest the uncertainty mentioned earlier. In a sense, it is time that writes history. The observer of events does not have the advantage of distance, of the facts sorting themselves out as calculated discourse breaks up to break open, and settles to reveal its true character.

All these are part of the act of writing ourselves into the language, English, coloring it with the content, the referential range of our history and experience, and so, possess it. And write our-*selves* out of the British Empire. And write ourselves into a defining profile, an identity that is simultaneously a sense of being restored as a sovereign people, through a constructing liberating literature in English. A literature that draws from the other half of the hyphen, the one rooted in our various cultures, which is a whole dimension I have not considered.

**Conclusion.** There is none. The imagination is open-ended. So, too, the permutations of our interests, our experiences, and, consequently, the occasions for poetry. We lack external means to sort out the good from the bad, the good from the indifferent. Instead, we exercise judgment or, as some may prefer, preference. And when we exercise either judgment or preference, we do so out of that sense of poetry constructed by our reading, by those poems that are central to how we consider, and receive, new poems; how we visit old ones. There is no central point from which to assess. Or a set of generally accepted—or potentially acceptable—principles and procedures that reader and critic of new literatures in older, ex-colonial languages, to help define a critical, exegetical discourse. The means are there, in much of the theory and theorizing, and in the practice despite its decline. They make for different, potent approaches, but where is the power to secure broad acceptance, a functional authority, and even one that is provisional? Language has been democratized, its installation on a web page quick, inexpensive. In one sense, the virtual banishment of grammar has affected ethnic, psychological and literary salvation, at times under considerable racial and other tensions. We have ceased to fear it, ceased to feel uncertain about its hidden power, which demands time and energy, caution and abandonment, conformity and rebellion, for its release, if not deeper revelation.

This sense of fragmentation and loss is not new. It is implicit in every literary movement; part of the built-in dialects that mark and make up the literary collective of nations. As William Blake reminds us, there is no progression without contraries. He himself judged that in the poetry of his time:

The languid strings do scarcely move!

The sound is forc'd, the notes are few!

To which I add a longish footnote:

Muse

You ceased to

Celebrate the incumbent rose;

Or gently spur an evening's twist  
 Of colors, articulate in repose  
 Above patches of ritual mist.  
 You neglect  
 The power of fevers, inherited dreams;  
 The layered cunning of a splendid phrase;  
 Or moonbeams entering iridescent streams  
 For fishes to brighten their liquid gaze.  
 You shed deep, continental fires  
 For a grouchy, chemical sun.  
 Does every poet who aspires  
 Let computer programmes run  
 The anxious syllables of discourse?  
 Where is up-to-date imagination,  
 Unbidden, restless, sans remorse?  
 By ardour, treason, occasional verse,  
 Its leaping, sudden-wild migration  
 Takes and manages a universe.  
 Great singularities fall and split:  
 You have yielded . . . bit by bit.  
 Nature is untoward, much ravished;  
 Re-arranged as symptomatic words.  
*Environment*, esp. when tarnished;  
*Or endangered*, esp. elephant herds;  
*Threatened* whales cruising with unshut eye  
 As Arnold's *Greenpeace* mermaid weeps  
 Below our broken, gaping Antarctic sky,  
 Whose destiny she keeps.

Even full-bodied rhyme is separation,  
 Not the gathering of meaning . . . clan.  
 Nor must you think it preparation  
 Of the child as father of the man.  
 For trade-and-politics are now the hymns.  
 We lose mysterious richness, marvelous awe  
 As GATT, MFN . . . our multiplying acronyms,  
 Replace redemptive image, metaphor.  
 Accept, knowing such change is death;  
 A clear betrayal.  
 Or passionately burn  
 To help your tribe recover breath,  
 And yet another compass, to return.

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