

An Interview with Arthur Yap¹

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Abstract

In this interview, conducted in 1996, Arthur Yap talks about his poetry and the contexts in which it is written. He talks briefly about minimalism and abstraction and about writers as observers of the world around them. He talks about the slow development of a Singaporean literary tradition, the writer's role in society and writing in a multi-lingual environment. He talks about the younger writers of that period and of writing in a cosmopolitan culture.

A Tribute: Revisiting the Poetry of Arthur Yap

Arthur Yap (1943-2006) is perhaps the most discussed Singaporean poet to date. He has published four collections of poetry, *only lines* (1971), *commonplace* (1977), *down the line* (1980) and *man snake apple* (1986). In addition to these four volumes he was one of five poets whose work is represented in *Five Takes* (1974), and in 2000 Skoob Books published *the space of city trees: selected poems*. Yap's work has been recognised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore Poetry Award (1976, 1980), the Cultural Medallion for Literature (1983) and the South-East Asian Writer's Award (1983). His books have been translated into Japanese, Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia. He taught at the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, from 1979-

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1998.

Arthur Yap is a poet that one can return to many times. His work is always fresh, bright, welcoming and engrossing. Why is it so engaging? One reason might be that in spite (or perhaps because) of its minimalism, it is resonant and densely nuanced. His minimalism is tightly and neatly organised. Yap is a dedicated and meticulous craftsman who handles language with wry humour, reverence and precision. His poetry is also philosophical and intellectual, with a sharp intelligence and uncompromising integrity. However, at times it seems to tell us to *stop* thinking: to watch, listen, wait and feel. At times he observes, touches and responds to the tangible material actuality of the world around him, without analysing and without judging. He loves the haecceity of things – the way they shiver, drip, roll or just lie there; the way they touch, move or change us; the way they “make no sense at all.”³ He is, as he says in this interview, an observer – of things, of people, of time, of happenings. He observes the world in its complex relationality and, above all, in its cycles of change. Nothing stays the same and things are rarely as they appear. They often open out onto other things or incidents. They connect with people, locales, events. There is growth and change in all these actors of the urban and natural environment. And death is around the corner, knitted into the most banal objects, gestures or occasions. The poet observes with a quirky wit, sorrow and an almost Buddhist detachment and acceptance.

Generally then, he is not a descriptive or narrative poet. As a minimalist, he is not interested in the veracities or mimesis of representation. Words are like objects – they have a specific weight, colour, tone and texture. He unpacks and reassembles them like Lego, judging them by their length and breadth. He presses them together, fond of repetition and reversal. Like rituals – which gain meaning through repeated incremental variation of detail – he plies words, placing them in odd juxtapositions so that they look similar but different, so that they bring disparate ideas and things together to surprise, delight and puzzle us. He makes us look twice (“now, just *what* exactly does that mean?” we ask ourselves). He opens up generative spaces, sets us thinking, musing, feeling. He makes the world capacious – decussated and cross-hatched with intensities, silence, insight, correspondences. The city is a splendid shipwreck, the newborn child has the face of a little old man, a park is a floral clock in a new plastic heart.

Some poems start *in medias res*; they will begin: “shall I add...”; sometimes they don’t surrender up a conclusion. They open up in the middle of an ordinary day, of the commonplace. Sometimes the poet is a satirist: observer of the foibles, follies and marvels of a nation and the people that constitute it. He’s not at all a personal poet and is rarely autobiographical. But he shares with us his intimate delights and the things that enchant him. He collapses binaries: poetry is “this

³ “location.”

privacy which is public literary study”; it is “the public transaction that... must be private ultimately.” Often he is cryptic, ambiguous. Meaning leaks away from the poem. Tone shades into a range of affects and bodily sensations. He’s hard to pin down. Is that why we keep going back to him? That and his magnanimity: the dexterity, productivity and tender pleasures of his imaginative world. Arthur Yap in real life was a man of few words; as a writer, he is one of the truly great creative minds that Singapore has produced and one of the best poets of late twentieth century.

AB: Recently you said that when you paint you try to minimalise, and later you said about your writing that: “most of my things are very short, but I think to be a minimalist you have to have this kind of vision.” Can you say something more about what minimalism is to you?

AY: In writing I try to pare down the descriptive bits. If I feel that I could say something in as few words as possible, then I would rather do it than to go on padding. One should describe sufficiently to give the reader a sense of what one feels, but not at the same time overwhelm the reader in any way. For example, I feel that if you use lots of adjectives they have a mutually cancelling effect. If you can describe a scene well enough, without having to use far too many words, I would rather do so.

AB: I asked you if you would describe your poetry as abstract and you said no. Do you want to develop on that at all?

AY: It’s rather similar to painting. In order to arrive at anything that is abstract I think you need a basis that is representational. Otherwise, how can one account for something that is abstract? Abstraction is simply the paring away of things that are not essential. When I say not essential, I do not mean in an objective way, I mean perhaps, what is non-essential to one may be not the same to another. So then you arrive at something that does not have a representational basis.

AB: You said that you are interested in everyday life too.

AY: Well, I think that the things that really interested me were just ordinary things. Or, perhaps seeing people in a situation, you know, or talking to people or viewing a landscape or something. These things do mean something to me. I don’t go to see the obvious landmarks and so on, you know, so I think it is through these things I feel I get to know a place better than I would otherwise.

AB: Can you say something about Singapore as an environment to work in as a writer and how you respond to the landscape, the environment, to the culture and so on?

AY: I think it's very international, you know, and as such I think people are open to influences from everywhere. The thing is not to accept any influence blindly. How you are able to assimilate influences and also relate it to your own context I think is more important.

AB: What are your thoughts on the contemporary arts scene, Arthur?

AY: Well, lots of people are writing, painting and so on, you know. It is certainly a lively scene. There are some young writers who are indeed very promising, but then I suppose with writing becoming a more popular activity, it carries with it also the kind of writing aimed at a popular market.

AB: It's still a very small market, isn't it here?

AY: It's a small market but it certainly justifies publication, you know, and so even though the market [might be considered] small, it allows the writer to make a living out of his writing.

AB: So when you say popular markets and popular writers, what are you thinking of here exactly?

AY: I'm thinking of books that are written out of say, murders etc, you know. Or the proliferation of ghost stories, things like that. People do like to read about the macabre.

AB: [laughs] Yeah. Do you think that literary writers are recognised adequately in Singapore? Do you think the situation has improved?

AY: Yes, I think definitely the situation has improved. It's much easier for people to get grants, to write, to travel, to publish and so on.

AB: And has that been a good thing?

AY: Something like this must lead to good and bad. In a sense it will definitely give encouragement to people who are good, but who otherwise would not publish and so on. But at the same time, it would mean people find it much easier to get

grants and so on, and they may not be doing very much to justify what they've obtained.

AB: You've been involved as a judge for the National Development Council Awards. Do you have any thoughts on competitions like that?

AY: Well, there will always be writers who write for competitions, you know. In this period there seem to be more people writing, I don't know how to account for it....

AB: When we were talking earlier, you said: "The competition syndrome may produce a kind of identity."

AY: Yeah. [I think there should be] something more than, you know, writing for the purpose of entering the competition.

AB: How do you think the new generation of writers fits into a development of Singaporean writing compared to, say, people of your generation? What are the differences?

AY: I think any kind of tradition would take a long time to develop. So I don't think I can say that there's a very fully developed Singapore tradition in writing as yet. There would be certain aspects that you could say would be typical of Singapore writing for the simple reason that things are written by Singaporeans, you know. I don't know whether that in itself is a sufficient criterion. But certain aspects of writing would reflect Singapore. So I would say from that point of view, there would be a development of some kind of Singapore tradition then.

AB: What do you think young writers are reflecting of Singapore?

AY: I suppose the aspect of living in a cosmopolitan society. Other themes would range from their aspirations, their fears, their misgivings, etc. I suppose, you know, things that are typical of living in a place and things that are also personal; that are not located in a particular place alone.

AB: How do you think their concerns are different to your concerns as a writer?

AY: The outlook seems to be a bit different. I think people seem to be more, I won't say exactly outgoing these days but they seem to have more things going on for them. As such, I think they take on a much more eclectic outlook than ever before. Very many things are open to them now. They have access to any kind of

information almost immediately. And this awareness of all the current issues and topics, I think this creates a very vibrant situation for people to write in.

AB: Would you describe them then as more cosmopolitan than your generation? Because, I mean you had your own set of global influences on your work.

AY: Cosmopolitan in a different way maybe, not necessarily more so.

AB: So how would you describe it as different?

AY: Oh, it seems to be more hands-on in a way, no? Yeah, and I really don't know how else to describe it [laughs]. I think I would for example, just be fairly content to observe things, but I think people here seem to be more participatory.

AB: That's the second time you've mentioned observing. Do you think that *all* writers are to some extent observers and voyeurs?

AY: I would say so, yes. Again it depends on how you want to use the term. If you want to use the term in a objective sense, you observe and that's that, and I think you observe without having to make your own personal contribution to what you are observing. But at the same time one can also be, you know, commenting on what one is observing.

AB: Yeah, so how do you think writers are different Arthur, to journalists or politicians, or just ordinary citizens?

AY: Well I think, if you look at it from one point of view, I would say that if you want to reflect the environment you live in then I think the difference is in the role that you play. If you are a politician, well definitely you have greater social clout than you have as an ordinary citizen, but as a writer you can contribute in your own way. The contribution may not be direct but if you are able to portray, if you're able to speak for yourself as a person living in a certain context, in a certain environment, then I think you are just making your own statement.

AB: So do you think writers have something to contribute to a culture and a society?

AY: Oh yes, yes. Collectively, the literature of a nation would embody the creativity of that particular nation.

AB: And, so, and how do they make a contribution? What kind of role do they play in a society?

AY: [laughs] Ah well, again I would use the word “observer.” Observers of a particular period of time, a particular context and so on.

AB: And do you think they observe in a different way than say a tourist or a housewife? Do they have a different kind of relationship with their society and with the world around them?

AY: I think not. I think fundamentally any citizen has a role in society. The fact that they write means that they are writers, but in addition they can be housewives; they can be anything else.

AB: Talking about the new generation of writers, you described the early writing in Singapore as a springboard.

AY: They are a springboard in the sense that the early attempts are always in imitation of someone else, as practice pieces.

AB: Do you think that’s the case now, that people are still imitating?

AY: I don’t think that’s any longer true today. If I can provide some kind of comparison: at one time if you went to art school you would start by doing charcoal sketches of plaster casts and so on and I think people tend to move away from these things now. So in writing, young writers begin to write without having to say, look I want to write a sonnet in this particular manner or I want to ah, do an imitation of somebody.

AB: And do you think that’s good?

AY: Yes I think, yes. Except that I think sometimes in some kind of basic practice you do get a certain feel, a sense of rhythm and composition and so on. I think some writers do not have the feel somehow for poetry, for example and it ends up like truncated prose. Sort of, the lines don’t end at the other side of the page [laughs with AB].

AB: Yeah, I know what you mean. Do you think these younger writers have got more confidence than earlier generations?

AY: Yes.

AB: And what do you think that's a result of?

AY: Hmm [considering]. I think that if you were to take the earlier writers, their models were T.S. Eliot or whoever you have. So I think younger writers know more things, they have access to more information and so on and generally I think there's a greater sense of confidence in what they do.

AB: And how would you compare that to when you started writing?

AY: When I started writing oh, there wasn't very much in the way of confidence, I think our sense of confidence was [pause], not knowing actually what confidence meant [laughing].

AB: It seems to me that in the 1970s and the 1980s there was pressure on writers to articulate some form of nationalism and it seems to me as though that pressure is not so great now.

AY: I don't think there was pressure actually asserted on writers, you know, to display some kind of nationalism. I think it was important then for people, for writers, to take on those topics, whereas now, I think possibly you don't need to be so pressing about it.

AB: Has your background as a linguist informed your own writing and your fascination with language?

AY: Umm, it generally makes me more sensitive to the use of language.

AB: Was English your first language Arthur?

AY: Oh no, oh no.

AB: When did you learn English?

AY: Oh, when I started school.

AB: Do you think the fact that you've been through that experience of having English quite radically de-familiarised to you – in the sense that you had to learn it – do you think that is a creative experience for a writer?

AY: You mean to learn English at an early age?

AB: Yeah, or having more than one language.

AY: Hmm [considering]. Well, I don't know because I don't think that I can function well in several languages equally, you know. I feel I'm most proficient in English than say in Chinese. So although it's not my first language, I feel I function best in it.

AB: Do you think that, having learned English as a second language that one is more conscious of the nuts and bolts of the language and the language as a purely kind of structural system?

AY: You use English but you may use words that are not from an English vocabulary and you may also use structures that are not particularly found in English. So I think this can create a certain, well it is contextual use.

AB: Occasionally in your work there was a sense of nostalgia for the things of the past that have slipped away in the passage of time and development in a city like this. Do you think that as a writer you are fascinated by the past?

AY: I'm not just interested in the past for its own sake. Nor am I interested in development for its own sake either. But certain aspects of the past... I think it would be regrettable if these were to disappear totally... you know, houses, certain traditions and so on.

AB: How do you think a society like Singapore copes with the fact that there is such a rapid transformation of the urban environment?

AY: Well, most people adjust very quickly [laughs].

AB: And what kind of world does it produce?

AY: I suppose it's a more efficient kind of living. I feel that it is natural that there will be development. Most people say that if you think in terms of development it will be ongoing, but I always feel that there should be some time for you to sit back and, you know, enjoy what has been developed, otherwise it doesn't seem to make sense. If you talk about some kind of ongoing change, it simply means that once you put up something it has to be pulled down again and so on. If something like that were to happen, it doesn't really make sense to me.

AB: And do you think that this is what writers are doing to some extent, like sitting back and reflecting and sort of making sense?

AY: I don't think that it's just sitting back and looking at the past and trying to make sense of things. Lots of writers are just making sense of what is going on around them and I think that is equally important.

AB: Can I ask you about *man snake apple*, which is a book that has always fascinated me – can I ask you about the title poem? I've described it as an allegory of contemporary life and the sort of thing we're talking about. Do you think that's an accurate description?

AY: I didn't set out to write an allegory as such, you know. I thought that using certain familiar aspects... I would just build up a theme.

AB: Hmm. But it is written in an indirect way I suppose.

AY: Indirect, yes, yes.

AB: It was quite an unusual poem for you wasn't it?

AY: Yes, yes.

AB: The long lines.... Did it take you a long time?

AY: Oh, yes, it did.

AB: And what about the intersection of spirituality and poetry in that book?

AY: When I came to the collection I was at a period when I wanted to examine these themes. Before that you know, I had been more satirical. I *felt* that I was moving towards doing things that were more lyrical to a certain extent. I think, what you called the more spiritual side also perhaps is in what you read at a particular time.

AB: How would you describe the themes of that book and those poems, that particular poem?

AY: Basically it is an attempt to try and see a much wider perspective.

AB: A much wider perspective than what?

AY: Well, I can imagine or envisage a particular kind of perspective if you like. There will be a particular area that seems you know, not directly accessible. And if you like you call it the spiritual. And I thought this was, you know, one aspect that I would like to understand. I think everyone has gone through times when one feels that there is definitely much more than just all the forces that one can, you know, be happy with. I think this is what I felt, you know, at that particular time.

AB: So, could we, could you describe it as, say, a spiritual history of Singapore?

AY: Oh no, I think that would make it sound far too grand.

AB: [laughs] I thought you'd say that.

AY: No, no. That poem is not about a particular place or a particular time.

AB: But it seems to me that you're trying to look at the sort of history of, or contemporary civilisation to some extent. It does take on a wide spectrum doesn't it?

AY: Hmm, yes.

AB: Can I ask you a bit more about spirituality. Does it inspire your poetry?

AY: For that collection yes.

AB: To change tack a bit, I wonder if I could ask you about the conflict talked about in Singapore between Eastern and Western values.

AY: If you look at it, it's very rarely such a big conflict. I mean it's easier to say, well if something goes wrong, that it's all due to Western influence and so on, that people lack an Eastern influence which would have a stabilising factor and so on, but then there would also be lots of aspects of Western influence that would be contributory and positive in many ways too, you know. I think it would be wrong to lump Western influence with all the negative aspects of life. I think what is more important is really not so much, you know, is this influence good for me or otherwise. It is not as if one can say this influence is not good for you and therefore you do without it and so on. I think one is bound to be exposed to so many things these days and what do you make of these things? These are the things that are ultimately important.

AB: Can I ask you about English language in Singapore. Do you think that the proficiency is going to improve? Do you think this is one of the reasons that some writers don't have a big readership in Singapore?

AY: Well, people are able to write in a more proficient manner now. But whether many are able to write in a creative manner again is another question all together.

AB: Do people take literature in English seriously in Singapore? Should more Singaporean literature be studied on the curriculum?

AY: Yes, I think so. In fact I think it is being done. But, you see, Singaporean literature has a very short history. So I don't think it would be so easy to sort of give you great periods and what not.

AB: Could I finish off by asking about the thing that I have always admired in your work, which is a certain amount of playfulness and risk taking and that ability to, to play creatively with language.

AY: I've always had a fascination with words and also word play. I also realise that if you overdo it, it can be pretty boring, you know, and you exhaust a good thing then. So, I tend to resort to less word play now.

AB: That's a good point to end on. Thank you, Arthur.