

# THE ART OF POETIC EXCHANGE

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Let's go to Paris! Everybody knows I've got a poetic licence, so we'll fly and we'll walk. It is June 2012, remember, and the city whispers—or swears—about the rotten weather. Who cares? We could go to le Louvre, le Centre Pompidou or le Musée d'Orsay. I'll pardon your French if you'll pardon mine. But there is a poetry festival just around the corner. Paris' place in the history of poetry echoes its prominence in the history of diplomacy and cultural interchange. Assured by its pivotal role in international relations, and buoyed by a flourish of unsurpassed poetic voices from local, surrounding and more distant places, Paris remains a centre for poetic exchange thanks to its residents no less than its visitors, émigrés and exilés who meet in cafés and bars; at Shakespeare & Co., the bookshop just across the Seine from Notre-Dame, originally devoted to avant-garde literature in English; or at the annual Marché de la Poésie (poetry market) and at the Festival franco-anglais de poésie (Franco-English Poetry Festival).

It was a local, Jean-Michel Place, who, thirty years ago in 1982, created le Marché de la Poésie where not only poets but artists, film-makers, editors and politicians met on the square in front of St Sulpice—a church famous for its fabulous organ and the even more famous composers and musicians it has hosted over the last two centuries. The Festival franco-anglais de poésie began in 1976 but was discontinued in 1979. The birth of the Marché de la Poésie in 1982, however, brought about the rebirth of the Festival, and with it the bilingual publication *La Traductière*. Both the Festival and the publication have been directed by Jacques Rancourt, himself a poet and translator from Quebec, ever since. You might in fact remember when the Festival franco-anglais de poésie and *La Traductière* came to Melbourne in 2008 with a party of French-speaking poets—some from France, others from Switzerland, New Caledonia, Québec and, funnily enough, Spain and Singapore.

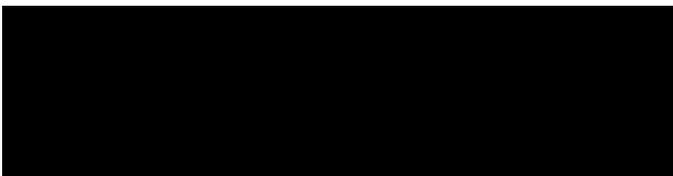
Both the Festival franco-anglais and its partner publication are now officially thirty years old. Thirty years, Jacques Rancourt recalls, 'of exploration of contemporary poetry in French and English, of translation between the two languages and still further expansion into other languages and cultures; thirty years of collaboration with artists; and finally thirty years of reflection on the interwoven themes of society, poetry and translation\*.

One of the attractions of the Festival franco-anglais is that each year one country is the focus of 'poetic exchange'—the extended conversation that happens between poets of different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, linguistic competencies and sensibilities. This year Singapore is the guest of honour. The Festival program features the work of Heng Siok Tian, Aaron Maniam, Tan Chee Lay, Edwin Thumboo, Toh Hsien Min, Zou Lu, Johar Bin Buang, KMT Iqbal, Lathaa and Chandran Nair. If you were around in 2008, you might have met Toh Hsien Min. No? In a previous life he was a wine critic.

Like Paris, Singapore's history is marked by cultural interchange—and here the similarities probably end, although it must be said both share the index of capitalism. As city-state, Singapore is geographically small, though its cultural and other complexities are quite out of proportion to its size. In the twenty-first century this seems to represent an exciting, rather than daunting, challenge for poets. While each festival poet writes about his or her own life out of a vision formed from within specific geographical and cultural parameters, tapping the resonances of the various cultural strands that weave the fabric of a national identity—still in-the-making—there is a strong impression of poets striving beyond national boundaries into the cultures of Southeast Asia and the world at large. Reading their work in an advance copy of *La Traductière* No.30, and in the print release of the Marché de la Poésie, I was struck by the sense of an extended scale of culture within Singapore, and its active cultural forms—by which I mean poetry, dance and the visual arts, forms that are partly traditional, but also international and global.

Singaporean poetry, I soon learn, is written in four languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Well, that makes me dependent on translators. And these are doing a good job, as far as I am concerned. It seems that, because of the various ethnic and linguistic communities I read in translation, poetry in Singapore cuts across linguistic and ideological boundaries.

Edwin Thumboo was one of the first poets to write in English and he did so out of a desire to counter colonialism from within. For him, it is clear that history—not merely the history and politics of events but the earlier historical phases of the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic cultural movements within Southeast Asia—provides a focus for poetry. However, Thumboo articulates further possibilities for poetic exchange and human communication by engaging with other literatures in English (including British, American and, to a lesser extent, Australian literature), literary criticism and literary theory. The awareness of writing as a Singaporean about Singapore, but having within reach the range of symbol, image, metaphor and resonance available globally, is also applicable to younger poets who continue to draw inspiration from classical Chinese writing, highly formalised Malay forms of literature and other cultural forms such as traditional music. So writing about Singapore as a Singaporean is to make use of a global range of symbol, image, and metaphor.





What Thumboo began is found in younger poets who draw inspiration from classical Chinese writing, highly formalised Malay forms of poetry and traditional music. The work of younger poets is also in tune with pop culture, technology and ideologically subversive movements. Heng Siok Tian, for example, entertains the reader with incisive, yet funny, feminist pieces while Toh Hsien Min and Tan Chee Lay offer witty portraits of Singaporean socio-political life in a variety of literary styles. In their own ways, Zou Lu and Lathaa portray the minimal physicality of things with lyrical virtuosity. Unsurprisingly, change, migration, journeys and transitions are common themes for poets of both generations. The displacement from country and home offers a chance for notions of culture and identity to crystallise, collude, or become open to reinterpretation and to take on new meanings in differing contexts.

Deemed as 'world famous' by American poet and novelist Michael Lynch only last year, the Festival franco-anglais de poésie this year will no doubt prove to be a feast of words, sounds and images across and beyond linguistic barriers. There is much that is exciting and unfamiliar to me. Take Singaporean poetry in Chinese or Tamil, for example; I speak neither of these languages.

At the unofficial launch of the Festival at La Pagode—a cinema housed within a most unusual building inspired by Japanese architecture with a splendid oriental garden—I learn more about Singapore's poetic landscape as Kiruthiga Mahendran, from Singapore's National Arts Council, introduces us to it in English. But I am distracted. Jacques has asked me to translate Kiruthiga's speech into French, and she speaks very fast. I do not provide a literal translation. Rather, I condense. It feels a lot more natural to do so.

I am glad it's over. Now I am entranced by the poems of Madeleine Lee. I've never encountered Chinese poetry before—certainly not 'live' and in a bilingual version. On closer inspection, what fascinates me is the apparently radical aspect of Chinese poetry: standard punctuation is entirely absent; the non-inflectional nature of the language, its terseness and line breaks produce contrapuntal effects. It is as though Lee's voice moves in and through her, as if it inhabited a giant flute, taking the listener on some intimate journey through *landseasky* (my wild interpretation of her merging the three elements in one single metaphor).

Here comes the pièce de résistance: the presentation of twenty or so 'vidéopoèmes' on the theme of the reader of poetry. This event is organised by the Festival franco-anglais de poésie, *La Traductière*, the Festival international du film expérimental, the Florean museum (Romania) and La Pagode. This is exciting stuff. It is interesting to see how poems are interpreted and transposed into a different medium, each artist giving his or her distinct spin on words, each emphasising a particular image and distinct melody in unexpected juxtapositions. Images and sounds impress and will, I know, linger in my memory.

They do. It is hard to filter those images and sounds as I listen to Shizue Ogawa (Japan), Max Alhau (France) and Eva Maria Berg (Germany) as they read at the Café de Flore on Tuesday night. The readings at the Café de Flore and Café de la Mairie are another staple of the Festival franco-anglais. Here we gather in good company to practice the art of poetic exchange instigated by Jacques Rancourt. I am delighted to meet again with friends I haven't seen for a year. It is also a great chance to be introduced to new poets and it is with pleasure that I accept a request to read their work in either English or French.

Some wonderful accidents of fate happen over a glass of wine and tonight it seems that the Canadian poet Denise Desautels and I get on like a house on fire. Hers is a versatile body of work where undercurrents surge into cascades of colours and textures. Her voice is deep and rich.

The Singaporean poets look tired—they are still jetlagged—but it seems that no-one really wants the night to end. It becomes evident to me that this is a milestone festival. It will deepen my understanding of Singapore and provide a glimpse into a region of unsuspected cultural depth. Eavesdropping on people in the audience, I suspect that this is a general sentiment.



*Festival franco-anglais de poésie: Jacques Rancourt, Toh Hsien Min, the actors Sylvie Moussier and Philippe Burin, Zou Lu, Heng Siok Tian, Aaron Maniam and Tan Chee Lay. Photograph by Marie-France Rancourt.*

At the official launch of both the Marché and the Festival on Thursday night, I ask Toh Hsien Min about the Merlion, an image which recurs in many poems I have read or heard so far. The Merlion is more than an image, says my companion. It is an icon loaded with significance. With the head of a lion and the body of a fish it has come to represent the nation of Singapore. The original 8.6 metre statue stands to attention in Merlion Park at the crossroads of the cultural and business centres of the city. The image of the Merlion has become a hallmark for Singaporeans and even non-national residents: it embodies their identification with the city-state. This is so, Hsien says, because Singapore's relatively short history has not yielded a more significant icon. And people in Singapore have taken the limitation of their island's history as a challenge to generate their own icons and stories. Their relationship with the Merlion is complicated and, as an icon, it conjures up sentiments that extend from dismay to consternation. Not surprisingly, this complexity is an inspiration, particularly for poets.

Given the complexity and centrality of this symbol, I invite you to meet the Merlion more intimately. So let's indulge in what will seem only a small digression from the Paris experience, for the iconography of the Merlion was uncannily foreshadowed by the architecture of La Pagode. Far from representing a break from the past, the Merlion is a creative revision of legendary stories about Singapore's past. A foreigner, Prince Sang Nila Utama, supposedly landed on the island's shores after a stormy boat ride. He saw a lion, which he took to be a good omen. He then established a colony on the island which he called Singapura, meaning 'lion city'. This story is retold and performed in schools and public celebrations.

The half-lion, half-fish icon itself is the result of the island's long-standing, state-directed pragmatism and artistic practice of engagement with the West. It was the creation of a foreigner, Fraser Brunner, in 1964. The Merlion was adopted and henceforth promoted by the Singaporean city-state. Its target audience was, no doubt, tourists but over time the Merlion has supplanted other island state symbols such as the tiger—which you have probably seen on their local beer and the ubiquitous Tiger Balm. The Merlion has morphed into souvenir sculptures, chocolates, even a wind instrument.

The Merlion has in fact exceeded its original capitalistic function to represent the Singapore brand more generally. For example, it is seen as a symbol of the island's aspiration to become a cultural hub of Southeast Asia and even of the whole world. The plan for a cultural hub aims to bolster political stability, social harmony and perceived national values among cosmopolitan Singaporeans. By promoting global awareness and a willingness to appropriate the best the world has to offer, the government hopes to expand the conceptual basis of creative production and enable the island state to be comfortable in its place among developed nations.

Because it plays such a critical role in Singapore's iconography, the Merlion has become a fixture of the local artistic landscape, especially of poetry. Edwin Thumboo points out the ways in which Singapore's writers have appropriated the icon reveal the various socio-cultural concerns and literary conventions of their respective eras and areas. He himself has identified with the symbol in his poetry in an ironic way. And like most of the early Merlion poets, he has recognised that the Merlion has a capacity to represent cultural symbolism and collective activity. Younger poets, he says, engage with the Merlion using tools and techniques drawn from Western popular culture. These types of appropriations demonstrate how Singapore-based writers negotiate tensions between their desire for individual expression and the limitations imposed by the city-state and the global (Western) marketplace.

Music wafts around the corner from the Place St Sulpice, which reminds me that this is not only a poetry occasion, but a choreographed interdisciplinary event. Yesterday there was a musical evening at the Theatre de Nesle in which words, voices and musical instruments swelled to what rang like an international language. Tomorrow I will visit the Galerie de Nesle, where artworks based on some of the poems published in *La Traductière* hang on the walls and I will attend the second night of readings, 'Around Singapore'. On Saturday there will be a jazz night and on Sunday, after a round table on the theme of poetic attention, there will be more music, a dance performance and 'literary fireworks'.

\*Rancourt, Jacques (2012). 'Poetic Attention, the Poetry Reader and Singapore', *La Traductière*, Vol. 30, pp. 9-10.

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