

Sounds in the Key of Light: Reticence as Soundscape in the Poetry of Arthur Yap

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In a Singaporean critical landscape that has for much of its short history been concerned with the use of English (a non-‘native’ language) in its literary culture, Arthur Yap’s poetry is notable for its detachment from that kind of consideration, even as he constantly demonstrates the authenticity with which colloquial nuances can be articulated. This is not to say that he deliberately writes in defiance of received discourse, stemming from post-colonial linguistic anxieties. Rather, in Yap’s writing, the notion of voice takes precedence over questions of language – not that language, as a poetic topic, is ever far from his thoughts and treatment. More importantly, his writing demonstrates a keen sensitivity to “the verbal frames that order everyday experience” (Brewster 140).

With the focus being on the individual’s relationship with language, given its immanent complexities and ambiguities, what results is a concentration on the uniqueness with which the individual responds to these qualities of language. If there is any sense of detachment that stems from these engagements – as we are wont to identify in his poems – this is because Yap’s poetic personae are solitary in the contemplation of their own thoughts and experiences, a contemplation that is continually echoed in the sound of their own voices. This is the thrust of Arthur Yap’s poetry, his writings being conducted largely in the service of this idea of voice, as well as of auditory qualities in general. However, these poetic strategies are not ends in themselves, but serve a larger aesthetic purpose.

Yap’s poetry, taken as a whole, is very directly engaged with the idea of space, with the image of the city as exemplum. Such engagement allows for the possibility of spatial perceptions to be inhabited by the shared thoughts, actions and communication between inhabitants of a particular space. Indeed, the space transcends physicality and absorbs more universal and universally recognised qualities.

By playing on the conventions of voice, the poems complicate – but also enrich – the dynamics of how sounds can transmit meaning. Consequently, human relationships, largely dependent on oral and auditory engagements, take on significance by becoming sources for inventiveness. In the world of Arthur

Yap's poetry, experience is complex because the nature of human communication is varied, ranging from the mundane and droning to the sustained, energetic, deep and meaningful. Through his combination of synaesthetic, cacophonous and euphonic strategies in the poems, Yap very often succeeds in creating an auditory architecture that – relying on both a sense of space and sonic perceptions – builds up the soundscape of a vibrant and vital world, at once complex yet complete: we *hear* his landscape rather than perceive it merely through the immediacies of visual perception.

One characteristic of Yap's poetry is his cummings-like insistence on writing in the lower case, a characteristic best described by Rajeev Patke: "This e.e. cummings aspect...makes a point that nonconformity is as much a matter of principle as of temperament" (296). Yet the effect of this refusal to use initial capitals – i.e., to capitalise or perhaps capitalise *on* – is a poetry quite unlike cummings, totally subdued, even reticent. And such reticence actually removes the poems' apparent quirkiness of being merely superficial novelty, for they make a point about the enactment and projection of the poetic voice. But, in a thematic sense, the consistent use of the lower-case extends into and is consonant with the notion of contextual continuities, that the recitative bases for poetry are parts that make up a totality – parts simultaneously autonomous and inextricable from one another.

Another aspect of Arthur Yap's poetry ties in with much that has been discussed so far: his reliance on simple, direct diction, the effect of which is immediacy in the way that the words are received. Critics have also pointed to the other effect of this – a recognisable conversational tone – an "alert[ness] to the nuances of the spoken idiom...Yap has a keen and neutral ear for mimicry, and can ventriloquise intonation as fluently as he can disguise his own studied ambiguity" (Patke 296). Yet another effect is the deflation of a sense of formality that is associated with poetry. Yap's poems are rendered accessible by the quotidian mood that emerges from such deliberateness of diction – this despite the engagement with sometimes abstract ("paired stills" comes to mind), even obscure, subject matter such as in the oft-cited "2 mothers in a h d b playground" and others, like "old house at ang siang hill".

The kind of experience that Yap's poetry articulates and vitalizes is modern and urban. His poetry thus engages with and questions the modern, urban conditions of alienation, the compulsion towards identity and identification, while the gestures towards conformity that it is all filtered through, both worry and fascinate him. In poems like "down the line" for example, he implicitly questions alienating human circumstances, as well as the valorisation of conformity to received norms and mores:

a habit by which the world moves, people will not
 look at the centre of things. the custodian must
 find some flaw about his own belief to show up
 those, accusing him, as punitive. wrong,
 that in his pursuit, he does them good
 purely by chance. (Yap 78)

The linguistic dynamics and inherent poetic complexities of Yap's writing, together with a setting that places the reader at the centre of the action, offer a perspective that celebrates the values of absorption into a larger sense of community, beyond the limitations of the social, geographical and political. The individual in Yap's formulation is an inextricable part of humanity; solipsism is self-defeating, as are ideas of socially constructed identity. As Yap puts it, in 'dramatis personae': "we in public are private figures / humanising the landscape" (Yap 27). It is this humanising quality in his poems that triumphs over all anxieties. And it is a quality given play precisely because the poet insists that the underlying human impulse must resonate through the physicality of what it means to be alive to a world full of possibilities, and always and already a sum total of cumulative, collective experience.

This experience issuing forth from the expressive source that is the poet is shared with and absorbed through the reader-audience's own sense of the world. We are reminded here of Robert Pinsky's observation that:

poetry is a vocal, that is to say a bodily, art. The medium of poetry is the human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily as dancing.

Moreover, there is a special intimacy to poetry because, in this idea of art, the medium is not in the expert's body, as when one goes to the ballet: in poetry, the medium is the audience's body ... The reader's breath and hearing embody the poet's words. This makes the art physical, intimate, and individual. (8)

The essential sonority of the poetic work, then, is an entire process of passage from physical vibrations through a sentient entity. To be moved by poetry in this sense, then, is no longer a matter of metaphysical or figurative description, but is a response with tangible, corporeal effects.

Words, we remember, are physiological events. They bear a particular strain of sensuality by being constructed of the sounds that convey them. The musicologist, Donald Ferguson, following the path-making work of William James and Carl Lange, points out, "The true elements of expression in language are the definitional meanings of words. ... The element of musical expression accordingly should be those values of emotional experience" (25). Ferguson locates the shared

processes between the sound of words and the sound of music – in the neuro-motor and nervous responses that are aroused in the human subject. It is in the inherent tonal quality of language and music where these physio-neurological triggers can be observed, in a process that involves resonance, expression and reception. Poets, through their own vocation, are deeply entrenched in these processes.

Archibald MacLeish suggests that “it is [through] the relationships of words as sounds that the poem exists. The poem’s meaning is evoked by the structure of words-as-sounds rather than words-as-meanings” (64). Therein lies the building blocks of poetry as an almost plastic art form, one that John Hollander calls “*ut pictura musicaque poesis*” – poetry simultaneously as song and picture. Furthermore, poetry for Hollander involves structure and effect, the gap between both of which is the “music of poetry” (23-4). The implication of such a view is important to the craft of poetry – its incantatory impulse ranges beyond the pages on which words are printed. Arthur Yap’s poetry exemplifies such a studied approach to the form, in complete realisation of the tradition that he has inherited – a tradition that is not culturally-specific but wholly anthropological, and wholly human. Words and poetry are, for him,

a page of contained dimensions
 housing a pharynx
 that, from edge to edge,
 is still,
 still as a minute glottal sphinx. (92)

Through poems such as “words”, above, Yap confirms Hollander’s observation that “there is no equivalent, in the ear’s domain, for the word ‘visionary’ in that of the eye.” Yap’s poetry indeed effects that which Hollander describes as “visionary sound” (24).

At their most affective, Arthur Yap’s poems demonstrate these deeply-felt sensitivities to the sonority of poetry. Through his examination of the implications of language and its articulation – from writing through reading to inference, all of which can be seen to be grounded in an aesthetic sensibility that foregrounds voice, hence sound and musicality – we can track a particular trajectory in the development of our engagement with his poems. The variety of voices and sounds that occupy such a landscape are dynamic elements that converge to define, even form, a sense of space, much like a resonance box within which vitality is perpetuated and even amplified. If we look at “old house at ang siang hill” again, we realize that the house is caught in a fragmented, undecidable state of occupancy, at least in the poetic moment. Granted, the second person address presumes a respondent, or at least silent auditor, it is in fact addressed to no one in particular, but everyone in general. This, after all, is a “house-that-was” (Yap 16). The old house is nothing more than

a shell, with fixtures that testify to a time past. Yet, while the poem may create the physical texture of the house, it is really the “speak[ing] quality” that fills the emptied space within. This is helped in no small part by the impending intrusions of “new development” – a word loaded with the noise of the urban experience. The poem’s quiet ambience is merely a disarming contrivance, a sleight of hand, through which we are meant to hear the past and ongoing environmental changes – much like the house itself, reverberating with the poem’s sonority. What is more, we are learning it all through the voice of a speaker whom we cannot identify, indeed who may not even be present at the scene.

Indeed, the narrator’s absence is a crucial characteristic of Yap’s poetry. It largely explains the sense of reticence, even self-effacement, that is characteristic of his writing. This, along with a persistent sense of the distinctive silences in his poems compels us to read only what is available: the language of sound, and the sound of language. A quick survey of Yap’s poems suffices to suggest his near obsessive reliance on the deep repository of aural elements of the human condition: speak, say, tell, ask, laugh, shout, ear, listen, hear, quiet, silent. Poem after poem, they build their own concordance of auditory functions. Constructed around them are entire poems such as “balancing sounds,” “statement,” “these sounds endlessly,” “an afternoon nap,” “would it have been,” “a lesson in the definite article,” “the grammar of a dinner,” “words,” “2 mothers in a h d b playground,” “fiscal ear,” “man snake apple,” “dialogue,” “in the quiet of night,” “nightjar,” “paraphrase” – and this list is hardly exhaustive.

These poems do not constitute isolated incidences, but are part of a larger calculated poetic style directed at foregrounding the inherent auditory significance of poetry. They are a return to our deep, anthropological relationship with poetry as a mnemonic technology by which to deposit, and call forth as necessary, the records of our human experience. Artistry aside, Yap’s poems enact the embodiment of those

deep, ancient links that join memory, human intelligence, culture, and the sounds of spoken language. In the particular physical presence of memorable language we can find a reminder of our ability to know and retain knowledge itself. (Pinsky 16)

Arthur Yap’s poems, then, are not stylistically aural for its own sake. Rather, the aural serves a far deeper function than the poet may be aware of, which is to sustain the links between knowledge and our own sense of humanity.

The “keenness” for the verbal that both Anne Brewster and Rajeev Patke have separately identified in Yap’s work is attuned to the capacities of a deeper font of human consciousness. The enchantment of his poems lies in the urban landscape

and its hold over the individual's fractured location within the modern milieu. In poems like "statement" and "fiscal ear," this sense of disjuncture takes the form of the tone of officialdom that separates the public from the private spheres of existence: "we in public are private figures / humanizing the landscape," as he notes in "dramatis personae" (Yap 27). In "fiscal ear," this slipping in and out of role takes a comic but troubling tone as the protagonist, the appropriately named mr song, exposes his contradictory stances about expenditure. This takes place through his speech and behavior over two sets of circumstances – official and domestic: the doubly blurring delineation in each of the two stanzas is effected by the absence of punctuations to mark out speech from thought and from action. Thus mr song "wonders why the caller wants to be stingy /.../ what you want to be stingy for?" and proceeds to enact the compulsions of extravagance, "without need to consider any fiscal bother" (Yap 103). On the home front, however, those sentiments ring hollow in his admonition to his wife: "you think i print money? he wonders if his wife / thinks he prints money" (Yap 103). The correspondence of the two stanzas with two contradicting attitudes is clearly a parody of the personality type that lacks self-awareness, but who is nevertheless deeply enamoured of his own perception of rhetorical triumph. mr song, in other words, is a type of all those who enjoy the sound of their own voice, and who are in a position to exercise that voice *ad infinitum* and for their own ends in both the public and private spheres. In the way that words are repeated in the poem, we get a sense that the repetitions themselves are emphasised, rather than the inherent message. This fracturing of voice and substance, then, is indicative of the incongruence between the public and private persona – and that even within the private sphere of domesticity, there is further disconnect with the inner being. The linguistic repetitions that emerge are evidence of a larger system of rhetorical drives so common even in private communication – and which Yap associates very closely, particularly through the medium of officialese, with all forms of public transaction.

This has obvious appeal for a poet like Yap because the language of bureaucracy is public and thus has social implications; and also because there is a tendency, in the language of official contexts and public modes of communication, to latch on to jargon, sound bites and slogans. This is not to say that officialese is poetic, but that an examination of the responses to it can be a way of comprehending the public dimensions of poetry, as well as its potential to relate to the depths of the human consciousness. Yap's poem "statement" tries just such an examination, but fails to enter into those depths, presumably because that peremptory mindset continues to be rigid, and resists any attempts to penetrate its semblance of stability (Yap 29). Here, Yap presents a soundscape constructed largely out of colloquial manifestations of the workaday environment, but does so by avoiding the predictability of a specific localisation. Instead, we are faced with a kind of pidginisation that involves the phonic sensibilities of cubicle-speak.

The language use that “statement” unravels is a crucial example of Yap’s frequent concerns in his poems. It has very little to do with what each statement actually means, but rather what the consequences of its articulation might be. In the case of “statement” this is revealed to be a form of language that sounds de-personalised and resolutely unsentimental. The tone of the poem aims to undermine any emotional anxiety (or the expression of anxiety). It is a language which represents a mindset founded upon conformity. It is also one with deeply sinister implications:

so if you say: please may i jump
off the ledge? and go on to add
this work is really killing,
you will be told: start jumping. (Yap 29)

The parodic spirit of such a portrayal aside, the instinctive call and response model of the (reported) exchange, premised on a hypothesis – “if” – speaks of an approach to language use, which seemingly unthinking, is also evidence of our propensity to deploy language in such a rigid and patterned manner.

It would have been easy to point to the poem as an invective directed against the faceless, thoughtless institutional mechanisms that drive the modern urban landscape. Indeed, the evidence of bureaucracy can be discerned throughout the poem:

most probably they will say nothing,
thinking should it legally, morally,
departmentally be yes/no/perhaps,
or it’s not too late:
why don’t you come along? we shall bring
this matter up to a higher level (Yap 29)

Yet, the lack of human sentimentality in the language is in fact grounded upon, if not human passion and empathy, then at least decency. We enter into the poem because it implicates us, and it calls out to us: “why don’t you come along?” (Yap 29). The poem speaks of the possibility of being amenable – “no one is in any way / narrow-minded anymore these days” – and in the incongruence of locating a bureaucratic setting with the black humour of a work-flow kind of discussion on suicide, we do get a sense of such a possibility, no matter how seemingly absurd (Yap 29). All this is made plausible by the distinctive poetic voice pervading the poem, being articulated through a language that is non-standard yet recognisable. More than anything else, the diction suggests syntactical flexibility, and this in turn may ultimately be the source of liberation from the imposing, overwhelming

institutional strictures that limit human potential and the possibilities of arriving at some form of “a higher level” – the latter, a bureaucratic short-hand for authority, but also suggestive of a ‘higher level’ of morality (Yap 29).

In Yap’s schemata, this “higher level” rests, as this paper has continually emphasised, on the poet’s ability to see past the limitations imposed through our reliance on specifics. It would be remiss to suggest that Yap is uninterested in specifics – the universality of his poems’ concerns must surely include those. Neil Murphy notes:

It is clear that poets like Arthur Yap...have the power to take us back into the world of poetry, a world not of reduced but of enlarged meaning and sentiments, into the words, and the fraught energies that command them, the energies that define [the] poet’s humanity.” (191)

He chooses to deal with the complexities of the human condition through the medium of his art – language – as his subject matter. Involvement with the emotional and physical landscape, these poems would suggest, is constrained, not merely by individual ability, but also individual motivation. Yap’s remarkable absence from his own poems, then, has a kind of potency that we seldom witness in literary expression. To the extent that he allows his work to ‘speak for itself’, the poems are highly effective because of the deep sonority with which they provoke our responses. They embody a type of musicality that Wallace Stevens compares to

the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with measured voice ... we have an eloquence and it is that eloquence that we call music every day, without having much cause to think about it. (*Necessary* 125-6).

Interestingly, the enigmatic eloquence that Stevens points out is closely associated with the kind of reticence that readers see in Stevens’s own poetry. In this regard, both Yap and Stevens share a similar approach to their work. And where sound and musicality are a preoccupation for Yap, this reticence that they share is even more acute in their attempts to encapsulate the dynamism of silence.

We can trace a distinct but common sensibility between the two poets that provides a sense of the intellectual and aesthetic range of Arthur Yap’s achievement. His “in the quiet of the night” (whether he is aware of it or not) shares more than the ambience of Stevens’s “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm.” In his poem, Stevens constructs a spatial basis on which to make the connections between the linguistic and epistemological qualities of the written word. But it is the external conditions that are necessary for making the transaction possible:

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
 The house was quiet because it had to be.
 The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind.
 The access of perfection to the page. (Stevens *Collected* 311)

Yap's poetic sentiments in "in the quiet of the night" are grounded on the same epistemological considerations – and he takes it even further, trusting his own words to hold themselves up to the closest of intellectual scrutiny:

in the quiet of the night
 when alert ears pulse sound
 i can hear the words again.
 ...
 i uderstand he is a poet
 & i understand his poetry. (Yap 118)

Yap's end-stops here are quite crucial, as they create just the right moments of pause for the subsequent consolidation to take place. These are pauses that are sufficient to enact the quietude that the entire poem is hinged on: an ambience wherein the deepest of thoughts resonate. What follows justifies the poetic gesture, confirming the poet's awareness of the implications of his verse, and the attendant silences:

i even understand my own knowledge
 of this privacy which is public literary study. (Yap 118)

Elsewhere in his poetry, Yap's playfulness with language can be seen as the gleeful engagement of one who is fully comfortable with his own medium. In "in the quiet of the night," the metatextual gesture confirms the refinement and intellectual confidence of the poet as the source of eloquence, in the way that Wallace Stevens describes it. But it is also a moment of supreme seriousness. Those two lines explain his poetics in a manner that encapsulates (and surpasses) all critical attempts to do the same.

Throughout "in the quiet of the night," Arthur Yap does not abandon the artistry with which he deploys the effects of sonority – the abiding silence of this poem notwithstanding. As a testament to the potency of sound in his poetry, the effects of the three opening lines of "in the quiet of the night" are persistent, we realise, and sustained throughout the poem's entirety, even as apprehension of the poetic moment appears to waver in the second stanza. Here again, the poet's self-awareness comes to the fore even as his persona struggles with the idea of comprehension itself. The tension arises as a result of uncertainty over the perceived status of meaning:

i will
 know, in reading again,
 i do not know him
 or any other, or myself... (Yap 118)

This shifts the poem's concerns from one of epistemology to one that has ontological complications, as it relates to the very act of reading and the very status of the conditions under which the reading and comprehension take place. And it is in the interweaving effects and potentialities associated with language that these concerns emerge as dynamically as they do:

i do not know him
 or any other, or myself, or *that any poetry*
is the public transaction that it must be. (118; my emphasis)

As long as language is a public process – meaningless without reception—the poet struggles with his involvement. For words connect the poet with his public (the assumed reader and auditor), and make meaning in as much as sound mediates what we hear (or do not hear).

Sound in language, hence in poetry, sustains the communicative process of comprehension, misunderstanding and interpretation. And even as Arthur Yap's final acclamation in "in the quiet of the night" is that "it [poetry] must be private ultimately", the totality of poetry's effects are – as can be seen in the many representative poems from Yap's *oeuvre* – perpetuated "in the quiet of the night / when alert ears pulse sound / i can hear *again* the words, the poet I was earlier reading" (118; my emphasis). The absent poet, after all, resides in the sound of his poem and that sound is his poetry.

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