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## Modernist Non-Events: Disappearing Modernisms in New York and Singapore

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**Abstract:** A 1942 meeting of T.S. Eliot in a BBC recording studio with George Orwell, alongside several Caribbean and British Indian writers of color, suggests a multicultural vision of high modernism that never quite happened. The exemplary modernism of Eliot's *The Waste Land* prompted a number of imitations, extensions, and experiments, only some of which made it into subsequent literary history. This paper concerns two modernist non-happenings, *Epistle to Prometheus* by Babette Deutsch and *F.M.S.R.* by Francis P. Ng. *Epistle to Prometheus*, a book-length poem combining Eliotic modernist ambition and broadly left politics, was suppressed by the author almost immediately after publication for reasons that remain obscure. *F.M.S.R.*, a long poem in the Eliot tradition addressing a train journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, was completely lost until recently discovered and the author (Teo Poh Leng) identified. The diversity of approaches in these poems shows how, in the postwar years, modernism was retroactively unified, and how many approaches, including some taking Eliot's influences in unusual directions, have been lost to history.

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### 1. Ways of Putting the Same Thing

In November 1942, a wide-ranging group of writers met in a BBC recording studio “to discuss the influence of India on English literature for the BBC programme *Voice*” (Morse 133). These included T.S. Eliot and George Orwell, poet and critic William Empson, and several Caribbean and British Indian writers of color, among them novelist Mulk Raj Anand, novelist Venu Chitale, poet and editor J.M. Tambimuttu, and poet and playwright Una Marson. The *Voice* programs were broadcast on the

BBC's Eastern Service, which, as Daniel Ryan Morse notes, "was the first widespread realization of the BBC's lofty civilizing goals, the place where the abstract idea of a serious and cultural service was put into practice" (84). Anand, who put this program together, shaped his own ideas of modernist literary practice through his broadcast work on the Eastern Service. In his article, Morse describes Anand's use of intertextuality in his broadcasts "as a cooperative rather than derivative project"—not derivative, that is, of Western aesthetic tendencies—and thereby foregrounds an account that contrasts with "the traditional narrative of international modernist aesthetics, with the West coming first and the 'rest' lagging behind" (Morse 85). One can see the conflicting accounts of modernism even in this moment, with Anand's cooperative notion of intertextuality played out in a BBC studio devoted to civilization-by-broadcasting, or even in the interplay between Home Service programming, which "jettisoned serious programming during the war in favor of light music," and Eastern Service broadcasts making space for cultural diversity (84).

It makes sense that Eliot, who in his graduate school years intensively studied Indian philosophy and Sanskrit, was at this meeting. In 1915, in an omnibus review of ten books for the *New Statesman*, the young Eliot berated "cultivated British officials in India" for "ignoring what the young and educated Indians of to-day are thinking" in favor of "a perpetual rehash of what they imagine to be the philosophy of the Vedas" ("What India" 389). Eliot's poetry and prose throughout shows a wide-ranging and sympathetic reading in Indian thought, and one cannot read his work extensively without acknowledging these debts. *The Waste Land*, his most well-known poem, ends with a mantra from the Upanishads, and the third of the *Four Quartets* deploys Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* as a central figure.

It is easy to forget what a dominating figure Eliot was at the time of this 1942 *Voice* broadcast, just how much his poetics determined the acceptable, how much his position as an editor and critic determined what was read and discussed. In his classic 1931 study *Axel's Castle*, Edmund Wilson observed that over the previous decade Eliot had "left upon English poetry a mark more unmistakable than that of any other poet writing English" (111). A few pages later, Wilson applies the same observation to his criticism, noting that "Eliot has done more than perhaps any other modern critic to effect a revaluation of English literature" (115). In 1936, the poet and critic Babette Deutsch summarized Eliot's influence on poetry concisely:

Eliot is the most influential of those who have made symbolist technique an active principle of English verse, and one has only to examine the lyrical output of the decade between 1917 and 1927 to see how deeply, if belatedly, this influence penetrated Anglo-American work. It is responsible for the emphasis upon musical nuances; the interest in a subtler and more involved consciousness; the use of a more flexible, more various vocabulary, juxtaposing the lyrical and the anti-poetic, to convey these shades; the ready resort to synesthesia; expression of an experience in terms of a sense other than that which first apprehends it, as the blind man explained scarlet to himself by the clangour of a trumpet. (*This Modern Poetry* 137-138)

By 1942, when the BBC *Voice* program was recorded, Eliot was the most influential poet and critic in English.

And yet the question of Eliot's influence must be answered by asking "which Eliot"? There are

significant shifts in Eliot's poetics over the preceding decades, including the role of Indian thought in his poetry. Consider the famous conclusion of *The Waste Land*:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot, *Poems* 71)

Shortly after it was published, Eliot added notes to the poem, notes that virtually all readers today encounter as integral to the poem itself. As Christopher McVey discusses at some length, the note to the final line ("Shantih shantih shantih") changed. In all his notes, Eliot translates the final line as "the Peace which passeth understanding." However, whereas later editions of *The Waste Land* gloss this translation as "our equivalent to this word [*shantih*]," Eliot's original 1922 note describes it as "a feeble translation of the content of this word [*shantih*]" (McVey 174). McVey considers the original version of the note "the superior of the two versions, both because of its humility and because it underscores rather than whitewashes the global nature of the poem's various source-texts" (186). I would say the original note does more than this: it acknowledges the inadequacy of translation in poetics, the primacy of material language, and the potential incommensurability of thought. The later note, however, smooths things over with its assertion of equivalence.

Twenty years after the shock of *The Waste Land*—with its polyglot discourses and discordant affective ranges raucously competing for space, attention, and determinative meaning—Eliot published "Little Gidding," the last of what became *Four Quartets*, a poem spoken by a univocal, ruminative, if sometimes self-doubting, single consciousness. The gap between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* traces a range of modernist response in a single poet, a twenty-year chasm between rhetorical strategies: it is hard to imagine the poet of *The Waste Land* even contemplating a poem announcing near its conclusion, with apparent complete sincerity, that "history is now and England" (Eliot, *Poems* 208). And yet, as just noted, in changing his gloss from "a feeble translation of the content of this word" to "our equivalent to this word," Eliot himself had set the stage for such univocal delivery. The later gloss's assertion of equivalence between different languages and expressions prepares the way for this moment in "The Dry Salvages," the third movement of *Four Quartets*:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—  
Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing:  
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray  
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,  
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened. (197)

Krishna is not quoted immediately, though the context and the quotes later in the section make clear that Eliot is referring to Krishna's words to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, primarily from chapters 2 and 8 (Eliot, *Poems* 967-977; Fowler 407-423). What interests me is the second line of this passage, which

asserts the same equivalence claimed in the revised note to *The Waste Land*'s last line: namely, that different ways "of putting the same thing" are even possible. With such a view of language, there is no need to quote Krishna at all, much less shift to a different language entirely as *The Waste Land* does.

All of this is leading up to what might seem an obvious point: that though Eliot's influence in 1942 was undeniable and in some sense peaking at that moment, it was also multiple and contradictory, its multiplicities including but not limited to its approaches to or confidence in unified global meaning, its contradictions internal as well as external, self-inscribed as well as driven by reception. And so, although one can trace a number of Eliotic influences in later poetics and critics, there remain multiple Eliots and Eliotic modernisms to influence and be influenced by. The writing of linear, developmental historical narrative is one way of losing some of this multiplicity and contradiction; erasure by history itself is another. After the Zero Hour of 1945, literary modernism started settling into something else—something historical and, apparently, relatively stable. We can see the signs of this stabilization almost immediately in the years following: the early history of the Bollingen Prize, for example, the emergence and resolution of outrage over Ezra Pound, is American modernist poetry deciding how to look at itself historically. To recover alternate modernisms from the period before 1945 is to unsettle this stability yet again, but it is also, if we are honest, to reach back across a considerable, seemingly unbridgeable gulf.

In the rest of this essay I will examine two long poems of the 1930s that suggest different ways the Eliot influence was felt and lost. Lost, I say: for these two poems, one by an American and one by a Singaporean, have been for different reasons unavailable to most readers in the decades since. One was suppressed by the author herself for reasons that remain unclear; the other more or less disappeared with its author.

## 2. Prometheus: The Betrayal of Liberation

Babette Deutsch (1895–1982) was never among the major modernists and has received almost no discussion in the critical literature, but her career as a poet was regular and productive. In addition to over half a dozen full-length books of verse—ten if you count selected and collected volumes—Deutsch published four novels, several works of criticism including a widely used poetry handbook, translations of Rilke, Pushkin, and other German and Russian poets, and children's books and translations. A late poem seems almost a pre-elegy for Eliot. "Lament for the Makers: 1964," first published in *The Atlantic* in December 1964 and then in her *Collected Poems* of 1969, takes its title from a sixteenth-century poem by William Dunbar, and like Dunbar's poem is an elegy for multiple poets, in Deutsch's case including Louis MacNeice, e.e. cummings, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Robinson Jeffers (*Collected* 5-6). Deutsch seems to be thinking of Eliot in the final stanza:

Lament for the makers; it will never be over.  
Dante could not believe death had undone

So many; since he said so, how many has death undone?  
How many will death take tomorrow, or this year, certainly? (6)

In citing Dante, Deutsch is also quoting Eliot in *The Waste Land*: “I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot, *Poems* 57). It is hard to imagine that she is not considering Eliot among those who might be taken “tomorrow, or this year”—and who in fact died a month after “Lament” was published.

Over her career, Deutsch published one book-length poem, the 1931 volume *Epistle to Prometheus*. This is an ambitious work in ten sections, each section preceded by an epigraph, moving more or less from the ancient and mythological to the present and historical. The sections vary greatly in length and form: for example, the fifth section is a sonnet, but the third section is more than eleven pages of mainly free verse. All ten sections address the mythical Titan Prometheus directly, though the first section begins with a voice addressing the author, a kind of reverse epic trope, an invocation *from* the Muse:

How will you write a letter to a myth  
who never was a man?  
Although this ink  
should burn like angry blood or run like fire,  
he left no ashes even,—  
that are almost  
weightless in the sealed urn,—  
to grow stained or warm. (Deutsch, *Epistle* 9)

By the end of section 1, the speaker is addressing Prometheus directly and by name—“Prometheus, my friend” (11)—a perspective that is maintained throughout. The speaker at the end of the first section catches a vision of Prometheus creating humanity (“I saw an instant your enormous thumb / rounding an eye”; 13). The bulk of the poem surveys human history with Prometheus in mind, as it were, from ancient Greece (section 2), the Christian story (section 3), the fall of Rome and mediaeval times (section 4), the English renaissance (section 5), the French revolution (section 6), the rise of industrialization (section 7), the Russian Revolution of 1917 (section 8), and the struggle for Indian independence (section 9). The poem wraps up with a kind of coda (section 10) questioning the literary ambitions of the whole.

Babette Deutsch never reprinted *Epistle to Prometheus*; it was represented neither in her selected poems of 1959 nor her collected poems a decade later.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Deutsch seems to have been successful in suppressing the poem entirely. There exist no critical articles on the work whatsoever, beyond the reviews it received on publication. Those reviews are mixed. Writing in *The Nation*, a young Stanley Kunitz detected “a number of rare and excellent virtues” but found that “the poem leaves me imaginatively and emotionally cold” (162). Jessica Nelson North had similar mixed reactions in *Poetry*: the poem “contains much that is original and stimulating,” she wrote, “but there is no first-rate poetry in the book, in spite of its major proportions and its great variety of rhythm” (167). The most positive review was by Donald Davidson, who writes that Deutsch “displays a genius for concentration that is remarkable” but also makes the following observation: “It seems hardly credible

that so profound a subject should be reduced to so brief a statement and delivered in this bright trivial verse that always hovers between the ‘free’ and the regular” (437). Even this seeming critique, however, may be a backhanded compliment, suggesting the theme of the poem itself: “In modern civilization everywhere, the Promethean power of intellect, defiant of the gods, walks unchained; but the more light it sheds, the less deliverance it gives” (437).

What is the relation of *Epistle to Prometheus* to literary modernism or to modernity? Davidson’s review, which covers several poets, situates *Epistle* in the “very decided lull” following the fight between the advocates of *vers libre* and *The Waste Land*, on the one hand, and a resurgent traditionalism on the other (432-433). Regretfully, Davidson declares that “Poetry is not now a literary battleground” (433).<sup>2</sup> If Davidson situates *Epistle to Prometheus* in the lull after *The Waste Land*, Kenneth White declares that Deutsch is a follower of Eliot: “The author has adopted a method honored by T. S. Eliot—the method of quotation” (307-308). For White, whose review is the most negative I have seen, the problem with *Epistle to Prometheus* is not the Eliotic method but Deutsch’s taste in poetry: she tends to quote “lesser poets” than Eliot (308). This charge misreads both *Epistle to Prometheus* and *The Waste Land* (Deutsch and Eliot quote some of the same writers, and Eliot’s quotes in *The Waste Land* include phrases lifted from popular lyric and unpoetic speech). More importantly, it misrepresents the difference between them. *Epistle to Prometheus* differs from *The Waste Land* not in the *kinds* of quotations it uses but in *how* those quotations are deployed. Simply put, *Epistle to Prometheus* contains little of Eliot’s parataxis and none of his shifting perspective. Each section addresses Prometheus directly, as if to a real person (in moments of self-awareness, the poem acknowledges that this is impossible). Although Deutsch adopts modernist content and a modernist use of myth (here, mythical figures embedded within a sharply contrasting historical and contemporary milieu), she does not fully embrace modernist technique. It is an extremely *readable* poem, without the density of Pound or Eliot, and Deutsch’s self-questioning never goes so far as to call the poem itself into question. Deutsch’s approach is discursive rather than dramatic, didactic rather than illustrative. She might as well have titled the poem “Prometheus Unpacked.”

And yet *Epistle to Prometheus* weaves echoes of Eliot and Pound into its texture throughout, suggesting that Deutsch does view the poem as a modernist project. To take one from many possible examples, consider this passage from section 6 (the context of the section is the French revolution of 1789 and following):

Ballades are good for singing,  
but the time  
is out of tune, and I’m no lutenist.  
I am a woman writing to a myth,  
a figment, but with marks upon its wrist,  
a creature of no country and no nation. (54)

These lines echo *Hamlet*’s “The time is out of joint” but also Ezra Pound’s “For three years, out of key with his time” (Pound 185) and Eliot’s line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” that “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (*Poems* 9). The concluding lines are an example of what

Davidson calls the poem's "feminine asides" with which it is "unhappily garnished" (437). In my view, this is not a garnishment at all but a return to the poem's central theme, namely the retreated betrayal of liberating possibility by the facts of history. The line "a figment, but with marks upon its wrist" might be the most evocative in the entire poem, suggesting that the Promethean drive for liberation, enacted again and again over time, is repeatedly disappointed and even injured. The poem uses the figure of Prometheus to frame a psycho-political reading of historical liberation and its betrayal. I am reminded of Frederic Jameson's later formulation that "history is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their own intension" (102). Deutsch's didacticism, the poem's need to turn historical injury into a theme or motif rather than differently interrupting and injuring fact in each instance, gives the poem an overall feeling of predictability. The one exception may be the Indian liberation setting of section 9, which is, after all, the one case where the historical question had not, by the publication date, been resolved. But any reader who has gotten that far in the poem will have a sense of where it is likely to wind up yet again.

Let me suggest another possibility. The last three lines of the passage quoted earlier contain an interesting uncertainty, where "figment" and subsequent lines probably modify *myth* but may modify *woman*. If we take this uncertainty seriously, the female speaker is "a figment, but with marks upon its wrist, / a creature of no country and no nation." In that reading, the hope of female liberation, which is never the central subject of any section, may be the refused desire, the submerged subject, of the whole poem. The poem begins by referring to Prometheus as "a myth / who was never a man," but by this point we have a woman not only writing *to* a myth but who is *herself* myth.

That is one possible reading, and one that suggests more residual power to the poem than it might otherwise seem to hold. In any event, the poem's general outline of historical liberation and disappointment personified in Prometheus is clear enough. Why did she suppress the poem? For possible answer I turn to the epigraph to section 8:

There are historical periods when it is most important for the success of the revolution to pile up as many fragments as possible—that is to blow up as many old institutions as possible. But there are periods when enough has been blown up, and it becomes necessary to turn to the "prosaic" . . . work of clearing the ground of the fragments. And there are periods when it is most important to tend carefully the germs of the new growth under the fragments, on the soil that is yet full of rubbish. —Lenin (Deutsch, *Epistle* 67)

This is taken, with slight modifications in punctuation, from Vladimir Lenin's *The Soviets at Work*, published in English in 1918 under the name Nicolai Lenin (41). We know from her letters written during a 1923–1924 visit (during which Lenin died) that Deutsch was deeply enamored of Soviet Russia and even expressed interest in moving there: in postrevolutionary Russia, she wrote, "there is a *Stimmung* [mood], a sense of new life, a vigor, that I have never experienced before with such steady intensity" (Davis 152). By the time of *Epistle to Prometheus*, Deutsch represented the revolution as "war's adorable bastard" (71) and included the Soviet Union among the other betrayals of liberation—but even here, Lenin is on liberation's side.



It is instructive to compare Lenin's discussion of fragments in this passage with Eliot's "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" from *The Waste Land* (*Poems* 71). Whereas Eliot self-reflexively gathers the "fragments" of the poem itself against his own "ruins," for Lenin the "fragments" are the ruins of the old order, to be made and then cleared. From this perspective, Deutsch's unified, unfragmented voice in *Epistle to Prometheus* is of a piece with its central drive, which is a kind of skeptical liberation, a hope preparing perpetually to be disappointed. *Epistle to Prometheus* attempts to apply a mythic method to a historical poem, adopting the trappings of Eliotic modernism but not its consequences or effects. Prometheus personifies a recurrent pattern in history, not a particular historical moment; the poem posits a unitary meaning, a kind of Will to Revolt, that transcends both culture and time but that history itself continually undermines. But history never interrupts or troubles the poem as such: it never destabilizes the method with its own injuring reality (beyond, as noted earlier, the "feminine asides" dismissed by Davidson). The poem departs from modernist parataxis not out of a failure of method or nerve but as an outgrowth of its more or less universalizing, broadly left-tending politics and its sense of historical recurrence. By the time of *Epistle to Prometheus*, Deutsch held a less optimistic view of the Russian revolution than she did in 1923–1924, but her Promethean hero still aligns with Lenin, and such a position became hard to sustain over time. Deutsch may have suppressed the poem for any number of reasons, but the reviews are not so negative as to suggest she would have considered it a complete failure. It seems more likely that the convergence of revolutionary politics with nonrevolutionary poetics, an oxymoronic Eliotic Leninism, became less and less comfortable to remember.

### 3. *F.M.S.R.*: The World's the Train

*F.M.S.R.* is a long poem published in London in the late 1930s (probably 1937) under the name of Francis P. Ng.<sup>3</sup> It may be the first book-length poem in English by a Singaporean. Virtually all knowledge of the poem, and of its author, and even of its precise publication date, was lost during the Second World War. *F.M.S.R.* was held by fewer than half a dozen libraries worldwide (Ogiharo-Schuck 39) when it was rediscovered in the mid 2000s by Singapore poet Alvin Pang (Ogiharo-Schuck and Teo 5). In 2009, the opening three sections of *F.M.S.R.* were published in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, the first comprehensive attempt to survey and collect the English language literature of the city state. *Writing Singapore* provided the following headnote for the excerpt:

Francis P. Ng's poem *F.M.S.R.* was published in the United Kingdom in 1935. The editors have been unable to find out any biographical information regarding the poet, and would welcome any information regarding his life or writings, if any. (Poon et al. 95)

In 2015, Eriko Ogiharo-Schuck corrected the date of publication and announced that Francis P. Ng, the author of *F.M.S.R.*, was a pen name for Teo Poh Leng. Also in 2015, Ogiharo-Schuck and Anne



Teo (Teo Poh Leng's niece) published *Finding Francis: A Poetic Adventure*, which included the complete *F.M.S.R.* along with the three other known poems of Teo Poh Leng and other historical and biographical material. From *Finding Francis*, we learn that Teo was a Catholic from an ethnic Chinese family; that "he was raised bilingually in Teochew (a Chinese dialect) and English" and also probably knew some French, Latin, Malay, and Mandarin (12); that he received an English education in Catholic schools and at Raffles College; and that he spent his brief career as an elementary school English teacher until disappearing, presumably killed by invading Japanese forces, at the age of 29 or 30. Because the original of *F.M.S.R.* is so rare, I will cite the text in *Finding Francis*, and I will refer to the speaker of the poem as Ng and the biographical writer as Teo.

The ten parts of *F.M.S.R.* comprise just under four hundred lines, leading to a poem a little shorter than *The Waste Land*. The title *F.M.S.R.* refers to Federated Malay States Railway, the main rail company in British Malaya, and a nine-hour train journey between Singapore, where Teo was raised, and Kuala Lumpur. There is no plot as such: though it does involve a railway journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, it begins and ends in Singapore, in sections mixing unrhymed free verse, rhymes in more variable meters, and more strict forms. Repetition is prevalent throughout, from rhymes to repeated words to sentence structures (primarily using anaphora). The song-like section 7 was published elsewhere as "Song of the Night Express." An unambiguous lyric *I* appears only in section 3, with the first person in other sections either entirely absent or nested in some dramatic setting. The poem begins by critiquing Singapore's tourist economy: "Millionaires from the New World with nothing else to do / Wander the Old World like wandering Jews" (Ng 40). This opening gambit provides some sense of the poem's critical voice, as well as its tendency toward brash rhymes and outrageous comparisons. Some sections provide a direct critique of Singapore itself, and others a withering condemnation of Malayan society, while throughout there is a prevailing sense of death and inauthenticity. The rail journey proper begins in the sixth section, arriving in Kuala Lumpur in the ninth and then returning to a Singapore cemetery at the end.

In her introduction to *Finding Francis*, Ogiharo-Schuck refers to *F.M.S.R.* as Teo's "masterpiece" (16) and makes a case for its value as "Teo's theory of modernist poetry put into practice" (20). In truth, however, it is the work of an apprentice writer in his early twenties, a student poet who has encountered modernism with the force of a discovery and remains unsure how to harness the energies he has released. Other than *F.M.S.R.*, Teo is known to have published only three short poems: one of these ("Song of the Night Express," as noted above) was incorporated into *F.M.S.R.*, while the other two are slight objects, prone to cliché, awkwardly handling their meters through syntactic inversion and antiquated vocabulary. They are not without historical interest: "Time is Past" has a complex connection to racial identity, with the poet suggesting that to be "timeless" is also to be "fair" while also being haunted in a "daylight dream" by a ravine that "makes me pale" (35). "The Spider" operates obviously as an *ars poetica*, with the speaker weaving designs in his "cosy coign" while the storms of the larger world "have unlaced my masterpiece" (37, 38). In both "Time is Past" and "The Spider," the speaker seems acutely aware of his marginal status in Singapore and of the difficulty of making an impact in the world of English-language poetry.

In essays published in the *Raffles College Magazine*, Teo defended both modernist techniques and modernist poems; Ogiharo-Schuck claims that these essays suggest an effort by the undergraduate

student to lead a “Malayan modernism” (Ogiharo-Schuck and Teo 17-20). Whatever the truth of this claim, Teo’s forceful advocacy of modernism may be unique among Singapore poets of the 1930s, and what distinguishes *F.M.S.R.* (in addition to its being possibly the first book-length poem in English by a Singapore poet) is its attempt to realize this vision. Despite its occasionally awkward execution, *F.M.S.R.* has an ambition and drive unique, so far as I can tell, in prewar English-language poetry from British Malaya. Philip Holden considers *F.M.S.R.* an interesting failure, noting that it “is one of the first of many efforts to tropicalize T.S. Eliot, transposing ‘The Waste Land’ to a Singaporean landscape, but finds the colonial city and its environs marked more by petty irritations than the existential aridity of Eliot’s poem’s London” (10). On the other hand, Ng may simply amplify some of the pettiness already present in Eliot’s poetry.

Ng’s voice in *F.M.S.R.*, which presents a sweeping critique of Singapore life, condemns Singapore consumerism and Malayan Muslim culture on equal terms: “Heathenish culture on one side, / On the other Mohammedan barbarism” (48). It does not seem to turn such a critical eye on Teo’s own Catholic faith, and perhaps this lacuna is aided by Eliot’s public profession of Christianity in the late 1920s. And yet the profession of faith in this poem is curious:

My faith has kept me whole  
And I can stand no nonsense  
I tell you:  
Leave the darn place,  
*Dépêchez-vous,*  
*Allez-vous s’en, allez-vous s’en!* (Ng 44)

The first line seems straightforward, as though the authoritative voice of the poet is speaking, but the following lines, with their conversational bluster (“I tell you”), suggest a particular speaker not necessarily equivalent to Francis P. Ng. Indeed, the French lines practically translate *The Waste Land*’s “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” (Eliot, *Poems* 61), one of the moments in that poem where a different voice most obviously breaks in.

Against Holden’s reading of the poem as an interesting failure in which localism and bitterness overwhelm the poem’s modernist heritage and dampen its universal appeal, I suggest a reading at once more polyvocal than a thematic reading can provide and more local than Eliot’s “Unreal City” (*Poems* 56). This reading positions *F.M.S.R.* as “minor literature” in the sense described by David Lloyd in his study of the nineteenth-century Irish poet James Clarence Mangan. In Lloyd’s representation, the “minor” writer undermines the authority of “major” work and represents a necessary, early stage in the development of a national literature in advance of the nation itself. Whereas “the major work should be in some manner directed toward the production of an autonomous ethical identity for the subject” (19), Lloyd holds that “minor modes of writing . . . tend to undermine the priority given to distinctive individual voice in canonical criticism” (23). Lloyd describes minor literature as both a set of literary strategies and as an historical effect of a particular moment (in this case, what I would call the pre-postcolonial). We can apply this moment to his analysis of Mangan’s poetry of Victorian Ireland and to my analysis, *mutatis mutandis*, of Ng’s poem in 1930s British Malaya.

Lloyd describes the strategies of minor literature thus:

The minor text adopts writing strategies that are in some sense defined by their dependence on prior texts. Those strategies include parody, in the strict sense of a writing that is in a relation simultaneously of dependence and opposition to its original; translation, where it emerges as anti-philological in not returning to the originating moment of its original; and citation, in the form of an intertextuality not characterized by anxiety. (22)

Compare this description of the strategies of minor literature with the headnote attached to the published *F.M.S.R.*:

Most of the images in the poem are used as symbols. Some portions of it that contain local allusions and place-names are deliberately rendered to appear unintelligible and incongruous by the author for reasons that are best left unexpounded. The poem was composed very intermittently between the years 1932–1934. The author has applied varying metres so as to express the varying rhythms of the railways. How far he has succeeded or failed in this direction is left to the reader to judge. For fear of disfiguring the pages with footnotes, however necessary, he has omitted their insertion—perhaps rather spitefully. (Ogihara-Schuck and Teo 39)

And yet the poem does contain notes: two on place names, one acknowledging previous publication of section 7, and one remarking “‘*Impetuous feet*’ is borrowed from Yeats’ ‘*Wanderings of Oisín*’” (43). But while *F.M.S.R.* is a poem saturated with borrowings from Eliot in virtually every stanza, the only note explaining a literary allusion is to a seemingly trivial borrowing from the early W. B. Yeats. Further, Ng disavows notes in a headnote but includes notes in the poem.

All this suggests that the voice of *F.M.S.R.* is more complex and parodic than first appears, with an attitude toward notes akin to that of Louis Zukofsky in “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” his first serious work and, like *F.M.S.R.*, both an homage to and critique of *The Waste Land*. (Zukofsky includes a long, very funny note at the beginning of his poem rather than the end.) There is not space here to consider “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” as a minor text in Lloyd’s sense, though I would argue that it meets his criteria. If we take the voice of *F.M.S.R.* to be more complex and polyvocal than it appears, we can note that the “wandering Jews” of the first line are not, as the myth of the Wandering Jew tends to claim, shoemakers or *sellers* of goods: instead, the Western tourists come to Singapore to *buy* shoes and other goods, but “when they leave nothing / Follows them but the sound, / The emanation of their own unsatisfied craving” (Ng 40). Allusions in the poem come sometimes to be repeated signifiers that float apart from their ancestry: tigers are at once “Tiger Beers” (40), actual tigers in Ponggol Zoo or stuffed tigers in Raffles Museum (41), big cats that are not lions in “Singapura Lion-City” (41), and the wild tigers of Malaya filtered through a quotation from William Blake (48). Although the headnote claims the images are used as “symbols,” they are remarkably unstable, mobile, and playful symbols indeed.

In the penultimate section, the traveling speaker (who may at this point be either the voice of the poet or the Western tourist of the first section) has been driven to despair:

The world's the train, a crepitating blaze,  
 A polluted place,  
 And all its saints are no less sinners,  
 And all its women and men are cold cinders,  
 With no faery, no Cinderella, no godmother  
 To look after;  
 Which when it ceased to blaze and drowns its craze  
 Leaves unsmouldering ashes. (50-51)

It is tempting to linger on the unusual word *crepitating*, one of many in the poem representing sounds, but I am more interested in *faery*, since it brings to mind Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín," the only poem Ng acknowledged in a note. Perhaps that note was not as trivial as it first appeared. "Wanderings" is a long poem in the form of a dialogue between the titular hero and St. Patrick: that is, between the Old World of faery, where Oisín has spent the previous several centuries, and the New World of Christian Ireland. The dialogue between worlds would not have escaped the notice of the author of *F.M.S.R.* Here, the collapse of *all* legends—including, perhaps, the Catholic ones elsewhere asserted in the poem—into "unsmouldering ashes" brings the poem back, in its final section, to the local Bida Dari cemetery, where the urge is to "Bury at night, by electric light / Burning the night, / Lengthening shadows of darkening forms / Beckoning sorrows wriggling with worms" (Ng 51). This is how *F.M.S.R.* ends, with the possibility of a kind of rebirth through local sorrow but the abandonment of all legend.

Projects of historical recovery often seek to recast our understanding of literary history by showing that certain works or movements had more public effect than we now recognize. This is not my purpose here: I am interested in these poems not because of their effect in the world but because they had no effect at all, yet still managed briefly to exist. Shall we say that *F.M.S.R.* is a "successful" poem? It hardly matters, since the poem had no chance to find an audience. Whether or not Teo wanted to formulate or lead a Malayan modernism, both modernism in the region and Malayan nationalism were delayed and then reformed, first by the war and then by the events of decolonization, settling in 1965 into a split between Malaysia and the city state of Singapore. One imagines that Teo would have found a place in that city state had he not disappeared in February 1942. But one cannot be sure. Both *Epistle to Prometheus* and *F.M.S.R.* show the diverse modernisms that might have followed from Eliot, had circumstances been otherwise. Affirming the existence of such works, and the possibilities they represent, reminds us of how many other voices have never been, and can never be, recovered.

## Notes

1. In the Foreword to her selected poems, Deutsch groups *Epistle to Prometheus* among poems that she "was unable to rework . . . to my satisfaction" (*Coming of Age* 11); a similar note in *Collected Poems* adds that the poem was not "now acceptable to me" (x).
2. This is a recurrent theme in American poetics: a few decades later, following the "anthology wars" of the 1960s—again between advocates of an avant-garde and a revanchist formalism—the so called "poetry wars" would emerge again in the early 1980s between post-New American Language poets and so-called "New Formalists."

3. The publisher of *F.M.S.R.*, Arthur H. Stockwell, Ltd., still exists and seems to be a fee-based publishing service rather than a traditional small press. A WorldCat library search for Stockwell books published before 1940 suggests that this was always the case.

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