

On the Ellipsis: Singapore, Kafka, and *If We Dream Too Long*

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Wealth and speed are what the world admires, what each pursues. Railways, express mails, steamships and every possible facility for communications are the achievement in which the civilized world view and revels, only to languish in mediocrity by that very fact. Indeed, the effect of this diffusion is to spread the culture of the mediocre.

—Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Up to 2010, the Singapore Tourist Board used the slogan *Uniquely Singapore*, as part of its worldwide promotion of the city-state. One could deride it not so much for being bad (for that would be a matter of taste) as for being absurd – as absurd as the fact that the city-state is also branded as a “global city”. Whilst there is nothing intrinsically problematic about situating oneself as global, it suggests that what is unique about Singapore is precisely the fact that it can be like any other ‘global’ city in the world.

In fact, the state of Singapore and globalization have always been synonymous.¹ After all, it has always been a port. The nature of ports is that of transience, flow – with the crucial element being speed. The greater the turnover, the higher the profit: this is especially true when it comes to entrepôt trade where the lack of duties means that revenue can only be generated through the constant movement of goods. The fact that there are goods moving through is more important than what these goods actually are. In this we can hear an echo of the underlying logic of Singapore: significance is more important than signification – the importance of something (even identity) is only due to its relationship to everything else, rather than its intrinsic meaning.

In this sense, Goethe is right in pointing out “diffusion”. His mistake, however, is to focus on mediocrity: not only does that hardly matter, it may even be beneficial. For, it is often easier to diffuse goods, ideas, notions, that are similar to the prevalent thought and logic that appeal to the masses. One may even go as far to say that the rapid diffusion is hinged on mediocrity. Thus, it is not so much that it is diffusion that spreads mediocrity but the other way round: things diffuse precisely because they are mediocre.

One can always point out – and those obsessed with figures can turn to the GDP and GNP charts – that the focus on diffusion has been a brilliant economic strategy. In fact, one would be hard pressed to contradict that, even in the face of the current global economic crisis; but the economy of this state is out-performing most others. However, Singapore's economy, being so closely linked to the world economy, suggests that everything here is inter-changeable with everywhere else, and this includes its people. It can be seen in the Foreign Talent Scheme adopted by the Singapore Sports Council: the underlying logic is that as long as you generate surplus value in the form of medals, you can be Singaporean.²

The strategy of the state is that of the perfect seductress: she who gains not through a show of strength (and personality and identity) but precisely through a demonstration of emptiness. As Jean Baudrillard reminds us in *Seduction*: “[T]he great stars of seductresses never dazzle because of their talent or intelligence, but because of their absence” (96), by allowing you to make them anything you want them to be, by letting you fill them with your fantasy. The state of Singapore is the one who utters, “I can be whatever you want me to be.” This is a complete turnaround from the strategy of the British Empire, where Singapore was supposed to be the “Impregnable Fortress”: the state is now perfectly content to be imbued with anything, everything, as long as there is production and performativity involved. When the then Indonesian President Habibie assigned to the island state the derogatory term, “little red dot,” a certain truth escaped him:³ the island state's strength lies not in a great display of power but rather in the fact that it displays its vulnerability. It is in its show of weakness – ‘we are a small island with no one to depend on except its people’ – that the secret to its power lies. It is a willingness to reverse the figure of the “Impregnable Fortress” and absorb all external influences (the Swiss have a good economy: let us adopt their model; Israel has a powerful military: we shall adopt their model; etc), that has enabled the state to flourish.

But this is not to say that Singapore can mean anything and everything as well. Even if we want to posit that the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a momentary relationality when we attribute a resonance – or meaning – to a mental image, to a word. In order for this to be, there has to be a correspondence between the signifier and the signified: whether this correspondence is real, or imaginary, is an altogether different question. In order for there to be a correspondence between one thing and another, an act of recognition is required; this is also an act of memory. So, what enables us to read in the first place is a memory of this very relationality between the signifier and signified, a memory that is governed by rules, by laws, by grammar. As Jacques Derrida teaches us in *Right of Inspection*, even though one has a “right to see,” and that it takes a certain “skill to see,” in that it is not a random, purely arbitrary act, one is always already bound by a “law of seeing” (1). In this way, all seeing is a negotiation between the one who sees and what (s)he is

seeing. More importantly, every seeing always already involves a certain inability to see, to know: if all knowing is premised on a certain correspondence, we then have to take into account the problem of forgetting. The only time when one can articulate the fact that one has forgotten is when one has remembered that one has forgotten. Otherwise, one can at best utter the phrase, "I forgot": a phrase that has no object. This suggests that the object, and source, of one's forgetting is always already beyond one. And thus there is no reason to believe that one will know whenever forgetting happens to one. Hence, each act of memory is always already haunted by the possibility of forgetting. Forgetting is not necessarily an antonym of memory, but quite possibly part of memory itself. Thus, each time we utter the word "Singapore," there is a momentary correspondence between the utterance and the object of the utterance, but one which we cannot be sure of: each time we utter "Singapore," we are positing, taking a position, but one that is elliptical at best.

An ellipsis suggests that there is either something more, or something less, in a sentence – one can use it to suggest more to be added, or a retraction. More precisely, it has an unknown – and perhaps even unknowable – effect. And if we consider the fact that forgetting can occur at any time, and place, there is then no reason why each act of remembering (that is recalled in, and by the sentence) might not bring with it the possibility of forgetting as well. In other words, each sentence always already brings with it the possibility of an ellipsis; whether we see it or not, it is perhaps irrelevant. As Werner Hamacher teaches us, an

ellipsis is the rhetorical equivalent of writing: it depletes, or de-completes, the whole so as to make conceptual totalities possible. And yet every conceivable whole achieved on the basis of ellipsis is stamped with the mark of the original loss. Ellipsis eclipses (itself). It is the "figure" of figuration: the area no figure contains. (74)

And it is the very elliptical nature of Singapore, its very lack of *grund*, essence, that allows it to be "whatever you want me to be" – the perfect object of desire, an empty object that can be impregnated with one's fantasy.

But how does one reconcile the fact that there are rules that one faces, with the notion that these rules are held together by an empty signifier? For one is only bound by these rules (Laws) when one is under the auspices of the state (which goes by the name of "Singapore"). One is faced with a situation where there are real limitations that one has to obey or face consequences whenever one is within the borders of the state, even though these laws are only called forth, and come under, the name "Singapore". Here, it is not too difficult to hear an echo of the problem that Franz Kafka repeatedly highlights to us: one can never know the law before which one stands. This is the problem that K faces in *The Trial*: he is brought before a power that he neither knows nor can see, but which clearly has an effect on

him. All K can do is to guess and posit what is required of him, as is evident in the statement of the priest in the cathedral when he says to K, “no ... you don’t have to consider everything true, you just have to consider it necessary” (223). This is because K is faced with a law that he must approach, has both power over him, and is a law that is hidden from him. And it is this that the priest attempts to highlight to him through the famous parable of the Law:

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes to this doorkeeper and requests admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he can’t grant him admittance now. The man thinks it over and then asks if he’ll be allowed to enter later. “It’s possible,” says the doorkeeper, “but not now.” (215)

It is not that K is not allowed into the Law, not allowed to see what is judging him; but just “not now.” As there is no time stipulation, the moment of admittance is deferred, not necessarily eternally, but without any certainty. However, just because “not now” is a figure of speech does not mean it has no effect on their lives: the man from the country waits outside the doorway till the end of his life; K’s trial fully occupies his daily existence. Both of them are completely consumed by the Law, by a force that they do not see or comprehend; by a force they are blind to.

However, even as the Law is a force that affects them at no point are they compelled to be before it. It is the man who decides that “he would prefer to wait”; at no point is he forced to remain (216). This opens the possibility that it is the man who is free; unlike the doorkeeper who is captive to his duty, captive to the Law, as not only has he to wait for the man to appear, but must also wait there till he decides to leave: in this sense, it is the executor of the Law who is most bound to it. As the priest explains further, “the man is in fact free: he can go wherever he wishes, the entrance to the Law alone is denied to him, and this only by one person, the doorkeeper” (221). He continues: “The doorkeeper, on the other hand, is bound to his post by his office; he is not permitted to go elsewhere outside, but to all appearances he is not permitted to go inside either, even if he wishes to” (221). Even as the doorkeeper is bound to the Law, it is not as if he knows what the Law is: one can assume that he hasn’t been too far into the Law – he is only the lowest doorkeeper. Moreover it is the man from the country that sees a light (presumably from the Law); nothing is said of whether the doorkeeper sees it. Even less is said about where this light is from. This suggests that both of them are affected by a power that is beyond their comprehension (215). The fact that this advice comes from a priest – a figure that is always already cloaked with a divine Law, a Law that is beyond all phenomenological experience – should not escape us either. However, just because a priest is of the order of the Law does not mean that we will ever know what the advice, or the Law itself, means: the advice is a fact of significance,

but one in which the signification might always be beyond us—the advice might well be a Law onto itself.

The forces that K faces in *The Trial* find an echo in our very own K – Kwang Meng, in Goh Poh Seng's novel, *If We Dream Too Long*, where our K is constantly feeling suppressed by a force around him, dictating what he can and cannot – should and should not – do. And our K faces an even bigger problem: at no point is he actually summoned before any court – all he is feeling is something that cannot be verified by anyone else. In that sense the forces can be felt only by him; they could well be voices in his head. As such, one can never know if our K is put under the very forces – Law – that he has written for himself.

Whenever one speaks of writing, if one listens carefully, one can also detect an echo of authority – as if the writer of the situation can play at being God, all-seeing, and in full-control. The trouble with authority is that it is always already illegitimate. For, if something is legitimate, access to it would be open to everyone – governed by the Law. It is only when something is illegitimate that the authority of a person is required. Thus, the authoring of authority is potentially the undoing of the Law itself. For example, a death-sentence can only be pardoned by the authority of the sovereign. However, when (s)he enacts that sovereign right, (s)he is going against the legal system which sentenced the person to death; the same legal system that upholds that very sovereignty. At each enactment of that sovereignty, (s)he is always already beyond the law: in fact, (s)he is authoring the very law, and in doing so, demonstrating illegality within the law itself. In other words, authority itself is always elliptical – sentencing but never able to complete its own sentence; only perhaps just beyond reasonable doubt.

But just because it is an absurd situation does not mean that it can be spoken of. This is the lesson of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*: the shock and horror of the crowd was not in the fact that the little child pointed out that the Emperor was naked (who didn't already know that), but in foregrounding the absurdity of the situation. Which brings us to this question: it is easy enough to see what secret Kafka, through K, was speaking of – the very nature of the Law itself – but what was it that Goh Poh Seng was approaching? One should never forget that *If We Dream Too Long*, widely regarded as the first Singaporean novel, was initially not even accepted as a novel. As we learn from Koh Tai Ann's elegant introduction to the 2010 edition, "Dr Goh recalls sadly that upon publication, *Dream* 'received very little publicity ... the local press was unenthusiastic and the university was not supportive.'" (xvii) She continues:

It was the victim of its own pioneering status ... It therefore met with a mixed reception in the national press from academic reviewers and the general reader. On the one hand, the novel was judged according to literary-aesthetic

criteria tacitly or unconsciously derived from the evaluation of either canonical literature or popular 'pulp' fiction from Britain and America ... On the other hand, readers accustomed to exotic Western romances ... had no taste for a novel set locally with local characters. (xvi-xvii)

In other words, *Dream* suffered from the problem of being too local, and not foreign enough. Thus, the precise problem that Goh Poh Seng faced was that the novel was *Uniquely Singapore* – it was just that Singapore wasn't – isn't – quite ready to face its own elliptical status.

And in our K you find the wandering figure, but one who doesn't know where or what he is moving around for; in other words, K is lacking any method. Here, we must remember that method comes from the Greek, *meta hodos* (over way/path): Kwang Meng is the meandering one, the one that has no means to even begin to find his way up to the top of the mountain. And even if he does get there, he has no manner of recognising that he has. In other words, he is not only the elliptical figure, uttering the fact that there is something more or less to come; he is the very figure of forgetting itself – instead of an elliptical figure, he is the very figure of an ellipsis. *Dream* is not just a tale of a young man attempting to 'find himself', to discover who he is – this is, in a far more radical way, a tale of K who finds in himself precisely the notion that there is nothing to find. And here, we must never forget that in "radical" we can hear echoed, roots, foundations, groundings. What is ground-breaking about the novel is the fact that the very *grund* that is being explored, spoken of, exposed – the secret that is revealed – is *abgrund*.

There is an echo of the priest's advice in Hock Lai's lecture to our K over lunch when he says: "You must remember we didn't make the world, we must accept its terms, its conditions and conventions, or we opt out ... You gotta make up your mind, and fast!" (31) It is no matter if it is true or not; only necessary. And more than that, speed is of the essence.

But this being a port city, one would almost expect everyone to always already have recognised that fact. That, however, would be completely missing the point of secrets. Often it is not the content of the secret that matters, but the very uttering of it. If the password to my bank account is my birth-date, just because the day of my birth is public knowledge is no issue: it would only be crucial if someone else knew the significance of those digits. The signification of the Emperor's nakedness is not an issue; it is the significance of the child mentioning it. This is why the classic horror movie scene is when the monster takes off his mask, only to reveal that under the mask is exactly the same face. In this way, not only are we unable to tell which is the real monster, we are no longer able to trust our phenomenological senses. Hence, all our abilities to discern are lost, and our very selves – more importantly our notion of self – is called into question. In fact, the typical liberal

politically-correct stance about not discriminating by looks shows precisely this: appearances have been raised to the level of the absolute; it is no longer open for negotiation, discussion. In fact it is best if no one talks about it. This unwillingness to engage appearances suggests that appearances are so important that they are beyond discussion. More than that: they are so important they must remain secret. For, it is not so much that we can live with lies: it is more that it is lies that we need, in order to live. It is not that we cannot tell that it is an illusion: it is that this illusion is crucial, not just to sustain a fantasy, but the very reality which we live in.

Once again, we tune ourselves to the echo of Hock Lai, and his quip that “once you’ve seen at real close range how the rich live, your whole perspective enlarges ... Once you’ve seen this at close range, your own world crumbles into dust” (55-56). It would be too easy to read this merely as a sociological commentary – or even worse, as nostalgic socialism from Goh Poh Seng. What is at stake is far more important: it is the very notion of distance. For the elliptical nature of Singapore not only suggests that one can never be certain of what one knows, it also means that the state is affected by something that is potentially other, and completely unknowable to it. It is a heuristically useful fiction to allow the state to maintain itself as a state – the illusion of a nation – but it is always already haunted by a primordial loss. In other words, we have to believe in the possibility of a certain completeness, a certain certainty, a certain statehood, stateliness, an ability to maintain a certain state – and act as if we can know something – without actually believing in it. What is imperative for us is to maintain a proper distance. This lesson is learnt very early on by our K, when the relative he most looks up, Uncle Cheong, reveals his secret to happiness: “adaptability. Not, he was quick to qualify, to accept everything; but to adapt oneself to everything and every situation” (11). And we hear an echo of this when our K is on the bus heading towards the beach, and when passing Changi Prison, reflects:

And those political prisoners, those fierce young men, refusing to recant, sticking it out six, seven years for some idea, some ideal; don't they know it's useless? Their people, the people whom they believe they were fighting for, going to prison for, have forgotten them, are on their way to the sea. (63)

It is not so much that there is no production, no possible performativity, in ideas, even ideals – for any action always also comes with its idea – but that the idea itself is no longer useful. The idea has changed, moved, altered; and the error of the prisoners is in believing that the idea remains in the same, one, state; the error is in believing in the essence of the idea. One is almost tempted to say that what is missing from their Marxism is a bit of Groucho: “I have principles. If you don't like them, I have others.”

For, what else is a proper distance, a gap between appearance and reality,

other than the space of irony. And here, we should not forget that reality itself already implies a certain grasping, a seizing of a particular, a choosing, a version. Thus, reality itself is always already elliptical – haunted by the primordial loss of the real. However, in order to maintain itself as reality, it has to maintain the fiction of its completeness – to maintain a version of itself as reality, it has to have a certain aversion to the real. In other words, what reality has to do is keep up its appearances. Hence, the relation between appearance and reality itself is not so much antonymic but one in which reality itself is an appearance. Thus, maintaining a proper distance is allowing the appearance of reality to maintain itself: “accept its terms, its conditions, its conventions”; and more importantly, not to look at “close range.” This might just be why our K, “hated coming out of a cinema into the real world. Especially if it was a matinee show. To come out from the celluloid dream into the impossibly bright and hurting daylight, was too abrupt and stunned the senses” (66). In the daylight, it would have been too easy to make the mistake of trying to see too clearly and thus ruining the magic of the movies: ironically the only thing that saves our K is the light itself.⁴

In this port, ‘I can be whatever you want me to be’ as long as you don’t make the mistake of actually believing me. If everything functions around, with, under, the logic of performance – and we must never forget the echo of functionality that haunts us – there is no reason to believe that dreams are exempt. And this might have always been the warning in the title: the problem does not lie so much in dreaming, but when one dreams too long. It is not so much that dreams are lies – moreover when we are faced with lies, in them potentially lies some truth – nor when we start to believe the lies (if one is convinced by lies, then there is again no real problem), but when one starts to realise, when one looks too closely and sees, that one is lying in lies; that the dream itself is a lie. This is the very conundrum that our K expresses to Lucy: “I am what I am ... It is that simple ... And that difficult too” (66). The problem lies in the fact our K expects there to be only one self; expects that there is a correspondence between his name and his self.⁵ And in that, he has forgotten the fact that we are thrown into our names, that we are named; that our name refers to both us and no one else, and at the same time every other person with the same name except us; that all names do is name the very fact that they are naming. In fact, the only time that one has to use a name, the only time that a name is necessary, is in the absence of the person. Hence, one’s very name always already bears an echo of one’s death. And when we meditate on the naming of this state, we cannot forget that the very lion that it calls forth is always already missing: each time the Lion City (Singapore) is uttered, all that is fore-grounded is the primordial absence of the very lion itself.

But just because the name “Singapore” refers to a continual absence of the lion does not necessarily mean that it will never appear, that it will never be a lion city; perhaps just “not now”. The error would be to continue the dream of looking

for the lion, looking for an essence that will remain fixed, certain. Instead, what has to be embraced is the notion of speed, constant movement, flow, change; what has to be embraced is the notion that the Lion City is a port – nothing more, and infinitely nothing less. And more than that, a port without a hinterland, without a ‘rest of the country’; that the port itself is the country. It is not as if we never knew this – this message is in the national anthem. In *Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore) the lesson is to just move forward – no looking back, no reflection, just move on ... ideally as quickly as possible. And we find that same teaching in Goh Poh Seng’s novel: *If We Dream Too Long* is not just a title – it also points out the very logic of the state; perhaps just a little too clearly. Dream by all means; just don’t expect the dream to remain the same. Try and know, understand, but don’t ever believe that one’s conclusion can be maintained. Hence, all knowing, meaning, is at best a dream; not one that can be dwelled upon, understood, not one that is clear, but instead elliptical. For, there is no figure that captures distance, a gap in-between, and movement towards at the same time – a movement that is constant, ever changing, and always already indefinable, and quite possibly unknowable – than the ellipsis. And this is why Dream could not end in any other way except with Kwang Meng’s sudden realisation that he had to head home, but not in any way that could be known in advance, for he “couldn’t comprehend,” and perhaps would never do so. All he could do was to echo an alter ego,⁶ and head there “with all convenient speed” (155).

And here, we should always keep in mind the fact that in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Echo manages to make her voice heard through echoes. Perhaps, it is at the moment of echoing that Kwang Meng finds his own voice. Not in the banal sense of an identity, or even worse, of an essence, but in the fact that in the movement of voices, forces, one still speaks. Our K realises that, like Singapore, he is nothing other than a port. And here, if we momentarily return to Goethe, we should also reopen the notion of the mediocre, and remember that it speaks of the middle (*medius*) and a mountain (*ocris*: jagged mountain). Perhaps, there often is too much emphasis on scaling that mountain, on reaching a destination, and not in the fact that the middle is also the point in which things meet, interact – the mean can after all be golden. But even as we speak of a mean, it is not as if this mean can be known in advance, applied *a priori*. It can only be discovered contextually – it is a mean that is singular to every situation. And more than that, the middle is not so much a point in itself but an in-between, a space where there is no space... elliptical.

Perhaps then, it is not so much that we have to read Singapore elliptically, but that we have to realize – without making any claims to know, to knowing, to understanding – that “Singapore” is nothing more, and nothing less, than the name of that ellipsis ...

Notes

¹ Singapore consistently ranks as the world's most globalized country and Asia's leading global city. See <http://www.guidemesingapore.com/blog-post/singapore-business/singapore-asia%E2%80%99s-leading-global-city>

² An echo of this logic can also be heard in the state policy towards homosexuality. Even though homosexual acts are illegal, the state is well known as one of the gay capitals of Asia. One could attribute it to a variation of 'don't ask, don't tell'—as long as the pink dollar continues to flow and the talent the city state needs can be recruited. Perhaps one might also consider this: surplus value in a relationship is no longer confined to the production of another human being. This is precisely why human resource management is the rage these days: humans are a resource, and hence the generation of more resources justifies their being (regardless of what the actual content of these resources is). However, if they are not meeting the minimum level of performativity, they are depreciating; and one should cut one's losses. It is not as though the state has ever hidden this fact: in Singapore, one is constantly reminded that 'humans are our only resources'.

³ In the *Asian Wall Street Journal* of 4 August 1998, it was reported that then President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie had remarked while pointing to a map: "It's O.K. with me, but there are 211 million people [in Indonesia]. All the green [area] is Indonesia. And that red dot is Singapore."

⁴ Even as a sentence may always already be haunted by the possibility of an ellipsis, the sentence can never foreground it – it cannot point to its own writing, its own "area no figure contains": in order to write a sentence, one has to maintain an ironic distance about the impossibility of doing so. Perhaps then, that is the very secret of this piece: it is only hidden away in a footnote, that one can admit to the impossibility of writing whilst maintaining appearances in the main text.

⁵ Here, I owe a debt of gratitude to Koh Tai Ann, who pointed out to me during a conversation that Kwang Meng means 'brightness, or clear understanding' in Chinese. Thus, perhaps our K makes the mistake of taking his name too seriously: in looking too closely at himself, all he ends up doing is discovering that there is nothing to see, that his name refers to nothing but the fact that it is a name. One could also read his name ironically: after all, Kwang Meng seems to believe he can see through society's appearances but has no insight into his own condition beyond the fact that he is stuck: "He cried for all that had passed and all that was to come." "He shall not go. He shall only go home" (155).

⁶ Balthazar, an unimportant servant in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* whose sole line in the play, "Madam, I go with all convenient speed" echoes throughout Dream, resounding through Kwang Meng, the nobody at the mercy of other's decisions and instructions.

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