

The Votive Pen: Writings on Edwin Thumboo

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Professor Edwin Thumboo has a room in the upper recesses of the FASS Building of NUS* where if you're lucky, you are allowed entry. I was fortunate for I met Professor there for many a morning of mental flâneurie, though I can't deny I was confused at first by what I witnessed.

It is a scattered collective out there, the only question you answer as you cross the magic threshold: *are you willing to let your senses rule?* You walk in, the carpet under your feet is of rough tufted wool, camphor from the incense hangs heavy. There's a picture of Yeats on the wall, when he was young and nubile with locks curled around his temple like David's. Liu Ling sits in the corner in drunken stupor, Adolphus Thumboo, Professor Thumboo's grandfather, who had lived in Muar and though a Christian remained a practicing *tantric*, looks down in phlegmatic antiquity. There are tiny figurines of African birds, pebbles picked off a riverbed in Japan. In the midst of all this sits Professor, checking your response and you wonder, how does he survive this tumult?

You gingerly attempt to peel open some layers. You ask about Yeats, the most familiar of the scattered menagerie. Professor is unequivocal in acknowledging his debt to Yeats. According to him, just as Yeats had to consciously shake-off Shelley's 'Italian light', he too had to gradually rub away the influence Yeats had on him. It was from the Irish poet that he learnt to understand the power of language – the wave of storm it can evoke, the messiness, the edginess, the wildness of words and at the same time the sweet tranquillity of it. He read Eliot obsessively too but for him, Eliot remained a bit too cerebral, his lines did not hold the music that Professor sought in poetry.

Hearing this, you are tempted to rush to conclusions. Is it possible that Ireland had something to do with Singapore's early development of local literature written in English? For after all, wasn't it Yeats who turned away from interpreting Irish nationalism as a mindless revival of everything that was Gaelic and instead decided to write about everything that was Gaelic but in the more widely accessible English tongue? Ireland had the longest colonial history...it taught many lessons...your mind rushes ahead of the conversation, excited at the thought of finding an answer to the conundrum.

But Professor is quick to point out the difference. When he or his predecessors, be it Professor Wang Gungwu or the prolific Goh Sin Tub, turned to English, it was more of an organic decision, born of the environment of racial unrest in Singapore. Here he pauses, thoughtful, and the conversation turns to his syncretic upbringing instead. He speaks of Taoism, the religion Kang Sai Eng, his Peranakan mother. Taoism that derives from *Tao*, one of the most basic and comprehensive words of the Chinese language which means *the way* and is said to be the guiding light of all of art and science is by its very nature syncretic, more inclusive than Confucianism or Buddhism. Perhaps added to this is also his family inheritance that lends itself naturally to syncretism and it was this early awareness of connections that later developed into a more objective, structured study of syncretic religions, what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the ‘family resemblances’.

From here, the conversation as if of its own volition, moves to Professor’s Sino-Indian poems and you know you have lost him again in the dregs and drifts of the delta. He speaks of his quintessentially Indian poem *Krishna*, dedicated to the deeply metaphysical, scholarly Raja Rao and said to present in a microcosm Professor’s understanding of India. Yet, we both agree, it is difficult to miss its unmistakable Chinese elements as the poet explores the sensuality of Krishna and his radiant Radha in Vrindavan where they cavorted by the dark waters of the Yamuna. In describing the sublime union of Krishna’s unstirring eternal divinity with the activating energy and dynamic creative impulse of Radha, he had brought into play the male and female duality and interdependence of the *yin and yang*.

But by now your morning is up and you leave with your mind a turnstile of vibrant images that glow and grow dim and emerge yet again. And then, after a couple of days you have the opportunity to walk the streets of Singapore with him and you realise it’s the multiplicity of the metropolis that he notices. The matrix that unfolds of the city is immense, the possibilities of combination infinite. There is of course the colonial map of the city – the cool colonnade of the Fullerton Building, Singapore River with Whiteway Laidlaw on its banks. But superimposed on it are the highways and skyscrapers as the city silhouette changed. And in between is the inexhaustible list of his fierce engagements – from the *rojak* pushcart selling cuttlefish to teatime cakes at *Adelphi* – the possibility of infinitude is embedded in the very construct of the city and Professor equally present at every intersection with its *mélange* of reality, experience, culture and perceptions.

You return home and in its barren solitude, you decide to read one of his earliest long poems, *The Cough of Albuquerque* (1955/56), a poem for which Professor expressly states his dislike and yet instinct tells you it might hold a clue, corralling as it does his most untutored emotions. And sure enough, in the voice of the persona – a ceaseless seeker, endearing in his earnest ardour, you find an answer. Like holograms on a dark night, you notice the scattered symbols that constituted his childhood and you realise each is a binary – arrangements of cultures, faiths, value systems and underlying all of it you hear his search for a resolution or unity.

Armed with what appears to be a nascent solution, you return and the Professor smiles, he has pre-empted your understanding. And from that day onwards start discussions on unity. He speaks about CBD, the Central Business District, one of the early innovations of the PAP (People's Action Party). With the word as a scaffold, Singapore would slide up on its economic graph, but for Professor it would mean a simplification of some of the gridlines, easing of the weight of the many dividing walls. It and its family of words like 'meritocracy' or 'nation-building', with their broad bandwidth formed a cultural harbour where races took cover.

This was the beginning. Searches for further truths and finer unities have followed. Thus, there is an entire anthology of friends' poems which create a latticework of experiences. As the poet traverses from one point of the web to the next, he extends himself to access a new idea of poetic inspiration, a further intensification of a relationship, a realisation that in the most unlikely of situations mirroring of personal emotions happen and they are the signifiers to the essential unity of life.

Similar in intent are the spate of biblical poems. They are particularly important in the poetic career of a man who though not an atheist, has struggled forever to quieten the mind in the acceptance of a superior ordinance. Through them he attempts a unity between his religious and literary impulse, exploring obscure corners, the complex interrelation of characters and historical patterns. A single theme emerges, that God's mercy is greater than the greatest of sin.

And so, we return to the Professor's room. The pattern has changed, there are paintings by Thomas Yeo on the wall, yet the tumult remains the same. I look askance at him, after a lifetime of seeking unity, why not select a single symbol, something like the ringstone of the Baha'i faith? Professor smiles, maybe he has pre-empted again my thoughts and as I watch him, I realise, the creation that he embodies is self-renewing, continuous, never-ending. Like the Sanskrit *Sbristi*, it lies quiescent in every moment, implies a certain projection rather than a new beginning. For

it there cannot be a single, external signifier. It is a construct that is to be used to move beyond all confines.