

Edwin Thumboo: Two Voices

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Abstract

The article finds two dominant approaches in the poetry of Edwin Thumboo. In the first, the speaker stands as observer-biographer of the world of public affairs and shared space; in the second mode, the speaker of the poems comprehends that world from a point of view of lyric empathy, as part of a process of self-disclosure. Though the first mode yields poems of particular excellence, I suggest that it is the second, lyric, impulse that is fundamental, and more productive of poetry likely to be seen as occupying a central place in his oeuvre.

A brief final section surveys what seem to be some new directions in Edwin Thumboo's poetry.

Keywords

Public, lyric, catalogue, cadence, citizenship, empathy

Introduction

To appreciate Edwin Thumboo's achievement as a poet, it is necessary to take stock of the extraordinary changes that have occurred in his life-time, from his early years in the Singapore of the 1930s and 40's and 50's, into the period of an acceleration of nation-building after independence from the colonial power and from Malaysia, on into the cyber-present. In that time, nature which had seemed to set the boundaries of development has yielded to sculpted topographies that parallel social reformations. For the poet, called not only to mirror these developments, but to plumb their meanings, forms had to be found sufficient to the anticipations stirred by such rapid, and radical, shifts in his material world – timely means of articulating a new map of society.

Edwin Thumboo I think finds two principal means to match his poetry to these immense rearrangements. First, he has developed a poetry directed towards the objective, the constructed, the agora, the thing-world, as loci for his meditation on history. Second, he develops and extends a lyric mode which has

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been central to his writing from the first, a poetry of rumination and introspective voyaging.

1. Poetry of Shared Space. The “Grammars of Living” and the Architecture of Language. The Catalogue

A favoured technique of this address to public events is to offer a series of verbal snapshots, sometimes measured by the phrase, often by a run of isolated words, which function as shades of perception directing attention to the work’s central, or underlying, subject.

It is cataloguing of a particular sort, whose different impact from the method in Walt Whitman’s hands is consequent, no doubt, on its very different origin in time and place – the American poet’s sense of possibility extending into seemingly limitless territories of invention, over against the re-casting of inherited forms both expressed in and circumscribed by the need for decisive, present, action. The United States of America, circa 1870, where inexhaustible opportunity seemed to beckon, and Singapore, circa 1970, where, in a vastly different milieu, the need for demonstrable competence in the execution of detail was pressing, and the sky was indeed the limit, in quite a different manner from the meaning usually given to that phrase.

In Edwin Thumboo’s hands, the catalogue method becomes a centring of facets of development, a collocation done to manage and reshape what seems essential in the given. In “The National Library nr. Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore” and “RELC,” for instance, the subject, the focal point and underpinning element of the poetry is the lingua franca chosen by the nation as a vehicle for its redefinition. The movement here, we might say, is centripetal.

In Whitman’s poetry, by contrast, the collection of parts is made to extend outwards spatially. The movement, in his verse, is centrifugal:

The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
 My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
 The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
 The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of
 money, or depressions or exaltations,
 Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful
 events.
 These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
 But they are not the Me myself.
 (“Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose* 26)

When Whitman’s juxtapositions draw this far flung, polyglot, selection into his compass, the effect is to allow the poet to move beyond them. Because there is not the same urgency about settling the self’s public persona as there is in Thumboo’s poetry, the speaker who stands as a point of attraction for the

different objects, inclinations and approaches, the “out of many, one” of the American version of democracy, is relaxed about the plurality he invites; relaxed to the degree that the “I” remaining at the conclusion of the process stands as a type of emptying out of subjectivity

These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.
(“Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose* 26)

The cadence of “The National Library, nr. Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore” and “RELC” and other poems in which a compressed catalogue provides an important aspect of structure, and an icon of the impulse that drives the verse, is urgent in its reach for conjunction. It builds a stress into those lines that impresses a similar definitiveness upon the lines following. So, the emphatic, urgent, rhythm of

teacher, generous giver
To our people, the young and old
In search of fact, legend, myth.

As you uncoil the spirals of each mind
Words become colour, image, question
To push the imagination, yet again.
(*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 120)

flows on into – *overflows* into

You unfold, arrange and ink our languages
And histories, their matrixed grandeur (120)

introducing a tension by way of a similar rapid-fire regularity, where such regularity might not have been heard so emphatically had it not been preceded by that first, “catalogue,” line.

Those faces that “Smile, merge into mosaic, a kind of telling” of lines 5-7 of the second stanza, being grounded in the life rather than standing as series of abstractions about it, seem effective in a way that the tenth line, “the great intent of earth, air, sea, and stars,” is not. Something similar might be said of much of the third stanza, perhaps especially of lines 4-6

Alexander plants cities to mark his tour
Of Asia where Confucius, Buddha, Christ,
Muhammed, urge the betterment of man (121)

where, though there can be no quarrel with the proposition, the run of focal points invites something beyond citation.

It seems to me that these poems of the shared space, the agora, are at their strongest when personalised. “The National Library, nr. Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore” begins by addressing the library as a living being, and because it does, and the whole is given that orientation from the first, the search for “fact, legend, myth” of the first stanza feels substantiated; humanly grounded.

The “spirals of each mind” of the second stanza of this poem extends the idea, introduced in the first, that we are not so much in the presence of a building, as a living force shaping the lives of those who come to it. The effect is carried by means of a metaphor that draws on the poetic because it displaces the overt. In contrast, when we come to the “courage, image, question” of the following line, this connection seems lost, a little, in the abstractness of the terms.

In probing the limits of the effectiveness of a catalogue method, it seems that this might rest with the degree of sensuous presence the poetry draws upon, which is another way of saying, the distance kept from abstraction.

But this caveat has, itself, to be qualified. There is one place, at least, where the method succeeds in being extended. I am thinking of the fourth stanza of “National Library, 2007, nr. Bugis”

Now endless knowledge besieges in giga bytes. Galaxies,
Kingdoms, Effluent and Ultraman, a little finger click away.
Screens never tire, are ever-ready, quick but untutored.
The Cursor is not guiding hand. Yours are safe stations.
Let the young, including my seven butterflies, explore,
Grow, discern and cherish; test shifting worlds, judge and
Prefer. Learn to check their walk and track that serpent
As we re-arrange our gardens, our declensions of heart,
As we make fire, stoke determinations, chart curiosities, all
To bind single beams of clean passion whose conclusions
Are your best beginnings. (123)

Here method flourishes, in part because the speaker as it were “cuts loose,” in part because points of comparison work as much by the sounds of the words that locate them as they do by designation – “Effluent and Ultraman,” for instance, are clearly there to be relished on the tongue as much as they are given to supply information. Comparisons, here, become a rush of persuasive enthusiasms. It is easy to imagine this stanza declaimed – orated – to great effect.

Cadence: Telling and Showing

Cadence is a curious notion, an idea of rhythm having less to do with the sense head makes of an imagined effect than what the inner ear receives immediately. There is I think no more reliable marker of a poet's aesthetic axis than the room made in his or her verse for rhythms cast against the expectation of a metrically compliant norm.

Seen from this viewpoint, cadence is an inscription of feeling as near to song as words unscored can come, prior to those reasons it finds to explain and, perhaps, to justify, itself. Where scansion invites ideas of computational control, cadence makes space for surge and rise and fall, for semi-demi-quaver and crescendo across the full spectrum of potential visceral responses. It is "organic," without carrying any of the (miraculously oxymoronic) vaporous heaviness the word sometimes brings with it in high romantic, or late romantic, hands. But it should not be equated with a "free verse" serendipity, as some early modernists tend to do, any more than a Beethoven symphony can be comprehended as a *potpourri* of tempi adding up to something memorable by dint of the composer's inexplicable access to inspiration. Cadence also has its exactitudes, of a different sort from the metronome's calibrations.

It can be considered an index of the poet's gathering of the world he sees into what is most private to himself, no less. That much allowed, we do well to look for the cadence which is particular to him and to be mapping it sympathetically onto his treatment of theme and subject, rather than trimming idiosyncrasies to suit patterns we have grown used to, enjoyed, or had recommended for approval.

To the ear schooled to appreciate Tennyson, Houseman, or Yeats, much of the verse of the twentieth century American poet John Berryman sounded awkward, even inept. But his jagged rhythms declared, in a way little else could, a style that preserved something essential of the man who made them. The deviation from customary ideas of mellifluousness stands as a mark of their value in his case. In the hands of a considerable artist, it usually does.

I have risked digressing because appreciation of his cadence is in my view crucial in helping to distinguish an emotional or feeling trajectory (the question of the possible difference between the two will have to be set aside, here) which, as much as any other single characteristic, gives Edwin Thumboo's poetry its suasive strength.

2. Introspective Voyaging and the Meditative Voice

There is a speaker in many of the poems whose voice is markedly distinct from the orator of public affairs, whose preferred mode is the ruminative and whose angle of approach, even in matters of community, is the inward gaze. When the "march of events" does provide the subject of this group of poems, it arises from and is substantiated by the personal.

Because lyric well-executed is aspected song, and song registers more indelibly than an objective accounting, the lyric voice can prove more effective than a direct address to the public occasion. What the lyric reports of public events can leave its mark deeply even as it seeks – usually as a secondary impulse -- to persuade, because it stirs feeling before it appeals to reason. We empathise a moment before we comprehend; sometimes, at the highest reaches of the lyric manner, simultaneously. Affect connects “over the head” of argument, with affect in the reader. Heart speaks to heart, as the Sufi maxim has it.

In one way – a little idiosyncratically, perhaps – this type can be considered epic in a more subtle form than those of the first group because, as Ezra Pound considered all art should, it attaches the universal more effectively in striking at it through particulars. In this connection – elaborating Pound – it has always been characteristic of a certain type of poetry of distinction that it does draw attention to those everyday occasions whose value we tend to overlook in seeing them so often. For the poet writing in this mode, familiarity breeds, not contempt, but a disregard which may more insidiously undermine a relish in the everyday. So, the poet sets out to restore and refresh a liveliness we had supposed exhausted. This aspect is I think both fundamental to Thumboo’s way of working and characteristic of him at his best. He is – he has been, from his earliest poems – at his most adroit when addressing even the object world from within a lyric mode.

It is not surprising that of those prompts to poems of this sort, it is certain places, often redolent of a past which – as he concedes -- must be supplanted, and above all, friends and friendship, which provide the most fertile ground.

Edwin Thumboo’s treatment of a soon to be superseded past is unusual. Especially, it should be distinguished from nostalgia, as the word is usually understood. In this poet’s hands, nostalgia is not bound intractably to regret. Rather, there is about a number of important poems a hopeful acceptance of change at the same moment as there is celebration of the value of what must pass.

“Temasek” is a poem in which this complex of attitudes is located by a teasing ambiguity, but although the ambiguity is of its essence, it isn’t necessary (or desirable) to remain in doubt about where it lies. Its crux comes in the third and fourth lines of the first stanza, and the first two lines of the second. The poem – one of Thumboo’s finest, I think – is well worth quoting in full:

Deprived of you, history and sense
Turn quicksilver. In my grieving side
Grammars of living break their tense,
Diminish tact, impatience, pride.

Other contraries of soft power
 That override or humble fact, debate,
 The sea's recession or the faded flower.
 I wonder if, again, old fashioned Fate,

Jealously ruminates in secret, rides
 Its creatures who celebrate or rue.
 I am bare. Unknowing, the world derides
 My acts, my silences... deprived of you.
 (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo 4*)

If we take the “you” of the opening line to be deprived of a present, lively sense of his origins by a (“quicksilver”) movement of history and (good?) “sense,” we can see how the speaker might also feel that the “grammars of living” under the new dispensations “Diminish... tact... pride/ Other contraries of soft power.”

But how are we to understand that these fresh-minted forms also diminish “*impatience*,” as they must, given the syntax of the verse, since “tact, impatience, (and) pride” form part of the same series, of which “Grammars of living” is the head? It may be, certainly, a good thing that impatience is diminished, and not good that tact has been. But it might equally be suggested here that there is, or was, a usefulness to impatience, an opportunity afforded by it, which has been removed by the press and rush of the contemporary. In this reading, the poem takes a waspish turn with those “grammars of living that break their *tense*” (my emphasis), because it is here that meaning is made to hover between a condition of language and a psychological, and/or an emotional, disposition.

The question of where something instinctive ends and something decided takes over is not resolvable by poring over alternative readings. Nor should it be, since that is the business of exegesis, which is largely cognitive, and the lyric poem’s business is the business of being poetry before and after critique puts its hooks into it. There is a tolerance, a welcome, even, for ambiguity in poetry and accounts of it from the literary side, which can set the philosopher’s teeth on edge. But it is in this refusal of explanation as an absolute that much of the value of poetry – which is, often, happily, most unreasonable – rests.

This is so of this poem. The ambiguity is vital to its meaning as affect, because as it stands it shows how it feels to move within a range of responses to the inevitability of change. And this sense operates at a level more fundamental than ambivalence, understanding that term to refer to a response which can be decided about cognitively. The roots of an ambiguity of the sort found in “Temasek” are, in contrast, not inspectable; it is a structure of meaning as feeling embedded as deeply as the formation of language itself.

As a way of underlining the very different orientation of Whitman’s and Edwin Thumboo’s attitudes to the world of shared space we might note that at

the conclusion of “Temasek,” the poet has reached a condition which seems at first sight reminiscent of Whitman’s

I am bare. Unknowing, the world derides
My acts, my silences... deprived of you (4)

But the similarity is only apparent. The two positions really are poles apart, the American poet in an arms thrown wide posture – some might say, baring his chest with a rather naïve confidence to a world in which many an unpleasant, as well as a pleasant, thing is flying about – and the Singapore poet, aware that something, indeed, has been lost, something personal sacrificed, even in a context of genuine improvement. More than this. There is a recognition that it is inevitable that this must be so if the state is to flourish as it should.

3. Introspective Voyaging and the Meditative Voice, Continued: “Today Once More”

Years ago, where that old Bedok Road suddenly
Swung inland, I felt you breathe. Benedicting
Sunlight by the pillbox lit a curve in which I heard
My heart’s first cry. It grew into a circling eagle,
Whose thermal eye kept clean our dome of blue.
Far below the rippling tide turned and gripped,
Removing sand beneath my feet. You held me
Citizen as I grew, from that wondering in awe
What made darkness come at noon, or why sea-salt
Is bitter, and the wind’s lamentations cleanse.
(The Best of Edwin Thumboo 118)

The first thing to be said about these lines is that they are lovely. They are the more persuasive in having nothing demanding about the place their speaker finds for himself through them; their beauty rests with the gentleness of their assurance. As far as their construction is concerned, I think that not a word could be changed to improve them – a useful litmus test of all poetry, I suggest. This is poetry of an elevated sort.

The entire first section reaches beyond what could have been available were it to depend on the claim to revelation of a truth “oft thought but ne’er so well expressed,” or by figurative turn, which are frequent expedients of a more declarative type of verse. It is not information, or illustration, so much as cadence, that secures this effect.

A series of unhurried portraits of a natural setting prepares for a subject which remains obscured, in part, after it has been named. The “you” of lines two and seven could be the country itself, an idea of it, or – as other poems

(“The River,” “It is Special”) suggest, a beckoning of the numinous that runs through much of this poet’s work. The voice is that of a story-teller sage, taking time (but no more than the time required), to prepare a way for some declaration of importance

Years ago, where the old Bedok Road suddenly
Swung inland, I felt you breathe
(*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 118)

In the lines immediately following, we find a similar movement, of near rhapsodic meditation on embryonic citizenship in its natural setting, whose purpose is to bring us, as the speaker himself comes, to an understanding of the importance of these pervasive, gently commanding, forces that have helped define him as a public figure

You held me
Citizen as I grew (118)

This verse movement, which can be characterised graphically but not traced on a graph, allows for shifts in point of view that might have been less persuasive had they been brought to a shuffled fusion within the line. Because they are teased out descriptively across the section *by* the natural setting they describe – from early vision (“My heart’s first cry”) to panoramic view, to the eye of innocence open to nature’s promptings, to contemporary citizen – these placements, inevitable, after the fact, as a memorable melody, carry the reader with them before she or he feels inclined to begin to reckon the mechanism by which this is achieved.

The first and the fifth and final sections of “Today Once More” show Edwin Thumboo’s version of the lyric manner in full flower. In the third section, lines 19-22, a cataloguing, “snapshot” method is restored temporarily, but only to be “talked over” by a reprise of the lyric manner in the fifth and final section

Today, no smoke from burning half-dead wood to smudge
Our skyline’s signature...
... I cross
The Padang as banzais echo to again, rolling down city steps
As Coleman’s demolished home haunts the new with gusto. (119)

It is a magical world, part displaced and part in present time, where relish in opportunity is shadowed by death

Eyes tearful not from fumes

But the death of friends. Gopal and James now live in
That ever present past...

Regret? Yes and no. All is still here, as I pass the latest Bedok
Knowing epiphany, tide and crab are still a mile away
Across our first reclamation, when land pushed back the sea. (119)

“The *latest* Bedok” marks a delicious turn, seen in the light of the last two lines (a descriptive prompted by the poem itself, since food is its next topic. Good dining is never far from this poet’s smorgasbord), displaying a grateful-reluctant – or reluctantly grateful – acceptance and a celebration of inevitability as the landscape of less volatile times is made to live anew.

4. New Directions and Possible Revisitations. A “Mauberley” Vein. Poems of the Numinous. Interrogations of Language

In “Visiting Mr. Dickson’s Port, March ’99,” the lyric and muted epic, or “public” or agora manner, meld with the personal in the figure of the statesman who provides the poem’s ostensible subject. It is a longish poem – a tour de force, I think – whose command of tone and – again – of cadence throughout is grounded in the intimate contemplation of a person the poet cannot have known. An affair of state is personalised. The meditation on a public theme works outwards from an affection. Here is the first stanza of the poem:

Earlier, at the Sailing Club we scrutinized
His portrait, concluding he was rough but regal.
Looking pukka as he sat half-way up the wall.
Ram-rod straight despite threatening opulence.
Mr. Dickson looked serenely disapproving, especially
When red-nosed, tipsy regulars sailed by to the bar.
(*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 46)

In their tongue-in-cheek, distanced, amity, a group of poems in the last section of *The Best of Edwin Thumboo* collection – “A Kenyan Brother,” “How to Win Friends,” “The Sneeze, Hock Lam St. Nr. City Hall” – as does the Dickson poem, belong to a family which can be seen to extend via Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* back to a rich tradition of Latin satirists and epigrammatists. Here is another delightful example of the mode from “Visiting Mr. Dickson’s Port, March ’99”:

Above a flowing highland-white-luxuriant beard,
His blue, gunmetal eyes seemed lit by fires of exile.
Regular pinko-grey, he dreamt of territory and trade.
True Founding Father, the very stuff of Empire.
Like our Raffles, but in a minor key; dour; dependable.

Nor does he strike us as avidly collecting manuscripts,
 Ceramics, fabrics, or, like Farquar, native women.
 Perhaps a royal kris or two would do nicely on a wall
 Below his pair of dirks impressing fueding Chiefs. (46)

It is a retrieval, or perhaps better say a recapitulation which – having regard to the placement of these shorter poems in the ultimate section of the *Best of* collection – perhaps suggests the possibility of more poems along these lines.

But to speak of these poems as being in a “Maunderley” vein, indicative as it might be in some ways – both poets use a similar circumlocutory plainspoken-ness, for instance (“Nor does he strike us as avidly collecting manuscripts”) – is an expedient as useful in marking differences between Pound’s cycle as it is in locating points of precise congruence. The poets are distinct in their angle of approach to their subjects (though not, I think, altogether, in method) and not surprisingly so, given the very different milieu which gave the American poet his occasion near the beginning of the twentieth century.

There is, I think, though, sufficient similarity to justify the conjunction, which – in this reader’s way of thinking – invites high praise. The conciseness, the skill at play in raising types above the stereotypical by a truth to a life we might plausibly expect to meet next time we step from the house (thence, in Pound’s case, in all likelihood, directly into a literary soiree), the steadiness of hand required to fashion miniatures with an epic scope, make for a type of verse that whets the appetite.

There are two other groups, or types, of poems in the fifth section of the collection, some of which feel as though they are probably recent: investigations of the nature of language and its relation to poetry in particular, and a second group which probes some possibilities poetry might offer in approaching the numinous.

Though it is too soon to offer anything approaching a detailed reading of this work, it seems at this point that here, too, it is those poems grounded in a lyric empathy with their subject rather than those taking a point of view external to it that are the more successful. So, of the “language” poems we have, I think that “Word as Linguist” and “Word 11,” the most attractive, and of those poems addressing the numinous, the excellent “Muse in Media.” The indication such work offers of possible new developments in an accomplished poet at this stage of a long and distinguished career is not only welcome, it is inspiring. Clearly, Edwin Thumboo’s reach continues to extend in directions and in ways which are very far indeed from exceeding its grasp.

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