

Stepping into Meaning with “Iskandar J in His Studio”: Analysing the Poetry of Edwin Thumboo

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Abstract

Drawing on Edwin Thumboo’s poem, “Iskandar J in His Studio,” I illustrate our methodology for investigating meaning which is based on M.A.K. Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistic theory. A systemic-functional perspective, with its emphasis on the semogenic (“meaning-making”) power of language, provides the ideal handle for investigating Thumboo’s poetry as not only an intentional act of meaning but also as a work of art. A poem, like any other text, is the complex realisation of three kinds of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Ideational meaning has to do with how we construe our world of experience. Interpersonal meaning has to do with how we use language to relate to those with whom we are speaking. Textual meaning concerns what gives texture to a text. The more cohesive and coherent the text, the greater is its texture.

Keywords

Creativity, meaning, ideational, interpersonal, textual, systemic-functional

Yeats in a very early poem has a line ‘Words alone are certain good,’ and if you look at the history of the major religions, the word has always been central. You begin with a word and you end with a word. Literature uses words in perhaps the most comprehensive way. The best in language and the worst in language are found in literature, and it’s the best that instructs you, that teaches you. (Edwin Thumboo, in an interview with Bill Bunbury, *Encounter*, 14 December 2003: “Beyond Good and Evil.” ABC Radio National)

Introducing Edwin Thumboo

The poetry of Edwin Thumboo has contributed much to the shaping and definition of Singapore’s English Language poetic canon. Among Singapore writers, “Thumboo remains the most influential voice, primarily for his topical and insightful exploration of social and national themes.... Much decorated for

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his poetic contributions and public commitment, Thumboo is often considered to be the unofficial poet laureate of Singapore" (Seet, "The Write Stuff").

Thumboo's poems are deliberately crafted and interwoven in such a way as to direct the reader's attention to the motifs being developed by the poet. Beyond the verbal, there are also visual metaphors in Thumboo's poetry. One can see a vase in "Iskander J," a hexagram in "David," a pentagram in "Conjunction," and a tetrahedron in "A Poet Reading." The various associations of these geometric shapes with certain religious, spiritual, or philosophical beliefs, referred to by some as "sacred geometry," add another dimension of meaning to the poem.

While he counts Shakespeare, Keats, Poe, Beddoes and Eliot as "instructive influences" – helping to develop his "sense of rhythm, of colour in words, of structure, pattern" – still it is Yeats who Thumboo considers "the major influence":

In my case, the major influence was Yeats. Eliot, too, to some extent, but Eliot was of the mind, more often than not, cerebral. And if it is of the mind, the mind can resist it. You can rationalize; you can invent a verbal formula. But when it comes from within, like Yeats, more instinctive but artful nonetheless, it is less easily displaced, harder to shed. The influence is harder to analyze. And if it is hard to analyze, it is even harder to find an antidote, a way of release. (qtd. in Klein, "Edwin Thumboo")

The poem's potential for making meaning is born out of the poet's experience, and finds expression, where language lives, in "[t]he works of man and the face of human life" (Wordsworth 314). Edwin Thumboo's experience in the multilingual and multicultural context of Singapore has contributed to his uniquely creative use of language.

Creativity in language

Creativity occurs across a wide range of language activity, sometimes deliberate, sometimes spontaneous, ranging from the highly-valued to the everyday. It expresses who I am, in nature and in community. "Creativity," writes Ronald Carter, "is ubiquitous across a range of text-types and is especially salient in spoken discourse too. It depends for its effects on particular patterns of language form and is interactive in that both senders and receivers are involved, dialogically, in the co-creation" (81).

With every reading, the poem lives to mean again. Creativity in language is not limited, however, to what Mukařovský called "poetic language" (Garvin 17). Even in everyday conversation, creativity "inheres in responsive, dialogic, interpersonal acts of mutuality as well as in individual acts of self-expression" (Carter 28). Acts of creativity are social and psychological, not limited to what

Chomsky describes as our innate ability to produce and understand an infinite number of novel yet well-formed sentences.

“Creativity is culturally-variable” (Carter 48). In *Linguistic Creativity in Japanese Discourse*, Maynard (2007) notes differences between Japanese and English metaphors, and describes a kind of language play, based on different readings of *Kanji*, which is unavailable in other languages.

Creativity is “relative to the values, beliefs and judgments formed within and according to the needs of different social groups, communities and cultural systems” (Carter 82). On the one hand, we contemplate the poet’s creative use of the word “expectorant” (instead of “expectant?”) in the line, “Some just wait, expectorant but undecided,/ Contemplating means to conjugate verbal icons” (Thumboo, “A Poet Reading” 35), while on the other hand, when someone like George W. Bush says “They *misunderestimate* me,” it is derided as a malapropism.

Creativity in language draws on existing resources in the grammar, perhaps to resolve “tensions of various kinds, either within the system itself, or in relation to encounters involving individuals that arise in the course of everyday situations” (Wells 79). An instance of creativity is meaningful because it is purposeful. An act of meaning is creative because it is somehow innovative, or employs certain techniques to achieve either prominence (i.e. foregrounding) or what Halliday refers to as “de-automatization.” In his discussion of J.B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls*, Halliday explains his preference for Mukařovský’s term “de-automatization” over “foregrounding,” “since what is in question is not simply prominence but rather the partial freeing of the lower-level systems from the control of the semantics so that they become domains of choice in their own right” (“Poetry as Scientific Discourse” 131).

Creativity in language creates new realities. For example, Halliday describes how Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” constructs “a semiotic universe at the intersection of science and poetry” (“Poetry as Scientific Discourse” 167). Using “the syntactically intricate, dynamic, non-metaphorical lexicogrammar” of everyday spoken language, Tennyson “lessened the distance between scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge, so making science human again” (“Poetry is Scientific Discourse” 166).

There is something inexplicable about our potential for ceaseless creativity, in both the making and the reading of meaning, not just in poetry, or some other form of verbal art, but in every aspect of our lives. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from attempting a “raid on the inarticulate” (Eliot, *Four Quartets*), in order to gain insight into the reality-generating power and creative energy of language.

Reading Edwin Thumboo

When I read Edwin Thumboo, I do so as a linguist, investigating the multiple

layers of meaning and metaphor which go into producing these highly textured, grammatically intricate works of verbal art.

My goal is to address what Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, calls “the language question.” In an interview appearing in the *South China Morning Post* (11 March 2007), Tan says that “there’s a question about her books she’s longing to be asked.” It is “the Language Question,” or as Tan elaborated, “[readers] don’t see the care and craft and the way we adore the language and play with it” (Meece, “Holy Writ”).

Thumboo credits language with playing an important role in how he looks at both literature and life. As he puts it, “On one hand, I look at language as part of the literature I am studying. It is a critical, exegetical exercise. I enter the text as best as I can, attentive to what the writer has done. On the other, I’m looking at language as part of my life. I am trying to create, to make my poems, putting language together” (Klein, “Edwin Thumboo”).

M.A.K. Halliday’s Systemic Functional Theory, with its emphasis on exploring the semogenic (“meaning-making”) power of language, provides the ideal handle for investigating Thumboo’s poetry as not only an intentional act of meaning but also as a work of art.

A poem, like any other text, is the complex realisation of three kinds of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Ideational meaning has to do with how we construe our world of experience. Interpersonal meaning has to do with how we use language to relate to those with whom we are speaking, whether, for example, the speaker is asking a question and expecting something in return, or making a statement of fact. Textual meaning concerns what gives texture to a text. The more cohesive and coherent the text, the greater is its texture.

Stepping into Meaning with “Iskandar J in His Studio”

As we proceed to look at each of these kinds of meaning and how they are discoverable in the poem, I will also outline the steps to be taken in doing the analysis. Examples will be drawn from Thumboo’s poem, “Iskandar J in His Studio” to illustrate our methodology and its relevance to our quest for achieving a better understanding of the text.

Iskandar J in His Studio

The Kentong speaks; believers gather.
God be praised for such rich calendars of Earth:
Special black, white, grey, blue, and ochre.
Time-packed layers that, from under valleys,
Rise with storied tales, then wait in hills to meet,
Match, mix infinitely under a monsoon-sun.

Our Maker's Art is eternal, precise and final.

Great are its forms. Take a little in both hands.
Persist. Learn all you can till our making is second
Nature. Then freely unveil the clay's deep legacy;
The globe's true perfection: no beginning, no end.
Let soul and spirit roam and ride its surfaces
Into smooth, prospective geometry and calculus.

Clay, the silent language of my heart, encloses

Shades, contrasts, philosophies, agencies; everything,
And more when coaxed. Pour light and water carefully;
Stir to purify, refine, then bake a piece of history.
What you behold after the fire has done its work,
Is but one quest. Abundance lies between the many.
You kneed futures, listening as each lump sighs

Unto your fingers a mood, a voice, a shape.

So when understanding leavens textures
Humility is born. I grow with each live touch
As busy fingers hear the centre of our Earth;
Then my inner being. Secure their bonding
With every journey to village and city squatting on
Her breathing skin. Thus feel reverence in the Dust

From which I come, from which I humbly make.

What sparks off soul and mind, what descends through
Fingered hope; comes forth steadily upon the wheel,
Or tight slabs releasing turquoise stillness into waves;
A lesong, four bottles, a bell whose peal is only silence;
Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures,
Passion and intimacy, to change a house into a home.

The wheel turns and stops and starts.
I dialogue, learn and share
As it spins, again,
Again.

STEP 1: Parse the Poem into its Constituent Parts

The first step is to parse the poem into clauses, identifying the constituents of each clause by grammatical role, whether Subject, Predicate, Object, Complement, etc., and also noting where there is embedding (using square brackets []).

- <c 1a> The *Kentong* *Subject* speaks *Predicates*; <c 1b> believers *Subject* gather *Predicate*.
 <c 2> God *Subject* be praised *Predicate* for such rich calendars of Earth *Adjunct*:
 Special black, white, grey, blue, and ochre.
 Time-packed layers [<c 3a> that, from under valleys,
 Rise *Predicate* with storied tales *Adjunct*, <c 3b> then wait *Predicate* in hills *Adjunct* <c 3c> to meet,
Predicate
 <c 3d> Match *Predicates*, <c 3e> mix *Predicate* infinitely under a monsoon-sun *Adjunct*.]
- <c 4> Our Maker’s Art *Subject* is *Predicate* eternal, precise and final *Complement*.
- <c 5> Great *Subject* are *Predicate* its forms *Complement*. <c 6> Take *Predicate* a little *Object*
 in both hands *Adjunct*.
- <c 7> Persist. *Predicate* <c 8a> Learn *Predicate* all [<c 8b> you *Subject* can *Auxiliary*] *Object* <c 8c>
 till *Conjunction* our making *Subject* is *Predicate* second
 Nature. *Complement* <c 9> ‘Then *Conjunction* freely unveil *Predicate* the clay’s deep legacy;
 The globe’s true perfection: no beginning, no end. *Object*
- <c 10a> Let *Predicate* soul and spirit *Object* roam *Predicate* <c 10b> and *Conjunction* ride *Predicate*
 its surfaces *Object*
 Into smooth, prospective geometry and calculus. *Adjunct*
- <c 11a> Clay, the silent language of my heart, *Subject* encloses *Predicate*
- <c 11b> Shades, *Predicate* <c 11c> contrasts, *Predicate* philosophies, agencies; everything,
 And more *Object* <c 11d> when *Conjunction* coaxed. *Predicate* <c 12a> Pour *Predicate* light and water
Object carefully; *Adjunct*
- <c 12b> Stir *Predicate* <c 12c> to purify, *Predicate* <c 12d> refine, *Predicate* <c 12e> then
Conjunction bake *Predicate* a piece of history. *Object*
- <c 13a> [<c 13b> What you behold <c 13c> after the fire has done its work,] *Subject*
 Is *Predicate* but one quest. *Complement* <c 14> Abundance *Subject* lies *Predicate* between the many.
Adjunct
- <c 15a> You *Subject* kneed *Predicate* futures, *Object* <c 15b> listening *Predicate* <c 15c> as *Conjunction*
 each lump *Subject* sighs *Predicate*
- Unto your fingers a mood, a voice, a shape. *Adjunct*
- <c 16a> So *Conjunction* when *Conjunction* understanding *Subject* leavens *Predicate* textures *Object*
 <c 16b> Humility *Subject* is born. *Predicate* <c 17a> I *Subject* grow *Predicate*
 with each live touch *Adjunct*
- <c 17b> As *Conjunction* busy fingers *Subject* hear *Predicate* the centre of our Earth; *Object*
 Then *Conjunction* my inner being. *Object* <c 18a> Secure *Predicate* their bonding *Object*
 <c 18b> With every journey to village and city *Adjunct* squatting *Predicate* on
 Her breathing skin. *Adjunct* <c 19a> Thus *Conjunction* feel *Predicate* reverence *Object* in the Dust
- [<c 19b> From which I *Subject* come, *Predicate* <c 19c> from which I *Subject* humbly make.
Predicate] *Adjunct*

<c 20a>[<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through
 Fingered hope;] *Subject* comes forth *Predicate* steadily upon the wheel, *Adjunct*
 Or tight slabs [<c 20d> releasing *Predicate* turquoise stillness *Object* into waves *Adjunct*];
 A *lesong*, four bottles, a bell [<c 20e>whose peal *Subject* is *Predicate* only silence *Complement*];
 Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures,
 Passion and intimacy, <c 20f> to change *Predicate* a house *Object* into a home. *Adjunct*

<c 21a> The wheel *Subject* turns *Predicate* <c 21b> and *Conjunction* stops *Predicate* <c 21c> and
Conjunction starts. *Predicate*

<c 22a> I *Subject* dialogue, *Predicate* <c 22b> learn *Predicate* <c 22c> and *Conjunction* share *Predicate*
 <c 22d> As *Conjunction* it *Subject* spins, *Predicate* again,
 Again *Adjunct*

The last three lines form one sentence, a complex of clauses, i.e. a clause complex, consisting of four clauses. The sentence begins with the Subject – *I* – followed by the first predicate – *dialogue* – then a second predicate – *learn* – then a third predicate making the third clause – *and share*. The fourth and final clause in this clause complex begins with a conjunction – *As* – followed by the remainder of the clause – *it spins, again, Again*.

The Subject in clause 20

<c 20a> [**<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through**
Fingered hope;] *Subject* comes forth *Predicate* steadily upon the wheel, *Adjunct*
 Or tight slabs [<c 20d> releasing *Predicate* turquoise stillness *Object* into waves *Adjunct*];
 A *lesong*, four bottles, a bell [<c 20e>whose peal *Subject* is *Predicate* only silence *Complement*];
 Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures,
 Passion and intimacy, <c 20f> to change *Predicate* a house *Object* into a home. *Adjunct*

is a combination of two rank-shifted clauses functioning not as clauses but as nominal. This we have indicated using square brackets to denote rank-shifted or embedded clauses; in other words, clauses which function, grammatically speaking, not as clauses, but as units at the rank of noun group.

Stepping into Ideational Meaning

Ideational meaning may be sub-divided into the *experiential* and the *logical*. The experiential refers to our ability to talk about our experience, while the logical deals with the expression of certain logical relations, such as by means of conjunctions like *and, or, if, not*.

STEP 2: Identify Process, Participant and Circumstance

The ideational function of language is realised by the semantic system of

transitivity. Transitivity analysis is concerned with the semantic configuration of process, participant and circumstance, or in other words the clause as a means of representing the processes of doing, happening, feeling, thinking, being, speaking, etc.

After parsing the poem “Iskandar J” into its constituent clauses, we next identify the process, participant(s), circumstance(s) in each clause,

- <c 1a> The *Kentong Actor* speaks *material*; <c 1b> believers *Actor* gather *material*.
 <c 2> God *Goal* be praised *material* for such rich calendars of Earth *Circumstance*:
 Special black, white, grey, blue, and ochre.
 Time-packed layers *Actor* [<c 3a> that, from under valleys,
 Rise *material* with storied tales *Circumstances*, <c 3b> then wait *material* in hills *Circumstance* <c 3c> to
 meet, *material*
 <c 3d> Match *material*, <c 3e> mix *material* infinitely under a monsoon-sun *Circumstance*.]
- <c 4> Our Maker’s Art *Carrier* is *relational, attributive* eternal, precise and final *Attribute*.
- <c 5> Great *Identifier* are *relational, identifying* its forms *Identified*. <c 6> Take *material* a little *Goal*
 in both hands *Circumstance*.
- <c 7> Persist. *material* <c 8a> Learn *material* all [<c 8b> you *Actor* can] *Goal* <c 8c> till our
 making *Carrier* is *relational, attributive* second
 Nature. *Attribute* <c 9> Then freely unveil *material* the clay’s deep legacy;
 The globe’s true perfection: no beginning, no end. *Goal*
 <c 10a> Let *material* soul and spirit *Goal/Actor* roam *material* <c 10b> and ride *material*
 its surfaces *Goal*
 Into smooth, prospective geometry and calculus. *Circumstance*
- <c 11a> Clay, the silent language of my heart, *Actor* encloses *material*
- <c 11b> Shades, *material* <c 11c> contrasts, *material* philosophies, agencies; everything,
 And more *Goal* <c 11d> when coaxed. *material* <c 12a> Pour *material* light and water *Goal*
 carefully; *Circumstance*
- <c 12b> Stir *material* <c 12c> to purify, *material* <c 12d> refine, *material* <c 12e> then bake
material a piece of history. *Goal*
- <c 13a> [<c 13b> What you behold <c 13c> after the fire has done its work,] *Identified*
 Is *relational, identifying* but one quest. *Identifier* <c 14> Abundance *Carrier* lies *relational, attributive* between
 the many. *Attribute*
- <c 15a> You *Actor* kneed *material* futures, *Goal* <c 15b> listening *material* <c 15c> as each
 lump *Behaver* sighs *behavioural*
- Unto your fingers a mood, a voice, a shape. *Circumstance*
- <c 16a> So when understanding *Actor* leavens *material* textures *Goal*
 <c 16b> Humility *Affected* is born. *material* <c 17a> I *Behaver* grow *behavioural*
 with each live touch *Circumstance*
- <c 17b> As busy fingers *Senser* hear *mental* the centre of our Earth; *Phenomenon*

Then my inner being. *Phenomenon* <c 18a> Secure *material* their bonding *Goal*
 <c 18b> With every journey to village and city *Circumstance* squatting *behavioural* on
 Her breathing skin. *Circumstance* <c 19a> Thus feel *mental* reverence *Phenomenon* in the Dust

[<c 19b> From which I *Actor* come, *material* <c 19c> from which I *Actor* humbly make. *material*
] *Circumstance*

<c 20a> [<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through
 Fingered hope;] *Actor* comes forth *material* steadily upon the wheel, *Circumstance*
 Or tight slabs [<c 20d> releasing *material* turquoise stillness *Goal* into waves *Circumstance*];;
 A *lesong*, four bottles, a bell [<c 20e> whose peal *Carrier* is *relational, attributive* only silence *Attribute*];
 Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures,
 Passion and intimacy, <c 20f> to change *material* a house *Goal* into a home. *Circumstance*

<c 21a> The wheel *Actor* turns *material* <c 21b> and stops *material* <c 21c> and starts. *material*
 <c 22a> I *Actor* dialogue, *material* <c 22b> learn *material* <c 22c> and share *material*
 <c 22d> As it *Actor* spins, *material* again,
 Again *Circumstance*

After parsing the poem into its constituent clauses, and identifying the process, participant(s), circumstance(s) in each clause, I listed out all those participants in *er*-roles (Actor, Senser, etc.), along with whatever process they were engaged in doing or performing, into the table shown below (clause numbers shown in parentheses).

Participants	Processes
The Kentong	speaks (1a)
believers	gather (1b)
Time-packed layers	rise (3a) wait (3b) to meet (3c) match (3d) mix (3e)
Our Maker's Art	is (4)
Great	are (5)
you	take (6), persist (7), learn (8a), unveil (9), behold (13b), kneel (15a), listening (15b), feel (19a)
our making	is (8c)
soul and spirit	roam (10a) ride (10b)
Clay	encloses (11a) shades (11b) contrasts (11c)
one quest	is (13a)
the fire	has done (13c)

Abundance	lies (14)
each lump	sighs (15c)
understanding	leavens (16a)
I	grow (17a), come (19b), humbly make (19c), dialogue (22a), learn (22b), share (22c)
busy fingers	hear (17b) Secure (18a)
[<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through Fingered hope;]	comes forth (20b) sparks off (20b) descends (20c)
tight slabs	releasing (20d)
whose peal	is (20e)
the wheel	turns (21a) stops (21b) starts (21c)
it	spins (22d)

Table 1.1: participants and processes

Based on the information in Table 1.1, we can identify two primary participants – “you” and “I” – whose participation extends over several sentences. “I” only occurs from clause 17 onwards, and except for one occurrence in clause 19, “you” occurs only between clauses 6-15. Both “you” and “I” are primarily actors in material (i.e. doing) processes, but then there are more material processes than any other kind (see Table 1.2).

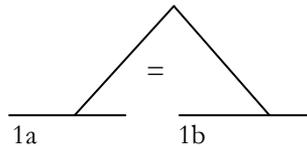
material		mental	relational, attributive	relational, identifying	behavioural
speaks (1a)	has done (13c)	behold (13b)	is (4, 8c, 13a, 20e, lies (14)	are (5)	sighs (15c)
gather (1b)	knead (15a)	hear (17b)			grow (17a)
be praised (2)	listening (15b)	feel (19a)			squatting (18b)
rise (3a)	leavens (16a)				
wait (3b)	is born (16b)				
meet (3c)	Secure (18a)				
match (3d)	come (19b)				
mix (3e)	make (19c)				
take (6)	comes forth (20a)				
persist (7)	sparks off				
learn (8a, 8b)					
unveil (9)					
roam (10a)					

ride (10b)	(20b)				
encloses (11a)	descends (20c)				
shades (11b)	releasing (20d)				
contrasts (11c)	to change (20f)				
coaxed (11d)	turns (21a)				
pour (12a)	stops (21b)				
stir (12b) to	starts (21c)				
purify (12c)	dialogue (22a)				
refine (12d)	learn (22b)				
bake (12e)	share (22c)				
	spins (22d)				

Table 1.2: Processes by type

STEP 3: Identify the Hypotactic and Paratactic Relations between Elements

<c 1a> The *Kentong* *Subject* speaks *Predicate*; <c 1b> believers *Subject* gather *Predicate*.



<c 2> God *Subject* be praised *Predicate* for such rich calendars of Earth *Adjunct*:
Special black, white, grey, blue, and ochre.

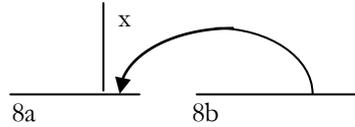
Time-packed layers [<c 3a> that, from under valleys,
Rise *Predicate* with storied tales *Adjunct*, <c 3b> then wait *Predicate* in hills *Adjunct* <c 3c> to meet,
Predicate

<c 3d> Match *Predicates*, <c 3e> mix *Predicate* infinitely under a monsoon-sun *Adjunct*.]

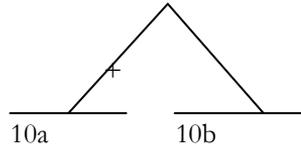
<c 4> Our Maker's Art *Subject* is *Predicate* eternal, precise and final *Complement*.

<c 5> Great *Subject* are *Predicate* its forms *Complement*. <c 6> Take *Predicate* a little *Object*
in both hands *Adjunct*.

<c 7> Persist. *Predicate* <c 8a> Learn *Predicate* all [<c 8b> you *Subject* can *Auxiliary*] *Object* <c 8c>
till *Conjunction* our making *Subject* is *Predicate* second
Nature. *Complement* <c 9> Then *Conjunction* freely unveil *Predicate* the clay's deep legacy;

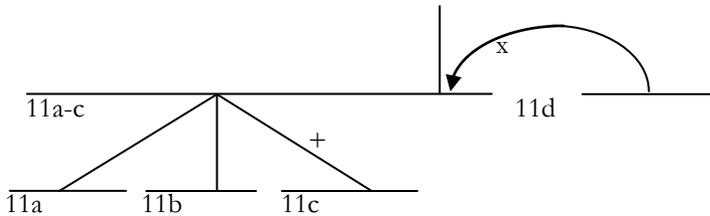


The globe's true perfection: no beginning, no end. *Object*
 <c 10a> Let *Predicate* soul and spirit *Object* roam *Predicate* <c 10b> and *Conjunction* ride *Predicate*
 its surfaces *Object*
 Into smooth, prospective geometry and calculus. *Adjunct*

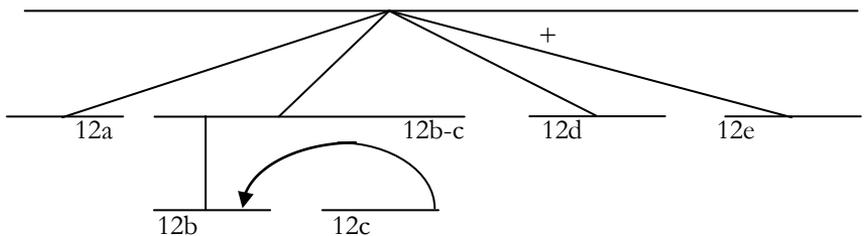


<c 11a> Clay, the silent language of my heart, *Subject* encloses *Predicate*

<c 11b> Shades, *Predicate* <c 11c> contrasts, *Predicate* philosophies, agencies; everything,
 And more *Object* <c 11d> when *Conjunction* coaxed. *Predicate* <c 12a> Pour *Predicate* light
 and water *Object* carefully; *Adjunct*



<c 12b> Stir *Predicate* <c 12c> to purify, *Predicate* <c 12d> refine, *Predicate* <c 12e> then
Conjunction bake *Predicate* a piece of history. *Object*

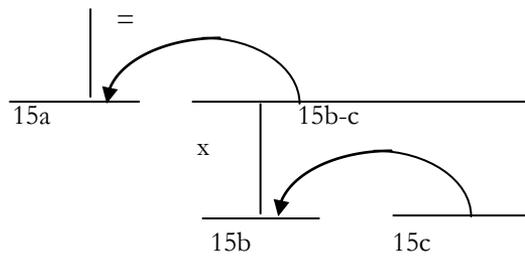


<c 13a> [<c 13b> What you behold <c 13c> after the fire has done its work,] *Subject*
 Is *Predicate* but one quest. *Complement* <c 14> Abundance *Subject* lies *Predicate* between the many.

Adjunct

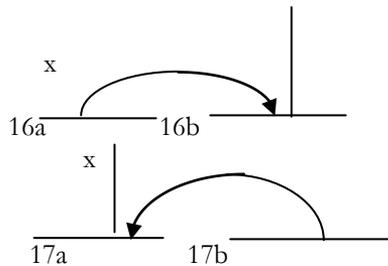
<c 15a> You *Subject* kneed *Predicate* futures, *Object* <c 15b> listening *Predicate* <c 15c> as *Conjunction*
 each lump *Subject* sighs *Predicate*

Unto your fingers a mood, a voice, a shape. *Adjunct*

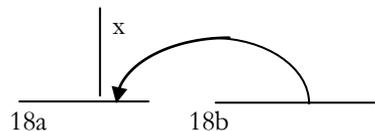


<c 16a> So *Conjunction* when *Conjunction* understanding *Subject* leavens *Predicate* textures *Object*
 <c 16b> Humility *Subject* is born. *Predicate* <c 17a> I *Subject* grow *Predicate*
 with each live touch *Adjunct*

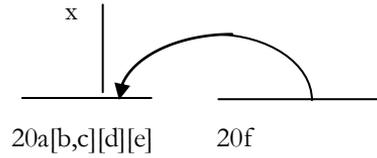
<c 17b> As *Conjunction* busy fingers *Subject* hear *Predicate* the centre of our Earth; *Object*



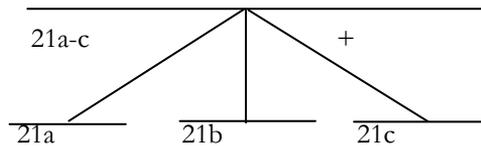
Then *Conjunction* my inner being. *Object* <c 18a> Secure *Predicate* their bonding *Object*
 <c 18b> With every journey to village and city *Adjunct* squatting *Predicate* on
 Her breathing skin. *Adjunct* <c 19a> Thus *Conjunction* feel *Predicate* reverence *Object* in the Dust
 [<c 19b> From which I *Subject* come, *Predicate* <c 19c> from which I *Subject* humbly make.
Predicate] *Adjunct*



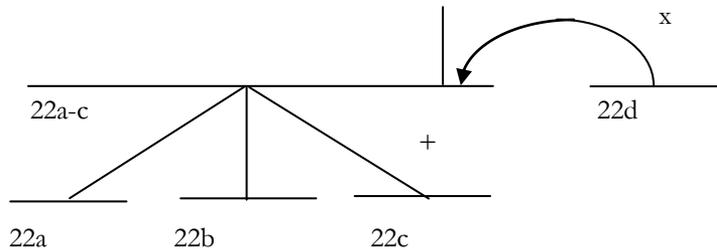
<c 20a> [<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through
 Fingered hope;] *Subject* comes forth *Predicate* steadily upon the wheel, *Adjunct*
 Or tight slabs [<c 20d> releasing *Predicate* turquoise stillness *Object* into waves *Adjunct*];
 A *lesong*, four bottles, a bell [<c 20e>whose peal *Subject* is *Predicate* only silence *Complement*];
 Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures,
 Passion and intimacy, <c 20f> to change *Predicate* a house *Object* into a home. *Adjunct*



<c 21a> The wheel *Subject* turns *Predicate* <c 21b> and *Conjunction* stops *Predicate* <c 21c> and
Conjunction starts. *Predicate*



<c 22a> I *Subject* dialogue, *Predicate* <c 22b> learn *Predicate* <c 22c> and *Conjunction* share *Predicate*
 <c 22d> As *Conjunction* it *Subject* spins, *Predicate* again,
 Again *Adjunct*



One striking observation is that both clause complex 11 and 22 combine parataxis with hypotaxis, forming the same complex logical structure. In clause complex 11, however, it is “Clay, the silent language of my heart” which is engaged in multiple activities, while in clause complex 22, it is “I.”

Stepping into Interpersonal Meaning

A poem’s “double work” (“A Poet Reading” 76) is to make meaning and to give meaning; functioning both ideationally and interpersonally, as declaration and as invitation.

STEP 4: Identify Whether the Main Clause is Interrogative, Declarative or Imperative.

There are no interrogatives, only declaratives and imperatives. The imperatives are concentrated in sentences 6-10.

<c 6> Take *Predicate* a little *Object* in both hands *Adjunct*.

- <c 7> Persist. *Predicate*
 <c 8a> Learn *Predicate* all [<c 8b> you *Subject* can *Auxiliary*] *Object* ...
 <c 9> Then *Conjunction* freely unveil *Predicate* the clay's deep legacy; ...
 <c 10a> Let *Predicate* soul and spirit *Object* roam *Predicate*
 <c 12a> Pour *Predicate* light and water *Object* carefully; *Adjunct*
 <c 12b> Stir *Predicate* ...
 <c 12d> refine, *Predicate*
 <c 12e> then *Conjunction* bake *Predicate* a piece of history. *Object*

The concentration of imperatives suggests not only much activity, but also repeated interaction between the speaker and the one being addressed.

Modality is another aspect of interpersonal meaning related to the expression of the speaker's attitude about what he is saying. In English, modality is expressed by the use of modal adjuncts (possibly by certain adverbs like "surely," "possibly," or by various thematic structures such as "it is possible that," "there is a possibility that"), or through a small set of verbs known as modal auxiliaries, e.g. "can," "may," "might," etc.

STEP 5: Identify Modal Adjuncts and Modal Auxiliaries.

There is only one instance of a modal auxiliary in the poem:

- <c 8a> Learn *Predicate* all [<c 8b> you *Subject* can *Auxiliary*] *Object* ...

Stepping into Textual Meaning

Textual meaning deals with those structures that give texture to a text. The more cohesive and coherent the text is, the greater is its texture.

STEP 6: Identify Theme { -topical | -interpersonal | -textual } in Each Finite Clause.

- <c 1a> **The Kentong** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 1b> **believers** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 2> **God** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 4> **Our Maker's Art** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 5> **Great** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 6> **Take** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 7> **Persist.** *Theme-interpersonal*
 <c 8a> **Learn** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 9> **Then** *Theme-textual* **freely unveil** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 10a> **Let** *Theme-interpersonal* **soul and spirit** *Theme-topical*
 <c 11a> **Clay, the silent language of my heart,** *Theme-topical* ...

- <c 11d> **when** *Theme-textual*
 <c 12a> **Pour** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 12b> **Stir** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 12d> **refine,** *Theme-interpersonal*
 <c 12e> **then** *Theme-textual* **bake** *Theme-interpersonal* ...
 <c 13a> [**<c 13b> What you behold <c 13c> after the fire has done its work,]** *Theme-topical*

 <c 14> **Abundance** *Theme-topical*
 <c 15a> **You** *Theme-topical* ... <c 15c> **as** *Theme-textual* **each lump** *Theme-topical*
 sighs

 <c 16a> **So** *Theme-textual* **when** *Theme-textual* **understanding** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 16b> **Humility** *Theme-topical*
 <c 17a> **I** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 17b> **As** *Theme-textual* **busy fingers** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 18a> **Secure** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 19a> **Thus** *Theme-textual* **feel** *Theme-topical* ...

 <c 20a> [**<c 20b> What sparks off soul and mind, <c 20c> what descends through Fingered hope;]** *Theme-topical*

 <c 21a> **The wheel** *Theme-topical* ... <c 21b> **and** *Theme-textual* ...<c 21c> **and**
Theme-textual
 <c 22a> **I** *Theme-topical* ...
 <c 22c> **and** *Theme-textual* ...
 <c 22d> **As** *Theme-textual* **it** *Theme-topical* ...

Beyond the Clause

Patterns of lexico-grammatical choice contribute to establishing texture, on the basis of which one can identify the functionally-significant spans that together form the text as a whole. Lexicogrammatical choice may be *experiential* (choices from the system of transitivity), *logical* (choices related to clausal taxis), *interpersonal* (choices from systems of mood and modality) and *textual* (choices related to theme-rheme and information structures).

A functionally-significant text span ranges in size anywhere from the text as a whole down to each individual constituent clause. Between the text as a whole at one end and its constituent clauses on the other end is a hierarchical organisation of spans of text, each span related to another as intended by the writer or speaker. The same taxis relations existing between clauses at the level of clause-complex apply to functionally significant spans of varying size.

In “Iskandar J,” for example, repeated references to “you” combined with the imperative clause type cluster together between sentences 6-15. From

sentence 16 onwards, however, the focus shifts from second-person to first-person. The shift is also marked by the conjunction “So” linking functionally significant spans consisting of several paragraphs. “So” conveys a sense of outcome, such that what follows from sentence 16 onwards is the result of all the ongoing activity carried out in the previous span.

See Table 1.3 for a suggested mapping of the logical relations between functionally significant spans, from the poem as a whole at the bottom up to each constituent clause in “Iskandar J.”

Poetry in the Making

In addition to the grammatical resources described above, the poet also draws on various poetic devices such as alliteration, meter and rhyme for aesthetic effect to create verbal art. For Thumboo, technique is all about poetry in the making: “the chiseling of Language, the rearranging of language, the sound, the rhythm, the tautness, the layering” (Klein). The poet’s technique, he writes, is “what releases the poem into a form of immortality” (Klein), it is what makes it art.

However, as is illustrated by the layout of “Iskandar J,” the poet’s art may be not only verbal but also visual. “Iskandar J” is a poem, but it takes on the shape of an object which looks like something formed on a potter’s wheel. Line length, spacing between lines, and punctuation combine to form this symmetrically crafted work of art in five sections, each of which corresponds to the five functionally-significant spans illustrated in Table 1.3: 1-3, 4-10, 11-15, 16-19, 20-22.

“Iskandar J in His Studio”	
1	<p>The Kentong speaks; believers gather. God be praised for such rich calendars of Earth: Special black, white, grey, blue, and ochre. Time-packed layers that, from under valleys, Rise with storied tales, <u>then</u> wait in hills to meet, Match, mix infinitely under a monsoon-sun.</p>
2	<p>Our Maker’s Art is eternal, precise and final. Great are its forms. Take a little in both hands. Persist. Learn all you can till our making is second Nature. <u>Then</u> freely unveil the clay’s deep legacy; The globe’s true perfection: no beginning, no end. Let soul and spirit roam and ride its surfaces</p>

	<p>Into smooth, prospective geometry and calculus.</p>
3	<p>Clay, the silent language of my heart, encloses</p> <p>Shades, contrasts, philosophies, agencies; everything, And more when coaxed. Pour light and water carefully; Stir to purify, refine, <u>then</u> bake a piece of history. What you behold after the fire has done its work, Is but one quest. Abundance lies between the many. You kneed futures, listening as each lump sighs</p> <p>Unto your fingers a mood, a voice, a shape.</p>
4	<p>So when understanding leavens textures Humility is born. I grow with each live touch As busy fingers hear the centre of our Earth; <u>Then</u> my inner being. Secure their bonding With every journey to village and city squatting on Her breathing skin. Thus feel reverence in the Dust</p> <p>From which I come, from which I humbly make.</p>
5	<p>What sparks off soul and mind, what descends through Fingered hope; comes forth steadily upon the wheel, Or tight slabs releasing turquoise stillness into waves; A lesong, four bottles, a bell whose peal is only silence; Flat pillows; the Tao of tea in two great cultures, Passion and intimacy, to change a house into a home.</p> <p>The wheel turns and stops and starts. I dialogue, learn and share As it spins, again, Again.</p>

Table 1.3 Logical mapping

Beyond Technique

But there is also an element of mystery in the poetry of Edwin Thumboo. Mystery in the sense of there being, to borrow Einstein’s wording, “something subtle, intangible and inexplicable,” and truly beyond anyone’s ability to fit neatly into some literary or linguistic description. For some this leads to “[v]eneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend”

(Einstein 157); for some, this force is the Muse, while others “listen to the one we come to find” (“A Poet Reading”), we come expectant of an encounter with “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

There is mystery because there is something incarnational about Edwin Thumboo’s poetry. Incarnational, not in a sacramental sense, but rather as revelation, revealing through our own humanity the image of the Source. The poet invites us, as he puts it, to walk into ourselves, and by doing so, to come to terms with the reality of who I am by my understanding of who “she is” (“A Poet Reading”).

Edwin Thumboo is an artist with a message. While the totality of his message is unlikely to ever be fully captured by even the most careful and detailed analysis, nevertheless this should not prevent us from trying to explore the processes by which the poet creates a highly textured, grammatically intricate work of art with multiple layers of meaning and metaphor. In the words of T.S. Eliot (*Four Quartets*), “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (314).

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