

“This Image of Themselves”: (Re)Discovering the Merlion’s Liminality

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Abstract

The publication by Singaporean small press Firstfruits Publications of *Reflecting on the Merlion* in 2009 marked a consolidation of the canon of Merlion poetry in Singapore. Apart from inspiring the work gathered in this anthology, Edwin Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion” has also attracted both praise and criticism for its engagement with the Merlion. This essay seeks to establish a reading of Thumboo’s poem using the concept of liminality, one that has previously been given little attention in the critical literature on the poem, despite being embedded in the text itself. It also argues that by ignoring this concept, the Merlion poems by Lee Tzu Pheng and Alfian Sa’at that followed after Thumboo’s have had the unfortunate effect of forcing the discourse surrounding the Merlion into a dead end.

Keywords

Merlion, liminality, Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng, Alfian Sa’at, Singaporean poetry

Reviewing the 2009 anthology *Reflecting on the Merlion*, Thow Xin Wei suggests that “with the publication of this anthology we can perhaps mark the formal establishment of the Merlion poem as a certain ‘genre’ of Singaporean poetry. This could be a good thing: a poet now has some idea of where to start, what paths have been travelled and where to go.” Providing such a roadmap likely informed the editorial decision not merely to consolidate a canon of past Merlion poems, but also to extend the anthology’s reach to embrace contemporary work. “Ulysses by the Merlion” is given pride of place after the various editors’ prefaces and Section One, indicating its stature as the literary forefather of the rest of the anthology (Chong 5). Section One contains other reprinted poems (with two exceptions), whereas Section Two contains poems appearing in print for the first time. Many of these poems actually come from mentors and mentees of the local Creative Arts Programme, where Thumboo has been an adviser for the past two decades. Their inclusion is the result of his approaching the organisers to solicit poems, out of his desire to reflect “both

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the voices of young and mature writers in this anthology” and his belief that “the anthology would benefit from a diversity of perspectives – positive, negative and ambivalent” (Lim S.Y.).

Thow further adds that with the anthology’s publication, “the reader and critic have a pre-existing corpus which enriches the reading of future works.” However, due to the comparative recency of the anthology, coupled with a nearly two-decade gap between Thumboo’s poem and the next significant Merlion poem, Lee Tzu Pheng’s “The Merlion to Ulysses” (1997), academic scholarship has tended to focus exclusively on making sense of “Ulysses by the Merlion.” For instance, Jan B. Gordon contends that it should be read in light of the Singapore government’s utilitarian language policy, in which the various languages used in Singapore can be manipulated to achieve specific, strategic economic and sociocultural goals (45-46). Hence, the poem winds up being “merely derivative, rather than a variation or an extension of the [Ulysses] myth” (47). Similarly, John Kwan-Terry suggests that the poem fails to bridge in itself “the Western mythic vision and the Eastern mythic envisioning,” with the result being that the “tone is eloquent, but the language is willed, and the images, particularly the icons of culture, are void of resonances” (125). However, these criticisms appear to assume a monolithic agenda for Thumboo’s poem that misrepresents the complexity and subtlety of its position. “Ulysses by the Merlion” is not simply an apologia for the government’s hard-nosed pragmatism.

In contrast, Yasmine Gooneratne defends the poem against Gordon’s charge of unoriginality, on the grounds that unlike the Ulysses of ancient Greece, who would have been appalled at how the people of Thumboo’s poem “Have changed their gods,”² Thumboo’s instead “takes a firmly positive view of Singapore’s new society as materially, architecturally, aesthetically and culturally creative” (15). She posits that the “development of a Western classical myth has been poetically managed in terms of a principle recognizable as Buddhist in origin: the concept of a universe governed by change and impermanence” (15), which undermines Gordon’s argument that the myth “becomes a mere literary frame for a landscape poem celebrating the ‘permanent values’ amidst the rapid technological change that develops a nation” (47). Gooneratne’s comment here echoes Kirpal Singh, who proposes that a Singapore classic “will have to have transition as its theme... [and] capture the permanence of impermanence” (“Towards a Singapore Classic” 79). Nevertheless, Singh’s analysis is not without its problems. Contradictorily, despite declaring that Thumboo’s poem “captures a crucial historical epoch, the transitional stage between the coming and the settling of the psyche, between the adventure and the resolve, between

² Edwin Thumboo, “Ulysses by the Merlion.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 18-19.

the aspiration and the actuality” (“Towards a Singapore Classic” 83), he maintains that it is not a classic and only “paves the way” for one to emerge (“Towards a Singapore Classic” 80). His reservation stems from what he regards as the poem’s “subtle ambiguity” that militates against how a classic is typically “an affirmative, wholesome, resolved, and inspiring work” (“Towards a Singapore Classic” 81).

Yet this ambiguity is what Rajeev S. Patke finds praiseworthy, although he misconstrues Singh’s comments to mean that “Ulysses by the Merlion” is itself destined to attain the status of a local classic (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 24). Patke reads Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion” and Lee’s “The Merlion to Ulysses” through the lens of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in order to demonstrate that “[n]either poem is quite complete, even in the shadow of the other” (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 29). However, the strength of Thumboo’s poem, in Patke’s view, lies in how it anticipates and partially redresses the objections of a poem like Lee’s, whereas in the midst of critiquing, Lee’s poem fails to “leav[e] itself any positive space to abide in” (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 28). While Patke concludes, “We await the next begetting” (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 29), he nonetheless stops short of articulating what form this might take, whether in Singaporean poetry or Singaporeans’ engagement with the Merlion. He perhaps gestures towards it by reprinting (yet not discussing) Alfian Sa’at’s “The Merlion” in the article, a poem that Eddie Tay sees as sharing affinities with Thumboo’s:

[They draw] attention to the ambivalence that attends to the formation of national identity. The two poems display two different kinds of awareness of the essential conundrum. The first recognises the power of national symbols in the creation of a myth of the nation’s origins, while the second reveals the dubious effects of such power as they become manifest in those subjected to it. (83-84)

While the foregoing critics have by no means exhausted the interpretive possibilities of Thumboo, Lee and Alfian’s poems, the continued proliferation of Merlion poems in the wake of theirs means that there is now a wealth of material that has yet to receive sufficient critical attention, in terms of how they reflect Singaporeans’ understanding of the Merlion. Colin Tan makes a cursory attempt, proposing the addition of poems by Felix Cheong, Gwee Li Sui, Alvin Pang, Daren Shiau and Yong Shu Hoong to the Thumboo/Lee/Alfian “trinity” (275), all save Yong’s “Merlion (Snapshot #5)” having now been collected in *Reflecting on the Merlion*. However, he does not undertake any sustained analysis of these poems, and potentially oversimplifies matters when he suggests that Merlion poetry as a whole is solely reacting against Thumboo’s poem, as opposed to the Merlion itself (276). This view is shared by Tay, who sees the genre of Merlion poetry as exhibiting a Bloomian anxiety of influence (82), and

also by Patke, who claims that “[e]ach attempt by a younger poet to re-write Thumboo’s poem confirms its status as the patriarchal script that requires and invites incessant acts of provocation, less like drawing a pair of moustaches on the Mona Lisa than of children eager to step outside the parental shadow” (“The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo” 184).

On the other hand, in one of the first works of criticism to address *Reflecting on the Merlion*, Christine Chong offers a more positive (i.e. less patricidally Freudian) way of viewing the textual relationships between the wider body of Merlion poems, approaching the anthology via Gérard Genette’s views on hypertextuality, which he defines as “any relationship uniting a text B (... the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (... the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (5; emphasis in the original). From this starting point, she then attempts to trace parallels between the development of major movements in the Western literary tradition and the evolving nature of Merlion poetry (12). When she does mention the anxiety of influence, it is to point out that “detouring from the original” is key to overcoming it, and what she sees as modernist and postmodernist Merlion poems have achieved this (10). Where Chong falls short is in the glaring omission of the anthology’s Section Two from her analysis, as though she has had to cherry pick poems to parallel the historical trajectory from Romanticism to postmodernism in the Western literary tradition. Her comment that the “extension of Thumboo’s Ulysses from Tennyson’s privileges the Western tradition over the East, which is only gazed upon, passive and enigmatic, reinstating Orientalist structures” (7) also seems at odds with the goal of reading a Singaporean body of poems precisely in terms of that tradition.

Adopting a different approach to categorising Merlion poems, Eric Tinsay Valles sees them as historically significant because they represent two types of creative activity taking place in Singapore, as defined by Koh Tai Ann: “culturally symbolic expressions of communal identity” and “the pop culture of Westernized, cosmopolitan youth” (716). He identifies Thumboo and Lee with the former because they “recognised that [the] Merlion had the capacity to represent cultural symbolism and collective activity,” while subsequent Merlion poets are aligned with the latter because they “engaged with the Merlion using tools and techniques drawn from Western pop culture” (193). Where Valles’s essay is most significant, however, is when he not only describes “Ulysses by the Merlion” as “the quintessential Singapore poem” (thus affirming Patke’s misreading of Singh), but then goes on to refer to Maurice Baker, the poem’s dedicatee and “the son of an English migrant father and a Tamil mother,” as “the site of liminal existence,” yet having “no difficulty in leading a fully integrated life” (195). Valles’s comment thus opens the way for the introduction of the concept of liminality into the present analysis, a concept that derives from the field of anthropology, specifically the work done by Arnold van

Gennep, and subsequently, Victor Turner.

Gennep theorises that rites of passage can be further broken down into “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)” (11). Turner expands on this by suggesting that the “subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible,’” and that this invisibility consists in being “at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (*The Forest of Symbols* 95, 96). He then further connects this to the idea of pollution as “a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction” (Douglas, qtd. in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 97), stating that “transitional beings are particularly polluting” (*The Forest of Symbols* 97). (There is perhaps then a level of irony in how Lim Nang Seng’s original statue of the Merlion is a structure that is perpetually spewing clean water from its mouth.) Turner’s later work goes on to draw attention to how the condition of liminality is one that is intrinsically “full of potency and potentiality. It may also be full of experiment and play. There may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors” (“Frame, Flow and Reflection” 466). Liminality thus offers a powerful new paradigm through which to view Merlion poetry, providing a way to understand the Merlion’s paradoxical ability to hold multiple meanings, depending on the context in which it finds itself.

Indeed, poetry seems to have a particular affinity for the Merlion, in a way that other literary genres in Singapore do not. While artists and sculptors have been creating a host of works in Singapore that represent, reinvent or subvert the Merlion symbol, “form[ing] a part of the local discourse... however bad the actual quality of the art” (Ng, “10 Gloriously Cheesy [Part 2]”), notable literary representations of the symbol outside of Merlion poetry consist of Gwee’s *Myth of the Stone* (1993), the first local graphic novel, in which merlions are part of a whole range of fantastical creatures and fighting against evil (Ng, “10 Gloriously Cheesy [Part 1]”), and the story “Lion City Daikajiu” in Jason Erik Lundberg’s 2011 collection *Red Dot Irreal*, in which the original Merlion statue joins other Singaporean landmarks in “declar[ing] war” on the island (60). One might chalk this imbalance up to Kirpal Singh’s remark that in Singaporean literature, “prose has not had as rich a harvest as poetry” (“Singapore Literature in English” 480). On the other hand, Thumboo concedes that the predilection of poets for the Merlion perhaps arises from a combination of poetry’s linguistic compression being more amenable to focusing on a specific symbol like the Merlion and the influence of his own “Ulysses by the Merlion” on later poets (“Re: interview request”).

Yet reading through the assembled poems in *Reflecting on the Merlion*, it can be tempting to agree with Thow’s criticism that “while several of the poems are fine, lyrical works individually, put together in an anthology, one can’t help but notice the marked repetition of themes, images and poetic devices used in

response to the Merlion.” However, one may recall here T.S. Eliot’s argument in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.... [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.... (15; emphasis in the original)

Thus these repetitions could be seen as later poets simultaneously signalling an awareness of their literary forebears and making a space for themselves in the ongoing poetic conversation surrounding the Merlion. In addition, since all the poems in the anthology are by living poets, able to take stock of each other’s work, they are in a position to demonstrate Eliot’s idea that where poetry is concerned, in which judgement is more about comparison than competition, i.e. works are “measured by each other,” it should come as no surprise “that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (15). An instance of this is Alfian’s acknowledgement, “Iconoclasm is easy.... Literary patricide, triggered by the anxiety of influence, is even easier. I looked back at my poem and decided that it is too reactionary” (“Empty Signifiers” 17). However, Thow is right to point out that the repetitions may also suggest that “the enterprise of Merlion poetry is paddling around in circles.” The poetic conversation has become moribund even as new poets continue lending their voices to it, but only because that avenue of inquiry which abjures the Merlion’s liminality has been exhausted. In effect, the measured message of Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion” has become buried by a recursive debate that tries to fix the Merlion’s meaning in place.

At this juncture, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the underlying message of Thumboo’s poem being “measured.” In his preface to *Reflecting on the Merlion*, Thumboo comments that icons are “major signifiers, especially those spliced into the nation’s identity and therefore virtually immemorial. They evolve over time, gradually working their way into the totality of a culture and environment” (“Of Icons” 8-9). That word “spliced” is illuminating because it suggests that even something as artificial in its origins as the Merlion can be grafted onto the Singaporean identity, and given sufficient time and historical distance, it will be incorporated, as part of the city-state’s process of

“mineralization” (De Landa 26; Schoppert 27). Alternatively, it reminds us that identity, like a film, can be a form of ongoing, unfolding narrative. Either way, the simple fact of the Merlion’s existence as a logo or statues should not be taken as the final word in its still-developing story. Even its apparent failure to be taken to heart by Singaporeans is not grounds for completely dismissing it yet, since Thumboo’s choice of verb in “evolve” suggests that the Merlion will necessarily find itself in a protracted liminal state, as it transitions into a position of influence within the urban – and therefore the sociocultural – fabric (Hull, Lam, and Vigo 110). It is this calibrated position vis-à-vis the Merlion that I believe Thumboo espouses in “Ulysses by the Merlion,” which some subsequent poems have obscured.

Indeed, “Ulysses by the Merlion” encodes the idea of liminality into itself on several levels. To begin with, I have already noted how Valles identifies Baker, the poem’s dedicatee, as “the site of liminal existence” because of his mixed parentage (195). While Thumboo himself is also of mixed race, more significantly, Baker was the chair of the English department at the National University of Singapore before Thumboo, and Peter Nazareth sees the poem’s dedication as a “tribute” to Thumboo’s tertiary education that schooled him in the Western canon (32). It is out of this literary grounding that Homer’s Odysseus springs into Thumboo’s poem, the Roman form of his name Ulysses being used for reasons of euphony, to evoke an association with the Roman Empire that conquered the countries that would become colonial powers in later centuries, and to call to mind James Joyce’s own epic novel *Ulysses*, which also appropriates the Homeric figure (Nazareth 33). As a result, Thumboo’s poem has been interpreted as imaginatively building on Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses,” indicating an “emphasis on the English literary tradition as not only a source upon which a local poet must draw to carry weight, but as a tradition that is desirable; one that the Singaporean poet should like to insert himself into” (Chong 7).

While Chong finds this fundamental aspect of the poem problematic because only Ulysses speaks in Thumboo’s poem, not the Merlion, and “[t]he extension of Thumboo’s Ulysses from Tennyson’s privileges the Western tradition over the East, which is only gazed upon, passive and enigmatic, reinstating Orientalist structures” (7), this perhaps overstates the case. A Singaporean writer like Thumboo should not feel obligated to deny his awareness of the rest of English literature, simply out of a misguided sense of nationalism. Instead, it would be more productive to acknowledge that in such a scenario, “identity is at once plural and partial.... But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy” (Rushdie 15). Thumboo has also stated his belief that Singaporean innovations in poetry “should not take the new writing away from the main creative tradition in English” (“Developing a Distinctive Style in Local Writing” 23), i.e.

an argument for continuity in the Eliotic sense instead of rupture. Furthermore, such a reading of Ulysses in the poem fails to appreciate his role as an archetype of the trickster figure (Russo 255). The connection of the Ulysses figure to liminality lies in how the trickster “facilitates change and forward movement” (Waddell xiv), “ideally suited to be an agent of transformation” (Kalsched 189).

This sense of movement is foregrounded in lines from the first stanza of Thumboo’s poem: “I have sailed many waters,” “travelled,/ Travelled and travelled.” The tripling of the word “travelled” might seem excessive, but its occurrence over a line break is a detail that actually strengthens its rhetorical effect, emphasising the distance of Ulysses’ voyaging within a stanza that is itself one long, winding sentence. A hallmark of Thumboo’s poem is also how it persistently balances its syntax and imagery, juxtaposing opposites and foreshadowing how the Merlion might come to embody the paradoxical either/and state of liminality. Ulysses is implicated in this either/and position when he proclaims to have “Met strange people singing/ New myths; made myths myself,” a telling description, given how Thumboo’s poem is seeking to unlock the mythic potential of the Merlion for the city-state of Singapore. In relation to the Merlion, the poem’s opening lines, “sailed many waters,/ Skirted islands of fire,” prepare the way for “this lion of the sea,” which as “Half-beast, half-fish,/ This powerful creature of land and sea,” draws from and dominates both the terrestrial and aquatic spheres. Yet despite their shared quality as liminal figures, the Merlion still “Puzzles” Ulysses. For this, it has been compared to the Theban Sphinx, another monstrously liminal creature, whose “puzzle can only be solved by those who have known it” (Tope 93).

The isolation of the word “Puzzles” in a single line makes it the linguistic fulcrum about which the poem pivots, “both incriminating and honest. It hints at a disjuncture between the perceiver and the perceived, the gazer and the gazed, in that there is incomprehensibility on the part of the perceiver. It is honest because it does not claim what is not there – full understanding, unitary perception” (Tope 94). Yet having confronted the Merlion, the Ulysses of Thumboo’s poem turns instead to a description of Singaporeans: “They make, they serve,/ They buy, they sell.” This is where the language of “Ulysses by the Merlion” reveals how Thumboo is keenly aware that the icon he is appropriating as a symbol of Singaporean identity is already fraught, inextricably bound up with the city-state’s economic imperatives. The spare diction and syntactical parallelism of the lines make the language of commerce stand out even more, recalling how in terms of nation branding, “the brand representation that is the Merlion... is a mixing of legend with a commercial rather than cultural engagement” (Koh B.S. 124). Nevertheless, it is precisely the latter that “Ulysses by the Merlion” seeks to pursue, holding out this hope for Singaporeans:

Despite unequal ways,
 Together they mutate,
 Explore the edges of harmony,
 Search for a centre

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake wrote that “Without Contraries is no progression” (xvi), but what “Ulysses by the Merlion” gestures towards is the effacing of contrariety, suggesting that under the aegis of liminality, the potential energy of opposites can be sublimated and reconciled in the service of “singing/ New myths” and “harmony.” In addition, the verb “mutate” also recalls “evolve” from Thumboo’s preface to the anthology. While the verbs possess multiple meanings, the ones most likely to surface in a contemporary reader’s mind probably come from biology. Both indicate the occurrence of change, although “evolve” has the more positive connotation of a development “from a comparatively rudimentary to a more highly organized condition” (*OED Online*), whereas “mutate” strikes one as having to do with an aberration from the norm, which at first seems at odds with a reading of Thumboo’s poem that sees mythic potential in the Merlion as a good thing. Yet the original biological sense of “mutation” had to do with “[a]n abrupt transition producing an organism with heritable characteristics differing markedly from those of the parent type... a mechanism for the origin of new species” (*OED Online*), which aptly ties back to Ulysses’ declaration that “Nothing, nothing in my days/ Foreshadowed this.”

A triumphalist reading of Thumboo’s poem would push the interpretation of the Merlion further at this point, claiming it as though Thumboo intends it purely as a metonym for Singapore as a rising metropolis, “So shining, urgent,/ Full of what is now,” where against the odds, a people have “Built towers topless as Ilium’s.” However, the poem’s language subtly, but consistently, resists this grand narrative, and it cannot simply be viewed as a mouthpiece for government propaganda, “evoked by the non-too-subtle [sic] demands made on public figures for clear demonstrations of loyalty” (Fernando, qtd. in Chiang 148). While various critics have noted the poem’s intertextual references (Gordon 48; Gooneratne 13; Chong 6-7), none mentions how “changed their gods” is a quotation from the King James Bible (33). In full, the verse reads, “Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit” (Jer. 2.11). While Gooneratne interprets this line as signifying Ulysses’s approval of what Singaporeans have achieved (15), the Biblical reference allows the line to preserve a level of ambivalence more in keeping with the liminal function of the Merlion, lending it the air of a rebuke, especially given how the poem concludes:

Perhaps having dealt in things,

Surfeited on them,
Their spirits yearn again for images,
Adding to the dragon, phoenix,
Garuda, naga those horses of the sun,
This lion of the sea,
This image of themselves.

Thus commerce almost becomes a necessary evil, akin to a phase that Singaporeans must pass through and become exhausted with, before “Their spirits yearn again for images” around which a national consciousness can coalesce. Or as in one critic’s formulation:

Nationalism functions as a kind of supplementary excess within capitalism: nationalism is both more and less than capitalism, its indispensable supplement without which it cannot function and yet which is never able to make up fully the lack which it supplements. This lack at the origin marks the paradox that nationalism, like capitalism, can never fully succeed in realizing itself. This reveals not so much a disabling flaw as the secret of its persistent and productive dynamism. (Young 14)

Once again, this points back to the idea that liminality is “a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibility” (Turner, “Dewey” 42). It is thus significant that the creatures Thumboo cites are not intended to replace each other, but rather they form a repository, “a pool to which we can add, but above all else, tap” (“The Search for Style and Theme” 7). The fact that Apollo’s horses are among the creatures being added may be read as a poetic affirmation of the importance to Thumboo of preserving the Western literary tradition as part of the cultural inheritance for Singaporeans, but the final pride of place is still reserved for the Merlion, “This lion of the sea,/ This image of themselves,” since “[i]t is manufactured, as they were manufacturers” (Nazareth 32).

Even so, any reader or critic of “Ulysses by the Merlion” would do well to remember that the poem’s final stanza has always been contingent, thanks to its opening word “Perhaps,” which makes Thumboo’s statement intrinsically provisional rather than prescriptive. This crucial distinction seems to have been lost in the polemic response to Thumboo’s poem that is Lee Tzu Pheng’s “The Merlion to Ulysses.” Her poem is a stern rejection of everything that Thumboo’s stands for, the effect being what Patke calls “a general bitterness in which nothing is spared” (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 28). In the process, what is lost is the “subtle ambiguity” (Singh, “Towards a Singapore Classic” 81) of Thumboo’s position on the Merlion, since her poem does not actually dispute its power as an icon (R.B.H. Goh 35), instead substituting its liminality with a reification of one particular aspect of its being, i.e. its paramount

economic importance as “the instant brainchild/ of a practical people.”³ Lee has stated how she is “irritated” with Thumboo’s poem because “some of the things Ulysses was saying in that poem just comes [sic] too pat and too easy” (qtd. in Ong 21). Yet in emptying the Merlion of mythic potential via a critique of the crassness of its commercial origins, her poem is then unable to articulate an alternative configuration of the Singaporean identity, “disabled from the affirmation of any kind of polity that will suffice.... What it can speak of is only disenchantment” (Patke, “Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 28).

Instead, what “The Merlion to Ulysses” establishes is a parodic form of mythic potential, predicated on precisely the economic pragmatism of the Merlion symbol, as opposed to any sort of affective connection it might eventually engender in Singaporeans. This is a sardonic treatment, in that it views the Merlion’s meaning as always already and immutably predetermined by its economic instrumentality. It is plain that for Lee, the Merlion was never “a free agent, it is only the embodiment of what the poet does not like” (Patke, “Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 29). Still, the hermetic nature of her riposte hardly seems fair to Thumboo’s earlier poem, which attempts to open up the question of the Merlion’s significance for debate, even as it performs the work of claiming it for the national psyche. Lee’s poem is almost vengeful in how it silences and castigates Ulysses, the latter task being done through a sustained pattern of alliteration, which in the context of the monologic form of the poem, verges uncharitably on mockery. The poem logically connects “detours” to “delays,” itself a verbal pun on the preceding line’s “daily,” due to the inversion of the vowel sounds. This suggests there is something habitual in Ulysses’ behaviour and “ill-planned journey,” which “spell[s] decadence, instability and dreams,” thus forming a staunch dismissal of the “Good ancestral dreams” of Thumboo’s poem.

This word cluster of indolence and inefficiency in Lee’s poem is contrasted with another that signifies the ideas of propriety and productivity: “proved/ productive and loyal, properly at home.” The Merlion also queries whether Ulysses is “Properly impressed,” before reminding him to “remember to respect [its] creators,” the auditory echoes in the words “impressed” and “respect” again emphasising the poem’s concern with appropriate responses and reactions. The implication is that a symbol like the Merlion cannot command respect for its own sake, as one might expect for an icon, but can only serve as a proxy for those who made it: “I am the scion of a wealthy race./ I wear the silver armour of my moneyed people.” The first line draws attention to the question of primogeniture and the Merlion’s fitness to “inherit” the mantle of Singaporean iconicity, since it was “chosen” rather than “really

³ Lee Tzu Pheng, “The Merlion to Ulysses.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 22-23.

evolved” (Lee T.P., qtd. in Ong 21). This inverts Thumboo’s view of the Merlion being assimilated into a Singaporean pantheon of images, once again focusing squarely on the Merlion’s touristic origins. That the Merlion wears silver rather than golden armour also suggests it is intrinsically a second-rate symbol. Given Lee’s Catholic background, an allusion to the Biblical 30 pieces of silver is also likely, but since the “silver armour” belongs to the Merlion’s “moneyed people,” both parties are complicit in the self-deception that is the Merlion’s iconicity, which itself supposedly betrays the function of genuine icons.

Curiously though, in spite of its bitter, hard-line stance, liminality still breaks through in Lee’s poem, if only in the second stanza’s accusation that Ulysses is “wedded to adulterous adventure,/ indulging a monstrous taste/ for consorting with monsters.” Except instead of potentiality, here monstrosity is decidedly negative, alliterating with “misbegotten” and “malingering,” which raises the spectre of lassitude that is anathema to “a practical people,” Lee’s Merlion also cunningly subverts liminal “instability,” presenting itself as the antidote in the form of “instant brainchild,” a hyperbolic claim, since however artificial its origins, the Merlion did not emerge overnight. It took time for it to go from symbol to statue, from statue to Thumboo’s poem, from Thumboo’s poem to Lee’s. The exaggeration is part of the poem’s deliberately cynical pose, an artifice it hints at in the lines “Look how easy it is to sell you/ my story? Are you the warrior, or the gull.” Lee’s poem brooks no dissent in order to satirise the unilateral imposition of the Merlion on Singapore (and Singaporeans) by the then-Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. The problem is that in arguing against the Merlion strictly because of its touristic origins, “The Merlion to Ulysses” has been prematurely polarising in its approach to the Merlion’s iconicity. By setting itself up as antithetical to “Ulysses by the Merlion,” it has created a false dichotomy, foreclosing the possibility of negotiating a nuanced approach to the Merlion that accounts for the symbol’s liminality.

Patke’s conclusion to his comparison of the Thumboo and Lee poems demonstrates the deleterious effect on the poetic discourse that the latter has had: “Neither poem is quite complete, even in the shadow of the other. Neither ameliorative utopianism nor resigned fatalism are a complete dialectic in themselves. We await the next begetting” (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 29). It is true that Thumboo’s poem is intended to be optimistically aspirational, “hoping that a Singapore surfeited on the commodity-fetish will then turn to the icon used emblematically by its poet, finding it an apt composite image for what they should aspire to become and what they have been rather than for what they are” (Patke, “Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 28). Yet this could only be seen as utopian thinking when it is set against the disapproving acrimony of Lee’s poem and its own tentativeness disregarded. Alfian’s “The Merlion” might then be thought of as “the next begetting” that Patke is

awaiting (“Singapore and the Two Ulysses” 29), the next stage in the evolution of the particular strand of poetic discourse that rejects the Merlion’s liminality. The poem begins innocuously enough with the remark, “I wish it had paws.”⁴ Yet where Lee’s poem only disparaged liminality as a concept, using the Merlion to subvert it without acknowledging that the Merlion itself is already monstrous and liminal, Alfian’s derides it for being “grotesque the way it is,” “writing in the water,/ like some post-Chernobyl nightmare.”

The sophisticated attack then calls into question the in-between state of the Merlion, framing this as an uncomfortable position for the icon to be in, “marooned on this rough shore,/ as if unsure of its rightful/ harbour,” thus substituting uncertainty for the propriety of Lee’s poem. Like Lee’s Merlion, Alfian’s is also a traitor, but here the charge of inauthenticity is specifically framed in relation to its miscegenation and its supposed aquatic origins, querying if it “has decided to abandon the seaweed-haunted/ depths for land”:

Perhaps it is even ashamed

...

to have been a creature of the sea; look at how
it tries to purge itself of its aquatic ancestry,
in this ceaseless torrent of denial, draining
the body of rivers of histories, lymphatic memories.

Alfian also invokes the Sphinx comparison, but diminishes the Merlion to a “lesser brother,” emphasising the “sibling polarity, how its sister’s lips are sealed/ with self-knowledge and how its own jaws/ clamp open in self-doubt.” If the Merlion is a “riddle” in Alfian’s poem, whose very existence consists in being “known” and thus “demarc[at]ing the boundary of the nation” (Tope 93), the poem has so far staged “the improbability of the Merlion as a national symbol” (Tay 83). For “after all these years,” as Alfian points out, it remains unable to resolve its own identity, let alone be equal to the task of representing a Singaporean identity.

However, the lyrical eloquence of the critique in the first two-thirds of the poem is undercut by its final stanzas, which actually hold up the liminal character of the Merlion as a parallel for the Singaporean identity, though where someone like Thumboo might see potential in this and embrace it, Alfian only sees a contradiction to be mocked. The Merlion “spews continually if only to ruffle/ its own reflection in the water,” in order that it need not confront the fixity of its own façade, which would “only scare a creature so eager to reinvent itself.” While the behaviour itself is neurotic, at least the notion of reinvention and endlessly malleable meanings jives with the manner in which Singapore’s

⁴ Alfian Sa’at, “The Merlion.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 24-25.

brand positioning undergoes periodic revamps, steered by the Singapore Tourism Board and other government agencies (Koh B.S. 36). The speaker critiquing the Merlion unwittingly aligns himself with its identity flux because of “the blond highlights in [his] black hair/ And [his] blue lenses the shadow of a foreign sky,” as well as his “acquired accent.” The difference between them is that in the poem, “the Merlion is cast as being aware of its own incongruity” (Tay 83), whereas the speaker is not seen to demonstrate any awareness of how his appearance superficially mirrors the Western stereotype of blond hair and blue eyes, while inevitably being a pale imitation, a “shadow” of what it apes.

This location of a critique of the Merlion in the voice of someone who has visibly rejected his Singaporean identity in favour of a superficial Westernisation proves problematic. It is clear that the poem’s strategy demands the acknowledgement that “the moment one articulates scepticism towards the legitimacy of a national icon is the moment one would have to examine the condition of one’s own identity-formation leading to that articulation” (Tay 84). Yet Alfian’s poem has also created a double bind for itself, since the Merlion and its critique are now equally suspect. This enforces a kind of poetic ambivalence, also manifested in the poem’s written out pauses that are placed on their own as the second and fifth stanzas, and diction that seeks to co-opt agreement even as it falls into inarticulacy, “I mean, you know, I mean....” However, all this still does not constitute recognition of the Merlion’s liminal potential, which would otherwise have secured for it a measure of “self-knowledge” within Alfian’s poem. The poem cannot escape its self-imposed impasse, instead remaining a series of questions that beget further questions, prevented from contributing to the project of building the basis for a Singaporean identity. Thus there may be a deliberate irony in how the last line of Alfian’s poem circles back like the ouroboros onto its opening statement: “Well, yes, but I still do wish it had paws.” It suggests that attempting to pin down the Merlion’s meaning, however intellectually attractive, is perhaps ultimately an exercise in futility.

If so, this wry comment appears to have been lost on subsequent poets. After all, “[t]o write the anti-Merlion poem is to ultimately end up mythologizing the Merlion” (Alfian, “Empty Signifiers” 17). So the trio of Thumboo, Lee and Alfian have instead become touchstones by which succeeding poets have defined their own poems, perpetuating this line of debate on what the Merlion means. Cheong dedicates “The Obligatory Merlion Poem” to Alfian, asking “What would your wrecking ball poetry/ have accomplished”⁵. In “Merlign,” Pang alludes to all three poets, as examples of how the Merlion

⁵ Felix Cheong, “The Obligatory Merlion Poem.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 43.

has “a face poets love/ to woo,”⁶ while Shiau names them directly in “Merlion Speaks,” as his Merlion is “tired of being upright, erect on [its] tail,/ posing for pictures, posed poems by ponderous/ poets.”⁷ The epigraph of Gui Wei Hsin’s “Telemachus by the Merlion” takes things to the next level, naming all the preceding poets (save for Shiau) because its own text is a bricolage of their images and phrases, with the difference that it is now Telemachus, son of Odysseus, beside the Merlion. This poetic “remixing” also takes place in the new poems of Section Two, e.g. Geoffrey Lim’s “Rhetorical Action,” whose opening line, “Merlion: you are my country –/ A mutant, mid-metamorphosis,”⁸ echoes two Alfian poems, “The Merlion” and “Singapore You Are Not My Country,” while Lim’s “shattering the mirror” forcefully reworks Alfian’s “ruffle/ its own reflection.”

The image of mutation and metamorphosis in a poem like Lim’s suggests that the idea of the Merlion’s monstrosity still persists, even among the newest generation of poets. Yet looking at the Section Two poems from these Creative Arts Programme participants, it seems any inkling of liminality has nonetheless been completely extinguished, for they either consider the Merlion’s ambivalent meanings inadequate or irrelevant. The title of Lim’s poem is telling, indicating that the poet considers it a foregone conclusion that a creature “struck/ dumb,” could never “answer,” and thus deserves no “blame.” In “More Than a Sum,” Kylie Goh begins with a plea to “Friends from a foreign land,”⁹ asking that they “not judge [her] home by this false face.” In the end, the touristic aspect of the Merlion is found wanting: “Amalgamation of fish and lion, it is like the money/ it purportedly ushers, it could never be enough –/ of an identity.” On the other hand, Theophile Kwek’s “Elegy to the Merlion” calls it “another/ nameless uncle at the coffee-shop whom/ we’d really like to meet but just can’t find the time,”¹⁰ which is symptomatic of the “broken relationship” Singaporeans have with the Merlion. It is also an indictment of “a generation that/ does not see luck as an independent variable,” and which thus could not care less about the stories spun by tourist agencies about the Merlion as a harbinger of good fortune.

It is Shiau’s poem, however, which has already provided what should amount to the final word in this line of poetic discourse: “for the country’s

⁶ Alvin Pang, “Merlign.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 26-27.

⁷ Daren Shiau, “Merlion Speaks.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 40.

⁸ Geoffrey Lim, “Rhetorical Action.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 70.

⁹ Kylie Goh, “More Than a Sum.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 61.

¹⁰ Theophile Kwek, “Elegy to the Merlion.” *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Eds. Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2009. 64.

sake/ let me stand for something.” This is the logical terminus of a quest for the Merlion’s meaning that fails to take into account its liminality. If state-sponsored meanings in the name of tourism are distasteful and unsatisfactory, and yet it is precisely this touristic aspect that seems to prevent many Singaporeans from establishing a connection of their own to the Merlion, what is there left but exasperation at the Merlion’s vacuous artificiality? There is perhaps also a measure of desperation in that final line, voiced by a diminutive icon that feels itself to have been “an afterthought” even at the point of its creation, now “hav[ing] lost [its] relevance,” signalled by the lower-case ‘i’ throughout the poem. Nevertheless, I believe that the Merlion is not beyond redemption, and that a way forward has always existed in plain sight. A closer look at other Merlion poems, beginning with Pang’s “Merlign” and Cheong’s “The Obligatory Merlion Poem,” will reveal how these actually gesture towards an alternative, more pragmatic form of engagement with the Merlion, one that I believe to be more fruitful than remaining at the level of contesting its meaning, since the poetic lineage they form keeps faith with Thumboo better in preserving a space in which the Merlion might continue evolving.

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