Title: Creative writing in English in Singapore
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Source: 18th Congress of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association, 27 January to 2 February 1997, Wellington, New Zealand
Organised by: Australian Universities Language and Literature Association

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CREATIVE WRITIN' IN ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE:

THE POETRY OF EIWIN THUMROO.

A paper prepared for delivery at the 18th Congress of the
Australian Universities Language and Literature Association
to be held at the Victoria University of Wellington from
the 27th of January till the 2nd of February, 1977. (Thanks are
due to Mr. Ooi Boo Eng of the Department of
English, University of Malaya for his help in preparing
this paper.)

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In the Singapore/Malaysia region writing in English began to be taken seriously only after the second World War. Creative efforts in this direction had, of course, been previously attempted but most of them proved dismally feeble and derivative. This is understandable when one bears in mind the pertinent fact that Palgrave's *Olden Treasury* was for a long time the literary text on which students in the higher institutions of learning were nourished. Romanticised sentimentality and/or violently agonised profusions were the two extremes within which fell the majority of creative writing that was produced. It is true that when the movements for independence in the two regions were initiated in the late forties and the very early fifties, some fairly effective political poetry in English found its way into university periodicals and other random publications. Perhaps, the most unfortunate feature of these ventures was that the personalities associated with them were motivated more by propagandist and immediate concerns than by a genuine desire to lay the foundations of a truly distinctive literary voice. Nevertheless, these were the beginnings and it did not take too long before seriously literary-minded people began to take upon themselves the responsibility of contributing and enhancing the tradition which the elders had willy-nilly started. Nationalistic fervour invariably led to the dawning of a new consciousness which needed articulation and this offered a good opportunity of budding writers to find the necessary nexus between their work and the audience at large. It was at this interesting stage in the history of the two countries that significant writers in English emerged.

It was to be expected that a certain measure of self-consciousness would be reflected in the works that were thus borne. To someone who is not totally familiar with the intricacies of social-political-economic interactions among the many and varied ethnic communities of Singapore and Malaysia, it may be told that the English language provided a neutral and racially objective vehicle of communication. Writing in English, the more vocal individuals
could meet on a common ground to express their feelings and attitudes about matters of national concern. While this afforded an excellent outlet for creativity it did to some extent nurture an apprehension on the part of those who were not always sympathetic to the imbibing of a foreign culture even when this was only made manifest in the choice of using a language. Early attempts at creative writing in English therefore were bound to reveal marks of a guarded expressiveness. As the years passed, however, the writers gained confidence and with exposure to the literatures that were fast being produced in many other of the third-world countries their morale was boosted. Among the most significant of this newer breed of writers was Edwin Thumboo (b. 1933) who has today emerged as the foremost poet of the region. This paper attempts some tentative formulations on Thumboo's poetic motifs and style with the hope of demonstrating that even when English is not the native tongue, a poetry of high order can be written by a man who seriously and conscientiously applies himself to the art.

Perhaps a good way of approaching Thumboo's poetry is to focus attention on a poem which, though not in itself very successful, reveals alot of what characterises his best work.

Words are dangerous, especially
The simple kind you leave behind for others,
For undesirable relatives and assorted purposes,
They are understood simply, edited,
Taken with a kind of air, a careful disregard;
Their plainness complicates.

When you say 'Tell him please,
That the anger has come to pass
That friendship is not mained...' or
'Please do come but after the
Fever has been put aside...'
When you mean to be polite,
Careful, explicit, considerate, circumspect,
Adopting the proper tone,
You are likely to be quoted as saying
'He won't...'

Words are neither valid, merciful nor bad,
In themselves, nothing unless used, urged,
Imported into dialogue,
Becoming part-anger, part-laughter, bruised,
Adding to the mood and gesture,
Words are words. Except for us
They are not personalities. ("Words")
To begin with, there is a lack of that control of words and sense which underlines Thumboo at his best: the kind of control, for example, revealed here only locally: in the paradoxical precision of the phrase "a careful disregard", or in the laconic wit of the statement "their plainness complicates".

As a whole, this poem becomes unstuck in its internal logic: if "words are dangerous...", it cannot be concluded that "words are words" merely; it is the users of words who are dangerous. "Except for us/They are not personalities".

But they are - they are facets of "the word": they have collocational affinities. Thus, it is very difficult to imagine, as the poem would have us do, that "when you mean to be polite,/Careful, explicit, considerate, circumspect,/Adopting the proper tone", you will be using the "simple kind" of words, and not, as seems more likely, falling into the pedantic verbosity of legal communication.

The notion of being "simple" will not collocate with that of adopting "the proper tone" because (to use Thumboo against himself) this latter phrase in the context of words like "careful" and "circumspect" suggests the "personalities" not of the user of simple words but rather of the "careful face" in the poem "Conformity"; the kind which, "Correct to the last cirumnoising detail", imposes "a curfew on the heart": the kind of person who has no right to feel superior, as he is permitted to be in "Words", to "undesirable relatives" who allegedly miscontrue his words.

The confusion of values in the poem, or the confused point of view, as it particularly betrays itself in the series of adjectives ("polite,/Careful, explicit, considerate, circumspect"), is softened but not dissoluted by the serial mode of articulation which - especially in the form here in which a series of modifiers come after the verb "to be", comparable in force or modality to the post-nominal series of modifiers as opposed to the prenominal series - lends itself often enough to a trial-and-error attempt at daubing in quickly shades of meaning. Whilst such a structure can accommodate a certain imprecision, or a certain impressionist precision - so that, for example,
"polite" dissolves into the collocational range of "circumspect" and signals "politic" rather than "courteous" - it cannot absorb all possibilities of collision between sharply differentiated words, such as "considerate" and "circumspect".

In Thumboo's more successful poems, even where irony complicates, we know exactly where we are because certain key words consistently generate or state judgements of human experience; judgements registered according to, and realising, a settled code of values which can invest with authority and assurance even a quickly thrown-off phrase like "that simple anger" ("Catering for the People"). The "that" points squarely to what we all know in our shared humanity, and the "simple" persuades us to accept what is pointed to as a form of human energy, regrettable but fundamental, and better, perhaps, than what whatever takes its place in those who lose it and "Take to town and politic each other".

If we must reach out for a convenient word or a single phrase to sum up what for Thumboo constitutes the world of "the good and the beautiful", there is perhaps none better though none more elusive than "simplicity"; or - what may be the same value in its different but related aspects - "true being", "true humanity", "human reality", "authenticity", "ordinariness", or even "humanism". One or some of all of these aspects of a supreme value maybe appealed to implicitly or realised by the context of the poem as a whole; as when, for example, the speaker in "The Way Ahead" comes out for "You and I" against the (capital-lettered) "Senior Civil Servant" and "Town Planner", or for "Old friends" against "the major figure", "the public monument", in "Ods Can Die". Everywhere Thumboo is alert to the presence of the simple, the true, the real, the human, and is glad to celebrate it when he finds, it.
Thumboo's pre-occupation with "simplicity" and "naturalism" - related values threatened with extinction by the forces generally of progress and modernity - is perhaps in clearest relief in "Fisherman":

Old fisherman, old shore;
Tides have washed their skin,
Deep rooted storm abounding lore
Lie looked within.

Across where cape is palm,
To them he hooks his eyes;
Absorbed into his native calm
Unspeculative, wise.

("Fisherman")

The fisherman of the poem is in no danger of specialising into political animal, organisation man, economic man, or anything else too narrowly, highly developed; "looked within" him lies the "storm abounding lore". Neither is he in danger of philosophising life away; he is "unspeculative" - and (in another sense, perhaps) not a dabbler in stocks and shares. He retains an organic relationship with the natural environment he works in and shares with it a large heroic simplicity. All this is suggestively crystallised in the very first line - "Old fisherman, old shore" - a perfect opening line of the type which carries the sense of them and expression coming into full being together. It is an unhurriedly phrased line; there is about it a calm meditativeness of tone, of manner, to which the sound patterning, the syntax and the sufficiently long pause generated by line-end and sentence-completion all contribute. In its simplicity, it works with beautiful economy - to induce comparison of the subject of the title, and at once to get to the heart of the theme: the identification of the fisherman with the shore, a kinship which the sense of the words asserts but which the line's division into two juxtaposed parallel phrase patterns dramatises; and to direct attention, through the repetition of "old" to the ground of their identity. Both fisherman and shore have long been opened, in a spirit of acceptance of a natural process, to time's wear and tear and this uncomplaining acceptance receives explicit comment in the poem's final line: "Unspeculative, wise".
Man's relationship to the land that nurtures him, his environment, nature, is of cardinal importance for Thumboo. In the almost purely descriptive poem, "Ayer Biru", with its memorable opening lines:

> Weak showers of light
> Drip through the thick foliage.
> Knotted mangrove roots are grey.

Thumboo manages superbly to comment on the rift that has set in between man and his surroundings today. Unlike a creature like "the hermit crab" which, despite movement, can be "Stilled by an unthought symphony," we human beings can only afford to be "one-day campsters", treating nature as little more than a picnic ground or transforming it into a wasteland of urban fragments - "Cast-off papers, toffee-wrappers." This lack of rapport between man and nature is an integral aspect of man's almost pathological state of incompleteness, seen in numerous other poems (e.g., "Conformity", "Love", "Lines", "Throes", "Colour", "Plush", "Ahmad", "A Quiet Evening", "A Brother in Nairobi", "God Can Die") as an adequate, lop-sided humanity which comes into particularly clear relief in the area of personal or social relationships. The syntax of "Ayer Biru", as elsewhere in Thumboo's good pieces, is the poem's making. Much of the poem's prevailing tone of matter-of-factness, much of the sense of a mind taking hold of the situation and its atmosphere in a cooly focused concentration of gaze, results from the accumulated impact of a number of short, uncluttered, "cleanly" realized statement-sentences. This detached yet fully engaged concentration is kept up even in the poem's most complicated sentence:

> On a rock the hermit crab
> Shifts its clumsy shell but stops,
> Stilled by an unthought symphony,
> Wild magic,
> As ripples lick the shore.

The utterance here of the content is like easily controlled breathing that can help the mind to keep separate for individual emphasis and attention, and yet together, all the related aspects or phases of a single thought. The management of line and syntax, for example, leaves the "crab" with a line-end pause, however minimum; the swing to the next line is then brought smartly
to bear on the verb "shifts...", and as a result of the crab's movement is felt with a weighted sense of concreteness. The process of reading here encouraged is clearly not just a matter of understanding what is said; it is more an active experience of the meaning understood. Thus, again, the crucial verb "stops" comes to a halt - an appreciably felt pause as line-end here coincides exactly with a possible syntactic period; and it is this seemingly long pause that gives credence to the fanciful surmise stated in the next line. Next, there is the noun phrase "wild magic" grammatically tied in opposition to "symphony" in the preceding line but also floating free as an independent line for the mind to latch on to it for the maximum evocative significance it can bear; and it can further more be felt as an independent exclamatory praise. And as the phrase is immediately followed by the closing clause of the sentence -

As ripples lick the shore
- "wild magic" gets naturalised into the enchanting beauty of water rippling even as at the same time natural beauty gets drawn into the realm of magical bewitchment.

Thumboo's finest poetry to date deals with the most serious of moral-cultural questions having to do with the nature of man, the nature of his bond with others of his kind, and the nature of his role as "caretaker" or "gardener" of his environment. To place Thumboo's concern in even broader perspective before specifying it in more particular terms, it may be necessary today to be reminded of a conviction which once powerfully exercised the mind of man but which has now become anachronistic: the conviction that man has within him the capacity and the potential to become god-like; that man's soul, as Patrick White might say, can achieve a state of the godhead if it is sufficiently enlightened and if it surrenders itself to the truths that are always inherent in the spirit of existence. The choice, of course, belongs to man himself - and it is here that Thumboo insists that we ask: What has man made of himself?
In the poem "In Africa" the question is one of what man has made of his environment seen as both space and time. Implicated in this issue, of course, is the question what man has made of himself in the first place to have no qualms either about "tracks and tractors, busy with the earth", or about the indecent speeding-up of the natural order of time:

There a nocturnal lizard finds a sudden day,
Moves unnaturally, glaring at the sun,
Displaced into this century.

The brutal efficiency with which the natural order of space is re-modelled means that:

This landing strip where kites circle and prey,
Unlock the sky,
This scar in the earth to which night comes,
When glow worms fly,
Will soon be better lit.

Tampering indiscriminately with the configuration of space is also tampering with man's experience of time. And any too sudden an obliteration of the past, whether the past of nature persisting through the continuity of growth into the present or the past of the tradition actively shaping the energies and forces of the present, makes the present and the modernity it represents synthetic and alien; an alienation all the more tragic if also indeed highly amusing the more man assumes it as if to the manner born, like the one-time country-boy in "Plush":

The Executive beams
From plush Dethelm chair
Table priced to match.
Cigar in the air,
Large.

or like the African in "A Brother in Nairobi":

There was a clerk in town
Who dressed himself to death
So proper, so spruce,
So carefully correct that he must have felt
Himself most pukka...
At home with foreigners.

So complete is the African's metaphorosis that it is perhaps only possible in dreams for nature, the past, and even simple human response, to make any connection - even â€¢ of contrast merely, let alone adaption - with the
meticulously got-up reality:

I wonder if he takes tie, overcoat,
The crease of his trousers, his new baggage
Into his dreams,
To match them with
The lion, the assagi,
Plains, drums, maidens' breasts and
Bare, simple eyes?

Keeping separate two different and even opposing orders of existence is made evident in the poem in the way behaviour of one kind or another can be turned on with deadly role-playing expertise according to circumstances:

He knew to put inferiors in their place,
How shape his words to please or growl
To suit the situation.

Everything done is acted, calculated. Beneath the coat and tie, behind the handshake, there is no "heart". Yet, this lack of an authentic humanity is not inevitable, as the end of another poem ("A Quiet Evening") seems to indicate:

The evening was serious friendliness,
The evening was an open heart,
Dressed properly with coat and tie.

Despite the "dressed properly", which perhaps is too suffocating a qualification of "open heart" (though it may also refer to "evening"), what seems intended in the context of the whole poem is that two sorts of "nature" can come together in harmony in bringing about a full humanity: the nature pointed to by the "heart" as something native to every man irrespective of the variables of time and place; and the nurture, represented by the "coat and tie", of a particular kind and period of traditional heritage. Without the first, nurture cannot become that second nature brought about by history and culture; what emerges, instead, is no more than empty imitation of "some who have learnt to mini-laugh". In the calculating execution of such mimicry there is falsity; and if departure from the truth is in a sense a kind of death - a negation of human moral reality - and if God is truth and man's soul is always trying to grasp the manifestation(s) of this truth, then "A Brother in Nairobi" shows that gods can die through human beings not being what they are; i.e. human beings.
The poems that align themselves with "Gods Can Die" within more or less the same area of concern are in the "straight", conversational or statement mode, and they are all good examples of the kind. But all of them, "Gods Can Die" excepted, are fine in the way many poems of their complexion (whether by Larkin, for example, or an Enright) are fine: the attempt to work in something or other of some entertaining value, an extra touch or two thrown in with the straight talk. The "straightness" is often not quite straight. Part of the pleasure, for example, of "Flush" comes from one's awareness of the witty deftness with which "the Executive" is staged-managed to make an impression, without erasing the sense that it is the snob himself who is doing all the role-playing. The phrasing of:

Cigar in the air,
Large.

is expertly managed: the cigar, so projected, seems to take on a life of its own, detached from the smoker of it; and the verb "expanded" in "His talk expanded" is pointedly cheeky - the talk after all does go on to take in as large and expensive an object as a Volvo. There is, in other words, behind such a poem - indeed in it - the consciously controlled, amusement, irony or contempt of the superior satirist out to get his victim. In "A Quiet Evening" there is in the lines

He came late, our guest of honour.
Perhaps the cares of state, or nerves,
Habits of self; debate, took time to shed.

a shade of superior irony in play, as well as a play of easy phrase-making: "exhibit a diagnostic ease", "Or raise intricacies to simplify an argument". In the poem "The Way Ahead", the something over and above the straight manner is an element of self-consciousness with which the "average man" with his common sense and humanity is played off against more complicated, more dogmatically confident thinking:
There were the four of us,
A Professor, much travelled and artistic,
A Senior Civil Sergeant who knew the way ahead,
The Town Planner and I; I?
The average man, the man-in-the-street,
Feeling nervous, ...

The superior ironio observer is here, too; hiding behind the average man, the ironist quietly questions while seeming to praise the credentials of the Professor ("much travelled and artistic") and the Senior Civil Servant ("who knew the way ahead"). All this is fine but how much finer - not necessarily always so, but as it turns out here - is the absolute un-complexity, the simple forthrightness of man speaking to man about man in these lines from "A Brother in Nairobi":

The African can be my brother
When he is most himself.
But some have learnt to mini-laugh
To adjust the tie before they give a hand,
Or make cold assessment as you stand,
Treating most efficiently,
These are not themselves,
And not my brothers.

Unlike, however, "Cods Can Die", the poem does not keep throughout to this level of dignified directness of stating its censure; one senses disdain in the way the word "pukka" is worked up to and then shot out with a controlled venom of contempt at its victim, a victim caricatured to death:

So carefully correct that he must have felt himself most pukka... 

And there is a kind of melodramatic irony in the rather over-dramatized contrast of world-views in the final stanza which weakens the impact of the poem.

Unlike the poems it has been associated with, "Cods Can Die" is that rare poem of cultural-social-political commentary which comes off as sincere expression played straight from beginning to end; completely unprotected by irony or wit, by indirection, or the hard polish of phrases elegantly turned. The poet's voice comes out measured and yet easy, saddened but unembittered by what it states:
I have seen powerful men
Undo themselves, keep two realities
One for minor friends, one for the powers that be,
The really powerful. Such people take a role
Supporting managers of state.

As straight and strong and fine is the movement of the following sentence,
grammatically complex but in its effect simple and lucid as it is taken through
five lines that feel through with a meditative gravity the whole of what it
carries, sorting it out into balanced and interrelated units of sense:

The causal word, the easiness, the quick straight answer,
The humane delay, the lack of cautiousness
That gave ample laughter to our evenings
Are too simple for these days of power
Whose nature is to hint not state.

In this completely thought - through statement of human gestures and human
values, rendered ineffectual and out-of-date by values emphasizing ruthless
or devious expediency in the struggle for position and power, there is
nostalgia for what is in retreat and anger with what prevails, but above all
there is a moving dignity. This dignity of bearing, which seems to come
with a voice speaking with the moral authority of clear-sighted experience,
can unbend to deliver a command as simple and colloquial as "It's a pity";
and it is one with the understanding of man and affairs shown in the sober
analysis following the comment:

"Good men who seek to serve
Find themselves into a cause
Then use the fate of nations as a rationale
To take their friends aside,
To lead themselves into history.

What comes through here is the speaker's possession of an understanding that
temper moral judgement with charity, without making the moral stand taken
any the less clear and firm: "We gain uncertainty/directness, with something like
the force of a proverbial statement. Against this the personal voice rises
clear and strong in gratitude for life's small mercies, for what true humanity
can still be found despite all:
But I am glad that others are powerful with compassion,  
Who see before we do what troubles us  
And help in kindness, show compassion to us.  
If not for such we lose our gods  
Who lived but now are dying in our friends.

"But I am glad...": not many poems risking this kind of naked emotional  
exposure - especially in behalf of kindness and compassion - can be shown  
to have emerged with the strength and dignity of "Gods Can Die".

Lest the foregoing discussion creates the impression that Thumboo's  
poetry centres exclusively on social/philosophical issues it must be stated that  
as a matter of fact very few poets in Singapore and Malaysia have been able to  
embody their romantic emotions in poetic language more lyrically and more  
admirably than him. "Lines" is one of the very few successful love-poems  
in English produced in this region, and its opening lines -

At Kepong where the hills begin
You grew a day infinite
- surely deserve inclusion among the memorable lines that can be found in  
contemporary love poetry in English anywhere. It does not often happen - the  
command which the lines show of an easy magnificence of bearing in the turning  
of a compliment proud in heroic assertion and tender in feeling; a compliment,  
that is also a narrative statement concretely tied to a specific place and a  
definite moment in the past.

In its attitude-and concern "Lines" bears comparison with a poem  
like "Fisherman", discussed above. The woman is in her way, like the fisherman  
in his, "Unspeculative, wise"; coming across as the embodiment of an attitude  
that takes to life fully and naturally:

You were composed:
On instinct
Touched your hair, made tongues at me.

In contrast the man is too "speculative" -

I grew afraid, knowing  
Light foams only the crest of waves  
Leaving dark thoughts
before the most basic and profound of human experience, and remains blind
to what his own analogy suggests of the inescapable mix of light and dark
in natural and human phenomena.

Love-poetry is difficult to write, but when it is well written,
it speaks with a charm which few readers can resist. Thumboo’s love poems are
almost all characterised by a candour acknowledgement that even in love the
very human tendency to dissociate oneself from the activity of the moment bears
heavily. However, the gentle tone and the grace with which this truth is realised
gives the love poems a moving force that registers his awareness that the other
in love is also a human being, making the relationship urgent as well as
complete:

So the dawn arrives
And in that warm disturbance
You gathered into a still beauty;
Softly urgent, undoing the guilt of giving.

The daring counterpointing of past and present in the lines just quoted lends
the expression a continuing significance of the kind which deftly transforms
the poetry of grammar into the grammar of poetry. Reflective seriousness conveyed
in a gentle yet sure tone enables Thumboo to transcend the more trivial of love’s
many aspects and to state a point of view in which the total complexity of the
situation is either implied or made explicit.

It has not, of course, been easy for Edwin Thumboo to arrive on
his own because of the tremendous pressures that acted upon him (and others who
write) insofar as the honest utterance of a sensitive, reflective response to
prevailing issues and attitude almost always meets with a certain amount of reserve
and/or envy. However, from the earliest, Thumboo’s poetry has been marked by
a distinctiveness of tone and a conciseness of diction which over the years have
been developed and refined to portray and express a literary sensibility at once
individual and yet containing that rare quality which allows it to speak for
thousands. Good poetry cannot be sustained for long in an atmosphere of vacuity and one of the most notable strengths of Edwin Thumboo's work is that during his formative years, there was a significant absence of worthwhile poetry written in English in the region. It is now some twenty-five years since Thumboo wrote some of the more interesting and valuable poems in his canon. During this period, especially recently, a considerable body of poetry written in English has been produced by younger men and women who have often been directly or indirectly influenced by Edwin Thumboo. That this should be so is not in the least surprising for wherever and whenever good literature is found, it inevitably applies itself to the susceptibilities and consciousness of those who come into contact with it.

As a man committed and devoted to the growth of a viable and resilient literary tradition - while at the same time retaining those touches of the basic qualities which define a man's and a country's humanity - Edwin Thumboo's poetry is an excellent example of the contribution needed towards the fulfilment of this objective. One of the most important characteristics of a good poet's work is that it must both identify and depict the ethos of the environment in which he operates, and this in a sensible and intelligent manner. As we have seen, much of Thumboo's work transcends the purely immediate and the purely personal to reach out for a wider relevance and hearing. Ultimate meaning is often derived from the symbiotic relationship that a poet establishes with his surroundings. For Edwin Thumboo, the process has been clear from the very start; and in his later verse the voice of a mutually meaningful identification with the environment rings out so vividly and movingly that he can truly claim the honour of being the people's poet. When the business of living is ruminated upon, the words of the poet reveal the perennial pre-occupations which, when fully appreciated and realized, define the quality of the life he leads:

And though we rush to work, appointments,
To many other ends, there must be time to pause,
Loosen the grip of each working day,
To make amends, to hear the inner self
And keep our spirits solvent.

("The Way Ahead")

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