

**Of New Covenants and Nationalisms:  
Christianity and The Poetry of  
Edwin Thumboo and Lee Tzu Pheng**  
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Christianity, as an inherited set of discourses, symbols, allusions and typologies, constitutes a powerful cultural remainder in the context of modern Singapore; this is notwithstanding the “conflictual” theories of colonializing and orientalizing discourses (as Bhabha 85, describes Said’s project), which emphasize relationships of “domination” and “subordination” in social relations and texts (Said 8). Conflictual post-colonial theories serve to confirm the antagonistic and oppositional milieu from which the newly independent nation and its culture emerges. As Bennett (5) observes, “national awareness” in the first place is “often associated with a process of de-dominionisation,” so that the process of new cultural formation is complexly involved in issues of political reaction, mutual suspicions, and the threat of alternative hegemonies. In the case of Singapore’s construction of a national identity, it has been observed by earlier studies (Chen 30–38; Heng and Devan 351; Stravens 277) that this conflictual and antagonistic relationship between the former colonial culture and that of the independent nation, is exacerbated by a governmental policy (particularly pronounced in the 1970s and 1980s) of opposing good “Asian values” to vicious “Western values.” In literary terms, Anglophone writers in Singapore have had to negotiate a wariness regarding the “dominant British tradition,” and a lingering unease over the role that “a timeless Western intelligence,” “the sensibility which European writers throughout the centuries have joined to evolve,” could possibly play within this culture (Fernando 36; Gooneratne 13).

Less obviously than the instrument of the English language (and thus less an object of suspicion), the culture of Christianity has made an enduring impact on Singapore society and letters. While the 2000 census

reports that only 15 per cent of the population professes Christianity, this religion has come to be perceived as being associated with middle-class professionalism, upward social mobility, and notions of liberal individualism familiar from Western European socio-intellectual traditions. A recent newspaper report on religion in Singapore comments that “the Christian faith . . . seemed to go hand in hand with the English-speaking” (Leow 2000), while it has for some time been maintained that Christianity is the religious grouping most “positively associated with the level of education” (Kuo and Tong 20). Many of the mission schools established in Singapore in the middle to late nineteenth century (Orr 16–50) have today come to connote a better educational experience than that provided in most government-funded “neighbourhood schools;” their popularity is thus a means of the subtle spread of Christian ideologies and values among an ascendant class, even where actual religious conversion is not accomplished. It is thus not surprising that dominant accounts of social identity in Singapore should draw (even if unconsciously) on Christian culture; nor that the main voice of social criticism in the first decades of Singapore’s independence should be via an Anglophone poetry which quite explicitly borrows from the moral values and symbolism of Christianity.

### **Material and Spiritual Selves: Christian Typologies of Social Identity**

Singapore’s growth as a prosperous city and port under colonial rule marks the coincidence of British imperialism, trade networks, the rise of evangelical movements in England and America, and cultures of thrift and hard work on the part of the mainly Chinese and South Asian immigrants who settled there in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This already suggests the ready confluence of ideologies within an entrepreneurial progressivism which, according to Weber (35–36) is also the fundamental ideology of a European “protestant ethic.” More recently, Landes (321) reinforces the notion of such an ideological confluence, when he explains the phenomenon of thriving Chinese business networks by noting that the Chinese “cherish a work ethic that would make a Weberian Calvinist envious.” This rather simplifying identification of Protestantism with commercial ambition has

been criticized, and made more sophisticated by accounts that locate this commercialist bent within a broader liberal-materialist ideology. Thus Tawney (220, 239) accordingly posits a “utilitarian individualism” that resisted overt ecclesiastical authority, at the same time that it created a “moral creed” that sustained and supported its acts of social re-organization. Thus entrepreneurial individualism becomes just one aspect and manifestation (rather than the *sine qua non*) of protestantism’s social progressivism and libertarian creed, which at the same time constructs a moral code as a justification and validation of its own commercial ethos.

Thus the “utilitarian individualism” of which Tawney (220) speaks, which is clearly fungible to capitalistic competition, also interposes itself at crisis points in British history as an “exercise of characteristic English freedoms” against tyranny (Hampton 32), as an affirmation of “personal religious experience” as opposed to ecclesiastical power (Lewis 29), and as a confidence in the progress of the individual which is the foundation of programs for the “well-being of society” (Chalmers 423). This moral and liberal face of Christian ideology can be seen in more recent form in Tony Blair’s Labour Party, which bases its form of democratic socialism emphasizing a “fundamentally optimistic view of human nature,” on a partnership with a Christian fundamentalism concerned with “equality,” “justice,” “compassion,” and “liberty” (Blair 10).

Such ideological underpinnings are in turn reinforced by the typological persistence of Biblical narratives. Thus Korshin (3–5) speaks of the “typological propensity” in Biblical and related discourses, as stemming from a wider “propensity for prediction” that arises especially in epochs of national and social crisis and uncertainty, and that is also capable of absorbing and accommodating other cultural documents and sources: for example, “imagery from pagan mythology and pagan literature . . . Hercules, Pan, Orpheus, Ceres, Achilles, Aeneas . . .” Similarly, Landow’s (*Victorian Types* 221) analysis of one recurring Biblical type—the “Pisgah vision”—shows that it becomes in post-romantic and post-Kantian treatments a secularized and humanistic scene of an individual’s internal ‘questioning,’ a dialogue projected out onto the natural landscape, and the process of posing and resolving a ‘spiritual crisis.’

Certainly not all Biblical types seem to have the same relevance or power in different social conditions, and some tropes emerge more clearly in post-colonial conditions. Thus Mills (4) reads St. Paul's letters as espousing "a hermeneutic of the borderland, of travel, of exile, and of persecution," in a way that points to their relevance to the conditions of subjection, diasporic dislocation and hybrid identity common to many post-colonial situations—although Mills is more interested in its relevance to the hermeneutics of modern literary theory. Other Biblical tropes that would lend themselves more readily as influential narratives under certain post-colonial conditions include the motives of captivity and oppression told in the stories of Israel's sojourn in Egypt and Babylon (Eberly 263), the hope for an ultimate new society ("New Jerusalem") promising to correct iniquities and inequalities, and narratives of the reversal of power and privilege ("the first shall be the last," Luke 13:30).

Singapore's multi-racial population, its rapid economic development since independence in 1965, its brief but frightening brushes with civil disorder (race riots, communist plots) in the 1960s,<sup>1</sup> its strong paternalistic government, its small size and lack of nature reserves, and (correspondingly) its heavily built-up urban areas, collectively structure a particular social consciousness concerned with the threats of social dissolution and disorder, the costs of progress and the lack of alternatives to materialistic creeds. These social concerns interact with inherited and adapted literary models, including Biblical types, to create a distinctive literature of spiritual loss and renewal, the guilt of past and present sins with the hope (however problematic) of future grace and redemption.

Not surprisingly, it is in the poetry written in English that these figures are most clearly registered. In addition to its formal resemblances to sacred writing—award-winning Singapore poet Lee Tzu Pheng maintains that "it's in poetry that . . . that sense of the mystery of creation is at its most intense and most immediately palpable" (Chan 49–50), and a significant part of the Bible consists of "poetry books" (Carroll and Prickett 351–352)—there are also historical reasons for this in Singapore's social development. Poetry was perceived as the highest form of writing in English, and had something of the status of a privileged genre in Singapore's late colonial and early independent history. The

role played by the Department of English Language and Literature at the then-University of Singapore had much to do with it: D. J. Enright, Head of Department in the 1960s, was himself a poet, and perhaps consequently, the Department produced among its staff members three award-winning poets (Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap), among others. In such a milieu, fiction took a back seat and has only come into its own in more recent years. Thus it is also true that it is in the older genre of poetry in English that the nascent concerns and perceptions of independent nationhood are most sharply recorded.

### **Babel and Wilderness:**

#### **Edwin Thumboo and Singapore's New Covenant**

The development of Biblical tropes as national symbols is evident in the career of a writer who can with justice be called the elder statesman of Singaporean poetry in English: Edwin Thumboo. Born in 1933, recipient of practically every literary award available to Singaporean literature, and long-time mentor of younger poets in his capacity as Professor and creative writing lecturer in the National University of Singapore, Edwin Thumboo is one of the few Singaporean poets to have come of age under British colonial and cultural rule. At the same time, his careers as civil servant, high-ranking administrator in the University system (he has been both Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and Director of its Centre for the Arts), and a number of posts and positions that have placed him very much in the public eye, explain why Thumboo is of all Singaporean poets in English the most likely to develop a pronounced public persona, and to be most concerned with the broader civic society of modern, independent Singapore.

O'Sullivan (2) observes that by Thumboo's second volume (*Gods Can Die*, published in 1977), the poet has "edged his poetry away from the more overtly lyrical elements of 'confessional' verse, which has been the dominant mode in English and American poetry for the last generation, and moved it towards a more public kind of writing which assumes that the 'voice' of the poem cannot be hived off from politics, race, a particular linguistic placement at a particular historical point." Patke (5) sees this public voice as Thumboo's awareness of "an obligation for

poets in the specific circumstances of contemporaneous history, which for Singapore, have metamorphosed through decolonization and political independence to the self-conscious project of nation-building.” O’Sullivan also rightly points out that the crux of Thumboo’s politico-poetical consciousness is the notion that “language defines both a man and the society in which he lives” (3).

This poet’s concern with words and this thematic focus on the linguistic construction of the individual and society, accordingly becomes in the context of multilingual Singapore a narrative of Babel. In the original Biblical narrative, Babel symbolizes man’s act of hubris in attempting to build a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven” (Genesis 11: 4, KJV), punished by the divine curse of diaspora, linguistic plurality and ultimately social confusion. As a fundamental social scene in the first book of the Bible, it establishes certain types of human behaviour that recur in other Biblical and related narratives. It represents a certain pride in human accomplishments, a materialistic will-to-order marked by the fact that the original plan was to build “a city and a tower” that would allow its planners to “make a name” for themselves.

This civic and materialistic ambition is the corollary of nationalism (“the people is one,” Gen. 11.6), and is also recognized as the antithesis of the conditions of cultural-linguistic hybridity caused by diasporas and migrations (“scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth,” Gen. 11.8). The tower of Babel is echoed in the civic-imperialist pride of Babylon, even in the pun on “Babel-Babylon” (Carroll and Prickett 327), in the many accounts of national/racial exile, imprisonment and diaspora, but also more faintly in New Testament narratives warning against the sin of material pride and greed (John 2.18–21; 1 Cor. 10–17) and recognizing the linguistic and moral confusion in fallen human society (Acts 2.5–10).

The Babel-type thus provides a richly determined field of meanings for modern Singapore—most obviously in its symbolism of a society threatened with “confusion” because of linguistic and cultural plurality. This crisis threatens on a number of fronts: internally, as the actual potential for misunderstanding in a multi-racial and multi-lingual society, and additionally as the potential *frissons* not only between the varied

ethnic cultures and religions, but also between the different dialects (as it were) of progressive-minded “cosmopolitans” and traditional “heartlanders”<sup>2</sup>, between richer and poorer, and so on. Externally and historically, the Babel-crisis is a figure for the racial-cultural gulf that resulted in the political separation between Malaysia and Singapore in 1965—a gulf that also persists between Singapore and its other predominantly Muslim neighbours, Indonesia and (to a lesser extent) Brunei—and for the economic divide that threatens to separate Singapore from other newly-independent nations in the region and further afield, with the attendant political and cultural frictions. Thus at the heart of the Babel narrative is also a socio-economic typology, of a national will that is also a materialist desire—one that is seen as causing its own downfall through arrogance.

It is interesting to see the Biblical typology of Babel emerging in Thumboo’s early poetry, even before the formation of the firm public voice and persona, and the adaptation of that typology to the symbolism of the nation—thus the poem “This is From the Tower,” from his first volume *Rib of Earth*, published in 1956, nine years before Singapore’s independence. The characteristic persona in this volume is the man voicing his “personal experience” of whom O’Sullivan (2) speaks: a young man who is caught in the complicated throes of relationships, a dawning awareness of the order (or disorder) of things, and the growth of the self measured against nature and society. The more consciously political persona of Thumboo’s later poems seems quite far away, but so (at this point in time) do independence, nationhood and self-determination. Yet personal experience becomes the foundation for the political persona in later poems—the link provided not only by a common set of biblical symbols (Eden, Babel, the serpent, the fall and others), but also by a developing, continuing typology: the poet as prophet of a new, impending order, one that is both problematic and deferred.

*Rib of Earth* is thus a starting-point, a poetical Genesis, and it is not accidental that many of its tropes are from Genesis, including the title of the volume—an obvious play on the creation of Eve, and thus an augury of the problematic relations between the genders which recurs in many of these poems. Interwoven into that story of the originary problematic

relationship is an analogy between the lovers and the land (hence rib of earth, rather than Adam's rib)—an analogy that will allow Thumboo to adumbrate a proto-nationalistic consciousness, couched for the time being as an intimation of socio-political unease in the smaller world of the lovers.

"This is From the Tower," a characteristic Babel-narrative, draws heavily on Biblical notions of beginning and renewal:

mist squats on God's land.  
We see the day's mood change.  
Clouds resolve to rain;  
our ears catch the laughter of the wind.

Water drumming on the roof  
beats like a borrowed conscience.  
Memory revives old love.  
She feels the water run amok among her bones.  
Wind drops and rain forgets to fall.  
Sunlight lifts the mist.  
For the eye is born  
a world baptised in rain.

This is from the tower. (4)

At the literal level, the perspective on this landscape is such as might be afforded from an actual tower, on whose roof the rain drums, and from whose height the mist apparently "squats" while the wind rushes by. Yet the explicit declaration in the very first line that this is "God's land," invests the landscape and its perception with spiritual meanings—an investment reinforced with words like "conscience" and "baptised" later in the poem.

Not literally or geographically "God's land," in the sense of being the Holy Land of the Middle East (the rainy, cloudy, intermittently sunny land too closely resembles the rural parts of Singapore and Malaysia described in poems like "Yesterday," "Ayer Biru" and "Changi" in the same volume), the poem's spiritual references acquire meaning only within

the context of a Biblically-inspired primal scene, adapted to the wet new Eden of Singapore, and to the personal experience of the speaker's loves and relationships. Thumboo's typical speaker is an Adamic lover, as in the poem "Louise" (15), where the uncertainties of the relationship and the possibility of estrangement and loss are figured in terms of the fragile memento ("What rib of earth, gift of you/Will the angels let me take?") that may remain. Posed with a similar problem, Philip Larkin in "An Arundel Tomb" could offer no more reassuring answer to modernist alienation than the stone tomb as solid (if inhumanly so) testament to the lovers' love. For Thumboo, the Adamic myth becomes the figural surety of something that will survive the uncertainties of relationships: just as Eve (whose person is invoked in this poem in the homophone "eve") is created out of Adam's rib, so are the lover's lives subtly intertwined with "A casual whisper," "that anger," the feel of a "captive hand," memories of youthful affectations like "the lisp borrowed when twenty-one" (15).

Yet the uncertainty remains: the inability to imagine a coherent future after separation. In the mish-mash of impressions that is the speaker's consciousness, the future is not identified with the perspective and memory of either the speaker or the loved one, but with

. . . some glimpse of God  
Of a higher thing  
To clarify the way (15)

In the present state and time ("On this side of day"), the immanent corollary to this transcendent truth, is afforded by nothing other than poetry: echoing Yeats' soul and bird in "Sailing to Byzantium," Thumboo's speaker avows that "Being shall sing and singing give" this artistic glimpse.

Returning to "This is From the Tower," it is now possible to see why the Babel myth and the notion of post-lapsarian language becomes central to Thumboo. The poet, once again, by virtue of this artistic perception and expression, occupies a privileged position, here symbolized by the elevated perspective from the tower—a position (as in "Louise") that is man's immanent approximation of the transcendent Divine per-

spective. The peculiar moral, epistemological and linguistic position occupied by Thumboo's poet-speaker is that of the privileged prophet or apostle, who of all sinful men ascends the most closely to the Divine truth, and who thus bears the burden of approximating this transcendent truth in immanent language, and thus too the likely fate of being misunderstood and alienated by his fellow men.

Thumboo's speaker in "This is From the Tower," like Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 32), finds himself borrowing the Divine perspective, values and language, and so identifies the natural scene to be "God's land" (4). Like both the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, and the "elegant Jeremiahs"—literary prophets decrying society's decline in nineteenth-century America and England (Landow *Elegant Jeremiahs* 23–33)—Thumboo's prophetic speaker is concerned with the social and moral future and well-being of his people, although that only emerges fully in his later works.

There is however a peculiar tentativeness, a precariousness to Thumboo's new world poet-prophet; unlike the assurance of the voice "crying in the wilderness,"<sup>3</sup> who if nothing else is assured of his position outside and repudiation of corrupt society (and his fulfillment of a narrative tradition and a prophetic heritage), Thumboo's speaker fears the breakdown of his society, uncertain what will take its place. Hence the heavy significance of speaking "From the Tower," whether this overdetermined symbol be God's perspective, the Sinai of the privileged prophet, a Bentham-like panoptical authority, or the peak of arrogance of a Babel utterance. For what follows man's occupation of the tower, in all of these senses, is a fall from that unsustainable perfection, into the imperfections of human nature. Hence the mood of extreme transience and instability in this poem: the "day's mood" which can "change" before one's eyes, the clash of contrary elements of weather ("sunlight" with "clouds" and "rain"), and the threat of disorder ("amok") underlying the whole scene.

The source of this insecurity is the rawness of the newly-independent society, with its origins in diasporic displacements and exiles from motherlands, its continuing struggle with the cultural imperialism of colonial fathers, and its uncertainties about the direction of its own

social development. These are often figured in Thumboo's poetry as various forms of wilderness, the antithesis (in landscape terms) of the civilization represented by the tower, and thus a constant reminder of the fragility of that civilization. The wilderness of the exiling motherland is figured in a poem like "The Immigrant" in the volume *Gods Can Die* (1977), describing the South Indian farmer's dream of migration to the Straits colonies: "Toddy and regular wages,/Where the jungle was being dismantled" (9). South India is a Biblical wilderness in the terms that Landow (*Victorian Types* 183) associates with the Adamic curse in Genesis 3.15—an arid and barren land that exacts a high human price for scant sustenance:

Though his body sweated into fields,  
The seeds kept cruel silence.

Yet Thumboo's poem, in keeping with the Biblical type, suggests that this is an ambivalent struggle and curse, for it also confers "Hope," a certain natural wisdom, an indigenous ritual life ("cabalistic"), and an identity with the land and its labours. The poem is accordingly cryptic about the immigrant's fate ("He came"), suggesting that even if this brought the desired material outcomes (by no means certain), the poem's silence at the end also suggests the loss of the cultural plenitude described earlier.

In this paradigm of migration, to come to Singapore is to leave and lose a pre-civilized state, ambivalent in its combination of physical hardships and primitive identity, but at any rate opposed to the social and political complexities of the Babel tower. Thumboo also figures this wilderness as the older landscape of Singapore, increasingly pushed to the fringe by material development, but also infected by the disease of urbanization and modernity. Images of a corrupt Eden run throughout *Rib of Earth*, not only in the several references to lovers reminiscent in various ways of Adam and Eve, but also in tropical gardens and forests despoiled by hints of evil: the serpentine "twisting" of "old thoughts to new ideas" in "Yesterday," a landscape that symbolically "betrays a habitation" (2); the self-examination on the pristine beach of "Changi," which introduces the "poison grub" of introspection and insecurity into

the speaker (3); the campers' litter in "Ayer Biru," which recalls the "slum-sight" of a young boy smoking and the violence of an Oedipal struggle (22–23).

Thumboo's Eden, viewed from the transitory and precarious perspective of the Babel-position, offers no innocent and idyllic past, nor a promise of a rich new land to come. National independence and decolonization are seen, not as a completely fresh start, but as a mixed condition most appropriately symbolized by the clash of religious beliefs, the compound of stubborn idolatrous residues and the search for true belief that characterizes the tumultuous Old Testament history of the nation of Israel. On the one hand, the ejection of the British and the achievement of independence are seen as elements of a new dispensation, in which the newly independent land is cleared of its false laws and gods: thus in the stridently anti-colonial "May 1954," from the 1979 volume *Ulysses by the Merlion*, the "white man" is accused of having "whored on milk and honey" (14), a reference to Exodus 3.8, where God promises Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into a land "flowing with milk and honey." This, in connection with the "superior ways" that the British assumed, while their "minions riot" uncontrollably, make them types of the idolatrous and barbaric nations described in Deuteronomy 7 whom it was the destiny of the Israelites to drive out of the promised land.

On the other hand, this declaration of moral and political independence is also accompanied by a certain bad faith, in part by an admission of the inextricable ties that bind the newly independent people to their former colonial masters. This is acknowledged in "May 1954," which concedes that "We may still be friend,/Even love you . . . from a distance" (15). Then there is the deeply felt affection and friendship for Shamus Frazer (Thumboo's University tutor and mentor, to whom *Rib of Earth* was dedicated) celebrated in "Fifteen Years After," in which Shamus as "teacher and friend" is measured against the type of the colonial teacher (*Gods Can Die* 52). Although Shamus's "affectionate" and selfless mentorship of his students is to be contrasted with the transitory indifference and facile professionalism of his colleagues ("other gods shed their skin, withdrew,/Taking their notes with them"), he is nevertheless an exception that justifies the colonial rule and legacy. He

is described in godlike terms, having “Brought new worlds” to his students—his selfless devotion (“Feeding us irrevocably on your self”—a kind of divine Eucharistic gesture) and his memory (“That day of in-cense,” “Your image”) treated in iconic, worshipful terms.

Appropriately for Thumboo’s mythos, Shamus is a literature tutor, his personal devotion to his students anchored in acts of linguistic and cultural transmission. Thumboo’s speaker remembers his as a “voice,” “Sweet or harsh, but ever itself,” and his gratitude rests in part on the legacy of cultural knowledge (“Christabel, Sohrab and Rustum”). Shamus is thus only the best representative of a colonial legacy whose authority cannot wholly be denied, and which is encoded even in the angry anti-colonialism of “May 1954,” which warns the British not to “Harbour contempt in eloquence” since “We know your language.” The Biblical myths of Eden and the promised land, if they are at all to be adapted to Thumboo’s mythos of independence, come with the realization of this legacy, this abiding influence.

Thus the mildly humorous tragedy of “An Ordinary Man” (*Gods Can Die*), in which a citizen of Chinese origin in the new Malaya, “Mr. Quek,” is forced abruptly (“Out of the blue Malayan sky”) to adapt to the style and language of the country’s new masters—one of his trials being “the instructions on ‘Malay Without Tears’/In thirty easy lessons,” which “was in Malay” (44). Although the poem “RELC” (commemorating the founding of Singapore’s Regional English Language Centre) declares in celebratory mood that “Here our languages have a home” (*Ulysses* 20), in this dedicated linguistic institution, the entire poem acknowledges the divisive weight of this inherited multilingual society (“History left us separate,” “Uncertainties we fight”). The ending of the poem is both Biblical, and deliberately ambivalent: “Here we are our brother’s keeper” (21), investing the RELC’s work with both the gloomy shadow of Cain’s envy and fratricide (Gen. 4.9), and a conscious will to have Singapore society succeed despite this acknowledgement.

This linguistic concern is of course also a cultural one, reflecting a constant awareness of the complexly hybrid nature of the modern Singaporean: on the one hand, caught between Asian and Judeo-Christian religions, East-West values and orientations; on the other

hand, forced to attempt a cultural accommodation from the different Asian religions in Singapore. One expression of these conflicts is evident in the poem “Wat Arun,” in which an ancient Buddhist temple in Thailand (“You my fathers made,” *Gods Can Die* 12) is viewed by a modern speaker (“vestigial of that line”). The speaker’s imaginative return to the spirit of the temple is in some ways an attempt to recover a primacy or essence (“I peel within/For heart”), which is seen as a corrective to the speaker’s experience of a confusing and dislocating modernity (“the buffeting of days”). This modern loss of a cultural rootedness is echoed in another poem, “Khan Tok in Chiengmai,” where the tourists watching a cultural performance “feel simple, undetailed,” in the face of a spiritual legacy from which they are excluded (“another time/Where nagas brood,” *Gods Can Die* 23).

“Wat Arun” articulates a response that is a fascination with the cultural and numinous pull of the Buddhist icon, combined with an underlying Christian symbolism. Thus the speaker, in a paradoxical statement, insists that:

Lord Buddha, shaman with the wheel  
Was in the loaves of Christ. (*Gods Can Die* 12)

The statement makes little sense without the extensive symbolic and analogical frame of reference that bread possesses in Biblical discourse: not only Christ’s miracle of feeding the multitude with loaves and fishes, but also his use of the analogy of the “bread of life” to describe himself, and hence the role of the wafer in the Eucharist (John 6.32–35; 1 Cor. 10.17). Thumboo’s poem records the conflict between two different “lordships”: on the one hand, the conquest of hatred and violence (“Washed away pregnancies of hate”) represented by Buddha’s teachings, but on the other hand, the stubborn insistence that this is itself assimilable to Christ’s own life of sacrifice and martyrdom and to his preaching of humility.

Thumboo’s poetry ultimately may not see a way clear to resolve these divided claims and influences. Here it is the semantic plenitude of the Biblical symbolism that contributes to this impasse, since it accords spiritual weight to a number of different social and political signifieds.

Thus “Lordship” refers in various ways not only to the Judeo-Christian God invoked directly in poems like “Christmas Week 1975” (*Gods Can Die* 60–61), but also to the competing spiritual authorities depicted in poems like “Wat Arun” and “John” (*Ulysses* 12–13); to colonial authority of varying degrees of arrogance and humility in poems like “Fifteen Years After” and “May 1954”; to post-colonial appropriations of power and influence in poems like “Proposals” (*Gods Can Die* 42–43), “A Quiet Evening” (*Gods Can Die* 54–55), “Gods Can Die” (*Gods Can Die* 62–63), and “Moments in a Day” (*Ulysses* 3); to the authoritative values of commercialism and materialism in poems like “A Letter” (*Gods Can Die* 36–37), “How to Win Friends” (*Ulysses* 6–7), and “Ulysses by the Merlion” (*Ulysses* 18–19).

For Thumboo, in the final analysis (to borrow a phrase from “Moments in a Day”), “There is no conclusion” to the multiple influences inherited in the Singaporean condition, and which compete within the modern individual with the force of spiritual conviction. Thumboo’s poetic project—corresponding in main to the first phrase of Singapore’s independence—is accordingly to document and evoke these conflicting spiritual impulses, in the process fostering an ethos of “compassion” (“Gods Can Die,” *Gods Can Die* 63) on the part of the people for their own social condition, an “open heart” (“A Quiet Evening,” *Gods Can Die* 55) that it is hoped will be the basis of a new society in which heterogeneous cultural and social demands will be treated with humility and patient acceptance.

### **Christ and Mammon: Lee Tzu Pheng and the Unworldly**

If Thumboo’s adaptation of Biblical symbolisms brings as its flipside a narrative of cultural containment or “sublation”—one in which a synthesis of old and new aesthetic elements comes to serve as a cultural corollary to an act of socio-economic containment, “self-restraint” and “repression” on the part of the newly independent nation (Patke 25–26)—it is nevertheless the necessary first stage in a literary dialectic through which Singapore’s place in the international realm is negotiated, and through which an ongoing critique of social processes and institutions is made possible. One way of viewing this is to see how Thumboo’s accom-

modation of a spiritual/metaphysical framework from Western cultural history allows him to locate Singapore's nascent social problematics in a larger world-historical perspective: a poem like "Moses" (Thumboo *Gods Can Die* 30) is thus instructive; a "resurrected" Moses is witness to the divisive violence amongst his "brethren," symbolizing the cycles of sectarian and national conflicts in which Singapore's own cultural tensions can be located.

Another way in which this Biblical narrative enables a social critique is in its establishment of a common pool or base of symbols that can in turn be borrowed, negotiated and refuted by subsequent poetic projects. In this respect, the poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng is in some ways a reaction to and dialogue with some of the main cultural terms and symbols in Thumboo's poetry, much as her sensibility also differs from that of Thumboo in many other ways. Lee shares with Thumboo the credentials of the academic-poet, the stature of a quasi-national figure who has won most of the available literary prizes and mentored and otherwise influenced many of the younger Singaporean poets writing in English. Yet her poetry represents a conscious turning away from the public voice and symbolism represented in Thumboo's work, and indeed cultivates a poetic persona that thrives on its pose of marginality and its critical attitude in relation to a mainstream Singapore society of middle-class life, professional-political will and material progress. This marked difference between her conception of the place of the poet and her poetry in society, and that of Thumboo, is no doubt shaped in part by gender, generational differences (born in 1946, she is 13 years younger than Thumboo), personal disposition and other such biographical factors.

Yet it is precisely because of these marked differences that her use of Biblical types and symbols is instructive, indicating the persistence and versatility of these narratives within new cultural and literary formations. In particular, the Babel typology occupies a prominent place within her poetic discourse—in the first instance as a recognition of the fallen nature of human language, and its failure to connect individuals and communicate truth. Early poems like "The Answer," "If," "Because I Only Write" and "A Birthday Letter, Slightly Revised" (from *Prospect of a Drowning*), express her conviction about "barricading speech" that

obstructs the communion between individuals, sentences that constrain the “living whole,” and words that carry “no grace” (“Because I Only Write” 17). This is clearly a paradoxical realization for a poet, whose craft depends vitally on words and meaning: as Lee acknowledges in “Nonetheless,” despite their imperfections, “words are nearly all that we have” (Lee *Against* 30).

More than the general condition of the wordsmith, however, Lee’s poetry depicts a freshly post-lapsarian persona, caught in the bewildering new condition of sin (such as follows the expulsion from Eden or the Babel collapse), that comes to symbolize the new social identity of the Anglophone Singaporean citizen as well as poet. Thus in “The Answer,” the emotional entanglements that personal relationships add to language (a familiar theme in Lee’s *oeuvre*), are received and further complicated by the speaker’s marked ignorance of the fallen world: she is immediately “ensnared” by both the language and emotional entanglements of the friend’s letter, and her attempt at a response is made clumsy by her “untried hand” (*Prospect* 15). The poem “If”—which records a similar situation in which the speaker struggles with language as the intermediary between her and a friend—likewise depicts the speaker as a new consciousness, faced with the troubling “grammar of sensations” (*Prospect* 16). Both these poems, like many of Lee’s other works, thus depict a post-lapsarian consciousness in which there is a profound split between “heart” and “mind,” language and reality, intention and result—a divide that resembles St. Paul’s sin-conscious split between “good” soul/intentions and “evil” body/deeds (Rom. 7.19). This allows Lee to make her persona the embodiment of a certain social condition: the individual’s birth into the alienating conditions of the newly-independent nation.

Lee’s poetic persona is thus—in a way similar to Thumboo’s precarious perspective “from the tower”—caught in a perpetual striving to transcend the earthly limitations of words-in-society, while not quite reaching the perfect “grace” of the divine perspective and order. Lee conceives of this poetic role in explicitly Christian terms (as she explains in an interview), as the “whole mystery of writing” which resembles the “ultimate mystery” of an “ineffable God’s” dealings with man, and man’s

attempts to grasp such a God (Chan 33, 48). Language-as-lack also has a social dimension, although Lee does not often articulate this in quite the same overtly public terms as does Thumboo. Her primary focus is on the inarticulate feelings and articulated misunderstandings between individuals (often friends or lovers), although these idiolects and their problematic relationships are themselves microcosms of Singapore society. Thus in a poem like “Unfinished,” the poet-persona’s unspecified relationship (which may be that of a mentor, guardian or friend) with the “young man,” Luke, implicitly symbolizes a larger social problem. The young man, like the young nation Singapore, is characterized by “energies” and “dreams” that have the potential to lead to confusion and disorder (*Against* 15). In Luke’s multiple desires, influences, and impulses—“belonging everywhere yet to no one,/no one, firm, defined, cohesive entity”—is an implicit echo not only of Babel’s disintegration, but also of Singapore’s own dreaming immigrant races, and the cultural pluralism that stands in the way of national unity. This parallel sounds a more sinister note in the image of “rivers of blood unstopped,” which denote the young man’s vital energies, but in the larger social context also connote the threat of race riots and other social violence.

Babel-symbols, as well as allusions to the Babel-conditions of the poet’s socio-historical context, become more clear in a poem appropriately entitled “Babel,” from Lee’s 1991 collection. The poem recognizes the nexus of language and power, alluding to the tempting “powered lure of words,” but also their divisive and obscuratory power: “. . . all our words divide/and cannot make us whole” (29). The lack of a specific object in these lines makes the word “divide” intransitive and open, allowing Lee to speak both of the individual’s condition of dividedness in moral-psychological terms, and of the social divisiveness implicit in so many of her poems. Thus when she says earlier in the poem that “our speech fails on our tongues/to dialects of blood,” it is on the one hand a comment (similar to the one she makes in “Unfinished”) on the individual passions and desires too deep for words that inhibit social relations. On the other hand, it is also an allusion to the different “dialects” spoken even among the Singapore Chinese community—a linguistic differentiation played out in the other racial communities, and *a fortiori*

between the races; “blood,” once again, is the ominous socio-ethical cost of this divisiveness.

“Telling it Like it Is” (*Against* 38) is likewise an implicit commentary on the linguistic difficulties lying at the heart of social problems. On one level a philosophical disquisition on human desire for communion (“the extravagance of our need”) and the abuses into which this often falls, the poem on another level uses a terse Biblical symbolism of exile and alienation that also stands for a vision of modern Singapore. Thus the phrase “the very blood in us cries out for dwelling” may be read as an allusion to the Cain and Abel story in Genesis 4 where Yahweh accuses Cain of his brother’s murder with the words “the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.” Like Cain, modern man is judged by his offering: the feeling of inadequacy regarding “the poverty . . . of our giving,” is what leads to a fear and anxiety that prohibits relationships (“we do not, for we dare not, take”).

Lee’s poem is an implicit re-working of the Babel scene by way of the Abel-Cain story, inasmuch as it implicates language as a crucial aspect of this brotherly violence: Cain, like Luke in “Unfinished” (and like the modern everyman) is a victim of “extravagant” and inchoate passions and desires for which he can find no perfect articulation, so that “the very blood” is forced to cry it out. Hence the significance of the poem’s title, exhorting the rare and difficult act of “telling it like it is,” of expressing the “harder . . . truth” of man’s nature and the consequent social relationship. Just as Babel’s linguistic fall symbolized diasporic dispersion and the death of national unity, so too does the mark of Cain represent an exile and alienation appropriate to Singapore’s migrant and culturally-split society: like another well-known biblical scene of lamentation, the Israelites’ sorrow in captivity “by the rivers of Babylon” (Ezek. 1.1, Neh. 1.4, Ps. 137.1–4), where their native language is inhibited in a “strange land,” Cain’s sorrow (“cries out for dwelling”) is an expression of the futile hope for rootedness, acceptance and belonging. While the analogy with modern Singapore is never made explicit or obvious in this poem, the symbolism of Cain’s condition—inarticulately impassioned, exiled, rootless and fratricidal—suggests its own cultural relevance to the poet’s milieu.

The condition of spiritual “poverty” (*Against* 38) represented by Cain also emerges in other poems where the element of social criticism is more explicit. Poems like “My Country and My People,” “Bukit Timah, Singapore” and “Leaving,” use biblical symbolism to critique the material successes of modern Singapore, and the conditions of social, spiritual and emotional exile which are nevertheless fomented by this success. In such poems, a dominant Singapore culture of rapid economic development, infrastructural upgrading, swift and firm patriarchal governance and commercial greed, is opposed by Christian symbols of silence, abnegation and humility at the margins of society.

“My Country and My People” reiterates Lee’s vision of a Babel society explicitly in terms of the hybrid conditions of post-colonial modernity—“neither here nor there”—characterized by “fence-sitting,” caught between a lost traditionalism (“I had no land to till”) and an alienating modernization of “highways” and the “chiseled profile” of “milli-mini-flats” (*Prospect* 51–52). This condition of between-ness is attributed to the political schisms following decolonization and independence: a nation caught between “quelling riots/in the street” on the one hand, and “cutting down/those foreign ‘devils’” on the other. Lee’s poem thus links modernity’s materialist ambitions and ideologies to a spiritual-social lack, a loss of an Edenic moment of coherence and communal-ity, represented in this poem by the speaker’s “shy, forbearing family” and its house “distant” from the city, and by her innocent rural co-existence with her “gentle, brown-skinned neighbours.” In other poems, this retreat from and resistance to modernity’s ambitions is figured in terms drawn both from Eden and from Christ in the wilderness. Thus in “Bukit Timah, Singapore,” a major thoroughfare near the city center represents the sheer anxious speed of modern Singapore, dominated by “men, machines,” “ambition [flashing] by in a new car,” “long-suffering civil servants,” ubiquitous schoolchildren, and “pretty office girls” (*Prospect* 49–50). Reminiscent of Old Testament attacks on idolatry, this fast and steady human stream is envisioned as a continual sacrifice to some Moloch or similar savage god: the “megalopolitan appetite” of developing Singapore. In contrast is the Christ figure of the “old farmer with fruit-heavy basket,” a relic from an idyllic and Edenic era,

whose measured presence on the road upsets its hasty traffic. This social schism—between modern materialists and old ruralists, concrete and soil, wealth and simplicity—if it does not starkly threaten social order in the way that is envisioned in many of the other Babel poems, it nevertheless figures the sentimental and moral cost of progress. The poem finally wonders “what that old farmer would say,/if he lived to come this way”—a question that prefigures his demise at the hands of modern society.

These *imitatio Christi* (at least in the mind of the poems’ speakers) recur in poems like “To My Niece” (*Prospect* 36), “The Shorter Way” (*Prospect* 44), “Diary Entries: Three Questions” (*Prospect* 45–46), “The Tree” (*Against* 54), “Recalling” (*Brink* 19–20), “Woman’s Song: Doing Time” (*Brink* 17), “Thamby” (*Lambada* 15), and others. In “To My Niece,” a series of New Testament images and tropes cluster around the child as figure of innocence. The child, with a face like “a folded flower in sleep” (36), has a homiletic function like the flowers in Christ’s teachings (Matt. 6.28–29), which are clothed in glory from God even though they (unlike materialistic man) neither toil nor spin. The New Testament figure of the child, like the homiletic symbol of the flower, is used to upset and invert worldly priorities, foregrounding helpless innocence rather than worldly strength and power, spiritual purity rather than material gain (Mark 10.15; Matt. 18.3). For Lee’s speaker too, the child is a locus and the means of forsaking worldly priorities (“forsake my day’s confusions”) in favour of a quiet being founded on love and peace:

. . . in you my being  
 finds meaning; my love  
 a sense of beginning. (36)

The poem “The Shorter Way” in the same volume focuses on a figure of contrasting age (“an old man in khaki, bent and brown,” 44), but similar function in symbolizing a repudiation of the material order of modern Singapore. A homespun prophet, the old man eschews the “long road” created by Singapore’s infrastructural development, the rapid “highway” of modern life, in favour of “this waste ground” behind

the speaker's house. Like the religious hermit or prophet, this old man in the wilderness is a figure of abject material circumstances, holding "his shoes in his hand" to save on their wear, and exposing his "flesh and skin" to the thorns, broken stones, rusty cans and other debris.

There is something in this poem of Robert Frost's technique of bringing out complex moral and existential allegories from everyday and seemingly commonplace situations. Lee's poem is loaded with suggestive allusions and connotations, so that the old man's debris-strewn shorter way seems to be an indictment of material progress: it is literally the dumping ground for excess building material (wood, stones, tile), and symbolically the "waste" product ("dung trails") of the growing city-state. Yet the old man's abjection also holds a spiritual insight: like the child in "To My Niece," he serves to contest dominant social values, offering an "image splintering to inverted fragments," an inversion of the comfortable consumerist man implied in official discourses of the modern city-state.

As pre-socialized children, ostracized old men, oppressed women, otherworldly characters who die an untimely death, the socially "low" who do not fit into the ethos of progressive Singapore, these Christ-figures are the symbolic center of Lee's social critique, allowing her to imply an alternative and invisible life of meekness, humility and charity. This positioning outside of the overwhelmingly dominant discourse of Singapore's development and progress, is facilitated by the common language and symbolism of the Bible's resistance to the world and Mammon. These tropes of linguistic Babel, childlike innocence and Christ-like inversion of worldly values, in turn substantiate Lee's poetic project to invoke a different world—a world of invisible and eternal values, emotions and truths parallel to and critical of the direction and structure of the present order.

Unlike Thumboo's more explicit engagements with the socio-political conditions of modern Singapore, Lee's engagement does not involve a constant foregrounding of the nation and its condition, and a hope for its speedy moral redemption. Lee's meek and marginal figures are part of a technique of spiritual withdrawal, which is also a dichotomizing of consciousness into two distinct realms; she thus contrasts unfavour-

ably the material world in which her speakers live with a higher and purer order—one that may not be attainable in the near future or on the material plane, but the very existence of which functions to spur introspection and regeneration. The utopian drive of this spiritual other-world might thus be seen as a corollary to a new nationalism in several complex ways: while it registers its difference from (and thus its dissatisfactions with) the rapid change of nationalized modernization, its very alterity may contribute to the moral development of the new state, and towards a project of fulfilling the ‘quality of life’ criterion associated with the economically and socially developed nation.

**Conclusion: Resurrection, Resistance, Reiteration**

Thumboo and Lee are not the only Singaporean poets writing in English who draw significantly on Christian types and symbols, of course. The prevalence of this narrative is evident both in elder poets like Arthur Yap, Oliver Seet and Robert Yeo, and in a new generation of poets like Angeline Yap, Felix Cheong, Boey Kim Cheng and others. This narratological-typological persistence is manifest even where there is no personal religious conviction on the part of the poet (although many of the Singapore poets writing in English are professing Christians, or the products of mission schools, or both), and must be seen as an example of cultural resurrection—the continuing vitality of an idiom long after and outside of the nineteenth-century colonial culture in which it was first spawned. It would of course be a mistake to see this as the resurrection of a somehow “pure” cultural expression; Singaporean poetry in English adapts the discourse as much as it adopts, so that there is a constant negotiation between original meanings and local ones, sacralization and secularization, Biblical allusions and a wider intertextual range. Yet the persistence of this cultural remainder, even in a national-social milieu so different in many ways from the historical colonial origin, indicates the broader influential nexus of English as a global language, and the related cultural organs of capitalist and liberal-individualist ideologies, post-Enlightenment ethics and values, and evangelical Christianity.

Resistance as a concept in post-colonial discourse analysis thus cannot be taken in abstract or isolation. Every act of resistance must be a resis-

tance in context, reacting against one socio-political pillar only to set in motion other forces which breed other acts of resistance and reaction. In the context of Singapore culture, the artist treads a contingently thin line between different social orders: while it is all very well to resist “Western” values and influences in the name of a new independent nationalism, this has attendant risks of disturbing the precarious balance of languages, religions, classes and other social subsets. Conversely, the encoding of an Anglophone Christian discourse widely recognized across national and racial boundaries, is the convenient means of resisting the contrary pulls of competing social groupings, and thus an inevitable tool of national construction.

## Notes

- 1 The anxiety about political insurgence rears its head even in more recent episodes such as the “Marxist conspiracy” of the 1980s. The issue of the racial divide, while not manifesting itself in violent means since the 1960s, persists to this day in the form of public dialogues on benchmarking the socio-economic advances of racial groups such as the Malays, and proposals for distinct “communal leadership” by members of such groups (Ng 1).
- 2 In his 1999 National Day Rally speech, Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explicitly associated the country’s progressive and successful citizens, its “cosmopolitans,” with an English tertiary or graduate education and linguistic competence that would allow them to participate comfortably in a global culture. In contrast, “heartlanders” are crucial to the stability and socio-political well-being of the nation in a largely domestic, inward-looking and insular manner (Goh 1999). Characteristically, “heartlanders” are more comfortable speaking vernacular languages, have only halting English competence, and are culturally traditional and conservative rather than progressive and modern. While the Prime Minister predictably did not make explicit the sensitive religious implications of his distinction, implicitly the “newer” religion of Christianity is clearly aligned with the global outlook, commercial and cultural progressivism, and Anglophone bias of “cosmopolitans,” while the “older” religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam and Hinduism are associated with the more insular and culturally-conservative “heartlanders”—if only for the vital reason that these older religions virtually never have English translations or versions of their rituals, which thus tend to be the domain of those more proficient in vernacular languages than in English.
- 3 Isaiah 40.3, itself a prefiguring of John the Baptist in Matthew 3: 3.

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