

REVIEWS

The Votive Pen: Writings on Edwin Thumboo. Nilanjana Sengupta. Singapore: Penguin Random House SEA, 2020. 280 pages. ISBN: 9789814882132.

Writing a Poet's Life: A Review of The Votive Pen

The Votive Pen by Sengupta Nilanjana is a literary biography of a major Singapore poet, Edwin Thumboo. Often referred to as the father of Singaporean literature, Thumboo writes in English but creates a nexus for Singapore's multicultural and multilingual realities in his verse. Nilanjana's biography showed how Thumboo's poetry is both personal and historical—reflecting his growth as a writer and at the same time, illustrated the transformation of Singapore from an island which had nothing, to an economic miracle in Southeast Asia.

Born in 1933, Edwin Thumboo, poet and academic, is regarded as being responsible for putting Singaporean literature in English on the literary map. Combining the myths, history, and everyday life in Singapore in his lyric poems, Thumboo is also regarded as Singapore's unofficial poet laureate. His works include *Rib of Earth* (1956), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), *A Third Map* (1993), and *Still Travelling* (2008). He was the longest serving Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (1980–1991) at the National University of Singapore. He is a multi-awarded writer and an active promoter of Southeast Asian literature in English.

According to Leon Edel, biographies must “be narrated as if it were a story” (Edel 1978, 3). Nilanjana's writing has an unmistakable narrative touch. While scholarly in her portrayal of events and ideas, she never forgets that her subject is a man, albeit an extraordinary one—intelligent but often opinionated, reticent but adventurous, inspired by his locale but is cosmopolitan, and spiritual but Augustinian¹ in his attitude to salvation. This unusually lyrical biography is at the onset multi-textual, allowing the reader to see the intersection not only of disciplines but of epistemes, using the story of one man as an axis of history and literature.

Balancing data and personality must have been difficult, one of the challenges in life-writing. Nilanjana's research was well-grounded but Thumboo has an interesting habit of recontextualizing or questioning data especially about himself, which can easily confuse anyone studying him. Data is rock-like, unassailable and impenetrable; but personality, wondrous and engaging, can sometimes melt data. Nilanjana's biography successfully achieved a happy balance between data and personality, a proof of the biographer and subject's decision to form an easy diplomacy without sacrificing accuracy or verve.

The *Votive Pen* consists of five chapters, namely, 1) Crossing the Boundaries; 2) The Isle is Full of Noises; 3) Tribes; 4) City on the Mind; and 5) Still Travelling.

The beginning of the book conveyed a clear thematic goal: the unity of things. Frustrated at the limited offerings in the colonial classroom, the young Thumboo would venture into libraries and carve for himself a multicultural intellectual foundation. He read about disparate cultures with their respective uniqueness, yet at the end of the day, he saw their unmistakable similarities with his own. He found the possibility for unity in a diverse world. Living in a multi-ethnic society like Singapore, the cross-cultural sharing of national space is inevitable and as a youth, Thumboo already had a strong sense of multiculturalism. Likewise, he started to develop an interest in a Southeast Asian community, a time when no Southeast Asian saw himself as one.

The second chapter, "The Isle is Full of Noises," reveals Thumboo's first stage of artistic growth. While Western poets such as Yeats had a profound impact on his work, it was surprising to discover that a lesser-known book, Michio Takeyama's *Harp of Burma*, had a significant influence on Thumboo's artistic growth. This 1966 publication narrates the story of a Japanese soldier in Burma during World War II who eventually decides to be a Burmese Buddhist monk, portaying the possibility of a harmonious coexistence among peoples who were once enemies, especially when their cultures conflate. These influences gave Thumboo a way "to create a vocabulary for Singapore" (Sengupta 2020, 83).

One of the highlights of the third chapter, “Tribes,” is Thumboo’s sojourn to Africa. Africa was an intellectual and poetic watershed for him. The African historical experience resonated with that of Singapore, increasing his awareness of postcolonial connections between Asia and Africa. This journey restructured his personal literary canon and helped him develop a sharper leaning towards literary decolonization.

The fourth chapter, appropriately titled “City on the Mind,” shows Thumboo at his best when writing about Singapore’s nationhood. His book, *Ulysses by the Merlion* celebrates the Singaporean monument that is a reminder of the nation’s mixed ancestry and the strengths of its people. His poetry collection, *A Third Map* stands at the apex of Thumboo’s poetic achievement. It is a cartography of Singapore’s nationhood, from its separation from Malaysia—“Ninth of August-I” and “Ninth of August-II”—to a list of Singaporean symbols of success—“RELC,” “NTI,” “The National Library, Singapore”—which are markers of Singapore’s intellectual achievements. At the same time, he also interrogates methods of nation building that the state used to create a compliant society. Poems like “Gods Can Die,” “The Interview,” and “The Sneeze” scrutinize state policies, social values, and practices that put a dent on the economic miracle Singapore has attained.

The highlight of the last chapter, “Still Travelling,” is Thumboo’s turn towards spirituality, Christianity in particular. Religion is not new to Thumboo’s poetry. His early poems referred to various religious beliefs, and his poetic arsenal is full of myths and personages from different belief systems. Christianity, however, seemed to have brought him the spiritual and intellectual engagement he has been seeking. Nevertheless, his religion is not exclusive. It is that of a searcher, looking for harmony in beliefs.

A votive object is something “offered or performed in the fulfillment of a vow.”² Edwin Thumboo’s life and writings seem like an offering to nation and humanity through creative and academic production. His poetry as a votive object is an offering not so much to the gods as in the ancient days, but to his people and country for prayers answered as Singapore

surpassed national challenges and economically succeeds, but also serving as a reminder to his people of their beginnings. Likewise, it is an offering to the spiritual self which continues to search for answers in the midst of material attainment. Finally, with great veracity and lyricism, Nilanjana faithfully renders his life and his Singapore but without forgetting to render Thumboo in his numerous subjectivities—as a citizen, poet, human being.

Lily Rose TOPE, Ph.D.
Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of the Philippines Diliman
lrtope@up.edu.ph

Endnotes

- ¹ As a young man, St. Augustine struggled with inner demons and from his struggles created one of the most important theological oeuvres in the Catholic church. His famous line was “Love God and do what you like.” He founded the mendicant eremitical Augustinian order in 1244 which valued community life over oneself. Augustine did not make a virtue of poverty but of sharing resources with others.
- ² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “votive,” accessed 14 April 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/votive>

References

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