

THIEU SON'S LITERARY CONCEPTION SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF WESTERN ROMANTICIST SINCERITY

Bui Linh Hue

Thai Nguyen University of Sciences

Abstract. During and after the debate between Art for art' sakists and Art for life' sakists from 1935 to 1939, the critic Thieu Son and other critics and writers who are influenced by European Romanticism were addressed as "aestheticist" and "bourgeoisie" for their praise of romantic literature. Recently, there have been several studies which aim to clear these unfair receptions and return the proper positions to them in Vietnamese literature and criticism. Continuing these efforts, from the perspectives of discourse studies, this article will explain Thieu Son's literary conception from its relationship with the nineteenth century Romanticist sincerity in European literature.

Keywords: Chân/cheng, sincerity, Art for art' sake, Thieu Son, Vietnamese Romanticism, Vietnamese Realism, Vietnamese modern literature, discourse studies.

1. Introduction

During and after the debate between Art for art' sakists and Art for life' sakists from 1935 to 1939, theorists advocating "art for art' sake" such as Thieu Son and Hoai Thanh have been criticized and labeled as "aestheticist", "bourgeoisie", "lack of revolutionary stance", or "remote from the masses of the people". The source of this debate is Thieu Son's essay entitled "Two Literary Concepts" in the magazine *The Saturday Fiction* (*Tiểu thuyết thứ Bảy*). He criticized the conception of Nguyen Ba Hoc and Pham Quynh which belittled the role of aesthetical literature while promoting moral and political literature: "Therefore, Mr. Nguyen's writings are only about ethics, and Mr. Pham's ones specializes in researching East-West theories" [1;531]. Tran Dinh Su and Phung Kien in recent studies have pointed out the importance of Thieu Son's literary viewpoint because it "raised the aesthetical essence of the new literature", contributing to the modernization of Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century [2; 53-66]. Continuing to change the superficial critique of Thieu Son in the 1935 polemic, this article, from the perspectives of discourse studies which consider criticism as discourse, will explain his literary conception from its relationship with the Romanticist sincerity in the nineteenth century western literature.

Received July 17, 2019. Revised September 5, 2019. Accepted October 22, 2019.

Contact Bui Linh Hue, e-mail address: huebl@tnus.edu.vn

2. Content

2.1. Eastern and Western concepts of sincerity before Romanticism

2.1.1. Pre-Romanticist western sincerity

Western culture, different from the Eastern one, has a long tradition of “focusing on truth” [3]. Different from Easterners who often think holistically, Westerners tend to think more analytically by focusing on conspicuous objects in the foreground and disentangling phenomena from the contexts in which they are embedded. This style of thinking has led to a clear division between different fields such as art, philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy since ancient times. The idea that there are different kinds and levels of truth in different fields has been raised since Aristotle's time: truth in science and philosophy is different from truth in rhetoric and speech. The concept of truth (sincerity) in Western culture is closely related to Aristotle's thought of truth. Aristotle argued that sincerity is a neutral state, which is in the middle between inferiority, lack of courage and bragging. Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) pointed out that the word *sincerity* appeared in English in the early 16th century, derived from the Latin *sincerus* meaning “clean”, “pure”, “sound”. For example, we can use the word *sincerity* to refer to a pure wine, a religion that has not been changed and mixed, or a consistent person. Later, the word was used in a figurative sense to refer to the sincerity of man: “a man's life is sincere in the sense of being sound, or pure, or whole; or consistent in its virtuousness” [4;12-13]. In the Middle Ages, under the influence of Aristotle and Christian conception of morality, a person's sincerity was judged from social ethics. A person is only “sincere” if he lives up to the commandments of the religion with the three standards which are faith, hope and charity.

2.1.2. Sincerity in Chinese and Vietnamese traditions before Romanticism

The conceptions of *chân* (真, 真) in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures are quite similar due to the influence of the three major doctrines and religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Unlike Western *sincerity* which only mean the ethical characteristics of people, *chân* in Chinese and Vietnamese culture can be *chân thành* (sincere), *thành thật*, *thật thà* (honest) (as in “chân tâm thành ý” 真心誠意 – sincere heart and mind, therefore, is often sometimes used to replace the word *tín* - reliable) or *thật, không phải giả* (real, not fake) (as in “chân nhân chân sự” 真人真事 - real character and real incident). Thieu Chu added: “The Buddhist and Taoist use the word *chân* in the same way as the Confucian uses the word *thành* 誠.” [5;516] Yanming An argued that the word *sincerity* has a synonymous concept in Chinese culture that is *cheng* (誠, 诚). *Cheng* needs to be understood in the context of human everyday conversation and be interchangeable with the word *tín* (faith). *Cheng* and *sincerity* are similar in that they all mean “to be true to oneself” [6;164]. An also pointed out the notion that “someone who can do bad things sincerely” will never happen because *cheng* in Chinese cultural traditions is always ethical [6;164]. Confucius believed that “Humans are born with benevolence,” and set out a path of self-improvement so that each person can maintain the righteous path and be useful for the family and society.

Vuong Duong Minh interpreted the Confucian philosophy of the mind: “Knowing your mind, you know the Way, and knowing the Way is knowing heavens” [7; 25]. The mind of a Confucian *junzi* (君子, a morally superior human being) aligns with the moral standards of a person who enthusiastically serves the court and the society. These moral standards are defined in the Five Bonds (ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend), and the Five Constants (benevolence, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge, and integrity). Buddhism and Taoism, meanwhile, eliminate personal desires and social constraints. Taoism believes that whenever one keeps his heart pure, he immediately sees the Way. Taoism advocates eradicating all social boundaries and emphasises various themes, such as naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity, detachment from desires, and most important of all, *wu wei* (actions without intention). Buddhism also considers cultivating the mind as the way to Nirvana, however, unlike Confucianism and Taoism, the Buddhist spiritual path requires the eradication of all human desires. *Samuyutta Nikaya* writes: “Eliminating desire and hatred mean eradicating delusion, my friend! It is also known as Nirvana” [7;27]. The three religions meet in the philosophy of the mind: “The philosophy of eastern philosophy goes from mind to body, to things, to heaven, to religion” [7;28]. In this respect, the “true mind” of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism is similar to western sincerity in the Middle Ages: they must be consistent with the moral standards of religion. However, Taoism which emphasizes living honestly to one's heart and returning to nature escapes social boundaries and meet the ideology of western Romanticism to some certain extends.

The Confucian thought that literature must attach to the Way has permeated the concept of sincerity in Vietnamese medieval culture and literature. Tran Dinh Huou when considering the artistic conceptions of medieval writers and scholars such as Nguyen Van Sieu, Cao Ba Quat, Nguyen Duc Dat and Le Quy Don pointed out that these scholars all attach great importance to the sincerity of content instead of formalism [8; 60]. Nguyen Van Sieu said: “The more clever the word, the more it will lose its true meaning. The stranger the idea, the less it expresses” [8; 129]. Ngo Thoi Nham wrote: “Poems, if too complicated, easily fall into falsehoods, if too nihilistic, easily fall into emptiness and sadness. Only being pure, simple, straightforwardness and having no deceit and sadness but focusing on preventing bad things and preserving good things, are the main characteristics of poetry” [8; 70]. Contrary to false literature, real literature is natural and pure. However, the opinion of Ngo Thoi Nham also shows that, for the medieval poets, the sincerity of the soul in poetry must still be closely linked to the feudal morals and social order.

It can be seen that the word *chân* in Vietnamese medieval culture and literature has quite similar meanings, close to *cheng* in ancient Chinese cultural tradition and *sincerity* in Pre-Romanticism western culture. They are united in the sense that “to be true to oneself”, however, this is a “self” which is conditioned by morality and social order. Interestingly, *chân* in Vietnamese tradition and *cheng* in Chinese one can both indicate the inner sincerity and the truth of the outside world, while the word *sincerity* since the Western Middle Ages, has been used to indicate human morality only [9]. The

differences between this Eastern *chân/cheng* and the Western *sincerity* represent the holistic and analytical thinking of the two cultures.

2.2. Sincerity in the 19th century Western Romanticism

In Europe, during the nineteenth century, the era of Romanticism and the awakening of personal ego, although the word *sincerity* was used with the meaning of “living true to oneself”, it had a different meaning from one in the previous period. *The Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850* (2004), confirms the role of sincerity as an important idea of the Romanticist artist: “Sincerity, in simplest terms the correspondence between an actual feeling or belief and its expression, gained new importance as a value and ideal during the Romantic period. The word *sincerity*, from the Latin *sincerus* (pure, unadulterated), is present in French (*sincerite*) as early as the thirteenth century and in English in the sixteenth century; early usage generally referred to the genuineness of a Christian doctrine or belief. In the Romantic period, the emphasis that writers put on personal experience and feeling amounted to an unprecedented commitment to sincerity. This commitment reflected the changing status of the self and of poetry during that period. The dissolution of the authority of political and religious tradition resulted in a new focus on the personal experience of the individual as a repository of truth. Meanwhile, the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and the advances of science were seen to threaten poetry’s claim to truths. As M. H. Abrams explains in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, poets defended themselves against the rationalists by implicitly claiming that their writings were true because they were sincere. For Romantic writers, sincerity was no longer an attractive but dispensable social trait (as it appears to have been in the writings of the earlier eighteenth century); it had become an dispensable foundation of truth itself” [10; 1052-1053].

For a time, Romanticism in Vietnam has been used to be criticized as a manifestation of the bourgeois, backward, and anti-progressive. However, Western Romanticism is a revolutionary response, contributing to the modernization of world literature as well as changing the way of recognizing the self and society. On the surface, Romanticism in the nineteenth-century European literature is a rejection of society with its moral and legal constraints. But the underlying cause for this rejection was the disagreement towards the Enlightenment rationalism. The rationality has permeated into literary and artistic composition, reflected in classical style principles and in the favor of the Greek-Roman canons. The Romanticists advocate breaking the boundaries between tragedy and comedy, between novel and elite literature. Disregarding reason, Romantic authors value intuition, imagination and emotions. Romanticism is also partly a reaction to the materialism of industrial civilization. Returning to the nature, the “exotic”, and the supernatural imagination is a way of showing aversion to factories, cities, and goods, which are the manifestations of industrial civilization. Western society in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a particularly chaotic period, with many turbulences and struggles between bourgeois revolutions and the efforts to rebuild royalist politics. Disgusting the puppet literature, the romantic authors aimed to fully express the individual in both his bad and his good, his reason and his instinct, in order to awake individualism and revolutionary spirit. With these revolutionary characteristics of Romanticism, Realism, which is seen

as a reaction against it, to some extent, can also be considered as a continuation of this movement.

Man, under the influence of the individualism promoted by Romanticism, does not necessarily live up to the moral standards of religion and society. Although romantic writers did not formally use or formulate the term *sincerity*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth, two figures who laid the foundations of Romanticism, have repeatedly mentioned this issue. In *Confessions* (1781), Jean-Jacques Rousseau declares: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself" [11; 17]. Also, in the book, Rousseau had "not done anything bad, nor added anything good" about himself. For example, he included in the book the process of growing up from adolescence with physical weakness and desperate thoughts of waiting to die, to the first failed sexual experiences and love affairs, or his intended and incidental sins. He believes that no human being has no evil thought or sin. Unlike saint confessions, a kind of autobiography which have been popular before Romanticism, Rousseau's autobiography was courageous, sincere and unbound by any religious or moral standards. Rousseau reflected on himself, accepting to face himself with the judgment of society as a way of seeking freedom. This leading modern autobiography also focus on natural environment and emotions. In his earlier book, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (*A Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 1750), he argues that rather than purifying morals, the science and the arts corrupt humankind's original, essential nature [10;1053]. Therefore, returning to nature and emotions is the way to help people revive their original innocence and benevolence. Thus, 19th-century Western romanticists separate sincerity from the bonds of bourgeois morality and politics. According to them, artists and common people need to live and express themselves honestly.

The notion of the sincerity of the romantic authors in the nineteenth century became a premise for a shift in the Western conception of the relationship between works, artists and society: sincerity is replaced with the concept of authenticity [12]. This concept was raised by the thinkers of existentialists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger in the late nineteenth century, then Andre Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre. Authenticity becomes the key ethical standard of existentialism. The starting point of existentialism is the disorientation and confusion when confronted with a seemingly meaningless or absurd world that humans cannot control and come to lose their ego [13;8]. People are forced to rely on themselves and not others or existing institutions to find the meaning of existence for themselves. People only have the freedom when they are able to create their own selves. An authentic act is an act which is done by a man's free will and he is responsible for that choice [14]. Thus, it can be seen that authenticity is quite similar to the concept of Romanticist sincerity. They are only different from each other in term of ontological perspectives. After the existentialists, the postmodern people began to reexamine and doubt even this very concept of authenticity. Post-colonial criticism has shown hybridization to be a new feature of the post-colonial and globalized world. In particular, the existence of "subculture", "youth culture" and the commercialization of cultural products make the concepts of identity and authenticity even more unreliable.

However, this is another story, in this article, we only discuss the influence of Romanticist sincerity to Thieu Son's thoughts on literature.

2.3. The influence of Romanticist sincerity to Thieu Son's criticism

Thieu Son's *Criticism and Essays (Phê bình và Cáo luận, 1933)* is a book that clearly reflects the influence of Romanticist sincerity to his literary criticism.

In his essay "Art to Life" ("Nghệ thuật với đời"), Thieu Son expressed his defense for aestheticism by criticizing the moralists' conservative criticism of *The Tale of Kieu*: "*The Tale of Kieu*, which the moralists criticize as lewd, and the patriots criticize as being harmful to the masses' progress (...) Literature only needs to seek and show the beautiful." He asserts that "Whoever wants to write literature, must first free his soul from all prejudices which are created from morality, politics, religion and serve only art" [15;131]. This literary conception of Thieu Son is very close to the concept of the romanticist sincerity. Putting this article in the context of his other critical essays in this book, such as "The Romantic Trend from J. J. Rousseau", "Romanticism in Vietnamese Literature" and "Realism", it can be seen that Thieu Son's opinion is directly influenced by Western Romanticism in general and by Jean Jacques Rousseau, the most prominent figure of this literary movement, in particular.

Thieu Son points out that, unlike Voltaire who is still influenced by the Enlightenment classicalism, which led him to "a rational and objective literature" [16;166], Rousseau extremely opposes any moral standards and social order: "Rousseau is a crazy, world-weary man, who considers anything available in society as corrupt, harmful and need to be eliminated to create a fresher and better life for mankind. He believes that humankind are born with "good nature", however later become spoiled under the influence of the society. Laws, customs and education all are built with false principles and with unrighteous conditions" [16;167]. He points out that Rousseau's denial does not represent an atheist's madness. He quotes Rousseau: "The mind is crawling below, but the soul is soaring. Intellectually, we are small and lowly, but thanks to our affection, we are still tall and great. No matter our position among nature, we, a breed that loves justice and have emotions, are not despicable" [16;167]. Thieu Son shows that Rousseau does not completely deny ethics and justice, but only rejected the rationalist and conservative morals and social orders to establish the new ones which are based on emotions, human goodness and personal stance.

Thieu Son also cites from Rousseau's rebellious works such as *Julie or the New Heloise*, *Confessions*, *Emile or on Education* to show that, by honestly confronting and expressing oneself, and being free from traditional constraints and prejudices, Romanticism helps people to "know their egos fully", to understand their "spiritual capacities, and also their potential power of affection and thinking, as well as the deepest parts of their soul." Thieu Son recognizes that Romanticism is not a trendy movement, but a repetitive creative mind, and a "state of the soul that has been eternal and never destroyed" [16;170]. Romanticism has also been present in Vietnamese literature for a long time, because it is a literature which is "heavy in mind but mild in reason", especially in complex social situations that people can no longer rely on traditional morals and social orders. The situation in Vietnam at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century is such a time: when the

Confucian script was no longer used, Confucianism was depraved and the society was chaotic, intellectuals had to “act like crazy people or write romantic poetry” [17;176].

At this point, Thieu Son's conception of literary creation meet Hoai Thanh's ideas on sincerity in the New Poetry Movement (Thơ Mới). Hoai Thanh sees “a desire to be honest” in this poetry: “When our affections and feeling have been changed, our poetry has to be renewed too. The desire to untie poetry is only the desire to articulate our faith and melancholy, the desire to be honest. A painful and urgent need” [18;19]. He pointed out one of the reasons for the need to live true to one self is the erosion of the traditional morals and belief in medieval Vietnamese society. Hoai Thanh bitterly acknowledges the “weakness” of Confucian spirit in Vietnam at that time: “In the old days, if someone who is falsely accused as Cao Ba Nha, or abandoned like the lady on Tam Duong wharf, can still depend something stable. Nowadays, the layer of prejudice on our soul has been washed away along with the superficial forms of poetry. The West has helped to return our soul to us. However, we are astonished to realize that we lack one thing, one thing which is more important than a hundred thousand others: a full faith” [18;54-55].

2.4. Thieu Son's concept of sincerity in the cultural and political contexts

Is Thieu Son's aestheticist literary notion which puts the author's ego first a mere Western imitation, or an insightful choice to guide writings and criticism of his time?

Outlining the context of Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century, Pham Xuan Thach points out two opposing trends: one is the traditional literary trend, which is attached to moral and educational purposes, and an opposite trend which aims to modernize and separate literature from other fields in order to catch up with the world. Corresponding to these two trends are two styles of criticism: the one of moralists and the one of young critics who are influenced by European culture. Examples of the former are the moral criticism of *The Tale of Kieu* or the accuse of Vu Trong Phung's novels as cynical porn fiction. Moralists also attacked Romanticism literature by labeling them as “melancholy literature” and “cheesy love novels” [19;326]. These polemics are one of the manifestations that since 1932, the conflict between the “old” and “new” intellectual generations became fierce. Pham Xuan Thach also proves that “if in the first three decades of the twentieth century, new conceptions of literature still appeared timidly, then in this period, in the debate between Thieu Son, Hoai Thanh, Le Trang Kieu and Hai Trieu, Phan Van Hum, Hai Thanh, the aestheticist conception of literature became the leading voice” [19;330].

Thus, this aestheticist conception of literature in general and Thieu Son's praise of sincerity is an advocacy for Vietnamese romantic writers, freeing them from the tradition of propaganda and moral literature and release literature from the combination with history and philosophy. In this way, Thieu Son encouraged the modernization of Vietnamese literature. The ability of honestly expressing human soul, especially his ego, also led to the renovation of literary forms, which are the separation of literature from history and philosophy, the elimination of the boundaries between elite and popular literature, the denial of restrictive genre principles. Therefore, Vietnamese Romanticism is not only a revolution to modernize literature, but also a revolution in the perception of individuals and society.

Although his essay started the polemic between Art for art' sakists and Art for life sakists, Thieu Son did not pay much attention and participated directly in the arguments. He even complained about the "fierce polemic with difficult and hard-to-understand arguments". In fact, Thieu Son did not completely negate the role and duty of art to life, however, he put them after aesthetical values which he considers to be the prerequisite of art: "Whether an author supports art for art' sake or art for life' sake, he first has to be an artist. If he is an artist, he must first cultivate his art, live his art, consider it as his life principles before using it as a medium" [20;149]. A work can only inspire and save the human soul when it is so beautiful that be able to touch the soul. Thieu Son believes that, if still being able to be touched by the beautiful, the minister would think of the people instead of committing corruption, the maid would enjoy her work instead of being sunk in cynical thoughts. Returning to the beauty and the innocence is the ultimate goal for art and the savior for human soul.

The meeting between the concept of *chân* in Thieu Son's criticism and the Western Romanticist sincerity originates in the similarity of historical conditions. First, it is the similarity in the need to express the inner person as a result of the awakening of individualism. Second, there is the need for literary modernization: it is necessary to separate literature from moral and political purposes. However, there are also differences between the historical contexts of the nineteenth century Western Romanticism and the early twentieth century Vietnamese one. Originating in the reaction to rationalism and the materialism of industrial civilization, European Romanticism asked for releasing literature from the moral and social constraints, and aimed to return humankind to nature and his original innocence. Meanwhile, Vietnamese Romanticism appeared in a complicated situation: semi-feudal colony regime led to the sudden change of the economy and culture. The pseudo-industrialism, the formation of the city along with its materialism and cruelty, the sudden separation of people from their traditional community society led to the loneliness, the lost of faith, and lack of idealism. Romanticism in Vietnam can be considered as an expression of the postcolonial hybrid: Vietnamese artists adapted Romanticism as both a consequence of the cultural assimilation of Western colonists, and as an active choice to modernize literature and to establish "national identity", which is a reaction against that assimilation itself.

Thieu Son received the influence from European Romanticism in an active and alert manner. He did not go to extreme polemics to assert aestheticism. Thieu Son did not separate art's duties and its aesthetic values. Therefore, he came to support both romanticism and realism naturally, and had a flexible definition of truth in realism: "Realism, in fact, there must also be a romantic part in it." He asserts that "There are differences and distances between the truth in reality and the truth in literature", and if "An accurate description is not yet the truth". To reveal the truth of life, it is necessary not only to include in literature visible and sensory facts, but also the truth of the dreams and imagination [21;179-181]. Thus, there is realism in romanticism and vice versa. At this point, Thieu Son meets the ideas of some medieval writers on receiving and presenting reality. The physical resemblance is not as important as the spirit of thing (*cái thần*). Nguyen Van Sieu takes the example of artist To Dong Pha to prove that in literature, when "a writing, like a painting, if depicts only the outward appearance,

without grasping its spirit, will be either superficial or, like the moon under the water, the flower in the mirror, seldom reach truth" [8;138]. At the time of the 1935 polemic over Art for art' sake or Art for life' sake, the Vietnamese tradition of moral and political literature which is a result of feudalism was continued by Marxist activists like Hai Trieu and Hai Thanh. The New Poetry (thơ Mới), which was influenced by French Romanticism, and novels had been timidly received among Vietnamese readers and often attacked by Confucian moralists and Marxist critics. In this context, Thieu Son's flexible reception of sincerity and truth in literature helped to protect Vietnamese Romanticism and Realism literature against the attack of moralists and social activists, contributing to the modernization of Vietnamese literature.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, by creatively adapting European Romanticism perspective of sincerity in receiving Vietnamese Romanticism and Realism, Thieu Son proves himself as a modern and independent thinker in the context of early Vietnamese professional literary theory and criticism. In his essay entitled "How great men are different from normal ones", Thieu Son asserts: "Therefore, in studying, you need to keep your spirit free, refrain from letting a thought, a theory, a doctrine dominates you" [22; 190-192]. So, by eliminating all the social, political and ethical prejudices and respecting the human ego as well as the aesthetical quality of literature and arts, Realists and Romanticists writers and critics meet each other and serve life.

Acknowledgment: This article is sponsored by NAFOSTED (National Science and Technology Foundation) in the project No. 602.04-2018.302 which is in charge by Dr. Bui Linh Hue.

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