

SOME ISSUES OF LITERARY AND ARTISTIC THEORY VIEWED IN THE BACKGROUND OF RENEWAL

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First of all it is the meeting of two ends of the century, that is the target of Canh tân (renewal) of strong-willed Confucian scholars at the beginning of the century and the objective of Đổi mới (renewal) launched and led by the Vietnam Communist Party at the end of the century. One of the other issues is the consideration that the literary renewal is above all the consequence of changes in the economic and political life. At the same time the literature and arts themselves also have their own immanent rules and they move in correlation with economy and politics. The other issues are concerned with concrete theoretical ones such as the freedom of creation, the responsibility of citizen, the relations between the contents and form, the thought and the art, the literary schools and styles, the materials and tones, the expansion of familiar functions of literature and arts. Finally it is the realization that reasons for the inadequacy of literary zenith works are caused by subjective restrictions of the artist in all three aspects: talent, ardor and stature. The research in these problems is aimed at seeking the direction of actively preparing for a turning-point in the need of the appearance of a young generation which plays the role of main force, the product of the epoch we are living today the time of commencing the 21st century.

The Vietnamese cultural, literary and artistic life in the period of renewal began from the VI Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party nearly 20 years ago. In retrospect of the history, the turning-points have generally occurred in cycles of more or less ten years in the 20th century. In the political, social and cultural life of the first three decades of this century there was the transfer of historical role in turns from the feudal Confucian scholars influenced by “Tân Thư” to the intellectuals who combined Confucian learning with Western

learning, then to the generation of intellectuals of pure Western learning. In all the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, in the political life, the gradual transfer of revolutionary leading right to Marxists and communists occurred while in the cultural life an abullient revolution had been taking place with historical acceleration in all fields of poetry, prose, drama, literary translation, studies, theories, critique, in music and painting to satisfy the

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need of renewing and developing the literature and learning. A fundamental revolution created fixation and stability in all the models of genres for the whole century. Ten years after the August Revolution 1945 was the anti-French resistance war, the national, realistic and people's literature and arts were created with the purpose of building the people's literature and arts. After 1954, ten years of forming the project of building socialism according to the Soviet model in North Vietnam and establishing pro- American Communist - exterminating system in South Vietnam, two different cultures, literatures and arts with some aspects in opposition to each other co-existed in the country. Ten years of fierce war in both regions of the country in the bipolar position of the world and the hot and cold wars between two camps after 1965 were attached to the literature and arts in war and in service of the war. After 1975, the country was united with embarrassment and stagnation in a socialist subsidized model. Nearly 20 years of renewal in the breakage of the socialist camp, the country was gradually released from the crisis and isolation with the area and mankind.

To sum up the entire 20th century - it was an extremely eventful one in upheavals, changes and searches. However there was something which only appeared clearly at the end of the century; it is the meeting between two targets: *Canh tân* and *Đổi mới* at the two ends of the century. This meeting voiced a very profound and tenable fact lying in the deep vessel of urgent needs of the nation; it is the need for development and exchange. In order to have development, it is necessary to have exchanges (being released from the situation of isolation and embargo). For the exchange (integration) the nation must be developed.

These two requirements took place at the

same time as premisses of each other and appeared at the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless after the historical transfer between two centuries of 19th and 20th, the whole nation had to spend nearly 40 years to devote its power to the liberation of the country from the colonial yoke and win victory in two wars. Only after the national liberation and reunification of the country was completed, did the requirement of development really emerge as an imperative and covering task. It was the comprehensive development in politics, economy, society, culture, literature and arts... A requirement of development had the purpose of integrating the nation into the world and bringing the people's economic, cultural and spiritual life to a high level, in comparison not only with the past but also with the area and mankind.

This was the objective the first starts of which took place even in the decade at the beginning of the century; it however was only set into motion really at the end of the century. The official point of time of this start took place in December 1986, the year of conducting the VI Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party, the year of starting a cause named "*Đổi mới*" (renewal).

The achievements of renewal in literature and arts have been first of all the consequences of movements in the economic and political life. The development of the multi-sector commodity economy, the acceptance of market operations according to the rule of competition, the expansion of exchanges with the area and the world, the extension of the socialist-oriented democracy and the pursuit of the target of political stability have been the premisses of overall scale governing all activities of the social life. The answer to these problems of overall

scale will objectively be the common orientation for the cultural, literary and artistic development.

On the other hand, literature and arts also have their own needs and their own immanent rules; they also move and change in correlation to economy and politics. Literature has shifted to a new stage and carried a new quality on the basis of a new inspiration about the truth, on a new artistic conception about the man, on the expansion (or returning) of the specific traits and heaven-entrusted missions of literature and arts, on the voluntary and more inseparable attachment to the really extended and changed needs of the public, on understanding the searches for styles and tones and on the results of open exchanges to shift to a new state which is abundant, diverse with a lot of complicated aspects.

The perfection has accompanied the imperfection originating from changes and creating a lot of changes in a good deal of conceptions which have governed the way of literary and artistic composition, theory and critic not only in Vietnam but also in all the broken socialist camp. Naturally it has taken place not according to a simple diagram and not completely in a serene atmosphere. It has had to look for the way by many tests, debates, conflicts and losses. This situation has been indeed regrettable; however it is hard to avoid in a cause of real revolutionary character as the renewal with a view to bringing the country into the orbit of development and maturity. A cause the stature of which can be compared to the August Revolution in 1945 changing the national destiny.

To my mind the literary and artistic achievements in renewal first and chiefly are a new inspiration about the truth and a great aspiration for democracy. The truth

has been deepened into more strata and the need for democracy is more urgent. Therefore the general picture of life in literature and arts in over the last two decades did not lack some gloomy colour patches, which were not optimistic to look at them. However “not optimistic to look at them” does not mean we have fallen in pessimism. A sound and dialectic attitude has no bias towards pessimism or optimism. The reason is that the history and life go between these two poles. The history of nation and the history of literature go in the same position. The history of nation has been emphasized by *Hịch tướng sĩ* (The Edict to officers and men), *Đại cáo bình Ngô* (The Proclamation of victory over the Chinese); however the history has also the loud weeping sound in *Đoạn trường tân thanh* (Moral pain expressed by the new voice) and *Chinh phụ ngâm* (The elegy of a warriors wife). The history in the time closer to the present has had Đồng Nai spirit nobility. The history also has had tragic and indignant pages in Cao Bá Quát, Phan Thanh Giản, Nguyễn Trường Tộ then two Phan aged men at the beginning of the century. The history has had victories in the war and bad consequences after the war. Somebody has said that later the history will only reserve *Hịch tướng sĩ*, *Đại cáo bình Ngô* and forget all. The reality has not happened as such. The history is well balanced and fair and includes both aspects. The only exception is we used to exploit one aspect or deliberately forget the other aspects.

If the aspiration for democracy had existed after the August Revolution and been preserved completely after two wars, the VI Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party would not have needed such a heart-stirring slogan as “Taking the people as the

root". Naturally it is a long way from the motto to the implementation with much hardship and it is difficult to know when it is ended. In the past two decades, literature and arts have been taking the mission to voice this urgent aspiration strictly.

Nowadays it is easy to realize the response of the public from two directions towards the work of so called "there is some problem": to praise and to despise, to sympathize and to protest; many currents of public opinions are not only different from one another but also contrary to one another. Even the prizes given by Boards of examiners or Associations of occupation are the same. We do not know how to do with this situation if we accept that there is freedom of composition, there is also freedom of criticism in literary life with full of concerns and it is seeking an open direction in an overall general orientation of socialism, without following the model of old thought.

If the general real state of affairs sketched as above is accepted or temporarily accepted, the assessment of today's literary life much needs a self-possessed attitude in order to see the chief aspect which is new values it has brought about and not to be puzzled in face of bad aspects, complicated ones; the latter has happened and will indispensably take place when the life is changing.

The assessment of today's literary situation cannot be separated from the understanding of yesterday's situation. Today's literature is a complicated picture, a multi-coloured painting with both light and dark aspects; however we should not forget that it has new values. In retrospect of yesterday's literature, we need have a historical viewpoint to assert its achievements and it is impossible not to see restrictions and errors. "Is there such a period of time?" was the problem brought forward in a

debate-taking place nearly ten years ago. The war is a compulsory situation of history engendering and raising the national heroism as manifested in literary and artistic creations; nevertheless the war also restricts a good deal of development aspects of the literary and artistic life. Somebody has said about the situation in the former Soviet Union with purges in intellectual, cultural, literary and artistic circles even in the 1920s onwards, not only until the period of Stalin, or the Chinese conditions with the Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution causing the death to tens of millions of people; tens of thousands of writers, artists and intellectuals have been chased, forced to die unjustifiably and imprisoned...They have compared these situations to those in Vietnam and realized that the same situation has happened in Vietnam in a more gentle state. Indeed if we make the comparison as above, the situation in Vietnam has not been too pessimistic. However it has existed in reality in Vietnam and it is difficult to avoid. It is lucky that the events taking place many years ago have been gradually reexamined on the point of view of Renewal. Nevertheless by a long time of waiting until renewal, many events have lasted too long over or less than 30 years for people who have served their sentence or been found not guilty. So there have been unnecessary harms and losses and there has been "fault-correcting" in literature and arts. When returning to a past time literary theoreticians and historians must record all its right and wrong aspects, even hidden or dark aspects in order to re-erect the historical picture honestly to make them self-evident. If they will find "such a picture" in reality, it will be the way of returning justice to history, there is nothing to panic. History has drifted along the current, it cannot return. The man's spiritual memory about history is always preserved

as the recommending and reminding.

The result of renewal in literature and arts has its profound reason in political, economic, cultural and social life. In separate examination of literature, the direct reason must be a spiritual factor that is the *freedom of creation* which has the starting point from the need of "untying" in 1987 - a need for freedom has become really urgent and a scale of freedom has been extended. The requirement for freedom of creation has been thought to be natural in tens of years in the past; it has been thought that nothing remains to be discussed, no respect remains to be unbound; suddenly it has cropped up as an imperative need it has revealed that the socialist democracy which we used to praise before still has a lot of difficulties; the principles of leading and managing by the Vietnam Communist Party and Government still have narrow aspect; ties have come from a good deal of directions, not only from the upper stratum but also in the state of mind of reception of the public and even from the writers themselves so that the creation in all literary and artistic fields have not come to great targets. These targets have always been brought forward in summarizing reports and in Congresses of the occupation circle. There have been occasions they seem to come within reach as in 1983, the year of the III Congress of writers; in this year the country also really entered into the period of pre-crisis.

Everybody looks forward to a great literature and we have always been yearning for it! The atmosphere of freedom of creation has been considered to be the necessary condition to bring this desire to reality. However the freedom cannot be required and assessed metaphysically, isolated from the background. Freedom is attached to the inevitable; it is perceived inevitable. Freedom is accompanied by responsibility. "Your freedom stops at the

place where my freedom begins" (Anatole France). Therefore what the literary renewal has brought about go on these two rails. Topics are extended more well-ventilatedly; the way of managing is more effusive; there has been the respect for creative subjects in the capacity as an artist who is not in opposition to the responsibility of the citizen and does not put himself out of the common situation of the country and people still in hardship and corollaries. In other words there has been close correlation between the writer and the public. To come to the public there is still a link which cannot be ignored it is the new situation of the country the nation the epoch.

The freedom of creation in literature has been frequently put forward; however it has a new aspect in today's circumstances. The literature in the 1980 - 1990 period has been released from the calm and unanimous position in North Vietnam and the confused situation of South Vietnam; now it is going into a disorderly and complicated period of looking for a new way of approach; it does not follow the old models. This is apparently the sign of development between two borders of gains and losses, the good and the bad. The development implies a good deal of real situations and possibilities; that means the man has always been standing in face of trials. Though these challenges are great and there is still the bad, the false and the loss, the gain is fundamental, what of today is worth.

In face of the requirements of development according to the direction of exchange and integration into a large world, formerly the new challenges of literature were also bases to push forward the common development of literature; formerly these challenges had strange aspect. New exchanges and integrations were only partial reserved. Willy-nilly these new exchanges and integrations were an entity strongly

affecting the literary complexion in this new period. They have helped writers look back at themselves to lessen easy optimism. They have helped adjust their strict outlook on the world outside them as before. More important, they have helped in a common orientation, making writers not isolated with the world and not dissolved themselves into the world.

The emphasis on the education function of literature in the past years was naturally attached to the concern over the ideological contents of the work first. The content and form, the ideology and art, materials and tones... are organically attached sides to create the completion of the work. At literary zeniths, this attachment is a complete combination to the degree that it is possible to say it is the result of content conversion of arts and arts conversion of content. However literary zeniths are generally rare. The existence of literature in general and on the common plane is the contribution of many people, many generations of writers. On the common plane, a complete combination of content with form is hard to be done. Like contents like form is naturally normal. Only the completeness in combination at the zenith is hard to be carried out. Therefore there has frequently been the unequalness. The concern over contents, materials, object and theme... in other words the question "What are written?" must always be put before the question "How are they written?" which is the one belonging to the sphere of artistic form. Both questions must be put after the question "For whom are they written?" in the development of the revolutionary literature, the socialist realistic literature.

The arrangement according to the order as above has objective reason. The proletariat and toiling masses in the historical palace, many of them are plunged in somberness

and poverty, need a literature with the contents expressing their vital aspirations and with simple and straightforward form. Propaganda values and universalizing effects have become the first important requirement in the target and value of the proletarian literature and the socialist realistic literature. So the literary value sometimes coincides with the propaganda value. Little attention has been paid to what have gone too far into the polysemantic specific traits of literature and absorbed into many strata of the text; these specific characters lie outside the table of values. The confirmation of this tendency has been summarized in an important clause: "The theme and the way of manifestation are the demonstration of the Party and people characters in our literature and arts" (1, p.114)

The requirement for striving to zeniths with the complete combination of ideological and artistic values has gradually been put forward in the development in the subsequent stages of the new literature and arts. While the thorough criticism is conducted against the formal searches by various tendencies of Western modern literature, including the so-called formalism, many areas of exchanges with the world are restricted and the understanding has a good deal of superficiality and errors, it is natural and easy to understand that the socialist realistic literature is hard to record excellent countenances, brilliant zeniths as desired and in comparison with mankind. The requirements for the unanimity of the socialist realistic method, i.e. the unanimity of ideology and world outlook are not really easy to bring about the abundance of literary schools and inclinations. As for style, if it is encouraged, then in the requirement of "unanimity about method", it is really difficult to achieve what are very unique and carry the personality in the

creation. In brief, the requirement for close attachment between the content and the form, between the thought and the art is hard to change the general state of monotony and dullness in a lot of orthodox literary works in the socialist realistic literature. The reason is that in the guiding thought and in activities of literary theory and critique, priority has been usually given to defining literature in the capacity as consciousness, as a weapon for class struggle; the second aspect of literature as an artistic type of language, requiring the creation in the direction of individualization and aiming at aesthetics has been slighted. The searches for renewing language and genre, the impressions of creation by masters of literature, the literary works which are not only valuable in life and human affection but also impregnated with beauties of language, musical melody and pictures have been arranged in the auxiliary plane. Therefore the genuine artistic effect of literature has become dim or too deficient. The sign of literary renewal in the final decade of last century was marked by the gradual return of the respect for formal artistic factors, styles and tones, in other words, by the re-balance of the concern for both content and form, ideology and art, schools and styles, materials and tones... for the art to become real art, literature become real literature and each writer will always feel the torment of language as true as M. Gorky had said. This concern is the specific trait, the true requirement of literature. When all the literature and types of arts move in this direction, when the discrepancies in comparisons with mankind have suddenly been put forward before a wide horizon, we really have bases to pursue and carry out the ratio of one hundred per cent for both content and artistic form which has been reminded many times.

If the freedom of literary composition has been guaranteed in general, if the narrow conceptions of arts have been dismantled fundamentally, certainly there are no more good reasons to argue that the literature and arts in nearly 20 years past in renewal have not achieved great values and zeniths as the Vietnam Communist Party and people have expected.

To my mind, if 10 years are tared for preoccupations, findings and argues which have not been settled, if 10 other years are devoted to writers and artists to be released from embarrassments and difficulties when the country gave up the system of budget subsidies to come to the market economy, the time of renewal still had more or less 10 years in excess for all individual creations in all fields. Ten years are not short time. However from after 1995 up to now, literature and arts have not achieved compositions worth their time, let alone great values and zeniths.

To my opinion, the reason for this real state of affairs does not lie in the objective circumstances because it is true that the objective conditions for the development of literature and arts in this time are most favourable than any other previous time in all the 20th century.

So there is only the subjective reason in the competence of creation of each individual writer and artist in all three aspects of talent, zeal (or sentiment) and stature in short it is a formula of 3 Ts in the Vietnamese language (according to cultural activist Nguyễn Khắc Viện's way of expression). All three aspects above have not been sufficient in all writers and artists of all age brackets present in the past 10 years, especially in the young circle. In saying "not sufficient" I mean they have existed in deficiency. Any one aspect in the three does not exist. A connection of quantity is deficient in order to form a

force, a staff to complement and replace preceding generations, which have fundamentally completed their historical task in the capacity as a staff.

Finally I would like to return to the problem of *exchange* and *development* as stated at the beginning of this essay. It is the objective condition for the development and achievement of literature and arts in any period of time.

In the overall background the picture of literary exchange in the 20th century in Vietnam is a turning-point, a thorough change in comparison with the 19th century and even with all 10 centuries from the time of Đại Việt culture and ancient middle age literature coming into being under the Chinese influence. It is possible to say that the influences of Chinese literature in all 10 centuries were extremely profound. They created education and ethics, an academician, prose and poetical asset with stable moulds, with the continuous succession of generations of former competition-examinations and scholars. Special points in the content of prose and poetry in the patriotic spirit and national self-strengthening have often appeared in comparison with the Chinese literature, especially in periods of time the country suffering from fierce challenges to defend national independence; in general, the moulds, literary forms, educational and ethical direction were stable in the same model. This thousand-year old literary exchange system was only replaced by the Western relations after over 10 centuries in the final years of the 19th century: in the first half of the 20th century the chief substitute was the French literature; in the later half of the 20th century, it was Russian and Soviet literature (in North Vietnam), Western European and American literature (in South Vietnam). The impressions of influence of these literatures still lie in the subconsciousness of

generations of writers, readers and circles of management and leaders.

Looking at the orientation of guiding the literary development and at the state of mind of receiving literature of a great part of the public, indeed we are not hard to realize the influences of Chinese culture and literature in exchange results, although sometimes they are interrupted.

In the first half of the 20th century the influences of French literature came after those of the Chinese literature in the exchange results. Economic bases in the direction of urbanization, the colonial politics, the Vietnamese-French education with the French script and Romanized Vietnamese script as the linguistic instrument, the import of French literature into the composition life and school areas...have created profound influences and impressions, rapidly changing the Vietnamese literature, bringing about the modern color and character. In other words, they have rapidly brought the Vietnamese literature into the orbit of the world modern literature. It is possible to say that the influences of the French literature were no less profound so that it could create such turning-point and thorough interruption to the traditional literature, dazing a whole generation of Confucian intellectuals in the transitional period from Tú Xương to Tản Đà ... and creating a rapid and definite change to have its complete form from after 1930.

The French influences through the system of schools and a generation of Western learning intellectuals who deeply understood the conservatism, stagnation and foginess of the old literature and learning and finally the movement in the direction of urbanization of the colonial economy and politics was very deep-rooted. These influences not only occupied the decisive position in the first half of the 20th

century but also had an effect in the later half of the century although the bridge for direct exchange was interrupted by the war.

The influence of exchanges with the literature of Russia, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries had the decisive role to the literary life in North Vietnam in four decades in the middle of the 20th century after 1945. The exchange results were the continuation of what had been recorded in the first half of the century. They helped the stability of literature on the way of modernization. By the war conditions and the struggle orientation between two camps, the form of exchange in the opposing situation between two camps was one-sided. It only accepted one side with strict and narrow principles of consciousness and world outlook (in North Vietnam) or it relaxed for individual searches (in South Vietnam). Directly oriented to the targets of serving politics and attached to the life and political tasks, the literature of socialist North Vietnam created a fundamental unanimity in political and ideological orientations. By little relation with the world and some discrimination against what were outside the socialist camp, the revolutionary and socialist area, the literature of North Vietnam lacked the liberality and diversity of literature in the capacity as an artistic sphere, a type of language art. The literature of North Vietnam at that time was alien to global problems of the post-industrial life.

The new exchange at the end of the 20th century after the reunification of the country, when Vietnam would like to be friendly with the whole world would be an exchange turning towards many horizons. Although this exchange was opened and its borders were loosened, it could not avoid the cover of some fog. These horizons were full of promises and contained mysteries

and dangers. In nearly two past decades literature and arts have had new signs as the consequences of the above exchange on all fields of the composition, theory, critique and in cultural, literary and artistic life in general. All kinds of doctrines, schools and trends of the Western modern literature were criticized as “gorgeous mushrooms on the decayed trunk of the imperialist culture” and “the products of greatest frenzy and impasse of the bourgeois society in its death pangs” (2)... These doctrines are now gradually re-identified to have the right to existence and they are deploying their competition and ability to penetrate the domains of literature, painting music, architecture and cinema. The literary findings and renewals in the fields of Modernism and Post-Modernism which the Western literature has passed have appeared and had the right to exist in the Vietnamese literature. These findings and renewals are a world phenomenon, which has deeply impressed in literature in many areas. They comprise the destiny of the man, the worry of the century, ideological literature and philosophical literature, unreasonable drama, the current of consciousness and the latent layers of the spiritual world... have also appeared and had the right to exist in literature. Fierce debates have taken place and they will continue. This is natural because all the renewals come into existence on the basis of negating the old to scramble for the living place. If any strange gust of wind coming into existence can create the ventilation, it is easy to tremble or cause accidents, first of all for those who used to shutting the door, not acquainted with the wind or have had few occasions to see ventilated spaces.

In exclusive look at literature the impressions of Modernism and Post-Modernism have had a good deal of ways of penetration into the compositions of a

part of the young generation. Although there has not been strength and dare as in painting and music, literature (including composition, theory and critique) has not much lagged behind with the epoch to be able to approach and receive new manifestations of modern trends of composition not only in the West. However all these findings still bear the character of exploration and test. They have not yet created a powerful inclination to my opinion, in Vietnam until now there has not been an economic and social basis for a change of the spiritual life deeply affecting the inspiration and artistic thought of both the writer and the reader. General readers in Vietnam are still alien to findings according to the modern Western style (not to envy or refuse); middle-aged writers in Vietnam are only acquainted with the way of equipping traditional realism and lyrical character.

The author will certainly be hard to find a confidant among readers if in his poetry the search for "word shade" and the hunt for signals are used instead of feeling, rhyme and melody, if in his novels there are no more plot and characters or the character remains only in the name K or changed into worms like those of F. Kafka or carries a pig's tail as that of G.G. Marquez...

Judging the contingent, I assume that we have not yet possessed a continued generation of very young age at the age of 20, a generation does not belong to the product of war of new-colonialism and of socialism, including socialism in the time of budget subsidies. It must belong to the product of the time we are living now. Being the product of today, the members of generation must understand history; they must not shield themselves with the shadow of history. They respect the value of their fathers and elder brothers, however they do not resign themselves to past ties as their fathers and elder brothers. Such a young generation must appear not in the

capacity as separated, lonely individuals. They must seek one another, associate together and aim at the same target at a ripe time in the capacity as a contingent in order to form a monumental battle as occurring three times in the 20th century. It was 1930-1945 period perfecting the modern countenance of the national literature and arts only after 30 years starting. It was 1960-1975 period in which the literature and arts completed a sacred mission: defending the achievements of the August Revolution and bringing the anti-US resistance war to complete victory. The period from the first half of the 1960s to the first half of the 1990s deserved to play the role of forerunning and starting the renewal.

Now is the time initiating the 20th century when the renewal has had an itinerary of nearly 20 years. Just one century ago was the period of time, the entire country was seething in the Modernist flame "The speech session was crowded with people as in a festival. On the date of declaiming literary texts, guests come as rains". It is the period of time the whole country almost has the same desire to thoroughly give up what is called fogysim to approach the modern Western knowledge to broaden the national visibility.

1905 the year of establishing the Modernist Association; only two years after that Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Dong Kinh Private School of Righteousness) was opened.

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