

Khế Iêm

STEPPING OUT
ESSAYS ON VIETNAMESE POETRY



BƯỚC RA

TIỂU LUẬN THƠ VIỆT

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Tiểu Luận Thơ Việt

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STEPPING OUT: ESSAYS ON VIETNAMESE POETRY

AN INTRODUCTION TO A BRIEF LITERATURE
AND VIETNAMESE NEW FORMALISM POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Vietnamese New Formalism is different from American New Formalism in which meter and rhyme still remain. Actually, we utilized the term “New Formalism” only to introduce the Blank verse form of English poetry to Vietnamese poetry. But Vietnamese blank verse is also different from English Blank verse because of different languages and metrical forms. These essays introduce to international audiences a brief view of Vietnamese literature and Vietnamese New formalism poetry, and hope to propel Vietnamese poetry onto the international stage. I would like to thank poet and translator DoVinh. Especially I would like to give my thanks to editors Carol J. Compton and Richard H. Sindt for their edits and comments.

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Introduction To Vietnamese New Formalism Poetry *A Review after 10 Years*

To poets Đỗ Quyên, Inrasara and Lê Vũ

New Formalism is an American poetry movement begun in the early 1980s and developed through the 1990s, led by a number of young poets composing in the traditional style. But why New Formalism and not some other movement? Traditional Western poetry, began with Homer (his two works *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, each written in 16-syllable verses), and then followed with free-verse with the American poet Walt Whitman (towards the end of the 19th century). Free-verses, throughout the 20th century, developed strongly in United States after the Second World War with many avant garde movements, withered at the end of the century, and created reactions and revivals of the meter in poetry.

English is a strong-stress and poly-syllabic language with emphasis on consonant sounds. Poetic form depends upon the number of syllabic sounds in a verse, for example, a common form has 10 sounds, iambic pentameter (*unstress, stress* repeated 5 times), from verse to verse with end-rhymes. If there are no end-rhymes, then it is called blank verses. Vietnamese poetry in the 5-word, 7-word, 8-word or alternating 6-word and 8-word form breaks up the verses according to the word count. Vietnamese is a mono-syllabic language; therefore, its poetic form, besides having rhymes at the end of a verse, may be organized according to the inflections of level / oblique tones.

Poetry comes before poetic rules. From antiquity, poetry has been developed alongside musical instruments such as lutes and flutes, and people sang it as a song. Later on, even when music and words were differentiated, the relationship between words and music remained as rhythm and sounds, between the practical and the aesthetics, long-standing traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation, becoming poetic rules. That is why poetic rules, simplified as rhyme schemes, as end-rhymes, are innate in the heart of the reader and the poet. Once these principles are codified, in much the same way as musical notations, the skill of the poet is to marry words and ideas such that, when the poem is read, there is a spiritual dimension reverberating through, rising to the level of goodness. Free-verse came into being with the desire to escape from the traditional rhythm and rhymes; the goal of making poetry new replaced the standard of making it good. So, to make rhymed verses new or to reform them is to corrupt poetry, and we can only replace the standard of goodness with a different standard. Like modern art, the traditional notion of beauty is replaced by the drive to create, to make anew.

Poetry in any age goes through the cycle of flowering and decline. Rhymed poetry after a long period of time goes into retreat because social conditions change; poetry can no longer express human emotions, and free-verse poetry is given a chance to be born. Modern Western-style free-verse poetry and painting is compatible with the spirit of conquest (towards the end of the 19th century) and confrontation (during the cold war period) and the development of science and technology, resulting in two world wars. The period of confrontation created extremism and anomalies in American post-war poetic activities, which are biased toward free-verse, pushing aside meter and rhyme poetry, viewing them as an obsolete form of poetry. Meanwhile, in other countries such as England, free verse and meter / rhyme verse developed side by side.

The rise of New Formalism movement helped American poetic activities regain their balance. But, after a period of revival in rhymed verses, some American poets thought that it was not necessary to adhere to any terms but that it was sufficient for poetry to be good. So, after all, is “New Formalism” just a revival of past traditions? “New” here means “retro”. The key principles of rules, like enjambments, rhyme-schemes, even everyday and common language already exist from the Romantic period early in the 19th century, with William Wordsworth’s blank verses. Free-verse poetry, the Imagists at the start of the 20th century, with poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, also promotes the use of common language and precise words in poetry. Language usages vary over periods of time. When everyday language is infused into poetry, poetry is given new life, captivating the reader and resurrecting rhymed verses. These successes cannot be overlooked; they are a major contribution. Another reason is that readers in the information age are no longer impressed with the new aspects of poetry, so the poet must return to the standard of good poetry, with real talents, in order to preserve poetry.

What about Vietnamese New Formalism Poetry? In Spring 2000, in the special edition of the *Vietnamese Journal of Poetry* entitled “Encounter with a New Millennium”, Vietnamese poets utilized the term “New Formalism” to introduce to Vietnamese poetry the *Blank Verse* form of English poetry. To accept a new form of poetry is to accept the methods of composition, applying new principles: enjambments, repetition, prose narration, and the use of common language.

1/ In English poetic forms, the enjambment technique is very common as compared to line-break in free-verse poetry. When adapted to Vietnamese poetry, this technique is defined as follows:

“When the enjambment technique is used, it changes the practice of stopping at the end of a verse, the reader is prompted to search for the missing part (of the sentence), the speed of reading is in-

creased and one must read visually. This brings up the concept of time and space in poetry. What is lost, perhaps, is a part of life, of the past or future, and, as such, the present is nothing but emptiness. Such emptiness is not empty because of the ever-changing, ever moving character of what is known and what is unknown, intertwining with each other. Poetry thus arises out of the ambiguities and complexities of syntax, creating musical rhythm. What is clear, a poem and the perception of rhythm does not lie in language (words), but in the content of the language. The content of the language is the movement of emotions through grammar and syntax.”¹

2/ Common (everyday) language: An example often cited:

“The poet Timothy Steele, while having lunch at a popular eatery, coincidentally overheard a lover’s quarrel, after which the woman stood up and, before leaving, said loudly:

x / x / x / x / x /
You haven’t kissed me since we got engaged.

The saying complies with iambic meter (*unstressed, stressed*) and repeated 5 times (penta –), thus forming iambic pentameter. Steele recognized that form is drawn from common language, and New Formalism converts common language into poetic forms.”²

English formalism poetry has two categories, *rhymed* and *unrhymed* poetry (blank verses). This is true in part because English is a polysyllabic language, rich with rhymes, which makes it easy to create enjambments and transform common language into poetry, whether there are rhymes at the end of the verses or not. In contrast, Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language, wherein it is difficult to convert common language into poetry because it would not conform to metered (rhyme) schemes. Once the metered (rhyme) schemes are eliminated and replaced with enjambment

techniques to create free associations, then Vietnamese poetry becomes no different from English blank verses. Common language flows into poetry, erasing the musical qualities of metered poetry, and helps the poet to discover new rhythms and musical qualities. Folk poetry in the six-eight form utilizes simple language but retains the characteristics of lullabies and songs; plain language or common language is not spoken like lullabies or songs. New Formalism is a type of poetry that is read.

3/ In poetic rules, regardless of the form, alliteration techniques are employed to create musical qualities and rhythm for the poem. The repetitions of *the level / oblique* sounds is found in Tang poetry forms, and the equivalent *unstressed, stressed* sounds, repeated five times in one poetic verse, is found in English. In these ways, traditional poetry creates repeating syllables. When English free verse wished to escape from these rules and traditional sounds, they replaced the repetitive syllables by repeating *words* and repeating *phrases*. Similarly, in order to escape from the sounds of rhymed verses, Vietnamese Blank Verse adopted the same technique used in English free verse, that is, repeating *words* and *phrases* in a poem.

4/ Narrative / Story-telling quality is a common characteristic throughout all poetic traditions that tell a story. In Vietnamese Blank Verse poetry, this story-telling quality also means that thoughts and concepts are continuous and not disconnected, as in free-verse poetry.

At this point, Vietnamese Blank Verse poetry has achieved all four critical qualities of English Blank Verse to become a separate poetry form. With respects to American poetry, the label of “New Formalism” was advanced by its enemies, intended as a jab. Later on, the two founding poets of this movement, Frederick Feirstein and Frederick Turner, combined it with Narrative Poetry to create a new movement, Expansive Poetry. Regardless, American New

Formalism had accomplished its goals of reviving rhymed (metered) poetry, and erased the barriers between poets. Because of the dominance of free-verse poetry throughout the 20th century, there were serious rifts, once thought to be irreconcilable, between the schools represented, on the one side, by Robert Frost, who described free verse as “playing tennis without nets”, and on the other side by Ezra Pound, who championed free-verse, trailblazing “make it new”. Only after the arrival of New Formalism did American poetry finally overcome the fever of the Avant Gard poetic movements which blossomed after the 1950s. Poetry harmonized between free-verse and metered forms.

The technical term (label) of “New Formalism” was very accurate with regard to Vietnamese poetry. Vietnamese poetry also reverted, but only took old poetic forms and adapted to new qualities in order to be transformed into a new poetic form. In addition, Vietnamese New Formalism was also an assimilation of the traditional and modern, erasing all distinguishing borders between the English and Vietnamese language, thereby creating an exchange of cultures. (It is worth noting here that there are many similarities between the Vietnamese and English language, such as the *unstressed*, *stressed* and *level / oblique* tones. The only difference is the strength of the sounds. Old English was mostly monosyllabic up until the adaptation of polysyllabic words from French and Latin. This adaptation permits us to readily accept English Blank Verse, which utilizes alliteration (repetition) in ways that other polysyllabic languages such as French, cannot accept, because they are not strongly stressed.)

Poets used descriptive styles and alliteration techniques to create rhythm in free verse poetry, combined with the critical qualities of enjambment and narration from English poetic rules, and then channeling into traditional Vietnamese to be the forms 5, 7, 8 words and six-eight blank verse poetry. Quite exceptional, Vietnamese New Formalism poetry sets new standards while as-

piring to even greater heights, able to harmonize all the various poetic forms with free-verse poetry. But then again, why not just keep on composing free verse poetry, why force conformity with forms? We already know that there are many ways to differentiate between poetry and prose, but, as for form, poetic rules are the defining characteristic. When prose is composed, we write to the end of the line before we start a new line; and so, if the poem has no form at all, then it becomes a prosaic composition. Although it harmonizes with free verse poetry, Vietnamese Blank Verse is more akin to prose poetry than it is to other types of modern free-verse poetry.

Besides accepting Blank Verse poetic forms, via an American Avant Gard movement, there is another reason. Perhaps ingrained in the psyche of the refugee/immigrant, there is the motive to understand who we are and who the different peoples around us are, thus giving rise to the need for the discovery of new poetic forms. Thereby, a need to employ new means in which to gain mutual understanding between Vietnamese and other cultures is realized. And thus, the issue of translation becomes central.

“The purpose of New Formalism poetry is to propel Vietnamese poetry onto the international stage. That is why translation is emphasized to seek readers from different languages and cultures. If the old markings are too submerged in cultural or linguistic systems, then the foreign reader would not understand, including the young Vietnamese readers presently in Vietnam. But everyone knows that poetry cannot be truly or fully translated because the sounds of a language cannot be translated. This is especially true with traditional poetry, in which the sounds of the language give rise to the musical quality of poetry.”³

That is why New Formalism poetry must change the way it is written, in response to the demands of translation. With respect to words, if normal, everyday language is used to make poetry, then

poetry becomes absent of rare and archaic words, and the readers do not get stuck with words when they read poetry. As for style, poetry moves closer to prose and utilizes repetition in order to create rhythm, so meter is conserved, and traces of prose are removed to form poetry.”⁴

Because, upon translation, the sounds of one language are confused in another language, meaning is lost if translations are word for word. Otherwise, if a verse is translated literally, the result will be a very distasteful verse in the target language. In poetry, musical and rhythmic qualities are pervasive, linking up emotions and ideas. So the translation of poetry is no easy task; this we all know. In order to resolve these matters, we must first change the way we compose before any translation is rendered. For example, alliteration (repetition) techniques in Vietnamese poetry add a new critical dimension to rhythm which upon English translation is preserved. The English reader will be able to read the poem as if it was composed in English and not in another language originally. Another advantage is that the English reader is able to empathize and relate to a foreign country and culture even though they are reading uniquely different poems. Those who read Vietnamese will recognize, upon encountering the English translation of the poem, the outstanding characteristics of Vietnamese poetry for one simple reason: a bilingual reading is deliberate and otherwise time-consuming, requiring careful and thorough reading of the poem.

An American poetry commentator (critic), Angela Saunders, had the following thoughts about Vietnamese New Formalism poetry when she wrote her introduction for the anthology *Poetry Narrates*.

“Poetry itself, in any language, is a traditional literary method to pass oral accounts and stories from one generation to another. The rhythm and sounds of a poem provide

the means of delivery and way to remember the verse. Sounds that flow in the native tongue of one language are linguistically specific and are not easily translated into another language. A poem set to melodies and tunes in a native tongue lose its aesthetic appeal in translation. Thus a conundrum is created. In an increasingly mobile society, how does one bridge the gaps between linguistic, cultural, and generational barriers while preserving traditional heritage?”⁵

And she recognized the following characteristics of Vietnamese New Formalism poetry,

“[As] a patterned number of syllables, enjambments are used at exact syllable counts that remain consistent throughout the poem. This means that a thought that begins on one line may continue or suddenly stop on the next. Traditionally, enjambments, or stops, will occur to highlight specific words or thoughts. This unnatural stop pattern will often enhance the visual and emotional impact of the poem. Each use of repetition, enjambment, and imagery allow us to truly see the beauty of the thoughts each author is trying to portray. The placement of each word is such that one must consider each meaning implied by positioning, line endings, and strong sensory imagery. For each element paints a desired portrait; each word an integral part of the poem; and each repetition and position shouting out the thoughts of the author and the translator and each poem taking on life of its own.”⁶

Once the poem is translated and able to be read as if it was an original composition, the result is that American and Vietnamese poets can read each others' poems in two languages.⁷ As examples, such interesting meeting of the minds happened in “Bilingual Poetry” (a bilingual edition) and “Other Poetry Voices” from

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