Some literary critics claim that there have been few new directions emerging in modern Vietnamese literature. Their assumption is both correct and incorrect. It’s correct in that the onset of the reform movement that started in 1986, and began the free market economy, allowed publishing houses greater freedom to publish. This factor made it hard to keep track of, or review, the flood of novels, short story collections and poems which began appearing abundantly in bookstores. Yet few among these works attracted readers or had a long life in their hearts. However, the assumption is not correct as well, since there have also been many new novelists and young short story writers who are not known, either at home or abroad. They haven’t been introduced properly to the world because their works need to be reviewed in Vietnam and translated into English or other foreign languages, and this has only happened to a few of them.

In the last decade, several authors, including Bao Ninh (The Sorrow of War), Duong Thu Huong (The Paradise of the Blind), Pham Thi Hoai (The Nine Men of My Life), Nguyen Huy Thiep (The General Retires), and Le Luu (Long Time Passing), have become known abroad. These are novels that typically describe Vietnam during the ‘50s, ‘60s, and up to the early ‘80s. This period was further explored by Le Minh Khue (The Woman on the Express Train), Nguyen Khai (Past Continuous), Nguyen Khac Truong (The Land of Many Ghosts and Many People), Duong Huong (The Haven for Single Women), Ma Van Kbang (Against the Flood), Ho Anh Thai (Beyond the Red Mist), Nguyen Manh Tuan (The Dairy Farm), and more. All of these dealt with Vietnam after the war, after the policy of renovation was initiated, with the change from a subsidized to a market economy. They have been introduced in English-speaking countries, but have yet to make a large impact.

In fact, most books are judged by the reactions of readers, as perceived by the media. Critics gauge those opinions and either praise or pan the books accordingly. Some writers allow their talent to dwindle by paying too much attention to their readers’ or critics’ opinions. Others, after writing one or two novels, begin to see themselves as representative icons of their time. The books of these writers fade quickly, as they lose their readers’ interest. Two recent examples are Nguyen Viet Ha, who wrote God’s Opportunity, and Bui Ngoc Tan, author of Story Told in the Year 2000. These, along with the others mentioned, appeared for a time, and then vanished, without leaving any deep impression in the readers’ hearts, without achieving the immortality of such works as The Tale of Kieu or The Warrior’s Wife, from past centuries.

Thus the present state of Vietnamese literature is a rather complex one, since young, new authors have to deal with a double-tradition. The first is the classical literature that reached its peak in the 17th century, and from then disappeared, under French domination in the 19th and early 20th centuries, into the literature of the distant past. The second is the revolutionary literature that emerged in pre- and post war times, and lasted almost fifty years, up into the ‘80s: a literature which reflected the struggle against colonialism and foreign invasion, containing many historical epopees, but anachronistic in the era of modernization and globalization in which the new post-war generation lives.

Yet short story writers such as Ly Lan (The Candle on the Other Side of the Mirror), Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc (The Inn), Y Ban (Letter to the Mother Au Co), Vo Thi Xuan Ha (A Flying Swarm of Sparrows), Nguyen Thi Thu Hue (Post-Paradise), Tran Thi Huong (The Windy Season) and many others are adding to the colours of Vietnamese literature, and creating a new wind, and a new style. These authors have been exploring new forms of writing as well, and readers, both at home and abroad, wonder whether they will persevere on a road that will be full of difficulties; if they will be up to the tough challenges of creating a new literature.

More and more contemporary poetry is being published as well. Since Vietnam has always been a poetic country, the policy of renovation has made it easy for anyone who wants to have his/her collection of poetry published. But not all who have published books of poetry are poets. Among the well-known poets, there have been much new thinking and new experiments in composition and form as well. Vietnamese poets don’t feel constrained by any limitations, nor are they frozen on conventions. Poetry is as liberal and varied as life itself. Poets like Nguyen Quang Thieu, Truong Nam Huong, Mai Van Phan, Doan Thi Lam Luyen, Nguyen Ngoc Phu, Du Thi Hoan and others are making a great impression on readers. And, as with writers, the younger poets are willing to speak out, renovate, and experiment, rather than following in the old ruts.

This is a glance through the panorama of contemporary Vietnamese literature. It is a literature presently largely unrecognized, but if one examines it closely, one can see the potential for great creativity. It is a potential which is on the move, and ready to explode. Vietnamese literature is waiting for a new leap into the future.

(taken from Phan Thanh Hao and Wayne Karlin)

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