Review


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Tho Kế (Poetry Narrates) Tuyển Tập Thơ Tân Hình Thức Ân Bản Song Ngữ (An Anthology of Vietnamese New Formalism Poetry A Bilingual Edition) edited by Khé Iêm (2009) proposes to unfold pages upon pages of New Formalist poetry in Tiếng Việt and English. In comparison to the American movement from which it draws its name, the rather successful Thơ Tân Hình Thức arose out of a distinct need to identify the concept of belonging to an increasingly complex community under the umbrella of Vietnameseness in order to address the issue of belonging. Rather than give a traditional outline of the text, or the movement, that readers could just as easily find in the first few pages of the collection, this review argues in favor of the collections relevance to students, while also exploring some of the key images of the poems.

Students of Southeast-Asia, Vietnam, and literature will be impressed with the ease of exploration evoked by the free verse of English sections, while readers and students of Tiếng Việt will be impressed with the very nearly tr.sam ca, or lyrical style relayed and made easy to access. This is not to say that the poems are composed as traditional tr.sam ca, but rather that their style is generally metered and can be very nearly sung when recited in a mellifluous fashion. Lower levels of Vietnamese readers may find it useful to read the English translations first, before immersing themselves in the Vietnamese text. Meanwhile higher level readers would still be happy to have the English translations ready for reference.

Scenes related to the readers are dominated by memories of the Saigon street life, reminiscent of the experience of any ngaưi ba ló (backpacker) who has the need to di phcet (travel by motorcycle while sleeping in the open air) in order to go see the Quỳnh (blooming cactus) of the night (163, 205). In this sense we are seeing an emergent identity of the poetic community that stems from the successes, the trials, tribulations, and triumphant failures of life in the dust lanes of modern Vietnam. Here there are a certain number of ties that are being explored, beyond the narratives of the ngaưi tau (boat people). Rural Vietnameseness, urban depressionism, and international ghosts are the inquirers of these verses. Questions of Bolsa, the Vietnamese capital of Westminster Country in California, where silence is a dominating theme evoked by the
conception that poets are relating the voice of the voiceless, are rarely answered, but rather left to hang in between the lines. In silence there is a world of imagery; of death, of mothers, of tears, of life, of ciet (small cases used for carrying books popularly used by school children from the small towns in rural sections of the tỉnh (provinces)) and holier things (29, 129). It is in these translations of images that students begin to feign an understanding of Vietnamese culture at the margins.

The Phan Khế translations of the ther Inrasara, such as in the poem Poisonous Dreams (131) place the visceral experience of the lives of the ngaređ dân tộc (minorities) particularly associated with the Central Highlands, into a context that is contemporaneous with images of the karmic cycle; “Do It Again!” where the intricacies of things Not Belonging-to-Us and those which Belong-to-Us perhaps retain a sense of Us in the Belonging since they are Not-Us, and we are told to “Seek” them out (65). In reflection, readers might wonder which them or its we are trying to seek. By remembering that this collection heralds poets like the recluse Trần Vũ Khang (145) we might see that we are simply looking a cross section of authors who view the world through a particularly unique lens. This lens has a particularly profound interest in promoting the understanding of life in more complex terms, perfectly happy to take a very realistic interpretation of a romantic world in this Sau khi ngày 11 tháng 9 năm 2001 environment.