

## THE RECEPTION OF THE WORLD'S LITERARY THEORIES SINCE THE RENOVATION TO DATE

NGUYỄN VĂN DÂN<sup>(\*)</sup>

### 1. Achievements gained in terms of Vietnam's literary study method

Generally, in the contemporary period, literary study in Vietnam developed as one of the basic sciences. Vietnam's literary study was no longer just about interest-based praise and criticism, but was mostly based on scientific theories. It can be said that the literary study in Vietnam was able to integrate with the world.

The greatest achievement in Vietnam's literary study in the contemporary period was **academic freedom**. This can be considered as the achievement in globalization, integration and cultural exchange. It was a freedom which was advocated by Vietnam Communist Party in the general sense of creative freedom, and furtherly, cultural freedom. On a basis of innovative thinking, academic freedom was promoted, one of the things which concretized academic freedom was the freedom to receive the world's literary theories. And, to compare with period before the Renovation, this was a big improvement.

The second important achievement of

reception of the world's literary theories was its contribution to the trend of **professionalization of criticism activity**. Professionalization trend was reflected in all cultural fields in the Renovation period. And in literary study, this trend was shown as *enhancement of scientific characteristics of criticism activity*. To enhance the scientific characteristics, the reception of the world's literary theories was one of the key resources.

Another achievement of reception of the world's literary theories was the promotion of **democracy in scientific study**. Since the Renovation, democracy became an objective needed to be enhanced in social life, including scientific life. Resolutions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Party Central Committee (8<sup>th</sup> Tenure) of Vietnam Communist Party set democracy one of the main tasks of the development of literature and art: "Strive to create literary and art works which have high ideological and artistic values imbued

---

<sup>(\*)</sup> Assoc. Prof. and Dr., Institute of Social Sciences Information.

with the spirit of humanism, democracy, have profound effect in developing people” (Vietnam Communist Party, 2000, p.171). And most recently, in Resolution no. 33-NQ/TW of the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference of 11<sup>th</sup> Party Central Committee on “Building and development of Vietnamese culture, people to satisfy the requirements for sustainable development of the nation”, democracy was repeatedly emphasized (Vietnam Communist Party, 2014).

Currently, Vietnam is beginning drafting *Law on Referendum* and *Law on Social Objection* for codification of people’s democratic rights. Thus, the promotion of democracy is a task well-suited with the policies of the United Nations. Democracy is the prime objective of humanity in today’s diverse world. And Vietnam is following the right direction of humanity to build a sustainable developed society.

In such spirit, democracy in study is being promoted in our country, and it is one of the most important achievements in policy of scientific development in general and literary study in particular. In reception of the world’s literary theories, democracy has been promoted. Scientists as well as those interested have the rights to participate in discussions, objections on matters of literary theories. Many conferences have been organized such as conference on postmodern theory, reader theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, central – peripheral theory... In here, many different opinions have been spoken, discussed in the spirit of democracy.

From those achievements in policy, Vietnam’s literary study has made progress in literary theory, criticism and history. There are many studies with high scientific values, deserving to be “professional” studies. However, in the reception of theories, we find that there are still some obstacles to overcome in both study and application.

## **2. Some limitations to overcome when receiving foreign theories**

Regarding the reception of foreign theories, in our opinion, the important thing is to not localize foreign theories, but rather indicating their applicability and applicability in Vietnam. Even in many cases, importing in “intact condition” is necessary, and bad import or Vietnamese localization can lead to understanding in the wrong context and the danger of theories being re-written or paraphrased. Here are some issues that need to draw lessons in the reception of theoretical influences of the world’ literature in Vietnam.

### *a. Not yet pay full attention to the availability of theory*

Clearly, the introduction of foreign theories is not simple and applying them is extremely difficult. In fact, many people are just satisfied with the introduction and they think how to apply is other people’s task. So, when introducing, they have not thought if that theory is applicable and especially in Vietnam. For example, when performing *Structuralism and Literature* study (2002), researcher Trịnh Bá Đình wrote: “This study is not intended to deny or praise structuralism but to introduce it.

(...) Readers will read, reflect, draw conclusions themselves and if they find it useful, they can apply in both literary study and criticism, especially domestic literature” (Trịnh Bá Đĩnh, 2002, p.67). Although the author does not praise structuralism, he highly rates it when saying: “It has been criticized, challenged and stood firmly by its outstanding scientific achievements in many fields” (Trịnh Bá Đĩnh, 2002, p.8). But in practice, the application of structuralism in Vietnam is quite vague. Some other theories such as phenomenological theory, deconstruction theory... also fall into the same situation. Indeed, the application of theory in Vietnam still has many matters to discuss.

#### *b. Discrepancy in reception of theory*

Foreign theories can come from many different resources. Some resources are the originals of works, some resources are translations from another languages which the researchers have access to, and some resources can be considered as secondary documents: they are brief, summary introductions for theories. Whether accessing from any source, accurate communication is the first requirement. To communicate accurately, who introduces and communicates must master the system of categories, concepts, terms... This requires the expert level to approach theories, while there must be coordination and cooperation between scientists to have unification in reception.

When there is lack of mutual coordination and cooperation, the

reception will fully follow the interest of each researcher and they will introduce what they like. Meanwhile, some terms, concepts are also not understood in a uniform way. On the other hand, due to the lack of coordination and cooperation, there are some theories which are re-introduced by others badly, differently. That false “import” is what makes concepts and terms confused, ambiguous.

Case of the concepts of comparative literature and comparative cultural study is one example. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, these two terms have been clearly defined. That is: comparative literature is a study of relationships between different literatures of the nations in the world; where comparative cultural study compares different types of art, including literature, across the country and internationally. However, there is someone “importing” a false foreign definition of comparative literature when studying literary theories, they say that “comparative literature is comparative study of literature and other forms of art”, leading to confusion between comparative literature and comparative cultural study. Theory of comparative literature has been carefully introduced for decades in Vietnam, but many people receive a separate and outdated opinion of a foreign author to consider it a proper definition of comparative literature. There is even someone who re-introduces the foreign ideas of comparative literature which others (namely we) have introduced to be criticized long time ago in Vietnam. Therefore, in our opinion, there is a need to master the history of the matter before

introducing to know which foreign opinion is accurate to select and which opinion has been removed as well as to what extent the matter has been dealt in Vietnam.

The incomplete introduction by many people of genetic structuralism of the French theorist Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970) also misleads that Goldmann was a structuralist. In fact, Goldmann was a sociologist, his theory of “genetic structuralism” involved analyzing the relationship between the structure of work and the social structure/mechanism/system and the generation of interdependence of those relationships. Goldmann did not have anything related to *document structure* as in the case of structuralism. His theory is a specific theory of sociology - literature. His concept of social “structure” means social “structure” or “system”. With those theoretical features, we can call his method “sociological structural/mechanism/generating system method”, it does not dissect *document structure* as what structuralists do.

The confusion between the technique of “defamiliarization effect” of German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and the concept of “defamiliarization” in art of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovski is also a good example of the false reception of foreign theories. Many theoretical books and literary dictionaries of our country still believe that the concept of “defamiliarization effect” was given by Brecht in 1949 and unify Brecht’s concept with the concept

of “defamiliarization” proposed by Shklovski earlier (1917), for example, *Dictionary of Literature (new version)*<sup>(\*)</sup> or *Dictionary of Literary terms*<sup>(\*\*)</sup>. Even in 2009 print (p.172) of this dictionary, authors also noted Russian term *ostrannenie* for the word “defamiliarization”, while beginning the explanation of that word by introducing the Brecht’s concept of “defamiliarization effect” as in *Dictionary of Literature (new version)* (!). We know that the term *ostrannenie* was introduced by Shklovski since 1917. So if further noting that term, it should introduce Shklovski’s theory first, it cannot introduce the Brecht’s concept of “defamiliarization effect” which appeared 32 years later. In fact, Brecht’s concept in German is called “*Verfremdungseffekt*” (*V-Effekt*). If considering semantically, both concepts of these two authors can be translated as “defamiliarization” (i.e. “making it strange”), and maybe Shklovski’s theory of “ostrannenie” had given Brecht suggestions to develop his “V-Effekt” technique. But in fact, each of those concepts was defined by its author completely differently.

Brecht used the concept of *V-Effekt* to refer to his specific technique of narrative theatre (narrative drama) to against traditional theatre. In English, the term “narrative theatre/drama” is called “epic theatre”. Regarding this

(\*) Editors: Đỗ Đức Hiểu, Nguyễn Huệ Chi, Phùng Văn Tửu, Trần Hữu Tá (2004), World Publishers, p.794 (word “defamiliarization” edited by Lại Nguyên Ân).

(\*\*) Editors: Lê Bá Hán, Trần Đình Sử, Nguyễn Khắc Phi (1992), Education Publishing House, p.118.

type of narrative theatre/drama, apart from the adjective “epic”, the reference books in English also notes the adjectives “narrative”, “nondramatic” to explain more clearly that this type of theatre prone to “telling/narrating” events, not to “acting” like traditional theatre. So we cannot translate the term “epic theatre” to “*historical theatre/drama*” as a meaning elicited by the adjective “epic” (for example, author Nguyễn Văn Trung in the South translated to “heroic drama” (Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1965, p.39)). Brecht’s notion was that *V-Effekt* was a theatrical technique to make audience always aware that they were watching a play rather than witnessing an on-going real story: *theatre is a theatre, not the real world*. Therefore, in research books printed in English, apart from literal translation of Brecht’s term *V-Effekt* which is “alienation effect” (a-effect), they also translate to “distancing effect”; and in French books, they translate it to “*effet de distanciation*” (with the same meaning).

In such way, we also have to translate Brecht’s term to “distancing effect”, that is effect distancing between audience with the theatre, to be precise. Obviously, the word “distancing” here is used metaphorically more often, it means there has to be a certain distance between the audience and the scene (Nguyễn Văn Trung translated this term to “‘view from afar’ standard” (Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1965, p.40)). However, it is difficult for this term to become a scientific term. In the North, being aware of Brecht’s spirit, Vietnam’s theatres

and a number of writers have translated his concept to “spacing” effect<sup>(\*)</sup>. However, “spacing” is absolutely not an appropriate term, because, according to Vietnamese dictionary, “spacing” is “horizontal distance”).

And Shklovski’s term *ostrannenie* is a technique in production of literature *to make the portrayed object to be different*. Therefore, all theoretical books and encyclopedias in English translate this term to “*defamiliarization*”, i.e. “make it strange”. Therefore, we can also translate Shklovski’s term to “*defamiliarization*”, but there are still people mistranslate it to “differentiation”. However, it should be distinguished that, *while considered “defamiliarization” an obvious technique of writers, even a nature of art, Brecht introduced “defamiliarization effect” as his own innovative technique to reform traditional theatre*. Perhaps being aware of the difference between the concepts of Brecht and Shklovski, scientists in the world do not unify their two concepts as one and do not translate them to one common term. It should be added that, according to *Britannica Encyclopedia* of UK, Brecht also found suggestion for his *V-Effekt* technique in the theory of “*alienation*” in Hegel and Marx’s philosophy. Therefore, English has literal translation for Brecht’s term *V-Effekt* which is *alienation effect* (In

---

(\*) For example, theatrical researcher Đinh Quang; literary historical researcher Hoàng Nhân in the book: *Western literature* (Đặng Anh Đào, Hoàng Nhân et al.), Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 1999 (third edition), chapter 3 (about Bertolt Brecht), p.682.

Chinese: “alienation” also means “difference”). It can be seen that Shklovski’s theory of *ostrannenie* was only one of suggestions for Brecht, Brecht is not develop Shklovski’s theory to build *his own’s* theory of narrative drama.

So, the understanding of defamiliarization in our country needs to be reviewed. *First*, it is needed to restore the meaning of the art of innovation of Brecht’s narrative drama to “distancing effect”. *Second*, it is needed to understand that the concept of “defamiliarization” of Russian formalism is only a specific name for the policy of research forms of works. If we only listen to the introduction from an intermediate source without learning carefully, it will lead to misunderstanding and discretion in theory and application. We believe that the precise recognition and differentiation of those terms are very important, because today there are many people who do not understand what defamiliarization means, whatever they think a little different in literature, they attribute to defamiliarization technique, making this term lose its specificity and become meaningless.

The uniform of concepts “deconstruction” and “desecration” is also a consequence of false reception. “Deconstruction” is the technique of “dismantling” document, and “desecration” is overthrowing idols, eliminating scared, worshipping emotions for an object. These two concepts are completely unrelated to each

other. However, many people still think that when someone “desecrates” an image, it means they are “deconstructing”. That is a mistake, a difference in reception of foreign theory and a carelessness in literary study and evaluation.

Some people also say deconstruction is to find omitted meanings of the work. If saying so, any critic work can be deconstruction, because omission can always happen. In fact, deconstruction is the process of “dissecting meaning” and adding meaning to the document, not finding omitted meaning, it is derived from Barthes’ view that “Analyzing documents is not to find out how documents are determined (like the term causality), but rather to find out how it burts and expands (...). Our goals are not to discover *meaning* (...). Our goals are to define, imagine, their openness in meaning” (R. Barthes, 1985, p.330); it is also derived from Derrida’s view that any behaviour or information will have “slippage of meaning” (See Stuart Sim, 1999, p.5). In here, this view encourages readers’ manipulation which we cite Barthes’ work *S/Z* as an example.

### *c. Lack of consideration in reception*

There are many cases of unconsidered reception, including the case of deconstructionism. Advocate of deconstructionism is to manipulate works, however, many Vietnamese researchers consider it a breakthrough theory in literary study. Barthes claimed that he did not care about the aesthetics of documents, but many people in our country still regard him as a typical literary theorist of 20<sup>th</sup> century. When

unconcerning aesthetics, it means being away from literature field. In fact, Barthes' object of semiotic analysis was "story" ("récit"), but he had a very broad definition for "story". He said that "story" was present in all cultural genres, under the forms of both written and oral literature, both forms of gestures and expression in other images, static or dynamic form. Therefore, he dissected and analyzed every aspect of document, *except for aesthetics*. Thus, it is clearly that the title "literary theorist" which many people give him is no longer bear its true meaning.

Recently, a number of people does not acquire carefully and completely when acquiring post-modern theories. When there is foreigner saying that postmodernism is very close to Marxism, they conclude immediately that postmodernism is derived from Marxism. They do not know that the key point of postmodernism *in* philosophy is the dissolution of two grand narratives: one is rationalism of century of Enlightenment and one is Marxism. The saying that postmodernism is derived from Marxism is the consequence of the "The Six Blind Men and the Elephant" disease, it means the understanding of a theory is not thorough. On the other hand, it is also the consequence of the *dependence on foreigners* disease (or "fond of the West" disease, says Prof. Trần Đình Sử) of reception of foreign theories carelessly, although sometimes speaking of some foreign theorists appear to be illogical obviously. The fact shows that, not all words spoken by foreigners are by scientists nor those by

locals are untrustworthy.

And we see stories of feminist literature are brought up. In the West, feminism is shown in many areas, especially in the socio-politics such as claiming political participation of women which has not yet received adequate attention in many countries. And *in literature*, feminism is mainly expressed in the discovery, recovery and interest in works of female writers. In Vietnam, we have issues of feminism in a number of social areas, but what about in literature? Which issue will we solve? In fact, there must be issue related to feminism then we can talk about feminism in literature. Currently, in our country, there are only articles of foreign countries about feminism but there is no saying about what feminist literature in our country is. Is it because there is no issue so one cannot study? If unable to identify the issue, the study of feminism in literature is only about putting a new label for the job which has been being done for a long time, or introducing Western feminism in our country unnaturally. The science calls it "masking the issue". It is only a small step from masking the issue to masking the science. That is something that needs to be considered very carefully.

And most recently, we find that in Vietnam, people start to talk about "the prospect of post-colonial studies in the literature". But we do not know what issue we will study in the post-colonial literature in Vietnam? In fact, the post-colonial literature in the world has appeared in (and for) *former colonies* of France, Britain and U.S, those countries

still retain political institutions and culture of the metropolises, they have issue of conflicts between institutions and national identity, issue of finding national identity after colonialism, because the majority of those countries still remain in French Union or British Commonwealth after independence.

However, according to researchers, *not all the countries who experience the colonial period will have postcolonial issues*. For example, U.S was a British colony, but it does not have postcolonial issues (according to Jonathan Hart and Terry Goldie, 1997, p.156). Despite of using English as the official language, U.S' culture does not have conflict between institution and national identity, because U.S has political institutions and culture which are completely autonomous, independent of metropole's political institutions and culture. In this country, the postcolonial issues are only issues of indigenous Indians. Similar cases also happen in former European colonies, when these countries gained absolute independence and also have no postcolonial issues. This is a very important comment, it will help us to avoid dogmatic stand in imposition of postcolonial studies on any former colony.

Similarly, Vietnam gained independence in the democratic revolution, overthrewed colonialism, established a new regime with entirely new political institutions and culture. So in Vietnam, over more than half a century, is the issue to be solved the postcolonial literature or building new literature? Regarding postcolonial topic, will Vietnam be viewed as the case of U.S

and some European countries, or as former colonies in Africa, America and Asia? Why do we set out now to study postcolonism in literature after nearly 70 years? Does postcolonial literary study in our country, if any, derive from practical requirements or imposition of external theory? Such determination of the issue is very important.

Not to mention that many people still misunderstand the key concepts of this field of study: two English terms "Postcolonialism" and "Orientalism" are translated to "chủ nghĩa hậu thực dân" and "chủ nghĩa phương Đông". In fact, there are no Postcolonial "ism" and Oriental "ism" in science (if any, they will have a different connotation and in other area). In science, "Postcolonialism" simply means "postcolonial study"; and "Orientalism" have meanings: "Oriental style", "Oriental learning" (or "Oriental study"). In Western languages, the suffix "ism" in many cases does not have meaning of "chủ nghĩa".

Also in the tendency of acquiring new things, now someone is talking about renovation ability of "phê bình sinh thái" ("ecocriticism"). With advocating harmonious relationship between people and nature, they say: "On the basis of ecological holism, advocates of ecological aesthetics are harmonizing between man and nature, man and society, man and himself rather than man possesses, conquers and renovates nature, *not advocate working and creating the beauty* <sup>(\*)</sup>". This is the

---

<sup>(\*)</sup> Nguyễn Văn Dân emphasizes.



interpretation of a Chinese researcher quoted by author Đỗ Văn Hiểu in the article “Ecocriticism – The trend of innovative literary study” (Journal of Writers, No. 12/2012). Is it truly a perspective of ecocriticism? If yes, every conception of philosophy and literature must be reviewed. Why don't people renovate the nature? Why don't people work to create the beauty? If we consider United Nations' view on sustainable development, we can see that they do not advocate it, they think that people cannot help but develop, once developing, they cannot help to renovate the nature. *The matter is renovating the nature sustainably rather than destroying the nature.* And this idea is just developed on the basis of nature protection ideology which has been around for centuries. If following the opinion “not advocate working and creating the beauty”, what will happen to every work of art which praise working to conquer the nature? If being applied in Vietnam, what will happen to the entire treasure of national history? This is not a renovation of ecocriticism as claimed by author Đỗ Văn Hiểu but essentially a “revolution” to remove most of traditional values of literature. So can this theory be applied in literary study? Or is it just the theory of environmentalists? The theory of sustainable development is essential, but does it digress if being applied in literary study?

It can be said that, with all achievements gained, Vietnam's literary study has taken a bigger step than before Renovation. This is mainly thanks to the reception of the world's literary theories. However, the

reception of theories in Vietnam is still sprawling and messy. With many infeasible theories, the application of theories will still be limited. There are excessive theories and short of practices in Vietnam's literary study. Currently, there are still many issues remaining open. Both theory and research application still have many inconsistencies and contradictions of viewpoints and practices. This situation is somehow related to the reception of the world's literary theories. Especially, until we overcome the disease of being dependent on the external, Vietnam's literary study is still a sea without any big wave □

## References

1. Vietnam Communist Party (2000), *Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Party Central Committee (8th Tenure) on building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity* (16/7/1998), in: Vietnam Communist Party, *Resolutions of the Party Central Committee 1996-1999*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
2. Vietnam Communist Party (2014), “Resolution no. 33-NQ/TW of 9<sup>th</sup> Conference of 11<sup>th</sup> Party Central Committee on building and developing Vietnamese culture, people to satisfy the requirements for sustainable development of the nation”, <http://nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/23477402-xay-dung-va-phat-trien-van-hoa-con-nguoi-viet-nam-dap-ung-yeu-cau-phat-trien-ben-vung-dat-nuoc.html>.

3. Trần Đình Sử (2006), “Twenty years of literary theory, criticism, study – Achievements and reflections”, *Culture and Arts*, no. 52.
4. Trịnh Bá Đình (2002), *Structuralism and literature*, Literature Publishing House – Center for Vietnamese National Studies, Ho Chi Minh City.
5. Nguyễn Văn Trung (1965), *Assessment III*, published by Nam Son, Sài Gòn.
6. R. Barthes (1985), *L’aventure sémiologique* (“Cuộc phiêu lưu ký hiệu học”), Seuil, Paris.
7. Stuart Sim (1999), “Postmodernism hiện đại và triết học”), The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought (“Từ điển phê bình tư tưởng hậu hiện đại Routledge”), edited by Stuart Sim, Routledge Inc., New York, USA.
8. Jonathan Hart and Terry Goldie (1997), “Post-colonial theory” (“Lý thuyết hậu thực dân / hậu thuộc địa”), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, General Editor and Compiler: Irena R. Makaryk, University of Toronto Press, Toronto - Buffalo - London (reprinted for the fourth time).

(continue to page 22)

24. Charles S. Steinberg (1958), *The Mass Communicators public relations, public opinion, and mass media*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York.
25. Slavoko Splichal (1999), *Public Opinion: Developments and Controversies in the Twentieth Century*, Rowmen & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Maryland.
26. Theodore L. Glasser and Charles T. Salmon (1995), *Public opinion and the communication of consent*, The Guilfor Press, New York.
27. Phan Tân (2014), “Study of current public opinions in Vietnam through the universal approach to value systems and core values”, *Sociology*, No.3 (127).
28. Michael Traugott (2012), “Methodological Trends and Controversies in the Media's Use of Opinion Polls” In *Opinion Polls and the Media reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion*, Edited by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Strombck, First published 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
29. Roger D. Wimmer and Dominick, Joseph R. (2006), *Mass Media Research an introduction* (eighth deition), Thomson Wadsworth.
30. Graham F. Wilson (1962), *A theory of public opinion*, Institute for Philosophical and Historical Studies, Inc., Volume Two.