

Vietnamese satiric literature in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Vietnam history of literature

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Abstract: *The article presents generally the studies on satiric literature of the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, focusing on the historical, cultural and social context, and on satiric literature as a particular literary current, thence confirming the remarkable evolution step of satiric literature as it became a movement, a creation trend having particular important voice, contributing to literature evolution in general.*

Keywords: Satiric literature, Vietnamese medieval literature, literary history.

Vietnamese satiric literature is a particular current, having an evolution associated closely with culture, society and politics of specific periods of history. According to the *Dictionary of literary terminology*, “Satire is a special type of literature and in the same time is a principle of artistic reflection, in which the aspects of laugh like ironic, satiric, exaggerative, bombastic, funny... were used to mock, criticize, denounce and protest... the negativeness, evils, obsolescences, wickedness of society. By etymology, satire is the use of figurative and discreet words to ridicule and ironize the others, but in literature satire is associated with the esthetic category of

comic with various aspects such as funny, humorous, mocking. Satiric literature comprises various tones of laugh from funny story to comic novel (like *Good Luck*), from comedy to satiric poem (like poems of Hồ Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Khuyến, Tú Xương...)” (Lê Bá Hán, Trần Đình Sử, Nguyễn Khắc Phi, 2007: 246).

Thus it can be seen that the basic characteristic defining and classifying satiric literature is the laugh, and satiric prose and poetry are a “special type of literature, associated with the esthetic category of comic having different tones of laugh...” (Various authors, 2004: 1962).

It is obviously that since the middle of 19th century to early 20th century, Vietnamese satiric literature has developed considerably, becoming an original movement and trend of creation, having gotten great achievements. In this period there already were many studies on satiric literature in general and on specific satiric authors and works in particular. Beside that, other literary history writings have contributed significantly to summarization and deep evaluation the achievements of satiric literary current of the period from the middle of 19th century to early 20th century, highlighting its contributions to the history of national literature.

1. Studies on the historical, cultural and social context

In general, most studies of literary history on Vietnamese satiric literature of the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century have focused on presentation and analysis of Vietnamese historical, cultural and social features of this time as the premises of literature evolution. This is a Vietnam social picture of a complex period with most “dark and humble” changes in national history, represented in various works such as: *Vietnam elementary literary history* by Dương Quảng Hàm (French Indochina Public Instruction Department Press, 1943), *Vietnam sketchy literary history* by Hạo Nhiên Nghiêm Toản (Part II, Vĩnh Bảo Bookshop, 1949), *Vietnam literary history of the second half of 19th century* by Nguyễn Tường Phượng, Bùi Hữu Sùng (Nguyễn Khuyến School published, 1952), *Elementary table of Vietnamese literature* by Thanh Lãng (Second book, Presentation Publishing

House, 1967), *Complete Vietnamese prose and poetry discussion* by Hà Như Chi (New Life Publishing House, 1974), *Hoàng Việt prose and poetry selection* (Culture Publishing House, 1957) and *Vietnam brief literary history* by Lê Quý Đôn team (Construction Publishing House, 1957), *Vietnam new brief literary history* by Phạm Thế Ngũ (National Education Collection Press, 1961), *Vietnamese satiric prose and poetry (since 13th century to 1945)* collected and compiled by Vũ Ngọc Khánh (Literature Publishing House, 1974), as well as the later works like *Vietnam literature in transitional period 1900-1930* by Trần Đình Hượu, Lê Chí Dũng (Higher and Professional Secondary Education Publishing House, 1980), *Vietnam literature of the period from the second half of 18th century to the end of 19th century* by Nguyễn Lộc (Education Publishing House, 1999), *Vietnamese satiric poetry from the second half of 19th century to the first half of 20th century (physiognomy and features)* by Trần Thị Hoa Lê (Ph.D. dissertation in philology, Hanoi National University of Education, 2007)...

The 1858 French invasion of Vietnam led to many basic changes of Vietnamese society, especially to the deepening division of social classes. The Confucian community were divided into various outlooks on life: pacifist, warmonger, neutralist. “These three options encountered the unresolvable impasse, having more and more obviously experienced the disintegration and impotence of Confucian ideal in the face of national danger” (Trần Thị Hoa Lê, 2007: 6). Also conceiving Confucian division as mentioned above, Vũ Ngọc Khánh in the work *Vietnamese satiric poetry and prose*

(since the 13th century to 1945) (Literature Publishing House, 1974) has also considered that in fact there were three types of Confucianists: The so-called Confucianists who betrayed Confucian personality, some of which became lackeys of enemies (illicit Confucianist); the Confucianists who had indomitable spirit, had bravery to struggle, always being ready to sacrifice for national saving (militant Confucianist); and the third more complex type of Confucianist who consists of many sorts of men having different situations, losing orientation, not knowing how to do and from where to begin.

According to researchers, except the dominant class, the rest had to experience a real metamorphosis, a degeneration since the defeat of Cần Vương uprising when the French officially effectuating the colonial exploitation in 1897 and the socio-ideologic modality having appeared. The farmers and handicraftsmen lost land and profession, having had to go to the town making various jobs such as rickshaw driver, household servant, babysitter, housemaid, pedlar, worker, (in French plantation), prostitute, scoundrel, errand... Beside that, there appeared various new classes such as Western-educated intellectuals participating in "protectorate" administration, writers and journalists earning living by letters or making way to elite position, officials working in French colonial services... From the view of Confucianists, these new classes gave birth to new social psychology, outlook on life and lifestyle different from previous ones that were antagonistic to each other, upsetting the social order. "Everywhere there were only puppet-plays, the insolent dishonest boys

and girls, the wandering prostitutes and scoundrels. And there were the parvenus who only loved moneys and lost dignity. And there were innumerable other absurds: The blind lead the sharp-eyed person, the dishonest teaches to the just. The society in which money is the master, violence overwhelms justice, always has such farces" (Vũ Ngọc Khánh, 1974: 145).

The laugh of Confucianists was born from this view on those farces. Together with this laugh, literary conception was changed, enlarging the reflection scope as well as the enjoying subjects. The laugh in literature is not only the necessary laugh of conscience reacting to the corrupt society, but also a laugh with entertainment, denouncement, attack and struggle.

In the beginning of 20th century, when the Duy Tân (Modernism) and Đông Du (Journey to the East) movements of Confucianists settled down, the bourgeois democratic thought changed struggle orientation to another domains. The attempt to compete with foreign capitalists or to upset colonialism having failed, the attacks were then focused on small corners like protest against feudalistic ethics, reaction to great family regime, criticism against unsound customs of the countryside. "In these conditions, satiric literature had the opportunity to spread both actively and negatively" (Vũ Ngọc Khánh, 1974: 366).

In Trần Thị Hoa Lê opinion, beside the above basic socio-cultural premises of the thought of laugh, there were also another specific social conditions, namely the birth of many publishing houses and presses from the South to the North of country; the influence of foreign satiric

literature with the famous names such as Rabelais, La Fontaine, Voltaire... imported in Vietnam through translations of some scholars like Trương Vĩnh Ký, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Đỗ Thận...

In short, in literary history works, the researchers have analysed quite deeply the historical, cultural and social context - a premise for the development of Vietnamese satiric literature in the period from the late 19th century to early 20th century. As mentioned above, the conceptions on this historical period were quite unanimous.

2. Study of Vietnamese satiric literature evolution as a particular current

According to Vũ Ngọc Khánh in *Vietnamese poetry and prose (From 13th century to 1945)* (Literature Publishing House, 1974), since the end of 19th century, the physiognomy of satiric literature was much more rich and diverse. Most specialists in satiric literature have the opinion that although satiric inspiration had appeared long before in national literary history, but until the period from the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, it just became a literary current when it had evolved quantitatively and qualitatively. Then satiric prose and poetry exploited the problems of profound ideological and socio-political significance, with contents of strong criticism and struggle. Satiric laugh exploits various aspects of life, so it diverse and sharp.

Before, Confucian education ever influenced our conception on literature. In the article *The combination of rich self-satirizing and self-narration in Nôm medieval literature* (*Literary study*, No. 5, 2010: 18-25), Đàm Anh Thư referred to Confucian conception in Confucius'

books: In the book *Lun Yu (Analects)*, Confucius taught that the gentleman needs the formality: "Being not formal, the gentleman will not be solemn, not be good learner". Thus, according to the author, literature before 16th century, both in Chinese and Nôm, rarely chose the satiric as key inspiration.

By the end of 19th century, the appearance of Chinese transcription (Nôm script) and modern Vietnamese script have given a new wind to literature. According to Văn Tân and Vũ Ngọc Khánh, Chinese characters in satiric literary works "request a difficult understanding", "the profound subtlety of Confucianists have sent these works in the inaccessible archive that little people want to reach" (Vũ Ngọc Khánh, 1974: 37). Literary language since the middle of 19th century has enlarged its amplitude of expression of thoughts, including satiric thought. Beside this, the conception on function and value of literature is different from previous one. In the article *Conception of novel in the literature of the period 1900-1930* (*Literary studies*, No. 9, 2007: 85-99), Lê Tú Anh paid attention to the need of entertainment of the novel in particular and of literature in general. Nguyễn Thái Hòa in the work *The loyalism of Châu Trần* also believed that, beside criticizing and ironizing the society, the laugh of this period also had significance of helping the readers to "relax", "enjoy themselves in tea break" (Nguyễn Thái Hòa, 1928: 1).

By examination of the studies in literary history associated with Vietnamese satiric literature of the period from the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, we saw that there were different

types of periodization of creation trend history. In 1943, Vietnamese satiric poetry of the second half of 19th century was for the first time presented by Dương Quảng Hàm as an independent literary trend in his *Vietnam elementary literary history*. In this work, Dương Quảng Hàm comprised the whole written literature of Vietnam medieval period from the 10th century to the beginning of 20th century. In chapter XX, Dương Quảng Hàm divided the Nôm literature into 4 trends: moral, sentimental, nationalist, and satiric. The satiric trend was described as “often presentation of human feelings and world state in order to ridicule the bad, the ridiculousness and the bad habits of men” (Dương Quảng Hàm, 2002: 389). Dương Quảng Hàm presented the preminent authors of this trend, like Nguyễn Quý Tân, Nguyễn Văn Lạc (Học Lạc), Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương, and for the first time generalized some essential points of satiric style of each author. Thus, with *Vietnam elementary literary history*, Dương Quảng Hàm had the merit in discovering and confirming satiric poetry as a special literary trend.

Further, also in 1943, Dương Quảng Hàm continued to write the *Anthology of Vietnamese prose and poetry*, and then combined it with *Vietnam elementary literary history* to make *Vietnamese literary textbook of high school*. This textbook included four satiric poets of 19th century such as Nguyễn Quý Tân, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương, Từ Diễm Đồng.

By 1949, in *Vietnam sketchy literary history*, when presenting Nôm poetry of Nguyễn Dynasty from 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, Hạo Nhiên Nghiêm Toản emphasized satiric feature of the authors like Hồ Xuân Hương,

Nguyễn Công Trứ, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương. Among which, Nguyễn Khuyến is considered to have “forte in Nôm prose and good in all manners: mockery, self-satirizing, expression of feeling, description of landscape”, having slight ironical satiric tone, being discreet with composed and free manner; and Trần Tế Xương “perhaps is the most popular poet”, “his poems have only the bitter, ironic, mocking and self-mocking tone”, “are the mirror of poor Confucian psychology and of situation of whole society in the transitional period” (Hạo Nhiên Nghiêm Toản, 1949: 20, 21, 22).

By 1952, in *Vietnam literary history of second half of 19th century*, Nguyễn Tường Phượng and Bùi Hữu Sùng divided Vietnamese literature of the end of 19th century into 5 trends as follows: of times, moral, sentimental, propagandizing and satiric, among which the satiric trend was represented by three writers like Nguyễn Văn Lạc, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương (Nguyễn Tường Phượng, Bùi Hữu Sùng, 1952: 115-158).

In 1953, with the work *Literature in Nôm writing*, Thanh Lãng developed the study trend of previous scholars, enlarged the list of satiric authors and works. Thanh Lãng thought that the time since 1750 to 1900 was “a prosperous period of Nôm literature”. He also divided Nôm literature of this period into 4 trends such as: moral, political, sentimental and satiric.

The textbook *Vietnam literary history* by teacher team of Hanoi National Pedagogical University (Education Publishing House, 1962, reprinted in 1978), consists of 5 volumes, with volume IV A presenting the literary period of the second half of 19th century, in which the authors focused

analysis on the laugh in the works of Nguyễn Khuyến and Trần Tế Xương.

By 1971, Nguyễn Lộc gave birth to the work *Vietnamese literature of the second half of 19th century* (in 1999 this book was reprinted in combination with another work to make the *Vietnam literature of the period from the second half of 18th century to the end of 19th century*). Nguyễn Lộc divided the literature of second half of 19 century into 4 trends: patriotic and struggling against French, denouncing the reality, hedonistic with isolationism, and slavish. The trend of “denouncing the reality” was also called trend of “denouncing the satiric reality” or “denouncing the satire”, being “quite diverse and evolved nationwide from the South to the North” (Nguyễn Lộc, 1999: 720). He analysed the contents and artistic values of poems of Nguyễn Văn Lạc, Nguyễn Thiện Kế, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương. The special feature of the book is that the author paid attention to the analysis of trend of anti-French patriotic satiric literature, represented by Phan Văn Trị, Huỳnh Mẫn Đạt, Lê Quang Chiêu...

In investigating the studies on satiric literature of the time from the second half of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, we saw the appearance of a remarkable trend that put the satiric literature in the relation between the second half of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century at different levels and recognized the continuation of development as well as the differences between these two periods. In 1957, the book *Vietnam brief literary history*, with volume 3 dealing with the period *From the middle of 19th century to 1945*, compiled by Lê Quý Đôn team (Construction Publishing House),

continued to confirmed the place of satiric literary current. We can say, up to this study, the Vietnamese prose began to be recognized in the satiric literary current, remarking its development for the period from the beginning of 20th century to 1930. The chapter V of this book was entitled “Satiric literature”, referring to satiric trend of the period from the middle of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century. After having listed the satiric authors, the book focused to analysing prose and poetry of the two authors Nguyễn Văn Lạc and Trần Tế Xương.

By 1961, in a laborious literary history work *Vietnam new brief literary history* (Vol. 2, 1963), Phạm Thế Ngũ divided Nôm literature of the past dynasties into 4 trends: moral, sentimental, satiric, of times. When discussing the satiric trend, he classified the different satiric aims as follows: The satire of teachings, with noble laugh to advise people (the poems of human feeling and world state by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, Nguyễn Công Trứ); the funny satire, with joking laugh (thơ Hồ Xuân Hương) or tricky message like many poems and parallel sentences with personal sneer; the satire of world state, with the criticizing laugh from the political position (*Ode to Tây Hồ dispute* by Phạm Thái)... (Phạm Thế Ngũ, Volume 2, 1997: 52-53). In the same opinion with Thanh Lãng, Phạm Thế Ngũ thought that “investigating carefully, we see that these above trends are not different nor separate from each other in nature and contents. They are sometimes connected with each other, for example literature of world state often has satiric nuance, sometimes also leaning to morals, while the moral literature

doesn't exclude feeling character..." (Phạm Thế Ngũ, Volume 2, 1997: 54).

By 1967, Thanh Lãng published the *Elementary table of Vietnamese literature* (Presentation Publishing House). He divided pre-modern literature (1862-1945) into 3 generations: The generation of 1862 (1862-1913), the generation of 1913 (1913-1932), and the generation of 1932 (1932-1945). He ranked the Romantic and satiric writers (Dương Khuê, Dương Lâm, Chu Mạnh Trinh, Trần Tế Xương, Học Lạc, Nguyễn Khuyến) among the first generation of Vietnamese pre-modern literature (generation of 1862).

Beside that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s there were other achievements of literary history studies referring to satiric prose and poetry such as: *Vietnamese literary commentation* by Phạm Văn Diêu (Hoành Sơn Publishing House, 1969), *Complete Vietnamese literary discussion* by Hà Như Chi (New Life Publishing House, 1974)... In these studies, the authors put forth the quite delicate remarks on satiric style of preminent poets like Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương, Tản Đà.

In 1974, the first special study on written Vietnamese satiric literature was published with title *Vietnamese poetry and prose (From 13th century to 1945)* by Vũ Ngọc Khánh (Literature Publishing House). With 548 pages, the book let us to see quite clearly the physiognomy of written Vietnamese satiric literature of a long historical period, although giving priority to presentation of works. With the conception that the aim of satiric nature is negating, criticizing and destroying the enemy of common sense, truth, independence and freedom, seeing satire as a weapon, the

author gave priority to those satiric works with character of struggle and decimation rather than of the simple laugh. Vũ Ngọc Khánh arranged satiric literature in three major parts. The first part consists of the works by Confucian scholars living from the beginning to the middle of 19th century. The second part consists of the works from the second half of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century. The third part consists of the modern satiric works from the early 20th century to 1945. As for satiric literature of the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Vũ Ngọc Khánh considered that satiric literature never was so prosperous as then. "Almost in every decade there appeared a generation of satiric poets, marked by some representative writers" (Vũ Ngọc Khánh, 1974: 23).

Remarkable achievement of the compilation by Vũ Ngọc Khánh is that it collected a rich number of satiric works in poetry and prose. Beside that, in the brief history of each minor period, the author has exposed a rather comprehensive view on contents and artistic features of satiric literature. In certain extent, Vũ Ngọc Khánh has based the explanation of the fast evolution of satiric poetry and prose of the period from the late 19 century to early 20th century on the presentation of socio- historical factors that impacted on literature. However, this work has some un-reasons in periodization, in classification of satiric authors and contents. For example, one of the un-reasons is that the author has ranked those writers that were near to each other in birthdate and death date or creation time like Phan Văn Trị, Nguyễn Khuyến, Tú Xương on two different periods...

By 1988, in *Vietnam literature in transitional period 1900-1930* by Trần Đình Hượu and Lê Chí Dũng, the important status of satiric literature from the late 19th century to the early 20th century was confirmed in the process of national literary history. The chapter 5 (*Satiric poetry developed into one current*) analysed the new socio-cultural conditions that made the satiric poetry and prose current evolve “suddenly” strong, in the same time it showed the contents and artistic features of satiric literature in this period. The authors have put forth many important considerations as follows: “The development of satiric poetry is the mark of breaking down the Confucian framework of literature”, “satiric poetry has become the tool of political struggle”, “satiric poetry and patriotic literature aid each other”, “in our pre-modern and modern literatures, satiric poetry made direct preparations for critical realist literature” (Trần Đình Hượu, Lê Chí Dũng, 1988: 202, 228, 244)...

On 21st century, Trần Thị Hoa Lê succeeded the previous authors in studying Vietnamese satiric literature of the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Hoa Lê published several important works like *Satiric poetry from the second half of 19th century to early 20th century, a progress move of Vietnamese satiric poetry* (*Culture and Arts*, No. 7, 2001: 53-55), *Self-satirizing poetry from the late 19th century to the early 20th century* (*Journal of Science of Hanoi National Pedagogical University*, November 2004: 88-93), *The image of “chaos” and satiric tone in Han script poetry of Nguyễn Khuyến* (*Journal of Han-Nôm* No. 3, 2006: 23-27). Especially,

in philological Ph.D. dissertation in 2007 Hoa Lê showed clearly the physiognomy of Vietnamese satiric poetry in period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. The author analysed the evolution of this satiric poetry period in three stages: The first stage is from the middle to the end of 19th century, the second stage is from the early 20th century to 1920s, the third stage is from the late 1920s to 1945. In the first stage, we saw the “old Confucian” laugh style in slight and discreet words together with profound satiric significance. In the second stage, there was a “intermediate Confucian” style leaning to popular laugh, mainly with the ironic and mocking tone, the sharp and violent words criticizing direct the subjects. In the third stage there was a “Western-educated” satiric style... The author also surveyed in particular the number of satiric poems in this period, the number of authors, the number of those authors who created much works, the author groups distributed by region, education, academic title and profession...

In short, these above literary history studies although are different from each other in evaluation but all have considered satiric literature from the late 19th century to the early 20th century as a special literary trend of this historical period, a mark of the new step of evolution into the particular excellent current of national literature □

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