

The reform of Vietnamese poetic language since 1986

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Abstract: *Since 1986, social change has had significant impact on the artistic thinking of Vietnamese poets. During this period, a breakout has occurred in both content and form, especially poetic language. Never before has the language become so rich and abundant, which also includes symbolic language, superrealist language, body language, sexual language apart from informal one. One may even see “intentionally fragmented language” which is created in seek of a sense of oddness.*

Keywords: Vietnamese Poetry, Renew Poetry, Poetic Art, Reformed Poetry, Poetic Language, Symbolic Language, Body Language, Sexual Language

1. Foreword

The 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (December 1986) marked a major turning point, opening the way for a comprehensive reform throughout the country, including innovation in thinking, economics, politics, arts, literature, etc. Literary innovation has indeed flourished in all genres including poetry - a nimble, avant-garde genre.

Poetry after the Reform no longer illustrates an idea or talks much about morality but awakens people's individuality, compassion, and sense of values. Poetry of this period exposes human tragedies and seeks new and more modern values, which is the reason for the rise of several new and unique poetic forms, especially poetic language.

Over time, never before has the language of poetry faced big challenges today. How does the innovation manifest? Every era has its language. Will the renewed languages of poetry be accepted by readers today? The paper provides a literature review of linguistic innovation in Vietnamese poetry after the Reform to partly answer the above questions, thereby giving some comments and assessments about contemporary Vietnamese poetry.

2. Forms of poetic language after the Reform

As Tran Dinh Su said (1996: 43) that “poetry is a linguistic act”, the poets of the post-Doi Moi generation wanted to make an innovation in the poetic language. These innovations have both positive effects and

issues that need to be further discussed and studied.

2.1. Daily and colloquial language

The inclusion of daily and colloquial languages in poetry is a fairly common trend in poetry in the post-Doi Moi period (1986). Some researchers believe that daily language is flooding into poetry, so poetic language is closest to real life, opening up great possibilities in describing real life. But it is not a language of ease. “Many poets like to use folk sayings, making the poetry easy to enter the reader’s mind and more real and close to life” (Diep, 2006: 47). Poets who represent language innovation in this way are Nguyen Duy, Bui Chi Vinh, Dang Dinh Hung, Thanh Thao, Tran Dan, Le Dat, etc. It is suitable for modern thinking, gives the epic language a new vibrancy, meets the increasingly diverse cognitive needs of today’s readers” (Huong, 2017: 71). “The renewal of conceptions about reflecting reality in poetry, the desire to tell the truth, and the inspiration to criticize make the poetic language change to find a match” (Thuy, 2008: 41). The introduction of raw, bare images into poetry during this period became popular, giving it new values. This uniqueness and novelty are not easy to feel, sometimes even difficult to accept. However, researchers all believe that every era has the poetry of that time, and it is asserting its new position. New poetry must create a new language to convey the new feelings of the poet, the nation, and the times. “This kind of language has helped to renew poetry, rather than keep it within the poetic influence of the New line of poetry and the solemnity of revolutionary poetic language” (Ca, 2003: 99).

However, apart from the positive analysis and evaluation of the introduction of daily

language into poetry, several opinions wondered whether too much daily and spoken language in poetry will reduce the art of poetry or not. “It is possible that the rudimentary quality makes the formal beauty of the verse a little faded away” (Huong, 2017). “If poetry is only speech, it will inevitably lose itself, speech is massively included in poetry, sometimes for no artistic purpose, but simply as a fashion. Their poetry will risk becoming garbage” (Thuy, 2008: 42). Moreover, “Applying everyday expressions to poetry, increasing the parody in poetry is a necessity of democratic life, but if it’s overused, poetry will become trivial and petty. Poetry will even return to its monosyllabic nature, while the essence of poetic language is multi-meaning and ambiguous” (Nguyen Dang Diep, 2006: 25). “Some complain that poetry is being destroyed or eliminated” (Thuy, 2008). “The poetry of this language lies amid the fresh and vivid beauty of life, while the vulgar and trivial are easily offensive” (Ca, 2003: 199).

So how can the daily language used in poetry make it more and more fresh and peculiar without becoming banal and vulgar? That is not only the concern of poets when composing but also the desire of readers and researchers when learning about contemporary poetic language. Some researchers indicated the positive aspects and weaknesses of the poetic language after 1986; however, those concerns were only expressed in the question of whether or not to use too much everyday language in poetry. There is no in-depth, systematic analysis of the downsides of using this language.

Poetry requires a breakout, but not an indelicate and trivial one.

2.2. *Symbolic and surrealist language*

The symbolic and surreal language is often found in innovative poets such as Le Dat, Tran Dan, Phan Huyen Thu, Nguyen Duy, and Nguyen Quang Thieu. However, it was not at this stage that symbolic poetry appeared, instead it existed in the poetry of Xuan Dieu, Han Mac Tu, Bich Khe, and Doan Phu Tu from 1930-1945. But as Nguyen Dang Diep (2014) found, in the period after 1986, the innovation in “symbolic language makes poetic meaning become blurred, the openness of poetic image is multiplied. Strangeness in language becomes prominent.” Dang Thu Thuy (2008: 39) argues that “all the seemingly uncertain structures of words have been loosened, revealing their new tones”. The “unusual combination of words creates surreal images in Dang Dinh Hung’s poetry”.

Poets in the post-Reform period also considered poetry to be a mysterious spiritual voice, a flow of the subconscious, so they draw dreams, they even thought that there must be a way of language decoding to understand poetry. One researcher even exclaimed, “Does readers have to have a high aesthetic level to understand Vietnamese poetry in the Reform period?” (Hien, 2016: 5). For researchers, the renewal of poetic language at this stage is still a bold innovation, a new direction, in which “the lines of poetry, verses and words have just drifted engrossed in dreams, both illogical and surreal because the gaps in the lines of poetry and words create magical symbols” (Hue, 2020: 67).

Are these the differences between the surreal symbolic poetic language of this period and the symbolic language of the 1930-1945 period? As Nguyen Dang

Diep (2014: 80) once affirmed: “The symbolic language in poetry after 1975 is characterized by another cultural process: industrial and post-industrial culture”.

Explaining the current movement of surrealist poetry, Ho Si Vinh (2020: 11) said: “Even if it is a topic of daily life, poetry needs surrealism, thinking, inspiration, looking for beauty in harmony, sweetness in bitterness, symmetry in asymmetry”. But how to accept surrealism, and how to apply it in poetic language so that it remains close and receptive, without confusing readers are issues of interest and analysis by researchers and also the expectation of Vietnamese readers in today’s poetry.

2.3. *Body language*

The removal of limited areas in literature has created an openness in composition, especially in the creation of poetic language, one of which is body language. There are two opposing opinions about the creation of body language, some at first thought it was a breakout of poetry after the Reform, but there were also many others indicating the abuse and objection of this type of language. How to use body language properly and is it recognized as an ontological problem in modern society? Poems that use lots of body language, such as Vi Thuy Linh, Du Thi Hoan, and Phan Huyen Thu, are characterized by bold, individualistic, and fresh writing styles that break out of the narrow framework towards body love” (Hanh, 2021: 98), and towards discovering sexuality from the perspective of cultural values, which makes the seemingly taboo issue very noble and sacred. “Sexual language used artistically will have a great attraction to make people more human, more thirsty for life” (Diep, 2016: 66). Some modern poets succeeded in sexually

transforming language. They renewed poetry by playing with words. “The poet ‘drops’ one word or more, out of a verse, and then ‘plants’ in it one or more homonyms, turning a verse into many verses. That is, a word has several meanings, so a verse conveys many different meanings at the same time” (Thuy, 2012: 43).

But to get readers’ acceptance of new forms of poetic language, especially sexual language, is not easy. It was a difficult creative process for each poet in the period after 1986 because the gap between artistic language and mediocrity was very thin. Excessive use is offensive, which is why many readers do not accept works where obscenity appears too much” (Diep, 2016: 70). While in the past, poets Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Du used metaphorical language to express the beauty of the body or to describe the woman’s body, for such poets as Phan Huyen Thu, Vi Thuy Linh, Ly Hoang Ly nowadays, sensitive parts of the body are no longer restricted areas, so they don’t need metaphors and metonymy anymore.

Questions about more artistic, more humanistic ways of writing about the body, and how to use body language effectively, are difficult for contemporary poets to answer. They keep struggling in that innovation process. Although there have been analyzes of the success and limitations of this type of language in modern poetry, the main causes, and remedies for it have not been pointed out to help readers not be indifferent to poetry.

2.4. The creation of new words and non-linguistic elements (symbols, numbers, accents, images)

Faced with the requirement of comprehensive renovation, contemporary

Vietnamese poetry has created a new corpus such as reduplicative words that are completely absent from Vietnamese dictionaries: *mung mung, ru ru, tràn trụa, thơ thác, bông bênh, vui vui*, etc. While the introduction of new words reveals the relentless creativity of the poets after the Reform, it makes readers feel confused, even offensive. “In some respects, new reduplicative words do not meet the needs of expression, and somewhat confuse users” (Vinh, 2017: 44).

Nguyen Lien (2003: 4) commented on Tran Dan’s poetry as follows: “Words are drawn up, become symbols, symbols become letters, verses are drawn in a new order with the participation of magnified curves, lines, commas, and dots like little creatures, to make poems or pictures of the indefinable genre.” “The most remarkable and controversial method is the use of “empty words”; that is, syllables that have not yet made sense and have not been able to become a unit of word formation in Vietnamese (Hieu, 2006: 124). Even, “thanks to their strong imagination and ability to associate, contemporary poets have created many odd and different images” (Hue, 2020: 63) that “it is difficult to determine whether poets are the creator of the word, or the word itself makes the poet” (Hue, 2020: 64).

It seems that modern poetry has ceased to be a purely verbal text. Poets find ways to renew their poetry with different linguistic styles, “tolerating many extra-linguistic elements such as marks, numbers, symbols, symbols, drawings, pictures, etc., which makes poetry no longer a purely verbal text” (Thuy, 2008). From this aspect of linguistic innovation, most researchers believe that poetry lies in the beauty of

words, which once surpassed imagination, going beyond the limits of the linguistic shell, it will become confusing, and alien to readers. Poetic language created in this way is unlikely to bring success to modern poetry.

3. Poetry is a semantic game

Readers of poetry in the new period have witnessed the emergence of the phenomenon of poems as ‘lines of words, a play on words and poems of new forms’. In essence, these poets uphold the role of artistic language, against the wear and tear of existing discourses” (Diep, 2014: 66). They set language up as a game. While this semantic game is not new in the world, the new poetic language appearing in Vietnam has created a worldview, a completely new way of feeling compared to traditional poetry. Readers do not easily accept such puns, but innovation in poetic form is always an open direction for contemporary poets.

“The language of games, copy-paste, automatic spirituality, intuition, spirituality... are also enhanced in poetry, especially among young poets who want to experience a new perception of words in a post-modern mind” (Ha, 2017). Because they want to experience, innovate and integrate, “many people see poetry as a semantic playground. The value of the poem lies in the novelty of the art form. The pioneering are Tran Dan, Le Dat, Hoang Cam, Duong Tuong” says Pham Ngoc Hien (2016: 6). “They no longer attach importance to the fact that literature reflects reality, do not care about the literal and real meaning of words. The value of a word is not its actual meaning but its suggestiveness, i.e. the figurative meaning of the word. Many poets are not satisfied

with the available words from the past. They invent new words, even though it makes no sense”.

Pham Ngoc Hien (2016:6) even emphasized: “In the past, people considered poetry as a means to convey emotional thoughts. Now, they see poetry as a creative game. Therefore, young poetry means coming to endless word games, where there are only rules of the game and no rules of poetry”. Referring to the rules of the game, not the rules of poetry, Pham Ngoc Hien analyzed many poems of contemporary poets to see the endless creativity by breaking, separating, and creating new words as proof for the new poetry has no longer any rules.

Epilogue

The novelty of the Vietnamese poetic language after 1986 has not yet been “accepted” by readers and researchers, but, understandably, these are efforts to innovate, integrate and find their way of Vietnamese poetry of this period. Only harmony can make today’s poetry inward but still be deeply interested in socio-political life, domestically and internationally, and human feelings. “Vietnamese poetry today has not found that harmony” (Thanh, 1996: 302). But one should not “be too impatient and try to negate the efforts of poets in renewing poetry, especially when poetry is falling into the current gloomy state. They would like to overcome the ‘portrait drawing’ in literature” (Diep, 2014: 26). It is still possible to keep the hope that although post-Reform poetry has not yet created artistic heights, it has made a mark, a push in language innovation that is worthy of respect, even if it is considered a semantic game, creating many “meanings of words” in each verse (Le Dat), or “simply identifying poetry with words” (Tran Dan) □

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