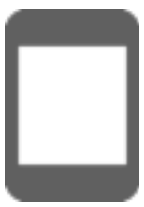
The Rise and Fall of Avant-Garde Vietnamese Poetry in Online Literary Magazines during the Early Twenty-First Century



Trần Ngọc Hiếu
Hanoi University of Education
hieutn1979@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This article describes the impact of the Internet on contemporary Vietnamese-language poetry.[1] In the early 21st century, the Vietnamese literary landscape regained its momentum after its decline of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period that began in 1986 with the boom of online literary magazines such as *talawas*, *Tiền Vệ* (Avant-garde), *Da Màu* (Colored Skin), *eVăn,* and others. As a form of deterritorialization, these online literary magazines opened a transnational space for Vietnamese literature, challenging orthodox censorship while competing with traditional forms of publishing under the control of the state. These journals created a carnivalesque playground for avant-garde poetry, which not only questioned the definitions and conventions of literature but also inspired political resistance. Since 2010, the state's censorship has placed restrictions on these poetic experiments, causing their decline. Nonetheless, it is necessary to review what the Internet has contributed to the development of Vietnamese poetry while considering the possibilities and limitations of avant-garde poetry in online Vietnamese literary magazines.

Keywords: avant-garde poetry, the carnivalesque, censorship, Internet, digital literature, online literary magazines, media and literary publishing, Vietnamese literature

TRẦN NGỌC HIẾU is a lecturer in Hanoi National University of Education and has a PhD in Literary Theory. His research interests include literary theories, contemporary arts, and Vietnamese modern literature. His articles and essays are published in national literary journals such as *Literary Studies Journal* (*Nghiên cứu văn học*), *Foreign Literature* (*Văn học nước ngoài*) and *Culture and Arts Journal* (*Tạp chí Văn hóa nghệ thuật*). He also co-authored an essay on ecocriticism with Đặng Thị Thái Hà that appeared in *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects* edited by John Charles Ryan.

A SKETCH OF THE AVANT-GARDE TRADITION IN MODERN VIETNAMESE POETRY BEFORE THE INTERNET ERA

The history of modern Vietnamese avant-garde poetry, in a sense, can be traced back to the Thơ mới (New Poetry) movement, which emerged in 1932. If it is commonly understood that the first impulse of avant-garde art is the brave disruption of established rules to challenge and even provoke traditional critics and readers, then New Poetry was indeed a revolution, as later literary scholars claimed (Huy Cận and Hà Minh Đức 1997). Under the direct influences of nineteenth-century French poetry, New Poetry was fundamentally a Romantic movement. New Poetry marked a radical break with the tradition of medieval poetry in that its language of composition was the National script (Quốc Ngữ)[2] instead of the Hán-Nôm script, and that it rejected all the rules and conventions derived from the principles of classical Chinese poetics, thus opening up novel possibilities for the development of Vietnamese poetry in later periods.

In only about ten years, the New Poetry movement showed signs of escaping from the magnetic pull of romanticism, turning instead towards symbolism, as seen in the poetic works of Bích Khê,[3] Đinh Hùng,[4] and the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group,[5] and manifesting some surrealistic elements, as seen in Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry.[6] However, the evolution of modern Vietnamese poetry since 1932 has been discontinuous, often disrupted and fragmented due to particular political contexts. It was initiated in the colonial context,[7] then went through the Cold War era where conflicting ideologies divided the country into two separate regions, each of which developed its literature in different, or, to be more precise, contrasting ways. It became an exiled form of literary expression with the Vietnamese diasporic community after the fall of Saigon but remained in the homeland under the cultural censorship of the late socialist state. In such contexts, poetic experiments in the spirit of modernism and the avant-garde were still carried out through the creative impulses of poets who embraced aesthetic innovation and political resistance, as in the case of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm,[8] Thanh Tâm Tuyền, and Sáng Tạo (Creation) groups.[9] And yet these avant-garde poets either had to work underground for many years or were excluded from orthodox accounts of Vietnamese literary history since 1975. If their works were introduced, they were often criticized by mainstream literary critics as unintelligible and potentially rebellious. The control of the state over publishing activities since Đổi Mới (Renovation)[10] period, to some extent, has been loosened, but only a very narrow space, under the burden of censorship, has opened for avant-gardist experiments.

THE INTERNET—A TRANSNATIONAL SPACE FOR VIETNAMESE POETRY

In 1997, the Internet was officially in use in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (H.P & Thùy Vân 2017). But the impact of the Internet on Vietnamese literature began earlier, when *Diễn đàn văn học nghệ thuật liên mạng* (*The Internet Forum for Literature and Arts*), an electronic literary magazine, was founded in 1995 by diasporic Vietnamese writers in the United States.[11] Diasporic Vietnamese literature embodied both the legacy of pre-1975 Southern literature[12] and the voice of the exiled Vietnamese community after the fall of Saigon. This was the first time that Vietnamese literature took advantage of the Internet to refashion its way of publishing and destabilize the monopoly of the physical book form. This particular body of Vietnamese literature was doubly marginalized—excluded from the orthodox history of Vietnamese literature, confined within national borders, and also positioned

as minority literature within the country where Vietnamese exiles lived. Online publishing offered the potential to connect writers and readers in the Vietnamese community, both diasporic and national.

In the beginning, the Internet mainly served as a channel to introduce a number of Vietnamese literary magazines that had a lively period of growth, such as *Hợp Lưu*, *Văn học*, or *Việt*. In 2001, there were already multiple literary webzines for diasporic Vietnamese communities. Among these, *talawas*, which first debuted on November 3, 2001, can be considered the first online forum enabling daily exchanges and commentaries on art and literature. Founded in Berlin and edited by Phạm Thị Hoài, a prominent Đổi Mới-period author based in Germany, *talawas* did not specialize in literature, and later, political issues would become its main concern. However, it is undeniable that from the early days of its formation until the time of its deactivation, literature remained a topic of interest for both its editors and readers, to the extent that it was often called a literary website. It was also on this forum that Nguyễn Quốc Chánh, a controversial poet since the early 1990s, introduced his poetry collection *Of Metaphorical Identity* (2003).[13] The collection, as Nguyễn Quốc Chánh claimed, represented his refusal to compromise with the mainstream publishing paradigm. The Internet era had given poets opportunities to push their creativity to extreme limits despite cultural censorship. *Of Metaphorical Identity* should rightfully be considered the first samizdat poetry collection of Vietnamese literature in the Internet era. Around the time when *talawas* was established, the website *Gió-O*, edited by writer Lê Thị Huệ in the United States, was launched on November 15, 2001. In 2002, the website *Tiền Vệ* (*Avant-Garde*) (whose predecessor was the magazine *Việt*, active from 1998 to 2001) was founded by critics Nguyễn Hưng Quốc and Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn in Australia. The reputation of these two critics and their ambition to create a space for radical innovation in diasporic Vietnamese literature made *Tiền Vệ* one of the most exciting literary websites. It gathered the most provocative writers of the early 2000s, including authors who refused or were not permitted to officially publish in the country. Later founded in October 2006 in the United States, *Da Màu* (*Colored Skin*), a large gathering space for Vietnamese exiles, was co-founded by writers Đỗ Lê Anh Đào, Đặng Thơ Thơ, and Phùng Nguyễn. Originally conceived as an electronic literary magazine, the magazine, with its title *Colored Skin*, demonstrated that its founders were highly aware of identity politics. *Da Màu* wanted to promote the body of Vietnamese-language literature within the multicultural and multilingual environment of the United States and tear down all geographic, political, historical, and ethnic boundaries within literature to create "a true literary playground where all tongues are heard, all voices are raised, and all literary tendencies are equal" (*Da Màu* 2006).

Between 1995 and 2006, the existence of websites and online literary magazines was a particularly remarkable signal: many events and debates in Vietnamese literature began and spread from here. Advances in technology-enabled these literary websites to form overseas earlier than similar developments within the country. Their influence drove domestic efforts to build electronic literary newspapers, most notably the *eVăn* page (created in 2003). As a branch of the *VnExpress* online newspaper, which was considered the most-read news site in the country, *eVăn* was conceived as a conspicuously open forum. More open-minded than the mainstream cultural press, the journal was committed to introducing experimental or provocative literary works, in terms of aesthetic and poetic innovation, such as Tam Lệ, the female writers of the Ngựa trời (The Praying Mantis) group and Mở Miệng (the Open Mouth group).[14] Editors of those literary websites at that time not only saw the Internet as a technical solution that facilitated the publication and dissemination of works and the connection among readers; more importantly, they were excited by the democratic potential of the

Internet, as an imperative for the growth of literature. Phạm Thị Hoài, in the third year of the publication of *talawas*, stated that:

> For us, Vietnamese people and Vietnamese writers, the Internet is the greatest grace granted by fate. What kind of legal ban on private publishing could remain valid before the hundreds of thousands of each author's self-published sites? Which restrictions on free speech could remain efficacious before the millions of self-established and self-governing forums online? (Phạm 2004)

As Phạm observes, the Internet became an instrument for Vietnamese writers to overcome the censorship policies of a totalitarian regime and exercise their freedom of expression. The editors of *Tiền Vệ*, on the other hand, had a vision that the Internet could help Vietnamese writers realize their dream to "build a Commonwealth of Vietnamese art and literature, where despite geographical and political differences, people can encounter each other in an attempt to explore and experiment to return the work of writing to its original meaning: making something new" (*Tiền Vệ* 2003). This Commonwealth refers to a deterritorialized community: the Internet allowed Vietnamese-language writers, wherever they were, to come together, as long as they shared the aspiration to create and ambition to renew the vigor of literature. In other words, the Commonwealth was a transnational cultural space, located beyond geographical boundaries and within literary language; it was built with a spirit of pioneering aesthetics and uncompromising politics. The image of such a Commonwealth indeed is an "imagined community," a term proposed by Benedict Anderson (2006) in his seminal work on nationalism in which a nation is defined by a shared perception of its origin and its future, its shape, and its soul through various discursive practices.

The "imagined community" that these literary websites project is a democratic and liberal environment that promises new forms of resonance between writers and readers. Between 2000 and 2005, Vietnamese-language online literature differed to online literature in mainland China, the political context of which bore many resemblances to that of Vietnam. Online literature in mainland China in its early days branched into popular culture, and the Internet even facilitated the creation of literary works as a business.[15] Meanwhile, the most popular Vietnamese-language literary websites at this time were all eager to generate aesthetic breakthroughs or, more specifically, to stimulate various trends of writing that deviated from the mainstream literature that dominated the country's public space. The Internet gave diasporic Vietnamese literary websites the opportunity to create their gravity from the periphery. No longer had a space reserved for overseas writers only, they attracted writers from within the country, those who wanted to oppose mainstream art and literature, and those who were attracted to the liberal spirit of the avant-garde that the world of cyber literature had opened up. In other words, the Internet triggered an illicit "border-crossing" for many Vietnamese writers: most of the important Vietnamese authors in the early twenty-first century, especially of poetry, published on these websites. These include writers who always insisted on their dissident position, such as Nguyễn Quốc Chánh, and those recognized by the mainstream, such as Inrasara, Nguyễn Quang Thiều, Vi Thùy Linh and Phan Huyền Thư.[16] Transgressively "border-crossing" to publish their creations, for many domestic authors, can be considered a self-marginalizing act. Self-marginalization also characterizes *eVăn*, a unique domestic literary website that pursued different ambitions in comparison to state-directed policies in art and literature. These calls from the periphery, certainly, made the center uneasy. Cultural bureaus naturally felt apprehensive in the same way they had felt about the wave of Renovation-period literary works that emerged right around the disintegra-

tion of the socialist bloc. Various forms of censorship started to arise: *eVăn* was forced to eliminate its founders' orientation; *talawas* was blocked by a firewall in Vietnam starting in 2005; *Tiền Vệ* and *Da Màu* became increasingly difficult to access from within the country.

Online literary magazines represented a timely occurrence for Vietnamese-language poetry in the early 2000s, a particularly active period when there were young writers in the country who became controversial due to the unrestrained quality of their voice and poetics. Prominent authors among these included Vi Thùy Linh, Phan Huyền Thư, Văn Cầm Hải, and Nguyễn Hữu Hồng Minh. The space for arguments around these writers was expanded by these online magazines, the most pioneering of which was *talawas*. The "Poetry, and Young Poetry" section of the website, created during the site's early days, not only gathered available reviews from printed newspapers and allowed readers to easily access them but also published other reviews submitted by authors who intentionally chose not to submit to mainstream media channels. *Talawas* attempted to build a democratic environment in its effort to introduce many different, even conflicting, opinions, about these poetic phenomena. Furthermore, within five years, many important topics related to poetry continued to be discussed online whereas the mainstream press hardly mentioned them or did so with utmost vigilance. These topics included the renovation of poetry, sexuality in poetry, the vulgar in poetry, parody, feminist tendencies, and postmodernism. An online space for criticism was formed and it outperformed the mainstream press which remained under the control of censorship and was always wary of advocates of literary transgressiveness.

Poetry was the main genre in these online literary journals. First of all, due to its brevity, in comparison to longer kinds of narrative, poetry could better adapt to new forms of digital presentation. More importantly, authors who wanted to experiment with tendencies that deviated from mainstream contemporary poetry found it extremely difficult to be accepted by official journals and publishing houses. Therefore, online literary journals at this time, despite their different orientations, were consciously building an imagined community for avant-garde poetry. This imagined community bore the image of a carnivalesque playground, as elaborated in the next section of this essay. Through various efforts in criticism, translation, and archival publication, these e-journals constructed a past for this peripheral stream of poetry and sketched a future for it to journey towards. This past embraced the avant-gardist and underground tradition not only in Vietnamese literary history but also in world literature. And the future it envisioned as a promising mode of postmodernism that might generate multiple ways to innovate both poetics and politics.

A CARNIVALESQUE PLAYGROUND OF POETRY

The carnival is the artistic world model of François Rabelais as interpreted by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). However, this term proposed by Bakhtin has great implications for cultural studies as well. The carnivalesque world is a counter-space to the mainstream culture dominated by the privileged class. It contests the everyday reality of social life along with all of the rules, norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of orthodox culture. It reflects the variable, multifaceted, and relative nature of the world, in contrast to the invariant and inviolable world maintained by the orthodoxy. The carnival, therefore, is a peripheral cultural space, a site of carnivalesque laughter. As Robert R. Wilson comments, "Carnival always plays against an official discourse: it is the mask (the overt doubleness) of the official discourse (forms, conventions, rules of formation and expression) that it mocks" (1987, 78-79).

Play here can be understood as a parody, a desacralization, a decanonization, or in other words, it provokes and destabilizes official discourses.

With the orientation described above, Vietnamese online literary magazines between 2000 and 2005 attempted to establish themselves as a carnivalesque space. In spite of their different rhetorical strategies, online poetry practices generally constituted a carnivalesque discourse. These practices not only intransigently challenged poetic concepts standardized by orthodox culture but questioned predefined visions of traditional poetry. Đinh Linh, a Vietnamese-American poet and fiction writer who was also an active contributor to these online literary magazines, referred to the poetry published on the *Tiền Vệ* website: "Compared to the official verse culture in Vietnam, in which old men are browbeaten into penning puppy-love doggerel, where the more adventurous ones would insert a ghost or two into their stanzas to flaunt their "surrealist" credentials, *Tiền Vệ* kicks ass!" (2006).

While there had been previous efforts since the Thơ mới (New Poetry movement) to significantly refashion the structure of Vietnamese poems, now the poetry practices of the Internet questioned the possibilities of poetry itself. In the most extreme form, online literary journals introduced compositions that went far beyond popular notions of poetry. A prime example is Lê Văn Tài's concrete poetry published in *Tiền Vệ*. Not only playing with the visual image of the words, especially taking advantage of digital platforms to accentuate the visual effects of the work and make an impact on readers, Lê Văn Tài also blurred the line between poetry and painting or experimental photography. Here is one of his concrete poems in which the characteristics of a poem and a visual artwork become indistinguishable:

Figure 1. From the quartet "Rainbow Seasons" by Lê Văn Tài. (Image source: https://tienve.org/home/literature/viewLiterature.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=7582).

Also on *Tiền Vệ*, Tam Lệ (Trần Nguyên Anh) introduced poems made up of numbers or visual poems made up of only a single letter or a single word. Not only did the poems themselves stun their readers but how the poems were created was also unprecedented. In the case of Tam Lệ, his visual poetry was a literal sort of technical poetry. As the author did not hide any of the steps and procedures of composition, "making poetry," therefore, didn't exclude "manual" work. He disclosed the process behind his poetics. As he said on *Tiền Vệ*, to make these kinds of visual poems, he "bought an alphabetical toy set used for young kids to learn a language and a black inkpot made in Germany." Then, "when inspired or undisturbed," he "patiently stamped these letters onto various kinds of paper." And finally, "he scanned or photographed his works, sometimes using photoshop to erase the ink stains or create certain visual effects" (Tam Lệ, From "Poem of Letter 'M').

These visual poems might be seen as radical experiments that challenge institutionalized conceptions of poetry. Were they still called "poetry"/ "poems" if they were found outside the context of these e-literary magazines? Were they then just cartoons that parodied romantic and sentimentalist themes and that become kitsch things or photographs that were meaningless? The editors of these e-literary magazines played their roles like curators in that they presented anything like a poem as long as it went further than all accepted conventions and definitions of poetry. In short, in these e-literary magazines, poetry could be everything except for what it used to be, or normally is.

In another sense, there were authors like Bùi Chát who considered poetry-making as "poetry-playing," a funny, nonsensical game similar to the way "a kid plays with sand" (2003, 1) or Đinh Linh who considered poetry-making a way of "turning poetry inside out" ("Về thơ"/"On Poetry") and Lý Đợi, a member of the Open Mouth group, a provocative poetic phenomenon, who proclaimed that "We do not make poetry" (2004). In other words, poetry-making, to the poets of the Open Mouth group, involved negating all ready-made definitions, all official canons, all standardized criteria of evaluating poetry. Saying "we do not make poetry" was their equivalent of saying "we practice anti-poetry." The carnivalesque nature of the Internet environment accommodated these drastic anti-poetry sentiments.

Anti-poetry, first of all, rejected the notion that poetry had to be attached to the so-called poetic—the well-established tradition in Vietnamese poetry. The poetic gave people a pleasant or delusional feeling of liberation from reality via a series of images taken from life only to be aestheticized or idealized into highly crafted or refined imageries. Instead of the poetic, online poetry practices carried into poetry not only the bare realism of contemporary Vietnamese society but also what was perennially considered filthy and disgusting. Nguyễn Quốc Chánh, in his two samizdat online works *Của căn cước ẩn dụ* (*Of Metaphorical Identity*, 2001) and *Ê, tao đây* (*Hey, I'm Here*, 2005), gave a blunt description of an urban space trapped in "nightmarish marshes" brimming with garbage. Chánh often structured his poems in a dizzying manner, bloating them with contemporaneous images of urban and environmental decay.

Images of filthiness and rancidity also frequently appeared in the poetry of Phan Bá Thọ, Đinh Linh, and Lynh Bacardi. The authors of the Open Mouth group explicitly named their own practice "trash poetry," "filthy poetry," and "cemetery poetry" (Lý Đợi 2004). Letting the un-poetic spill into poetry was a way to allow the poetic to go beyond aesthetic reactions and be seen as a political attitude. If poetry conformed to conventional poetics, poetry would cover up reality and become alienating. It would be complicit with official discourses that manipulate language into an instrument that hides their own instability and insecurity. For example, a term like "socialist-oriented market econ-

omy" is a seemingly scientific expression that in fact shields the capitalist nature of Vietnamese society at present, despite the conspicuous leadership of the Communist Party. With their practices, Internet poets pulled poetry away from the ostentatious rhetoric of dominant ideologies in their game of disguise. To borrow the words of Nguyễn Quốc Chánh, the poet must break free from a "language held hostage" (From "Những ý rời"/ "Fragmented Thoughts," line 19). To that end, the poet's voice must be the bluntest and crudest voice in this context. Inra Sara made a comment on this phenomenon: "It blows a rotten breeze into our poetic atmosphere. It forces us to turn around and look at it. And look at ourselves, too! Could it be that lately we've been much too fragrant, much too frilly?!" (Inra Sara 2003).

The prevalence of sexual language is also a prominent feature of these anti-poetic Internet phenomena. Throughout the history of Vietnamese poetry, sexual language has been present as a provocative element that questions moral and aesthetic sense. In the poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương,[17] it was used to invoke the traditional folk culture that was repressed during an era ruled by Confucianism and to challenge the moral values that the patriarchy imposed on women in feudal times. In the poetry of Trần Dần,[18] it painted a picture of the instinctive and the private—dimensions that Marxist ideology heavily suppressed to elevate the social nature of humanity. Hồ Xuân Hương used an ambivalent poetic language evoking sexual images in a manner similar to the method of "using the ribald to lecture on the refined" often seen in folk riddles while Trần Dần willingly metamorphosed phonetic elements and disrupted grammatical structures in his poems to insinuate suppressed memories and libidinal impulses. Internet poetry, in comparison, used sexual language in a direct manner, refusing to camouflage the images of genitalia and intercourse behind any elegant language. Instead, the poets consciously turned sexual language into a blasphemous and aggressive language of resistance against official discourses' masked suppression of thinking. Nguyễn Quốc Chánh inaugurated the words that were considered utterly obscene in Vietnamese such as "đụ" ("fuck), "lồn" ("cunt"), and "cặc" ("cock"), turning them into "the most beautiful words," if not the words with the most pitiable fates in the history, considering that "*After 10 centuries of being screwed by the Chinese, Lồn, Cặc & Đụ acquired a different form: Vagina, Phallus & Intercourse. Lồn, Cặc & Đụ were expelled from the rank of Butt, Cheek, etc. & they started to lie forlornly on the sidewalk, next to the woman who sells balut eggs, the dude who cycles & that Magdalene whore*" (From "Đụ vỡ sọ"/ "Fuckin' til breaking skull," line 1-4). This carnivalesque act of inauguration, in a way, questioned the mythologies made up of sophisticated and polite speech, which then became grand narratives of tradition or national identity—things that the Vietnamese authorities would like to requisition to buttress the narratives of communist ideology that could now no longer stand firmly on its own. Using other methods, but still, in the same spirit, Lê Văn Tài played games with his concrete poems as he established the relationship between the symbols of history and traditional culture with the most touchy descriptions of genitalia. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc offered an interesting analysis when he compared Lê Văn Tài's reexamination of history to a phallogocentric discourse, referencing the term phallogocentrism coined by Jacques Derrida to refer to the centrality of male privilege throughout history (Nguyễn 2013, 252-3, and 259-262). When distorting the Bible in his redefinition, announcing "in the beginning was the cunt," (Bùi Chát 2007), Bùi Chát not only blasphemed phallogocentric discourses but laughed at all great narratives of history. These acts of provoking poetry and language norms confirmed Julia Kristeva's argument about the carnival discourse: "Carnivalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but

rather, an identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law" (1980, 65).

The dominant tone in this carnival playground is a playfulness, sarcasm, parody, and a fearless attitude towards taboos. This tone was established in the prose of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Phạm Thị Hoài in the early Đổi Mới period but it had been quite absent in poetry. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sexual language and hyperrealist forms of expression started to surface in the poetry of Dương Tường và Hoàng Hưng[19] but for the most part, poetry was still in the realm of the serious. Internet poetry in the early years of the twenty-first century mocked all that was serious. In 2007 Bùi Chát released an entire collection of poems that parodied the most in-vogue poems and the most acknowledged canons of the time. The title of this collection, *Xin lỗi chịu hổng nổi* (*Pardon me, can't stand it*), publicly showed an attitude of utter boredom with standards of poetry. Through parody, Bùi Chát suggested the possibility that poetry might escape those predetermined standards. In another poem, the author reused the linguistic elements of the text that the Ministry of Culture and Information had sent to the Goethe Institute in Hanoi, demanding them to cancel the book talk with Open Mouth poets on June 17, 2005, on the grounds that the works of Open Mouth were vulgar and inconsistent with the fine customs and habits of the nation. Bùi Chát shattered the words and meanings of this text and rearranged them into a new poem in which lines of open sarcasm were juxtaposed with a series of nonsense statements:

> *We would like to cordially respect*
> *The Socialist Republic of Poetry*
> *Immediately stop all activities*
> *That support and organize*
> *June 17, 2005*
> (Excerpt from "Xạo chẻ bờ kè"/
> "Flirting with hoes at a riverside pub,"
> page 7, lines 16-21)

Playfulness is an expression of free disposition. Bùi Chát's collage poem in the style of Dadaism not only served as a naughty trick on an authorized governmental document but also bluntly disclosed that poetry was precisely murdered by the repression of free expression, and not by the poetic works accused of violating the fine customs and habits of the nation.[20]

Within the first five or six years of the 21st century, this carnivalesque playground of peripheral culture exuded an undeniable force of attraction. The birth of poetry collections such as *Khoan cắt bê tông* (*Cutting and Drilling Concrete*, 2005) and *Thơ 47* (*Poetry 47*, 2007)[21] showed that this proactive self-marginalization was becoming a movement, overcoming geographical barriers and political censorship, and gathering writers who, despite their different poetics, shared a refusal to compromise with mainstream culture. Internet literary magazines offered something like a playground where every rule and standard of mainstream culture suddenly lost the capacity to control the creators, where all canons could be questioned, where laughter, parody, and sarcasm were allowed to be uttered. To the advocates of mainstream culture, this carnivalesque playground was run by "spoil-sports." According to an argument by Johan Huizinga, the spoil-sport could pose a threat to orthodox culture because he "shatters the play-world", "reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world", "robs play its illusion," and "threatens the existence of the play-community" of orthodox culture (1955, 11). These spoil-sports of the poetic playground, thus, faced potential forms of punishment, of which the cancel-

lation of the Goethe Institute's roundtable on poetry with the Open Mouth group was an example. The official press published articles that attacked them, calling them a toxic cultural phenomenon. Firewalls were set up to prevent readers in the country from easily accessing certain literary websites. In 2013, Đỗ Thị Thoan, the author of a master's thesis on the Open Mouth group, was condemned by orthodox circles of academics and critics for she had dared to research a taboo phenomenon. The author's master's degree was rescinded and she was forced to resign from her post at the Hanoi University of Education. The incident exposed the lack of academic freedom in Vietnamese universities.[22]

THE DECLINE OF ONLINE LITERARY MAGAZINES AND AVANT-GARDE POETRY

The vivid life of online literary magazines was no doubt a threatening sign to the state. The above-mentioned forms of control and repression showed that online poetic rebellions were interpreted as manifestations of dissent. Websites such as *talawas, Tiền Vệ*, and *Da Màu* themselves were also increasingly interested in topical political issues within the country, which was why these websites became targeted and banned by domestic censors. In 2008, *talawas* briefly put its operations on hold before switching to a new platform as the *talawas* blog on March 15, 2009, but it only lasted for another year. As I finish writing this article, the website *Tiền Vệ* has temporarily ceased its updates daily. *Da Màu* and *Gió-O* are still up and running but it has been a long while since there was any creative or critical development interesting enough to garner much public attention in these magazines.

It would be an exaggeration to argue that state censorship is the only cause of the decline of online literary journals and the revolution of Vietnamese-language poetry. In addition to political factors, another important cause that motivated this course of events and has not yet been thoroughly analyzed is the transformation of the media ecosystem in Vietnam. Online literary magazines in the early 2000s were built using the platform of Internet forums which, by the end of this century's first five years, had lost their traction once platforms for blogging became fashionable. In Vietnam, starting with the emergence of Yahoo! 360º, personalized social media channels were increasingly popular, and have perhaps reached their climax with the reign of Facebook. Instead of submitting to online magazines, some authors now use personal social media channels as their gateway to approach public audiences. Other new platforms also attracting writers in Vietnam, though there have not been sufficient statistics to measure their competitiveness with Facebook, include Medium, Spiderum, and Reddit. While literary e-magazines might be able to gather authors into certain groups to have a more focused influence, the current presence of dispersed media channels is losing that sense of concentration. In addition, personalized social media channels nowadays are also easily attracted to the lure of commercial profits. The publishing industry does not see digital literature as a rival with traditional presses but as a means of support. Many authors choose to work with a publisher to extend the influences they have built online; publishers also actively hunt for authors who have generated enough interest online to have their works printed.

Internet poetry now is hardly immune to the impact of the market, which is a very different phenomenon compared to the early 2000s when the avant-garde movement was synonymous with an active refusal to please readers and compromise with the market. In the last two or three years (2016–19), several Internet poets have become commercially popular such as Nguyễn Phong Việt, Nồng Nàn Phố, and Lu. The popularity of these authors somewhat corresponds to the popularity of

English-language Instagram poets such as Atticus, Rupi Kaur, and Lang Leav. These authors' poetry, still deeply immersed in the aesthetics of romanticism, satisfy the desire of the young to use literary quotations as a way of self-fashioning.[23]

But does it mean that the poetic tremors created in the first five years of the twenty-first century were meaningless? Indeed, some might consider it an unsuccessful rebellion, an unfinished revolution if compared to the New Poetry movement or the Creation group. It merely created, as some might say, a scene of chaos scattered with debates that went nowhere. Perhaps mainstream culture is still trying to defend its poetry after the vigorous turmoil that Internet poetry generated. However, after all, orthodox poetry did suffer several injuries and simultaneously, the most severe forms of censorship are still ready to take effect on anyone who might want to discuss the offenders responsible for those injuries or anyone who would like to continue their spirit of resistance. The incident around Nhã Thuyên's thesis is proof of this situation, which in itself, is a present absence, something haunting or dissident to the orthodoxy. Therefore, Internet poetry ought to be regarded as a landmark event in Vietnamese literary history, although official critics have always found a way to avoid it when discussing contemporary Vietnamese poetry.[24]

NOTES

1. In my essay, this concept means the literature written in the Vietnamese language by writers within Vietnam and of the global diaspora. Throughout the essay, it is synonymous with the concept of Vietnamese literature.
2. The national script is an alphabet invented to transcribe the Vietnamese language using the Latin script, based on its employment in the alphabets of Romance languages, in particular, the Portuguese alphabet, with the addition of diacritics. It was formed in the seventeenth century as Catholicism was spreading in Vietnam. The missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660) is considered to have contributed significantly to the formation of the national script. This national script had not acquired an official status in Vietnam until the French colonial rule encouraged and used it to replace the Hán-Nôm script of the feudal period.
3. Bích Khê (1916-1946), whose real name was Lê Quang Lương, was born in Quảng Ngãi. His notable poetry collection was Tinh huyết (Blood, 1939), which included poems that evoked pure musicality in the spirit of Paul Verlaine who once proclaimed, "Music before all else."
4. Đinh Hùng (1920-1967) was a noted poet before 1945. After 1954, he emigrated to Saigon. His published collections of poetry include *Mê hồn ca* (Orphean Hymn, 1954) and Đ*ường vào tình sử* (Road to the History of Love, 1961).
5. Xuân Thu Nhã Tập was a group of artists who shared a similar philosophy of composition and gathered as a group in 1939, including poets Đoàn Phú Tứ (1910-1989), Nguyễn Xuân Sanh (1920), and Phạm Văn Hạnh (unknown dates of birth and death). In *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (*Poets of Vietnam*), a collection of New Poetry works edited by Hoài Thanh – Hoài Chân and published in 1941, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh and Bích Khê were mentioned as poets influenced by the symbolist poetics of Mallarmé or Valéry. Many scholars later also acknowledged the symbolist turn of Bích

Khê and the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group. It is notable to refer to Trần Đình Sử (1995) and Đỗ Lai Thúy (2015).

6. Hàn Mặc Tử (1912-1940) was the author of the renowned poetry collections *Gái quê* (*Country Girls*, 1936) and *Thơ điên* (*Mad Poetry*, 1938), the latter of which bears many imprints of surrealist poetics. Regarding the encounter between Hàn Mặc Tử and surrealist poetry, it is noteworthy to refer to essays by Đỗ Lai Thúy (494-506), Phạm Xuân Nguyên (547-552), and Đào Trọng Thức (573-579) in Phan Cự Đệ and Nguyễn Toàn Thắng (2002).

7. From the mid-19th century to 1945, Vietnam was colonized by the French. In the colonial context, various aspects of Vietnamese society and culture had radical transformations under the direct influences of French politics and culture. With the August Revolution in 1945, Vietnam declared its independence from French colonialism. However, it was until the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 that French colonialism in Vietnam was officially put to its finale.

8. The Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair is considered the first dissident movement in North Vietnam since 1954. The movement was initiated in early 1955 and ended in June 1958. The members who supported and participated in this movement were artists and intellectuals living in the North. They demanded artistic freedom and criticized the lack of democracy in society at the time. They created the *Nhân văn* (*Humanities*) newspaper as the movement's official news outlet; the first issue was released in January 1956 and suspended in December of the same year. Communist authorities accused the movement of nurturing and propagating harmful thoughts. On June 5, 1958, in Hanoi, more than 800 artists and writers signed the resolution called "the Resolution of 800 writers and artists," announcing their support for the resolution of the Vietnam Association for the Arts and Letters, condemning the Nhân văn Giai phẩm Affair and supporting the expulsion of the association's members who had led the affair. For more information on this movement, please refer to Zachary Abuza (2001) and Thụy Khuê (2002).

9. The magazine *Sáng Tạo* (Creation) was established in Saigon in October 1956 under the editorial supervision of Mai Thảo (1927-1998) and deactivated in September 1961. The key writers of this magazine were important authors of pre-1975 Southern literature, such as Mai Thảo, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Nguyễn Sỹ Tế, Quách Thoại, Trần Thanh Hiệp, etc. Among these writers, Thanh Tâm Tuyền (1936-2006) is often considered as a prominent poet of pre-1975 Southern literature whose writings manifested straightforwardly his avant-gardist attitude and his sense of modernist aesthetics.

10. The Đổi Mới ("Renovation") period began with the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986, which promoted and implemented a lot of important reforms on the economy and culture. In a more democratic political atmosphere in comparison with the previous period, there were new voices in literature and arts that exposed hidden histories of the past, questioned the significance of the Vietnam war or represented the upside-down reality. The most notable authors of this period included Dương Thu Hương (born 1947), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (born 1950), Bảo Ninh (born 1952), Phạm Thị Hoài (born 1960). However, when the Socialist bloc collapsed in Eastern Europe and Russia, the State regained its control over literature and arts: Dương Thu Hương was oppressed and even imprisoned because of her dissident voice; Phạm Thị Hoài's debut novel–*Thiên sứ* (*The Crystal Messenger*, 1988) was banned; Nguyễn Huy

Thiệp and Bảo Ninh's fiction came under attack on mainstream media for distorting social reality and history. The mid-1990s, thus, marked the decline of The Đổi Mới period.

11. Regarding the establishment of the *Internet Forum for Literature and the Arts*, please refer to an interview with writer Phạm Chi Lan (1961-2009), who initiated the forum, conducted by Thụy Khuê: "RFI interviews Phạm Chi Lan, Editor-in-Chief of the Internet Literature and Art magazine" (1996). The magazine deactivated in April 2001. The interview was republished on *Da Màu* on September 25, 2009, in homage to Phạm Chi Lan.

12. After the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was separated into two regions. While in the North literature developed under the direction of communist ideology, in the South it grew up in the context of liberalism. In this politic and cultural context, there were various attempts in Southern literature to make breakthroughs in aesthetics and poetics following the spirit of avant-gardism and modernism for which Thanh Tâm Tuyền and the magazine *Sáng Tạo* were prominent examples. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the Communists considered this literature as toxic, influenced by American imperialism that should be forbidden. Many important authors of this literature were imprisoned or lived in exile after 1975. They were also the first generation of Vietnamese diasporic literature. It is still politically sensitive to discuss pre-1975 Southern literature, especially to reexamine its contributions to national literature, in the academic circles or mainstream media. Recently, musician Trần Long Ẩn, Chairman of Vietnamese Union of Literature and Arts Society, declared that the pre-1975 Southern literature and arts were "dangerous" because it "distorted the revolutionary ideals of the Communist," thus it is an urgent task to heighten vigilance over this legacy (Quốc Ngọc 2019).

13. Nguyễn Quốc Chánh (born 1958) has published two poetry collections with an official publishing house, *Đêm mặt trời mọc* (*Midnight Sunrise*, Youth Publishing House, 1990) and *Khí hậu đồ vật* (*Inanimate Weather*, Youth Publishing House, 1997).

14. On the spirit of *eVăn*, it is noteworthy to refer to an interview with Đinh Bá Anh, one of the first two editors of this website (interview conducted by Phạm Thị Hoài, 2005).

15. About the development of Chinese internet literature, it is worthy to refer to Guobin Yang (2010). Yang observed the evolution of Chinese internet literature since 1997 when the first literary website was launched in mainland China: "Since then, Chinese internet literature has evolved into a complex of internet businesses and online writing, publishing, reading, and gaming communities, thus significantly transforming the field of print culture. In this process, aspiring writers with neither cultural nor economic capital turned to the newfound spaces of the internet for self-publishing and community building and made non-instrumental claims about literature in an attempt to achieve recognition. Literary web sites, for their part, adopted commercial strategies for self-promotion. Consequently, internet literature not only successfully challenged the cultural hegemony of print literature but also expanded the field of literary production and consumption" (333- 334). There was a trend of Vietnamese internet literature around this moment that also involved in the commercialization but this was not the direction of Vietnamese online literary magazines I am discussing here.

16. These authors are all members of the Vietnam Writers' Association who have been officially published and awarded certified prizes. For example, Inrasara, a Chăm poet, was awarded the Writers' Association Award in 1997 and 2003, and the Southeast Asian literary award in 2005; Nguyễn

Quang Thiều was awarded the Poetry Prize by the Vietnam Writers 'Association in 1993 and is currently the Vice President of the Writers' Association; Vi Thùy Linh and Phan Huyền Thư were both well-received authors. And yet, from 2001–06, they actively participated in publishing on literary websites. For example, *Tiền Vệ* used to publicize many of their works which they chose to not publish on official channels.

17. Hồ Xuân Hương was a Vietnamese poet who lived between the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. Considered a unique female voice in medieval literature, Hồ Xuân Hương was considered bold when she carries into poetry the language of the body and sexuality, honoring the beauty and secular desires of human beings, which went against the strict moral tradition of Confucianism.

18. Trần Dần (1926–97), a poet and a key member of Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm group. During the period of being banished from the official cultural environment in the North after Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm movement was oppressed, he continued his writing in the dark and made various poetic experiments in the spirit of avant-garde aesthetics.

19. There were several poetry collections in the late 1980s – early 1990s causing controversy about their poetic language such as *Lê Đạt* & *Dương Tường* (1989), *36 bài tình* (*36 Love Songs*,1988), *Ngựa biển* (*The Horse from Sea,* 1995), *Người đi tìm mặt* (*The Man in Search of His Own Face,* 1994)

20. It is rather visible to see Dadaism's influences over various poetic practices introduced on the literary websites that are the objects of my discussion here. It is noteworthy to account for the defense and promotion of Dadaism in the context of Vietnamese literature. This art movement, among other modernist movements, used to be seen as "mushrooms growing on the rotten trunk of capitalism" – a notorious quotation from Trường Chinh (1907-1988), a leader of Communist Party (1974, 19). On *Tiền Vệ*, Hoàng Ngọc –Tuấn introduced and translated an improvised lecture by Stefan Wolpe (1902-1974), a German-born composer who acknowledged Dadaism's impacts on his creative mind. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc introduced and explicated Dadaists' spirit and their provoking aesthetics manifested in typical tropes and devices such as collage, parody, ready-made. He also thought of Dada as an art movement going beyond modernism and belonging to the line of postmodernism, which, in Nguyễn's opinion, should be the destination of contemporary Vietnamese literature (2007, 304–307). Dadaism was interpreted by these critics as a symbol of the dissident attitude to politics and aesthetics which is always necessary for the artists who want to renovate art and literature.

21. These are two poetry collections edited and self-published by the Open Mouth group. Bùi Chát, a key member of Open Mouth, had established the Scrap Paper Press in 2001. This is an underground publisher that operated without securing permits from the state. Initially, they published samizdat books in the form of photocopies. Later when the Internet became popular, in addition to publishing in print, they also used online channels to publish their works and help audiences access their works more easily. In 2011, in Argentina, Bùi Chát was awarded the Freedom to Publish Award by The International Publishers Association. As the Open Mouth group and Scrap Paper Press were always under the watch of Vietnam's security agencies, Bùi Chát was detained immediately when he returned to Vietnam after receiving the award in Argentina. For more information on this case, please refer to https://www.ifex.org/vietnam/2011/05/04/bui_chat_freed/

22. Đỗ Thị Thoan, known by her pen name Nhã Thuyên (born 1986), is a poet and critic. In 2010, she defended her master's thesis "The Position of the Marginal: The Poetry Practice of the Open Mouth Group From a Cultural Perspective" at the Department of Literature, Hanoi University of Education. Her thesis ranked excellent and later she started working at the university as a lecturer. However, since May 2013, her thesis was re-examined and condemned as a dangerous thesis," "counter-cultural," "anti-scientific," "borrowing the name of science to do politics," "not only causing harm to the art and literature scenes but also disseminating thoughts of rebellion, dissent and destabilization in political and ideological life, negatively affecting the younger generation, especially students in school." She was forced to resign from her post and had her master's degree rescinded in 2014. The university also stopped extending their contract with her advisor, Associate Professor Nguyễn Thị Bình. The incident gave rise to a number of opinions in defense of Nhã Thuyên and her advisor in particular and of academic freedom in the universities in Vietnam in general. But eventually, these voices did not receive a response from the Hanoi University of Education and the Ministry of Education.

23. Regarding this topic, I myself have published an essay in Vietnamese about the emerging trend of Vietnamese internet poetry in the second decade of the 2000s (Trần Ngọc Hiếu (2017, 35-49)

24. Vietnamese literary critics and scholars have had publications on contemporary Vietnamese poetry. However, most of them ignored online literary magazines where the most controversial poets and their work were introduced and uncompromisingly challenged the readers. The implied message of censorship to literary critics and scholars through Nhã Thuyên's incident is that they can claim anything about contemporary poetry as long as they do not analyze or discuss in detailed on this phenomenon. For example, they can write about the sexualized poetic language but in their accounts, such poets as Nguyễn Quốc Chánh, Đinh Linh, Bùi Chát are excluded. Or if their names and their poems are mentioned, they are just objects of critique for having destroyed poetry. Inra Sara's essay collection *Chưa đủ cô đơn cho sáng tạo* (N*ot Solitude Enough for Creation*, 2006) may be the only official publication that did not criticize this phenomenon with a negative attitude and even appreciated it as an optimistic sign of the contemporary literary landscape.

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