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**Bodily Impacts: Locating Vietnamese Modernism in the Contact Zones**

**by**

**Trang Ngoc Doan Cao**

**A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the**

**requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**South & Southeast Asian Studies**

**in the**

**Graduate Division**

**of the**

**University of California, Berkeley**

**Committee in Charge:**

**Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair**

**Professor Penelope Edwards**

**Professor Chana Kronfeld**

**Fall 2014**

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## **Abstract**

### **Bodily Impacts: Locating Vietnamese Modernism in the Contact Zones**

**By**

**Trang Ngoc Doan Cao**

**Doctor of Philosophy in South & Southeast Asian Studies**

**University of California, Berkeley**

**Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair**

This dissertation examines Vietnamese modernist poetry as a cross-cultural contact zone, historically embedded, and composed of a dense network of intertextual engagements. What are the salient features of this cluster of work, and how do they inform our understanding of the larger constellation of international modernism? This dissertation makes several contributions to existing studies. First, this project explores the historical development of Vietnamese modernism by tracing the evolution of modernist poetry through three historical eras: the late-colonial era of the 1930s, the revolutionary era of the late-1950s and the “Renovation” era of the 1970s/1980s. In doing so, I demonstrate that there was indeed a modernist “movement” in Vietnam with trajectory and momentum, and even though historical events disrupted it at certain junctures. Second, this dissertation examines the complex transnational force-field that shaped Vietnamese modernism by tracing its web of connections to literary traditions in Vietnam, China, France and the former Soviet Union. Third, it considers the value of different theoretical orientations to the study of marginal literatures including approaches derived from history, colonial and postcolonial studies, comparative and world literature. I view these texts as markers of wider collisions, convergences, and re-articulations, rather than homologies. More than merely point out features that Vietnamese modernist texts share with European counterparts, I discuss the ways these poems participate in conversations with, and thus shift understandings of, modernism elsewhere—but from within the specific socio-cultural context of Vietnam. I move beyond internal-formal analysis to relate Vietnamese modernism to specific historical moments of cultural engagement to uncover the perceptible network of literary relations. In examining this case-study, I offer an extension to the cultural imagination of modernism, and a modest contribution to understanding cultural formations on the margins.

*To Trần Thị Thanh Thủy, my mother.*

For all the endless kitchens, sinks of dirty dishes.  
Because words beyond the life of ships dream on.

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## Introduction | Towards a Theory of Modernism and Cross-Cultural Poetics

At three points in twentieth-century Vietnamese literary history, we see the emergence of small, but important bodies of literature that could be called “modernist.” Departing from traditional literary models, and distinct from emergent “modern” trends such as romanticism or realism, these Vietnamese texts exhibit a mixture of aesthetic features and poetic qualities from several literary trends that had developed in Europe over the course of a century or more. In his essay “On the Category of Modernism,” Lại Nguyên Ân details the spectrum of these literary movements grouped under the category of “modernism”—symbolism, Dadaism, futurism, surrealism, formalism, and more. He then poses a critical question. Given the traces of these aesthetics in Vietnamese literature, but also given their very European designation, “Is it possible to propose the project of locating manifestations of modernism in Vietnamese literature?”<sup>1</sup> What frameworks could we use to explore this literature if conventional Western categorizations of “lineage, tendency, and schools (-isms)” do not prove particularly useful within this Asian context?<sup>2</sup> Further, is it possible to discuss a Vietnamese modernism without seeing it as following in the long shadow of a French literary tradition, or as a derivative by-product of colonial manufacturing?

This dissertation project makes several important contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it explores the historical development of Vietnamese modernism by tracing the evolution of modernist poetry through three historical eras: the late-colonial era of the 1930s, the revolutionary era of the 1950s and the “Renovation” era of the 1980s. In doing so, I demonstrate that there was indeed a modernist movement in Vietnam with trajectory and momentum, even though historical events disrupted it at various junctures. Second, this dissertation examines the complex transnational force-field that shaped Vietnamese modernism by tracing its web of connections to literary traditions in Vietnam, China, France and the former Soviet Union. Third, it considers the value of different theoretical orientations to the study of marginal literatures including approaches derived from history, colonial and postcolonial studies, comparative and world literature. I view these texts as markers of wider collisions, convergences, and re-articulations, rather than homologies. More than merely point out features that Vietnamese modernist texts share with European counterparts, I discuss the ways these poems participate in conversations with, and thus shift understandings of, modernism elsewhere—but from within the specific socio-cultural context of Vietnam.

Vietnamese modernism has a history of being marginalized—and doubly so. Shunted aside and excluded, it has been subject to silence in Vietnam as it has in world studies of cultural movements. This variant of the international movement developed within a cross-cultural contact zone of uneven hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it embodies an intertextual collage of cultural collision, convergence and rearticulations, and moreover, it is a product of willful cultural transgressions

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<sup>1</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân, “Về phạm trù chủ nghĩa hiện đại” [On the Category of Modernism], April 2004, *Văn Hoá Học*, <http://vanhoahoc.vn/nghien-cuu/ly-luan-van-hoa-hoc/vhh-cac-truong-phai-trao-luu/204-lai-nguyen-an-ve-pham-tru-chu-nghia-hien-dai.html>. He asks “Có thể đặt vấn đề đi tìm các biểu hiện của chủ nghĩa hiện đại ở văn học, và rộng hơn, ở văn nghệ Việt Nam hay không?”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. He writes, “Đối với văn học trung đại Việt Nam vốn phát triển trong đặc tính của vùng văn hóa Đông á, sẽ không dễ dàng thuận lợi nếu người nghiên cứu muốn khảo sát sự phát triển của nó thông qua những phạm trù như trào lưu, khuynh hướng, trường phái.”

<sup>3</sup> Mary Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

and métissage. Understandably, Vietnam's persistent twentieth-century backdrop of national territorial defensiveness has made it tricky for scholars to study particular works, or delve deeper into the logic of modernist cultural formation. Vietnamese cultural critics have not always looked favorably upon the trends and figures gathered under modernism's umbrella.<sup>4</sup>

Western scholarship enacts its own form of territorial defensiveness. Its categorizations and periodizations center modernism within Europe or a cosmopolitan Euro-Anglo imagination.<sup>5</sup> Intent as they are to map and graph lines of literary lineage across an array of historically disparate cultural movements, these works have surprisingly little to say about modernisms on the margins of Europe.<sup>6</sup> This is even though they generally acknowledge what Raymond Williams notes as a fundamental condition for and feature of modernism: "endless border-crossings."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, condensed and belated modernism—those that manifest multiple modernist traditions simultaneously in a short span—disturb the cartographic maps as well as the linear graphs of literary dynamics. If Western scholarship mentions the outliers at all, they obliquely dismiss them as derivative.<sup>8</sup> Herein lies a paradox. In order to be considered eligible for membership in this category, designated by scholars' posterior views, the marginal literature must bear an arbitrarily assigned set of major modernist a priori codes. This reductive view disqualifies features of the minor work that is distinct or disparate and establishes an imitative status.

Studies of minor literature have proposed correctives.<sup>9</sup> But some of these scholarly

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<sup>4</sup> Like treatments of non-European modernism elsewhere, discussions of Vietnamese literature with modernist markings are pregnant with anxiety. After all, these works first emerged in the umbra of colonial modernity and under the "aegis" of a *mission civilatrice* [civilizing mission]. Among other radical shifts, the colonial period saw the French administration abolish an educational system, replace the indigenous writing system with a Romanized script, Quốc Ngữ, and strategically introduce an array of French literary models in attempts to distance Vietnam from its longstanding cultural intimacy with China.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the boundaries of modernism as mapped by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), "The Name and Nature of Modernism," 19; and Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Chana Kronfeld warns us of the distortions that occur when scholars rely on this metaphor of literary historiography—the map. According to Kronfeld, maps can only provide a topographic view of static, bounded surfaces; they cannot capture the dynamic crosscurrents and undercurrents that more truly reflect the multidirectionality of literary development. See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso 1989), 34.

<sup>8</sup> Anxious views of agency and authenticity often compel scholars to sidestep critical explorations of textual affiliations. This oversight mutes the circulations and re-articulations that form the contact zone of literature. Add to this the problem of modernism studies generally—namely, the tendency to negate those minor writings that do not fit into the major borders of the articulated European canon, or deform them through a myopic vision of marginality. Anna Balakian, for example, tells us in her classical study that "surrealism is essentially French" and does not have a real pulse elsewhere. And her view of non-French symbolism resigns them to alien forms of "transplantation and metamorphosis, a germination...on another soil, in another climate." While outdated, Balakian's approach set the tone for a body of scholarship that would echo similar sentiments. These studies are symptomatic of a kind of narrow vision that designates modernist movements as decidedly French. Other manifestations of these aesthetics are viewed as creative mutations rather than participation, and if they are to be found elsewhere, remain within the sphere of First-World cultures, such as Germany, England and the United States. James McFarlane and Malcolm Bradbury's *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature*, another classical study, offers a cartographic formula that limits the borders of modernism to Europe and North America

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, JanMohamed Abdul and David Lloyd, "Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minor Discourse," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1984): 5–12; JanMohamed Abdul and David Lloyd, "Introduction: Minority Discourse—What is to be Done," *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1984): 5–17; See Susan Stanford Freeman, "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading: Toward Locational Modernist Studies," in *modernism*, vol. 1, eds. Astradur

interjections reenact exclusionary practices. They demand that in order for a work to be considered minor and modernist it must possess discrete set of characteristics, foremost, an intrinsically oppositional spirit of “reterritorialization” towards core cultures.<sup>10</sup> Some reframe striking similarities between the minor works and major culture as a conscious act of colonial disturbance. This reconception of mimesis inverts the power structure for the colonial subject, but posits literary similarities as camouflage, subterfuge, and essentially menacing. In Homi Bhabha’s view, for example, this “uncanny doubling” effect punctures the colonizer’s claim of cultural authority.<sup>11</sup> It is unclear whether Vietnamese modernist poets aimed to affront European traditions; but they make their affection for international modernist works apparent.<sup>12</sup> Works that fall beyond these narrow frames get lost in the fray. This dissertation pulls the voices of those Vietnamese modernist poets from the margins and makes audible the intertextual conversations they have engaged in with international modernisms since the start.

What are the salient features of this cluster of work, and how do they inform our understanding of the larger constellation of international modernism? How can we explore both the aesthetic features and cultural enunciations of Vietnamese modernist literature without falling prey to paradigms of influence-imitation, or rehearsing reactionary stances and

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Eysteinson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 35–52; Susan Stanford Freeman, “Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author,” in eds. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, 152; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), Chapter 4: “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”; Chapter 7: “Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense”; Chapter 9: The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency”; Chapter 11: “How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation”; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: “What is Minor Literature,” 16–27 (23); Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*; Liu, Lydia, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Particularly, Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Chapter 3: “What is Minor Literature,” 16–27 (17–23); Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 65–88; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Chapter 4: “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” These scholars limit the bounds of minor literature to a pronounced “political” character.

<sup>11</sup> In Bhabha’s view, this is because mimesis produces an “uncanny doubling” effect that robs the colonizer of absolute claim over the literary production. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Chapter 4: “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.”

<sup>12</sup> For example, in the introduction to his friend Bích Khê’s collection of poems, Hàn Mặc Tử wrote: “We can compare Bích Khê’s poetry to an extraordinary bouquet...and analyzing it, we see that his poetry fuses three distinct characteristics: symbolism, mysticism, and decadence” [*Ta có thể sánh văn thơ của Bích Khê như đóa hoa thần dị... Và đem phân chất, ta sẽ thấy thơ chàng gồm có ba tính cách khác nhau: Thơ tượng trưng, thơ huyền diệu và thơ truy lạc...*]. See the introduction in Bích Khê, *Tinh Huyết* [Blood Essence] (1939) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1995). In another article on Bích Khê, Hàn Mặc Tử compares the provocative power of his poems to that of Baudelaire. See Hàn Mặc Tử, “Bích Khê: Nhà Thơ Thần Linh” [Bích Khê: Poet of the Gods], in Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm, Phê Bình và Tư Tưởng* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works, Criticism and Reflections] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002), 165–168. Likewise, Trần Dần calls Mayakovsky “teacher, friend, love,” in the literary arts. See Trần Dần, “Nhân Ngày 14-4 Kỷ Niệm Mai-a-kốp-ki Nhà Thơ Vĩ Đại Của Liên-Xô Qua Đời” [On the Occasion of April 14 in Memory of the Death of The Great Soviet Poet Mayakovsky], *Sinh Hoat Văn Nghệ* [Life and Arts] no. 37, 1955, p. 3. In his manifesto of Vietnamese symbolism, he cites poetic influences of Verlaine, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. See Trần Dần, Trần Mai Châu and Vũ Hoàng Địch, “Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng” [Manifesto of Symbolism], *Dạ Đài* [Netherworld] no. 1 (1946), available at *Tiền Vệ* [Avant-Garde], <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>. Dương Tường readily discusses his poetic inspirations from Verlaine, Apollinaire, to T.S. Elliot. See Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè: tập luận* [Only the Ears / The Ear Threads of the Oriental Magpie-Robin: Collected Essays] (Nhà Nam: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009).

exclusionary practices?<sup>13</sup> The case of Vietnamese modernism underscores the need for more precise and nuanced understanding of cross-cultural poetics. I adapt two concepts that may help us sidestep unproductive paradigms and explore a localized case study of modernism on the margins: intertextuality and the contact zone.<sup>14</sup> This dissertation examines Vietnamese modernist poetry as a cross-cultural contact zone, historically embedded, and composed of a dense network of intertextual engagements. In employing Mary-Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zone," I view Vietnamese modernist literature as a locus of intersecting desires and conflicts, and where writers grapple with uneven hierarchies of power, political implications, and aesthetic aspiration.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, I also explore "the literary dynamics and cultural politics implied by this contact zone's textual—or, better yet, intertextual—unfolding."<sup>16</sup> We might speak of

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<sup>13</sup> Theoretical frameworks of influence and intertextuality all attempt to redress the notion of "imitation" or "authenticity" in one way or another. It seems a matter of perspective. At one end of the spectrum we have those scholarships that, in their silences and refusals, reduce forms of non-European or non-Anglo modernisms to a derivative status. At the other end the scholarship inverts the paradigm of original-imitation to suggest that mimesis is a form of empowerment, whereby the colonial subject menaces the dominant culture's claim to literary authority of the dominant culture. Then there are models that examine the implications of a text bearing the cultural or aesthetic markers of other texts. For a few variations, see Michael Worton and Judith Still, eds., *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, eds., *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), Chapter 4: "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse"; Chapter 7: "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense"; Chapter 9: "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency"; Chapter 11: "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation"; Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang [1967] 1977), 142–148 (146–147); T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), *Quotidiana*, ed. Patrick Madden, January 23, 2008, [http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition\\_and\\_the\\_individual/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition_and_the_individual/); Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1973] 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Harsha Ram offers a compelling example of how to explore intertextual dynamics within a cross-cultural contact zone. He traces Boris Pasternak's translations of a Georgian poet to reveal the complex circuitry of the Russia-Georgia cultural intercourse. See Harsha Ram, "Towards a Cross-cultural Poetics of the Contact Zone: Romantic, Modernist, and Soviet Intertextualities in Boris Pasternak's Translations of T'itsian T'abidze," *Comparative Literature* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 63–87.

<sup>15</sup> I employ Mary Pratt's conceptualization of "contact zones," as a nexus between indigenous, colonial and international cultures. In her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Pratt employs the term as a way of describing the space of colonial encounters: "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict..." (6). This usage acknowledges the ongoing effects of contact, as Pratt articulates: "'contact zone' is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal correspondence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term 'contact,' I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination." See Mary Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ram, "Towards a Cross-cultural Poetics of the Contact Zone," 66. I engage theories of intertextuality within my analysis, particularly those advanced by: Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike: Recherches pour une sémantique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, [1966] 1969); translated in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, transl. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142–148. New Historicist approaches attempt to reinvest agency into theories of intertextuality. See Susan Stanford Freeman, "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading: Toward Locational Modernist Studies," in *modernism*, vol. 1, eds. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 35–52; Susan Stanford Freeman, "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author," in eds. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, *Influence and*

modernism on the margins of an empire as an “intertext,” composed of a densely imbricated web of writing that registers the valences and transformative power of the cross-cultural encounter.<sup>17</sup> Teasing out particular intertextual practices—translation, transposition, appropriation, allusion, and more—within modernist texts allows us to explore the nature of the poet’s interactions and range of cultural and aesthetic goals in discrete moments.

This dissertation identifies the key participants in intertextual conversations within a select body of modernist Vietnamese poetry—that of Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940), Trần Dần (1926–1997), and Dương Tường (1932–present).<sup>18</sup> I consider the particular historical contexts in which they wrote, their implicit or explicit poetics, and the modes of intertextual engagement in their poetry and the wider cultural implications. While this select body of work cannot be representative of an entire movement it does offer representative examples of Vietnamese modernism at particular stages in its evolution. Specifically, I seek to explore what happens to literary traditions at points of cross-cultural encounter, within the modernist text, and what implications does this have for understanding cross-cultural phenomena. As Harsha Ram puts the task of exploring intertextuality:

To elucidate either the overt or buried literary antecedents in a text is not just an academic exercise: it can serve philologically to verify the transposition and alteration of wider discursive formations such as cultural traditions [...] supranational literary tendencies (romanticism, modernism, socialist realism), and even political projects (such as representation of empire or socialism) across spatial-temporal and even linguistic boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

The chapters in this dissertation are devoted to exploring these various intertextual strategies that compose Vietnamese modernism. Chapter 1, “Early Modernist Monsters: Intertextual Hybridities in the Poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử (1930s),” investigates the emergence of a new poetic consciousness within a colonial modernity. I detail the ethos of the New Poetry Movement—attempts to work out the perceived rupture from the past, national identity crisis, and interface with French cultural influences—but also the divergent path that the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử forged towards a modernist poetics. I examine a set of Vietnamese literary criticism to reveal how early modernist innovations provoked discomfort and intense cultural debates.<sup>20</sup> The

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*Intertextuality in Literary History*, 152; Chana Kronfeld, “Intertextuality, Agency, Translation,” (Draft paper solicited by *PMLA*, January 2, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Ram, “Towards a Cross-cultural Poetics of the Contact Zone,” 66.

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, I examine the poems and writings collected in the following publications: Tôn Thảo Miên, ed., *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm và Du Luận* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works and Criticism] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002); Trần Thanh Mai, *Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940)* (Sài Gòn: Những Mảnh Gương, 1941); Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lúa* (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009); *Trần Dần Thơ* [Trần Dần: Poems] (Đà Nẵng: Nhã Nam, 2007); Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [To Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001); Dương Tường, “Wagner,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác: Thơ Dương Tường* [Mea Culpa and Other Poems: The Poetry of Dương Tường] (Hải Phòng: Hải Phòng, 2004); Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chim choè: tập luận* [Only the Ears / The Ear Threads of the Oriental Magpie-Robin: Collected Essays] (Nhà Nam: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009); Dương Tường and Lê Đạt, *36 bài tình* [36 Love Poems] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Ram, “Towards a Cross-cultural Poetics of the Contact Zone,” 65.

<sup>20</sup> In particular, Trần Thanh Mai, *Hàn Mặc Tử*; Hoài Thanh (Nguyễn Đức Nguyên), *Thi Nhân Việt Nam 1932–1941* [Vietnamese Poets] (Hà Nội: Nguyễn Đức Phiên, 1942); Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* [Modern Writers] (Hà Nội: [Unknown], 1942); Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm, Phê Bình và Tương Niệm* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works, Criticism and Reflections] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002).

chapter then focuses on the early-modernist experimentations of the poet Hàn Mặc Tử—an astonishing hybrid of Vietnamese, Chinese, and French literary traditions that speak to the complex historical moment. I discuss the particular intertextual practices Hàn Mặc Tử employed and show how modernism of this period enacted both a renovation and disturbance of Vietnamese, Chinese, and French literary traditions. As such, it speaks to the character of continuity and disruption, affiliation and affront, in Vietnamese modernism and challenges dominant theories of minor modernism.

Chapter 2, “Trần Dần, Mayakovsky, and the Politics of Vietnamese Modernism in the 1950s,” examines the shift in cultural affiliations away from France and toward China and the Soviet Union during a revolutionary period. Here, I focus on the remarkable relationship between Trần Dần and the Russian avant-garde Vladimir Mayakovsky. I take Trần Dần as a key to understanding the debates over cultural restrictions and aesthetic liberty central in what is known as the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm controversy.<sup>21</sup> I examine Elsa Triolet’s memoir, Vietnam’s primary engagement with Mayakovsky, to determine how her textual representations translated his futurist poetics into the Vietnamese context. I then analyze Trần Dần’s literary criticism and personal writings to show how he contests national cultural policies by engaging transcultural avant-garde poetics. I show how within a highly restrictive socialist culture, Trần Dần’s intertextual practices of citation, translation and re-articulation enacted a form of dissent by forging poetic links to a literary figure whose unorthodox history and ambiguous relationship to the Soviet state provided a model for modernism within communist strictures.

I devote Chapter 3 “‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’: The Praxis of Modernism in 1950s Vietnam” to intensive textual analysis of Trần Dần’s epic poem. I examine the unique formal features of this poem—a fusion of Mayakovsky’s iconic stepladder layout, futurist, symbolist and surrealist aesthetics—as well as its cultural-political statements. The poem, as a complex contact zone, reveals the convergence of international modernist poetic goals in conflict with internal political goals. Trần Dần enacts his modernist poetic itinerary and political dissent in this fourteen-chapter epic. I show how Trần Dần engages a sophisticated series of intertextual practices to compose dialectical arguments against the cultural politics of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its official literary model, socialist realism. This chapter details the way new modernist configurations compel the production of new meanings, contrary to existing theories of modernisms on the margins.

Chapter 4, “The Modernism Underground, 1970s/1980s: Dương Tường and the Poetics of Sound,” focuses on a body of poems that exhibits even more extreme formal experimentations, and more explicitly modernist poetics during a period of cultural silencing. In particular, I examine the poetry of Dương Tường, who employs a musical syntax and intertextual practices to produce a polyphony of voices and meanings, at times unreadable by conventional approaches. By privileging the unbounded qualities of sound and its evocative and affective power, Trần Dần’s poems resist semantic and linguistic control. We see how intertextual modernist innovations of this period become strategies for thwarting ideological hegemony and

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the cultural debates of this period, see Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (Winter-Spring 1990): 154–174; Thụy Khuê, “Chapter 11: Trần Dần,” in *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm*, January 2010, *Thuy Khue*, <http://thuykhue.free.fr/mucluc/trandan.html>; Heinz Schütte, “Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955–1957,” *Südostasien* (Working Papers) no. 22 (Berlin: Humboldt University 2003), 19, available at <http://asa232.asa.hu-berlin.de/soa-wp/pdf/SOA-WP%20-%20022%20-%20Hundred%20Flowers%20in%20Vietnam%201955-1957%20%28Heinz%20Sch%20C3%20Ctte%29.pdf>.

promoting aesthetic pluralities that invest the reader with power to participate in the production of meaning. The modernism of this period also embraces cross-cultural and intertextual encounters as necessary for poetic evolution.

## Theoretical Challenges

Astradur Eysteinnsson relates the problematic nature of conceptualizing modernism given its paradox. There exists divergent and oppositional concepts of modernism as, on the one hand, an autonomous aesthetic project, and on the other, a historical cultural force. A fair share of studies that take a New Criticism approach dehistoricize modernism on grounds of its preoccupation with formal order, “centered on its own creation or composition,” or view it as closed aesthetic circuits removed from the temporal-spatial events of history.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, theories of modernism that “seek to inquire into the various ways in which formal features of modernisms either parallel, interact, or react to social modernity,” read formal elements as signs and symptoms—reverberations—of a cultural-historical moment, or as modernity’s aesthetic counterpart.<sup>23</sup> This approach risks taking “distortions” in modernist texts as a reflection of the chaos of history or a subversion of social order. The case of Vietnamese modernism shows that we cannot insist on the “purity of each art” or view individual modernist works as “closed systems.” Despite these divergent views, theories of aesthetic autonomy frequently coexist with that of cultural subversions, or questioning the foundations of the reigning social-cultural order. The fact is that modernist works exhibit collective gestures of kinship and affiliations rather than mere attempts at asserting aesthetic or cultural autonomy. This dissertation dissolves the strict and superficial boundary between modernism as cultural force and as modernism as an aesthetic project, as well as the “boundedness” of modernist moments.

It is useful to establish the theoretical backbone of this dissertation as well as a critical vocabulary to discuss the conceptual approaches to modernism that I engage throughout. Chana Kronfeld shows us in her study of Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms the need to view “the movement between center and periphery, marginal properties and dominant ones, as necessary for literary change.”<sup>24</sup> The evolution of Vietnamese modernism must also be considered in terms of Vietnam’s complex relationship with its literary-linguistic past, Chinese, the agents of its colonial history, French, and the comrades of its communist revolution, Soviet Union. Examining the intertextual traces in Vietnamese modernism allows us to view literary dynamics as processes of both continuity and disruptions in the production of meaning.

As examples of three modernist moments, the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử, Trần Dần, and Dương Tường, do not clearly recite, revise or reject the literary traditions they interact with. Instead, we find that the poems form a dense web of multiple, partial, and ambiguous affiliations with Chinese, Vietnamese, French, and Russian literary traditions. This feature raises questions

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<sup>22</sup> See Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), Chapter 1 “The Making of Modernist Paradigms,” 8–49. Eysteinnsson is referring to the conceptualization of modernism by Malcolm Bradbury and McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), “The Name and Nature of Modernism,” 19; as well as Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), x–xi.

<sup>23</sup> See James M. Mellard, *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 30; Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, [1963] 1979), 32–33.

<sup>24</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 31.

about the dominant models of influence, intertextuality, and imitation—T.S. Eliot’s conceptualizations of “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; Harold Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence”; French poststructuralist theory of intertextuality as “an anonymous tissue of citations” (Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes); and Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of mimicry and colonial menace. These models show a spectrum of tactics in dealing with questions of cross-cultural literary relationships.

Eliot challenges a common perception that a poet’s greatness lies in his individuality and departure from his predecessors. Appearing in a moment of avant-garde collectivities, of manifestoes announcing decisive breaks with the past, Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) asserts the present writer as a member of the largest collective of all, the great writers of the past.<sup>25</sup> Eliot saw no progress in the history of literature: it does not improve, its bodiless corpus only grows and changes. However, its accruing variations are, for Eliot, the very condition of literary “talent.” The “whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” is a polylingual archive made up of past authors.<sup>26</sup> The “talent” in the essay’s title is the present author’s ability to recombine the elements of this archive so as to produce a new relation to it, one which complicates all the other extant combinations. The poet’s “historical sense” gains him entry into the living corpus, and allows him to change the way it is configured and (re)read. For Eliot, past works of art form an order or “tradition”; however, that order is always being altered by a new work that modifies the “tradition” to make room for itself. A great poetic work has the ability to reshuffle the order and revise the way we read the past. It is through this awareness of tradition and its relationship to the present work that the poet can assert his agency.<sup>27</sup> Eliot’s model inverts dominant view of agency and influence. Rather than seeing the past as pressing on the present, Eliot shows how the present actively engages and reworks traditions.<sup>28</sup>

Harold Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” suggests that rather than insert himself into a tradition, an artist must destroy it. The primary struggle of the young poet is against the old masters. He, the “ephebe,” must “clear imaginative space” for his work through a creative

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<sup>25</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), *Quotidiana*, Ed. Patrick Madden, January 23, 2008, [http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition\\_and\\_the\\_individual/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition_and_the_individual/) (accessed July 1, 2010). The essay was published in the *Egoist* in September and December of 1919. Its immediate cultural context included several other significant preoccupations with revising the past: F. T. Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), the serial publication of Marcel Proust’s “In Search of Lost Time” (1913–1927), and Tristan Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto” (1918).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Agency for Eliot meant not the genius of the poet (as is the case in romanticism) but the originality and power of the literary work. In fact Eliot prescribes a kind of “depersonalization” as necessary for the work to engage with the past and possess potency in the present. This leads to Eliot’s so-called “Impersonal Theory” of poetry. Since the poet engages in a “continual surrender of himself” to the vast order of tradition, artistic creation is a process of depersonalization. The mature poet is viewed as a medium, through which tradition is channeled and elaborated.

<sup>28</sup> This bilateral view, in which “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past,” imagines literature as a living, continuously shifting mass in which writers and their utterances form a symphonic quorum, rather than a static line of descendants. However, participation in Eliot’s “tradition” requires that a poet be familiar with almost all literary history—not just the immediate past but the distant past and not just the literature of her or his own country but the whole “mind of Europe.” In Eliot’s Eurocentric framework, Vietnamese modernism would be deemed an incomplete attempt to rearticulate both the literary traditions of Vietnam and France and gain membership in that most exclusive club, the European canon. This valuation could not account for those literatures whose marginal status forms a dominant component of the work and whose marginality constitutes a decisive self-removal from major traditions. Yet despite its Eurocentricity, the model of intertextuality Eliot proposes, with some modifications, is useful in considerations Vietnamese modernism—as an engagement with tradition in the present, which may indeed change the way modernism is read.

misreading of strong poets of the past.<sup>29</sup> Bloom's central thesis is that "poetic influence always proceeds by misinterpretation," and that this misprision is "perverse, willful revisionism."<sup>30</sup> This Bloomian framework locks the poet in a reactionary stance, poised to battle the ghosts of those who came before for his place in the literary pantheon. Bloom's proposed methods of "misprision," six in total, range in severity from critical engagement, to revision, to disavowal.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Eliot, who imagines the past as a polyvocal, living and dynamic chorus, Bloom conceptualizes the literary past as a static line of descendants—and a psychological threat. Bloom's model leaves no room for plurality. What's more, it assumes that strong literary productions arise from an oedipal impulse to murder the father in order to wrest authority from him. While Bloom suggests that the relationship between precursors and their poetic "sons" is likened to a (twisted) Freudian "family romance," this high-drama cannot account for the way Vietnamese modernist texts integrate and engage multiple literary traditions.<sup>32</sup> Kronfeld underscores for us the way "Joseph Brodsky has shrewdly protested that such accounts of influence have no concept of the continuity and collectivity of culture."<sup>33</sup> Bloom's militant view maintains a notion of literature as a bounded island and does not account for the kinship and affinity crucial to its evolution. In an article translated in 1990, Brodsky remarks:

There is nothing more pleasant physically (even physiologically) than repeating someone else's lines—whether to oneself or out loud. Fear of influence, fear of dependence, is the fear—the affliction—of a savage,

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<sup>29</sup> It poet is always a "he/him" for Bloom, and never "she/her." He disregarded the literatures of women in his conceptualization of a literary pantheon.

<sup>30</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–156. Bloom's six methods of "misprision" include: 1. Clinamen, "poetic misreading or misprision proper." A "swerve" away from the precursor; a corrective movement in the later poem, with all the implication that the precursor was correct up to a point, but that he, the ephebe, has made the right turn in his new poem; 2. Tessera (mosaic-making), "completion and antithesis." Bloom claims to use it more in the sense of the ancient mystery cults, who could, for example, reconstitute a piece of pottery from a mere fragment of it. It is antithetical because it implies that the precursor did not go far enough—despite the ephebe's retention of the precursor's terms and perhaps worldview; 3. "Kenosis, "is a breaking device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; kenosis then is a movement toward discontinuity with the precursor." From St. Paul, who uses the term in regard to Jesus' emptying the divine out of himself to assume human form. Similarly, the poet empties out the poetic afflatus of the precursor. The precursor too is emptied out; 4. Daemonization (or the Counter-Sublime) is an achievement of a new sublime via the ephebe's own daemonization. The ephebe taps into a daemonic power that informed the precursor poet, and hence, is inspired by a power superior to the precursor. In this way, the uniqueness or originality of the precursor is "explained away," or the ephebe achieves ease through the belief that he has tapped into a source equal to or greater than the precursor; 5. Askesis, "or a movement of self-purgation," an achievement of solitude. The ephebe's revisionary movement "curtails" both his own and the precursor's achievement, fundamentally a cleansing of influence, and a general avowal of independent achievement; 6. Apophrades, "or the return of the dead." Taken from "the word from which the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to re-inhabit the houses they had lived in." The later poet is burdened by his own achieved solipsism, and so he makes the conscious effort of holding his own poem open to that of the precursor. But the fact that the later strong poet consciously engages the work of the precursor, rather than is helplessly influenced by it, shows the strength of the later poet, and even creates the "uncanny effect" that later poet seems to have written the precursor's work, rather than vice versa. We now (in the rare cases that the later poet overpowers the precursor) see the precursor's work in terms of the later poet.

<sup>32</sup> Kronfeld highlights a most outrageous example of Bloom's marginalization of women and non-white writers. Wrote Bloom: "Most feminist poetry, of course, is like most black poetry. It isn't poetry. It isn't even verse." See Robert Moynihan, *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul De Man* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986), 30.

<sup>33</sup> Chana Kronfeld, "Intertextuality, Agency, Translation," (draft of paper solicited by *PMLA*, January 2, 2009), 11.

but not of culture, which is all continuity, all echo. (I wish someone would inform Mr. Harold Bloom).<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the influence models that sought to examine literary relationships through ideas of paternity, authority and filiation, French poststructuralist theories of intertextuality exploded the notion of authorial agency and hierarchy. The term “intertextuality” was originally coined by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 work, *Semieotikè*, during a period of Parisian radicalism.<sup>35</sup> Kristeva’s original reworking of Mikhail Bakhtin’s emphasis on the “doubleness” or dialogic quality of words, heteroglossia and polyphony to discuss the nature of intertextuality suggests that “[a]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”<sup>36</sup> Her work, as Mary Orr underlines, challenges notions of authorial hierarchy and textual singularity since all texts “lose their special status by permutation with others.”<sup>37</sup> This suggests that works are produced not in response to social reality but to previous works, and the codes and conventions that govern them—intertextual codes that Roland Barthes characterized as “a tissue of citations drawn from innumerable centers of culture...the author can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior.”<sup>38</sup> Kristeva’s bold theoretical approach “retains the social in the very erasure of authorial hierarchy.”<sup>39</sup> Because the “text” in this formulation interacts only with other texts and maintains within itself whole systems of codes and citations independent of “context,” authorial agency along with historical specificity gets erased.

In his 1967 essay, “Death of the Author,” Barthes expands on this notion of authorial erasure. Any text, Barthes tells us:

is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural language (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in stereophony....to try to find the “sources,” the “influences” of a work is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable...they are quotations without inverted commas.<sup>40</sup>

This poststructuralist (and nearly deconstructionist) theory proposes to level the asymmetrical power relations that vex models of intertextuality. But in order to do so, it must do away with the author’s agency and historical situations, as well as erase the particular and selective articulations of parody, citation, translation, allusion, and so forth. The author’s role is diminished to one of assembling the fragments of a sprawling mosaic. Texts become unbounded bodies of mutable words unmoored from any historical time or place. This model of intertextuality, while resolving certain issues of hierarchy, detaches texts from their social-situatedness and performs historical

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<sup>34</sup> See Joseph Brodsky, “A Footnote to a Commentary,” trans. Jamey Gambrell and Alexander Sumerkin, in *Rereading Russian Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Sandler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 183–201.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 66; Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1930), ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>37</sup> Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 62–67.

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 146–147.

<sup>39</sup> Kronfeld, “Intertextuality,” 13.

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 160.

erasures.<sup>41</sup> The particular cultural conditions of Vietnamese history formed the very context for Vietnamese modernism and its authors' choices. To discount this would be to render the particularities of Vietnamese modernism illegible.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, working with poststructuralist methodologies, transposes the notion of intertextuality into one of mimicry.<sup>42</sup> The intertextual traces in the so-called parent-child (or master-slave) relationship, becomes one of "literary servility"—but with particularly militant motivations. Bhabha's analysis is largely based on the Lacanian concept of mimicry as camouflage rather than resemblance. The quality of subterfuge that Bhabha ascribes to works imitating the forms of the imperial culture evokes a whole range of aggressive practices and defensive tactics. For Bhabha, mimicry repeats rather than re-presents, and in that very loaded act of repetition, "mimicry emerges as a representation of a difference that is itself a disavowal."<sup>43</sup> The mimicry of literary form, according to Bhabha, leaves the trace stain, the impure, the artificial second-hand that disturbs the colonial order. In this conception, literature that bears markings of colonial culture destabilizes colonial subjectivity, unsettles its authoritative centrality, and corrupts its discursive purity. Bhabha's construction, much like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's, requires that hybrid minority writing be primarily a form of resistance and reaction, or a disturbing echo of difference.<sup>44</sup> Although Bhabha's lens reinvests political agency into intertextual practices and reinvigorates notions of imitation with authority, he nevertheless designates this endeavor as one based foremost on mimesis for political articulations. This reading would reduce Vietnamese modernist innovations to series of reactionary mimesis rather than selective, multiple and partial affiliations in the production of meaning.

The "reactionary stance" does not account for the partial and selective affiliations that Modernist Vietnamese literature forms with literary traditions other than French. Bloom's oedipal formula, unfortunately, also reduces intertextuality to a militant activity rather than forms of selective affiliation. Eliot's model of influence perhaps applies most to Vietnamese modernism—enabling us to view it as a participation in and reworking of existing bodies of literature. While western poststructuralist theories propose a way to level the hierarchal relationships of intertextuality—by viewing the text on the level of "anonymous, impersonal, and indeed ahistorical" semiotics, they provide no explanation for the particular dynamics of literary engagement.<sup>45</sup> These dominant theories of influence, intertextuality, and imitation in and of themselves cannot provide a full and accurate model for discussing Vietnamese modernism.

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<sup>41</sup> New Historicist approaches attempt to reinvest agency into theories of intertextuality. See Freedman, "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading," 35–52; Idem., "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author," 152.

<sup>42</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Chapter 4: "Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse."

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: "What is Minor Literature," 16–27 (23). According to Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature must possess three features: 1) it must perform a the deterritorializations of a major language in that it is written in the major language; 2) it is thoroughly political: "its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics and; 3) it forms a political "collective enunciation" thus, "what each author says individually . . . [is] necessarily political . . . and even revolutionary" (17). The individual, then, speaks in a collective voice—a voice nevertheless 'contaminated' by the political domain. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Chapter 4: "Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" for his discussion on the "uncanny doubling" effect of the colonial echo.

<sup>45</sup> Kronfeld, "Intertextuality," 15.

Current trends in studying minor modernism have tried to wrest the focus away from majoritarian discourses through theories of decentering and “deterritorialization.” In this shift minor literature possesses the appropriating force to “replicate exclusionary practices in its attempt to model itself after the hegemonic literary canon.”<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s study, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, has perhaps been the most influential in leading this trend. However, the narrow criteria they provide for defining minor modernism severely limits what literature could be included, and in effect, rehearses the exclusionary practices of major discourses. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.”<sup>47</sup> This checklist means that in order to gain membership into the category of “minor modernism” the work is “always written in the language of the major,” always “oppositional,” and always ideologically-charged with the task of articulating a collective political statement. In this perspective, Vietnamese literature could only be considered modernist if it maintains a reactionary stance. These theories of marginality limit the functions of minor modernism, and its intertextuality, to practices of cultural reterritorialization, whether that be on international or national terrain. Kronfeld poses a critical question that is particularly informative: “How to search out and counterpose an alternative tradition and theory of marginal modernisms without universalizing them?”<sup>48</sup>

Recent modernism studies and particularly those with focus on East Asian modernism offer new ways to explore the circulatory system of modernism without reducing it down to graph models of lineage, or map models of surface boundaries. Miryam Sas’s comparative study of Japanese and French Surrealism, for example, shows that “cultural memory” forms the basis for a specific model of intertextual relations. Memory, for Sas, constitutes a bilateral participation in the making and remaking of consciousness.<sup>49</sup> In this view, the dialogue between Japanese and French surrealism constitutes a relationship of sharing in texts, of “transfer, transplantation and translingual adaptation” over time and distance that destabilizes the original-imitation trap.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Lydia Liu’s *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900- 1937* (1995) shows us how the migration of literary concepts and language from Europe to China, and mediated by Japan, entailed active, multilateral forms of distortion on the part of Chinese writers.<sup>51</sup> She shows how imports lose their register and become wholly reorganized according to the particular context of location and culture, and an articulation of difference as well as similarity, is necessary. While the theories of memory-making and translocational practices alone cannot account for the specific intertextual exchange between Vietnam and France, the same multilateral approaches must be applied to studies of Vietnamese modernism if the studies are to produce more than parochial visions.

Recent approaches in translation studies (as translation is one form of intertextuality) may supplement deficiencies. These studies view translation as a site of political encounter as well as cultural engagement. For example, Harsha Ram in his article “Translating Space” suggests that “Whereas an original poem all too often repatriates the fact of power—which is equally the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Miryam Sas, *Faultlines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>51</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

power of and over language—for a national literary tradition, a translation relocates political and poetic force as an encounter between entities: nations, languages, structures, and their agents.”<sup>52</sup> I take this perspective as a dominant characteristic of Vietnamese modernist poetry, which shows intertextuality as not only an agential poetic engagement, but also a participation in the production of cultural dynamics.

Equally instructive, Chana Kronfeld’s deployment of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance, and especially his trope of the rope, provides a way to explore the intertextual strands of Vietnamese modernism without falling into the trap of authoritarian hierarchies or decontextualizing the work. In this conceptualization, family members share features, but there need not be one set of features shared by all: “In spinning a thread, we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the fibre does not reside in the fact that one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.”<sup>53</sup> In this figurative reorientation of literary historiography, we see the way Vietnamese modernism contributes to international modernism through its partial, selective, and multiple affiliations, rather than seeing it as replicating a whole series of a priori major codes.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, Vietnamese scholar Đỗ Lai Thúy insists on examining the intertextual traces in modernist Vietnamese texts as an act of “weaving” [*gói tiếp*] multiple literary strands to form a fabric rather than “succeeding” [*nói tiếp*], or a single line of inheritance. By not subjecting the minor work to the tyranny of imitation and hierarchy, and allowing room for deviant characteristics, this approach obviates the need to locate in the minor work a set of fixed conditions and features attributed to major modernism. Here, we may begin to discuss textual nuances in relationships of selective affiliations and assemblage rather than those of imitative postures and oppositions.

The work of pulling apart the deeply interwoven threads that make up a work—to examine its textures, fibers, colors, and length—is immensely difficult. But this comparative work is necessary if we are to understand modernist texts as markers of wider convergences, collisions, and rearticulations, rather than homologies. The following dissertation only begins to tease out some of the intertextual traces and reverberations of Vietnamese modernism to consider its wider implications for literary and cultural studies. This beginning, however, compels a retheorizing of minor and international modernism. My goal is not to enculturate Vietnamese poetry into the body of European modernism; nor is it to make it representative of minor writing. However, examining the particular intertextual practices in Vietnamese modernism provides insights into how authors knit strands of modernist aesthetics to participate in the production of semantic and transcultural meaning.

Kronfeld foregrounds the need to explore a writer’s alignment “not in terms of influence but as historicized intertextual affiliation.”<sup>55</sup> She warns that “many of the exclusionary practices of literary theory and historiography can be traced back to an optical difficulty with stereoscopic and kaleidoscopic vision: the difficulty to see writers...as simultaneously maintaining multiple literary affiliations, and to view those affiliations as partial, potentially contradictory, and ambivalent.”<sup>56</sup> My dissertation attempts to counter the tendency to maintain a first-world

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<sup>52</sup> Harsha Ram, “Translating Space,” in *Between Languages and Cultures*, ed. Anuradha Dingwanney (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), 199-222 (200).

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein as quoted by Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 63. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

designation of internationalist modernist cultures, which would “render” Vietnamese modernism “illegible.”<sup>57</sup> By examining modernism from within the contact-zones, I explore the way cross-cultural encounters shape Vietnamese modernist literature at given historical moments. This localized case study allows us to connect those modernist “moments” in Vietnam as a cultural formation rather than as isolated and disconnected instances. Further, it situates Vietnamese modernism within a larger constellation of modernist works, allowing us to compare the aesthetic relationships between the various trends through another lens.

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<sup>57</sup> Amie Parry, *Interventions into Modernist Cultures: Poetry from Beyond the Empty Screen (Perverse Modernities)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

## 1 | Early Modernist Monsters: Intertextual Hybridities in the Poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử

Some called him a mystic; others thought him a misfit. Many were convinced he was a madman. Nguyễn Trọng Trí (September 22, 1912–November 11, 1940) has been dismissed as all these things, and yet they make up the very mythos and acclaim that surrounds him. He is best known as Hàn Mặc Tử, a leprosy-afflicted poet who died at 28 years old, and, retrospectively, as the “Baudelaire of Vietnam.”<sup>58</sup> He is also the key to understanding early Vietnamese modernism. Literary critics have conferred upon him a hyper-tragedian status that dominates readings of his work. Vietnamese scholars have viewed the disjointed nature of his verses as a window into the fractured mind of a sick and dying man; his odd use of symbols and grotesque imagery as a reflection of his bodily disintegration; the sensual fervor of his language as the religious ecstasy of a poet in his death-throes.<sup>59</sup> The scholarly trend that favors reading Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetry through the sensational details of his life collapses his body with his body of work (or corpse with corpus). The myth of Hàn Mặc Tử secures his place in the public imagination, but also it encourages overtly biographical readings of his poems. To suggest that his illness dictated his poetry would imply that he was a poetic vessel and not in control of his art. What this tendency misses is how those very “odd” features of his work, rather than being symptoms of his ailments, were decisive modernist literary orientations.

Hàn Mặc Tử is a significant figure in New Poetry [Thơ Mới], arguably Vietnam’s most important modern literary movement. Between 1932 and 1945 members of the New Poetry Movement produced a large, formally-radical body of modern Vietnamese verse. These were eager young poets coming of age at the onset of a colonial modernity and educated in the Franco-Vietnamese school system. They could read French and they wrote using only the newly-institutionalized Romanized writing system, Quốc ngữ, which further distanced them from Vietnam’s literary and linguistic past.<sup>60</sup> They had access to new literary models and new print technology. The advent of the newspaper and journal in the colonial era arguably contributed to the emergence of a Vietnamese public sphere. This “new print media became a crucial marketplace of ideas.”<sup>61</sup> These poets felt compelled to discard conventional forms and to abandon the restrictive Confucian idea of “literature as a vehicle of virtue.” New Poetry

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<sup>58</sup> Loosely translated, Hàn Mặc Tử means “Ink Grinder,” alluding to the traditional scholar-poets of the past who had to grind ink in shallow dishes of water to use with their brush. For the retrospective titling, see Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm, Phê Bình và Tư Tưởng* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works, Criticism and Reflections] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Raymond Williams underscores the tendentiousness of literary criticism and its posterior historicity, especially in the way the rebels and lunatics of the past are later celebrated as the heroes of the canon. See Raymond Williams, “Chapter 1: When was Modernism?” in *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), 25.

<sup>60</sup> Prior to twentieth century, Vietnamese used Chữ Nôm, an ideographic vernacular script that used the classical set of Chinese characters to represent Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary as well as some native Vietnamese words. From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the twentieth century all administrative documents and official histories, including law, medicine, philosophy and policy were written in this script. It was the writing system of the elite and educated and most of all Vietnamese literature was written in Nôm. See John DeFrancis, *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977).

<sup>61</sup> George Dutton, “Advertising, Modernity, and Consumer Culture in Colonial Vietnam,” in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Exploring the Middle Class in Vietnam: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, Vol. 2, eds. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Daniele Belanger, and Lisa Drummond (New York: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 21–42.

renounced the past and incited passionate debates—art-for-art’s sake versus art-for-life’s sake, new poetry versus old poetry—in late colonial-era journals and newspapers. In practice, however, “discarding the past” was more complicated. Marked by the influence of French literary models, on the one hand, and a desire to renovate traditional Vietnamese literary forms, on the other, New Poetry challenged the hegemony of “rational” worldviews and destabilized conventional Confucian hierarchies. Rather than conceive literature as a tool to promote morality, New Poets saw it as a medium for expressing new ways of thinking and being.<sup>62</sup> They favored the individual’s perspective over collective enunciations. They also believed that poetry’s form had to change in order to capture the dynamic experiences of modernity. At first, this poetic pioneering focused more on content and theme; there was an established literary ideology they had to disrupt. Poetic innovations of this era show attempts to revitalize old forms with new content. Of the many leading figures of the New Poetry Movement, Hàn Mặc Tử went the furthest in his literary innovations.

By 1936 the movement bifurcated and Hàn Mặc Tử led New Poetry in a separate direction. Whereas new poets like Xuân Diệu pursued a fervent romanticism—which exalted emotionalism, nature worship and the ego—Hàn Mặc Tử and a handful of other poets including, Chế Lan Viên and Bích Khê developed a “darker,” more metaphysical aesthetics.<sup>63</sup> A sense of cultural loss, nostalgia and disorientation accompanied the thrill of modern exploration. Symbolist and surrealist poetics, these poets felt, could better capture this dissonance. I would argue that Vietnamese modernism actually began with this split. Inherent in this sense of modernity was a theory of its own literature. Hàn Mặc Tử founded a literary group in Bình Định, which he named the “School of Disordered Poetry” [Trường Thơ Loạn], sometimes called the “School of Mad Poetry” [Trường Thơ Điên]. The dominant assessment of this group was that “Under the flagstaff of General Hàn Mặc Tử the members of the School of Disordered Poetry composed feverishly...[Their] poems are flooded with moon, souls, blood, shadows of ghosts, human skulls, skeletal bones, marrow...each one of them drunkenly stepping into that terrifying

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<sup>62</sup> Neil Jameson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 111, 112; David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>63</sup> The term “symbolism” presents complex issues in its conception and use. Widely debated and highly problematic, symbolism designates for historians literature of the post-Romantic era with a common conception of the use of poetic language for the first time apparent in Baudelaire, and which extends to unite such otherwise diverse poets as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, Rimbaud, and Verlaine. For literary critics, symbolism presents an artificial classification of heterogeneous writers separated in nationality, race and time. While classifications are generally produced based on a specific set of characteristics—thematic, formal and historical—which distinguishes one set of literary aesthetics from the literary norms of other periods, symbolism’s international scope and hybridity present distinct challenges to the task of classification. This paper does not engage in the polemics of the term’s authenticity and classification. Rather, this essay takes symbolism to mean generally the post-Romantic tradition that started in France with Baudelaire and influenced a host of European literatures at the end of the nineteenth century bearing the composite of the formal and thematic characteristics discerned in this paper. These characteristics include: the relating of physical realities (or objects) to the reality of another order; an attempt through symbolic language, to impose or restore a unity between seemingly disparate objects; value of evocation over description; the collapsing of space between the human and the infinite with transcendental aims; privileging of the unconscious, dreams, and states of ecstasy or madness; a conscious use of symbols to suggest a higher order of being. Surrealism shares some of these sensibilities (particularly in regards to ecstatic states, dreams and madness) but with discrete differences, primarily in that it is abstract and allegorical rather than symbolic. René Wellek suggests, for example, that in surrealism, the image has no beyond; it wells, at most, from the subconscious of the individual.” See Wellek, “The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History,” *New Literary History* 1, no. 2, “A Symposium on Periods” (Winter 1970): 249–270 (269).

world.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed Hàn Mặc Tử was one of the first Vietnamese poets to introduce the topos of madness and the grotesque into Vietnamese poetry. As one prototype of early Vietnamese modernism, the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử exhibits radical hybridizations of French, Vietnamese and Chinese literary aesthetics, which reverberate in later waves of Vietnamese modernism. As such, the work of Hàn Mặc Tử marks an important stage in the evolution of this cultural formation.

In this chapter, I explore intertextual practices in the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử. I first consider how conventional approaches to Hàn Mặc Tử’s work—those that emphasize biographical and historical determinants of his literary innovations—limit understandings of the modernist content of his poetry. I perform close textual analysis of several poems, paying attention to how he weaves multiple cross-cultural modernist strands into existing Vietnamese literary traditions—forming a textual contact zone. I show how the poet’s intertextual practices place these literary traditions into new conversations with each other, and produce new meanings. Additionally, I examine how Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetics compel a rethinking of modernist literary dynamics.

## A Belated Modernism

The observation made most frequently about Hàn Mặc Tử is that “Within a period of about ten years, [he] traversed the impossible road from Tang-style poetry, to romanticism, symbolism and then surrealism in the project of modernizing Vietnamese literature.”<sup>65</sup> What developed over the course of a hundred years or more in France and elsewhere in Europe manifested in a condensed and belated form in Vietnam in the span of about forty years. In the work of Hàn Mặc Tử, this literary evolution occurs in just one decade.<sup>66</sup> The simultaneous translation of these modernist aesthetic trends brings them into new conversations and relationships that disturb traditional literary boundaries.

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<sup>64</sup> “Dưới ngọn cờ của chủ soái Hàn Mặc Tử, các thành viên trong Trường thơ loạn say sưa sáng tác. Có những đêm cả bọn đem chăn màn ra bờ biển ở lại suốt đêm để thả hồn theo những vần thơ kỳ dị. Thơ của các thi sĩ Trường thơ loạn tràn ngập trăng, hồn, máu, bóng ma, sợ người, xương cốt, tình tủy... Tất cả say sưa bước chân vào thế giới rừng rợn đó...” See “Hàn Mặc Tử với Trường thơ loạn” [Hàn Mặc Tử and the School of Disordered Poetry], available at <http://giaitri.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/gioi-sao/trong-nuoc/han-mac-tu-voi-truong-tho-loan-1882495.html>. By 1946, the impetus towards modernism that Hàn Mặc Tử set in motion inspired groups of writers to produce their own symbolist manifesto and literary treatise, which would guide a number of works into new poetic geographies. See, for example, Phạm Văn Hạnh, Đoàn Phú Tứ, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, “Xuân Thu Nhã Tập, Thơ Là Gì?” [What is Xuân Thu Nhã Tập], *Tạp chí Thanh Nghị* [Thanh Nghị Journal] (1942). This was the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group’s manifesto, published in their journal Thanh Nghị along with a series of demonstrative poems. See also *Xuân thu nhã tập*, introduction and edited by Nguyễn Bao (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1991). The Dạ Đài group, headed by Trần Dần, also composed a manifesto of symbolism. See Trần Dần, Trần Mai Châu and Vũ Hoàng Địch, “Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng” [Manifesto of Symbolism] (1946), available at <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>. For a discussion of this group, see Hồ Thế Hà, “Quan niệm về thơ của nhóm Dạ đài - Nhìn từ sự tiếp biến Lý luận văn học phương Tây” [Conceptions in the Poetry of the Dạ Đài Group – From Western Literary Theory Perspectives], in *Những khoảnh khắc đồng hiện* [Instances of Synchronized Appearance] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2007). Both of these manifestoes demonstrated symbolist orientations but fused them with surrealist poetics.

<sup>65</sup> Hà Minh Đức as quoted by Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Writing about Bích Khê’s collection, Hàn Mặc Tử insists: “We can compare Bích Khê’s poetry to an extraordinary bouquet...and analyzing it, we see that his poetry fuses three distinct characteristics: symbolism, mysticism, and decadence” [*Ta có thể sánh văn thơ của Bích Khê như đóa hoa thần dị... Và đem phân chất, ta sẽ thấy thơ chàng gồm có ba tính cách khác nhau: Thơ tượng trưng, thơ huyền diệu và thơ trụy lạc...*]. See the introduction in Bích Khê, *Tinh Huyết* [Blood Essence] (1939) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1995).

This hybrid writing transgresses the imagined borders of modernism and its mappings, as well as practices of linear historicization. A poetry that recombines historically and culturally disparate literary traditions necessarily interrogates existing frameworks for understanding literary dynamics. First, Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry disrupts a mode of literary categorization that insists on tracing individual strands of modernism (symbolism, surrealism, futurism, and so forth) through a singular, linear European genealogy. It also complicates practices of periodization that consider these strands separately, bounded in times and places with neat breaks in between. Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry redraws the existing cartography of modernism, which has for so long insisted on a Eurocentric axis, as well as its temporal graphs.<sup>67</sup>

Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry also poses challenge to Deleuze and Guattari's insistence that non-European modernisms, minor modernisms, are always acts of "reterritorialization," for example by appropriating the language of the "dominant culture" in reaction to that culture.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, the postcolonial theories of Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha lose their legs when we examine Hàn Mặc Tử's work carefully. Their theories which suggest that echoes of European literature in third world writings are instances political opposition or menace.<sup>69</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử's hybrid poems integrate multiple literary strands, both East and West, in ambivalent relationships of both affiliation and antagonism. Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry shows that we cannot apply simplistic binary conceptualizations of influence-reception, or cast it as anticolonial literature. These defensive and myopic views limit what constitutes "modernism" and excludes variants that do not fit dominant categorizations.

### **Critical Reception and the Misadventures of Hàn Mặc Tử's Reputation**

Existing scholarship on Hàn Mặc Tử has been severely limited in scope and vision. Marked by an underlying sense of nationalist anxiety, most existing critical approaches read Hàn Mặc Tử's work through a lens of influence and imitation. In the 1940s, the late-colonial Vietnamese audience had a fraught relationship with Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry. Critics unable to explain the

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<sup>67</sup> For a few examples of this Eurocentricism in discussions of modernism, see Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernisms: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (London: Penguin [1978], 1991); Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). Nicholls's Chapter Nine: "At a Tangent: Other Modernisms," shift only slightly beyond Europe to include American modernist writers. For works that draw attention to this issue, see Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, [1990] 1992); Gabriel Josipovici, *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (NY: McMillan Press, [1997] 1998); Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Stanford Freedman, Susan, "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading: Toward Locational Modernist Studies," in *modernism*, vol. 1, eds. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 35–52.

<sup>68</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Chapter 3: "What is Minor Literature," in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), 16–27.

<sup>69</sup> See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), Chapter 4: "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse"; see also Chapter 7: "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense"; Chapter 9: "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency"; Chapter 11: "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation"; Chapter 12: "Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity." See also Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 65–88 (67).

bizarreness of his experiments read his work through his ailments or dismissed it altogether. During the period of communist cultural repression in the 1950s and 1960s (and well into the 1970s and 1980s), Vietnamese literary officials dismissed Hàn Mặc Tử's work as debauched and decadent because it bore traces of French symbolist and decadent aesthetics.<sup>70</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, during a period of “reform,” Marxist literary critics eager to redeem Hàn Mặc Tử as a national treasure focused on the “realist” aspects of his poems, even while they acknowledged the modernist “influence.”<sup>71</sup> Taken together, these projects, distorted by politics and overdetermined by biography, provide only a superficial view of his work.

A thumbnail biography of Hàn Mặc Tử suffices to show how the details of his life became an attractive lens through which to read his work. Nguyễn Trọng Trí was born on September 22, 1912, in Qui Nhơn, a small fishing village in the central region of Vietnam.<sup>72</sup> He was the youngest of seven siblings in a Catholic family. His father, Nguyễn Văn Toàn, worked as a civil servant, a secretary. He could read the bible in Latin. His eldest brother, Nguyễn Bá Nhân, was practiced in writing Tang-style poetry. Hàn Mặc Tử's earliest poems reveal his ease with the difficult Chinese form. Hàn Mặc Tử learned French while attending the Franco-Vietnamese high school, Pellagrin a Huế.<sup>73</sup> During this period he sent poems to Sài Gòn newspapers—*Tân Văn* [Modern Literature], *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [Modern Woman], *Sài Gòn Báo* [Sài Gòn News]—and published under the (quite Buddhist) pseudonym “Phong Trần” [Dust of the Earth]. At the age of 20 he adopted the pen-name Lê Thanh. With no civil servant jobs available after graduating, he migrated to Sài Gòn to find work. Within two years of his arrival in Sài Gòn, he had become well-known in the circuit of southern Vietnamese journalists. In 1934, at 22, he became editor of the literary criticism section of *Sài Gòn Báo*. He made a name for himself by winning a poetry competition held by the famous man of letters, Phan Khôi. At this point he adopted the pen name Hàn Mặc Tử.

In 1936, Hàn Mặc Tử returned to Qui Nhơn and launched a writing circle comprised of up-and-coming writers from the central region who would later emerge as major figures in New Poetry: Chế Lan Viên, Bích Khê, Hoàng Điệp, Quách Tấn, Đinh Hùng. While already an existing practice in Europe, the formation of literary groups organized around shared sensibilities was a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam. More significantly, Hàn Mặc Tử's decision to name the group the “School of Disordered Poetry” [Trường Thơ Loạn] or the “School of Mad Poetry” [Trường Thơ Điên] was an important literary choice that critics misunderstood at the time. During this year, traces of leprosy or Hansen's disease, began to manifest. (But we know that Hàn Mặc Tử consciously embraced a poetics of “disorder” before the illness took effect.)

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<sup>70</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, “Quan Niệm Mỹ Học của Các Nhà Thơ Mới Lãng Mạn” [The Aesthetic Perspectives of the Romantic New Poets], *Tuyển Tập Phan Cự Đệ* [The Collected Works of Phan Cự Đệ] vol 1: *Thơ Lãng mạn Việt Nam, 1930–1945* [Vietnamese Romantic Poetry, 1930–1945] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2000), 85; Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” in *Selected Writings* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [1948]1977), 155–225.

<sup>71</sup> For collected essays that all serve to revise the New Poets that were condemned earlier as “misled nationalists,” see Huy Cận and Hà Minh Đức, eds. *Nhìn Lại Một Cuộc Cách Mạng Trong Thi Ca (60 Năm Phong Trào Thơ Mới)* [Retrospective Views of a Revolution in Poetry (60 Year Anniversary of New Poetry)] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, [1992], 1997).

<sup>72</sup> I offer the biographical details of Hàn Mặc Tử's life as related by Trần Thanh Mại, *Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940)* (Sài Gòn: Những Mảnh Gương, 1941).

<sup>73</sup> He did not read Chinese, but studied the Classics in Vietnamese. For examples of his excellence in the thơ Đường [Tang-style poetry], see the poems of his first collection *Gái Quê* [Country Girls] (1936), found in Trần Thanh Mại, *Hàn Mặc Tử*; and Tôn Thảo Miên, ed., *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm và Du Luận* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works and Criticism], (Hà Nội, Văn Học, 2002), among others.

Scholars focusing on his mental and physical “afflictions” fail to address how Hàn Mặc Tử deliberately invoked ideas of madness as part of modernist literary orientations.<sup>74</sup> Chế Lan Viên relays that “Hàn Mặc Tử wrote, ‘To make poems is to be mad.’” They defined this poetics of madness in what they took as their first manifesto, insisting that this new poetry “disorders the Past...envelopes the Future.” It is through “shouts...shrieks...sobs...laugh[ter]”—the “nonsensical” or the seemingly “irrational”—that one arrives at greater “sense.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1937, before Hàn Mặc Tử could return to Sài Gòn to take on a new editorial position, disease ravaged his body, making the journey impossible. His romances went unfulfilled and unrequited. Despondent and depressed, he left Quy Nhơn and took up residence in a shack on the town’s periphery where he refused visitors and isolated himself from society. He remained there until 1939, when he moved to Quy Hòa Hospital, a missionary refuge for lepers. It was there that he died in 1940, only 28 years old. Trần Thanh Mại, a young southern literary scholar who was a friend of Hàn Mặc Tử’s brother, left a powerful account of his death that would contribute to the poet’s mythos: he tells us that the poet died with “one hand grasping the bible, and the other, a copy of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* [The Flowers of Evil]”—considered by many to be the keystone of symbolist (and decadent) poetry.<sup>76</sup>

At the time of his death, Hàn Mặc Tử had published several poems and articles but only one full collection of poetry. With *Gái Quê* [Village Girls] (1936) Hàn Mặc Tử employed the strict Tang form inherited from China but broke with its rules of prosody, versification and etiquette by using provocative language and sensual imagery. His remaining six collections—*Thơ Điên* [Mad Poems] (later retitled *Đau Thương* [Sorrow]) (1937), *Xuân Như Ý* [Ideal Spring] (1938), *Thượng Thanh Khí* [Exalted Air] (1939), *Cầm Châu Duyên* [Fate of the Silk Cloth], *Duyên Kỳ Ngộ* [Unusual Fate], and *Quần Tiên Hội* [The Fairy’s Court]—were published posthumously in 1941, just one year after Hàn Mặc Tử’s death. Trần Thanh Mại published the six collections in a book-length biography that romanticized the poet’s tragedy.<sup>77</sup> The poems themselves met great resistance and dismissal among literary critics, who took particular issue with the “distortions” they found in the work.<sup>78</sup>

### *Dis-ease towards the Grotesque*

Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetry disturbed those who read in the colonial era. It still disconcerts today. While the traditional measure of “good” poetry was a combination of refined images, balanced lines and euphony, Hàn Mặc Tử broke from rules of prosody and etiquette, and presented readers with distorted landscapes, misshapen forms and unsavory bodily secretions such as vomit, blood, and spit.<sup>79</sup> While skilled at creating beautiful scenes, Hàn Mặc Tử also thrust readers into

<sup>74</sup> See Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 8; Idem, “Quan Niệm Mỹ Học,” in *Tuyển Tập Phan Cự Đệ*, vol. 1, 85.

<sup>75</sup> See Chế Lan Viên, *Điêu Tàn* [Ruins] (1937) in Vũ Tuấn Anh, ed., *Chế Lan Viên – Về tác gia và tác phẩm* [Chế Lan Viên: Author and Works] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> Literary historians generally agree in considering Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* to be the keystone of French symbolist poetics. The collection was published in 1857. It is available digitally at <http://fleursdumal.org/>.

<sup>77</sup> Trần Thanh Mại, *Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940)*. Sài Gòn

<sup>78</sup> For examples, see Hoài Thanh (Nguyễn Đức Nguyên), *Thi Nhân Việt Nam 1932–1941* [Vietnamese Poets] (Hà Nội: Nguyễn Đức Phiên, 1942); and Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* [Modern Writers] (Hà Nội, [Unknown Publisher], 1942).

<sup>79</sup> On the marks of traditional Vietnamese poetry, see Huynh Sanh Thong, ed., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed., *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh Through the Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, ed., *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry* trans. Nguyen Ngoc Bich with Burton Raffel and W.S. Merwin (New York:

spaces that can be described as disorientating, eerie, and disturbing. His poems featured the strange, ugly, incongruous, and above all, the unpleasant, alongside traditionally high-brow subject matters. In a literary terrain traditionally marked by decorum, ponderous language, and polite romanticism, Hàn Mặc Tử created a poetic enclave of the grotesque.

The poems' geography often lay beyond the real (sur-real, we could say). This landscape is populated by demons, wandering souls and "fragrant corpses," and punctuated by strange noises. In "một đêm trăng" [A Night of Moon], for example, a shadow "stalks" the speaker—stalks his shadow, in fact: "Whose shadow stalks my shadow / It's the she-demon's shadow / laughter's cadence like the sound of shattering crystal" [*Bóng ai theo dõi bóng mình / Bóng nàng yêu tinh / Nhịp cười như tiếng vỡ pha lê*]. Rather than present clearly-drawn bodies, Hàn Mặc Tử lets the unseen and unsaid take the imagination hostage. It is a world where shadows lurk, and laughter menaces. What is not seen disturbs more, and agitates the other senses. With a single line, the poet evokes the hazards of broken glass through the incongruous laughter to disrupt quiet nighttime contemplation, commonly found in Vietnamese rumination poems.<sup>80</sup>

While playing on a poetic tradition that employs the natural landscape to evoke contemplative spaces, Hàn Mặc Tử disturbs the still pools of reflection. In "Say trăng" [Moon Drunk] he introduces the grotesque to distort and de-romanticize those familiar scenes:

Wind reels ever higher the moon topples on its back  
Smashes and dissolves into a pile of dry yellow  
I lie in the heap of that night's moon  
In morning wake rabid and vomit out blood

[*Gió rít tận cao trăng ngã ngửa  
Vỡ tan thành vũng đọng vàng khô  
Ta nằm trong vũng trăng đêm ấy  
Sáng dậy điên cuồng mửa máu ra*]<sup>81</sup>

Hàn Mặc Tử flips lofty symbols (in this case, the moon) on their backs and at the same time "smashes" a convention of poems as picturesque landscapes or still portraits to contemplate the nature of being. Gone are the flat, calm and clear pools of spilled moonlight for reflection; what remains is a disheveled heap of dry and jaundiced detritus. What was traditionally a landscape for profound contemplation Hàn Mặc Tử profanes with descriptions of

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Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); and Maurice M. Durand and Nguyen T. Huan, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>80</sup> Moody, mystical spaces were not uncommon in traditional rumination poems by literati and scholars (that bring up and chew over a well-worn topic), in which the poem embodies the poet's Zen contemplation of the world and his own mind. Here, the poet identifies himself with the object of contemplation rather than asserting himself in the poem: he becomes one with the object and world. Yen Yu disproved of emotional excess in poets, as it disrupted magnanimity, and according to him "the worst of them (modern poets) scream and growl." See James J.Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 81, 82. Poetry in this traditional sense is, above all, a reflection, an image of the world that resembles nature distilled into a calm pool from which readers can then view the world. But even while Hàn Mặc Tử re-conjures worlds containing this Zen Buddhist ethos, he disrupts quiet contemplation. For more on intuitionist view of poetry and contemplative poems (Zen), see Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed., *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*; and Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, ed., *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*. Interestingly, "to ruminate" is to think carefully and deeply about something; of an animal, it means to bring up and chew again what has already been chewed and swallowed.

<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, many citations of this poem completely omit the final line, in which the speaker vomits blood.

bodily fluids and broken things. The poet symbolically rejects the romanticism of a poetic tradition that is too smooth, too removed from the body and that exalts beauty and nature as truth. Indeed, the speaker wakes “rabid” (we can imagine foaming at the mouth) and expels this notion of romanticism, by vomiting blood. In “Hồn lìa khỏi xác” [Soul Leaves the Corpse], the speaker tells us “Tonight I spit the soul out of my mouth” [*Đêm nay ta khạc hồn ra khỏi miệng*], a line he recycles in “Say trắng” [Moon Drunk].<sup>82</sup> Whereas the “hồn” traditionally carries sacred and romantic resonance, here the poet has it forcefully spat out of the speaker’s mouth on several occasions. But more than a description of his physical ailments or the grotesque for its own sake, Hàn Mặc Tử employs it as a modernist poetic device. The speaker releases the soul, “to fly ecstatically with a thousand currents” [*Cho bay lên hí hửng với ngàn khơi*]. The drive to transcend the temporal and apprehend the infinite resonates a symbolist poetic.

Hàn Mặc Tử creates cognitive dissonance by making the familiar strange. Rather than beautiful landscapes, “withered autumn ropes weave themselves into dry sounds / a strange star grows in the mound.” Hàn Mặc Tử fuses life and death more viscerally by drawing the mind to the image of a burial. In another poem he has “Moonlight in staggered beat / Crumbles like the fragrant smoke of dreams.” The “stagger”—in walk and in music—is a pulse off. As a step that breaks away from syncopated, or usual and expected, rhythms, the stagger evinces Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetic sensibility. The seemingly familiar world takes on strange new colors and slants as Hàn Mặc Tử introduces the grotesque to force the mind towards new perception.<sup>83</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử’s treatment of traditionally elevated or romantic subjects—nature, cosmos, the soul—jolted readers of colonial modernity out of easy and comfortable modes of reading.

### ***Dominant Vietnamese Approaches and Anxiety of Influence***

Early scholarship on Hàn Mặc Tử focused on his ailing body as a source for the ambiguities of his work. This approach implicitly denies the writer’s agency as it suggests that his poems are merely derivative of his life.<sup>84</sup> The literary critic Hoài Thanh published in 1942 one of the first surveys of modern Vietnamese poetry: *Thi Nhân Việt Nam* [Poets of Vietnam]. In his chapter on Hàn Mặc Tử, the bewildered critic confesses that he is unable to examine the poems in any great depth, because they thrust readers into a world completely beyond dream or reality, one that is “haunting,” terrifying” and full of “demons.” It is a world “created by utter loneliness,” Hoài Thanh flatly dismisses Hàn Mặc Tử’s agency, as he sidesteps the task of analyzing the poems. Hoài Thanh justifies the superficial nature of his criticism in the following way:

Because the poems were produced in such an extreme state, we cannot judge whether they are good or bad. They have gone beyond the scope of the human world, and the human world has no right to critique them. We only know that in the pantheon of Vietnamese literature, there has never been anything as horrific. We only know that we stand before someone who is deformed by illness, frenzied because he has been too wounded in

<sup>82</sup> “I spit the soul out of the mouth’s door” [*Ta khạc hồn ra ngoài cửa miệng*].

<sup>83</sup> See the discomfit this causes critics like Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 8; Idem, “Quan Niệm Mỹ Học,” in *Tuyển Tập Phan Cự Đệ*, vol 1, 85.

<sup>84</sup> Some examples of this include: Trần Thanh Mại, *Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940)* (Sài Gòn; Hoài Thanh, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam*; and Vũ Ngọc Phán, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* [Modern Writers] (Hà Nội: [Publisher Unknown], 1942).

love...perhaps a psychologist would be better equipped than a literary scholar to analyze it.<sup>85</sup>

Trần Thanh Mai suggests that Hàn Mặc Tử's illness was pivotal to the direction in which his poetry would evolve. He asserts that "[Hàn Mặc Tử's] poetry boils up with his disease... When his illness grew fierce, so did his poems." Referring to Hàn Mặc Tử's *Mad Poems*, he tells us that the poet's sudden slip into more abstruse language in the second and subsequent collections reflects a mental collapse: "Hàn Mặc Tử's poems from this period onwards, are the nonsensical babblings, mutterings, and the uproarious laughter of a man who has lost his mind." The critic, alluding to Baudelaire's iconic poem "Correspondences," insists that Hàn Mặc Tử had become "lost in the forest of symbols," most prominently that of the moon and the soul.<sup>86</sup> Two-thirds of the poems in this 50-page collection feature the moon [*trăng*] in its title or as its subject, and one-third of the poems discuss the soul [*hồn*]. Culling from "medical" arcana and an 1811 "narrative of actual facts" by Xavier de Maistre, *Le Lepreux de la Cité d' Aoste* [The Leper from the City of Aoste], Trần Thanh Mai suggests that since symptoms of leprosy wax and wane with the moon, Hàn Mặc Tử's writing could, similarly, be traced to lunar currents and their effect on his body.<sup>87</sup> Trần Thanh Mai suggests that symbolically, the "moon here is the haunting moon of his illness."<sup>88</sup>

Significantly, Trần Thanh Mai aligns Hàn Mặc Tử with "Les Grands Nevropaths" [The Great Neurotics] of the French literary canon (Baudelaire, Hugo, Proust), linking Hàn Mặc Tử's genius to the pathology of his illness.<sup>89</sup> This linkage underscores the privileged place French literature held in the Vietnamese imagination. It also reveals Trần Thanh Mai's attempts to legitimize the "madness" of Hàn Mặc Tử's poems. He tells us, "It is because Hàn Mặc Tử was sick that Vietnamese literature sees the expanse of strange new skies open before it."<sup>90</sup> This service aside, Trần Thanh Mai attributes the genius of Hàn Mặc Tử's poems primarily to illness. He reads Hàn Mặc Tử's particularly visceral verses as fugues; he groups the particular "strangeness" of the poems into physiological symptoms. This move suggests that Hàn Mặc Tử was actually mad, and thus, while a genius, lacked real agency or command of his wits. Had Trần Thanh Mai pushed a bit further, he may have noted the way "disorder" functioned as a poetic device to disturb conventional logic.

Communist literary critics also invoked details of Hàn Mặc Tử's life to discuss his work, but with distinct political goals: to expose it as a deformed product of a historical moment. In his 1966 essay, "The Western Perspectives of the Romantic Poets of 'New Poetry,'" Phan Cự Đệ underscores Hàn Mặc Tử's physical and mental "degeneration" to reveal the supposed moral

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<sup>85</sup> Hoài Thanh, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam*, 209.

<sup>86</sup> Trần Thanh Mai, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 42, 43. See Baudelaire's "Correspondences" (1857), which is generally viewed as the seminal text of symbolist poetics: <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>. So when Trần Thanh Mai makes this remark, he is referring to the ideas found within the first four verses: "Nature is a temple in which living pillars / Sometimes give voice to confused words / Man passes there through forests of symbols / Which look at him with intimate eyes" (my translation).

<sup>87</sup> The story is a dialogue between a leper who reminisces with a soldier about his lost youth and his sequestered life in a tower with a view of the Alps. De Maistre himself was a soldier and the biographical note insists that the story is not a work of fiction. See Xavier de Maistre, "Le Lepreux de la Cité d' Aoste" [The Leper from the City of Aoste], in *Voyage around my Room: Selected Works of Xavier de Maistre*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New York: New Directions, 1994), 155.

<sup>88</sup> Trần Thanh Mai, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 61.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–54.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

decadence of his poems. He states that because Hàn Mặc Tử's poems focus upon the "moon, flowers, music, and fragrance, he has entirely cast society and people out of the realm of poetry!" He insists that the place "where Hàn Mặc Tử retreats from reality is where he has met up with Baudelaire, the decadent French poet." For Phan Cự Đệ and other critics writing during this politically-charged moment, Hàn Mặc Tử's poems are a byproduct of the colonial age that privileged the individual over the collective. In charging Hàn Mặc Tử with "immoral" tendencies, the scholar does not analyze the writing so much as he judges the ideologies that he assumes motivates them. Phan Cự Đệ, linking Hàn Mặc Tử to the alleged decadence and immorality of Baudelaire, disregards the aesthetic specificities of Hàn Mặc Tử's poetry.

Beginning in the 1990s, revisionist critics retooled Hàn Mặc Tử's biography. Phan Cự Đệ's essay, "The Marvelous Artistic World of the Poet Hàn Mặc Tử," shows a remarkable shift from his earlier critical stance. Whereas Hàn Mặc Tử was "decadent" and "immoral" in Phan Cự Đệ's earlier writings, he now appears rather romantic. Sidestepping his earlier depictions of Hàn Mặc Tử as a corrupt agent under French influence, Phan Cự Đệ recasts him as a young man swept up in the anomie of an era and his own tragic circumstance. This relabeling is significant. By neutralizing the formal radicalism of Hàn Mặc Tử's poetic experiments, Phan Cự Đệ directs attention towards the less controversial traces of the poet's "motivations" and towards more nationalistic aims. His revised classification of Hàn Mặc Tử coincides with a primary imperative of the Renovation era: to produce cultural capital that would boost economic reform and re-inspire national confidence.

The critic is astute enough to locate the sources of Hàn Mặc Tử's literary inspirations in modernist traditions. He glosses: "Hàn Mặc Tử wanted to erect a poetic universe borrowing the colors and the mysterious sources of correspondences after Baudelaire, the verbal alchemy of Rimbaud, and the magic of André Breton's surrealism." The scholar insists, however, that Hàn Mặc Tử extracted the more positive aspects of these models to rescue a national literature. For him, these are "the poems of someone who loves his country, loves his people," and "the poems are clearly drawn from a number of details from real life." According to Phan Cự Đệ, Hàn Mặc Tử's "love poems" refer directly to particular persons and reveal the anguish experienced of unrequited romances; the distorted landscape portraits refer directly to real geographical locales that the poet could no longer imagine clearly; the obsession with the moon as a reflection of the isolation he felt. Phan Cự Đệ assigns a historical or biographical "fact" to each remarkable formal feature he reads so that they are a reflection of history rather than aesthetic intervention. He anchors the poems' experimental nature to details of the poet's life. Phan Cự Đệ suggests that Hàn Mặc Tử's poem were essentially "realist"—still the preferred tradition for Marxist critics during Renovation.

The primary impulses in Vietnamese literary criticism of Hàn Mặc Tử encouraged different biographical approaches to textual analysis. Colonial criticism construed his poems as a product of biological determinants. Communist criticism, on the other hand, employed a historical-determinist approach that uses Hàn Mặc Tử's biography to depict his poems as a negative product of a historical moment. Renovation-era critics retooled his biography to extract the "real" nationalist details of his poems. Taken together, these overly-determinist approaches fail to explore literary motivations (rather than biological or political motivations). Finally, by positioning Hàn Mặc Tử's work as a case of exceptional circumstance, Vietnamese literary criticism on Hàn Mặc Tử discourages a fuller comparative cross-cultural study of modernism and how it evolves over the course of some decades in Vietnam.

## Intertextual Dynamics in the Poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử

A series of literary traditions available to Vietnamese writers during colonial modernity provided a unique environment for Hàn Mặc Tử's aesthetic experimentation. He not only had access to the traditional forms of Tang-style poetry or the Vietnamese *lục bát*, but also to French symbolist, and surrealist literature. In “Cô gái đồng trinh” [The Virgin Girl], for example, Hàn Mặc Tử employs the traditional Chinese Tang form but invigorates it (indeed, he corrupt the form's etiquette) with surrealist sensualism. In “Trăng tự tử” [Suicide Moon] he combines French symbolist and surrealist aesthetics simultaneously to disturb traditional perceptions of a Vietnamese cosmology and enact symbolist aspirations of restoring a lost unity. In “Ngoài vũ trụ” [Beyond the Universe], Hàn Mặc Tử makes allusions to a biblical tradition but subverts the exalted through a symbolist secularizing of religious experience. No single poem replicates exact combinations of intertextual practices and affiliations. The intertextual echo-chambers of Hàn Mặc Tử's poems vary in modes and degrees of stylistic, formal and thematic appropriations. This literary mixing and recombining aligns with what Hàn Mặc Tử conceptualized as a “School of Disordered (or School of Mad) Poetry.”<sup>91</sup> In practice, this took the form of deliberately disordering literary models and their attendant codes to reformulate the direction, scope and shape of modernist literature.

### *Chaos, O Well of Disorder: A Poetics of Distortion*

Karl Marx's now-axiomatic phrase encapsulating the condition of modernity, “All that's solid melts into air,” finds particular resonance in Hàn Mặc Tử's poems.<sup>92</sup> His poetry reveals a deliberate deforming of natural objects and blurring of their borders through language. This suggests that Hàn Mặc Tử was less concerned with representing a fixed external world than he was with internal landscapes and transforming perceptions. As traditional structures lose coherence, symbols also lose their shape, and Hàn Mặc Tử's poems register this shift in meanings. By translating cultural codes and expanding or rewriting their definitions, Hàn Mặc Tử directly engages an intrinsic intertextual practice. Hàn Mặc Tử shared with modernist writers elsewhere this task of revising recognition and perception. The Russian Formalists, for example, emphasized the duty of the artist to deform habits of recognition. This was necessary to startle a world habitually cloaked in a veil of indifference into new ways of seeing. As Bergson put it: “In each art then, the artist picks out of reality something which we, owing to a hardening of our perceptions, have been unable to see ourselves.”<sup>93</sup> Further, “Art is not a copy of nature; its task is to distort nature so that it is fixed in a different consciousness.”<sup>94</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử carries out the task of disordering by translating strands of both French symbolist and surrealist aesthetics in order to dismantle traditional objects and their attendant signs embedded within classical poetic genres. This practice opens up a space for new and multiple meanings.

His poem, “Trăng tự tử” [Suicide Moon] illuminates this point:

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 8. The School of Mad Poetry consisted of a some of the most notable up-and-comers of New Poetry from the central region, including Bích Khê, Chế Lan Viên, Quách Tấn, and Yên Lan.

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of this sense of modernity, see Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, [1982] 1988).

<sup>93</sup> Thomas E. Hulme, “Bergson's Theory of Art” (1924), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 156.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 107.

Trăng tự tử

Lòng giếng lạnh! Lòng giếng lạnh!  
Sao chẳng một ai hay  
Nghe nói mùa thu náu ở chỗ này  
Tất cả âm dương đều tụ họp  
Và trăng mây ngừng lại ở nơi đây  
Đề nghe, à đề nghe  
Bao lời bí mật đêm thời loạn  
Bao giọng buồn thương gió đã thè  
Bao lời ai oán của si mê  
Mà trai gái tự tình bên miệng giếng  
Miệng giếng há ra  
Nuốt ực bao la  
Nuốt vì sao rơi rụng  
Loạn rồi! Loạn rồi, ôi giếng loạn!  
Ta hoảng hồn, hoảng vía, ta hoảng thiên  
Nhảy ùm xuống giếng vớt trăng lên...<sup>95</sup>  
[Suicide Moon

The soul of the well is cold! The soul of the well is cold!  
Why doesn't anyone know this  
I hear autumn hides in this place  
All principles of light and shade unite here<sup>96</sup>  
And moon and clouds halt in this place  
To listen, ah, listen  
How many secrets in times of turmoil  
How many wind-sworn oaths in grieving voices  
How many bitter words roused by mad ecstasies  
Yet boys and girls still confess love at the well's lip  
The well's mouth opens  
Swallows immensity in a gulp  
Swallows scores of fallen stars  
Chaos, chaos! O, well of disorder!  
Stricken out of spirit, sense, and reason, I  
Leap down the well to retrieve  
The moon's corpse...]<sup>97</sup>

A series of linguistic doublings and reversals form the poem's internal structure. Repetitions, of "lòng giếng lạnh" [the soul of the well is cold], "đề nghe" [listen], "bao" [so many], "miệng giếng" [well's mouth], "nuốt" [swallows], "loạn" [chaos], and "hoảng" [stricken], dramatize sounds dropped into the bottom of a well and resounded back. Here, the poet engages a modernist sensibility to collapse the distance between sound and sense. What

<sup>95</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 275.

<sup>96</sup> The Vietnamese "âm dương," the principals of "light and shade" refers explicitly to notions of "yin-yang."

<sup>97</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

happens in echo? An echo, we know, is a series of sounds caused by the reflection of sound waves from a surface back to the listener. In linguistic reverberation, which takes place after the original utterance has ceased, sound travel also incites a necessary migration of meaning.

Thematically, echo reinforces the doubling effects of a mirror, in this case, the reflection of the moon in water. Poems that take for their subject the interactions between moon and water (or sky and water) are not novel to Vietnamese literature. Indeed, they form a classical genre of premodern contemplative poems in which objects in nature are used to reflect a stable cosmology. In traditional moon-water poems, the reflection of moon on water produces an uncanny doubling that opens up a psychic space where dualistic elements meet, blur boundaries and converge harmoniously. Nguyễn Trãi's "Moon in the Water" and "Water and Sky," and Mạc Thiên Tích's "Moonlight over East Lake," are but a few examples.<sup>98</sup> In the first example, "moon in the water, moon high in the air / you clearly see the two but they are one," affirms the second poem's utterance of cosmological unity: "A steaming heaven and a surging tide / the two have merged as one and share one hue." The third example reinforces this notion of temporal and spatial unity found in the doubled image of the moon reflected in water: "rain's ceased, mists lifted—all is one great void / a lake has blended with primeval space / clear heavens and calm ripples bear two moons." Hàn Mặc Tử's "Suicide Moon" gestures towards this poetic tradition of conveying cosmological harmony, particularly in that "Tất cả âm dương đều tụ họp" [All principals of light (yin) and shade (yang) unite here]. However, Hàn Mặc Tử evokes this poetic convention, only to subvert it using French symbolist and surrealist poetics.

Firstly, Hàn Mặc Tử employs a novel free-verse form that radically departs from the traditionally strict meters of the Vietnamese lyric. This decision to abandon strict meter is consonant with the poem's theme of chaos and a loosening of constraints. In the same manner that echo distorts the original utterance in its circulation, the image of the moon projected on the water is distorted in its reversal as both celestial body (life) and corpse (death). From the onset, the poet makes clear his intentions to invert the direction of the gaze. The poet, rather than superimpose his feelings upon objects (or the pathetic fallacy of romanticism), finds that objects in the material world possess a language that must be apprehended. French symbolists adhered to the notion that the "symbol proper" possessed "some embodiment and revelation of the infinite."<sup>99</sup> In this understanding, objects possess a value capable of evoking a higher order of reality, one that transcends the temporal and historical in a timeless assemblage.<sup>100</sup> In the Baudelairean sense, the symbol constitutes a correspondence between our perception of matter and the eternal truths of a spiritual order. The poet's task then, is to intuit these symbols and restore a lost unity.<sup>101</sup> In Hàn Mặc Tử's symbolist treatment of the well, we see the speaker's

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<sup>98</sup> These poems can be found in Huynh Sang Thong, ed./trans., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 122 and 304.

<sup>99</sup> Arthur Symons, "The Symbolist Movement in Literature 1899," in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou eds. *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 134–135.

<sup>100</sup> By symbolism, I mean the poetics that are persistent: the relating of physical realities (or objects) to the reality of another order; an attempt through symbolic language, to impose or restore a unity between seemingly disparate objects; value of evocation over description; the collapsing of space between the human and the infinite with transcendental aims; privileging of the unconscious, dreams, and states of ecstasy or madness; a conscious use of symbols to suggest a higher order of being. See Ibid; and Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Random House, [1967] 1977).

<sup>101</sup> In Schelling's early German Romantic views, the symbol as that which apprehends the moment of illumination of the infinite and whole, and carries with it transcendental aims. See Daniel Whistler, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic*

attempt to retrieve a lost unity—yet through a disordering of the senses necessary to perceive the confluence of all things. Hàn Mặc Tử employs this symbolist aesthetic in conjunction with a surrealist perspective: rather than invoke a romantic sensibility that invests the object with the poet’s feelings, the poem takes on a surrealist slant in which reflections disturb and distort rather than represent.<sup>102</sup>

The poem’s intertextual collage of translated symbolist and surrealist aesthetics reinvests the well with new meaning, indeed, inverts its traditional signification. The space opened up by the man-made object would, in traditional Vietnamese conventions, become a vessel to convey the harmonious meeting of sky, earth and water—a cosmology embedded within the human and natural world. Instead, the well composes a site of cosmological chaos and historical conflicts: “Bao lời bí mật đêm thời loạn / Bao giọng buồn thương gió đã thề / Bao lời ai oán của si mê” [So many secrets in times of turmoil / so many wind-sworn oaths in grieving voices; so many bitter words roused by mad ecstasies]. The well, rather than being a passive receptacle for reflecting the poet’s feelings (via romanticism) or a stable Vietnamese cosmology (via the Tang-style etiquette), becomes an active agent of disruption and chaos: its mouth menacingly “opens,” it “swallows scores of fallen stars.”

The poem moves from the exteriority of the well to an interiority in which universal relics of human passions, history and war are thrown into chaos along with perceptions of a coherent world order. The poem reads as a symbolist attempt to locate a lost truth or unity through apprehension of the codes embedded in objects, underscoring a view that there is a failure in the immediate reality. However, the speaker also embraces this state of cosmological flux. The poem implicates the speaker in the creation of disorder. The speaker’s indulgence in the fantasy of the moon as a body to be scooped up and retrieved, suggests a kind of acceptance and participation in this alternative reality—one that demands reviving a corpse (or the body of literature).

A poetic orientation towards disorder resonates in French surrealism. Surrealists saw madness as a potent state with transformative power. Lunacy enabled one to loosen the shackles of rationality and reason that limited perceptual experience. Madness meant a triumph over stifling logic and presented a means to reorient perceptions.<sup>103</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử translates both symbolist and surrealist poetics into his reworking of a traditional Vietnamese poetic convention. In a final reversal, the mad act of suicide, “leap[ing] down the well,” is also an act of salvation and salvage, “to retrieve the moon’s corpse.” Note that this act of rescue requires the speaker to first read the encoded mysteries of the symbolist object, and then assume its postures of madness: “stricken out of spirit, sense and reason.”<sup>104</sup>

The reimagining of the moon’s body as corpse, and the speaker’s drive to retrieve it, evokes a surrealist conceptualization of desire and death, where the rewriting of an object’s

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*Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 1; and Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement*.

<sup>102</sup> On the surrealist aims of distortion, see Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1959] 1986), 190.

<sup>103</sup> André Breton further develops this concept of madness in his novels, *Nadja* and *L’Amour Fou* [Mad Love]. See André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism (1924),” in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 66–75; André Breton, *Nadja* (1928) (New York: Grove Press, 1960); André Breton, *Mad Love (L’Amour Fou)* (1937) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

<sup>104</sup> On echolalia, as a condition of certain mental disorders, including autism, dementia, schizophrenia, and tourettes, see Erwin Stengel and A. V. S. de Reuck, “Speech Disorders and Mental Disorders,” *Disorders of language*, vol. 12 (Geneva: World Health Organization, [1959] 1964): 285–298.

meaning through one's desire depends on the death of its original sign.<sup>105</sup> The implicit disordering of the senses required to salvage “the moon's corpse” (or the now mangled symbol of a coherent Vietnamese world order) reflects one essential drama of colonial modernity in Vietnam. An ambivalent relationship can be seen to take place in the poem as it forms a partial and dual affiliation with French symbolist and surrealist aesthetics to subvert a traditional Vietnamese poetic genre and register a present reality beset with unstable meanings. Significantly, in Hàn Mặc Tử's rendering, the death of fixed signs opens up the potential for a plurality of meanings.

Interestingly, while surrealist texts developed the notion of sensory disorientation, also found in symbolist texts, into a trope of madness, Hàn Mặc Tử registers the poetics of both modernist strands at the same time. The simultaneous translation of symbolism and surrealism into the Vietnamese poem in order to revise a traditional Vietnamese convention offers a fuller perspective of the way literary dynamics functions—not as a series of hand-me-downs, but of cross-directional reassemblage and reinterpretations specific to a context. In using French aesthetics to revise a Vietnamese tradition, the poem embodies the different registers of historical change but also the transformative nature of that cultural exchange. One may read the poem's play on echo and its inherent distortions as a form of mimicry and menace (as Homi Bhabha and Jacques Lacan might speak of colonial ambivalence in literature). Indeed, Hàn Mặc Tử employs techniques found in French symbolism to subvert reader expectations of a particular tradition of poetry—but in this case it is a Vietnamese tradition, not a colonial culture, which is menaced. To view Hàn Mặc Tử's engagement with symbolist and surrealist aesthetics as merely a form of mimetic doubling that disturbs the colonizing culture's position would negate its decisive use of French literary aesthetics to create a rupture from, and continuity with, a Vietnamese and Chinese tradition. Bhabha's postcolonial conceptualization would have us read Hàn Mặc Tử's poem merely as a sort of antagonistic colonial echo—a practice that risks reinforcing the hierarchal relationship of originator and imitator that the very theory aims to remedy. As we see, the poem is concerned with much more than disturbing a colonial order; it insists on disordering all systems of meaning. Here, Hàn Mặc Tử creates an intertextual echo-chamber that allows multiple poetic traditions to converge, reverberate and distort one another into new articulations, and with the poet as the sound-source.

### ***The Moon and Madness in Hàn Mặc Tử's Poetry***

Hàn Mặc Tử's collection *Thơ Điên* [Mad Poems] (later renamed *Đau Thương* [Sorrow]), as well as his initiative with the School of Disordered Poetry, suggest that madness is both theme and organizing aesthetic principle—a poetic device chosen precisely because it could reorient perceptions. In his introduction to *Mad Poems*, he writes: “I make poems? It means that I am too weak! I have been fooled, I betray all that my heart, blood, soul, tries their best to keep secret. And it also means that I have lost reason, I go mad. She beats me so hard, I let out a cry, a shriek, a scream.”<sup>106</sup> Here, Hàn Mặc Tử suggests that the act of poetry-making requires abandoning rationality and reason and harnessing a particular lunacy. Yên Lan, a member of the writing cohort, recounts that Hàn Mặc Tử took Chế Lan Viên's poetry collection, *Điêu Tàn* [Ruins] (1937) as the group's “first manifesto” [*tuyên ngôn thứ nhất*]. In the introduction of the

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<sup>105</sup> Nicholls, “Death and Desire: The Surrealist Adventure,” in *Modernisms*, 308–309.

<sup>106</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 160.

collection, Chế Lan Viên tells us “Hàn Mặc Tử wrote, ‘To make poems is to be mad.’” Chế Lan Viên goes on to say:

I add: to make poems is abnormality. The poet is not human. It is a dream thing, a drunk thing, a lunatic, it is a fairy, a ghost, a fiend, a devil, a demon. It escapes the Present, it disorders the Past, it envelopes the Future. People don’t understand it, because it says nonsensical things, though the nonsensical makes sense. But often it doesn’t speak. It shouts, it shrieks, it sobs, it laughs. Everything about it is extreme. Its screams crack skulls. Its shrieks cuts the larynx, its sobs flood/overflows tears, its laughter floods marrow to marrow. And yet some people claim to understand it, and bring it out to compare to man/people, and criticize it for being deceitful to People. To it, everything it says exists...<sup>107</sup>

As a roadmap for their poetic orientation, this treatise asserts that the trope of lunacy is required to reorder the senses for perceiving the confluence of all things, or the infinite.

The moon, as related to lunacy, becomes a key symbol for Hàn Mặc Tử to carry out this new poetic orientation. The conflation of moon and madness does not have a tradition in Vietnamese literature as it does in the West. Hàn Mặc Tử revises the traditional Vietnamese symbolism of the moon (reunions and cyclical time) through an intratextual collage between the poems in *Mad Poems*; two-thirds of the poems mention the moon in various non-traditional permutations, and later collections would reinforce its symbolist orientation. The poet’s “entire mouth is moon and moon” (“Một miếng trăng” [A Piece of Moon]); the moon spills from his mouth (“Một đêm trăng” [One Moon Night]); like some succubus it “pursues the poet” through forests with “laughter of shattering crystal”; a “puddle of moonlight” transforms into a “pool of blood” by morning (“Say trăng” [Drunk on Moon]) and of course, the speaker “leap[s] down the well to retrieve the moon’s corpse” (“Trăng tự tử” [Suicide Moon]). These mutations of the moon’s symbolism suggest that traditional meanings are no longer stable and are indeed in states of flux. However, chaos and disorientation presents rich opportunities for new aesthetic possibilities and meanings.

In “Trăng vàng, Trăng ngọc,” [Gold Moon, Jade Moon], the word “moon” is repeated a total of twenty-four times in the poem’s fourteen lines as the speaker, in a giddy, hysterical tone, frantically offers to sell the moon, and then vacillating, recants the possible transaction:  
Trăng vàng, Trăng ngọc

Trăng! Trăng! Trăng! Là Trăng, Trăng, Trăng!  
Ai mua trăng tôi bán trăng cho  
Không bán đoàn viên, ước hẹn hò...  
Bao giờ đậu trượng vinh qui đã  
Anh lại đây tôi thôi chữ thơ.

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<sup>107</sup> “Hàn Mặc Tử viết: Làm thơ tức là điên. Tôi thêm: Làm thơ là sự phi thường. Thi sĩ không phải là Người. Nó là Người mơ, Người say, Người điên. Nó là Tiên, là Ma, là Quỷ, là Tinh, là Yêu, Nó thoát Hiện Tại. Nó xáo trộn Dĩ vãng. Nó ôm trùm Tương Lai. Người ta không hiểu được nó vì nó nói những câu vô nghĩa, tuy rằng những cái vô nghĩa hợp lý. Nhưng thường thường nó không nói. Nó gào, nó thét, nó khóc, nó cười. Cái gì của nó cũng tột cùng. Nó gào vỡ sọ, nó thét đứt hầu, nó khóc trào nước mắt, nó cười tràn cả tuyết là tuyết. Thế mà có người tự cho là hiểu được nó, rồi đem nó so sánh với Người, và chê nó là giả dối với Người. Với nó, cái gì nó nói đều có cả...” See Chế Lan Viên, *Điêu Tàn* [Ruins] (1937) in Vũ Tuấn Anh, ed., *Chế Lan Viên – Về tác gia và tác phẩm*.

Không, Không, Không! Tôi chẳng bán hòn Trăng.  
Tôi giả đồ chơi, anh tưởng rằng  
Tôi nói thiệt, là anh dại quá:  
Trăng Vàng Trăng Ngọc bán sao đang.

Trăng! Trăng! Trăng! Là Trăng, Trăng, Trăng!  
Trăng sáng trăng sáng khắp mọi nơi  
Tôi đang cầu nguyện cho trăng tôi  
Tôi lặn cho trăng một tròng chuỗi  
Trăng mới là trăng của Rạng Ngời.<sup>108</sup>

[Gold Moon, Jade Moon

Moon! Moon! Moon! Is moon! Moon! Moon!  
Who wants to buy the moon; I'll sell the moon to you  
I'm not selling reunions, the fulfillment of promises...  
Once you've passed the honorable examinations  
Come, I'll give you change in words of poems

Moon! Moon! Moon! Is Moon! Moon! Moon!  
No! No! I'm not selling the moon's soul  
I was just kidding, if you thought  
I was serious you're much too foolish  
How could I bear to sell the gold moon, jade moon?

Moon! Moon! Moon! Is Moon! Moon! Moon!  
Moon shines moon shines in every place  
I am praying for my moon  
I'm stringing a strand of pearls for the moon  
The new moon is the moon of brilliance]

Hàn Mặc Tử connects poetry explicitly with the symbol of the moon when the poetic voice tells us that he'll give the buyer of the moon back “change in words of poems.” Note that the poetic exchange comes after passing the examination, the traditional Confucian system of learning required for any civil post. While Hàn Mặc Tử employs a traditional Tang seven-syllable form, a hallmark of Confucian learning, he nevertheless deviates from its very conservative etiquette through the use of colloquial diction and a tone of giddy hysteria of a man hawking the moon. This refusal to adhere to convention is significant. Firstly, the figure of the merchant sits on the lowest rung of the Confucian hierarchy of professions (with the scholar on top). In the first line of the second stanza, the poem throws off the strict meter of the seven-word lines with one additional syllable—“No! No! I'm not selling the moon's soul!” [Không, Không, Không! Tôi chẳng bán hòn Trăng!]. The refusal of the “tôi” [I] to make a commodity of the moon's soul, while recanting the mercantile motives, also enacts a refusal of the form's traditionally depersonalized, collective enunciations.

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<sup>108</sup> Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 257.

In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil Jamieson boils down the tensions of modern poetry into one central debate: that between the individual and the community. For Jamieson, New Poetry was defined by the cult of individualism that presented problems for the existing social structure: “All social institutions and ethical and moral conventions were now subject to review. The entire panoply of civilization and culture was open to question in light of the individual human being’s right to the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>109</sup> In a society anchored by social structures that affirmed the collective, the radical appearance of the “I” [tôi] in Vietnamese poetry for the first time presented startling new problems. If the “I embodies the spirit of New Poet” it was a daring and reckless revolt against dominant Confucian ideology of collectivity, and “embraced a radical spirit of negation.”<sup>110</sup> Writing during this period, Hoài Thanh saw that this assertion of the “I,” while flagging brazen new literary innovations, also signaled the disconnectedness of the age. Unmoored from the community and traditional values, the individual was adrift, and possibly a misfit to society.

The traditional symbols of the moon that the seller cites—“reunions and promises of meeting again”—also do not apply here, as he is “not selling” these things. Instead, what the poet offers is words that transform the classical meanings and understanding of the object. The act of writing is in fact an act of transmutation and transgression, one that removes the moon (and the poetic form) from its traditional semantic constraints. The poetic voice states matter-of-factly that you cannot sell either the moon or poetry: “it’s foolish.” The poet withdraws his work from being a commodity by inscribing the nonsensical, or illegible into the work. In its “unreadability” the poem removes itself from material transactions and becomes repossessed purely as and for the aesthetic; it distances itself from utilitarian purposes and establishes itself as art-for-art’s sake. Peter Nicholl’s underlines the way “surrealism destroys the limits of a merely ‘useful’ reality” through engagement with forms of disorder.”<sup>111</sup> A critical political dimension of surrealism in France was its critique of, and self-removal from, commodity culture. Hàn Mặc Tử’s poem employs this surrealist orientation towards madness and hysteria as a way to reformulate the role and shape of Vietnamese poetry, to include the individual statement. This self-removal of the aesthetic from the utilitarian bespeaks the larger conditions of the historical period he wrote in, when issues of class and commodity culture were prominent, and debates about art-for-art sake were serious questions.

The tone of madness and hysteria enables the poem to transcend traditional meanings of the moon and the formal conventions of the Tang form. The moon in traditional Vietnamese poetry signified the promise of reunions, linked closely to the cyclical view of time and returns. Nguyễn Du’s “New Moon” is one example of the typical treatment of the moon: as a poetic device that conjured up allusions to legends of the archer and the moon maiden (mythical lovers who are separated), and signals a desire for reunion and the beloved’s return.<sup>112</sup> In Hàn Mặc Tử’s poem, the moon does not signify a reliable order or reunion, instead, it forms the poetics for a disruptive new mode of seeing and writing. Hàn Mặc Tử coopts the surrealist trope of madness to transform traditional Vietnamese poetic forms and their functions. In this inherently intertextual dialogue, we see that if there is an oppositional stance, it is one antagonistic towards a Vietnamese rather than a French literary tradition. Yet, in still employing the Tang form, the poem mediates the gap between the classical form and the modernist sensibility. This move

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<sup>109</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 111, 112.

<sup>110</sup> Hoài Thanh, “Một Thời Đại Trong Thi Ca,” *Thi Nhân Việt Nam*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 309.

<sup>112</sup> Huynh Sang Thong, ed./trans., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, 128.

debunks postcolonial theories that posit the intertextual in minor writing as primarily a disruption and destabilization of the colonizer-colonized relationship.<sup>113</sup>

### *The Grotesque as Aesthetic Reorientation*

In Hàn Mặc Tử's poems, the introduction of Western aesthetics becomes a tool to challenge existing conceptions of art and morality. Peter Nicholls underscores the way modernity brought about new "ironic sensibilities" that slipped moorings and rejected the traditional sense of art as arbiter of moral truth or objective reality.<sup>114</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử can be credited with introducing, for the first time in Vietnamese literature, notions of the grotesque. The grotesque introduces new tensions because it disturbs ideas of beauty, purity and truth. It implies that the physical world ceases to be reliable. It signals the problematic nature of existence and indeed marks a period of radical disorientation and changes. The works of Franz Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe are examples of deliberate attempts to instill both empathy and dis-ease in the reader. By introducing disharmony via the grotesque in his poems, Hàn Mặc Tử reorients readers towards a fundamentally modernist sensibility—one that demands a metaphysical seeing anew.

Baudelaire for example, used the subject of "Une Charogne" [A Carcass] to disturb cognitive stability and traditional considerations of beauty.<sup>115</sup> In his poem, the decomposing carcass of an animal writhes and twists on the ground as worms and maggots feed on it. The collapsing of borders between life and death becomes the transformative work of art rather than a representation of nature. Baudelaire's "corpse poems" suggest that through the artist's rendering, or artifice, beauty could be located in any object, even the "wicked and repulsive." This refocuses attention on the beauty born of the poet's art and agency, rather than on mimetic representations of nature. This shift in perspective also makes an argument that art should be governed by its own values rather than by moral standards, and no object is intrinsically unfit to be treated aesthetically.

In colonial Vietnam, debates of art-for-art's sake versus art-for-life's sake coincided with the modern notion that art should be divorced from Confucian morality.<sup>116</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử's aesthetic treatment of "unethical" objects forms a critique of Confucian morality and liberates art from its confines. In an introduction that he writes for Bích Khê's collection of poems, Hàn Mặc Tử notes, "The poet craves the new, the beautiful, that which convulses the emotions of his soul to paralysis and stupor, 'whether that beauty is noble or profane, pure or impure' [quote from Baudelaire], so long as it possesses the power to stimulate intoxication and delight. In this we recognize that Bích Khê's poems have been dyed with Baudelaire's blood..."<sup>117</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử goes on to say, "objects that are very ordinary, and even profane and repulsive, horrible, the poet sees instead, as exalted, noble, fragrant, and pleasurable...for example a skull."<sup>118</sup> Hàn Mặc

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<sup>113</sup> I am referring to Bhabha here.

<sup>114</sup> Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Une Charogne" [A Carcass], in *Les Fleurs du Mal* [Flowers of Evil] (1857). See the original poem and multiple translations at: <http://fleursdumal.org/>, or in *Oeuvres Complètes du Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Ancienne Maison Michel Lévy Frères, 1896).

<sup>116</sup> For a thorough study of these debates, see Thanh Lăng, *Phê Bình Văn Học Thế Hệ 1932* [Criticism on The Literature of the 1932 Period] (Sài Gòn: Quốc Học Tùng Thư, 1965).

<sup>117</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử, "Bích Khê: Nhà Thơ Thần Linh" [Bích Khê: Poet of the Gods], in Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 165–168.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

Từ's introduction to Bích Khê's collection reveals his conception of symbolism as he goes on to explain:

We haven't even had time to shiver at the sight of the polished white bone with teeth...when the poet quickly reveals that it is a golden vase, a jade bowl vessel [...] wild intoxicant, and to drink is to swoon in the perfumed marrow, the cool cerebrum...a human skull is no longer a human skull. Even the grisly aspect of death is lost, the frightful destruction of time upon objects. What remains is the image of dream smoke, the spring chamber, the pool of moon. What was muck and mire is now sweet-smelling and pure enough for us to want to bite into those teeth, to suck out what is delicious from the mouth, the cool substance of the sockets, the nostrils, the deep concaves of the cheeks.<sup>119</sup>

In this perspective, the grotesque, as mediated through poetry, has the potential to transform even a profane object, a human skull, into a profound experience. Invested with new meaning through perspective, the traditional symbol of death transcends the temporal in the way it offers a glimpse of the infinite. Furthermore, this passage insists that the aesthetic value be divorced from moral values, as it is governed by its own principals.

Hàn Mặc Tử takes up this challenge of removing the aesthetic from the moral to disturb conventions of appropriate poetic subject matter in his own series of "corpse poems." In "Người Ngọc" [The Jade Body/Person], Hàn Mặc Tử takes the traditional Vietnamese signifier of purity (most intimately related to jade stone) to disturb boundaries between the exalted and the profane, the spiritual and corporeal. He combines the traditional Tang form with allusions to Baudelaire's iconic symbolist poem, "Correspondences," and his "Une Charogne," adding a surrealist gesture towards notions of the marvelous:

### Người Ngọc

Ta để chữ Ngọc...trên tàu chuỗi  
sương ở cung Thiềm rõ chẳng thôi  
Tình ta xóa mãi không thành khối  
Nữ giận đòi phen cắn phải môi

Cho ta hết cả: hương và sắc  
Của những bông hoa thắm lạ kỳ  
Ta sẽ học ra từng búng huyết  
nhuộm đầy phong vị khúc mê ly

A-ha! Ta vồng người trong mộng  
hư thực như là một ý thơ  
ta đi góp nhặt từng tia sáng  
và kết duyên tình để ước mơ

Hôm nay trăng sáng là trăng sáng  
không biết thiêng liêng ở cõi nào?  
cô nương gái đẹp đương nằm chết,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

trên cánh tây mình, hải xiết bao<sup>120</sup>

[I place the word jade...on the gondola  
Dew from the Thiềm palace drips incessantly  
I keep erasing our love but it never fades to smoke  
An angry fit sometimes demands a bite on the lips

Give me everything: fragrance and color  
Of flowers dyed with the strange  
I will spew them out with each blood spray  
Fully stain a charming piece of obscurity

A-ha! I am a person in dream  
Truly as corrupt as a poetic idea  
I go about gathering bright rays  
And plait love and fate to dream

Tonight the bright moon is so bright  
I wonder where the sacred resides  
Miss Beautiful Girl lies dead  
In my arms; tighten the grip]

This poem employs a traditional Tang form of regulated seven-syllable line with alternating end-rhymes [*lu shih* (Chinese)], but nevertheless corrupts both the form's prosody and prescribed aesthetic propriety.<sup>121</sup> The Tang form had remained an elite, aristocratic medium—the quintessence of Confucian decorum and restraint. The explicit rules governing this form obeyed an implicit etiquette that controlled style, diction, and subject matter—usually reflections of nature and a depersonalized and detached tone.<sup>122</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử evokes this convention and makes allusions to its etiquette by assigning the word “jade” to the banana-shaped boat moving towards the “Thiềm palace.” He even refers to her by the archaic formality of “cô nương” (miss; equivalent to the English m'lady).<sup>123</sup> However, this initial nod to the lofty palace (or the moon) and its symbols of propriety are quickly negated. The mist that shrouds the palace suggests its distance from the speaker. Likewise, the poem distances itself from the form's prescribed decorum by introducing individual emotion, anger, charged by the sensual image of desire, “a bite on the lips.” At this point, the speaker's demands of “everything: fragrance and color / of those flowers stained by the strange” alludes to Baudelaire's “Correspondences,” in which “perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond” and emit sounds and scents that are “rich, corrupt, triumphant, full.”<sup>124</sup> This echo of Baudelaire is reinforced by the speaker's claim that he

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<sup>120</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử, “Người Ngọc” [The Jade Body/Person], in Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 281.

<sup>121</sup> See Liu, Wu-chi, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Greenwood Press, [1966]1990).

<sup>122</sup> Huynh Sang Thong elaborates on this. See his *The Heritage of Vietnamese Literature*, xxx.

<sup>123</sup> In the poem, “Cung Thiềm” may also refer to the moon. If we read “Cùng Thiềm” as the moon rather than the palace, the particular blurring of boundaries between worlds, tensions between the dream and the real, high and low, still apply.

<sup>124</sup> The symbolists, for instance, took the idea of “correspondences” as revelations that occurred when objects help reveal the mysterious relationship between man and the universe. In this, colors, fragrance and music combine to produce this vision. In fact, for symbolists like Verlaine, “de la musique avant toute les choses” [music before all

“will spew them out with each spray of blood.” Here, the projections of bodily fluids and sensual details corrupt the propriety inscribed into the Tang form, the jade, the palace, the maiden.

The sudden realization—“A-ha! I am a person in a dream”—in the third stanza points towards the need to blur boundaries between dream and reality through poetic vision. And indeed at this point in the poem, the speaker shifts perceptions. The speaker asks, ironically, “Where does the sacred reside?” The contrasting diction Hàn Mặc Tử employs in the final stanza answers this question. By juxtaposing the elevated and antiquated form of address reserved for ladies of high rank, “cô nương” [miss/m’lady], with the informal and colloquial, “gái đẹp” [pretty girl], Hàn Mặc Tử ironizes the reverent tone of the traditional form. He collapses the exalted with the profane and blurs boundaries between “high” and “low.” Both French symbolist and surrealist poetics sought to locate the profound in the profane as means to achieving illuminations. They aimed to extract from the mundane and ordinary visions of marvelous, “convulsive beauty.”<sup>125</sup> The achievement of this is made possible by ecstatic states, state of dream, or sensual itineraries.

The poet’s aestheticization of death and decay lays metaphoric grounds for the birth of new artistic visions. Hàn Mặc Tử introduces the jarring image of the beautiful corpse lying in the speaker’s arms to make this point. This is a far removal from the Confucian decorum that imposed distance between the sexes. The intimacies invoked by the physical closeness of the body as the speaker “tighten[s] the grip” corrupts the internal etiquette of the Tang form. Chinese poetry valued reticence and reserve and disapproved of passion and effusiveness. Here Hàn Mặc Tử injects desire and evocations of physical intimacy into the strict form. Huỳnh Sang Thông tells us that the “plebeianization” and bringing down to earth of this form has roots in Vietnam as early as the fifteenth century.<sup>126</sup> What is distinct in Hàn Mặc Tử’s deflation of this form, however, is that he employs modernist aesthetics to do so. This particular hybridization underscores the way Vietnamese modernism makes partial affiliations with multiple textual traditions in a process of both revision and participation. More importantly, it suggests that the dynamics of Vietnamese modernism is both a process of continuity and disruption. The poem’s final line underscores the speaker’s complicity in the beautiful maiden’s death as she lies in his arms. Likewise, it hints at the poet’s purposeful act of destroying “pure” and “elevated” form as he tightens his hold on the corpse.

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else] and the suggestiveness of music was capable of producing the needed correspondences. For Baudelaire, correspondences between the senses, or synaesthesia, enabled the mysteries to be intuited. For Rimbaud, the mysteries of the universe required a derangement of the senses. See Nicholls, *Modernisms*; Symons, “Symbolist Manifesto”; the poems of Baudelaire, <http://fleursdumal.org/>; and Symons, “The Symbolist Movement in Literature 1899,” in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou eds. *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*.

<sup>125</sup> See Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism 1924” in Waldberg, *Surrealism*, 66–75; Walter Benjamin elaborates on the surrealist quest for the marvelous through forms of disorientations and intoxication that enabled the irrational to surface in the everyday. See Walter Benjamin: “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism.htm>; and Margaret Cohen, *Profane illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>126</sup> Huỳnh Sang Thông tells us that Nguyễn Trãi, the illustrious general and paragon of neo-Confucian learning, actually practiced relocating the subject and diction of this form to speak of Vietnam-specific cultural concerns. See Huỳnh Sang Thông, ed. and trans., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, xxxi.

*Profane Illuminations: Sensual Itineraries in Hàn Mặc Tử's Poems*

Hàn Mặc Tử's "Cô gái đồng trinh" [The Virgin Girl] again subverts the seven-syllable Tang structure to further expand aesthetic and formal borders, assert multiplicity, and remove art from the spheres of morality:

Cô gái đồng trinh

Đêm qua trăng vướng trong cành trúc  
Cô láng giềng bên chết thiệt rồi  
Trinh tiết vẫn còn nguyên vẹn mới  
Chưa hề âu yếm ở đầu môi.

Xác cô thơm quá thơm hơn ngọc  
Cả một mùa xuân đã hiện hình  
Thịnh sắc cơ hồ lưu luyến mãi  
Chết rồi xiêm áo trắng như tinh.

Có tôi đây hồn phách tôi đây  
Tôi nhập vào trong xác thịt này  
Cốt để dò xem tình ý lạ  
Trong lòng bí mật ả thơ ngây

Biết rồi, biết rồi! Thôi biết cả  
Té ra Nàng sắp sửa yêu ta  
Bao nhiêu mơ ước trong tim ấy  
Như chực xuân về thổ lộ ra<sup>127</sup>

[The Virgin Girl]

Last night the moon snagged in the bamboo branch  
The girl from the next village is really dead  
Virginity still intact, whole and new  
She's never known caresses upon her lips

Her corpse is so fragrant, more fragrant than jade  
An entire spring manifests  
The hint of color seems to linger on  
Dead and yet her dress is white as crystal

I'm here! I'm here the detachable soul!  
I'll enter into this flesh  
And skeleton to investigate strange notions of love  
In the secret heart of the innocent lass

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<sup>127</sup> In Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 182.

I know! I Know! I know everything!  
It turns out she was about to love me  
So many dreams in that heart  
Like the sudden eruption of spring]

The dead body of the virgin girl becomes a pure site for poetic innovation of form and content. A salient feature of modernism is the undoing of divisions between form and content. Hàn Mặc Tử poet combines the ideas of the virginal and pure (hallmarks of Tang form and Confucian content), with the image of the corpse (traces of French symbolism and surrealism) to suggest a necessary break of formal borders. The speaker declares that the corpse is “more fragrant than jade,” the traditional symbol of decorum, and subverts traditional conceptions of purity. By combining notions of death and decay with the pure, Hàn Mặc Tử reorients perceptions of morality and art. Hàn Mặc Tử collapses the spiritual with the sensual and the pure with the profane by evoking the soul’s entry into the body. This move enacts a novel reversal where the soul, rather than departing from a corpse, enters into it. The act of entry can be read metaphorically, as sexual penetration, further jarring ideas of the virginal. This penetration is further enforced by the ecstatic proclamations of the final stanza, “Biết rồi! Biết rồi! Thôi biết cả!” [I know! I know! I know everything!]. To have knowledge, in the biblical sense as well as in Vietnamese colloquialism, is also a euphemism for having been sexually intimate with somebody. And the “sudden eruption of spring pouring out,” the body’s confession, is suggestive of orgasmic release.

The poem’s form replicates its subject matter: a corruption, or penetration of a “pure” form or body. By introducing symbolist and surrealist sensibilities into the Tang form, a forcible entry, Hàn Mặc Tử collapses cultural boundaries as well as challenges conceptions of art as arbiter of moral truth. The poem conflates the spiritual and the sensual, as well as the exalted and the profane. We see in Hàn Mặc Tử’s poems, as in Baudelaire’s and Rimbaud’s, tropes of intoxication and perversity as a way to foreground moral versus aesthetic truth.<sup>128</sup> A disordering of the senses signaled a necessary disordering of meaning where multiplicity and indeterminacy was privileged over clarity. The hybrid form privileges multiplicity and plurality of meanings over bounded singularity. Hàn Mặc Tử deforms notions of pure form through intertextual collage of Vietnamese, Chinese, and French aesthetics. Yet the poem does not necessarily suggest that this interpenetration is a form of defilement. If it is a corruption, it is a desired and pleasurable one. By translating symbolist and surrealist aesthetics into the Tang form, Hàn Mặc Tử rewrites the form’s often starched and stiff propriety with dynamic human desire. The body and poem becomes sites of both aesthetic violence and recuperation, registering the cross-cultural dynamics between China, Vietnam and France.

### ***Registering the Subconscious and Synaesthetic***

Disjuncture forces the mind towards new perceptions. In the breaks, the mind must grope for new pathways and patterns of reassemblage. In the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử this disruption occurs through rapid shifts in perceptions and superimpositions of multiple forms and the codes that govern them. Along with the trope of madness, dreams provide a means to challenge rational perceptions and blur borders between conscious and subconscious worlds. For the French

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<sup>128</sup> See Arthur Rimbaud, “Le bateau ivre” [The Drunken Boat] (1871), and “Une Saison en Enfer” [A Season in Hell] (1873), in *A Season in Hell and The Drunken Boat*, transl. Louise Varese (New York: New Directions, 1961).

surrealists, dreams, fantasies, and unconscious states, loosen the structures of reason that prevent the mind from perceiving the “marvelous,” or states of profound illumination.<sup>129</sup> In the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử, this dissolution of form, and the quest for the marvelous, also blurs the borders between disparate literary traditions. Poems such as “Chơi giữa mùa trăng” [Playing in a Season of Moon] reveal a disordering of the senses and a distortion of rational perceptions through an assemblage of multiple forms and traditions. Drawing on the Chinese and Vietnamese myths of the night sky, Hàn Mặc Tử transmutes and translates this traditional cosmology into a world of symbolist-surrealist fantasy and illusion. “Chơi giữa mùa trăng” enacts a nocturnal journey through a watery landscape in which natural forms dissolve beneath the speaker’s gaze and perceptions:

The moon is light? Especially the mid-autumn moon, its light is more marvelous, more fragrant, and the poet who listens with deliberateness will recognize the many fragments of intoxicating music that the wind rends loose. And then wherever one goes, one touches the extraordinary things of that place. Those things resound though people do not see clearly their powerful vibrations. I mean the full moon of a season of longing, erected out of jeweled tears, made with departures, and what more, the manifestation of a source of abundant delight...Isn’t that right, lad Nguru and lass Chúc?<sup>130</sup>

The river? The river is a bolt of white silk, no, it is a road the moon laid with golden tapestry, and on both shores are sand banks and green forests, and desolation, and quietude.

My sister and I are of one mind with our oars, gently gathering those golden strands floating on the water’s surface. My sister laughs boisterously, a laughter clear as crystal and extraordinarily pure. She keeps asking me, “Here’s a riddle: does the moon grow under water or in the sky, and are we on a boat in the sky or underwater?” I peer up to the sky and then into the water and laugh in response, “it’s both, sister!” What joy, alas, brother and sister occasionally erupt into laughter and disturb the atmosphere of silent propriety.

Then we are made of light, of the marvelous and it’s not enough, Nguru Lan and Chúc Nữ, the gods of a mid-autumn still drunk on wind and bringing back to us the scent of naphthalene [moth-balls]: in there, who knows, there wafts the moans of an ancient longing...The boat drifts so softly we keep suspecting that we are moving through a pool of dream, and enraptured by the light, brother and sister seem to be entranced, not knowing whether there is indeed a body and not recognizing who we are. The illusion begins. Each minute the moon rises higher; the atmosphere also raises the mild temperature by a few degrees, and intelligence, and dream, and poetry, and water, and boat rises also, swirls up like smoke...At the higher layer of the atmosphere, the virginal Milky Way River drowns those stars that lose their way. My sister suddenly shouts,

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<sup>129</sup> See Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism 1924” in Waldberg, *Surrealism*, 66–75.

<sup>130</sup> Here, Hàn Mặc Tử refers to the legend of the lovers Nguru Lan and Chúc Nữ, who in Chinese and Vietnamese legends are turned into the stars Vega and Altair. The legend is also known as “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.”

“We’re almost at the Milky Way River! Hurry up and row! We’ll moor the boat to the Hàn Giang port!”

Moving in the boat we had the pleasant impression that we were carrying a boat of halos, a boat of jade and pearls, because there were always stars falling onto the boat...

Up there, that’s right, the imprint of a fairy is calling the boat to hitch a ride.

Suddenly our region of dream diminishes in brightness. My sister keeps pointing her finger in the direction of the harbor of Chùa Mo hamlet and tells me: “Oh, no, Trí! The moon’s been caught in the bamboo branch over there, do you see? It keeps trying to untangle itself but cannot escape, what should we do?” I laugh: “Why don’t we tie the boat at this port, and we’ll climb on the sand dunes, reach our hands up and help untangle the moon from danger.” We quickly hide the boat in a bush of flushed yellow *lau* flowers, and together become lost on a strange road, our feet trample on sand but it seemed we stepped on a sheet of silk. A spring runs from a white stone cave, pure as the pulse of jade, leaping over leaves, so pure that whenever we looked at it we were terrified because it seemed a white serpent.

How come tonight is as charming as a moving portrait? I want to ask my sister if she too tasted sweetness in her throat, as if just swallowing a gulp of water so cool it numbs the tongue and teeth. My sister remains quiet—but moon leaf after moon leaf fall onto the sleeve of her shirt like sheets of gold music. The cavern is a piece of mountain composed of sand too white, whiter than the skin of a fairy, of white silk, more white than the dignity of virginity—a white that makes me want to convulse madly, want to place my lips upon it and kiss, or press my cheek upon it to experience the force of the sweet bracing coolness of the sand.

My sister and I both spread our arms, grab onto each other’s sleeves, cling to each other and plunge upwards... Occasionally our knees ache too much that my sister and I fall over. An opportunity for my sister’s crisp laughter to burst and dissolve in the air. At the summit we are a bit worn out. But so dizzy, so luminous, how can our minds comprehend? Is this the waters of Weariness Bồng mountain the palace of gods and fairies leftover from ancient times? Peer down to the sand and desperately try to find vestiges to keep a footprint of the Fairy’s Paradise [Elysium], but the sheet of sand of silk stretches too white and pure.

*bát trí thử địa quy hà xứ  
Tư tỵ Đào Nguyên vấn chủ nhân*<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử quotes the final couplet of a Tang poem by the Chinese poet Tào Đường, and translated by the Vietnamese poet Tân Đà. The translation goes:

Lưu Nguyễn Du Thiên Thai  
Thụ thập Thiên Thai thạch lộ tân  
Vân hòa thảo tĩnh quýnh vô trần  
Yên hà bất tỉnh sinh tiền sự

Right now we are in the middle of a season of moon, though we open our eyes we cannot see clearly where the nine points of the earth are, or the ten directions of Buddhism anymore. The entire universe flickers in dreamy colors to the point that our pairs of pupils blur because of the dazzle...there is moon, light, in every direction/place, as if the entire earth that brought us here is flooding in moon and floating like flotsam towards another earth.

The light overflows, the light spreads, my sister and I open our pockets and bag it up, as though bagging jewels...I suddenly notice my sister seemed too light and flowing, wise, good, and majestic as the statue of the Virgin Maria, the virtue transmitted by the will of the saint. I want to wholeheartedly kneel down before her and plead for her counsel. But good heavens, why is my sister so beautiful? My sister's skin is white, but her shirt and trousers are an even whiter material, it looks too clean.

I grab my sister's hand and pull at it, asking: "Is that you, sister?" I tremble a little when I had the faint idea that my sister was a fairy, a ghost, or a demon. But then I burst out laughing and quickly shout: "A-ha, sister Lê, you are moon, and I am moon also!" We looked and it was so, we were really moon. My sister was thrilled as spring, leaping back and forth delighted by the opportunity to develop the naïveté of a girl of fifteen. I kept staring at my sister and felt a deep and depthless joy. At times I was too proud and substituted that modest beauty, but I only knew to appreciate it beneath the autumn sky of this night. The bright moments of this night brighten my soul, and releases the "I" of mine from the prison of flesh...I suddenly let out a howl in a rabid way and turn my palms up to catch a star about to fall. My sister runs towards me and tells me:

—"You screamed too loud, I feared the sound would shake the heaven's air and the light of the stars would dissolve into foam and vanish..."

—"No, no, sister! So the light of tonight will fade, and we will be saddened with regret. I want to fly straight into the air and find the light of ten thousand years."<sup>132</sup>

"Chơi giữa mùa trăng" is perhaps most exemplary of Hàn Mặc Tử's intertextual collages. The fantastical nature of this prose poem relies on a complex assemblage of multiple literary traditions: the modern prose genre derived from French novels, classical Chinese and

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Thủy mộc không nghi mộng hậu thân  
Văng vãng kê minh nham hạ nguyệt  
Thời thời khuyến phệ động trung xuân  
Bất tri thử địa qui hà xứ  
Tu tự Đào nguyên vấn chủ nhân

Tản Đà was a large supporter of the "old style" poetry and stood on this side in the debates against new poetry. This form is riddled with obscure Chinese allusions, a removed, lofty, elevated diction, and a strict observance of meter and prosody.

<sup>132</sup> "Chơi giữa mùa trăng" can be found in Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 172–177.

Vietnamese legend, Buddhist and Catholic symbolism, classical Tang poetic form, and French symbolist and surrealist aesthetics. The phantasmagorical and the mythical aspects offer both a sense of collective memory and external reference. The journey of contact and crossings within the poem is allegorical of the very poetic modes Hàn Mặc Tử employs, as well as registering the particular conditions of flux in that historical moment. He alludes to the classical Chinese/Vietnamese myth of the lovers “Ngu Lan” and “Chức Nữ” who were transformed into the stars Vega and Altair, yet reassembles the myth through the prism of French aesthetics. The subject of blurred natural borders also requires more porous literary boundaries.

From the onset, the speaker underlines the kind of sensory modality that is necessary to embark on the marvelous poetic journey—a synaesthesia, or confounding of the senses. This coordinated interplay of the senses enables the reader to perceive the “marvelous,” “fragrant light” (sight and scent), “intoxicating sounds” (scent and sound) and “gold music” (sight and sound). The sensory interchange at the level of language generates unforeseen combinations and, by the same token, disturbs established modes of perception. Hàn Mặc Tử’s poem suggests a needed reassemblage of the traditions and blurring of their borders through novel recombining. Synaesthesia as a literary device is most closely associated with French Symbolist poetics and particularly in Baudelaire’s iconic poem, “Correspondences,” or Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” [Vowels].<sup>133</sup> The delirium of the senses inscribed into the poems reflect the tendency in modernism to blur genre distinctions. Indeed the subject of Hàn Mặc Tử’s poem forms its very internal structure of blurred borders. The poem’s quest for “the marvelous” requires a disordering of the senses, resonant with surrealist poetics. The poem’s simultaneous register, that the surrealist “marvelous” can be attained through symbolist synaesthesia, collapses the boundedness of modernist literary categorizations.

The legend Hàn Mặc Tử invokes, of Ngu Lan and Chức Nữ, ironically, assumes a reliable premodern cosmology. However, the confidence (and lack of nuance) of this world order is displaced by the speaker’s shifting perceptions and the interchangeability of objects, persons, cultures, and literary traditions in the poem. This narrative flux, fragmentation, and disruption form the basis for reworking literary influences. Hàn Mặc Tử alludes to the myth of “Ngu Lan and Chức Nữ,” lovers who were separated by the king of the heavens at either ends of the Milky Way, save for once a year when they were allowed to meet. This legend originated in China but found its own version in Vietnam. In the traditional Vietnamese version, Ngu Lan is a cowherd for the king of the heavens; Chức Nữ was a fairy weaver-girl. When they fell in love, they forgot their duties and the cosmos fell to chaos. The king of the heavens became furious and banished them to either ends of the Milky Way River (as the stars Vega and Altair). Moved by their love, however, he allowed them to reunite once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar. Realizing that there was no bridge to connect the two lovers stranded at either ends of the river, the king of the heavens gathered a group of mortal craftsmen to construct the celestial bridge. But the men, driven by their individual visions and ideas, and unable to collaborate, failed to realize this bridge. Instead of building the bridge, meant for the reunion of lovers, they argued, fought and destroyed each other. In a rage, the king of the heavens turned them into a flock of black birds that bound together to form the bridge across the Milky Way.

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<sup>133</sup> Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” is often viewed as the iconic poem that developed ideas of synaesthesia for symbolists. Rimbaud’s sonnet “Voyelles” (1871) in which each vowel is assigned a color, helped popularize synaesthesia as poetic device.

This myth is as much about chaos and restoring cosmic order as it is about collaborations and unions. Interestingly, Hàn Mặc Tử recalls the story through a combining of disparate traditions and revises it through a disordering of the senses.

Hàn Mặc Tử renders natural landscapes into a phantasmagoric realm of fantasy. The allegorical landscape of contact and crossings, of rivers and sandbanks, quickly loses any sense of a rational dimension or coherent shape. “The river is” interchangeably, “a bolt of white silk, no, it is a road the moon laid with golden tapestry;” and as “[they] stepped on the sand it seemed [they] stepped on a sheet of silk;” the “virginal stream” appeared to be the biblical corrupter of innocence, “a white serpent.” The reliable signs of the natural world fall away as “The illusion begins,” and “intelligence, and dream, and poetry, and water, and boat rises also, swirls up like smoke...” Hàn Mặc Tử plunges the poem into a hazy dreamscape overcast by an atmosphere of deep mystery. Objects in the poem dissolve and mutate into new forms from moment to moment, just as the poem itself enacts a dissolution of the clear borders between literary forms.

The sister’s riddle is particularly telling: “does the moon grow under water or in the sky, and are we on a boat in the sky or underwater?” Her question, and the brother’s response, “it’s both!” suggests collapsed boundaries—formal, spatial, physical, and psychological. Indeed, at a later juncture in their journey, the siblings become the moon themselves. This transformation is made possible through a suspension, or discarding, of logic, particularly through states of dream. The porous quality of dreams and the unconscious was particularly important to surrealism. Breton and his associates looked to dreams to release hidden desires and irrational love, the delirium of obsession and madness. Such states enabled uncensored creative impulses and possessed a greater expressive capacity for art than any rational convention. According to Breton, it was only through the lens of madness, dreams, and the unconscious (the realm of the surreal, defamiliarized, and mysterious) that one could see the vibrations of the marvelous. Hàn Mặc Tử takes up this surrealist convention, privileging the illusory, even as he combines it with classical myth and Buddhist worldviews that see the human world as an illusion.

Multiplicity is as much the poem’s subject as it is its form. Rapid shifts in the speaker’s perceptions coincide with a collision of literary forms and cultural traditions. The poem’s long prose lines that fold one thought over into another replicate a kind of stream-of-consciousness inherent in dream and automatic states that enable a fusion between literary and cultural traditions. The speaker’s sister appears to be the virgin Mary, the Vietnamese “tiên” or “fairy,” “a ghost, or a demon.” “The speaker also moves quickly between a spectrum of mental states: awe, convulsive desire, euphoria, religious reverence, fear, giddiness. At the same time, the poem fluctuates between Vietnamese, Chinese and French literary conventions, as well as between Eastern Buddhist and Western Catholic reference points. The immateriality and illusory nature of the world of man is an integral part of the Buddhist world view, and one which Hàn Mặc Tử evokes throughout the poem. Catholicism finds representation through references to the Virgin Mary and notions of purity. However, Hàn Mặc Tử corrupts both these traditions by introducing the theme of desire and a positive sense of the “impure.” A key ethos of Buddhism is that desire forms the source of all suffering and suspends man in illusion. Catholic teachings also chastise human desire and promote the physically pure. While Hàn Mặc Tử evokes an illusory world and makes links to a Buddhist tradition, he also combines it with the French surrealist notion that the illusory is not something to avoid and lament, but rather, a state to strive towards in creative expression.

When the speaker views the white sand of the cave, he remarks that it is “more white than the dignity of virginity—a white that makes me want to convulse madly, want to place my lips

upon it and kiss, or press my cheek against it to experience the force of the sweet bracing coolness of the sand.” This comment introduces sensual desire into the equation and suggests that there is a state purer than that of virginity. With this statement Hàn Mặc Tử invites a connection to the surrealist notion of “convulsive beauty” that enables one to achieve states of “profane illumination” through desire, obsession and the new perceptions of the everyday.<sup>134</sup> When the speaker tries to locate the footprints of the mythical Fairy’s Paradise, he finds that “the sheet of sand, of silk, stretches out too white and pure.” The notion that something “too white and pure” prevents access to paradise is a curious and novel perspective that inverts traditional ways of thinking about purity. Generally, the pure are those who gain entry.

When the speaker sees his sister as the incarnation of the Virgin Mary’s statue, he tells us: “I want to wholeheartedly kneel down before her and plead for her counsel. But good heavens, why is my sister so beautiful? My sister’s skin is white, but her shirt and trousers are even a whiter material, it looks too clean.” Hàn Mặc Tử introduces the concept of his sister/the virgin appearing “too clean” as the speaker shifts from a state of spiritual reverence to a sudden cognition of material and corporeal beauty. Indeed, he corrupts the very notion of purity with his shift in attention from the virtue emanating from her statue-like appearance, to her clothes and skin. This movement may also suggest that something “too Western/white” cannot fully access the complexities of modern Vietnamese poetry and perceptions. The speaker’s shifts in perceptions enables him to view his sister as resembling the Virgin saint, a fairy, a ghost or demon all at once, and this very mutability and *mélange* in vision is precisely where her marvelous beauty derives from. The poem suggests that an assemblage and collapsing of cultures is necessary, as well as the boundaries between the spirit and the senses. This collapsing of the dichotomy between the spiritual and the sensual, can also be found in French and Russian symbolism. Like the French symbolists and decadents, the Russian symbolists were concerned with the possibility of integrating the sensual and the spiritual. But whereas the symbolists were satisfied to relish in the senses (as a spiritual expression), the much later Russian symbolists insist that surface and sensory experience serve as a conduit for divine experience.<sup>135</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử’s modernist approach coincides with European modernism in this attempt to fuse the spiritual and sensual.

Hàn Mặc Tử reinforces the tensions between the pure (and singular) and impure (multiplicity) both thematically and formally. The poem itself is a blending and adulteration of forms. By alluding to the classical myth, Hàn Mặc Tử gestures towards the message of collaboration in constructing a poetic tradition. The mythical bridge, built out of forced collaboration, allows the lovers to meet and unite; the bridge is a conduit for the transcendent magic of the night in which the poem situates itself. In the same way, the poem forms a bridge that unifies multiple traditions to achieve modernist goals. Rather than bounded and individualistic literary borders, the poem attempts to “release the ‘I’ ... from the prison of flesh.”<sup>136</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử works the original source myth through symbolist and surrealist lens. Yet

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<sup>134</sup> See Benjamin, “The Last Snapshot”; Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism 1924,” in Waldberg, *Surrealism*, 66–75.

<sup>135</sup> See Katerina Clark, “Revolution as Revelation: The Avant-Garde,” in *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 29–45; Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>136</sup> In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire writes of a “Monsieur G” who was like a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I,’ at every instance rendering and explaining it into pictures more living than life itself which is always unstable and fugitive. We may hear echoes

the revision requires a multidirectional and multifaceted sourcing. The notion of “too clean,” “too pure” suggests that foreign as well as familiar elements must be integrated. And indeed, at this point in the prose poem, Hàn Mặc Tử immediately introduces a quote—a couplet of a Chinese poem in strict Tang form, diction, and register, translated by Tấn Đà into Vietnamese. Tấn Đà was a major proponent of the camp for “old poetry” in challenging the legitimacy of new poetry. The sudden appearance of this couplet, in direct contrast to the modern prose form, underscores two key intertextual practices: citation and translation. By integrating the translated couplet into the modernist poem, Hàn Mặc Tử performs a double citation and translation. He cites a translation and translates it through his own reworking of the myth using modernist aesthetics. These particular practices make historical links not only to the classical Chinese literary tradition, but also a pre-modern Vietnamese tradition and modernist French tradition.

This multidirectional affiliations Hàn Mặc Tử makes suggests that intertextuality in Vietnamese modernism does not necessarily comprise a revolt against or a removal of one tradition to install another, or that the historical connections need be erased. The poem’s deliberate bricolage technique and its blurring of definite boundaries register the complex and dynamic relationships between these textual and cultural traditions, enabling literary evolution. In fact, the poem resolves some of the conflicts it evokes: individualized vision, the aesthetic versus the moral, static, strict and singular border versus the dynamic, porous and plural interactions. By hybridizing literary forms and their functions, Hàn Mặc Tử destabilizes the codes traditionally affixed to them. The deliberate, selective, and conscious practices of intertextuality in Hàn Mặc Tử’s poems remove the work from a position of imitation to one of translation, participation and innovation.

### **Conclusion: Reorienting Theories of the Minor and Modernism**

The poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử compels a rethinking about what constitutes minor, modernism, and calls into question dominant theories of influence, intertextuality and imitation. Deleuze and Guattari’s argument that the minor is only modernist when it is oppositional to major forms and when it is written in the language of the major, does not apply to Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetry. While Hàn Mặc Tử’s poems may register the cadences of historical violence or uneven power hierarchies, they do not necessarily invoke an oppositional, rebellious stance. Rather than malicious appropriation or parody, the poems’ intertextualities form an integration and affiliation with other traditions through practices of allusion, translation, and transposition. The poems’ intertextual “echo-chambers” form the very site of the contact zone, where cultural crossings and blurred literary borders reconfigure understandings of a specific cultural-historic moment as well the extra-temporal aesthetic relationships.<sup>137</sup> While the poems bear features of “assemblage” that Deleuze and Guattari deem a defining element of minor literature, they are still written in Vietnamese and with Vietnamese cultural references (not the language of the major culture), and do not necessarily form an act of reterritorialization. That some aspects of these Vietnamese

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of this sensibility of the modern in Hàn Mặc Tử’s poem and in the “release of the “I,” the singular individualistic “I,” through an apprehension and registering of multiplicities.

<sup>137</sup> I borrow “echo-chambers” from Chana Kronfeld’s use of the term in her study of Hebrew and Yiddish modernism, that is, not the hollow-soundings of Barthe’s “echo-chamber” but one in which the voices may ring and resonate without losing all identity. This term captures for me the dynamic multidirectionality that is key to understanding the intertextual characteristic of modernism. See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

works fit the criteria of minor modernism while others do not makes clear that Deleuze and Guattari's narrow categorization needs reassessment.

The postcolonial lens of Homi Bhabha, Trinh Minh-Ha, bell hooks and others, also hold less force when examined through the poems of Hàn Mặc Tử. The partial affiliations that the poems make with French modernism run counter to the notion that literary imitation, or textual ambivalence, creates a semiotic space of disturbance and resistance. The poems I have examined translate and transpose French aesthetics into a particular Vietnamese context that reworks extant classical Chinese-Vietnamese forms and conventions. In a sense, this bricolage can be seen to mediate historical shifts in Vietnamese literature and register the forces of cultural encounter and collision. In using both classical and modern conventions, Hàn Mặc Tử's poems suggest that Vietnamese modernism constitutes both a continuation of tradition (and reworking of it) as well as ruptures from it. This textual multiplicity, however, does not clearly exhibit itself as menace to the colonial order, especially considering the way Hàn Mặc Tử employs French aesthetics to invigorate traditional forms, or to disturb conventional modes of Vietnamese poetic expression.

The way Hàn Mặc Tử deliberately introduces thematic and formal orientations towards chaos and disorder, suggests that textual interplay is viewed as a positive aesthetic force. Hàn Mặc Tử's poems show the way textual affiliations between Vietnamese, Chinese and French literary traditions are multidirectional, selective and partial. In particular, the choices and selections Hàn Mặc Tử makes in his poems resonate with the conditions of colonial Vietnam and the drive towards locating more dynamic forms of expression and perception. These textual motivations overlap with the goals of international modernism. This also means that while modernist intertextual practices may form a dense web of citations and translations, it is not necessary to divorce them from the historical context from which they are produced, or erase the sources of their textual affiliations. If anything, modernism gains greater meanings, power and momentum from being located within specific sites of intertextual cross-cultural encounter.

The simultaneity of French symbolism and surrealism in Vietnamese literary reception enables Hàn Mặc Tử to combine the poetics of these movements and reveal their connective tissues more thoroughly. Indeed, belated modernisms possess a retrospective vision that enables them to translate, recombine and reformulate modernist poetics. In the same way T.S. Eliot conceives of the present and the past as bilateral interactions, Hàn Mặc Tử's poems demonstrate the way an engagement with traditions both East and West, past and present, can actually reformulate the very ways we read those works. It is thus a practice of reorientation and re-vision. Hàn Mặc Tử's articulations of symbolist and surrealist traces in interaction with Chinese and Vietnamese traditions forces us to reconsider the way modernist literary dynamics has traditionally been conceived. Rather than viewing modernism as a linear line of heritage or geographically bounded body, via the geographical and chronological (map and graph) models of literary historiography, we can thus begin to view it as a series of live multidirectional and overlapping crosscurrents.

Hàn Mặc Tử's early modernist experimentations demonstrate an orientation towards symbolist and surrealist aesthetics as a way to expand literary and perceptual boundaries. This tendency towards hybridizing Vietnamese forms with those of international traditions persists in later modernist Vietnamese works. Subsequent waves of modernism that took place during the next four decades reveal a trend towards disruption of bounded forms, plurality of meaning, and blurring of literary borders through creative recombination. The selectiveness of these literary affiliations varied, however, as the historical moment shifted and writers found themselves in entirely new contexts. Hàn Mặc Tử's poetic innovations during the late-colonial era raise the

possibility of a dynamic engagement with multiple traditions beyond national borders. Artists could not only look backwards and forward, but also towards a pool of transnational resources limited only by their imagination.

## 2 | Trần Dần, Mayakovsky and the Politics of Vietnamese Modernism in 1950s DRV

“My most respected /comrades of posterity!/Rummaging among/these days’/petrified crap...”  
–Vladimir Mayakovsky, “At the Top of My Voice”

“Someone calls these bits of spit pearls!”  
– Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Listen!”

“Live and write to fight the gang of fakers, the bloated, the good-for-nothings, the sick, the maggots, the rotten.”

– Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)*

### Introduction

How do international modernist poetics, practices and orientations circulate and find currency within Vietnamese works? What structures, apparatus, agents and processes are involved? The quotes above connect two figures of a significant relationship in 1950s Vietnam between a group of writers, particularly the poet Trần Dần, and the iconoclast Russian avant-garde Vladimir Mayakovsky. It is generally acknowledged that Trần Dần’s poems of this period formally resemble Mayakovsky’s in their iconic stepladder layout and brash tenor. Yet few scholars have explored the nature of this poetic affiliation in depth, or distinguished it as a modernist engagement.<sup>138</sup> How and why was the Russian avant-garde so significant for Vietnamese writers at this time? How does Russian futurism have such purchase in the Vietnamese imagination? In this chapter I examine how cultural agents invest (or reinvest) particular aspects of a poetry and

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<sup>138</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến called Trần Dần’s poems “apings” of Mayakovsky’s poems. According to the scholar, Trần Dần’s poems “also climb stepladders” and also “speaks loudly,” but these are hollow imitations. See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maia cốp xki. Con người, cuộc đời và thơ* [Mayakovsky: Person, Life and Poems] (Hà Nội: Đại Học và Chung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, 1976), 204, 207. Tony Day discusses Trần Dần’s poetic affiliation with Mayakovsky in forging a new cosmopolitan literary outlook. Day does not link the avant-garde sensibilities to “modernism,” but suggests that “‘realism,’ whether ‘socialist’ or ‘magical,’ is another” way to conceptualize world literature on the peripheries. See Tony Day, “Still Stuck in the Mud: Imagining World Literature during the Cold War in Indonesia and Vietnam,” in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya HT Liem (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010), 131–169 (132). See also Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Trần Dần–Một thi trình sạch (I)” [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary (I)], *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* [Culture and Arts] no. 286 (April 2008): 80–85 and 104; and Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Trần Dần, một thi trình sạch (II),” <http://phongdiep.net/default.asp?action=article&ID=4156>. Đỗ Lai Thúy does explore the similarities between the poems of Trần Dần and Mayakovsky, particularly in the formal layout as a way to express the dialectical and multidirectional (84). Likewise, Thụy Khuê devotes a chapter of her study of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phạm Affair on Trần Dần, and touches on the similarities between his poems and Mayakovsky’s. See Thụy Khuê, “Chapter 11: Trần Dần,” in *Nhân Văn Giai Phạm*, available at <http://thuykhue.free.fr/mucluc/trandan.html>. See also Nguyễn Phượng, “Mayakovsky và Trần Dần - từ những tương đồng đến những dị biệt” [Mayakovsky and Trần Dần: From Similarities to Differences], August 2012, *Văn Học và Ngôn Ngữ* [Literature and Language], <http://nguvan.hnue.edu.vn/?comp=download&id=8&Bai-viet-ve-Tran-Dan.html>. The scholarship composes but a handful of short articles and passing mentions.

poetics (or public image) with new meaning and potential, and mobilize it to advance their goals. More broadly, I relate how this particular cross-cultural engagement shapes the character of Vietnamese modernism in this revolutionary period.

I focus on the dynamics of modernism in 1950s DRV by tracing paths of political-poetic circulation in the textual mediation of state apparatus, cultural agents and writers. Beyond mere citation or imitation, their intertextual practices of translation, transposition and reinterpretation demonstrate an active investment in the production of meaning. The various attempts to (re)define Mayakovsky and modernist poetics compose a series of competing dialogues, collisions and convergences. They also reflect the underlying issues central to the cultural debates of this period: epistemological and creative power. Who gets to determine the production, shape and dissemination of knowledge and aesthetic creation? I examine how a Russian futurist poetics find particular resonance in the imagination of Vietnamese writers of 1950s North Vietnam. In doing so, I show how a group of Vietnamese poets, particularly Trần Dần, mobilizes modernism's potential for protesting cultural hegemony.

I begin by discussing the doctrinaire socialist realist literary model enforced by the DRV state and the restrictive context of 1950s North Vietnamese culture. I contextualize Trần Dần's cultural activities against this backdrop to show the development of his poetic perspective. I then touch upon the politics of Mayakovsky's canonization as a state apparatus before tracing the intertextual engagement with Mayakovsky's poetry, poetics and public persona through the writings of three cultural agents. They are: 1) Elsa Triolet, whose French-language memoir and role as mediator offered Vietnamese poets a counter-narrative to the narrow socialist image of Mayakovsky; 2) Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, the foremost Vietnamese scholar on Soviet literature, whose study of Mayakovsky reveals how cross-cultural poetics involves a series of framing and contestations; and 3) the poet Trần Dần, who through a series of critical articles, personal writing and poetry forged an alliance with Russian futurist poetics to advance his modernist project and cultural dissent. This chapter lays groundwork for Chapter 3, which I devote to close textual analysis of Trần Dần's epic poem "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc,"—the praxis of his modernist poetics and cultural dissent.

In his recent study of 1950s Cold War Southeast Asian literature, Tony Day engages the question of how we account for writers who were "cosmopolitan in outlook, yet also intensely committed to participation in the development of their national communities." Extending the frame beyond the national, Day suggests that international socialist political currents, as well as the aesthetic awareness of a world literary stage, shape the writing of Trần Dần in this period.<sup>139</sup> Trần Dần's translation of Mayakovsky, Day suggests, was informed by international current of shared proletariat sensibilities. This allowed the writers of the 1950s to at once define their cultural-political struggles in the DRV and participate in an international poetic space. Day notes: "Mayakovsky's verse offered Trần Dần and his friends a stirring example of cosmopolitan modernist poetry that was at once lyrical and realist, but also critical of the shortcomings of the

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<sup>139</sup> Day primarily engages with Pascal Casanova's "republic of letters": "a geography of uneven centers and peripheries, determined in its parts and as a whole by an ongoing struggle between centripetal forces oriented towards the cosmopolitan principal of autonomy and the centrifugal forces of cultural nationalism. He takes particular issue with the way Casanova posits Europe as the fixed core from which the peripheral cultures are in constant gravitational orbit around and towards. See Day, "Still Stuck in the Mud," 134; and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Harvard University Press, 2004), 80.

communist revolution.”<sup>140</sup> This perspective is key to understanding how politics and poetics coalesced in 1950s Vietnam and how, significantly, Vietnamese modernism at this juncture possessed characteristics of both modernist avant-garde aesthetics and socialist concerns. Day’s approach is instructive in encouraging considerations of Trần Dần’s writing within particular national context and “specific world historical terms,” as embodiment of a politicized moment.

Trần Dần (1926–1997) remains infamous as one of the alleged “ringleaders” of the so-called “Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm saboteurs.”<sup>141</sup> The second wave of Vietnamese modernism cannot be discussed without mentioning him. More accurately, in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the 1950s, he was “the focal point around which a number of intellectual concerns coalesced,” manifesting in debates and contestations of DRV culture, politics and aesthetic freedom.<sup>142</sup> Then a young military writer just in his thirties, Trần Dần was the spark from which a brief flash of dissent—named the “Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair” after the two constituent literary journals *Nhân Văn* [Humanity] and *Giai Phẩm* [Works] central to the controversy—erupted in 1956. At the heart of this intellectual conflict were artists who had devoted years of their lives to promoting the communist revolution but who now found their creative liberty severely restricted to highly dogmatic and ideological forms of writing. They protested through a proposal, articles and poems, and were heavily penalized as “reactionaries” for this.<sup>143</sup> Those involved were charged with ideological crimes against the state and subject to humiliating public self-criticisms, literary censorship, banishment, forced labor camp, and imprisonment. The Trần Dần–Mayakovsky relationship helps us understand the character of these aesthetic protests—an unusual mix of revolutionary ethos and avant-garde aesthetics.

Mayakovsky is best known as a leading member of the flamboyantly anti-establishment, avant-garde group of writers who called themselves the “Futurists” (1912) and, contrarily, as the communist state’s “best, most talented poet of [the] Soviet epoch” (1935 on).<sup>144</sup> The paradox of Mayakovsky’s personas—avant-garde poet and paragon of socialist writing—presented conflicts throughout his life and left the door open to contestations after his death.<sup>145</sup> Mayakovsky had a significant impact on Vietnamese intellectuals of this period. The image of Mayakovsky as hero of socialist cultural production and poet of the state was widespread, cultivated in Vietnam as it was in the Soviet Union under Stalin. But Vietnamese writers with modernist perspectives did

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<sup>140</sup> Day, “Still Stuck in the Mud,” 163–164. Day is hesitant to affix the label of “modernism” to Trần Dần’s work, even if he recognizes the way the “stirring example of modernist poetry” influenced the Vietnamese poets of this era.

<sup>141</sup> For examples of such allegations, see Từ Bích Hoàng, “Vạch thêm những hoạt động đen tối của một số cầm đầu trong nhóm phá hoại *Nhân văn-Giai phẩm*” [Exposing More Shady Actions of a Few Leaders of the *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs*], *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* [Army Arts] (hereafter *VNQĐ*) no. 5 (May 1958): 63–69; Vũ Tứ Nam, “Sự thật về con người Trần Dần” [The Truth about Trần Dần’s Character], *VNQĐ* no. 4 (April 1958); Xuân Diệu’s “Một số vấn đề đấu tranh tư tưởng trong thơ” [A Few Issues in the Ideological Struggle in Poetry], *Văn Nghệ* [Literary Arts] (March 10, 1958); and Idem., “Qua cuộc đấu tranh trong nhóm phá hoại *Nhân văn-Giai phẩm*” [Through the Struggle of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs], in *Trên mặt trận văn nghệ* [On the Battlefield of Literary Arts] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1958); Đỗ Nhuận, “Bộ mặt thực của Trần Dần trong nhóm phá hoại Nhân văn-Giai phẩm” [The Real Face of Trần Dần in the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm Saboteurs], *Văn Nghệ* no. 12 (May 1958).

<sup>142</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 1 and 129.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>144</sup> These proclamations were made by Stalin in *Pravda* [Truth], December 5, 1935, p. 4. See Laura Shear Urbaszewski, “Canonizing the ‘Best, Most Talented’ Soviet Poet: Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Soviet Literary Celebration,” *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 4 (September 2002): 637.

<sup>145</sup> See Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (New York: Paragon, 1988); Juliette Stapanian, *Mayakovsky's Cubo-Futurist Vision* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1986).

not engage with Mayakovsky through the programmatic constructions of the communist states. It was not the official portraits, commemorative articles, or paeans to the “socialist spirit” of Mayakovsky that they embraced.

According to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, this deep, extended romance between Vietnam and Mayakovsky was sparked by a slender French-language memoir written by Elsa Triolet. The Editions Sociales Internationales (ESI) publication was registered in the holdings of the Hanoi National Library on September 9, 1939, the very same year it was published in France. Triolet’s text is pivotal to the meeting of the Russian avant-garde and Vietnamese modernists. She was “the matchmaker in the initial encounter between Mayakovsky and Vietnam,” Hoàng Ngọc Hiến tells us, and “the image of Mayakovsky derived dominantly from Triolet’s memoir.”<sup>146</sup> Translations of Mayakovsky’s writing used her book as the source text. After the First Indochina War, the DRV state disseminated Mayakovsky’s poems as part of compulsory curriculum [*phổ cập*]. In 1948, the Vệ Quốc Quân [National Guard], an organization in which Trần Dần was centrally involved, translated a French book discussing Mayakovsky’s poems, *Ba bài thơ Maia* [Three Poems of Mayakovsky].<sup>147</sup> In 1951, Hoàng Trung Thông published his translation of Mayakovsky’s essay, “How Poetry is Made,” [*Làm thơ như thế nào*], taken from that book. In 1953, the Literature and Arts Association published his “Six Poems of Mayakovsky.” In 1957, Trần Dần himself co-translated with Hoàng Trung Thông a slim book of Mayakovsky’s poems, *Thơ Mai-a-cop-xki*, with an introduction by Lê Đạt.<sup>148</sup> The most important form of transmission, according to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, was that “Mayakovsky’s poems were circulated in the notebooks of cadres.” Trần Dần and other military writers admitted frankly: whatever they knew of Mayakovsky, whatever they loved, they learned through Triolet.<sup>149</sup>

Triolet’s memoir provided an alternative framework for understanding Mayakovsky. Through this text, Vietnamese writers learned of the poet’s reputation as an avant-garde, his investment in modernism, his nonconformist attitude and trouble with the literary establishment.<sup>150</sup> Trần Dần and his contemporaries were drawn to the poet’s more subversive qualities. Mayakovsky’s dual position as both party insider and outsider, paragon of socialist writing and “adopted stepchild” of the revolution, made him a figure whose bumpy road reflected their own difficult relationship with cultural authorities in the DRV. The grandiose construction of “the best, most talented poet of [the] Soviet epoch” also opened the door for alternative interpretations.<sup>151</sup> Mayakovsky’s unorthodox history and ambiguous relationship to the Soviet state provided a model for literary avant-gardism within a restrictive socialist culture.

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<sup>146</sup> See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 197, 198.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 198. These poems were translations into French by Ingber and Gabriel Arout.

<sup>148</sup> See Day, “Still Stuck in the Mud,” 163 fn. 122. Day is citing this information from *35 Năm văn học* [35 Years of Literary Studies], 208–208, 214.

<sup>149</sup> See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 198. See Elsa Triolet, *Mayakovsky: A Memoire*, trans. Susan de Muth (London: Hearing Eye, 2002).

<sup>150</sup> For examples of Vietnamese artists highlighting Mayakovsky’s more trenchant poetics, see Lê Đạt’s essay, “Nhân dịp kỷ niệm 25 năm ngày Mai-a-kóp-ski tạ thế” [On the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Mayakovsky’s Passing] *Văn Nghệ* 69 (April 21, 1955); and “Học tập Mai-a-kóp-ski (Maiakovski), phát huy sức sống mới của thi ca Việt Nam” [Study Mayakovsky to Develop the Vitality in the Poetry of Vietnam] *Văn Nghệ* no. 70 (May 1, 1955); Trần Dần, “Nhân Ngày 14-4 Kỷ Niệm Mai-a-kóp-ki Nhà Thơ Vĩ Đại Của Liên-Xô Qua Đời” [On the Occasion of April 14 in Memory of the Death of The Great Soviet Poet Mayakovsky], *Sinh Hoat Văn Nghệ* [Life and Arts] no. 37, 1955, p. 3; and Hữu Loan’s, “Cũng những thằng nịnh hót (sau khi đọc bài ‘những thằng nịnh hót’ của Maiakovski)” [Those Same Sycophants (After Reading “The Sycophants” by Mayakovsky)], in Hoàng Vân Chí, *The New Class in North Vietnam* (Sài Gòn: Công Dân, 1958), 34–36.

<sup>151</sup> *Pravda* [Truth], December 5, 1935, p. 4.

In transposing the charged socialist aura of Mayakovsky, Trần Dần forged an intertextual affiliation to advance a modernist poetics that opposed DRV cultural hegemony.

### **Socialist “Realism” and the Culture of 1950s DRV**

After the August Revolution of 1945 and by the 1950s, the French literary models that had inspired a rich corpus of modernist experimentation in Vietnam during the 1930s and 1940s were now viewed by the communist state as poisonous artifacts of the colonial era. The DRV state considered those who engaged with the “imperialist” West, France, and its “decadent bourgeois” aesthetics to be reactionaries. Serving the state and supporting the national agenda demanded a “destroying of the old self” and effacement of individual subjectivities. The “I” of romantic individualism that flowered in literature of the colonial period was under attack and disavowed as part of the unenlightened, bourgeois past.<sup>152</sup> Artists were forced to engage literature in service of the communist revolution. Writers like Trần Dần who came of age during the colonial period struggled to uphold the institutional basis of art’s autonomy and restore its relationship to social practices.

When Stalin promulgated the decree “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations” in 1934, he declared socialist realism to be “the only true art” of the Soviet Union.<sup>153</sup> This cultural doctrine played a central role in determining the form of acceptable literature and cultural production in communist Vietnam. Vietnamese cultural officials viewed French literary influences as “infections.” Trường Chinh, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Worker’s Party’s and the Central Committee’s mouthpiece and cultural theoretician, delivered his report on *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* at the Second Congress of Culture held in Việt Bắc from July 16–20, 1948. A seven-chapter manual on cultural “theory” and practice, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* focuses on three main issues: general theory of culture, the process of developing Vietnamese culture, and specific issues related to literature and the arts. According to Trường Chinh, the most glaring feature of “counterrevolutionary” culture is that its poor content is hidden inside rich, glossy, subtle, and deceptive forms such as cubism, impressionism, symbolism, surrealism, Dadaism, and so forth.<sup>154</sup> He compared those corrupt “bourgeois” products to the poisonous mushrooms sprouting from the rotten wood of “imperialist” culture.<sup>155</sup> To remedy the sickness that had infected Vietnamese intellectuals in the colonial period, Trường Chinh prescribed a literature that was to produce “the most revolutionary cultural standpoint in the world.”<sup>156</sup> By 1948, the restrictive doctrinaire socialist realism became the mandate for artistic production in the DRV. By 1950, the import of Maoism cultural policies into Vietnam

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<sup>152</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 98; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics,” in Truong Buu Lam (ed.), *Borrowings and adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Southeast Asia Paper No. 25. Centre for Asian and Pacific Studies) (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, Manoa, 1982), 63–83.

<sup>152</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 98.

<sup>153</sup> For a fuller discussion of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, see Sergey Ivanov, “The Leningrad Years,” *Unknown Socialist Realism: The Leningrad School* (Saint Petersburg: NP-Print Edition, 2007). For a discussion of socialist realism in Vietnam, see Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, *Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics* (PhD thesis, Victoria University, 2004), 4, <http://vuir.vu.edu.au/279/1/02whole.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> Trương Chính, *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hoá Việt Nam* [Marxism and Vietnamese Culture] (1948), 2nd edition (Hà Nội: Sự Thật, 1974), 21. See also Trương Chính, *Tuyển tập* [Collected Works], vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1997), 135–170 (148).

<sup>155</sup> Trương Chính, *Chủ nghĩa Mác*, 19.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–96.

reinforced this particular “stranglehold” on permissible artistic endeavors.<sup>157</sup> Socialist realist writing aims to further goals of communism. Not to be confused with social realism, which sympathetically depicts subjects of social concern, socialist realism glorifies the roles of the meek and working class, peasants and proletariats and their struggle for emancipation, to the detriment of reality. Though Trường Chinh insists on the “objectiveness” of this genre, he also admits that some objective truths are unfavorable to the cause: “For example, shall we report a battle we have lost truthfully? We can, of course, depict a lost battle, but in doing so, we must see to it that people realize how heroically our combatants accepted sacrifices, why the battle was lost, what our gains were and notwithstanding the defeat, that our combatants never felt demoralized because all were eager to learn and draw the appropriate lessons in order to secure victories in future battles.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, socialist realism was an ideological tool for shaping a collective consciousness.

Artists who strayed from the official cultural doctrine were severely punished. The socialist realist style limited acceptable form and content, especially forbidding erotic, religious, abstract, surrealist, and expressionist aesthetics. Socialist realism also outlawed formal experiments, including internal dialogue, stream of consciousness, the nonsensical, free-form association, and fragments—considered decadent, unintelligible to the proletariat, or counterrevolutionary.<sup>159</sup> Martin Grossheim’s study of cultural politics in the DRV provides a telling description:

Thus, literature and film in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam celebrated “the war as a feast for all the people.”<sup>160</sup> Writers and other artists had to paint war and the construction of socialism in glowing colors [*tô hồng*], absolutely stick to the dichotomous classification of the warring parties as “good” and “evil”, and thereby contribute to the myth of the “heroic” [*anh hùng*] “holy” [*chiến tranh thần thánh*] and “just war” [*chiến tranh chính nghĩa*] against the US imperialists and the South Vietnamese “puppet regime.” To write about the “real” face of war, about suffering and death was tantamount to treason.<sup>161</sup>

The strictures of socialist realism in the DRV left little room for developing the modernist innovations set in motion during the colonial period.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan-Văn Giai-Pham Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (Winter-Spring 1990): 154–174.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> For examples of Vietnamese socialist realist literature, see Nguyễn Quang Sáng, “Chiếc lược ngà” [The Ivory Comb] in *Chiếc lược ngà*, 2nd ed (Sài Gòn: Giải Phóng, 1968). This is a collection of short stories and excerpts from novels by southerners who joined the revolution, and includes a story by Nguyễn Ngọc, under his pen-name. See Nguyễn Trung Thành “Rừng xà nu” [Xa Nu Forest] (1963), in *Chiếc lược ngà*.

<sup>160</sup> Mai Ngũ, “Về một thời kỳ đã qua” [Of A Time Past], 107, quoted in Martin Grossheim, “The Lao Động Party, Culture and the Campaign against ‘Modern Revisionism’: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam before the War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 1 (February 2013): 80–129 (31).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid; David Chanoff and Đoàn Văn Toại, ‘Vietnam’. *A Portrait of its People at War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 83; and John Kleinen and Cao Xuân Tứ, “The Vietnam War Through Vietnamese Eyes. A Review of Literary Fiction and Cinema,” *The Vietnam Review* (Autumn-Winter 1997): 422. For the concept of “just war” [*chiến tranh chính nghĩa*], see Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN. Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 40–41.

<sup>162</sup> It is well known that both Mayakovsky and F.T. Marinetti (the strident founder of Italian futurism) had roots in and championed symbolism before transplanting and radicalizing key features of symbolism into their futurist

## *Trần Dần and the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair*

Like Mayakovsky, Trần Dần had earned himself a reputation as a trailblazer early on. In 1946, at the age of 20, Trần Dần along with Đinh Hùng, Vũ Hoàng Địch, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Trần Mai Châu, and Nguyễn Văn Tậu formed a literary group that called themselves “Dạ Đài” [Netherworld].<sup>163</sup> They proposed to revolutionize Vietnamese literature with poetics they proclaimed in their “Manifesto of Symbolism” [*Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng*], published in the November 16, 1946 issue of the group’s eponymous journal. Much in the direction of Hàn Mặc Tử and The School of Chaotic/Mad Poetry [Trường Thơ Loạn / Điên] in the 1930s, as well as the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập [Elegant Spring-Fall Set] Group led by Nguyễn Xuân Sanh in the 1940s, Dạ Đài was poised towards modernist innovations via symbolist poetics.<sup>164</sup> The outbreak of war disrupted the project, but Trần Dần was committed to the modernist vision. As early as 1947, the writer Hoàng Cầm recalled hearing about a soldier named Trần Dần who experimented with the stepladder form made popular by Mayakovsky and painted in the cubist way, which his cohorts considered “difficult to understand” [*khó hiểu*].<sup>165</sup>

Trần Dần’s life demonstrates a commitment to both modernist aesthetic ideals and national independence.<sup>166</sup> At the onset of the First Indochina War, Trần Dần returned to his hometown of Nam Định and volunteered his writing skills at the Bureau of Propaganda in Zone 4. In 1947–1948, he joined the Vệ Quốc Quân [National Guard] military taskforce. In Regiment 148 in Sơn La he was engaged writing propaganda, reporting stories, and assigning literary tasks. Along with Trần Thụ and Hoài Niệm, Trần Dần founded the first group of military artists, the Black River Group [Nhóm Sông Đà] and the journal for military literature and arts *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* [Army Arts].<sup>167</sup> By 1949 he was a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In 1951, Trần Dần was responsible for the ideological training of cadres. In 1954, Trần Dần fought in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ. In October of that year, he was sent to China to write a script for a motion picture of the victory of Điện Biên Phủ. There, Trần Dần clashed with the “bigoted”

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campaigns. Trần Dần shares this biographical detail with them: only 19 years old in 1946, he wrote and published the Vietnamese symbolist manifesto and dedicated a journal to this enterprise before war broke out and truncated this group’s efforts.

<sup>163</sup> Note the closeness of “Dạ đài” and “Dada,” as in the avant-garde movement that emphasized the chaotic and absurdist features of art.

<sup>164</sup> See Trần Dần, Trần Mai Châu, Vũ Hoàng Địch “Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng” [Manifesto of Symbolism], *Dạ Đài* no. 1 (1946), available at *Tiền Vệ* [Avant-Garde], <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>. The Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group lasted from 1939–1946 (also at the onset of war). See *Xuân Thu nhã tập*, ed. Nguyễn Xuân Xanh (Hà Nội: Văn Học, [1942] 1991). Xuân Thu Nhã Tập also published a manifesto in the first issue of their journal. On the School of Mad/Chaotic Poetry, see Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm, Phê Bình và Tư Tưởng* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works, Criticism and Reflections] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002), 73. The School of Mad Poetry consisted of some of the most notable up-and-comers of New Poetry from the central region: Bích Khê, Chế Lan Viên, Quách Tấn, and more. The second issue of the journal had just been set in November 19, 1946, but before it went to press war had broken out.

<sup>165</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 127. Apparently as part of the Black River [Sông Đà] writing group, he was criticized for composing poems that were too “cubist.”

<sup>166</sup> Trần Văn Dần was born on August 23, 1926 in Nam Định. The son of a wealthy family, his father was an official working for the city treasury. Trần Dần finished middle school in Nam Định and then went to Hà Nội, completed high school and attained his baccalaureate [tú tài]. He died on January 17, 1997 in Hà Nội, having just been invited back into public life after nearly thirty years in literary exile. I drew the biographical details from Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

man who was sent to supervise him on the trip and returned early due to their conflicts.<sup>168</sup> Georges Boudarel suggests that while in China, Trần Dần was captivated by Hu Feng, the Chinese leftist literary critic—also internationalist, cosmopolitan, and Westernized—who was fiercely advocating for pluralism and freedom in literature and arts against the cultural dictatorship espoused by Zhu Yang—Mao’s cultural minister.<sup>169</sup>

According to Boudarel, “emboldened by what he saw in China,” Trần Dần returned to Vietnam with a project to promote a change in the cultural policies that had, following Maoist dictates, strangled creative production. The assault squad of soldiers he depicted in his 1955 reportage novel based on the war, *Người người lớp lớp* [Men Upon Men, Wave Upon Wave], “scarcely fit the image of the official hero.”<sup>170</sup> Hoàng Cầm, describing Trần Dần’s ire towards the dictatorship of socialist realism, tells us:

[Trần Dần] hated the easy, lazy way of writing, describing the soldiers and yet one could only see guns firing, fires raging, only noises but not people. He called that kind of writing smoke-and-fire-literature. Looking at the written page, a reader searches forever and still will not find a person, not life events, only machines hanging around, repeating a set of empty nouns and images, the loud noises made by an empty barrel.<sup>171</sup>

In 1955, Trần Dần rallied the support of group of about thirty military artists to draw up a platform asking the political commissars in the army to revise their policy on artistic production. The “proposal for literary arts policy” [*Đề nghị chính sách văn nghệ*] asked that the upper echelons grant the military writers independence from military writing regulations and sanction their participation in the civilian self-headed Literature and Arts Association. According to Boudarel, “In fact, the project went far beyond [the appeal for creative liberty] and even infringed upon the Communist Party’s own line in cultural matters...” The contents of the proposal are only known by the few passages quoted in attacks on its authors.<sup>172</sup> For example, according to Vũ Tú Nam, Trần Dần allegedly said: “The highest expression of a writer’s responsibility is his respect and faithfulness to truth.” In response to the question of whether the writer should comply with truth or political directives, he responded:

Truth is a million times greater and transcends any directive, any ideology...If the truth is in opposition to policy or directives, than [the writer] must write the

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<sup>168</sup> Hoàng Cầm, “Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học: Con người Trần Dần” [Continuing to Reassess A Case in Literature: The Personality of Trần Dần], *Nhân Văn* no.1, 1957.

<sup>169</sup> Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s,” 156.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>171</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 128, translating from Hoàng Cầm’s “Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học.”

<sup>172</sup> For examples of articles that cite in part the unpublished 1955 proposal for creative independence that Trần Dần presented to General Nguyễn Trí Thanh on behalf of the artists at a meeting in February 1955, see Từ Bích Hoàng, “Vạch thêm những hoạt động đen tối của một số cầm đầu trong nhóm phá hoại Nhân văn-Giai phẩm” [Exposing More Shady Actions of a Few Leaders of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs], *VNQĐ* no. 5 (May 1958): 63–69; Vũ Tú Nam, “Sự thật về con người Trần Dần” [The Truth about Trần Dần’s Character], *VNQĐ* no. 4 (April 1958); Xuân Diệu, “Một số vấn đề đấu tranh tư tưởng trong thơ” [A Few Issues in the Ideological Struggle in Poetry], *Văn Nghệ* [Literary Arts] (March 10, 1958); and *Idem.*, “Qua cuộc đấu tranh trong nhóm phá hoại Nhân văn-Giai phẩm” [Through the Struggle of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs], in *Trên mặt trận văn nghệ* [On the Battlefield of Literary Arts] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1958); Đỗ Nhuận, “Bộ mặt thực của Trần Dần trong nhóm phá hoại Nhân văn-Giai phẩm” [The Real Face of Trần Dần in the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs], *Văn Nghệ* no. 12 (May 1958).

truth and not massage [*gò bóp*] the truth to force it into the framework of policy... The writer can only write at the urge and behest of reality... You don't write to please [the ministry] of information and propaganda, to please the superiors, to get a name for posterity. A million times over, there's no whiff of coming to your senses serving whatever! The shirt can't cover up the smell of rot in the gut. The revolution doesn't need those people that acclaim and applause while shutting their eyes. Those guys chirping policy, not to mention those "who worship policy," their members squeezed out of shape, impoverished...<sup>173</sup>

Trần Dần's suggestion—that the work of certain writers were a form of political masturbation—enraged officials. Heinz Schütte's treatment of this proposal is especially informative:

Accusing the political cadres of smothering the arts and creativity, he concluded that the writer should not write so as to satisfy the wishes of the department of propaganda and education, and that the "revolution does not need flatterers who fawn over political programs, ruminating about hatred of the enemy and patriotism, nor does it need shamans who celebrate its cult, deceitfully beating their cymbals and chanting their repulsive litanies... In our literature there is at present much artificiality (and even hypocrisy)... To call it by its rightful name, it's a hackneyed, simplistic and elementary literature. The writer comes equipped with a frame and crams reality into it... Why do we, for example...not write about love? When we write about love, then it is a matter of sacrificing oneself for the fatherland... Why are only peasants and workers worthy of being portrayed?<sup>174</sup>

General Nguyễn Trí Thanh condemned the proposal as reeking of "bourgeois liberalism." Shortly after this, Trần Dần was placed under house arrest and sent to "reeducation camp." He made several requests to leave the party thereafter.

Like Mayakovsky, Trần Dần did not shy from launching staunch critiques against the cultural establishment's dogma and artificialities.<sup>175</sup> In March of 1955, he participated in a series

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<sup>173</sup> Vũ Tứ Nam, "Su That Ve Con Nguoi Trần Dần," 5. My translation.

<sup>174</sup> Heinz Schütte, "Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955–1957," *Südostasien* (Working Papers) no. 22 (Berlin: Humboldt University 2003), 19, available at <http://asa232.asa.hu-berlin.de/soa-wp/pdf/SOA-WP%20-%20022%20-%20Hundred%20Flowers%20in%20Vietnam%201955-1957%20%28Heinz%20Sch%20C3%BCtte%29.pdf>; Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s," 157; Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 132.

<sup>175</sup> During that period Trần Dần was involved with a girl who had a "questionable background." Her Catholic family left Hà Nội in the great 1954 migration after the partition that officially separated North Vietnam from South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. In the wake of the French defeat at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the Geneva Accords of 1954 decided the fate of French Indochina after eight years of war between French Union forces and the Viet Minh, which sought Vietnamese independence. The accords resulted in the partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with Hồ Chí Minh's communist Việt Minh in control of the North and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South. The agreements allowed a 300-day period of grace, ending on May 18, 1955, in which people could move freely between the two Vietnams before the border was sealed. The partition was intended to be temporary, pending elections in 1956 to reunify the country under a national government. Between 600,000 and one million northerners moved south, while between 14,000 and 45,000 civilians and approximately 100,000 Việt Minh fighters moved in the opposite direction. See Andrew Hardy, "Vietnam - Internal Migration," *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, vol. 6, eds. David Levinson and Karen Christenson (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 2002). See Hoàng Cầm, "Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học." The girl was from a catholic family. Added to her "questionable" background was the fact that her family had been granted a few houses that she rented out—her primary source of income. Trần Dần was

of critical attacks on the award-winning poetry collection *Việt Bắc*, written by Tố Hữu, considered by the state to be Vietnam's "first communist poet."<sup>176</sup> In addition to his criticism of one of the party's highest-ranking cultural leaders, Trần Dần also published a critique of Phùng Quán's novel *Vượt Côn Đảo* [Escape from Paolo Condore] in which he told writers "do not color the war in rosy tones [*tô hồng*], don't lie, don't produce fake heroes, all heart and no thought."<sup>177</sup> In doing so, Trần Dần also implicitly critiqued the works of high-ranking party members, writers such as Nguyễn Đình Thi, Tô Hoài, Xuân Diệu, whom he charged with "just closing their eyes and glorifying *Việt Bắc*."<sup>178</sup> In these articles Trần Dần cites Mayakovsky's poetics to strengthen his cultural dissent. I return to this literary criticism in greater detail in the final section. The party had invited intellectual "debate" as a way to promote the literature of party officials; they did not foresee how intellectuals would seize this opportunity to voice real criticism. The mismanagement of the debates surrounding *Việt Bắc* led the party to take hostile measures to tamp the fires that had sprung up. Trần Dần was accused of being an escapist, a pacifist and infected with bourgeois sentiments. From June–September 1955, authorities put him in detention, locked him in a room for three months and forced him to engage in the practice of self-criticism [*kiểm thảo*].<sup>179</sup> Just two months after his release, the party shipped him off "for reeducation purposes" to observe the innocuously-named "land reform" campaigns being carried out in Bắc Ninh, which involved villagers making severe class allegations against one another and mass public executions.<sup>180</sup>

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reckless in his first great flush of love and "did things that went against the army's regulations on the conduct of personal life." The party disapproved of this relationship and assailed him with rebuke. Some cadres criticized him by saying he had "become depraved, fallen into debauchery!" Others suggested that he was sleeping with the enemy. Hoàng Cầm recalls: "they only had words of ridicule, swift judgments, viewpoints and perspectives of class, ideology, bourgeois, proletariat, etc...they pulled out lofty phrases from the huge archive of political books to pass verdict on a love."

<sup>176</sup> Trần Dần, "Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu" [The Poet Tố Hữu's Perspective on Matters], in Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)*, 141–148. This article was written in May 1955 but remained published until near the end of Trần Dần's life, nearly half a century later.

<sup>177</sup> Thụy Khuê, "Chapter 11: Trần Dần."

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s," 158. It was during this time that Trần Dần wrote "Nhất định thắng" [We Must Win]—the poem central to the *Nhân Văn* controversy.

<sup>180</sup> This was the fifth phase of land reform in Bắc Ninh, from November 2, 1955 until February of 1956. See Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s," 158; Hoàng Cầm, "Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học"; Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)*. An article in *Nhân Văn*, November 5, 1956 is particularly informative on the land reforms: "In the agrarian reform, illegal arrests, imprisonments, investigations (with barbarous torture), executions, requisitions of property, and the quarantining of landowners' houses (or houses of peasants wrongly classified as landowners), which left innocent children to die of starvation, are not exclusively due to the shortcomings of the leadership, but also due to the lack of a complete legal code. If the cadres had felt that they were closely observed by the god of justice... calamities might have been avoided for the masses." *Nhân Văn* was one of the best-known opposition periodicals that was allowed during the three-month period of relative intellectual freedom in the fall of 1956, modeled on Mao's "Hundred Flowers" campaign. For more thorough discussions of the land reforms in Vietnam, see Edwin E. Moise, "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam," *Pacific Affairs* (Spring 1976): 70–92; also his *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983). See also Alec Holcombe, "Politburo's Directive Issued on May 4, 1953 on Some Special Issues Regarding Mass Mobilization," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2010): 243–247, quoting a translated Politburo directive from May 4, 1953. This directive was published in *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập* [Complete Collection of (Communist) Party Documents], a 54 volume work authorized by the Vietnamese Communist Party (Hà Nội: Chính Chi Quốc Gia, 2004).

On February 24, 1956, Khrushchev’s secret speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party leaked and its contents sent shockwaves throughout the socialist world. He had denounced Stalin, the grievous crimes committed under the dictator’s watch, and the dangers of the cult of personality—which Trần Dần had pointed out a year before in his 1955 critique of Tố Hữu’s poem. A few months later, May 26, 1956, Mao Zedong announced the Hundred Flowers Campaign. “The policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” he wrote, “is designed to promote the flourishing of the arts and the progress of science.”<sup>181</sup> In the DRV, this short flowering period manifested in the apparent lifting of restrictions on literary production and encouraged a brief flourishing of journal publishing. The articles and poems published in issues of *Nhân Văn* and *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* [Works of Spring] showcasing artistic innovations that departed from socialist realism or remarked on the state of cultural affairs.<sup>182</sup> They were mild forms of protest.

What was pitched as a loosening of restraints turned out to be a ploy to lure out and punish those who held critical views of the state.<sup>183</sup> Members of the literary establishment’s upper echelon, Tố Hữu and Hoài Thanh, now took it upon themselves to “ferret out reactionary ideas [they] fancied [they] could detect in Trần Dần’s work.”<sup>184</sup> In December 1956, the state seized issues of *Nhân Văn* and *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân*. The Writers’ Association organized a conference with one hundred and fifty attendees to critique Trần Dần’s poem, “Nhật định thắng,” which could be viewed as a poem that “under the guise of optimism for the future...gloomily described the general malaise which was then prevailing in North Vietnam.”<sup>185</sup> Trần Dần was charged as being a “reactionary” disciple of Hu Feng (who had just been arrested as a counterrevolutionary for speaking out against Maoist literary doctrines in China), and jailed in Hoa Loa Prison for three months. He tried to commit suicide by slicing his throat in jail.

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<sup>181</sup> See Mao Tse-Tung [Zedong], *Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom: The Complete Text On The Correct Handling Of Contradictions Among The People* (1957), available at [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5\\_58.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm). This was the speech he gave at the Eleventh Session (Enlarged) of the Supreme State Conference. Mao Zedong went over the verbatim record and made certain additions before its publication in the *People's Daily* on June 19, 1957. For a more thorough examination, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Contradictions Among the People, 1956–1957* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

<sup>182</sup> Hoàng Cầm recalled: “[T]he flowers didn’t have time to bloom before they were crushed. *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* was condemned and [Trần Dần’s] poem “Nhật định thắng” [We Must Win] along with it. People concluded that those powerful members of the literary establishment felt publicly attacked and found a way to revenge that.” Trần Dần’s “We Must Win”—the poem central to the debate—was published in the first issue of *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* in March.

<sup>183</sup> Hoàng Cầm, “Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học.” There was another possibility as to why this particular poem and its author was targeted. Hồng Cương suggested that upon Trần Dần’s return from witnessing the land reforms, he had written about it critically. He wrote: “Trần Dần đã phá trại sáng tác về cải cách ruộng đất bằng cách nêu ra thủ phạm chính trong sai lầm cải cách ruộng đất là Trung ương, rồi mới đến đội, rồi mới đến cốt cán, phải đánh vào Trung ương là chính. Ai viết để phản ánh cải cách ruộng đất thẳng lợi là căn bản thì bị Trần Dần trực tiếp hoặc xúi bợn đồng loã như Hoàng Tích Linh đe dọa là viết như vậy không đúng sự thật, sẽ bị nông dân đánh chết. See Hồng Cương “Bọn phản bội Trần Dần – Hoàng Cầm – Từ Phác” [The Traitors Trần Dần, Hoàng Cầm, Từ Phác], *Quân Đội Nhân Dân* [The People’s Army] no. 437, April 11, 1958, p. 4; edited by Lại Nguyên Ân and republished on talawas, <http://www.talawas.org/?p=5678>.

<sup>184</sup> Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s,” 159. For examples of this witch-hunt, see Từ Bích Hoàng, “Vạch thêm những hoạt động đen tối,” 63–69; Vũ Tú Nam, “Sự thật về con người Trần Dần”; Xuân Diệu’s “Một số vấn đề đấu tranh tư tưởng trong thơ”; and Idem., “Qua cuộc đấu tranh trong nhóm phá hoại *Nhân văn-Giai phẩm*,” in *Trên mặt trận văn nghệ*; Đỗ Nhuận, “Bộ mặt thực của Trần Dần.”

<sup>185</sup> Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s,” 158.

By 1958 the communist regime had completely changed its course, as Mao did. In what is known as the “Anti-Revisionist Campaign,” those targeted in the crackdown were publicly criticized, banned from publishing and condemned to prison labor camps.<sup>186</sup> Trần Dần was banished from the Writers’ Association, forbidden from publishing for three years (it turned out to be nearly thirty), and sentenced to “reeducation labor” [*lao động cải tạo*] from August 1958–February of 1959, along with Lê Đạt, Đinh Hùng, Tử Phác and others. In 1960 the state sent him to Thái Nguyên for another eight months of labor camp. He lived in literary exile until 1988, when he was invited back into the public sphere under a new cultural program.<sup>187</sup>

Studies of Trần Dần’s role in the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair and his relationship to Mayakovsky have focused primarily on the political; there is a lack of attention to the aesthetic and intertextual.<sup>188</sup> These works nonetheless help us understand the cultural climate that encouraged certain sympathies. In his recent essay, “Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese ‘Reform Communism’ in the 1950s,” historian Peter Zinoman suggests that the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm movement embodied DRV intellectuals’ naïve optimism of reforming the party’s ideological structure in a moment of thaw after Stalin’s death. Zinoman sees “the veneration of the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky by the leaders of Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm” as their alignment “with the cultural mood and politics of reform communism in the Soviet Union, where ‘a reinvigorated ‘cult’ of Mayakovsky found expression under Khrushchev.’” According to Zinoman, Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm writers such as Trần Dần and Lê Đạt “mobilized the poet’s

<sup>186</sup> See Grossheim, “The Lao Động Party.” It seems the DRV took cue from China.

<sup>187</sup> Despite all the trauma of these years, Trần Dần was remarkably prolific. He produced a new collection of poetry, essays and novels nearly every year (with a few lapses) for nearly thirty years under literary obscurity and censorship—a corpus totaling twenty collections of works. These include: 1959: *Sắc lệnh 59* [Decree 59] (poems); *Con tàu xã hội* [The Ship of Society] (poems); *17 tình ca* [17 Love Songs] (poems). 1960: *Công tỉnh* [Province Gate / Crossing Consciousness] (poems, published in 1994). 1961: *Đêm núm sen* [Night of Lotus Nipples / Night of Grasping Lotus] (novel). 1963: *Jò Joacx* (poems); 1964: *Mùa Sạch* [Clean Season] (poems, published in 1998), *Những ngã tư và những cột đèn* [Intersections and Street Lamps] (novel); 1965: *Một ngày Cầm Phá* [A Cầm Phá Day] (novel). 1967: *Con trắng* [White Child / White Creature] (poems-diary). 1968: *177 cảnh* [177 Scenes] (epic on silk or *hùng ca lụa*). 1974: *Động đất tâm thần* [Mental Earthquake] (poems-diary). 1978: *Thơ không lời - Mây không lời* [Wordless Poems – Wordless Clouds] (painting-poems). 1979: *bộ tam Thiên Thanh - 77 - Ngày ngày* [Three Set of Thiên Thanh – 77 – Day After Day]. 1980: *bộ tam 36* [Three Set 36] (long poems - *Tư Mã zâng sao*). 1987: *Thơ mini* [Mini Poems]. The majority of those works that remained unpublished during his lifetime reveal an evolving strain of Vietnamese modernism forged during the revolution and after, taking on even more far-reaching avant-garde characteristics out of the public eye. These experiments resembled more closely the formalist experiments of the French writer Guillaume Apollinaire (especially his calligrams), Russian futurism and formalism, as well as American language poetry. After Renovation [Đổi Mới] began in 1986, Vietnam attempted to move to a market economy. With a new cultural program to generate capital from literary output, the state invited Trần Dần and his friend to rejoin literary life in 1988. In 1991, the epic poem that he had written in 1957 in the midst of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm controversy, “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!” was published, in part, for the first time over thirty years after it was written. See Lại Nguyên Ân, “Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm ‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’ Hùng Ca Lụa Trần Dần” [A Few Comments Written After Trần Dần’s Epic on Silk “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!”], in Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa* (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009), 122. Trần Dần published another collection, a novel in verse that was awarded a prize by the Writers’ Association posthumously. This was *Công tỉnh* [Province Gate (or) Crossing Consciousness] (1960) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1994). Trần Dần passed away in 1997, but the project of revising his work continues to this day.

<sup>188</sup> Striking similarities exist between Mayakovsky and Trần Dần. Both men began their artistic careers as avant-garde poets and painters with modernist orientations. Both experienced the collision of artistic and political destinies, and conflicts between personal aspiration and social duty. Both spoke out against corrupt cultural officials, political pandering, and literary servility. Both were subject to public censure by the establishment and forced to revise their modernist origins. Both attempted suicide, though only Mayakovsky succeeds. And like Mayakovsky, Trần Dần’s works were also buried until revision projects resurrected them as cultural currency.

image in service of a relatively orthodox agenda” to reform communism (rather than to dissent). Zinoman’s essay underscores a key to understanding cultural dynamics as part of multidirectional, international and overlapping currents. However, establishing a political link by commenting obliquely on literary affiliation risks restricting literary impulses to the political. This may impose “a series of annexations, short-circuits, and passes in silence over the actual aesthetic, formal or stylistic characteristics that actually make literature.”<sup>189</sup> Close attention to the inter/textual details of the literature provide more nuanced understanding of cross-cultural poetics and provoke considerations of how the aesthetic project advances a cultural dissent.

## Constructions of Mayakovsky and Modernist Poetics

### *Mayakovsky’s Death and Resurrection*

In revolutionary Russia, suicide amounted to a counter-revolutionary declaration. When Vladimir Mayakovsky died of a self-inflicted shotgun wound on April 14, 1930, the news resounded throughout the Soviet Union. It was known that the poet had a difficult relationship with the literary establishment and communist party. In view of Mayakovsky’s popular support, extra care was taken to stifle any identification of his suicide with political despair. The Soviet state took great pains to explain the nature of his act as exclusively personal (disappointment in love) and invent a convincing, moving fable that inculpated nobody. Leon Trotsky writing in May 1930 of the poet’s suicide lends a sardonic tone: “The official report on the suicide hastens to declare, in the language of judicial protocol as edited in the ‘Secretariat,’ that the suicide of Mayakovsky ‘has nothing in common with the public and literary activity of the poet.’ That is to say that the willful death of Mayakovsky was in no way connected with his life or that his life had nothing in common with his revolutionary-poetic work... This is untrue, unnecessary, and stupid.”<sup>190</sup> In the years following his death, there was a rapid and efficient movement to obliterate his name from the Soviet cultural arena. This was until 1935, when Lili and Osip Brik convinced Stalin that Mayakovsky was *the* poet of the revolution.<sup>191</sup> As Pasternak wrote, “Mayakovsky began to be cultivated forcefully, like potatoes in the time of Catherine the Great” and fed to the people.<sup>192</sup> In 1935, Stalin proclaimed him to be “the best most talent poet of our Soviet epoch,” issuing a resurrection of Mayakovsky that Pasternak viewed as “the poet’s second death.”<sup>193</sup>

The project of resurrecting Mayakovsky required carefully-crafted networks of erasures. Laura Shear Urbaszewski notes that “One particularly challenging problem was Mayakovsky’s widespread reputation as an iconoclast and a futurist, a poet connected with “decadent” literary movements.” State-sponsored publications, critical commentaries, conferences, and jubilees were

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<sup>189</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 1.

<sup>190</sup> First published in Bulletin of the Left Opposition (Russian), May 1930. From *International Socialist Review* 31 no.1 (January–February 1970): 44–46. This is also in Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Art*, trans. Eide O’Callaghan for the Trotsky Internet Archive, September 2008, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/05/mayakovsky.htm>.

<sup>191</sup> See Urbaszewski, “Canonizing the ‘Best, Most Talented’ Soviet Poet.”

<sup>192</sup> Boris Pasternak, *Liudi i polozheniia*, 149, cited in Urbaszewski, “Canonizing the ‘Best, Most Talented’ Soviet Poet,” 637.

<sup>193</sup> See Chantal Sundaram, *Manufacturing Culture: The Soviet State and the Mayakovsky Legend, 1930–1993* (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2000), 141; Patricia Blake, “The Two Deaths of Vladimir Mayakovsky,” in *Vladimir Mayakovsky, The Bedbug and Selected Poems*, trans. Max Hayward and George Reavey, ed. Patricia Blake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 9–50.

strategically launched to dictate how Mayakovsky's life, poetry, and historical role would be interpreted. These devices served not to promote his texts as literary models, but to forcefully shape them into a genealogy in which Mayakovsky was to represent a final flowering stage of what soviet literature was to become: socialist realism. They strove to erase the subversive aspects of his life and conveniently overlooked his more provocative work so as to not weaken a figure launched as a new hero-model of socialist cultural production.<sup>194</sup> Until someone paid greater attention to his neglected love poems, personal reflections or epic poetry, Mayakovsky remained a mythical figure of propagandistic poetry, a caricature of a socialist hero.

As Chantal Sudaram reminds us, however, commentaries are not static. The works themselves often "retain contradictory, potentially subversive values" that make it difficult for canonizing authorities to completely eliminate the artifact's alternative meanings.<sup>195</sup> Triolet wrote how she despised the way "historians writing their histories posthumously ravaged [Mayakovsky]." Her memoir, then, serves as an intertextual corrective. Triolet's text mediated alternative understanding of Mayakovsky's poetry and person for the poets of 1950s Vietnam. While it affirmed Mayakovsky's socialist ethos, it also celebrated his modernist avant-garde

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<sup>194</sup> Sundaram, *Manufacturing Culture*, 143.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. Robert Payne wrote: "As [Mayakovsky's] legend grew, he became more powerful, more heretical, and more dangerous to the Soviet state. The Soviets realized too late that they had canonized a heretic. For heretic he was—to the very end, to the last breath. He never sacrificed his individuality, never submitted to the iron rules of the communist state. On the contrary, he made use of the communists for his own ends. Proud and insolent, profoundly in love with freedom, hating all bondage, he became a prophet proclaiming a new age of freedom." See Robert Payne, "Introduction," in *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, trans. Guy Daniels (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 18.

<sup>195</sup> Mayakovsky's birthplace of Bagdadi in Georgia was renamed Mayakovsky in his honor; in 1938, the Mayakovskaya Metro Station was opened to the public; in 1974 the Russian State Museum of Mayakovsky was opened in the center of Moscow in the building where Mayakovsky resided from 1919 to 1930. The mythos of Mayakovsky travelled far. In 1957, the American poet Frank O'Hara wrote a poem named after him, "Mayakovsky," in which the speaker is standing in a bathtub, a probable reference to his satirical play depicting disillusionment, "The Bathhouse." The fourth stanza goes:

Now I am quietly waiting for  
the catastrophe of my personality  
to seem beautiful again,  
and interesting, and modern.

The country is grey and  
brown and white in trees,  
snows and skies of laughter  
always diminishing, less funny  
not just darker, not just grey.

It may be the coldest day of  
the year, what does he think of  
that? I mean, what do I? And if I do,  
perhaps I am myself again.

See Frank O'Hara, "Mayakovsky," *Meditations in an Emergency* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1996). In 1986 English singer and songwriter Billy Bragg recorded the album *Talking with the Taxman about Poetry*, named after a namesake Mayakovsky poem; in 2007 Craig Volk's stage biodrama *Mayakovsky Takes The Stage* (based on Mayakovsky's screenplay *At The Top Of My Voice*) won the PEN-USA Literary Award for Best Stage Drama.

orientation and his infamy as a futurist whose poetry attacked the artificiality of socialist literature and its establishment. Within these pages, Trần Dần could read Mayakovsky's reputation as an iconoclast, a rabble-rouser and agitator who wrote poems identifying with "card sharps" and "pimps," and singing "in the name of and on behalf of alcoholics, *soldiers in disciplinary units*, and criminals."<sup>196</sup> Mayakovsky's poems and plays, especially *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House*, were deeply satirical attacks on party officials and bureaucrats and those writings that only serviced party propaganda.<sup>197</sup> Trần Dần takes up a strikingly similar project in his critical writings and poetry during the 1950s.

### *Triolet's Mayakovsky: A Counter-Narrative*

The Russian futurist poetics that the Vietnamese engaged with was always filtered through French-language texts and avant-garde sensibilities. Elsa Triolet's memoir enabled a complex conversation of Russian, French, and Vietnamese modernist poetics. A Russian-Jew, Triolet had been intimate with Mayakovsky for eighteen years, since she was a teenage girl, and "knew him variously as lover, friend, poet, and champion of the Revolution."<sup>198</sup> During her formative years in pre-revolutionary Russia, she travelled in intimate circles with members of the Russian avant-garde and counted the famous artists, writers and thinkers among her friends. Cubo-Futurist and Formalist aesthetics significantly inform her writing, and Mayakovsky was arguably the greatest influence on Triolet.<sup>199</sup> Triolet immigrated to France in 1917, but remained connected to the Russian avant-garde and their activities. In 1939 Triolet was married to Louis Aragon, one of the founders of the French Surrealist movement and leading member of the French Communist Party.<sup>200</sup> Considering her background and aesthetic sympathies, how did she frame Mayakovsky's life and work? What features do her text underscore? If Vietnamese writers engaged with the Russian avant-garde through Triolet's mediation, how did she shape the image of Mayakovsky in their minds—in contradistinction to socialist constructions? Triolet's memoir

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<sup>196</sup> Sundaram, *Manufacturing Culture*, 34. My emphasis.

<sup>197</sup> We know Trần Dần had access to these works. See Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)*. See Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*.

<sup>198</sup> Susan De Muth, "Introduction," in Elsa Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 5. It was through Triolet that Mayakovsky met and fell in love with her sister, Lili. For the rest of his life, Mayakovsky would be involved in an intense, volatile and unconventional affair with Lili, even living *a trois* with her and her husband Osip Brik, a fact Soviet biographers often elide. For a more intimate look at their relationship, see Ann and Samuel Charters, *I Love: The Story of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

<sup>199</sup> See Claire Davison, *Art and the Artist in the Literary Works of Elsa Triolet* (PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 1991), 30–34.

<sup>200</sup> Thus, Mayakovsky had been transmitted to the Vietnamese through a French avant-garde lens. Having been involved in Dadaism from 1919 to 1924, Aragon became a founding member of Surrealism in 1924, with André Breton and Philippe Soupault under the pen-name "Aragon." In the 1920s, Aragon became a "fellow traveler" of the French Communist Party (PCF) along with several other surrealists, and joined the Party in January 1927. In 1933 he began to write for the party's newspaper, *L'Humanité*, in the "news in brief" section. He would remain a member for the rest of his life, writing several political poems including one to Maurice Thorez, the general secretary of the PCF. During the World Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture (1935), Aragon opposed his former friend André Breton, who wanted to use the opportunity as a tribune to defend the writer Victor Serge, associated with Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition. Nevertheless Aragon was also critical of the USSR, particularly after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) during which Joseph Stalin's personality cult was denounced by Nikita Khrushchev. See Hannah Josephson and Malcom Cowley, eds., *Aragon: Poet of the Resistance* (New York: Duell and Sloan, 1945); Max Adereth, *Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon: An Introduction to Their Interwoven Lives and Works* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994).

disturbed the official “Soviet poet” image with contradictions and complexities that the Stalinist state worked to erase. While establishing Mayakovsky’s socialist ethos, her memoir celebrates his identity as a modernist and avant-garde. This is the memoir’s central theme and tension. Triolet reiterates the persistent conflict between artistic and political destiny, and along with it, Mayakovsky’s attempt to synthesize aesthetic freedom and ethical responsibility. Within these pages we read the tensions between the “I” of the poet’s subjectivity, and the “we” of those making history played out in a drama that pits the personal and poetic in conflict with the public and political. These were the very same conflicts experienced by writers in 1950s North Vietnam.

The roughly 90-page memoir is divided into seven sections: a preface and six chapters. The preface establishes the book’s guiding logic. It opens as follows:

Mayakovsky was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> July 1893 in the Georgian village of Bagdadi. His father was a forester. He was the son of tall trees and the beauty of the Caucasus. He grew to be taller, stronger, and more remote than other men. He died in 1930, felled at his height.<sup>201</sup>

The opening firmly roots Mayakovsky in the reader’s consciousness as part of a mighty landscape, naturalizing him as it compactly portrays his physical, personal, and social stature. Note that “he was felled,” a phrasing with particularly incriminating implications. Triolet makes clear his cultural impact in citing the square and bus station now named after him, as his “undisputable genius is recognized by the whole nation.” But what is missing from official paeans now issued by the “literature officials,” as Triolet wryly calls them, are the more complex, personal details. Triolet draws attention to those other works that have been ignored and neglected in the years after his death and during the period of his resurrection as the “people’s great poet.” She underscores that while his slogans and “publicity poems” (propaganda) are etched in people’s minds, his “love poetry” and “satirical poems” have not lost their “devastating power.” She turns her attention to these works throughout the memoir. This section closes by recalling a forceful phrase painted in huge letters on the brick wall adjoining Mayakovsky’s house: “All my thundering poetic might / I give to you / the attacking class.” This was, Triolet wrote, “the profession of his faith.”<sup>202</sup> The section’s closing statement presents a fitting symmetry with its opening, that is, a declaration of poetic fury towards “the attacking class.”

### *Defending Mayakovsky, the Avant-garde*

Triolet’s memoir pivots on acts of defense. She writes that she talked about his poetry whenever she had the chance, she “discussed it, defended it” until her voice was hoarse against those “intellectuals” and “aesthetes” who hatefully declared his modernist poetry to be “incomprehensible.” Mayakovsky was forced to address and account for the “incomprehensibility” of his poetry throughout his life. She quotes his telling article “The Workers and Peasants Don’t Understand You” (1928) to illustrate: “...they joyfully shout: “I don’t understand the Futurists!” The clarion call has gone up again and again over the past fifteen years, always just as excited and happy.” She notes how Mayakovsky defended himself

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<sup>201</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky: A Memoire*, 9.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

against the charge of being obscure, elitist/individualistic, un-proletariat. Mayakovsky argued that poetry should not condescend the masses and lower its quality; one should help them understand poetry with some critical guidance:

Art is not, of itself, art for the masses. It can only become that as a result of many forces pulling together, critical analysis to establish the work's validity and usefulness; judged useful, mass distribution via the Party machine...you have to learn how to organize a book's being understood."<sup>203</sup>

Ironically, the party machine under Stalin would control and manipulate the way Mayakovsky would be read and remembered, not for his aesthetic innovations but his “socialist spirit” and propaganda. In framing the attack on Mayakovsky and his defense, Triolet sets up a dialectical argument she then participates in. Triolet plays cultural translator for those who could not read him. She parses the particulars of Mayakovsky’s futurist sensibilities and formal innovations, investing his modernist style with great significance. While admitting that his poems from 1912 “are the most obscure,” she discusses these “innovative” aesthetic features to illustrate their purposes and invest them with revolutionizing potential. Trần Dân and his cohorts would have recognized their own poetic tendencies in Triolet’s description.

Triolet devotes a great number of pages to describing Mayakovsky’s futurist background and the vitality of those years. In 1912, the Futurists published their manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” and took their act to the streets.<sup>204</sup> They performed readings in city squares, cafes, cabarets, hotel foyers, and music halls. Triolet recalls how these futurist evenings were like boxing matches that sometimes ended in fistfights and salvos of rotten eggs and tomatoes. People were often “shouting, heckling, whistling...” all the while the poets thundered off verses, yelled back at the audience, hurled curses, and even berated them.<sup>205</sup> According to Triolet, these Futurist performances were a kind of protest of philistine tastes directed at “intellectuals and aesthetes” and “designed to flabbergast the bourgeoisie.”<sup>206</sup> Triolet’s treatment of this passage emphasizes Mayakovsky’s incredible courage in the face of ridicule. Her language reveals an admiration for avant-garde audacity.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>204</sup> The manifesto of Russian Futurist, though less militant than the Italian manifesto, echoes similar tones of a destruction of the past and a love of speed and modern technology. They urged “throwing Pushkins, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi and others from the Steamship of Modernity.” See Anne Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51; John E. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988). Compare this aesthetic to that of the first futurist manifesto, in which F.T. Marinetti wrote: “...today, we establish Futurism, because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni and antiquarians. For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards.... Museums: cemeteries!... Identical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another.... Why poison ourselves? Why rot?.... And what is there to see in an old picture except the laborious contortions of an artist throwing himself against the barriers that thwart his desire to express his dream completely?... Admiring an old picture is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn instead of hurtling it far off, in violent spasms of action and creation.... Do you, then, wish to waste all your best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down?....When the future is barred...the admirable past may be a solace for the ills of the moribund, the sickly, the prisoner... But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong Futurists! See F. T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/ConstrBau/Readings/MarinettiFuturist09.pdf>.

<sup>205</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 27.

<sup>206</sup> See Esla Triolet, *Mayakovsky: A Memoire*, trans. Susan de Muth (London: Hearing Eye, 2002), 19.

Triolet returns again and again to the fact that even though Mayakovsky gave hundreds of readings and lectures all over the USSR, “in every audience, there would always be a little group who would gang up against him in some spiteful alliance.”<sup>207</sup> She tells us that “in 1913–1914 the press were only interested in wounding Mayakovsky.” Critics called him a “lout, unrefined, a megalomaniac...” who inserted himself too much into the poems.<sup>208</sup> These were the same charges that the Vietnamese “culture officials” lobbied against Trần Dần and Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm writers. Triolet illuminates how literary officials misunderstood Mayakovsky’s brash poetic voice. His first major long poem, “A Cloud in Trousers,” for example, is a tale of love and poetry in bold, jarring images, using a “depoeticized” language of the streets. In it, Mayakovsky scorns the lofty image of the poet. Instead, the author says he is merely “spit from the filthy night on the palm of a beggar.” Poetry does not come easy, he asserts. It causes “blisters on the brain” and demands tremendous creative energy:

Then after they clear the rhymes  
while boiling a soup with birds and flowers  
the tongue dumb on the dusty road is dragged  
Because it has no way to speak, shout!<sup>209</sup>

Triolet notes that while Mayakovsky’s *Khoroch!* [Good!] was a “hymn to joy and optimism” it still describes the real “suffering, struggles, victories and everyday life of those difficult years from 1917 on.”<sup>210</sup> Contrary to the edicts of socialist realism, which forbids writers from describing “demoralizing” aspects of life, Mayakovsky did not flinch from depicting images of decay, death, sorrow, starvation, devastation. Likewise, Triolet does not shy from quoting lines from his poems to showcase this fact. Within these lines, Trần Dần and his cohorts could see a blunt and bracing treatment of social situations using modernist forms. Triolet recounts how Mayakovsky’s poems were opposed by every faction: those intellectuals who read Pushkin and Tolstoy (the die-hard classicists) and those who only read proletarian writers. He was at once criticized for writing “socialist” poems *and* for writing lyrical poems. Leon Trotsky writing of *Literature and Revolution* proclaimed that “A Bohemian nihilism exists in the exaggerated Futurist rejection of the past, but not a proletarian revolutionism.”<sup>211</sup>

Mayakovsky’s detractors were quick to make distinctions. Whereas “we [the communists] stepped into the revolution...Futurism fell into it...That is why Futurists like Mayakovsky, are weakest artistically at these points when they finish as Communists...The futurist poets have not mastered the elements of the Communist point of view and world attitude sufficiently to find an organic expression for them in words; they have not entered, so to speak, into their blood.”<sup>212</sup> According to Trotsky, “Mayakovsky’s revolutionary individualism poured itself enthusiastically into proletarian revolution, but did not blend with it...His subconscious...is not that of a worker, but of a Bohemian.”<sup>213</sup> Trần Dần’s life and works were also subject to such criticisms despite his service to the revolution. Like Trần Dần, Mayakovsky was lampooned for instilling too much of his own “ego and arrogance,” the poet’s pathos and his

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>209</sup> See Victor Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983).

<sup>210</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 46.

<sup>211</sup> Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (1925) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 131.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 132–146.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 149.

personal loves into what is supposed to be the proletariat story of mass sacrifice: “so that it is not the revolution that is struggling with obstacles, but it is Mayakovsky who does athletic stunts in the arena of words.”<sup>214</sup>

Triolet refutes the false dichotomy of aesthetic ideals and socialist duty. She makes a striking point when she tells us that from 1919–1922, Mayakovsky was engaged in writing great poems like the *150, 000, 000*, an epic propaganda-art poem, as well as *I Love*, a masterful example of the lyrical form; he was writing *About This*, “a love poem” and one of the most remarkable works for its perfection of its form...And at the same time he was making advertising posters for state industries, ordered by unions and officials.”<sup>215</sup> Triolet emphasizes how Mayakovsky could both service socialism by writing propaganda and compose highly personal poems. Triolet then frames her argument (and Mayakovsky’s) with one of his love poems that, interestingly, privileges personal love over collective war:

[...]

People,  
Listen!

Get out of the trenches  
You can finish your war later.

If  
The fight reels on  
Blood-drunk like Bacchus,  
Even then  
Words of love will not perish.  
Dear Germans!  
I know  
You have Goethe’s Gretchen  
On your lips.  
The Frenchman dies  
On the bayonet, smiling  
And the shot-down pilot  
Smiles as he crashes –  
For they remember, Traviata,  
Your mouth in a kiss...<sup>216</sup>

In the poem, the passions of love infuse with, indeed displaces, the passions of war. Triolet suggests that the cultural establishment’s problem is its inability to reconcile the complexities and contradictions of Mayakovsky’s poetry, set as it was on narrow singular vision.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>215</sup> “150,000,000” is an allegory of the decisive battle between 150,000,000 Soviet workers and the evil forces of capitalism, led by Woodrow Wilson. In style, the poem parodies the Russian *bylina*, or folk epic. This work, however, pleased neither the artistic community—Boris Pasternak in particular—nor the proletariat reader. See Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 62.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 77. This is from Mayakovsky’s *The Backbone Flute* (1916).

## *Revision, Renunciations and Erasures*

The memoir paints a portrait of a pained artist who was forced to revise and renounce his modernist origins. Triolet's constant return to the effects of this self-denial is suggestive. Quoting part of a speech he gave shortly before his death, Triolet shows that Mayakovsky was eventually forced to admit that his poems "weren't readily comprehensible." She tells us that "as early as 1920, Mayakovsky said that he no longer considered himself a Futurist. In 1923 however, he announced that he would stick to the term because it had become "a flag for so many people."<sup>217</sup> Triolet underscores the way Mayakovsky "tried to move closer to the VAPP [Association of Proletariat Writers of the Soviet Union], despite the organization's openly-stated opinion of him—that he was nothing but a 'fellow traveler' compared with the real proletariat poets." This meant he had to distance himself from his past. In a speech he gave in 1928 on party policy on literature, he denounced *Lef* as being outdated. This was the journal Mayakovsky founded with Osip Brik and that had become "inextricably linked [with Futurism] in the minds of the public." In February 1930 at a writer's organization conference, he attacked the Constructivist and Futurists for not being proletariat enough, and "being more concerned with style than content." But Triolet makes an interest linkage at this point. She writes: "At the exactly same time—February 1930—that's to say two months before his death, he officially joined the RAPP, which later degenerated into a disgusting sort of sect."

Triolet's positioning of these events—Mayakovsky's denunciation of the avant-garde, his eventual membership in the "disgusting sect" of the proletariat writer's group, and his suicide—links his death to the erasure of his identity.<sup>218</sup> The RAPP, or Russian Association of Proletariat Writers, was the one most closely aligned with government policy. By 1934 it had subsumed all other writer's group and ruthlessly enforced socialist realism as "the official style of Soviet culture."<sup>219</sup> Immediately following this section, Triolet tells us that she "wishes to return to the period of 1912–1913 and those first Futurist evenings. This swift shift juxtaposes the vitality of those early years with his desperation in 1928.

In Chapter Five, Triolet returns to the fact that Mayakovsky was assailed by "conjecture...judgment, gossip and slander" to the very end. She recalls again the last speech he gave two weeks before his death, addressing the stream of scorn:

...because of this I often have days when I wish I could escape somewhere – anywhere – just so I wouldn't have to listen....I usually manage to pick myself up...start fighting back, insisting on my right to exist as a writer of the revolution, and not to be marginalized...The revolutionary writer is not someone of the fringe whose books are left gathering dust on the shelf...but that the revolutionary writer is a man who participates fully in ordinary, everyday life and the construction of socialism.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 26.

<sup>218</sup> The RAPP, Russian Association of Proletariat Writers, became the strongest writers' organization, and most closely allied to government policy. By 1932, they had subsumed all the other groups, and they were responsible for promoting the doctrinaire socialist realism as the official mode of cultural production in the Soviet Union.

<sup>219</sup> See Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. H. F. Scott (New York: International Publishers, 1935).

<sup>220</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 75.

Triolet then turns her attention from the speech to his suicide note, placing the two into an implicating intratextual relationship. Triolet’s thematic and formal organization leads readers to draw conclusions that the cultural critics were ultimately to blame for his demise. Because Mayakovsky was not allowed to have an everyday life, to be a poet and participate in the “construction of socialism,” he suffered internal fissures that destroyed him. Mayakovsky’s desire to resolve those conflicts finds particular resonance with Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm writers of 1950s Vietnam.

Triolet tells us that by 1925 Mayakovsky was a star; people recognized him wherever he went: “Autographs, adulation, soviet youth with him and for him...he contributed to a considerable number of newspapers and magazines. Yet he continued to have problems with the ‘literary establishment’. Mayakovsky never gave up and defended his position and his poetry to the end.”<sup>221</sup> Triolet cites the last recital he gave before his death to underscore the way Mayakovsky was constantly admonished, hounded and forced to account before the communist party:

Called to account

    Before the CCC [Central Control Committee of the Communist Party]  
    Of our beautiful future,

Over the heads

of the ruthless careerists

    and gangs of opportunistic “poets”

        I’ll be waving

            All hundred volumes

                Of my party books

                    My Bolshevik party card.<sup>222</sup>

Triolet’s citational choices cast Mayakovsky as a distinct socialist hero: the persecuted poet that battled the small-minded, petty and corrupt of the communist establishment. Triolet tells us “They persecuted him right up to his death.” By this she meant the “literary officials,” those who were members of the socialist writer’s organizations and participated in the “Writer’s Congress.”<sup>223</sup> Not without a note of irony, Triolet reminds us of the dictate regarding Mayakovsky, pronounced by none other than Stalin: “Indifference to his memory and his works is a crime.”<sup>224</sup> Indeed Triolet takes up the task of ensuring that a fuller account of his works and memory existed: she highlights complex aspects of Mayakovsky’s life and work that the Soviet cultural establishment clipped in their socialist rendering.

In the final chapter Triolet provides a provocative excerpt from one of his “love poems” to make a point:

Book –

*The Whole World –*

        looking for a name.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, 64.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

“The twentieth Century,  
Whom shall we resurrect?  
- There is a Mayakovsky...  
Let’s try to find something  
more appealing,

the poet’s not handsome enough.  
Reject.”

I’ll yell  
From this very page  
- Don’t look any further!  
Resurrect me!<sup>225</sup>

The irony of this poem is obvious in retrospect: after years of ridiculing and rejecting Mayakovsky as an unrefined, unproletariat avant-garde and not good enough, “the workshop of human resurrections”—the Soviet state—brought Mayakovsky back to life as their socialist hero (while eliding his modernist poetry).<sup>226</sup> Triolet directs attention to the cultural factory, the state workshop that attempted to (cheaply) manufacture Mayakovsky as Soviet product. Triolet worked to erase their mistakes and insincerities. If the complexities of Mayakovsky’s poems and person were not readily comprehensible, then Triolet’s textual mediation—translation, citation, explication and framing—invests them with new clarity and meaning. Trần Dần would have found sympathy for own predicaments in Triolet’s efforts to redeem Mayakovsky.

### *Hoàng Ngọc Hiến and the Politics of Literary Criticism in the DRV*

Perhaps the most important study of the Trần Dần-Mayakovsky relationship belongs to literary scholar and critic, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến (1930–2011).<sup>227</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến built his career as an authority on Soviet literature in general and Vladimir Mayakovsky in particular. During his life he published several volumes dedicated to the translation and exegesis of Mayakovsky’s work, including the controversial satirical plays that attacked communist bureaucracy.<sup>228</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến graduated from the University of Moscow in 1959 after defending a doctoral dissertation on Mayakovsky. This timing meant that he was present in the Soviet Union during an important moment of cultural transformation. In the “thaw” of de-Stalinization, he would have been acutely aware of the significant attempts to challenge the official interpretation of Mayakovsky as a series of state manipulations. As Robert Payne notes: “The government claimed him, but could not take possession of him. The legend he had created for himself was more powerful than the

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. This line on “the workshops of human resurrections” can be found in Mayakovsky’s epic poem “About This,” (1923) under the heading “Faith.”

<sup>227</sup> He was lecturer at the University of Pedagogy in Vinh from 1964–1973; he was both lecturer and director of the liberal arts Nguyễn Du School of Writing (1974–1993).

<sup>228</sup> These works include his translations of Mayakovsky’s plays, *Maiacôpxki* (1984); and his study *Văn học Xô Viết đương đại* [Contemporary Soviet Literature] (1987).

official caricature presented to the public.”<sup>229</sup> How does Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s familiarity with the debates surrounding his life-long literary subject translate in his scholarship?

His 1976 monograph, *Maiacôpxki. Con người, cuộc đời và thơ* [Mayakovsky: Person, Life and Poems] can be read as a barometer of the still-tense political climate in the years following the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair.<sup>230</sup> Respectful of Mayakovsky but dismissive towards Trần Dần and his cohorts, the book could be read as an example of literary scholarship that Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn suggests “appeared as sub-texts of the political narratives.”<sup>231</sup> Like other literary scholars in the DRV, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến had to tread carefully when attempting to introduce more “subversive” modernist literature into the Vietnamese public imagination. This meant that he had to, during certain periods, show an apparently critical political stance towards certain individuals (Trần Dần and Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm supporters) in order to advance more liberal cultural agendas. This required careful maneuvering. This scholarship is important for two reasons. 1) It introduces Mayakovsky’s more “subversive” works into the Vietnamese intellectual arena and gives Vietnamese intellectuals access to a greater range of complexities. 2) It brings to the fore issues of literary contestations and reveals practices of translation, interpretation and appropriation as tools to construct and control meaning. Arguably, one could view Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s rebuke of Trần Dần as a veiled attempt to stow more subversive subject matters into the conversation. For example, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến draws attention to the fact that by the 1950s in the Soviet Union and elsewhere there were those who were “contesting” the official image of Mayakovsky, even “misreading” his socialist enunciations to advance their own cultural agendas. The trajectory of Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s career supports this view.

In 1979, just three years after he published the monograph, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến himself was protesting the doctrinaire character of socialism realism in Vietnam. In an article that appeared in *Văn Nghệ* [Literary and Arts], he notes how writers have become too concerned with writing “what should be” [*phải tồn tại*] instead of “what is” [*đang tồn tại*]. According to him, this tendency shows they have adopted “doctrinaire realism” [*chủ nghĩa hiện thực phái đạo*], a kind of writing that blindly follows fixed rules and discourages the telling of truths. He pointed out that pressure from the party to write only in the formulaic socialist realist model had smothered creativity.<sup>232</sup> In 1983, he actively lobbied for a renovation of literature and loosening of cultural restraints.<sup>233</sup> By the end of his career he had earned a reputation as a progressive literary scholar. He published extensive volumes on modernist literature and theory. He headed the Nguyen Du School of Writing and devoted efforts to promoting work that would reinvigorate Vietnamese literature after the creative drought.<sup>234</sup> He counted such writers as Bảo Ninh,

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<sup>229</sup> Payne, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, 18.

<sup>230</sup> See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki. Con người, cuộc đời và thơ* [Mayakovsky: Person, Life and Poems] (Hà Nội: Đại Học và Chung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, 1976).

<sup>231</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, *Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics* (PhD thesis, Victoria University, 2004), 4.

<sup>232</sup> See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, “Về một đặc điểm của văn học nghệ thuật ở ta trong giai đoạn vừa qua” [Some Characteristics of Our Literature and Art in our Recent Period], *Văn Nghệ* no. 23 (June 9, 1979).

<sup>233</sup> See Đeet Thân, “Nhã đau (đầu) c c thh) giác (ViVi vv Hoàng Nggn Hiin)” [The Pain (and Tenterhooks) of Intuition (Writing on Hoàng Nggn Hiin)], *Văn Hoá Ngh An* [Ngh An Culture], January 27, 2011, <http://vanhoanghean.com.vn/dat-va-nguoi-xu-nghe6/nguoi-xu-nghe43/noi-dau-dau-cua-truc-giac-viet-ve-hoang-ngoc-hien>. This article discusses Hoàng Ngicle di great efforts and risks in lobbying for creative liberties and the dissolution of socialist realism in Vietnam.

<sup>234</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s scholarly contributions to the new direction of literary studies in Vietnam include, among other works, *Văn học - học văn* [Literature and Literary Studies] (1992); *Văn học gần và xa* [Literature Near and Far] (2000); *Triết lý văn hóa và triết luận văn chương* [Cultural Philosophies and Philosophic Essays on Literature]

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, Dương Thu Hương among his proteges. Significantly, these writers and their works engaged in relatively strong critiques of the communist state, monolithic depictions, mythologizing heroes, totalizing narratives, teleological aims, and romanticizations—the very issues Trần Dần criticized in the 1950s.<sup>235</sup>

Throughout the study, the author stresses that “Introducing the person of Mayakovsky, this author essentially emphasizes the poet’s socialist spirit: separating him from this spirit makes it easy to misunderstand or distort his personality.” In order to discuss Mayakovsky’s avant-garde background, the scholar must continually affirm that the socialist aspects of the poet always came before the more controversial aspects of his literary career. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến carefully plots out the transmission of Mayakovsky in Vietnam, noting how as early as the late 1940s, Mayakovsky’s poems were available in Vietnam. In 1954 the state wanted to “elevate political thinking and literary consciousness in the cadre and masses” and disseminated French-language Marxist books and newspapers from France and the Soviet Union (*Litterature sovietique* and *Nouvelle critique* for example). He underscores how the dominant transmission of Mayakovsky’s poems have been the work of ideological institutions. Interestingly, the scholar gives the greatest significance to Triolet’s 1939 memoir as Vietnam’s original engagement with Mayakovsky. He does not mention the way Triolet valorizes Mayakovsky’s avant-garde stature and futurist poetics; he does not remark on her discussion of his lifelong conflict with the cultural establishment—but he does direct readers to this text that he regards highly.

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s focus destroys the illusion that the state held absolute interpretive authority on a cultural product. He informs readers that in the Soviet Union and elsewhere there were attempts to contest the official image of Mayakovsky. He quotes an article published in *Văn Nghệ* no 17 on September 9, 1958: “These days...there are a number of people, in Russia there are a few and in other countries there are more, who try desperately to cling to the fact that Mayakovsky struggled against those who “abused authority” [*mại dụng Quân*] and misuse and mis-explain some of Mayakovsky’s poems to smear the government that the people themselves raised.”<sup>236</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến states his reluctance in being blessed with the legacy of Mayakovsky’s satirical works, because “in some ways it is linked to the lies of the deceptive Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm clique.” And yet, he pays considerable attention to these works.<sup>237</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s presentation of this controversy points out the way others have employed Mayakovsky to contest national politics and challenge state authority.

Significantly, the scholar draws our attention to the fact that Mayakovsky was a subject of debate. According to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, “it was a heated dispute and competition between the true friends of Mayakovsky [the communist party] and the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm saboteurs [*bộ phận phá hoại*] for Mayakovsky’s flagstaff [*ngôn cờ*].”<sup>238</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến calls the plots and schemes [*âm mưu; thủ đoạn*] of this group “highly dangerous and dishonest” [*hết sức nguy hiểm và bất lương*]. He states that anarchists “exploited and distorted [*lợi dụng và xuyên tạc*] Mayakovsky to oppose the regime.”<sup>239</sup> It is worth noting Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s decision to devote

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(2006); *Văn hóa và văn minh - Văn hóa chân lý và văn hóa dịch lý* [Culture and Civilization: Cultural Truths and Translating Culture] (2007).

<sup>235</sup> We could view the literary impulses of the 1990s as an extension of the cultural debates in the 1950s.

<sup>236</sup> See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 201.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>238</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 200.

<sup>239</sup> Here, to make his point and political positioning clear, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến cites the scathing lines from articles by Xuân Diệu and Tô Hữu—high-ranking party officials whom we know played key roles in attacking the authors of *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* and whose works, in turn, were also intensely criticized by the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm writers.

significant attention to the fact that there existed divergent interpretations of Mayakovsky—translations and counter-translations, and appropriations of his poetic statements to rebuke authorities. Rather than maintain the state’s façade of absolute authority, the scholar draws attention to contestations involved in defining Mayakovsky’s work.

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s critique of Trần Dần’s poetry reveals how invested Vietnam was in the official socialist image of Mayakovsky. Particularly informative is how the scholar points to the way individuals with alternative agendas could distort this image. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến points to how there were those who used poetry in their political opportunism. He writes that Mayakovsky’s influence in Trần Dần and Lê Đạt’s poetry halts at the external similarities of flimsy imitation: “their poetry also ‘climb stepladders’, also ‘speak loudly.’” But these aspects, he insists, are just apings of Mayakovsky’s work. According to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến this is “an instance of shoddy copying [*một sự chép dịch*].”<sup>240</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến asserts that any formal resemblances between Trần Dần’s work and that of the Soviet poet are simply instances of slavish imitation [*bắt chước*].<sup>241</sup>

Particularly instructive is the way Hoàng Ngọc Hiến presents a series of translations and counter-translations of Mayakovsky’s poems. On the one side, he positions the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm writers and their attempt to “mistranslate and exploit” Mayakovsky’s more virulent statements to damage the regime; in the other camp, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến shows how high-ranking party officials attempted to “correct those mistranslations.” The scholar reveals translation not as a neutral act, but one that requires a grappling for interpretive power to determine how a work is understood.<sup>242</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s study offers a lens into the way poets like Trần Dần, and likewise the socialist state, appropriated the image of Mayakovsky—through poetic innovations and critical writings—to contest cultural politics in the DRV.

Notably, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến highlights how Mayakovsky’s poems and image were not readily accepted. Literary works had to be framed, explained, and argued. He states that the

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See Xuân Diệu, “Một số vấn đề đấu tranh tư tưởng trong thơ” [A Few Issues in the Ideological Struggle in Poetry], *Văn Nghệ* [Literary Arts] (March 10, 1958); and Idem., “Qua cuộc đấu tranh chống nhóm phá hoại Nhân văn-Giai phẩm” [Through the Struggle of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Saboteurs], in *Trên mặt trận văn nghệ* [On the Battlefield of Literary Arts] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1958).

<sup>240</sup> Trần Dần’s poem, “Đời đẹp lắm” [Life is Beautiful], *Văn Nghệ* 122 (May 1956), is a prime example of this for him.

<sup>241</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 204.

<sup>242</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến tells us that in summer 1957, during a moment of economic crisis that led to heavy minds and wavering faith, “the saboteurs took the opportunity [*thừa cơ*] to adulterate and injure the political path of the party and government.” See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 207. We do not know what work he is referring to exactly, but his decision to not name the translations in question is telling. Xuân Diệu then counters by translating a section of Mayakovsky’s epic poem “Very well,” “the section that speaks of the cold and hunger of the Russian people in the winter of 1919, to reestablish the bright soul [*tâm hồn sáng*] and steadfastness of Mayakovsky in the midst of a climate darker and more turbulent than what North Vietnam saw.” According to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, this was Xuân Diệu’s attempt to emphasize “singular faith in the revolution” [*một lòng dạ tin tưởng ở cách mạng*] (*Văn* no. 8, June 28, 1957). In that same year, according to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, “the saboteurs did not cease to invent untruthful stories to defame the cadres and the party members they resented.” But Hoàng Ngọc Hiến also tells us that in 1951, Hoàng Trung Thông had translated and published Mayakovsky’s essay, “Làm thơ như thế nào” [How Poetry is Made]. In 1953, Hoàng Trung Thông translated and published “Six Poems of Mayakovsky” through the Literature and Arts Association (it was republished in 1954). Tony Day tells us that Hoàng Trung Thông also co-translated and published a book of poems with Trần Dần, *Thơ Mai-a-cop-xki*, with an introduction by Lê Đạt in 1957. I was unable to locate this text. See Tony Day, “Still Stuck in the Mud: Imagining World Literature during the Cold War in Indonesia and Vietnam,” in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya HT Liem (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010), 163 fn. 122.

image of Mayakovsky that materializes in the hearts and minds of a large numbers of readers, the great socialist spirit of the poet is in some ways fuzzy and dim, and what is brought to the fore are aspects of his personality that are still diminished or misunderstood [*cường điệu hoặc hiểu sai*].”<sup>243</sup> In this respect, his study suggests that cross-cultural poetics requires complex and multidirectional series of translations, framings, interpretations and revisions. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s study implicitly promotes these intertextual practices as tools to advance more dynamic understanding of literature. His study would suggest that multiple, converging and conflicting views are necessary correctives to prevent any singular perspective from distorting a poet and his works.

### **Forging Affiliations towards a Modernist Poetics**

Striking similarities exist between the lives of Trần Dần and Mayakovsky. But beyond biographical sympathies, what aspects of Mayakovsky’s poetry and poetics resonated most for Trần Dần in the context of 1950s Vietnam? How does Trần Dần interweave these strands to support his own cultural and aesthetic perspectives? Trần Dần aligned himself with aspects of Mayakovsky’s poetic and political perspectives to both contest the totalizing narratives of communist cultural policy, but also—we should note—to configure his own modernist poetics.

#### ***Bringing Mayakovsky to Life in 1950s Vietnam***

The article Trần Dần wrote on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Mayakovsky’s death in April 1955 reveals the most important points of cross-cultural impact between the Russian and the Vietnamese poet. “Nhân Ngày 14-4 Kỷ Niệm Mai-a-kốp-ki Nhà Thơ Vĩ Đại Của Liên-Xô Qua Đồi” [On the Occasion of April 14 in Memory of the Death of Mayakovsky, the USSR’s Great Poet], begins promptly on the defense.<sup>244</sup> It opens by recalling the difficulties Mayakovsky faced with cultural authorities. Trần Dần then remind the reader: “If Mayakovsky suffered unjust prejudices—that his poems lack politics, the power to mobilize the masses [*kém chính trị, kém vận động quần chúng*], difficult to understand, or use big words, etc—then Stalin raised the matter of reassessing [*xét lại*] them.”<sup>245</sup> For Trần Dần to begin with a defense suggests that his commemoration was no neutral homage. Those charges issued against Mayakovsky were the very same ones Trần Dần faced in this restrictive period. The defense and need for “reassessment” suggests that Mayakovsky’s modernist poetry were still a subject of debate.

Trần Dần repeats Stalin’s now-famous proclamation of the Mayakovsky as the greatest poet of the Soviet epoch to declare that “Stalin’s judgment has now become the judgment of the masses.” Trần Dần raises his key point:

Mai-a’s poems are not meant to satisfy those who are used to examining poems through formulas [*công thức*]. The cowardly and fearful [*rụt rè ề dẹ*] will be unsatisfied [*hài lòng*]. Those used to abandoning themselves [*thả mình*] in poetry

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<sup>243</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, *Maiacôpxki*, 205.

<sup>244</sup> Trần Dần, “Nhân Ngày 14-4 Kỷ Niệm Mai-a-kốp-ki Nhà Thơ Vĩ Đại Của Liên-Xô Qua Đồi” [On the Occasion of April 14 in Memory of the Death of The Great Soviet Poet Mayakovsky], *Sinh Hoạt Văn Nghệ* [Literary Arts Life] no. 37, April 14, 1955, p. 3.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

so that it is serene [*êm ả*], gentle [*nhẹ nhàng*], close to the handkerchiefs [*sít soa*] of sentimentalism [*tình cảm chủ nghĩa*]. They won't be content, they don't have the ability to possibly understand Mai-a.<sup>246</sup>

Trần Dần's word choice reveals the undercurrents of his contempt. Within the span of a paragraph, he employs five alliterated compound-adjectives: “rút rút,” “e dè,” “êm ả,” “nhẹ nhàn,” “sít soa.” This linguistic convention, in which the near-repetition of the second word intensifies the meaning of the first adjective, onomatopoeically renders the meaning into something that is “more of itself.” In this case, “gentle” [*nhẹ*] would be even meeker, and a “sniff” [*sít*] would become sniveling. This mocking tone sets up the primary tension within Trần Dần's article: between those that are courageous, creative, open-minded, and those that are formulaic, close-minded and cowardly. Indeed Trần Dần directs his ire towards those who “cannot be satisfied, [*không mãn ý*], don't have the capacity to understand [*không hiểu nổi*] Mayakovsky's poems,” and subsequently become “vexed” and react harshly” to them. In defending Mayakovsky's poetry against slander by those of philistine taste, Trần Dần defends his own modernist poetic orientations.

Discussing Mayakovsky gave Trần Dần a venue to define and articulate his own poetics in contrast to the dominant cultural model. According to Trần Dần, Mayakovsky's poems “reject those conceptions of poetry and those ways of living that are plaintive [*ỉ eo*], doltish [*trì trề*], formulaic, superficial [*sơ sài*], and sentimental” (note the mocking compound-word structures). By setting up these features as undesirable, and from Mayakovsky's perspective, Trần Dần implicitly attacks socialist realist conventions. Trần Dần synthesizes the power and effectiveness of Mayakovsky's poetry in two key characteristics: 1.) They “unite many contradictions” [*thống nhất được nhiều mâu thuẫn*] and 2.) They refuse to be simple and one-dimensional [*không giản đơn một chiều*].<sup>247</sup> By valorizing two salient features of modernism, Trần Dần at once invests modernist poetics with aesthetic power and undermines the primary impulses of socialist realism (and in corollary, the DRV state's cultural limitations). Trần Dần implies that the dominant literary model cannot capture life's collisions and complexities.

Trần Dần values poetic complexity. He suggests that because Mayakovsky could be “a charging communist but clear-headed, fierce but kind, resentful but loving, severe but generous, violent but merciful...” his poems possess a rich poetic tenor. Trần Dần notes how Mayakovsky's poems capture the complexities and “richness of the revolution,” and combine “both the large feelings and those personal, pitiful, and common experiences of the people.” Trần Dần privileges the poetic fusion of many contradicting elements. In other words, not only should poetry capture the complexities of experience, it had to contain multiplicities, be polyvocal and polysemous. Here, Trần Dần transposes Mayakovsky's futurist poetics to assert his position against the one-dimensional socialist realist depictions. Additionally, this articulation

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> The multiplicity and multi-directionality Trần Dần underscores are particularly important to modernist literary aesthetics. Baudelaire and French symbolist poets spoke of the “combining of the senses” (synaesthesia) as well as the fusion of contradictory things; the French surrealists privileged the combining of the profound and the profane and irrational modes of perception; while the Russian and Italian futurists emphasized dynamism, movement, and multidirectionality to produce the hyperkinetic, cacophonous experiences of modern life. See David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Victor Khlebnikov, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912) in *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestos*, ed. Anne Lawton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51; and F. T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/ConstrBau/Readings/MarinettiFuturist09.pdf>.

reveals Trần Dần's symbolist poetic origins: the desire for the confluence and "correspondences" of disparate things in order to produce a harmonic and heightened experience of being. In speaking of Mayakovsky as the "teacher, friend, love," Trần Dần aligns himself explicitly with a socialist ethos that expressed itself in modernist aesthetics. For Trần Dần, the fierce spirit of Mayakovsky's poetry shows precisely what contemporary literature lacks: "audacity, daring, determination to address things that...needed love, needed hate, needed scorn, needed protection, needed attack..."<sup>248</sup> Trần Dần draws correlations between "the millions of millions of people in Russia, in China, in nations that have translated Mai-a," saying "we can all read his poems in the circumstances we live." The social and political issues addressed in Mayakovsky's poem, Trần Dần suggests, translates to the conditions of North Vietnamese society.<sup>249</sup> Translation, then, is an intertextual tool to expose shared issues in a new context. This cross-cultural transposition and shift in lens enables a culture to recognize itself in a kind of refracted image. Trần Dần's commemorative article in fact performs this intertextual act. In placing Mayakovsky's poetic and political perspectives in relation to the Vietnamese landscape, Trần Dần invest Mayakovsky and modernist poetics with the potential to address the immediate cultural problems.

### *Tố Hữu's Việt Bắc as System of Corrupt Signs*

Trần Dần's literary critique of Tố Hữu's *Việt Bắc* deserves special attention. This article demonstrates Trần Dần's alignment with Mayakovsky's poetics and his attempt to mobilize this political-poetic perspective.<sup>250</sup> Although posed as a straightforward work of literary criticism, the article actually carried out a two-prong attack: it criticized the literature and attacked DRV literary officials as well as undermining communist cultural authority. It is within this piece that Trần Dần voices a severe and controversial critique: he assails the poem for committing the grave error of "deifying the leader" [*thần thánh hoá lãnh tụ*], Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>251</sup> This is significant. Trần Dần in 1955 essentially exposes a serious issue that Khrushchev notes a year later, in 1956, when he denounces Stalin's "cult of personality."<sup>252</sup> Critical views toward leader-worship precipitated a series of changes in the cultural policies of communist states. When party officials invited literary debates in order to publicize and legitimize Tố Hữu's new collection of poems, *Việt Bắc*, they expected only mild jousting typical of Vietnamese intellectual activity. They did

<sup>248</sup> Trần Dần, "Nhân Ngày 14-4 Kỷ Niệm Mai-a-kóp-ki."

<sup>249</sup> Indeed, his epic, "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!" embodies two distinct trajectories and accomplishes two tasks. First, as a poem that adapts Mayakovsky's stepladder form, revolutionary enunciations, and the poetics of multidirectional, polysemous literature, Trần Dần positions himself within an international literary space (circulation). Second, Trần Dần's epic presents a negative mimesis or nemesis of Tố Hữu's similarly titled poem "Bài Thơ Việt Bắc" in that it takes the same epic form and revolutionary content but exposes the one-dimensionality, flatness, malaise, and diffuseness of the former *Việt Bắc* tribute. In this, Trần Dần subverts the North Vietnamese interpretations of Mayakovsky's literature while critiquing the existing socialist realist ethos and forging a link with an international modernism.

<sup>250</sup> While on the surface both poets wrote similarly themed poems that touted patriotism and revolutionary ethos, the poems themselves, their valuation, and the poets' fates were starkly different. While Tố Hữu received the Gold Star Order and Hồ Chí Minh Award—the highest honor given to a literary work by the party—Trần Dần was publicly ridiculed for his literary activities, placed under house arrest, sentenced to hard labor, banned from publishing, and lived out his days in relative literary obscurity until his work was revitalized some thirty years later in the 1990s.

<sup>251</sup> Trần Dần, "Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu" [The Poet Tố Hữu's Perspective on Matters], in Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [To Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001), 141–148 (148).

<sup>252</sup> That Trần Dần points that out at this stage, in 1955, suggests that this issue was already brewing and apparent to intellectuals in the DRV, or that critiques had been circulating from the Soviet Union as early as 1955.

not foresee the way intellectuals would seize this opportunity to critique cultural policies and literary officials.<sup>253</sup>

Titled “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu” [The Poet Tố Hữu’s Perspective on Matters], the article formulates an attack on both Tố Hữu’s perspective, or his superficial manner of looking at things, and his perception, the inability to capture the dynamic experience of modern life. Trần Dần states quite bluntly in his first point of attack that Tố Hữu “lacks any clear new perspective.”<sup>254</sup> This is a crucial point, Trần Dần stresses, “because whether a poet’s personality is clear or vague [*rõ rệt hay mờ nhạt*]...reflects whether that poet lives and writes with a deep or shallow consciousness in relation to society.” Here Trần Dần not only criticizes the vagueness of the work but also the unformed consciousness behind its production and the shallow manner of engaging with a subject. This is evident in that “the best lines of Tố Hữu’s poem, those that people are able to recall, could well belong to Nguyễn Du, Tản Đà, or a kind of folk song [*ca dao*]”—that is, outdated and unevolved from the traditional literature it was modeled after. At the base of Trần Dần’s critique is that Tố Hữu’s poetry lacks innovation so is unable to capture new experiences.

Trần Dần qualifies this statement, however, for he is not averse to continuities of traditions. He tells us: “This is not a case of “basing [a poem] on an old treasure” [*dựa vào vốn cổ*], but a reliance [on that source] that lacks development.” This lack, according to Trần Dần, is the inability to deeply engage with the tradition in order to transcend and create something new of it. Trần Dần does not suggest a complete rupture from the past; he conceptualizes modern literature to be an interaction with the past in the present in order to enhance the new perspective. This articulation reveals similarities between Trần Dần’s view of literary influence and innovation and T.S. Eliot’s conception of tradition and the individual talent, which imagines an innovative work to reconfigure understandings of past traditions in its novel literary participation in the pantheon.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Tố Hữu was influential in defining the strict cultural policy in North Vietnam and during his career he enjoyed a steep rise in party rank. As leader of its cultural arm, the stream of scathing critiques would not have sat well with him or the party. For fuller discussion of the dynamics of this debate, see Alec Holcombe and Lại Nguyên Ân’s article, “The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu: 1954–1958,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–90.

<sup>254</sup> Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 141. This article was written in May of 1955 but remained published until near the end of Trần Dần’s life, nearly half a century later. Though the collection of writings on the debates, composed and edited by Lại Nguyên Ân, would seem the most fitting forum for this essay, it was not included. Lại Nguyên Ân makes this article available on line in his own digital collection, tells readers he did not include it in his edited volume, but does not offer reasons as to why this was the case. One could speculate, however, that being aware of the political sensitivity surrounding Trần Dần even after several decades, Lại Nguyên Ân decided to play it safe and not push the envelope. See Lại Nguyên Ân, ed., *Tư Liệu Thảo Luận 1955 về Tập Thơ Việt Bắc* [Documents of the 1955 Debates on Tố Hữu’s Poetry Collection “Việt Bắc”] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2004).

<sup>255</sup> Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 142. Trần Dần’s conception of influences in modern poetry coincides beautifully with T.S. Eliot’s concept of intertextuality. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot challenges our common perception that a poet’s greatness and individuality lies in his violent break from his predecessors. Appearing in a moment of avant-garde collectivities, of manifestoes announcing decisive breaks with the past, Eliot’s essay asserted the present writer as a member of the largest collective of all, the great dead poets of the past (or Dead Poet’s Society). Unlike Filippo Marinetti, Eliot saw no progress in the history of literature; it does not improve, its bodiless corpus only grows and changes. However, its accruing variations are, for Eliot, the very condition of literary “talent.” The “whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” is a polylingual archive made up of past authors. The “talent” in the essay’s title is the present author’s ability to recombine the elements of this archive so as to produce a new relation to it, one which complicates all the other extant combinations. The poet’s “historical sense” gained him admittance into the living corpus, and indeed, change the way it is configured and

According to Trần Dần, Tố Hữu’s poems possess an “air of distant poetry” [*không khí thơ xa*], that is, “Tố Hữu looks at the new, modern life through the ragged, old curtains” [*màng cổ cũ*], and “shoves modern images into the [frame of the] past.” For Trần Dần, modern poetry should possess an urgency and immediacy that Tố Hữu’s distant landscapes failed to capture. Here Trần Dần aligns himself with a futurist poetics that worked to rigorously unite the visual with the poetic. A visual authenticity created by syncing the poem’s layout with the poet’s description would create the visceral, dynamic experience of the gaze in flashes of perception. Trần Dần asserts that real poets know how to translate experiences large or small in strong, immediate ways: the modern lyric must have its own “powerful thrust” [*khí phách*]. Trần Dần’s formulation of poetic energy converges with futurist poetics in the view that lean well-chosen words and visual orientation bolstered the energetic tempo of the verse.<sup>256</sup>

More generally, Trần Dần criticizes Tố Hữu’s poetic vision as being “too dim and indistinct” [*mờ nhạt quá*], his poetry as being “lazy” [*lười biếng*], and the words and meaning in the poems “ordinary” [*tầm thường*].<sup>257</sup> Trần Dần goes as far as equating the language in Tố Hữu’s poem to “babbling” [*lảm nhảm*] and “posturings” that rob poems of real meaning. In Trần Dần’s view, this is because whatever subject matter Tố Hữu looks at, “he only sees the surface formula of that matter” [*công thức bề mặt của vấn đề ấy*] causing the lines of verse to be diffused [*tán mát*]. Indeed, Trần Dần’s primary critique of Tố Hữu’s *Việt Bắc* is that it spreads itself to cater to all tastes [*hay nói dàn ra cho đủ vị*]. Trần Dần suggests that Tố Hữu’s poetry exhibited the sycophantic character of propaganda. Modern poetry, according to Trần Dần, does not demand the writer to be “a mediocre cadre of propaganda, thinly spreading out a bunch of cheap wares [*hàng xén*]. According to Trần Dần, the problem is that “Tố Hữu cares too much about the political correctness at the surface and over-explains...he lacks the spirit of a revolutionary who knows how to concentrate and accumulate force.” Trần Dần refers readers to Mayakovsky’s love poems as stirring examples of how even when writing about tender subjects the poet can still maintain poetic potency and force.

Trần Dần urges readers to reconsider: “what is political correctness” [*thế nào là đúng chính trị*]? For if the poem lacks impact and forceful action [*tấn công; tích cực mãnh liệt*], it cannot accurately express the politics. What Trần Dần hints at here is a modernist drive to unite form and content. In Trần Dần’s example, if the poem’s form does not embody the energy and force of the content, it cannot transmit an authentic political message. Further, Trần Dần insists that authenticity requires the poet to dig into life to wrest from it the wide range of experiences. This is necessary, according to Trần Dần, to “eliminate superficial formulas and enter into the essence of things.”<sup>258</sup> This conception of the “essence” of objects or experiences resonates with a

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read. For Eliot, past works of art form an order or “tradition”; however, that order is always being altered by a new work which modifies the “tradition” to make room for itself. A great poetic work has the ability to reshuffle the order and revise the way we read the past. This meant that fidelity to the past did not mean forfeiting novelty. It is through this awareness of tradition and its relationship to the present work that the poet can assert his agency. Eliot’s model attempts to correct the inversed view of agency and influence. Rather than seeing the past as pressing on the present, Eliot shows how the present actively engages and reworks the past. Trần Dần’s key point, that poetry should be “very new and at the same time a continuation/inheritance of the old” [*nó vừa rất mới lại vừa rất kế thừa cái cũ*] suggests that modernism can be conceived of not simply as ruptures, but continuities in its recombining of existing traditions in novel ways.

<sup>256</sup> Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 143. For a dynamic study of the aesthetics of speed in modernism, see Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

<sup>257</sup> Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 143.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

symbolist poetics that seeks to locate in the symbol the essence of things that would create a correspondence of rich, perceptual experiences.<sup>259</sup> Trần Dần suggests that political correctness in literature must first come from true engagement and apprehension of complexities of things rather than coming armed with preconceptions. This required formal innovation to capture the subject's essence.

Trần Dần's second point poses direct challenge to the socialist realist form sanctioned by the party. Trần Dần states matter-of-factly: "Tố Hữu's perspective is much too narrow [*nhỏ bé quá*]." Pulling lines of Tố Hữu's poetry as example, Trần Dần builds his critique. In Tố Hữu's depiction, the great leader (Hồ Chí Minh presumably) is "at times formulaic and strained...in other places [the leader] becomes a plain leisurely Daoism monk....In some places the leader is immense—the poet and the people are miniscule, walking beneath his red, lead cane. The leader is like a mountain and the masses like tiny baby ants." In other words, the images are not "suitably balanced" [*không cân xứng*]. According to Trần Dần, by aggrandizing the image of the leader, Tố Hữu in turn "diminishes him and makes erroneous the relationship between the leader and the masses."<sup>260</sup> Trần Dần critiques the socialist realist tendency to romanticize and mythologizes heroes, making them larger-than-life, monolithic and untouchable. Trần Dần draws attention to how this practice creates a cult of personality that falsifies lived experience and corrupts the ideological foundation of communism.

Trần Dần prescribes not only a demythologizing of the leader, but greater dialectical complexity. He proposes descriptions that permit the leader to be "at once extraordinary and ordinary, generous and strict, action and intelligence, simple and rich, moral and yet unshackled by formulas..." Trần Dần opposes Tố Hữu's use of "grand-daddy formulas" [*công thức cha già*] to describe the leader, revealing his distaste for literature that panders. Trần Dần's literary perspective converges with Mayakovsky's trenchant hate of the flatterers and sycophants in the socialist bureaucracy. Trần Dần also used the language of the streets and images of the everyday, revealing the preference for on-ground perspectives. Trần Dần takes particular issue to the way Tố Hữu writes about the sacrifices of the masses without any complexity: portrayals of the poor masses in only sacrificial postures renders them flat caricatures, empty vessels for ideology. Trần Dần charges Tố Hữu with turning patriotism and the love for the nation into a "love [that is] flimsy and thin" [*tình yêu nó mỏng manh*]. Trần Dần again returns to Mayakovsky's poetic standards: "We want what Mayakovsky says: a grand love, a grand hate..."<sup>261</sup> The intensity of feeling Trần Dần demands comes not from the subject or content, but from perspective, and in particular, "the depth with which [one] recognizes objects" [*cỡ trình độ nhận thức sự vật*]. This point underscores Trần Dần's symbolist orientation that sees truth, "the essence of things," as encoded in objects and apprehended through a penetrating perspective.

Trần Dần's final point is that "Tố Hữu's perspective swaddles subject matters in a feeble sadness" [*bao phủ lên vấn đề một cái buồn yếu đuối*]. According to Trần Dần, this is "not a sadness that jolts one to action" [*xóc người ta lên hàng động*], but a sadness that "lulls weakly and meekly" [*ru yếu đuối và nhẹ*]. In other words, this sadness is a romantic "bourgeois"

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<sup>259</sup> See his "Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng" [Manifesto of Symbolism], *Dạ Đài* [Netherworld] no. 1 (1946), available at *Tien Ve* [Avant-Garde]

<http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>; Arthur Symons, "The Symbolist Movement in Literature 1899," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, eds Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 134–135; Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Random House, [1967] 1977).

<sup>260</sup> Trần Dần, "Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu," 144.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

sentiment.”<sup>262</sup> This remark undercuts the tendency in socialist realism to romanticize subjects in one-dimensional depictions. Trần Dần upholds a new standard for poetry in correlation to the new “people, workers, nation, age” who are “not weak, feeble, ordinary, or small” like Tố Hữu’s poems would depict. Here, Trần Dần makes his nationalist goals clear: an art worthy of the revolution and struggles of the people rather than an embellished romantic mythology of the few. According to Trần Dần, the era demands and values the truth [*trọng sự thực*]. The poetic realism, or truth, Trần Dần calls for, is interestingly embodied by modernist poetics. As evidenced by his discussion, this authentic literature is comprised of complex socialist perspectives expressed via Russian futurist orientation towards dynamism and energy, and combined with French symbolist perceptual depth to reform a Vietnamese “realism.”<sup>263</sup> Trần Dần, forging links to Mayakovsky’s poetics, establishes his position against totalizing narratives of socialist realism and DRV cultural politics.

Trần Dần insists that poets must “discover new objective laws” [*những quy luật mới của khách quan*]. This goal should not be propelled by a lust for “newness for novelty sake, but because life is constantly shifting.” Like the Russian and Italian futurists, Trần Dần demanded aesthetic that would more accurately capture the dynamism of modern life, from the larger, external, social events to the personal, lyrical landscapes. This authentic experience, however, does not rely on logical sequences of expression or rational modes of perception that are characteristic of realist genres. In fact, it is quite the opposite, for those outdated forms fail to capture the chaos of life or the subjective experiences of the soldier. The “realism” Trần Dần proposes is one that stands in opposition to the socialist realism espoused by the party and its cultural leaders, and one that develops a more unique form of Vietnamese modernism through a hybridization of modernist aesthetics and revolutionary ethos.

### ***Trần Dần’s “Ghi” [To Put Down]: Crystallizing Modernist Poetics***

Trần Dần may have worked to elide his more subversive literary and political orientations, but they are readily discernible in his personal writings. The journal he kept from 1954–1960 was never meant for an audience. (Indeed, the ideas and statements it contains would have been highly dangerous in the context of 1950s Vietnam.) Because of this, the writing exhibits a clarity and the candor of an individual working out issues privately. It records Trần Dần’s unique perspective and responses to the events and consequences of those intense cultural debates. At the same time the journal reveals a modernist poetics crystallizing against that backdrop, through a process of dialectical self-reflection and intertextual affiliations. Trần Dần’s writing shows those very “opposing sounds, strident tones, provocations, arguments, breakings” that the poet

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<sup>262</sup> Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 147.

<sup>263</sup> The symbolists, for instance, took the idea of “correspondences” as revelations that occurred when objects help reveal the mysterious relationship between man and the universe. In this, colors, fragrance and music combine to produce this vision. For symbolists like Verlaine, “de la musique avant toutes les chose” [music is above all other things] and the suggestiveness of music was capable of producing the needed sensations. For Baudelaire, correspondences between the senses, or synaesthesia, enabled these aspects to be intuited. For Rimbaud, it was a derangement of the senses. See Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, [1995] 1999); and Arthur Symons, “The Symbolist Movement in Literature 1899,” in eds. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, 134–135.

demanded of serious literary engagement.<sup>264</sup> The journal forms an intertextual contact zone in its own right as it works out the impacts of cross-cultural currents along with national and international political-poetic convergence and conflict. The text reveals Trần Dần's deep engagement with Russian futurist and French symbolist poetics in his reconfiguration of Vietnamese modernism.

The journal is an interesting example of modernist textual and linguistic collage. It is written primarily in Vietnamese but littered throughout with French terms for, among other things, Russian and socialist concepts. To provide but a few examples:

frapper mille coeurs, tourner, anarchiste, avant garde, moderne, classique, réalisme socialiste, reminiscences, clavier, haute police, élément, auto-suggestion, je suis meilleur a tout de point de vue, l'angle de vue, caractere specific, adepte entete, stalinisme, surmenge surmenage, render, aurevoir, impossible, trotkistes, bergson, chemin de calvaire, idées noires, contrepoids..."<sup>265</sup>

Trần Dần often interjects a Vietnamese sentence with a French word to compound an effect, such as when he declares "Văn thơ tôi sẽ balayer bọn ấy. Quét! Quét!" [My prose and poetry will sweep the gang of them! Sweep! Sweep!].<sup>266</sup> The confluence of abstract terms belie the author's ease and intimacy with French in engaging literary theories and cultural concepts. This textual hybridity produces a particular awareness: Trần Dần's engagement with Russian futurist poetics and soviet cultural concepts are always mediated through French and translated into the Vietnamese context. The journal reflects the unique refraction and convergence of cultures within this historical moment, which lends the modernism of this period its particular contours.

The writing reveals Trần Dần clarifying his modernist orientations. For example, during the time authorities placed him in detention for "reeducation" through self-criticism sessions, he wrote: Detained three months to self-criticize; Infection and venom: *anarchiste*; In the past [I] opposed the old order with *symbolisme* (Manifesto of symbolism); Now [I] oppose the falseness of the literature and arts [cultural] leadership with rampant disorder."<sup>267</sup> We could read Trần Dần's anarchist sensibility as an accumulative force of Russian futurist poetics, but also as an extension of his early symbolist poetic orientation towards chaos and disorder as a creative force for new perceptions. This sense of continuity and contrast exhibited in Trần Dần's writing suggests modernism's network of connective tissues, even as it announces abrupt breaks from past traditions. We see this poetic drive towards uniting divergent or disparate elements throughout the journal.

Trần Dần states his desire for "a calm that jolts"—a harmonizing of dissonant and conflicting things in order to bring them into novel relations and startling new perspectives. He continually demands poetic polyphony and polysemy. Given the particularly restrictive cultural climate that promoted socialist realism, Trần Dần's orientation towards modernist multiplicity enacts a willful opposition. Trần Dần proposes literary dissonance and disorder as a creative force that disrupts claims of fixed, singular meaning. Reflecting on two works being lauded at

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<sup>264</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân, "Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm 'Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!' Hùng Ca Lụa Trần Dần" [A Few Comments Written after Trần Dần's Epic on Silk "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!"], in Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa* (1957) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009), 129.

<sup>265</sup> Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)*, 53.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. "Ba tháng bị giữ lại kiểm thảo"; "Nọc bệnh: anarchiste"; "Khi xưa phản đối xã hội cũ bằng symbolism (Tuyên ngôn tượng trưng); "Bây giờ phản đối những cái sai trong lãnh đạo văn nghệ bằng loạn ầu."

that moment (Tổ Hữu's *Việt Bắc* and Phùng Quán's *Vượt Côn Đảo* [Escape from Poulo Condore]), Trần Dần asks:

Why is it that the fakers are believed more than the honest? Why do the reptiles get used often? Why do they appear in this age? In the Party? In the revolution? The strangest part is why don't we expose their true faces? My poetry will *balayer* [sweep] them. Sweep! Sweep! [...] I only have one principle! Live and write to fight the fakers, the bloated [*y ach*], the good-for-nothings [*mốc xì*], the sick, the maggots, the rotten [*người ù*]. *Anarchiste*? If that's what they call an *anarchiste* than I very much want to be an *anarchiste*. I don't have what it takes to be a government official, the abilities of the rotten. My ability is that of the *anarchiste*, the wrecker (October 3, 1955).<sup>268</sup>

Writing of socialist realist literature of the period, he states that “there is much fakery”: Trần Dần takes particular issue with the flat and singular views of socialist realist depiction. He rebukes the work of these cultural officials as being “formulaic,” “superficial,” and “full of oversimplifications” because the writer puts forth a fixed framework, then forces truth into that.” For instance, Trần Dần describes the way socialist realist literature depicts the hero as “one who hates and resents, enters the army then finds great strength to achieve...looks to his superiors and complies with each discipline.” Trần Dần sees this as a feudal outlook that enforces class relationships. The socialist realist hero “follows every command immediately without ever disagreeing.” Towards his friends, he's always helpful; but he criticizes affection (or personal love). “And towards the party words of gratitude plop out each time he opens his mouth.” For Trần Dần, this caricature of a hero “depicts humans without blemish or any defects” and “without any whiff of the real heroes of the masses.” Throughout his journal entries, Trần Dần scorns the limitations of this form and challenges the politics of those who endorse it.

Throughout the journal, Trần Dần persistently advocates for employing modernist poetics to produce richer semantic and perceptual experience. For Trần Dần wants “At times I want a kind of poetry that is accommodating. Sometimes a kind of poetry without rhyme. Sometimes a kind of poetry that's like a piece of jade. Sometimes a kind of poetry that narrates. Sometimes a kind of poem that's coarse. Sometimes a kind of poem that's decent, has the robustness of rosy flesh. Sometimes a kind of poetry that is rather like a soldier...” Foremost, Trần Dần argues for a shattering of singular, staccato voices and fixed meanings. He asserts the desire for poems with “several meanings, the ethereal.” But since “people want clear meaning and logic,” he writes, “I want a kind of poetry with one clear meaning and attached to it, thousands of other meanings.”<sup>269</sup> Trần Dần presents the conflict between his poetics and the audience's conditioned mode of reading. They desired logic and singular, fixed meaning that is immediately apparent. This literary sensibility, for Trần Dần, is “illogical.” For Trần Dần, capturing complex conflicting elements creates richer perceptual experiences.

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 73–75. Oscar Wilde's 1891 essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism” has been seen as modernism advocating anarchism. Oscar Wilde “stated in an interview that he believed he was ‘something of an Anarchist’, but previously said, ‘In the past I was a poet and a tyrant. Now I am an anarchist and artist.’” See David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 11. See also Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), *The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive*, August 10, 1997, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext97/slman10h.htm>.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 55.

Trần Dần's poetics is best showcased in his declaration:

I want a kind of poetry without rhymes, without strictures [*ky luật*]—people like poems that are rhyming and easy to read. That's why I want a kind of poetry that is very free with a sure rhythm, a rhythm with enough strength and melody to exist on its own—in places with rhyme, in places without. It's very rhythmic, but it's a rhythm created by things that are coarse, tortuous, that offend the ear, rattle the skull. Yet such things are rhythmical. Meaning that all these things jostle together to create a calm. A calm that jolts [...] People want poems to be transparent, optimistic [*phấn khởi*], rosy [*hồng hào*], serene. That's why right now I want a kind of poetry with the spirit of tears, sweat and blood gushing. The spirit of smoke and dust, dirt and grit, gunpowder, corpses, crematoriums, burning fields, ripping bombs, incinerating bullets. The spirit of disappointment, ruins, separations, disintegration, and failures. I want a pack of medicine sweet enough to fit the taste of the bitterest and most biting things on earth."<sup>270</sup>

This entry makes apparent Trần Dần's ire towards the cultural climate in that period. Trần Dần clarifies his own obstinate stance against the privileged socialist realist framework that forced literature to be simple, clear, logical, positive, and in service of communist ideology. He poses direct challenge to these expectations. In response to the formal and thematic restrictions of literature that glorified war and conveyed a rosy optimism in simplistic formulas, Trần Dần contrarily proposes images of corpses and death; visceral body secretions and torn flesh; the sense of loss, failure and disappointment—combined in a rhythmic free-verse form that “rattles the skull.”<sup>271</sup> His trenchant statement echoes Mayakovsky's poetic oratory force.

Notably, the mixed and multidirectional strands of Trần Dần's modernist poetics converge in this compact paragraph, which acts as a kind of literary manifesto. Within this passage we see the penetrating gaze of symbolist poetics. There is a Baudelairean emphasis on the grotesque to jolt readers out of familiar modes of perception, unmoor the object from a fixed sign, and assert art's autonomy from the utilitarian sphere of moral judgment. The surrealist desire is also present in Trần Dần's drive towards the profane as a way to achieve profound experience. We can discern the oratory force of a futurist revolutionary tenor and aims to create dynamic energy through auditory and visual rhythms. More broadly, the visual collage, overlay, and superimposition of disparate things that the passage demands, and enacts, reflects an overall modernist technique for producing new consciousness in reconfigured relationships. Foremost, Trần Dần's statement reveals a poetic itinerary that combines multiple modernist practices within this Vietnamese cultural moment.

Overall, Trần Dần's journal shows his active formulation of modernist poetics in relation to and against the backdrop of the restrictive cultural politics in 1950s DRV. As he articulates the contemporary cultural issues and events, he positions himself in relation to them politically and aesthetically. Trần Dần's personal writing reveals the convergence of Russian, French and Vietnamese poetics. However it was Mayakovsky's avant-garde audacity and revolutionary

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> For a discussion of these “rosy portraits,” see Martin Grossheim, “The Lao Động Party, Culture and the Campaign against ‘Modern Revisionism’: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam before the War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 1 (February 2013): 80–129 (31).

futurist poetics that provided Trần Dần a model for reconfiguring his modernist poetic vision to correct the cultural myopia of the revolutionary moment. Throughout the journal, Trần Dần locates points of contact with Russian avant-garde poetics to exercise interpretive control over what is an appropriate literature in contradistinction to socialist cultural discourse.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the cross-cultural dynamics of modernist poetics through the little-explored lens of the Trần Dần-Mayakovsky relationship. I demonstrate how the contact zone of this cultural encounter involves a series of multidirectional and overlapping textual mediations. I show the way the official image Mayakovsky circulated from the Soviet Union, through French mediation, and into the Vietnamese intellectual sphere, but also that it did not stop there. As I demonstrated, cultural agents like Elsa Triolet, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, and Trần Dần deploy a series of intertextual practices—translation, transposition, appropriation and so forth—to (re)define and contest the meaning of Mayakovsky and Russian avant-garde aesthetics within their respective cultural milieus. These various attempts compose a network of competing dialogues, collisions and convergences that reconfigure the potential of modernist practices and perspectives within particular contexts.

The one-dimensional state construction of Mayakovsky rendered him into a mute emblem of socialist cultural ideology and silenced his avant-garde enunciations. Counter-narratives such as Elsa Triolet's memoir act as cultural mediators and correctives to this intricate network of elisions and erasures. Triolet translates and transposes Mayakovsky's poetic voice from the socialist propagandist back into the valor of the futurist avant-garde. By reintroducing the complexities and contradictions of Mayakovsky's life and work, Triolet disturbs the static official image and implicitly challenges state claims over absolute truth. The case of Mayakovsky represented an analogy for writers like Trần Dần who was then contesting the restrictive cultural policies of the Vietnamese communist state. At this revolutionary juncture, DRV cultural policies imported from the Soviet Union and Maoist China severely restricted cultural production to the doctrinaire socialist realist model and highly ideological forms of writing—as they restricted the understanding of Mayakovsky to the narrow socialist perspective. In redefining and reinvigorating the more subversive features of Mayakovsky's political and poetic perspectives, Trần Dần and his contemporaries were in fact restoring their own poetic voices and cultural perspectives. The textual affiliations Trần Dần makes with Mayakovsky's poetics wrests control from the state's monopoly over the production of culture and meaning.

Through a series of textual affiliations Trần Dần reinterprets Russian futurist poetics into the cultural context of 1950s DRV. Trần Dần's focus on Mayakovsky shifts the emphasis from the socialist-political to the modernist-aesthetic, enacting an opposition to the hegemony of the cultural establishment. Trần Dần's discussion of Mayakovsky provided a way for him to talk about the DRV's flawed cultural policies and the weak aesthetic scaffoldings of socialist realism—both of which aimed to produce singular and fixed meaning and adapt art to politics. Forging links with Mayakovsky's life and poetics, Trần Dần advanced a vision of literature that, contrarily, emphasized the “polyphonic, polysemous [*đa nghĩa*], multidirectional [*đa chiều*] and dialectical [*biện chứng*]”—that is, a modernism complexly composed of multiple, divergent and

converging strands.<sup>272</sup> Trần Dần reconfigures his early French surrealist-symbolist poetic orientation with Russian futurist poetics, bringing them into new poetic relationships within the Vietnamese cultural moment. We see, for example, how the privileged symbolist poetic of chaos relates to surrealist poetics of disorder and resonates with Russian futurist notions of anarchy within Trần Dần's modernist poetic itinerary. In the cultural context of 1950s DRV, this recombining and hybridizing adapts politics to the aesthetic to counter to ideologue attempts to aestheticize politics via socialist realism.

The close contextualized study of Trần Dần's modernist poetics as evoked through his intertextual affiliations with Mayakovsky resonates with T.S. Elliot's notion of literary influence and aesthetic innovation. That is, rather than view Trần Dần's affiliation with Mayakovsky or other modernist poetics as a unilateral transmission of influence, we see that Trần Dần actively reconfigures our understanding of the modernist corpus through his poetic intervention. By engaging Russian futurist and French symbolist and surrealist poetics in conversation with Trần Dần's Vietnamese cultural perspective and the context of 1950s DRV culture, the poet brings these multiple strands into new relations, investing them with new meanings and potential. The contact zone of this cultural convergence is indeed a site where agents "grapple with uneven hierarchies of power."<sup>273</sup> If Trần Dần's reinterpretation of Mayakovsky's modernist poetics is viewed as an act of "reterritorialization," as it would through the Deleuze and Guattari lens, these acts reclaim literary territory and interpretive power from the dominant culture of national and international communism, rather than oppose the avant-garde culture of the European periphery, Russian.<sup>274</sup> Trần Dần's retranslation of Mayakovsky, for example, is only menacing towards the institutions that benefit from propagating a false image of the poet and the elision of modernist innovation. Trần Dần forms a politico-poetic comradeship and allegiance with the Russian avant-garde in attempts to restore power to the aesthetic domain and to the imagined body of modernism. The Mayakovsky effect in Vietnam shows how Trần Dần forged international poetic affiliations to both compose a modernist poetic vision and contest national cultural policies—that were adapted from international political circuits. We could view the debates of this cultural moment as a battle over attempts to adapt art to politics (aestheticize politics) and attempts to adapt politics to art (politicize aesthetics).<sup>275</sup> Modernist poets of this period were indeed invested

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<sup>272</sup> See, for instance, Lại Nguyên Ân, "Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm 'Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!,'" 122–133. See also Đỗ Lai Thuý, "Trần Dần— Một thi trình sạch (I)" [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary (1)], *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* [Culture and Arts] no. 286 (April 2008): 80–85 and 104; and Đỗ Lai Thuý, "Trần Dần, một thi trình sạch (II)," *Phong Diep* <http://phongdiep.net/default.asp?action=article&ID=4156>.

<sup>273</sup> I employ Mary-Louise Pratt's conceptualization of "contact zones," as a nexus between indigenous, colonial and international cultures. In her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt employs the term to describe the space of colonial encounters: "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. . . ." Pratt explains that "contact zone" is "an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal correspondence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term "contact," I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination." See Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6–7.

<sup>274</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: "What is Minor Literature," 16–27.

<sup>275</sup> For more on this subject, see David Weir, *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); and Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*.

in a territorial logic, but it is a defense of aesthetic potential and power over the domain of politics.

### 3 | Exalting Epic and Corrosive Drama: Trần Dần’s “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!” and the Praxis of Modernism in 1950s Vietnam

Georges Boudarel writing of the “intellectual dissidence of the 1950s” tells us: “...torn between his Vietnamese ego which drove him to accept anything in pursuit of national independence and his Western education which made him aspire to a utopian freedom for the individual, the Vietnamese intellectual lived through all these years both as an exalting epic and as a corrosive drama”<sup>276</sup> In his formative years Trần Dần was committed to symbolist poetics as a means to renovate Vietnamese literature—not with the individualistic “I” [tôi] of the New Poetry Movement, but the “us” [ta] of a collective modernist consciousness. Along with Đinh Hùng, Vũ Hoàng Địch, Trần Mai Châu, and Nguyễn Văn Tấu, Trần Dần, formed the Dạ Đài [Netherworld] writing group and penned the Vietnamese “Manifesto of Symbolism” [*Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng*] with the stated aims of “bind[ing]...the rhythm of Baudelaire’s footsteps, the confidences of [the premodern poet] Nguyễn Du, the revolt and departure of Rimbaud, the loneliness of the romantic poets...”<sup>277</sup> Thus, they aspired to a vision of poetry that would combine modernist poetics with the soul of a premodern Vietnamese literary tradition. But Trần Dần’s commitment to these aesthetic ideals conflicted with the cultural policies of 1950s North Vietnam. While the socialist state disavowed French literary models and denounced much premodern literature as “feudal” during the period of revolution, it adopted the official literature of the communist international: socialist realism.

In Vietnam as in Maoist China, in a brief and illusory moment of “openness” under the guise of “allow[ing] a hundred flowers to bloom,” the communist state lifted bans on journal publications. But the DRV state only tolerated criticism of the leadership from writers for a brief period. This period encouraged writers like Trần Dần to advance an aesthetic vision distinct from the state’s restrictive cultural program. Trần Dần’s epic poem, “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc” (ĐĐVB) embodies those trenchant debates on cultural policies and aesthetic freedom. As a contact zone, the poem grapples for aesthetic power within North Vietnam and with conflicting international affiliations. Like the modernism that Trần Dần advocated, socialist realism was an international cultural movement. It was developed in the Soviet Union but circulating through several countries and had purchase in Vietnam. “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc” was written within a context of national conflict, which entailed the adoption of socialist realism, but orients itself outwards, towards a constellation of international modernism. The unique character of the poem derives from the multiple, competing drives of the cultural moment in which Trần Dần wrote. We can view the poem as both an aesthetic project and a cultural argument. It is a challenge to the ideals of socialist realist literature and DRV cultural restrictiveness; yet it does this while advancing a modernist program with avant-garde aesthetics that extends beyond the national frame. Trần Dần enacts his modernist poetics and cultural dissent in this fourteen-chapter epic.

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<sup>276</sup> Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan-Van Giai-Pham Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (1990): 154–174.

<sup>277</sup> The Vietnamese reads: “...nói lại: nghiệp dĩ của một Baudelaire - Tâm sự của một Nguyễn Du - Sự nổi loạn và Ra đi của một Jimbaud - Nỗi cô đơn của những nhà thơ lãng mạn.” See Trần Dần, Trần Mai Châu, Vũ Hoàng Địch, “Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng” [Manifesto of Symbolism], *Dạ Đài* [Netherworld] no. 1 (1946), available at *Tiền Vệ* [Avant-Garde] <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>.

Chana Kronfeld insists on the need to analyze and determine “why a particular feature came to be perceived as exemplary within the particular conditions for the creation and reception of a particular brand of modernism at a particular historical and cultural juncture.”<sup>278</sup> What were the contours of this second phase of modernism in Vietnam? Vietnamese modernist poetry of the colonial era exhibited a radical hybrid character that oriented strongly towards symbolist and surrealist poetics in reworking classical Vietnamese and Chinese models. What aesthetic features did modernist poets privilege in this particularly tense cultural juncture of 1950s DRV? This chapter examines the intertextual practices and modernist aesthetics the poet employs to at once advance his poetic ideals and contest the cultural politics of that moment. By analyzing the poem’s multiple trajectories, both poetic and political, I show how “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!” forms a resistance to certain international literary trends adopted as national cultural policy in Vietnam, while selectively affiliating with Russian (and French) modernist aesthetics. In doing so, the poem also renovates the traditional Vietnamese epic genre.<sup>279</sup> The first section discusses the poem’s framework and the theoretical approach this framing encourages. The second section provides a summary of chapters to map the text’s poetic terrain and novel orientations. I devote the third part of this chapter to close textual analysis and show how Trần Dần combines temporally and geographically disparate literary traditions to formulate his aesthetic position.

The fate of this poem reflects the fate of its author and modernism in this period: it saw a brief burst and blossomed for a short time before it was buried. After the persecution of intellectuals at the end of the 1950s, modernism and its writers went underground. Trần Dần wrote this poem between February and September 1957 in the midst of intense cultural debates in Vietnam that resounded those in China and the Soviet Union. The poem’s last segment, Chapter 14, “Hãy đi mãi” [Keep Going Forever] was published in November 1957, in issue no. 28 of the weekly *Văn* [Literature]; the journal *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* no.12 in December featured another excerpt of the poem.<sup>280</sup> But aside from these two limited appearances, the “epic on silk” [*hùng ca lụa; épopée sur soie*], as Trần Dần subtitled it in Vietnamese and referred to it in French, would sink into utter silence as if it never existed. It was only after the “Renovation” period began in 1986 that segments of the poem emerged. In 1988, for example, the journal *Lang-bian* published excerpts of four chapters.<sup>281</sup> The Writers’ Association published the poem in 1990 and 1999 with all chapters included, save for the final chapter.<sup>282</sup> However, in the earlier publications, several lines, particularly those that mentioned “regime” or “oppression” in proximity were removed. The 1990 version is missing a striking 156 lines of the 2009 version’s

<sup>278</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>279</sup> I am referring to Frederic Jameson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Homi Bhabha specifically. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: “What is Minor Literature,” 16–27; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), Chapter 4: “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”; Chapter 7: “Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense”; Chapter 9: The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency”; Chapter 11: “How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation”; Chapter 12: “Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity”; and Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 65–88 (67).

<sup>280</sup> Trần Dần, “Hãy đi mãi” [Keep Going Forever], *Văn* [Literature] no. 28, November 1957; Trần Dần, “Hãy đi mãi,” *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* [Army Arts] no. 12, December 1957.

<sup>281</sup> According to Lại Nguyên Ân, “Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm ‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’ Hùng Ca Lụa Trần Dần” [A Few Comments Written After Trần Dần’s Epic on Silk “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!”], in Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa* (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009), 128.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

908 lines (17 percent or nearly one-fifth of the poem). In 2007, on the ten-year anniversary of the poet's death, the Nhã Nam publishing house gathered Trần Dần's poems in a collection and published only three chapters of ĐĐVB. They omitted the most graphic chapters and showcased only the "heroic" sections.<sup>283</sup> Partial publication decontextualized the poem and blunted its full subversive force. The poem would not be published in its entirety until over fifty years after it was written, in 2009, and after its author's death.<sup>284</sup>

At first glance, "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!" appears to be a call for revolutionary mobilization and a tribute to the heroism of soldiers. (Việt Bắc at this point had become the symbol of military triumph and independence from French colonialism). But on closer inspection, the epic's formal techniques and its major themes makes it far from an homage to the revolution and its heroes. Formally, ĐĐVB is quite radical. The epic departs from traditional Vietnamese epic poetry in its unconventional use of non-rhyming lines and uneven prosody. Rather than the Vietnamese *lục bát* (6/8) form, or the *thơ Đường* [Tang poetry] metrics (5/7) that govern traditional epic ballads, "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!" employs free-verse lines with no strict metering. Instead, off- and slant rhymes, consonance (echo of vowel sounds), and enjambments form the poem's primary pulse and rhythm.

Another remarkable formal feature is that the poem employs the idiosyncratic "stepladder" layout of Mayakovsky's poems, with lines of varying length staggered in descending order one after the next in constant movement forward. This particular alignment creates enjambments, room for turns of phrases, and richer semantic possibilities. This layout visually enacts an advance across a terrain in which readers encounter rapid successions of fragmented images, much like the dynamics of seeing in motion. Additionally, the poem employs a low diction and vernacular of the everyday, in contrast to the lofty, elevated, and allusion-ridden language of traditional Vietnamese epics. And while the Vietnamese epic tradition relies heavily on linear narrative sequences of *sử thi* [historical poetry] and *tự sự* [narrative] to relate the historic events surrounding named characters, the poem features an anonymous "I" [*tôi, anh*], "you" [*em*], and inclusive "we" [*ta*] in episodes with abrupt shifts in perception that suspend in spaces that are not entirely concrete. At times the poem chronicles the various physical geography and terrains in which the speaker inhabits briefly, but it primarily focuses on the speaker's internal landscape, which perceptually blur material borders. The poem makes cognitive leaps that disrupt notions of time and space. Furthermore, techniques of collage, overlay, fragmentation, and disjointedness disrupts the possibility of any singular, sustained view or monolithic image.

Trần Dần's contemporaries noted that "the poem is infected [*nhiễm*] with... 'the oratory force [*khẩu khí*] of Maiakovsky,' a manifestation of dada and futurist [*đá đả và vị lai*] poetics...that in the revolutionary context is a kind of interference of opposing sounds, strident tones, provocations, arguments, breakings."<sup>285</sup> In personal and public writings Trần Dần had stated the desire for this dialectical force of multiple, competing perspectives and meanings (rather than the singular perspectives of socialist realist works). He wanted to harness the power of textual multiplicity, so that "all these things jostle together to create a calm. A calm that

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<sup>283</sup> In the essay that introduces this publishing effort, the editor speaks of the difficulties of publishing the entire poem because of its contents. This hesitancy bespeaks the unresolved tensions that still surround the poem today and its more radical content. See Vũ Văn Kha, "Gửi độc giả" [To The Reader], in *Trần Dần Thơ* [Trần Dần: Poems] (Đà Nẵng: Nhã Nam, 2007), 11–13.

<sup>284</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ* (1957) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009).

<sup>285</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân, "Đôi Đồng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm 'Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!,'" *ĐâyĐĐVB* 129

jolts.”<sup>286</sup> We could view this defining characteristic as an aesthetic dissent against the cultural and ideological uniformity enforced by the DRV state.

### The Making (and Unmaking) of a “Hero”

Trần Dần conceptualizes his modern epic poem to be quite different from the traditional Vietnamese genre. He makes this apparent in the term he uses to define the poem. The term “trường ca” translates to “long song” and refers to the “epic” genre.<sup>287</sup> However, “Anh hùng ca,” as Trần Dần defines the poem, while a synonym for “epic” is literally “herosong.” This is an interesting choice considering that the herosong is usually just a subsection of the epic genre, which may include historical poetry [*sử thi*] and linear narrative [*tư sự*] to advance the plot, but it is never the entire epic. On its own, *hùng ca* suggests only the heroic sections, such as the victory of a battle.<sup>288</sup> It is interesting to note that while “trường” evokes the battlefield [*chiến trường*] and the theater of war on that terrain, “anh hùng” draws attention to the hero figure. In calling his epic poem a “herosong,” Trần Dần draws the poem’s focus towards the figure of the hero, rather than history. As we shall see, the hero of Trần Dần’s epic challenges conventional notions of heroism, particular those of the official socialist realist program. This decision resonates with Trần Dần’s contempt for the propagandistic “smoke and fire literature” of socialist realism, and how one could only see “machine guns firing, fires raging, only noises but no people.”<sup>289</sup>

Trần Dần formally sets his work apart from the traditional Vietnamese epic, but at the same time he adopts a classical genre of painting as framework. Trần Dần specifically designated his epic poem to be a “hùng ca - lụa” or “épopée sur soie” [epic on silk]—a wholly novel construction and the first use of this term.<sup>290</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân has suggested that Trần Dần borrowed “épopée sur soie” from the genre of “peinture sur soie” or “tranh lụa” [paintings on silk]. According to Lại Nguyên Ân, Trần Dần infuses “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc” with the unique quality of the ancient style of silk paintings: “the image painted on silk gets washed with water, is redrawn again, then washed again... repeated several times like this, until the color is etched deeply into each silk fiber, so even washing won’t bleed it.”<sup>291</sup>

This deliberate naming and linkage is meaningful. First, it fuses the ideas of three mediums—writing/textual, painting/visual, and weaving/textural—and orients the reader toward the materiality of the poem. This designation draws attention to the concept of the “image” (in this case, of the hero) and how one composes the visual image through textual mediation. By evoking the repeated cycles of painting and washing, the author draws attention to the very processes of artistic creation. Rather than a fixed, flat portrait, the hero image is composed of a series of vision and revision: drawn and redrawn in many strokes, washed and rewashed, until it

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<sup>286</sup> Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [To Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001), 55.

<sup>287</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân, *150 thuật ngữ văn học* [150 Literary Terminologies] (Hà Nội: Đại Học Quốc Gia, 1998), 365 (*trường ca*); 9–10 (*anh hùng ca*).

<sup>288</sup> Thanks to Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm for this helpful insight.

<sup>289</sup> Hoàng Cẩm, “Tiên tới xét lại một vụ án văn học,” quoted in Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 128.

<sup>290</sup> In 1987, Trần Dần himself typed an asterisk beside the term “hùng ca - lụa” to signal a footnote at the bottom of the page explaining the term: “épopée sur soieÉpopée?! the only appearance – I add to this today (9/1987) to affix the form of the epic [*hùng ca*]... And the rest... I leave whole as its history has been? Except the dictation which the publishing house attends to. – T.D. –Broken Horseman [*Tư mã Gã*].” See Lại Nguyên Ân, “Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm ‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’,” 127.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

takes to the fiber. This aligns with Trần Dần's belief in the malleable nature of the "heroic" as well as the complex processes of literary creation. The designation of the poem as a "hùng ca - lự" destabilizes the fixed heroic portraiture in socialist realist literature and makes ironic the notions of heroism.

Second, by imprinting the idea of "silk" on his epic the poet invokes a gauzy, diaphanous character. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that notions of transparency and reflection exist only in the dimensions of depth of a visual image: "The impression that the transparent medium makes is that something lies behind the medium. If the visual image is thoroughly monochromatic it cannot be transparent."<sup>292</sup> Trần Dần draws attention to the transparent quality he wishes to attribute to his herosong—in contrast to the "solid" and monolithic character of socialist realist portrayals. In doing so he signals both notions of depth and the idea of the hero image as a construction.

Indeed, the concept of "process" governs the epic's form and its content. Significantly, the reference to "silk" evokes the weaving together of multiple threads to compose the canvas upon which the artist superimposes the image. This resonates with Trần Dần's demand that literature be composed of complex, contradictory and multiple articulations. Writing in the contemporary period after *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] (1986), literary scholars like Đỗ Lai Thúy and Lại Nguyên Ân view Trần Dần's modernist poetry as a product of selecting and combining several literary strands—something that only a few progressive Western literary scholars writing about modernism have begun to do in more recent years.<sup>293</sup> In his essay "Trần Dần—Một thi trình sạch" [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary], Đỗ Lai Thúy shows how Trần Dần's poetry "interweaves" [*gói tiếp*] many strains of both Vietnamese and international literatures, rather than "succeeding" [*nối tiếp*] them.<sup>294</sup> This metaphor is particularly useful for conceptualizing Vietnamese (and other) modernisms as the result of combining select threads, adding strand by strand, to form a coil of modernism. The notion of succession, on the other hand, implies a single line of lineage that does not account for the multidirectional hybridity of modernisms on the margins. In the same vein, Chana Kronfeld's deployment of Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance, and especially his rope analogy, provides a way to explore the intertextual strands of Vietnamese modernism, both its pronounced and less pronounced fibers, without being trapped in authoritarian hierarchies or decontextualizing the work. This approach acknowledges the agency of the artist who selects multiple and partial literary strands and combines them in unique formation. At the same time, it diminishes the notion of literary passivity.<sup>295</sup> In concert with the approaches advanced by Đỗ Lai Thúy and Kronfeld, and in following Trần Dần's

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<sup>292</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schattle (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, [1977] 2007), 5.

<sup>293</sup> These scholars were more progressive. They had relatively greater freedom (and new tools for literary criticism apart from Marxist readings) to shift away from political narratives and examine the aesthetic qualities in Trần Dần's poems. See, for examples, Đỗ Lai Thúy, "Trần Dần— Một thi trình sạch (I)" [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary (1)], *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* [Culture and Arts] no. 286 (April 2008): 80–85 and 104; and Đỗ Lai Thúy, "Trần Dần, một thi trình sạch (II),"

<http://phongdiep.net/default.asp?action=article&ID=4156>; and Lại Nguyên Ân, "Về phạm trù chủ nghĩa hiện đại" [On the Category of Modernism], April 2004, *Văn Hoá Học*, <http://vanhoahoc.vn/nguyen-cuu/ly-luan-van-hoa-hoc/vhh-cac-truong-phai-trao-luu/204-lai-nguyen-an-ve-pham-tru-chu-nghia-hien-dai.html>. For a good example of Western scholarship employing this theory, see Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>294</sup> See Đỗ Lai Thúy, "Trần Dần, Một Thi Trình Sạch I," 81.

<sup>295</sup> This approach resonates with Chana Kronfeld's adaptation of Wittgenstein's theory of the rope coil in her study. See Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, Chapter 2.

suggestive framing, my reading examines the way Trần Dần weaves various traditions to form the cancas of his modern epic.

Trần Dần strove for multidirectional, dialectical, polyphonic, and dynamic poetry. The poems had to resist superficial perspectives [*cái nhìn bên ngoài*], the shallow or perfunctory [*hời hợt*] views of the “political and formulaic...cadre thinly [*xoàn xĩnh*] displaying an abundance of mediocre wares [*hàng xén*].”<sup>296</sup> This marketplace analogy signals his distaste for those that hawked poetry like cheap products and saw poetry as transactional. The desire to elevate the aesthetic without eliding the revolutionary context makes Mayakovsky and Russian futurism with its socialist character ideal points of contact for Trần Dần. The scholar Thụy Khuê notes in her study that while the Mayakovsky influence is apparent in Trần Dần’s epic poem, “the tenor and tone are still Trần Dần’s own. Trần Dần the symbolist.” Indeed, we note symbolist aesthetics seep through the poem.

Lại Nguyên Ân proposes additional points of contact. He asserts that Trần Dần’s poetry exhibited more than just formal affiliations with Mayakovsky. This Mayakovsky influence manifested in Trần Dần’s poem as the anarchic drives of both dada and futurism [*đá đả và vị lai*]. The poem pronounced the mood of revolution in the “interference of opposing sounds, provocations, arguments, breakings.”<sup>297</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân suggests that Trần Dần himself drew parallels between his poems and the work of the Russian futurists to express his immense hatred for the doltish, passive and formulaic [*trì trề tiêu cực công thức*], and to transcend the restrictive national arena through modernist poetics. Aside from the connection to dadaism and futurism, Lại Nguyên Ân insists there is another significant strand of affiliation that has yet to be explored. He notes a striking resemblance in personal tone and narrative elements between Trần Dần’s epic poem and the classical Vietnamese ballads, such as “Chinh phụ ngâm” [Lament of the Soldier’s Wife], “Cung oán ngâm” [Plaintive Song from a Palace], and other “ballad” [*ngâm*] traditions of premodern Vietnam. Traditionally, the *ngâm* forms were used by the literati as ways to obliquely critique uneven relations of political power.<sup>298</sup> Trần Dần works from these multiple traditions simultaneously to critique the cultural homogeny of the Vietnamese state.

Trần Dần seems to describe how men move in war, “Like acrobats in the psychic misdemeanor we call history...” (as Anne Carson so elegantly put it).<sup>299</sup> The modern “hero” exists in brief moments of concreteness, and then vacillations, surrealities, fade-outs. The poem makes clear that the geography the hero inhabits, both physical and psychological, is unstable. Bravery is not a fixed constant but sudden jolts that alternate with long moments of heartless despair. In ĐĐVB, the men are not mere receptacles of the charge that shoots them off in a straight trajectory toward victory, but humans filled with oscillations, conflict and uncertainty. The bodies in Trần Dần’s poem are bruised, bent, broken, rotted, and infested. And while DRV cultural policies called for literature that displayed confident, monolithic heroes, soldierly themes and revolutionary (ideological) content, Trần Dần’s ĐĐVB reveals the true fragmented mental and physical states of war as experienced by men who happen to be soldiers. Trần Dần commits

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<sup>296</sup> Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Trần Dần, Một Thi Trình Sạch I,” 82. He is paraphrasing Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu” [The Poet Tố Hữu’s Perspective on Matters], in Trần Dần, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [To Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001), 141–148.

<sup>297</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân, “Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm ‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’” 128, 129.

<sup>298</sup> See Huynh Sanh Thong, *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), Introduction; Nguyễn Gia Thiều’s “Cung oán ngâm khúc” is available at <http://chimviet.free.fr/Vanco/cungoan/cungoan.htm>; and Đặng Trộng Côn’s “Chinh phụ ngâm,” is available at <http://vnthuQuân.net/truyen/truyen.aspx?tid=2qtqv3m3237n2ntntn0n31n343tq83a3q3m3237n1n>.

<sup>299</sup> Anne Carson, “Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism,” *Plainwater* (New York: Vantage Books, 1995), 16.

the poem to a truer “realism” and modern way of writing—with its messes, grotesqueries and amputations.

## Summary of Chapters

The sheer scope of the epic poem makes it unwieldy to handle. Add to that the text’s refusal to adhere to conventions of linear narrative structures and plot. However, a sense of the thematic trajectory and arc of each chapter will, I hope, suffice as a kind of map of the poetic terrain and provide an overall sense of its constellation. Bear in mind that while my summary of chapters is chronological, the temporal modes within the chapters are not. Actions and events are also unanchored to concrete places and we move from internal thoughts, memories and conflict, to external physical geographies that at times lapse into surreal landscapes. The images and their overlay create a sense of disjointedness, exacerbated by sudden shifts in speaker attention and a language that offers impressionistic fragments rather than fully-drawn statements.

Chapter 1 begins with real places, geographies and terrains of the “here” [*đây*], Việt Bắc. But the speaker locates the poem within this place not to form a tribute to the location’s beauty, but rather, to direct reader attention to past events and the history that burden it. Men fell here, bullets scorched flesh here, and there was hunger, poverty, devastation here. The speaker reminds us that those moments, the injustices, have not quite passed and still exist though the wounds and scars have faded. Indeed, “We live / In the midst of/ a dangerous herosong” [*ta sống / giữa / bản hùng ca nguy hiểm*]. The poem resounds this statement throughout. More than a literal comment on the dangers of war, it suggests the danger of epic narrative, the herosong, in which “we” are inculcated.

Chapter 2 sounds the beacon call to “Go!” [*Đi!*], be a soldier, though it may mean destroying all that you love (village, fruit trees, bridges). Here, the speaker fuses notions of “sacrifice” with “suicide”—the will to win holds great personal cost: being a shield for bullets or blowing yourself up. As a trumpet call to action, this mode of mobilizing—describing the painful acts one must endure—is rather interesting, especially near the end when the poet introduces the idea of “false victories.”

Likewise, Chapter 3 shows escalated violence: mutilation, dismemberment, death. Instead of images of men, the speaker assails readers with graphic shots of body parts: sawed-off legs, arm stumps, decayed lungs, hanging necks. The strident charge to “Go! Go! Go!” into the perils (arrows, lashings, skewers, picks, bullets, bayonets) makes the mobilizing message ironic. Rather than galvanize men for war through a call to glory, the author illuminates certain injury and death. The chapter’s overall theme is one of suffering rather than success.

Chapter 4 emphasizes the messy realities of war so often left untold. It opens with a direct commentary: “War Is not/ like / Stories of / Propaganda / See just victories / And no losses at all/ The earth is large / But / The mind is small / It particularizes / Each / paltry happiness.”<sup>300</sup> This chapter remarks on the falsity of propaganda and obliquely critiques socialist realist literature. Here, we see contrasts between the fictional grandiose versus the small, true particulars. A sudden shift to a scene in “my village post” relays how the small gestures of shared tea and smokes around a fire mean more than the broad strokes and loud noises of guns, bombs and festivals of triumph.

Chapter 5 opens with descriptions of real places, relating their weight and meaning to the speaker. But the speaker quickly refuses to indulge in idyllic memories and incites instead the

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<sup>300</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*, Chapter 4: lines 5–12.

need for a will to leave. The chapter reiterates a constant theme: nostalgia is a sickness. With this the speaker bids “farewell” to the places, memories, loved one over “there.” This statement enacts the speaker’s need to distance himself from the “here,” or Việt Bắc. The chapter closes with the forceful and repeated “go!” This call to “go” forms the poem’s primary logic: that the past and its stasis is death.

Chapter 6 also opens with a reference to locations, but these are tenuous border regions, frontiers between one place and another, one season and the next. As the speaker catches himself indulging in dim memories, he forces himself to give them up, to leave. The reader’s perception then orients towards a new “here” as the speaker enters into dark regions of forests. Hunger, starvation, the primary driving force, transforms the man as he enters into the wild, uncultivated space. Fragmented images of hunting portray men like animals, and metonymically, as body parts—red blinking eyes, yellow teeth, snouts, a hand holding a blade. The language employed here also grows more disjointed as the speaker describes the trials in the dark regions of the mind. This is no heroic portrait, but rather, images of desperate, clinging men.

In Chapter 7 the usual passage of time marked by seasons have no real consequence. Time is instead marked by endless moments of starvation, suffering and pain. Signposts of the real world fade as the men lapse in and out of consciousness. The language here also grows more surreal. The “here” of the poem is now a space littered with sacks of bones, feverish bodies, and those who are barely conscious. Instead of showing whole men, the poem depicts skin, bones, mouths, eyes—dismembered and disintegrating.

Chapter 8 enters deeper into the dark, shadowy territories of the mind, surreal landscapes in which the protagonist and his comrades crouch, waiting. But a charge to “go!” disrupts the inertia. Chapter 9 then begins with a rush of action and long-distance travel: “feet / tramples wind.” The constant movement of men in war causes images to blur: people become machine parts or birds scavenging the shores. And rather than causality of events, the chapter paints war as collage of objects and violent images: the youth-brigade girl’s song, the soldier showered in bombs, hands groping through dirt, broken arms, wind, a shard of star. Quick snapshots of fragmented objects that are smashed together perhaps form more accurate psychic experiences of war.

Chapter 10 contrasts external motions of war with the smaller movements of the mind that ponder messes of love and relationships. Enter comrade Li-To who bemoans the speaker’s ponderings and consults a physician about this “sickness.” However, the moment of contemplation is brief and fleeting as the call to arms forces men to pick up weapons and leave.

Chapter 11 opens on the 30th of the Lunar New Year. Tết composes a moment of painful contemplation: the weight of the previous year and all the years past sit heavily at the doorstep. This chapter delves into the speaker’s internal conflicts as the festivities that drift around him expose the great jest. Memories and the sadness they evoke threatens to turn the man to stone. Then in a futurist moment, the speaker forcefully casts off the oppressive body of the past. “Go!” Motion is the only solution; “stagnation is death” and the past is “a cemetery” with tombs and mausoleums that pay tribute to decayed things. To sit in the past is to sink into those graves, the speaker tells us.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> The Italian Futurists and Russian Futurists articulated the same sentiments of the past in almost the same language.

See David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912), in *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestos*, ed. Anne Lawton (Ithaca: Cornell University

Chapter 12 opens on the eve of Điện Biên Phủ, in the middle of action. This chapter should be the pinnacle of the herosong, or the narrative crest. However, it begins by capturing the intense, frenetic movements of technological speed and the strides of machines. But the poem disturbs this wide-view with a flurry of images that depict not the hero, but men in war as rodents, bloody footsteps, scorched corn, rice husks, and jaundiced animals. The poems contrasts the high spirits of triumphant newsflashes and headlines with gritty on-ground details.

The central theme of Chapter 13 is fear of exposure. It begins with the speaker composing a few lines of verse while hiding in a tunnel. He writes “by firefly light,” afraid that his “enemy” would find and destroy him should his writing leak out. This scene conveys the danger of words and the act of writing as furtive: it takes place underground and under cover. Images of surveillance reinforce this idea: the speaker is being watched as he eats and sleeps. The perspective suddenly shifts outward, towards a collage of superimposed images of war, one overlaid atop another to form what would be the portrait of a victory. Yet the contrast between the hidden, internal mental oppression, and the apparent and external war of resistance, signals more disturbing issues at hand.

The epic’s final installment, Chapter 14, was the only one published during the 1950s as a single poem, “Hãy đi mãi” [Keep Going Forever]. While this chapter serves as the poem’s narrative denouement, it forms the poem’s primary argument. By publishing this chapter before all the others, Trần Dần intended to frontload his poetic thrust. As an ending to a narrative it resists traditional conclusions: it evokes uncertainty and does not celebrate the victory as traditional epics would, and it rejects finality. The pulse that runs through each chapter continues in this last postwar moment as the speaker reiterates the need to keep going. He insists that there are more injustices to right, more deception to expose, and the need to battle for the “fate of devalued human life” [*kiếp người hạ giá*]. Significantly, in this final section the speaker explicitly collapses the “going” with the “doing” of literary creation, rather than associate it with martial acts. Images of vocal chords being cut—combined with ideas of songs throttled, heads exposed, an executioner, and forest of blades—suggest the inability to speak under oppression. The speaker pushes: “Go!” There are no longer bullets whizzing through the air, but there are lashes of winds and rains, passing seasons, loneliness and persecution. And if the war is over, the heroic of the “go” lies not in martial struggle but in the revolution and revolt of ideas. Certain lines in this final section evoke the speaker’s defensive position, especially where he must affirm his love of the “motherland, the flag, the –ism”, but also that he cannot “toot the old whistle.” The past, the speaker insists, must be discarded as the “corpse” of old and moribund institutions. Again echoing the militant futurist call for destruction of the past and speed of motion, the speaker insists that act of literary creation is a weapon for resisting a corrupt and oppressive order. The chapter ends with the speaker upholding the valor of poetry as an honorable labor, “like / a craftsman/ build ships” that can transport people away from fixed shores of ideological stagnation.

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Press, 1988), 51; and F. T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/ConstrBau/Readings/MarinettiFuturist09.pdf>.

**Weaving a New “Herosong”: Vietnamese Modernism in Đi! Đây! Việt Bắc**  
***Đi! Aggressive Action, Speed, and Movements towards Futurist Geographies***

Đây!

Việt Bắc

Sông Lô

nước xanh

trông trăng mảnh nguyệt!

Bình Ca

sương xuống

lạc

con đò!

Đáy dạ thời gian

còn đọng

những tên

Như

Nà Phạc

Phủ Thông

Đèo thùng

Khau vác.<sup>302</sup>

[Here!

Việt Bắc

Lô River

blue waters

lurching moon fragment

Bình Ca

dew falls

lose

the ferry boat!

The pit of time

still stagnates

some names

Like

Nà Phạc

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<sup>302</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*, 5, Chapter 1: lines 1–17.

Phủ Thông [Pine Covering/Palace]  
Đèo thùng [Carrying Bucket Pass]  
Khau vác [Shoulder Pail]

The first few verses of ĐĐVB establishes the poem's advancing tone. The poem begins by evoking a timeless geography with ideas of the eternal past condensed in the names set firmly in place. However, against the backdrop of river, moon and mist (those romantic symbols of natural landscape), the ferry is lost. The vessel that carries one across the waters is tossed about in the mist with a fragment of moon. The traditional symbol of the moon has lost its shape. The moon's "fragment" stresses the destabilization of traditionally-held meanings. These lines suggests the pensive immobility of these romanticized sites, burdened by the history their names carry (Pine Covering, Carrying Bucket Pass, Shoulder Pail). Trần Dần's decision to employ a free-verse in the stepladder layout, rather than the block of text created by even lines of words, is a deliberate and meaningful choice. The poem visually enacts its drive to cast off the weight of the past and leave a place of stagnation. Aligned with Mayakovsky's futurist poetics, Trần Dần believed poetry had to reflect the dynamism of lived experience. Because the stepladder layout staggers one line after the next in diagonal descending order, it creates a constant forward propulsion. Indeed, the poem moves through the still geography of Việt Bắc to leave the stagnant place with its weighty history. Interestingly, while Việt Bắc was headquarters of the communist party and bastion of the Việt Minh anticolonial revolution, the poem moves away from that site into a series of unknown landscapes. The layout thrusts readers onwards, in free-verse, like the soldier's march across a terrain of pages; it acts as a mobilizing call in moments of hesitation or passive resistance: "Go! / Though knowing / it's your turn / to lie down // Don't bicker / Who topples first / Topples last // Plunge your body / into / the shock and flash / of spreading thunder // There's not a weapon as / ultramodern / as / the martial weapon: audacity."<sup>303</sup>

The imperative "go!" establishes the poem's motor and driving force, and sets itself up against a series of stagnations, annexations and impasse throughout the fourteen chapters. In addition, the "Here, Việt Bắc" [*Đây, Việt Bắc*] poses a tension to the "there" of other spaces in which the poem proceeds towards. The form and tone sets itself up, also, against the even-keel form of socialist realist poetry in Vietnam. Compare the first lines of Trần Dần's poem to the first few stanzas of Tố Hữu's famous paean to Việt Bắc and communist revolution (which Trần Dần took great issue with):

Mình về mình có nhớ ta  
Mười lăm năm ấy thiết tha mặn nồng.  
Mình về mình có nhớ không  
Nhìn cây nhớ núi, nhìn sông nhớ nguồn?

[...]

Mình về, còn nhớ núi non  
Nhớ khi kháng Nhật, thuở còn Việt Minh  
Mình đi, mình có nhớ mình  
Tân Trào, Hồng Thái, mái đình cây đa?

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 32, Chapter 3: Lines 23–40.

[When you/we return do you remember me/us  
Those fifteen eagerly heart-felt years  
When you/we return do you/we remember or not  
See trees recall mountains, see river recall source]

[When you/we return, do you/we still remember mountains  
When we resisted Japan, when Việt Minh still existed  
When you/we leave do you remember yourself/us  
Tân Trào, Hồng Thái, canopy of the banyan tree?]<sup>304</sup>

If Trần Dần's poem employs a marching layout and forceful tone that charts a course away from a pensive and immobile past, then Tố Hữu's poem, in contrast, embraces those broad sweeps of nostalgic "return," "remember" and "recall" distilled in the Việt Bắc mountains. The opening lines of Trần Dần's ĐĐVB also recalls names of places that resonate communist history, but only to set them up as a dialectical point of departure. Whereas Tố Hữu employs the traditional Vietnamese *lục bát* (6/8) metered form, Trần Dần abandons any formal meter and strict prosody. And whereas Tố Hữu's rhythmic lines lull the reader with its rhetorical back and forth questions that recollect past achievements in that region, Trần Dần's glances at those scenes in passing as his free-verse form and its pedestrian diction gallops on. The poem repeats the directive "Go!" over fifty times (not counting its synonyms), often fired off in successions of three or four, and particularly in moments when the speaker "I" lingers in any one place or indulges in the past too long. Trần Dần suggests that nostalgia, in traditional literature or modern socialist realist romanticism, is a sickness. For the Russian (and Italian) futurists, aggressive movement, energy and speed, more accurately captures the dynamic, hypersensory experience of a modern world. Further, movement in creation staves off death.<sup>305</sup>

Movement is the soldier's primary instinct and key to survival in war, but as a futurist poetics, movement is also the revolt against "the stagnant," "idle," "decayed" body of moribund literary traditions. Trần Dần exalts motion as a weapon against creative stasis. This notion resonates with Italian Futurism's militant demand for speed to destroy the "mausoleums of the past." In "The Founding and Manifesto of [Italian] Futurism" (1909), the first three tenets are: "...the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness; Courage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry; Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap."<sup>306</sup> In "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," Mayakovsky and his Russian Futurist cohort urged the audience to "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the ship of Modernity."<sup>307</sup> The rapid movement Trần Dần creates at once captures the aggressive psychic assault of war on the senses, and jolts readers into new modernist consciousness. Indeed, Trần Dần injects the "go!" into moments that stall at sentiment. By

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<sup>304</sup> Tố Hữu, "Việt Bắc" (1954), in *Thơ Tố Hữu* [Tố Hữu's Poems] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 2003).

<sup>305</sup> For a dynamic study of this avant-garde emphasis on speed, see Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009). See also Burluk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Khlebnikov, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste"; and Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism."

<sup>306</sup> Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism."

<sup>307</sup> See also Burluk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Khlebnikov, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste." The Russian futurists borrowed the strident language and key points from the Italian manifesto while localizing it to their own particular cultural and historical context.

recalling the places, memories, and people that hold meaning for the “I,” the speaker can then cast those feelings off. Trần Dần’s epic poem thus enacts his pointed critiques of Tố Hữu’s *Việt Bắc*.<sup>308</sup> Perhaps, as the poem suggests, the strength to resist romantic sentiments is part of the audacity needed to revolutionize literature. To linger in the backward glance or indulge in the past is certain death:

I leave behind

    The light of Hà Nội,

Leave

    the immense stars of Mộc Châu,

Leave

    Thao River’s red and murky waters

Leave behind

    All the places I have lived.

Each place

    A bowl of my life’s blood...

I’m disgusted by

    Each thing

        That is stagnant water

Like mold

    like death

        like lying in one place and refusing to move

Go!

    Is shouldering memories

        Carrying sorrow in your gut!

Life’s ship

    full of

        corpses of leaves of days past

But go, go!—

    Don’t cast anchor

        once more,

though some wharf

    has more than enough tender love

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<sup>308</sup> Trần Dần illustrates this point in his critique of Tố Hữu’s *Việt Bắc* collection. See Trần Dần, “Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu,” 143

Go!–  
Have the gall to remember

Lips  
thighs  
lover's warm legs!

There's nothing  
more hurtful than  
sluggishness!<sup>309</sup>

This “inertia,” “sluggishness,” “stagnancy” can only result in collecting “mold” and “decay” [*mốc meo*]. Here, movement pushes against the sluggishness of the mind that is content to remain in the institutions of the past and perform its empty rituals. The push forward is a drive for literary progress and revolt against aesthetic and cultural decay. Trần Dần reiterates this central theme throughout the fourteen chapters.

Rather than descriptions of clear battle scenes with transparent cause and effect, Trần Dần offers instead collages of crisscrossing impressionistic images to depict the frenetic speed and energy of war:

Điện Biên Phủ!

[...]

Last song verse  
lets loose  
storm sounds!

The horse of time  
springs forth leaping  
four hooves  
blind dust

Carrying news  
running  
round  
the world!

Clouds tell wind  
go and raise the peacock  
spread the news

Hooves communication  
compete with  
electric towers

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<sup>309</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*, Chapter 8: lines 49–103.



In chapter 2, for instance, the horrors of war halt the movement created by the charge to “go!” The speaker equivocates the idea of “sacrifice” with “suicide” as he presents the likely possibilities of total decimation. With each shove, each “go,” Trần Dần creates tensions to this movement through a series of gruesome images:

Go!

Go!

Go!

Become a  
Suicide soldier

[...]

If the cluster of mines

saws straight off  
pair of feet

Drag the stump of arm

crawl  
each step

[...]

If

tuberculosis  
eats into lungs—  
Keep going.

[...]

Arm though broken

still break it off  
all your might

If we get

necks hanged  
band of enemy

Let them only

string up  
on a single stand

One

howl-a thousand-pounds-of-explosives<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa*,” Chapter 2: lines 1–64.

Or:

When  
    the arm breaks  
                    and no one can patch it up

When the spine  
    is severed and cut  
                    still don't surrender

[...]

Take our bodies  
    to be  
            a bomb

Climb  
    into the middle  
                    of the convoy of armored cars

Explode  
    dynamic fruit – dragging – people – along

[one may] Accidentally hit  
                    the belly  
                            of those ferocious ships

[...]

Destroy the streetlamp  
                    leaning against  
                            the city of youth's bloom

Transform our native village  
                    into  
                            a Sahara of thirst and starvation<sup>315</sup>

The call that should galvanize soldiers instead forms a reflexive subtext that questions the linear drives of war. Soldiers not only have to confront the abstract weapons of war—arrows, lashers, bullets, picks, bayonets. Trần Dần ensures that mutilations are also awaiting the men: arms stumps, leg stubs, hung necks, clumps of exploded flesh. In other words, they could expect dismemberment, amputations, shattered bodies. In addition, the sacrifice entails destroying the things once loved. As a mobilizing call, this passage seems rather counterintuitive. It relays not glories but pitiful wounds. However, these juxtaposed rapid-fire images create what Trần Dần called “the dialectical,” or multiple and multidirectional perspectives that asks the reader to

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., Chapter 3: lines 49–70.



And                                    in a sea of smoke  
    we  
          toss  
                  bob up and down

Drops of water  
          pushed to and fro  
                                  in  
  squalls<sup>318</sup>

Trần Dần sets up this sense of smallness as an argument against the grandiose socialist realist depictions of the heroic. Whereas the monolithic socialist realist hero rarely encounters a true fall, the “heroes” of Trần Dần’s epic have their bodies smashed and broken; they die floating as mere drops in a sea of anonymous bodies.

In another example:

Trenches and tombs  
                                  fires scorch  
  bombs burn

People’s eyes  
          singed  
                  roast corn...<sup>319</sup>

[...]

Arriving here -  
          feet’s blood  
                                  spot  
  ten-thousand-mile long road

Becomes  
          one long vermilion stain  
                                  waning moon<sup>320</sup>

[...]

Way up high  
          a flock of young starlings

go and hide  
          those

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<sup>318</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*,” Chapter 2: lines 124–155.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 12: lines 149–153.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 12: lines 167–173

stray bullets...

Those days  
four corners of horizon  
flashing red eyes<sup>321</sup>

The frenetic action Trần Dần depicts relies on combining associated images through a modernist stream-of-consciousness. Here, the image of bombed-out trenches and tombs turn into burnt eye sockets, kernels of corn. The bloody footsteps of a long military march transmutes into one red stain cast by an ominous waning moon. Trần Dần employs these poetic devices, at once futurist and surrealist, to compose a multilayer portrait of revolutionary experience that is starkly different from the romance of war propaganda.

### *Grotesque Modes of Symbolist Protest*

While ĐĐVB's aesthetic direction connects most apparently with Russian futurist poetics, the less obvious affiliations Trần Dần makes are with French symbolist aesthetics, the dominant orientation of his early writing career. As an important symbolist aesthetic, the grotesque in ĐĐVB presents a graphic challenge to the monolithic portraits of socialist realist heroes. Indeed, as Boudarel pointed out, the men in Trần Dần's writings "scarcely resembled the image of official heroes."<sup>322</sup> "Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!" The grotesque disturbs the official portrait of heroism as men are reduced to body parts and predicaments. The poem exhibits the symbolist penchant for disturbing notions that conflate beauty with truth and morality. In ĐĐVB Trần Dần brings the portrait of the "hero" down to earth—demythologizes him—through a series of visual fragmentations. The poet does this not to indulge in the grotesque simply to disturb and defile; he does this to produce a healthier image, especially as the socialist realist literary doctrines threatened to sanitize both lived and creative experiences.

Rather than present images of virile, whole and healthy men—socialist heroes—Trần Dần assaults the senses with a kaleidoscope of grotesque body parts: bullet-ridden heads, punctured chests, leg stumps, arm stubs, hung necks, skinned heads, severed spines, and so forth. This archive of disjointed and dissembled human parts subverts the romanticism of heroic adventures. Whereas traditional Vietnamese epics and socialist realist literature composed the image of the hero through depicting a set of ideals, Trần Dần locates the hero in the corporeal, the material of his being. This purposeful distortion divests objects and figures of romantic ideas of singular fixed truths. Instead, the poet posits the object (the body) and the symbol (the hero) as site of fragmentation, contradicting, and conflicting currents.

In Chapter 6 of the poem, the speaker stands at a border region between one place and the next. These regions are not simply geographical frontiers; they are the hinterlands of the mind entering into darker places. The speaker forces himself to mentally leave that "scenery" of his old village. As he enters into the "here" of Việt Bắc, the forest, the reader is thrust into an "uncultivated" space of shadow, starvation and desperation:

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., Chapter 13: lines 43–50.

<sup>322</sup> Georges Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan-Văn Giai-Pham Affair," *Vietnam Forum* 13 (Winter-Spring 1990): 154–174.

We  
    keep entering forests  
                    look for something to eat

I transform  
    into  
            gaunt twisted limb

Amidst  
    countless firewood kindling  
                    my friends<sup>323</sup>

Trần Dần compounds this image through repetition:

Chúng tôi ra vào  
    như  
    một rừng cây

trụi hết lá  
    trơ cành  
    khô khảnh

Sương từng đóng  
    chất ùn  
    bên ngưỡng cửa<sup>324</sup>

[We enter and leave  
    like  
    a forest of trees

Denuded of all leaves  
    barefaced branches  
            brittle and dry

Dew in piles  
    heap firewood  
            at the threshold]

If the village stood for a place of youth and beauty, organized social structures, civilization, kinships, the immediate forests of Việt Bắc are a frontier of the wild and untamed, transforming men into inhuman things. They begin to resemble knotted and gnarled branches, for instance, and as they enter deeper and deeper into the woods, the bestial sets in. No longer human, they

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<sup>323</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*,” 45, Chapter 6: lines 26–50.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, Chapter 7: lines 86–94.

become just blinking red-rimmed eyes and a knife-wielding hand intent on hunting down something, anything, to eat:

I stagger  
    over  
        three slopes

To a valley  
    fall into the net  
        some bamboo

The knife holding the hand  
    like a stone  
        heavy

Two eye sockets  
    blink yellow  
        blink red<sup>325</sup>

In another depiction:

Mắt vàng sâu  
    thành  
        hững cục nghệ vàng

Như ở một “suối vàng” nào  
    những tia mắt nghệ  
        lặng  
            nhìn nhau

[Hollow yellow eyes  
    become  
        lumps of yellow turmeric

As if at some “golden stream”<sup>326</sup>  
    turmeric sparks  
        sink silent  
            stare at each other]<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., Chapter 6: lines 77–88.

<sup>326</sup> The Vietnamese “suối vàng” or “golden stream” is equivalent to the River Styx in Greek mythology, the borderlands between the living and the dead, earth and the underworld.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., Chapter 7: lines 70–76.

Trần Dần describes bodies in pieces. Rather than whole people, they are disjointed and dismembered: eyes, hands, limbs. The ailments they suffer reduce these soldiers to a catalogue of body parts in states of disrepair. And even rather than the pitiful images of humans in pain, Trần Dần employs techniques of collage and superimpositions to show the humanity seeping out of them. The eyes are black and red blinking things (animals) or they are lumps of yellow turmeric at the golden stream [*suối vàng*], or in limbo, staring disconcertingly back at readers from dark shores of near-death. The poems shows the “hero” by his afflictions, wounded or starving, in a Baudelarian squalor. Hunger reduces soldiers to bitten, twisted, and bleeding parts. And as Trần Dần reveals, the sharing of a scrap of food makes them resemble more a pack of animals than soldiers: “Ten [of us] / jostle one another/ to eat [without rice] / A baby box of meat / Still sniveling and animated / Like elbowing each other / to go to the front...”<sup>328</sup> Trần Dần presents the image of squabbling hungry men desperate to get a morsel in their bellies. As he compares this scene to that of people jostling each other to go to the front, he implicitly challenges the elevated stature of soldiers and deflates the mythologies of heroism.<sup>329</sup>

In Chapter 11, the speaker sits in a stalled in moment of contemplation at Tết, the Lunar New Year border that heaps all the year’s weight at the doorstep. The speaker depicts the past as a graveyard of relics. He “tosses” another Tết “Into a corner of [his] heart” and relegates it to a “vault with heaps of broken things” that “have rusted over with verdigris...” Tết festivities become a painful oppressive force for the speaker, who experiences it as “a noose / to hang the neck.” More interestingly, the speaker compares the scene of merrymaking on the night of the 30th to the oppressive weight of the past, of being as “dark / as some regime’s / dark hushing” [*tối / như chế độ nào / bung bít tối*]. The restless drive to “go” then, is to leave such a space of restriction. This poem further enforces this notion as the speaker goes on to say that it is: “As though / The past has finished its term (in office) / and still mucks about [*phá tán*] / at the hour / of total collapse.” Further, Tết, as the moment of transition, evokes ideas of an interregnum between one season, one regime, one temporal moment and the next. The poem locates its primary action in aesthetic motion against “each stagnant pond / the place our bodies decay // Each habitual / way of thinking / blind and dim.”<sup>330</sup> Here, the accretion of years, memories and sentiments compose a cemetery of social institutions that Trần Dần insists needs discarding. Trần Dần transforms the exalted moment of new hope, tradition and ritual, into a distorted symbol of a bloated corpse.

### *Modernist Profanations*

The poet’s act of profaning these figures casts stark challenge to the “hero” of this epic and socialist realist literature generally. Trần Dần collapses the exalted with the profane and blurs conceptual boundaries between “high” and “low” culture. Both French symbolist and surrealist poetics sought to locate the profound in the profane as means to achieving “truer” illuminations. While surrealists aimed to extract greater truths through vivid perceptions of everyday,

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., Chapter 6: lines 137–143.

<sup>329</sup> On demythologizing, Marinetti wrote: “Let’s go!” I said. “Friends, away! Let’s go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We’re about to see the Centaur’s birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels!... We must shake at the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let’s go! Look there, on the earth, the very first dawn! See Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.”

<sup>330</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa*,” 89, Chapter 11: 194–199.

pedestrian objects, Trần Dần sought the truth of artistic creation by pulling lofty objects down to earth—to demythologize them.<sup>331</sup>

The doorframe peeps ajar  
two early stars

Like  
a pair of lovers  
strolling  
forest edge

By the fire  
we spit out  
a few handfuls of pointless stories

In ĐĐVB, moments of loftier considerations—predictable movement of celestial bodies and the romance of stars—are subverted by contrast to earthly bodies and profane functions—the spitting of phlegm as telling of pointless stories without any real direction. This bodily discharge, whether of tales of distraction or phlegm—corrupts any moment of romantic contemplation by directing attention to the corporeal human predicament.

Similarly, what is supposed to be the exalted pinnacle of the epic—“Điện Biên Phủ! / History’s feat of arms!” / Gong sound / [...] / battle / the herosong”—Trần Dần instead deflates with profane images: soldiers become “rats with yellow beards.”<sup>332</sup> In describing the act of digging trenches, Trần Dần depicts these men as having their “snout tips burrow / like / sewer rodents.”<sup>333</sup> And later, after a bout of explosions, “Fire chars us / into / a pack of yellow crawling animals.”<sup>334</sup> Trần Dần subverts the very genre of herosong, profaning it, at the very moment it should be most elevated. In a symbolist profanation of the exalted, the wide sweep and arc of Vietnamese revolutionary history, the poet directs reader attention toward the events on underground in the small, cramped spaces. What he reveals is the claustrophobia of an oppressive situation:

I’ve gone the entire  
length of trenches  
width of graves.

An underground  
palace –  
darker than night.

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<sup>331</sup> See See André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism (1924),” in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 66–75. Walter Benjamin elaborates on the surrealist quest for the marvelous through forms of disorientations and intoxication that enabled the irrational to surface in the everyday. See Walter Benjamin: “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism.htm>; and Margaret Cohen, *Profane illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>332</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*, Chapter 12: lines 1–48.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 12: lines 187–189.

<sup>334</sup> ĐĐVB*ibid.*, 98, Chapter 12: lines 130–132.

Each soldier lies  
                  shoved into  
                                  a baby vault,

Like a pupa  
                  laying idle rotten  
                                  in a cocoon.

Trench-streets  
                  tight  
                          yet deep  
                                  steep and inaccessible.

Narrow  
          as  
          a narrow (minded) situation.<sup>335</sup>

The poet equates the trenches with tombs and graves, sites of death and decay. Less than soldiers, these men become the soft larvae of insects in cocoons. They cannot move, contrary to the aggressive action of mobilized soldiers. The large sweep of Vietnamese history of revolutionary triumph becomes destabilized in this moment of lower, on-ground perspectives. Notably, in the chapter immediately following this scene, the speaker sits in an underground trench, writing:

Tôi ngồi viết  
          trong hầm  
                  căng bạt kín

Con đom đóm đèn  
          thiếu thở  
                  mắt lim dim

Chỉ sáng đủ  
          đôi ba  
                  dòng chữ.

Nếu như lọt  
          ra ngoài đêm  
                  một tia sáng nhỏ

trái phá  
          sẽ  
                  sầm sầm  
                          xô đến

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., Chapter 12: 194–212.

chôn ta!

[I sit writing  
in the tunnels  
tightly stretched tent.

A luciola (firefly) light  
short of breath  
eyes flickering,

Only bright enough for  
a few  
lines of verse.

If it leaks out into  
night outside  
a small bright ray

The fruit of destruction  
will  
boom boom  
rush over  
bury me!<sup>336</sup>

Here, an activity of illumination, poetic writing, reveals itself to be a dangerous act that if discovered will bring about destruction. With his focus on activity underground, the poet suggests the dangers that lurk below surfaces, especially as they relate to the creative act. It is from that narrow space underground that the speaker experiences the real war. Within this passage Trần Dần lowers the focus to obliquely critique the social realities of DRV cultural politics.

### ***Detritus and Fragmentation: Surrealist Landscapes in ĐĐVB***

Trần Dần seems to suggest that socialist portraits that turn history into neatly-packaged consumable object, is a short cut. ĐĐVB, then, is an exercise in surrealist montage against the abbreviations of history. Trần Dần creates for us a tableaux, and environment out of refuse, a history out of detritus. A kind of modernist civic duty is attached to this practice of assembling the fragments of war, both human, material, and the intangible (memories, affect, and so forth). As Susan Sontag tells us of the visual montage: “True modernism is not austerity but a garbage-strewn plentitude—the willful travesty of Whitman’s magnanimous dream.”<sup>337</sup> Trần Dần’s landscape becomes, like T.S. Elliot’s apocalyptic vision, a wasteland of history filled with the fragments and detritus that the mind is forced to perceive simultaneously, reassemble, and make sense of.

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., chapter 13: 1–17.

<sup>337</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 68–69.



farewell to scenes / of human life.” The markers of this other place—barren trees, moans, and sickly moonlight—signal a surrealist journey into the subconscious world. Note the way the poet has synthesized the senses of sight (light) and sound (moan) in the way the light falls across the planes.<sup>341</sup> Trần Dần disturbs the sense of familiar terrain and brings readers into a landscape that alienates in order to open up new possibilities for interpretation and meaning.

In another sequence depicting a feverish insomnia of “thousands / upon thousand / of white nights” [*đêm trắng*] or sleepless nights, people transform into inhuman shapes and resemble other creatures. Here, we’ve entered into surreal landscapes where humans turn into furtive night birds:

Cá nước  
thức ngàn  
ngàn  
đêm trắng

Mắt mở to  
như cửa ngõ  
đen ngòm

Người dân nước  
đã hóa thân  
cò  
vạc

chui bờ  
rúc bụi  
sống về đêm.

[Spring sings duet  
with  
leaves falling  
flooding forest

Fish  
stay awake  
thousands  
on thousands  
white [sleepless] nights.

Eyes open wide  
like a door opens  
pitch black

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<sup>341</sup> Synaesthesia, or the combining of the senses, is a key symbolist aesthetic. We also see this sensory fusion in surrealist texts. Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences,” which is generally viewed as the seminal text of symbolist poetics, illustrates this idea. Baudelaire’s poems are available at <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>.

Water folk  
    have transformed bodies  
                    night herons  
                            storks

Creep shores  
    peck dust  
        live by night]<sup>342</sup>

Trần Dần composes the atmosphere of this surreal world, first, by collapsing the eerie sounds of moving stream with rushing leaves that “[flood] forests.” The “duet,” or synchronization of voice, forms the parallelism and merge of spaces—the terrestrial and the aquatic. Within this watery night world that floods the forest, the sleepless fish stare back with wide open eyes. The poet employs the double reflective surfaces of water and eyes to great effect. The rippling mirror surfaces, rather than reflect, have the power to distort the images captured within their frames. The eyes, like doors, form an entrance [*cửa ngõ*] between one world and another, between the eyes of fish, the human eyes of “water folk,” and the lens of night birds. The portal that opens allows readers to enter into a dark, “pitch black” world in which people who live by this mirror world of water begin to shift shape. Humans transform into the gangly and crouched figures of storks and night herons animated by a play of light and shadow.

These surrealist moments in the poem produce spaces of porousness in-between-ness and uncertainty. As an interstice between one world and another, where concrete shapes and symbols lose their definite meaning, the poet invites new perspectives that disturb and challenge straightforward “rational” modes of thought and perception. As readers enter into these spaces through gaps and openings, the “doors” that the poet creates, we must also grope through the psychological complexities of the experience. Here, the static fixtures of the logical world disintegrate and logical modes of thought do not aid understanding. People are not as they appear. Contrary to socialist realist literature, which provides only one-dimensional, straight-on shots of the hero on a flat canvas, “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!” exhibits the multilayered, multidirectional and superimposed sensory perceptions that make up complex perceptual experiences. Trần Dần emphasized the qualities of this “epic on silk” painting to suggest greater transparency and psychological depth. Trần Dần weaves surrealist techniques into his heroic portrait in order to dismantle the static modes of literary perception and flat representations of socialist realist rationality. Through these modernist presentations, the image of the hero remains blurry and uncertain, the clearly drawn outlines of the socialist realist revolutionary hero disturbed. Formally, Trần Dần closes the distance between poetry and visual arts as well as motion picture as he applies techniques to recreate the dynamics visual perception.

### ***Đi! Mobilizing Modernism***

If the initial “Go! Here, Việt Bắc!” was meant as a rallying call to fight military battles, then the final “go!” after the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ and in the poem’s last chapter, suggests a call to another kind of revolution:

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<sup>342</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lạ*, Chapter 9: lines 92–109.

Each  
(and) every disgraceful thing

Does not hurt as much as  
the disgrace (of):  
the moldy!

Let's cut each mooring rope  
if our lives  
stop moving!<sup>343</sup>

Here, Trần Dần reiterates the idea that stagnation is death. Although the war is over by Chapter 12, in this final chapter 14, “injustices” and “deceptions,” the poet notes, “still exist.” That we must “keep going forever” directs the reader’s attention to other issues that still require interrogating:

Khi bóng tối  
còn đâu  
như máy chém

Những lời ca đứt cổ  
bị bêu đầu

Lũ đao phủ tập trung  
hình cụ  
mặt trời lên

phải mọc giữa rừng gươm.<sup>344</sup>

[When dark shadows  
still somewhere  
like a cutting machine

Those song verses throats slit  
their heads displayed

The gang of executioners focus  
(on) the old/concrete image  
sunrise

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 110, Chapter 14: lines 1–8. Compare this to the theme and tone of the Italian Futurists: “Let’s go!” I said. “Friends, away! Let’s go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We’re about to see the Centaur’s birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels!... We must shake at the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let’s go! Look there, on the earth, the very first dawn! See F.T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/ConstrBau/Readings/MarinettiFuturist09.pdf>.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., Chapter 14: lines 27–37.



If the past  
    presses on the back  
        of the present

Heavy  
    line of bitter weights,

I will blow up  
    all the bullet vaults of cries

dispose the corpses of firecrackers  
                    every thing  
                    that's decrepit<sup>347</sup>

This strident movement that the author proposes, then, is the revolt against the stagnation of old regimes and ways of thinking that continue to oppress. However, the source of oppression is no longer physical but ideological and explicitly linked to literary creation:

Go on forever  
    and never satisfied

I could  
    accumulate many sins

But never  
    become so stupid  
        (as) to commit the crime:  
                            of squatting [*nằm ì*].

Rusty patina  
    how different is it  
        from death?

Death of the heart death  
    (that) no longer dares to love and ache

Death to the block of brain  
    no longer dares to think!

If  
    my day has not come  
        to vomit blood,

My lungs keeps tormenting and tearing at  
                            poetic words.

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., Chapter 14: lines 197–206.

I could  
ignore  
sounds of a thousand vulgar curses

Except for the curse: “Live but not creating!”<sup>348</sup>

In the context of events surrounding Trần Dần during this period, this final chapter’s call to movement can be read as a demand for aesthetic freedom and the will to live as an artist: “Tôi có thể / mặc thây / ngàn tiếng chửi tục tằn / trừ tiếng chửi: ‘Sống không sáng tạo!’” The speaker’s exaltation of feverish movement through the various terrains of the poem, both internal and external, culminates into this final revealing moment. The revolution is not the military variety, but a war on the aesthetic and cultural frontiers. The past must be destroyed in order to make room for new aesthetic productions. This futurist charge to “Go!” reveals itself to be a modernist literary project that embodies revolt against the repressive institutions of the past and present. Trần Dần’s persistent statement throughout the epic resonates with Italian futurism’s proclamations:

Why poison ourselves? Why rot?... And what is there to see in an old picture except the laborious contortions of an artist throwing himself against the barracks that thwart his desire to express his dream completely?...Admiring an old picture is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn instead of hurtling it far off, in violent spasms of action and creation.... Do you, then, wish to waste all your best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down?...When the future is barred...the admirable past may be a solace for the ills of the moribund, the sickly, the prisoner... But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong Futurists!<sup>349</sup>

Through a series of modernist intertextual affiliations, the poem manifest its argument against the repressive cultural policies of the DRV. Further, while it contests national restrictions, it positions itself firmly within international modernist tradition.

## Conclusion

Trần Dần’s “Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!” embodies the complex registers of this second-wave of modernism in 1950s North Vietnam. The poem’s intertextual collage records not only valences of the national politico-cultural debates and the communist international wave of influence in Vietnam, but also the artist’s transcultural aesthetic project. A unique fusion of socialist ethos and avant-garde aesthetics, the poem enacts both a form of dissent against restrictive international literary models that the DRV adopted, and forms discrete affiliations with international modernist traditions. In this chapter I have teased out the features perceived as exemplary for the creation of modernism at this particular historical juncture. Trần Dần’s modernist epic borrows formal features of Russian futurism and integrates it with French symbolist and surrealist aesthetics to subvert the conventions of socialist realism—the DRV

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., Chapter 14: lines 151–174.

<sup>349</sup> See Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.”

state's prescribed literary model. By weaving these modernist strands into the particular cultural context of 1950s Vietnam, Trần Dần places these poetics in relation to each other, configuring their motivations and meanings in new ways. This dynamic shifts the focus of Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on minor modernism's "reterritorializing" character, as well as Jameson and Bhabha's conceptualization of third-world literature as a form of menace.<sup>350</sup> While articulating the transnational conflicts of that period, the poem performs a dissent of national cultural paradigms.

Trần Dần's new epic model also renovates traditional Vietnamese epic conventions by locating the primary tension within the subjectivity of the speaker "I" rather than grand sweeps of third-person narratives that transmit the social consciousness of the collective "we." Indeed, by calling his epic a "herosong," and subverting this convention through particular futurist, symbolist, and surrealist aesthetics, Trần Dần throws into question long-held notions of heroism depicted in literature. He further defines the poem as an "epic on silk," drawing allusion to the classical art of painting on silk, and our attention to the very processes of constructing an image. This aesthetic choice foregrounds the artist and act of creation and disturbs the illusion of the text as unquestioned historical artifact. Here, Trần Dần underscores the writer as mediator of realities. By revealing the act of painting the hero image as a series of fragmentation, breakings, revision, and overlays, Trần Dần draws attention to the very processes of its opposition: socialist realist constructions of monolithic characters and myths. Through decidedly modernist techniques, Trần Dần breaks the hero figure down to size. He is not interested in simplistic pictorial devices of naïve realism. Trần Dần demonstrates the depth of character and psychology made possible through modernist mediations.

Trần Dần's modern epic is more interested in aesthetic mobility than political mobilization. Formally, the poem creates a compelling call to "go!" and captures the love for aggressive speed and frenetic movement through applying futurist aesthetic techniques—stepladder layout, curt lines, a barrage of simultaneous, superimposed images. At the same time, he impedes this sense of forward action by introducing images that repel rather than attract, making the call to (military) arms ironic. So while Trần Dần creates an aesthetic dynamism, he constructs ideological and psychological roadblocks. Flashbacks and nostalgia, also, form impediments to progress; the speaker must tear away from these moments to keep moving forward. These discursive moments form a dialectical space and the poem's core tension, forcing the reader to pause. Impeded perceptions forces the reader to reconsider perceptions of war, hero and literature itself, as it opens up space for multiple interpretations. Trần Dần is intent to capture restless energy so that a profile never remains static and fixed, but shifts, multiplies, continually appears and disappears, returns deformed. Static, one-sided perceptions and static representations become a fetish of the past as Trần Dần discards the notion of absolute truth. In doing so, he makes an oblique critique of socialist realist representations as he advances a modernist poetic project.

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<sup>350</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: "What is Minor Literature," 16–27; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), Chapter 4: "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse"; Chapter 7: "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense"; Chapter 9: "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency"; Chapter 11: "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation"; Chapter 12: "Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity"; and Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 65–88 (67).

By featuring the symbolist poetic of the grotesque highly in the epic poem, Trần Dần signals the deformities of the cultural moment. Trần Dần introduces these images not only to provide more accurate descriptions of the afflictions of war, but also to jar conventional modes of depiction. That men are reduced to body parts or animals ruptures the socialist realist tendency to glorify the protagonist figure in monolithic portraiture. Just as the speaker must pull himself away from indulging in romantic nostalgias, these literary techniques jolt readers out of comfortable consumption of cultural products. These moments suggest that formal beauty is no longer the arbiter of truth. The grotesque signals an instability of signs and fixed meanings, thus inviting the reader to engage in a new order of understanding.

Adopting modernist techniques of automatic stream-of-consciousness, dream-like states, and surrealist blurring of images, Trần Dần creates meaningful shifts that signal new modes of perception. The poet assures the reader that the linear temporal world cannot accurately capture the hypersensory experiences of the psyche—particularly a psyche at war. The poem introduces spatial and temporal ruptures to destroy the sense of time flowing continuously and homogeneously with identical speed everywhere. In doing so, it counters the teleological drives and fixed constants of socialist realist literature. The poet juxtaposes internal activity with the happenings of an external world to suggest a multitude of subjectivities exists simultaneously—in contrast to socialist realist notions of a single shared consciousness. Further, Trần Dần blurs the borders of objects to suggest the malleability and multiplicity of things. These techniques provoke questioning notions of a fixed, absolute and definite reality. The surrealist moments in the poem signal a wider process of transition from a mentality circumscribed by the war to a realization of the profound changes it has produced.

This view of literary dynamics as a complicated network of crisscrossing and overlapping fibers accounts for the textual plurality and promiscuity that we find in modernist works on the margins of Europe, and in Vietnam particularly. In contextualizing the work within the historical juncture, we gain insight into why particular literary features gain more prominence in certain periods. Hence, we see futurist aesthetics, with its revolutionary enunciations, worked deeply into Trần Dần's literary project and feature more highly in mobilizing 1950s modernism. Futurism possesses the oratory force to articulate against the stifled oppression of the cultural moment. Likewise, the symbolist and surrealist poetics developed earlier in colonial Vietnam are embedded deeper in the poem's folds to signal deeper metaphysical drives. Using this approach, we can tease out discrete intertextual practices as selective and affiliative acts without decontextualizing or suspending the literature in a void.<sup>351</sup> If there is a territorial defensiveness, a vying for literary aesthetic authority, it is enacted in the national arena between competing literary and cultural discourses—contrary to dominant understandings of minor modernist dynamics. What Trần Dần's example of modernism in this period strongly suggests is that perhaps modernism posed a threat to a defensive nationalist cultural agenda precisely because it facilitates multidirectional, transcultural and polyvocal dialogues. Indeed, belated modernism invites a production of new meanings in its inherently intertextual configuration.

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<sup>351</sup> For example, Roland Barthes' notion of intertextuality displaces the author and suggests that the text becomes an "anonymous tissue of citations." In this poststructuralist view, the text stands on its own, detached to any historical context. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang [1967] 1977), 142–148 (146–147).

#### 4 | The Modernism Underground, 1970s/1980s: Dương Tường and the Poetics of Sound

Wagner

Ở đây tất cả đều tầm mún  
Chỉ riêng khổ đau là hoành tráng

Here everything is petty and mean  
Only suffering is grandiose

Thôi chào tovaritsh Thế kỉ<sup>352</sup>  
Giờ lũ hồng ròi  
Tôi chẳng còn thì giờ dặn dò cái chậu giặt

Alright then ciao tovaristch Epoch<sup>353</sup>  
It's now the hour of red masses  
I ain't got time to instruct to scrub the bathtub

Kìa con chim xứ rét đã về  
ngậm một nhánh IM hoá thạch

There, the cold region bird has returned  
mouthing a branch of fossilized QUIET

tôi đi  
hành tinh hoang

I go  
an uncultivated planet

-Dương Tường, 1969<sup>354</sup>

#### Introduction: Modernism on the Margins of 1970s/1980s Vietnam

Vietnamese modernism went underground after the repression of Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm in the late 1950s/1960s. But that is not to say that it was snuffed out. The case of modernism in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that this literary impetus did not lose the momentum it had gained in the late 1950s. Quite the opposite. Although the hostile measures taken against those involved in the controversy disrupted the public development of these works, modernist poetry continued to grow and evolve beyond the scope of the state's watchful eye. Writers centrally involved in the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair—such as Trần Dần, Lê Đạt, Đinh Hùng, and Hoàng Cầm—were forced to suffer humiliating public censures and self-criticism sessions, sent to prison and “reeducation camps,” and banned from public intellectual life.<sup>355</sup> Yet despite the high stakes and

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<sup>352</sup> The Vietnamese “chào” is ambiguous. It is at once “salute,” “goodbye,” or “hello.” I have used the Italian “ciao” in the translation to designate this mutability.

<sup>353</sup> The word “tovaristch” is Russian for “comrade.”

<sup>354</sup> Dương Tường, “Wagner,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác: Thơ Dương Tường* [Mea Culpa and Other Poems: The Poetry of Dương Tường] (Hải Phòng: Hải Phòng, 2004), 37. The year of 1969 was also the year in which Hồ Chí Minh died.

<sup>355</sup> For an examination of the events related to this cultural debate, see Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan-Văn Giai-Pham Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (Winter-Spring 1990): 154–174; Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (Boulder, CO:

great personal cost of this corrosive drama, these poets did not abandon the modernist course. Obstinate, they forged an aggressive path towards restoring the autonomy of art with even more formalist experimentations that were more intimately linked to a variety of international literary traditions. So while they were marginalized within their own society, (and perhaps doubly marginalized in the world cultural context) these poets imagined themselves as part of a larger constellation of modernist writers.

How does one evade the mandates of a restrictive cultural regime or slip the noose of a political logic that reduced poetry to a “fashioned chant of worship” or “repulsive litanies”?<sup>356</sup> The poet Hoàng Hưng recalls how in the 1970s Trần Dần and his cohorts had positioned themselves in a binary opposition between those who followed *dòng chữ* [word current], and those who pursued a *dòng nghĩa* [meaning current].<sup>357</sup> In the latter camp were poets who took the meaning or content of a poem as root and purpose. According to Hoàng Hưng, this type of poetry was always overwhelmingly orthodox and staunchly opposed the poetic orientation of an extreme minority of marginalized, “unorthodox” poets who were intent on exploiting the potential of “words” themselves.<sup>358</sup> So on the one side are poets who begin with a fixed point or meaning that they want to reach so they clothe this content in language; on the other are those who strip words down to bare essential parts and empty them of content. Another way to think of this is that while mainstream writers stressed the signified [*biểu nghĩa*], or significance of a work, those poets on the margins emphasized the signifier [*nâng nghĩa*], or the materials of words.<sup>359</sup>

Though their approaches varied, these marginalized poets were all deeply invested in the materiality of words—their physical shapes, sounds and textures—and the potential for a heightened *experience* of art. As such, their poems employed a kind of meta-language that draws attention to words themselves. For example, Lê Đạt was interested in “salvaging, tending, caring for the *Word Shadows/Light*” [*lượm, chắt chắt, nâng niu Bóng chữ*]; Đinh Hùng made words “self-agitate” [*tự hành*] and proliferate through a form of “automatic writing” [*écriture automatique*] that loosened word meanings and enabled creative accidents; Trần Dần “democratized words [*dân chủ hoá chữ*], reformed their intercorrelations [*hoán cải tương quan chữ*], discovered new relations in old words.”<sup>360</sup> Dương Tường, one of the younger members of

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Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2001), Chapter 2 “The Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair, the 1967 Purge, and the Legacy of Dissent”; Chapter 4 “The Battle Over Intellectual Freedom and Freedom of the Press.”

<sup>356</sup> For “fashioned chant of workshop,” see Hoàng Hưng, “Đường Dương Tường nghiêng...” [Dương Tường’s Tilted Road], afterword in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 151–157 (153). For “repulsive litanies,” see Heinz Schütte, “Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955–1957,” *Südostasien* (Working Papers) no. 22 (Berlin: Humboldt University 2003), 19, available at <http://asa232.asa.hu-berlin.de/soa-wp/pdf/SOA-WP%20-%20022%20-%20Hundred%20Flowers%20in%20Vietnam%201955-1957%20%28Heinz%20Sch%20C3%BCtte%29.pdf>. For “

<sup>357</sup> Hoàng Hưng, “Đường Dương Tường nghiêng...” in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 152.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> Dương Tường discusses this distinction in a dialogue he had with the poet Ngô Thế Oanh. See Dương Tường and Ngô Thế Oanh, “Những đường parabol tư duy” [Those Parabola Thought Roads], in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè: tập luận* [Only the Ears / The Ear Threads of the Oriental Magpie-Robin: Collected Essays] (Nhà Nam: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009), 16–24 (19–20).

<sup>360</sup> Dương Tường, “Về thơ Việt Nam hôm nay (Trả lời Thụy Khuê ở nước ngoài)” [On Vietnamese Poetry Today (Response to Thụy Khuê from Abroad)], in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè*, 41–47 (46, 47). For examples of these poetic approaches, see Lê Đạt, *36 bài thơ tình* (chung với Dương Tường) [36 Love Poems (with Dương Tường)] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1989); Lê Đạt, *Bóng chữ* [Word Shadows/Light] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1994); Lê Đạt, *Đường chữ* [Word Roads] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009). See also Đặng Đình Hùng, *Đường vào tình sử* [Path in Love’s History] (Sài Gòn: Nam Chi, 1961); Đặng Đình Hùng, *Bến Lạ* [Strange Shores] (1970) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1991); Đặng Đình Hùng, *Ổ Mai* [Salted Apricots] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1993). See also Trần

this cohort, focused on how to exploit the dynamic sound system of the Vietnamese language through a “poetics of harmonics” [*thi pháp âm bồi*]. He takes words as musical units and exploits the echo and resonance of phonemes and tones to stimulate a semantic explosion. This emphasis on sound associations posits poetry as a *process* of “becoming-meaning” [*đang nghĩa*], as opposed to poems that operate on a presupposed premise that words “already/have meaning” [*đã nghĩa*]. In Dương Tường’s stated poetics, the “primary material of my poetry is not the word [*con chữ*] but the sound [*con âm*].” Thus any meaning produced in the poem derives from the reader’s perception of word sounds, their auras and phantasms.<sup>361</sup>

This chapter explores the modernism of 1970s and 1980s Vietnam through the lens of Dương Tường’s poetry. While these poets approached modernism in diverse ways, their poetics converged in the goal of “liberating language” [*giải phóng ngôn ngữ*].<sup>362</sup> Dương Tường’s poetry exemplifies this drive. Foremost, his poetics of sound captures the aim of engaging poetry as a *process* (rather than a mode of expressing meaning via a fixed semantic drive), one that requires the reader to participate in meaning-making. Because sound travels, it is indeterminate, not yet fixed or closed as words are. The porous, unbounded quality of sound lends poems tremendous evocative and affective potential. Further, Dương Tường’s work more clearly shows the convergence of multiple modernist strands. The intertextual dynamics of his poems reconfigure the relationships between several modernist practices within this particular Vietnamese context. I perform close textual analysis of select poems to examine the discrete mechanics of this *thi pháp âm bồi* that sees sound-sense as the key to invigorating language. In doing so, I tease out the spectrum of cross-cultural modernist poetics Dương Tường engages, as well as the poetic logic in relation to the cultural moment. These poets’ separatist turn to the margins of language represents a counter disavowal of the dominant culture that had rejected them. So while the modernism of this period sets itself up as an autonomous aesthetic project, the poetics it privileges suggests that modernism of 1970s/1980s was also a cultural response to the historical moment. Indeed, a disavowal composes its power in its counter-positionality to the dominant structure.

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Dần, *Cổng tỉnh* [Province Gate / Crossing Consciousness (1960) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1994); Trần Dần, *Mùa Sạch* [Clean Season] (1964) (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 1998); Trần Dần, *Trần Dần Thơ* [Trần Dần: Poems] (Đà Nẵng: Nhã Nam, 2007). Dương Tường also adds his intimate perspectives on the works of his fellow modernist poets. See Dương Tường, “Về tập thơ ‘Bên lạ’ của Đặng Đình Hùng” [On Đặng Đình Hùng’s “Strange Shores”] and “Lời bạt cho tập thơ ‘Mùa sạch’ của Trần Dần” [Afterword for Trần Dần’s Poetry Collection “Clean Season,” in *Chỉ tai con chích choè*, 25–27 and 28–31, respectively. See also Đỗ Lai Thuý, “Trần Dần– Một thi trình sạch (I)” [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary (1)], *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* [Culture and Arts] no. 286 (April 2008): 80–85 and 104; and Đỗ Lai Thuý, “Trần Dần, một thi trình sạch (II),” <http://phongdiep.net/default.asp?action=article&ID=4156>.

<sup>361</sup> See his explanation of these concepts in Dương Tường, “Về thơ Việt Nam hôm nay,” in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè*, 46, 47. See also Dương Tường’s interview with Lê Hồng Lâm for talawas, “Vật liệu thơ: Không phải con chữ mà là con âm” [The Material of Poetry: Not the Word But the Sound], March 2, 2005, *talawas*, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=3774&rb=0101>; reprinted in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè*, 72–81. See also Dương Tường interview with Nguyễn Đức Tùng, “Viết không khác người ta thì đừng viết” [If You Can’t Write Differently Then Why Write At All], July 31, 2007, *talawas*, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=10558&rb=0101>; also reprinted in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè*, 96–121.

<sup>362</sup> Hoàng Hưng, “Đường Dương Tường nghiêng...” in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 151.

## *A Thumbnail Biography*

Trần Dương Tường (August 4, 1932), an acclaimed translator, art critic and poet, was born into an intellectual family in Nam Định. He never actually finished high-school. The August Revolution in 1945 disrupted his studies. He quit to become a correspondent for Việt Minh troops then, and when the anticolonial struggle against the French erupted in 1946, he joined a group of correspondents in Hà Đông. A few years later he joined the army and in 1949 he became a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Despite having only a primary education, Dương Tường spoke fluent French, which grew steadily more sophisticated through his avid reading. Dương Tường recalls how he and his fellow soldiers had overrun a French outpost, found a trove of French literature and took as many of the books as they could carry.<sup>363</sup>

Dương Tường has translated over fifty literary and theoretical texts, including the major works by such acclaimed writers as Vladimir Nabokov (*Lolita*), Albert Camus (*L'Étranger*), Murakami (*Kafka on the Shore*), Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*), William Shakespeare, Gunter Grass (*Tin Drum*), Claude Simon (*La Route des Flandres*), Marcel Proust (*Du côté de chez Swann*), Patrick Modiano (*Boulevards de Ceinture*), and Jorge Amado (*Terres Violentes*).<sup>364</sup> He published his first translation in 1960, *The Golden Rose*, a collection of short stories by Konstantin Paustovsky. He followed up with translations of Anton Chekov's play *The Seagull* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in 1963, but he was forbidden from signing his name to any of his translation work until 1972. It is unclear why this was the case.<sup>365</sup> Dương Tường was not a central figure in the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm controversy. However, he joined the debates and supported his close friends Trần Dần, Lê Đạt and Hoàng Cầm. His actual proximity and degree of participation in the controversy of those years is unclear. But those years were also difficult for him, as they were for all intellectuals. Like many others, he served several months in a "reeducation camp," then spent the greater part of a year in hard-labor camps in North Vietnam. Not permitted to return to Hà Nội until 1964, he went to work as a reporter investigating American crimes in Vietnam for a news agency, the Thông tấn xã Việt Nam in Nghệ An, and taught himself English during that time. Back in Hà Nội during the anti-revisionist and anti-party campaigns [*du án xét lại chống Đảng*] in 1965–1966, he watched many of his friends suffer imprisonment, ill-treatment and abuse. He recounts that his life as an intellectual was also full of hardship during those years as he and his family "tasted all life's bitter and biting."<sup>366</sup> Dương Tường affirms his conviction that the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm fight for aesthetic freedom was necessary, and the punishment they received was unjust. He declares his sympathy their struggle and where he stands along those fronts. In a single-line poem he wrote "to be cut into tomorrow's headstone": "tôi đứng về phe nước mắt" [I stand on the side of tears].<sup>367</sup>

Dương Tường's poetry, too, reflects this conviction towards aesthetic autonomy and the valor of modernism in this pursuit. Though he began writing poetry at 18, he never published but only circulated his work among friends. In interviews he states that he destroyed all poems

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<sup>363</sup> Bạch Liên, "Dương Tường Devotes His Life to Literary Passion," *Việt Nam News*, August 28, 2012, <http://vietnamnews.vn/sunday/features/229382/duong-tuong-devotes-his-life-to-literary-passion.html>.

<sup>364</sup> For a thorough list of Dương Tường's translations, see Đặng Tiến, "Dương Tường kẻ chữ" [Dương Tường Man of Words], January 16, 2009, *Diễn Đàn* [Forum], <http://www.diendan.org/sang-tac/duong-tuong/>. Dương Tường's translation of twenty famous French classics earned him an Officier des Arts et des Lettres, the Literature and Art Medal from France for promoting its literature in Vietnam.

<sup>365</sup> Presumably, he was been banned from publishing for a certain period.

<sup>366</sup> Dương Tường interview with Nguyễn Đức Tùng, "Viết không khác người ta thì đừng viết."

<sup>367</sup> Section heading in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*.

written before 1960 because he realized they did not contribute to the modernism he felt was needed to renovate Vietnamese literature.<sup>368</sup> Dương Tường published his first collection of poems with Lê Đạt, *36 bài tình* [36 Love Poems] in 1989, after the cultural policies of the Renovation [Đổi Mới] Era (1986) loosened strictures on literary production. The poems of that first published collection, however, were written between 1960 and 1980. Like the many collections of Trần Dần, Đinh Hùng and Lê Đạt that were composed between these years of silence and remained unpublished until after 1986, Dương Tường's work shows commitment to a modernist poetic vision. It also demonstrates that the challenges to doctrinaire socialist realism was a persistent effort; this impetus did not suddenly emerge in the apparent "openness" of the Renovation Era.

### Metabolizing Modernism: Intertextual Energies in Dương Tường's Poems

As a poet and as a translator of French, English, German, Spanish, and Russian literatures, Dương Tường's literary perspective is not one of territorial defensiveness. Instead he welcomes cross-cultural literary encounters. For him, these encounters provoked greater awareness of the Vietnamese language and the power that being changed can give. Dương Tường's poetry is a densely imbricated web of writing composed of multiple poetic entanglements. We can discern poetics resonant of early and late French symbolism, Dadaism, surrealism, Russian formalism, American concrete/language poetry, and even the premodern Vietnamese Nôm poems of Hồ Xuân Hương.

Dương Tường readily acknowledges that his poetry forms a site of intercultural and intracultural literary contact. He insists on the need to keep learning from "those in the past, from those in our time, those with our country, and those outside."<sup>369</sup> In this imagined community of a world literary arena, "learning is not copying." Instead, a writer "engages with what is compelling, novel, so that a *metabolisme* of these things transform our ego, and it becomes something of us."<sup>370</sup> His statement reflects the theoretical perspectives of T.S. Eliot ("Tradition and the Individual Talent") and poststructuralist Roland Barthes (*S/Z*)—whose works he knows well.<sup>371</sup> In the first instance, an author engages with the entire body of past works to inform his or her innovation and, at the same time, by entering into this corpus, changes understandings of the extant literary combinations.<sup>372</sup> In the second view of intertextuality the text is always an "anonymous tissue of citations" as a result of the thousand sources of cultural intercourses it contains. But unlike Barthes who saw the text as a castrato, "the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes," Dương views intertextual play as a way to reawaken a fuller sense of self in culture.<sup>373</sup> Rather than see textual entanglements as erasing origins and historicity, Dương Tường relays how engaging with other literatures and

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<sup>368</sup> Dương Tường interview with Nguyễn Đức Tùng, "Viết không khác người ta thì đừng viết."

<sup>369</sup> Dương Tường's interview with Lê Hồng Lâm for talawas, "Vật liệu thơ: Không phải con chữ mà là con âm"; Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chích choè*, 80.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> Dương Tường and Ngô Thế Oanh, "Những đường parabol tư duy" [Those Parabola Thought Roads], in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chích choè*, 23–24. Dương Tường has translated both Barthes and Eliot.

<sup>372</sup> See T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), *Quotidiana*, Ed. Patrick Madden, January 23, 2008, [http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition\\_and\\_the\\_individual/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition_and_the_individual/).

<sup>373</sup> For example, Roland Barthes' notion of intertextuality displaces the author and suggests that the text becomes an "anonymous tissue of citations." In this poststructuralist view, the text stands on its own, detached to any historical context. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang [1967] 1977), 142–148 (146–147).

languages—*embodying them*—heightens perspectives, contrasts and connections that deepen his romance with the Vietnamese language.<sup>374</sup> To illuminate this point by way of a personal analogy: the best romances are those that seem as if all the vanity bulbs are lit.<sup>375</sup> This is not a statement of narcissism. Rather, it depicts how truly dynamic relationships allow those involved to engage more of their own faculties in interplay, to see parts of themselves more clearly because all the lights are lit. These encounters allow literatures to absorb and reflect each other in alchemic transformations. Dương Tường’s modernist poetry is invested in the transformative power of literary intercourse and convergence.

Foremost in his modernist innovation and aim of “liberating language,” Dương Tường recognizes the Vietnamese literary past as a rich site of impetus and inspiration. In particular, the premodern poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương shows an acute awareness of Vietnamese’s inherent musicality, a sound system that allows one to slip the moorings of singular meaning. The inherent playfulness of the tonal range has tremendous potential to pervert and proliferate meanings, even when it adopts decorous forms.<sup>376</sup> Hồ Xuân Hương, for example used the Tang *lu-shih* tradition, with its millennial propriety, as camouflage for obscene statements.<sup>377</sup> With a music of pitches inherent in every poem, an entire dynamic of sound—inoperable in English—comes into play. And since like-sounding words can mean vastly different things, a whole world of double meanings is possible in any poem. These second meanings and phrase reversals, slang, or *nói lái*, are usually obscene. Take, for example, her sly-crafted poem “The Lustful Monk,” which describes a monk’s struggle to reach spiritual enlightenment. The religious subject suggests piety and spiritual virtue, but a close reading reveals her biting remarks about corrupt religious institutions. The first line reads “Cái kiếp tu hành nặng đá đeo” [A monk’s path as heavy as wearing stones]. The word “đeo” means “to carry,” or “bear,” but its tonal echo, “đéo,” means “to fuck.” Dương Tường pays homage to Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetic wit, her play on echo and resonance, and her understanding of Vietnamese as a subversive musical syntax.<sup>378</sup>

Dương Tường also looks to the Vietnamese present, especially the poetry of Trần Dần and Huy Cận. He sees Trần Dần’s etymological exploration of root words, particularly their permutations, as a way to rediscover the intercorrelations of words and form new word connections. Dương Tường has openly established his affiliation to Trần Dần, stating that he sees “Trần Dần like an elder brother and a teacher” in poetry. Dương Tường also takes inspiration from Huy Cận, whose poems defamiliarize traditional ideas and images with surprising, surrealist transmutations.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Bạch Liên, “Dương Tường Devotes His Life to Literary Passion.”

<sup>375</sup> Thanks to Esme Watson for this brilliant analogy.

<sup>376</sup> Đào Thái Tôn provides in depth examination of her poems to uncover the bawdy aspects of her erudite verses. See Đào Thái Tôn, *Thơ Hồ Xuân Hương từ cội nguồn vào thế tục* [The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương from Its Origins to the Vulgar] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 1996).

<sup>377</sup> For a discussion of the etiquette of Tang poetry, see James J.Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (University of Chicago, 1962).

<sup>378</sup> Hoàng Hưng, “Đường Dương Tường nghiêng...” in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 153.

<sup>379</sup> Dương Tường interview with Nguyễn Đức Tùng, “Viết không khác người ta thì đừng viết.” See Huy Cận, *Lửa thiêng* (1940). In his first collection of poems, written during the New Poetry Movement of the colonial 1930s and 1940s, Huy Cận employs the indigenous Vietnamese *lục bát* (6-8 word metered form), but innovated the content with sensual, surrealist shifts in perception and an intimacy not characteristic of traditional Vietnamese poems. Take his poem “Ngâm ngủi” for example:

Ngâm ngủi

Dương Tường's poetry also demonstrate an array of international modernist ties. He takes Paul Verlaine's symbolist dictum for composing poetry as maxim: "de la musique avant toutes choses" [music before all else]. Dương Tường also roots this privilege of sound over sense back to Stéphane Mallarmé's 1868 symbolist sensibilities, which takes the sound of words, not their meanings, as the basis of poetry, so that any meanings invoked or evoked are the ghosts of word-sound associations.<sup>380</sup> With this, Dương Tường tunes into what English poet T. S. Eliot called an "auditory imagination," in which the feeling for sound, syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorate every word and compose a layered landscape of textures and tones.<sup>381</sup>

French surrealism also informs Dương Tường's modernist drive to escape fixed borders. In particular, Dương Tường engages the surrealist drive to fuse the profane with the profound in order to achieve a secular ecstasy (what Benjamin called "profane illumination").<sup>382</sup> In this view, the material and mundane world possesses instances of the marvelous: it requires a loosening of logic and a chaos of sensibility. Dương Tường also reinstates the surrealist engagement with

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Nắng chia nửa bãi, chiều rồi...  
 Vườn hoang trinh nữ xếp đôi lá rêu.  
 Sợ buồn con nhện giăng mau,  
 Em ơi! Hãy ngủ, anh hầu quạt đây.  
 Lòng anh mở với quạt này,  
 Trăm con chim mộng về bay đầu giường.  
 Ngủ đi em, mộng bình thường!  
 Ru em sẵn tiếng thùy dương mấy bờ...  
 Cây dài bóng xế ngân ngơ...  
 - Hồn em đã chín mấy mùa thương đau ?  
 Tay anh em hãy tựa đầu,  
 Cho anh nghe nặng trái sầu rụng rơi...

[Compassion

The sun cleaves half the plain; it's evening  
 In virgin gardens, mimosas furl a pair of bereft leaves  
 Deftly, the spider weaves sad strands  
 Darling, sleep...I'll serve you with this fan  
 My soul spreads opens with this fan here;  
 A hundred dream-birds return, flocking to your headboard  
 Sleep now, darling, dream the ordinary  
 Lulling you with bowed-willow songs at hand, the many shores  
 Tall trees score bewildered shadows  
 How many mournful seasons have ripened your soul?  
 Here, repose your head against my arm  
 Let me hear, heavy, the sorrowfruit loosen, fall...]

<sup>380</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé was writing about his poem "Sonnet." See Dương Tường, "Về thơ Việt Nam hôm nay," in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chích chòe*,

<sup>381</sup> See T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 111. See also John Xiros Cooper, ed., *TS Eliot's Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*, Vol. 7 (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 118, for a discussion of Eliot's concept of "auditory imagination."

<sup>382</sup> Walter Benjamin elaborates on the surrealist quest for the marvelous through forms of disorientations and intoxication that enabled the irrational to surface in the everyday. See Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism.htm>; and Margaret Cohen, *Profane illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Freudian psychological processes, desire and the erotic, to achieve these ends of shaking lines of dulled perception.<sup>383</sup>

In Dương Tường's poems we also see a playing with typography in part to comment on the fundamental instability of language. Here, the Vietnamese poet syncs up with Apollinaire, who repudiated realistic and naturalistic approaches to writing, which he believed, imposed arbitrary limitations on the writer's vision. Dương Tường also proposes concrete and visual poetry as a way to reconfigure the experience of language. Additionally, Dương Tường tells us, he learned the willful destruction of syntax and spelling from e.e. cummings. According to Dương Tường, the violation of common spelling not only liberates creative constraints, it is also a way to transcend frameworks of the "proper" institutionalized knowledge and resist the oppressiveness of a "tin canned-goods civilization" [*thứ văn minh đồ hộp*]. Perhaps Dương Tường's poems engage most intimately with Russian formalist concepts, especially Viktor Shklovsky's distinction between "recognition" (automatized perception) and "seeing." Seeing happens when something makes us to look again and regard a thing as though we are encountering it for the first time. In his *Theory of Prose* he explains:

Held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war. [...] And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "estranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to its fullest.<sup>384</sup>

Foremost, Dương Tường engages defamiliarization, a concept that has been much misunderstood. More than just something novel in art or the surprise of a unique metaphor, defamiliarization is the manipulation of an artwork's devices such that the artist disrupts mere recognition. In this respect, euphemisms, erotica, riddles, and poetry produce this effect by impeding recognition and prolonging the engagement. Dương Tường's phonetic and lexical investigations show the way poetry that involves new arrangement of words and semantic structures around them removes itself from the "domain of automatized perception." It calls attention to itself as an artifact, that is, artificially created by an artist "in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text."<sup>385</sup> According to the Russian formalist:

...The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> See Andre Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism 1924," in *Surrealism*, ed. Patrick Waldberg (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 66–75. On the surrealist aims of desire and distortion, see Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1959] 1986), 190.

<sup>384</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 5, 6.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, "Art as Technique."

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

As we shall see, Dương Tường disrupts familiar patterns to impede automatic perception through a manipulation of the phonetic, typographical, and orthographic aspects of language as poetic devices.

### *Note on Translation*

Translation always entails loss. This is doubly the case when the poetic project purposefully evades stable meanings, insists on plurality and structures poems as difficult processes that are reliant on engaging a closed system of codes. Dương Tường uses words in poems as composers use notes in a musical composition, except these notes are particularly Vietnamese. The sounds of the Vietnamese language creates vast potential for wordplay and the perversion of meaning and he allows word-sounds, shapes, and placement to suggest associations. But even though he emphasizes the sound rather than the sense of a word, it is impossible to empty the word vessel of associated content. The poet relies on an extant system of meaning and associations: his disruptions and distortions—or defamiliarizing—of words requires the reader to recognize its relation to, and distance from, the familiar. (This is similar to the way we recognize something as grotesque because we see its disproportion to and distortion of a recognizable form within a system.)

Vietnamese is a tonal language. Those diacritical marks around the vowels indicate the word pitch or tone. Tones distinguish one word from the next. The dynamic sound system of Vietnamese invites tonal play and echo as well as openness for word associations—disabled in English translation.<sup>387</sup> Without those tone marks, however, a Vietnamese reader would find a text unreadable. Indeed, Dương Tường relies on this obstruction. The poems contain purposeful misspelling in order to defamiliarize and engage the process of seeing, as opposed to recognition (which invites a lazy, automatic perception.) By misspelling words and not providing diacritics in many instances, he forces the reader to fill in the blanks, perform creative substitutions, and proliferate possibilities in the process of making sense.<sup>388</sup> Vietnamese readers are able to do this because they have access to the system of codes—which thematically, semiotically, and otherwise make a literary text reflect structures that are interwoven, but not in a definite way that closes the text's meaning. This system is language-specific.

Dương Tường insists on the plurality of the text—a plurality that should not be reduced by any privileged interpretation. Driving the translation of any poem toward a pole of stable meaning would erase all the semantic possibilities (and blatantly negate the poet's project). Dương Tường structures these poems as processes that rely on the reader to move through a series of associations, displacements, substitutions and so forth. He uses phonetic spellings and misspellings that detach words from specific meaning, defamiliarizes them, and proposes sound as a way to activate associations. Given these particular challenges, I am unable to reproduce the dynamic sound system and linguistic interplays of these poems. I also have to resist the compulsion to produce polished lines of verse and consign them to singular interpretations. I

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<sup>387</sup> For studies of Vietnamese sound systems, see Marc Brunelle, Brunelle, Marc. "Tone perception in Northern and Southern Vietnamese," *Journal of Phonetics* 37, no. 1 (2009): 79–96; Murray B. Emeneau, "Homonyms and puns in Annamese," *Language* 23, no. 3 (1947): 239–244.

<sup>388</sup> Barthes also flags the way in which the reader is an active producer of interpretations of the text, rather than a passive consumer. But in this circumstance "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author." See Barthes "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, 148.

translate the bare bones of words along with any attendant associations to only begin to speak of the poems' governing structures. I relinquish any illusion of control or authority in translation.

Here, I translate to reflect the convictions and practices of Dương Tường's own poetics. This involves shifting of the task of translation from that of interpreting the source text to that of capturing the phenomenology of reading. That is, both capturing reading as a psycho-physiological experience of text, as an adventure of consciousness and perception in reading, and then writing that experience back into the translation of the source text. I make transparent the humbling process of uncertainty, which involves a great deal of clumsy reaching, groping, and fumbling about with words, possible words, and possible meanings. The poems in their original form are limber and muscled with momentum. They vibrate with a musicality and wit and interconnectedness that I regretfully cannot capture. The pursuit of this end necessitates demonstrating reaching for linguistic extensions that, inevitably and regretfully, undoes the codedness of the language system.

### **Musical Syntax in Modernist Movements: Dương Tường and the Poetics of Harmonics**

*De la musique avant toute chose,  
Et pour cela préfère l'Impair  
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air  
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.*

*Il faut aussi que tu n'aïles point  
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise:  
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise  
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint [...]*

[Music before everything,  
And for this prefer the Odd more—  
Vaguer and more melting in air  
Without anything to weigh or arrest it.

But you must also not go about  
Choosing words without some carelessness:  
Nothing is dearer than the grayish song  
Where the Wavering and the Precise join]

--Paul Verlaine, "Art poétique," 1884

Dương Tường structures poems like songs. That is, he creates a multilayered sound system, a composition of notes arranged so as to produce an array of aural sensations. What does a poem that is a piece of music do? What does it say? What does it abbreviate? Dương Tường draws an implicit argument: sound or music, the organization of sound, engages different modes of perceptual and cognitive processing. Music blurs rigid borders of fixed "rational" ordering and enters the fluid, more ambiguous system of the evocative (rather than explicit) and affective

(rather than logical).<sup>389</sup> Sound structure in Dương Tường’s poems challenge the fixity of language structure, and thus, its corresponding cultural system.

Dương Tường proposes sound as a mobile way of seeing things, of experiencing a poem’s process. Because in his poems the word becomes a unit of sound, it loses attachment to any fixed or specific meaning. This forces the mind to experience itself in the process of discovering contiguity, proximity and close succession, in order to capture uncertainties in a net of connections. Through this process we learn that words are not static or reliable. They do not sit dutifully as stoic symbols of virtue. They change clothes, dissemble into parts and go, promiscuous with possibility. That very slippery nature of word-sound allows Dương Tường to evade clear singular meaning, which counters state dictums on cultural productions. Dương Tường focuses on sound as a way to reanimate the Vietnamese language, now petrified in slogans and admonishments of communist ideology, and to question cognitive and cultural systems. Inherent in Dương Tường’s “poetics of harmonics,” or poetry of a sound system, is a poetics of dissonance. The communist state’s attempt to “unify all voices” (by silencing others) in order to simplify and streamline ideas in art towards the war effort had no room for individual or ambiguous utterances. Music becomes a way, then, to produce polyphony and polysemy.

### From Sound to Sensation: Somatosensory Systems in Dương Tường’s Poem

Dương Tường sets up explorations of sound-sense and its visceral effects on the body. He engages readers in a series of semiotic poetic experiments that both invite and impede vocal emissions and the production of meaning. In its use of nonsensical utterances and non-words (that is, words not found in the dictionary), the poem calls attention to the text on the page not as words but as sound signifiers (or musical notation), effectively forcing the reader to produce sound effects and experience the poem bodily. Thus, any meaning is derived as a consequence of these oratory restrictions and attempts at utterance. Take this poem for example:

khoảnh khắc

Khoảnh khắc	self-centered / instant / cut
Phố nằm tên hên	street lies sad / unattentive / despondent
Con jó thòk	the thrusting wind / the wind utters / the wind escapes
bỗng chốc	sudden locks / jolts
vú nũm cau	tits fling scowl / areca nut
phau phau	spotless spotless

khoảnh khắc	self-centered / instant / cut
le lói	flicker / loll about
chân mây mây mây	horizon / clouds / vaguely recall / you [informal]
chợt đỏ ệk	suddenly so red
những câu thơ xác ướp	embalmed corpse verses / verses embalmed in body

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<sup>389</sup> On sound sense, cognition and music, see Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Amy Bauer, “Tone-color, Movement, Changing Harmonic Planes: Cognition, Constraints, and Conceptual Blends in Modernist Music,” in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology*, ed. Arved Ashby (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 121–152.



small and uneasy sense of satisfaction. The poem thwarts reader expectation; it does not provide a single stable meaning. But that is the point. The poem forces the mind to engage in a series of insertions, displacements and interpretive leaps in order to produce some kind of sense. It creates an immediate awareness of something missing or awry and draws attention to the reader's desire to form connections, questions it. And as such, the poet pronounces words to be an abstraction of speech sounds, and as a sort of sound notation. The poem lends itself to a lesson in phonetics, which concerns the physical production, acoustic transmission and perception of the sounds of speech. Foremost, the reader learns that they are no longer passive receptors of poetic utterance of literal representations, but participants in a production of sound-sense—one that locates frustrations within the reader's own body.

Non-words such as “khăk,” “thôk,” “chôk,” “tok,” “tôk,” “jó,” “hộb,” “lub,” and “bub” confront readers with visual strangeness and obstruction; it compels the mind to activate new modes of connection even as it prevents one from doing so easily. Here, the poem compels one to grope towards sense through the physical sound and image of the word. Dương Tường engages readers in new semantic possibilities even as he poses this experience through physical limitations. We are implicated in the desire to make meaning (rather than simply receive it) as a process. The poem sets up visual and phonic barriers with unorthodox orthography. Phonotactic constraints, or restrictions on the permissible combinations of phonemes, are highly language-specific. The poem makes three violations of the Vietnamese language system. 1) Vietnamese words may begin with “k” but they never end in a “k.” 2) Likewise, Vietnamese words may begin “b” but they never end in a “b.” 3) Finally, the letter “j” does not exist in the Vietnamese alphabet. The appearance of these foreign intrusions suggest a deliberate obfuscation of meaning. However, while these combinations frustrate textual conventions, they encourage a sensory, bodily experience of the materiality of words: sounds, textures, and visual shape they take. It also alerts the reader to how the fixity of type on the page, brittle black letters, nonetheless create a visceral sense of obstruction. However, the active reader participates in a series of circumventions. For example, the reader recognizes that the “k” ending—the sound it produces—possibly replaces “c” or “t” endings; the “b” sound substitutes easily for words ending in “p” (and that “b-p” is literally a mirror-image flip); and that the “j” replaces the Vietnamese “gi-“ sound cluster.

### *Semiotic Bounds and Leaps*

In the Saussurean sense, a thing (word, image, sound, etc.) can only become a sign when we invest it with meaning. If we interpret things as signs, largely unconsciously, by relating them to familiar systems of conventions, then Dương Tường disrupts conventional circuits and emphasizes meaning-making as conscious process rather than automatic reflex. The sense of almost-but-not-quite familiar word spellings, now reduced to word-sounds, remove secure signposts for interpretation. Saussure emphasizes the way no word has a value that can be identified independently of what else is in its vicinity.<sup>392</sup> Drawing the clues from the recognizable words surrounding the unfamiliar, for example, and beginning with these sound patterns in place, the reader begins to make leaps of association. For example, we may take “jó” to sound like “gió” [wind]. And because common spelling and diacritics are not there to determine what the “misspelled” word is, the reader is forced to make creative substitutions through sound associations and visual clues. We may, for example, read “thôk” as “thọc”

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<sup>392</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, [1916] 1983).

[thrust], “thốt” [utter], or “thoát” [escape], and thus the verse could ostensibly read “the thrusting wind,” or “the wind utters,” or “the wind escapes.” The surrounding word, “bỗng” [sudden], in proximity to the actions of a thrust, utter, or escape steers the mind towards reading “chốc” as “chốt” [locks], or a suddenly bolting up in relation to the actions in the poem. The reader begins to form relationships between the sound pattern, or the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, and the possible concepts.<sup>393</sup>

In this revision of poetic language, words are made to *embody* their possible meanings. The poet emphasizes the materiality of language—where their visual shape, the sounds they carry—create physical and psychological sensations in apprehending the word. For example, the letter substitutions force the signifier, the physical form of words, to perform its possible significations. Visually, the “k” is suggestive of a figure locked in defensive stance and more effectively enacts the sense of obstruction—the hard guttural stops that the sound-word produces—than the open “c.” The “b” word ending enforces the “feel” of a box and enclosure with its erect border more discretely than the “p” that it dislocated. And while “gió” produces the sound of gentle wafting, the “j” of “jó” exaggerates the “z” sound of the word, evoking a more forceful current. In the same manner, the horizontal-running line of verse, along with the possible word-associations they produce evokes the “feel” or impression of ambling down a street alongside rows of trees with their hanging branches: “hàng cây tok rữ con jó tôk anatômi hê hê lub bub nũm cau lạch ngằn xuội luội tr” [row of trees hair fallen a wind turns over anatomie of summer / sidewalk / [lub bub] / flings a scowl / areca nut / canal / [xuội luội tr’]. The appearance of the French “anatomie” along the row of more-or-less Vietnamese words performs the sense of surprise evoked by these words: in “flipping over” a “body” of “trees” (evoked by the erect figure and “hair falling”), a body of “summer” or “sidewalk,” and migrating into the body of a woman (“breasts”). With the placement of this single French word, the produces the experience of discovering a body, in contrast and juxtaposed to the familiar, or the self. He offers the reader a provocative “canal” (or rivulet) into this exploration, but bars full entry, as evoked by the truncated “tr” consonant cluster.

### ***Collapsing Boundaries: Toward Modernist Sound-Sense***

Just as the visual patterns of word shapes suggest a poetic logic, the arrangement of word-sounds amplify the poem’s possible meanings. For example, the migration of sound through associations also produce slippages in meaning. Take “chân mây mà mạy” [horizon / clouds / vaguely recall / you (informal)] for example. The series of like words with different diacritics enact a gradual descending in tone (even-falling-drop). The word meanings themselves move along a vertical axis that declines and slips from the lofty “clouds” or “horizon” to the “vaguely remembered” or lowly informal “you.” However, the word for horizon “chân mây” contains the word for foot-- “chân.” In a sense the poem prepares the reader for this descent from the foot of sky to the feet of the pedestrian. Dương Tường engages the qualities of sound to produce and amplify meanings.

#### ***Sounding Ideological Restrictions***

The proliferating pattern of words ending in “k—“khăk,” “thôk,” “chôk,” “tok,” “tôk”—produces a visual and bodily sensation of glottal stops. The poem employs the phonetic spellings to amplify the sound-sense of the word. This physical experience evokes the idea of words being

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 66. According to Saussure, this sound pattern may be called a “material” element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses.

cut off, amputated, choked, and lodged in the throat. Note how the consonant clusters that *do* exist in the Vietnamese language—“tr” and “kh” —denote and enact the truncation of speech, evoking sensations of being able to speak. This collapse of sound and sense produces meaningful bodily registers for understanding the poem. It makes it so that the sensation of constrictions, limitations and obstructions resonate and compound in the ideas of “những câu thơ xác ướp / ái tình đóng hộp / ôi chao văn minh đồ hộp” [embalmed corpse verses [or] verses embalmed in body / passion boxed up [or] casketed love / alas a tin-canned goods civilization].”

The formal innovations of Dương Tường’s poem suggest that orthodoxy is a restriction. The poet seeks ways to escape and transcend limited frameworks of understanding, and he implicates the reader in the process. Privileging sound for its affective and evocative potential, the poet encourages cognitive leaps of associations and migrations of meaning.<sup>394</sup> By deforming the word vessel (signifier), he extracts it from being a transparent transmitter of a set content (signified). By obfuscating immediate meaning, the poet urges readers to participate in the uneasy process of sense-making, as the poem enacts a process, rather than be mere receptacles for fixed meaning. Constellations of meaning form via the reader’s perception of word-sound patterns, their tones, textures, and shapes, as well as the physical experience of sound, which is not limited to a fixed content. The poem reintroduces the body into the poetic experience, through the bawdy or the physical sounds the reader is asked to produce. The absurd becomes a form of revolt. The poet misspells and misrepresents, for instance, as a kind of protest; it destabilizes conventions of what is deemed “proper.” This deliberate distortion of familiar signs enacts a revolt against the stifling oppression of institutionalized forms of knowledge.<sup>395</sup> The poem embodies a critique of “Thứ

<sup>394</sup> Dương Tường interview with Lê Hồng Lâm for *talawas*, “Vật liệu thơ: Không phải con chữ mà là con âm”; Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chích choè*, 78.

<sup>395</sup> Compare this poem to the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov’s “Incantation by Laughter,” the iconic poem of *zaum* or trans-sense, pervasively neologistic poetry. Khlebnikov also aimed to transcend the fixity of word content and ideology through a poetics of irrationality.

#### Incantation of Laughter

We laugh with our laughter  
 loke laffer un loafer  
 sloaf lafker int leffer  
 lopp lapter und loofer  
 loopse lapper ung lasler  
 pleap looper ech lipler  
 bloop uffer unk oddurk  
 floop flaffer ep flubber  
 fult lickles eng tickers  
 ac laushing ag lauffing uk  
 luffing ip luppling uc  
 lippling ga sprickling  
 urp laughter oop laughing  
 oop laughing urp laughter

[Заклятие смехом  
 О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!  
 О, засмейтесь, смехачи!  
 Что смеются смехами, что смеяньствуют смеяльно,  
 О, засмейтесь усмеяльно!  
 О, рассмешищ надсмеяльных — смех усмейных смехачей!

văn minh đồ hộp” [tin canned goods civilization]—that is, culture that is manufactured, boxed up, and ready for the masses to consume. This culture, the poet suggests, may claim itself to be proper and civilized but its shiny exterior cannot hide the paltriness of its contents. Furthermore, it limits the range of possible poetic experience. As the poem would suggest, this restrictive culture does not permit the most basic form of protest—the utterance of “không” [no]. Even this becomes thwarted: “sao em kh<sup>^</sup> sao em kh<sup>^</sup>” [why do you n-- why do you n--]. In this environment, Dương Tường suggests, the mind/spirit, “tinh thần”—a single compound word in Vietnamese—are visually split, then splayed apart.

### Word-Sound Slippage as Willful Errancy

Dương Tường demonstrates the way sound can slip the moorings of conventional logic, owing to its evocative and porous quality. Because sounds produce instantaneous impressions on the psyche, in some ways he bypasses the rigidity of rational thinking. “Nôel 2” enacts a series of perversions through word-sound migrations and auditory associations. If to pervert means to alter something from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended, then the poem manages to do this on both formal and thematic levels.

Nôel	Noel
đèn	lamp/light
môi em	your lips
za em	your skin
jêruzalem	["za" (skin) and "em" (affectionate you) divided by line.]
pha phem	mingle mix
hang/hem Đức Mẹ	cave/thin Virtuous Mother
jọt	drop/drip
jọt	drop/drip
hé he	slightly parted
mùi quen	scent familiar
mà quên	but forget
Nôel	Noel
bụi sáng	morning/bright dust
bạch lạp nhực rằm	stark white full breasts
năm năm	five [finger] grasp

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О, иссмейся рассмеяльно, смех надсмейных смеячей!  
 Смейево, смейево!  
 Усмей, осмей, смешики, смешики!  
 Смеюнчики, смеюнчики.  
 О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!  
 О, засмейтесь, смехачи!]

See Velimir Khlebnikov’s “Incantation by Laughter,” trans. Charles Bernstein, *International Literary Quarterly* 10 (February 2010): [http://interlitq.org/issue10/velimir\\_khlebnikov/job.php](http://interlitq.org/issue10/velimir_khlebnikov/job.php).

ngực rằm	full breasts
nem nén	repress rope
ngực rằm	full (moon) breasts
bạch Lạp	wax white
Avê	Ave
Mariem	Mariem [French “husband” and Vietnamese affectionate “you”
(em)] mười bảy	seventeen
đồng trinh	virgin
hai mươi	twenty
đồng trinh`	virgin
phi lí	absurd
đồng trinh	virgin
chuông lá khói	bell leaf smoke
chìm	sinks
rêquiem	requiem
mưa nhem	dirty rain
lọ lem	soiled vessel
hài em	your remains
phi lí	absurd
bạch Lạp ngực rằm	wax white full (moon) breasts
sao Bethlê-em	Bethlehem star / why Bethdrag-your feet
để	so that
chuông lá khói	bell leaf smoke
chìm	sinks
Nôel	Noel
Nô-elle	No elle [French “she”]
Nô-em	No em [Vietnamese affectionate “you”]
trót quen	accidently intimate
thành quen	becomes forget
phố nê	street flavor/taste
phonème	phoneme
kèm kem	enclose keep / escort along
đèn ren	lace light / light ambling
đùi ren	lace thigh / thigh ambling
lụa len	silk wool / jostle
phố nê	street flavor/taste
mà im	but silent
thềm	crave
men	ferment (spirits)
nhá nhem	at dusk / gnaw slowly
lối khói	smoke path
lá khói	smoke leaf

bohème	bohemian
boong	boong [ring...]
boong	boong [and resound]
chuông em	your bell
lá khói	smoke leaf
thèm em	crave you
thềm em	your veranda floor
đường đêm	night road
tràn im	floods silence
khuya thêm	more late
rộng thêm	more wide
mùi thêm	more scent
buồn thêm	more sad
sao em	your star / why did you
phi lí	absurd
ngực rằm	full breasts
phi lí	absurd
đồng trinh	virgin
phi lí	absurd
kèn đen <sup>396</sup>	black clarion
tình đen	black love
tình điên	mad love
pòm pèm	pòm pèm
mưa đêm	night rain
cột đèn	lamp post
chờ em	await you
mồm đêm	night muzzle/snout
Nôel	Noel
Nô-elle	No elle [French “she”]
Nô-em	No em [Vietnamese affectionate “you”]
Nô-men	no ferment (spirits)
No man's land	No man's land
N-mô m-nen x-len	[N-mo m- <i>n</i> en (gets-dim) x- <i>l</i> en (touch-wool)] <sup>397</sup>
leng beng	dinkie cut off
lang ben	tetter <sup>398</sup>
ma lem	debauched
Mariem	Mariem

<sup>396</sup> A shrill, narrow-tubed war trumpet.

<sup>397</sup> The suggested phonetics resemble the beginning of the Amitabha Buddhist sutra mantra: namo amitābhāya tathāgatāya tadyathā.

<sup>398</sup> Any of various skin diseases, such as eczema, psoriasis, or herpes, characterized by eruptions and itching.

x-em x-em	s-ee s-ee / see-you see-you / touch you touch you <sup>399</sup>
hem em	decrepit you
đồng trinh	virgin
Amen <sup>400</sup>	Amen

### *Defiling Bodies, Perverting Systems*

The poem adopts the convention of a “requiem,” a sacred musical composition set to religious text and traditionally performed in liturgical service accompanied by monophonic chanting one note at a time. Typically, requiems are performed in a mass for the dead.<sup>401</sup> Indeed the poem’s pacing, word arrangement and tonality reproduces the rhythm and spiritual registers of a funeral procession. However, its very title marks a stray from convention. Noel is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, yet the poem turns its focus on to the female figure and, ironically, in a dirge to the virgin “Mariem” and the unnamed “em” (affectionate “you”). The poet thwarts the holy conventions of the requiem and ideas of a sacred day in this surrealist gesture by introducing unorthodox images and ideas of the erotic. The poem also makes a nod to the symbolist grotesque in introducing erotic ideas into the image of a (dead) body (which perhaps alludes to the corpus of literature, in this respect).

This aesthetic challenge to morality or pure forms resonates in the poem through visual and auditory slips in sound-units. Literal insertions mark the textual and cultural violations. For example, within the word “Jêruzalem,” “za” and “em” [your skin] of the previous line get resounded, though now a vertical wall (l) separates them. In a similar way the word “Mariem” contains both “Mary” and “em,” and marks a fusing of the sacred virgin with the profane, the intimate term for referring to a lover. And while Bethlehem alludes to the journey of Mary and Joseph to the city where Jesus was born, the “em” set off within the phonetic spelling of “Bethlê-em” contains the word “lê,” or to drag, roped by a hyphen to “em”—a presentation that impedes a movement towards the sacred site.

The poet enforces this conceptual movement from the lofty profound to the on-ground profane in the poem’s visual layout of descent. The very first stanza sets up this perversion as the poem moves from ideas of Christmas to light, lips, skin, the “Jêruzalem” that contains “her skin” to a mingling in the “narrow den” of the Virtuous Mother:

Nôel	Noel
đèn	light
môi em	your lips
za em	your skin
jêruzalem	jêruzalem
pha phem	mix mingle
hang/hem Đức Mẹ	narrow/den of Virtuous Mother

<sup>399</sup> “xem” means to see, but with the hyphen between the “x” and “em” it suggests a reading of “see-you” but from a distance. Alternatively, the phonetic sound of “x” is “xờ” or touch, suggesting “touch you.” the hyphen here, also, creates a sense of distance and longing.

<sup>400</sup> Dương Tường, “Nôel II,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 25–31.

<sup>401</sup> See Alec Robertson, *Requiem: Music of Mourning and Consolation* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1976).

The onomatopoeic “jot/jot” audibly enforces this perverse descent as a “drip/drip” that leads into the “slightly parted” [hé he] entrance. The repeating “em”-sound finds resonance in words that denote the corporeal or sully. In a sense, the poem fleshes the spiritual image of the virgin mother.

The transmutations of “Nôel” enact this move from the sacred to the profane as well as the formal distortion of words: Nôel / No-elle / no-em / no-men / no man’s land / n-mo m-nen x-len. In this migration, the mind moves from the sacred event to the missing “she” denoted by the French “elle” and affirmed by the missing “em.” This lack of “men” or fermented spirits then journeys into “no man’s land” where recognizable words disappear and dissolve into a series of broken sounds. It then moves along this vertical axis to the idea of a “dinky” [leng keng] being “cut off” [beng], vesicular skin diseases [lang ben] and the notion of something debauched [ma lem]. And here the stanza arrives at “Mariem,” ironizing notions of the pure.<sup>402</sup>

The fourth stanza enforces this pattern of straying from convention through sound-sense. Even as it begins with “requiem,” a “dirty rain” [mua nhem] and “soiled vessel” [lọ lem] disturbs the sense of the sacred. Further, proximity of the words “lem” and “nhem” invite the compound word “lem nhem,” used to put emphasis on “dirty.” The “hài em” of bodily remains becomes “absurd” as the poem leaps to images of “wax white full (moon) breasts” [bạch lạp ngực rằm]. The weight of this image is emphasized by the heavy diacritic tones of the three successive words, and enforced by the words “drag-you” within “Bethlê-em.” In this way, the poem poses the question “why drag yourself [there]? The consequence of this is a “sink[ing]” of “bell leaf smoke.”

### *Sound as Semantic Transgressions*

Dương Tường shows how Word-sound patterns compose a collage of textures and meanings: the “em” evokes the missing “you”/“she” and proliferates the ghost of this lack through this piece. While “em” may evoke the “êm” of stillness and quietude, re-soundings of “em” fill the poem with the black noise of absence. Within the poem, the invocation of “em,” whether on its own or as phones within words, resound a total of forty times in both words that denote sacredness (rêquiem, mariem, Bethlê-em) and sully (lem, nhem, hem, ma lem, bohème). The “em”/“êm” sound cluster composes a kind of incantation:

thêm em	crave you
thềm em	your veranda floor
đường đêm	night road
trần im	floods silence
khuya thêm	more late
rộng thêm	more wide
mùi thêm	more scent
buồn thêm	more sad

Resonating “em”/“êm” notes locate the missing female figure throughout the poem’s landscapes, creating a layered effect, a proliferation of the feminine “you.” In the speaker’s “crave” he moves through an internal landscape that finds the “em” on the “veranda,” the “night road” that

<sup>402</sup> Note that if we split the compound word “lang/ben” we get “roaming” or “wandering” and sound association with “bên” or “over.”

“floods silence.” But it is a silence that resounds. The repeating “thêm” overflows each successive line with affect for her. Because we find this sound in nearly all of the words, referring to both elevated and “earthy” things, the idea of the “you” gains contradiction, complexity and nuance.

This layered tonal effect of sound distorts and opens up the original “em” to greater evocative/interpretive potential. For example:

bohème	bohemian
boong	boong [ring...]
boong	boong [and resound]
chuông em	your bell

This sound set is a striking example of how phoneme and sound associations invite creative slippages. The reference to bohemian ways finds articulation through the onomatopoeic sound of a ringing and resounding bell. The “boong” of the pealing bell immediately brings to mind the homophone of “buông”—a word that denotes a loosening and setting free. The double “oo” of “boong” also more effectively relates this sense of loosening. And the sound gives off the idea of the “bohème” texture. This effect is particularly striking as the sound-sense forms the image of the “chuông em,” “your bell” and the erotic feminine space this phrase resounds. In associative sound associations, the poem moves from an idea (bohème) to a (re)sounding of the idea (boong boong) and then an image that embodies both (chuông em [your bell]). Sound migrations compose rich layers of meaning and amplify the poem’s theme of loosening formal and moral restraints.

The resounding bell becomes the poem’s primary motif and a way to introduce contrast. This is particularly evident in series of alliterative words and phoneme clusters. Take for example:

kèn đen	black clarion
tình đen	black love
tình điên	mad love

The successive “đen, đen, điên” produces the sound effect of bells playing, similar to the way “ding, dang, dong” evokes the tonal range of a bell. In the context of the poem, this sound play resounds more effectively the words’ related ideas. In the same manner, the striking sound of “phi lí” between the two “virgins” in the fourth stanza, immediately after “hai em” [your remains] in the fifth, and around and between ideas of star, breasts, and virgin results in an oppositional sound that calls attention to the “absurd” in notions of “đồng trinh” [pure].

### *Towards Profane Illuminations*

Indeed, the text’s promiscuity embodies its theme. The poem is impure in that it contains foreign bodies of language: “Nôel, elle, jêruzalem, Avê mariem, rêquiem, Bethlê-em, phonème, bohème, no man’s land.” Together, the French and English composes, and remarks on, an intercourse. If we read this cross-cultural intermingling as a kind of impurity, the poem’s logic also suggests that there is a need to contaminate ideas of the sacred and virginal, to bring it to the ground.

The roaming, roving and incantatory quality of the poem creates an ambulatory sensation of footsteps on a stroll. In moving away from lofty notions of Mariem, the poem moves towards the more corporeal “em” and down to the street. The signposts of this amble reside in the urban: the “street flavor,” “night road,” “lamp post,” “night rain” captures a desire that soils and dirties, that grasps at thighs and breasts, seeks fumes of hard spirits, and jostles. In this sense the poem explores an urban bohemian enclave within a framework of sacredness. The pedestrian stroll with its street flavors, its secular and corporeal love, encourages what Walter Benjamin proposed to be the French Surrealists’ ultimate goal: profane illuminations. According to Benjamin, this is the “creative overcoming of religious illumination” and its claim to absolute truth. Profane illumination is located in the material world; it excavates the detritus of social life to capture spiritual intoxications for the secular. It aims to produce revelation or insight within the everyday to transcend the prosaic state of empirical reality.<sup>403</sup> Dương Tường’s focus on the bohemian vagabond wandering forms a remark on non-traditional, marginalized, anti-establishment in social and political views. Here, notions of sexual and social deviance argue for aesthetic deviance and its exalting experiences.<sup>404</sup>

Dương Tường’s poetics of sound integrates this surrealist program, as well as the symbolist privilege of sound-sense to both produce “alchemical” resolutions of the sacred and profane. In this way, the porous and evocative potential of soundscapes produce psychological immediacy and meaningful shifts in perception that slip the bounds of institutionalized logic, which in the context of 1970s and 1980s North Vietnam reduced aesthetic experience to the rigid orthodox borders of communist rationality. Through this orientation towards modernist poetics of sound, Dương Tường composes creative protest to the “holy,” unassailable socialist doctrines that attempted to control experiences of reality. Additionally, in the poet’s emphasis on exploring the structures and arrangement of sound-units, phones, as ways to produce textures and “background” to experience the art of art, he forms direct connection to the Russian Formalist poetics.

### **Dissolving Borders in Musical Movement**

Dương Tường’s modernism orients towards a dissolving of formal and perceptual borders. He implicates music and its sense of movement in this process. Many of poems take on the formal and thematic elements of musical compositions. Take “Serendad 1” for example:

Serenad 1

Những ngón tay mưa  
duong cầm trên mái

những ngón tay mưa  
kéo dài tai quái

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<sup>403</sup> See Richard Wollen, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 132. See also Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929); and Cohen, *Profane Illumination*.

<sup>404</sup> André Breton’s 1928 surrealist novel discusses surrealist poetics through the madness of the female character, who is presumably a prostitute, but whose errant wanderings produce the material of profane illuminations. See André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

một nỗi nhớ siêu hình  
nhạc nhòe đường xanh  
đêm lập thể

những ngón tay mưa  
trườn theo phố lạnh  
màu nâu cảm tính  
đường parabol tư duy  
điệp khúc u hoài  
những chuyến tàu đi

những ngón tay mưa  
trời sao bạc  
tím mộng Scheherazade  
đêm ngàn-lẻ-hai

ngã tư  
cột đèn  
ô kính  
những ngón tay mưa  
xập xòe kỉ niệm

em  
mười chín  
mưa  
bụi sao

ngả nghiêng trời nào  
một chớp mí  
thăm thẳm

đừng hát nữa em  
những ngón tay mưa  
những ngón tay mưa...<sup>405</sup>

[Serendade 1

those fingers of rain  
piano on the roof  
those fingers of rain  
drags on strange ear  
a metaphysical missing  
(music) blurs blue road  
cubist night

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<sup>405</sup> Dương Tường, “Serenad 1,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 11–13.

those fingers of rain  
crawls / wipes after cold street  
brown color of feeling  
path of parabola thought/thinking  
refrain swells endlessly  
the ships that leave

Those fingers of rain  
silver starred sky  
purples Scheherazade's dream  
the thousandth-and-second night / night of thousand-two-way (streets)

intersection/four-way / private road  
lamp post  
window / closed umbrella  
those fingers of rain  
closes spreads memory

you/girl  
nineteen  
rain  
spray of stars

tilting/toppling some sky  
a blink of eyelid/lash  
chasm

don't sing anymore [darling]  
those fingers of rain  
those fingers of rain

Dương Tường structures poems the way one structures music compositions, that is, through an organizational logic of song developing using a master note or sound cluster, and building the composition around it. The persistent pattern of “những ngón tay mưa” [fingers of rain] sets the poem's tempo, mood and governing theme of aural and visual experience. The poet collapses the “fingers of finger / piano on the roof” drawing attention to the way words are used as a sort of musical notation. The “fingers of rain” evoke both the effects of light refracted through raindrops that produce the poem's misty atmosphere, and the range of notes, as the fingers rain play sounds on the rooftop. That sound of rain plays on the reader's emotions, stroking or pulling “on the ear” and opening a “siêu hình” or “metaphysical” space. Here, the poet underscores the act of listening as a metaphysical experience. Note that “siêu hình” is literally “sur/above image/form.” The meta-musical “fingers of rain” as piano playing produces a scattering of sound-images, where “music blurs blue roads” and has the capacity to dissemble and break-up concrete spaces.

## *Synaesthetic Compositions*

The musical motif fuses with that of painting (and poetry) in a Synaesthetic movement.<sup>406</sup> The poem moves into a metaphysical space of a “cubist night,” where objects are broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form. This cubist perspective produces a multitude of perspectives simultaneously (multi-facets) instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, in order to convey a physical and psychological sense of the fluidity of consciousness that blurs the distinctions between the temporal (between past, present and future) as well as spatial. For example, the “fingers of rain” has the power to break down solid objects as “music blurs blue roads,” “crawls after the cold street” and conjures the earthy “brown color of feeling.” The poet produces the swell of physical movement, the affect produced through the swell of a refrain, and the swell of rain-pour collecting. He then shifts and layers this swell of sound and sense simultaneously on to the image of waves, the wakes of “ships that leave.”

It is instructive to emphasize a key line in the poem’s third stanza: “the roads of parabola thought” that swells the refrain continually. “Para-bola” literally means “throw-beside,” as the poet perhaps throws language, or rather meaning, “beside itself.” In that sense, a fixed meaning, thrown beside itself, can never be reached: it is always in the process of arrival. The idea of relating the two continually opening-out sides of a geometric parabola, which can “never reach” a solid line or final destination, to the form of a (metaphysical or fundamental) question finds a useful analogy here. Newton discusses four classes of cubics, the divergent parabola is a third class, whose legs diverge from one another, and run out infinitely in contrary ways.<sup>407</sup> Duong Tường’s poems, while perhaps oriented towards a poetic subject shared by the dominant literary tradition, moves on a separate line or leg of meaning.

The poet endows sound with metaphysical power. This musical movement produced by the incantatory “fingers of rain” takes readers from a particular space in a house (roof) through blue roads that lead to ships, to oceans, that take us into a desert-scape, and then back to a city, a street, a room in which the speaker sits. Music, therefore, has the capacity to move us through different landscapes and evoke disparate but simultaneously existing geographies. By alluding to the symphonic suite by Rimsky Korsakov, based on the collection of Asian tales in Arabic of “One Thousand and One Nights,” Duong Tường evokes an intertextual meta-narrative.<sup>408</sup> The tales of this collection were gathered over many centuries by various authors, translators, and scholars. There are many versions of this collection, featuring sets of tales, but the frame story remains consistent through each version: the story of the sultana who postpones her death by telling her lord tales, seriatim, for a thousand and one nights.<sup>409</sup> Sometimes a character in

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<sup>406</sup> On synaesthesia in modernist movements, see John Zubizarreta, “Darío, Stevens, and Paz: The Modernist Connection,” *South Atlantic Review* (1991): 47–60. He relates: “a method of poetic association, sometimes a veritable mania...and feeling the world is generally explained in psychological term: ‘synaesthesia’” (79). See also Judith Zilcher, “‘Color Music’: Synaesthesia and Nineteenth-Century Sources for Abstract Art,” *Artibus et historiae* (1987): 101–126; and Bauer, “Tone-color, Movement, Changing Harmonic Planes,” in ed. Arved Ashby, *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*, 121–152.

<sup>407</sup> See Isaac Newton, *Sir Isaac Newton's Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy and His System of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 68.

<sup>408</sup> Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) was a Russian composer, and a member of the group of composers known as The Five. One of his best-known orchestral compositions is the symphonic suite “Scheherazade.”

<sup>409</sup> In Sir Richard Burton's translation of *The Nights*, Scheherazade was described in this way: “[Scheherazade] had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of bygone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the

Scheherazade's tale will begin telling other characters a story of his own, and that story may have another one told within it, resulting in a richly layered narrative texture. The poem forms an intertextual dialogue with the collection, especially as the poet superimposes his own musical suite, the poem, over another and takes the narratives of the collection beyond the frame to the “thousand-and-two night.”

### *Connecting Traditions*

The poem shifts here and moves from a desert-scape to an urban scene, marked by an “intersection” or “four-way,” “lamp-post,” a “window.” The “fingers of rain” connect the objects of these disparate spaces through a shared somatosensory system within the poem, as it “spreads and smears memories.” The Vietnamese “xập xoè” enacts the onomatopoeic effect of this spreading and reiterates the image of fingers on the piano keys. The very porous nature of rain, and sound, enables the dissolving of solid borders so that these connections can move fluidly from one space to the next. When the poem shifts to the idea of the female figure, the “em,” the spare one-two word beats of the lines in this stanza reproduce the effects of rain droplets. With very few words the poet pulls the image of a nineteen-year-old girl from a night rain and “spray of stars.” The micro-focus on the “tilting sky” dramatizes this moment in which “a blink of lashes” evokes the opening of “a chasm.” The final stanza asks “don’t sing anymore,” but the repetition of “fingers of rain...” keeps dripping beyond the borders of the poem and its own frame.

Within this composition, Dương Tường engages a particular Vietnamese literary motif through an intertextual layering of allusion, citation, and transmutation—governed by a logic of musical composition. He takes the classical Vietnamese literary motif of the relationship between the courtesan/prostitute [*kỹ nữ*] and the scholar, and creates depth by layering it with, and fusing it to allusion to the story of the courtesan and the sultan. The refrain of “those fingers of rain” connect the two in the sensory system of the poem. In the first instance, the courtesan must tell engaging stories—serially—for a thousand and one nights in order to stave off her execution. Indeed, the poem continues the story on the night “one thousand and two,” evoking this continuity and connection. The Vietnamese courtesan, in addition to other kinds of performances, must sing for her livelihood, though the speaker asks that she “*đừng hát nữa em*” [darling, don’t sing anymore]. Dương Tường makes implicit connections to the classic Vietnamese epic poem of Nguyễn Du’s *Truyện Kiều* [*Tale of Kieu*].<sup>410</sup> The famous line associated with depicting the epic poem’s female heroine is “*nghiêng nước nghiêng thành*” [topples nations topples palaces].<sup>411</sup> That is, her combination of beauty and skill in poetry, painting, chess and music was a deadly one. It held such power as to crumble empires; but it also meant she would live a burdened life—for these talents always do in the Vietnamese tradition. Dương alludes to this text and echoes those well-known verses in a new context:

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sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred.” See Richard F. Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (UK: Burton Club, 1950), 14 (footnote).

<sup>410</sup> Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition of Truyện Kiều*. trans Huỳnh Sang Thông (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 25–28. The phrase “*khuyh thành*” are repeated in lines 253–258 and 1299–1302 (“*Miệt mài trong cuộc truy hoan / Càng quen thuộc nét càng dan díu tình / Lạ cho cái sóng khuyh thành / Làm cho đồ quán xiêu đình như chơi*”) referring to Kiều’s powers.

mưa                                      rain  
bụi sao                                  spray / dust / clump of stars

ngả nghiêng trời nào      topples what sky  
một chớp mi                      a blink of eyelash  
thăm thẳm                        chasm

With this collage effect of sound and sense, he remarks on tradition and the need to connect to the past, to transgress it, and to evolve in order to remain alive. Indeed, the poem performs the traditional scholarly pursuit of the four skills that demonstrate learnedness: *cầm kỳ thi họa* [music, chess, poetry, painting]. The poem’s synaesthetic and formal collapse of music, strategic movements, poetry and cubist painting reinvigorate these classical motifs of intellectual refinement in a new context, and reconfigure them in a new modernist frame. This is not least because the courtesan’s lute is replaced by a piano in this frame, signaling new instruments at hand. The poet connects the serial storytelling, or epic narrative, to the epic poem, and also in this context, to the epic nature of the musical suites (Dương Tường’s “Serenad” poems form a series of three). Likewise, the connection between Scheherazade and Kiều, the eponymous character of the epic poem, relates cross-cultural connections that resound each text and bring them into louder symphony. The poem’s spatial movement from the palaces to the brothels to the city streets also makes an implicit statement that connects the fates of the courtesans with the prostitution of the contemporary world—whether cultural or literal, the boundaries of bodies necessarily blur in the process. Dương Tường evokes both the destructive and creative powers of the combined forces of the arts.

### ***Modernist Meanings in Musical Movements***

Dương Tường links the “Serenad” poems as a suite of three pieces. As in musical composition, the pieces of the set act as layers of the “narrative,” or amplification of the original motif. In “Serenad 3” the poet extends the sound-metaphor of the piano and its repeating notes.

#### Serenad 3

Chờ em đường dương cầm xanh  
dậy thì nõn dương cầm phở

Chờ em đường dương cầm sương  
chúm chím nụ dương cầm biếc

Chờ em đường dương cầm xiêm  
vàng vặc ngục dương cầm trinh

Chờ em đường dương cầm khuya  
ôi cái im đêm thom mộng

Chờ em đường dương cầm trắng  
ứa nhụy lạch dương cầm xuân

Chờ em đường dương cầm mưa  
giọt giọt lá buồn dạ khúc  
Xào xạc lòng tay khuya

Anh về lối dương cầm lạnh<sup>412</sup>

[Waiting for you the piano path [is] blue  
Teach then tender bud piano street

...Duong's path holds blue  
then tender Duong holds street

Waiting for you the piano path [is] mist  
Slightly parting piano bud is bluish green

...Duong's road holds mist  
bud of Duong holds bluish green

Waiting for you the piano's path [is] a garment  
bright yellow piano's breasts [is] virgin

...Duong's path holds a garment  
...Duong's chest holds virginity

Waiting for you piano's path [is] late night  
O night's quiet smells of dreams

...Duong's path holds late night

Waiting for you the piano's path [is] moon  
Overflowing piano waterway [is] spring

...Duong's path holds moon  
...Duong's waterway holds spring

Waiting for you the piano's path [is] rain  
Drop [by] drop sad leaves a piece of entrails  
Rustles the palm [of] late-night

...Duong's path holds rain

I return the piano's way [is] cold

...Duong's path holds cold]

The organization of the word-notes are quite novel in the poem. The placement of the three words, “đường dương cầm,” along the line creates the possibility of a double reading on each line, depending on where we place the stress. For example, “đường dương cầm” translates to “the piano’s path” or “Dương [Tuờng]’s road holds...” What this does is collapse the instrument with the man so that each line that features these three words, or sound cluster, proposes multiple and simultaneous meaning-paths at once. Here, word-sound becomes an economical device to break linear word logic.

The poem’s refrain and pivot point of “Chờ em đường dương cầm” creates a new organizational logic of sound evocation, where the consistent notion that “waiting for you is the piano’s way/waiting for you is the path that Dương [Tuờng] holds” produces a series of notes with affective registers. The repetition of “đường dương cầm” mimics the legato of a piano composition. Legato, or tied together (in Italian), is used for slurred compositions; one line follows the next without pause, but allows for re-articulation.<sup>413</sup> Here Dương Tuờng rearticulates the leading word-sound-image composition to effect a kind of incantation. Repetition of a

<sup>412</sup> Dương Tuờng, “Serenad 3,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác: Thơ Dương Tuờng* [Mea Culpa and Other Poems: The Poetry of Dương Tuờng] (Hải Phòng: Hải Phòng, 2004), 35.

<sup>413</sup> Barbara Wharram and Kathleen Wood, eds., *Elementary Rudiments of Music* (Mississauga: Frederick Harris Music Company, 1969).

word/sound empties it of fixed meaning as the notes repeat in constantly shifting contexts. If we follow just the one sequence of reading “the piano path [is]” (rather than Dương’s path holds) we see the idea of the piano’s way is simultaneously “blue”-“street,” “mist”-“bluish green,” “garment”-“virginity,” “late (night)”-“dream,” “moon”-“spring,” “rain”-“cold.” As words set next to the cluster of “đường dương cầm,” with its inherently unstable meaning, the words also lose their original meanings and take on new registers as well. They become tones of the piano that are at once blue, mist, moon, wet, cold, and so forth.

The reader follows this sound logic along the dual paths presented (the piano’s way/the man holds or contain) filled with various word-notes. The placement of these notes along the lines in a consistent order allows for meanings to not only be produced in either direction on a horizontal axis, but also on a vertical axis. For example, if we take each third word on the second line of each two-line stanza as beats that fall in the same position, they evoke a relationship: tender, bud, breast, silent, rivulet. A sensuality forms through a logic of notation, or where the beat falls. Likewise, the end words of each stanza form their own meaning. The poem’s musical character opens up multitudes of simultaneous meanings. We can trace the “consonant” character of the words movement from the virginal and pure, the pubescent, towards the rivulet and deluge, towards the very visceral entrails. The movement of word-sounds shifts meanings from the profound to the profane in a surrealist gesture that opens up a confluence of meanings. In the musical compositions of the poem, Dương Tường enacts modernist proposals to loosen the strictures of experiencing language, inviting readers to participate in the process of making meaning. In particular, he connects and collapses the notions of prostitution through his allusions to the courtesans that resound in this poem.

### **Wordplay and the Migrations of Meaning**

Dương Tường’s poem demonstrate that he not only reaches for French surrealist and symbolist strands in his modernist poetic innovations, or merely adopt a Russian Formalist approach, he also takes root in particular Vietnamese poetic traditions. In this he shows the closeness and connection of the Russian Formalist focus on the materiality of language and traditional Vietnamese poetic awareness of word sound systems. He has stated that: “The specialty of sound poems I learned from none other than the grand lady Hồ of our ancestors with poems like “Hang cắc có” [The Ill-Fated Hole], those “đứng chéo trông theo cảnh hắt heo” [stand aslant see askance scenes of hog tossing/desolation].<sup>414</sup> The great lady Hồ that Dương Tường refers to is of course the classical premodern poet Hồ Xuân Hương (approx. 1772–1822), whose witty wordplays slipped it, so to speak, to corrupt bureaucrats, hollow officials, and gender biases in society. In the quoted verse she inverts the classical poetic trope of “heo hắt” or “desolate scene,” to produce the satirical effect of “hắt heo” or “hog-tossing,” allusions to lewd sexual behavior. Her poems satirized everyday social situations as well as the hierarchies of social institutions. Her poems accomplish their multiple meanings through a series of word slides, flips and inversions—made possible by the promiscuity of word sounds—that reinsert the body/bawdy

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<sup>414</sup> “Ngôn thơ con âm mình học chính là ở bà cố tổ họ Hồ của chúng ta với những bài ‘Hang cắc có,’ những ‘đứng chéo trông theo cảnh hắt heo’...” See Hoàng Hưng, “Đường Dương Tường nghiêng...” in Dương Tường, *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 153.

into “lofty” subject matters.<sup>415</sup> In the same way, Dương Tường reinvests a traditional Vietnamese tradition with aesthetic power in his Vietnamese modernist poetics.

The slip-slide of meaning through a focus on the musical quality of the Vietnamese language has a long tradition. The scholar-poet Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778–1858), for example, employs a poetic sensibility similar to Hồ Xuân Hương to satirize the “anh đồ” or effete bureaucrats and officials who feigned lofty Confucian learnedness and morality. These were usually couplets or four-line verses in the Tang-style seven-syllable meter and prosody that corrupted the form’s orthodoxy and obliquely critiqued lofty establishments by introducing bawdy subjects or the riddle and wit of a “folk” [*dân gian*] tradition. In this tradition, the poet takes the tones of words as a springboard for creative associations and leaps in meaning. For example: “cung quăng cùn quẳng chi cùn quẳng, đặc bắt ngoại bò vàng chi liêm lá” [palace mosquito/larva still tosses away money with scarves/absurd/measures/card games/diplomat /golden calves/yellow cows/lick leaves]<sup>416</sup>

Dương Tường’s long poem, “Mea Culpa” forms an intertextual play with this tradition of wordplay in formal compositions, but innovates it with formal destruction of spelling, syntax and abrupt turns in ideas and images. “Mea Culpa,” or “It’s my fault,” is particularly illustrative of a willful and wayward poetic errancy. Structured as a “tổ khúc 7 chương” or “traditional musical (composition) in seven parts,” the poem sprawls in discrete segments across sixty-six pages. Admittedly, Dương Tường takes a familiar poetic convention (phrase, image, subject, etc) then distorts it through violations of language, orthography, syntax, typography and layout. The “faults” of the poem are precisely what makes them modernist and innovative, and in the context of 1970s North Vietnamese culture, an aesthetic dissent. The poet accepts blame for his faults—which he conducts anyhow, suggesting that the erroneous is more sincere, more meaningful, than those seemingly orderly and unblemished forms.

### *Unexpected Turns and Familiar Strangers*

The poet Hoàng Hưng has also suggested that Dương Tường’s “Mea Culpa” poems form a kind of errant wayward rambling. This itinerant wordplay proposes freewheeling associations through word sounds/registers. Here, the mischievous and playful lead to unexpected surprises and discoveries of the Vietnamese language, and escape the confines of content-subject matter by inviting new meanings. Dương Tường begins with a familiar phrase and jars perceptions with unexpected turns. For example:

những bản thảojà chín tháng  
mười ngày  
còn bị nạo thai

cho

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<sup>415</sup> See Đào Thái Tôn, *Thơ Hồ Xuân Hương từ cội nguồn vào thể tục*. For translations of her poems, see Hồ Xuân Hương, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*, ed./trans. John Balaban (Copper Canyon Press, 2000). See also a review of these translations (or mistranslations), according to one N. SaoMai, <http://www.gio-o.com/nguyensaomai.html>.

<sup>416</sup> He was a scholar and poet who wrote declamation poems satirizing what he saw as corrupt bureaucracy. See Chu Trọng Huyền, *Nguyễn Công Trứ, con người và sự nghiệp* [Nguyễn Công Trứ: Character and Career] (Hà Nội Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1995), 11.

cái cột đèn sà m sỡ đêm nào  
cũng zòm zèm cửa sô chỉ điếm  
phòng xếp đôi vợ chồng mới  
cưới<sup>417</sup>

[those manuscripts old ripe/nine months  
ten days  
still get womb-scraped

for

the lamp post taking liberties some night  
every pry and peep the door push open coarse thread/informant  
chief's room/arrange pairs of wife husband newly  
wed]

The phrase “old and ripe” is a classic Vietnamese poetic term used to refer to things being ready. Here, Dương Tường shifts the idea of a manuscript into a pregnancy that gets terminated, scraped out, as it were. This interesting fuse of intellectual pursuits with corporal consequence is striking, and taboo as a traditional Vietnamese literary subject, as it is in the context of 1970s and 1980s communist Vietnam. This abortion is because of, the poem suggests, the “lamp posts” shining their obtrusive light into private rooms every night—evoking the image of the cadre at his post and notions of surveillance. Here, words become interlocutors that speak between the words that come immediately before and after. For example, if we untangle the sequence of “cửa sô chỉ điếm,” we get multiple word clusters with certain words working double-time: *cửa sô* [window/door pushed open]; *sô chỉ* [coarse thread]; *chỉ điếm* [denounce/inform]. The word network open up connections and meaning: the shared phoneme of “chỉ” [thread] literally and figuratively stitches ideas of coarseness to those informants.

Ideas multiply with each word thread woven into the next, so that the sounds of “phòng xếp” suggest the “chief’s office” even as it doubles as “rooms that arrange” those “đôi vợ chồng” or husband and wife pairs, reminiscent of the tight quarters of communist cadre housing in which people were asked to spy and report on each other’s conduct.<sup>418</sup> Dương Tường himself has stated that he “một đời ăn nằm với chữ,” a phrase that denotes the intimacies and intercourse of marriage.<sup>419</sup> In other words, he commits his life to being wed to words, to servicing them as a husband would. In this poem we see the suggestion of how authorities attempt to control the space of those newly couples, or writers and their works. Through a mesh of word threads tied together by their sound associations, Dương Tường makes an oblique critique of the restrictive

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<sup>417</sup> Dương Tường, “Mea Culpa,” (Section 2), *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 94.

<sup>418</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài’s short story, “Man Nương,” depicts these cramped cadre quarters of this period and the kind of “romances” they bred. See Phạm Thị Hoài, *Sunday Menu: Collected Short Stories of Phạm Thị Hoài*, trans. Ton-That Quỳnh Du (Canberra, AU: Pandanus Books, 2006).

<sup>419</sup> See also Dương Tường interview with Nguyễn Đức Tùng, “Viết không khác người ta thì đừng viết” [If You Can’t Write Differently Then Why Write At All], July 31, 2007, *talawas*, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=10558&rb=0101>; reprinted in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè: tập luận* [Only the Ears / The Ear Threads of the Oriental Magpie-Robin: Collected Essays] (Nhà Nam: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009), 96–121 (109).

policing culture of communist North Vietnam that destroyed and forcefully aborted entire bodies of work.

### *Modernist Mutations*

This straying off-course brings surprise and discovery by taking existing forms in new directions to enhance the systems for understanding. For example:

Tôi trót ngót nghét nửa thế kỉ  
ngoại tình với tên tôi<sup>420</sup>

zuongtuongtrên mái

thường khi mưa toàn những  
vú nâu<sup>421</sup>

[I pack bitterness into half a century  
cheated on/loved outside my name

zuongtuongontheroof / zrongthoughtontheroof

often the rain is full of those  
brown breasts]

Here the poet alludes to the traditional Tang seven-five-seven syllable line model but disrupts it. The first two lines adhere to this structure of a seven-syllable line followed by a five-syllable, but the poet then introduces a foreign convention. So, if he “cheats” on his “own name,” or participates in an outside/foreign love affair, the result of this intercourse forms a kind of creative mutation, a monstrosity: “zuongtuongtrên mái.” However, in the ideas he set up in the first line, a sound logic follows. “ngót nghét” [condense bitterness] resounds the compound word “nhốt nhét,” which means to lock-up or cram into a tight space. In this sound sense, “zuongtuongtrên mái” is precisely what happens under restrictive cultural regimes: a compression and seeking of affection elsewhere. This textual move connects Dương Tường’s poetic affiliations with external literary traditions and a metalinguistic awareness. Dương Tường’s poetry, while renovating the Vietnamese language, contains intertextual connections to poetic innovations of the Russian Formalist, particularly in their characterization of a language—meta-language—that makes assertions about existing language systems.

If Dương forges intertextual connections, he also performs intra-textual acts. “zuongtuongtrên mái” in fact makes direct allusion to his poem “Serenad 1.” The poem this one alludes to features the line “duong cầm trên mái” [piano on the rooftop], but which through its repetitions produces the notion of “Dương Tường trên mái” [Dương Tường on the roof]. Further, he adds an additional tonal play on the word “tường” [think/thought] in “zuongtuongtrên mái” to suggest a certain logic, a thinking or thought, within this compression of words. Within this

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<sup>420</sup> “ngoại tình” is literally “outside love,” denoting cheating or infidelity. Here, it is something that the poet relishes in, thwarting conventional spellings of his own name.

<sup>421</sup> Dương Tường, “Mea Culpa,” (Section 4), *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác*, 111.

segment of “Mea Culpa,” the poet refers to this intertextual logic of citation, appropriation, conflation and connection. Further, by connecting this long poem with the three-suit series, he composes a musical link between the two sets, layering the effect of their meanings through resonance. In another intratextual linkage this poem recalls the other poem’s “đêm lập thể” or “cubist night,” in which the persistent notes of rain blur “blue roads” and reaches towards the “brown color of feeling.” Here, the poet re-sounds this cubist moment, collapsing visual and auditory sensory systems, to compose the surrealist image of “the rain full of brown breasts.”<sup>422</sup>

The segments in this poem achieve greatest effect in composing new connections, or in reworking traditional motifs in unexpected ways. For example:

lã chã  
24 mùi hoa viôlét

tình thật  
tôi nãng jặt lòng mình như  
đàn bà tháng tội jặt trang<sup>423</sup>

[flowing  
24 violet bloom scents

real love  
I scrub wash my heart like  
women in month of sin cleanse moon]

Dương Tường relates the flowing “scent” of violets (fusing the senses of smell and sight) to women’s menstrual cycles—a novel subject of poetic innovation and identification for a male poet to take up. In the textual and semantic movement from the “flow” to the flowering scent, the poet enacts a “real love” and new mode of perception. He, too, “washes” or wrenches his heart as women cleanse their bodies of menses (traditionally related to the moon’s cycles). The affection character of this statement is enhanced by the sound associations produced by the ambiguous “jặt.” As an unfamiliar and thus a yet-unfixed sound vessel, the word proliferates possible meanings, including, “giật” [startle (awake)], giặt [wash], which in the context of the poet’s empathy is especially tender.

Dương Tường reworks a poetic tradition in a novel way. The poet relates the “real” of this love by including the corporeal reality of women’s bodies. Rather than displace the bodies of women in lofty symbols, as untouchable objects on pedestals, the poet creates an incredible intimacy. He pulls the moon down to “profane” notions of menstruation and blood flow. But in doing so he collapses the borders and distance between his heart and her body. Introducing the “profane,” the bodily, and the everyday into considerations of love, the poet makes the statement of “real love” or “true love” more meaningful. The surrealist sensory slip and transmutation of image, motored by sound-associations, grounds the profound in the mundane world. These moves locate the marvelous moments of insight on ground. In the context in which he was writing, there was a need to introduce the “real” to disturb perceptions and the glossy images of socialist realist figures that proliferated the Vietnamese cultural landscape. Dương Tường’s

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., “Serenad 1,” 11.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., “Mea Culpa,” (Section 3), 101.

poems demonstrate a necessary modernist intervention in poetry, one that requires cross-cultural bodily impacts.

### **Conclusion: Ideological Constrictions and Formal Consummations**

The modernism of the 1970s and 1980s developed out of the public eye and on the margins of Vietnamese society. The large collection of works produced by this small group of writers demonstrates modernism's resilience and staying power in the literary imagination at a moment when it was highly unpopular. It also shows that these poets privileged modernist poetics for its ability to "liberate language." Detached from the pressures of participating in a public intellectual discourse, poets like Dương Tường had the space to carry out their modernist aesthetic experimentations. They turned more aggressively towards the formal elements in their innovations and away from the strain of state-sanctioned art that favored content, particular of the socialist variety. As the poetry of Dương Tường shows, artistic innovation aimed at unmooring art from the political statements advocated by the ideologues. In this aesthetic inward-turning, the poetry becomes self-centered and self-referential. It draws attention to the materials and processes of art, and makes transparent the language of the text as artifice, an organized system of devices. This historical moment created a crisis of culture. The aesthetic choices Dương Tường makes, the particular poetics he privileges and puts into practice, can be seen as "solutions" to the problems of the moment. So while Dương Tường's poems enact the autonomy of art, they are still responding to particular conditions of this social-historical juncture.

Dương Tường's focus on the materiality of words as sound units, put into various modernist frames, would seem to be a fragmentation of language rather than a rescue. In the Deleuze-Guattari reading of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the dynamic of Gregor's becoming-insect is tied to the idea that language, which is becoming-noise, "stops being representative in order to now move towards its extremities or its limits."<sup>424</sup> In the poetry of Dương Tường we are not concerned with a "distribution of states" or with the molecular breaking down of words themselves into noise, as Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka insinuates. Rather, the breakdown of words forms a discontinuous leap, a displacement of meaning into a totally different space or place; the event of this displacement or this indefinite opening-out implies infinite possibilities in lexical diffusion. In Dương Tường's conception, this breakdown of language into parts allows it to recombine, reformulate new articulations, to refresh the impoverished body of Vietnamese language that under a communist regime and revolutionary culture had grown stiff and emaciated. If in this conception the word is a vessel, then modernist poets of this period would empty the ship's cargo-hold to lighten the load and make room for new meaning possibilities.

In particular, we see the aims of restoring a polyphonic and polysemy to language, as well as the attempts to engage the reader in the act of making meaning, in processes of creating

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<sup>424</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1993), Chapter 3: "What is Minor Literature," 16–27 (23). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature is one in which language is no longer designatory. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits" (23). A "minor literature," then, escapes signification and representation: a "minor literature" resists resemblance and mimetic representation, much in the way that abstract art resists figuration, representation or imitation of real life. Language then enters "becoming" through a non-significatory, non-representational "line of flight" in which words and things are "intensities" in which sounds vibrate.

new perspectives. The imperatives of the communist cultural regime, to “unify all voices” had reduced literature to socialist realist stock narratives of a singular tone: the proletariat, the noble peasant, the brave soldier, all moving teleologically through a series of simplistic ideological shifts, towards the same conclusion: hate for the western imperialists, scorn for the native feudal landowners, love for the communist way. As Nguyễn Đình Thi recalls: “Every creation is a bullet shot at the head of the enemy.”<sup>425</sup> Every artistic creation was to aid the evolution of the socialist man. But Dương Tường saw how someone who spends his entire life drawing profiles will believe man only has one eye.<sup>426</sup> Dương Tường’s modernist poetics represents a refusal to subordinate art to politics or limit the experiences of art. As such, it focused on creating the phenomenology of reading. Dương Tường’s poems invite word play to produce surprise and encounter of language rather than drive towards fixed and predetermined ends. Additionally, the sense of the careless and irreverent wandering without apparent aims in wordplay slips the moorings of literary orthodoxy that proclaims the transmission of ideas and meaning (ideology) to be literature’s primary goal.

If we are to speak of a territorial defensiveness, then this was a battle that took place within the national sphere, a battle of the art of the marginal setting itself in tension to the politics of the dominant culture. Here, Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor modernism must be reworked. The contest here is not between core and margin cultures over modernist poetic authority; rather, it is a national contest to define the bounds of art and politics. In this contestation, we see Dương Tường bolster/arm himself with an array of cross-cultural modernist tools. The inward-turning of these poems is also thus an outward-turning to the network of the international modernist cultures. The literary critic Harold Bloom spilled much ink discussing the afterlives of poets in the works of following generations. The case of Dương Tường and modernism of the 1970s and 1980s would suggest that Vietnamese poets were not hindered in their creative process by the ambiguous relationship they necessarily maintained with modernist precursor poets. The anxiety of influence, it seems, belongs primarily to the literary critic and not the poets themselves.<sup>427</sup> Dương Tường’s poetry demonstrates a celebrated connection to many former modernist trends.

As I have shown, Dương Tường’s poems place a curious accent on cross-cultural dynamics. Dương Tường uses classical literary motifs, but distorts them, through surrealist, symbolist, and formalist interventions, thus transforming perception. The moon of lovers’ union becomes the moon of women’s menstrual cycles in the poet’s identification with the profane aspects of the female body. Classical Vietnamese arts of mandarin refinement, music and painting, find new, more fluid synaesthetic composition through the motif of “fingers of rain.” The symbol of the bell, resonant of sacredness in Buddhist as it is in Catholic traditions, gets transformed through tonal play, into the erotic instrument of the female body. In this way, Dương Tường brings entire Vietnamese literary traditions into play in novel ways.

He translates Verlaine and Mallarmé’s maxim on sound into a distinct Vietnamese poetics of harmonics.<sup>428</sup> He quotes in four different languages from a variety of poets,

<sup>425</sup> Nguyễn Đình Thi, “Nhận Đường” [Recognize/Accept the Path] (1947), in *Văn học Việt Nam 1945–1954* [Vietnamese Literature 1945–1954], ed. Mã Giang Lân (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 1998), 191.

<sup>426</sup> I borrow this phrasing from Anne Carson writing on Braque’s “nature morte.” See Anne Carson, “On the Rules of Perspective,” *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 34.

<sup>427</sup> See Harold Bloom’s concept of *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University press, [1973] 1997).

<sup>428</sup> Dương Tường, “Về thơ Việt Nam hôm nay (Trả lời Thụy Khuê ở nước ngoài)” [On Vietnamese Poetry Today (Response to Thụy Khuê from Abroad)], in Dương Tường, *Chỉ tại con chích choè*, 45–47.

philosophers, theorists (French, Vietnamese, Russian, English), from Baudelaire to e.e. cummings, from Viktor Shklovsky's to Roland Barthes. He enters them into a conversation with each other as well as himself. He reconfigures the extant combinations to reveal incredible resonances between them, and within this particular Vietnamese cultural context, that gains us insight into how these many culturally and historically varied movements may be grouped within a constellation of modernism. Through Dương Tường's intertextual engagement, in the body of his text, we begin to see modernism's connectedness. The poems comprise a network of modernist poetic strategies that take on new life through artful citations, transmutations, translations and so on, without erasing the particularities of Vietnamese and its response to the historical moment. These strands of international modernist poetics, once interwoven into another system—with its distinct extant semantic, linguistic, textual codes—and within a particular cultural moment, acquires its own specificity. The poet's selection and combination of the strands relate his response to the particular historical juncture and what he deems necessary to counter or contribute to this system.

For example we see how playing with orthography was a practice of Russian formalism, as well as American language poets; in Dương Tường's poetic experiments, purposeful misspelling enacts the rebellion of art against rigid frames of institutionalized understanding, and communist enforcement of "proper" form. Likewise, Italian Futurism, Russian formalism, and French surrealism connect in their approach to typographical experimentations. In toying with textual arrangements, Dương Tường also creates room for semantic uncertainty to engage the phenomenology of reading. And as we see, the privilege of sound-sense is not only a French symbolist (Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rimbaud) or Russian futurist (Khlebnikov, Burliak) enterprise. Dương Tường locates the dynamics of sound as a poetic force in premodern Vietnamese poetry; and he gives it new vigor with modernist poetics. Finally, the intentional distortion of conventional symbols, shapes and forms to profane or secularize the profound runs across the spectrum of symbolism, surrealism, futurism, as well as the Vietnamese literary past. Dương Tường proposes a new poetic syntax that combines the many cross-cultural utterances, orientations, and practices. The intertextual enunciations, both east and west, form a counter argument to the equalizing and flattening effect of the socialist realist aim of "unifying all voices." Dương Tường's poems also propose a unifying of many different voices, a polyvocality, but one that engages many cultures and does not erase differences. He values symphony but does not mute the individuality of its instruments. He lays bare the network of modernist poetics necessary to sound a response to this period's cultural silencing.

## Conclusion | Localizing Modernism in Cross-Cultural Constellations

Only in recent years have scholars like Lại Nguyên Ân even proposed the possibility of speaking of modernism in Vietnam. Lại Nguyên Ân notes that in the works of Hàn Mặc Tử, Bích Khê and Đinh Hùng (those in the School of Mad Poetry) in 1938 there were “tendencies of modernism...decadent, surreal, and avant-garde.”<sup>429</sup> He adds to this trail the poems of Nguyễn Xuân Sanh’s Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group and Trần Dần’s Dạ Đài group in 1946, which produced the first Vietnamese manifesto of symbolism.<sup>430</sup> Lại Nguyên Ân’s periodization ends in the late 1950s with Trần Dần’s Russian futurism inspired, Mayakovsky-like poems. Lại Nguyên Ân’s sparks of insight were just that—intriguing remarks in the last four pages of an article on the category of international modernism and not yet a fully-realized study of modernist formation in Vietnam. Others like Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, Đỗ Lai Thúy or Phạm Xuân Nguyên have discussed the pronounced symbolist, surrealist or futurist qualities of certain works in short articles, but do not go beyond this.<sup>431</sup> English-language treatments of these authors’ poetry is scant at best, and then, they only touch on Trần Dần.<sup>432</sup> To the best of my knowledge, there is no other study that examines these works as “modernist,” traces the development of the poetics across a span of time, or situates them within a larger constellation of modernism. In other words, there has not yet been a pronounced study of the cultural formation in Vietnam. My dissertation has provided a modest contribution and start to this effort.

This study is the first English-language literary and historical scholarship to scrutinize the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử, Trần Dần and Dương Tường extensively. It is perhaps the first serious

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<sup>429</sup> “các khuynh hướng tiền hiện đại chủ nghĩa và hiện đại chủ nghĩa như suy đồi (décadance), siêu thực, tiền phong...” See Lại Nguyên Ân, “Về phạm trù chủ nghĩa hiện đại” [On the Category of Modernism], April 2004, *Văn Hoá Học*, <http://vanhoahoc.vn/nghien-cuu/ly-luan-van-hoa-hoc/vhh-cac-truong-phai-trao-luu/204-lai-nguyen-an-ve-pham-tru-chu-nghia-hien-dai.html>, section 3.

<sup>430</sup> See Trần Dần, Trần Mai Châu, Vũ Hoàng Địch, “Bản tuyên ngôn tượng trưng” [Manifesto of Symbolism], *Dạ Đài* [Netherworld] no. 1 (1946), available at *Tiền Vệ* [Avant-Garde], <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=787>; and See *Xuân Thu nhã tập*, ed. Nguyễn Xuân Xanh (Hà Nội: Văn Học, [1942] 1991).

<sup>431</sup> See, for instance, Lại Nguyên Ân, “Đôi Dòng Ghi Sau Tác Phẩm ‘Đi! Đây Việt Bắc!’” 122–133. See also Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Trần Dần— Một thi trình sạch (I)” [Trần Dần: A Pure Poetic Itinerary (1)], *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* [Culture and Arts] no. 286 (April 2008): 80–85 and 104; and Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Trần Dần, một thi trình sạch (II),” *Phông Điệp*, <http://phongdiep.net/default.asp?action=article&ID=4156>; Nguyễn Đăng Điệp, “Hàn Mặc Tử và mỹ học của khát vọng [Hàn Mặc Tử and an Aesthetic of Thirst],” *Nghiên Cứu Văn Học* [Literary Studies] no. 9 (July 2009); Phạm Xuân Nguyên, “Đôi thoại trong đêm với Hàn Mặc Tử” [Dialogues in the Night with Hàn Mặc Tử], September 10, 1991, file:///C:/Users/trang/Downloads/DoiThoaiTrongDemVoiHanMacTu.pdf; Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, Baudelaire Chủ nghĩa tượng trưng và thơ mới [Baudelaire, Symbolism and New Poetry], May 11, 2007, [http://thotanhinhthuc.org/truoc\\_den\\_docsach/tapchitho/tapchitho\\_5/tct\\_5\\_hoangngochien.htm](http://thotanhinhthuc.org/truoc_den_docsach/tapchitho/tapchitho_5/tct_5_hoangngochien.htm).

<sup>432</sup> See Tony Day, “Still Stuck in the Mud: Imagining World Literature during the Cold War in Indonesia and Vietnam,” in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya HT Liem (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010), 131–170; Neil Jamieson, “Shattered Identities and Contested Images: Reflections of Poetry and History in 20th Century Vietnam,” *Crossroads* 7 no. 2 (1992): 71–134; Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, *Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Literature and Politics* (PhD thesis, Victoria University, 2004), 4, <http://vuir.vu.edu.au/279/1/02whole.pdf>; Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 126–143. Most treatments of Trần Dần’s poetry remains surficial; he is discussed less as a poet and more so as a major figure in the cultural debates of 1950s DRV.

study of Dương Tường’s poetry in any language. Certainly, it is the first full scholarship to demonstrate there was indeed a modernist movement in Vietnam—and one that reconfigures understandings of cross-cultural poetics and modernist cultural formation on the peripheries. I have exploded the notion that modernism is bounded to European centers. Or, that a reductive model is needed to discuss Vietnamese modernism. I have also shown that the localized dynamics of cross-cultural engagement defies theoretical frameworks of influence and intertextuality. By tracing modernist poetry across three discrete historical moments, I show that this localized modernism had a trajectory. Certainly, history events—the outbreak of war, restrictive cultural policies, and imposed silences—have disrupted a straightforward course. These “ruptures” nonetheless form the cultural moments that inform the character and path in which modernism would develop. This scholarship allows us to begin to speak of modernism in Vietnam as a discrete poetic movement with impulse, continuity and some momentum.

I have traced the evolution of Vietnamese modernism by examining a slender yet illuminating selection of poetry representative of what I see as three perceptible phases of modernism.<sup>433</sup> These are: 1) the early content modernism of the late-colonial era of the 1930s/1940s, or enactive modernism; 2) the form-content modernism of the late 1950s revolutionary era, or reactive modernism; and 3) the formal modernism of the 1970s/1980s Renovation era, or introspective modernism. Within these three historical junctures I note a gradual movement between two extreme poles: from a poetry that is enactive, descriptive and focused on innovation through content, to that which is reactive, prescriptive and focused on formal experimentations. And whereas the modernist poetry of the early phase focuses on questions of “being” in the world, the late modernism pays attention to conscious experiences of poetry, or phenomenon. Nonetheless, a series of connective threads run through all three phases.

The early modernism of the late 1930s enacts in theme and content the Janus-faced energies of a post-traditional society in a moment of colonial modernity. Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetry reflected the perceived need to sweep away restrictive remnants of established social orders and liberate experiential possibilities of the individual self. This sense of being suddenly unmoored from traditional structures invited a new lively perception, a “spree of vitality.” However, a sense of dislocation and disorientation, a Baudelairean ennui, accompanied this excitement.<sup>434</sup> In this early modernism, poets like Hàn Mặc Tử translated the transitory world through poetic enactments: feverish streams of consciousness, disturbing dream-like states, and sudden shifts in perception and perspective. He pulled from Vietnamese poetic material and forms to compose new contents, disturbing the original forms in the process. He engaged a poetic logic of madness and disorder to disturb Confucian rationalism and invite new perceptions. His poems employed a surrealist sensuality in a similar way, to demonstrate the psychic force of desire and the multiplication of senses capable of blurring perceptual borders. His poems deployed images and

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<sup>433</sup> Specifically, I examine the poems and writings collected in the following publications: Tôn Thảo Miên, ed., *Hàn Mặc Tử: Tác Phẩm và Du Luận* [Hàn Mặc Tử: Works and Criticism] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002); Trần Thanh Mai, *Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940)* (Sài Gòn: Những Mảnh Gương, 1941); Trần Dân, *Đi! Đây Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lửa* (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009); *Trần Dân Thơ* [Trần Dân: Poems] (Đà Nẵng: Nhã Nam, 2007); Trần Dân, *Ghi (1954–1960)* [To Put Down (1954–1960)], ed. Phạm Thị Hoài (Paris: Văn Nghệ, 2001); Dương Tường, “Wagner,” *Mea Culpa và Những Bài Khác: Thơ Dương Tường* [Mea Culpa and Other Poems: The Poetry of Dương Tường] (Hải Phòng: Hải Phòng, 2004); Dương Tường, *Chỉ tai con chích choè: tập luận* [Only the Ears / The Ear Threads of the Oriental Magpie-Robin: Collected Essays] (Nhà Nam: Hội Nhà Văn, 2009); Dương Tường and Lê Đạt, *36 bài thơ tình* [36 Love Poems] (Hà Nội: Trẻ, 1989).

<sup>434</sup> Raymond Williams writing of Baudelaire’s new sensory experience of modernity. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 281–282.

ideas of the “profane” to disturb a Confucian morality and worldview that anchored, but also immobilized, traditional Vietnamese literature and society. The modernist poets of this era aimed to synthesize what they saw as a split between consciousness and existing cultural productions. They wanted to fuse the “profound,” lofty, or spiritual with the everyday, corporeal, or “profane.” Hàn Mặc Tử also introduced into poetry the notions of the grotesque, the “monstrous” to both perform a sense of an unstable reality, and make an implicit argument for unchaining art from the sphere of moral judgment.<sup>435</sup>

Hàn Mặc Tử was invested in stylistically enacting altered states of mind that would poetically re-create, put the reader in touch with the confluence of new sensory experience, but also a strongly-sense state of unity felt to be lost. He employed symbolist poetics to reflect this instability of signs and meanings. His poems enact the tension between the thrilling forces of change but also its threats: the transformative also meant certain decay.<sup>436</sup> The poems display this mythopoetic longing for wholeness in its enactments of rupture. This spiritual-aesthetic impulse derives from an estrangement from nature, society, the sacred. The language of these poems show a sense of alienation but also propose the collapsing of both aesthetic and perceptual distances to bridge the lacuna. If the source of dissociation was the limits defined by the rationalism of a Confucian hierarchy and the infinite potentials of a new world, then Hàn Mặc Tử recreated new poetic worlds to collapse perceived distances. As is the case in the later phases of Vietnamese modernism, a persistent conflict shaped the poetry of this stage: nostalgia and anomie. This is both a longing for a past and a sense of alienation from its social/cultural ideologies.

The early phase modernism of Hàn Mặc Tử, like that of Baudelaire, was one of theme or content more than it was a formal modernism. Yes, Hàn Mặc Tử occasionally employed the novel form of prose-poems and free-verse to enact the stream-of-consciousness and sudden shifts in perception. But the poems derive their novelty primarily through the collage of new subjects. He broke from rules of prosody and subverted the traditionally decorous etiquette of the Tang-style form, his preferred form overall. But, for the most part, the structure of the Tang-style forms remained intact: stanzas held tightly by the prescribed 5 or 7 word-lines with alternating full or near end-rhymes. His innovations focused on evincing the experience of modernity primarily through theme and content. Thus, I view these poems as performative or re-creative acts that attempted to nullify traditional poetic discourse as much as they tried to integrate it into the present moment.

In the late 1950s, revolutionary culture and the dominance of communist ideology made individual expression dangerous. The aesthetic sensibilities developed during the colonial period came under threat. The DRV state denounced those “bourgeois” Western literary models as

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<sup>435</sup> In an introduction that he writes for Bích Khê’s collection of poems, HMT notes, “The poet craves the new, the beautiful, that which convulses the emotions of his soul to paralysis and stupor, ‘whether that beauty is noble or profane, pure or impure’ [quote from Baudelaire], so long as it possesses the power to stimulate intoxication and delight. In this we recognize that Bích Khê’s poems have been dyed with Baudelaire’s blood...” He elaborates: “objects that are very ordinary, and even profane and repulsive, horrible, the poet sees instead, as exalted, noble, fragrant, and pleasurable...for example a skull...a human skull is no longer a human skull. Even the grisly aspect of death is lost, the frightful destruction of time upon objects. What remains is the image of dream smoke, the spring chamber, the pool of moon. What was muck and mire is now sweet-smelling and pure enough for us to want to bite into those teeth, to suck out what is delicious from the mouth, the cool substance of the sockets, the nostrils, the deep concaves of the cheeks...” See Hàn Mặc Tử, “Bích Khê: Nhà Thơ Thần Linh” [Bích Khê: Poet of the Gods], in Phan Cự Đệ, *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 165–168.

<sup>436</sup> Hàn Mặc Tử’s poems “Người Ngọc” [The Jade Body/Person], “Cô gái đồng trinh” [The Virgin Girl] for examples, both take the corpses of women as subjects. See Phan Cự Đệ, ed., *Hàn Mặc Tử*, 281 and 182.

corrupt and proclaimed socialist realism to be “the only true art.”<sup>437</sup> Certain poets saw the attempt to aestheticize politics as an encroachment on their aesthetic freedom and the hard-earned territory they had gained earlier on.<sup>438</sup> The DRV state attempted to forcefully subordinate art to politics and drive literature to utilitarian limits, in service of ideology. This tension formed the negative impetus for the modernism of this period. Poets like Trần Dần were defensive of the aesthetic territory they had gained in the colonial period from the restrictive didacticism of traditional literature and the social hierarchies.

This second phase modernism overlaps with the first in terms of its values. These poets also valorized renewed and proliferated perceptions, polysemy and complex aesthetic intervention, but saw these as virtues that had to be defended against the new “democratic” mass—the peasant and proletariat audience for whom the state insisted all cultural productions be based. This modernism is reactive: it was still committed to the “multi-colored and polyphonic,” but saw these as threatened by the “greyly standardizing pressures of its contemporary environment.”<sup>439</sup> Thus, we see in Trần Dần’s poems the angst of the soldier defending poetic territory. The modernist poetics he employs spoke directly to what he viewed as a lurid death of art in flattened, formulaic socialist realist depictions: singularity and limited experience. Like T.S. Eliot’s charge to “force, dislocate if necessary, language into meaning,” Trần Dần’s poems attempt to inject blood back into the grey, flaccid corpse of literature.<sup>440</sup> His poems harnessed futurist poetics to push against the “pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep,” of dulled literary senses. Taking up the clarion call to “aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap,” Trần Dần’s poems formally and thematic embodied the futurist revolt against hollow, one-dimensional structures. In this case, it was socialist realist “arts” enforced by a cultural establishment.<sup>441</sup> His poetry maintained a revolutionary ethos, but the “socialist” character was grounded in representing on-ground complexities and conflicts, proliferating meanings and perspectives, to thwart the dictates of a restrictive cultural regime.

This phase marks the beginning of a new modernist formal sensibility: combining and mediums. Trần Dần called his epic poem “hùng ca - lụa” [herosong/epic on silk], fusing the ideas of the visual and oral arts. He drew attention to the materials of poetic language by linking his epic poem to the classical art of painting on silk and abstracted the properties of visual

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<sup>437</sup> Trương Chinh, *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hoá Việt Nam* [Marxism and Vietnamese Culture] (1948), 2nd edition (Hà Nội: Sự Thật, 1974), 21. See also Trương Chinh, *Tuyển tập* [Collected Works], vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1997), 135–170 (148) for his treatise on socialist realism and Vietnamese culture.

<sup>438</sup> For the reported “proposal for literary arts policy” [*Đề nghị chính sách văn nghệ*] that Trần Dần presented on behalf of the group of army artists and intellectuals, see Heinz Schütte, “Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955–1957,” *Südostasien* (Working Papers) no. 22 (Berlin: Humboldt University 2003), 19, available at <http://asa232.asa.hu-berlin.de/soa-wp/pdf/SOA-WP%20-%200022%20-%20Hundred%20Flowers%20in%20Vietnam%201955-1957%20%28Heinz%20Sch%20C3%BCtte%29.pdf>; Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan-Văn Giai-Pham Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (Winter-Spring 1990): 154–174 (157); Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 132.

<sup>439</sup> Tony Pinkney, “Editor’s Introduction: Modernism and Cultural Theory,” *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), 1–29 (5). Pinkney uses the example of T.S. Eliot writing of his secretary’s supper of baked beans to express the apocalyptic sense of the industrial world and its threat to culture. See Thomas S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: Facsimile of the Original Draft Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), “Unreal City.”

<sup>440</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Vol. 11. (London: Methuen, 1964), 284.

<sup>441</sup> See F. T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, available at <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/ConstrBau/Readings/MarinettiFuturist09.pdf>.

perception for the poetic. He expressed this new sensibility through a heightened awareness of typography and word placement on the page. His poems achieved the dynamics of movement and visual perception through a brash tenor and staggered organization of words along the page using, in the case I presented, the stepladder layout to enact this advance.<sup>442</sup> Trần Dần seized the authority of Mayakovsky's avant-gardism, his status as a heretic, to bolster his poetic dissent. Further, Trần Dần employs surrealist shifts in perception, the stream-of-consciousness abhorred by ideologues, to dramatize a fractured reality and contradict the totalitarian narratives and monolithic depictions of socialist realism. Similarly, he injects the symbolist grotesque into the picture to disturb the rosy portraits of war and redress sanitary depictions.<sup>443</sup> This anarchic drive was an extension of the poetics of chaos and disorder that modernists of the previous phase privileged as a creative force. Poets of this phase composed modernism as a prescription to remedy what they viewed as the sicknesses of this age: the erasure of shifting, conflicting, and complex perspectives; state control over the production of meaning; and the subordination of art to politics.<sup>444</sup>

The modernism of the 1970s/1980s increasingly shifted its focus and away from the embattled field of content toward form. If the communist state had seized firm control over the contested territory of cultural content, then the modernist poetry of this “silent” period circumnavigated this obstacle. This third phase of mature modernism still shared the poetic sensibilities of the second and first phases, but rather than wage their battle on the front of ideological content, these poets shifted art off the political field. They focused on renovating the very structure of language to disturb the systems of understanding and experience. These moves appear to be distancing postures, but the poetic choices of these marginalized authors formed an implicit engagement with the cultural moment and a counter positionality.

This poetry drew attention to itself as artifice, as an artistic creation composed of carefully arranged devices to achieve certain experiences. The poems estranged the reader in their odd arrangements and emphasis on the structural properties of words—sounds, shapes, textures. By isolating syntax they thwarted linear, causal or temporal progressions; the poems relied on the evocative power of juxtaposed objects more so than through direct propositional discourse. Spelling “errors” as well as odd graphic placement disoriented the reader. But this was precisely the point of the hard lean towards formalism: to impede automatized recognition (and counter the general acceptance of political discourse). Dương Tường defamiliarized the poetic text to force readers to engage in a series of cognitive exercises in order to penetrate it and enter into its logics. The poetry of this modernist phases implicated, indeed activated, the reader in a *process* of meaning-making. Thus, the modernism of this phase focused on poetry as phenomenon. Dương Tường's poetry divests the text (and its author) of absolute authority and invests readers with interpretive power. At the same time, it reinvests poetry with greater semantic potential. This underlying logic forms an implicit argument against the cultural conditions of that moment, which encouraged in the masses a passive consumption of whatever ideology was being fed to them.

Like the poetic impulses of the previous phases, this mature phase also rejected the idea

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<sup>442</sup> Trần Dần, *Đi! Đâu Việt Bắc! Hùng Ca Lụa*; Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

<sup>443</sup> For a discussion of these “rosy portraits,” see Martin Grossheim, “The Lao Động Party, Culture and the Campaign against ‘Modern Revisionism’: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam before the War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 1 (February 2013): 80–129 (31).

<sup>444</sup> For the details of the cultural debates, see Schütte, “Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955–1957”; Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s,” 157; Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 132.

of singularities (of meaning, perspective, or purpose) and totalizing tendencies. Dương Tường's poems form intricate webs of cross-cultural and intertextual dialogues. Unlike how earlier modernist poetry pronounced the international poetics it employed as foreign instruments, the poetry of this mature phase has metabolized the array of poetic trends, fusing it into its own system. Dương Tường's poetry is candid about this naturalization. It is not self-conscious in demonstrating Vietnamese poetic intercourse with French symbolism and surrealism, Russian futurism and formalism, American concrete and language poetry. This intermixing of French, Vietnamese, Russian and American poetics affronts the cultural insularity of that historical moment, and in a sense, it restores the thrill of the initial Vietnamese colonial encounter with international modernisms, but without the accompanying sense of identity loss.

Viewing this course of development we see that Vietnamese modernism was a movement with continued impulse, though historical conditions dispersed or disrupted its energies. Vietnamese modernism comprises of disruptions—and continuities—with the past and the present in which poets wrote, and at each juncture poets privileged certain practices and poetics over others to adjust to the skirmishes of the shifting cultural fronts. Persistent threads ran through each moment. First, there was a gradual but continuing trajectory away from didactic or moralizing tendencies (ideology foremost) towards a focus on the aesthetic and formal aspects of poetry. In this, modernist poetry increasingly shifted away from a focus on content and towards formal solutions. Second, in this move, the modernism at each juncture turned away from realistic or naturalistic depiction, or the representational, towards the abstract and evocative in attempts to catalogue the processes of heightened perception and experience. Third, in all three phases poets privileged a poetics of dissonance and distortion; they insisted that poetry break the arbitrarily imposed limits on artistic vision and experience. We see how these poets took notions of chaos, madness, and disorder from enacting their concepts and themes to the extremes of formal experimentations that took apart the very structures of language.

As I have shown, Vietnamese modernism pulls from diverse strands of extant literary practices, metabolizing them, and recombining them according to the poet's discretion and the particular perceived needs of the cultural moment. Every text may indeed carry within in the imprint of the thousand cultural intercourses. It may compose an "anonymous tissue of citations," but we need not erase identity, cross-cultural conversations, and historical context in the process of examining the intertextual body. The modernist poetic text is not Barthes' castrato that loses all identity to sing different songs. It is not a vague abstract body detached in ahistorical space. Vietnamese modernism reveals itself as the very complex registers of history and cultural contact. This study has shown the need to reinsert the agential, the poet, back into the picture in order to determine why particular poetics and practices are privileged at given moments. For it is not texts that impose themselves on authors, but authors that actively select and engage with the range of resources available to them. Belated and condensed modernisms, such as Vietnamese, have an even greater spectrum of literary material at hand. Chana Kronfeld emphasizes the power of the belated:

theories of modernism that are modeled on the belated, decentered or linguistically minor practices may provide insight into the processes that have become automatized or rendered imperceptible in the canonical center. Through the multiple, broken prisms of the minor the mystified notion of a unified

canonical modernism is exploded, subjecting the very language of the center and periphery itself to a critique that exposes its own historicity.<sup>445</sup>

Most literary scholars agree that modernism is a frustratingly unspecific term, encompassing a vast array of diverse cultural movements that took place in world capitals from Paris to New York. Of all the major art-historical –isms, it is perhaps the most stubbornly unperiodizing, aesthetic logic of looking back to “origins” is present as much as the ruthless abandoning of the past for a futurism. The boundaries of its epoch is troublingly elastic, made to stretch across a century-long path from the 1850s to 1950s. Modernism presents a thrilling pageant of heretics that includes, among others, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Pablo Picasso, F.T. Marinetti, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot. To complicate matters, I include the Vietnamese poets Hàn Mặc Tử, Trần Dần, and Dương Tường in this catalogue of *poètes maudits* [accursed poets], self-identified literary outcasts whose lives and literary impulses went against mainstream society.

Yet, within this complex of diverse cultural movements grouped under this term—from symbolism to Dadaism, surrealism, futurism, formalism—there are still features, in form and poetics, which we recognize as “modernist” and belonging within a constellation. Raymond Williams’ discussion of the *Politics of Modernism* insists that modernism, the historical and cultural phenomenon, “cannot be grasped by brands of literary theory, which in self-serving circularity, are actually born of its own procedures and strategies.”<sup>446</sup> This means that we cannot hope to understand modernism using theoretical models that contort literatures to conform to their limited readings. This dissertation has presented a local-historical case-study as topical intervention. The ongoing task, and the one I accepted in this study, is to uncover the tangled network of arteries of this vascular system, and speak of them in such a way so as to not erase the cultural-historical particularities of the literature. For without considering historical specificity and the situations of the authors, we cannot begin to speak of cultural formations, or move from the internalizing logic of the formal to the formational of culture.

I have offered an extension to this cultural imagination of modernism by examining the case of its Vietnamese variant. I explored modernism as theme/content and formal innovation, but also as a cultural formation. I moved beyond internal-formal analysis to relate Vietnamese modernism to the cultural moments and encounters that shaped it, the history and politics of its evolution, to uncover the perceptible network of literary relations. In examining this case of a belated modernism on the margins, I have made a modest contribution towards a theory of cross-cultural literary dynamics and how they inform cultural formations.

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<sup>445</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 5.

<sup>446</sup> Pinkney, “Editor’s Introduction: Modernism and Cultural Theory,” *The Politics of Modernism*, 3.

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