

## ***From the Author***

*translated by David Payne*

An attempt at conversation is always an attempt to reach a thorough understanding, meaning to unceasingly face misunderstandings. An attempt to search out traces and connections. An attempt to erase and to insert some question marks. An attempt to encounter those with shared illusions, shared struggles, shared understandings. An attempt to accept others outside and within oneself. As a result, while the conversation about poetry in this collection is a dialogue, it is also a monologue. I stumble over personal pronouns: at one moment saying “I,” then at another preferring “I, plural.”

Though I am named as the author, this is not the fruit of individual labor; like all reading, it yearns to be a reading with. Formed over seven years, or perhaps even longer, first my graduate thesis on the Mỏ Miệng (Open Mouth) group and then the *Underground Voices* project provided the basis for these essays (renewed many times over the period from approximately 2011 to 2018), I don’t know how to name the strangers and companions, the ruptures and connections, the arrivals and departures that have gone along with me.

As I have been intensely preoccupied with the entanglements of Vietnamese poetry, and endeavoring to understand thoroughly the-things-that-occur around me, it is as if, over many long years, I keep getting stuck in those-things-that-were- past-but-continually-reoccur, with half-answered questions. Why these (Vietnamese) poets? The saboteurs, the protestors, the marginalized, the ones who don’t belong? Why these presences seemingly forced to be absent? Fond of quietness, I found myself closer to anomalous utterances, to the faint of heart, to silenced voices, to those on the edge, to thicker, deeper, more silent shadows. I was, however, alarmed by the vehemence, the clamor, the derision. Of course, fighting is also not necessarily a Vietnamese specialty. The capacity to wordlessly endure a legacy of tears doesn’t need to be multiplied forever. When a poetic language faces life or death, when language has to struggle and cry out to break

free from its bonds, to give itself a chance to open up, then these poetic presences, to me, involve laborious and noteworthy choices. I force myself to stay and listen to these sounds, attempting to translate these hardships into the language of a reader. It isn't even a choice: I [plural] am unable to avoid joining myself with others and others with myself, am unable to avoid listening and offering words, if I expect to be a presence in this community, where the story of one individual (or many) is always (of necessity) a common story.

If I must have a message in these pages, I think it is that the attempt to write these [self-]vanishing presences into existence is also, for me, a critical reflection on the Vietnamese language. I do not seek a Vietnamese that rails angrily, a hot-headed Vietnamese, a Vietnamese that seeks to incite. Yet behind all the anger stirred up in the pages of these marginalized poets, I hear the story of a Vietnamese language that is mistreated, that is mistreating itself, and attempting to survive. Something else is alongside|shines through: a Vietnamese that is light, playful, and full of osmotic potential. A Vietnamese that doesn't shirk collisions and alterations as it attempts to protect its beauty and to nurture its potential. A Vietnamese that doesn't accept to be silenced. For this reason, I don't want the English translation of this collection to be seen merely as an introduction to a Vietnamese literature that has never yet appeared in any national magazine or in literary diplomacy aimed at "foreigners," but rather, in an illusion of equality, I want Vietnamese language and literature to collide and be in dialogue with other languages, with other literatures. I am blind and disoriented: is there any real difference between the reader and the author, within and without, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese? Where did I expect to find it? Here. There. In the original in the translation. Would it create more possibilities for human touch?

Each writer in this story has repercussions that only seem to resonate with few: poetry and the possibilities of poetry survive in its own language. Why do I [plural] still read and write poetry? Why do poetic utterances need to be heard,

and understood? Can poetic words more or less engage me [plural] with a poetic way of living? Why do I have to display my writing and reading self? I read poems, I make poems visible, and poems read me, and make me visible. My reading is a way for me to not cease writing, however weary of collisions and seldom achieving détente. But perhaps this is what happened: despite the efforts and expectations of the readers, many writers ceased writing and are no longer present. And despite the efforts and expectations of the writers, many readers have given up their reading. I look into the tragic and phlegmatic face of poetry: why don't those voices continue? Did their writing just peter out? If reading is just a futile concomitant, then why do books like those still cry out to exist?

Naively reckless, I rise and fall with myself, up and down the hell of conversations that every ploughing up further confuses. Those expecting me to fail, those waiting for me to stand up, those wanting to see me survive. I respond by speaking, by silence, by falling down with a thud, by immense effort, by amusing myself, and by writing. There are stories that ask for a moment to heal, waiting for the presence of empathy. There are stories that attempt to speak. There are stories that have completely lost their naive enthusiasm and have received many persistent wounds.

I also bear in mind my own unavoidable shatterings, the polarized arguments that lead me to the realization that I can't achieve détente. Once again, I want to challenge myself, re-experiencing those wounds, those immature understandings, accepting and receiving those things that were and are to come, and gradually diminishing my fear, in order to give myself a chance to conclude, meaning an opportunity to begin again, an opportunity to depart and to move on.

I have not ceased doubting the necessity of the things I do, nor have I dared to believe that the pages I write have any worth. But no matter what, I have written something that I could not write now, something that I cannot rewrite, and, who knows, I may perhaps stumble upon the persistence not to give up reading and writing, here or there.

I may know what will not come back, but I don't know what will come. There are things that ought to be: I should be somewhere else in space, on a different axis, to understand the here and now. But there are also those concomitants of understanding: enduring, lingering, and opening the heart. To heal and be present. And finally, to take a step, deliberately, painfully, chafingly. And to abandon the desire to look back, because of the Orphean shadow there.

But if I don't look back, all those illusions in which I believed will also evanesce, and how will I know how fragmented I have become?

*February, 2018*  
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