

An abstract painting featuring a central figure with a large, detailed eye and a red heart. The figure is rendered in a dark, textured style, possibly metallic or stone. The background is a vibrant red, with a bright yellow sun or moon in the upper left. The lower part of the painting shows a landscape with blue waves and a yellowish ground. The overall style is expressive and surreal.

LÊ VĂN TÀI
NGUYỄN TÔN HIỆT
PHAN QUỲNH TRÂM

EDITED BY
Nguyễn Hưng Quốc
& Nhã Thuyên

VAGABOND PRESS
ASIA PACIFIC POETRY SERIES



Poems of Lê Văn Tài, Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt
& Phan Quỳnh Trâm

Edited by
Nguyễn Hưng Quốc & Nhã Thuyên

Written and translated into English by the authors.

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FROM DIASPORA TO TRANSNATIONALISM

The three poets whose works appear in this book are perhaps the most typical ones in Vietnamese diasporic and/or transnational literature in Australia.

Born in 1943, Lê Văn Tài arrived in Australia as a boatperson in 1984. In Vietnam, he was a well-known artist whose innovative techniques had influences on several of his contemporary painters. In Australia, he has continued to paint and hold many exhibitions, both individual and collective, and is regarded as a rarely gifted artist who synthesizes a variety of different cultures and styles, from Chinese, Khmer and Indian to French, Russian and American; from folkloric to surrealist, and from traditional to modern and postmodern.¹ In Australia, in addition to painting, Tài started writing poems. Interestingly, his first poems were written in English, the language that he commenced learning when he left Vietnam in 1981. More interestingly, these poems were highly regarded by critics. It can be said that Lê Văn Tài is the first poet within the first generation of Vietnamese in Australia to be published in the most prestigious literary magazines and anthologies. However, since the late 1990s, when *Việt*, the first Vietnamese literary journal, was published and particularly, since early 2000s, when *Tiền Vệ*, the first Vietnamese literary webzine was launched, Lê Văn Tài has switched from English to his mother language. With such a process of creation, Lê Văn Tài is the first and, perhaps, the most successful bilingual poet in the Vietnamese community in Australia.

Lê Văn Tài's poems have two particularly striking characteristics. Firstly, as a visual artist, he writes poems with

1 Merrill Findlay, "Redreaming the Earth" in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc (ed.) (2013), *Thơ Lê Văn Tài*, California: Văn Mới, p. 467.

distinguished and impressive images such as an “afternoon’s bloody sky” and “mother’s milky round breast-sun”. This characteristic can be seen more clearly in his concrete poetry. It can be said that Lê Văn Tài is the furthestmost and most talented poet in this genre in the history of Vietnamese literature. His concrete poems are not only beautiful in shape but also deep in thought, or, in Mark Stevenson’s words, “will change the way you see the world and read the page.”²

Secondly, Lê Văn Tài can be regarded as one of the most representative poets in both talent and style in the Vietnamese diaspora since 1975. If through his paintings, in Arnold Zable’s words, “boundaries between reality and dreams, between the known and unknown, between Vietnamese past and Australian future have disappeared”,³ or in Merrill Findlay’s words, “take us beyond the binaries that divide ‘us’ from ‘them,’ East from West, North from South, mind from matter”,⁴ his poetry, similarly, in John McLaren’s words, “defies any national categories. It is a hymn of joy for his adopted home, but at the same time it is grounded in the scenes and the labours of his native Vietnam, and always tinged with the bitterness of exile”.⁵ Lê Văn Tài’s poems, whether in English or Vietnamese, float between Vietnam and Australia, his home and his host countries, the present and the past, nostalgia and dream, tradition and innovation. In Homi K. Bhabha’s words, that is a space of in-betweenness or the third space. Lê Văn Tài calls it a spaceless space in which he constantly tosses and turns with the sense of identity, one of his most restless obsessions. He writes more about identity than any other Vietnamese poet. Similar

2 Mark Stevenson, “Le Van Tai and the Living Page: Review of Waiting the Waterfall Falls”, *The Age* 15.3.1997; printed in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc (ed.) (2013), op.cit., p. 452.

3 Arnold Zable, “The Arts of Freedom”, *The Age* Saturday 15.4.1995; printed in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc (ed.) (2013), pp. 457-8.

4 Merrill Findlay, op. cit., p. 459.

5 Lê Văn Tài (1996), *Waiting the Waterfall Falls*, Melbourne: Victoria University, p. xi.

to other Vietnamese diasporic poets, the so-called identity in Tàì's poems is linked with the past and tradition, but in contrast with other poets, he has a more critical remembrance than nostalgic one. Similar to most diasporic poets, his identity is hybrid; and similar to other postmodernist poets, this identity is not given nor fixed as a product but as a production which is always in the process of establishing itself but never finished. In other words, for Lê Văn Tàì, identity is a performance but not a substance.

Similar to Lê Văn Tàì, Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt left Vietnam by boat and arrived in Australia as a refugee in 1983. In contrast to Lê Văn Tàì who was originally a visual artist and writes in both Vietnamese and English, Hiệt was originally a musical artist and only writes in Vietnamese and then translates his work into English by himself. However, both have the same obsession: Vietnam. But, Vietnam, in Tàì's poems, is a heritage, associated with the past and tradition, political and cultural, which he tries to forget and overcome; in Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt's poems, it is a reality, in the present and more political. Apart from politics, Hiet has another obsession: poetry. In his two poems "Speech of a poet" and "Poetry: something pending", Hiệt approaches crucial issues of poetry such as the essence of poetry and of poetry reading, the relationship between poet and poetry, between author and readers and between readers and poems as well. These are not simple, linear, straightforward and clear-cut relationships. In linguistic terms, a poem is neither a signified of what the author wishes to express nor a signifier that the author uses to send out some message. Poetry, in fact, is a process of signification with sound, rhyme, rhythm, imaginary, and metaphor which has its own life which is not on the page but in the act of reading. To read a poem is not to catch a meaning hidden in words but to experience it.

As a scholar who is concerned with literary theory, Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt is fully aware of new techniques in poetry writing. His

fifteen poems in this book display a kaleidoscope of aesthetic approaches. His styles and forms are always innovative, changing from one poem to another, due to which he is widely evaluated as one of the best poets in Vietnamese literature not only in Australia but also in Vietnam and abroad.

In contrast with both Lê Văn Tài and Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt, Phan Quỳnh Trâm was born in the early 1980s, and therefore, has no experience and memory of the Vietnam War which ended in 1975. She came to Australia as an overseas student and has finally chosen Australia as her new country. In terms of technique and art, Phan Quỳnh Trâm is closer to Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt than Lê Văn Tài: each of her poems is an experiment not only in thought but also in form. However, in terms of languages, she is closer to Lê Văn Tài than Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt: She writes in both Vietnamese and English. However, while Lê Văn Tài is a bilingual poet, Trâm seems to be a translingual poet. In one interview, published on her website, she says:

I write poetry in both Vietnamese and English but I have to confess that I don't intentionally want to be a bilingual poet. Generally speaking, I don't choose the language for my poems; my poems choose the language for themselves. Sometimes, a poem comes to mind with a Vietnamese rhythm and/or tone, and I write it down in Vietnamese; other times, the same applies for English. However occasionally I find myself in a different situation: after finishing a poem in either Vietnamese or English, I am still not satisfied. The poem has to end; its structure has to be closed, and I cannot add anything else. However, emotionally and intellectually, I still have something to say. As a result, I write a second version of that poem in the other language. It seems that the poem is only complete in both languages, Vietnamese and English. In such cases, I don't translate my poems. I rewrite them in the other language. Neither this language nor that language, rather both of them as a whole, expresses what I am really feeling and thinking.

I am not sure if I exclusively write about certain topics in a particular language, however in re-reading my own poems, I have a feeling that my Vietnamese poems are quite emotional whereas my English ones are more conceptual and usually have more poetic games.

It can be said that Lê Văn Tài and Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt, who came to Australia as refugees, are diasporic poets, while Phan Quỳnh Trâm, a former overseas student, is a transnational one. These two terms, diaspora and transnationalism, often overlap and are sometimes even interchangeable, however, in my view, have some subtle differences in emphasis: diaspora deals with dispersal, mostly traumatic, whereas transnationalism deals with the cross-border process. In the future, therefore, it is likely that Vietnamese literature in Australia will be more transnational and translingual than diasporic.

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc
Melbourne, 2015

LÊ VĂN TÀI

