



Iconic poet of love, a dominant romantic of the New Poetry generation, Xuân Diệu embodies the soul of Vietnam at its highest lyrical manifestation. Being in the vanguard of the modern poetry movement, he was the butt of ridicule and diatribe of the traditionalists, one of whom, Thái Phi, in a newspaper column thought of his verse in these terms, “Compared to Asian works his poetry tastes like bitter melon / compared to

European oeuvres his poetry chews like breadfruit fiber.” Decidedly a serious derogation for a poet who moved and still moves millions of hearts, this judgment stands as a monument to the vitriolic war for the hearts and minds of poetry lovers throughout the length and breadth of the country. Unfazed by the tirades and aided by a prodigious spark of creativity, the mellifluous Xuân Diệu wrought verse after lyrical verse that charmed his audience and won a huge following among the urban literates of his days. Today Xuân Diệu's reputation is assured with his detractors and their pronouncements relegated to mere footnotes in the annals of Vietnamese literature.

We will probe Xuân Diệu as poet of love and examine his notions on being a poet with a brief look at the moon as motif in his poetry and in Hàn Mặc Tử's. We start off with his treatment of nature, as it is inextricably bound up with his feelings about love.

The Poet of Nature

Xuân Diệu invests much of his sensibility in the beauty of nature. A dewdrop on a flower at dawn, a willow drooping its twigs, a trembling breath of breeze, the cold breath of wind, the hazy veil of fog, all are captured in his nature poetry with vividness not simply for their own sake but for the sake of encapsulating his heightened feelings that each object stirs up in his heart. Inevitably his poetic sensitivity blends the mood of nature with his own mood to create an atmosphere of delicately sweet melancholy, which is characteristic of a whole generation of new poets. Romanticism is embraced at the very outset with no reservation, for it fits the Vietnamese soul so naturally. Nature under Xuân Diệu's pen is not painted with a few brush strokes as in the traditional verse but in luxuriant details that explode with the richness and vigor of modern exuberant inspiration.

Xuân Diệu distinguishes himself by a charming lyricism that resonates with all generations of poetry lovers. His verse sparkles with resplendent images depicted in naturalistic details and clothed in deep emotions. He is adept at mingling his and his generation's pervasive romantic melancholy with nature. Xuân Diệu's genius is in his ability to transport us to the world of his emotions, in which we discover ourselves as if looking in a mirror. To illustrate, let us see how the melancholy magic of autumn is snatched from a stand of weeping willows yielding under the weight of a doleful season.



Đây Mùa Thu Tới

Rặng liễu đìu hiu đứng chịu tang
Tóc buồn buông xuống lệ ngàn hàng
Đây mùa thu tới mùa thu tới
Với áo mơ phai dệt lá vàng.

Hơn một loài hoa đã rụng cành
Trong vườn sắc đỏ rữa màu xanh
Những luồng run rẩy rung rinh lá
Đôi nhánh khô gầy xương mỏng manh.

Thỉnh thoảng nàng trăng tự ngẩn ngơ
Non xa khởi sự nhạt sương mờ
Đã nghe rét mướt luồn trong gió
Đã vắng người sang những chuyến đò.

Mây vẫn từng không, chim bay đi
Khí trời u uất hận chia ly
Ít nhiều thiếu nữ buồn không nói
Tựa cửa nhìn xa nghĩ ngợi gì.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Here Comes Autumn

The grieving willows droop in deep mourning,
Their sad hair streaming like teardrops falling.
Here comes autumn, here comes the autumn cold
In its faded mantle woven with leaves of gold.

Countless blossoms have fallen off their branch
Amidst a garden where the red mingles with blue.
The trembling breath of breeze shakes the leaves and
A few shriveled limbs like fragile bones in somber hue.

At times the moon appears with all her puzzled look.
And on the far side mountains start to veil with fog.
I hear the bitter cold stirring the wind,
But see no boats making their cross-stream run.

High in the cloudy sky the birds flee on
While the leaden air broods o'er the parting.
A few sad girls against the door lean in silence
Looking pensively into the distance.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)
Translated by Thomas D. Le

In a piece dedicated to the old-school bard Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, his eternal despond surfaces on contemplating an evening that gives him an inexplicable sense of melancholy as if the whole existence is nothing but the pervasive sadness that dwells everywhere from the rustic path to the deserted boat dock, from the misty fog of love to the atmosphere of music sounds. All around is a landscape of sweet dusky emptiness invading his heart with gentle gloom, an existential angst that clings like a barnacle to his consciousness as he tries to gain serenity and harmony with nature.

Chiều

Tặng Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu

Hôm nay trời nhẹ lên cao,
 Tôi buồn không hiểu vì sao tôi buồn...
 Lá hồng rơi lặng ngỗ thôn,
 Sương trình rơi kín từ nguồn yêu thương.
 Phất phơ hồn của bông hường,
 Trong hơi phiêu bạt còn vương má hồng.

Nghe chùng gió nhớ qua sông,
 E bên lau lách thuyền không vắng bờ.
 Không gian như có dây tơ,
 Bước đi sẽ đứt, động hờ sẽ tiêu.
 Êm êm chiều ngẩn ngơ chiều,
 Lòng không sao cả, hiu hiu khẽ buồn.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Evening

To Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu

Today the weightless clouds ascend aloft;
 Joyless I am, yet know not why.
 The roses' leaves fall quiet on dimming paths.
 Floating about, the soul of rose wanders,
 Spreading under its breath sweet love's
 beauty.

It seems the wind hungers to cross the stream,
 Yet fears the reeds reveal the empty boat.
 It seems the air is in a tangled web
 That each step tears and each move rips.
 Serene the eve lingers in dusky haze.
 Though safe my heart wallows in mild soft gloom

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 16 February 2008

Just beneath the surface of his nature expressions is love. In fact, this irrepressible love permeates all his verse. Whether he talks about the moon, the sea, the birds, the trees, his tender feelings for them fills the ambiance and the sounds of his verse is the music with which he exults the marvels of love. One cannot separate Xuân Diệu's love of nature from his love of man. They are the essence of his personality and the essence of his poetry.

Nguyệt Cầm

Trăng nhập vào dây cung nguyệt lạnh
 Trăng thương, trăng nhớ, hơi trăng ngần !
 Đàn buồn, đàn lặng, ôi đàn chậm !
 Mỗi giọt rơi tàn như lệ ngân.

Mây vắng trời trong đêm thủy tinh
 Lung linh bóng sáng bỗng rung mình
 Vì nghe nương tử trong câu hát
 Đã chết đêm rằm theo nước xanh.

Thu lạnh càng thêm nguyệt tỏ ngời,
 Đàn ghê như nước, lạnh trời oi ...
 Long lanh tiếng sỏi vang vang hận
 Trăng nhớ Tầm Dương, nhạc nhớ người ...

The Moon Lute

The moon entered the lute's tune cold
 The moon of love. Oh, moon of old!
 The lute's sad voice ends in a plaintive note
 As each teardrop is like a bell that tolls.

The cloudless sky makes a crystal clear night.
 I shudder at such a shimmering light,
 And hear the belle in her song die
 While full moon shines on the blue stream.

Cold autumn grows colder in the clear moonlight
 The lute is like the frightful water; oh so cold;
 Glittering, a vengeful cry lifts its voice.
 As moon misses Tam Duong, music misses the belle.

Bốn bề ánh nhạc: biển pha lê
Chiếc đảo hồn tôi rộn bốn bề ...
Sương bạc làm thính, khuya nín thở
Nghe sầu âm nhạc đến sao Khuê.

Xuân Diệu (Gửi Hương Cho Gió, 1944)

Biển

Anh không xứng là biển xanh
Nhưng anh muốn em là bờ cát trắng
Bờ cát dài phẳng lặng
Soi ánh nắng pha lê...

Bờ đẹp để cát vàng
-- Thoai thoải hàng thông đứng --
Như lặng lẽ mơ màng
Suốt ngàn năm bên sóng...

Anh xin làm sóng biếc
Hôn mãi cát vàng em
Hôn thật khẽ, thật êm
Hôn êm đềm mãi mãi



Đã hôn rồi, hôn lại
Cho đến mãi muôn đời
Đến tan cả đất trời
Anh mới thôi dào dạt...

Cũng có khi ào ạt
Như nghiền nát bờ em
Là lúc triều yêu mến
Ngập bến của ngày đêm

Anh không xứng là biển xanh
Nhưng cũng xin làm bề biếc
Để hát mãi bên gành
Một tình chung không hết,

From four corners the music's light shines on the crystal sea
In midst of which my island soul struggles about.
As silver dew holds its tongue, the night holds its breath,
While a melancholy tune reaches up to the Khue star.

Xuân Diệu (Fragrance to The Wind, 1944)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

22 February 2008

The Sea

I don't deserve to be the ocean blue
But I want thee to be the white beach sand,
The sandy beach stretching calmly its hue
Under the crystal sun.

The comely beach of yellow sand
Extending to the rows of pine
So dreamily and quietly
For eons by the roaring brine.

Let me be the clear turquoise swells
That kiss ceaseless thy yellow sand,
The gentle kiss that softly dwells,
The quiet kiss that has no end.

I will kiss thee again, again
From here clear to eternity
Till none of this wide world remains
Before my heart can beat calmly.

There're times when I would fain surge in
As if to crush thy edges dear
It's when my billows roar passion
To drown thee in ceaseless love sheer.

I don't deserve to be the ocean blue
But want to be the turquoise sea
To sing eternal songs by thee
In endless love for dear thee true.

Đề những khi bọt tung trắng xóa
 Và gió về bay tỏa nơi nơi
 Như hôn mãi ngàn năm không thỏa,
 Bởi yêu bờ lấm lấm, em ơi !

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Dâng

Đây chùm mong nhớ, khóm yêu đương
 Đây nụ mơ mòng đợi ánh sương,
 Đây lá bàng khuâng run trước gió
 Đây em, cành thẹn lẩn cành thương.

Tất cả vườn anh rất đợi chờ
 Bởi vì em có ngón tay thơ.
 Đến đây em hái giùm đôi lộc,
 Kẻo tội lòng anh tủi ước mơ.

Bước đẹp em vừa ngụ tới đây.
 Chim hoa ríu rít, liễu vui vầy.
 Hãy làm dáng điệu xuân ôm ấp:
 Ánh sáng ban từ một nét tay.

Xuân Diệu

Ta Muốn Ôm

Cả sự sống mới bắt đầu mơn mớn;
 Ta muốn riết mây đưa và gió lượn,
 Ta muốn say cánh bướm với tình yêu,
 Ta muốn thâu trong một cái hôn nhiều
 Và non nước, và cây và cỏ rạng,
 Cho chênh choáng mùi thơm, cho đã đầy ánh
 sáng,
 Cho no nê thanh sắc của thời tươi;
 -- Hỡi xuân hồng, ta muốn cắn vào ngươi!

So when the foam comes boiling white
 And wind gusts in from everywhere,
 Insatiably I'll kiss with might
 'Cause I love so thy sand edge bare!

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)
 Translated by Thomas D. Le
 28 October 2004

Offerings

Here is a bundle of longing, a fascicle of love;
 And here the bud of dream waiting for the foggy light;
 Here too the unquiet leaves fluttering in the wind
 And here the twig of coyness with the shoot of love.

My whole garden is in a holding mode,
 For you have such a touch of poetry.
 Come here to pick a pair of fortune flowers
 And save my heart from its ill-fated hope.

Your feet hardly trod round this way
 Than birds burst out chirping, willows singing.
 Open your arms to clasp the spring,
 Then from your hand let there be light.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 16 February 2008

I Want to Grasp Thee

Life has just begun to burst forth.
 I want to seize the clouds and wind,
 Drunk with love on butterfly wings.
 I want to embrace in an ardent kiss
 The mountains, streams, trees, and bright grass
 To delight in this world of perfume and light,
 To satiate my soul with the prime of life.
 O, vermeil spring! I want to bite into thee!

Translated by Thomas D. Le

The Poet of Love

When Vietnamese speak of love, they generally think of the species that Xuân Diệu talked about; and when they speak of love poetry, they again think about Xuân Diệu's own brand. What quality does this artist of the New Poetry generation possess that touches so many hearts? The answer may be summarized in the simple fact that Xuân Diệu embodies the romantic soul of Vietnamese and speaks the language of that soul with passion, spontaneity and originality. Men and women see in him a man who has lived through all the vicissitudes of love and recorded his own trials and triumphs. He has experienced ecstasy and depression, ridden the roller coaster of joy and pain, and simmered in anger and frustration. In love the poet has flung himself into fantasy but invariably awakened to a far less inspiring reality. He has in turn met with acceptance and more often with rejection. He has lived in hope and despair. Doubt is his faithful companion and fulfillment a rare acquaintance. In silence he swallows his grief, then laments his gullibility. He has found fleeting happiness only to see it metastasize into sorrow. In short, he tells all about the faces of love as he experiences them intensely. And we recognize ourselves in his reactions though we might wish to be stronger.

Of no less importance is his language. It is the language of feelings delicately wrought with exquisite tenderness. It is the language of passion, for he loves and lives with an intensity and abandon that are personal and compelling. Xuân Diệu knows the exact terms to describe the modulations of our hearts and the intricacies of our thoughts. His diction has the suppleness and strength to amaze and delight us as well as the grace and delicateness to enchant and soothe us. The vividness and vibrancy of his phraseology, powerful in its deft handling of synesthesia, testifies to his skill as a master of the verse. Few can read Xuân Diệu without feeling a flutter in their hearts that is characteristic of deep emotions. His language captures masterfully the moment and the feelings of the instant, as it traces unerringly their journey into the realm of reverie. *Now lone, I hear the whole even/ Seeping slowly into my lonely soul* (Lovesick Even).

For more than seventy years Vietnamese have regarded Xuân Diệu as a love prophet who speaks the voice of the heart in innumerable ways, attitudes, and moods with candor and sincerity. Generations have committed his verse to memory for its beauty and lyricism. His love poems have remained so fresh that today men use them in their courtship without fear of falling into bromides. A great romantic among romantics, Xuân Diệu lends authentic voice to men of all ages and creates memorable lines that their women never tire of hearing as his words of love come from a living heart that quickens when charmed by beauty, slackens when frustrated, and surges when excited. His heart races in moments of transport and explodes when raised to the climax of ecstasy. It is shredded to smithereens when jilted but recovers only to be buffeted by thwarted love. It behaves alternately with savoir-faire and with naïveté.

It is greedy, as all hearts are. And it knows to sing with hope and lust as well as to weep with despair and self-pity. Time never heals his hurts and injuries and often leaves him more lonesome, more forlorn. He lives in hope, but tastes more of bitter disappointment. Yet he keeps loving for as a man and as a poet he is fated to love. In short, Xuân Diệu's heart is a man's heart aspiring to elusive love.

Yet Xuân Diệu's rise among the New Poets is not without struggle. The old-school poets waged an implacable four-year war against him, along with his fellow travelers, as the paragon of the upstart breed. Beginning in 1932, when the New Poetry movement was born, the traditionalists bombarded him and adherents of the new movement with ridicule, diatribes, and barbs of unprecedented mordancy. They considered him as well as the new poets clueless and talentless. “What poetry!” the ancient Thái Phi exclaimed. “After reading several of his poems, one cannot help laughing because his poetry is not poetry. French-sounding it is not; Chinese-styled it isn't,” as if to pass muster poetry has to be recognizably French or Chinese. But if Xuân Diệu was vilified by the older generation, he was lionized by the younger ones. Young literate urbanites recognized in him their icon for he spoke to them and for them. For the first time in history, Vietnamese had a taste of modern thought (in relative terms) that came with a Western education. They could not wait to slough off the stuffiness of traditionalism and the ancients were in their eyes no more than a passé generation trying to fight for the status quo. They were aware of the winds of change and, most of all, they knew that the future is theirs to shape.

The New Poetry movement is symptomatic of a larger social movement of emancipation: emancipation of the mind, emancipation of thought, emancipation from antiquated and regressive traditions and customs, emancipation from an oppressive and obtuse social order. It is also a repudiation of a stagnant past. The educated young cast their eyes beyond the borders. And they saw the rise of Japan and the decline of China. Looking inward they witnessed the failure of their elders, and the stagnation and backwardness of many aspects of life. They wanted to change the status quo and to modernize. Hence, they regarded the elders as the remnants of a failed system. In this light the New Poetry movement is nothing short of revolutionary. By and large the new poets imitated the Western paradigm in certain respects in order the better to modernize. Little wonder that the elders saw it as a dangerous cultural phenomenon, a threat to their stature and status. For their part, the young generations considered the elders' generation arthritic and antithetic to progress. The new poets had no qualms about sweeping this inept Humpty Dumpty off the wall. By 1937 the country had formed a large enough class of modern-minded citizens ready to take the lead in the cultural affairs of the country. And the New Poetry movement is just the tip of the iceberg. Even the elders knew that their days were numbered.

It would be remiss while discussing Xuân Diệu's love poetry to ignore other new poets of his generation, for they too are quite compelling when it comes to the matter of the heart. Such names of Đinh Hùng, Huy Cận, Lưu Trọng Lư, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Bích Khê, Hoàng Cầm, Nguyễn Bính to name a few, still hold us in the sway of their love verse. They along with Xuân Diệu create a corpus of love expressions that remain unparalleled in beauty and

richness to this day. We are heirs to these pioneers of modern lyricism, the glorification of the individual, freedom of expression, and freedom from traditional strictures. And Xuân Diệu, who goes further than anyone else in these dimensions, has secured a prized place in the hearts of lovers of all time.

Xuân Diệu never ages just as his love verse never ages. It has caught the essence of love in easily memorizable words. And above all, it has captured the hearts and souls of the men and women in love along with the hearts and minds of those in love with poetry and the finer pleasures of poetry.

Tương Tư Chiều

Bữa nay lạnh mặt trời đi ngủ sớm,
Anh nhớ em, em hồi ! Anh nhớ em.
Không gì buồn bằng những buổi chiều êm,
Mà ánh sáng đều hòa cùng bóng tối.
Gió lướt thướt kéo mình qua cỏ rói;
Vài miếng đêm u uất lẩn trong cành;
Mây theo chim về dãy núi xa xanh
Tùng đoàn lớp nhíp nhàng và lặng lẽ.
Không gian xám tưởng sắp tan thành lệ.

Thôi hết rồi ! còn chi nữa đâu em !
Thôi hết rồi ! gió gác với trăng thềm,
Vớ sương lá rụng trên đầu gân gũ.
Thôi đã hết hờn ghen và giận dỗi.
(Được giận hờn nhau ! Sung sướng bao
nhiều !)
Anh một mình, nghe tất cả buổi chiều
Vào chầm chậm ở trong hồn hiu quạnh.

Anh nhớ tiếng. Anh nhớ hình. Anh nhớ ảnh.
Anh nhớ em, anh nhớ lắm ! Em ơi !
Anh nhớ anh của ngày tháng xa khơi,
Nhớ đôi môi đang cười ở phương trời,
Nhớ đôi mắt đang nhìn anh đắm đắm.
Em ! xích lại ! và đưa tay anh nắm !
Gió bao lần, từng trận nhớ thương đi,
-- Mà kỷ niệm ôi, còn gọi ta chi...

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Lovesick Even

This cold day the sun goes to bed early.
I miss you, dear, I miss you so.
Nothing sadder than a still eve
When gloam mixes with the last rays.
The dragging wind glides o'er the tangled grass
Amid snippets of night darkly hiding among the
limbs.
The clouds follow their birds to green mountains
In flocks and rows silent in unison
While gray skies nigh dissolve into moist tears.

It's over now! What's left, my dear?
It's over now! no wind through loft nor moon on
porch
With dewy leaves falling on our heads bound.
No more jealousy or anger or spite.
(What a bliss to be mad at each other!)
Now lone, I hear the whole even
Sleeping slowly into my lonely soul.

I miss your voice, your figure, your image.
I miss you, dear, oh how I miss you, dear!
And I recall those days so far away.
I miss your lips that smiled in country far
And eyes on me that filled with passion deep.
My dear, come close! Give me your hand!
O wind, thy gusts that brought me memories!
O memories, what good thou call'st me for?

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

28 October 2004

Yêu

Yêu là chết trong lòng một ít
 Vì mấy khi yêu mà đã được yêu.
 Cho rất nhiều song nhận chẳng bao nhiêu;
 Người ta phụ, hoặc thờ ơ, chẳng biết.
 Phút gần gũi cũng như giờ chia biệt.
 Tưởng trăng tàn, hoa tạ với hồn tiêu,
 Vì mấy khi yêu mà chắc được yêu!
 - Yêu, là chết trong lòng một ít.

Họ lạc lối giữa u sầu mù mịt
 Những người si theo dõi dấu chân yêu.
 Và cảnh đời là sa mạc cô liêu.
 Và tình ái là sợi dây vắn vít
 Yêu, là chết ở trong lòng một ít.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Cứ Phải Là Em

Cứ phải là em; chẳng phải ai
 Là em, em nữa, chỉ em thôi
 Sao người anh quý anh yêu thế
 Mà chẳng cùng anh ở suốt đời ?

Khác chi cây sống mà đem chặt
 Chặt giữa ngang lưng sự sống còn,
 Chặt giữa đang hoa, ngang giữa lá
 Khác chi hoa nở phải vùi chôn!

Em có bao giờ tưởng tượng xem
 Một mình anh sẽ sống không em,
 Bơ vơ như đã muôn lần chết,
 Đã chết nhưng còn phải sống thêm!

Lời ước cùng nhau thưở sánh đôi
 Anh còn vẹn vẻ giữ y lời

To Be In Love

To be in love is to die a bit in your heart
 For not always is love proffered paid back.
 You give plenty, yet not receive your part;
 And know nothing when you are being sacked.
 Whether together or when your ways part,
 You think of moon waned, flowers wilted, soul
 dead.
 For not always is love proffered paid back.
 To be in love is to die a bit in your heart.

They are lost in the darkest gloom,
 Lovelorn souls that follow their sweetheart's steps
 To find life in dead desert doom
 And love nothing but a tangled web.
 To be in love is to die a bit in your heart.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

1 June 2008

Must It Be You

It must be you, and no one else;
 Just you only, and only you.
 Why should one I cherish and love
 Not want to live with me for life?

Just like a living tree felled down
 Life's vital parts are cut in half;
 So are the flowers and their leaves,
 And blooming buds buried to death.

Have you ever given a thought
 To me who must live on without your love,
 Lonesome as if dying a thousand deaths,
 And yet in death must I live on!

The promise made some time ago,
 I still keep it faithfully so.

Rằng không ai thế thay em được
Em vắng, yêu em vẫn suốt đời.

Duy có lòng em, vẫn hẹn hò,
Ấy là ân huệ của em trao
Cho anh một đoá hoa tinh túy
Một đoá hoa lòng chẳng héo khô.

Xuân Diệu

Anh Là Người Bạc Bẽo

Ngẫm cho kỹ anh là người bạc bẽo,
Em yêu rồi, anh đã vội quên ngay
Mới hôm kia tình tự đến mê say
Sang bữa nay anh làm như mất hết
Anh đòi mãi như một kẻ keo kiệt,
Trong hồn anh tình ái chẳng lâu sao?
Anh không chắt chiu dành dụm tí nào,
Là đất xấu hạt gieo không nảy nở
Nên anh mới luôn luôn nghèo khổ
Giận hờn như anh chẳng được em yêu
Mà thật ra em yêu dấu rất nhiều
Ngẫm cho kỹ anh là người bạc bẽo.

Xuân Diệu

Anh Đã Giết Em

Anh đã giết em, anh chôn em vào trái tim anh
Từ đây anh không được yêu em ở trong sự thật
Một cái gì đã qua, một cái gì đã mất
Ta nhìn nhau, bốn mắt biết làm sao ?
Ôi ! Em mến yêu ! Em vẫn là người anh yêu mến nhất.
Cho đến bây giờ ruột anh vẫn thắt
Tim anh vẫn đập như vấp thời gian,

Nhớ bao nhiêu yêu mến nồng nàn,
Nhớ đoạn đời hai ta rạng rỡ

None can replace you in my heart,
You are the one and that I know.

Only your heart you promised me,
A blessing you bestowed on me.
Give me a flower that never fades
That lives fore'er in purity.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
17 May 2008

I Am an Ingrate

If you think about it, I'm really an ingrate.
Having loved you, I already forgot about it.
Only the other day we were so intimate;
Yet today I act as if nothing had happened.
I keep demanding with great greediness.
Can there be no love at all in my soul?
I am in no way a parsimonious man
But infertile ground where no seeds can grow.
That's why I am always destitute
And spiteful as if you love me not
Even though you just adore me.
Come to think of it, I'm really ingrate.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
26 June 2008

Slain You I Have

I have slain and buried you in my heart.
From now on I can no longer love in deed.
Something is past, something is lost.
Facing each other, our eyes simply cross.
Oh, my dear sweetheart! You're my most beloved.
My guts are torn asunder at this time.
My heart still beats as it skips the time.

'Tis memory of a passionate love,
The memory of our lives so bright,

Nhớ trời đất em cho anh mở
 Nhớ
 Muôn thưở thần tiên
 Ôi ! Xa em, anh rơi vào vực không cùng
 Đòi anh không em, lạnh lùng tê buốt
 Nhưng còn anh, còn em, mà đôi ta đã khác
 Ta: hai người xa lạ - phải đâu ta !
 Anh đã giết em, anh chôn em vào trái tim anh
 Anh vẫn ước được em tha thứ
 Anh vẫn yêu em như thưở ban đầu
 Thế mà tại sao ta vẫn xa nhau ?
 Tại em cố chấp
 Tại anh đã mất
 Con đường đi tới trái tim em
 Anh đã giết em rồi, anh vẫn ngày đêm yêu
 mền
 Em đã giết anh rồi, em vứt xác anh đâu ?

Xuân Diệu

Tình Thứ Nhất

Anh chỉ có một tình yêu thứ nhất
 Anh cho em kèm với một lá thư
 Em không lấy, và tình anh đã mất
 Tình đã cho không lấy lại bao giờ.

Thư thì mỏng như suốt đời mộng ảo
 Tình thì buồn như tất cả chia ly.
 Giấy phong kỹ mang thâm trong túi áo
 Mãi trăm lần viết lại mới đưa đi.

Lòng e thẹn cũng theo tờ vụng dại
 Tôi bên em, chờ đợi mãi không về
 Em đã xé lòng non cùng giấy mới
 - Mây đầy trời hôm ấy phủ sơn Khê.

Cũng may mắn, lòng anh còn trẻ quá
 Máu mùa xuân chưa nở hết bông hoa ;
 Vườn mưa gió còn nghe chim rộn rã,

The memory of the world you let me uncover.
 Oh, such a memory
 Of a wonderful time!
 Alas! Now away from you, I am falling into a
 bottomless pit.
 Without you, my life drowns in deep freeze.
 I'm here, and you're still here, yet we are so changed.
 We two are total strangers, not our own selves at all!
 I have slain and buried you in my heart,
 Yet still want your forgiveness
 For I still love you as on the first day.
 So why are we so far apart?
 Because you are opinionated
 And I have lost
 The way to your heart.
 Kill you I did, but I still love you day and night.
 Now you have killed me. Where did you throw my
 body?

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 23 February 2008

First Love

My dear, this is my first and only love;
 I gave you it along with a letter.
 You took it not, and so is lost my love.
 Once given, it is given forever.

The missive thin as is illusive life;
 The love is sad as are all the adieus.
 The sealed message secure in the pocket
 Written a hundred times before it went to you.

Bashfulness goes with written awkwardness;
 Beside you I abide, never wanting to leave,
 Though you shredded my heart with its message.
 What a cloudy sky covers all that grieves!

Luckily my heart is still in its prime,
 Its vernal blood yet to show youthful shine;

Anh lại còn yêu, bông lựu, bông trà.

Nhưng giây phút dù say hoa bướm thắm
 Đã nghìn lần anh bắt được anh mơ
 Đôi mắt sợ chẳng bao giờ dám ngắm
 Đôi tay yêu không được nắm bao giờ

Anh vẫn tưởng chuyện đùa khi nhỏ tuổi
 Ai có ngờ lòng vỡ đã từ bao !
 Mắt không ướt, nhưng bao hàng lệ rõ
 Len ti tê thắm trộm chảy quay vào

Hoa thứ nhất có một mùi trinh bạch,
 Xuân đầu mùa trong sạch vẽ ban sơ.
 Hương mới thắm bên ghi như thiết thạch ;
 Sương nguyên tiêu , trời đất cũng chung mờ.

Tờ lá thắm đã lạc dòng u uất,
 Ánh mai soi cũng pha nhạt màu ôi.
 Anh chỉ có một tình yêu thứ nhất,
 Anh cho em, nên anh đã mất rồi.

Xuân Diệu

Bên Ấy Bên Đây

Lòng ta trống lấm, lòng ta sụp
 Như túp nhà không, bốn vách xiêu
 Em chẳng cứu giùm, em bỏ mặc
 Mưa đưa ta đến bến đìu hiu.

Em ở bên mình: Ta ngó say;
 Song le bên ấy với bên này
 Cũng xa như những bờ xa cách
 Không có thuyền qua, không cánh bay,

Ta thấy em xinh, khẽ lắc đầu,
 Bởi vì ta có được em đâu!
 Tay kia sẽ áp nhiều tay khác
 Môi ấy vì ai sẽ đượm màu

The rain-whipped garden still rings with bird songs
 And I'm in love, 'midst pomegranate and tea blooms.

The moments bewitched by butterflies and flowers
 Are the thousand times I caught myself dreaming.
 My eyes averting with fear dare not adore
 The beloved hands I never dream of touching.

I had thought it was just youthful playfulness.
 Never did I suspect I had fallen in love!
 Though bone dry my eyes in grievous sadness
 Dribbled furtive teardrops in my heart's cove.

The first flower has a pure fragrance
 Of primal springtime's salutary days.
 The first scent endures as if graven in stone.
 When dew vanished, the universe goes the same way.

The letter carries my heart in turmoil,
 And daylight can't dispel its gloomy shade.
 I have but this my first love to give all
 To you and now I have got nothing left.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 6 June 2008

This Side That Side

My empty heart is collapsing
 Like an empty hut with run-down walls.
 Not caring one bit, you help not at all
 Letting the rain plunge me in woeful doom.

From where you are you hold my heart in spell.
 Yet here I stay and there you dwell
 In two sundered and separate worlds
 With no ferries to ride nor wings to fly.

Though you are lovely, I just shake my head
 Knowing I never can touch you!
 Those arms will tangle up with other arms
 And those lips will redden by someone else.

Họ sẽ ôm em với cánh tay,
 Và em yêu họ đến muôn ngày
 Thôi rồi! Em chẳng thờ ơ nữa
 Như đôi cùng ta tự bấy nay.

Như đôi cùng ta giữa cảnh mưa
 Mà lòng không hiểu, trán bơ vơ
 Không tặng âu yếm trong câu nói
 Trong mắt còn nguyên vẻ hững hờ.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Dại Khờ

Người ta khổ vì thương không phải cách,
 Yêu sai duyên và mến chẳng nhằm người
 Có kho vàng nhưng tặng chẳng tùy nơi
 Người ta khổ vì xin không phải chỗ.

Đường êm quá ai đi mà nhớ ngó
 Đến khi hay, gai nhọn đã vào xương
 Vì thả lỏng không kiềm chế dây cương,
 Người ta khổ vì lui không được nữa.

Những mắt cạn cũng cho rằng sâu chứa;
 Những tim không mà tưởng tượng tràn đầy.
 Muôn nghìn đời tìm có đôi sương mây
 Dẫn thân mãi đến kiếm trời dưới đất.
 Người ta khổ vì cố chen ngõ chật,
 Cửa đóng bưng nên càng quyết xông vào.
 Rồi bị thương người ta giữ gươm dao,
 Không muốn chữa, không chịu lành thú độc

Xuân Diệu

Dối trá

They will hold you in their arms
 And love you for thousands of days.
 Alas! You'll never show them your cold heart
 As you've always shown it to me.

For us it's just like we're caught in the rain
 With no idea why you could not care less,
 You never say a word of tenderness
 But give a look that spells a hope in vain.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

14 June 2008

Naïveté

One suffers from the wrong way to love,
 Giving the wrong kind of love to the wrong person.
 With rich treasure one knows not how to give
 And suffers from the wrong way to ask.

The path to love is smooth, so one neglects to look
 And when aware a thorn has got into the bones.
 Nonchalantly one fails to hold the reins,
 Then suffers when the way out is slammed shut.

One sees deep commitment in shallow eyes,
 Full loving heart in one wholly empty,
 Fore'er pursuing substance in mere smoke,
 Looking for the sky under the ground.
 One suffers from getting into a tight spot,
 Banging to gain entry through a closed door;
 Then when wounded one keeps the weapon
 Refusing cure and relief from poison.

Translated by Thomas D. Le

25 May 2008

Disingenuous

Nói chi nữa tiếng buồn ghê gớm ấy
 Để lòng tôi sung sướng muốn tiêu tan ?
 Tất cả tôi run rẩy tựa dây đàn
 Nghe thỏ thẻ chính điều tôi giấu kín,
 Sợ đôi mắt diễm nhiên và diễm lệ,
 Vâng, nói chi để khêu lại nguồn sầu.

Tôi ngỡ đã cạn hẳn trong bấy lâu
 Để lại nhóm cho cháy thêm ngọn lửa
 Tưởng gần tàn-yêu? yêu nhau? làm chi nữa!

Tôi vẫn biết rằng tôi chẳng xứng người,
 Mùa xuân tôi chưa hề có hoa tươi;
 Tôi như chiếc thuyền hư, không bến đỗ;
 Tôi là một con chim không tổ,
 Lòng cô đơn hơn một đứa mồ côi,

Nhặt nụ cười của thiên hạ, than ôi,
 Để tự nhủ: "Ta được yêu đấy chứ!"
 Tôi chỉ sống để hoài hoài tưởng nhớ
 Mãi mãi yêu nhưng giấu giếm luôn luôn
 Mà người thì, lơ đãng, giậm trên buồn,
 Bạn đi hái những cành vui xanh thắm.

Tôi biết lắm, trời ơi, tôi biết lắm!
 Hỡi lòng dạ sâu xa như vực thẳm!
 Tôi biết rằng người nói vậy cười chơi.
 Tiếng đã làm tôi tê tái cả người
 Tim ngừng đập, để thu hồn nghe lắng,
 Máu ngừng chảy, để cho lòng bớt nặng.

Tôi biết rằng chỉ cách một ngày sau,
 Cây bên đường sẽ trông thấy tôi sầu,
 Đi thất thủ, đi lang thang, đi quanh quẽ.

Vì vội đến kiếm tìm nhau, tôi sẽ
 Chỉ thấy người thương nhưng chẳng thấy tình
 thương,
 Và như màu, theo nắng nhạt như hương
 Theo gió mát, tình người đã tản mát.
 Tôi sẽ trốn, thần thờ, ngỡ ngác,
 Trái tim buồn như một bãi tha ma.
 Gượng mím cười: "người quên nghĩ rằng ta
 Sẽ đau đớn bởi một lời nói vội".

Speak no more that dreaded word of grief
 And let my happy heart dissolve into nothing!
 All of me vibrates like a lute's string
 Whispering my very own secret.
 I dread so much those lovely serene eyes.
 Yes, speak no more to revive no gloom.

I had thought all must be over by now.
 Why then reignite the dying
 Spark to life. Love, love again? Why alas!

I always know I am not worthy;
 My spring is never adorned with flowers;
 I'm like a broken boat without harbor;
 A lost bird without a nest;
 Lonesome as lonesome an orphan be.

Alas, fated to pluck a smile from one,
 I think to myself, "I'm loved too!"
 I live only in eternal longing
 Always in love, but always hiding.
 Yet she, absent-minded, treads on my grief,
 Busy gathering her green twig of joy.

I knew it, heavens, I knew it;
 But can't fathom your abysmal depths.
 You're flirting around just for fun.
 Just one word and my whole being freezes;
 My heart stops; my soul listens;
 My blood halts to ease its burden.

I knew that barely on the morrow
 The road-side trees will see my sorrow,
 Aimless steps wandering on my solitary way.

In haste to see each other, I will seek,
 Only to find loved one but not the love.
 Just as color love fades like a scent in the sun.
 Dispersed by wind it vanishes.
 I'll take cover, bemused and befuddled,
 My heart is filled with graveyard gloom
 Forcing a smile, "She must have forgot that
 A rash word can cut to the quick."

Vì, khốn nỗi! Tôi vẫn còn tin mãi
Sự nhầm kia: - tôi không thể không yêu.

Dẫu không tin, tôi càng cứ yêu nhiều:
Khi người nói, tiếng người êm ái quá...
Có lúc, tưởng chỉ để rơi tàn lửa,
Tay vô tình gieo một đám cháy to:
Người tưởng buông chi đôi tiếng hẹn hò
Tôi hưởng ứng bằng vạn lời say đắm.

Đang rạo rức, thì ào, rồi rầm.
Ngập lòng tôi. - Mà ai ngờ tới đâu;
Tôi điên cuồng, tất nhiên phải khổ đau
Tôi biết lắm, trời ơi, tôi biết lắm!

Vậy trót lỡ, tôi sẽ đành lẳng lẳng
Chịu mối tình gậy lại bởi tay ai.
Không cầu xin, không trách móc, vì - ôi!
Tôi chẳng biết làm cho lòng người cứng cõi

Cứ như thế cho đến giờ đen tối
Hoa ái tình chung phận đoá hồng khô,
Mà trái tim đã ghé dáng hững hờ
Sẽ chung phận của tro tàn bếp lạnh.
Tôi giấu sẵn một linh hồn hiu quạnh,
Cho nên, liền chiều đó, tôi hết vui.
Không thấy người bằng không thấy mặt trời

Tôi ôm ngực thử nhìn xem biên giới
Của sầu tủi. Nhưng, hỡi người yêu hỡi!
Nó mệnh mông vô ảnh, bủa vây tôi,
Yên ổn đi, thắc mắc đến đây rồi,
Mơ ước tới, mà chán chường cũng lại.
Và mơn trớn cả một kho ân ái,
Tôi một mình đối diện với tình không
Để lắng nghe tiếng khóc mất trong lòng.

Xuân Diệu

Yet, alas! I still cling to the idea,
Wrong-headed, that I cannot stop loving.

The more I lose faith, the deeper I fall in love.
When she speaks her voice is so soothing.
At times, just a puny tiny spark
Feeds a fire that rages out of control.
No sooner does she hint at seeing me
Than I utter a thousand words of passion.

Much rumbling confusion and excitement
Overwhelm my bosom, yet no one knows.
I lost my mind and I agonize so.
I knew it; heavens, I knew it!

It's my fault, and I must hold my peace
To suffer the fate that she has dealt me.
I won't implore or blame, for, alas, I
Know not how to harden myself.

Thus life goes on until the darkest hour
When love bud shares the fate of wilted rose.
And my heart pained that fears her jilting hand
Just like a fireless hearth will be morose.
Having this lonesome soul hidden within
On that same eve I lost the joy of living
Not seeing her is like the sun not seeing.

Clutching my chest I fathom the bounds
Of my shameful grief. Yet, O my sweetheart!
It surrounds me with its invisible cloak.
I try to calm down but the trouble is nigh.
Whatever my dream, I feel only despair
While dreaming of embracing the lode of love.
Alone I face this empty heart
And hear the cries that rend my soul.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
7 June 2008

Đa Tình

Nghìn buổi sáng, bình minh xe chỉ thắm
 Dem lòng tôi ràng rịt với xuân tươi.
 Thuở xưa kia là con của mặt trời,
 Tôi có lửa ở trong mình nắng đọng.

Đời muốn chữa cho tôi lành bệnh sống,
 Dem tuyết sương lời lẽ buốt vào gan;
 Tuyết sương mòn, băng giá phải trôi tan,
 Tôi là lửa chẳng bao giờ biết nguội.

Tôi đã yêu từ khi chưa có tuổi
 Lúc chưa sinh, vợ vẫn giữa vòng đời;
 Tôi đã yêu khi đã hết tuổi rồi,
 Không xương vóc, chỉ huyền hồ bóng dáng.

Vào đêm tối tôi sẽ làm đuốc sáng
 Rọi u minh tỏ rạng ánh hồn sâu;
 Đến ru thơ bao kẻ hãy buồn đau;
 Tìm ấp mộng những hồn sâu rã mục.

Hồn đông thế, tôi sợ gì cô độc!
 Ma với nhau thì ôm ấp cùng nhau.
 Chuyện yêu đương bấy giờ đã hết đâu,
 Niềm tâm sự vẫn còn như thuở sống.

Trong cõi lòng lan đi bao ấm nóng,
 Giữa hồn thường thắm thiết một ma thơ
 Dem nhớ nhung an ủi dưới trăng mờ,
 Và trong gió phát phơ đi có bạn...

Kẻ đa tình không cần đủ thịt da;
 Khi chết rồi thì tôi sẽ yêu ma.

Xuân Diệu

Love-Crazy

In countless morns the sun weaves ruddy threads,
 Binding my heart fast to a fresh spring.
 For eons I've been his offspring
 Burning with fire in my sun-soaked head.

Life wants to cure me of my lust of living,
 My guts with cold fog and snow of words wilting;
 E'en fog and mist and frost will dissipate;
 But being fire, I never will abate.

When under age love have I known
 Before birth while roaming life's bourn.
 I'll still love when my time has gone,
 Leaving shadows of me and lifeless bones.

I will light darkest gloom with fire
 To shine through recesses of mire,
 To soothe with verse souls in distress
 And kindle dreams and battered hearts redress.

With all those souls I fear no loneliness!
 We share shady embrace among spirits.
 But love never shall die within our midst,
 And its secret shall live as if in life no less.

This warm heart spreads its timeless glow
 Around all souls from this bard's shade
 And brings healing in dim moon glow
 And light breezes to fellow shades.

Loving hearts need no flesh to thrive;
 When dead I'll just as ghost survive.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 10 May 2008

Phải Nói

"Yêu tha thiết, thế vẫn còn chưa đủ ?
 "Anh tham lam, anh đòi hỏi quá nhiều
 "Anh biết rồi, em đã nói em yêu;
 "Sao vẫn muốn nhắc một lời đã cũ ?"

-- Yêu tha thiết, thế vẫn còn chưa đủ,
 Nếu em yêu mà chỉ để trong lòng;
 Không tỏ hay, yêu mến cũng là không.
 Và sắc đẹp chỉ làm bằng cẩm thạch.

Anh thèm muốn vô biên và tuyệt đích,
 Em biết không ? Anh tìm kiếm em hoài.
 Sự thật ngày nay không thật đến ngày mai...
 Thì ân ái có bao giờ lại cũ ?

Yêu tha thiết, thế vẫn còn chưa đủ,
 Phải nói yêu, trăm bận đến nghìn lần;
 Phải mặn nồng cho mãi mãi đêm xuân,
 Đem chim bướm thả trong vườn tình ái.

Em phải nói, phải nói, và phải nói

Bằng lời riêng nơi cuối mắt, đầu mày,
 Bằng nét vui, bằng vẻ thẹn, chiều say,
 Bằng đầu ngả, bằng miệng cười, tay riết
 Bằng im lặng, bằng chi anh có biết !

Cốt nhất là em chớ lạnh như đông,
 Chớ thản nhiên bên một kẻ cháy lòng,
 Chớ yên ổn như mặt hồ nước ngủ.
 Yêu tha thiết, thế vẫn còn chưa đủ.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Say It

"I am deeply in love, dear, is that not enough?
 "How greedy you are, and demanding too!
 "You already know, for I've told you I love you.
 "Why insist on me repeating old stuff so oft?"

You love me deeply, but is that enough?
 If you are in love, but you just keep it inside
 And not show it, then words are empty,
 And beauty is as cold as marble.

I have an immense desire, did you know?
 And absolute, too. I'm in constant search of you.
 If today's truth is truth no longer tomorrow,
 How can, my dear, love ever be old too?

Be deeply in love, but that is still not enough.
 You've got to say love, hundreds, no, thousands of times.
 Be so loving that every night is one of spring,
 And birds and butterflies freed in the love garden.

Say it, you must say it, you must.

With words that dwell privy in your eyes and your
 brows
 With joy, bashfulness, and ecstasy at dusk,
 With head cuddling, smile on your lips, and
 grasping arms,
 With wordless intensity, what else do I know!

Just make sure you don't stay frigid as ice
 Or be unmoved beside one burning with desire,
 Nor be as placid as still water in the pond.
 Be deeply in love, but that is still not enough.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

5 April 2004

Xa Cách

Tặng Đỗ Đức Thu

Có một bạn, em ngồi xa anh quá,
Anh bảo em ngồi xích lại gần hơn.
Em xích gần thêm một chút: anh hờn.
Em ngoan ngoãn xích gần thêm chút nữa
Anh sắp giận, em mỉm cười, vội vã
Đến kề anh, và mơn trớn: "Em đây !"
Anh vui liền; nhưng bỗng lại buồn ngay
Vì anh nghĩ: thế vẫn còn xa lắm.

Đôi mắt của người yêu, ôi vực thẳm !
Ôi trời xa, vùng trán của người yêu !
Ta thấy gì đâu sau sắc yêu kiều
Mà ta riết giữa đôi tay thất vọng.
Dầu tin tưởng: chung một đời, một mộng,
Em là em; anh vẫn cứ là anh.
Có thể nào qua Vạn lý trường thành
Của hai vũ trụ chứa đầy bí mật.
Thương nhớ cứ trôi theo ngày tháng mất,
Quá khứ anh; anh không nhắc cùng em.
-- Linh hồn ta còn u ẩn hơn đêm,
Ta chưa thấu, nữa là ai thấu rõ.
Kiếm mãi, nghi hoài, hay ghen bóng gió,
Anh muốn vào dò xét giấc em mơ.
Nhưng anh giấu em những mộng không ngờ,
Cũng như em giấu những điều quá thực...

Hãy sát đôi đầu ! Hãy kề đôi ngực !
Hãy trộn nhau đôi mái tóc ngắn dài !
Những cánh tay ! Hãy quấn riết đôi vai !
Hãy dâng cả tình yêu lên sóng mắt !
Hãy khăng khít những cặp môi gắn chặt
Cho anh nghe đôi hàm ngọc của răng;
Trong say sưa, anh sẽ bảo em rằng:
"Gần thêm nữa ! Thế vẫn còn xa lắm !"

Xuân Diệu

Still Too Far Away

To Đỗ Đức Thu

The other day you sat too far away from me
So I asked you to move over a bit closer.
You inched over closer, but I demurred.
To be a good girl you inched still closer.
As I was boiling over, in haste with a smile
You scooted closer cooing, "Here I am!"
I brightened up then scowled at once
For I thought, you were still too far away.

A lover's eyes, how abyss-like they really are!
O high heaven, the forehead of a lover!
What do I see deep behind beauty's face
That I grasped in my frustrated hands?
Even with faith in one life, one dream,
You are you, and I am still me.
Is it possible to cross over the Great Wall
Of our two universes filled with mystery?
Though longing flows down the river of time
My past, I did not share with you.
My soul's dark recesses darker than night
Inscrutable to me, inscrutable to all.
Always searching, suspicious, baselessly jealous
I want to inspect your mind in its dreams.
But I keep my unexpected dreams from you
Just as you keep the naked truth from me.

Let's bring our heads together, press our breasts!
Let our hair short and long mingle!
Our arms! Let them squeeze our shoulders!
Let our love well up in our eyes!
Let's close our lips with a tight seal
So I can hear the pearls of your teeth.
Enraptured I fain say to you,
"Come closer! You are still too far away!"

Translated by Thomas D. Le

10 April 2004

Vì Sao?

Tặng Đoàn Phú Tứ

Bữa trước, riêng hai dưới nắng đào,
Nhìn tôi cô muốn hỏi "vì sao ?"
Khi tôi đến kiếm trên môi đẹp
Một thoáng cười yêu thỏa khát khao.

-- Vì sao giáp mặt buổi đầu tiên,
Tôi đã đày thân giữa xứ phiên,
Không thể vô tình qua trước cửa,
Biết rằng gặp gỡ đã vô duyên ?

Ai đem phân chất một mùi hương
Hay bản cầm ca ! Tôi chỉ thương,
Chỉ lặng chuỗi theo dòng cảm xúc,
Như thuyền ngư phủ lạc trong sương.

Làm sao cắt nghĩa được tình yêu !
Có nghĩa gì đâu, một buổi chiều
Nó chiếm hồn ta bằng nắng nhạt,
Bằng mây nhẹ nhẹ, gió hiu hiu...

Cô hãy là nơi mấy khóm dừa
Dầm chân trong nước, đứng say sưa;
Cho tôi là kẻ qua sa mạc
Tạm lánh hè gay; -- thể cũng vừa.

Rồi một ngày mai, tôi sẽ đi.
Vì sao, ai nữ hỏi làm chi !
Tôi khờ khạo lắm, ngu ngơ quá,
Chỉ biết yêu thôi, chẳng hiểu gì.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Lời Kỹ Nữ

Khách ngồi lại cùng em trong chốc nữa;

Why?

To Đoàn Phú Tứ

The other day, we met in bright sunshine
Looking at me, you wanted to ask "Why?"
When I came there to see on your lips fine
A hint of smile that so much pleased my eye.

Why was it that even on the first day
I was so soon banished to great sadness.
Hardly had I stepped in across the way
Than I knew right then that we'd be loveless.

Who would want to take a fragrance apart

Or a piece of music! I only love
And just follow the pulses of my heart
Like a fisher's boat lost in misty cove.

How can one explain the meaning of love!
And a day at dusk the meaning thereof.
It fills my soul with pale sunlight
With flimsy clouds and breezes slight.

You who come from the groves of coconut
Standing deep in the water euphoric,
Allow this man the desert passing through
To take shelter from the torrid summer too.

I will then leave this place on the morrow.
Why? Why would anyone much care to know?
I am but a slow-witted simpleton
Who knows only to love, understands none.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

9 May 2004

The Courtesan's Words

Stay with me longer then, ye my fond guest.

Vội vàng chi, trăng lạnh quá, khách ơi.
 Đêm nay rằm: yên tiệc sáng trên trời;
 Khách không ở, lòng em cô độc quá.

Khách ngồi lại cùng em ! Đây gói lá,
 Tay em đây mời khách ngả đầu say;
 Đây rượu nồng. Và hồn của em đây,
 Em cung kính đặt dưới chân hoàng tử.
 Chớ đạp hồn em !

Trăng về viễn xứ
 Đi khoan thai lên ngự đỉnh trời tròn.
 Gió theo trăng từ biên thới qua non;
 Buồn theo gió lan xa từng thoáng rộn.
 Lòng kĩ nữ cũng sầu như biển lớn,
 Chớ để riêng em phải gặp lòng em;
 Tay ái ân du khách hãy làm rèm,
 Tóc xanh tốt em xin nguyện dệt võng.
 Đẩy hộ hồn em triền miên trên sóng,
 Trôi phiêu lưu không vọng bến hay gành;
 Vì mình em không được quán chân anh,
 Tóc không phải những dây tình vương váu.
 Em sợ lắm. Giá băng tràn mọi nẻo;
 Trời đầy trăng lạnh lẽo suốt xương da.
 Người giai nhân: bến đợi dưới cây già,
 Tinh du khách: thuyền qua không buộc chặt.

Lời kĩ nữ đã vỡ vì nước mắt.
 Cuộc yêu đương gay gắt vị làng chơi.
 Người viễn du lòng bận nhớ xa khơi,
 Gỡ tay vương để theo lời gió nước.
 Xao xác tiếng gà. Trăng ngà lạnh buốt.
 Mắt run mờ, kĩ nữ thấy sông trôi.
 Du khách đi. Du khách đã đi rồi.

Xuân Diệu (*Gửi Hương Cho Gió*, 1944)

Why hurry ye? The moon is cold, my gentleman.
 It's full tonight to light up heaven's feast;
 Walk not away to leave my heart dead wan.

Come sit by me! This here my welcome knee,
 My arm a haven for your tipsy head,
 And here the strong wine, and this here my soul.
 With due respect, my prince, I place them at your
 feet.

Tread not on them nor on my soul!

The moon has taken leave for its far clime
 With nonchalance in the round firmament.
 And in its wake sea wind blew to the heights
 Spreading sadness in waves to far-off land.
 This paramour's blues vies with the vast sea.
 Let me not face up to my own sore heart.
 This arm of love, use it as your own drape.
 These young tresses, I weave them into bed.
 Please push my painful soul onto the waves
 To drift aimless without harbor or cove
 Because I would not hinder your free steps.
 My hair is not the tangling web of love.
 I am frightened. Cold has spread everywhere;
 The moonlit sky with its bone-chilling cold.
 For the maiden: it's haven under the old trees;
 For her man guest: the unmoored boat is free to
 roam around.

The tear-filled words the courtesan uttered
 Amid the intense love that raged during the act.
 The joy seeker that left his heart back way yonder
 Shrugged off the snarling hand after the fact.
 The rooster crowed under the moon's cold glow,
 The maid behind blurred eyes beheld the river flow.
 The guest is gone. The guest is gone forever so.

Xuân Diệu (*Fragrance to The Wind*, 1944)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

26 October 2004

Thở Than

Tôi là một kẻ điên cuồng
 Yêu những ái tình ngậy dại
 Tôi cứ bắt lòng tôi đau đớn mãi,
 Đau vô duyên, đau không để làm gì.
 Ôi! tình si
 Không có một giờ yên ổn!

Nếu bỏ được trái lòng cho gió cuốn,
 Dem vứt đi, như là trái chua cay!
 Nếu một chiều có thể rải tung bay
 Tất cả linh hồn thổn thức!

Xuân Diệu**Sighs**

I must be one real mad person
 Who fain loves all those crazy loves
 And thus I force my heart to suffer
 Hapless pain and needless hurt.
 Oh! This sickness with love
 leaves me not one instant of peace!

If only I could throw love fruit to wind
 and let it be carried away like bitter fruit!
 If only I could sow to all the winds
 one dark eve all the sobbing souls!

Translated by Thomas D. Le
 19 July 2008

The Moon According to Xuân Diệu

Few Vietnamese poets of any persuasion can pride themselves with dispensing entirely with references to the moon. In an agrarian society, the villager's life cycle parallels that of the moon. Though most field work is done during the day, it is at night that villagers find time for recreation and sometimes for extended agricultural production. Even religious practices and social customs follow the lunar cycle, and time frequently is reckoned on the cyclical march of the moon. To poets and non-poets the moon plays a pivotal role in all aspects of Vietnamese life. Furthermore, Vietnamese are a people of natural poets. From the day they were born Vietnamese are exposed to the sound and rhythm of poetry. As infants they are put to sleep or soothed to contentment by their mothers' lullabies. As they grow up folk songs in rhymed verse surround them during most of their activities, from farm work to village fêtes to courtship rituals. Folk sayings and folk songs are in verse, not just because of the ancient oral tradition to which they are a part but because the language itself has a musical quality that invites rhyming and rhythm aided in no small measure by its tone system and monosyllabicity.

To such a society, the moon always claims a prized place in most of its activities, for many of them do take place at night. It is not unusual at harvest time in moonlight to hear the rhythm of farm girls husking rice, pounding grain in their wooden mortars. Many villages

stage moonlight meets and campfires at which time the game of courtship unfolds itself openly between groups of boys and girls challenging and responding to one another in verse, either memorized from an inventory of songs prepared by poets or made extempore.



Regardless of societies, the moon has always been an inspiration for poets in the East, but especially so among Vietnamese poets of the New Poetry movement. The famed Chinese Đường poet Li Po is reported to have died trying to grab the moon's reflection in the water thinking he was taking possession of his eternal muse. As a romantic, Xuân Diệu responds to the moon with lust and expansiveness. But he seldom goes to extremes. Except for the one

poem, *Ca tụng* (Eulogy) discussed below, where he rhapsodizes about the moon in human terms, and comes closest to Hàn Mặc Tử in treating it with passionate enthusiasm about its multifarious attributes, he stays in line with other poets, i.e., within the limits of poetic conventions.

The moon as inspiration, confidante, sweetheart, bosom friend, and faithful companion never fails to stir Vietnamese hearts and delight Vietnamese souls. The moon has always been taken as a beauty, mysterious because of its inaccessibility, intimate because of its discreetness, reliable because of its steadfastness, and trustworthy because of its silence. Lovers come to it to confide their joys and sorrows, and in times of stress to blame it for their love woes. Whether crescent or full, dim or bright, the moon can be counted on to appear with the regularity of clockwork. Sensitive souls maintain a close relationship with the moon for it always cyclically shows up at night, allowing acts that shun broad daylight to occur away from the glare of censure, the sting of doubt, and the venom of gossip. As enhancer and facilitator the moon, by spreading its mantle of romance upon the darkened world, encourages sub rosa behavior and all sorts of capers and escapades. No wonder it inspires poets of all time.

Patient and remote yet goodhearted and tight-lipped, the moon fits the image of the perfect sweetheart and confidante. The moon is always a good listener with an ever-present smile and a knowing expression. Its omnipresence fosters confidence and comfort. Never a deserter, the moon may be eclipsed by the elements just as people may be saddened by events. Once the weather clears, always inevitably, it reappears in its former radiance and splendor. To the poet the moon is sheer magic, distant yet close, and capable of feats of superhuman power such as opening the tap of poetry.

What is the moon then to Xuân Diệu? The answer lies in *Eulogy*. But before examining its content, however, we linger a while on the poem's unusual form as according a quality rarely seen in his other works. *Eulogy* is one of the few Xuân Diệu's poems that illustrate how far the poet has come in innovation on verse forms. Whereas repetition of verse segments are not infrequent, repetition of entire lines throughout the poem are a rarity even among the new

poets. This prosodic procedure endows the poem's structure with strength, in much the same sense that adding reinforcing bars insures extra strength to the concrete. The iteration of the same lines across stanzas is the thread that binds the parts of the poem together into an adamantine web. It adds a haunting quality to the atmosphere and heightens the mood with unrelenting incantation. Furthermore, repetition lies at the heart of rhythm and musicality, which poets seek for effect. We can thus draw a parallel between Xuân Diệu and Baudelaire, Verlaine and Edgar Allan Poe as masters of the musical verse.

In form *Eulogy* is reminiscent of Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir*, in which the second and fourth lines in one quatrain are repeated as the first and third lines in the following quatrain. To illustrate, let us first examine Baudelaire's work.

Harmonie du soir

Voici venir le temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir ;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du
soir ;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir ;
Le violon frémit come un coeur qu'on afflige ;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand
reposoir.

Le violon frémit come un coeur qu'on afflige,
Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir !
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand
reposoir ;
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige.

Un coeur tendre qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige !
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige...
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor !

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

Evening Harmony

Here comes the time when shaking on its stem
Each flower evaporates like a censer.
The sounds and perfumes through the night air
whir.
Melancholy waltzing and dizzily grim!

Each flower evaporates like a censer.
Like an afflicted heart shudders the violin.
Melancholy waltzing and dizzily grim!
The sky is as lovely and sad as an altar.

Like an afflicted heart shudders the violin.
It hates the vast, dark void, that heart tender.
The sky is as lovely and sad as an altar.
The sun drowns in its own blood that won't run.

It hates the vast, dark void, that heart tender.
From the brilliant past it keeps all souvenirs
fond.
The sun drowns in its own blood that won't run.
Your memory shines like a sacred bread holder!

Translated by Thomas D. Le
7 June 2008

The repetition pattern in Baudelaire's poem is striking. Notice how the first and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, as do the second and third lines in an *abba* pattern, in addition to the repeating pattern of lines as described above.

Xuân Diệu's *Eulogy*, however, relies on a different pattern. The poem consists of nine quatrains. For the purpose of patterning the repetition, the poem is divided into three units of three quatrains each. Within each unit, the first couplet of the first quatrain repeats as the first couplet of the second quatrain. Then the last couplet of the second quatrain repeats as the last couplet of the third quatrain. Thus a symmetric onion-like embedding pattern is achieved. The pattern applies to all three units with one deviation on the final line. As a reprise of the first line of the poem, this last verse serves to encapsulate the work in envelope fashion, thus delivering an interesting wrap-up effect.

We now turn to content. Xuân Diệu regards the moon as a poet's object of desire. It is personified as a woman as its roundness is reified as the round breasts that the poet caresses. And just like a woman, the moon is compared to a flower in heaven that shivers among clouds. But this precious disk also roams the firmament veiled in mystery. It causes fog to moisten the gentle breeze of eventide. Then it soothes one's heart with relaxing colors the better to transport it to the kingdom of ecstasy. As a cask of wine, it intoxicates the dim night and makes its head spin. Preternaturally the orb of night is endowed with the ability to obsess fragrance with its light. Visualizing in one's mind's eye a pleasant scent being obsessed with light is gaining a glimpse of the power the moon possesses over the poet's imagination. As for its musical gift, the moon has no peers. It coaxes enchanting music from shimmering strings of silk, all the while keeping the time for the waltz of breezes. The moon combs the forests' hair with its rays, wrinkles the sea with concentric waves, and fills the sails with billowy gusts. These are the images of a world of dreams into which Xuân Diệu breathes intriguing life. The poet brings into play all his senses and lets his sensations crisscross boundaries between them with verve and alacrity. However, compared to Hàn Mặc Tử, who indulges in bizarre fancy, Xuân Diệu retains a certain moderation and balance. His moon, however whimsical it may be, remains familiar, lovely, and sympathetic. Meanwhile Hàn Mặc Tử's moon is a protean creature, with substance and body that he hugs and smells. Just as in a science-fiction movie, the moon is like an amorphous glob that envelops objects in her embrace and breaks up into pools. Amazing feats of supernatural power that the febrile mind of Hàn Mặc Tử summons up with nimbleness.

Against this panoply of supernatural prowess of Hàn Mặc Tử's moon, Xuân Diệu's moon's human attributes are no less astounding. She, for now it is becoming to address the moon as a woman, can bend her head in a pensive attitude to meditate on the sorrows of man. At once an apparition and an immortal, she builds castles of gossamer; she reigns as a serenissima queen or as an aroused demoiselle who spurns the truth and often weeps till her eyes are surrounded by circles of grief. She is born of love, mystery and illusion, to shed eternal light onto the eyes and souls of poets, for she is the dream breast of this special race of humans. Xuân Diệu endows the moon with flesh and blood in order to be intimate with her. He needs her, desires her, and realizes that underneath all the characterizations the moon remains the one steadfast friend he cannot do without.

Xuân Diệu's vision thus differs in a number of important respects from that of Hàn Mặc Tử. The underpinnings of his treatment of the moon motif are firmly anchored in a romantic

notion of a benevolent and kindhearted entity that the moon embodies. Any flights of fancy indulged in are tame as compared to the outlandish thoughts of the Qui Nhơn poet, for whom the moon is a wilder creature endowed with gifts and prowess such as only he has the power to conjure. Whereas Xuân Diệu closely aligns himself with the romantic view of the moon, Hàn Mặc Tử pushes the boundaries of credulity and acceptability to their limits, conjuring up in the process the symbolic, the surrealist and the bizarre. Xuân Diệu, by contrast, remains romantic to the core and to the end.

Ca Tụng

Trăng, vú mộng của muôn đời thi sĩ
Giơ hai tay mơn trớn vẻ tròn đầy;
Trăng, hoa vàng lay lắt cạnh bờ mây
Trăng, đĩa ngọc giữa vòm trời huyền bí

Trăng, vú mộng của muôn đời thi sĩ
Giơ hai tay mơn trớn vẻ tròn đầy.
Trăng, nguồn sương làm ướt cả gió hây,
Trăng, vồng rượu khiến đêm mờ chuếnh choáng!

Người ám ảnh hương thơm bằng ánh sáng,
Ru màu êm mà gọi thức lòng ngây;
Trăng, nguồn sương làm ướt cả gió hây
Trăng, vồng rượu khiến đêm mờ chuếnh choáng!

Trăng thánh thót hoạ đàn tơ lấp lánh,
Trăng nghiêng nghiêng suy nghĩ chuyện ưu phiền;
Người là ma, rồi người lại làm tiên,
Người tạo lập những đền đài mỏng thoáng,

Trăng thánh thót hoạ đàn tơ lấp lánh
Trăng nghiêng nghiêng suy nghĩ chuyện ưu phiền...
Người là trăng, hồi trăng đẹp bình yên;
Hồi trăng đẹp, người là trăng náo nức;

Người hay khóc, người không cần sự thực,
Nhớ thương luôn nên mắt có quầng viền.
Người là trăng, hồi trăng đẹp bình yên,
Hồi trăng đẹp, người là trăng náo nức.

Rừng xoã tóc để người làm chiếc lược;
Biển nhân người thành ức triệu vòng khuyên;
Gió căng người trên những cánh buồm thuyền

Eulogy

Moon, the poet's dream breast of all time,
Whose roundness he fondles with both hands.
Moon, yellow flower that fringes the cloud banks;
Moon, disk of jade in the mystery of heaven.

Moon, the poet's dream breast of all time,
Whose roundness he fondles with both hands.
Moon, source of dew that bathes the breeze;
Moon, cask of wine that makes dim night's head light!

Thou entrancest fragrance with light;
With quiet hue soothest to rouse a heart to frenzy.
Moon, source of dew that bathes the breeze;
Moon, cask of wine that makes dim night's head light!

Moon, thou mak'st lilting music shimmer;
Head slanted thou ponderest life's sorrows;
Thou art ghost, then art immortal;
And thou build'st gossamer castles.

Moon, thou mak'st lilting music shimmer;
Head slanted thou ponderest life's sorrows;
Thou art moon, O moon gracious and serene;
O moon of beauty, thou art moon of zest;

Thou weep'st often and need'st no truth;
Burdened with care thine eyes show dark circles.
Thou art moon, O moon gracious and serene;
O moon of beauty, thou art moon of zest.

Woods let their tresses down for thee to comb;
Sea hugs thee with its countless concentric waves.
Wind blows thee to fill the sails of boats;

Người đánh nhịp cho sóng chiều xuôi ngược;

Rừng xoã tóc để người làm chiếc lược;
Biển nhân người thành ức triệu vòng khuyên...
Trăng của xa xôi, trăng của hão huyền,
Người vĩnh viễn như lòng trăng ý gió

Trăng của mắt, trăng của hồn rạng tỏ,
(Trăng rất trắng là trăng của tình duyên).
Trăng của xa xôi, trăng của hão huyền,
Trăng, vú mộng của muôn đời thi sĩ.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Trăng

Trong vườn đêm ấy nhiều trăng quá;
Ánh sáng tuôn đầy các lối đi,
Tôi với người yêu qua nhẹ nhẹ ...
Im lìm , không dám nói năng chi.

Bâng khuâng chân tiếc dậm lên vàng,
Tôi sợ đường trăng tiếng dậy vang,
Ngỡ ngác hoa duyên còn núp lá.
Và làm sai lỡ nhịp trăng đang.

Dịu dàng đàn những ánh tơ xanh,
Cho gió du dương điệu múa càn;,
Cho gió đượm buồn , thoi náo động
Linh hồn yếu điệu của đêm thanh.

Chúng tôi lặng lẽ bước trong thơ,
Lạc giữa niềm êm chẳng bến bờ.
Trăng sáng, trăng xa , trăng rộng quá !
Hai người, nhưng chẳng bớt bơ vơ.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Thou keep'st time to whichever way it blows.

Woods let their tresses down for thee to comb;
Sea hugs thee with its countless concentric waves.
Moon yonder, moon of illusion,
Everlasting as thy heart and the thought of wind.

Moon of the eye, moon of the soul bright,
(Moon thy very self, thou art moon of love).
Moon yonder, moon of illusion,
Moon, the poet's dream breast of all time.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)
Translated by Thomas D. Le
27 April 2008

Moon

That night the garden held plenty of moon
Whose light flooded the alleyways.
My sweet and I gently walked on
Deep in silence without a word to say.

Our worried feet trampled on the gold light
I feared the loud noise on the moonlight path.
Startled the flowers hid behind the leaves
And left the moon to march to her own beat.

Softly the moon plucked its blue rays
To the wind's melody and dance of boughs,

To the wind's sadness and stillness,
To the graceful soul of the night.

We silently made our way through verse
Lost in limitless bliss.
The moon is bright, far away, expansive;
Being together, we still feel lonesome.

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)
Translated by Thomas D. Le
13 June 2008

Trăng Sáng

Anh đứng cửa sổ trước
Thấy cành, gió đưa nhau
Anh đứng cửa sổ sau
Thấy cây long não sáng

Biết là trăng giữa cỏ
Rải những cọng rơm vàng
Biết là trăng trên trời
Đang rắc hoa liễn cánh

Những khi em ở gần
Hai ta vui ngày tháng
Anh mãi thơ quên trăng
Em nhắc anh : “Trăng sáng”.

Anh bồi hồi vui sướng
Hiểu tình em vẫn đầy
Vẫn nhớ trăng hò hẹn
Vẫn một vầng đằm say

Nay em đang ở xa
Anh nhắc em : “Trăng sáng”
Anh gọi em : “Trăng ngà”
Đứng bồi hồi canh vắng.

Xuân Diệu

Buồn Trăng

Gió sáng bay về, thi sĩ nhớ;
Thương ai không biết, đứng buồn trăng.
Huy hoàng trăng rộng, nguy nga gió,
Xanh biếc trời cao, bạc đất bằng.

Mây trắng ngang hàng tự thuở xưa,
Bao giờ viễn vọng đến bây giờ.
Sao vàng lẻ một, trăng riêng chiếc;

Bright Moon

Standing at the front window
You see the boughs sway in the wind
Standing at the rear window
You see the bright eucalyptus.

The moon in the green grass
Scatters its golden straws.
You know the moon in the sky
Sowing all its petals abroad.

The moments you were nigh
We enjoyed our time together.
I was by poesy absorbed,
You reminded, “Moon's bright.”

I felt so happy
Knowing your love's whole,
Still recalling moonlit dates
Spell-bound by moonlight.

Now you're far away;
I remind you, “Moon's bright!”
I call you, “Moon of ivory”
In midst of night lonesome.

Translated by Thomas D. Le
13 June 2008

Grieving with Moon

Morning breeze makes the poet feel lonesome.
Not knowing whom he loves, he grieves with moon.
Radiant is the vast moon, majestic the wind.
Under the deep blue sky the land's a silver glint.

For ageless eons white clouds have traveled
Ceaselessly far and wide till now.
A lone gold star twinkles with moon lonely

Đêm ngọc tê ngời men với tơ.

In jade-like night tipsy and silvery.

Khắp biển trời xanh, chẳng bến trời,
Mắt tìm thêm rợn ánh khơi vơi,
Trăng ngà lặng lẽ như bông tuyết.
Trong suốt không gian, tịch mịch đời.

Over harborless seas under blue sky
My eyes find nothing but immense light.
The ivory moon's silent as a snowfall.
Across vast space, over infinite life.

Gió nọ mà bay lên nguyệt kia,
Thêm đêm sương lạnh xuống đầm đìa.
Ngẩng đầu ngẫm mãi chưa xong nhớ,
Hoa bưởi thơm rồi: đêm đã khuya.

Should that wind reach yonder moon's cove,
The cold fog blankets night with streaming tears.
Head tilted up I still suffer lost love,
As grapefruit blooms embalm the midnight drear.

Xuân Diệu

Translated by Thomas D. Le
26 June 2008

On Being a Poet

Xuân Diệu's art depends on no theory or school of thought or philosophy. It simply derives from the stirrings of his heart, the vibrations of his soul, and the creative spark of his mind. All he needs to write is his own nature as a man with a sensibility acute enough to extract from daily life what is to become the essence of his poetry. Thus Xuân Diệu the artist is just an extension of Xuân Diệu the man.

Nowhere but in *Cảm xúc* (Feelings) does he spell out a characterization of a poet so aptly and vividly. In Xuân Diệu's vision, the poet does not exactly live on earth though his feet are planted on the ground. The poet dwells in the sky and partakes in celestial events when so inspired. He sings to the music of the wind, follows the moon in its trajectory through dreams, and floats about among the clouds. Of flesh and blood, the poet can be just as immaterial as nature's denizens are material for he alone possesses the power of imagination with which he escapes all material constraints. Yet he is very much in this world as well as of this world.

The poet conceives of poetry as a rendez-vous of thousands of like-minded beings from all corners of the globe, a vessel that holds all the mental powers of all stripes. It is likened to a garden where birds flock to sow seeds from all directions and where from those seeds may blossom the sweetest of fragrances or the vilest of poisonous fruits. Such is the land of poetry, open to those whose souls are tangled in an intricate web of human concerns or divided among myriads of human affections. That land is the dwelling-place of hospitable beings that open their hearts and minds to all winds and to all sounds of music.

To speak with the voice of poetry, the poet is a bundle of sensations. Not only is his all eyes and all ears, he thrives only when all his other senses are equally awakened and stimulated. In his deep-set eyes dwells a world of climes; his ears are attuned to the music of

life, from the imperceptible murmurs of nothingness to the soft tunes of deep space expanding to infinity. His hands feel the pulsation of his heart that ebbs and flows in rivers of living blood and that vibrates in unison with thousands of other hearts all united by the common bond of humanity. He smells the fragrances of beauty and stench of ugliness alike just as he tastes the wholesomeness of hope and the foulness of despair. His senses freely cross one another's boundaries without constraints for only when he can explore the unusual or the impossible does he truly fulfill his mission as the spokesperson of man's heart and mind and soul.

The poet communes with nature, befriends its animate and inanimate citizens with empathy and attunes himself with all denizens of creation. And so he understands the language of birds, the rustling of waters, the weeping of rain or the whistling of the sun's rays. He is a part of this wonderful universe of being as elsewhere he is a part of the world of nothingness. He is everywhere to lend voice to the ineffable. Yet he is very much rooted to earth though his head may be among the clouds. Like Icarus he fashions wings to escape the labyrinth of humdrum existence where the Minotaur of monotony and ennui reigns. He must unshackle his heart, his soul, his whole being so they can be free to feel and live a life deeper, more intense than the normal rung of humanity. We can extrapolate from all this that the poet must liberate himself from the prison of time to acquire the ability to travel infinitely to the past or infinitely to the future. In that sense he can shape the future from the past just as he can reshape the past from the future.

In spite of his lofty concept of the poet, Xuân Diệu admits to being but a tiny needle at the mercy of the powerful magnets of all creatures. Being aware of his own limitations as a speck in the vastness of the universe, he knows the powerful forces arrayed against man. The poet is in the forefront of that awareness. It is here that Xuân Diệu comes closest to being existential in the sense of realizing his own contingency and the insuperable burden of facing life with complete freedom but without faith in anything other than his own frailty and vulnerability. Without the vaguest idea of a subatomic particle in a giant accelerator, Xuân Diệu assimilates the poet's fate with the human condition. So when the poet, particle that he is, is flung at dizzying speed in the bosom of fragrant night air bathed in the dreamy moonlight, there is no telling where he will end up. Such is the destiny of the poet, buffeted by a whirlwind of powerful emotions and fated to open his heart and mind to the irresistible attraction of life. If he ends up singing the praise of love and being filled with ecstasy doing so, is he being flirtatious, i.e., being sensitive to the beauty of love, or is he just fulfilling his mission as a poet? The answer is clearly both, for to him loving and being a poet are one and the same.

Such is Xuân Diệu's notion of a poet, individualistic and personal. We can describe it as romantic for its emotional and individualistic orientation, but any label is no more than an expedient, a handle with which we hope to grasp the complex of attributes that Xuân Diệu endows his poetic ideal. And if we can draw a parallel between his romanticism and French romanticism, with which he was familiar, it is not possible to prove that he borrowed any of the elements of his concept from French literature, though he was imbued with it. On the

contrary, there is evidence that his romanticism is spontaneous and comes from his artistic sensibility and imagination as well as from the soul of Viet Nam. We need only read his work to convince ourselves of his originality and Vietnamese-ness. With this sure-footed anchor, Xuân Diệu needs no theoretical underpinnings for his creativity. Once he embarks on his emotional adventure he is in his element and power. Xuân Diệu is Xuân Diệu, a charming creator of a language of love that never dies.

Cảm xúc

Tặng Thế Lữ

Làm thi sĩ, nghĩa là ru với gió
Mơ theo trăng, và vợ vẫn cùng mây,
Để linh hồn ràng buộc bởi muôn dây,
Hay chia sẻ bởi trăm tình yêu mến.

Đây là quán tha hồ muôn khách đến;
Đây là bình thu hợp trí muôn hương;
Đây là vườn chim nhả hạt mười phương,
Hoa mật ngọt chen giao cùng trái độc...

Đôi giếng mắt đã chứa trời vạn hộc;
Đôi bờ tai nào ngăn cản thanh âm :
Của vu vơ nghe mãi tiếng kêu thầm ...
Của xanh thẳm thấy luôn màu nói sẽ ...

Tay ấp ngực dò xem triều máu lệ,
Nghìn trái tim mang trong một trái tim
Để hiểu vào giọng suối với lời chim,
Tiếng mưa khóc, lời reo tia nắng động.

Không có cánh nhưng vẫn thềm bay bổng;
Đi trong sân mà nhớ chuyện trên trời :
Trút ngàn năm trong một phút chơi vơi ;
Ngắm phong cảnh giữa hai bề lá cỏ ...

Tôi chỉ là một cây kim bé nhỏ,
Mà vạn vật là muôn đá nam châm;
Nếu hương đêm say dậy với trăng rằm,
Sao lại trách người thơ tình lơ là.

Xuân Diệu (*Thơ Thơ*, 1938)

Feelings

To Thế Lữ

Being a poet is singing with wind,
Wandering 'mongst clouds and dreaming of moon,
Tangling one's soul in thousands of strands,
Or splitting into hundreds of affections.

It's like an inn for myriad guests;
A vessel that collects thoughts of myriad scents;
A garden where birds from all corners sow their seeds
For honey-sweet blooms and poisonous fruits.

Well-deep eyes hold climes in myriads of cells,
And ears that never stop incoming sounds
Of the nothings that keep coming in murmurs,
And of the deep blue that see colors of whispers.

Hand over heart he feels the tears and blood
Of countless hearts contained in just his own,
To get meaning from the voices of streams and birds,
The tearful cries of rain and shouts of living sun.

Without wings, he yearns to soar skyward,
Feet pacing the courtyard, head in the clouds,
Compressing millennia into one fleeting minute,
Soaking up the scene on both grassy banks.

I am but a tiny needle
In a world teeming with magnets.
If the night's scent stirs him up in full moon,
How can the poet be accused of flirtation?

Xuân Diệu (*Poetry Poetry*, 1938)

Translated by Thomas D. Le

27 April 2008

In sum, the influence of Xuân Diệu on Vietnamese poetry cannot be overemphasized. Generations of poets from his time on have routinely captured the joys and sorrows of love much in the same manner he had manifested in his verse. Today we read him the more to understand and appreciate our own heart, for his voice is our voice, his emotions are our own, and his expression the very same we want to possess. In a larger perspective we read him because of the beauty of his verse, the depth of his emotions, his love of life, his universal appeal, his genuineness as an artist, and his optimism in the face of romantic melancholy. He forged ahead with a deeply-felt individualism amid cheers and boos and used a newfangled idiom that demonstrates the subtlety and strength, the suppleness and power of the Vietnamese language. With the New Poets Vietnamese literature has come into its own to claim its place as an instrument of art and of all other human disciplines. These pioneers have expanded the language's capacity for abstract and expressive thoughts. They have endowed the language with a new freedom to develop in compass and complexity. And Xuân Diệu was with them in the thick, if not in the forefront, of this modernization effort. Xuân Diệu the man lives because Xuân Diệu the poet does, in the modern Vietnamese soul. ■

Thomas D. Le

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