

On Tampering with Literature and the Writing System

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I. Tampering with Literature

As I was ready to write on one of the fundamental questions of life in this space, my attention was drawn by the Đàm Trung Pháp's article above *Lời Lời Châu Ngọc Hàng Hàng Gấm Thêu*, in which he relates an instance of tampering with the narrative poem *Truyện Kiều* by a mechanical engineer by the name of Đỗ Minh Tuấn in Vietnam. His action affected some 1,000 verses out of the 3,245 verses of the iconic poem by Nguyễn Du, with the ostensible goal of improving its comprehensibility, relevance to modern times, and its logic. Almost one third of the poem is reportedly excised and replaced with the revisionist's own words, making him a sort of co-author. It was an unprecedented attempt on the rights of the individual artist to own his or her own work, and responsibility toward the audience and history. One might be forgiven to suspect that such an action must have been motivated by political ideology as is everything else authorized or condoned by the government.

Đàm Trung Pháp is scandalized by this unabashed action due to its blatancy and insolence. He is all the more offended because *Truyện Kiều* holds a unique position in the Vietnamese culture, a respected status of a great literary achievement, and an almost sacrosanct place among many Vietnamese intellectuals. A twentieth-century scholar Phạm Quỳnh was famously quoted as saying, "*Truyện Kiều* còn, tiếng ta còn; tiếng ta còn, nước ta còn." (If *Truyện Kiều* lives on, our language will live on; if our language lives on, our nation will live on.). That terse statement asserts the importance of a poem to the language it is written in, and the importance of the language to the land where it is spoken. There is a degree of hyperbole in such statement, given that the destiny of a language does not solely hinge on the destiny of any one single work of literature, and that a work of literature is fixed in time whereas a language evolves over time. Literature cannot stop language from evolving, but only reflects its evolution. As a matter of fact, it is language that dictates what kind of literature it allows at any given time. Take the English language as an example. The great works that epitomize the periods of evolution of this language are *Beowulf* for Old English, *The Canterbury Tales* for Middle English, and Shakespeare's works for Early Modern English. Both *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* are rescued from oblivion by historians and scholars who see value in preserving the past for future generations.

It is the speakers of a language that preserve both oral and written literature as part of their affirmation of self-identity. The Ancient Greeks had Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes. But it is the Greeks, the Romans, and their disciples -- the rest of the Europeans -- that preserve their literary heritage. Ultimately, the speakers of a language are the ones that have to preserve their cultural heritage. A language does not depend on literature to survive, witness pre-literate tribes in the Amazon basin and elsewhere in the world where civilization has not touched. When the last speaker of a certain tribe dies, the language became extinct, not the other way around.

Phạm Quỳnh's statement, however, is right on target when it asserts that if the Vietnamese language lives on, the country will live on, assuming the speakers have a country, which they have. Those who want to conquer Vietnam for good will have to erase the Vietnamese language from the face of the

earth. Since it is impossible to eliminate or exile ninety-seven millions Vietnamese speakers by military invasion (a doomed proposition from the outset given historical precedents), the alternatives could be demographic pressure, such as surreptitious or overt deliberate, osmotic migration, or language policy. With collaborators and traitors from a target nation, a would-be conquering nation that dares could try to achieve its dark scheme through sinister actions that they hope no one would notice or care. This alternative assumes a great deal of risky, wishful thinking, such as the naivete, apathy and submissiveness of the target population, the corruption, cowardice and venality of its leaders, and so on, I will return to language policy in the second section below.

Taking a cue from President Charles de Gaulle when he pardoned Jean-Paul Sartre, who was arrested for civil disobedience, saying, "You do not arrest Voltaire," a concerned Vietnamese will say, "You do not tamper with Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều*," for to many Vietnamese, tampering with *Truyện Kiều* is tantamount to unpardonable sin.

This essay strives to explore the issue rationally, for at stake is the important question, "Should a work of literature -- of arts in general -- be open for revision by the public?" My purpose is to understand the issue and to raise questions, but not to judge.

The motives cited above by the revisionist may make sense only in the context of literary criticism or teaching of literature. I said "may" with all reservation and caution. The literary critic and the literature teacher do not tamper with the original text, and do not actually change the text to suit any purpose.

Truyện Kiều

Elucidation

Literature teachers and academics are likely to elucidate obscure, difficult or ambiguous textual passages whether the issue results from language change or change of cultural context or authorial decision. They respect the authors and their works. and do not attempt redacting, editing, revising, altering the authors' words or replacing the original text with their own words. They will express their opinions straightforwardly and honestly, but will not replace the original with their version.

Let take one author by way of illustration: Shakespeare. This playwright occupies a unique position in world literature by being the most thoroughly studied of all authors. He is universally admired, and his name is known by all educated people throughout the world. His plays have been widely anthologized, taught in schools and colleges in most countries, and produced all over the world by some of the most prestigious theaters that have ever existed. For four hundred years Shakespeare has held, and continues to hold, sway over academe and perhaps the popular culture of the world. It is safe to say more books and articles were written and continue to be written on Shakespeare and his plays than on other authors, bar none. (I am aware the Bible is a contender, but we are not into religion here.). Most importantly for our purpose, the Bard is one author that engendered critical and literary theories relevant to our discussion.

Yet how many students or readers of Shakespeare's plays can comprehend everything they read without help from notes, interpretations, explications, glossaries, dictionaries, and a whole host of study guides designed to alleviate their frustration and facilitate understanding? There are probably some, but they

do not speak English. In this assessment I am being timid, if not charitable. Terence Hawks, General editor of the collection *Accents on Shakespeare* recognized the simple fact: “*The worrying truth is that nobody can just pick up Shakespeare’s plays and read them. Perhaps – even more worrying – they never could.*” (Hawkes, 2002, General editor’s preface, p. x). This comment applies to the Shakespeare’s native land, where Shakespeare has been on school curricula for centuries.

Be it as it may, no one has ever had the idea of changing one word of Shakespeare's to "improve" the original. I said this fully aware of instances where editors and others, over four hundreds years, occasionally modernized Shakespeare's spelling and changed his words or word orders for various reasons. To my knowledge, Shakespeare's plays are the most documented, annotated, and emended by editors/publishers, importantly due to typesetting constraints or errors, formatting and versioning proliferation. It is not unusual for a play to have two or more versions which differed in minor details involving spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and so on. There is even talk about authorship attribution, which is debated without end to the present day. However, I do not know of any instances where someone undertook a wholesale alteration of the scale reported in the case of *Truyện Kiều*.

A cursory look at the literature Shakespeare spawned about himself and his plays reveals a staggering abundance of works from academics, critics, men of letters, poets, authors, scholars, researchers, editors, essayists, biographers, and sundry others from the English-speaking world and beyond. Every aspect of this playwright's work is examined, interpreted and commented on. Literary critics and theorists have always had a field day with the Bard’s plays. They subjected his works to all critical approaches on the book. For his language there are glossaries and dictionaries. A few titles by way of illustration should suffice. The list is far from exhaustive: *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*, *The Oxford Illustrated Shakespeare Dictionary*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Shakespeare*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Original Shakespearean Pronunciation*, *Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment*, *A grammar of Shakespeare's Language*, *Shakespeare A-Z*, *Shakespeare and Language*.

Moreover, his works were analyzed and discussed from a multitude of points of view using any imaginable critical theories. Consider *Shakespeare and Modernity*, *Shakespeare in the Present*, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis*, *Spiritual Shakespeares*, *Gothic Shakespeares*, *Marxist Shakespeares*, *Shakespeare and Marx*, *Shakespeare and Women*, *Shakespeare and Text*, *Shakespeare Thinking*, *Shakespeare and Literary Theory*, *Presentist Shakespeares*, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, *The Presentist Threat to Editions of Shakespeare*, *Historicism*, *New Historicism*, *Presentism*, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, *Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, *Presentism: Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare and Women*, *Shakespearean Metaphysics*, *Shakespeare and Philosophy*, *Philosophical Shakespeare*, *Godless Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, *Shakespeare Thinking*, *The Law in Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare and Literary Theory*, *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, *Performances of Mourning in Shakespearean Theatre*, *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace*, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, *Shakespeare and the Modern Theater*, *Shakespeare and Carnival*, *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, *Green Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare and YouTube*, *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, *Shakespeare and Popular Music*, *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, *Chinese Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare in China*, *Shakespeare in Japan*, *Shakespeares After Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare on the Global Stage*, *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, *Shakespeare and War*, *Shakespeare and Tolerance*, and so on. This meager list does not include books and articles on his 37 plays and 154 sonnets. No aspects of Shakespeare, his works and life escape scrutiny. In short, no author in history has reached universal dimensions like Shakespeare.

As can be surmised, a literary work is apt to have versions and variants effected over the years by editors, commentators, copiers, or the authors themselves, but by and large there is no massive revision like in the example of *Truyện Kiều* above. Works of literature in previous periods are notorious in this respect. Before the introduction of the movable type printing press by Gutenberg in Europe around 1450, everything was written on materials more or less durable with an ink of varying quality. Palimpsest was parchment used over and over, with the new text overwritten in place of the erased old one. The process of copying by hand from the original suffers from human errors. Then, it is not infrequent for the original to get lost leaving scholars to thrash out the issue of authenticity or authorship. With the movable type printing press, knowledge dissemination exploded in the Renaissance and beyond. So did errors of any kinds relating to printed materials.

At inception, Shakespeare's plays are meant to be performed on the stage, not to be read. The actors played a crucial roles in shaping the forms the plays were subsequently available to the reading public. Shakespeare himself was an actor and owned the theater where this works were performed. Their recollections and alterations were initially responsible for variants and versions. At first only half of his plays were printed in quartos. Only later did he focus on the literary value of his plays. There recently has been an idea that Shakespeare had early on wanted to make his works a literary project for publication. In those days theater-going was popular while play-reading was reserved for the elite. Books were expensive and few knew how to read. Today books are relatively cheap and accessible to many whereas going to the theater is considered elitist. We know that Shakespeare's plays suffered worse variations than *Truyện Kiều* ever did.

Truyện Kiều was written in *Chữ Nôm* in the quintessential Vietnamese six-eight verse form, which figures spontaneously in folk songs, folk sayings, and lullabies. Every child raised in the traditional way was exposed to the smooth rhythm of the six-eight meter, a couplet formed with a verse of six syllables whose sixth rhymes internally with the sixth syllable of the second verse. The eighth syllable of the second verse in turn rhymes with the sixth syllable of the six-syllable verse of the following couplet. Then the rhyming pattern repeats itself. Thus *Truyện Kiều* opens with the following two couplets:

*Trăm năm trong cõi người ta
Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau.
Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu,
Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng.*

*Within a span of man's life of a century,
Talent and fate are locked in rivalry.
After a cataclysmic change,
What is witnessed is heart-rending.*

Two things are apparent in the above opening: First the rhyme pattern is clearly in the six-eight meter. It is a spontaneous, natural pattern of the Vietnamese speech, just like the iambic foot in English is spontaneous and natural to the English ear. The second feature is that every word is pure Vietnamese, as scholars are likely to say *tiếng Nam (Nôm) ròn* (pure Vietnamese speech). Although the story of *Truyện Kiều* was borrowed from a Chinese source, Nguyễn Du used the Vietnamese language to write his masterpiece. Surely, Vietnamese has an abundant supply of Chinese loans, and some of them are

used by the author in *Truyện Kiều* to add color, amelioration, mitigation, poetic quality, and so on, but never to show affectation or ostentation. While I am no *Truyện Kiều* expert, I believe the secret of the poem is its appeal to all strata of society through the rhythm and music of speech—which makes it highly quotable—, its exquisite artistry, the preponderance of the vernacular versus the scholarly, and its resonances with the common man, who recognizes universal emotions and beliefs such as love, faith, fate, filial piety, misfortune, greed, treachery, compassion, honor, jealousy. Finally, it treats the thesis with empathy, simplicity and lucidity.

Chữ Nôm is a logographic script derived from Chinese characters. Each word has two components, the phonetic and the semantic. The phonetic Chinese character represents more or less the sound of a Vietnamese word. And the semantic character supplies the meaning. The whole word is thus a cumbersome combination which can only approximate the native Vietnamese word with room enough for ambiguity and guesswork. Scholars who wrote in *Chữ Nôm* invented some one thousand new characters and introduced diacritics; and there was some effort at standardization by Nguyễn Trường Tộ under the last Emperor Tự Đức, who was reluctant to do away with Chinese characters as the official script. By that time it was too late. The French had come, and *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* gradually gained the ascendancy to the relief of the Vietnamese everywhere. Thanks this Romanized script, Vietnam is the only country formerly under the influence of China which has the most successful of all scripts in the world--the Roman alphabet. One can imagine the complex *Chữ Nôm* characters: The position of each component in the combination is presumably not standardized. Since the Vietnamese sound system differs markedly from the Chinese, the result is at best approximate, if not misleading sometimes. Thus, there are variants, e.g., one Vietnamese homonym *ba*, (three, father, wave) has three variants. Yet despite its shortcomings, *Chữ Nôm* served its purpose well due to the patience, creativity, intuition, imagination, and ingenuity of its users. *Chữ Nôm* was created by the elite, who knew Chinese well, out of Chinese characters and therefore was accessible only via Chinese characters. However, it is to *Chữ Nôm* that we owe *Truyện Kiều* and an entire corpus of Vietnamese literature up to the time when *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* was officially adopted, which is no mean feat. Today a serious enterprise is under way to research, develop and standardize *Chữ Nôm* in the country, spearheaded by the Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies.

Chinese loan words, called Sino-Vietnamese, do cause comprehension issues, especially when they are rarely if ever used in speech. Admittedly, *Truyện Kiều* contains such collocations, which require explanation. But it has plenty of company throughout world literature. Borrowing is a universal trait of language. Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean traditionally borrow from Chinese. All European languages traditionally borrow from Greek and Latin. This is where critics and literature teachers at all levels come in, and with them a whole slew of resources briefly described above, not to revise to the original, but to explain it, or to interpret it by using their own literary theories. I will not discuss critical theories since the topic lies outside the scope of the essay, except to the extent that such discussion bears directly on the purpose at hand.

To date the only monumental project of elucidation of *Truyện Kiều* I know of is one undertaken the late eminent Hán-Nôm (Sino-Nôm) scholar Đàm Duy Tạo, whose work is published on the website of *Viet Hoc Journal (Vietnamese Studies Journal)*. Firmament featured part of his work from October 2018 to July 2019 covering the first 992 verses. Since the *Chữ Nôm* original of the poem was presumed lost, his explanations were based on extant *Chữ Nôm* versions and at least two in *Chữ Quốc Ngữ*. If he thought a certain word from a popular version was wrong, he proposed a more suitable one based on folk sayings, rhyming patterns, classical or popular allusions, logic, or context. This project is an invaluable

tool of teachers and researchers alike. I would call this approach of close-reading formalism. The text is all there is. However, he did not undertake a massive revision of *Truyện Kiều* text.

The Modern World and Relevance of *Truyện Kiều*

In this section, I briefly review the theories that bear on the interpretation of *Truyện Kiều* or any literary works regardless of national origin by capitalizing on the rich scholarship that is well known in the Western world and the literate world throughout the globe. This discussion will be on Shakespeare and his works because of the abundance of critical and theoretical literature on the Bard than on any writers in history. More importantly, Shakespeare is the root cause of why Renaissance scholars devoted so much energy and polemic to how to tackle the issue of approaching literature and history. The scholarship emanating from their efforts bears on Shakespeare. However, it is applicable, minor details and obvious differences excepted, across the board to any authors anywhere. Just substitute Nguyễn Du or *Truyện Kiều* in lieu of Shakespeare, and nothing is lost.

The above statement, however, needs qualification. Clearly there is a great deal of difference between Shakespeare's plays and *Truyện Kiều*. Shakespeare's plays are meant primarily to be performed in a theater whereas *Truyện Kiều* as a narrative poem can only to be read, recited, or declaimed, unless it is adapted for film or play. Without communication through time and space, the English of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries found Shakespeare of all time whereas the Vietnamese, following Phạm Quỳnh, elevate *Truyện Kiều* to icon status of the Vietnamese nation for all time. Both examples are emblematic of reverence of literary genius. But the question of how to approach literature ought to remain regardless of country of origin and history.

[Digression or footnote] I can envision objections to this approach: How can I be sure that methods applied in Western literature are valid when practiced on an Eastern literature like Vietnamese. Haven't I missed what Rudyard Kipling wrote in "The Ballad of East and West" (1889):

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet?

The second line that doesn't get quoted in the same breath though it completes the meaning is:

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;

The first line is quoted glibly out of context and could mean all sorts of things from racism, naïveté about indiscriminate borrowing to contempt for the "others." But the next two lines cast a different scenario:

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.

The rest of the poem elaborates on the details of the encounter between the two strong men, and concludes with a refrain of four opening lines.

Perhaps East and West will never meet, but that's not the meaning of this poem.

[End of digression or footnote].

Just as all humans age, so all human creations, culture, become old, including works of literature. Some of these endure for centuries or millennia; others died from oblivion; still others are moribund for lack of vitality. Thus, the legitimate question is whether the work still retains its relevance to modern times. Yet even though time is a great equalizer, an exceptional masterpiece never loses its relevance. In all ages, historians, philosophers, scholars, researchers make sure that the past will not be forgotten. For what purpose? And this is the crucial question. To serve as beacon, example, model, lesson, heritage, or whatever because great literature has not only the contemporary but also the eternal? Does great literature ever go out of fashion? At least this seems a plausible purpose. However, things are not so simple, as we shall see.

Is *Truyện Kiều* relevant to the twenty-first century audience? This question was already posed for Shakespeare's plays as we saw above. The book and article titles cited there, *Shakespeare and Modernity*, *Shakespeare in the Present*, *Presentist Shakespeares*, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, *The Presentist Threat to Editions of Shakespeare*, *Historicism*, *New Historicism* and other books and articles of recent vintage should indicate that the issue was thoroughly discussed. Whether an old work of literature is relevant to today's audience has always been in the back of a reader's mind. One wonders if the word relevance subsumes taste, fashion, fads, trends along with redeeming values of some realm such as social, cultural, ethical, philosophical or spiritual. Today's popular novels that made the bestseller lists of, say, the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal, will have to pass the test of time for durability. Taste, fashion, fads, and advertisements are short-lived and fickle: What was *de rigueur* in the 1920s would strike most twenty-first-century folks as quaint, odd or out of place unless they grew up in those days. Even last year's bestsellers are not immune from oblivion.

The question is how can we interpret/understand an old literary work so that it can be relevant to today's audience. And what exactly do we mean by relevance? Do we read for pleasure or for a deeper level of understanding that can enrich our lives and blunt Camus's pronouncement that life is absurd, or perhaps change our lives for the better? In today's fast-paced materialistic and consumerist world, the questions themselves are vulnerable: Who cares? Yet, we had to ask questions about ourselves and about our creations, if only to rise above the level of the rest of the physical world. Is consumption of material goods the goal or meaning of life? Man is made to understand. Hence, he needs to interrogate, examine, investigate, interpret, and unearth meaning. Admittedly different works of literature or history require different approaches. Serious readers, e, g., scholars, historians, students, critics, academics do not waste time on trivial pursuits.

With respect to literature, we can employ any of the variety of critical and literary theories in existence: formalism, Russian formalism, psychoanalysis, reader response, deconstructionism, structuralism, post-structuralism, new criticism, feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism, cultural materialism, historicism, new historicism, presentism, modernism, post-modernism, ecocriticism. and more. We can be almost sure the -isms will not stop there.

For the purpose at hand, we choose two opposing but relevant approaches of Historicism and Presentism. Other approaches will be discussed when appropriate. There always is tension between Historicism and Presentism. The controversy pitted scholars, thinkers, academics against one another, with the more recent presentists challenging the time-worn historicists, and, to further muddy the waters, the historicists themselves split into Old historicists and New historicists, who were at odds with each other.

Historicism

Let's get one thing straight: The term Historicism here applies to the study of history and literature. We do not refer to the term as it applies to philosophy. When we approach past events or literary texts, we try to interpret them in their historical contexts, for it is almost intuitive to do so. Historicism dates back to Thucydides, and may be referred to as (Old) Historicism. The brand of historicism we are dealing with originates with German thinkers in the twentieth century. What is historicism? Paul Hamilton, in the Introduction to his book *Historicism*, has this to say:

Historicism (or 'Historism' of this translation of Curtius' *Historismus*) is a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds. It has enjoyed a long tradition of influence upon many disciplines of thought, recently experiencing a lively renewal in contemporary literary criticism. The most prominent late 20th-century critical fashions, poststructuralism and postmodernism, have ended up being understood through the images of history they imply. Yet this historical turn rejoins a well-worn tradition of historicism. At present, historicism is tempted to present itself as 'new', the latest way forward for literary theory. That alone might be a good reason for a book on it. (Hamilton 2003, 'Introduction', p. 2).

Historicism opposes the reverence of reason as a tool to deduce from first principles universal truths and natural law that humans and societies should live by, as the Enlightenment would have it. Historicism claims that history shows such variety that it defies reducing to a set of laws applicable to all times and places. There is no such thing as immutable human nature as humans and history evolve.

Historicism is concerned with putting everything human-created, texts and non-texts, in its proper historical context in order to interpret its meaning according the way it fitted the cultural patterns of its time. Hamilton (2003, 'Introduction', p. 3) called this first endeavor of historicism hermeneutical, i.e., interpretive. He concedes that "[u]nderstood hermeneutically a text's meaning is limited by the value accorded its discourse within the culture of its first audience." (Hamilton 2003, 'Introduction', p. 3). But the meaning derived in its original cultural environment will likely evolve in later times. Hamilton does recognize that between the time of a first audience and later times there might have been changes so that the original meaning no longer applies to audience of later times.

The term historicism, however, encompasses so many meanings that it is useless as a label for a theory, a movement or a school of thought. Reynolds (1999, Section 2. Classification of historicist theses) undertook the task of disentangling the confusedness of the term by identifying five "theses" under which it has been used, as explained in the following block quote:

1. To be understood properly things must be considered within their historical contexts... I propose to call this "mundane historicism."
2. History has its own methods which are distinct from those of the natural sciences...history deals with highly contingent, unrepeatable and particular events...the natural procedure is to try to understand the intentions of the agents involved and to discern the significance of their actions for future events. This I will refer to as "methodological historicism."

3. There are to be found in history general laws, rhythms, or patterns. And with these the social sciences can make predictions about the future. It should be immediately obvious that this version of historicism is at odds with the last version... no better title can be found than "Popperian historicism."

[To Karl Popper, historicism purports to predict the future based upon laws discovered by application of scientific reasoning. But historicism since inception opposes such approach, contending that history is impervious to generalization of any kind. Popper was criticized by historians and philosophers of history for appropriating the term historicism to mean the exact opposite of what it traditionally means. *Comment mine.*]

4. Standards of rationality are not fixed and eternal, but change over time...Due to the nature of the subject I will refer to this as the thesis of "epistemic historicism".

5. There are no absolute ahistorical values of any kind, rather all ideals are local and relative to a particular historical culture and period...this thesis draws the more radical conclusion that the very concepts of "truth", "objectivity", "reason", "scientific knowledge", etc. are merely social constructions favored by a particular culture at a particular time in history...Because it purports to apply to the entirety of a culture and its ideals I will call this "total historicism". (Reynolds 1999, Section 2. Classification of historicist theses).

If you are confused over what the term historicism means, you are not alone. No one will pretend that the field of literary theory is not a messy one.

New Historicism

Under the influence of Michel Foucault and as a reaction to the Enlightenment, natural-law theorists of the 17th century, up to Kant and Hegel, a new approach emerged in the 1980's. In 1982, Steven Greenblatt edited *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance (Genre 15 [1982], 3-6)*, in which he called New Historicism a conjunction of several ideas, approaches, insights, practices that were applied in the study of Renaissance literature that independent scholars arrived at. Greenblatt himself did not see, at this date and several years after that, New Historicism, a homegrown Anglo-American approach, as a unified theory, doctrine or movement. According to Veese ('Introduction', p. xi). New Historicism is a portmanteau word encompassing "literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences, hard and soft." It rejects New Criticism with its "empty formalism" and insists on considering history in analyzing literature. It relishes in the discovery of particularities, at times bizarre, in the past and is suspicious of universals. New Historicists are united in sharing five basic assumptions summarized by Veese as follows:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;

4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (Veese, 'Introduction', p. xi).

Let's try to make rough sense of these assumptions. Every human act, literary, social, economic, political, cultural, and so on, is inseparable from the material practices that are employed in its creation. A play, for example, is not produced *in vacuo*, but with the material practices of the time. Literary texts are intertwined with non-literary texts such as psychology, history, politics, economics, philosophy, etc. because they influence and inform each other. Any act to critique of, say, an idea uses the vocabulary and tools that created it, and thereby threatens to undermine the critic's position. Any literary text is inseparable from the milieu in which it sprang, i.e., is historical. History being infinitely granular, any attempt to derive universal essence or truths is doomed to failure. There is no absolute truth; everything is relative. A discovery is subjective interpretation. And finally the last assumption is straightforward: a critical method to describe culture under the capitalist system is part and parcel of the capitalist economy.

More concretely, Myers cites four "enabling presumptions" of the new "movement," which Greenblatt in an article published by *Genre* in 1982 titled New Historicism, as follows:

1. Literature is historical, which means (in this exhibition) that a literary work is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it, therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it.
2. Literature, then, is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history.
3. Like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces—there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs inescapably and irretrievably to the Renaissance. There is no continuity between him and us; history is a series of "ruptures" between ages and men.
4. As a consequence, the historian/critic is trapped in his own "historicity." No one can rise above his own social formations, his own ideological upbringing, in order to understand the past on its terms. A modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries experienced it. Given this fact, the best a modern historicist approach to literature can hope to accomplish, according to Catherine Belsey, is "to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology. (Myers, 'Introduction', para. 7).

The New Historicist ideas alarmed the traditionalists of academe, who saw in them an insurgency against the great Western canon, an assault of the rampart of traditional values, according to which there is such a thing as eternal, universal truth embedded in unchanging human nature. They were on high alert that (Western) civilization was on course for the descent to barbarism. Not that the "insurgents" were barbarians at the gate; they were within the ivy-covered walls of academe. Greenblatt is an expert on Renaissance literature at UC Berkeley, and so are others from academia experts on

Renaissance or Shakespeare. At present, New Historicism has the ascendancy as the favorite critical theory in teaching and studying texts, literary and non-literary, despite the fact that Kastan (1999, 'Introduction', p.13) deems it too narcissistic because the New Historicist is well aware of her situatedness. However, let's not get bogged down on polemic because this would take us too far afield. Any further discussion has to await another time.

Presentism

Let us now turn to Presentism. Compared with Historicism and New Historicism, Presentism is a new kid on the block. Though the word *presentism* first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary since 1916, it never gained popularity until the 1980's, when it began its meteoric career, threatening to dethrone New Historicism as the theory to deal with literature or history study. Ironically, the New Historicist came uncannily close to the position of the Presentist in recognizing that the critic's situatedness in the present carries her intellectual baggage with her in interpreting the past.

Merriam-Webster Online defines *presentism* as "an attitude toward the past dominated by present-day attitudes and experiences," as such it has a pejorative sense. In an article on Presentism, Wilson (2019, Section I) argues that "[i]n literary studies today, however, presentism is less a bad form of historical inquiry and more a good form of political scholarship." In Section II, he likens Old Historicists with scientists who seek to study the past objectively for its own sake (knowledge for knowledge's sake), doing what can be called basic or pure research. New Historicism counters that humans are incapable of engaging the past from any point of view except the present due of their being situated in the present. This argument is in essence the Presentist stance. Wilson concludes, "It's a condition of being. We have never been not presentist."

In a nutshell, Presentism views the past in terms of the present with all the ramifications that it entails. As Benedetto Croce, the Italian historian and philosopher, said "All history is contemporary history." History is written from the point of view of the present as experienced by the authors. The most important ramification is what *should* we do with the knowledge (facts and truths) gained either by historicists or by presentists. There is strong reaction against politicizing scholarly knowledge, such as to make the world better. Advocates of the hands-off attitude such as Stanley Fish oppose activism whether ethical or political. Wilson, while conceding that teachers should avoid advocacy or activism, feels strongly that they should never abdicate academic responsibility and integrity. Current assaults on academia by the current administration should not intimidate teachers from speaking the truth. One can discuss politics in conjunction with the subject of study, be it, say, King Lear or Othello, and not cringe about whether this may make somebody look bad. The debate still rages on among the academics. For now, this bit of background should suffice. I would add that this discussion is not wide of the mark, but of utmost relevance in today's world.

Wilson distinguishes six flavors of presentism based on purpose or methodology.

1. *Naive presentism*: unreflectively using the terms of the present to interpret the past; bad presentism in the discipline of history.
2. *Strategic presentism*: deliberately using concerns of the present to motivate our study of the past; here the present is a lens for looking at the past, which is the object of study.

3. *Analytical presentism*: using an interpretation of the past to cultivate an interpretation of the present; here the past is a lens for looking at the present, which is the object of study.

4. *Theoretical presentism*: using particulars from the past to create abstract schemes and ideas with the potential to elucidate the present and even the future; a more ambitious form of the analytical mode.

5. *Political presentism*: using applied research to draw parallels between the past and present for a call to action in the here and now; ultimately, the mode here is advocacy rather than interpretation.

6. *Historical presentism*: analyzing presentisms from the past—past uses of the past to interpret the present and the present to interpret the past; this model returns to pure research, but now doing pure research of applied research. (Wilson, 2019, Section V).

So far our attention has been focused on critical approaches as they pertain to Shakespearean Studies. But they have spread the Victorian Studies and beyond. Remember that literary texts are historical, so that are studied the same way as history. What about *Truyện Kiều*? We both historicize and presentize *Truyện Kiều*, mindful that the past and the present are in constant and mutual relationship. As Wilson (2019, Section V) correctly says, “Just as the present can be used to motivate our interpretation of the past, the past can be used to enhance our understanding of the present.” Let make this relationship an symbiotic one.

Reading Truyện Kiều historically

I am aware that what I claim to be the case, especially with respect to opinions and judgments, will be tainted by my present intellectual baggage I bring to formulating my narrative. That is everything is interpretation. My challenge, and the challenge of anyone who attempts to read the past, is, “What does this anecdote/detail/evidence mean to the people of the time of Nguyễn Du, and not at the time of Phạm Quỳnh or our modern time?” We have to reconstruct the past on the evidence that the past leaves to us. Clearly, each body of evidence will yield its own narrative. Since none has all the evidence, none can be certain of their conclusion. We operate method-wise like scientists, i.e., we go where the evidence leads us until counter-evidence surfaces and calls for revision of our conclusion.

Let us start by reviewing a thumbnail sketch of history around the time of *Truyện Kiều*, while allowing greater depth into the past for the sake of clarity. Most names of personages are omitted for brevity’s sake. If the reader is familiar with the historical background, this sketch is not necessary.

The history of Vietnam from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is a tragic one. The Posterior Lê Dynasty had been in steady decline since the sixteenth century. Taking advantage of the impotence of royal authority, Mạc Đăng Dung rose in the northern border enclave of Cao Bằng, killed the Lê King, and founded the Mạc Dynasty. The Mạc quickly sought recognition from the Chinese Minh Emperor. The Lê royal descendants took refuge in Thanh Hóa further South with the support of the Trịnh lords and the Nguyễn lords. The two houses were related by marriage. The armed conflict between the Lê Dynasty and the Mạc Dynasty lasted sixty years, until the Lê Dynasty was restored to Thăng Long (Hanoi) with the aid of the Trịnh lords, who destroyed the Mạc. The arrogant Trịnh lords began to act tyrannical, and the Nguyễn lords began to worry about their fate. It wasn’t long before the Trịnh lords

moved to usurp power in the North, reducing the King to figurehead status. The Nguyễn lords fearful for their safety moved south to Huế, which they made their capital.

Though now in firm control of the North, the Trịnh lords still paid lip service to the successor Lê King. Fear of the Lê loyalists, of the Chinese-supported Mạc remnants in their border enclave of Cao Bằng, and of the increasingly militarily assertive Southern Nguyễns, had prevented the Trịnh lords from deposing the King. They were content to wield the power to govern in the name of the Lê King. For good measure, the Trịnhs sought support of the Chinese Minh Dynasty.

Meanwhile, the Nguyễn lords in the South, emboldened by the impunity of the Trịnhs' actions, reinforced their military, asserted dominion over the southern half of country, and overtly opposed the Northerners. The country was now de facto divided. Both factions pretended to owe allegiance to the Lê King, with the Trịnhs claiming defense of the Crown against the rebellious Nguyễns, and the Nguyễns claiming defense of the Crown against the Trịnh usurpers. The Nguyễns consolidated their power, expanded their territory by conquest of the Chăm Kingdom and by annexation of "Water" Cambodia (the Mekong Delta) by defeating the Siamese. But the Nguyễn lords ruled with an iron hand. Corruption, repression, and poverty were rampant throughout the country. Both regimes were unpopular, as they were waging their intermittent but devastating internecine wars with weapons purchased from the Dutch and Portuguese merchants looking for trade. From the region of Qui Nhon three brothers known as Tây Sơn recruited disaffected and impoverished peasants, even Chinese merchants, and rose in rebellion. The (second?) youngest brother, Nguyễn Huệ, was a military genius. The Tây Sơn carried the war to the North under the slogan "protect the Lês, destroy the Trịnhs" and secured Thăng Long for King Lê Chiêu Thống. Then entrusting the King's protection to a general, the Tây Sơn withdrew to the South to face the Nguyễn forces. They nearly destroyed the Nguyễn clan. The sole survivor, Nguyễn Ánh, took refuge in Siam. In 1802, after reunifying the country, he became Emperor Gia Long, founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty,

Under pressure from the Tây Sơn, King Lê Chiêu Thống was obliged to seek help from China. He approached the Viceroy of Liangguang (Tổng Đốc Lưỡng Quảng) Tôn Sĩ Nghị to relay his request to the Thanh (Qing) Emperor. The Chinese governor saw an opportunity to reestablish Chinese control of Vietnam by establishing a puppet regime. The Thanh Emperor approved an expeditionary force of two hundred thousands under the command of Tôn Sĩ Nghị. The Chinese invasion was launched before Tet and succeeded in restoring King Lê Chiêu Thống on the throne. At first there was little resistance from the Vietnamese. The Tây Sơn troops, faced with overwhelming numerical superiority, decided to withdraw to preserve their strength. Easy advances made the Chinese overconfident. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Huệ in Huế was planning his operations carefully. Before launching his offensive, he declared himself Emperor Quang Trung and addressed his troops in patriotic terms. Although Nguyễn Huệ's army was half the size of the Chinese force, his soldiers were highly motivated. His troops moved out rapidly on the first day of the Lunar New Year while the Chinese were celebrating theirs and were caught completely by surprise. The first Tết offensive in history was under way. By the fifth day Emperor Quang Trung's forces were in Thăng Long; on the seventh day they were celebrating their victory. On the Chinese side, it was a total rout. Tôn Sĩ Nghị was reported to have fled back to China in such a hurry that he rode on an unsaddled horse. The year was 1789.

King Lê Chiêu Thống with some of his loyal courtiers escaped to China to seek military assistance once again. This time the Thanh Chinese had no stomach for foreign adventure. He did not obtain any

assistance, was tricked into becoming a Chinese subject, and died in humiliation. Lê Chiêu Thống remains forever an archetype of high treason and opprobrium in Vietnamese history.

Unfortunately, the reign of the Tây Sơn did not last. Nguyễn Huệ died in 1792. Within 10 years, Nguyễn Ánh, partly with the military assistance of France, was able to reunify the country, founded the Nguyễn Dynasty and became Emperor Gia Long. Nguyễn Du was active during this historical period. The above thumbnail historical sketch serves as a backdrop to give perspective to an interpretation of the relevant past. It lends substance to:

*Trải qua một cuộc bẽ dẫu,
Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng.*

*After a cataclysmic change,
What is witnessed is heart-rending.*

Vietnam in this 300-year period of the Lê Dynasty underwent a crucible of gigantic struggle testing whether the nation is resilient and strong enough to survive division, regionalism, hatred, feudalism, and tradition. Nguyễn Du was loyal to the Lês by family tradition; his father was prime minister under a Lê king. But he now served, albeit reluctantly, Emperor Gia Long, a descendant of a family who supported then betrayed the Lês. Similarly, Kiều reluctantly becomes a prostitute, for a higher cause, while being loyal to Kim Trọng. While Kiều ends up reunited with her first love, Nguyễn Du never was able to make good his first loyalty to the Lês. To all appearances Nguyễn Du was showered with honor by being appointed ambassador to China while Kiều never consummated her love even after marriage to the man she loved. She rejects sexual contact on the grounds that she is no longer worthy.

Nguyễn Du's divided loyalty must have been for him a source of internal conflict, given that the other loyalists had refused to collaborate and devised ways to cope with the new order. Imbued with Confucianist ethics, they would prefer poverty to ease by collaborating. During World War II, French intellectuals faced more or less the same dilemma. Should they collaborate with the German occupiers or should they join the resistance? Or should they resign to status quo, move on to do whatever they liked. Jean-Paul Sartre chose passive resistance. Being a philosopher he wielded his pen as weapon and created la *littérature engagée* in defense of the human individual in the face of a dehumanization ideology. He proclaimed, *l'enfer, c'est les autres* (hell is the others). We know what he meant by the "others." For Sartre the enemy is never in doubt, the German occupiers. However, for Nguyễn Du the enemy was not so clear. True, he was loyal to the Lês, whose last king was a disgrace to the country. The major players, the Trịnhs, the Nguyễns, the late-comers Tây Sơn, and the Lês, had been duking it out for decades whereas Nguyễn Du was just an observer. What options did he have? Now that the new order had been established and peace had finally come, did it make sense to him to remain disengaged, especially when the ruler needed him, and the country was in need of reconciliation, reconstruction and development? Yesterday's enemy was no more so today. The new Emperor had offered an olive branch to Nguyễn Du, which is a genuine act of reconciliation. Nguyễn Du must have weighed the pros and cons before making an informed choice by stifling his private Confucian scruples. Between refusal and engagement, his choice was clear, but not necessarily easy. He was free to choose a course of action that would suit the situation best; and he was free later to change his mind without prejudice to his integrity, if he wanted to. By accepting the offer he was willing to let bygone be bygone, and turn the page on the past. Pragmatism, common sense, a sense of duty, concern for the future all must have been weighed in his decision. One unintended consequence of his decision to

cooperate was his appointment as ambassador to China, which led to the discovery of the source of his Tale of Kiều. One could throw obloquy at him as unprincipled, unscrupulous, unabashed, and honorless. But any such judgment needs substantiation. How could we know how much agonizing soul-searching and hand-wringing he had to endure before each decision was made? One cannot make a virtue out of stubbornness. Neither can one make a virtue out of hypocrisy and sanctimony.

As for Kiều, she was tested beyond imagination. She was tested to a breaking point. A beautiful and talented woman, Kiều had the right to expect better of life, not because she was entitled but because as a human being she had legitimate aspirations, given her abilities. Of course, character, personality, situation in life, circumstances, chance, luck, and more have to be factored into the equation. But she lived in a patriarchal society, a system designed to facilitate certain outcomes and inhibit certain others. The Confucian order privileged a hierarchical structure constructed to maintain social stability, harmony, and tranquility at the expense of individual freedom, expression, development, and growth. One is not supposed to rock the boat built and managed by the male-centered power caste. Its hierarchy of subordination governs monarch-subject, husband-wife, and father-child relationship, with the ancillary male child as heir-females relation following the same pattern. The feudal systems of East and West are similar in important respects. However, where in the West there occurred an awakening manifested in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and later Romanticism as overarching movements that injected reason, notions of respect for the law, equality, fraternity, and corporate and individual freedom into human consciousness, the East has none of the same compass. Here Rudyard Kipling's first line of "The Ballad of East and West": "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" seems to apply unconditionally. The East had to learn the essence of freedom haltingly, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes hostilely under the pretext that Western notions do not necessarily fit the temperament of Eastern man. It's not the case that the East does not borrow from the West; it borrows left and right; it just borrows selectively.

As a foreshadowing of the tribulations Kiều is later destined to encounter, the poem earlier on recounts the story of a much admired diva gone too soon in her prime and now lying beneath the green sod. It is the third of the month of the year when nature awakes to bird songs, fresh breeze, and green leaves. It is a time of remembrance of the dead, and people in variegated clothes, including Kiều, her sister Vân and her brother Vương Quan, throng the cemetery to clean grave sites and reminisce. Visitors are burning incense and votive papers to the departed, praying and reflecting all over the landscape till the sun dips toward the horizon. One by one they left as the gloom gradually spreads. Fresh incense and flowers remain at every site except one, which shows neglect and desolation. Kiều learns from her brother that it's the grave of Đạm Tiên, who in life was a singer celebrated for her beauty and talent. A young man from afar hearing of her reputation set out to see her. On arrival the young man found her chamber empty. She had died some time before so that the carriage tracks of erstwhile visitors in the front yard had turned green with moss. He wept and staged a mock funeral to her memory in a roadside plot, which is now covered in red dust from the traffic. Kiều weeps, and, as if by premonition, laments the fate of beautiful women, who in life are wives of all men and who are destined to die husbandless. This is a poignant portent of what will befall our heroine in subsequent development.

It is in the waning hours, when Kiều and her siblings are about to head home, that a friend of Vương Quan, Scholar Kim Trọng appears on horseback. He spies Kiều hidden behind the flowers as befits a traditional girl who finds herself in the sudden presence of a man. It is love at first sight for both of them. Yet there is not an introduction and not an acknowledgment of each other. Later, driven by mutual feelings they manage to meet and exchange vows of fidelity. Neither of them knows at that time

that their separation will last years. Yet, despite all the trials and tribulations, they manage to stay alive for the final act of their extraordinary misfortune. Kiều did attempt suicide, being so overwhelmed by a cruel fate. But by human intervention, again, she was saved. Their final reunion is cause for relief that bad karma has definitively left the couple alone. We are in awe of the faith, steadfastness, love that they reserve for each other, and are wondering if there can be a comparable exemplar of such faith and steadfastness in love in the twenty-first century. But we deplore the misogynistic nature of the society that allows Kiều's body to be shown by Tú Bà as a desirable object to Mã Giám Sinh.

Reading Truyện Kiều in the present

The thesis of *Truyện Kiều* is manifestly the tension between talent and fate. But the protagonist Thúy Kiều is a woman living in a strongly patriarchal, traditional society. It seems the tension is between female talent on one side, and patriarchy and misogyny on the other. In another setting, such as one of the Western countries, she may have a fighting chance at becoming a success story because she will have the freedom to fashion her own destiny rather than have destiny foisted on her willy-nilly.

The first observation is the backwardness of a traditional society. Conservative, self-righteous, sanctimonious, exploitative, rigid in outlook, slow to reform, such a society is incapable or unwilling to loosen its grip on power and consent to share power. Kiều and Đạm Tiên, sisters in misfortune, cannot expect sympathy or compassion from such a system. Fortunately, individuals of good will, such as the Buddhist monk Giác Duyên, still exist to the glory of humanity. Such individuals add meaning to life and make it tolerably worth living.

The second observation is the reactionary nature of such societies. Kiều lives a precarious life, not of her own making, but forced upon her because of her vulnerability as a woman. What happens to her could only happen in a corrupt, lawless society totally ignorant of human rights, especially the rights of women. A false accusation of smuggling by a silk merchant leveled at Kiều's father results in a raid of his residence by a bunch of thugs, confiscation of all his properties, torture right in his home and imprisonment. The price of his father's freedom? Three hundred taels of silver. This is a case of flagrant extortion, and it goes unpunished. Kiều, driven by filial piety, decides to sell herself into bondage to save her father from prison. Thanks to a man of good will, a go-between is contacted who produces a man named Mã Giám Sinh, who will provide the necessary funds in exchange for "marriage." Well-dressed and arrogant, Mã is actually a pimp. The go-between shows off Kiều's body and talents to Mã. The price is agreed upon; the father signs the papers; Kiều follows Mã to a woebegone fate. Her father is acquitted and regains his freedom, but at a tremendous cost of selling her daughter to prostitution. Someone has power over everyone in society, including Kiều's family, the power to decide the fate of everyone. It's the social structure designed by the power elite, who usurped the right of everyone and made everyone their slaves.

Why must Kiều be forced to sell herself to save her father? Because unsubstantiated allegations are allowed to hold by the court system. This is a gross miscarriage of justice, and it is allowed to stand. Is forced prostitution the only solution? Or are there other measures less demeaning, more humane and more respectful of human dignity? This corrupt society makes no provisions for compassionate resolution of conflicts. In a society where respect for the law is the norm, the justice system will investigate allegations of wrongdoing, and she would have a chance to find ways to fight abuse of power and oppression, false accusation, and government overreach. We pity Kiều for living in a society where the odds are stacked against women, who in the final analysis have only their bodies as assets,

not their character, abilities, or intellect. In other words, women are regarded as objects. Kiều is a classic case for feminist outrage. As long as women are subjected to sexual predation, exploitation, and abuse, society has the duty to extirpate the cancer that ravages it from within.

Sadly, human trafficking is still rampant in the twenty-first century despite efforts to tamp it down.

Lastly, such as a society is repressive. Rebellion, civil war occur because of popular discontent. Từ Hải is a rebel with a cause. He refuses to cooperate with the Court and prefers to carve out a bailiwick for himself and thousands of followers. He is a freedom fighter for his followers who yearn to be free. To the Court, he is a menace to be destroyed at all costs. In another environment, he would be allowed to air his grievances and has them addressed in a peaceful manner. Public tranquility is achieved via repression and oppression, not by dialogue, participation, deliberation and election.

Kiều has her own weakness. After years of suffering at the hands of sexual predators, pimps, con men, madams, jealous wives, she is by a strange twist of fortune married to Từ Hải, a renegade. Yet it is to this union that she owes some respite, and enjoys years of relatively tranquil conjugal life. Từ Hải treats her with decency and respect, something that eluded her until then. But life as outlaws is always precarious even though Từ Hải is a valiant man of prowess. The government never ceases to try to root out such thorn in their side. Enter, a wily governor, who knows how catch a powerful prey like Từ Hải--by way of a woman. So he sends Kiều expensive gifts, and promises more favors that would make her life even happier. He speaks to her in glowing terms about a life of luxury in the service of the government if Từ Hải surrenders. All she needs to do is persuade her husband to disband his army, lay down his arms, and join the government peacefully. Kiều finds the cunning governor persuasive. After years in purgatory, so to speak, and on the lam, Kiều must be exhausted and yearns for peace and safety. So she goes to work on her husband and tries to persuade him with the prospect of a peaceful life free from fear for their safety. Từ Hải, like most men, behaves like Adam, who listens to Eve, who listens to the serpent. The moment Từ Hải gives in to Kiều, he is doomed. He is surrounded by government soldiers and dies standing, as befits the hero that he was. Kiều now realizes too late that she is the architect of her own ruination, and that she has been used for a purpose inimical to her well-being. Frailty, thy name is Woman!

As for Hồ Tôn Hiến, he is a prized hero of the Court for eliminating a scourge to its authority. He is the strategist who succeeds in an extremely difficult challenge thanks to Kiều, whose gullibility turns her into his accomplice. At stake is no less than an army of well-armed men ready to do battle to preserve their freedom. Từ Hải is formidable foe, so far unconquered and impregnable. Hồ knows the danger of tackle such a worthy enemy head on. Superb observer of human behavior, he penetrates Kiều's thin armor to get to her to do his bidding. In the face of gifts and sweet talk, Kiều's defenses crumble. The old fox has made short work of her scruples.

Is Kiều guilty of Từ Hải's demise? Or is she victim of the weakness of her character? It is difficult not to condemn Kiều for the enormity of her act. Not only is she directly responsible for her husband's death, but she also puts his followers in great jeopardy. We can dismiss weakness of character as a defense. I feel that everyone should be responsible for his or her own action. Yet while we cannot make light of her past trials that were visited upon her with a vengeance, we have to find out to what extent that past is responsible for her present behavior. This is not an easy proposition. In assessing guilt, we should not forget intention. Clearly she did not intend to kill her husband; she did intend to save him, however. It is extenuating circumstances like these that partially exonerate her. Much as she earns our

sympathy for the unfair deal life metes out to her, she cannot escape a sense of guilt for her role in the death of her husband.

Từ Hải should merit our sympathy too. His only crime is his pursuit of freedom and justice that the regime denies its citizens. Given a justice system that is fair to all and less prone to corruption by the powerful, and that holds that no one is above the law, he probably would not feel the need to rebel. We are appalled at the way Kiều's family is ruined by corruption and miscarriage of justice. In a society that such acts of lawlessness are condoned, Từ Hải has every reason to mistrust the government. Rather he, along with his followers, chooses non-participation and freedom. He would never surrender to a government he cannot trust. He is adamant about yielding to the government for whom might makes right. Unfortunately he does not pay enough attention to his Achilles' heel. His undoing comes from the quarter he least expected, his wife. From time immemorial it is the truth men know. Men are prey to beauty, and beauty is subliminal subtlety. When men wake up, it may be too late. Beauty works in life, and in death. Từ Hải, though mortally hit by barrages of arrows, maintains his defiant upright posture. The moment Kiều appears with tears, he collapses, in his last tribute.

Women in a traditional setting have no rights, are objectified and dehumanized. Kiều is at the mercy of a toxic cultural environment without recourse. As a principled, self-respecting woman, she upholds her dignity and integrity as best as she could, fighting back a parade of seedy characters from Mã Giám Sinh to Thúc Sinh. At long last, she is able to reunite with Kim Trong in matrimony, fulfilling the pledge of fidelity they swore to each other years before. Perhaps out of shame, she denies herself the pleasure of physical contact because she believes she is no longer pure. The long arm of tradition claims another victim by imposing its absurd code of ethic again. She is beset with guilt and shame, and is unable to overcome the burden that weighs on her heart and soul. In another more tolerant setting, she can easily expunge her guilt complex and have a normal sex life in matrimony that she and Kim Trong deserve.

Logic of *Truyện Kiều*

First off, I don't know what to make of the logic of a poem. If logic means verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*), then, yes, we want the story is to be believable. This is the requirement of the seventeenth-century French drama in addition to the three unities. Even Hàn Mặc Tử's mad poetry is believable, given his mental state. Therefore, my comments on this rubric will be brief.

In *Truyện Kiều*, Nguyễn Du begins with a thesis that talent and fate are in constant conflict. This thesis is formulated as a metaphor and a personification: talent and fate "hate" each other. We construe it as an inverse proportion between the two terms: (1) The more talent a woman has, the worse her fate will be. Or we can interpret it as a neutral inequality, talent \neq fate. But the inequality fails to capture the spirit of the thesis. Either way the Vietnamese Bard succeeded in proving his thesis. Let's set the truth value of proposition (1) as true. But the converse is not necessarily true. (2) The less talent a woman has, the better her fate will be. This proposition is false.

On a more philosophical level, the thesis hints at the power of Heaven or Supreme Being to strike down human pretentiousness, and to set limits to human condition lest man get the idea of defying His authority to be equal to Him. We see this in Greek mythology when Zeus condemns Tantalus to never satisfy his hunger or thirst even though fruit and water are tantalizing near; when Sisyphus is condemned to perpetuity to roll a rock to a hilltop where it rolls back down; when Prometheus is bound

to a rock to suffer an eagle by day to devour his liver, which grows back overnight to be devoured again by day. The Bible tells how God banished Adam and Eve to earth for daring to eat of the forbidden fruit of knowledge of good and evil. As the saying goes, man proposes, God disposes.

Now, at the word conceptual level, there is the potential conflict of art and logic. Art is creativity, and creativity defies logic. Creation is emancipation from constraints, from tyranny, from shackles; it needs the oxygen of freedom lest it suffocate, wither on the vine, and die. `

My contention is that critics should respect the author's flights of imagination and admire the way the human brain can create a world of its own that has the capacity to amaze, delight, baffle, shock, awe, even outrage. We shouldn't delude ourselves as to the creativity of meaning that humans are capable of. When Nguyễn Du writes (ll. 1525-26):

*Vầng trăng ai xẻ làm đôi,
Nửa in gối chiếc, nửa soi dặm trường.*

The moon fractured in two;
Half lit the lone pillow, half lit the lengthy road,

we do not call him out for being illogical; we praise him for the splendid imagery.

Take Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall, Jackson Pollock, van Gogh, Michelangelo, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Xuân Diệu, Hàn Mặc Tử, to name of few.

Here is a random sampling of their works: Pablo Picasso: *L'homme aux cartes* (The Card Player); Piet Mondrian: *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*; Marc Chagall: *I and the Village*; Jackson Pollock: *Autumn Rhythm*; van Gogh: *Starry Night*; Michelangelo: Frescoes on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel.

Baudelaire in "*L'Albatros*" (The Albatross) writes:

*Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.*

The Poet is like the prince of clouds
to haunt the storm, and the bowman to mock;
Exiled to earth amidst the shouts
His giant wings an obstacle to walk. (tr. TDL)

Arthur Rimbaud, in his poem "Vowels" (*Les Voyelles*), writes:

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels. (tr. TDL)

The romantic poet Xuân Diệu writes in "*Ta Muốn Ôm*" (I Want to Grasp Thee):

Hỡi xuân hồng, ta muốn cắn vào ngươi!

O, vermeil spring! I want to bite into thee! (tr. TDL)

In his poem “*Anh Điên*” (I am Mad), Hàn Mặc Tử--I would call him the martyr poet--writes:

*Anh nuốt phứt hàng chữ
Anh cắn vỡ lời thơ
Anh cắn, cắn cắn cắn
Hơi thở đứt làm tư!*

I swallow up the line of words,
And bite open the poem,
And I bite, bite, bite, bite
To break my breath in four! (tr. TDL)

We should reckon with the arsenal at the disposal of artists, poets, writers that allows them to reach the unreachable, to articulate the ineffable, to create something out of nothing. We should fill ourselves with wonder and wonderment, open wide babylike our eyes, and soak in the world they are unfolding for our enjoyment on pain of death of heart and soul and mind.

Conclusion

To conclude the issue of tampering with literature, let us draw a lesson: One cannot tamper with a work of literature under the pretext of updating it for modern audiences. It behooves us, modern readers, to make sense of past works by analysis and interpretation. Under no circumstances should a work of literature be modified to suit the purpose or taste of anybody whether contemporaneous with the author or not. It stands to reason that the work should be respected in its totality free of modification by strangers and that it is a product of intellectual creativity by one person embedded in a time period that is irretrievable. A work of art or literature is not a fungible product subject to death by a thousand cuts and modifications.

II. Tampering with of The National Writing System *Chữ Quốc Ngữ*

Two years ago, in Firmament of January 2018, Pham Doanh reviewed the study project for a reformed *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* that a certain Bùi Hiền was reported to have spent years to complete. In this scathing article, Pham Doanh points out how the proposal makes absolutely no sense. Normally Firmament doesn't reprint its past articles, but the issue here is so important that a reprint imposes itself. It will follow the present essay to save duplication in this discussion.

The question is, “Why should *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* be reformed at all?”

It is already phonetic and easy to pronounce. Apart from the tone diacritics over the vowels that require a little practice for Western ears, the consonants and vowels are always pronounced the same way. Let's do a quick review.

The letter *a* is always pronounced [a], *e* is always pronounced [ɛ], and so on.

The clusters *kh*, and *ng* may be a little challenging, but not much. *Kh* occurs word-initially only while *ng* occurs both word-initially and word-finally, e.g., *không* [xouŋ^m] (no), Khanh [xã] (male and female name), *ngang* [ŋaŋ] (across, etc.). *Kh* [x] is a voiceless velar fricative pronounced with the back of the tongue raised toward, but not quite touching, the hard palate forming a narrow horizontal slit while the tip points downward toward the back of the lower front teeth, and a strong puff of air coming from the lungs is squeezed through the narrow slit on the way out. This is exactly the German sound spelled *ch* in as *Bach* [ba:x]. The *ng* [ŋ] is exactly the English *ng* [ŋ] in *singing in the rain* [sɪŋŋ ɪn ðə reɪn].

The cluster *nh* also occurs in two positions, word-initial and final. In initial position, *nh-* is pronounced [ɲ]-as in the Spanish *niño* [niño], approximately [ny]. In final position, *-nh* is pronounced the same way with the secondary effect of shortening and tensing the previous vowel.

The letter *d* is pronounced [y] in the South, and [z] in the North.

The initial cluster *gi-* is pronounced as [y] in the South, [z] in the North.

The initial *g-* is a voiced velar stop (plosive) in combination with *-a*, *-o*, *-u*, and becomes *gh-* in front of *-e* and *-i*.

The cluster *tr* is pronounced [tr] in the South and [tʃ] an affricate in the North.

The *ch* is pronounced [ty] in the South and [tʃ] in the North, Thus the difference between *ch* and *tr* is neutralized in the Northern dialect.

In final position, the difference between *-n* and *-ng* is neutralized in the Southern dialect.

The letter *c* is always pronounced [k]; *s* is [ʃ] in the South, [s] in the North; *x* is-always pronounced [s]; *qu-* is pronounced [kw] in both regions, or [w] in sloppy Southern speech.

The *r* is an alveolar flap in the South, and [z] in the North.

The letter *v* is phonetically [v] in the Northern dialect, and careless [y] in the Southern.

This just about summarizes all essential information about the Vietnamese sound system as regards dialectal differences.

The tone system is cause for concern for Southerners, who cannot get the tones of *hỏi* (mid-rising) and *ngã* (mid-rising glottalized) straight, unlike the Northerners, whose speech incorporates the distinction since infancy. This distinction is stubborn for the Southerners, but they can learn to overcome it.

The Southerners have trouble with the distinction between final *-n* and *-ng*. By contrast, the Northerners have trouble distinguishing the initial *ch-* and *tr-*. Again, they can learn to overcome the hurdles quickly

In addition, the intonation, i.e., the pitch and modulation of the voice, differs from region to region and cannot be regulated by spelling. So is accent. Bù's proposed reform tries to achieve uniformity of accent by forcing all speakers to conform to the Northern dialect because the proposed system does not have variants obtaining in the South. Speech cannot be legislated by fiat while orthography can. However, when speech evolves the spelling is left behind. We see this in the great vowel shift in Middle English from the 15th century to the 16th century, when vowels were raised and the high vowels were diphthongized. Early Modern English of Shakespeare's time is different enough from today's English as to require a pronouncing dictionary.

Chữ Quốc Ngữ does a wonderful job in representing the sounds of Vietnamese in a consistent manner, so that learners of all ages and linguistic backgrounds can learn to spell and pronounce the language with a minimum amount of effort. There is no need of spelling bee in Vietnamese because any grade school student can master Vietnamese spelling in a relatively short time with proper training. The language is overwhelmingly monosyllabic; and there are no inflectional endings, i.e., morphology is simple. Vietnamese is an analytic language, i.e., gender, number, case, tense are expressed by a separate word or no words at all, rather than by inflectional suffixes to the radical. By contrast, all Indo-European languages are in varying degrees synthetic. To my knowledge, Latin was the epitome of synthetic languages, and Old English was less synthetic than Latin, but far more so than Modern English. Fortunately, English has shed most its inflections and become morphologically simpler, a blessing to the learner. But its spelling is chaotic. Wouldn't it be nice if Bù Hiền had undertaken the reform of English spelling and left *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* alone?

Any project of reform of the writing system (or of anything else) should involve a cost-benefit evaluation in its feasibility study. At a minimum on both sides, time, money, personnel, education and training, conversion, ease of implementation, disruption, and cutover have to be considered. Below are minimum questions that come to mind after cursory and informal brainstorming by one man.

First, *how much time* will be required to *prepare* for the changeover? What institution(s) will be the first to *transition* to the new system? Which institution will *manage* the project from inception to completion? What is/are the *contingency plan(s)* (plan B), and are they in place ready to go? What is the *duration* of the project? How much *time will be saved* when the new system is functional?

Second, *how much money* will be budgeted for the implementation of the project? Is there an itemized *budget prepared and approved* for each phase of the project? Is there a *budget for contingencies*? Since the entire country needs writing, the cost of unlearning the old and learning the new, the cost of conversion of all kinds of books and written documents have to be factored in. Are safeguards in place to fight corruption so rampant where money is involved. Then there are opportunity costs, that is, costs incurred for relinquishing other benefits that may be reaped if this project did not exist. Specifically, if this project did not exist, the funds earmarked for its implementation would be saved and made available for other needed worthwhile projects, such as education and health care. What are *monetary benefits* when the new writing system is fully operational?

Third, what are the *human resources required* for the project? Is *personnel sufficient* to manage and carry out day-to-day operations? Are *personnel hired, qualified and/or trained* to serve in their required capacities? What are the *provisions for personnel* upon completion of the project? What are the *expected benefits* in terms of personnel.

Fourth, what are the provisions for *education and training of personnel* in the new system responsible for managing and implementing the project. Is there a *time table* for such education and training? Who are the *trainers*, and who trains the trainers? Since this is a reform of the writing system, we are talking about tens of millions people from school age on up. They have to unlearn the old system and learn the new. What *categories of people* should be trained first? Suppose we choose teachers of all levels, should they be trained simultaneously or gradually? What about books and documents old and new? Legal documents have a shelf life of decades. Historical documents important to the nation ought to be preserve forever. Old and new documents from literature to history, from politics to science have a shelf life of their own. That's why a time table is needed to set priorities.

Fifth, how is *conversion* from old to new effected? Existing written documents have to be rewritten in the new system. We are dealing with millions and perhaps billions of printed pages in all fields of endeavor. Entire collections of all libraries in the country; entire collections of legal, political and historical records and documents, research papers, scientific papers and books, including private legal documents such as wills, titles and contracts, including those in electronic format have to be converted. What do we do with the old documents after conversion. It is a massive recycle project involving more money. What about manuscripts of historical value written by hand preserved for posterity? After a few generations no one can read them. Researchers will be stymied because a piece of the past is lost to them. If the contention is made that both new and old systems are close enough to allow mutual comprehension, then why bother to switch after all? One conundrum comes to mind: Since conversion cannot proceed uniformly at the same pace, I can conceive a possible, though not so far-fetched, scenario of a court session where the defendant's attorney produces an original but crucial document written in the old system that nobody could understand. Worse yet, in the transitional period that last years, when conversion is partially done, scientists, writers, poets, politicians, government officials, historians, researchers, teachers and students in all disciplines, and the population at large continue to write. What system should be used? The new system that only part of the audience can understand, or the old system that everybody can understand yet is destined to disappear in a near future?

Sixth, how easy is it to implement the new system? If it involves about a dozen or so changes, why bother to go to great costs for dubious and meager results. If implementation is involved, can technology help? In this case, will the costs be contained?

Seventh, will the implementation result in disruption in private and public life? Will the court system, law enforcement, health care, education, business, manufacturing, diplomacy, the military, the economy be adversely affected? Is a massive disruption in the country's life with the potential to endanger the safety and security of the nation worth the adoption of the flawed writing system which is derived from the more perfect model of Chũ Quốc Ngữ?

Finally, when is cutover effected? Will there be a smooth, clean-cut, trouble-free transition? Will it incur additional costs? If so, what sources of funding are available and at what cost?

When I look at the questions that must be asked, the conclusion is inescapable. Given the half-baked concepts of the writing system exhibited by Bùi Hiền, his project was a solution in search of a problem, an exercise in futility. The final question is what was his motivation for trying to fix what is not broken. In seeking to eliminate unnecessary letters, his study introduces new problems; his proposal fails to take differences in dialects into account, and causes spelling mistakes and confusion. It whitewashes the cost-benefit equation. Worse of all, he tried to legislate speech, which by nature varies over time, by way of spelling. An example of a careful approach to spelling is the simplification of American spelling of English. Americans merely drop letters where it is harmless: *judgement*→ *judgment*; *honour*→*honor*; *tranquillity*→*tranquility*, *dialogue*→*dialog*. They know not to tamper with the colossal body of literature untouched by simplification that every English speaker needs to take advantage of. They know not to convert *enough*→*enuf*. A nation-state without written records of its past is vulnerable to extinction as a nation-state.

Conclusion

Clearly the Chữ Quốc Ngữ is better than Bùi Hiền's proposed modifications. It is capable to accommodate regional differences that his system tries to suppress. It allows for differentiation between dialects with elegance, simplicity, and insight. It has been successful in following well-known international conventions of the international Roman alphabet. It has served the nation well by being the vehicle of communication, education and creativity for the Vietnamese people across time and space. The entire life of the nation depends on Chữ Quốc Ngữ. And the massive Vietnamese diaspora throughout the world write novels, poems, plays, newspapers, journals, academic research, scholarly works, etc. in Chữ Quốc Ngữ. In that respect alone, Chữ Quốc Ngữ plays an indispensable role in Vietnamese culture. Let us leave it alone. ■

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