

*In booming thunder which on horizon sounds.
 In boxy, blurred and somber homes, your characters
 Kneel, candles lit and prayers pronounced.
 You've entered homes in gusty night,
 For agony and affection, a mangled heart your prize.
 Now leave serene, oh gallant Nguyễn Huy Thiệp,
 Verse, your sword, shimmering with morning gleam,
 The fields offering incense of primal spring,
 Your every footprint bearing glyphs to being.*

Adieu dear author, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.

U Ô N G T R I È U

Translated by Ryan Nelson and Khánh Hòa Lê

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp: The Solitary Volcano

I know that as many people hate Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as love him. Why do so many people hate Nguyễn Huy Thiệp? Is it because they personally dislike him, his cranky demeanor, his fierce, straightforward writing style? Or because they are jealous of his talent as a writer?

I read Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories long before I met him. As a child, I read them in *Văn Nghệ* [Literary Arts] newspaper. Later, when taking my first steps down the writer's path, I reread them quite a few times. Here is one special thing about Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories: they are not boring when you reread them. The experience of rereading is almost as pleasurable as the first reading. After more than ten years, I reread Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories and realized with surprise that they aged very little. I make this claim having reread many highly acclaimed contemporary Vietnamese works. When I reread Lê Lựu's novel *A Time Far Past*, I did not have nearly the same emotional reaction to the story.

When rereading Nguyễn Bình Phương's novel *The Absentee*, I did not enjoy it as much as the first time. Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* held up a bit better, but if we are talking about which literary works maintained their appeal the most, it is Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories.

I do not remember where I first met Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, maybe Nhân's Café on Bảo Khánh Street, near Hoàn Kiếm Lake. For many years, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp patronized this place with his best friend, the poet Nguyễn Bảo Sinh. Hanging out together at Nhân's Café helped Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Bảo Sinh forge a legendary friendship. On pleasant afternoons, the two old men would order a pot of tea, sit on the ground floor of the café, and talk. Sometimes, they spent their entire session just sitting there, drinking and chatting. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp would retrieve sweet potatoes or home-boiled peanuts from his pocket, sip tea, and absently observe the street outside. It seemed that the noisy streets never affected him, or maybe that he had suffered so many bruises in his life that nothing could bother him anymore. On cold days, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp wore a blue woolen hat that obscured his eyes. Inside, he sported a sweater. Outside, a windproof jacket. On his old, common, yellow Honda motorbike, he would glide slowly down the streets with a scarf around his neck and dark sneakers on his feet. His outward appearance was nothing special except for the bright eyes and patchy beard painted on his somewhat austere, timeworn face.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp spoke slowly and stammered. He often repeated his opening words many times before finishing a sentence, I believe due to old age and poor health. His experience teaching history in the highlands of Sơn La influenced, more or less, his writing during the early stages of his career, when he favored short historical fiction. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp may have spoken slowly but when he told stories, they seemed to have been carefully thought out for a long time before he communicated them. I never heard him tell a meaningless story. Every story he told seemed to contain a philosophy.

Once, I asked Nguyễn Huy Thiệp two questions I considered of essential interest to my readers. The first question: Of your short stories, which one do you like the most? Nguyễn Huy Thiệp listened to my question and seemed to ponder it for a bit. Then he carefully and fully answered the question. He said, if considering each and every factor, such as time period, topic, atmosphere, etc., he liked "The General Retires" the most. Please note

the phrase “considering each and every factor.” This is a phrase I think Nguyễn Huy Thiệp took careful consideration when using. I also discovered during my interview that the writer was very sensitive and congenial, not at all the arrogant guy I once thought he was. “The General Retires” brought him fame and controversy, and he later turned the work into a screenplay. The movie was good, I believe, but, unfortunately, not widely distributed. Additionally, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was not as carefree or casual as I had imagined him to be. To him, family life and children were very important. He sacrificed many things to take care of his family. For example, he gave up smoking and drinking alcohol to set an example for his son. He often told me, first and foremost, you need to live, live with dignity, then start writing. Please cherish your life and work, and happily make use of them both to accomplish your goals. Several times, he also told me a Buddhist story that he related to. A large rock that sinks quickly in water, when placed within a sturdy boat, can be transported to the other bank easily. To him, the story meant that the writer always needs a special vehicle to accomplish his or her purpose. Based on that mentality, he preached against disparaging and disregarding one’s life or work.

A second question I asked: In the past, some critics fiercely lambasted you. Even today, there are still people who persistently curse you. One hears disparaging comments and insults made without a hint of regret when your name comes up. Are you angry with these people? Nguyễn Huy Thiệp responded quickly to the question. He said, each person needs an occupation to make a living. Writing is my profession. They have their own profession. There is no need to be angry with them.

Was Nguyễn Huy Thiệp arrogant? Yes. When he was young, he used to be very arrogant; he admitted this many times. But over time, I came to see him as becoming calmer and more leisurely. A gentle, wise, old man. Once, I saw him sitting alone in a conference organized by the Vietnam Writers’ Association. Not many people sat near him. Was this because people feared or begrudged him his reputation or was this because he was known for “making enemies” with other writers, such as he did in his article “Chatting with Daffodils” or his play *Operating on the Writers?* Nguyễn Huy Thiệp always looked calm and thoughtful in the midst of emptiness. It was as if he was a solitary mountain, calm to the chaos and noise around him.

One day, I went to Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's house, but, unfortunately, he was not at home that day. The alleyways leading to his house wound from left to right, from right to left, swirling to and fro—in a very Hà Nội way. In the capital, alleyways are like old mazes that challenge people when they first discover them. He sent me his home address: house number 71, Lane 77, Bùi Xương Trạch Street. Because of what he had personally told me about the house, I was able to recognize it without asking anyone. In the middle of cramped Hà Nội, where land is scarce and as expensive as gold, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp still had an open-air, walled foyer made of dark bricks in front of his house. I looked through the moldy wooden gate and called out for him. After three calls, a woman came out and opened the gate halfway to examine this stranger. I will never forget that image: a small, middle-aged woman with a pale blue face mixed with hints of sadness holding the gate. Her voice was sad and tired, as wary as the way she opened the gate. She said that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp had just left, and that I should not call him because he had many errands to run. Based on that sentence, I guessed that the woman was his wife (I knew that his sister-in-law also lived at the residence), and that she understood and pampered him completely. Why the sad expression on her beautiful pale blue face? Did enduring the unusual personality of her writer husband explain this sadness and disappointment, or was it simply that everyone experiences sadness and disappointment in life? I made my way back to the narrow alleyway in front of his house. Fortunately, I did not get lost because I know Hà Nội's back alleys.

These days, I am rereading Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories, searching for his best work, at least according to my own taste. "Lumberjacks" gave me the greatest pleasure because I like the character Bường, who has the qualities of both a hero and a gangster. The story's rude and insolent language and philosophy delight me. In the story, I like the part where the character Ngọc rushes in to fight Bường to prevent him from raping a young girl. This is a very appealing passage. It reveals the story's characters and expresses the author's philosophy, both violent and obscene, but written as beautifully as a romantic poem.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp rarely dedicated his short stories to anyone. If not mistaken, I can think of only two examples. He dedicated one of his stories to the memory of Vũ Trọng Phụng and a second to Nguyễn Hồng Hưng.

Who is Nguyễn Hồng Hưng? Someone who knew Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. I met architect Nguyễn Hồng Hưng at the house of Bảo Khánh, a reputable art collector in Hà Nội. That day, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp told me that he had two “teachers” during the later stages of his career, Nguyễn Hồng Hưng and Nguyễn Bảo Sinh. The Buddha statue in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s garden was created by Nguyễn Hồng Hưng.

During a warm and sincere party held at Bảo Khánh’s house, I was “lucky” to be presented with a portrait of me painted by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Nguyễn Hồng Hưng. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp painted the portrait masterfully—many people like to collect his paintings done on pottery. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp had asked me if I wanted to sit facing forward or have him study me closely from the side. I asked him to draw me looking straight forward at him, and I was happy with the painting. Talking to him, I realized that the phrase “literature is life” did not hold true for Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, at least in his later years or directly in his style of writing. The writer who pens the fiercest, sharpest, and most distinctive short stories in Vietnamese literature is very quiet and reasonable. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is like a solitary volcano within the village of Vietnamese literature. While no longer erupting violently, his hot lava still simmers, giving off a heat that temporarily warms up the literary atmosphere. It will surely endure much longer . . .

Originally published in *Văn nghệ Quân đội*, March 21, 2021, http://vannghequandoi.com.vn/su-kien/nguyen-huy-thiep-hoa-diem-son-co-doc_11815.html. Thanks to Phạm Xuân Nguyên for obtaining permission from Ông Triệu for the translation and publication of this piece in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

VƯƠNG TRÍ NHÀN

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm and Peter Zinoman

We Are Lucky to Still Have Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

In contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp stands alone at a singular height. He wrote because he felt he had to write and because not writing was not an option.