

He remained someone who had experienced a lot and possessed genuine knowledge. We should not forget that he was once a teacher of history.

I often think that I am lucky to have lived at the same time as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. We are lucky that we still have Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.

Interview with Vương Trí Nhàn by Thiên Điều. Originally published in *Tuổi Trẻ*, March 22, 2021, <https://tuoitre.vn/may-man-chung-ta-con-co-nguyen-huy-thiep-20210322084054517.htm>. Thanks to Phạm Xuân Nguyên for obtaining permission from Thiên Điều for the translation and publication of this piece in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

PHẠM THỊ HOÀI

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm and Peter Zinoman

A Lonely Stroke That Slanted the Sky

When I first encountered Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, the winds of Hua Tát had been blowing strongly for some time and the bulwark of socialist realist literature was wobbling.² There he sat, small, wrinkled, old, quiet, and extremely lost in the famous salon of the great teacher Văn Tâm,³ surrounded by books, paintings, antiques, and old photographs revealing the glory of a distinguished family line. The salon also featured fine food served with a tragically out-of-date elegance by Văn Tâm's wife, Cao Thị Xuân Cam,⁴ and a crowd of famous intellectuals who maintained a certain distance (more or less) from the regime. Right after that first meeting, he invited me for a late cup of coffee at a café that he highly praised. "We need to stay in touch with that salon crowd," he told me, "but it will be the end of us if we are taken in by them. We must be cautious."

But I felt no great need for caution. The tic of the Vietnamese character that makes me despair the most is the need to mull over everything carefully, to be better safe than sorry, to examine everything up and down and back and forth. You must always be on guard; curb your tongue five or seven times before speaking, compare wisdom and foolishness. The survival kit for basic living is full of tips for knowing when to move forward and

when to move backward. All our elites are consumed by these tricks of self-preservation; they obsess over them even when reaching for the sky. But the tricks eventually become their way of life. I did not admire that mode of being and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp said that it was because I was both young and had lived a fortunate life. I could see what he meant. But on the other hand, I had just left my first marriage. I lived with rats and cockroaches in a basement apartment with a ceiling so low that I had to crouch. And every morning, I rolled off the bed, (happily) without any food in my belly.

He spoke seriously in the lowest male voice that I had ever heard before or since: “Life is full of unpredictability,” he said, “It seems that I am full of unpredictability too.” I reminded him that he was simply repeating a line from the narrator in “The General Retires,” which reads: “It seems that I am rather outdated, clumsy, and full of unpredictability.” “You admitted your unpredictability. What about your datedness and clumsiness? Do you ‘seem’ to suffer from those or not?” He swallowed a low growl and stammered, “Ah, ah, ah, ah . . . br, br, br, br . . .” I frequently teased him about his stutter during the four and a half months of our close relationship. Vainly relying on my youth and his affection for me, I made jokes freely without fear of overstepping boundaries. I knew I could not truly affect him.

Indeed, a wall separated him from the outside world, and he was most sublime when the wall was most solid. It was that wall, not some angelic or saintly muse, that helped him to produce such superb writing at the time along with a special literary vibe that surprised and dazzled us. Most writers in Vietnam did not possess such a wall. They cleared bushes and built for themselves tidy nests where they smoothly laid tidy eggs. But he did not like his wall, the magical fortress that made me jealous. As long as the wall remained an obstacle to him, his headbutts against it sparked enough fire to ignite a literary movement. By the time I met him, however, the war between him and the wall was over, more or less. The wall hurt him, but it also degraded. It diminished, and he no longer flourished.

Compared to how others tended their nests, his literary road was rough. But Hoàng Ngọc Hiến’s famous public wish that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp try to avoid “smooth sailing” did not come to pass.⁵ Among important authors of Vietnamese literature, he achieved one of the most successful and, indeed, stable careers. This country has produced a long line of writers who were

made outcasts, silenced, exiled, imprisoned, purged, and eliminated. War, politics, and poverty robbed us of Vũ Trọng Phụng, Phạm Quỳnh, Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, and Nam Cao, and banished to faraway lands Mai Thảo, Võ Phiến, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Tô Thùy Yên, and Dương Thu Hương. Nguyễn Du in “Fired Gold” may be seen as a moving and romantic portrait of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp himself, a man “whose face is creased with misery,” whose “material life is impoverished and luckless . . . because his livelihood is based on unproductive activities that can only satisfy life’s minimum needs.” It appeared that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was trapped in the miserable life of a low-level bureaucrat in a subsidized socialist system, rather than suffering the historic tribulations and upheavals that befell the author of *The Tale of Kiều*. The real Nguyễn Du, not Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s fictional version, had made a decision even though life at the time confronted him with such difficult choices. Nguyễn Du, the noble representative of a dying dynasty, chose to fight against the Tây Sơn peasant uprising. That fight between the great national poet and the great national hero has troubled later generations including our own. Nguyễn Du failed and went into hiding. He returned home, refused to collaborate; then he fled again. He was arrested and imprisoned. He lived a life of seclusion. The final seventeen years of his life illuminated his eminence; he repeatedly resigned from his positions amid promotions. Even when he held important positions, he stayed away from official literary circles. Nguyễn Du’s “immense grief and immense sadness,” as Trương Tửu once wrote, was derived from a consciousness of political engagement, failure, and the meaninglessness of success. This differed from the calculation about when to gallop or when to rein in the horse in the best interests of self-preservation—the kind of calculation made habitually by Nguyễn Tuân, a literary giant who had just passed away, leaving behind an empty space in the literary pantheon that many writers aspire to occupy. While Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s clothing did not match Nguyễn Tuân’s Francophile style, he was essentially a rural version of the latter.

In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s skillful rendering, Vietnam’s countryside appeared crude, dark, miserable, and full of suffering. But it was also a place to remember fondly, to desire, and to strive to return to. The countryside was the only place where our sentimental hearts could embrace simplicity, wholesomeness, purity, divine humanity, philosophical folk wisdom, and

a kind of indecent but ear-pleasing language (and obscene jokes) that helped to blow off steam. It was as if the countryside was a refuge for us from a phony and complicated urban society with its pseudo intellectuals and frivolous salons. But from the time he made the countryside fashionable in literature to the time that the YouTube channel of the rustic foody Nguyễn Thị Tân reached more than four million followers,⁶ the countryside has remained unchanged, with names that bloody our memory such as Thái Bình, Tiên Lãng, Đắc Nông, Văn Giang, and Đồng Tâm.⁷ In truth, it has never been a refuge.

I chided him for romanticizing the countryside and for ignoring its real, urgent problems. He countered that I placed too much belief in the social significance of literature. In his view, only mediocre writers lacking real confidence tried to reflect society within their writing. He elaborated on this point in the essay “Writers and the Four Mafia Godfathers”: “Works that try too eagerly to reflect society are often inaccurate. How could they not be? If our politicians do not fully believe in the policies that they force people to carry out, how can our writers be any different?”⁸ In his stories, members of the literati such as Nguyễn Trãi, Nguyễn Du, and Nguyễn Bính, like all rural teachers, understand nothing about politics. He portrays them as naive and gullible children who “possess only small reservoirs of kindness incapable of saving anyone.”⁹ Even their performative loneliness fails to add up to much.

At a certain point, we grew apart, and I could only hear his voice from a great distance—that low voice that had once stirred my heart. He started to discourse broadly about how writers are guided by the hands of God; about how there is only a thin line separating intelligence and ineptitude; about the expression of a heart’s inner feelings; about doing things not for fame and gain; about correcting oneself and searching for one’s correct path; about true human nature and Buddha nature; about the triple virtues of integrity-compassion-beauty; about the idea that “bigger hearts suffer bigger humiliations”;¹⁰ about the notion that life is sad but beautiful and deserves both contempt and admiration. He even talked about the preservation of national identity during the process of integration with the civilized world. He spent much time discussing literary heroes. Pure poets were despised by the vulgar crowd and the great gambles of talented artists were blocked by diligent mediocrities. The frauds and the ungrateful prevail

in the school of literature. And yet despite his regrets about these matters, he still joined the chorus in issuing forth noble words at literary events. He gradually joined “the old bunch of worthless poets and writers,”¹¹ as he himself called them. Nguyễn Tuân had ten glorious years at the start of his career and spent the remainder of his life nurturing a myth about himself through various forms of self-preservation. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was not so different.

Not all great writers suffer for their art. Goethe is a great figure in German literature despite his comfortable career as an official. Even though he worked as a state employee, he was still able to perform his own magnificent dance. In the Western world today, the biggest challenge for writers, most of whom train at famous universities, is simply to sell one’s talent at a higher price than is deserved. But Nguyễn Huy Thiệp came from a different world, a world in which all great work sprouts from suffering. The national disaster of Nhân Văn enabled Trần Dần’s many masterpieces.¹² Bùi Ngọc Tấn’s experience as prisoner CR880 produced *A Tale for 2000* [*Chuyện kể năm 2000*]. Phùng Cung’s twelve years in solitary confinement gave birth to *Prison Moon* [*Trăng ngục*].

There would be no Nguyễn Huy Thiệp without Đổi Mới [Renovation]. Many people paid a heavy price for him to have a timely career. There is no king in the literary world. But his great literary talent should not have limited him to reign only over the realm of short stories. The last time I saw him was ten years ago. When I arrived, this famous contemporary Vietnamese writer sat there, small, wrinkled, old, quiet, and extremely lost among several dozen readers at the Berlin Literary Festival. I reminded him of his dream from the good old days of “riding a strong wind and leveling fierce waves.” He told me that he had washed his hands and put away his pen. I have written enough, he said. If I wrote more, the younger generation would hate it. I know when it is enough. I know myself. I know life.

No one understands and writes about Nguyễn Huy Thiệp the way that he wrote about himself. When we were close, I often played with his own words to describe him. That last day that we met, I thought of a line from his work to describe him as “a lonely stroke that slanted the sky.”

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Notes

1. “Interview: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 485–498; Nguyễn Ngọc, “An Exciting Period for Vietnamese Prose,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008): 197–217; Doan Cam Thi, “Bad Fathers: The Patricide Theme in Three Short Stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 60–86.
2. The title of this piece is a sentence from Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short story “The Crane Is Flying and Crying Alarmingly” [“Hạc vừa bay vừa kêu thảng thốt”]. The “Winds of Hua Tát” is a series of ten mini folktale-like stories, some of which were first published in *Văn Nghệ*, nos. 3/4 (February 17, 1987). Lại Nguyên Ân’s Facebook post on March 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/nguyenan.lai/posts/10222386848718907> (accessed May 15, 2021).
3. Văn Tâm (1933–2004) was an important literary scholar.
4. Cao Thị Xuân Cam is the wife of scholar Văn Tâm. She came from a famous intellectual family that included her father scholar Cao Xuân Huy and her older brother, the linguist Cao Xuân Hạo.
5. “I Do Not Wish You Smooth Sailing, My Friend” [“Tôi không chúc bạn thuận buồm xuôi gió”] is the name of the famous 1987 essay by the late critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến on the works of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.
6. Nguyễn Thị Tân is a farmer who lives in Xuân Hương Hamlet, Bắc Giang Province. In May 2019, her son created a YouTube channel for her called Bà Tân Vlog to share her cooking and more. Within twenty days, her channel went viral with one million subscribers. Nguyễn Thị Tân immediately became an Internet celebrity in Vietnam. As of May 2021, her YouTube channel boasts 4.11 million subscribers. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVEa49SSGKMXv1JrcEoEx_A.
7. The government’s forced land confiscation for economic projects has emerged as one of the most serious problems in Vietnam in recent decades. Thái Bình, Tiên Lãng, Đắc Nông, Văn Giang, and Đồng Tâm are locations of violent clashes between farmers and local governments.
8. “Nhà văn và bốn trùm Mafia,” *Sông Hương* 3 (April 1991): 41–45.
9. Line from “Fired Gold,” in *Crossing the River: Short Fiction by Nguyen Huy Thiep*, ed. Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Dana Sachs (Willimantic: Curbstone, 2003), 200.
10. A sentence from Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short story “The General Retires,” in *Crossing the River: Short Fiction by Nguyen Huy Thiep*, ed. Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Dana Sachs (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 2003), 54.
11. A line from Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s essay “Trò chuyện với hoa thủy tiên và những nhầm lẫn của nhà văn,” in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Giăng lưới bắt chim* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2006), 3.

12. In the original, Phạm Thị Hoài references works by Trần Dần that she considers masterpieces such as *Cổng tỉnh*, *Đêm núp sen*, *Jờ Joacx*, *Mùa sạch*, *Những ngã tư và những cột đèn*, *Con trắng*, 177 cảnh, *Động đất tâm thần*, *Thơ không lời-Mây không lời*, *Thiên thanh*, 36 thờ dài-Tư Mã dâng sao, *Thơ mini*, and *Sổ bụi*.