The Problem of Contemporary Thai Literature

Montri Umavijani*

The contemporary literature of Thailand, like that of any ASEAN country, is struggling hard for survival in an age of technological progress and meterialistic gain. As is true of any age, the writer may legitimately feel himself hampered by various factors. In the first place, there are the general difficulties of living among machines; but the purpose of art has always been to create human values in the world of facts and objects. Other obstacles, more specific, however, seem to impinge on the writer's profession. These primarily have to do with his publishers and his public. The two elements cannot simply be overlooked, as together they constitute the inescapable milieu which shapes and forms the writer's talent. In the following pages, I would like to examine the present state of Thai literature.

To contemporary Thai writers, at least, the publishers and the public are one and the same thing. First, the publishers have a keen sense of what the general public wants. Conversely, in their commercial aims, they keep the public taste unchanged for a great number of years. Unless the public makes a strong demand for a change of literary direction, the publishers will assume that it is content with their supply. The publishers and the public seem to refer to one another for maintaining the *status quo*. Thus writers are at great risk drawn into this vicious circle. At best the more compliant of them get 10 % of the marked price, multiplied by the number of copies printed. If the books sell, they have no way of knowing how many copies are printed. In spite of this unfairness, popular writers can still make a lot of money from their books by selling them to moving picture companies. But by then we can be sure that they are not making any more literary endeavours.

There is, however, another kind of publisher who caters to "quality" books. These publishers usually pay very small fees to (the) authors, and make a good show of their patronage in publishers' notes. A few of them even make the point that the paper used for the publication of these books has been donated by some benefactors or foundations. They continually emphasize that they do not expect any sale. The writers are consequently awed by the great trouble caused by their own activities. They finally either turn to write for the general public or cease to write altogether.

The above problem is of the greatest importance for the existence of any national literature. The fact is that there can be no literature unless good writers have an audience. In Thailand, the times and life style have changed much since the long great age of poetry in the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods and a large span of the Bangkok period. The earliest Thai poets wrote for themselves and for their peers. The difference between popular or folk poets and court poets did not really bother them, as

*Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University

they could concentrate on their particular audiences and also exchange their arts. Even the royal patronage was sometimes granted to folk artists of distinction. We only have to think of the great popular poet, Suntorn Phu, who flitted in and out of the court. Modern life in any country puts an end to this atmosphere of cultural community. An aesthetic education is, therefore, all the more needful for these writers. Each writer should make himself open to the cultural heritage of his own country as well as to the achievements of other cultures, both East and West. This aesthetic education teaches us something which is splendidly described in E.M. Forster's words about "all novelists writing their novels at once, no matter what ages and races they come from" -- all at work "together in a circular room." Only when Thai writers join others in the "circular room" can we be sure of our national literature.

Particularly for Thai literature, this kind of education enables writers of talent to mature and transcend the insipid taste of the public. It can be achieved in two ways, i.e., from a study of literature and from criticism. Thai writers only stand to gain from a knowledge of world literature, even in translation. Reading other literature should be an essential part of their training. If training is needful in other professions, it is no less so in the arts. Of course, some awards national or international, or even some kind of endowment for the arts, may be given. But that seems like a temporary remedy to the problem and does not affect writers in general. When all is said and done, we still lack the internal sustenance of literary criticism. More specifically, contemporary Thai literature stands in need of a good criticism which would provide an understanding and appreciation of its authors' aims as well as showing its continuity. At present, our criticism is strongly marked by partisanship and commercialism. That sort of criticism in the long run stifles talent. On the contrary, genuine criticism makes writers conscious of producing literature. It now seems something like our last stand. If contemporary Thai literature falls somewhat below the standard, we may ascribe the fact to an absence of criticism. For the time being, we cannot boast of our poets. In terms of poetic sensibility, it would seem that the love of liberty has made our poets more revolutionary, or at least more radical, than our novelists, except for a very few like Sri Burapa. For the past twenty years or so, poets have been writing about the dawn of some hope. At first, this dawn was not at all definite. There were some who continued to write love poetry all their lives. But a few others took the dawn to mean a new political era, and ardently waited for it. At this dawn they parted, the love poets and the politicals poets. In this respect, there was a significant turning point in the career of such a writer as Ujjeni when she turned away from her love poetry to write about what she visualized at dawn:

> The sky at morning like today
> Will delight us beyond anything.
> As the people's path will be strewn
> With beautiful rose leaves.

Here, rose leaves are lives and actions. Soon this call for social action rose to a war cry in the following lines of the downright political poet, Chitr Bhumisak :

When the sky clears up,
The people will rule this land!

Discontent and feelings of unrest were increasing. In a series of poems, Angkarn Kalayanapongs fiercely denounced modern life and love, railing at those woman who prostitute themselves to American soldiers. In a striking prophecy, he talked about Phra Dhat Phanom, the ancient pagoda in the northeast of Thailand and something like the London Bridge in T.S. Eliot's *Wasts Land*, tumbling down. That actually happened a few years later. But Angkarn was also gifted with the art of satire and a genuine love of the past which enabled him to have a reductive view of the present. In another poem, he impersonates an obnoxious politician in power who speaks his mind about Thailand :

Ha! How dare you criticize my boss?
What is wrong about us politicians?
The Field Marshal, that's a man of genius,
He is truly a god incarnate.

You're the tame one and yet do not know the tiger.
How dare you provoke me with your idiot's face?
Beware of the handbombs I am throwing
To exterminate all your kind in town.

Of course, this is an oblique and clever satire on the savagery of Thai politics. Among other less gifted poets the tone was simply personal, almost vulgar. They called themselves "the students." Obviously, they were writing with an end in view. The end was the Students' Uprising on October 14, 1973.

The October Uprising was somehow the culmination of the Thai poetic sensibility. Many elements came to a head with this event. To those poets, it was a new era just as the French Revolution had appeared to Wordsworth. Almost everybody was credited with a good poem or two about it. The best remembered of these, a pair of poems cast in the form of the traditional lullaby, was written by Suchit Wongthet. Also, Naowarat Pongpaibul made a vivid, almost photographic description of the scene in *From Sunday to Monday:*

Smoke curls up in quick black jets:
The ghoulish thieves scurry before it,
The fire burns up the nation's stains,
Such is the great use of fire!

Soon it rains cool from heaven,
The rain of mercy to wash things clean,
Like nurses in white wearing red crosses
Come to soothe us and heal our wounds.

The volleys of guns raining from all sides
Are caught in mercy's nets dropped from heaven;
Blood-stained dust soars thickly everywhere,
And heaven's merciful rain washes them white.

For a while, it seemed that the dawn had arrived. But excess and opportunism soon attached themselves to this success. Several poets wrote imitations of Chitr Bhumisak, just as several political *arrivistes* took liberties with the people's donations. With the waning of political arder came the decline of poetry.

Concurrent with this change in feeling was the struggle for from in modern Thai poetry. The four important tradi-

tional verse forms, the *klong*, the *chant*, the *garp*, and the *glon* finally proved to be insufficient, even cumbersome. Modern poets rely more on the *glon* than on any other form. The best known type of the *glon*, called the *glon* 8, has 8 syllables and is brittle with inner rhyme. This form is widely used and dominates much of the rhythm in Thai poetry. Sporadic attempts had earlier been made to check the flow of the *glon*, notably by Prince Bidhyalongkorn who introduced the *glon* 6 in his *Kanok Nakorn*, and King Rama VI who used the "irregular" *glon* in his translations from Shakespeare. Unfortunately, none of these experiments was developed by later poets. Among modern poets, Angkarn Kalayanapongse is the only one credited with an individual style in his *glon* and his *klong*. But that is more the effect of his temperament than a deliberate sense of form. Similarly, if we look to those who write prose poems such as Raj Rangrong for a revolution in form, we will be the more let down, for the absence of rhythmic language takes us further away from poetry. Moreover, the experiments with visual poetry of Chang Tang seem to have sprung from a dubious foreign influence. As a matter of fact, we have in Thai poetry such "trick" poems as can be read from right to left, or downward, or upward, for different meanings. Such a device could have been exploited to serve poetic feeling, and we would have had our Thai Appollinaire. But Chang Tang is solely interested in the visual aspect of poetry: his poems are mute. The struggle for from will have to go on in probably as disturbing a manner as the change of sensibility. At present, Angkarn Kalayanapongs is the only poet of some good standing. But even he has been affected by the milieu and has taken to poetic dejection -- temporarily, we hope.

If Thai poetry feeds on hopes and ideals, the Thai novel is by comparison earthbound and practical. Incidentally, the novel quickened to life when SEATO began to give its awards in 1968. The awards somewhat changed the outlook upon fiction. For example, Botan, a promising young novelist, got the SEATO Literary Award for her *Chotmai Chak Muang Thai* or *Letters from Thailand* in 1969, against far better known candidates. The book is a satire on Thai society in epistolary form. It consists of 100 letters written by a Chinese immigrant to his mother in China about the difficulties he has living in a country whose culture and people he cannot appreciate. In the course of time, however, he realizes that his life in Thailand has wrongly been lived by Chinese principles. At this point, the story turns abruptly to the desintegration of a Chinese in Thai society. Thus the social criticism emphasized at the very outset seems to dissolve into irony. The novel shows Botan to be unable to decide between satire and irony.

Incidentally, Krisna Asokesin was the first author to receive this award in 1968 for her *Ruea Manut* or *The Human Ship*. She was also the last ever to receive it the second time in 1972 for her *Tawan Tok Din* or *The Sunset*. In *Ruea Manut*, Krisna Asokesin portrays man chiefly as a network of relationships with a few simple elemental passions at the basis of such relationships. Her other works likewise are constant expositions of cases of passionate

unlawful love. The titles of her books are very telling : *Mia Luang* or the *The Wedded Wife*, *Mia Noi* or *The Concubine, Sao Kae* or *The Old Maid,* etc. In all these works, she reveals the naturalist's desire to examine the causes of social evils. But hers is a slow and relentless process of agony and remorse which wears out the hearts. In this regard, the title of one of her novels justly terrifies the reader: *Nam Saw Sai* or *Water Courses through the Sand.* This book moves at a very slow pace, showing retribution overtake the sinful lovers.

Ruea Manut, probably her beat work so far, presents a gallery of stock characters of passionate love. Making use of the Buddhist metaphor that all men travel on the same ship, the ship of lust, the novel aspires to the form of allegory. But its structure is too loose to achieve this. Still, like Franz Kafka, Krisna Asokesin is very good at describing scenes of nightmare and mental aberration. In *Ruea Manut,* for example, a wife by attempting suicide calls her husband back from his new wife, formerly their own servant. But she is also visited by the servant girl's mother, an extremely vulgar woman, who has brought her sons and daughters bearing insectlike names to pester her. This is how the sick and horrified wife sees them :

> The hag sits at a squat on the floor, one son standing over her head, another sitting on her shoulder; two daughters sitting or standing willy-nilly outside the door.

Si Fah received the SEATO award in 1970 for her *Khaw Nok Na* or *American Surplus*. The novel is about two unwanted children, one a negro girl and the other a blonde girl, born of the same mother but of different fathers. The negro girl, Dum, is clearly the protagonist. From her bitter experience, she has grown to hate everything that is beautiful, especially the blonde girl, her elder sister. And she also hates herself for being black. Dum is seen at one point cleaning her skin with a strong detergent, and at another burning herself with a live charcoal. In one scene, she faces for the first time in her life an American negro whom the other children call jokingly "Dum's father." She feels as if she were looking at the image of herself, and she is at once infuriated and fascinated by it. But, unfortunately, Si Fah here allows sheer comedy to overwhelm everything else. The undercurrent of ironic humour is, therefore, lost.

Khaw Nok Na is much bogged down by a strict chronology of events which Si Fah, like most Thai novelists. takes to be essential to her naturalism. It begins with Dum's early age and grows with her to the length of two volumes. The author may have some reasons in presenting her story that way. One of them is perhaps that her novel concerns the education of the protagonist, or is of the type usually called the *bildungsroman.* But she is at least entitled to a point of attack. Besides, the narrative form is obviously the wrong choice for the work. Instead of the narrator's explaining her case, the protagonist should have been presented as acting and doing. As a matter of fact, Dum is already a character with an essence. If she had been handled with some sense of

form, the apparent ugliness would have turned into aesthetic beauty.

Suwannee Sukonta, the recipient of the SEATO award in 1971, interestingly combines two extreme tendencies in her works, i.e., impressionism and naturalism. Impressionism is probably due to her formal training in the fine arts; naturalism is derived from observation and self-teaching to become a novelist. Her dialogue and writing style are at once marked by a dreamlike quality and a startling precision. Significantly, both impressionism and naturalism are unified by a sense of irony which moves fast and freely from one extreme to another. Irony is used as a synthetic power in her works just as the romantics have used imagination. However, there are times when her ironies seem rather far-fetched and ineffectual. In *King Fah*, a young man whose father has seduced a number of girls as well as intentionally ruined a family, finally has to earn his living as a male prostitute and marry a girl from that family. When this takes as long as two volumes, the irony seems lost.

Her award-winning novel, *Khao Chue Karn* or *His Name Is Karn,* is strongly based on irony. Karn, a poor and idealistic medical doctor, and Harutai, the star of the university graduates, marry, without much knowledge of each other. Later, Karn's devotion to his work in a remote province at once tires his wife and causes him to have many enemies among the local officers. He lets his wife return to Bangkok alone. There, she resumes a relationship with her former boyfriend, Tomorn. They have a car accident which makes Harutai lose her memory. Tomorn tries to nurse her back to health and tells her to think of him only. Karn comes back a stranger to his wife. And, at the climactic point of the novel, Karn is re-introduced to Harutai by the latter's mother. "He is already married to you, dear. His name is Karn."

The last SEATO award was given in 1972. Since then the contemporary novel has perceptibly changed. For, even though the former recipients of the SEATO Literary Awards are still active, it seems that they have not produced anything of note within the past few years. The over-zealous concern with clinical and sociological issues have led Suwannee Sukonta, Si Fah, and Krisna Asokesin to works like *Phra Chand Si Namngern* or *The Moon Is Blue*, *Tammai?* or *Why?* and *Pratoo Ti Pid Tai* or *The Closed Door*, respectively. Suwannee Sukonta's *The Moon Is Blue* traces the problem of drug addiction among adolescents to their broken homes. Si Fah's *Why?* points out that different political ideologies may divide and even destroy the people within the same country. Especially for Krisna Asokesin who has been writing about human relationships in the married circle, her book entitled *The Closed Door* is doubly symbolic. In a specific sense, it signifies the author's need to re-consider her usual materials and the future direction of her writings. In a general sense, it is a warning to other writers: There is a "closed door" looming before every contemporary Thai novelist.

But there are some who have not yet got to the end of the road even though their roads do not seem very long. Writers of the present generation

do not produce big two-volume novels anymore : they frequently turn out slim paperbacks there called "pocket books" which sell for between ten and twenty baht (a dollar). The writers are mostly local colourists who seek to impress their readers with stories about provincial areas and customs, or about historical pasts. Their tone is either humourous or nostalgic, or a combination of both. The main outlet for this kind of writing is a weekly magazine called *Fah Muang Thai* or *The Thai Sky*. Local colourism was neatly begun in this magazine by veteran writers talking about their times and the things they had experienced. Also, ordinary people were encouraged to write about their hometowns in a special column. Subsequently, younger writers took up the same attitude and wrote about their new pasts in something like *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Otherwise, they talked about their native places or their professions with first-hand knowledge. This practice, though very useful, has some harmful consequences for beginning writers. For, while it is all right for established authors to write autobiographical notes on life and letters, pretending to give certain truths about their own lives as well as some of their convictions, this pretension to truth on the part of young writers seems untimely and does not often lead them to the creation of fiction. Readers may temporarily be interested in knowing how people live at an irrigation dam, or at a temple, or at a banking company, but such peculiarities do not always continue to interest them. Besides, such experiences will be exhausted in the long run. It is doubtful just how many writers such as Yok Burapa, Maitri Limpichat, Mananya, etc. will develop into novelists. The case of Nimitr Bhumitavorn is even more curious. This writer has produced one fine work of short fiction entitled *Sroi Thong*. The book was selected for the competition for the ASEAN Literary Award in 1977, but it did not get the award. Though a very moving novel, it has some flaws in its structure. Evidently, Nimitr Bhumitavorn is struggling to free himself from the local colourism which engulfs him. He has become bolder with his short stories and sketches, bur he has not yet written anything comparable to *Sroi Thong*. He may one day become a full-fledged novelist. But, without the aid of criticism, he will have to grope for his path all alone. Local awards do not necessarily spur him on, and failure to get an international award will only distress and baffle him.

The development of the Thai novel ends with a sad note. If we have to explain why, we may say that Thai writers as yet do not have the energy with which to realize their aims. And this energy is the most terrifying thing to talk about, for it necessarily involves a long heritage, a knowledge of other literatures, in short, and aesthetic education, and an interpenetration of the writer and the public. Thai writers fall short of a vision of life in their works chiefly from a want of the energy of art. With this notion in mind, we only have to look ahead in the literary field of Thailand with more hope.