

THE RECEPTION OF NOUVEAU ROMAN IN SOUTH VIETNAM 1954–1975: THE CASE OF HOÀNG NGỌC BIÊN'S *THE NIGHT SLEEPING IN TOWN*

A RECEPÇÃO DO NOUVEAU ROMAN NO SUL DO VIETNÃ 1954-1975: O CASO DE HOÀNG NGỌC BIÊN A NOITE DORMIDA NA CIDADE

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Abstract: The Nouveau Roman was a literary movement which developed in France during the 1950s, 1960s. The Nouveau Roman writers shared the view of going beyond the traditional definition of fiction and the established conceptions of plot, action, event and narrative. This movement reached South Vietnam during the 1960s and had a remarkable influence. This article discusses the two following points: first, the reception of the Nouveau Roman in South Vietnam, which can be observed through the translation and discussion of French avant-garde authors; second, the Nouveau Roman spirit in Hoàng Ngọc Biên's short story collection *Đêm ngủ ở tỉnh* [The night sleeping in town].

Keywords: Nouveau Roman (New Novel). Hoàng Ngọc Biên. South Vietnamese literature. *Đêm ngủ ở tỉnh*.

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Resumo: O Nouveau Roman foi um movimento literário que se desenvolveu na França durante as décadas de 1950 e 1960. Os escritores do Nouveau Roman compartilhavam a visão de ir além da definição tradicional de ficção e das concepções estabelecidas de enredo, ação, evento e narrativa. Este movimento chegou ao Vietnã do Sul durante a década de 1960 e teve uma influência notável. Este artigo discute dois pontos a seguir: primeiro, a recepção do Nouveau Roman no Vietnã do Sul, que pode ser observada através da tradução e discussão de autores franceses de vanguarda; em segundo lugar, o espírito do Nouveau Roman na coleção de contos de Hoàng Ngọc Biên *Đêm ngủ ở tỉnh* [A noite

dormindo na cidade].

Palavras-chave: Nouveau Roman (Novo Romance). Hoàng Ngọc Biên. Literatura sul-vietnamita. *Đêm ngủ ở tỉnh*.

1. Introduction

Literature, and particularly novel, like any other genre of art, always changes to become relevant with the development of the society. The 1950s witnessed the emergence of a group of writers, namely the Nouveau Roman, whose aspiration was to determinedly revive and to radically renovate the genre of novel, an essentially vivid genre that was being beset with insufficiencies. It would be difficult to assert the positive influences of their experimentation, but their extremely new contributions should be noticed first. They had important contributions to the alteration and renovation of Western fictions in general and French novels specifically in the twentieth century, travelling on a journey “for a new novel”, in the words of Robbe-Grillet.

In South Vietnam 1954–1975, Hoàng Ngọc Biên stood out as a unique literary phenomenon. He was a versatile artist known not merely as a painter, a critic, but also as a writer. His literary oeuvre was not very massive and renowned, yet his works made remarkable contributions to Vietnamese modern literature. Prior to 1975, Hoàng Ngọc Biên was ultimately successful with his short-story collection entitled *The night sleeping in town* [Đêm ngủ ở tỉnh]. It is outstanding not only because of the Vietnamese spirit in his way of writing, but also for the reason that he selectively received the influences of some Nouveau Roman writers. Being influenced by these foreign authors, he, however, had his own renovations, which are very Vietnamese as well.

2. Results and Discussions

There are a number of questions for discussion, as follows: in the war-torn South Vietnam, how did writers receive the Nouveau Roman movement? Which Nouveau Roman writers were prioritized to be translated? Which aspects of the Nouveau Roman movement did South Vietnamese writers take notice of? What are the manifestations of the Nouveau Roman spirit in Hoàng Ngọc Biên’s writings? And what is the significance of this literary reception?

Nouveau Roman in South Vietnam before 1975: From the perspective of translation

South Vietnamese society between 1954 and 1975 was in close association with war. The war devastated not only rural areas but also cities, making the South a context entangled with various problems in different aspects, such as economics, politics, society, culture, thought and

particularly literature and art. The confrontations between the two politically opposite sides mostly took place in the rural regions. The urban areas, though influenced to some degree by the war, were relatively safe and sound. Cultural activities there thus continued to develop in a context of democracy, open-mindedness and globalization.

French literature in the twentieth century witnessed the flourishing of modern literary movements and schools, among which the Nouveau Roman was a prominent phenomenon. Catching up with the world, South Vietnamese writers between 1954 and 1975 animatedly received this literary movement. Literary translation should be examined firstly since it is an essential factor which facilitates the development of a literature. On the one hand, thanks to the special attention of Saigon government to culture and arts, and the emergence of numerous magazines, such as *Sáng Tạo* [Creativity], *Thế Kỷ XX* [The Twentieth Century], *Văn* [Literature], *Trình Bày* [Demonstration], *Bách Khoa* [Encyclopedia], literary translation in South Vietnam during the time was more lively than in the North. The translation of the Nouveau Roman was among the most noteworthy cases. As a matter of fact, when discussing about the translation of French literature in South Vietnam during this period of time, the works by classic authors, e.g. Rousseau, Voltaire, Hugo, Balzac, translated into Vietnamese are mostly mentioned. However, it is noticeable that there were, besides, a number of translators who introduced literary pieces written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, etc. to South Vietnamese readers, such as Thu Hoa, Phan Lạc Phúc, Hoàng Tuyết Sơn, and especially Hoàng Ngọc Biên.

The number of Nouveau Roman fictions translated exceeded that of the works which demonstrated their philosophy, as it can be seen in the following list: *Ba hình tượng phản chiếu* [Three reflected visions], *Bãi cát* [The beach], *Trên những hành lang đường xe điện hầm* [In the Corridors of the Metro], *Căn phòng bí ẩn* [The secret room] by Alain Robbe Grillet (translated by Hoàng Ngọc Biên, 1969); *Bleston*, *Đàm thoại* [Conversation], *Nhìn về hai phía Berlin* [Looking both ways of Berlin], *Nhật ký* [Diary] by Michel Butor (translated by Hoàng Ngọc Biên, 1969); *Chiếc mặt nạ* [The mask] by Nathalie Sarraute (translated by Hoàng Ngọc Biên, 1969); *Tro tàn* [Ash], *Đối thoại* [Dialogue] by Claude Simon (translated by Hoàng Ngọc Biên, 1969); *Tiểu thuyết như một tìm kiếm* [Novel as a search], *Ngữ thức và nhà văn* [Linguistic consciousness and writer] by Michel Butor (translated by Hoàng Ngọc Biên, 1966); *Alain Robbe-Grillet và quan niệm viết tiểu thuyết* [Alain Robbe-Grillet and his conception of fiction] (an interview by Jacqueline Piatier and Madeleine Chapsal) (translated by Phan Lạc Phúc, 1965); *Kỉ nguyên của nghi hoặc* [The age of

suspicion] by Nathalie Sarraute (translated by Thu Hoa, 1965). Despite the insubstantial number of works translated, they made significant contributions to literary theory and criticism in South Vietnam 1954–1975. Moreover, most of the works translated are among the greatest writings of the Nouveau Roman writers, which manifest expressly their literary philosophy. Translation was thus an initial stage in the reception of Nouveau Roman in South Vietnam during the period.

Discussions on the Nouveau Roman in South Vietnam were mostly centered around the essential renovations of these French avant-garde writers. Hoàng Ngọc Biên, Nguyễn Quốc Trụ, Huỳnh Phan Anh, Đặng Phùng Quân, Nguyễn Nhật Duật, Nguyễn Văn Trung, Nguyễn Quang Hiện, Doãn Quốc Sỹ demonstrated their interest in the movement's revamps in terms of different aspects, such as figure and plot, in comparison to the aesthetics of Western traditional novels. To be specific, they aimed to figure out new narrative techniques in novels: experimenting new relationships between man and his world; restructuring the narrative core of novels by shifting it from character to reader; awakening readers instead of mesmerizing them. The Nouveau Roman's renovations were extreme to some certain degree, yet implying the writers' utmost aspiration for the renewal of novel techniques solely in terms of formal aspects. First of all, the Nouveau Roman authors are very adventurous. They did not explicate in advance the significance of reality, but creating emotional journeys which readers can travel on to find it out themselves instead. It was also the major concern of Robbe-Grillet. He did not justify or explain clearly anything. Writing, for him, is a journey where words themselves speak up their voices. Secondly, a number of critics during the time drew their attention to the issue of human existence. Character was no more the main focus in their novels. They were thus depicted without any personal information, and their psychology in each particular situation was not described specifically as well. More importantly, they even do not reveal themselves apart from indefinite, vague individuals which readers can recognize only after reading the entire work and themselves putting all the events together. Due to such vagueness, each reader can provide a unique way of interpretation, which reflects Robbe-Grillet's idea that in the modern time, we can never truly understand a person. Briefly, the uncertainty in time and space, the attempt to escape from inherent prejudices and the inner gaze, which the Nouveau Roman writers aimed at, also piqued many South Vietnamese authors' interest.

The Nouveau Roman movement had great influence on not only translation and literary criticism in South Vietnam, but also the development of literary compositions. It should be, however, first noted that South Vietnamese literature between 1954 and 1975 and the Nouveau Roman movement, to some extent, shared some traits in common. While the Nouveau Roman

novelists in France advocated literary renovations during the 1950s and 1960s, a lot of writers in South Vietnam, like Mai Thảo, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Cung Trầm Tưởng, Duy Thanh, Nguyễn Sĩ Tế, Tô Thùy Yên, Lê Huy Oanh, Ngọc Dũng, in the early 1960s, conducted harsh discussions on various issues of Vietnamese fiction and poetry. They immensely criticized old literature associated with the elder generation of Nhất Linh, aiming at a renewed and renovated literature. Such a cultural and literary atmosphere facilitated the Nouveau Roman's influence in some South Vietnamese writers. Quickly exposed to avant-garde literature, the literary group Đêm Trắng [White Midnight] including Huỳnh Phan Anh, Đặng Phùng Quân, Nguyễn Nhật Duật, Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Nguyễn Quốc Trụ soon applied the Nouveau Roman's renovations to their literary composition. Nevertheless, Hoàng Ngọc Biên was the very writer whose works reflect most clearly the influence of Nouveau Roman, as Huỳnh Như Phương puts it: "Hoàng Ngọc Biên, though not a member of the group Đêm Trắng, thoroughly studied and conducted in-depth researches on the Nouveau Roman movement" (Huỳnh Như Phương 2019, 151).

Hoàng Ngọc Biên's *The night sleeping in town* – a typical case of reception of Nouveau Roman

Literary influences are a popular phenomenon in every literature all around the world, and it is not an exception in Vietnam. However, while being influenced by foreign literature, Vietnamese authors also have their own creations in order to, on the one hand, show their personal style, and on the other hand, contribute to the diversity of their country's literature, as it can be seen clearly in Nhất Linh's reception of Dostoievsky, Hồ Biểu Chánh's reception of Hugo, Khải Hưng's reception of Gide, and Hoàng Ngọc Biên's reception of the Nouveau Roman as well. It is our observation that Hoàng Ngọc Biên was not influenced by any particular Nouveau Roman writer, which can be clearly seen in his short story "The man cycling to the city in the morning" [Người đạp xe vào thành phố buổi sáng] (1969) and his collection *The night sleeping in town* (1970). For example, the impact of both Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute can be found in some of his works. This feature constitutes Hoàng Ngọc Biên's unique style of writing.

Published in 1970 after his well-known short story "The man cycling to the city in the morning" (1969), *The night sleeping in town* consists of five short stories, respectively "Morning"

[Buổi sáng], “A street corner” [Một góc phố], “The night sleeping in town”, “Hilly city” [Thành phố dốc đồi], “A passage amidst summer” [Một đoạn giữa mùa hè]. It was distinct from almost all other short story collections in South Vietnam 1954–1975, especially in terms of its plot and characters. It is claimed by Huỳnh Như Phương that: “Hoàng Ngọc Biên thoroughly studied and conducted in-depth researches on the Nouveau Roman movement. He translated some works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, demonstrating his literary standpoint through his short story collection *The night sleeping in town* published by Cao Thơm in 1970” (Huỳnh Như Phương 2019, 151).

Writing as searching: the problem of plot

Since the early days of the movement, Alain Robbe-Grillet stressed that the Nouveau Roman was not a theory, but only a search: “These reflections in no way constitute a theory of the novel; they merely attempt to clarify several lines of development which seem to me crucial in contemporary literature” (Robbe-Grillet 1965, 9). The essence of this discovery is that they did not view fiction as a way of narration any more, but a search for a brand new narrative method, modality and technique, which facilitated the Nouveau Roman writers’ exploration of novel realities of life. In their pieces of writing, the formal aspects were thus more significant than those related to the content. Each work written by these Nouveau Roman authors was, therefore, an exploitation of new narrative forms.

Critics prior to the twentieth century usually evaluated a novel based merely on its “story” that was thoroughly made up by its author. Appreciated novelists were those who could create cohesive and coherent story with logical plot sequences and dramatic and attractive events that can hook their readers. As a result, he had to fulfil two requirements. First, it was a must to follow the planned storyline in order to make the narrated world “as real as life” and coherent. Second, he had to appear to know more than he really did. In other words, in traditional novels, the intervention of the writer as God could be seen explicitly. Their attempts, in fact, stemmed from their aim to reflect a flawless, stable world which can be fully understood and controlled. Viewing “novel as a search”, the Nouveau Roman writers focused more on the way of writing rather than arranging events and details according to a pre-determined logic. Rationality used to be applied to the understanding of the world in the past. However, in the present, when everything becomes complicated, entangled and discontinuous, the belief in the power of

rationality turns out to be fanciful. And this awareness reinforced Nouveau Roman novelists' philosophy of writing.

Hoàng Ngọc Biên was also in tune with these pioneering ideas. Writing, just like life, is an eternal search, and its meaning lies in that very act of searching. Hoàng Ngọc Biên's fictions are thus never limited within preestablished modals. Each of his works suggests a different way, a particular narrative technique to discover reality.

Through his works, Hoàng Ngọc Biên intended to bring his readers directly into a turbulent and anarchic life, which indicates that all preset arrangements were destroyed, and that the author did not follow the planned plot any more. Being constructed based on an intricately arranged plot, his works are fragmented and readers need to put those fragments into order. The fragmentation of his novels does not follow the principle of causality, but only constitutes a chain of appearingly unrelated states and events, in which the past and the present are blended. Events and characters' thoughts are not narrated according to any logic. Instead, they emerge following the characters' emotional state. Therefore, readers must themselves rearrange those fragments and subjectively explore the work if they would like to have an entire panorama of its story line. It is not difficult to find out that the protagonist's emotions and thoughts in "Morning" are continuously presented, but almost all of them are not related to one another. The thoughts of one figure are told right after those of another. There are sometimes passages capturing scenes both in the present and in the past. The nostalgia of the character "I" [em] in "Hilly city" can be also a good example:

I'm back here again, my dear, I'm here, day by day walking on old streets which have been seemingly widened and stretched, travelling around the lightful market every night, watching grocery stores which are more glorious than before, and every morning and afternoon, I go up and down the familiar slope to eat, just like when I was in school...

Summer just stopped in Danang with intense heat, every day I go in and out to prepare for my trip, I struggle to arrange warm clothes, I pull out from the bottom of the clothes chest a blue overcoat you and your friends liked...

Here I am now, in a room on the third floor that you have gone up and down many times, I lie on a single bed that the landlady intentionally brought to me, perhaps because of her affection for me, the small bed that still has the black and blue ink stain since the day you came to visit me for the first time, seeing me inserting ink in the fountain pen you gave me a month ago, and I was so touched that I knocked the whole bottle over the bed end... (Hoàng Ngọc Biên 1970)

Readers are sometimes confused because there are times when the character remembers when he was in Da Nang preparing to go to Da Lat, sometimes he remembers the days alone

walking around Da Lat. The story line is, in other words, guided by his mind and thoughts. In that way, it is as if readers can accompany with the character, live in the real chaos of life, not only vaguely hearing the story recounted in a voice tinged with morality. And that is because a chaotic, pristine life is far more valuable than a life presented via an ingenious plot.

A unique point in Hoàng Ngọc Biên's story is that the writer does not explain anything, since reality always includes problem that cannot be solved and cannot be changed. It is a reality where people, like those in "Morning", are ceaselessly haunted by their low social status, or bored with the stereotypical, mechanical works they have to deal with every day without any chance of changing, just like the characters captured in "A street corner". Hoàng Ngọc Biên's short stories always obsess readers, encouraging them to find out the truth, the answer that needs to be exposed. In "The night sleeping in town", the protagonist pays a visit to his old town but ends up in asking for the reasons why he is back. And at the end of the work, it is also not stated what the reason is. Why did the lover of "em" in "Hilly city" leave, so that she has to go all the way to Dalat to fight with her soul? The answer is, too, completely vague. Such narratives create layers of questions even though the narrator does not pose the questions directly. The author skillfully draws readers into a state of doubt. At that time, readers do not only stand outside to enjoy the work, but have to, together with the narrator, create the story. But in the end, the character does not know, even less the author. So does that truth exist after all, or does it exist as an unknown? In the journey to find the answer, where will people be led, and will they find anything? All are vague. Such inexplicability a particular nature of Hoàng Ngọc Biên's literary works. Life, for him, must exist beforehand, and then its meanings, as Nguyễn Văn Trung once said: "Life is there before it has meaning." (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1962, 122)

The work is, however, written not for the purpose of explaining the meaning of reality, but to facilitate readers to live with the happenings of the story and thence to find out its meanings on their own. To put it another way, the writer, his characters, and readers as well are all en route to find the the answer to problems of the reality. Literature is no longer a tool to fight for anything. It neither reflects nor serves anything. It is merely a search, in Butor's words. And it also does not know in advance what it is looking for. To the Nouveau Roman novelists, life is just there, neither significant nor absurd. And its meaning is thus temporary, impermanent. The writer's composition process is also the journey on which readers are driven to find the meaning of life. The writer, therefore, does not directly participate in the interpretation of life. He is not required to establish his stance, in terms of either politics or morality.

In short, like Nouveau Roman writers, Hoàng Ngọc Biên will never be able to answer the questions “Why was the book born?”, “What does it mean?”, etc., for the reason that their books are all what he brought to life, and nothing more. The creative journey is just a journey of experimentation, never jumping to a conclusion or trying to fight for anything. It is merely a unique expression of itself, which is completely corresponding to the Nouveau Roman writers’ conception of fiction, as stated by Huỳnh Như Phương (2023, 7) that “fiction has become a way of writing whose object is the writing itself, and an act whose ultimate aim is language”. Hoàng Ngọc Biên’s writing process is just an act of writing, where words overlap each other. One word gives rise to a sentence, and each sentence gives rise to a paragraph. In the end, the work becomes a continuous operation, in which the characters’ inner monologues, memories and dreams are mixed with the narrator’s words, forming a chaotic sequence, a complicated whole that readers have to find their own ways to understand.

Denial of stereotypes: a way of picturing the characters

Sarraute’s *The Age of Suspicion* heralded an era of skepticism over the outdated features of traditional fiction. From skepticism to denial, Nouveau Roman writers determinedly denied all the norms originated from Balzacian mode of fiction, which has long been considered “immutable”. In their novels, figures are not psychologically explored and presented to readers. And because there are no characters with specific personalities, their works are also alien to narrative events.

In a traditional fiction, its story should be fascinatingly recounted, through which readers can gain insight into various social issues. But the Nouveau Roman novelists did not compromise with that. In their works, narrative events are blurred, torn, and even disappear. Description is preferred over narration. It is also clearly seen that in their novels, the plot becomes less important than ever before. Nouveau Roman novels thus undoubtedly marked a new era of fiction. In a number of their works, the story line is extremely simple, without any thrilling, compelling or engaging event. The story ends without a climax. In fact, Flaubert was earlier aware that the plot does not play any role. What the writer was interested in is how to impress his readers, not just what to tell. The Nouveau Roman works still have a story, but they did not intend to present interesting, thrilling, and cohesive events, but focused more on problematizing the reality.

It is doubtless that the short stories printed in the collection *The night sleeping in town* still have stories to be told. Yet they are all very simple. Thus, it is pointless to look for details, events and actions while reading Hoàng Ngọc Biền's works. Instead, readers should immerse themselves in the atmosphere, the tone of voice, and the thoughts presented. A segment of life haunted with memories, time, and love in early days is narrated in "Hilly city". In "A passage amidst summer", a miserable everyday life of a young couple is recounted. Readers can choke up at the story of a man who tries his best to take care of his family, albeit with a "calm" attitude in "The man cycling to the city in the morning". Hoàng Ngọc Biền does not attract his readers to adventures of events, but rather facilitating their experience of different situations in life. They thus can recognize more clearly what life means. In other words, the writer does not intentionally hide it, but because it is extremely complicated and multi-faceted, each individual has to discover it in his or her own ways.

The Nouveau Roman writers rejected the outdated concept of the "lifelike" characters, which has been doubted by people in the twentieth century. Characters in traditional novels are always constructed with pre-determined appearance, fate and personality to make them real. The Nouveau Roman authors wanted to put an end to that illusion. They denied the role of characters "because they were skeptical of 'available' images and visions of life and man" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1962, 192). The contemporary era is exactly the age of "suspicion", so it is a must that the characters are separated from their author. They need to exist as independent entities, of which each reader will have his or her different interpretation. In works written by the Nouveau Roman novelists, characters exist only as unidentified entities, with their basic attributes reduced and simplified, while those with backgrounds, personality, psychology fully provided are no longer preferred. To explain this, characters since then have been only signs and the starting point from which numerous aspects of life can be revealed.

A unique point expressly seen in Hoàng Ngọc Biền's characters is that they are mostly constructed with very sketchy background details. While the minutiae of the scene are described meticulously, the most general information about a person is completely absent from the work. The character is first and foremost a human being, and that's all. There is no need to question further because according to the writer, the character and the people we meet every day are alike. And of course, we can only know and meet them for a moment or for a short period of time, which is apparently not enough for us to clearly understand them in detail. Hoàng Ngọc Biền's characters have no name, and even a specific background. They appear to the reader only for a transient moment, and almost by chance. The information about the character is not clearly

provided by the author. Readers can only rearrange the details and images presented to vaguely imagine a bit about the character. This is different from most traditional fictions, in which writers try to clarify their figures as much as they can. In short, Hoàng Ngọc Biền's characters are those who have no history, or have forgotten their history. They are just entities that can be grasped and seen, which are both all and nothing at the same time. Their existence is stripped, and they thus become illusions, dreams, memories, nightmares or reflections. The major character in "Morning" is not given a clear profile. He is an unknown person, with no place to live, no personality, just wandering in the market and only knowing him as a houseboy: "If I step back to five or six months earlier, I'll be the filthy boy brought to the landlady by the baker. If I could take another step back, maybe ten years ago or so, I would be a red-haired boy lying in his crib like the son of a soldier next door. And even further back, would I be a puppy or a kitten. Further, I would be a mouse, or a lizard,..." (Hoàng Ngọc Biền 1970). We also do not know who the teacher in "The night sleeping in town" is, where he comes from, but only the fact that he comes from somewhere far away from the province that the reader will know by the end of the story: "Here I am sitting now, the cool morning breeze hitting my face through the wide open windows of the bus,..., on the swaying bus that takes me back to my city" (Hoàng Ngọc Biền 1970). The information provided about the character is very vague. What kind of person is he? How is his temperament and what is his social status? No one knows where his city is, why he returns to this place, etc. All details are left open. The protagonist in "The man cycling to the city in the morning" was only depicted through some details related to his family situation (as a poor and large family with many children). He is told to work far away from his hometown, which is, however, completely vague: "the road from his little house in the furthest hamlet of the farthest suburb, on the side where the sun does not rise in the morning, to a factory located in the outskirts is quite a long distance." (Hoàng Ngọc Biền 1969). That is all information about the old man. In "Hilly city", it is only sure that the character "I" [em] is residing in Danang, as the writer puts it: "Summer has just ended in Danang with intense heat, every day I go in and out to prepare for my trip" (Hoàng Ngọc Biền 1970).

Hoàng Ngọc Biền, in his essay "Notes on a change in French literature", found that it would be a "stereotypical and deceitful depiction" if the character is built to represent some typical character traits of the community. In his own works, the characters are very ordinary people in society, such as a guy who roams around the market ("Morning"), a white-collar worker and his boring working days ("A street corner"), teachers preoccupied by their mental entanglements ("A passage amidst summer"), a family with difficulties and burdens to make a

living (“A passage amidst summer”, “Hilly city”, “The man cycling to the city in the morning”). Hoàng Ngọc Biên subtly removed all the names, faces, physiques, temperaments, and passions of his characters, as well as replacing a well-informed narrator with an anonymous one, which, in fact, may be his readers themselves. The story is not unusual and noteworthy, but the endlessly long sentences in Biên’s short stories make readers drawn into the story, hardly taking their eyes off.

Hoàng Ngọc Biên’s characters are not built following any available model. Their characteristics neither represent anyone, nor speak for a certain class. Readers can thus encounter them anywhere in life. The writer thereby makes his readers feel like they are living inside the fictional world, and thus have no doubt of it in it. Robbe-Grillet’s *On Some Outdated Concepts*, from our observation, expressly presents these ideas. Literary figures, for him, used to be created only as portraits of the writers’ era. They are thus portrayed with a unique personality and appearance, based on which their actions and words will be produced. Characters, therefore, become an effective means for the author to express his personal point of view. Nevertheless, the contemporary era denies the universality of man. Both the author and his characters are skeptical of each other. Therefore, fictional figures are now no longer built according to stereotypes. The characters in Robbe-Grillet’s novels do not represent a social class. They do not have any distinctive characteristics and signs to distinguish themselves from others. Those are just ordinary people in society, without anything special.

Besides, Hoàng Ngọc Biên was very interested in examining human entities, but as undefined ones rather than social members, whose psychological life, personality and actions reflect their complex social relationships. They are, in Nguyễn Văn Trung’s words, the entities that “are as if unformed, unstructured, not having worn human meanings” (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1962, 121). In Balzacian novels, the psychology of the characters is described meticulously and subtly, as demonstrated by Trầng Thiên (1963, 62) that “I have the feeling that I can profoundly understand people’s hearts after carefully commenting and analyzing their outer appearances”. However, when reading works of this model, readers may find it difficult to be exposed to the “depth” of the characters directly, but only have the feeling that they have seen the whole characters’ souls through their gestures, words and actions. The Nouveau Roman movement, and specifically Nathalie Sarraute’s point of view, negated those notions. Sarraute said that the inner nature of man sometimes does not match with what he manifests according to social norms and morality. Therefore, it is necessary to go deep into the human subconscious to discover that chaotic, contradictory and bizarre world.

When trying not to picture his characters through their psychology, ideology, and personality, but the vague, chaotic, disordered complexes hidden deep inside them instead, Hoàng Ngọc Biên did not want his readers to get lost in searching and rearranging simple details about the characters. He aimed to facilitate his readers' experience of moments when they are ceaselessly confused, thereby gradually figuring out subtle truths of life. At the same time, Hoàng Ngọc Biên understood clearly that literary characters, like everyone of us, frequently encounter complex feelings, sometimes intensely while sometimes transiently. But after all, everything will be back in place, calm and peaceful. Nguyễn Đăng Thường, a South Vietnamese writer during the time, commented on this trait of Hoàng Ngọc Biên's works:

The night sleeping in town [is written] just to prove first to oneself that I am or am living. It is a meticulous look on everything that surrounds us as if to verify, and the voice narrates and monologues as if it is trying to make a list of the little things that happened, the joys and sorrows, the dimmish happiness, the objects seen, held in hand, touched, the lingering or fleeting sounds and smells, the warm sweater of a lonely day, all of these are recalled (and only recalled) as to convince oneself or another person of our presence and that of the person in life" (Nguyễn Đăng Thường 1971, 47).

Literary critics as well as readers appear to be fed up with the novels of the "Minuit" authors. They argue that such works are difficult to read, due to their familiarity with traditional works. They are more acquainted with characters whose life and actions are built based on interpretable schemes. When approaching Nouveau Roman works, they seem to fall into a chaotic and incoherent world which is difficult to understand. If we only use the standards of the past to evaluate the innovations of the present time, the works of future generations will not be able to escape the old tradition. Instead, new and sometimes downright daring directions should be facilitated, though such unexplored paths may be paved with a number of difficulties ahead.

3. Conclusion

Adventurous people are never satisfied with old, inadequate things. Fiction and life are alike. It is a journey, a journey without destination. Although Nouveau Roman fictions may make it difficult for some readers to read, but they are also very interesting because of its complex nature, and its difference from the traditional form of fiction that we have been extremely familiar with. With his efforts to explore and renovate the art of fiction following the path pioneered by Nouveau Roman writers, Hoàng Ngọc Biên created a unique way of writing, contributing to the modernization of literature in South Vietnam in the period 1954–1975. His

works are undoubtedly challenging to be read, but his spirit of innovation is always worthy of recognition. It indicates the aspiration of Vietnamese writers who always attempt to change in order not to become outdated.

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