

Literary Historiography and Socio-Cultural Transformation: The Case of Thailand.¹

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper proposes to deal with significant features in the development of Thai literary historiography. By way of an introduction, it may be worthwhile to make some general remarks about literary historiography in Thailand. It must be admitted that literary historiography is an area to which scholars of Thai literature have yet to address themselves systematically. The absence of interest is partly due to a widespread belief among Thai scholars and within Thai literary circles that the major responsibility of literary studies is that of the investigation of the literary work itself and that it is less rewarding to apply oneself to the study of how the Thai have looked at their literature or how Thai literary historians have written their histories of literature. A corollary from the allied field of literary criticism may help to shed light on the issue; it is often thought that the writing of a history of criticism is a thankless task, for one should more gainfully be busying oneself with the writing of criticism itself. Besides, experience from a sister-discipline, namely history, has shown that debates on Thai historiography have tended to assume the character of an ideological conflict which many literary scholars would be chary to enter into. The wounds from the 1973-76 period of political storm and stress are still smarting, and some scholars cannot help feeling that the short-lived flirtation with a political enticement almost robbed Thai literary studies of its time-consecrated philological purity, not to say, philological puritanism.

And yet one could look at the problem from another angle. If we take literary studies to be a textual discipline, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with texts within contexts, and more often than not, within historical contexts. In the case of Thai literature, we must admit that these contexts are to a

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1. The present paper was presented at the XVth Congress of the "Federation Internationale des Langues et Litteratures Modernes" (FILLM), Budapest, August 22-27, 1984. It was written for an audience not necessarily familiar with Thai culture and literature.

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considerable extent identifiable. Literary historians make efforts to interpret texts within those contexts, but the way they interpret them can be illuminating in the sense that, as interpreters, they too are conditioned by their own contexts. The interaction between the context of the original literary work and that of the literary historian at the receiving end is an extremely interesting phenomenon which merits serious consideration. Recent historiographical disputes in Thailand, as mentioned earlier, have centred around this kind of problem, and issues have come to the fore whereby certain historians and certain historical “schools” have been accused of deliberate misreading of the “text” and misinterpretation of the “context” as a result of their own ideological preoccupations. One might ask whether the same could happen, or might have happened, to Thai literary historiography. But more important than his adjudicating role in deciding as to which interpretation is or is not faithful to the original context is the literary historian’s ability to capture trends of thoughts, models of thinking, intellectual orientations or even socio-cultural patterns that are reflected in the actual writing of literary history at a particular period or through a certain span of time. An example from Thai literary history may serve as an illustration. Why, one may ask, do almost all manuals of Thai literature written over the past 40 years incorporate King Ramkhamhaeng’s Stone Inscription No. 1 into the repertoire of Thai literature? Strictly speaking, this is more of a historical account of the Kingdom of Sukhothai in the 13th Century. But Thai literary historians have no qualms in treating it as a literary work and in justifying its literariness. Is this an instance of academic chauvinism of a particular period or are we to interpret this as a more perennial phenomenon of the Thai concept of literature?

The present paper does not attempt to give a comprehensive account of the evolution of Thai literary historiography, but is meant to serve as prologomena to more detailed and systematic studies which, hopefully, will be carried out in the near future. It seeks to see literary history as a code, the deciphering of which may reveal messages of a more general kind which, for want of a more appropriate term, might be said to be of “national dimensions”. This is not because some of our eminent literary historians have been men of high standing who have wielded influence far beyond the confines of literature and literary history, but because in the writing of literary history they have had to deal with issues of high seriousness that demand of them the kind of perspicacity and farsightedness that may not be necessarily called for in their literary musings or in their reading of a particular “autonomous text”. In this respect, the present paper tries to demonstrate that at certain crucial moments,

Thai literary history may even rise to the level of a cross-examination of its own national conscience.

THE RESTORATIVE EFFORT AND THE BENT FOR SELF-ASSERTION

As fortune will have it, one of the earliest records which could be regarded as an “extrinsic” evidence contributing towards the construction of a Thai literary history is an account of the life of the 17th-Century poet Siprat contained in the portion of a Mon Chronicle known as “Evidence given by a citizen of the Old Capital (of Ayuthya)”. The citizen in question is supposed to be ex-King Uthumporn who was taken as a hostage to Burma after the sack of Ayuthya by the Burmese in 1767. This is an account of the life of a poetic genius which bears certain resemblances to the Western image of a “poète maudit” characteristic of the “fin de siècle”. One modern scholar is of the opinion that the account contains inconsistencies and historical inaccuracies which could be interpreted as a deliberate stratagem to confuse the Burmese², while another scholar thinks that there was an attempt on the part of the “citizen” to create a myth of Siprat to outdo a similar Burmese myth about the sixteenth-century poet Nawade.³ Be that as it may, the myth of Siprat has been perpetuated in Thailand itself right up to the present, whereby school children are made to recite his verses by heart and to treasure the memory of a genius who could effortlessly extemporize exquisite poetry and whose tempestuous nature, as befitting a great artist, led him to a bad end. It is a known fact that most school textbooks derive such information from a work written during the first half of the present century called “The Legend of Siprat”⁴ in which the author, *Phraya Phariyatithamthada*, was indulging in unabashed myth-making, drawing his materials from “oral” sources whose veracity cannot be proved. Later scholars even suspect that some of the poems attributed to Siprat could have been the scholar’s own concoctions. The myth of Siprat does show up tendencies that will prove to be significant in the later development of Thai literary history. These may be summarized as follows. First, the biographical approach seems to have a special appeal within Thai literary circles. Secondly, facts and fiction get entangled in the form of myth or (secular) legend that often defy analysis. Thirdly, the reliance on oral sources makes it extremely difficult

2. P. Na Pramuanmak: *Kamsuan Siprat and Nirat Narin*, 1959, p. 17.

3. Gilles Delouche: *Contribution à une hypothèse de datation d'un poème thai: Le Kamsuan Siprat*, Thèse, Paris III, 1981-1982, p. 50, (in French).

4. In: P. Na Pramuanmak, op. cit., pp. 18-57.

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to determine the authenticity of the text. Fourthly, the breaking up of the Kingdom after the fall of Ayuthya in 1767 and the subsequent restoration efforts seem to have left an indelible mark upon Thai thinking in general as may be witnessed from the mythologization of Siprat, in itself an unmistakably self-assertive act!

The rise of literary history after 1767 therefore was part and parcel of a larger endeavour in the reconstitution of political unity. Although the actual writing of what we can strictly call “literary history” did not take place until much later, early efforts in the recovery of literary texts could be viewed as contributing towards the foundation of literary history. Much labour and insight in the way of “textual criticism” must have gone into the reconstitution of literary texts, for it is commonly known that roughly nine-tenths of written records were lost. Textual restoration took the form of both a rehashing from available written and oral sources and recomposition of commonly known stories and tales.⁵ Since these early pundits did not bother to put down in writing the principles guiding their restorative efforts, we shall never be able to know for certain as to what “approaches” to “literary history” were adopted by them. However, it might be possible to draw certain conclusions from the process of restoration on the whole that literature figured prominently among the lost treasures to be restored. King Taksin, whose prime concern was the regaining of Thai sovereignty and the unification of the Kingdom, did find time to compose his version of the *Ramakian*. King Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty likewise presided over the restoration of older literary texts and commissioned the composition of various literary works, His Majesty himself finding sufficient leisure to engage in the composition of three works, including another version of the *Ramakian*, which was written to commemorate the inauguration of the new capital of Bangkok. There was no doubt that the upsurge in literary creation during the early years of the Bangkok era was part of a cultural consolidation which served as a prop to the overall political restoration. The “national” aspiration of such artistic fervours became explicit in the monumental endeavour undertaken during the reign of King Rama III, namely, the *Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho*. Three important aspects are to be noted in connection with this “encyclopaedia in stone”⁶ First, in this striving for permanency, literature was accorded an important place alongside Buddhist teachings and medicinal treatises. Secondly, the inscriptions pertaining to literature consist of two main types, namely, models of traditional

5. Damrong Rachanuphab, Prince: *History of the Royal Library*, 1969, p.57, (First Edition: 1916).

6. Dhani Nivat, Prince: “The Inscriptions of Wat Phra Jetubon”, in: *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. XXVI, Pt. 2, October 1933, p. 163, (in English).

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prosody and didactic verses, both traditional and newly commissioned, thus embodying a “restorative” philosophy as well as a utilitarian preoccupation necessary for a self-assertive process of nation-building. Thirdly, knowledge and wisdom were transferred from private to public domain, the dedication (also in stone) of 1836 being explicit on this issue. “In undertaking to restore the monastery and in fitly dedicating it, His Majesty has not been actuated by a wish for reward (in future lives) such as universal sovereignty or even heavenly joys, but by an aspiration to arrive at full and complete knowledge whereby human beings will be restored from the wheel of misery...”⁷ The point to be noted here is that our “literary historians” of the early 19th Century, in their selection and propagation of literary works, were imbued with a certain measure of faith in the text. Their particular brand of utilitarianism goes beyond the material welfare of the people to the realm of spiritual salvation.

If stone could be used to serve the cause of public dissemination, what about the printing machine? The introduction of the printing press into Thailand by American missionaries in the middle of the 19th Century is a factor relevant to the consideration of the evolution of literary history. In this connection, special mention must be made of the great work of the Royal Library and the leadership provided by Prince Damrong Rachanuphab (1862-1943). Prince Damrong’s epithet as “the founding father of Thai historiography” is apposite, although some modern historians may contest certain interpretations of his, and we can probably make further claim that he too was “the founding father of Thai literary historiography”. Although he never wrote a complete history of Thai literature, it can be said that no subsequent histories of Thai literature would have been possible without his pioneering efforts. The responsibility of the Royal Library was manifold and was later to be shared among various government agencies such as the Royal Institute, the National Library, the National Archives, the Fine Arts Department, the Office of the National Cultural Committee, the National Identity Board and the Teachers Council Press. First, its staff had to act as collectors of manuscripts, and this, in Prince Damrong’s own words, had to be carried out as efficiently as possible since they had to compete with Western collectors who were buying up manuscripts to be taken to Europe and the United States. Secondly, they had to fulfil the function of editors, and this was probably their most arduous task, for Prince Damrong and his collaborators had no solid tradition of textual criticism to fall back on and the volume of work was immense.

7. Ibid., p. 145.

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Thirdly, the personnel also engaged themselves in the dissemination and promotion of Thai literary heritage. In this, the task was alleviated by that characteristically Thai custom of distributing books at cremation rites; hence the Royal Library did not always have to invest in the actual printing of literary works, for which it did not have sufficient funds in any case. It can be seen that the "restorative" work and the "self-assertive" bent of the early years have borne fruit. Literature became public property, and with the advancement of modern education (in which Prince Damrong himself had had a hand in the capacity of Minister of Education), literature became part of public education.

If we look more closely at the work of Prince Damrong as a literary historian, we shall see that, in many respects, his efforts were dictated by an educational pre-occupation, which accounts for both his virtues and weaknesses. It is known that he was high-handed in his editing of literary texts: he did not give sufficient grounds for distinguishing a "good" text from a "bad" text. He emended profusely, and later scholars suspect that he tolerated or even commissioned recompositions of parts of "classical" texts, since the printed versions, first published under his direction, contain long passages which do not correspond to the dozens of manuscripts now still extant in complete form! There was an air of princely authority about him, even when he made a judgement on a poet he otherwise revered like Sunthon Phu.

"(Sunthon Phu's) poetry cannot be compared to that of poets of high status like H.M. King Rama II. This is only natural, for they have had different kinds of education. People of high status have learned not only basic literacy, but have also been initiated into the subtleties of the language and the discipline of letters before they start writing, whereas people of low status like Sunthon Phu have only learned to read and write without knowledge of the great poetics. They just love to write verses... and acquire skill in verse writing. They regard poetic fluency above the proper use of language."⁸

It appears that in this case the concern of an educator has coloured the judgement of a literary historian, and it is also to be noted in this connection that evaluative judgements are accepted practice in Thai literary history. One must not forget that Prince Damrong had played an important role in the modernization process of Thailand, having been Minister of Education and sub-

8. Damrong Rachanuphab, Prince: "The Life of Sunthon Phu", in: *Phra Aphaimani*, 1924, pp. 40-41. On the work of Prince Damrong, see: Punya Borisuthi: *Etude sur l'oeuvre du Prince Damrong*, Thèse, Paris, 1967.

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sequently, Minister of Interior, and it is only natural that, as a literary historian, he should have adopted a somewhat utilitarian approach to literature. His editing of the Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho reflects this tendency : what is to be perpetuated is what has utilitarian values. In the Preface of 1929, he explained why certain sections of the Stone Inscriptions had been left out.

“... Certain parts are not of much use because the state of knowledge at present has gone much further than that prevalent in the age of the Inscriptions, for example in the fields of medicine and therapy. We have therefore decided not to print them.”⁹

The same principle applies to his handling of literary texts as well, for he would leave out texts which he considered to be of less practical value. This attitude is very remote from the historicist's notion of history, and as far as literary history is concerned, Prince Damrong had perhaps set the tone for a trend which rarely admits of a doctrine like “Art for Art's Sake”.

The great achievements of Prince Damrong and his team lie in their attempt to create a system, or rather a set of systems, for Thai literary history. The Prince himself, according to the records kept at the Damrong Memorial Library, contributed altogether 199 prefaces or introductions to literary works. Some of these are fairly solid studies taking the form of genre-histories or literary biographies. When dealing with a particular work, he would normally attempt the dating of the work, and if it was a work with historical roots, he would try to distinguish between the dating of the historical event and that of the composition, such as in the Preface to the verse narrative *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, first published in 1917. His data gathering was comprehensive, and he never failed to make use of oral sources when they were of real significance. The question of authorship was also of interest to him, and when confronting a work with collective authorship, he used stylistic comparisons to determine the authors. In line with the much-favoured biographical approach as mentioned earlier, he also wrote literary biographies, the best-known being that of Sunthon Phu. In the absence of written materials, he had to rely on oral sources, and more importantly, on autobiographical information in the actual works of the poet, a practice which subsequent literary historians and critics have followed, sometimes uncritically, and which have resulted in many instances of what is known in literary criticism as “intentional fallacies”. But it was on the study

9. Damrong Rachanuphab, Prince: Preface to *The Inscriptions of Wat Phra Jetubon*, 1929, p. iii.

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of the evolution of literary genres that he really expended much thought and research effort. He was a conscientious historian in the sense that he tried to relate a literary work to its historical context as well as to its generic framework and at the same time to trace the development of that genre within a historical framework. He wrote studies on such important genres as the drama, the "sepa" (a form of verse-narrative), the "kap he rua" (boat song), the "sakawa" (verse repartee). The immensity of the task, the absence of adequate written data and the controversial nature of certain of his conclusions have somehow intimidated later scholars who hesitate to engage themselves on similar lines, and apart from the works of some foreign scholars, notably members of the "Hamburg School" of Thai Studies, there have been few studies by Thai scholars themselves that can claim to have surpassed the work of the pioneer. And yet one has to admit that the Prince was, more often than not, circumspect in formulating his conclusions: words like "probably", "perhaps", "may-be", "possibly" abound in his writings.¹⁰ In many instances, it is the later manuals of Thai literary history that have blindly appropriated his views and put them in apodictic form. Should a controversy arise, one could always refer back to Prince Damrong. In some ways, the father of Thai literary history has become the scapegoat of Thai literary scholarship. When all is said and done, Prince Damrong's work could be considered the crowning achievement of an epoch, the restorative and self-assertive period which picked up the remnants of a Burmese invasion and consolidated them into a cultural bastion against Western imperialism. It may be appropriate at this juncture to quote the opinion of a French scholar.

"The general aim which emanated from all his work was to preserve all that appeared to him to be running the risk of disappearing under the menace of the West, all that constituted the beauty and the greatness of his country."¹¹

LITERATURE AND EDUCATION : THE ROAD TO SELF-CRITICISM

If the work of the Royal Librar was more of a historiographical nature, the task of the Literary Academy, founded in 1914 probably with the "Académie Française" in mind, was to be that of the guardian of the purity of the Thai language and of literary quality, and hence it had to deal with contemporary

10. See: Klaus Wenk: *Studien zur Literatur der Thai*, Band I, Hamburg, 1982, p. 19. In a number of recent works, Wenk has raised doubts as to the editorial soundness of the classical works published under the auspices of the Royal Library.

11. Schweisguth, P.: *Etude sur la littérature siamoise*, Paris, 1951, p. 344, (in French).

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literature as well. The Royal Proclamation inaugurating the Academy now sounds almost like a schoolmaster's comment on a pupil's essay, with admonitions on corrupt usages comparable to the present-day "franglais". It also pinpoints bad books that are translated from "bad foreign books", for its patron, King Rama VI, was Western-trained and was engaged in the promotion not only of classical Thai literature, but also of "high" European literature, such as Shakespeare which he himself translated magnificently. Whatever one may say, with the benefit of hindsight, on the parochialism of the Literary Academy, its concern with contemporary literature was a significant step in the evolution of Thai literary history. It is only to be regretted that it addressed itself mainly to the criticism and evaluation of literary works which were in line with the King's preoccupation with an "Indological Renaissance",¹² and did not deign to tackle newly emerging works of prose-fiction or essays. "Self-criticism", in this respect, was far too elitist to be of real significance.

One remarkable feature about the development of Thai literary history is its occasional imperviousness to socio-cultural change. The 1932 Revolution which ushered in democracy and constitutional monarchy did not have immediate effect on literary historiography. Perhaps the didactic and educational mission embedded in the early efforts of literary propagation did not leave room for much innovation. Political scientists have been debating for years now as to whether the 1932 Revolution and the political and ideological movements that preceded it have really instituted significant changes in Thai society. As far as literature is concerned, a lay-man can easily discern that the leaders of the Revolution and the power-mongers of the later generations have not really allied themselves with top-notch educationists, or to be more precise, have not really given serious thought to the use of literature as an instrument of political education. The same could not be said of the literary-minded political leaders under the absolute monarchy. Literary education subsequent to the Revolution was, for many years, probably based on the repertoire set up by Prince Damrong and his followers, less the "restorative" fervour. Some scholars in the 1940's and 1950's were still talking the same language as Prince Damrong. In his book *Thai Literature* (1959), Phra Worawetphisit, a scholar of immense erudition, paid no

12. King Rama VI had great interest in *classical* Sanskrit literature, which he read in English translations. The interest was *shared* by some of his learned contemporaries, for example, Prince Phitayalonkorn. The King composed a number of poetic works based on Indian classical themes.

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attention to contemporary literature and shared the views of earlier literary historians that Thai literature had served as a safeguard against Western colonialism, because through literature, we could prove to Westerners that ours is a nation endowed with high culture.¹³ He firmly believed in the correlation between the advancement of education and the quality of literature. In his opinion, the reign of King Rama VI represents the culminating point of Thai literature, because "town people (sic) all received a good education. Scholars went abroad for further studies, and those who stayed back either received education up to the secondary level or could go on to the university level. For these reasons, literary creation was moving in leaps and bounds."¹⁴ This is indeed literary history for the educationists!

Another work of literary history worth mentioning in this connection is Pluang Na Nakhon's *History of Thai Literature*, first published in 1952, which has since gone through 8 editions. This is probably the most systematic and consistent of all histories of Thai literature that we possess. It is meant to be a manual for the student and serves the additional purpose of an anthology. The need for an anthology was urgent at that time, since many of the works published by the Royal Library had gone out of print. Pluang himself, during the early part of his career, had distinguished himself as a poet and fiction-writer and he selected his texts with rare discriminating power. The book possesses a remarkable variety, containing a "standard" repertoire as well as rare pieces of journalistic virtuosity.¹⁵ In a recent interview, Pluang maintained that he wrote the book out of a "pleasure of the text" and had no intention of making any claim regarding the greatness of Thai literary heritage. Be that as it may, the *History of Thai Literature* does convey the impression that Thai literature possesses a "great tradition" that derives its strength from the legacy of a long history, and there is no denying that Pluang's anthology has been shaping the literary taste of his readers. To many readers, the anthology provides the first systematic exposure to traditional Thai literature. It is only to be regretted that this History-cum-Anthology does not take us beyond the 1932 Revolution, and the final Chapter, a mere two-page account of the "Literature in the Democratic Age", ends on a pessimistic note with a quotation from Goethe: "The

13. *Phra Worawetphisit: Thai Literature*, 1959, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

15. Pluang Na Nakhon: *History of Thai Literature for the Student*, 1980, pp. 455-479.

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decline of literature indicates the decline of the nation".¹⁶ We have said earlier that Thai literary historians have a natural bent for evaluative criticism, but in the case of Pluang Na Nakhon, literary evaluation seems to betray a regrettably restricted literary taste. The "pleasure of the text" turns out to be coloured by a slight tinge of royal blue.

Whatever be its shortcomings, a work like Pluang's *History* fulfilled an important educational role in providing access to a solid classical repertoire. It was left to the individual readers themselves to probe deeper into this literary treasure-house and to form their own judgements. It could be said that the kind of "literary education" offered at the secondary and tertiary levels in the post-war period was not as bad as it is often made out to be, and that an inquisitive, critical and original mind could very well rise to its heights from such a nurturing ground. Chit Phumisak (1930-1966) was the supreme example of such an original mind. It is not easy to talk objectively about the life and work of this scholar-critic, for his revolutionary activities, his subsequent imprisonment and his being killed "in action" have proved to be ample materials for a myth. That he was more or less "canonized" by the young revolutionaries of the 1973-76 period of democratic boom added further strength to the "Myth of Chit Phumisak". When all is said and done, one has to admit that his influence on young writers, critics and students of literature has been immense. He has created a new consciousness of the moral nature and the social relevance of literature. It is only regrettable that he did not always know how to put his staggering erudition to good use, for he was at times preoccupied with a propagandist mission, which in many ways coloured his critical writings. Yet Chit was an important milestone in the development of Thai literary historiography, although he never attempted to write a systematic history of Thai literature. His major approach is that of *reinterpretation* and *reevaluation* of classical Thai literature. On the one hand, he saw classical Thai literature as a product of a corrupt and oppressive aristocratic ruling class, the history of Thai literature being that of an exploitation of the common people. Chit very often adopted a content-oriented approach, and in this respect he may have even founded a "school". Another point worth mentioning is his constant attacks on the aristocratic ruling class on account of their incurable sexual obsessions. Naturally, he could find sufficient evidence from classical Thai literature to substantiate his diatribes. On

16. *Ibid.*, p. 549.

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the whole, Chit scrounged traditional Thai literature for two things, namely, the repressive bent on the part of the ruling class and the resistance on the part of the people. He may have been more successful in his search for the first than for the second. One cannot help feeling that he at times dramatized and even exaggerated traits of popular resistance in Thai literature : his *Preface to Nirat Nongkhai* is a case in point.¹⁷

In spite of propagandist aberrations, Chit is important in one particular respect. He has shown that the study of literature can take the form of a cross-examination of national conscience. Thai literature is a testimony to national pride as well as national shame. It is the message of a general nature like this rather than his interpretations, re-interpretations or (deliberate) mis-interpretations that is likely to survive the "Myth of Chit Phumisak". We are dealing here with "self-criticism" of a singular kind.

But the young revolutionaries of 1973-76 did not really have time to digest Chit's message, and they even radicalized some of his viewpoints. The call to "set fire to literature", meaning to do away with all traditional literature, was something that Chit would never have approved of. All in all, many of his ideas and methodological approaches were appropriated by young writers and critics, particularly the idea about literature being used as an instrument of political tyranny and about the sexual mania of the ruling class. Some particular works of classical literature fared badly during this period, especially *Phra Lo*, an epic-romance usually regarded as the acme of its kind, which was now regarded as the epitome of sexual aberration of the aristocratic class. The Oath-Taking Proclamation (*Ongkarn Chaengnam*) had its bad days as well. Even a university scholar, Chonthira Kladyu, who was otherwise a great admirer of classical Thai literature, interpreted the 14th Century cosmological treatise *Trai Phum* as serving a political purpose of strengthening the status of kingship.¹⁸ When all is said and done, credit must be given to the young critics of the 1973-76 period for their interest in modern and contemporary Thai literature, and in this respect, they went beyond their master Chit Phumisak. Some of their re-discoveries and revaluations are of significant value, especially the reinstatement of writers like Seni Soawapong, whose social novels are now recognized as standard works of modern Thai literature.

17. Chit Phumisak: *Preface to Nirat Nongkhai*, 1975, pp. 1-116, (originally written in 1961).

18. Chonthira Kladyu: *Literature for the People*, 1974, pp. 44-49.

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As mentioned earlier, most Thai literary historians have paid far too little attention to contemporary literature, and in this respect, the critical works of *Mom Luang* Bunlua Thepyasuwan must be regarded as pioneering efforts. An educationist of international repute, a noted language teacher, a fiction-writer of some stature, *Mom Luang* Bunlua turned to literary history late in her career, but what she did produce was epoch-making. A long essay called "The Turning Point of Thai Literature" published in the *Festschrift Wanwaitayakon* (1971), and later published as a text-book, deals with the rise of modern Thai literature towards the turn of the Century and takes the reader up to the late 1960's. For the first time, the novel as a literary genre receives an objective, scholarly treatment, and *Mom Luang* Bunlua's evaluation of contemporary "popular" novels is illuminating, for she knows how to point to their virtues as well as weaknesses. More interesting still is her treatment of the essay and non-fictional prose which, she thinks, have progressed very far after 1932, the reason being that the new democracy has proved to be an impetus to literary expression of this kind and that higher literacy has naturally created a larger reading public. Due credit is therefore given to the democratic government, and this coming from a "Mom Luang" a member of the royal family! In a full-length study entitled *Analysis of Thai Literature* (1974) *Mom Luang* Bunlua offers a work of theoretical as well as practical criticism. It is not a literary history in the strict sense of the word, but in her analysis of certain classical works, she also adopts a historical approach and relates a work to its historical context. Some of her interpretations could be regarded as innovations in Thai literary history. For example, she adopts a sociological approach in her chapter on *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, taking this literary masterpiece to be a reflection of the Thai way of life and concluding that Thai society as seen through this work was a "society that lacks discipline".¹⁹ She is quite explicit in saying that even the king in this work lacks discipline and a sure sense of justice in the governing of his own kingdom. Instead of taking the traditional stance of seeing didactic elements in classical literature, *Mom Luang* Bunlua warns against using literature for didactic purposes. Literature, according to her, is an image of life in all its facets and demands a certain level of maturity for a proper comprehension. The liberal-mindedness and the sobriety that inform her critical works provided a soothing antidote to the revolutionary paroxysm of Chit Phumisak's disciples. Here is a kind of self-criticism that can lead to constructive self-knowledge. Both in scholarly and in journalistic circles, *Mom Luang*

19. *Mom Luang* Bunlua Thepyasuwan: *Analysis of Thai Literature*, 1974, p. 40.

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Bunlua's contributions to literary studies have been fully recognized. She has given confidence to many young scholars and critics that a "middle course" is possible and that serious consideration of contemporary literature is an integral part of literary history.

EPILOGUE : THE SEARCH FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The period following the political event of 1976 did not turn out to be totally bereft of constructive literary activities. In the field of creative writing, the "literature of social consciousness"²⁰ has even gained strength, and soul-searching questions have been dealt with in contemporary fiction and poetry. Literary criticism and literary history did not really suffer the same fate as the political avantgardism. Within months after the political upheaval of October 1976, a new literary magazine *Bookworld* was launched, and for a period of 6 years, it provided a forum for writers, critics and scholars of all "denominations" to air their literary views. Its significance to the development of literary history cannot be denied, for apart from printing criticisms of contemporary literature by critics from both the academia and the world of journalism, it strove to fulfil the role of a chronicler of modern literature, devoting single issues to important modern writers, both Thai and foreign. Its contribution to Thai literary historiography probably cannot be gauged fully at the present, but a few years from now, literary historians writing a history of modern Thai literature will certainly have to rely on this magazine as the most important source of information on Thai literature and criticism. One particular feature of Thai literary life needs to be mentioned here: in the field of literary criticism and literary studies, a literary magazine has sometimes been able to perform functions that in other societies would normally be reserved for learned journals. There is no clear-cut distinction between the "learned" and the "journalistic". When *Bookworld* ceased publication in 1983 as a result of financial losses, another literary magazine "Book-path" (*Thanon Nangsu*) came into being. It too has the ambition of making its contribution to literary history. The May 1984 Issue contains a lengthy article on the "Evolution of the Thai Free-Verse", a genre-history that harks back to the tradition of Prince Damrong! Although no conclusive answer has been given to a number of questions, particularly those concerning the origin of the Thai free-verse,

20. See: *Thai-PEN Anthology: Short Stories and Poems of Social Consciousness*, 1984, (in English). The term is used to describe recent development in Thai literature which is marked by a tendency for social criticism.

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it can be seen that an inquisitive mind is at work in this magazine article. We really want to know ourselves better.

Even the "school" of Chit Phumisak has mellowed over the years, and when Sathian Chantimathon published his *Stream of Thai Literature for Life* in 1981, he was already concentrating more on the "secondary" mission of finding the self-assertive urge of the "people" as expressed in Thai literature rather than being bogged down with the "primary" mission of denigrating the aristocratic class. The book contains two parts, the first part being an attempt to *re-write the history of Thai literature* from the point of view of the "people", and the second part being a collection of earlier articles. It is the first part that merits special attention, for the author very interestingly establishes the unity and continuity of the Thai "literature for life"²¹ which he sees as an endless "stream". Without any doubt, this is a literary history of the modern period whose data base is more comprehensive than that of any existing history. Reading it one could not help feeling that the author might have produced a more meaningful history, had he not imposed upon himself a somewhat rigid dichotomical framework of class struggle that appears rather contrived at times. This is probably characteristic of the new "scientific" approach to literature: Sathian seems to believe that seeing things through a frame is to see things more clearly. Are we dealing here with the quest for self-knowledge through a "partial" vision?

The application of a theoretical framework also characterizes Nithi Ieosiwong's *Bourgeois Culture and Early Bangkok Literature* (1981), which can be called the first consistent attempt at a social history of Thai literature. The literature of the early Bangkok period, as distinct from that of the earlier period of Ayuthya, represents a merging between court and popular cultures, the intermediary being the rising bourgeoisie (which included Chinese immigrants). While viewing with some detached amusement the aristocracy's readiness to befriend the wealthy bourgeoisie on the basis of common mercantile interest, Nithi seems to welcome the transformation which took place in literature as a move towards a more agile and more liberal form of artistic expression. It can be said that Nithi's work offers fresh insights into the relationship between literature and socio-economic conditions, but some of his interpretations may appear a little far-fetched. For example, he thinks that the rise of literacy is supportive of the dissemination of literature, and that we owe it to the

21. "Literature for Life" is a Thai version of "littérature engagée", probably marked by greater acerbity than the Sartrean original!

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money-minded bourgeoisie (who promoted literacy as part of the promotion of business) that literature should have progressed so far in the early Bangkok period.²² The novelty of Nithi's approach (which may not be so novel in some other countries) lies in the fact that knowledge of history, including economic history, can help us understand literary transformation, and in this respect, he goes much further than *Mom Luang* Bunlua's sociological reading of traditional literature, for Nithi views such transformation as being conditioned by socio-economic change. This is a method that has its merits as well as pitfalls, and Nithi has been criticized by some literary scholars as having tried to bend his facts to suit a theoretical framework. Be that as it may, credit must be given to this eminent historian for having asked questions that no earlier scholar has asked and for providing answers that no previous literary student has thought of. He has helped literary historians to look at Thai literature from fresh angles. There is no denying that these various perspectives contribute towards a better understanding of ourselves and our literary culture.

Our understanding has been enriched also through studies in "regional literatures" and folk-literature which scholars have been pursuing vigorously for the past 10-15 years. Knowledge of the literatures of the North, South and North-East of Thailand has extended our notion of literature, which formerly used to be confined to the literature of our successive capital cities. It is appropriate to mention here Thawat Punothok's work *Regional Literature* (1982). This is indeed a bold step in the direction of a synthesis. Although he relies chiefly on written sources and does not as yet appear confident enough to put to good use recent research into the oral tradition, Thawat succeeds in creating a new consciousness of a literary heritage that is a great deal more comprehensive than the traditional image of "Thai literature". There is one cultural trait that emerges quite clearly from his investigation, namely, that the majority of works of "regional literature" are deeply anchored in Buddhist beliefs and traditions. The role of the Buddhist temple in the propagation of the literary culture is also very much in evidence. Are we to assume that through the study of regional literatures, we may arrive at a deeper understanding of our cultural roots than hitherto?

It can be seen that the major works of literary history that have appeared after 1976 seem to be imbued with a certain measure of sobriety and perspicacity

22. Nithi Ieosiwong: "Bourgeois Culture and Early Bangkok Literature", in: *Thammasat University Journal*. Vol. 11, No. 1. March 1982, p. 77. (The full version appeared as a research report in mimeographed form, published by Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1981).

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that contribute towards the consolidation of Thai literary historiography. Although we still do not possess a complete history of Thai literature that gives an overall picture of our literary heritage, these “partial” views can provide a basis for future work of synthesis. It is an irony of history that a period of political doldrum has not engendered a corresponding lull period in literary creation and literary studies. Perhaps literary history, by its very nature as a reflective discipline, does not give its best when called to respond to immediate needs. It needs time to reflect upon literature and to reflect upon itself. This does not mean that it should retire to some cozy Olympian heights; rather it should position itself in a realm of Buddhist detachment.
