

SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SUNTHON PHŪ

Prefatory Note

The following article is an English translation of the introductory chapter to the second volume of my "STUDIEN ZUR LITERATUR DER THAI" (Studies relating to Thai Literature).

This volume was recently published with the subtitle "TEXTE UND INTERPRETATIONEN VON UND ZU SUNTHON PHŪ UND SEINEM KREIS" (Texts and interpretations of works of Sunthon Phū and his circle), 372 pp., Hamburg and Bangkok 1986. It contains the following works of Sunthon Phū and his presumed pupils in German translation together with detailed commentaries and annotations:

Chapter I	<i>Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām</i>
Chapter II	<i>Nirāt Phū Khau Thong</i>
Chapter III	<i>Nirāt Muang Phet</i>
Chapter IV	<i>Nirāt Phră Prăthom</i>
Chapter V	<i>Phlēng Yāu Thawāi Ōwāt</i>
Chapter VI	<i>Nirāt Inau</i>
Chapter VII	<i>Nirāt Nēn Klan</i>
Chapter VIII	<i>Suphāsit Sōn Ying</i>

In 1986 (2529), the year of Sunthon Phū's bi-centenary, the following contribution may be of general interest and special significance.

In Thai literary studies it has justly been emphasized that the works of one of Thailand's greatest poets, Phră Sunthḡn Wōhān or Sunthḡn Phū, as he is commonly referred to, are scarcely known as yet outside Thailand. Only a few essays have so far been published in a Western language to convey to those not familiar with Thai some notion of the extensive literary production of this poet. General interest in Thai culture has first and foremost been focussed on things visible, on objects of the fine arts such as paintings and sculptures.

As matters stand in philological and literary studies in Thai at the present time, it is certainly something of a venture, nay adventure to embark upon studies of Sunthḡn Phū and his works. The truth of this is borne out by the introduction to the various works of the poet under review in this study.

There are many open questions, points in doubt and gaps in our factual knowledge regarding bibliography and the poet's intentions. In view of the present state of affairs we can hope to solve only a few of these problems. It is with this in mind that the present study has been undertaken.

As to method I have started from scratch taking into account almost all that was available in secondary literature. From this relevant data and opinions are quoted in the present study, without adding comment however or entering into a discussion of their merits. Any literary historian has to face the fact that almost everything in the life and works of Sunthḡn Phū is doubtful, to say the least. The reader is referred to the evidence produced in the following eight chapters.

Only by a radical break with what has hitherto been transmitted and by admitting that many things no longer lend themselves to exploration by us today, can we hope to replace "opinions" by facts, negative ones notwithstanding, and to label as such what is merely of fantastic or anecdotal nature to separate it from the few facts that can so far be considered as certain scientific knowledge.

The following selection from the works of Sunthḡn Phū and those presumed to be his pupils was for the most part made according to objective criteria and for the rest according to my personal preference. It seemed to me imperative to begin this volume with *Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām* which as part of a greater poem belongs to world literature. Before anything else, the name of Sunthḡn Phū will always be associated with his *nirāt* poems, notwithstanding his great poem *Phra Aphaimanī*.

Mention should also be made of the less known poem *Phlēng yāu thāwāi ōwāt*, as it is calculated more than any other to shed light on the poet's personality. I would finally observe that the *nirāt* of the poet Nēn Klan must be considered as a

fortunate literary discovery which I would place on an equal level with the poems of the great master Sunth๑n Phū.

1. Sunth๑n Phū and Thai literary research

a. Text editions

Most of the texts attributed to Sunth๑n Phū are today available in print. However, there is as yet no such thing as a complete edition of his works. Considering the deficiencies of Thai literary studies at this juncture¹⁾ it is scarcely possible to refer to a definitive canon of texts of this poet.

(a) From the poems that can be attributed to Sunth๑n Phū with a fair measure of certainty, an attempt to edit a critical text has been made so far only in one case, viz. *Nirāt phrā prāthom*. But even here only one of the manuscripts extant has been used to verify the text.

All other printed poems of Sunth๑n Phū have been edited in a version which, in broad terms, we can only presume to be the authentic text composed by Sunth๑n Phū. The question arises how to explain the discrepancies between the printed texts and the manuscripts which in some cases are considerable. The reader needs only to refer to the list of variants of *Nirāt phrā prāthom* contained in the present study. In the case of this poem it is indeed an open question how the printed version has come about at all. Who selected the version from the various manuscripts and according to what criteria? Why are numerous sections of verse contained in the manuscripts disregarded?

In cases of ambiguity the manuscripts alone are doubtless the authentic text composed by Sunth๑n Phū! The textual history of this *nirāt* can be taken as a classic example of the way in which literary research in Thailand stands on rather shaky ground as long as a poem's authentic text has not been established with precision and competence.

It is evident that any further studies of the poems of Sunth๑n Phū should first and foremost aim at setting up a historical-critical edition of all his poems²⁾. This task should indeed be a primary concern of Thai rather than of foreign scholars.

(b) With the help of historico-comparative as well as descriptive

1. See in this connection WENK, *Literature and Literary Studies in Thailand, Aks๑nsat Mahāwithalai Sinlapak๑n* pī 8 chabap 2, pp. 98 pp; NAGAVAJARA, *Literary Historiography and Socio-Cultural Transformation: The Case of Thailand*, in *JSS* vo. 73, pp. 60 pp.

2. See in this connection WENK, *op.cit.*

linguistics it may thus be possible to come to a clearer decision as to whether Sunthōn Phū is the author of certain poems or whether that authorship is questionable. Predictably, such studies will yield not a few surprising results. One such is that lately among other things Sunthōn Phū's authorship of *Suphāsīt sōn ying* has been doubted – and probably rightly so!

(c) Since the poet is ranked among Thailand's national heroes, it is surprising in our literary studies to find allusions to texts of Sunthōn Phū that have not so far been printed³), or which are alleged to have been lost⁴), or of which his authorship is called in question⁵). To learn that manuscripts, presumably in the poet's own hand, were in ignorance or out of sheer lack of interest in Wat Thēphidārām (Bangkok) as late as 1937⁶), fills us with no less consternation.

b. Secondary literature

Considering Sunthōn Phū's fame in Thailand, studies of scientific relevance about his works and person are relatively few in number. The name of the poet, it is true, occurs constantly in books or articles on literary subjects, but mention is almost invariably made in rather a routine and cursory manner. Surprisingly, only a small number of monographs have appeared so far to clear the ground for new insights.

As in the past, the pivotal point from which to start all research is "The History of Sunthōn Phū" written by Prince Damrong and published by the National Library in 2370 (1927)⁷). Due to his remarkable scientific achievements the renown of the prince has been unquestioned to the present day so that his writings have, on the whole, not been subject to criticism. Nevertheless, a great number of Damrong's statements and opinions have quietly been corrected in modern

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3. SATAWETHIN, *Sunthōn Phū*, p.25, for example mentions a poem, extant but unprinted: Klon chaloem phra kiet phra ong chau lakhanakhun.
 4. See on this for example PRAMUONMAK, *Prawat kham klōn sunthōn phū*, p.471, where the *suphāsīt sōn dek* are mentioned; see on this also SATAWETHIN, *op.cit.*, p. 37.
 5. PHRAPHAPHITAYAKON, *Lōk khōng phāsā lae wānakhadī*, p. 156; the title Manisuriya was mentioned in connection with Sunthōn Phū. It's attribution to him, however, is doubtful. Another significant surprise is contained in the text edition of *Wanakam nirāt khōng Sunthōn Phū*. In this text extensive nirat poems are attributed to Sunthōn Phū, which, are not in the other text editions, and which in the secondary literature are not mentioned at all or only in passing, such as *Nirāt duan*, *Nirāt prāthom phrāthon*, *Nirāt thawarawadi*, *Nirāt kō cān*, *Nirāt thalang* and *Nirāt ramphueng*.
 6. Thus KANČANASON, *196 pī Sunthōn Phū*. pp. 19 pp.
 7. This text was however published prior to this year as a supplement (to the works of Sunthōn Phū), see SCHWEISGUTH, *Etude sur la littérature siamoise*, p. 385.

literary studies without any criticism of him. Even prior to Damrong assessments were made of Sunthōn Phū by competent writers. Satāwēthin⁸⁾ for example mentions the poetess Khun Phum as having spoken very highly of Sunthōn Phū comparing him to a white elephant, an utterance possibly made during Sunthōn Phū's lifetime. Khun Phum is said to be born about 1815⁹⁾.

Likewise, the popular publicist Thien Wan whom Rosenberg recently rescued from oblivion¹⁰⁾ wrote about Sunthōn Phū in 1903¹¹⁾ pointing out in his notes "that Sunthōn Phū, a citizen from Klaeng and Bān Nān Krām composed the epos Phrā Aphaimani". In particular, he praised the realistic handling of the plot and the unpretentious character of the author. Efforts to give a full account of Sunthōn Phū's poems were also made by Khamwilai in his book *Rōi pī khong Sunthōn Phū* published in 2498 (1955) and by Pramūonmāk in his study *Prāwat kham klōn Sunthōn Phū*. The latter study was published in 2499 (1956). Both studies aim at giving an overall view. They do not include, however, the longest of Sunthōn Phū's poems *Phrā Aphaimani*.

We fully appreciate the efforts made by both these authors to appraise the works of Sunthōn Phū who is said to be the greatest poetic genius of their country, especially those of Khamwilai who himself is known as a poet of remarkable talent¹²⁾. Both authors do not lay great stress on philological faithfulness and, more often than not, are content to work with philologically unreliable texts. Consequently, their conclusions are doubtful on many points and, instead of bringing clarity into the argument, rather add to the existing confusions.

Satāwēthin's monography about Sunthōn Phū, in which he goes so far as to equate the poet with the Thai people¹³⁾, does not contain anything intrinsically new either. In the course of the last few years, however, the younger generation has gradually taken a more critical approach to the poet and his personality which is based on more objective criteria. Some of these younger pioneers, however,

8. *Sunthōn Phū*, p. 17; SATĀWĒTHIN perhaps refers to *Phlēng yāu chaloem phrā kiet*, verses (623pp) in which Khun Phum describes Sunthōn Phū as *ačan* and *khru* and further remarks that he composed Phra Aphai "in order to sell it".

9. See Schweisguth, op.cit., p. 262.

10. ROSENBERG, *Nation und Fortschritt, Der Publizist Thien Wan und die Modernisierung Thailands unter König Chulalongkon*.

11. In the periodical *Tunlawiphakphotčanakit*, R.S. 121, Vol. 2, p. 191.

12. See on this details in WENK, *Die Ruderlieder – káp hē rūō – in der Literatur Thailands*, pp. 89 seq., 154 pp and 178.

13. op.cit., p. 2.

overshoot the mark, and yielding to the spirit of the day their criticism becomes mere prejudice.

The collective volume *Rak muang Thai* edited by Sombat Ānthawōng and Rangsān Thanaphōnphon, published in 2519 (1976), contains an article of some 92 pages entitled "Reflections on an enquiry into politics in the epics of Sunthōn Phū". Some time later, in 2521 (1978) Sombat Ānthawōng wrote an article about the world-view of Sunthōn Phū. Though adding very little to literary history, this article nevertheless has the merit of drawing attention to a number of facts that, in future studies of Sunthōn Phū's works, his personality should not be left out of account.

Another tendency of literary research is evident in Nithi İosiwōng's study entitled "Sunthōn Phū the great bourgeois poet", published in two series in *Sinlapa wathanātham* in 2524 (1981).

Somewhat outside the scope of the aforementioned studies is an article by the psychiatrist Bunsui Choetkienkun entitled "A medical enquiry into the life and works of Sunthōn Phu", published in *Lōk nangśue* in 2525 (1982). In his article Dr. Bunsui deals with the psyche of the poet and arrives at conclusions, as in part does the present author, that Sunthōn Phū's poems evince intense psychopathic symptoms of a highly strung personality. (The apparent attempt to detract from the established renown of a national hero provoked a flood of angry letters to the editor of *Lōk nangśue*.)

In the book "The thoughts of Sunthōn Phū" Sagniem Khumpawat embarks upon a different literary subject-matter of limited scope. The title of this book calls for a brief explanation. In 28 chapters, or rather subject groups, the author sets about to catalogue Sunthōn Phū's statements and opinions about indigenous flora and fauna, women in general, Mon women, astrology and spirit worship, Brahmins, etc. The catalogue is certainly not complete, but it may serve as a guide to the manner in which the multifarious themes of Sunthōn Phū's poetry might be examined.

Prathip Wathikthinkon in his book with the brief title *Sunthōn Phu* deals with the formal structures of the poems and with prosody in particular. He is the first Thai to try to classify the poet's verses by means of carefully arranged tables. Prathip's book like those mentioned above is but a tentative beginning – it deals only with the poet's *nirāt* – but it marks a turning point in so far as its conclusions are based on verifiable facts.

Most Thai publications put Sunthōn Phū on a par with the greatest poets in

world literature. On the other hand, there exist neither Sunthōn Phū archives, nor for example a yearbook exclusively dedicated to him, nor an ideological dictionary, and there is almost not one detailed comprehensive analysis of a single one of his works, that such analysis can help to arrive at new insights is borne out by the present study in Chapter III. In this text the year of composition of *Nirāt muang phet* could be established with a degree of probability almost amounting to certainty to supersede all former conjectures.

As far as I am aware, we do not possess a single piece of evidence of or about Sunthōn Phū. Possibly one or the other manuscript, or parts thereof, have been drawn up by him. However, we do not really know anything about that at all. Some of the above-mentioned authors make an effort to determine place and time at which the poet sets out for the destination of the journey described in the respective *nirāt*. All this is mere conjecture which cannot be supported by a single line in his works or any other document. Another author alleges that Sunthōn Phū had "forty wives" —*phalayā!*—. One author mentions 23 wives and 10 mistresses. It is likewise uncertain which of his reputed sons was by which wife.

Neither his origin nor the name of his parents nor his birthplace are known. This notwithstanding, a horoscope has been set up which even contains the hour at which he arrived on this planet¹⁴). Is there a single document to mark his alleged year of death? Certainly not in the "History of the fourth Reign" by Thiphākarakawong. Damrong does not tell us either from where he had knowledge that Sunthōn Phū "died in the fourth Reign in the year of the hare B.E. 2398 at the age of 70 years". Such statements smack of vagueness and hearsay. There is no indication of day or month and an age with the round figure of "70" is suspect¹⁵).

All things considered, we are confronted with a rather desolate state of affairs. The works of a poet whose name is mentioned in Thai literature in one and the same breath as Tolstoi, Goethe and Shakespeare, are but little known in all their depth and beauty even at home. A good deal of information currently presented can probably be relegated to the realm of fantasy and anecdote.

c. Translations into western languages

At the present day only a small part of the voluminous works of Sunthōn Phū is accessible to western readers in translation. In 1959 Camille Notton

14. See on this further Ch.II of the present volume, under III.

15. *Prawat Sunthōn Phū*, p. 57.

published a French translation of *Ramphan philāp*¹⁶⁾ together with short fragmentary excerpts from other poems. In the same year Schweisguth followed up with a French translation of the *Nirāt phū khau thong*¹⁷⁾, and Hundius translated the *Nirāt muang klaeng*¹⁸⁾ into German in 1976. Recently, a contribution in this field was made by Volkmar Zühlsdorff with a German rendering of *Rampan philap* in 1983. An English translation of the *Nirāt muang klaeng* by prince Prem was printed in 1984.

The present author published a translation into Sermon of the *Suphāsīt sōn ying*¹⁹⁾ in 1965 followed by the translation of another *suphāsīt* poem, viz. *Sawatdi raksā* in 1982. (At this stage of my research I feel inclined however, to believe that Sunthōn Phū can not longer be considered as the author of *Suphāsīt sōn ying*²⁰⁾). Apart from these poems quotations, mostly in English translations, of small sections from various poems are scattered in magazines, newspapers and scientific periodicals. Of special significance is a contribution by Kemper which is a translation of section 25 of *Phrā Aphaimani*²¹⁾.

Finally, there are a number of paraphrases. Prince Prem published a paraphrase of Sunthōn Phū's most popular poem *Phrā Aphamani*²²⁾ in 1952. Incidentally, mention must be made of two paraphrases of *bot lakhōn Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, section 24 of which was allegedly composed by Sunthōn Phū. The authors of the paraphrases are Prince Prem (1955 seq.) and Kasem Sibunruang (1960) respectively²³⁾.

2. Notes on the poet's personality

a. The initial position

From the five poems examined in the present study only a single date could be established with fair measure of certainty. The journey to Phetburi which later came to be the subject of *Nirāt muang phet* was made during the rainy season of

16. NOTTON, *La vie du Poète Sunthone-Bhou*.

17. SCHWEISGUTH, *Sunthon P'hu – Nirat P'hu K'hau Thong*.

18. HUNDIUS, *Das Nirat Mueong Klaeng von Sunthon Phu*.

19. In *Oriens Extremus* (OE), XXII, part I, pp. 65-106.

20. See on this Ch. VIII of the present volume under I.

21. In *OE* 11. Jahrg., Teil 1, pp. 109-126.

22. *The Story of Phra Abhai Mani*, 141 pp.

23. See on this the bibliography of the present volume.

the year 1827²⁴). If we assume that the *Nirāt Nēn Klan* was written in 1833, another date may be fixed in as much that we can conclude that Sunthḡn Phū's state of health in 1833 was good enough for him to set out on a journey as fatiguing as described in the *nirāt*. Avowedly, it is always a delicate matter to interpret the psyche of a poet on the basis of his own works. The problems attending such a procedure have been discussed amply elsewhere. With all due reserve, the selection of Sunthḡn Phū's poems presented in this study nevertheless permits the emergence of a few characteristic traits of his personality. As mentioned before in section I.b., the notable Bangkok psychiatrist Dr. Bunsui was brave enough in 1982 to analyze Sunthḡn Phū's personality in the light of utterances contained in his works. The reaction from conservative quarters to Dr. Bunsui's essay was rather discouraging to both the author and his publishers. What Dr. Bunsui considered to be nothing else but an analysis abreast of the latest findings of his science was, and continues to be, nothing less than a sacrilege to conservative readers. I assent, in the main, to both Dr. Bunsui's basic position and his scientific method, although I do not think that he is right about a number of his basic assumptions such as the statement about Sunthḡn Phū's having had forty "wives". (Neither can I follow in other respects Dr. Bunsui's far-reaching conclusions.)

The basis of our enquiry of course is Sunthḡn Phū's poems. In order to begin we must take courage and assume that it was indeed Sunthḡn Phū's intention to give in his poems expression to personal experiences and his innermost feelings. Proceeding this way, there will always remain a certain degree of subjectivity on the part of his interpreter. Yet, for those familiar with Thai poetry prior to Sunthḡn Phū, this poet's art doubtless achieved a breakthrough to a new type of poetry centering round the poet's personality.

With him Thai poetry assumes a new orientation. The longings of the narrator, his sadness and human powerlessness so frequently expressed, all this is new and far removed from the stereotypes and conventional expression of feelings of the time before him. The passages of Sunthḡn Phū's and his pupils *nirāts* are expressive of personal traits; they portrait the existential concern and dejection of all mankind and stand out against the stilted and non-committal empty phrases of former times. These poems are not the utterance of a glorious fairy prince or victorious hero, but of a human being suffering from the woes of this world and his own frailty. This poet dares to reveal, at least partially, his own tragedy to the reader. Allusively, he lays open the gulf of his despair and dissonance - more

24. See on this Ch. III of the present study, under I and II.

analytically than passionately - but he makes up for that by his creative genius, his verse which serves him as a mask and guards him against obtrusively uncovering what is veiled by nature. Such an attitude requires fortitude to expose oneself as one really is - at least *pars pro toto* - instead of trying to add a trifle to one's own stature by retaining impenetrable reserve. Still the fact remains that Sunthḡn Phū's works are anything but a confession.

b. The man Sunthḡn Phū

To portrait the man Sunthḡn Phū is a vast enterprise which, due to what has already been stated can never be tackled to everybody's satisfaction. Sunthḡn Phū has not left a coherent autobiography, or even biographical notes that could be considered authentic. The absence of such documents may be explained by the poet's adherence to the teachings of Buddha, possibly even by his lack of self-regard which leads to the exclusion of others from intimate knowledge of one's private life. What in the following pages is classified as "autobiographical" must really be considered as nothing else but Sunthḡn Phū's reflections on things real or imaginary. It has already been mentioned that nothing authentic is known about the origin and the youth of the poet. It may, however, be assumed with some degree of certainty that he came from the very dregs of the population, a free-born man, it is true, but only a *phrai* with the "worth" *-sakinā-* of 10 to 25. Due allowance should be made of these origins when evaluating his later development. His thoughts and feelings are rooted in the social environment into which he was born. That he was probably familiar with courtly manners in his early years, does not change matters²⁵⁾

In the poems presented in this study Sunthḡn Phū does not refer to his youth at all, possible references are so veiled that we are unable to recognise them as such. By contrast, Nēn Klan, who possibly is Sunthḡn Phū's adopted son- is far more outspoken and realistic about the problems of his youth. This comparison suggests that Sunthḡn Phū may well have deliberately repressed his childhood. Nēn Klan successfully unburdens his heart; not so Sunthḡn Phū. Although with measure of resignation, Nēn Klan eventually takes an affirmative approach to life, Sunthḡn Phū is far more hesitant in his approach. Nēn Klan frankly admits that he was abandoned or rejected by all his relatives--see chapter VII . Sunthḡn Phū, a far more complex personality could however not bring himself even indirectly to write about his parents and their family life which was obviously shattered. It is only in

25. Reputedly his mother, whose name we do not know, was a wet-nurse at Wang Luang.

Nirāt muang klaeng, written perhaps at an age of 22, that the poet gives some vent to his spiritual troubles. When visiting his father, then as it is said the abbot of Bān Krām monastery, he does not succeed in restraining his tears, having his mother at the back of his mind “living far away in the capital city”²⁶). After a wearisome journey “he caught sight of the face of his father” (791), one may safely add “for the first time”. His father takes gentle, even loving care of him, but Sunthḡn Phū continues to long for his mother who lives in the attractive city whereas his “father lives in the wilderness”. Verses (784-791) of *Nirāt muang klaeng* inform us with some degree of certainty of four significant circumstances: Both parents were still alive when Sunthḡn Phū was probably over 20 years old; there must have been an affectionate relationship between son and mother (784-786); at the end of his journey he met his father and his father’s relatives for the first time in his life; in spite of his late encounter he has no unfriendly feelings towards his father; on the contrary he feels inclined to believe himself to be the cause of his parents’ separation; during his sojourn his father takes great care of his physical and spiritual well-being.

There are no references in the poet’s works to this subject i.e. the separation of his parents, and there is no point in pondering over how his parents’ separation was accepted by him. One Thai author has it that the separation was caused by a Lesbian love-affair of the mother, and that Sunthḡn Phū’s relationship to her was a mixture of love and hate²⁷). Apart from the fact that there is no evidence to prove this allegation, it is in fact contradicted by the verses from *Nirāt muang klaeng* quoted above. Does the early separation of the parents by itself justify the assumption of an “absence of a feeling of security in tender years”?²⁸) The question is quite legitimate since children in old Thailand in general grew up in the extended family. Is it legitimate to conclude alone from the fact of his parents’ separation that the poet suffered from an “inferiority complex” -without knowing his genotype?²⁹)

Sunthḡn Phū was indeed homeless and nobody will deny, after reading his poems, that he was a person affected with certain complexes. However, it would be wrong to look for causes which cannot be substantiated by known facts. It is generally known that impressions received in early childhood have a decisive

26. See on this also HUNDIUS, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

27. CHOETKIENTIKUN, *Sunthḡn Phū*, p. 36.

28. *ibid.*, p. 32.

29. *ibid.*, p. 33.

influence on character formation on later years. This is why I have deemed it appropriate to deal briefly with what we know about the poet's domestic situation during that period. After all, we can proceed from the assumption that in all societies with a firm hierarchic structure—as in Thailand—education is not geared to the cultivation of self. The educational system has built-in safeguards against self-centredness and egotism. This may lead to dissonances and tensions in childhood which cannot be overcome in later years. In other words this means that everybody, from early youth on, is assigned a certain position in society, a fact which largely inhibits the free development of the personality. In the following chapters attention is repeatedly drawn to verses and whole sections which with some degree of certainty may be considered to be autobiographical utterances. How does Sunthōn Phū present himself as a man? Is he a poet and man marked with a stigma? And no less importantly, how does he assess his relationship to his environment? Most of what Sunthōn Phū said about himself sounds pretty gloomy. It has a negative slant, he often approaches the verge of depression. There is too much of fatalistic acceptance in him. He can almost never bring himself to laughter that breaks the tension. Only in rare places are signs of self-irony discernible. The reader will sit up when coming across one of those rare passages which are couched in a serene or calm mood, such as in *Nirāt muang phet* (68). *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (517 pp.) , (564 pp.). All these poems are permeated by gloom and depression. It would be idle to quote examples.

Typical of his basic frame of mind are his constant complaints about his loneliness and isolation and his alleged material distress. Yet, his works do not contain any verses in that outright mood of melancholy which is the most poetic of all means of expression.

The sadness of his mind appears to spring largely from his inability to realise ideals or abstract conceptions, although as a Buddhist he was well aware of the working of the karmic law against which he did not revolt. It is a fact that everyday life with its attendant problems and difficulties causes a continual awareness of self. In this context it should be borne in mind that Sunthōn Phū was a poet with a delicate mind permanently under latent tensions which intensified in situations of uneasiness or loss of comfort.

Sunthōn Phū's spiritual world was grounded in Buddhism of the rigorous Theravada variety. This is evident as a *leitmotif* in all his poems here presented in translation. However, it is also true that side by side with Buddhist principles there are many things in his verses, and probably also in his way of life, that are utterly un-Buddhist. He is eager for fame and never conceals his sensual appetites. He is

out for good food and, presumably, intoxicating drink and constantly complains of an alleged want of material goods. He does so quite massively in some passages and thus lays open to be, in a high degree, “a man full of contradictions”. Often enough, the precepts of his religion are at variance with the vital needs of his personality. It was good for his poetry though that he never repressed his vital needs, when repression would jeopardize his mental balance, so difficult to achieve for a complex personality. Despite all his desires Sunthōn Phū was fully aware that none of his actions would be without consequences and that *taṅhā* is the main cause of human suffering and the ceaseless cycle of rebirth. (What a sublime form of empiricism in the realm of morals!)

In a manner varying between devotion, enthusiasm and gratitude Sunthōn Phū makes mention of such persons of rank who supported him at times. In this context he constantly refers to Rāma II., see *Nirāt phū khau thōng* (16) . (23) etc., and to “heavenly princes” in *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* (4)-(7), or to Mōm Bunāk in *Nirāt muang phet* (548)-(551), or to “judges” in *Nirāt muang phet*, (596)-(599). Goethe’s epigram No 34 b referring to the Duke of Saxony/Weimar Karl August, may pertinently be quoted here: “He bestowed what is seldom granted by the Great,/ affection, leisure, confidence, fields, gardens and houses./ I was indebted to nobody but him.../ as a poet being inexperienced in business”. But Sunthōn Phū likewise mentions persons who let him down or did not live up to his expectations, e.g. Čau Fā Aphōn in *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* (272)-(275). Opposed to his many utterances about his desolate situation and his personal discontent there are numerous quite obtrusive instances of self-praise. Who else could possibly match him, “the poet by passion”? (See *Nirāt phū khau* 350). Or remarks like these: “His name is on everybody’s lips”, “a master of phlēng yāu verse”, in *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* (269 pp.). Other people copied from him without acknowledgement, *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (637) , (639). He apparently derives some sort of narcissistic satisfaction from his own creative abilities, compensating for his sufferings possibly conditioned by psychosis. He laments his alleged poverty, the depravity of mankind, the hardships of nature, but he never complains about any difficulties in composing his verses or about a lack of ideas for his poems, nor about any technical obstacles impairing his poetic production.

Egotism is indispensable for all creative work. An author who suppresses his ego degenerates into a mere scribe. However, Sunthōn Phū’s self-awareness is not just strong and healthy and combined with modesty, but he is a person of excessive, almost narcissistic self-centredness craving for recognition and social approbation. Considering the primitive nature of his alleged emulators who copied

him without acknowledgement, he could easily prove his superiority. Yet he strikes an aggressive note which clearly aims at drawing attention to his own poetic genius. The poet obviously was keen on establishing his own fame. What is more, his verses subconsciously give expression to his conviction that as a simple citizen he was in all respects the equal of the Great and those of rank and wealth. His name was on the lips of everybody! Sunthḡn Phū, it is true, does not revolt against established order but he is conscious of his personal mission and his uniqueness to such an extent that he feels justified in putting his name beside the name of those of noble descent which, of course, runs counter to the unwritten laws of hierarchically structured Thai society. Nobody with impunity can go outside the limits of the role assigned to him by destiny. Nobody is allowed to profess openly that he aspires to raise his social status by referring to his achievements³⁰).

Now let us proceed to examine the poetic works of Sunthḡn Phū with a view to finding references to his own person. It may not be entirely fortuitous that such a great number of *nirāt* poems have come down to us from this particular poet. The *nirāt* genre of Thai poetry encompasses movement and separation. Such travelogues lead to a certain destination where one rests for a while and then returns to the place of departure.

Travelling in old Thailand was surely never a comfortable undertaking, except on a royal barge³¹) or in a howdah on elephant's back³²) even without taking into account the many risks on the way. The journeys of Sunthḡn Phū were toilsome and his complaints are numerous. He mentions winds and waves, mosquitoes, wild beasts, the narrowness of the byways and their concomitant congestion, hunger and lack of accommodation, etc. Nevertheless, again and again he sets forth out on journeys not only to Phetburi (obviously several times), but also to Phū khau thḡng near Ayuthayā, Nakhḡn Pathom, Suphanburi, Phrā Thaeu Dong Rang, Klaeng. Was it the love of travel or adventure? What may have prompted him? For one thing it was certainly his thirst for knowledge, his craving for new experiences or for new inspiration for his poems. However, over and above all these rather positive aspects another motive must not be overlooked: he was prompted by an impulse to flee—from himself and from others, by unrest and perhaps

30. See on this for example WENK, *Phālī teaches the Young*, pp. 102, 109 seq.; MULDER, *Everyday life in Thailand*, pp. 71 seq. and elsewhere.

31. See in this connection for example WENK, *Die Ruderlieber – káp hē rūö – in der Literatur Thailands*, pp. 11 seq.

32. See about this the illustration plate LXVIII in WENK, *Mural Paintings in Thailand*, Vol. II, first part.

by a sense of compulsion.

It appears to the present author that the motive of flight combined with unrest was perhaps the strongest impulse for Sunthōn Phū's poetic effusions, flight from one place to another, from laity to monkhood, each time to another monastery. It was a flight from women which will be discussed at greater length later, perhaps a flight into intoxicating alcoholic drinks, and a flight into dreams to which an entire elegy is devoted (*Ramphan philāp*). In every single one of his *nirāts* there are hypothetical phrases such as "if I had this... I should do that", etc. Such phrases are not to be understood as expressions of wishes admitting that there is something missing, defective or imperfect, but as projections of a deep-rooted sense of frustration from which he seeks to escape, a flight from actual reality. The present is always affected by variations of self-consciousness, by shortcomings and death, hence only the past and the future are open to life: either relegate a would-be paradise back into the past or project it out into the future. The medieval knight for example periodically returns into his narcissistic paradise - King Artus' Court or Grail Castle. Sunthōn Phū's entire literary works may be regarded by way of sublimation as a flight from present time.

The field of polar tensions from which Sunthōn Phū sought to escape is also reflected by the deliberate mention of the appointments he held, the official duties he performed, and of his habits. The poet lays stress on calling himself *samien* (royal scribe) or *ālak* (secretary), or *khurū* (teacher), *nak būot* (monk), *mahatlek* (page); but he also refers to himself as *khon khuk* (convict), *phō khā* (merchant) and *khon dit lau* (addicted to alcohol). Normally, the dignity and standing of an *ālak* excludes any comparison with a *khon khuk*, and the gulf between a *nak būot* and a *khon dit lau* cannot be bridged at all.

The contemplation of nature, the name of a tree, of a flower conjures up in him right away the name of a woman. He indulges in dreams to be with her "locked in embrace" clasping her with arms and legs and "resting on cushions". This is wishful thinking uttered in a straightforward manner quite un-usual in the Thai language which is rather discreet in referring to intimate relations. However, it does not matter whether Sunthōn Phū's fancies or dreams were centered on a real or imaginary person. Similar passages recur in almost all his poems. They indeed permit a partial insight into the poet's psyche. Let us suppose that in *Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām* Sunthōn Phū identifies himself with the role of abbot Koet Thau who knowing Khun Phaen well bursts out in a jocular yet angry tone: "Look at this lady-killer! I predicted that he would get into trouble because of women!" (873 pp.)

As announced above, the poet's relationship with women needs further illustration. Words of remembrance, longing, affection and gratitude contrast with harsh words of refusal and contempt. These cannot be attributed to oriental machismo, but evidently are part and parcel of Sunthôn Phū's character. His utterance that he does not care for "bad women" is still acceptable, see *Nirāt phū khau thong* (312). In other verses, however, he openly criticizes the very make-up of the female character, see *Nirāt muang phet* (220 pp.), and its inferiority to that of man. He offers to cite many other bad qualities of women in *Nirāt phānāthom* (640pp), (672pp). Possibly apart from female relatives, all women mentioned in Sunthôn Phū's verses may be classified into two categories: Firstly, Sunthôn Phū condemns women or rather womanhood lavishing adverse criticism on the females in question. Secondly, Sunthôn Phū expresses his longing for real, or more frequently, imaginary women for sexual gratification or just to assuage his imaginary loneliness, e.g. *Nirat phrā prāthom*. (80pp), (139pp.), (167), (214pp), (238), (510pp.), (764pp). There is no middle way in him, no such thing as longing for a woman in order to give her all his love, and to receive love from her, affection and devotion in return. All this testifies to his distorted relationship with the opposite sex. What we can glean from Sunthôn Phū's works regarding his environment gives us some inkling, but these notions are far too vague to allow for drawing up a psychogramme of his complex personality with absolute certainty³³). Are his "pains of love", it may be asked, just reflections of his world-weariness or, in more general terms, just the suffering of the individual from his time and environment?

Sunthôn Phū did not like the so-called "simple life". This is one of the reasons why he complained about his material poverty. If I interpret the verses of *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* correctly, e.g. (247pp), good food meant to him so much that he was not ashamed to take meals in the palace together with (or prior to?) the servants. He accepts the prevailing hierarchic order as long as he derives personal profit from it. It is not difficult to enlarge upon Sunthôn Phū's relationship with his environment by adding some more facts. On several occasions he comments on his relationship with his "pupils" who may have been his own, or as Nēn Klan, his adopted sons. Alternately he embarks with one or the other on his various travels, and he reports in a matter-of-fact and sometimes affectionate style on their participation in certain events. But his pupils are never real companions nor friends but only attendants. He complains of his loneliness in *Nirāt phū khau thong*, he

33. As CHOETKIENTIKUN tries to do, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

notes "I see only Nū Phat" (214). How his talented pupil Nēn Klan depicts him is of great interest: "Father is resting and complains of his poverty. He sighs and makes us feel ashamed," *Nirāt Nēn Klan* (183pp). Sunthōn Phū makes his young attendants feel so uneasy that they also "swallow their frugal food only hesitantly" (184). Another scene which Nēn Klan describes is significant: Nēn Klan and Nū Tāp are counting the "32 bends of the khlong", "one, two, three...when father interrupts by asking questions and thus stops us counting the bends". This may be just a casual observation of the young author. On the other hand, this observation may have a subconscious critical connotation. The meaning of many utterances, especially in *Nirāt muang phet* and *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* which presumably refer to his personal environment can no longer be deciphered by us today. We cannot even tell whether the numerous female persons he mentions in his verses were real living persons or just products of his poetic imagination or perhaps objects of sexual appetite. We must however keep in mind that Sunthōn Phū was a poet, and he was not the only poet for that matter to write phrases and tags and make allusions which will forever remain an enigma to the reader, which cannot be fully deciphered, but which to the poet were nevertheless full of meaning at the time of writing.

It may be added in passing, or as a mere curiosity that Sunthōn Phū very frequently refers to "silk" in such an emphatic way that the layman, as the present author, may feel inclined to speak of a "silk complex". We must leave the subject to experts competent in this field to clarify the issue. I just wish to quote a few passages in which the poet refers to silk in a way which is calculated to baffle the reader, viz. *Nirāt muang phet* (251), (485), (624), (637), (659 pp), (674pp); *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (556), (704) etc.

3. Sunthōn Phū — a citizen of his time

Dealing with the personality of a poet soliloquizing in his poems, to give the reader insight into his rather personal problems, is one thing. Another thing is to deal with the social status of such a personality against the background of a society that is stratified from top to bottom, from the king down to the meanest slave, a society in which everybody was compelled to take his place according to his *sakdinā*³⁴). Presumably only for short intermittent periods Sunthōn Phū enjoyed the status of a poet laureate. King Rāma II and later King Rāma IV conferred on him instead of a laurel wreath, the name of Phrā Sunthōn Wōhān. I do not know of

34. See on this WENK, *op.cit.* foot-note 30.

another case in Thai literary history where a common penniless citizen, a *phrai*, was raised to such high honours due to nothing else but sheer poetic genius. In his own estimation Sunthōn Phū had thus reached the status and prestige which he deserved. The pusillanimous, melancholic and despondent way in which he complains of external circumstances and personal desolation after the death of King Rāma II., his royal sponsor, reveals his utter dismay at living on persona non grata after 1824. He bewailed the past and his fall under the sovereign who was far less devoted to the muses than his predecessor. Sunthōn Phū takes advantage of every opportunity to attract to this state of affairs, *Nirāt phū khau thong* (17pp). *Nirāt muang phet* (6pp), *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (634), (872pp) etc., *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* (272). The thoughts uttered here are cautiously complemented in *Nirāt phrā prāthom*, "...persons who believe themselves to be good and dignified do not accept the love of those abandoned..." (480pp); there is a great deal of social criticism in these verses. It testifies to Sunthōn Phū's personal courage that, under the reign of the new sovereign who, as reports have it, was not friendly toward him, he stressed his affection and devotion to his sovereign's predecessor. But it also testifies to the liberality of a much reviled autocratic regime that the poet was left untrammelled. The process of reminiscence and gradual withdrawal from those formerly honoured follows a certain pattern which is clearly discernible in Sunthōn Phū's poems—if only in its final stage. While reminiscing he selects and gives expression only to what is positive and useful.

Besides those verses paying homage to Rāma II., it is striking that Sunthōn Phū was eager to ingratiate himself with the great and mighty and the rich in such conspicuous a manner that, at a first reading, one is sensible of obsequiousness which sometimes is rather embarrassing. One cannot always accept that it was only gratitude for benefits received to which he wished to give expression. One is almost prompted by associating himself with the names of powerful persons who had granted him social favour. A particular case is the *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt*: A popular poet, at a mature age of about 45 years, addresses his royal pupils, the one about 11, the other 8 years old. As "a servant at their feet" (10) the poet entreats the *chau fā*, "the heavenly princes", ie. the princes of the highest rank, to apportion some of their merit to him. The wording and substance of his entreaty are in keeping with the hierarchic order of his time fixed by law. According to karmic law, a heavenly prince, on account of his former incarnations, has higher merit than a *phrai*. This truth which is quite irrefutable for a Buddhist, is made use of by Sunthōn Phū in his own peculiar way. He teaches his pupils that it is of great advantage for those wielding power that they should approach their servants "with

due respect for their dignity" (97). They should help those who are loyal (112pp); kind words are more effective than iron fetters (116pp). He urged his pupils to accept his teachings and demonstrated his own virtuousness and loyalty. While respecting all due form and decency Sunthōn Phū in his poem seizes his chance to bring home to the members of the royal family that those in power depend on the loyalty and devotion of their servants and vice versa to the same degree. All this is, of course, embellished with trimmings and interspersed eulogies. Nevertheless, the poet's audacity is remarkable in making such utterances in a society where the King was absolute, indeed was Lord in life and death, *čau chiwit*, as in ancient Thailand. Sunthōn Phū does not hesitate to describe the *nak prāt*, the sage i.e. himself, as "the seat of the breed of swans" i.e. of kings (292pp). Hence the assumption is not far-fetched that Sunthōn Phū equates the nobility of birth with that of the spirit. Yet the poet, as an individual, did not outrageously step outside the bounds of the social frame, but merely called attention to the very special role which was his to play in society.

It is questionable whether Sunthōn Phū's way of acting was representative of the general attitude of his estate at the time. Probably, it was granted to him alone to give expression to what was indistinctly felt by good many others. This ability alone was enough to make him stand out from his contemporaries and it testifies to his genius. To describe Sunthōn Phū, or rather his poems as a product of his age³⁵) would, therefore, be only half the truth. Nothing in contemporary literature indicates that a turn in Thai intellectual life was brought about by the works of Sunthōn Phū. The poet must be considered as a singular figure during the reigns of Rāma II. and Rāma III. It is only just to refer here also to Mahā Montri and his *Phlēng yāu wā phrāyā mahā thēp*³⁶ during the reign of Rāma III. Some of the far-sighted ideas in Sunthōn Phū's poems are in contrast to his total adherence to a centuries-old tradition. This, for example, is evident in verses (156pp) in *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt*.

What is more: we must not only examine Sunthōn Phū's relationship with his patrons of high rank, but his relationship with people socially his equals who, like him, had the *sakdinā* worth of a *phrai*. But let us concentrate on how "the royal secretary", the poet popular already in his life-time, describes his own people. This question refers more directly to the "poet" than the "citizen".

35. Thus IOSIWONG, *Sunthōn Phū mahā kawī krathumphī*, p. 15.

36. See on this WENK, *Rāden Landai, Das Leben und Werk des Mahā Montri*, pp. 81. seq.

Is Sunthḡn Phū the bourgeois, *Krāthumphī*³⁷? This is a solgan which fails to do justice to both the poet and his time. It is, however, conceivable to ascribe to him the qualities of an actor who plays his role perfectly. Why, it may be asked, should his own relevant indications and references not be taken literally? *Nirāt phū khau thḡng*, reads (351): "I have enacted this role of separation so casually". And he said he was "a poet by passion", (350).

In this way Sunthḡn Phū transforms his life into art which, according to Nietzsche and others, is the vocation of man. The poet has many faces: courtier, sage, pious Buddhist monk, and a man allegedly consumed by carnal desires. It is a fact, however, that human life tends to be corrupted in society, and that sensitive natures cannot play their role in it without donning a mask.

To the heading of Sunthḡn Phū, a citizen of his time, we must add a few more facts which can be substantiated directly from his verses.

It has repeatedly been pointed out in literature³⁸) that the Thai as a whole were already prone to nationalist attitudes of self-assertion at an early stage of their history. I wish to refer to this once again, but I think we had better relegate any attempt to give explanations to the future. Both Sunthḡn Phū and his pupil Nēn Klan make contemptuous remarks about Chinese people, cognate both in race and language, who could look back upon a cultural heritage of some 3000 years when the Thai people were still unknown. The proper word to designate the Chinese people in Thai is *čīn*. This is a neutral word. In the poems of Sunthḡn Phū and his pupil Nēn Klan – and other poets as well – *čīn* is used only exceptionally. In its place they use the derogatory word *ček*, e.g. *Nirāt muang phet* (29), *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (338), *Nirāt Nen Klan* (192pp), (286pp), (293), (414), (467pp) etc. Nēn Klan calls the Chinese "rat-tails", (268). Their activities, status, wealth and their religious ceremonies are described in a way – see details in the chapters of the book – which is calculated to produce aversion, contempt, and even xenophobia in the Thai reader or listener. Obviously the time was not yet ripe for recognizing without resentment the achievements of another race in many respects superior. This must, however, be said in favour of the Thai: they only followed suit and did what was generally done by all other neighbouring peoples. To the Chinese all non-Chinese were, and still are considered barbarians.. The kings of Burma considered their throne as the "centre of the universe" (not just of the earth), and

37. Thus id. foot-note 35, *passim*.

38. See on this among others ROSENBERG, *op.cit.* foot-note 10 and the references on literature given there, pp. 81 seq; WENK, *Mural Paintings in Thailand*, Vol. I, p. VIII and elsewhere.

mention must here be made also of the well-known hypertrophy of the representatives of the Indian cultures who up to the present classify Southeast Asian art merely as "Indian colonial art" or "art of Further India".

Apart from the Chinese, other people are mentioned several times, e.g. Mon, Lao and Lăwā. They are almost invariably associated with servile functions³⁹⁾ and, from the outset, are regarded as inferior to the Thai. To characterise their lowly status it is not necessary to resort to the use of derogatory words. Nevertheless, the Mon are referred to as "slovenly" in *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (100), – notwithstanding the fact that Thai culture is inconceivable without the Mon. It is significant that the Mon are so frequently mentioned. This might conceivably confirm the opinion of some authors that a considerable part of the population was Mon (Khmēr) during the Ayuthayā period⁴⁰⁾.

4. Sunthōn Phū the poet

The prominence to the name of the poet in the field of Thai literary studies gives rise to a question. For which particular qualities did he attain such a great distinction? Surely, the fame of his poetic works could not have survived, if it rested alone on particular environmental conditions or on a complex personality. Which role must actually be assigned to him in Thai literary history? This question must be posed in two respects: firstly, as to the role he played by objective standards scientifically measuring the quality of his verses. Secondly, as to the role assigned to him by his contemporaries and the present day literary critics. Was Sunthōn Phū the consummation and climax of a literary tradition of three hundred years standing, or was he a new starting point, the beginning of a literary of the future? Such questions are weighty and difficult to answer. Considering the poor state of Thai literary studies at this juncture we can tackle them only with great hesitation and try to find, at the best, some hypothetical answers.

a) The master of form

Our knowledge of Thai literature prior to the beginning of the Bangkok period, uncertain and incomplete as it is, still does not admit of any doubt that all literary types of which Sunthōn Phū made use, were known and practised long

39. See on this WENK, *Studien zur Literatur der Thai*, Vol. I., pp. 25 seq. and elsewhere, and Ch.I of the present volume.

40. See on this among others WOLTERS, *A Western Teacher and the History of Early Ayuthaya*, p. 94.

before his time. This goes for the *nirāt*, the *suphāsīt*, and for the *bot lakhon* as well. Sunthōn Phū took up the existing framework, but, during his long literary life he did not add a new type to those he had found. It should be added here that, in Sunthōn Phū's time and probably under his decisive influence, the form of the *bot lakhon* was expanded into what is known as "the long epic". It would indeed be anachronistic to classify such works as *Phra Aphaimani*, *Inau* and *Khun Chāng Khun Phaen* under the category of *bot lakhon*. These poems, by sheer reason of their length and volume, cannot be considered as texts written for entertainment or moral edification and to be enacted on a stage and accompanied by music. They are indeed elaborate epics of great art, parts of which attain to the level of world literature.

Prosody is intimately linked with form in poetry, and with this in mind we must pay due attention to the recurring self-designations of the poet such as *nak klōn*, *nak leng klōn*, see *Ramphan philāp* (392). It is true that this metre was used in poems prior to Sunthōn Phū, but it was he who made the *klōn* to what we know it to be today, namely the metre by which the Thai language could develop most beautifully. This is Sunthōn Phū's most important contribution to the formal structure of Thai poetry with consequences going far beyond merely introducing a new count of syllables or a new arrangement of rhymes⁴¹). Through it the poet gave expression to a new sense of growing self-reliance in Thai society, which probably was not noticed by his contemporaries. The autochthonous elements of the nation freed from alien patterns, under his direction were tending towards a climax in the sphere of poetry⁴²).

A young author of Ramkanhaeng University in Bangkok, Prathip Wathikthinakon, has made the worth-while effort of carrying out a thorough formal analysis of all *nirāt* poems of Sunthōn Phū written in *klōn* metre (not the *Nirāt suphan*)⁴³). In detailed tables he has given a host of information: the number of syllables to each half-verse, i.e. *wak*, the rhythmic scanning of the half-verses, the position of syllables in inner and end-rhymes, the frequency of individual tonal syllables as a whole, and of rhyming syllables in particular. This so far singular achievement should be followed up by other pertinent studies to bear out in what decisive measure Sunthōn Phū formed the metre of *klōn* for all those

41. See on this also WENK, *Die Metrik in der thailändischen Dichtung*, pp. 111 seq.

42. I should like to point here to Thai painting as a parallel, the most independent creation amongst the so-called fine arts in Thailand which reached its climax between 1790 and 1830 approximately.

43. *Sunthōn Phū*, especially pp. 92 seq.

who came after him⁴⁴).

We may proceed from the assumption the Thai language was already fully developed when Sunthōn Phū started his poetic career, except for idiomology which even today is subject to continual change. The poet therefore was unhampered in the composition of his verses with ease as per se produces euphony and harmony, even though the contents of his verse did not arouse much interest. The Thai language leaves much scope for keeping the meaning of a phrase in suspense. Since the formulation of phrases is easy for the talented, linguistic expression does not unduly exert the intellect. Lively persons with vigorous minds thus develop a facility of poetic expression which goes together with a certain inability or unwillingness to dissect everything intellectually. In fact, it is not the idea that generates the word, but vice versa, the word generates the idea. This is true of many verses of Sunthōn Phū, and for that matter, of many other poets as well. Not a single one of his *nirāt* was composed from start to finish following a definite idea. Rather, they were all created by linguistic and literary inspiration on the spur of a moment. To Sunthōn Phū writing poetry means, among other things, just personal liberation and artistic play.

b) New subject-matters for the *nirāt*

What has been said under a) above is certainly of great significance for Thai poetry which is very sensitive to form. But decisive for the general evolution of Thai poetry was, after all, the meaning and the message of Sunthōn Phū's verses. In them an entirely new style evolves, a fact that, as the present author would assume with certainty, went not unnoticed by his contemporaries. Thai literature was enriched by a new language and new subject-matter in a way hitherto unknown. There was no period of transition. The reader was not warned by fanfare. It came into existence all of a sudden and was received so gently as is possible only in Thai culture. The age of Sunthōn Phū was certainly not ripe for cultural or political revolution and nothing indicated the need for revolutionary adjustments. However, as the kings of the Čakri dynasty vaguely sensed the advent of a new era from the West, the machine and gun-boat age—which is evident in the introduction of rational elements into Buddhism and central government e.g., so Sunthōn Phū, a citizen with a sensitive personality and great poetic talent, expressed in his verses what he subconsciously sensed in his age.

44. In Thai secondary literature we find almost invariably nothing but brief statements as to what a great master of *klōn* Sunthōn Phū has been and that he was surpassed by nobody else.

For a better understanding of this process, Sunthōn Phū's *klōn nirāt* poems should be compared with the form and the substance of the *klōn nirāt* written before him. It is with great hesitation that one dares to refer to the *Phlēng yāu nirāt rop phamā thī thā din daeng* of Rāma I or to the *Nirāts* of Mahā Uparāt Surasinhañāt⁴⁵). What else existed in Thai literature of the type *klōn nirāt* prior to Sunthōn Phū's *Nirāt klaeng*? Surely, a small number of little known texts, mostly unprinted as yet, texts not even known by literary historians. They nevertheless have some significance, but the type of *klōn nirāt* came into full life and brilliance only with Sunthōn Phū.

c) What are the new elements?

A text of the quality of *Kammoet Phlāi Ngām* – a piece belonging to world literature – was totally unknown in all Thai literature prior to Sunthōn Phū. If we disregard for the moment the high stylistic and aesthetic level of the poem, it is the realistic representation of the environment, the photographic faithfulness of the narration which fascinate us in this unique text which is part of the voluminous epic *Khun Chāng Khun Phaen*. What is true of this masterpiece, holds good more or less also for the *nirāt* poems of Sunthōn Phū. They are closely linked with, and copied from, real life. In these poems the reader can recognise the poet as well as his life and his environment.

Sunthōn Phū's break with traditional subject-matter is rather abrupt. We do find real representation of things in poems of other poets such as Sī Mahōsot⁴⁶), but they have a different relationship to the whole of these poems. Though necessary, they are of secondary importance and are merely instrumental in carrying on the action which, in the analysis, is a glorification of His Majesty. The subject-matter of Sunthōn Phū's poems, however, goes beyond the pale of fairy-tale fantasy or mere eulogy. His *nirāt* poems are something more than versified *nithān* or *niyāi*, even though they still contain a fair portion of traditional elements such as the enumeration of what he has actually seen or merely visualised.

He is keen on observing and describing reality, on expressing personal feelings, not just old clichés. Sunthōn Phū is one of the Thai poets who in his poems is actor and reporter at the same time. This, of course, implies that we have also to keep up with his occasionally tiresome lamentations.

The frame of action, for instance for the journey indicated in the heading

45. See WENK, *Studien zur Literatur der Thai*, Vol. I, Ch. IV, V and VI.

46. See on this *op.cit.*, Ch. I and II.

of his *nirāt* poems, is a certain geographic datum easy to check. In fact, he enumerates locality after locality, most of which are still there today. These places were not inhabited by celestial beings, but by living persons whose peculiarities were minutely described either with critical remarks or with loving sympathy. To exercise criticism presupposes a great deal of rational thinking. The poems presented in this volume almost never deal with fantastic ideas or with what cannot be controlled by the intellect. There is no room for powerful fairies, horses equipped with seven – league – boots or winged creatures who can cross continents at a pace or wing-beat. Buddhism certainly conditions intelligent people to be rational, although in some cases this may bring about an inability to observe or understand magical phenomena in our environment. Sunthōn Phū gives expression to this in rather moderate terms, whereas his alleged pupil Nēn Klan uses forceful expressions, see *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (429pp) and *Nirāt Nēn Klan* (395pp)

For Sunthōn Phū a journey is not only a pastime – though with a definite destination – but an opportunity to gain more experience and acquire new knowledge which he may later impart to others. He makes careful notes of what he observes, perceives, and of what appears strange and extraordinary to him. Sometimes it is a particular landscape, a striking formation of the river bank, sometimes he comments on the usefulness of certain plants on his way. Yet his description of localities does not reach the standard of geographical surveys, not do the enumerations of species of fauna or flora have such a precision as would preclude or in any way inhibit poetic expression. Much is also left to the reader's imagination.

Sunthōn Phū conceives of the world only as being nature. This implies that the world-view of the poet – as far as real things are concerned – is built on his own perceptions, hence his view of the world is not screened or deflected by anything, and it is free of doubt. And this also implies that the time to him is not of linear cycles. All that is human, including the psyche, is subject to this cyclical movement, hence ever-recurring. Nature is, however so immense and boundless, so perfect in herself, so uniquely self-sufficient – oceans, mountains, jungles – that pure contemplation of her may lead to barrenness of poetic expression. Nature is deaf to man's anguishes and agonies. But poetic production is just stimulated by the latter.

The question arises again and again whether the poet describes landscape only as he objectively sees it or whether he represents it from within with reference to his self. When thinking for instance of the name of a woman, instantly a shrub of the same designation must come into sight on the bank of the river which serves as a motif for expressing his feelings about that woman. Often enough in his poems

the objectivity of the outside world is but a projection of his mind. Often enough nature herself is suppressed to give room to mere conceptions that spring from the poet's imagination. Only on rare occasions does he express his feelings about the beauty of nature without making reference to his personal sufferings or longings. The routine listing of trees, shrubs or flowers would be less annoying if they were couched in a more rhapsodical style or permeated with more majestic pathos. However, he who has seen the world, and is able to gauge the abysses of the human mind, rather prefers to remain on the surface of things and express himself in cliché phrases. At this point, let us insert a few remarks that do not only concern Sunthøn Phū's poetry, but Thai poetry in general.

Why is reference made again and again to lofty and punny trees, leafy or in full bloom, described sometimes in detail? We know that Thai thought as expressed in literature is conditioned, to a great extent, by animistic relicts - a fact which most Thai people are hesitant to admit-, but which nevertheless is a fact⁴⁷). It is moreover generally known that trees are universally considered as symbols in a variety of ways⁴⁸).

Thai poets travelling in boats and barges, in their *nirāt* poems—pretend—to describe what they see, among other things, trees, the fragrance of which, in some species, is said to produce specific effects in men such as sadness or the suggestion of pleasant things. Incidentally, the effect of scents has been proved by scientific methods. A great number of aromatic essences, so-called pheromones, have been discovered in plants. Every *nirāt* poem contains innumerable verses of this sort. In *Nirāt Inau* "the spirit of the banyan tree is murmuring" (322), in *Nirāt Nēn Klan* "a tree goddess gives forth murmuring sounds" (627) which "make the travellers vehicle progress on its way" (636). Again and again we come across discrepancies between refined intellectual and archaic attitudes to life.

Sunthøn Phū, the prototype of a highly sensitive race, penetrated primarily by Theravada Buddhism would possibly relegate such verses to the realm of *nithān chāu bān*, i.e. tales of country folk. It may be assumed that the propensity to enumerate these particular species of indigenous flora derives from pre-Buddhist times. Presumably, much must be attributed to the workings of the subconscious mind for, as has been said before, Sunthøn Phū at any rate gives more room to realistic representation instead of overfreighting his verses with mere symbolism.

In every single one of his poems he points out that in a variety of situations

47. Proof of this is furnished, among others, in WENK, *op.cit.*, pp. 10, 29, 140, 143, 245, 246.

48. Concerning this see references in JUNG, *Der Mensch und seine Symbole*, passim.

it is useful to be aware of facts, and this certainly is not patriarchal overbearing, but it is expressive of his personal craving for knowledge. His eagerness for knowledge has nothing to do with a bourgeois conception of education. It is not knowledge man requires for survival in his natural environment which Sunthōn Phū wished to impart, but knowledge about the fatefulness of human existence. The concept *kam* is the central concept of his thought. The instances for the occurrence of this word are quite numerous in his works. With Sunthōn Phū religion clearly plays an important role and instinctively compensates for the limitations of the intellect which spring from the vital depths of life. For Sunthōn Phū it is absolutely certain that all mankind is subject to the law of *karma* in the same way as to the change of seasons. The knowledge about our own transience is always present in his mind. What then are the things necessary to know for passing through this life?⁴⁹ 1. The real essence of nature, especially of our own environment; 2. The customs of the country and how to behave accordingly – *tām phāsā*, see *Nirāt phū khau thong* (125); 3. To recognise our place in society and to accept our role, – which the poet emphasises again and again in each of his poems.

Yet another way is open to Sunthōn Phū, the faithful Buddhist who is keen on rational arguments. Even in him there is left a good margin of the magical elements in traditional Thai thought. The description of the magical powers of Phlāi Ngām borders on the abstruse, see *Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām* (812pp). It was difficult for Sunthōn Phū, presumably so often assailed by depression not to succumb to man's longing to participate in the Divine through magic. On such occasions he rebels against the rigorous chain of cause and effect which excludes all that is supernatural and, concomitantly, all good things that come by chance or good luck.

If a place is of some historic interest, he reports what he deems worth reporting, see *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (193pp), (422pp.), (811pp) etc. The range of the poet's interests is wide. His *nirāt* poems are also a rich source for those who are interested in economic history of ancient Thailand, e.g. *Nirāt muang phet* (252pp), (276pp), (503pp), (708pp); *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (331), etc.

The principal commercial products are given for each locality, fruit, fish, firewood and salt, cloth and brass utensils. In mentioning the surrounding flora he

49. SOMBAT ČANTHAWONG, in *Rak muang Thai*, pp. 116 seq. in this connection points to the concept *wisai*, which according to ALABASTER, *The Wheel of the Law*, p. 237. stands for the "four qualities of visual phenomena" namely noise, taste and their intensity and nature. Sunthōn Phū also uses this expression occasionally, see for example *Ramphan philap*, (98).

does not go beyond what other poets used to mention before him. However his pupils, the poets of *Nirāt Inau* and *Nirāt Nēn Klan* furnish more detailed information. In the one mentioned first, the description of nature, especially vegetation serves to express the poet's own lyrical mood, and with Nēn Klan shrubbery and thicket along the river bank are described as places of horror, the hiding places of wild beasts such as tigers. In some cases, however, the poet takes interest in nature proper, see *Nirāt muang phet* (312pp); *Nirāt phrā prāthom* (472pp), and he intimates that he feels an urge to have others share his knowledge of the flora of the country, see *Nirāt muang phet* (270pp). Sunthōn Phū suggests to his readers that mere perception is conducive to the knowledge of things. Surely, such things as law and philosophy must be studied methodically, see *Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām* (1024pp); *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt* (56pp), (60pp), but only a small number of people are qualified to take up formal studies. On the other hand, the environment of real things is accessible to everybody and should be studied to enrich personal experience. Sunthōn Phū expresses his concern for education not only in *Sawatdi raksā* or *Phlēng yāu thawāi ōwāt*, but also in *Kamnoet Phlāi Ngām* and in most *nirāt* poems.

The poet looks at the world from below, from his own low position as a *phrai*, he does so in a straightforward manner without interposing any intellectual concepts. Thus he achieves a realism in his verse in direct touch with everyday life, by attracting interest to the small things, to the trivialities of life. He has an eye for what is simple and typical, but his mind goes further than this. What he has seen and noted leads him to engaging in a dialectic process between the outer world and the world of his mind, a process that tends to lead his thought in directions frequently opposed to the course taken in the respective poems. The narration of a *nirāt* is always progressive, passengers of a boat are heading for their destination, Sunthōn Phū, however, is looking backward in his mind. There are many associations, e.g. the name of a flower, which bring back memories of the past, man, being conservative by nature, is reluctant to adjust himself to new situations; he is subconsciously sustained by a longing for his original condition. In his diction Sunthōn Phū does not highlight his verses by sudden points, the conflict of dialectic reasonings is mostly reflected by asyndetic sentences or by comparisons.

The description of his environment is for the most part critical as far as people are concerned. It is consistent with his character that he is concerned more with what separates than with what unites. Unreserved praise and admiration are uttered only in describing Buddhist sanctuaries and buildings such as the Nakhōn

Pathom Čēdī in *Nirāt phrā prāthom* and the Phū khau thong in the *nirāt* of the same name, or the Khau lūong in *Nirāt muang phet*. As is proved by the same description of the Phū khau thong Sunthōn Phū is fully aware of the conception of space in Hinduistic-Buddhistic cosmology. With a sure hand he combines the vertical line prevailing in the latter with the characteristic features of Thai architecture, see *Nirāt phū khau thong* (282pp). In Sunthōn Phū's *nirāt* poems we also find the three qualities Lévi-Strauss (*Traurige Tropen – Sad tropics*) associates with travelling: "Travelling is more than a change of place, a journey is made in space as well as in time and in the social hierarchy", see chapter IX *ibid*.

All that has been written about Sunthōn Phū will necessarily remain rudimentary. It is perhaps impetuous to attempt to explore an alien personality. There is the risk of painting some personal characteristics in too loud colours, whereas other traits are perhaps overlooked, concealed or masked. If we had better knowledge of Sunthōn Phū, we might perhaps be confronted with a good deal of startling or embarrassing circumstances, but we have been spared such surprises by indifference or negligence of Sunthōn Phū's contemporaries and successors. Considering the scantiness of the material that has come down to us I venture to say that the biography of this poet will never be written, if we disregard the fabrications of feuilleton writers and other inventions. Sunthōn Phū's works will stand out as landmarks in Thai literary history.

The citizens of Klaeng, the destination of his first *nirāt* poem, have proudly erected a bronze bust in honour of the poet. It shows a firm face with an earnest if somewhat melancholic expression. The features of his mouth and nose suggest a certain disdain of the outside world. Judging by his head we may infer that he was a lean basically leptosomic type. Graphic representations of the poet follow similar lines. In the light of his works, Sunthōn Phū could possibly be imagined to have been like the person represented in such pictures. But we must realize that any attempt to draw a picture of him is only the product of personal imagination.

"It is a high calling to have a presentment of noble minds" – this maxim of Goethe was certainly not a motto for Sunthōn Phū's creative work. He probably did not even think of such a lofty and pretentious aim – in fact, such a thought, owing to the Buddhist culture of his environment, could not arise in him at all. We must admit though that some parts of his poems are expressive of Thai thought, feelings, aspirations and presentments of the Thai of his age – at least *pars pro toto* – but Sunthōn Phū did not make himself their harbinger. There is no indication

of this in his works. His poems are an artistic play, an expression of his personal moods and problems and, last but not least, a reverence to the "Great Teacher" Gautamo Buddho.

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