

Chapter 4

Thai Literary Works with Surrealist Traits (1964-1984)

In contrast with the European phenomenon, in Thailand, artists discovered the surrealist revolution before writers. Between the years 1964 and 1984, there were comparatively few literary works produced that contain distinctively surrealist traits. In fact, many of the authors whose works will be examined here were also artists with a literary gift or writers with an involvement in the arts. In any case, most were more likely to have been influenced by the paintings or, even more directly, by the writings of No Na Paknam than by the poetry or manifestoes of Breton or of the other writers of the surrealist group. Part of the reason for this was that because much of the writing on surrealism was in French or English, it was relatively inaccessible. Another reason was that the philosophy on which the new esthetic was based and which informed much of surrealist poetry proved difficult to understand for those with little knowledge of Western ideas and Western ways of thinking.

Therefore, these writers, like the painters, were inspired chiefly by the plastic arts, especially the paintings of Dali, which they found reproduced in magazines and newspapers. They interpreted these images in their own manner while retaining the impulse or emotion that first moved them to create their literary works. In other words, they made use of surrealist techniques and style to criticize certain social conditions or to convey their own personal anguish. Some even dared to produce provocatively erotic works – a characteristic they shared with their European predecessors. Yet, although the number of literary works is substantially less than the number of paintings and drawings, some are just as valuable as the canvases of some of the country's best known painters.

Most of the Thai literature with a surrealist bent belongs almost exclusively to the genres of poetry, drama and the short narrative (novellas and short stories), and almost not at all to the novel. Thai writers even seem to have accorded greater importance to the short story than to poetry, in contrast to the early development of surrealism in Paris.

Poetry

Poems influenced by surrealism or bearing certain surrealist traits were written by Angkarn Galayanapong, Viroj Nuy-butara, Thawan Datchani, Suchart Sawati and Keo Laithong.

- *Angkarn Galayanapong*

An outstanding artist and poet, Angkarn was responsible for masterpieces in both painting and literature. One of his poems, *Imagination*, is considered a surrealist work because of its surreal or supernatural imagery:

The sea, flooded to the sky...
The stars, drowned in the paddy field...
The rotted stones, as light as cotton wool...
And crabs sit astride the clouds on their way to paradise...

According to Chonthira Satyawatthana, the first Thai instructor to identify the poem as surrealist, the images in the first stanza are surrealist because of their appeal to unreality and their origin in the poet's imagination. In fact, these images are very similar to those found in traditional Thai poetry, such as *Lilit Pralor, the Legend of Sri Praat* (16th century) and *Nirat Narindra* (early 19th century). This seems to indicate that Angkarn belongs more properly on the side of tradition, both in terms of his ideas as well as his poetic form and technique. The image of "the sea flooding the sky" appears in *The Three Realms* (13th century), in the part which describes the creation of the world and the universe. It is found as well in traditional nursery rhymes: "When the world is flooded, fish eat the stars." But these surrealist images could also be interpreted as representing a possible reality, if one accepts the hypothesis that in this way, that the poet is establishing an organic link with history. But rebellion and eroticism are completely absent from the poem.

While in her Master's thesis on the surrealist tendencies in Angkarn's poetry, Saiwaroun Noinimit identified certain elements of protest (attacks against new technology and human greed), the poet's primary intent was to point out to readers the possibility of a better way of life. A closer examination of these traits shows that they are ideas grounded in religion, and traditional literature and painting, and that they are meant to be instructive. It seems, therefore, that the works of Angkarn represent a revolt and identity that are proper to him but which could not be considered as a rejection of traditional values or social institutions.

Moreover, Angkarn is a very devout Buddhist. One cannot conclude that the images found in his poetry are any stranger, more provocative or more powerful than those in traditional Thai poetry. In our view, some of his poems bear a resemblance to the works of the surrealists, as he was often inspired by certain surrealist paintings that he was especially fond of, foremost among them Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*. In an interview that appeared in *High Class* magazine (April 1990), he recognized that "the surrealist imagination is a reality and that many things are hidden behind Dali's painting; that while in reality, watches would never melt, they do make us think of many other things: eternity, the power of time, man's struggle, so hot that it is eventually consumed in the eternal fire..."

The inspiration that sparked Angkarn's imagination can be seen more clearly in the poem called "The Dream Made by the Pha Luang Mountains," and especially in the following selection:

"Time passed with its eternal golden ray until time withers into infinity in a calm and peaceful setting, absolute – until one hears the voices of the angels."

Elsewhere, the image of "fossils with fixed, tortured eyes," which appears in the poem "The Poet's Will," may have been inspired by Max Ernst's *The Eye of Silence*. In his prose poem "The Cry of the Dead," these fossils are given the power to move and speak.

- *Viroj Nuy-butara*

Viroj is also both a poet and a painter, but he is much less well-known and much less prolific. He has said that when he has the urge to write a poem, he writes as he feels, without any special preparations or any attempt to use poetic language. “I even write in the taxi if that’s where the urge overtakes me.” This method might recall the technique of automatic writing employed by the European surrealists. Viroj has also been known to play with the form of the letters or the tonality of words with no concern for semantic sense:

And soon we will fall asleep as we nod off
 On a beautiful corpse.
 We are finally satisfied!
 Heave a sigh of relief
 After having been disturbed
 Mentally and morally.



It may be that the poet was inspired by the combinations of words and images produced by such surrealist artists as Miró or Tanguy. As for the image of the “beautiful corpse,” it was the name of a poetic game played by the surrealists. What is most interesting about Viroj’s poem is the way he plays with words and tones, which is both surprising and provocative. And like the work of the surrealist poets, it is an automatic expression of the writer’s unconscious. It is too bad that Viroj produced so few works.

- *Thawan Datchani*

In addition to his work as a painter, Thawan joined with a group of artist friends to produce a collection of writings in English called *Dare* (1969). Below are two of Thawan’s poems: “How to Paint the Portrait of the Dog” and “Fragrance of Sperm.”

How to Paint the Portrait of the Dog

First, paint meat
 paint good meat
 excellent, tasty for
 the dog
 paint a smell of blood in the air to
 tempt
 the dog.

Then, place your canvas at Rajprasong Square,
 wait for the dog
 wait for a week, a month, a year,
 or even for life, but
 wait.

When the dog comes, if it comes, be silent.
 Let it devour the meat, and
 If it barks, it’s a good painting.

If it barks not, it's a bad painting.
 If it barks, then
 Sign your name and
 Sleep.

It is possible (indeed rather likely) that this poem was inspired by Jacques Prévert's "How to Paint the Portrait of a Bird," which Thawan could have read in the English translation. Prévert used a surrealist technique which consisted of playing with the real and the illusory, even though he was no longer a member of the surrealist group at the time. Thawan may have believed otherwise. A comparison of these two poems makes clear that both poets focus their attention on an animal – in Prévert's case, it is a bird, and in Thawan's, a dog. Some of the details found in the French poem are missing from the Thai poet's work.

The other poem, "Fragrance of Sperm," shows a surrealist influence in that it makes use of obscenity to provoke:

Fragrance of Sperm

Fragrance of sperm
 From Petchburi Road,
 Pollen of contemporary civilization
 For sale.
 Before I get there with my empty basket,
 They've sold it already
 To the Gringos.

The presence of sperm recalls such works of Miró as *Carnival of Harlequin*. But in Thawan's poem the intention is not to release the repressed subconscious. Instead, the poet is reacting to the condition of prostitutes in the bars on Petchburi Road who serviced American soldiers during the Vietnam War. A similar reaction can be seen in the paintings of Somchai Hatthakitkoon, which include *The Call-Girl*, *The Cultural War*, and *The Goddess Kali of the 20th Century*.

- *Suchart Sawatsi*

Suchart is a journalist, editor and author whose works range from poetry to short novels. In 1982, he produced a provocative poem entitled *Imagination in Three Lines*, in which the verses in Thai or in English are accompanied by drawings.



The poem is a satire of sex tourism, which the government of the time was promoting as a means of generating foreign income. The poem appears to be a virtual copy of Magritte's painting *Time Transfixed* (1939), though Suchart himself claimed that his inspiration came from pornographic Japanese prints.

Another of Suchart's poems entitled *The Song of the Man Who Pulls the Flesh out of the Wreckage* contains a number of distinctly surrealist traits. The poem was written in response to the death of the poet's friend in a car accident. An expression of Suchart's sadness and anger, the poem has a style that comes close to the automatic writing of the surrealists. It is powerful, spontaneous and employs a brutally sexual analogy. Suchart compares the accidental death of his friend, crushed beneath the wheels of an automobile, to sexual desire and orgasm.

"We are a group of men having received a challenge between flesh and metal, between the accelerator and the point of orgasm...Close your eyes tight, close them...Entrust your heart to your girlfriend and then go down and beat your chest against the fender, caress it tightly and then ejaculate, make the liquid gush forth like rain, make it flow slowly to the last drop with a powerful desire, make it shiver and then stay silent for a long time...! Silent and a long time. Grip hard, ejaculate endlessly. Close your eyes tight and breathe in deeply. We are coming...we will be gentle with your flesh, your heart and your love. We are coming. We will free your flesh from the steel;"

This erotic depiction of the car recalls the poem "l'Aumonyme" by the surrealist Robert Desnos, in which driving is compared to sexual intercourse.

We can conclude that these two poems by Suchart resemble French surrealist poems in that they foreground sexuality and make use of provocative imagery to shock the reader. But his overriding intention – to criticize sex tourism or to point out the danger of automobiles – is completely different from that of the surrealists, who sought to rebel against rationality and realism and to achieve a new type of freedom through man's sexual impulses. Their primary preoccupation was to affirm the esthetic nature of the sex act.

- *Keo Laithong*

Keo Laithong is the pseudonym of Sethasak Sithongthuam. In a work entitled "Confession of the Subconscious," he refuses to conform to traditional literary models, adopting instead a style consisting of long phrases with intermittent pauses and ending in a question. *What? Flowers, you say?* It is an automatic, lingering trace of subconscious unease; it is almost the delirium of a madman or an obsessive. The same style of writing can be found in "The Magnetic Fields" by Breton and Soupault, to which we can compare the following excerpt from Keo's work:

Here there are no lights but the rotten corpses of rats in the corner of the room
flowers or the perfume the person who gave it to me told me that it is the
yellow of lymph from a decayed corpse but impossible to recognize this color
no one said that its smell goes back to the flowers of the night intoxicated by
this perfume one feels as if one were walking in the deserted lane covered in

mist perhaps there are dark rays of light and old wooden fences there is a male with the face of a seated dog that barks in front of a three-story building perhaps there is a man with black butterfly wings on his broad shoulders but these wings are those of a butterfly placing a kiss on the white forehead of a delicate skin that reflects the moon's rays of a white winged girl like a butterfly and suddenly the body of the male is transformed into a bar of gelatin which gradually melts on the wings of the girl falling then taking wing into the sky the instant when her body remains on earth she cries out and laughs softly as tears run down her cheeks and eventually on to the earth this earth bursts into flames flames of the soul the body of man will return the burnt wings agonizing in the midst of the inferno of the soul what? Flowers...

The strange nature of the passage allows us to see to what extent Keo makes use of imaginative comparisons and certain irrational linguistic formulations to describe a half-human, half-animal couple. The transformation of their bodies – his into a bar of gelatin and hers into a butterfly that loses its wings – is reminiscent of the paintings of André Masson, most notably his canvas called *Metamorphosis* (1939). It is possible to see a similarity between Keo's writing technique and the experimentation of the European surrealists, who wrote in a state of drowsiness to give voice to the subconscious. Yet, in numerous interviews, Keo has denied any knowledge of the surrealists and claims that when he composes a poem, he is possessed by a spirit that commands him to write.

Drama

There are, in fact, very few plays having any signs of surrealist influence. There are only those of Keo Laithong and Suwat Sricheua.

In *A Short History* and *Theater*, Keo rejects traditional characterization, title, form, setting and plot.

A Short History (1984) is a one-act play in which not only is the title surprising but the reversed order of the plot also fails to meet the audience's expectations. Its text and images are incoherent, as are the false line markings and the grammar. The characters consist of a young man, his reflection in a mirror and his shadow. One of these last two is aggressive, the other mild, and it is up to the young man to stop the constant quarreling between them. Another reversal of traditional expectations is the closing of the curtain at the start of the play and its opening at the end. The passage below demonstrates the aggressive nature of the young man's shadow.

Don't criticize him like that (in an aggressive tone full of touchiness), he's been with us a long time, a lot longer than the others. Time...it passes, time, really, without regard for anybody. Or time passes him by (with hesitation). That's always how it is with us. Sometimes I don't think about stopping myself from being touchy, because he spends most of his time with you. He spends his time (confused), time passes him by. It happens...it happens with us (with a cry in his voice) like breath, a smile, tears, flowers, demons...but me, I don't know, I really don't know if he loves us. And me, I don't know if I love him.