

An Examination of Sunthorn Phu's Creative Process

Montri Umavijani¹

ABSTRACT

The creative process in Sunthorn Phu's works shows him to be using the imagination in a succession of styles. His imagination can best be classified, according to Coleridge's theory, into the primary imagination, the secondary imagination, and fancy. In the early works, there is a strong evidence of the primary imagination which involves sense perception. Then, in the middle period, Sunthorn Phu takes up the secondary imagination which, according to Coleridge, "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate." The products of this imagination are, notably, **Phra Abhai Mani** and **Nirat Phu Khao Thong**. Lastly, in the later stages of his writing, there is a preponderance of dream and memory, termed by Coleridge as fancy. The example given is **Nirat Phra Prathom**.

A talk given at AUA Library on June 30, 1986 :

The creative process of a writer usually involves what the writer knows and how he transforms it in his work. Therefore, it is very difficult to talk about this process where details of life and works are uncertain and even dubious. Sunthorn Phu is just a case in point. Even though this year marks the bicentenary of his birth, we still know so little about his life. Besides, the little we know often takes us away from the works, or, worse still, makes us think poorly of them.

An account of the poet's life can be attempted along these lines. Sunthorn Phu probably had a standard education of the day. He was familiar with the great works existing then, including the **Ramakien** and **Inao**. When he came to be a poet, he wrote mainly three types of works, namely, narrative poems, travel poems, and didactic poems. And he had two kinds of audience. Most of his works were intended for either the patrons or the people to whom they were dedicated. Then they went beyond this private audience to a kind of public audience. His poems were copied by hand and circulated among a fairly large reading public. Towards the end of his life, he even sold his poems to readers. However, one cannot exaggerate too much about his reputation because, by dint of irony, even the date on which he died is not known.

Still, one important aspect of Sunthorn Phu's times is that the poet wrote with a readership in mind. In being conversant with his audience, he could not help becoming a public figure. This obliged him to go into fiction even while writing about some very personal matters. What we have in the works is, therefore, not the life but the life transformed by the rules of art, the foremost of which is the imagination.

¹ Dept. of Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart Univ.

Sunthorn Phu's imagination is wide and varied. Of the three kinds of imagination expounded by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, namely, the primary imagination, the secondary imagination, and fancy, it may be said that Sunthorn Phu exploited them all in an astounding evolution that is only found in the world's best poets. When he was young, he used sense perception and thus presented direct imagery. This is Coleridge's primary imagination. Examples may be given from the early narrative poems and two travel poems, **Nirat Muang Klaeng** and **Nirat Phra Bat**. Then, in the middle period, he learned to mix the things perceived with thoughts and feelings of a more personal, sometimes more philosophical, level. This resulted in an artistic creation. The practice was responsible for such works as **Phra Abhai Mani**, on the one hand, and the great travel poems such as **Nirat Phu Khao Thong**, on the other hand. Finally, when he grew older, he used memory and dream to a remarkable degree in his works. This tendency was not good for the storyteller; but it produced three great travel poems, namely, **Rampan Pilarb**, **Nirat Inao**, and **Nirat Phra Prathom**. The first two were dream poems; the last one was based on an actual journey, but written from memory and with an inclination to the dream.

It may be useful to take up some of the exemplary works and describe them briefly in terms of the imagination. In **Phra Abhai Mani**, for instance, the creative process is quite clear. Sunthorn Phu got his story in bits and pieces from various sources, in such a manner that made his critic Prince Damrong say of him that he was not truly knowledgeable. But this is precisely the working of the secondary imagination which, according to Coleridge, "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create."

Phra Abhai Mani is the story of the two princes who learned special skills, one flute-playing and the other cudgel-fighting. They safeguarded themselves from harm by their skills. As the story unfolded, we were shown a world like our own in which only specialists and technocrats existed. There was hardly any way to make these skilled people understand one another and live together peacefully. Sunthorn Phu himself proposed love and religion based on poetry as the means. Incidentally, at the height of the war of heroes, as the Paleuk War may be called, the hermit, who was the poet's spokesman, miraculously appeared and preached to all parties at war to learn to blame themselves and not the others, as the rudiment of world peace.

The **nirats** or travel poems best show the poet's evolution in the way outlined above. It is interesting to observe that when the primary imagination is in use, the traveller keeps going forward in time and space. The direction is centrifugal. With the secondary imagination, there is an equilibrium of the outward and the inward which makes the poems at once moving and holding. And by virtue of fancy which includes dream and memory, the poet turns his back on reality. He travels backward in an interior journey into himself.

I would like to give an example from **Nirat Phra Prathom** which I have translated into English for the Sunthorn Phu Bicentennial Celebration. Just one detail will be enough. The poet had been given a piece of rayon or silk by a woman who might then be either living or dead. He dyed it yellow, but he also used it to cover himself at night. He promised to clothe the Great Pagoda with it as soon as he arrived at his destination. At one point he said :

There remains just the pink rayon of hers:
 My nightly sleep is enfolded in its fragrance.
 I've dyed it yellow with much restraint
 To clothe the Golden Pagoda.

At another point, let us hear him speak in the original version:

ເຫຼືອແຕ່ຜ້າແພຣສີ່ພໍ່ນ
 ດີງປະໜຈະຄວາຍໃຫ້ສາຍສນຣ

Listen to the sound of poetry. The *i* sound and the *o* and *a* sounds are, evocatively, the Mon pipe and drum at funeral! How memory asserts itself in the poem.

Then, Sunthorn Phu reached Phra Prathom and fulfilled his promise. Leaving the Pagoda, he could not help looking back:

Suddenly the air is thick with birds;
 Some fly to and fro, high and low.
 Seeing birds and trees in the forest,
 I sob an look back with loneliness.
 On the Pagoda, a cool breeze blows constantly,
 Stirring the rayon into endless ripples,
 With such a sobbing sound as never ceases.
 I thrill and weep with tearless eyes.

This is Sunthorn Phu. And the year is the poet's bicentenary. Now, I shall refrain from assessing his greatness as a poet because so many people are harping on him for this occasion. But, if at any point in the future a literary exile from Thailand has to scrap up and leave the country before he can take anything with him, he will be able to travel light with the thin saffron robe such as described by, Sunthorn Phu:

ເຫຼືອແຕ່ຜ້າແພຣສີ່ພໍ່ນ
 ດີງປະໜຈະຄວາຍໃຫ້ສາຍສນຣ

Indeed, as a Buddhist poet, Sunthorn Phu has taught us to beat words into airy thinness, like gold leaves, to clothe the Buddha or the Pagoda. This is a poet. When will there come another?

LITERATURE CITED

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, **Biographia Literaria**, ed. George Watson. London, 1971.
 Sunthorn Phu, **Nirat Phra Prathom**, trans. Montri Umavijani. Bangkok, 1986.
 Umavijani, Montri, "Phra Abhai Mani," **Facets of Thai Cultural Life**. Bangkok, 1984.