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“Life’s Fickle Drama Has Been Performed, Fleeting Lives Witnessed with Pain”

Humans are but tools in the hands of society’s controlling forces, nothing but toys spun in the unpredictable circle of destiny and history. As Bối, the first-person narrator of *Three Others*, laments following the start of the Rectification of Errors Campaign: “I enter a maelstrom of fear, sorrow, joy and anxiety. I am spun into the game, twisted by the rope, turning fast and left to lie about. Left on my own, I am unable to grasp what’s going on” (216). And at the end of the novel, he exclaims, “We are all equally filthy—there is nothing else to say.” The earthshaking historical experience known as the Land Reform can be summed up in these two statements.

Three Others describes the Land Reform in direct speech and in the present tense. The perspective is that of an insider. Bối is a city dweller who drifts about during the war before landing a job in Hà Nội as a bookkeeper and warehouse clerk. Since he “had absolutely no prior experience toiling in the rice fields, he was able to avoid work assignments in the countryside during the period that he served in Việt Bắc.” After returning to Hà Nội, however, he can no longer avoid duties based in the countryside and is recruited into a land reform team. Bối thus assumes the title of a land reform cadre—not just an ordinary team member but a deputy chief in charge of establishing the “people’s court.” Bối’s position gives him the power of life and death over many people whom he neither knows nor understands. He avoids his duties, however, by shifting them to Huỳnh Cự, the team leader. This is partly a

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reflection of Bối's tentative character, but it also occurs because Cự is power hungry and enjoys controlling all aspects for the campaign. A popular saying of the period, "The land reform cadre comes first, God comes second," reflected real historical circumstances, but in the book it seems like a sick joke.

After the Land Reform, the team leader Cự escapes to the south and defects to the enemy. But he is allegedly assassinated by a communist agent, the son of a poor peasant from the same village where he had once led the Land Reform. Tô Hoài writes that it is "unclear whether this event occurred or not," and the book ends with this indeterminate sentence. This reflects the novel's status as literary hybrid: the novel-memoir. It has been said that Nam Cao wrote his novels like memoirs, while Tô Hoài writes his memoirs like novels. Tô Hoài's memoirs, *Dust and Sand at Someone's Feet* and *Every Afternoon*, capture all the earthly, dusty facts of human life. *Three Others* novelizes Tô Hoài's memories—it is both a mode of preserving personal experience and a literary experiment.

Tô Hoài's many decades of life experience and attendant memories serve as a rich source for his intelligent, fact-based writing. He relates and describes the unfolding of events in a dispassionate narrative voice. The voice is essentially indifferent—like an outsider telling a joke unconnected to his homeland or to himself. This worsens the pain. Everything is like a joke. Bối arrives for the land reform operation with no prior knowledge of the countryside or its peasants. The same joke is played on the urbanite Đình, who runs the "universal friendship farm" that ultimately destroys him. And the joke is made even at the expense of Cự, the ardent and radical team leader who eventually defects to the enemy. Hence, the story comes off as a farce. Yet the event was far from farcical in real life, since it destroyed the lives of countless ordinary people and shaped in a negative way the fate of an entire country and the historical course of the nation. While I was reading *Three Others*, I could not help but tremble at the intertwining of incredible facts and credible jokes that had been arranged by the cosmic hands that shape history and related by Tô Hoài's wicked pen.

I am glad that the novel has finally been published and that the author's literary and creative powers have not diminished over time. Tô Hoài was seventy-two when he wrote *Three Others*, and the events that comprise his

novel occurred thirty-five years ago. His many years of direct involvement in key episodes of Vietnamese history have endowed him with the right and the capacity to take a second look at life and to meditate on its changing currents. While the Land Reform is a major issue in our nation's history, it has been a difficult topic for Vietnamese literature to address. With *Three Others*, Tô Hoài has successfully taken on and overcome this challenge.

The writer Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, a close colleague and friend of Tô Hoài, recorded the following observation in his diary on July 9, 1956:

The fifth land reform wave was expected to uplift the people but it caused countless tragedies. Many individuals were unjustly charged. The saddest fact is that comrades who had made selfless contributions, risked their lives, and suffered harsh conditions in the underground during the anti-French resistance now faced the firing squad. Those who had followed the orders of the Central Committee and facilitated the migration south of our fellow citizens were now interrogated and dishonored without any chance to defend themselves or appeal their convictions. Those who had received “Điện Biên Phủ Medals” were stripped of them by team leaders and subsequently arrested and tortured. Some who had received honorary cloaks directly from Uncle Hồ had them stripped from their backs. Others were denounced as spies by land reform cadres, many of whom were just seventeen or eighteen years old and possessed no experience of the resistance and little understanding of humanity. These team leaders oppressed the peasants and abused their positions. It was a dark time for revolutionary humanism.¹

This paragraph could be taken as a footnote to *Three Others* since Nguyễn Huy Tưởng's concerns are embodied in Tô Hoài's novel. We are left wondering if Nguyễn Huy Tưởng might have endeavored to express similar sentiments in a novel, had he lived.

Does the “otherness” referred to in the title of the novel imply “cruelty?” Cruelty exists inside each human being, like a hidden devil that emerges to inflict harm only under the right circumstances. The exposure to the cruelty of others can also transform humans into devils. In the novel, the three members of land reform team become three “others”; not one of them preserves his basic decency. But *Three Others* also warns us against the cruelty in our own hearts. Half a century after the Land Reform, Tô Hoài's novel shows us in stark detail how “life's fickle drama has been performed”² in that

dark era. It reveals a piece of our history that has been kept in the dark, suggesting what we are still capable of and what we must still guard against.

Translated by Trần Hạnh and Zach Shore.

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Notes

1. Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, *Diary*, vol. 3, *Artist and Citizen* (Hà Nội: Thanh Niên, 2006), 113.
2. From Nguyễn Gia Thiều (Ôn Như Hầu), *Cung oán ngâm khúc* [Laments of a Royal Concubine], edited, annotated, and commented by Lê Văn Hòe (Hà Nội: Quốc Học Thư Xã, 1954).