

# AN IMAGINARY DIA- LOGUE: A COMPARA- TIVE LOOK AT CON- TEMPORARY THAI AND WESTERN POETRY<sup>1</sup>

## Chetana Nagavajara<sup>2</sup>

I do not wish to sound pessimistic, but it is time that the image of Thailand as a land of smiles should be questioned. In this respect, contemporary Thai poetry can substantiate my point that contemporary Thai society is extremely complex and defies any simplification. As we are meeting at Sanam Chandra Palace in Nakorn Pathom, it is only appropriate that I begin with a poem by Saksiri Meesomsueb (born 1956) "Retracing Footprints on the Path", which was the very first poem read at a poetry reading session on 14 March 1997, at Tabkwan House, only a few steps away from our meeting place today. The poem is quoted here in full in a translation by Chamnongsri Hanchanelak.

"Paper birds panicked into flight  
Reeling in vast tear-filled skies  
Boom, Boom.....scattered in  
fright  
Bang Bang...*ee-poh* guns  
broke the air  
Shot out *chamaliang* bullets  
Bright-eyed ones dropped  
drooped  
Eye-balls burst - broke and bled

Blood dripped dropped like  
prized gems  
Smooth flesh breached  
By powered thrust of iron  
blades  
Screams reverberated through  
the land  
but valued no more than fruit-  
flies' buzz  
Back and forth, back and forth  
Tears flooded the clouds  
Little rabbit's up to its neck in  
despair  
Grabbed heaven-spire, pulled  
hope crashing down  
Rainbow ghost lunged his  
lightening rod  
Ripping through the startled  
chest  
Rainbow ghost sucked dry the  
blood  
The sky moans mixed with  
fierce gun-fires  
Was it this tamarind tree or some  
other?  
Sobbing Pigtail, Topknot and  
Glae queried  
Was it on this branch or another,  
pretty tree,  
That they hung the beloved  
maid?  
Breezes blew, branch bent,  
body swung  
Beaten, battered, kicked as it  
hung  
No words, no cries, no  
recrimination  
Was the rope so tight that  
you're silent?  
Your eyes bulged, tongue hung  
out  
Is it rage that clenched your fist  
so?  
Let anger dissolve with the  
dissolving breath  
For your corpse they've  
cremated with burning tires

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<sup>2</sup> Emeritus Professor of German, Silapakorn University, Nakorn Pathom, Thailand.



They cupped hands to make  
megaphones  
For trumpeting news they'd  
concocted  
That we were a fungal and  
leprous lot  
With spotted hinds and scarlet  
heads  
Then they threw olive grenades  
Ten thousand *ee-poh* guns  
responded  
Spattering *Chamaliang* bullets  
Smashing lives, scattering  
bodies  
None died but revived by magic  
*wah*  
The dead were quickened with  
life  
Not killed, not dead, we're alive  
the wounded cured, the dead  
revived  
Not killed, we're still here to  
stand fast  
Hope and dreams are beacon-  
bright  
We select, analyze and put  
away  
Keep this, discard that to find  
the win-way  
You on your side, we on ours  
Differing yet steadfast...with  
Truth  
Lets' cross the peaks of  
ignorance  
To reach victory through  
wisdom of mankind  
Like fire is the vengeful heart  
Let die the hatred of days past  
"Foes to be fought is the abasing  
Delusion  
That inhabits the human mind"  
Come...keep banana guns  
against the wall  
And hone our wits for the vital  
war  
Make it sharp of edge and great

of depth  
Set tactics for strategic of peace  
Sixth October 2519  
Retracing footprints on the path  
Subtracting a finger or a toe for  
each year  
None's left on my hands and  
feet, dear friends  
Counting fingers and toes that  
day to this  
It's been twenty years, dear  
friends  
Counting fingers and toes that  
day to this  
It's been twenty years, dear  
friends"<sup>3</sup>

As you may have experienced from the video presentation, the response to the reading by the poet was overwhelming. Saksiri Meesomsueb and 15 other poets responded to an invitation by a research group engaged in a comparative research project entitled "Poetry as an Intellectual and Spiritual Force in Contemporary Society: Experiences from Thai, British-Irish, American, French and German Literatures". The poets interacted with the researchers on a number of issues related to the cultural environment that had induced them to become poets. After the morning and afternoon seminar sessions, the poets gathered again at Tabkhwan House for a reading session, each presenting one poem of his or her own which was expected to lend strength to the researchers' idealistic proposition that poetry is an intellectual and spiritual force in contemporary Thai society. It was no coincidence that "Retracing Footprints on the Path" should have

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<sup>3</sup> A video recording of the reading session is available from the German Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Nakorn Pathom.



served as an overture to an altogether spiritually and intellectually enriching evening.

The poem might appear to be a departure from the traditional notion of Thailand as a pleasure-loving country. The old myth about its pristine innocence can no longer be sustained. The political events of 1973, 1976 and 1992 more than demonstrated that a brotherly conflict in this Far Eastern land could at any time degenerate into a fratricide. If the Establishment, including our own educational authorities, continues to endorse the traditional image of the land of smiles (our history textbooks deliberately turning a blind eye to the atrocious events), our literature, and especially our contemporary poetry, refuses to enter into a complicity against the Thai people and valiantly accepts the responsibility of being the guiding light in search of truth. (The Ministry of Education recently, under pressure, decided to take up accounts of the bloody events into the new official history book, soon to be published. One of the chief authors is none other than our poet Naowarat Phongphaiboon, who has written heart-rending poems on the events, but invited for the [wrong] reason that he was there on the scene!)

It goes without saying that the poem by Saksiri Meesomsueb should be able to touch a responsive chord in the Thai public, but could it be expected that our

friends from other countries would be in a position to react likewise? I have had experience of presenting Saksiri's poem to foreign audiences, and the responses were to be encouraging.<sup>4</sup> It seems the poem contains a message which is supranational and in keeping with the times. In other words, it can enter into a *dialogue* with foreign counterparts. In order to establish a basis for such an exchange, it might be a good idea to explore contemporary Western aesthetic thinking which might help to show certain affinities with contemporary Thai poetry. I shall quote a few lines from "Discourse on the Poem" by the German poet, Christoph Meckel:

The poem is not the place,  
where beauty is nurtured...  
The poem is not the place,  
where truth is adorned...  
The poem is not the place,  
where pain is healed...  
The poem is not the place,  
where dying is appeased,  
where hunger is satisfied,  
where hope is exalted.  
The poem is the place for  
mortally wounded truth.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo die Schönheit gepflegt wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo die Wahrheit verziert wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo der Schmerz verheilt wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo das Sterben begütigt, wo der Hunger gestillt, wo die Hoffnung verklärt wird.

Das Gedicht ist der Ort der zu Tode verwundeten Wahrheit.

Christoph Meckel : *Hundert Gedichte*. Ausgewählt von Harald Weinrich, München : Hanser 1988, S.67, V.1,5,9,14-16. (My translation)

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<sup>4</sup> I wish to refer to lectures given at the following institutions: 13 August 1998 at the Siam Society, Bangkok (in English), 17 May 1999 at Leeds University (in English), 18 May 1999 at Manchester University (in English), 7 June 1999 at the Zentrum für Literaturforschung, Berlin (in German) and 17 December 2001 at Hongkong Baptist University.



We could almost reach the conclusion that Saksiri's "Retracing Footprints on the Path" has been written with Meckel's poetological programme in mind! The crux of the matter is what Meckel calls that "mortally wounded truth" which the poet does not hesitate to hurl into the face of his compatriots. The description of the event in stark naturalistic details probably goes beyond Meckel's poetological demand, but somehow does not lapse into an emotional paroxysm, for the poet knows how to steer the middle course and to contain the *physical cruelty* with an interplay between the real bloodbath and children's war games. The physical cruelty in the end is transformed into a *philosophical cruelty*<sup>6</sup> which also can be explained in terms of Buddhism. The poet does not plead for *forgetting* but for *forgiving*, not in the legal sense of an amnesty which every military *junta* in Thailand declared after a *coup d' état* in order to exculpate the murderers as well as the murdered, but in a *Buddhist* sense. (In Thai we distinguish between "Aphaiyathan" [forgiving] from "Aphaiyathot" [amnesty] )

What Saksiri is trying to present in his poem is a process of internalization of the historical event through *dharma*. This reminds me of a remark by Seamus Heaney on his departed friend, Ted Hughes: "...he [Ted Hughes] internalized the historical crises of the British nation [...] and transformed [them] into a healer's vision."<sup>7</sup> It seems as though Saksiri's poem was written in

the spirit of Heaney's characterization of his friend. An *imaginary dialogue* has thus taken place between a Thai poet and his British colleague. We Thai should consider ourselves fortunate in that our contemporary poetry has attained what Thai society at large has not achieved, or rather lacked the will to achieve, namely, to come up with a "healer's vision" and thereby forge a new beginning (as embodied in the *finale* of the poem) or a regeneration.

On the concept of "regeneration" in contemporary literature, literary scholars cannot but admire the moral courage and the spiritual force shown by contemporary literature, however dark or dismal the image presented may be. The British germanist Ronald Peacock has very well characterized this trend.

For the moderns [...] the aesthetic acceptance of the terrifying but honest image of the dark aspects of life and humanity, presented as suffering and helplessness without compensating consolations, rests on the prior belief that one should in conscience pursue the truth, whatever it is, and whatever it shows. This gives back to literature [...] a functional role and importance, because there is implied in the whole situation the idea of *regeneration*; both individual and society are to be redeemed by the instrument of truth.<sup>8</sup>

Although we Thai did not experience the last world war in the same measure

<sup>6</sup> The term "philosophical cruelty" is borrowed from Jan Kott's book : *Shakespeare notre contemporain*, Paris 1962, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> *The Observer*, 16 May 1999 (The Week, p. 4)

<sup>8</sup> 1972. p. 34.



as our European counterparts, yet it is still possible for us to enter into a dialogue with them, as our own tendency towards immolating our own brethren has some common elements with the European carnage. We should be grateful to our contemporary poets that they have the courage to confront all kinds of "historical crises", try to internalize and at the same time to surmount them. In this sense the French poet Daniel Biga never hesitates to give a clear answer: self-knowledge and knowledge of the world are prime conditions that must go hand in hand. The poem "Look" (*Regarde*) is a plaidoyer for an open worldview (in a literal sense).

Look

Look at love clouds  
 Look at the daily sun  
 Look into yourself  
 Look feel listen taste touch  
 Breathe laugh cry sing dance  
 run love  
 I have made my most beautiful  
 journeys in your arms  
 You are free  
 You are alive  
 With your suffering and  
 your joy  
 Your are an immense look<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Regarde l'amour les nuages  
 regarde le soleil quotidien  
 regarde à l'intérieur de toi  
 regarde sens écoute goûte touche  
 respire ris pleure chante danse cours  
 aime  
 (j'ai fait mes plus beaux voyages entre  
 tes bras)*

*Tu es libre  
 Tu es vivant  
 Avec ta souffrance et ta joie  
 Tu es un immense regard*

Daniel Biga: *Né nu, suivi de Oiseaux  
 Monican et de Kilroy was here*, Paris: Le  
 Chereche Midi: 1984 (Coll. Points Fixes),  
 p.69. (My translation)

The penultimate line quoted sounds like an echo from the well-known poem "Prometheus" by Goethe in which the prime conditions of man are described ("Here I sit, shape man/ in my own image,/ A race, that like me shall/ Suffer, weep,/ Be happy and rejoice...")<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the inner and the outer worlds constitute here a unity, under the condition that one is open to all facets of human experience. Joy and suffering lie at the root of human existence which one must accept. From Goethe to Biga a transformation may have taken place. Whereas Goethe's protagonist has to fight for this prime condition, it has already become a normality in Biga's poem. Such an acceptance of the world and of the human condition as they really are represents a philosophical position common in contemporary poetry. The dean of contemporary Thai poets, Angkarn Kalayanaphong, elevates this worldview to a metaphysical height. He makes his point very clear in the poem "World".

The world is not dependent  
 solely on valuable gems.  
 Sand and other things have  
 partaken of its creation.  
 All lowly elements have done  
 well in providing equilibrium  
 So that the universe will not  
 be devoid of any constituent  
 part.  
 This earth is not an abode  
 reserved for golden swans.  
 Crows have also their rightful  
 place.

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<sup>10</sup> My translation. The original German is as follows:

"Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen  
 Nach meinem Bilde,  
 Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich, sei,  
 Zu leiden, zu weinen,



Those revelling in their own  
exclusiveness are mere  
idiots.

If there is no friendship, the  
world will be robbed of all  
happiness.<sup>11</sup>

How can we maintain such a precarious  
equilibrium in the face of the multifarious  
crises that beset our contemporary  
world? Another French poet has an  
answer to offer, namely, to lodge man  
in nature. In the poem entitled "On the  
Great Apposition of the World" (O la  
grande apposition du monde), Michel  
Deguy demonstrates how the natural  
sphere and the human sphere can merge  
harmoniously.

A field  
of roses near a field of corn and  
two red children  
in the field near the field of  
roses  
and a field of maize near the  
field of corn  
and two old willows at the point  
of convergence;  
the singing of two rose-coloured  
children in the  
field of corn near the field of  
roses and two old  
willows that watch over the  
roses the corn the red  
children and the maize...<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Angkarn Kalayanaphong: *Poems*,  
Bangkok: Siam Press 1999 (6. Aufl.) (Original:  
Thai; my translation)

<sup>12</sup> un champ  
de roses près d'un champ de blé et deux  
enfants  
rouges dans le champ voisin du champ de  
roses  
et un champ du maïs près du champ de blé  
et deux  
saules vieux à la jointure; le chant de deux  
enfants

That two *red* children have transformed  
themselves into two *rose-coloured*  
children speaks for the power of nature.  
Another leading Thai poet Chang Sae  
Tang looks at this relationship between  
man and nature from another  
perspective. His approach to nature  
might qualify as anthropocentric.

When mother feeds her child  
with sweets  
The fruits on the tree become  
sweet.  
The sun shines on the tree  
The branches sway in the wind.  
Mother and child in mother's  
arms  
While away their time under the  
tree.<sup>13</sup>

Where will this East-West dialogue lead  
to? Have the Orientals led their  
Occidental colleagues so far from  
Christop Meckel's position that the latter  
are now ready to assume the role of  
healers and no longer take the poem as  
the place for "mortally wounded truth".  
There is no doubt that our poets are well  
aware that the twentieth-century man  
finds himself at the edge of the abyss  
which could devour him at any time.  
That they are ready and willing to  
counter such tragic possibility with their  
professed faith in life is a testimony to  
their creative force. The "historical  
crises" which Seamus Heaney  
mentioned offer our contemporary poets

roses dans le champ de blé près du champ  
de roses  
et deux vieux saules qui veillent les roses  
le blé les  
enfants rouges et le maïs...

Miche Deguy: *Poèmes 1960-1970*, Paris:  
Gallimard 1973, pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Chang Sae Tang: "Mother and Child", in:  
*Analysis and Anthology of Thai Poetry*, p.  
130. (My translation)



a unique opportunity to transform their "years abroad" into spiritual experiences. In this respect the American poet Denise Levertov has shown in her poem "In Thai Binh [Peace] Province" that poetry as an internalization of experience can transcend all painful memories.

[...] I've used up all my film on  
bombed hospitals, [...] and for the moments all my  
tears too are used up [...] So I'll use my burning eyes to  
photograph within me [...] [...] Peace within the long war.  
It is that life, unhurried, sure,  
persistent, I must bring home  
when I try to bring the war  
home.<sup>14</sup>

The time when Westerners indulged in superficial flirtations with the Orient is now over. Contemporary poetry has endowed the process of globalization with a new meaning because it sets knowledge of the world as a precondition for knowledge of the self. The time-consecrated academic "Orientalism" no longer suffices, for a poetic dialogue requires more than just rational and intellectual activity. The English poet Grevel Lindop had spent years studying Buddhism with Thai and Cambodian monks (residing in England) and developed himself into a practising Buddhist before he decided to embark on a life's work, namely, an *epic poem* entitled "Touching the Earth: A Poem on the life of the Buddha".

[...] We'll use what we can find,  
Golddust among the gravel;  
transmute the mind  
As best we can, offer it to the  
Lord,  
The lightbringer, the teacher  
who restored  
The lost path for our age. Give  
me your breath  
To praise once more that way  
past birth and death,  
Outside the worlds but starting  
from this ground,  
A prince's life, a Buddha's, one  
who found  
Safety, coolness, a lamp, a  
jewelled gate,  
A garden where the unspoiled  
virtues wait,  
All is impermanent: that  
teaching must  
Itself at last lie hidden in the  
dust,  
Waiting another who will  
understand  
Its cryptic patterns, drifted with  
the sand  
Of beings' folly, and clear it  
once again  
To offer the world a path out of  
its pain.<sup>15</sup>

The reading which the poet gave on 18 January 1997 at the International Temple in Ubon Ratchathani Province was so convincing in its sincerity and commitment that one was tempted to call the work "confessions of a beautiful soul" (to borrow Goethe's concept from his novel *Wilhelm Meister*). In this way the East-West dialogue paves the way for a quest for "Nirvana".

<sup>14</sup> Denise Levertov: In Thai Binh (Peace) Province, in: Carolyne Forsche (Edit.): *Against Forgetting*, New York: Norton 1993, p. 331.

<sup>15</sup> Grevel Lindop: *Touching the Earth: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha*. Introduction, pp. 45-60. (Quoted from the unpublished manuscript with the kind permission of the author.)



Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that we are dealing here with an *imaginary* dialogue. Most of our Thai poets have not mastered foreign languages well enough to be able to appreciate foreign poetry in the original form. Even their English, which they have learnt at school, remains defective. Translations from Western languages are few and far between. Conversely, Thai poetry is unknown in the West as a result of lack of translations. The anthologies that are available are not sufficiently publicized.<sup>16</sup> With regard to the educational background of these Thai poets, the aforementioned meeting between poets and scholars on 13-14 March 1997 turned out to be most revelatory. Most Thai poets come from the provinces and draw from the riches of local culture. Their works derive from oral traditions, quite close to folk songs, and they learn their poetic art from a familial and communal environment. One poetess confessed that she was often scolded by her disciplinarian father, but always *in verse*, whereas another poet related how his grandmother used to sing and recite to him *in verse*, describing her natural environment in a language that was highly metaphorical. If these poets ever enjoy higher education at all, it is mainly at "peripheral" institutions, and rarely at those prestigious metropolitan universities. In other words, they are self-taught and owe more to a rich "informal" rather education than to any

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<sup>16</sup> A German scholar, Klaus Wenk, of Hamburg University has done a great deal in the way of translating Thai poetry, both classical and contemporary, but even in German-speaking countries, his anthologies are rarely known. (See: *Studien zur Literatur der Thai*, Bde. 1-2-3-4, Hamburg: Das Seminar für Japanologie der Universität Hamburg, 1982-1989.

formal training. What a difference from their Western colleagues! How many contemporary poets in France and Germany have obtained their doctorates and how many poets in the UK and the USA are at the same time university professors? How did it come about that Thai poets and their Western counterpart could enter into a fruitful, albeit imaginary, dialogue?

The examples from Thai and Western poetry quoted above do possess certain common characteristics that point to a deeper intellectual and spiritual foundation. Are we entitled to speak of a common humanity? But such a concept cannot satisfactorily be explained in scientific terms. I am thus compelled to look for allies in various theoretical schools and the following theoretical digressions represent an attempt to give a provisional answer.

Let us hark back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the various speculations on the origin of the human language, among which the one by Johann Gottfried Herder probably suits our purpose best, as it is markedly oriented towards poetry.

Poetry is older than prose. For what is language in its beginning other than an imitation of the ringing, moving and awakening nature, a meeting point of elements of poetry? The natural language of all creatures, poeticized from mind into sound, a lexicon of the soul, a constant poetic narration, full of emotion and engagement: that is language at its origin, and is poetry different from that?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in.: Hermann Glaser et al. (Edit.): *Wege der deutschen Literatur: Ein Lesebuch*, Frankfurt/M. u. Berlin: Ullstein 1989, pp. 161-162. (My Translation)



To move on from the poetic origin of the human language to a theory of the commonalities of poetry at the dawn of the new millenium might be too big a leap and certainly scholarly adventurism. Perhaps we can seek help from modern linguistics, such as Noam Chomsky's concepts of "deep structure" and "surface structure", which could throw light on our search for an answer. Moreover, we may be able to explain certain poetic phenomena as "performance" which is based on a common "competence". But experts have warned that such a theory can be applicable only as a broad framework without fine technical subtleties and that a theory of the commonalties of contemporary poetry still requires further serious thinking and investigation.

If scholarly disciplines do not prove to be sufficiently helpful, can we then confide in the poets themselves? The French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé defined the mission of the poet in rather radical terms, namely, "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu", which T.S. Elliot in the footsteps of Mallarmé described as "to purify the dialect of the tribe". When we look at the concept of purification as the common goal of all poetic acts, a question arises as to whether our contemporary poets want to content themselves with just a linguistic purification or whether they wish to extend and amend Mallarmé's concept. We have seen above how Ronald Peacock characterized "regeneration" as one of the virtues of contemporary literature, and in this sense our contemporary poets have mutually responded to the challenge of the age through an implicit act of moral regeneration. Whether we are talking of the wrestling with history by Saksiri Meesomsueb, or the programmatic

demand by Christop Meckel or the internalization of an atrocious war by Denise Levertov, it is undeniable that many of our contemporary poets invariably and willingly engage themselves in a moral-philosophical debate.

If this is our conclusion, are we elevating contemporary poetry to such a dizzy height far removed from everyday life? We must find a middle position somewhere which corresponds to the real situation. Does a possibility exist in the world of today that allows us to think poetically in supranational and global terms and to express ourselves accordingly. Even some of our Thai poets who are still attached to their native soil are fully conscious that they are living in a world in which modern communications and new media cannot be ignored. (One contemporary Thai poet chooses to live at his parental home on an island in the South of Thailand but never hesitates to send his manuscripts by e-mail or telefax.) The French poet Michel Deguy openly pleads for a supranational and global communication in poetic creation.

...One should conceive of a work of art always with a vision that aims beyond those to whom it is initially addressed, surpassing the original group of reference; that is why it is preferable to aim at a "Francophonía" rather than the "French hexagon"; and even "Francophonía" is in turn to be overtaken intentionally, for example, by humanity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Deguy: *Aux heures d'affluence. Poèmes et proses*, Paris: Seuil 1993, S. 32. Deguy is an excellent translator, especially



It is possible that contemporary poets unconsciously think more and more globally. From the level of direct contact with a public within the framework of the oral tradition (including its reconstructed ambience of poetry reading) to the anonymous reading public or that of the internet and the media society, there open up immense possibilities for the poets of today. Michel Deguy has not hesitated to rehabilitate the recently much-maligned word “humanity”, but in a new context. The yearning for a dialogue with unknown partners is of paramount importance. This paper aims to demonstrate that a new age has dawned and that poetry possesses an immense potential to bring about a highly meaningful and valuable global dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

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from German (although he maintains that his spoken German is very poor). As a translator he has tackled the works of Heidegger and Celan. The journal *Po&sie* which he has directed for more than 20 years publishes regularly translations of foreign poetry.

<sup>19</sup> I would like to thank the following colleagues who indefatigably carried the research project to its fruition, namely, : Sumalee Virawongse (Thai poetry), Charturee Tingsabadh (British and Irish poetry), Nitaya Masavisut (American poetry), Achara Wanachaet (French poetry) and Sawitree Tongurai ( Assistant to Project Leader and Assistant Researcher in German poetry). Last but not least, my thanks go to the Thailand Research Fund which generously supported the research project. The present paper has been freely translated by the author from the original German version: “Imaginärer Dialog. Die zeitgenössische thailändische Lyrik und ihre westlichen Gesprächspartner”, in: *Das Gedicht behauptet sein Recht. Festschrift für Walter Gebhard zum 65. Geburtstag*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2001, pp. 267-276.