The Loquacious Turn or the Importance of Being Secondary

Chetana Nagavajara [1]

The Word as Ubiquitous Ally of the Arts

At the time of this writing (March 2009), an exhibition has just come to a close at the newly created "Bangkok Art and Culture Centre", entitled "Bangkok 226". My expectation in going there was to see an exhibition of works in the visual arts that could tell the story of how Bangkok evolved over the past 200 years. In other words, I had expected those works to be in a position to speak to us on their own terms and assembled in this specific exhibition in such a way as to engage in a seamless narrative. What I saw confused me. Both the art works which had been lent from various museums and collections as well as those works specifically commissioned for this exhibition could not, on the whole, justify themselves in being there on grounds of their aesthetic value. Having walked through the exhibition, I soon realized that the organizers had in mind a documentary on the history of Bangkok. Naturally large panels had been put up containing detailed accounts of the historical development as well as descriptions of the individual exhibits. To serve the purpose of a documentary, the *word* seemed to have a supremacy over the visual expression. I was not sure whether that had been done intentionally.

I subsequently took part in a discussion (on 12 February 2009) in which the curators also took part. They were honest enough to admit that they were trying to achieve two goals at the same time, namely to organize an art exhibition that would be viable aesthetically and to respond to the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre's commission to tell a history of Bangkok. Regarding the first objective, they had not been successful in borrowing works of great artistic value that are also relevant to the theme of the exhibition, and as for the second objective, they were following the current practice of having no qualms about explaining at great length the various exhibits.

---

[1] Dr. phil. Professor Emeritus, Silpakorn University.

It is the justification of the "verbal" ally of the visual arts that is of particular interest to me here. I do not think that the Thai curators have resorted to an all too convenient means to carry the message to the public. They were following an international practice. Gone are the days, perhaps, when an art exhibition contained principally works that were named "Compositions" Nos. 1-2-3, etc. Artists today vie with each other in labeling their works with titles that would capture the attention of the public – the more philosophical, the more attractive! They do not hesitate either to explain their own works by way of written texts. Curators further lend a helping hand in providing succinct explications and/or interpretations of the works. The *catalogue* is, more often than not, no longer a mere souvenir, profusely illustrated, that a visitor would love to take home, but a learned treatise, sometimes an aesthetic *tour de force* that buttresses the main *concept* of the exhibition. Some curators are exceedingly cooperative and allow the artist(s) to make oracular pronouncements that sometimes sound more like sermons than manifestos.

All that I have described above is carried on in words, and if controversies should erupt on account of the art works themselves, the belligerent factions would fight out their differences in a war of words. Mind you, there are curators and critics who are deeply conscious of their "public" mission and ready to put a brake on glaring self-serving excesses. I went to one of the most captivating exhibitions in Basel in 2002, entitled "Claude Monet… up to digital Impressionism," and could not resist taking home a weighty catalogue because I truly believed that the curators had done their job in a very responsible manner.

At that exhibition the works of the American painter, Clyfford Still, were also exhibited, which I found impressive. What he said about himself and his work somehow put me off. "…one stroke of paint… could restore to man the freedom lost in twenty centuries of subjugation," was one of his epoch-making statements. Another one is even more emphatic: "My work is not influenced by anybody." The curator responsible for presenting Clyfford Still's works felt compelled to cut him down to size. Michael Lüthy, in his article, "Painting the World or Painting the Self? On the Similarity between

Claude Monet and Clyfford Still", retorted in a clear-cut manner: "Still's own image of the *creatio ex nihilis* does not bear close scrutiny".[2] And he went on to document his judgment with a series of concrete evidence, closing with a theoretical exposition on the relationship between the self and the world in the arts.

The word here has its rightful function although we should always be on the alert and not allow verbal exposition, which is after all a *secondary* discourse generated by the work of art in its *primary* status, to usurp the legitimate *primacy* of the arts.

The Performing Arts and the Role of the Intermediary

I come from a culture in which the oral tradition has always maintained its strength. Improvisation is the mainstay of this tradition, and in traditional Thai folk theatre, for example, no "original" text really exists. Theatrical troupes take up familiar stories, tales, legends, even epics, agree internally on the storyline and subsequently on the scenario, and once they are on stage, the actors start improvising (mainly in verse.) Even in the case in which a fixed text does exist, such as the dance drama *Inao*, a composition by King Rama II which is regarded as the acme of Thai verse drama, a folk theatre troupe (which in the old days consisted of some actors who could not read or write) would do away with the written text and stage their performance based entirely on improvisation. The same could be said of Thai classical music, which originally knew of no system of notation and was passed on through memory. Musicians only adhere to the main melodic structure and are allowed sufficient freedom to improvise. Our actors and musicians, operating with no "*Urtext*", cannot be regarded as "interpretative artists" in the Western sense, who have to start from an authoritative literary text or a musical score. Thai artists are authors and performers at the same time. They do not strictly belong to an *intermediary* category that interprets the works of other artists and communicate these to the public.

---

[2] Claude Monet ... up to digital Impressionism.Catalogue of the exhibition organized by the Foundation Beyeler. Munich. Berlin. London. New York: PRESTEL, 2002, p. 182.

It is understandable that Western performing artists must have felt certain constraints in the tradition of reverential faithfulness to the original which they have to transmit to their contemporaries. Musicians particularly have to use their limited freedom with great acuity and subtlety. *Interpretation* is the fruit of this limitation, which has done much to lend spiritual strength to Western musical art. Transgression of this unwritten code of respect for the original may have arisen with the cult of stardom connected with commercialism and its concomitant advertising tricks. And advertising, of course, relies heavily on language. A little *verbal shift* can bring in millions! So we have "Karajan's Fifth" instead of "Beethoven's Fifth". Even as a foreigner who loves classical music, I feel upset about this epitome of the market force.

Western theatre has allowed itself greater freedom. The history of Shakespearean staging is marred by arbitrary tamperings with the text. So you have a new version of *King Lear* with no tragic ending, with Cordelia marrying Edgar and living happily forever after. But such an alteration would today be regarded as naive and unsophisticated because it cannot justify itself in grandiose philosophical terms. Let us face it: the modern German "director's theatre" (*Regietheater*) has come up with startling innovations (some would say, aberrations) in the name of rethinking or new conceptualization. I saw Hamlet at the Schaubühne in Berlin in October 2008, a production directed by Thomas Ostermeier that had earlier been staged at two festivals, in Athens and in Avignon. It was definitely an anti-Gielgud and anti-Olivier production, deliberately trying to drain the almost "holy" text of its poetic quality, marked by vehement actions with the leading role shouting his way through the play, propped up, of course, by a new unpoetic translation. *Hamlet* is usually regarded as the summit of verse drama, successfully transferred into equally poetic blank verse in German since the 19th century, but this new *Hamlet* was meant to reflect our own unpoetic age, with its high-tech and coarseness of manners. Naturally, the famous monologue, "To be, or not to be…," became a travesty of itself. I am reminded of the book by the American literary scholar, Gerald Graff, called *Literature against Itself* (1979), in which he was deconstructing the emerging movement of Deconstruction. Likewise, Ostermeier and his team of dramaturges were attempting to stage a new play, which could be called *Shakespeare against Himself*!

But if what transpired on the stage was deliberately a linguistic impoverishment, the programme booklet was not. This is today's trend to impoverish the *primary* discourse, and then enrich its *secondary* counterpart. The director and his dramaturges dispensed with their own explication: that would have been too easy, too simplistic, unsophisticated. The booklet consists of (sometimes lengthy) extracts from critical works on Shakespeare and on *Hamlet* by famous thinkers and critics like Freud, Jaspers and Eliot. You need to be a Shakespeare scholar to be able to glean from these various texts what the director was aiming at. The essay on *Hamlet* by T.S. Eliot betrays it all. Most literary scholars know this critical text as an example of a lapse of genius: Eliot considered *Hamlet* a total failure because Shakespeare could not find an "objective correlative" that would correspond to what he wanted to express. By implication, was the Director trying to prove to us that his was the *best way* to deal with a *bad play*?

As for the programme booklet, normally one would go to the theatre, say, half an hour before the performance begins in order to have time to read the programme. But the Schaubühne has set a much, much higher standard for its audience. Ideally, they should betake themselves to the Schaubühne 2-3 hours before the commencement of the performance and immerse themselves in the reading of these intellectually very demanding *secondary* texts, so that they would grasp the profundity of this new "interpretation". No need to take the authentic Shakespeare all too seriously, but pay heed to his critics, and implicitly, to his Berlin interpreters. The death of the author makes way for the birth of the critics. We are witnessing the defeat of the *primary* and the triumph of the *secondary*.

From Criticism to Theory

The Anglo-American usage of the term "criticism" is broad enough to embrace what is known in German as "Literaturkritik" as well as "Literaturwissenschaft". The demarcation line between academia and journalism is fluid. In this respect, the ups and downs of criticism become the concern of not only literary scholars but also a broader intellectual public. In its most

mundane form, criticism addresses works of art, whereby aesthetic, philosophical, poetological or sociological considerations, though implicitly relevant, are byproducts. Criticism, then, at certain times, can wield an immense influence on society; it can become an effective instrument of *public education*, as critics like Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and after him F.R. Leavis (1895-1978) have demonstrated. In societies sustained by the written culture, literature is a paragon of spiritual and intellectual life and literary criticism functions as a guardian of such healthy state of affairs. The controversy between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow on "The Two Cultures" in the 1960s of the 20th century was a battle for the supremacy of either the literary or the scientific culture.[3] Yet for all the seriousness with which criticism associates its mission, good criticism never aspires to usurp the primacy of the work of art. Whenever the critic loses sight of his *secondary* role, the artist is usually quick in putting him in his proper place as "the parasite on the back of the artist. For all their presumptions of intellectual superiority and privileged judgment, critics are, at best, the subservient explicators of the 'creative' arts, at worse their resentful usurpers." [4]

Be that as it may, great authors, though resentful of unjust criticism, do not reject it outright. Let us look back to Molière, for example, who in his *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* (1663) was fair-minded enough to let the opposing factions engage themselves in a debate (which leads to no conclusion), although we know only too well what was at the back of his mind. But it was the *prescriptive* or *normative* criticism, represented by the Acadèmie Française and later by the prescriptive *L'Art poètique* of Boileau, that made the *secondary discourse* an oppressive force in society. The Romantics, and especially the German Romantics, did change all that, especially with their "practical" criticism that restored Shakespeare and the Spanish "Golden Age" to their rightful place. These were august examples of how great literature could rise from the native European soil, examples propped by theoretical considerations that gave inspiration to many creative artists in the early 19th century. "Boileau ou Monsieur Schlegel!" was the battle cry of the French Romantics. [5]

---

[3]See: Chetana Nagavajara, "Education without the Concept of 'Two Cultures'," In: Cultural Heritage versus Technological Development. Challenges to Education. Singapore: Maruzen Asia, 1981.

[4]Rónán McDonald, The Death of the Critic. London. New York : Continuum, 2007, p. 8.

[5]Chetana Nagavajara, Schlegel in Frankreich. SeinAnteilan der französischenLiteraturkritik 1807-1835. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1966, Chapter VIII.

The effectiveness of the *secondary* discourse then is a happy equilibrium between practical and theoretical criticism. The dilemma we are facing today is due to our unwitting departure from the middle path. Nomenclature can be revealing at times. (Literary) criticism was considered inadequate, as it was probably tied to the journalistic routine of book reviews, and the preoccupation with mere individual works hampered the progress towards general principles and "poetics", (supposedly a corollary of the "science" of linguistics). So "theory of literature" *à la Wellek & Warren* was a welcoming interlude, which soon had to be abandoned, as it was merely serving literary studies as an assemblage of general principles and not ambitious enough to rise to the level of theorizing. (When Frank Kermode edited *The Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* in 1975, he was still hesitant to apply the term "theory" to those essays, which he merely called "Essays of Generalization.") A little shift from "theory of literature" to "literary theory" reflected an advance in self-confidence that did not take long to shed off the adjective "literary" altogether, culminating in the sole hegemony of "*theory*", which has been wielding immense influence on the human and social sciences. (The trajectory described above has most interestingly been followed by bookshops in North America and the United Kingdom, which have been re-labeling their shelves accordingly!)

It is a known fact that the inspiration for this self-assertive "theory" hailed from France[6] and that its most fertile growth happened in American academia. It has been pointed out that some leading American scholars were already producing works with succinct theoretical implications that preceded the advent of "French Theory". Harold Bloom was the case in point.[7] In the hands of scholars who master a huge "repertoire", theory has not been divorced from the criticism of the works of art. In other words, the balance between

---

[6]François Cusset, French Theory. Paris : Editions de la Découverte, 2003. (The title is deceptive, for the book is in French and written by a Frenchman.)

[7]Ibid., p. 128-129.

primary and secondary discourse was not disturbed. In lesser hand — and they are in the majority — theory becomes a new creed, a religion even, full of abstractions, turning its back on real life and even sometimes on the "primary" discourse, reveling in its own rhetoric of pseudo-philosophy. Its proponents preach and instruct, transmitting messages that sound like sermons. Its hallmark is *loquacity.*

The epidemic has, alas, reached our Far Eastern shores. New graduates from many Western universities are ineffective as teachers. They refuse to teach courses that lie outside their (sub)specialties, and they likewise refuse to supervise theses whose subject matter is not within the purview of what they have been taught in Western graduate schools. Their mastery of original works of art is minimal, and their rejection (or ignorance) of the "canon" makes them more of a liability. In seminars or conferences, they mostly present papers that narrate the standpoints of their theoretical master(s). When it comes to research, they only go in search of local materials that can substantiate Western theories. The students are those who suffer, and scholarship cannot advance because there remain so many research questions that these young academics are incapable of answering or unwilling to do so.

A Return to Common Sense

Antoine Compagnon in his seminal work, Le Démon de la théorie (1998), pleads for a judicious balance between common sense and theory. The great masters of the Yale School have since regained their "common sense". Harold Bloom, in his "Indian Summer", has gone back to the canon, Shakespeare and the "genii" in history. The French expert in narratology, Philippe Hamon, made a confession that when he produced those incomprehensible theoretical works, "J'étais dans la folie!" [8] (I was just crazy!) So my compatriots are 20-30 years behind those heavy-metal theoretical movements.

Most Germanists, somehow, have remained sober face to face with these critical-theoretical vicissitudes. They know their Büchner well. It is not sufficient to know just *Dantons Tod*. *Woyzeck* is also an imperative.

It is true that we are living in an age in which people tend to talk too much. The advent of the mobile phone has precipitated us further into

[8]One of his most indigestible books isTexteetidéologie (1984).The confession was made privately to Prof. Tasanee Nagavajara, Professor of French, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

the abyss of loquacity, as I have demonstrated in an earlier paper.[9] Maybe the new mode of living has impinged on the conduct of artists as well as academics.

The extreme confidence in the supremacy of the *secondary* discourse may have led us astray. We need to temper the *loquacious turn* with a *laconic shift*. Let us get back to read *Woyzeck*!

[9]Chetana Nagavajara, "berMacht, Allmacht und Ohnmacht der Sprache : Von Mündlichkeitüber Schriftkulturzu Medienherrschaft. In: WeimarerBeiträge 3/2007, 53. Jahrgang, pp. 381-397. I quoted in that paper a poem by the English poet Charles Tomlinson, called "All Aboard", a hilarious description of a train journey, in which the narrator tries, unsuccessfully, to avoid the ubiquitous cellular phone.