



The Loquacious Turn or the Importance of Being Secondary

Chetana Nagavajara, September 12, 2009

At the time of writing this essay (March 2009), an exhibition entitled “Bangkok 226” had just come to a close at the newly created Bangkok Art and Culture Centre. My expectation 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 speak to me on their own terms and be brought together in this specific exhibition in such a way as to engage in a seamless narrative. What I saw confused me. The choice of artworks which had been borrowed from various museums and collections as well as those specifically commissioned for this exhibition could not, on the whole, be justified on the grounds of their aesthetic value. Walking through the exhibition I soon realized that the organizers had had in mind a documentary on the history of Bangkok. Large panels with detailed accounts of the city’s historical development and descriptions of the individual exhibits had been put up. In the spirit of a documentary, the word seemed to have been granted supremacy over visual expression. I was not sure whether this was intentional.

Subsequently (on 12 February 2009), I took part in a discussion that included the curators. They were frank enough to admit that they had been trying to achieve two goals at the same time, namely to organize an art exhibition that would be viable aesthetically and fulfill the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre’s objective to tell the history of Bangkok. Regarding the first objective, they had not been successful in borrowing works of great artistic value that would also be relevant to the theme of the exhibition. As for the second objective, they had been following the current practice of uninhibitedly explaining the various exhibits at great length.

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 simply resorted to an all too convenient means to carry the message to their public. They were following an international practice. Gone are the days, perhaps, when an art exhibition principally contained works that were named for numbered “compositions”. Artists today vie with each other in labeling their works with titles that capture the imagination of the public – the more philosophical, the more attractive it seems to

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make them. Neither do they hesitate 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. More often than not, an exhibition catalogue is no longer a profusely illustrated souvenir that a visitor can flip through at home but a learned treatise, sometimes even 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 out through words, and if controversies erupt on account of the artworks themselves, the belligerent factions, too, fight out their differences in a war of words. There remain curators and critics who are deeply conscious of their “public” mission and ready to put a brake on glaring, self-serving excesses. The 2002 exhibition in Basel entitled “Claude Monet ... up to digital Impressionism” serves as a captivating example where the curators did their job in a very responsible manner.

At that exhibition the works of the American painter Clyfford Still were also exhibited. While I was impressed with his work, what he said about himself and his art 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/critic responsible for presenting Clyfford Still’s works felt compelled to cut him down to size. In his article, “Painting the World or Painting the Self? On the Similarity between Claude Monet and Clyfford Still”, Michael Lüthy retorted clearly: “Still’s own image of the *creatio ex nihilo* does not bear close scrutiny”.¹

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.

¹ *Claude Monet ... up to digital Impressionism. Catalogue of the exhibition organized by the Foundation Beyeler.* Munich, Berlin, London, New York: PRESTEL, 2002, p. 182.



The word here has its rightful function, although we must remain 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 story line and subsequently on the scenario. Once they are on stage, the actors start improvising (mainly in verse). Even when 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 included 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 no system of notation and has been 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 refer to an authoritative literary text or 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 communicates these to the public.

It is understandable that Western performing artists feel 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. Advertising, of course, relies heavily on language. A small verbal shift can bring in millions — thus “Beethoven’s Fifth” becomes “Karajan’s Fifth”. Even as a foreigner (who loves classical music) I feel upset about this supremacy of the market force.



Western theatre has allowed itself greater freedom. The history of Shakespearean staging is replete with arbitrary textual tamperings. So you have a new version of *King Lear* with no tragic ending, with Cordelia marrying Edgar and living happily ever after. But such an alteration would today be regarded as naïve 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 reconceptualization. I saw *Hamlet* at the Schaubühne in Berlin in October 2008. Directed by Thomas Ostermeier, the production had been staged at two festivals, in Athens and Avignon. It was 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 rendered into poetic blank German verse since the 19th century. This new *Hamlet*, however, was meant to reflect our own unpoetic age, steeped in high-tech and coarseness of manners. Naturally, the famous monologue, “To be, or not to be...,” became a travesty of itself. I was reminded of the American literary scholar Gerald Graff’s *Literature against Itself* (1979), in which he deconstructed the emerging movement of Deconstruction. Likewise, Ostermeier and his team of dramaturges were attempting to stage a new play that could have been called *Shakespeare against Himself!*

But if what transpired on the stage was a deliberate linguistic impoverishment, the program booklet were not. This speaks to today’s trend: impoverish the primary discourse, 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 consisted of (sometimes lengthy) extracts from critical works on Shakespeare and *Hamlet* by famous thinkers and critics like Freud, Jaspers, and Eliot. You needed to be a Shakespeare scholar to glean from these various texts what the director was aiming at. The essay on *Hamlet* by T.S. Eliot betrayed 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*?

Usually, one would go to the theatre, say, half an hour before the beginning of the performance in order to read the program notes. The Schaubühne, however, had set a far higher standard for its audience. Ideally, they should have arrived at the Schaubühne 2-3 hours before the performance and immerse themselves in these highly demanding *secondary* texts, so that they might grasp the profundity of this new “interpretation”. There was no need to take the authentic Shakespeare all too seriously, but one must pay heed to his critics and, implicitly, 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 not only of 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, can at times wield an immense influence on society; it can become an effective instrument of *public education*, as critics like Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and F.R. Leavis (1895-1978) have demonstrated. In societies sustained by written culture, literature is a paragon of spiritual and intellectual life. 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 was a battle for the supremacy of either literary or scientific culture.² Yet for all the seriousness with which criticism associates its mission, good criticism never aspires to usurp the primacy of the work of art.

² See: Chetana Nagavajara, “Education without the Concept of ‘Two Cultures’.” In: *Cultural Heritage versus Technological Development. Challenges to Education*. Singapore: Maruzen Asia, 1981.

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.”³ 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 with each other in a debate (which led 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 Académie Française and later by the prescriptive *L’Art poétique* 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 places. 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.⁴

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 merely served literary studies as an assemblage of general principles and was 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 his “Essays of Generalization”). The subtle shift from “theory of literature” to

³ Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic*. London, New York: Continuum, 2007, p. 8.

⁴ Chetana Nagavajara, Schlegel in Frankreich. Sein Anteil an der französischen Literaturkritik 1807-1835. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1966, Chapter VIII.



“literary theory” reflected an advance in self-confidence that did not take long to do away with 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 can be followed in bookshops in North America and the United Kingdom, which have been relabeling their shelves accordingly).

It is a known fact that the inspiration for this self-assertive “theory” hailed from France⁵ and that its most fertile growth occurred 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.⁶ In the hands of scholars who master huge repertoires, theory has not been divorced from the criticism of artworks. In other words, the balance between primary and secondary discourse was not disturbed. In lesser hand — and they are in the majority — theory becomes a new creed, indeed religion, 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

⁵ François Cusset, *French Theory*. Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2003 (the title is deceptive, for the book is written by a Frenchman in French).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128-129.

many research questions that these young academics are incapable of answering or unwilling to do so.

A Return to Common Sense

In his seminal work, *Le Démon de la théorie* (1998), Antoine Compagnon 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 returned 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!”⁷ (I was just crazy!). Thus, my compatriots are 20-30 years behind those heavy-metal theoretical movements.

Most scholars of German, somehow, have remained sober in the face of 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 further precipitated us into the abyss of loquacity, as I have demonstrated in an earlier paper.⁸ 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 reading *Woyzeck*!

⁷ One of his most indigestible books is *Texte et idéologie* (1984). The confession was made privately to Prof. Tasanee Nagavajara, Professor of French, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

⁸ Chetana Nagavajara, “Über Macht, Allmacht und Ohnmacht der Sprache: Von Mündlichkeit über Schriftkultur zu Medienherrschaft.” In: *Weimarer Beiträge* 3/2007, volume 53, pp. 381-397. In that paper I quoted the poem “All Aboard” by the English poet Charles Tomlinson, a hilarious description of a train journey in which the speaker tries, unsuccessfully, to avoid the ubiquitous cellular phone.