ON THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Dr. Chetana Nagavajara

It will be necessary to preface this paper with a few precautionary remarks. First, it is not the author's intention to present a learned treatise on the subject, and the paper is conceived more in the nature of the sharing of experiences. (1) Secondly, the author would like to clarify that he is not primarily a teacher of English literature and that he is more at home with German and French literature. The presentation would, of necessity, assume the character of generalized views on the teaching of western literature to Thai university students.

Having in recent years travelled fairly widely in South-East Asia, the author has had occasions to become acquainted with teaching and learning conditions in some neighbouring countries and has become more acutely aware of the particular problems besetting the teaching of western literature to Thai students. We have to face more fundamen tal problems than, say, in the case of our Filipino, Malaysian or Singaporean counterparts. The notorious "cultural gap" seems to have particular relevance and immediacy in the Thai context. It would be easy to illustrate this point by quoting a contemporary English or American poet writing about conditions so remote from our own. But even if we bring ourselves nearer in space and time, we shall still be confronted with a no less formidable cultural gap. The poem quoted below is by an English-speaking Singaporean poet, Robert yeo.

The Prince Ruminates

If it is a game, it is a deadly one.
The urbane prince of peace is now stricken
who made political trapeze an art–
although it seems more like ramwong
the way he swayed, the period he's been at it.
"How much the balance of my kingdom tips
Upon persistence of my fragile throbs.
When I am gone, think only this of me :
What I have done, I have done to keep us whole.
I don't know if we can unscathed
live, located as we are. Who was he
who said that ants tremble when elephants fight?
Mine is a dependent authority
suspended between King and half-brother.
Wouldn't it be best for me, like Sihanouk,
to be exiled, but voluntarily,
and to France, with cigars and cognac
to ferment memory, before I lose
what's left, and the King his untouched crown?
I'm beginning to feel this country needs me
about as much as it needs my walking stick."(2)

The poem was written during the Indo-China War, and looking back at the events which have taken place during the last few years, we could probably appreciate its prophetic ring all the more. But our immediate concern here as teachers of literature is certainly of a more basic kind. How are we to put the message across to our students? Let us imagine a classroom situation in an average Thai university. What would be the kinds of difficulties which the average Thai student may have to face?

The most basic problem would be that of vocabulary. Most of the students, say, at the third-year level, will need help, not only from a dictionary, but probably also from the classroom teacher, before they can grasp even the literal meaning of the poem. The next question that may arise could be related to the form of the poem. Many students still cling to the notion of poetry being written in regular verse-form. Could the above be described as a poem at all, since it has no rhyme? Besides, they would probably be puzzled by the tone of Yeo's poem. Is this the way to write poetry? The tone is not at all dignified; it is not austere enough to be treated as poetry. It reads

like prose, more like a conversation. At best the students might assume that the poet was trying to be funny. Once they have made peace with themselves and have overcome the initial bewilderment, they will be in a better position to appreciate the poem, at least its content. It could be expected that the majority of the students would be quite familiar with the recent history of the Indo-China countries, with Prince Souvanna Phouma and the war in Laos. Many would be able to identify which prince the poet was talking about. Since 1973, the average Thai student has become more keenly aware of the "political" message of literature-not to say, the political function of literature. So in this respect, the poem possesses an immediacy which may even prove to be attractive to the students. The less conventional among them may even go so far as to draw parallels with contemporary political verse which has sprung up in Thailand since October 1973. Purely from the point of view of content, the "cultural gap" may not be as wide as is usually the case with the study of English or American literature.

Still, the question may remain in the mind of some students as to whether this could be regarded as an "English" poem. An overseas Chinese writing poems in English could at best be accepted on the same international basis as a Hongkong pop-singer singing in English-no more nor less! The more literary-minded among the students might even question Robert Yeo's legitimacy as an "English" poet. Can we relate him to a particular literary tradition? At this particular point the teacher will have to intervene. Is it possible to anchor Robert Yeo in a literary tradition that we know of? Surely, he is not writing in English without any consciousness-be it apparent or hidden-of his indebtedness to certain western traditions. The expression "think only this of me" betrays it all, being a distinct echo of Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier". And what about that conversational tone we have spoken of earlier? Yeo would most probably acknowledge his debt to the author of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock". when our poet ventures to compare the Prince's political vicissitudes to the Thai "ramwong", a literary historian will not fail to see that Yeo got his sanction from Eliot. A question may arise as to whether the .students need to bother themselves with all these tedious and cumbersome details about literary traditions and cultural background. Here we are back at the age-old controversy whether to read a poem as a poem or whether the historical approach should be adopted, "The middle way" should be the answer here, since there is absolutely no harm in acquainting the students with certain factual infarmation. Much would be lost if we failed to appreciate the various literary allusions contained in the poem. There is no denying that in trying to place Robert Yeo in a literary tradition, the "cultural gap" widens again. It should be emphasized in this connection that there is no running away from such cultural gaps. Every teacher of foreign literature should take it upon himself as

his prime responsibility to bridge these gaps. The road to the real understanding and the full appreciation of foreign literature may be a sinuous and difficult one, but at the end of the road lies that which is universal in man, which is probably the ultimate goal of all humanistic studies.

It may be worthwhile at this particular point to outline the literary tradition of Thailand which has certainly shaped the mental attitude of most Thai students. If you look up the term "literature" in the authoritative Thai dictionary published by the Royal Institute, you will find the following definiton: "Literature: books which are recognized as being well composed", This is an elitist definition which smacks of the exclusiveness of "classical" literature. The best way for a western scholar to appreciate traditional Thai literature is to try to place himself in a *medieval* context. Until roughly a hundred years ago, i.e. until the introduction of the printing press into Thailand, the literary climate in this country could be described as comparable to that of medieval Europe. The oral tradition was predominant, and the art of improvisation was highly respected and widely practised. (These traditions are still very much alive in certain local communities in spite of the advent of modern technology and mass media.) The royal court played an important role as patron of the arts, and it was expected of a Thai monarch that he should be an accomplished artist, and particularly an accomplished poet. Several Thai monarchs were indeed distinguished poets in the same way as some of the medieval princes distinguished themselves as poets, bards and "troubadours". Many classical literary works were written collectively in the same manner as certain medieval epics and romances. Besides collective authorship, anonymity was another characteristic trait of traditional Thai literature. The author of the present paper believes that the kind of literary training from which Thai scholars could best benefit would be in medieval European literature and that Thai students should be sent to the west to be trained in this field.

Bearing in mind the kind of medievalism as deseribed above, we could not very well speak of the "reading public" in the same way as in the western context. The reading public, in our context, is a much more recent phenomenon. It would be just as valid to talk about the "hearing public". Auditive pleasure is something that the Thai would normally expect to derive from literature as well. Great literary works of the past were written to be sung, chanted or recited. Those at home in traditional Thai literature are usually sensitive to the mellifluous sound of the Thai language. Traditional Thai poets are virtuoso versifiers who are confident-and at times over-confident -in the power of their native tongue. Even the mediocre among them cannot be accused of lacking verbal virtuosity. This verbalism has proved to be the source of our greatness as well as our own undoing : Thai literature at its worst

is heartless verbal acrobatics. It is therefore, not surprising to note that in many a classroom—at schools as well as at university—the only kind of literary criticism practised by our teachers of Thai literature is the study of formal beauty, which, at times, degenerates into mere verbal exegesis with occasional excursions into the fields of prosody and, more often than not, etymology. The more unfortunate among secondary school graduates come up to the university with an outright aversion to classical Thai literature. Some of them might have found their way into your class! But there is no cause to be over—pessimistic. If you know how to "medievalize" English literature a little, if you know how to manipulate the "auditive" capacity of your students, you may even be ahead of your Thai colleagues in engaging their interest.

We have dwelt at some length at the question of teaching traditional Thai literature because this is exactly the pre-occupation of most of the Thai Departments in our universities. Contemporary literature constituted no part of the main syllabus of our Thai Departments until about 10–15 years ago. (3) But Thai students may be considered less privileged and less fortunate than their western counterparts. When they have to deal with older literary works, they have no critical editions to go to. Reliable handbooks and manuals are few and far between. There are not even adequate glossaries to fall back on. Some professors spend most of their time in class going through traditional literary works, page by page, line by line, word by word. Monastic exactness is highly valued in this kind of study, and examinations are administered to test comparable exactness on the part of the students. The results can be disastrous : students just give back to their teachers what they have been able to note down in the classrooms—no more, usually less. This being the case, it is no wonder that very few students want to major in Thai. In older syllabi, Thai majors are required to master three foreign languages, two of them classical. It is no small feat to require undergraduates to tackle Pali, Sanskrit and Cambodian at the same time. If you want to have a clearer notion of what this brand of young scholars is like, picture a linguist at a western university who is equally at home in English, Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek and Hebrew! Would you expect him to be also well-versed in contemporary English and American literature? You may be fortunate to have as your colleagues members of this old clan of Thai scholars. One must admire their encyclopaedic scholarship, but it takes some doing to try to interest them in the latest volume of contemporary verse.

A question may arise as to whether there has been any attempt to modernize the study of literature and literary criticism. We can reply in the affirmative, but with a few reservations. If you come from a tradition which has produced serious-minded criticism like that of, say, F.R. Leavis, you may find our attempts

rather elementary. It was only in the 30's that courses in literary criticism were introduced at Chulalongkorn, the initiator being none other than that versatile scholar, Prince Wan Waithayakorn, who was later to become known as our foremost statesman and diplomat. His pioneering work was carried on by Dr. Wit Srivasariyanond, a graduate from the Sorbonne, who has produced a standard work "Literature and Literary Criticism", now 30 years old and is yet to be superseded in its thoroughness. Both scholars have the merit of being at home in both Thai literature and western literature and have made constructive efforts to "bridge the gap". Unfortunately neither Prince Wan nor Dr. Wit stayed long enough in the university to be able to create a cadre of young critics, and their direct impact on literary study has been minimal. Strangely enough, the English and French Departments—not the Thai—have remained more or less immune to these pioneering efforts, for reasons which will be explained later in this paper. Suffice it to say at this juncture that although the early attempts at modernizing literary study were western-inspired, there was little response or support from the Departments dealing directly with western languages. (4)

It was not until the 50's that fresh attempts were made to put literary criticism back in its rightful place. Whether we like it or not, due recognition must be given to the works of Chitr Poomisakdi, a Marxist who began writing critical and theoretical treatises while still a student at Chulalongkorn. Very few of his contemporaries were appreciative of his endeavours: they were prepared to be impressed by his revolutionary theorizing, but the real message did not come through. Chitr was much ahead of his time, and only after the "October Revolution" of 1973 did he enjoy tremendous popularity, especially among young lecturers and students. There is no question about Chitr being tendentious; his disparagement of classical Thai literature can easily be challenged as deliberate misreading and distortion. Whether his influence has been more pernicious than constructive is a question which we shall continue to debate. He has "launched" literary criticism in a way that critics with sounder judgement and greater scholarship have been unable to do. The idea of social and political relevance of literature has since been assimilated into the consciousness of the young. Literary criticism has become respectable overnight and is regarded as instrumental in the process of creating a "new society". When young students talk about "literature for life", they are perpetuating Chitr's revolutionary ideas. The political implications cannot and should not be under-estimated, nor can they be ignored. The task of teachers of literature has certainly become more delicate as well as more challenging. It requires the highest degree of intellectual integrity to be able to turn facile pseudo-intellectual partisanship into humane literacy. There is no reason why teachers of western literature should not be able to contribute

as constructively as teachers of Thai literature. You should consider yourselves more fortunate than your predecessors of, say, 30 years ago, for you will be confronting students who believe that literature can be made relevant to contemporary needs.

It may be concluded from what has been suggested above that there is no such thing as a definite "school" of literary criticism in Tnailand. All that we can say is that the young are beginning to take a more lively interest in literature, particularly in the kind of literature that, to them, is socially relevant, and even the Thai press can bear witness to this fact. Our concern as teachers of literature is how to redress the notorious imbalance between the lively journalistic form of non-academic literary criticism and the drab classroom situation. This is not to say that literary study in the university should be reduced to the level of mere journalism. There is still much to be done at the university to establish the study of literature as an academic discipline. To cite a concrete example. A few years ago, a Thai jury for the SEATO literary award nominated as the sole entry from Thailand a work entitled "Agriculture and National Development" The work was well-documented and cogently written, but it was rejected by SEATO, to the consternation of the Thai jury, on the grounds that it was not a literary work. There is certainly something to be said for a thorough training in the "science of literature" (sic), as the Germans would call it! (5)

It has already been mentioned that literary criticism produced by Thai scholars has had little impact on students and teachers in foreign language departments. If we were to ask whether students in these departments are more at home with critical works and critical traditions in those respective languages, the answer would again be in the negative. Not that there have been no teachers of stature who could lay claim to being literary critics themselves: D.J. Enright taught at Chulalongkorn for one academic year. But as Enright confessed in his "Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor" (1969), the cultural gap was too great to bridge in so short a time. The author of this paper has interviewed a number of English, French and German graduates from Thai universities, and they do not seem to have experienced any startling "revelations" attributable to their teachers. One of them went so far as to maintain that the only courses in Euglish literature he enjoyed during his undergraduate days were those devoted to "external reading", which, incidentally, is a very sound approach to literature, for what else can replace personal discoveries? But it is not very flattering to his teachers-either "farang" or Thai. There have been instances where first-year students studying French were initiated into the beauty of French Gothic cathedrals through lectures in French by native speakers. Whether we like it or not, the more successful among our "farang" teachers have been those who have spent long years in Thailand, and know the language and the

people well enough to be able to "communicate". Another group consists of those orientalists who could already read, write and speak Thai and knew something about Thailand and its peaple before ever setting foot on Thai soil. If they happen also to be adept in their own literature, they normally prove themselves to be ideal teachcers, since they are in a position to compare two different cultures and their literatures. But it would be unfair to expect that every teacher of English should also be a Thailand-specialist.

Are we therefore to assume that Thai teachers of English fare better than their western colleagues? Not so. This has not always been the case, but the situation has improved over the years. The early generations of Thai teachers, highly-cultured Oxonians, Were labouring under the illusion that English literature should be taught to Thai students in the same way as it is taught to native speakers. We must replicate the right atmosphere. We must speak English in class; we must speak Oxford English and make our students speak Oxford English too. We must teach English literature in English, for how else should we teach it? If we taught it in Thai, it would not be English literature any more. This fallacy has been perpetuated for decades and in some universities, it is still being upheld as infallible dogma. Frankly speaking, this could be regarded as a basic misconception which has proved to be exceedingly detrimental to the study of foreign literature in Thailand. Is the medium of instruction the only thing that is important in a literature course? Is the Thai language so poor that we cannot express concepts and ideas inherent in a foreign literature? Could it be that we are dealing here with just a question of academic snobbery, or even academic mannerism? By no means should we advocate that the use of English be banned. What we should plead for is that there should be no inhibition in using Thai when teaching foreign literature. If we know our Thai students well enough, we must face the fact that their reading skill and their writing skill do not match: the writing skill being the weaker. Some teachers would agree that students' writing skill would improve if we made them write literary essays in English. But what kind of essays do they usally produce? Could they have expressed themselves better in Thai? After all, what is the prime objective of studying a foreign literature? To acquire language skills? Literature is worth more than the language through which it is expressed.

By advocating the teaching of foreign literatures in Thai by Thai teachers, we do not mean to belittle, in any way, the role of native speakers in the teaching of their own literature. Perhaps it would be appropriate now to discuss teaching methods that have been successfully adopted. Let us turn first to the "practical criticism" approach. You may even have to be a little more primitive with certain groups of students : they still have to be taught how to read, what to look for in a literary text and what

questions to ask when confronted with a text. You may wish to go through a selected text line by line, and sometimes word by word. This method is, of course, more suitable for teaching poetry than other literary genres. But even when you are dealing with a novel, it may still be necessary to make sure that your students know enough English to cope with a particular literary work. Some of them may not even be in a position to grasp the literal meaning, let alone to probe its emotional depths. There is no harm in indulging in a kind of "explication de texte", taking up a few pages which you consider to be chracteristic of the work, and go through those few pages quite thoroughly. When teaching, say, first or second year students, it may be worthwhile to take shorter narrative works which will allow you ample time to get to know your own students, to gauge their interests and responses and to find your own strategy in making them think critically. Let us not delude ourselves that the only major difficulty faced by the majority of the students is that of vocabulary. There are other deficiencies which are just as serious.

The second approach takes you back to the question already raised in connection with Robert Yeo's poem. If "practical criticism" were to stop at the mere appreciation of individual works without taking into consideration cultural or historical contexts, it would certainly be deplorably impractical, especially for foreign students. Certain howlers produced by foreign students are too easily excused by benign foreign teachers. They should, of course, not be tolerated. A student at Silpakorn, some years back, came up with a very ingenious explanation as to why Shakespeare staged his plays in the day-time: the answer offered was that "the electricity at that time *was not very good*". The proposed remedy for such a situation need not be a "survey course" in the conventional sense of a series of lectures on cultural and historical backgrounds covering a very wide span of a few centuries. Such a course would be tedious at best. But if the teacher knows how to select representative literary texts to illustrate the points he is trying to make concerning aspects of cultural or intellectual history, he may strike a responsive chord in his students. There have always been complaints against such historical approaches, be it literary history or cultural history, on the grounds that we are forced to deal with facts, and that facts are not supposed to be conducive to thinking! But literary study cannot be divorced from the context from which literature has emerged. This was also the case with Robert Yeo's poem. There is a great deal we can learn from the French method of teaching "civilisation".

Thirdly, we ought to acquaint our students with some theoretical thinking on literature. This is exactly where Thai students get left behind. It is true that the recent social and political upheavals have sharpened their awareness of the relevance of literature to society and life, but much of the "social demand" approach is

amateurish, and in many instances degenerates into sheer dogma which tends to exclude other equally viable approaches to literature. Literary theory is in no way superfluous. It can justifiably supplement the "close reading" approach advocated earlier. You will be surprised to find fourth-year students getting mixed up with such concepts as illusion, reality and verisimilitude. You will come across students arguing forcefully against certain literary creations for the simple reason that real life, as they know it, is not like that. Some may come to you with the notion that if literature cannot serve a didactic purpose, it must be bad literature. You may wonder why all these pre-conceptions have not been eliminated or even challenged before they come up to the university. You may wish to recall the rather grim picture of traditional literary study already described earlier. The fact remains that you can help to clear up the mess. You should not throw them a few standard theoretical works in English and expect them to be enlightened overnight. Your students need a drastically simplified "Wellek and Warren". Not that there have been no exhibitionistic tendencies on the part of Thai teachers : you may even come across Thai colleagues who recommend Northrop Frye's "Anatomy of Criticism" to undergraduates! As native speakers of English, you can certainly afford to be a little more accommmodating than that.

Our fourth point has to do with the relations between literature and other artistic creations. Teachers of French have successfully colaborated in a joint endeavour whereby the "nouveau roman" is studied in close conjunction with the "nouvelle vague" cinema and "absurd" drama. Of course, the participation of Thai teachers in such a course is indispensable. There is no reason why this kind of hybrid course should not work just as well in the teaching of English or American literature. Such cross-fertilizations are useful and stimulating, and if you know how to communicate with the students, it can prove to be a source of immense pleasure as well as pedagogical pride. As already explained earlier, the Thai do not view literature simply as printed texts. Popular tales are either sung or represented as murals. You may have to engage the interest of Thai students through other forms of artistic expression than just the printed word. In an age of great advances in educational technology, your task should not be too difficult. This is not to say that everything has to be created afresh according to purely educational objectives. Good teachers should know how to "educate" their students with whatever means at their diaposal. Commercial cinema, judiciously selected, can just as well serve the purpose. Some students might better qualify as "film-critics" than "literary critics"! If they know how to express critical judgements on the films they have seen, there is hope that the very same critical acumen could be developed for literature, sooner or later .

Before concluding, let us look at the general trend in Thai higher education

and its implications for literary study. With rapid expansion of the university system resulting in over-production of graduates, especially in the humanities and social sciences, university students cannot help feeling that the study of literature is simply not sufficiently employment-oriented to be of real practical use. Some language departments have already made drastic concessions to a "utilitarian" philosophy of higher education by concentrating more and more on the development of language skills and by introducing courses in Business English and the like. It is a paradox that while literary criticism is gaining strength in journalistic circles, literary study in the university is being upheld by but a few fervent zealots. Conditions in the west are certainly more conducive to the study of literature and literary criticism, and you will be doing your Thai colleagues a great service if you can give them the assurance that literature has an essential place in any university. We are of course, a great deal more humble than F.R. Leavis who constantly claimed that the study of literature should constitute the centre of the intellectual life of a university. We have never had a Leavis in the Thai university community. We would certainly welcome a few!

Footnotes

(1) The paper was presented at the Peace Corps TEFL Conference, A.I.T., December 12, 1977. It was primarily addressed to a western audience, some of whom had just arrived in Thailand.

(2) Robert yeo. **And napalm does not help,** Heinemann, Singapore, 1977. Reprinted with The kind permission of Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.

(3) The author admits that his experience as a student in Europe in the late 50's and the early 60's was not much different in so far as the study of contemporary literature was concerned.

(4) The information given here is based on personal interviews with the older generation of Chulalongkorn graduates.

(5) The term "Literaturwissenschaft" in German bears witness to the austerity of the discipline.