

Specialization as a disadvantage in literary criticism, from Tharoor versus Narayan

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Abstract. Specialization appears to be a more efficient way to achieve shared ends: you specialize in one task and I in another and we combine our efforts. Specialization in literature would seem to call for a divide between literary critics, who interpret and evaluate fictions, and fiction writers themselves. But such a divide is a disadvantage for assessing some claims made within literary criticism, notably that a certain style goes with a certain content.

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“It was not on the London underground

That this connection I found!”

Since the Enlightenment at least, specialization has been recommended (Smith Bk. 1, Ch. 1). You specialize in one task, I specialize in another, a third person specializes in a third task, and so on, and we combine our efforts, thereby achieving our shared ends more efficiently, such as that of making a pin, or we trade with one another. The vision of a system of narrow specialists, when applied to literature, would seem to require a division between the literary critic and the fiction creator. The critic interprets fictions and evaluates their quality but does not create them. That is the fiction creator’s task. But this division is an obstacle for evaluating some claims from literary criticism, I shall argue.

Reading Shashi Tharoor on R.K. Narayan, I find it natural to interpret him as committed to the thesis that Narayan’s style is very limited in the content it can handle. Here are two

quotations which perhaps do not quite say that, though it is difficult to avoid the impression that this thesis is being conveyed by Tharoor's overall article:

- (a) "Like Austen, his fiction was restricted to the concerns of a small society portrayed with precision and empathy; unlike Austen, his prose could not elevate those concerns beyond the ordinariness of its subjects." (2001)
- (b) "At its worst, Narayan's prose was like the bullock-cart: a vehicle that can move only in one gear, is unable to turn, accelerate or reverse, and remains yoked to traditional creatures who have long since been overtaken but know no better." (2001)

How does a critic respond to this claim if they are not convinced? It seems to me that the best way is to do some experiments where they try to use the same style but while dealing with other subject matter (see Edward 2022). But that goes against the division of labour, or of roles, between critic and fiction writer.

The theme of the relationship between criticism and creation is much discussed (e.g. Wilde 1891), and no doubt many are opposed to a strict division. I hope to have added something to the enduring theme with this specific problem with a division: that it inhibits assessment of claims that a particular style is yoked to a particular content. (Must the critic find a fiction writer who will do the experiments for them? What if they do not know any or none will? "I'm busy!")

References

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