The definition and uses of literary pastiche, and alternative conceptual schemes

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Abstract. In this paper, I try to define literary pastiche and present five uses of the practice. The appendix briefly presents a response I anticipate from Davidsonians to Michael Morris on alternative conceptual schemes.

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Introduction. Why engage in literary pastiche? Before addressing this question, it is necessary to explain what literary pastiche is. As I understand the term, there seem to be two ideal cases of literary pastiche, or ideal kinds of case. We can call the first kind of case "individual author pastiche." An instance of this kind meets the following conditions:

(i) The maker of the pastiche, author P, intends to imitate the style of a certain author, author O, or else, if "the style of author O" misleadingly implies that O has a single style throughout, O's style in a specific work or set of works.

(ii) If individuals of suitable expertise in the writings of author O are provided with a newly discovered work by O in that style and P's imitation of the style, both prepared for "blind review," they do not know which is by author O and which is not.

The reference to "knowledge" here is less than transparent. This is the beginnings of a clarification: experts do no better than chance in sorting out a work by author O from pastiches, when the author names are removed. By the way, "style" does not refer only to verbal style. It can cover structure and characterization. If we think of the author as solving a problem or set of

problems, such as how to write about politics in an artistically satisfying way, we can think of a style as a way of solving a set of problems.

We can call the second kind of case "collective pastiche." An instance of this kind meets the following conditions:

(i)   A plurality of authors ought to be grouped together as members of a collective entity, for example as members of a literary school or nation.

(ii)   There is a style rightly associated with that collective, or a set of styles.

(iii)   The maker of the pastiche does not qualify as a member of that collective.

(iv)   The pastiche aims to achieve a style rightly associated with that collective.

(v)   If individuals of suitable expertise in the writings of the collective are provided with a newly discovered work by a member of it and also the pastiche, both prepared for "blind review," they do not know which is by the member and which by the pasticheur.

An example is if one tries to write a short story in the style of a far Eastern country, which would not be out of place in an anthology of stories from that country.

Now pastiche may appear to be a youthful activity before discovering one's style, one's own voice, metaphorically speaking. But pastiche is also engaged in by older writers. Why do they do that? What is the value of pastiche? Pastiche has a number of use values – it is useful for various ends – and perhaps it has values that go beyond use as well. Below I identify some but not all of these uses, under various headings. Wherever it makes sense to, I focus on the case of individual author pastiche or attempts at it.[1]

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[1] Like various works of analytic philosophy of literature, I perilously ignore much of what literary critics have had to say. I am aware of the incredible claim that all possible styles have been created and there is nothing to do but put them into novel relations (see Strathern 1992: 150).

1. Aims of understanding. (a) One might produce a pastiche in order to better understand the work of a certain author. But at this point, you might respond with a distinction between knowing how and knowing that, or knowing how and propositional knowledge. The pasticheur knows how to imitate the author but may not have the kind of knowledge a critic has, which they can express in propositions, much as a person can ride a bike and ring its bell annoyingly without being able to explain in propositions how to do so. However, this distinction probably does not apply so straightforwardly in the case under discussion. The successful pasticheur is likely to notice certain patterns in the author's writing: the range of vocabulary used, qualities of the imagery (office imagery rather than nature imagery. say), of the ideas asserted, the distribution of certain punctuation marks, and more. How else to construct the pastiche? Good attempts at pastiche always, or almost always, sharpen what one notices about an author's text or set of texts.

(b) Related to this project of understanding is that of distinguishing two authors, especially authors who are often grouped together as similar. After producing pastiches, one might be more aware of the differences between two seemingly similar styles; or else that they are at least different relative to one's imitation technique. For example, with Gertrude Stein, you start with word rhythms and add concepts, say, and with Laura Riding you start with character and story concepts and then add Stein-like rhythms.

2. Problem-solving aims. Criticisms are made of some authors, for example that the fictions of a widely read European writer are misogynistic. What a pasticheur might do is treat that style as like a scientific paradigm (Kuhn 1996). Can they solve the problems set for that style? Can they write a pastiche, or set of pastiches, which avoids these problems? There is a

suggestion that these experiments are morbid, by the way (Nyqvist 2010: 245).

3. Liberal anti-holistic aims. Styles may be imitated for broadly liberal aims. Some people will say, "You can't write like an ancient Greek. That style requires Greek blood." Liberalism values choice and a liberal aim of pastiche is to show that this style is a choice available to us. It does not require a certain innate background.

In addition to showing that a certain innate background is not required, one might wish to show that a certain social whole is not required (one can write in the Ancient Greek style today) and that certain psychological qualities are not required (one need not have the sexual orientation of Plato, say).

4. Nationalist aims. Some authors may engage in pastiche to serve nationalists ends instead, imitating foreign authors. One wishes to send out a message: "We do not need this stuff. We can just produce it internally." (See Edward 2022) "The most ardent nationalist is the best pasticheur" sounds like a saying in the business. (But it is one thing to imitate a style and another to bring it into being – to create or pioneer it – and there is a question of whether this would have happened internally.)

Is pastiche intrinsically liberal or nationalist then? It is difficult to say. Although it can be put to national ends, it would seem to undermine nationalist ideologies. There is the ideology which says that the language of a people comes with a certain aesthetic sensibility built in to it. The foreign author's sensibility is different yet one has imitated that author in this language, hence the ideology is undermined. Also there is the ideology that artistic works are expressions of the spirit of the nation. How then did one manage to pastiche an author from another nation? Pastiche stands in a paradoxical relationship to nationalism: it may be done in defence of the

nation but it also undermines these ideologies. An attempted solution is to say that there are natural and unnatural artworks, given the language or the spirit of the people, and these pastiches are unnatural, perverse even, though perhaps necessary as defence.

5. Avoiding discrimination. Historically discriminated groups might prefer pastiche because they believe that assessments of literary value are often conducted by very prejudiced critics. There is a promise of tests regarding whether a pastiche is successful. Can a blind reviewer determine which is by the original author and which by the pasticheur?

Appendix

Regarding the nationalist claim that the language of a people comes with a sensibility built into it, this closely resembles a challenge Michael Morris raises for Donald Davidson's theory of how a language can be learnt: by a scientific method of framing hypotheses about sentence meanings and testing them. Davidson argues that such a method will never uncover an alternative conceptual scheme (1973-4: 19). But Morris questions the very availability of the method:

> We might think, for example, that learning a language involves acquiring very
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> general habits and a distinctive cast of mind. Such habits and casts of minds might
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> be thought to depend on some kind of non-rational training. (2007: 212)

I find Morris's earlier exposition of Davidson in his textbook very useful; but when it comes to this evaluative point, I presume Davidson would have responded in an analogous way to how he responds to the claim that another language incorporates an untranslatable metaphysics: put bluntly, "Look, Professor Anthropologist, you have described the metaphysics in English."

(1973-4: 6) Foreign habits and casts of mind seem to come through in the English language, rather than English being rigidly bound up with habits H1, H2, and H3 – to learn and use English is to partake in these, e.g. a dry humour – and some other language being equally rigidly bound up with H4, H5, and H6, e.g. a Rabelaisian humour. Davidson could have drawn attention to translations and literary pastiches as evidence of the flexibility of a natural language – the competition for best French novel in the English language and the like.[2]

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[2] I suppose one might propose, "You need to partake in these habits while learning but not necessarily afterwards: when using the language after competence is achieved"; but if there is this flexibility afterwards, as indicated by pastiches of foreign-language authors, the question will be posed: why not while learning?