

Why are pastiches not subject to more commentary? The specialization answer

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Abstract. There is a puzzle over why some literary works which are less esteemed are subject to more commentary and some literary works which are more esteemed are subject to less. By examining Max Beerbohm's pastiche of Joseph Conrad, I propose an answer regarding pastiches.

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I don't specialize in Beerbohm, Max

But to the earlier essayist I pay some tax

A commentator on Victorian literature observes that some novels which are less esteemed from that period are subject to a lot of commentary (Guy 1996: 3). Why do they attract so much attention compared to some more esteemed works? But I shall not restrict myself to Victorian times below. I wish to focus on rewarding imitations of literary authors, in a prestigious sense of the word "literary." I should say that "rewarding" does not necessarily mean "convincing." The case of Max Beerbohm imitating Joseph Conrad is helpful for realizing an explanation.

This is the opening of Beerbohm's imitation from *A Christmas Garland*:

The hut in which slept the white man was on a clearing between the forest and the river. Silence, the silence murmurous and unquiet of a tropical night, brooded over the hut that, baked through by the sun, sweated a vapour beneath the cynical light of the stars. Mahamo lay

rigid and watchful at the hut's mouth. In his upturned eyes, and along the polished surface of his lean body black and immobile, the stars were reflected, creating an illusion of themselves who are illusions.

(1912: 125)

Yes, this sounds like Joseph Conrad in certain respects, but not in others. What respects is it the same and what respects different? Why does Beerbohm drop the comma before “black”. Is it just an acceptable absence or a comment by this careful stylist on how Conrad uses the comma?

The obvious problem of getting an evaluation of this and other esteemed pastiches is that the ideal qualification is being a specialist in both authors and where do you find that? It is easy enough to find a Joseph Conrad specialist, somewhat harder to find a Max Beerbohm specialist, though he is admired as an essayist (Woolf 1925); but where to find both? Most critics have a ready excuse: “I cannot do it, because I don’t have a suitable background for the task.” In general, the value attached to specialization and the ideal qualifications required for commenting on pastiches – specialization in both the original author and the pasticheur – lead one to predict a shortage of commentary.¹

(The Conrad specialist may, furthermore, feel that commentary on such a piece is more an examination for them than the pasticheur. “Silence, the silence murmurous and unquiet of a tropical night, brooded over the hut that, baked through by the sun, sweated a vapour beneath the cynical light of the stars”: is that not Conrad and, if not, why on Earth not? “Conrad was a man of the seas, not an Oxford

¹ Pastiche is more mainstream since postmodernism (see Eagleton 1996: 201), but I believe it is still very hard to find commentaries on a pastiche. Where can I find an assessment of Italo Calvino’s famous Japanese chapter, for example – how good it is as an imitation?

sophisticate who suddenly decided to make literary preparations for outer space!”)

References

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