

9/22/2023: SPECTER OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

In contrast to traditionally self-directed paths into literary creativity— “the call of the Muse” —today’s literary content producers are ever more like athletes: trained, practicing, coached, competing, hoping to win... How have you dealt with the specter of professionalization in your own writing?

1. Ali ALSHAALI (UAE)

“I’m into literature because one life is not enough.” — Al-Aqqad

My reading of this session’s synopsis immediately sparked thoughts of legends like Shakespeare, Michelangelo, or the prominent Arab poet AlMutanabbi¹, and others for whom the pressures from audiences and critics was evident. Add to this the interventions received from political and financial hubs of power at the time. Interestingly, this applies to all of the aforementioned artists, despite major differences in production dynamics and the respectively prevailing societal systems. So, we can say that having external motives factored into the creative process isn’t a new phenomenon.

Ironically, I had to change the shade and voice of this paper a couple of times, going from being firmly against complacency in regard to the commissioning of literary works, all the way towards describing it as a legitimate and justified practice. Why? In fact, since I landed here in Iowa City a month ago, I must’ve received and accepted 5-6 requests to create specific works, including the one for this panel.

Applying a little root-cause-analysis, a beam of light should be thrown on why authors write in the first place. To which it would be fitting to say that artists, in general, create their works in order to fulfill a need; be it moral, financial or a mixture of these two and others.

In “Why I Write,” George Orwell declared that amongst numerous motives for authors, *genuine self-love* stands out, which works in tandem to the desire to look intelligent, to be talked about, and to take revenge on the adults who scolded you as a child.

So, producing art is not a luxury, at least for artists! Creatives would feel nearly bursting if they didn’t let the gates of expression open. The ambition of building a legacy is a purpose that can’t be ignored, even if often denied by some. This is not about early humans leaving messages on walls of caves, rather about ego-centric personalities that, *sometimes*, feel life hasn’t catered to them, and therefore they’ve decided to send thoughts and emotions as ambassadors to the generations to come, hoping for acknowledgement. It’s never too late to receive appreciation, right?

As the list of internal motives goes on, so does the show.

Challenges arise, however, when you’re asked to take a detour by writing texts that aren’t necessarily relevant to your greater goal, like, for example, speaking to the exceptionally smart group of International Literature Today students on the 16th of October in the Capitol Building, or is that too

¹ a prominent and famous Abbasid-era poet, who is considered by many critics to be the greatest Arab poet of all times.

Commented [MOU1]: ‘Tribute’ is a bit confusing here. Would you be ok with ‘thought’ instead? Other options would be ‘recollections’, ‘considerations’ or, if you are willing to change the verb as well, ‘evoked...the figures of...’”

Commented [AA2R1]: Agreed. Thanks, Ida.

Commented [MOU3]: I’ve added this for clarity – but please tell me if I’ve put words in your mouth! I assume it’s what you mean...☺

Commented [AA4R3]: You’re right.

specific? Writing endeavors, then, could slide into the category of **duty**, which I argue, would tone down the boiling power, consequently making the resulting works less flavorful.

“Writers have become more like athletes”—this is a description of a limited group of creatives. But it could also be deemed a true reflection of the dominating rhetoric nowadays aimed at emboldening writers to be more disciplined, devoted, and systematic with their projects.

Advocates of this model and its pertaining practices would wish to put reins on the classically imagined talent, once perceived as the one and only engine of creativity; a disputable concept that used to sweep minds and captivate the hearts of spectators and art lovers alike. For a long time, this understanding has been the easy way out; apply it and immediately no effort is required to explain, study, or subsequently—and most importantly—repeat the success of an artist.

Therefore, modern practices push back by suggesting that, even when/if a talent is recognized, it should merely be taken as a sign of the readiness of an individual to produce; a basic toolbox awaiting an expert to put it to use. How? Through practice and pencil sharpening, time and again. Or as Isabel Allende puts it: “Show up, show up, show up, and after a while the muse shows up, too.”

Constraints such as deadlines, specifications, clients’ expectations, are strong sources of distortion to a literary piece. Let me tell you, being an engineer myself that has decided to shift careers a long time back, I’d strongly prefer to keep these terms in the **damp** and cold basement of my life!

And while it’s been established already that external motives, including but not limited to commercial ones, are legitimate and somewhat unavoidable under some circumstances, it should be noticed that risks arise when writing loses its purity to financial considerations.

For an expert reader of literature, it’s not hard to distinguish between novels that were manufactured to appeal to judging committees and/or some sort of trends, versus works that emerged from the womb of personal struggle. I mean, to pin-point texts that were put together for pay cheques, as opposed to ones brought forth by the urge to say something to the world, today and in a thousand years.

What’s the Endgame?

Having an army of trained writers getting the job done promptly and in pre-set molds does fulfill the objectives of ruthless industries like those producing movies and TV dramas. And it is, without a doubt, a dream come true to the profit-thirsty companies. But only at the expense of turning creatives into tools, henceforth replaceable by robots, which are after all more knowledgeable and suffer fewer mood swings, if any.

News is splashing all across the face of the earth about the Writers’ Guild of America going on repeated strike, announcing an unwillingness to accept current wages, in addition to asking for guarantees not to be made redundant; a justified source of anxiety in a world where multi-billion-dollar businesses are preposterous enough to be announcing they foresee **not** hiring a single human

Commented [MOU5]: I have changed this from ‘category of a want’ to ‘category of a duty’ – which I realize is a major change! I wonder if you’ll agree with me that this is a more precise expression?

Commented [AA6R5]: Agreed. Thanks, dear Ida.

Commented [MOU7]: Typically humidity is associated with heat, dampness with cold – so I changed it! But you can decide, of course ☺

Commented [AA6R7]: Noted. Thanks.

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) 304 EPB Gerber Lounge

9/22/23: Specter of Professionalization.

Mansoura Ez-Eldin (Egypt), Loren Glass (UI English Department), Ali AlShaali (UAE)

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programmer, accountant, or other professional within a maximum of 5 years' time. What do these jobs have in common? They're based on getting tasks done systematically, in pre-set fashions.

Professionalization

Back to the question of how authors have dealt with the specter of professionalization. Acting playfully with the synopsis would call for a rebellious inquiry into whether professionalization is a specter at all. But it's better to move on.

Against a request text of any sort, a proposal of literary collaboration, or a commission to create content, most authors are free to accept or reject, and then take charge of their decision and its consequences.

Conversely, without much consolation for the writers of other genres, poets seem to be the lucky ones in the bunch, as they can always easily turn down, and with complete honesty say, poems *cannot* be tailor-made to fit specifications.

Poets can't be unlucky all the time, right? Poetry's particularity plays to its advantage; it is personal, situational, and somewhat mysterious. In other words, a poem is a capturing of a unique mixture of emotions at a certain point in time. Hence, genuine pieces are not re-producible, as circumstances are never repeatable, like water in a running river, as symbolized by "Siddhartha."

A meaningful wrap-up could be a quotation of a prominent contemporary writer and scholar, Abdelfattah Kilito, who said, highlighting yet another type of internal motive (or maybe external too):

"I will continue to write in order to contribute to the fight against oblivion. Isn't the main and vital role of literature to preserve the memory of humankind?"

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