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The Call of the Muse versus the Specter of Professionalization

There are two kinds of writers in the world: those who rely on genius while the other relies on hard work. Those based on imagination, the others based on experience. Those who write in the morning, routinely, after a cup of coffee or two, while the other writes occasionally, at night, after a whiskey, straight up, sometimes double. The list is never-ending. However, we need to be wary of these classifications per se.

“The call of the Muse” versus “the specter of professionalization” implies the need to put the two paradigms at opposite ends, yet I would instead perceive them as a question of precedence. Increasingly, we should focus on the bigger picture: how come professionalization gradually dominates the discourse of literature? What exactly is professionalization in literature? Who is a professional writer and who is not? Shall we define these terms, before having this discussion?

The call of the muse, in my understanding, is an urge to create something, an impulse to express, and sometimes a flicker of inspiration as well. It’s impulsively yet randomly gifted in rare psyches since the beginning of civilization. The call fades so easily that it doesn’t necessarily lead to a lifetime career.

Caused by contemporary capitalism, the specter of professionalization is a result of commercializing the arts, literature included. It’s an artificial mechanism that restricts literature into genres, books into categorizations, and writers into competing, either for prizes or for popularity.

I still consider the urge for self-expression, such as writing, a unique instinct of human beings, but we approach it differently nowadays. Some are considered “amateur” while others are considered “professional”: a concrete distinguishment with vague criteria, ironically. In thousands of years of history, there was no apprenticeship for writers, neither workshops nor training programs, awards, let alone creative writing courses. The writing was purely a self-learning process. Driven mostly by talents and interests, many writers start their careers by reading or imitating, and gradually find their way.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, writing is gradually treated like a craft, learnable and teachable, and the quality of which seems standardizable and compatible. For commercialized literature, books are products for sale, thus publishers become product managers, writers become producers and readers become consumers. It’s a competitive market aiming for sales and profits, almost like any other industry.

Those who do not fit into such a framework would rather compete for prizes and awards instead. To acquire a certain reputation, writers not only have to take creative writing courses, participate in book fairs, and join residency programs, and workshops, but also work on social networking and promoting – a process of so-called “professionalization”. Occasionally I ask myself: would you keep writing, without any single reader, without any possibilities of publication, or getting rewarded?

Polish writer, Olga Tokarzuk, gave a wonderful speech at her 2018 Nobel Lecture, saying:

We began to divide literature's leviathan body into genres, which we treat like the various different categories of sports, with writers as their specially trained players. (...) Increasingly, genre work is like a kind of cake mold that produces very similar results. (...) I have always intuitively opposed such orders, since they lead to the limiting of authorial freedom, to a reluctance toward the experimentation and transgression that is in fact the essential quality of creation in general.

For writers nowadays, unfortunately, neither only being kissed by the muse, nor only being haunted by the specter of professionalization, is enough. I started writing at such a young age and I've been through the transition of both paradigms. A hobby doesn't lead to a career automatically. After being kissed by the muse, what are you going to do with it? Passions are fleeting. You'll need persistence and stamina to respond to that calling, which indeed sounds like a marathon, both mentally and physically.

In this regard, training, either by selves or by institutions, is necessary. However, I doubt its priority. Focusing too much on the "craft" and "techniques", we might forget what's the essence of literature. Like any kind of creative effort, it should have been something ambiguous, boundaryless, and standardless.

Nowadays, the tendency of over-professionalization is prevailing. The market-oriented writing has gradually dominated the discourse of literature. Books are written for film adaptations, for social recognition, for any higher ends, except just "for fun". It doesn't matter what the author wants to write, instead, readers decide what they want to read, and they get it accordingly. Some hard-core web writers write at least 20,000 Chinese words every day, with no exceptions, even during holidays. I have mixed feelings about professionalization at this level; it's causing me peer pressure, instead of the pure pleasure of expression and creation. Personally speaking, I only consider the latter the priority of literature.

To answer that question mentioned earlier: I shall continue writing, even without any return, or even without anyone to read. Called by the muse, I am trying to find the original pleasure again – writing for its own sake.