

Self-interest and Henry Heine on the lack of English minor masters

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Abstract. I argue that Henry Heine's assessment of the English – that they are either rare universal geniuses or self-interested mediocrities – is prone to an objection which draws upon his own characterization. I tried to write this in an Edwardian style, but the result is a mishmash!

A quotation. When the traveller Henry Heine came to England, his impressions of the people were not entirely favourable, as George Eliot has drawn to our attention:

It is certainly a frightful injustice to pronounce sentence of condemnation on an entire people. But with regard to the English, momentary disgust might betray me into this injustice; and on looking at the mass I easily forget the many brave and noble men who distinguished themselves by intellect and love of freedom. But these, especially the British poets, were always all the more glaringly in contrast with the rest of the nation; they were isolated martyrs to their national relations; and, besides, great geniuses do not belong to the particular land of their birth: they scarcely belong to this earth, the Golgotha of their sufferings. The mass—the English blockheads, God forgive me!—are hateful to me in my inmost soul; and I often regard them not at all as my fellow-men, but as miserable automata—machines, whose motive power is egoism. (Heine, quoted in Eliot 1883)

As Heine depicts matters, the Englishman is either a rare universal genius or a mediocre self-interested blockhead, with nothing in-between, a people devoid of minor masters.

A tension! That is just the nature of our English race, Heine seems to be saying, but he

also characterises the mass as egoistic, which is a difficult combination to maintain:

(A) The English are a few universal geniuses and a mass of mediocre individuals. The race does not produce people capable of being minor masters.

(B) The mediocre individuals are each self-interested.

Given (B), perhaps there are quite a few who could be minor masters, but it is unprofitable for them to try, for they cannot compete with the universal geniuses and little is needed to compete with nearby others. Consequently, they confine themselves to mediocrity.

An example. Let us imagine that a university administrator in Manchester has written a book of stories which are meant to be in the tradition of Tchekhoff. But there is an inevitable criticism: that she captures very little of the empire here. So a rival buys from the South Asian markets, attends a Caribbean literature reading group, proofreads for Chinese overseas students, and then proceeds to write. He does no more than what is required to score above her book; he merely writes multicultural stories at this sub-Tchekhoffian level. Indeed, why trouble oneself with making a thoroughly Russian seed flower abroad?

A concluding analogy. Literature in England, for various contributors, is like a tennis match in which one has discovered that the opponent does not deal well with lobs. You aim for that side's clouds. They wait for the ball to bounce, it bounces high, and then they struggle to hit it back. Then you lob the ball in the air again. "Come back to me once you have solved that problem and I might play less repetitive and more watchable tennis" is the sportsman's message.

Reference

Eliot, G. 1883. German Wit: Henry Heine. In N. Sheppard (ed.), *The Essays of "George Eliot"*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.