

Comedies of translation: R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Annie Saumont, and beyond

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Abstract. This paper responds to Shashi Tharoor's criticism that "much of Narayan's prose reads like a translation." He does not name any writers in another language to back up his claim and without doing so there is an explanation for his impression, but one which leaves it looking misleading.

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Rhyming given the boot

At the correction institute

Amongst the many criticisms Shashi Tharoor has made of R.K. Narayan, one of these is: "much of Narayan's prose reads like a translation." (2001) He does not back up this claim with references to writers in other languages. Without doing so, there is an explanation for Tharoor's impression but not one which supports the criticism.

I was reading "A Christmas Story" by V.S. Naipaul and I found the style very similar to Narayan, though the theme of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity or the details of the handling of it is perhaps alien. Here is a paragraph from it:

Progress, as I have said, is an attitude of mind. And if I relate this trifling incident with such feeling, it is because it demonstrates how difficult that attitude of mind is to acquire, for there are hundreds who are ready to despise and ridicule those who think they are getting above themselves. And let people say what they will, the contempt even of the foolish is hard to bear. Let no one

think, therefore, that my new religion did not bring its share of trials and tribulations. But I was sufficiently strengthened by my faith to bear them all with fortitude. (1970: 38)

Soon the narrator tells of how he is flogging his students:

All flogging I did myself on Friday afternoons, sitting in impartial judgment, as it were, on the school, on pupils as well as teachers. It is surely a better system, and I am glad to say that it has now been adopted throughout the island. (1970: 42)

It is a harsher world than Narayan's, I feel,¹ but the surface style is very similar.

Getting back to the explanation, I think the flogging material from Naipaul might well have attracted French fiction writer and translator Annie Saumont.² Then it entered into French literature, like a subtle chemical in the water. Then prominent Indian critics paid careful attention to French literature and philosophy. And eventually the criticism emerges: Narayan reads like translation.

R.K. Narayan → V.S. Naipaul → Annie Saumont → French literature → "Narayan is translation"

¹This is not so easy to justify. Narayan himself deals with school beatings in his story "Father's Help," though with the question of what is imaginary and what real.

²Soon also there is the familiar-sounding: "It was now in my power to marry virtually anyone I pleased..."(1970: 42) There is perhaps a more French fiction trying to get out, focused on power and sadism.

Narayan influenced Naipaul who influenced Saumont and then sensitive Indians critics attending to French literature noticed a similarity in feel: that is a possible explanation for Tharoor's impression.

(There are also missing explanations in my own work, I should say. I have not explained why moving up a level can bring into one's discipline or organization or cult even people who need spoonfeeding. I think it is not an unreal phenomenon, whatever the explanation for this mystery, though some people would perhaps deny that one is moving up a level. "We're going to go global" or "We can do better than the previous generation" and this problem arises.)

References

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