

Literary Girls, by Kathleen Stock: chapter 5, realism

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Abstract. In this paper, I present a pastiche of Kathleen Stock responding to Raymond Tallis's defence of realism. It is followed by a note in which I briefly explain why I have approached this task by means of pastiche.

Some fictions are called realistic. What is it to be realistic? Although philosophy and literature may seem very different, there are actually parallels between them. Realism in fiction is like naturalism in philosophy. Naturalism is when you don't posit any supernatural entities in your account of what there is, such as ghosts or magic or even values which have magical qualities: to perceive the good is to desire to do the good. Realism in literature is like naturalism. It's a fiction which doesn't present anything supernatural. Maybe realism doesn't present anything wildly improbable either, like lots of amazing coincidences.

Realism has been attacked and defended. It is defended by Raymond Tallis in his book *In Defence of Realism*. Tallis was a professor of medicine at the University of Manchester who suddenly, zany, started writing books against fashions in literature and European philosophy. It may seem that Tallis represents the English-speaking analytic tradition. He refers to figures like Frank Ramsey. But in philosophy sometimes it looks as if two positions fit well together, but you can have other combinations. And actually you can be a naturalist in philosophy, as most analytic philosophers are, without favouring realism in literature. There's nothing inconsistent about that. In this chapter, I want to consider some arguments that Tallis

makes in defence of realism and why they don't work, as well as draw attention to some arguments he doesn't consider.

Debate 1: contemporary reality is different

Tallis has done his homework and identifies a number of authors who say that contemporary reality is different. Here is a quotation from him summarizing his findings:

Different writers would give different answers as to what it is about twentieth-century reality that makes it no longer amenable to realistic treatment and why realism, which flourished in the nineteenth-century and was apparently able to respond adequately to its realities, should be quite unable to deal with the world that emerged a few decades later. Certain themes, however, are sounded again and again: modern reality we are told is more horrible than anything that has gone before; it is more vast and more complex; it is pre-digested, in a manner that has no historical precedent, by the organs of the mass media; human artefacts now intervene between man and nature to an extent not previously seen, so that the individual's environment is a rapidly changing man-made rather than a stable natural one. (1988: 10)

Tallis's counter-argument to this is pretty simple. He argues that the past was not so different. For example, he draws attention to various horrible historical events.

Now maybe the past was not so pleasant, but for us in the twenty-first century these critics of realism look ahead of their time. Since Tallis wrote, the Internet has changed many people's lives. People spend so much time in virtual worlds, such as

online or playing video games. It's much easier to immerse oneself in a fantasy. The realist novel seems unsuitable for capturing the experience of a person who spends all their time involved in an online role-playing game, as a wizard or elf or even a woman, when they're a man.

Even if Tallis is right that history was not so different, he would have to deal with this claim: there are periods of history which are more suited to fantasy fiction and periods which are more suited to realist fiction. Some people, lots of people even, have experienced something so horrible that it's easier to construct a myth than try to capture the reality of it all.

Debate 2: indescribable reality arguments

Tallis takes a dialogue from Frank Ramsey and produces an adapted version, in which speaker A is demanding realism and speaker B is rejecting the demand:

A: Express reality!

B: Can't.

A: Can't express what?

B: Can't express reality.

A: Why not?

B: Because reality is... [Description of reality then follows]. (1988: 20)

Tallis calls this pragmatic self-contradiction. It's not like asserting a proposition and then asserting that this proposition isn't true – contradiction in logic. Instead B's action of describing is a counterexample to what B himself asserted. But I don't think there's necessarily any self-contradiction here, even a pragmatic kind. If a clever child tells you, "I can't describe the colour of that leaf, because look at all that complicated

variation in colour, and I only have simple words like ‘red’ and ‘yellow’ ” then they’re describing the leaf a bit when telling you why they can’t describe the colour of that leaf. But still they can’t write a description that captures the exact shades and colour variation they experience. They can just give a broad outline, which doesn’t really distinguish that leaf from some other slightly different leaf.

Tallis is sort-of right. There’s a paradox to solve. In a debate with a promoter of realism, someone commits themselves to saying (1) reality is indescribable; and then (2) they have to explain why; and (3) that explanation contains a description of reality. But in philosophy we don’t just say that there’s a fatal contradiction then. We look at whether there are ways of interpreting the person, so that there’s no contradiction. When properly interpreted, there may be no contradiction.

Debate 3: literary realism versus other fields (anthropology and reliability)

The realist literary novel promises knowledge. It seems as if it’s a kind of science. And people read these works for the knowledge they give. George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* has the subtitle “A study of provincial life.” But why write realism today? Hasn’t anthropology rendered realist fiction obsolete? I’m an academic but if I refer to a realist fiction as a source of knowledge, I’ll be posed the question: how can we trust this work, because it’s a fiction? Things might be made up because they’re more interesting for readers like that. What’s more trustworthy is an anthropologist who does fieldwork by immersing themselves in a culture and whose job is to report what they find, without making up stuff.

Tallis has a chapter with the title “Has the Cinema Rendered the Realistic Novel Obsolete?” but why assume the main threat is from the cinema? Why not

assume it's from academic fieldwork? Instead of reading fictions about inner city Manchester, one can read fieldwork reports.

Debate 4: literary realism versus other fields again (anthropology and multiculturalism)

Imagine I live in a busy multicultural city, like Manchester. And then I write realist fiction. But there are no coloured people in my fiction. It's all white people, and they're not even like most white people today. I'm going to be criticized for being decades behind the times, and someone who writes realistic fiction like mine but with more diversity is going to get the credit. Of course, it's not my fault. I write realist fiction based on the world I know. People tend to mix with people they care about, and people they care about are people they like, and people they like are mostly people they have lots of common ground with, and that tends to be people of the same ethnic group and social class. What would I have in common with a black person or an Asian person or a Pole, especially one from another social class? Again it would be easier for me to avoid this criticism by just doing anthropology: doing fieldwork. I could go to a school and work as a schoolteacher and write up about what it's like¹ to work in a multicultural school in inner city Manchester.

But it's important to distinguish this debate between literary realism and anthropology, and the previous one. The previous one was about how best to achieve the value of being regarded as a reliable source. This one is about how best to achieve the value of being in line with liberal multicultural values today, not the 1870s or the

¹ [Note the concept of what it's like has another function in philosophy, which is to formulate an aim of anthropological fieldwork (according to one conception). For example, a researcher from long ago would tell you how they could not engage in abstract thought when living the life of a native.]

1970s. Tallis has covered some of the key debates affecting whether realism has a future, but not all of them.²

Note. I have already written two pastiches of Kathleen Stock (the second of which I was hoping would be more embraced) and it wasn't actually in my plans to write another, but once one starts it is hard to stop!³ My rationale on this occasion is "I think that there are points which would probably occur to some readers of Tallis and it is worth having them in the public domain. If I wrote in my own way, I would probably have responses to at least some of these points, but another probability is that there is only so much that many readers interested in the future of realism can digest at once. The style Stock has recently adopted, in her book *Material Girls*, provides a useful way of introducing these points without over-complicating the discussion."

References

Eliot, G. 1871-72. *Middlemarch*. Accessed on 3rd April 2022 from:

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/middlemarch-a-study-of-provincial-life#/?tab=about>

Stock, K. 2021. *Material Girls*. London: Fleet.

Tallis, R. 1988. *In Defence of Realism*. London: Edward Arnold.

² [Realism was the official literary approach in authoritarian socialist states and a question I have is whether some authors reject realism as part of mocking authoritarianism – "We're free to do this."]

³ Perhaps this is a personal thing. I took a paper by Stock, which she put online and then removed, to be a pastiche of one of my writings, and perhaps she has no inclination to write another!