

The ignoring of Raymond Tallis on literary theory and the SYSTEMS THEORY of gender differences

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Abstract. Why was Raymond Tallis's book *Not Saussure* largely ignored by literary critics? Here I present one response to this question: he does not offer a novel alternative system for literary interpretation. And I consider whether the situation is any different in other fields, introducing a rival to Simon Baron-Cohen's empathizing-systematizing theory of gender differences when doing so.

The second edition of Raymond Tallis's book *Not Saussure* includes a preface complaining that it was largely ignored by the literary critics he criticizes. Tallis writes:

I expected a scandal to result and the post-Saussureans to die of shame or to apply for re-training as useful citizens. I was astonished when the arguments of both books were largely ignored and it was business as usual. *Not Saussure* received a handful of largely hostile or dismissive reviews. *In Defence of Realism* went unreviewed and is out of print – though it, too, is shortly to be re-issued – and the deconstruction industry continued to boom. (1995: x-xi)

Tallis, a former medical professor, also provides an explanation for his misplaced expectations and for why he was ignored:

I blame this naivety on my training in science, where competing theories are usually evaluated on their basis of the relevant factual evidence, their internal consistency, their power at predicting new facts and the success or failure of their

applications. This training left me ill-prepared for the standards and practices of the intellectual community whose views I criticised. (1995: xi)

He had misplaced expectations because he assumed that the standards of theory assessment were the same; and he was ignored because the standards used in literary criticism, or at least literary theory, are different. But what are these standards? Here is a more detailed answer as to why Tallis's book was ignored: "Tallis's objections are common sense. He does not present a novel system to compete with the systems for literary interpretation that he attacks, such as deconstruction. That is the criterion, or the standard, he has to meet." In this paper, I shall look into whether this is a good reason for ignoring Tallis and then raise the question of whether literary criticism is unusual compared to various sciences, assuming this is the reason.

A good answer? "I am not going to pay attention to him until he comes up with a novel system, to compete with deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis": I can see some strong reasons in favour of this response, but there is an obvious case against it. It works by analogy.

Let us suppose you are interested in buying an apartment. You have visited the place and you like it. You like the size of the rooms, you like the view, and it is a short commute to work! You feel this could be home for you. So you are going to buy the apartment, yes? Not so soon. You are surely going to pay someone to do a check on the details: the electrical system, the water supply, and so forth. But that person has not got another house to sell. They just provide you with a long report with their findings and a summary. Similarly, when someone appears with a new system of literary interpretation and this system feels good to you, are you not going to pay someone else to check on the details (or at least get someone to¹)? That other person is not offering a new system, and their criticisms probably presuppose or extend a familiar way of

¹ I shall assume, for the sake of simplicity, that this free option is not available.

thinking. It is a mixture of some commonsense and some logic, say. No new system: still, is your decision not going to be affected by what they say?

Here are some answers. (a) “I would pay in both cases and in both cases I would change my mind given a negative report, but in both cases I would not tell people about the report. I would just look for another apartment or another system.” (b) “I would pay for a check on the details if interested in purchasing an apartment, because it is really risky to live in an apartment with certain hidden flaws, but I wouldn’t pay for it with a literary theory, because I cannot see a risk to me, for example to my physical health.” (c) “I wouldn’t pay for a check in either case.” (d) “I would pay with a literary theory but not with an apartment.”

I confess I am not convinced that Tallis was ideally suited to the task of providing a check, but I think someone needed to do it at that time and his work is a useful starting point for the next person attempting the task. It seems to me that systems of literary interpretation need these checks as well, so that their drawbacks are understood, but there is probably no such thing as a fully safe system.

Other fields. Tallis portrays a contrast between literary criticism and the sciences, or the sciences he is more familiar with from his earlier training. In these sciences, criticisms would apparently not be ignored. Responses would be given. I am not sure that this is true. Consider Professor of Psychopathology Simon Baron-Cohen’s empathizing-systematizing theory of gender and autism. It says that the male brain is more oriented towards systematizing and the female brain is more oriented towards empathizing, but it is possible for a male to have a female brain and a female to have a male brain and autistics have an extreme version of the male brain: high systematizing and low empathizing. I have raised some objections to Baron-Cohen’s theory

(e.g. Edward 2019). I am not aware of a response from advocates of the theory. Perhaps a response is forthcoming; alternatively, perhaps the situation is very similar to the one Tallis faced: the band plays on, as he characterizes it.

Similarly, you might advise me as follows: “What you need to do is come up with a rival theory, rather than just make points against Baron-Cohen’s theory.” Okay, here is one: everyone is oriented towards systematizing – it is just that there are some trends within the sexes regarding which systems people are interested in. Put crudely: males are more likely to be interested in systems which do not seem about the human soul, such as physical systems and mathematical systems; females are more likely to be interested in systems to do with the human soul, such as a system representing how children’s minds develop or a system of literary interpretation.² I call my theory “SYSTEMS THEORY” – uppercase letters essential! I wonder whether textbooks worldwide will soon say: “There is the empathizing-systematizing³ theory and there is also SYSTEMS THEORY.”

References

- Edward, T.R. 2019. Overlooked systems in S. Baron-Cohen’s gender theories. *IJRDO Journal of Biological Science* 5 (6).
- Tallis, R. 1995 (second edition). *Not Saussure. A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

² I don’t wish to say that these trends are guaranteed by biology. In my experience, all females from some backgrounds have some interest in mathematical systems.

³ I misspelt this in the first draft I uploaded online and it occurred to me that “empathizing” is more suitably spelt phonetically, as well as a joke that may have occurred to others too: it is strange that “phonetic” is spelt like that.