

Literary Girls, by Kathleen Stock: chapter 4, pastiche of the long dead

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Abstract. This paper is an imitative response to Kathleen Stock's book *Material Girls*, another faux chapter. This effort may be fractionally closer by some measures than my previous effort. I include an appendix with my own response to the essayist targeted: Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Most people who have ever written professionally have also attempted to imitate the writings of someone else. That's a normal stage before developing one's own style. A young writer might even dress in a similar way to an admired author. We should not feel worried about this. Privately, they know that they're not that famous author. They're just immersing themselves in a fiction. It's a passing stage. But some people continue to write imitations even as they grow older. And, as the saying goes, practice makes perfect. In another sense of "pass," a pastiche aims to pass as if it were by the original author, and it succeeds among some appropriate audience, or it would succeed if they knew about it. If philosophers look into what a pastiche is, they will probably start debating the definition, but that can serve as a working definition for us. In this chapter, I want to discuss some arguments that have been made against the pastiche of authors long dead. I'm going to focus on an essay by the French avant-garde novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet called "The Uses of Theory." That's not because I'm especially interested in producing secondary literature on Robbe-Grillet. I actually cannot escape the feeling that Robbe-Grillet's essay is a hoax, or not quite what it seems to be. It certainly doesn't provide a nice list of theory uses. Like post-structuralism, and some other French movements, Robbe-Grillet's writing attracts fans in the English-speaking world, but it's hard to understand what, exactly, is

going on. I can just feel the eye rolls as I naively take it at face-value. But I'm going to focus on his essay because he asserts the main arguments people are likely to make against pastiche of the long dead (or POTLD, for short). As it stands, I don't think any of these arguments work.

Argument 1: impossible

Let's begin with a quotation from Robbe-Grillet:

To praise a young writer in 1965 because he "writes" like Stendhal is doubly disingenuous. On the one hand, there would be nothing admirable about such a feat, as we have just seen; on the other, the thing itself would be quite impossible: to write like Stendhal one would first of all have to be writing in 1830. (1989: 9)

Now I don't think that in praising a young writer for writing like Stendhal, a critic is necessarily saying that the young writer has produced a work that seems as if it were by Stendhal himself – some recently discovered work left behind by Stendhal or something Stendhal would have been happy to sign as his own. That's reading a lot into the claim. But let's suppose for the sake of argument that this is what the critic is saying. Is what the critic describes actually impossible?

There are different kinds of impossibility. There's logical impossibility. That's roughly when there's an inconsistency. Some claims are inconsistent, such as "That is round and that is not round," but there's nothing obviously inconsistent about "An author today (or in 1965, around when the Robbe-Grillet essay appeared) wrote a work just like Stendhal in style." And there's no proof of inconsistency. So at the moment we can't say that it's logically impossible.

A more demanding sense of impossibility is natural impossibility. Some actions are impossible because the laws of nature prevent them, for example levitating. You can imagine levitating and it's logically possible – there's no inconsistency about what you're imagining –

but the laws of gravity prevent you from just rising off the ground by an act of will. Of course, the laws of nature could be different. There's nothing inconsistent about that. Some fantasy novels, with lots of magic in them, are consistent. (That's why the coherence theory of truth doesn't work.) But given the laws of nature that govern our universe, also it's unclear why writing a convincing imitation of Stendhal today is impossible. What prevents it? Robbe-Grillet doesn't say. Maybe someone has drawn a grid of possible Stendhal writings and they believe that unless every square of the grid is filled in, Stendhal just wouldn't have died. But why believe that? Surely possible writings in the style of Stendhal are infinite, or very large in number. Until we're given a good argument, we have to say that new Stendhal-like writing is possible.

Some people will be frustrated with speculations about possibility from high theory and prefer an empirical approach. If you write an imitation, can it pass as a work by the author? And whom can it pass among? Can it pass among fans and can it pass among experts? If both, we should surely say, "It's possible." Surprisingly for a philosopher, I'm sympathetic to this approach.¹ But even if we look into theoretical considerations, what we know about the nature of possibility doesn't rule out producing a work as-if from Stendhal today. We don't have a good impossibility argument against POTLD.

Argument 2: no value

Robbe-Grillet thinks that writing in the style of a long dead author would not have value today:

A writer who produces a pastiche skillful enough to contain pages Stendhal might have signed at the time would in no way have the value he would still possess

¹ [One can define what it is to achieve an author's style, in a way that loosely resembles the Turing test. Do relevant people regard this as a work by the author? If so, then the style has been achieved.]

today had he written those same pages under Charles X. (1989: 10)

Well, we certainly wouldn't value the pasticheur as the creator of a style. But Robbe-Grillet's no value argument leaves a big question unanswered. A comparison with some less highbrow material is helpful here. Let's imagine that two people are watching an old horror film. One person is frightened, or they experience feelings we would normally describe as fear – there's actually a complicated debate about whether they can really fear what they don't believe exists. Another person can't stop noticing facts to do with when the film was made, such as out-of-date slang. They don't immerse themselves in the fiction, so they don't experience feelings of fright. Analogously, there are probably some readers who are like the first viewer. They're fans of Stendhal and they can just enjoy imitations today as if these works were more Stendhal. For them, there isn't a different value when they're reading. But another reader can't get certain facts out of their mind whenever they're reading – about when this imitation was made. They're more like the second viewer. Why should we prioritize this second kind of reader's experience?

Robbe-Grillet makes a comparison with other arts himself:

Moreover, no one would dream of praising a musician for having composed some Beethoven, a painter for having made a Delacroix, or an architect for having conceived a Gothic Cathedral. (1989: 10)

Again there are probably different kinds of Beethoven listeners, and some of them would enjoy a new Beethoven-like symphony. Also Robbe-Grillet seems to assume that what goes for other arts goes for literature. People have sold imitations of Leonardo da Vinci to museums, which believed they were purchasing originals, but just try writing a faux Shakespeare play today. It's harder to produce a convincing imitation of old literature than a convincing imitation of an old painting, which would naturally lead us – or some of us – to place a higher value on a successful

literary effort.²

Argument 3: backward looking

A third argument from Robbe-Grillet is that pastiches are backward looking, when literature should be capturing reality today and also preparing people for tomorrow. He refers to writers seeking new forms for the novel and says:

Such writers know that the systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and futile, but that it can even become harmful: by blinding us to our real situation in the world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow. (1989: 9)

But some future periods may have more resemblance to certain periods of the past; then pastiches of writing from that time can help prepare readers for what is coming. A lot of people are more interested in what their contemporaries are doing, so they're more likely to read these pastiches.

Also does every single author have to help with constructing the man of the future? The community of social anthropologists is quite small, so probably every single anthropologist has to do fieldwork.³ But when we switch from anthropology to novels and think about the duties of the novel, the situation is different. There are so many novelists. The bookshops are full of novels. Is it a problem if a few novelists write backward-looking pastiches? And what if an author can't realize their personal ambitions without POTLD? Robbe-Grillet tells us about the reception of his works:

My novels have not been received, upon publication in France, with unanimous

² Some musical genres value sampling as well, and if you value sampling, can you be against POTLD?

³ [See Jarvie 1967 for a discussion of the issue.]

enthusiasm; that is putting it mildly. (1989: 7)

And:

In the literary magazines, I often found a more serious response. But I was not satisfied to be recognized, enjoyed, studied only by the specialists who had encouraged me from the start. I was eager to write for the “reading public,” I resented being considered a “difficult author.” (1989: 8)

Perhaps for Robbe-Grillet to realize his populist ambitions, he needs to open his mind to imitating the long dead instead of always and exhaustingly seeking new forms.

Argument 4: against life

After he notes the situation with pastiche and the other arts, Robbe-Grillet tells us:

Many novelists know that the same is true of literature, that literature too is alive, and that the novel, ever since it has existed, has always been new. (1989: 10)

Human beings are alive and cats and dogs are alive, but literature is not alive, not literally anyway. Biology is the study of living things – there are specialists in studying primates, chromosomes, plant cellulose, etc. – but there’s no specialist in biology whose job it is to study literature and how it grows. But literature might sufficiently resemble something alive to describe it as alive, metaphorically speaking.⁴ Okay, let’s grant the resemblance then. Still, in life people don’t always do new things. A librarian might quit their job and then apply for the same job again, and work in the same library. Sometimes people go back to more childish ways of behaving. Life is not a straightforward movement of newness, in fact that would be quite mechanical, as if human beings were actually robots, programmed to follow the rule: be always

⁴ [I doubt that, from Robbe-Grillet’s point of view, this is a metaphor. I suppose processing that doubt can lead to unorthodox theories of metaphor and botanical descriptions of literature.]

new!

Robbe-Grillet tells us of how he tried to increase his readership:

I therefore published, in a politico-literary newspaper with a large circulation (*L'Express*), a series of short articles in which I discussed several ideas that seemed to me no more than obvious: for example, that the novel forms must evolve in order to remain alive. (1989: 8)

Perhaps this is obvious, given appropriate clarifications of alive and novel form; but we have to be careful about sliding between the even more obvious thesis that some change is good for the novel as a genre and the more controversial thesis that in order to remain alive the novel must always be new in the forms it takes. Robbe-Grillet slides between different theses as if they were one and the same.

In conclusion, Robbe-Grillet's essay makes all the predictable arguments against POTLD, but as yet there's no convincing argument; and while I'm not saying that Robbe-Grillet has to engage in this practice, maybe he's damaging his chances of realizing his ambitions in life by avoiding it.

Appendix

I shall try to exit pastiche mode, and briefly present my own response to Robbe-Grillet's essay. Some of its assertions read suspiciously as if they "came out of" an Englishman's portrait of French literature. Actually it is one particular Englishman I have in mind: critic, translator, and pasticheur Richard Aldington.⁵ Aldington was a translator of the French writer Remy de Gourmont. He tells us:

⁵ From my standpoint, the French like, or admire, Anglophone writers quite similar to pasticheurs: Simone de Beauvoir likes Horace Walpole, Nathalie Sarraute likes Ivy Compton-Burnett, etc. My paper "Are there uncontroversial error theories?" is a pastiche, by the way.

Remy de Gourmont was not what is called “a great figure.” His life can almost be told in a sentence: “He was born, he grew up, he read, he observed, he thought, he wrote, he observed, he thought, he wrote, and he died.” He was genuinely indifferent to those gratifications of vanity known as “honors.” In the capital of the vainest nation of Europe he lived the life of a philosophical hermit. (1970: 2)

Robbe-Grillet presents himself as exactly this kind of gratification-seeking writer, unable to accept the self-effacing workmanlike role Aldington admires in the “not great.” Here is more Aldington:

The intellectual inheritance of a Frenchman is so large and complicated that he runs a serious risk of being overcome by it. This, I think, is why so many writers both in France and elsewhere have made a virtue of ignorance, and wish to destroy all that has been painfully garnered over centuries. (1970: 7)

Correspondingly, Robbe-Grillet insists on perpetual newness. I don't know if the following was a conscious strategy, but it would be amusing if it were: whatever this critic characterizes you as, using his “near-omniscient intuition,” just be or “do” that!⁶

This essay is not the best one by Robbe-Grillet which I have read, but I think Aldington is the better essayist overall. However, even if there is a slight gap, Robbe-Grillet developed solutions to problems which people might face, and his writings may well matter more to people faced with those problems. Aldington was a very versatile and talented writer, but strangely he did not put his translation talents at the service of the best French writers of the time, rather the solid and self-effacing.⁷ What does one do when faced with such border patrol? Faced with this

⁶ I also find Robbe-Grillet's choice of Stendhal as an example amusing, because I think quite a lot of young aspiring writers who read Stendhal would probably start writing like that. “They're not really young then!”

⁷ It seems to me that de Gourmont is slightly better than Aldington describes him, but the translations I am more familiar with are by someone else.

problem, Robbe-Grillet's approach gives him and others some chance of crossing the literary waters into English letters as an example of the typically Gallic: "When this you see, remember R-G!"⁸ But I think Robbe-Grillet's best essay should make it across even without this boost. I find it threatening though: the best essay of Robbe-Grillet!

References

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⁸ "Why not just act in line with Aldington's preferences?" I think this is an interesting experiment, whether intentional or not, though I am not attracted to anything comparable.