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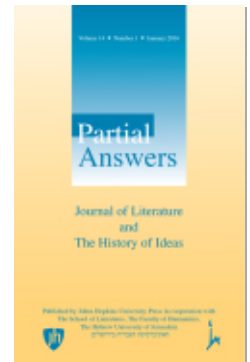
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*Feminist Narrative Ethics: Tacit Persuasion in Modernist  
Form* by Katherine Saunders Nash (review)

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Abbott concludes with the idea that “literature is ‘a machine to think with’: that is, a way of growing knowledge in a vast, collective evolving conversation. . . . there are important things we will never know and questions we will never answer. But . . . such experimental knowledge is at the present time not only useful but urgent” (154).

The ethical imperative to surrender to the experience of literature, or in Abbott’s terms, to the *isness* rather than the *aboutness* of literature, has also been articulated by others. In *Love’s Knowledge* (1990) Martha Nussbaum claims that “only the style of a certain sort of a narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them” (6). Ultimately, the ethical imperative urged by Levinas, Nussbaum, and now Abbott can be read as a version of the second century B.C.E. sage, Hillel’s dictum “that which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”

*Real Mysteries* taps into contemporary scholarship (what is being called, “post-classical narratology”) by David Herman, James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, Lisa Zunshine, and others and, in this respect, addresses professionals. But the book is also accessible by the general reader: it defines its terms, provides and explains examples, and includes clear introductions to, and summaries of, each section. Its elegant and original interpretations of a wide range of literary works, from classical to post-modern, are the wages of the theoretical approach; the material is very well organized and convincing. The plea for an experiential reading is not new but its grounding in narratology and cognitive theory constitutes a valuable contribution.

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**Katherine Saunders Nash, *Feminist Narrative Ethics: Tacit Persuasion in Modernist Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014. x + 178 pp.**

*Feminist Narrative Ethics: Tacit Persuasion in Modernist Form* opens with a three-part introductory chapter signposting the goals and contents of its four main chapters. In the first part, Katherine Saunders Nash provides a concise description of her primary focus: “This is a book about feminist novels written in modernist-era Britain. Most of them, though, have little to do with feminism as a theme, as a way of life for characters, or as a subject directly addressed by the narrator. Rather, these novels establish ethical standards and rhetorical strategies that guide audiences toward particular judgments about gender” (2). Indirection will thus be the critical means used to find out authorial directions. More specifi-

cally, Nash proposes to examine the oblique and, at times, tacit or wordless ways in which four British novelists “promote particular feminist beliefs and critique normative gender constraints” during the 1920s and 1930s. For readers, then, the challenge is to identify the writers’ ideological commitments that, albeit unstated, are nonetheless integral to their novels on different levels, including narration, focalization, and characterization. While not overtly feminist in theme, these modernist novels, Nash argues, do have “undercurrents” or agenda that enable alert readers “to trace meaningful connections among feminist aspects” (3).

By closely reading not only words and images but also techniques and strategies, Nash would achieve the general goal of her study: namely, “establishing a new theory of feminist narrative ethics.” (I will return to the word “theory” presently.) Her more specialized goal lies in analyzing what she calls “the *ethics of telling*,” which is defined as “the values endorsed by narrator and/or implied author in the act of narrative transmission.” In her subsequent analyses, however, Nash also discusses in detail other aspects such as the characters and events, or the stories involving what she calls “the *ethics of the told*” (4; emphasis in text). Apparently, whereas the concepts of “telling” and “told” are distinct and divisible in principle, you cannot easily have the one without the other in actual practice.

In the second part of her introduction, Nash presents a rigorous and, in my view, convincing defense of the controversial, even maligned entity designated the “implied author” — a term coined by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) — as no less vital and necessary than narrators, flesh-and-blood writers, and historical contexts for understanding the ethical-political investments of literary texts. “The implied author concept,” as Nash cogently explains, “allows me to attribute rhetorical purposiveness to . . . someone proximate but not equivalent to the novelist, a figure located outside the text, who attempts to guide the readers’ imaginative ethical judgments” (10). The third part gives readers a helpful overview of the ensuing chapters in which Nash examines the works of four novelists: two usually classified as high modernist, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, and two deemed low modernist, if modernist at all, Dorothy L. Sayers and John Cowper Powys. Although this is not expressly mentioned, Nash’s study thus entails an equal representation of female and male high- and low-modernist writers or, in short, a two-times-two equitability.

Analogously, the four chapters devoted to analyzing these writers’ novels are made to tally neatly, perhaps too neatly, with the four paradigms proposed in Nash’s introduction: the ethics of distance (Forster), the ethics of fair play (Sayers), the ethics of persuasion (Woolf), and the ethics of attention (Powys). The paradigms are said to epitomize “four distinct ways novelists may promote feminist principles” for the purpose of encouraging their acceptance by readers (4). Hence a tension arises and persists between Nash’s declared aim to establish “a new *theory*” that immediately precedes her delineation of the four paradigms — an aim pointing to abstract, comprehensive, or meta-critical levels of

discussion — and the “distinct ways” that accurately anticipate her emphasis on specific narrative techniques, rhetorical tropes, and actual story content. The chapters corresponding to the paradigms do not so much offer a new theory of feminist narrative as present insightful close readings of individual novels with special but not exclusive attention to the literary means that each author uses to advocate women’s personal and civic rights.

In the chapter titled “The Ethics of Distance,” Nash examines Forster’s critique of patriarchy and the gender-role constraints it imposes on both women and men in *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*. In these novels, as Nash ably shows, “the implied author’s political beliefs are partly obscured by a carefully constructed, stable, ironic detachment” — in a word, by distance. Nevertheless, while Forster’s narrator “deadpans ironies” as a kind of rhetorical camouflage, the implied author engages in posing “serious ethical questions” and placing “high stakes on particular answers” (23, 29). In her compelling chapter on “The Ethics of Fair Play,” Nash scrutinizes those novels in Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey detective series in which, contra the formal (and formulaic) conventions of this genre, a serious love interest emerges via the character of Harriet Vane. Sayers thereby deliberately, as well as audaciously for the early twentieth century, blends detective fiction with romance and the novel of manners. This chapter constitutes one of the finest in the book, providing subtle, nuanced analyses of characters’ motivations, focalization strategies, generic innovations, and more. As Nash demonstrates, Sayers artfully promotes both the feminist politics of her novels and the progression of the courtship plot between its protagonists, Peter and Harriet, without any detriment to the mystery plot. These two chapters exemplify the advantages of using close reading techniques informed by narratology in order to account for the ethical values covertly, almost wordlessly conveyed by certain texts and the moral judgments their implied authors (at-tempt to) persuade readers to adopt.

The final two chapters, “The Ethics of Persuasion” and “The Ethics of Attention,” seem to me less successfully accomplished than the three preceding them, partly due to the unwieldiness or recalcitrance inherent in the novels chosen for extensive discussion: Woolf’s *The Years* and Powys’s *A Glastonbury Romance*. In her penultimate chapter, Nash painstakingly compares Woolf’s various drafts with the published novel. The rationale for this compare-and-contrast procedure is that Woolf’s authority (or that of someone designated her “authorial figure”) “in making ethical claims through both the telling and the told is dispersed beyond the bounds of the text itself, which makes her hard to recognize as the implied author, and makes her more properly understood as what I call a *project author*.” It is only by such comparative methods that the ethical purposiveness of Woolf’s entire project may be apprehended. *The Years* is therefore not a stand-alone novel: “Its narrative ethics is best understood when readers recognize and acknowledge the murmurs or echoes of the novel’s drafts in manuscript, despite Woolf’s figuratively closing the doors to them” (91–92).

Several questions arise at once: how is the reader, be she one of Woolf's "common readers" or a professional critic, to evaluate and, no less, to enjoy a published novel that cannot be understood without studying its multiple manuscripts? What does this imply about the aesthetic value of the final work itself? Moreover, is it an ethical project *on the reader's part* to open doors closed by the author, or to ferret among drafts rejected as inadequate or deficient, for whatever reasons? How acceptable, valid, or legitimate is the resulting interpretive reconstruction of what the author ostensibly meant to say? And since this dispersal beyond the text's bounds is not unique to Woolf's *Years* but, rather, characterizes numerous literary works over the centuries, are all readers who are unable or unwilling to access a work's pre-texts precluded from (fully) grasping its ethical import? Further still, Nash's candid concluding remarks about *A Glastonbury Romance* — "In this extremely long and digressive novel . . . a traditional plot is distended almost beyond recognition, with no clear trajectory of revelations and deferrals to keep the reader's attention focused on a particular resolution" (142) — are arguably pertinent to *The Years* as well and, therefore, lead to yet another question. Why the choice of novels as avowedly "distended" or encumbered as *The Years*, with its many manuscript entailments, and the over thousand-page *Glastonbury Romance*, with its "teeming sprawl" (136), in order to demonstrate a *tacit* feminist ethics? Perhaps other modernist texts would have better served the critical purposes of this study.

Most problematic of all is the final chapter on Powys's ethics of attention. "Powys was no feminist," Nash writes; on the contrary, "[n]othing in his biography, personal papers, or novels suggests any investment in women's civic advancement." Moreover, in his fiction and nonfiction, he articulates "derogatory, even humiliating attitudes toward women," often representing them as "physically weak, narcissistic, highly sexed," and so forth. Powys's "retrogressive gender politics" notwithstanding, Nash includes *A Glastonbury Romance* in her feminist study for the progressive position it compels readers to adopt on a single issue: receptivity (119). This novel, she claims, "cultivates in its reader ethical attentiveness and judgment" that amounts — or, it could be said, comes down — to "the capacity of reading like a girl" (122). Refining her argument further, Nash explains: *Glastonbury* "offers young-girl-like attention as an efficacious alternative to phallic aggression." Apparently, a lifelong struggle afflicting the "flesh-and blood" Powys is resolved as "young-girl-like receptivity trumps penetration" in his novel (139). How young exactly remains a vague, unsettled issue.

A resisting reader may want to suggest, after rubbing her eyes and rereading, that girl-like receptivity is not quite the binary opposite of phallic penetration; viewed otherwise, it is a side-benefit, a sidekick, a subordinate, a required affiliate insofar as the feminine ear becomes yet another receptacle for self-indulgent, long-winded emissions. Viewed otherwise again, it is disturbing to find the "erotically charged stimulation of surrendering to another consciousness" in the

reading process equated here with the (to my mind, variously dubious) “pleasure of young-girl-like receptivity” (138).

Summarily stated, this reader’s response is mixed. The first three chapters of Nash’s *Feminist Narrative Ethics* are commendable; the last two, questionable. Yet there is an ethics, too, in opening doors to doubts and questions.

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**Omar Sabbagh, *From Sight through to In-Sight: Time, Narrative and Subjectivity in Conrad and Ford*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014. xlv + 232 pp.**

Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford collaborated on novels, short stories, and magazine editing for an immensely productive decade, and their mutual influence remained strong even after their friendship cooled in 1909. It is all the more surprising, then, that we do not have many parallel or comparative studies of these two major figures. We should therefore welcome Omar Sabbagh’s monograph, which sets out to examine how a selection of Conrad’s and Ford’s narratives narrate and thematize time, how they represent the self, and how they bring these two concerns together by examining time as subjective experience. These would seem to be valuable questions to examine: while the techniques of impressionism have been productively investigated by critics such as John G. Peters (on Conrad) and Max Saunders (on Ford), this study seems to be approaching new territory — the temporal dimension of early twentieth-century literary impressionism.

However, several problems with the approach soon become apparent. A 35-page prologue offers an anticipation of some of the material to come in “a personal register.” One of three epigraphs to this prologue is a quotation from Forster’s *Howards End* (1910): “Only connect.” Aside from assigning this as a rogue epigraph to Forster’s novel — one of the many typographical slips and minor errors that suggest insufficient attention at the proof-reading and copy-editing stages — this instruction is one that we might wish Sabbagh had followed himself. The prologue’s meditations range from St. Paul to G. K. Chesterton via J. S. Mill, George Eliot, and Rosa Luxemburg; the relevance of this material to the questions under examination is hard to discern. And Shandyesque discursiveness is a persistent feature of the book’s style, causing difficulties of comprehension not just with respect to its arguments but even at sentence level. Parenthetical insertions of only tangential relevance are so frequent that the reader not only struggles to follow, but also quickly begins to wonder how much the author is in control of his material.