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Hanna Meretoja. The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier. Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xviii + 282 pp.

Charles R. Sullivan
University of Dallas, sullivan@udallas.edu

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Abstract

Review of Hanna Meretoja. *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xviii + 282 pp.

Keywords

Narrative, Robbe-Grillet, Tournier

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Hanna Meretoja has written an important, even essential, study of postwar French literary history. Her subject, at its most basic, is a crisis of storytelling among the French new novelists of the 1950s and 1960s and a revival of storytelling with the narrative turn in theory since the 1970s and 1980s. She focuses on two novels—Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le labyrinthe* (*In the Labyrinth*) and Michel Tournier’s *Le roi des aulnes* (*The Erl-King*). But her reading and contextualization of these novels is so rich that her study could well serve as a more general intellectual and cultural history of postwar France.

Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959) presents the reader with a narrator who attempts to follow the meanderings of a soldier of a defeated army through a maze of indistinguishable streets, as he looks to deliver a fallen comrade’s personal effects. The soldier is unsure to whom he is to deliver his fallen comrade’s personal effects, and where and when. With shifting points of view, frequent dead-ends and re-starts, and an uncertain chronology, the novel’s aesthetic aimed to replace what Robbe-Grillet considered to be the totalizing aspects of Balzacian realism with an ontological instability that resisted any narrative reconstruction.

Philosophically, Meretoja masterfully demonstrates, the new novel was less bound up with structuralism than most commentators assume. Instead it drew on the Husserlian call “to the things themselves” and the Heideggerian conception of the “present-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*), especially as mediated through the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (and the literary theory of Roland Barthes). At the same time, Meretoja shows that the new novelists drew from a positivist and empiricist legacy with the result that they questioned the ability of individuals to impose meaning on a fundamentally strange world. This questioning of humanism was in part the product of a war that either subverted shared meanings or suspected them of complicity in tyranny. In part, too, a product of the waning of the Resistance ethos, this questioning of humanism created an ethical tension. If the new novel revealed the mechanization and routinization of modern society, it conceived freedom largely as a negative project of emancipation from oppression. To the extent that it undercut the meaning-creating agent, it had less to offer on how to rebuild from the ruins.

The second novel on which Meretoja focuses, Michel Tournier’s *Le roi des aulnes* (1970) follows the car mechanic Abel Tiffauges from his garage in Paris and his brief service in the French army to a German prisoner-of-war camp and eventually to a position at the East Prussian Kaltenborn castle where he rounds up young boys for Nazi military training. The broad features of this novel, with its easy-to-follow story line, could appear highly conventional. Meretoja argues,

however, that Tournier's novel was no simple return to storytelling as objective representation. It, too, relied on Heideggerian phenomenology, albeit a different aspect than the new novelists—the 'ready-at-hand' (*Zuhandenheit*), by which objects in the world are constituted by human purposes. The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur (as well as the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin), in which we are all already engaged in a thick web of narrative, provides the context for her reading of Tournier. Abel Tiffauges's very name references both the faithful pastoralist of the Hebrew Bible and the torture chamber of Gilles de Rais; his story begins in St. Christopher's boarding school where the protagonist can imagine himself in the mode of the medieval myth and comes to a close with the protagonist a monster in the mode of Goethe's poem "Der Erlkönig."

Out of this complex intertextuality comes the novel's ethical complexity. Tournier shares with the new novelists a sense of the dangers of narrative—for Tournier, Nazi violence was rooted in the malign inversion of storytelling into reified myths that subsumed the other into the same. But Tournier's novel also discloses how an ethics of responsibility and respect for others can also result from the creative reinterpretations that storytelling makes possible. *Le roi des aulnes* ends not with a monster like Tiffauges but with the martyr Abel sinking into a Prussian bog as he struggles to carry a Jewish child and death-camp survivor to safety.

Meretoja's study is densely written. But it is not a pedantic density. It is the disciplined density that aspires to, and achieves, systematic analyses of interrelationships among ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics, even as it remains acutely sensitive to how these interrelationships are shaped by, and shape, the historical context. Her study is a model of sophisticated interdisciplinarity and of how literary theoretical methodology and intellectual historical methodology can deepen critical awareness. Indeed, her study embodies that very dialogical narrativity that is the great achievement of the postwar crisis and return of storytelling.

Charles R. Sullivan
University of Dallas