

multiplicity where different points of views melt and if what they have in common is a political and social commitment not only to gender equality, but to the elimination of a politics of exclusion based on gender, race, social class or sexual orientation. We personally think that it is not possible, nowadays, to talk of just one feminism and the essays published in the second part of *Feminist Philosophies* sustain this point of view. They represent the variety of perspectives and the wide range of social and philosophical tendencies that exist within the field of gender studies. From the liberal feminists' ideas to the postmodern theorists; approaching the marxist perspective or getting closer to the radical feminists' point of view, the reader is introduced, in an easy and skilled way, into the complex and lively theoretical world of feminist theories.

As we have pointed out above, a certain understanding of sexuality, reproduction or the construction of the feminine body, among other things, can represent a way to limit the active participation of women in the social, cultural and economical sphere. In this context we think that the questioning of the normative ontological and epistemological categories that feminist intellectuals, men and women, are carrying on is of basic importance for the development of a fairer politics of gender equality. Their work relates women as marginalized social individuals to theories that can suggest solutions to overcome the politics of gender discrimination that exclude a great part of the feminine population from an active social and political role. In this sense, we think that the editors of *Feminist Philosophies* have been able to offer a good and professional summary example of this intellectual project.

Silvia Caporale Bizzini

**Gregory Comnes. *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994, 188 pp.**

The interrelation between ethic and aesthetic judgment remains a missing point in many theoretical and critical studies on contemporary fiction. Why postmodern fiction is or is not innovative from the formal point of view has been thoroughly explained by many scholars, and the myriad devices that sustain what is usually referred to as "self-conscious fiction" have been already classified; but the importance of avant-garde experiments to our comprehension of reality has not been, in my view, carefully examined.

Gregory Comnes's study is a brilliant effort to fill this gap in the particular context of Gaddis's fiction. But his recent book on Gaddis is both necessary and useful for another reason. Besides partially filling this gap existing in the field of studies on the postmodern novel, it also provides an example of the ethical relevance of fiction to our understanding. Like Coover or Pynchon, Gaddis is one of those contemporary authors for whom the consideration of "relativism" is, or should be, a basic assumption when it comes to organizing and evaluating reality. The dismantling of what Lyotard calls "grand narratives" is one of his chief concerns, as it is of many other contemporary novelists—the relevant question in Gaddis's fiction being that the problematization of our comprehension of reality takes on its important ethical dimensions as well. Implied, in Gaddis's fiction as

well as in Comnes's study, is the idea that relativism leads not to nihilism but to the disclosure of diversity and otherness as conditions of knowledge and judgment, and so "helps us construe sense and the possibility of order in a different way" (3). This is the basic working of ethics in the novels of Gaddis: the assumption of difference and the consideration of otherness. And this is achieved, according to Comnes, by means of two fundamental strategies: the calling into question of textual representation and the ensuing revitalization of the reader's role in the interpretive activity. The former is intended to undermine closure and the possibility of straightforward, unquestioned reference by undoing the alleged natural and objective character of representation. The latter, on the other hand, is intended to make the reader get involved in textual interpretation—so that meaning be not conceived of as the fixed product of outward reference but rather the outcome of an active process of interchange between author, text, and reader.

This is clearly a poststructuralist-hermeneutic approach, mostly based on Wolfgang Iser's and Stanley Fish's theories of reader-response criticism; but, although the relevance of postmodern theory in Gaddis's fiction, especially in *The Recognitions*, has been thoroughly explored recently (see Johnston), Comnes's study still contributes a new and fresh perspective in this regard. Drawing heavily on the thought of Walter Benjamin, he analyzes how the representation of "a world without absolutes" in Gaddis's fiction implies a constructive ethical commitment of the first kind. The key concept of the whole book is that of *agapē*, which designates the attitude of "giving . . . in the face of any situation" (30) that helps Gaddis's readers to apprehend and assess ethically the real world by unveiling the mythical residue of structures of knowledge and power. It is after reading Comnes's book that the vision of Gaddis's first three novels is not so much that of formally "postmodern" fictions but rather of broadly reflexive works—"epistemological novels," in Comnes's phrase—in which the examination of meaning figures prominently. Far from the moral reductiveness of critics such as John Gardner, Gaddis is illuminated by this work of criticism, in which literary and intellectual considerations are merged in order to offer an exhaustive assessment of Gaddis's fiction in light of poststructuralist developments in the field of ethics.

Unfortunately, Comnes's valuable book was in print when Gaddis's recent novel, entitled *A Frolic of His Own*, appeared. The only reference is a brief remark in the book's Conclusion referring to the continuity of Gaddis's interest in ethical issues, this time in the field of litigation. Like the others, Gaddis's new novel deserves study in detail because of its vigorous reflexive interests. Although Gaddis's exploration here seem to be confined to the field of law and order, its implications go far beyond—into the realm of what it means "refusing to think in terms of evidence" (Gaddis 110).

Regardless of this small problem, Comnes's work deserves a distinguished place in the field of criticism on contemporary fiction. It combines theoretical sophistication and critical lucidity, and the result is one of the most comprehensive and perceptive works on William Gaddis's fiction.

## Other Works Cited

Gaddis, William. *A Frolic of His Own*. New York: Poseidon P, 1994.

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