THE ETHICS OF MODALITY IN PAULINE SMITH’S “THE SISTERS”

MYRTLE HOOPER

This essay stresses that English is a language which encodes modality lexically. Word choice reflects possibilities, probabilities, consequences of actions, choices and decisions; registering ethics of judgement and conduct. Pauline Smith’s work has been criticised for propagating the myth of “Afrikaner as Israelite” and for representing an “enclosed world.” Yet in “translating” rural Afrikaners, Smith positions herself and her readers in relation to them. Hooper argues that through Smith’s frequent use of the locative mode which invites us to “behold” suffering or enduring subjects, she inscribes an ethos that is itself an opening for a positive ethics to emerge. “The Sisters,” particularly, uses modality to explore, interrogate and expose ethical matrices and dynamics of power.

The ethical turn takes place when I realize my enmeshment with the Other.

H. P. Steeve

Who am I that I should judge you?

Sukey, in “The Sisters”

Pauline Smith was a South African writer, born in 1882 in Oudtshoorn in the Eastern Cape, the elder daughter of an English district surgeon. As a child she often accompanied her father in his work amongst the poor Afrikaner farmers of the Little Karoo, and so the geography of the region figures starkly in her fiction: its fertile valleys of well-watered land, and mountainous areas whose droughts and rockiness render them desolate and hostile to those who eke out a living on their arid soil. A number of critics have been interested in her use of language in her fiction: the ways in which she translates Afrikaans idiom into English (Coetzee 1981); the medium in which she represents the confined world of the Aangenaam valley and its inhabitants (Roberts 1984); the silence of the characters who populate the world of her stories (McCormick 1983); the limited powers of their conversation (Haresnape 1977); her “style” of poverty (Clayton 1983); her use of interrogative statements and her use of “free indirect discourse” (Cosser 1992). Studies such as these respond to the fact that Smith is a craftsman who takes great
care with her use of language; and to the fact that Smith is an English speaker representing Afrikaners in English to an English readership.

To my knowledge, though, nobody has yet essayed a specific study of her use of modal auxiliaries, which are an intrinsic feature of her style, and which are fundamental to the characterisation and the rendition of relationship in her fiction. The story I wish to consider here recounts the experiences of a young girl in a community whose farming activities are crucially dependent on access to water. The event that focuses relations and brings them to a climax is the marriage of the elder sister, Marta, to her father’s farming rival and creditor, in return for waiving his debt and releasing water into the furrow he has built from the Ghamka River. The story is narrated much later by the younger sister, Sukey, who tried in vain at the time to intervene. Its retrospective cast reveals her reconsidering her decisions and actions and those of the others around her. Her narrative is marked by a preponderance of modals; and it ends in conversational closure that renounces the voice she raised against her father at the time. However this might exercise feminist critics; the renunciation of voice has a powerful ethical effect because it registers a moral self-revaluation that undercuts comfortable resolutions, leaving readers with questions, not answers. It works recursively, enjoining us too to ask: “Who am I that I should judge?”

The linguist John Lyons points out that modal auxiliaries are inscribed with speakers’ commitment to the truth value, or to the necessity, of the claims they make. As such, they carry traces of the relations that exist between speakers and listeners. My intention is to apply this theoretical understanding of modality to an understanding of Smith’s text—and to extend it by considering the ethical nature of these relations, and of the readers’ implicatedness as moral witness. Specifically I wish to show that the preponderance of modals, together with other linguistic features, reflects the ethical cast of the story and the processes of judgement that structure and damage the relationships portrayed in it.

In 1968, in his Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics, Lyons describes mood as “best defined in relation to an ‘unmarked’ class of sentences which express simple statements of fact, unqualified with respect to the attitude of the speaker towards what he is saying.” Traditionally, the term given to this “unmarked” mood is indicative, or declarative (1968: 307). In his later Language, Meaning and Context, he criticises the “intellectualist prejudice” which construes language as “essentially an instrument for the expression of propositional thought,” because the “method of traditional modal logic“ has the effect of objectifying modality (1981: 236). This is a serious shortcoming. In Lyons’ view, any theory of meaning which fails to account for the subjectivity of reference, deixis, and modality is condemned to sterility.