Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

Toker, Leona

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Toker, Leona. 
Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission. 
The Ohio State University Press, 2010. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27743.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27743

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1145052
I T H A P P E N E D.

Neither humanistic literature, nor enlightened philosophy, nor progressive political thought has prepared us for (let alone preempted) what happened in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1921, 1933, 1937, 1939, 1941, 1942 (etc.). Not only the start of World War I (1914), the Armenian genocide (1915), or the official start of World War II (1939) but also the 1918 creation of the CheKa (the nucleus of the Soviet and post-Soviet political police) and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in Petersburg, the ban on factionalism proclaimed at the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party (1921), and the Wannsee Conference (1942) were events of cosmic magnitude, though known to only a few and recognized by still fewer. It is probably with the benefit of hindsight that similar later events will be recognized as radically changing our world—unless there is no hindsight because, as, Einstein predicted, World War IV will be fought with clubs.

The history of the twentieth century, with what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has called the “caesura” (71–72) in the middle, has shown that actuality can surpass both the grimmest and the most ingenious artistic imagination. This, in addition to the ethical agenda of testimony, apologia, consciousness-raising, and homage to the dead, has contributed to the unprecedented popularity of life-writing since the mid-twentieth century.
Among the most prominent issues raised by literary critical studies of the different kinds of memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, nonfiction novels (Truman Capote, Norman Mailer), or identity-seeking travelogues (e.g., Michael Arlene’s *Passage to Ararat*), are questions about the relationship between the fictional and the factual, ranging from extreme hermeneutic nihilism to the admission that even nonreferential fictional narratives may accurately testify to the structures of historical reality.

Those of us who study both life-writing and classical literature, especially English, waver between seeing ourselves as oscillating from one of these two different worlds to the other or seeing these two worlds as not separable. At the moment, though ready to confess that it is classical English literature that helps me to keep sane, I lean to the latter view—provided the connections are drawn not only as lines of influence but also as negations of negations.

The frame of the current research does not accommodate unfolding this argument, but the one point I have to make here is that, despite addressing a different target audience, the best of the documentary prose of the second half of the twentieth century is akin to the literary modernism of the first half. In fictional prose narrative modernism may be seen as culminating in the works of Kafka, Joyce, and, in Russia, Andrey Bely. Varlam Shalamov (1907–82), the most distinguished artist among Gulag authors, considered himself the scion of the modernist writers of the Russian Silver Age.

One of the central features shared by these bodies of literature is the hesitation that resembles the “suspicion of fraudulence” (Cavell 1976: 188–89), so important in the aesthetic response to modernism (see p. 172). In reading documentary prose such a suspicion translates into the concern with

---

1. For a useful discussion of this work in the context of relational autobiography, see Eakin 2009.
3. I single out the literature of the European country that has not been radically ravaged by a socialist revolution or a Nazi onslaught (though it did not remain untouched by and unimplicated in such events), whether because of its democratic-reform tradition or, as I have been taught in a course on historical materialism, because of the ruling classes’ calculated redistribution of the profits derived from the exploitation of the colonies.
4. Postcolonial studies have made it amply clear that the world conjured up in the classical English novels is the same world in which colonial oppression took place. The exact links between nineteenth-century (including Victorian-era) science and culture, the birth of the concentration camp (Cuba, South Africa—see Kotek and Rigoulot 2000: 47–94), the birth of eugenics, its practice in the colonies such as German Namibia and British Tasmania, the Armenian Genocide, the Jewish Holocausts, as well as mass slaughters in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur are still awaiting a sustained scholarly investigation. At the moment, I believe that oppositional writers such as Jane Austen were critical of the same mind-sets that could be seen as implicated in the latency of the developments that twentieth-century readers know with the benefit of hindsight.
the truth-value of each individual testimony—in particular, into wondering about its modality—is it factographic or fictional? This goes beyond our possible wondering whether one or another detail is accurate or even whether an author’s whole representation of the events is not opportunistically mendacious. The need to know the modal status of a work of testimony is especially urgent when a narrative that we have been reading mainly “for the facts” suddenly offers us an unexpected aesthetic experience, too mixed to be called pleasure. What forces are responsible for such a bonus effect? We have counted as little on it as we may have counted on a semiotic cognitive enrichment from an exposure to abstractionist plastic arts. According to conventional expectations, in memoir literature, and especially in survivor narratives, the arête, the sense of difficulty overcome, pertains not to the composition of the work but to the experience with which it deals, because the composition is believed to follow not the creative imagination but the pregiven causal logic or temporal contingencies of the materials; hence novels about the times of atrocity are more readily but often less deservedly granted the status of art than factographic accounts, such as Primo Levi’s If This Is a Man or Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago. Or at least, this used to be the case: in recent decades the expectations of the audience seem to have been changing. A Duchamp-like framing of bowls or an autobiographer’s straightforward account of her experience are less and less frequently perceived as too easy, hence too trivial: what Keats called the “pinnacle and steep of godlike hardship” is more widely understood to have been attained not so much in the process of crafting the fair copy as in the cultural and biographical prehistory of the works, and in the intensity of the fermentation that their crudities and contexts have undergone in the creative consciousness.

The amount and quality of the scholarship devoted to life-writing in recent decades suggests that writers such as Levi or Shalamov have been allowed to teach large parts of the reading public not only to trust them but also to treat their narratives as factual while asking of them the kind of questions we would ask of fiction: questions about motifs and themes (internal reference) in addition to topics and issues (external reference), questions about symbols in addition to signs, about aesthetic and ethical congruence in addition to ideological emplotment. In terms of the semiological triad (see pp. 18–19), we have been taught to ask questions about syntactics in addition to those of semantics.

This new reading convention may reflect back on narratives packaged as fictional works—such as, for instance, Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”—of them, conversely, we may ask questions not only on the workings of narrative art but also of the accuracy of the historical representation, or rather, the
consistency of their internal reference with the extratextual information on the episodes of cultural history in which their stories are set. This approach is not to be confused with the so-called use of a work of art as a historical document, which is a legitimate if ultimately unsatisfying procedure with documentary prose. Rather, it is a variation on “backward mimesis” (I. Armstrong 2000: 6), the external field of reference enriching our understanding of the meanings of intratextual narrative details—meanings in the Wittgensteinian terms of what “hangs together” with what.

The permeability of the borderlines between fictionalized and factographic narratives further suggests that the narratological features that distinguish fictional works from factography, such as, for instance, the inside views of characters who are not the first-person authorial “I” or the absence of public verification landmarks, are sometimes a matter of pragmatically oriented choices: an author can say about a fictionalized third-person avatar what he cannot say about him- or herself in the first person; a narrative whose protagonist bears a name different from the author’s (e.g., Krist in a number of Shalamov’s stories) but undergoes the experience that was actually the author’s, may use the conventional authority of narrative omniscience to forestall troubling moral questions of the target audience. Such choices, combining the artistic and the pragmatic considerations, are likewise part and parcel of the ethics of narrative form.

To complete a paradigm of cultural remissions by adding the morphology of Lent to that of the carnival, I now propose to compare Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” and Shalamov’s story “The Artist of the Spade.” Since the latter is not part of the selection of Shalamov’s stories widely accessible in John Glad’s translation, it is reproduced here in the translation of Nedda Strazhas, with the kind permission of Berghahn Books, in whose volume Cold Fusion: Aspects of the German Cultural Presence in Russia, edited by Gennady Barabtarlo, it was published first, along with an earlier version of chapter 10 of the present book.

5. For a systematic discussion of the signals that a narrative is fictionalized, see Cohn 1999: 109–31.

6. I discuss this possibility in detail in “Testimony and Doubt” (2007), which compares two of Shalamov’s stories, one factographic and one fictionalized but both written in the same year, 1964, and dealing with the same year, 1938. It must be added that pragmatic considerations have, more notoriously, led to some authors’ passing of fictional narratives for factual ones, strictly imitating all the conventions of eyewitness narratives.