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.
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Scholars and critics have long recognized the need for ethical criticism to address not only the idea-content but also the morphological aspects of narrative, yet the search continues for ways to study the ethics of narrative form. In *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission*, Leona Toker suggests a method of linking formal features of narratives with the types of moral vision that they represent.

Toker is especially interested in cultural remissions such as the carnivalesque—that is, the inverting of standard cultural hierarchies or the blurring of boundaries between normally separated social groups, actors and audiences, self and other. She argues that cultural remissions have the potential not simply to provide a break from the determinacies of our quotidian existence but also to return us to that existence with some alteration of our perceptions, beliefs, and values. Toker contends that the ethical consequences of reading fiction result from features of its aesthetics, particularly what she calls, following the semiotician Louis Hjelsmlev, “the form of the content”—the patterns arising from the artistic deployment of narrative details. In addition to addressing the carnivalesque discourse of Bakhtin as well as the theory of oppositionality developed by de Certeau and Chambers, she puts theory into practice through detailed analyses of canonical texts by Fielding, Sterne, Austen, Hawthorne, Dickens, Conrad, Joyce, and other writers.

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