

Cultural Remission, Factographic Literature and Ethical Criticism: An Interview with Leona Toker

Lan Yun & Leona Toker

Abstract: Leona Toker is Professor of English at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and editor of *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*. She is the author of *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* (1993), *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (2000), *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission* (2010), and *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading* (2019). Toker engages in a number of research areas, including narratology, ethical criticism, Gulag literature, and Holocaust literature. In December 2019, Ms. Lan Yun interviewed Toker during her academic visit to Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In this interview, Toker approaches the concept of cultural remission and Gulag and Holocaust literature from an ethical perspective, exploring the complex relationship between literary forms and their ethical consequences. She claims that ethical criticism is coming back in new ways and that analysis of the ethics of form may take over from that of the ethics of character behavior as a potential orientation for future studies.

Keywords: ethics; cultural remission; Gulag literature; Holocaust literature

Authors: Lan Yun is a Ph.D. candidate at School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China). She is currently engaged in the study of narratology (Email: lanyunnn2019@163.com); Leona Toker is Professor of English Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and editor of *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*. Her current research deals with narratological issues and with Vladimir Nabokov's midlife works (Email: toker@mail.huji.ac.il).

标题: 文化缓解、纪实文学与伦理批评：利昂娜·托克访谈录

内容摘要: 利昂娜·托克是耶路撒冷希伯来大学英文系教授、国际权威期刊《部分解答》主编，主要从事叙事学、伦理批评、古拉格与大屠杀文学等领域的研究，著有《纳博科夫：文学结构之谜》（1989）、《雄辩的沉默：虚构叙

事中的隐瞒信息》(1993)、《从群岛归来:古拉格幸存者叙事》(2000)、《建构小说的形式伦理:文化缓解叙事》(2010)、《古拉格文学与纳粹集中营文学:语境间解读》(2019)等多部作品。2019年12月,托克教授在访问上海交通大学期间接受了蓝云博士的采访。在访谈中,托克教授从伦理视角讨论了“文化缓解”、古拉格文学和大屠杀文学,详细剖析了文学形式与伦理之间的复杂关系。托克教授认为文学伦理学批评正以新的面貌回归人们的视野,对文学形式伦理的探讨将逐渐取代以往关于人物行动伦理的探讨,这也是该领域未来发展的潜势所在。

关键词: 伦理;文化缓解;古拉格文学;大屠杀文学

作者简介: 蓝云,上海交通大学外国语学院博士生,主要从事叙事学研究;利昂娜·托克,耶路撒冷希伯来大学英文系教授、国际权威期刊《部分解答》主编,目前主要从事叙事学、弗拉基米尔·纳博科夫中期作品的研究。本文系国家社科基金重大项目“当代西方叙事学前沿理论的翻译与研究”【项目编号:17ZDA281】的阶段性成果。

Ethics and Cultural Remission

Lan Yun (Lan for short hereafter): Good afternoon, Professor Toker. Let's start our conversation with a very general question. How do you define ethics? Is ethics in ethical literary criticism different from the ethics discussed in your work *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission* (2010)?

Leona Toker (Toker for short hereafter): The book takes a specific direction in ethical literary criticism. What it tries to do is discuss the ethical aspects of the narrative form, not so much the ethics of the characters' ideology and conduct, not so much the ethics of the implied author or, for that matter, the historical author's ideology and choices, because ethics pertaining to the character's conduct as well as to what the author believes is not a purely literary matter. It belongs mainly to the external world and reflections of it. This point has already been made by Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep* (1988). The ethical aspects of narrative form are entirely a literary matter. They can be studied in different ways. For example, they can be studied as a matter of rhetoric, the ethics of the kind of a demand that the narrative makes on the reader. So it is the ethics of the narrative-reader communication. What does the narrative want from us? The rhetoric of the narrative is a system of signals that are supposed to affect the receiver of the communication. There is a rather well-known book by Roger Sell about communicative criticism in which he talks about the ethical aspect of literary communication. You don't necessarily

have to regard literature as a form of communication, but in so far as it is a form of communication, the book proposes that the positive ethical form of communication is leaving the reader some freedom and not imposing a certain way of looking at things on the reader.

Another approach to the ethics of form is watching how different features of the narrative create ethical situations in the novel. If you change one word in an episode of a Henry James novel, you may bring about a whole different ethical situation. Here we are talking about the influence of narrative details on the complex as an ethical whole. That is especially true in the cases of high artistic or ethical refinement.

In the book that I wrote on the subject, my starting point was this: I was very much under the influence of Sartre's statement that a narrative technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. And I asked whether a narrative technique also relates to the novelist's moral philosophy and whether we can find ways of connecting narrative technique with the author's ethos. (I leave aside the question whether it's the author or the implied author which is at issue when talking about a system of ethical beliefs.) The immediate answer to this question was negative. The same technique can serve different ethical positions. So that's not the way to look for the connection. But then I noticed a very interesting phenomenon: certain narrative techniques, the ones which I classify as non-carnavalesque, pertain to a kind of a low view of human nature, whereas the techniques that I regard as the carnivalesque pertain to a higher view of human nature. What is a high view of human nature? It's a view that accepts the possibility of very lofty ethical ideals and selfless behavior, including self-sacrifice, etc. At the same time, this position also accepts the possibility of very low moral downfall, evil, and the possibility that an individual can really descend to the depth of evil. So the high view is not an ethical notion in itself. It's basically related to a deontological position that says "What is right is right. What is wrong is wrong," irrespective of the utility of the conduct. It contrasts with the low view of human nature, a more utilitarian view, which tends to see conduct as largely, if not wholly, determined by self-interest, not necessarily immediate self-interest, but also extended or delayed self-interest. For instance, extended self-interest is the interest of your community, not necessarily your own advantage; it tends towards the principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." At the same time, the low view of human nature also refuses to see the depth of possible evil. So in my empirical observation, carnivalesque techniques with which my book largely deals are associated with this demanding high view of human nature, which largely combats cynicism and is opposed to the utilitarian

view of things. Though it recognizes the value of utilitarianism in its own limits, it leans towards deontological attitudes. This is largely influenced by an old book, *Three Traditions of Moral Thought* (1959) by Dorothea Krook.

Lan: You claim that you “still believe that aesthetic experience has an intrinsic ethical effect, irrespective of the presence or absence of ‘message’” (*Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction* 3). Do you mean that even if the “message” conveyed were unethical, the aesthetic experience would still produce ethical effects? Is form more important than content?

Token: So long as the reader is left the freedom to resist the message, is not forced to accept the message. One of the most painful examples is, for instance, the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose ideology is really quite terrible, but whose artistic achievement is high. My own view comes from the correction that Schopenhauer introduced into Kant’s aesthetics. Whereas Kant says that aesthetic experience is characterized by disinterestedness (in the sense of unselfishness), Schopenhauer goes further and says that at moments of aesthetic experience, the will in ourselves, which according to Schopenhauer is always negative, is silenced. In other words, our desires, our self-interest, our drives are for a moment laid aside and that effect, which is not a rational, is positive, if genuine.

Lan: So that’s why you think that cultural remission is the ethics of form.

Token: Cultural remission is my blanket term for three kinds of phenomena that may have some such effect. I mean the carnivalesque, the oppositional and the ludic. What is “culture”? I mean a system of significances that is transmitted not genetically — not the issue of going to theaters and museums, but the whole package of significances which is transmitted by education and by personal example. Culture usually lags behind the changes that take place in the world. Culture becomes formalized while transformations of reality continue.

Remission is a kind of a stoppage of thought-conventions and this is what culture depends on for its vitality. Whereas the world is constantly moving, the gap between the changes in the world and the culture that at a certain point gels is a dangerous gap, not only because the world moves on and at a certain point culture has to catch up with it, but also because, in the presence of this gap, cultural development can take a direction governed by its own dynamics and can lead into all kinds of big trouble. Culture can become a malady or illness. There are certain phenomena which are also part of culture, for example, writing and reading literature, but they have the potential of producing a kind of a pause in the continuity of

culture. Aesthetic experience also produces such a pause for an individual. In terms of culture, I see it as a remission, like a malady which stops for a while and then maybe its course can be changed.

Lan: So as long as a work can generate a certain aesthetic effect with a potential for cultural remission, it can be considered ethical. In this aspect, what matters is form rather than content.

Toker: I wouldn't exactly put it this way. I accept, to a large extent, the Russian formalist belief that content and form are inseparable. That is to say, to separate them is an artificial laboratory procedure. What is content? It is not just some kind of a thesis or some kind of a message, but also a recurrence of certain motifs, because a motif is part of the semiotic system or semantic system. The recurrence of the motifs is not only content but also form. So in the recurrence of motifs, for instance, the content and the form come together. Roger Sell's idea of communicational criticism says that the ethics of the literary communication goes part of the way towards explaining which kind of works are unethical, and that is not necessarily because of some kind of an ideology or attitude that they express but in the question of whether they impose it on the reader, whether they force it on the reader or whether they throw this ideology into the conversation as one of its ingredients, leaving the reader the freedom of not accepting it. There are actually many writers who deliberately produce contradictions, very often irreconcilable ones, in their works, exactly to create that space of freedom for the reader. Of course, there is no way I can consider the works of Marquis de Sade as ethically positive: he not just loves cruelty, but he attempts to seduce the reader to it.

Lan: In her book *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski proposes that "aesthetic experience has analogies with enchantment in a supposedly disenchanted age" (14). She also argues that "Aesthetic enchantment leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment" (53). Is her "aesthetic enchantment" akin to your notion of "cultural remission"? Could you please comment on her remarks?

Toker: With apologies, I have not read that book. The point that aesthetic experience is enchantment or is analogous to enchantment speaks to me. It is a kind of a remission in the sense that it produces a break in the determinacies of practical and actual life in society. The determinacies are broken apart. There is this interval when we move elsewhere, for instance, to an enchanted world, or to the suspension of the will, as Schopenhauer would put it. One moves out of oneself.

Of course aesthetic experience doesn't last long, because the self usually asserts itself. It is interesting that people sometimes associate aesthetic experience with a to-and-fro movement. Indeed, images of to-and-fro movement in some of Nabokov's stories become almost symbols of aesthetic experience. You move out of yourself, then the self reasserts itself, and you move back into yourself. Then again, you move out of yourself, then you move back. This kind of experience very often happens when you least expect it. In the book, I write about this experience that I had in the Louvre. I did not have any kind of a sense of aesthetic heightening when I stood in front of Mona Lisa which I had wanted to see so much in the original. I just marked "seen that, done that." Then, going out of the museum, I was arrested by a little landscape which just did that to me, gave me a moment of complete self-forgetfulness. I talk about carnival because it is also a break from the determinacies of everyday life in society and everyday structure, though I treat carnival not according to the hydraulic metaphor--letting off steam and then returning to one's usual evil ways. During that circumscribed period of time, one gets free from the constraints of everyday life. One allows oneself all kinds of usually unacceptable forms of behavior, but at the same time, one also gets to see things differently. One forgets the self. One sees things in such a new way that when the carnival is over, it's not that one returns to the same old thing: the same old thing becomes somewhat defamiliarized, moved away from the dead spot in which it was captured or arrested before. That's my sense of carnival, though it's not the general sense. The general sense is letting off steam and then returning to the usual life. I believe that as one lets off steam (the metaphor is not quite appropriate), one begins to see things differently during that short period, and then what has been seen can no longer be unseen.

Lan: It seems that you try to establish a contrast between true or genuine carnival and fake carnival by noting that "True carnival can be a vehicle of social protest, but a fake carnival may use the forms of a popular festivity for purposes of a radical attack on social structures" (*Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction* 13), and you seem to favor the former which is a form of cultural remission. I was wondering whether "fake carnival" is really bad or perilous in nature? Does it depend on certain situations?

Toker: The distinction is not mine. It comes from different sources, especially from the book *Carnival in Romans* (1979) by Le Roy Ladurie. In the French town Romans, a popular rebellion which became very destructive first took the shape of the carnival. It was a fake carnival. People pretended that they were just out to behave

in the carnivalesque way. There was the Lord of Misrule. There was dressing up. There was drunkenness. There were all kinds of Rabelaisian things, but it was a kind of a temporary cover for what was actually a rebellion and not just a carnival. So it was a kind of corrupted carnival. The idea of corrupted carnival comes from Bakhtin's discussion of the carnival, and his discussion is rooted in totally technical points. For instance, a carnival is usually limited in time. Real carnival is limited in time, just like real Lent, or Fasting; it has to be limited in time. If it is not limited in time, then it is fake or corrupt. Bakhtin uses the notion of corruption to suggest that the social consequences can be very sad. Carnival is limited in time, but it ought to cover broad spaces, as it is basically unlimited from the point of view of human experience in space. It's got to involve the whole community. It is corrupt if it is the experience of only one part of the community whereas another part is completely alienated and disassociated from it. So it's got to be limited in time, but vast in space.

Lan: Does that mean a true carnival is like a reform while a fake carnival a revolution?

Toker: The revolution in the bad sense of destructive, anarchic, revolutionary violence, because revolution can also be used in a positive sense, such as in "the scientific revolution." I do see it that way, and that is why carnival is in a certain way homologous to games, because they also mean taking a break from the determinacies of everyday existence. One enters a certain space for a game: unlike carnival, a game is circumscribed both in time and in space. Take soccer game for instance: you have the stadium that limits its place and it is circumscribed in time. The game gets corrupted if its participants do not enter it voluntarily, if they are forced into the game. Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* (1938) studies the play element in culture. When I say "play," I mean games, though there are formalized games and children's games which are not so formalized and not really circumscribed in time and space. A very interesting discussion is found in Roger Caillois's book *Man, Play, and Games* (1958) which distinguishes four kinds of games and shows the phenomenological relationship between the kinds of games and their different consequences. That book was also an influence on my thinking. Unfortunately, I have recently found out that the social ideology of Caillois was not something that I could accept.

Lan: You have also mentioned that "aesthetic experience is a 'time-out' from the consolidation of sociocultural determinacies, a space of inner freedom" (*Towards*

the Ethics of Form in Fiction 1). How can we be sure that what readers experience is not an illusion of cultural remission but an integral part of the sociocultural system?

Token: That's a very profound question. I think that it is very difficult to decide which is which. I think that the decisions are made spontaneously rather than through the work of reason. Why is it that some of the writers inspire trust in us, whereas others tend to remain suspect and seem to be pulling our leg and making fun of us. When I first read James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I did not understand three quarters of it. Only on a fifth reading did I begin to understand three quarters with at least a quarter still left vague, and that was with the help of all kinds of reader's guides and secondary materials. Yet though I did not understand a great deal, I had an instinctive sense that this is a very good book and if I don't understand something, it's my fault (I am not yet an informed reader), rather than the fault of the author. I have to prepare myself to understand more. Why was there this intrinsic, instinctive trust? In terms of this instinctive trust, I do believe that the experience through which that book led me was the experience of cultural remission, not the experience of getting integrated into some kind of a cultural setup or remaining integrated in it, much as I got to know about early twentieth-century Dublin. I am not saying that this kind of spontaneous aesthetic trust is infallible. We do make mistakes. Very often we are not prepared to see the excellence of something new. And very often a book that is not very good still manages to entrance us because it touches on some of our own preferences and prejudices. But what I'm saying again is that one can never know exactly whether what one is experiencing is a suspension of cultural determinacies or whether it is the continuation and the perpetuation of these determinacies despite our best intentions. We can never know for sure, but in many cases, we have a feeling, a trust.

Lan: Regarding the substance of content, the form of content, the substance of expression, and the form of expression, which one do you think is more important or to which should scholars pay more attention?

Token: Critics usually deal with the substance of content and the form of expression. It's the studies of intermediality nowadays, a new trend in narratology very developed in Germany, that deals with the substance of expression, with the way different media affect expression, communication and therefore also the content. The way I see my book is that it mainly deals with the form of content, not with the substance of content which is specific, social or moral philosophies or historiographical positions, but with the way this content is formed through types of mo-

tifs, recurrence of motifs, the structure of the narrative, the sequence of materials. So here we are already slipping between the form of content and the other parts of the Hjelmslev net, such as the form of expression. There is this kind of a deliberate slippage there.

Ethics and Factographic Literature

Lan: Let's move on to your latest book *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading* (2019). About two decades ago, you published *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (2000). What makes you so interested in Gulag literature?

Toker: The Gulag functioned not in the past, but in my time. I lived my childhood life unaware of what was happening. On the other hand, every child, at least every Jewish child in Lithuania, had deep inside him or her a kind of a chamber of horrors, or room 101, where one doesn't go. For me, at first it was the history of the Holocaust. In Vilnius, where I grew up, it was not very strongly felt, but in the second Lithuanian city, Kaunas, that past was felt very strongly. There are many memorials in Kaunas, and part of my family perished there, so I didn't want to go there. Also, we listened to transmissions from the BBC world service. At one point, the BBC world service started transmitting Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First Circle* (1968). Chapter by chapter, they just read it out loud. I was fascinated. Then at a certain point, it came to the episode of the arrest of one of the characters, Innokenty Volodin, and what happens to him after he is arrested. Compared to what I read later, that is not really horrifying, but I was horrified. I was so horrified that I did not touch that literature for a long time. I listened to Solzhenitsyn in the first place, because in 1962, we all read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) which was published in the Soviet Union. The very fact that this book was published in the Soviet Union seemed to promise the liberalization of the regime. Only then, of course, Brezhnev and his companions turned the wheel backwards. When I was reading that book, I almost felt that I was living in a camp. I completely sympathized with that character. I looked at my own experience. I started looking at what I am eating. He is constantly hungry. And I imagined myself in the camp. I was totally overwhelmed. Later on, I found out that Solzhenitsyn presented an easier camp, and that there were other writers who represented the majority of the camps, that were much harsher in different respects.

But Solzhenitsyn's tale allowed millions of people in the Soviet Union and in the world to imagine what a concentration camp was like, so that stayed with me.

However, when I came to Israel in 1973, I did not want to deal with that kind of experience. My heart was full of other things. Among other matters, I wanted to study English literature. I devoted 10 years of concentrated study to English and American literature. I didn't hold a Russian book in my hands all that time until I came upon Nabokov, which changed it all.

And you have to read Shalamov. He got me to reading memoirs of the Gulag and then I found out that some of them are great literature. So when I found out that it was actually great literature, I decided that I have to write about it.

Lan: Do you think that Gulag or Holocaust literature can also generate cultural re-mission?

Token: Some of the best works can, but it's complicated because when we read that literature, we feel that we should react to it not aesthetically, that we should think about people suffering, and when aesthetic experience overtakes us, we almost feel guilty. As if it shouldn't be the case, but it is. As a result of which, the reader of literature about concentration camps must always turn upon herself or himself and always try to analyze "What is going on with me? How am I reacting?" It's got to be self-reflecting in that sense. It becomes ethically complicated in a new way. I also find an additional importance in writing about Gulag literature, since many people write about the literature of the Holocaust. Nowadays, what I do is trying to watch how these literary strands, and the historical phenomena that they represent, comment on each other. I became aware that there is a trend in current Russian historiography to argue that "Yes, Stalin committed many crimes and caused people much suffering, but look how he developed the country." I even heard one report of a Ph.D. student in history who surveyed all the theatrical performances that were made in a certain region of camps; her conclusion was that "the Gulag brought culture to the North." I was angry. There is this kind of a pragmatic approach to history: "Yes. Maybe people suffered, but look how much good was done." I believe that much more good would have been done without making people suffer so much and without all these camps. And the fact that the people were made to suffer is an issue in itself, and it should not be waived in this utilitarian manner.

Lan: How do you view or evaluate the relationship between the factographic and the fictionalized in Gulag literature and Holocaust literature? What is their respective relationship with ethics? In your view, how should writers balance these two elements when writing?

Token: It seems to me that fictionalization can sometimes be a useful tool for bring-

ing out the essential qualities of the event more strikingly. It helps to emphasize the central features and of the experience represented. Moreover, fictionalization is arranging matters in such a way that the substance of content converges into patterns that have an aesthetic value. I'm so sorry to have to say that because those bodies of literature deal with very sad things. Still, fictionalization can be an ethical tool. It seems to me that works that are fictionalized and not strictly factographic can be used as a kind of historical testimony (not testimony in court, of course; they would never be accepted in court), because they often involve "the sample convention." That is the concept that I introduced as a bit of a modification of Wolfgang Iser's theory of fiction. Iser explained that fiction is characterized by selection, recombination and the as-if convention. The selection and recombination under the aegis of the as-if convention. In a work of fiction plot events happen "as-if", so fictionalization is a matter of the as-if convention, and when this convention is operative, you cannot treat the narrative as testimony. Yet there are certain narratives that deliberately present events as examples of more general phenomena. And this is what I call the sample convention. Samples are very often used as examples in moral philosophy, and they reduce the situation to its bare minimum. They remove the details, so to say, because if you add details, it becomes already a fictional narrative and not just an example. In literature, it very often works the other way. Writers take a kind of actual human situation, and by introducing certain generalized traits, by reducing the number of concrete features, by turning narrative details into symbols, they produce the sense that this event is just an example of how things used to be. That sense is also what makes us read the works as testimony. So it's fiction and yet it's almost factography. It can be accepted as attesting. What seems to me rather unethical is using the setting of concentration camps for all kinds of titillating love stories and things like that.

Lan: How do you compare Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn from an ethical perspective? In *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission* (2010), you raised a question about whether "A writer's technique always relates back to his...moral philosophy" (5), so which writer's moral philosophy do you identify with?

Toker: Shalamov's, even though he is much gloomier, but he is a writer who selects details in such a way that they all bring in certain depths of significance and generate different interpretations. There's a world of difference between saying "My life has no meaning" and "Life has no meaning" without the "My." One of his characters says, "I have just understood, there is no meaning of life." He's not saying

“my” life, but another character understands that he is about to commit suicide, so he risks his own life to keep the other man from doing so. It’s a whole ethical situation concentrated in one word, in the presence or absence of one word. Shalamov also constantly contradicts himself, and very many of his generalizations have to be taken ironically. Therefore, he leaves a space of freedom for the reader. You do not have to be influenced. As a citizen, he has the right to express his opinions. As an artist, he feels obliged not to impose these opinions on the reader. So one of the things that he does is self-contradiction and sometimes self-repetition in difference. His language is very spare. It’s as if his language imitates the body language of an exhausted prisoner who wants to move as little as possible to conserve as much energy as possible. That’s also Shalamov’s style. He condenses. He does not speak much. He does not explain much. He leaves a lot for the reader.

Solzhenitsyn tries to impose his opinions on the reader. And he wants to have an opinion on every subject, including women’s fashions. (Why did he have to mention his preferences that women should not have shoulder pads?) On the other hand, Solzhenitsyn’s works do carry one away. They are interesting; they engage the imagination and create suspense. You want to go on reading. And as you want to go on reading, you are sometimes angry with the author for doing that to you. I’m now (re)reading his novel sequence *The Red Wheel* (1986). He has studied a lot. He knows a lot. He has very strong opinions, though in this work he places them within the polyphony of other ideologies. Indeed, somehow in this work (in contrast to some of his other writings), he already leaves more leeway for the reader to resist his opinions. At first, several years ago, I found that work less interesting than *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), than *The First Circle* (1968) and *Cancer Ward* (1966), which I think is a masterpiece. Now, on the second reading, I am less critical and I flow with the text. But with Solzhenitsyn, you have also to try to be an informed reader, in order to understand what he is up to. It’s not the situation with Joyce, where you have to be an informed reader in order to understand the subtlety of the details. With Solzhenitsyn, you have to be an informed reader in order to resist his opinions. For instance, his criticism of the Constitutional Democratic Party in pre-revolutionary Russia. I had read about the Constitutional Democratic Party from other sources and have a totally different picture. Maybe that picture is also wrong: it might be interesting to triangulate. What I’m sorry about is that for very many years, people who were Shalamov’s fans decided that they had to hate Solzhenitsyn and vice versa, but it mainly came from people on the Shalamov’s side. I remember somebody saying to me, “How can you mention Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn in the same breath?” I think that there doesn’t have to be this kind of

polarization. Each of them does his job. Of course Solzhenitsyn was immensely influential in consciousness-raising all over the world, in calling public opinion to the critique of what was going on in the concentration camps, making people aware. But Shalamov deepened that consciousness and created works of more permanent artistic value.

Lan: What do you think of the factographic and the fictionalized in graphic narratives or other transmedial narratives about historical events like the Holocaust? Do different “forms of expression” generate different impacts on ethics?

Toker: When Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980) was first published, my first reaction was hostile and skeptical. Then I started reading it, and I saw it as a work of genius. Now what I think is that only people who have really been there can speak directly about the experience of concentration camps, of witnessing the mass murder, witnessing the Holocaust. They have the right to speak about it. The factographic is very often modeled on realistic novels. You think that realistic novels are modeled on natural narratives. Very often it’s the other way around. Natural narratives are modeled on realistic novels. People who have not been there have to take recourse to other forms of narration and self-expression, to other substances of expression in order — to represent not what it was, but what it looks like to them. Therefore, they are right offering us works of fantasy that do not claim realistic representation.

Graphic narratives can be a very good way of dealing with that situation. If you cannot do genuine factography, better take recourse to experimental forms (or, say, “other forms,” because graphic narratives are no longer an experimental form but a medium of its own in its own right, swerving away from the traditions of realistic fiction).

Lan: What attitude should readers assume and what reading methods should we adopt when reading factographic works?

Toker: I don’t want to say what we should do, but what happens very often is that we tend to ask two kinds of questions. One kind of question is why I am reading this. Is it voyeurism? Is it a wish to understand, to reach some level of understanding of what our world used to be like, what it may be like, what it is still like? Are there any other motivations for my reading, for my exposing myself to this kind of experience? I hope that we can answer that question truthfully. In fact, I was shocked when I first read an article by Omer Bartov that implicitly accused the readers and some of the writers of Holocaust literature of a kind of voyeuristic attitude, which we then try to normalize by our protest against and critique of the historical events that are described. I did not believe that it was true of myself, but the seed of doubt was sown, and that seed of doubt made me ask that question with

particular intensity: why am I reading this? That's one kind of question that Emily Miller Budick's book *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction* (2015) is about. The subject is not the content, but the reading subject. Who reads? Who writes? What is the ethical position of that subject?

The other question that most people ask themselves while reading is "how I would have behaved under these circumstances." We often base our negative judgment of the people described on the wish to believe that we would have acted otherwise. There is an ethical obligation to understand all the features of the context and all the realities of that situation before we judge those people. Primo Levi said that when he addressed schoolchildren and talked to them about his experience in Auschwitz, they often asked him, "Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you try to escape?" Because in the old times the first duty of a prisoner of war was to try to escape. Then he had to explain to them why escape was impossible and why it was unethical: for one escapee, they would kill very many other people. All those features of this entirely new phenomenon went against our understanding of a romantic prison. Shalamov keeps saying that the prisoners in the camps were martyrs but not heroes. In other words, they did not resist actively, so they suffered as martyrs. And everybody somehow expects heroic behavior in the sense of active resistance. At the end of the 1970s, an American literary critic, Terrence Des Pres, wrote a book called *The Survivor* (1976) where he said that there is heroism in the survival itself. Survival without plunging into despair and without totally immoral behaviour towards others is also heroism. This book changed the attitudes of many readers.

Our suspension of judgement of camp inmates is necessary. The question is where it ends. You do not judge the survivors. Maybe you even imagine that you would have behaved the same meek way. I could easily imagine I could behave in the same way. But what about the collaborators? What about those prisoners who were at the service of the perpetrators? You can say that they are also survivors and victims. Where do you draw the line? There is now quite a lot of literature that tries to argue that some of the so-called "prominent" prisoners in the camps, who collaborated with the perpetrators, only pretended to be cruel in order to keep their position because they could actually do good to the other prisoners. Sometimes it's real and sometimes it's just a lame excuse, but from there, there is just one step towards the perpetrators, the guards, the killers. Can one project oneself into those? Can one suspend judgment about them? Where does one draw the line? There was a documentary by a Kampuchean director Rithy Panh about Tuol Sleng, the Pol Pot prison. It starts with showing a former guard who was cruel to the prisoners.

He said he had to be like that. It shows this guard washing his baby, playing with his baby, being a good son to his mother, being a good husband to his wife, and his mother said, "I don't understand what happened. I brought up my son to be a good man." And some of these former guards said, "If we had not done that, we would have been killed ourselves." That's how they present themselves, as themselves victims of the regime. Does our suspension of judgment extend to these people who were perpetrators? It's a big question.

There is this famous novel by Jonathan Littell called *The Kindly Ones* (2006) which is narrated in the first person by a fictional former SS officer who participated in all the worst things. He tries to argue that he himself was as much a victim of the regime as the people who were his victims. That's quite a popular argument. I think that one of the things that Littell wants to do with that book is to develop this argument so far that it would absolutely exhaust it and that nobody else could later on make it because it would be like scorched earth.

So basically one of the questions that we ask is about ourselves: where we would find ourselves in that situation? On which side, and how we might want to behave there? The more we know, the better qualified we are to try and answer this question. But there is a question of ethics in suspending judgment and in deciding where to stop suspending judgment, where to discontinue a train of thought.

Lan: And empathy also plays an important part in this reading process.

Toker: Absolutely. That is why Littell makes his protagonist speak in the first person and presents him as traumatized by difficult childhood. So he is a victim in his childhood and later on he becomes a victim of the regime though he is a perpetrator. A person who has had a difficult traumatic childhood immediately invites the reader's empathy, especially if he is the first-person narrator. And then little by little, he does such awful things that we have to stop, turn upon ourselves and ask again, how come we flowed sympathetically with him for a long while.

Forward Thinking, or Prospects of Literary Studies in the Future

Lan: You have been editor of the journal *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* for quite a few years, how is the contemporary literary studies focalized from that position? Are there any remarkable changes in recent years in the ways that scholars approach literary texts? What challenges are there in the future development of literary studies?

Toker: I think that one of the greatest challenges for literary studies is overcoming

the negative qualities of professionalization. Both in narratology and previously in the deconstructive school, people got very focused on the methodology of analysis. They forgot to enjoy literature. That is what I mean by excess professionalization. I think that part of our challenge is still to enjoy reading literature, to subject ourselves to the possibility of aesthetic experience, to read and enjoy without immediately thinking what article I can write about this. Reading can and perhaps should be a spiritual experience.

Methodologically speaking, we in the journal *Partial Answers* don't accept articles that simply apply a theory to a text. It can be done in student papers, which is a very important part of training, but at the level of the Ph.D., it's got to be transcended.

The second question is very tough. I cannot really answer it because people who send papers to us are of two kinds. There are either those who send their papers anywhere without considering what the journal is about; these are usually very weak papers. Or they are people who really study the self-description of the journal and send us paper in the genre that we are asking for. So I cannot really diagnose changes in current literary studies on the basis of what we get in the journal. Rather, I can see that at the conferences that I attend. I think that ethical criticism is certainly coming back on new grounds, not through discussions focused on what the character does or thinks right or wrong and where the character goes wrong. Current ethical criticism is not about that. It is still looking for ways of studying the ethics of literary form. The literary form itself has ethical repercussions.

Lan: May I also ask for your advice for young scholars doing literary studies? Are there any particularities that we should pay more attention to?

Toker: I very much believe in the complex of the first reading and repeated reading. I think that we should try to approach the first reading not as students of literature but as regular readers and try to enjoy it. What makes us literary scholars is that we read not necessarily what is in fashion right now; though I did make a point to read Harry Potter and things like that. One should expose oneself to that experience as a regular reader and only on the second reading approach the work as a literary critic. And then analyze not only the text but also one's own previous responses and one's current responses.

There's also the question of resisting the text or being a compliant reader. There was this very influential book by Judith Fetterley, called *The Resistant Reader* (1977), which led to a significant change of attitudes. Wayne C. Booth (1961) talks about the rhetoric of fiction as a matter of the implied reader flowing with

the text and being affected by the rhetoric of the text. Fetterley says that there are certain texts that have to be read resisting the system of values of the author. For instance, she gives a feminist reading of *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald; the critical consensus prior to her study treated the character of Daisy in a very dismissive way. What if we look at the whole story from a point of view which is more sympathetic to Daisy, resisting the narrator's system of values? Once a student of mine responded to a Jane Austen novel by saying, "I can't bear it. I can't bear reading about people who occupy themselves with just visiting each other, having dinners and parties, and caring about their clothes. Why should I read about them? What kind of people are they?" That's an example of resistant reading. My answer to her was that there is value in trying to understand what the world looked like from their point of view. Almost all of Henry James's characters are rich and do not have to worry about making a living; precisely because of that, they have more leisure for exploring human experience, human relationships and ethical issues, even though they forget that the pressures of making a living are also a very important part of human experience. What is the relationship between the possibility of compliant reading and resistant reading? With which do you start? There is no prescription. Maybe one starts resisting Jane Austen because her characters get on your nerves. And then on the second reading one looks at their world from their point of view, shifting out of ourselves a little and seeing what kind of a system of significances is created there. But one can also work the other way. One can first submit to the text and flow with it as an implied reader, as Booth and Iser would have it, and on the second reading become resistant, at least to some extent. That's freedom. One can go either way, but both possibilities have to be kept in mind as options.

One more piece advice that is very banal. As they say, the Devil is in the details and God is also in the details, figuratively speaking. The excellence of a work of art, I believe together with Nabokov, is in the details and in the handling of details.

Lan: Finally, the last question. May I ask what might be the next project you are planning to do?

Toker: I have two things in mind. One is maybe developing some thoughts on narratology that I put aside when I was working on the literature of concentration camps, especially because people who work in this field are very impatient of narratology for some reason, which is a pity.

I also want to write another book on Nabokov concentrating on his middle period, the last years before World War II and the early years after World War II, up

until *Lolita* maybe. I think that a big change took place for him during that period. He had been a very joyful person. There was a lot of joy in his life and in his poetry and fiction up to the mid-thirties. Then, owing to personal factors and the political situation, this changed. There was less and less place left for joy in his view of the world. Something else came to take this place. I want to show that change.

Lan: Thank you, Professor Toker, for taking this interview.

Toker: Thank you, Lan. It's a huge pleasure.

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