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*Literature as a Moral Laboratory*

I am very grateful to the members of the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* for awarding me the prestigious Feltrinelli Prize.

The past year has been the most difficult year of my entire life. Fourteen months ago, my beloved wife, Rivka passed away after a brief illness. The two of us shared 56 years of love and deep friendship. Ika, as everybody called her, was a psychoanalyst by profession, very warm and very wise, and I learned a great deal from her. She also inspired some of the female characters in my works. Though she earned her doctorate in Paris, she had become very attached to Italy in recent years, and I know how happy she would have been, to be with me at this festive event here in Rome, the marvelous city we visited dozens of times together.

My three children and their spouses are with us here today, true representatives of the spirit and wisdom and love of their mother.

Also here are the editors and directors of the Einaudi publishing house of Torino, with whom I have worked for more than thirty years. Without their devotion and expertise, my books would not be known in Italy. Also here with us are my publishers and editors from London and Amsterdam, as well as my wonderful and loyal translator from Hebrew into English.

I have been troubled for a long time, both as a writer and as a reader and teacher of literature, by the relationship between art in general – literature, theater and cinema, in particular – and what we call morality, ethics or moral values. It has been difficult in recent years to find in reviews of novels, stories, plays, or even films a direct reference to the moral issues raised by the work, or to the writer's good or bad moral judgment, or to the moral behavior of the characters in the work.

Very rarely, nowadays, are we able to hear a reader's cry of protest or wonder at the moral stance taken by a character or author in a work of literature. Even more rarely is it possible to find a reader or a critic bold enough to allow their moral judgment to influence their aesthetic evaluation of the work. The most common words in the language of criticism, both professional and personal, in evaluating a literary work, are credibility, complexity, depth, and – especially – novelty. Only very rarely is it possible to find words such as moral, value, right and good.

In his excellent book *The Company We Keep*, the American critic Wayne Booth complained that among all the various schools of literary criticism, there was none that defined itself as moral criticism. References to morality may be found within various categories of literary criticism – political, social, cultural, psychological, psychoanalytic, feminist, post-colonial– but straightforward, open discussion of the moral aspects of a text remains unfashionable. Until the end of the 19th century, lovers of literature took for granted that serious fiction was a means of moral education. But no longer.

What happened? Why do we encounter so many discussions of medical ethics, judicial ethics, the morality of war, and so on, while literary criticism, in the universities and popular media, withdraws from the discussion of morality? And why has literature itself been blurring the moral conflicts in the tissue of the text, and pushing them backstage?

I would like to offer five possible explanations.

The first explanation, it seems to me, springs from our deepened understanding of psychology, which uncovers the sources of human failings. As the French saying goes, *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* - to understand all is to forgive all. The more sophisticated our psychological understanding, the more difficult it is for us to make the simple and obvious moral judgments required of us when we confront a character like Shakespeare's Iago or Molière's Tartuffe or Dickens's Fagin.

Until the end of the 19th century, it was possible to define a literary character as evil and corrupt or good and pure. Today, it seems less easy for the serious modern novelist to present a major character whose good or bad qualities are a given element of the plot, requiring no further explanation. In our current way of thinking, there is no such thing as a person who is simply bad or good. Such a person is disturbed, damaged, deprived of love, a bundle of complexes inherited from parents or engendered by circumstances beyond the character's control. On the other hand, a good and pleasant character in a novel cannot be accepted at face value. We often suspect that his or her kindness and compassion are a mask that conceals and compensates for dark impulses.

In Camus's novel *The Stranger* - a work of great importance that I believe signaled a new era of modern literature after the Second World War - the protagonist, Mersault, shoots and kills an Arab man on a Algerian beach for no reason at all. According to "post-moral" criticism, he cannot be simply a bad person. He is "alienated" or "shallow", he does not understand the ways of the world. It is modernity that is guilty of his crime. In other cases, novelists will enlist childhood hardships in order to understand the moral distortion of the soul. Society, economic conditions, parent-child relations are placed on trial as collaborators in the character's evil deeds.

In his novel *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky provided few details about Raskolnikov's childhood, made little of his having lost his father as a child, and did not elaborate on his relationship with his mother and sister. He made these choices, I believe, so that psychology would not draw our attention away from the moral dilemma at the heart of the novel: Does an individual have a right to self-fulfillment via the murder of a so-called "human flea?" A murderer of this type is no longer possible in a contemporary novel.

Of course I do not think that psychological explanations eliminate all the moral dilemmas that arise within a text, but they do dull the immediate sharpness of these dilemmas and force us to confine our definitions of moral judgment to areas "covered" by psychology.

Recently, as psychoanalysis and its offshoots have taken hold in academic scholarship, literature is perceived as containing some unknown secret, or hidden trauma, conscious or unconscious, which are the key to complications in the plot or the lives of the characters. A father or mother who disappeared without a trace, or the suppressed memory of a rape,

offer the author opportunities for manipulative flights of fancy that easily create suspense in the plot.

But let me say that in my opinion most people do not conceal secrets or traumas from somewhere in their past that are the source of good or bad in their lives. The central human problem is the question of development, how people utilize or do not utilize their potential given their personal circumstances, making moral judgments and choices and leading to consequences that may be good or bad. The question of moral decisions made by a person at crucial junctures in his or her life is much more relevant, generally speaking, than any hidden secrets, real or imagined, that contemporary literature has often relied on to build a suspenseful plot.

The suicide of Anna Karenina does not derive from damaged relationships with her father or mother during her childhood, about which we know next to nothing. Her actions are a product of her present situation, and of her moral judgments and choices, good and bad.

The second reason for the withdrawal of moral judgment from literary criticism springs from the growing importance of the legal system in our lives, which gradually overshadows moral debate. More and more we tend to see the world through legal rather than ethical eyeglasses. Because we live in democratic societies, and have faith in our systems of lawmaking. We have come to assume that the place in which to settle disputes regarding good or bad is the courtroom, where sharp-tongued lawyers are sometimes able to prove that a murderer is not exactly a murderer, but something else. We identify what is good in accordance with what the law allows us and what is bad in accordance with what the law forbids us. If we are allowed to drive 160 kilometers an hour, it must be good, even it creates a clear danger to human life. Sexual harassment is what the law defines as sexual harassment, which frees us from the need to take a personal stance that defines the act as good or bad, and leaves the decision to the law. And because we feel that the legal system is trustworthy, we are quite content to let it, and not literature, do our "moral work" for us.

The third reason, I believe, is tied to the amazing development in recent years of the media in all its aspects. The media often deal with moral issues superficially, but also with great speed and efficiency. Literature often seems to lag behind the media in examining new moral issues – for example, those concerning medicine or the status of women or homosexuality – because the media can respond immediately to the demands of political

correctness, to moral sensitivities that demand greater equality between sectors of society and atonement for old injustices. The widespread exposure enjoyed by the media makes its "moral work" both popular and immediate, and it seems that nothing remains for literature except to save its honor and hide in its own little neurotic corner, and try to pluck out yet another undiscovered psychological nuance or two – or to lament the superficiality of human life.

The fourth reason for the decline of moral discourse is that art is judged mainly according to aesthetic criteria. Any discussion of moral issues, therefore, misses what critics consider to be the real debate that should be held about literature.

The fifth reason is based on the fear that any moral discussion runs the risk of censorship or self-censorship. Such censorship could arise not necessarily in countries with totalitarian governments, but also in countries that enjoy the democratic freedom to engage in stormy ideological debates over religion and politics. My generation of Israeli writers felt that our literary predecessors, who had fought in the War of Independence, had stamped their writing with too much ideology and morality. We believed that moral debates prevented literature from taking wing and flying, and created in the reader inhibitions that stopped him or her from opening up to deeper experiences that cannot, and should not, be judged merely according to their moral value.

Beyond all these reasons, the larger problem of moral literary criticism is whether there can really be objective criteria by which to conduct serious debate and research. The field of literary studies is doing its best to adopt clear and accurate tools for research. But what a writer sees as moral or immoral – or even amoral – in the behavior of the characters he created is not necessarily obvious to his or her readers. It is especially difficult to reach a consensus among readers on one moral judgment or another, when we tend more and more to assume, and respect, the multiplicity of cultural and moral codes in human society.

When literary scholarship involves itself with the analysis of philology or the form and structure of a text or even the psychological motives of the characters, it appeals first and foremost to the reader's comprehension and relies on a consensus that comes from a mutual reading of the text. But the moment it begins dealing with moral evaluation, it finds itself considering subjective issues that vary from reader to reader. In the final analysis, every

moral stance is personal. And because variations and nuances are what interest us in a literary text, it is hard to find a common language for scholarship and moral judgment.

I have only one reply to all these questions, which is, to me at least, also quite convincing: Whether we like it or not, every artistic work that deals with human relations has a moral aspect because all human relationships may be evaluated according to moral categories.

The existence of a moral aspect in every piece of prose is what caused Jean-Paul Sartre to define the essential difference between prose (including theater) and the other arts (including poetry) in his well-known book *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* In all the other arts, no significant regard is given to issues of morality in the form and artistic content of a work, whereas in prose, theater and cinema there exists a moral dimension in the mere fact of presenting the relationships between characters.

When the interpreter of a literary work – a story, a novel, a play or a film – focuses, if just as an exercise, only on the moral map of the work; and deliberately ignores psychology, as well as the historical, biographical, sociological or philological background, he can discover some amazing things. For example, how an author, by rhetorical means and the organization of details, can make the reader empathize with moral choices that are utterly opposed to his own values, or tolerate a flawed moral reading. For example, when we analyze the biblical story of Cain and Abel only according to the moral map we discover to our amazement that not only was the first murderer in the bible not punished for killing his brother, but was promoted after the murder to a higher status. Cain went from daily agricultural labor to becoming an architect who built an entire city and named for the son born to him after the murder. In Dante's *Inferno*, the first section of the Ninth Circle of Hell, where traitors are punished, is called "Caïna", named after Cain – but the Bible Scripture indicates otherwise. The Bible's slippery morality results in the upgrading of the first killer. It is possible to apply this moral compass to many different texts, and what we find is often astonishing.

Morality is not some distant shining star suspended in the sky of our lives. It is omnipresent; it can be found everywhere that human beings are conducting interpersonal relationships, from the intimacy of a marriage and family, to an individual's society, his nation, even to the international community. It may be that the commentator on a certain work of literature will find that its author or one of its heroes makes no reference whatsoever to questions of

ethics that are demanded by certain situations. The reader, however, is entitled to relate to this lack and to try to learn from it about the quality and intentions of the novel's heroes. Even the black holes left behind by the novel, those things that remain unsaid and undone, are an integral part of it, and their effect on the reading is part of the creative activity.

The withdrawal of literature from the scope of large-scale moral debate is not good either for literature or for morality. Despite the professional competence of the media and the importance of the courts of law, they cannot match the ability of literature to bring a person to a deep level of empathy. Imagine, for example, that instead of the wonderful book by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – which was published in 1852 and aroused such deep sympathy among readers, prompting so many Americans to join the struggle for the abolition of slavery – a TV crew had been sent to Uncle Tom's cabin to interview the slave and, to maintain a balance, his owners as well. I doubt if, under such circumstances, the spiritual, mythic and perhaps political results would have been the same.

Literature can be a laboratory for complicated moral issues that don't occur in life or in court, in order to sharpen our sensitivity and moral insight. It is through the artist that imaginary situations may be created that can yield new insights, just as in laboratories of medicine or physics we reach insights we could not derive from direct observation of nature. Take, for example, Euripedes' play *Alcestis*, about a woman who volunteers to die in place of her husband, and her husband agrees. The play opens up new and interesting dilemmas and intuitions about married life, which no reality could imitate. Or consider William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily", which shows the ability of townspeople in the American South to pretend to be unaware of a murder that took place in the town many years before, even as the killer, a woman, not only goes unpunished but becomes a person everyone is careful to honor.

There is a significant difference between the way in which literature creates moral catharsis, and the activity of the media. Literature does not expect its devotees to understand, but to identify. The power of this identification lies in the fact that the moral issue does not remain on the cognitive level, but becomes part of the reader's personality, his or her own personal problem. Thus, the moral touch, if it succeeds, shocks the deeper strata of the individual's soul.

Plato feared the effect of the negative morality of poets, and believed that they and their poetry had to be inspected very carefully before being granted a place in his ideal state. In his old age, Tolstoy spoke out against a certain kind of literature, including his own great novels, because he was concerned about their amoral effect on society. The two shared a common belief that art, especially literature, has a powerful spiritual influence and a clear moral affinity.

Nowadays such theories would be met with a smile of derision. Nowadays, the attitude to art and literature is not so serious and concerned, and no heavy responsibility is heaped upon them.

More than a century ago, in 1913, an angry audience in Paris rioted at the performance of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*. The rioters saw in this music a coarse provocation against all their values, not only musical but moral. Who would take the trouble today of protesting in the name of values of any kind – even uttering a polite cry – against an avant-garde piece of music or a new book? At most, there would be lack of interest, a shrug of the shoulders, or suspicion that this composition might in time turn out to be a new version of *The Rite of Spring*. In the world of entertainment, anything goes, and the only question is whether it was a success or not. That is why no one expects literature to deliver any "new tidings," rather merely an "experience."

In recent years we have seen the return of religion as a decisive factor, sometimes extreme and benighted, in the experience of millions of people. We see this clearly among Muslims throughout the world, we see it among Jews, we see it among evangelical Christians in the United States and Catholics in Eastern Europe. Even in pluralistic, multicultural India we see the rise of extremist Hinduism. Part of the successful return of religion as a decisive factor in the modern world derives, in my view, from the fact that religions supply their believers with codes of moral conduct, good ones and bad ones. Either way, these codes give believers a clearer grasp, sometimes extreme, of a world whose values change rapidly, whose technology creates media and moral chaos. If the makers of art and culture give up on the centrality of moral struggle in their works, and do not try to return it to the heart of the creative endeavor, and make do with relativism, postmodernism, ethical nihilism, and political correctness, they will abandon an honored role that was always vital in the history of culture – a job that that no one else can do.

Let me conclude with a personal remark Writers of Hebrew literature in Israel over the last century, and especially in the last fifty years, following the Six-Day War of June 1967, in particular, felt compelled to deal with ideological and moral questions that were mainly concerned with the conflict with the Palestinians and the development of Israeli democracy. My colleagues and I felt the obligation to discuss the moral dimensions of Israeli life not only in our works, but in active participation in ideological and moral debates in the public sphere. To a certain degree my colleagues felt that the Israeli public demands this from writers, rather than painters, musicians, actors or other artists. It is the authors and playwrights and filmmakers who deal with human relations, and therefore with moral questions, and cannot confine themselves to the ivory tower of creativity without also speaking out in the public arena.

Although most of the public did not agree with the opinions and criticisms that my friends and I expressed, the lines of communication remained open, and people listened to us, by and large, with respect.

This climate of tolerance was a result of two factors: First, the Zionist leaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were often writers, whose imagination and moral sensitivity enabled them to foresee, as rabbis and Jewish community officials generally did not, the whirlwind of destruction that awaited European Jewry.

Secondly, in the Jewish tradition, the prophets, men of vision, moralists and critics, were accorded greater respect than kings and other rulers. In the Bible, their words of righteous opposition are what endure – not the excuses and propaganda of monarchs.