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Introduction: On the Nobel Prize, 1976

Literature and Morality: Dain A. Trafton

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LITERATURE AND MORALITY:

The Case for Reviving an Old-Fashioned View

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats,
"The Second Coming," 11. 1-8

In every society there are ideas that possess special power to cause distress, that evoke fears and hostilities, and that come to be surrounded by taboos. If one wishes to avoid the hostility and contempt of one's fellows or even stronger forms of condemnation, one must either refrain from mentioning such ideas entirely or refer to them only in ways that indicate clearly one's distaste. Imagine the circumspection with which one would have had to pronounce the words "republic" or "liberty" in a medieval monarchy.

Our society prides itself on its freedom from taboos of all kinds, including the taboos that attach to ideas. Today, with the encouragement of intellectuals, artists, teachers, journalists, and other fashioners of opinion and taste, Americans are becoming accustomed to think, do, watch, and say without much sense of outrage things that even a few years ago would have been deeply shocking. By its advocates, this trend towards greater and greater permissiveness in every area of life is said to be healthy and liberating. Soon, we are assured, we shall be happily free from the frustrating taboos that bedeviled earlier, less liberal societies. In light of this optimism, however, it is ironic to observe that as our taboos against ideas and activities once considered brutal and obscene have gradually disappeared, new taboos have emerged; and ideas and activities that formerly seemed innocent or noble have now become suspect.

The Taboo Against Moral Judgments of Literature

The idea that literature ought to perform a moral function in society, that novels, poems, and the various forms of drama (including films and television) should in some way make people better, occupies an honorable place in the history of our civilization. It can be traced

from Shelley and Goethe back to the Greeks. During the last one hundred years or so, however, the moral approach to literature has gradually slipped from favor among intellectuals and professors, and nowadays it is hardly mentioned in most of our universities and colleges or in our leading literary journals except as an outmoded notion of some historical interest but of no real importance for our time. Modern discussions of the relationship of morality to literature state or imply that moral judgments about a writer's work are not only beside the point but also dangerous and likely to lead to book burning or other forms of repressive censorship that would destroy the democratic tradition of free speech. A kind of intellectual taboo against discussing the moral dimensions of literature has come into existence. Of course it is true that to argue publicly in America in 1977 that literature should be moral will not cause one to be thrown into prison, but imagine the response that one would receive at a literary cocktail party in New York or Chicago or San Francisco, or in a literature class at Yale or Michigan or Berkeley if one were to contend, say, that James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for all its greatness, should be considered an immoral book. The reaction would be indignant scorn or amused contempt, but in either case the effect would be to discredit, even silence, the unorthodox idea without a thoughtful hearing; liberal taboos operate with a subtle ruthlessness that makes physical violence unnecessary.

The impact of these taboos extends far beyond the classroom and the literary circles of our major cities. Many students now arrive at college from high school already persuaded that only an old-fashioned or bigoted person would want to question the moral value of a book or film. Even middle-class Americans with high personal standards of morality grow uneasy when asked to bring those standards to bear on the novels they read or the television programs they watch. In private, they will deplore them, but they prove reluctant to speak out in public against what they privately condemn. They are so unsure of their moral position that they prefer to call it a matter of taste. In their hearts, they fear the contempt of liberal intellectuals, of professors, and even of their own children. Thus the taboo against subjecting literature to moral judgments works in unexpected places to create and perpetuate an atmosphere in which pornography and the depiction of every kind of perversion can flourish and be passed off with an air of enlightened righteousness as art. As Yeats says, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Most of the people who come under the power of the taboo against subjecting literature to moral judgments can give no rational account of their attitude beyond vague and sometimes shamefaced expressions of sympathy with the principle of free speech. They have simple and unreflectingly imbibed another tenet of the conventionally permissive liberalism

that dominates the spirit of our time. Behind this absence of reflection, however, lies a philosophical position that has been articulated by a number of modern thinkers, and the view that literature should be considered free from the constraints of morality rests finally on three fundamental arguments:

1. that literary creation is a special, possibly divine, activity, different from and superior to all other activities and therefore not liable to moral or any other kind of control;

2. that what is essential about a work of literature is its form rather than its content or moral message — the way the thing is said not what is said, the expressiveness of sound and rhythm, the brilliance of the images, the freshness of the diction, and the intricacy of overall form not the meaning;

3. that literature reveals a unique truth about people and things, and that one should consequently immerse oneself in the literary experience without concerning oneself about its moral effect.

There is a crucial objection that pertains to all three arguments. It derives from the fact that no matter what the quality or source of the writer's inspiration, no matter how dazzling his technique, and no matter how vivid his rendering of people or things, whenever he presents any human thought, action, or emotion that raises questions of right and wrong he cannot avoid expressing a moral judgment himself. The very words that he chooses to describe a rape, for example, or an act of generous love, or the passion of hatred, or lust, or heroic deed will in each case explicitly or implicitly convey his attitude towards what he is describing. Even if he seeks to give an objective description, he inevitably expresses a moral judgment, for to describe a murder clinically is not to eliminate all moral judgments but rather to present by implication an uncoventional one: that the moral revulsion against murder that is felt by most people is wrong, that murder is, in fact, morally unobjectionable. Futhermore, since the words which a writer uses not only reveal his own ethics but also influence us, his readers, to see life as he does, we must be prepared to evaluate his influence and to judge his work *morally*. Otherwise we simply abandon our responsibility and submit like sheep to whatever the writer wants us to think and feel. We must not be intimidated by the taboo against doing so; on the contrary, we must seek to break it down, for it is not

only pernicious but also founded on a false view of what literature really is and how it functions in the world.

In doing so, however, we must be careful to give the lie both by our words and our deeds to those who contend that moral criticism of literature necessarily springs from a narrow and censorious spirit, and leads to repressing works of true imaginative genius while fostering dully conventional pious tracts. There is no connection between the moral view of literature and the repression of genius; the former seems to have been no great hinderance to Euripides, Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Corneille, or Goethe. To demand moral responsibility from writers is not imcompatible with the flowering of a profoundly humane literature but is in fact conducive to it.

Shakespeare's Moral Greatness

Shakespeare offers the most instructive example. He shows us how a writer working in an age in which men of letters were expected to exercise their craft with moral responsibility, and in which censorship was a prerogative of authoritarian powers, could produce work of the highest order technically and imaginatively as well as of a profound and broad-minded morality. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare deals with a monster, a treacherous murderer, who finally comes to the nihilistic view that life "is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing." A narrow moralist, the kind so many contemporary intellectuals fear will flourish if a moral view of literature comes again to prevail, might have exhibited Macbeth's character without any sympathy or imaginative understanding, might have depicted him as nothing more than a bloody villain whose career and death confirm the commonplace that "crime does not pay." Shakespeare's greatness leads us to condemn Macbeth, of course, but only after we have come to know in detail the inner torment of Macbeth's soul, the uncertainty and fear of the early scenes, the growing desperation of the middle ones, and finally the nihilistic despair and grandly pathetic show of manliness at the end. Shakespeare brings us to a deep, imaginative understanding of evil through the sheer power of poetry; Macbeth's temptations, sufferings, and surrender to his passions broaden our humanity; we are brought to perceive the real meaning of those moments in our lives when we have been tempted to hurt someone else, perhaps even a friend or relation, in order to advance ourselves. The play forces us to recognize that in condemning Macbeth we also condemn something in ourselves. Thus Shakespeare's art manages to be moral without being moralistic.

On the other hand, the career of John Updike, a contemporary writer of skill and reputation, shows what happens when moral standards succumb to fashionable taboos. Updike's early stories and novels, like *Rabbit Run* (1960), exhibit a quasi-Shakespearean pattern of moral design wedded to an imaginative insight into the experience of evil, but his later work abandons this pattern in favor of a cheap mixture of titillation and sophistry. *Couples* (1968) probably marks the turning point in his career. The novel presents itself as a commentary on the ways in which the contemporary middle-class obsession with sex destroys society, family, and individual in suburban America; but the sexual descriptions go far beyond, both in number and vividness, what is necessary to create an image of the sexual Hell in which the characters live. On the contrary, the novel's fascination with sex is itself obsessive and reveals a complicity with the very evil that Updike pretends to be condemning. The moral stance of *Couples* is ambivalent, rather like that of a preacher who turns out to be a Peeping Tom. It appears to be designed to appeal simultaneously to two very different audiences — the traditional audience that admired *Rabbit Run* and the new, "liberated" audience that developed in the 60's under the influence of the Filthy Speech Movement, *Playboy*, and the *Village Voice*. The critics, however, carefully avoided moral judgments, lauded Updike's style, wit, characterization, and plot structure, and the book became an enormous public success.

Since *Couples*, moreover, the level of moral responsibility in Updike's fiction has sunk even lower. Although his novels remain conventional in form, their content conforms more and more clearly to a modish demand for whatever is unrestrained and outrageous. In *A Month of Sundays* (1975), parts of which appeared first in *Playboy*, Updike chooses for his hero a man who is in fact both a preacher and a Peeping Tom. This unconventional man of the cloth, the Reverend Thomas Marshfield, 41 years old, balding, beset by yearnings for forbidden pleasure, falls into adultery first with his organist and then with half the women of his congregation, tries to ease his conscience by making his wife available to his assistant, is denounced to the vestry by the jealous organist, and eventually finds himself in a sanatorium for wayward clergymen. While there, he writes about his experiences, partly as a prescribed form of therapy but more enthusiastically in the hope that his detailed accounts will be read by and arouse lust in the lady who runs the sanatorium; they are, they do, and the novel ends with a lyric tribute to the wonders of sex.

If all this were merely a bawdy tale, leavened and put in perspective by a Chaucerian sense of humor, Updike might have written an hilarious satire on the follies of a "swinging" clergy-

man. Unfortunately, however, although the book is funny, and although the joke is often on the hero, the real force of the with and humor is directed not towards misuses of sex but towards a variety of serious, or even sacred, things, from conventional morality to philosophy, theology, and even the sacraments of religion. The result is that those things are belittled, and sex gradually emerges as the best life has to offer. When the Reverend Mr. Marshfield describes the steps in his seduction of his wife before their marriage as a counterpoint to his study of the various periods in the history of western thought, the effect is to ridicule Plato, St. Augustine, and Kant by contrasting their commitment to the life of the mind with the urgency, the "relevance" of sexual gratification. When Marchfield imagines himself preaching a sermon justifying adultery, we are not treated to a comic exposé of sophistry but are rather asked to take seriously a libertine blasphemy. Marshfield compares the institution of marriage to the law of the Old Testament, and argues that just as the law was superseded by grace, so the constraints of marriage should be cast aside for the free love to be found in adultery; illicit sex is more intense and therefore truer than fidelity.

In spite of the cleverness with which Updike manipulates ideas and impressive names from the history of thought, passages such as these are not only offensive but shallow. The least we should expect from an innovator in morality is a careful refutation of the old values and a reasonable defense of the new. From *A Month of Sundays*, all we get is a parade of facile dirty jokes coupled with pornographic appeals to admit and indulge the passions. As offensive and shallow as it is, however, this novel, like *Couples*, has gone generally unchallenged on moral grounds, while receiving widespread praise for the skill with which it is written. Indeed, there is no way to attack the book effectively unless one addresses oneself to its moral dimension, and few critics dare to break the taboo that forbids such an approach. The taboo must be broken, however, for books like *A Month of Sundays* are polluting. According to the tradition of literary criticism that stretches from Plato down into the nineteenth century, imaginative literature has an extraordinary power to change things for better or for worse; and while one book obviously will not by itself overturn civilization, an accumulation of sophistical books holding the values of hard thinking and self-restraint up to contempt, and praising self-serving intellectual cleverness will prove destructive. Are not the values of restraint ones that have characterized free peoples? Do not the values of licentiousness more commonly lead to servility? Such considerations will be scoffed at by those who aspire to be the leaders of opinion in our society, but their scoffing will just betray the intellectual arrogance that so often accompanies an even deeper intellectual servility.

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