

Guest Editor's Preface

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Western literature originated from mythical narration, and its ethical purpose, as it is the case for every kind of knowledge, was to teach the necessary values to maintain alive the whole community and protect it, inside or outside, from any type of violence. Therefore, one of its problems has been its relationship to religious faith, that is the search for divine truth, while literature (like poetry and drama) does not lead the soul towards an ascetic path, but rather towards the most modern types of science, knowledge and questions about the sense of human life. A lot of works deemed to be against Christian faith, in fact, have been censured by the "Sant'Uffizio". Literature uses a symbolic language, made powerful by rhetoric and eloquence, organizing its own field, separated but in communication with the other fields of knowledge.

Literature does not look for any truth, this is the task of philosophy, a quarrelsome and sometimes bloody subject, which is however excluded from the places where power is exercised. Instead literary rhetoric, peaceful and bloodless, has the power of persuasion, which is the prerogative of those who eschew violence. Every great novelist, or poet, or playwright, who tries to represent the sense of the world, defines his own aesthetics. According to the competence of their readers, they can reduce or widen the literary field. Up to the nineteenth century, the role of literature was based on values as truth and morality, to be taught and transmitted to the young people. But at the end of the nineteenth century, French symbolism reduced the field and separated it from the other kinds of knowledge: it was the "art for the sake of the art", and its ethics lied in the greatness of the artist fighting against the social conventions of the bourgeoisie whose supreme values were money and power.

The Neorealist authors, on the contrary, opened the literary field to a large number of readers, and novelists felt engaged to fight against all political and cultural abuse. Between these two extremes there are a lot of other different relations that the artists may entertain with the historical and theoretical problems relevant to their specific age. Usually writers have a critical stance towards every kind of intolerance, oppression, fanaticism, and try to understand the reasons why people choose a specific position in the political, moral, religious, economic, ethical realms. Rhetoric and eloquence become essential tools to transmit these values to others but, in the last century, all writers usually refuse to ascribe any didactic or edifying purpose to art.

It is not a contradiction: writers, who pay much attention to the development of all knowledge concerning human life, are always conscious that a better knowledge of the psychological processes reveals the conditionings of human free will; it is therefore difficult to pass a moral judgment in certain questions. Moral judgment, in fact, seems to justify a position which excludes the legitimacy of any moral point of view in evaluating a literary work. Literary ethics is not direct but indirect, it does not teach a specific doctrine but rather a way of thinking and seems to justify a position which excludes the legitimacy of any moral point of view in evaluating a literary work.

Literature accustoms us to enter in the minds and in the emotions of other persons and therefore enables us to compare different feelings and positions. We can speak of something like a meta-ethics. In this branch of philosophy it is possible to find the deontological principles of a writer who wants to talk about ethics. One of the substantial points of a literary work is its capacity to arouse feelings of sympathy and empathy in the reader, to whom the author speaks.

Today literature is more and more missing part of its public and therefore its own specific language. Symbols and literary rhetoric have been degraded to commonplaces and have been transmitted to the mass literature, which does not criticize but rather praise current values. The market ethics is the ethics of progress, of production, of technological innovation, of competition and of exploitation. The literature and the arts are now perceived as a waste of time and energy, an egotistic luxury. New media are producing stories quite different from the past and from its rhetoric. The problem now consists in understanding that it is exactly in the presumed uselessness of literature that lies the power of its ethical mission.