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Individual Language and Mass Language

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Good evening,

To open the International Literature Festival Berlin as an Israeli author is not only a great honor, but also a conjuncture that would have been unthinkable until not so many years ago, and even today, I cannot be indifferent to its significance.

Despite the close relationship between Israel and Germany today—and between Israelis and Germans, between Jews and Germans—even now there is a place in one's mind and in one's heart, where certain statements must be filtered through the prisms of time and memory, where they are refracted into the entire spectrum of colors and shades. As I stand here before you, in Berlin, I cannot help but begin with these thoughts, which are constantly refracted within me, in that prism of time and memory.

I was born and raised in Jerusalem, in a neighborhood and in a family in which people could not even utter the word 'Germany.' They found it difficult to say 'Holocaust,' too, and spoke only of "what happened *over there*."

It is interesting to note that in Hebrew, Yiddish, and every other language they speak, when Jewish people refer to the Holocaust they tend to speak of what happened "over there," whereas non-Jews usually speak in terms of "what happened *then*." There is a vast difference between *there* and *then*. 'Then' means—in the past tense; 'then' enfolds within it something that happened and ended, and is no longer. While 'there,' conversely, suggests that somewhere out there, in the distance, the thing that happened is still occurring, constantly growing stronger

alongside our daily lives, and that it may re-erupt. It is not decisively over. Certainly not for us, the Jews.

As a child, I often heard the term “the Nazi beast,” and when I asked the adults who this beast was, they refused to tell me, and said there were things a child should not know. Years later, I wrote in *See Under: Love* about Momik, the son of Holocaust survivors who never tell him what really happened to them “over there.” The frightened Momik imagines the Nazi beast as a monster that controlled a land called “over there,” where it tortured the people Momik loves and did things to them that hurt them forever and denied them the ability to live a full life.

When I was four or five, I heard for the first time of Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi-hunter. I felt a great sense of relief: finally, I thought, there is someone courageous enough to fight the beast, even willing to hunt it down! Had I known how to write at the time, I might have written Wiesenthal a letter full of the detailed and practical questions that were preoccupying me, because I imagined that this hunter probably knew everything about his prey.

My generation, the children of the early 1950s in Israel, lived in a thick and densely populated silence. In my neighborhood, people screamed every night from their nightmares. More than once, when we walked into a room where adults were telling stories of the war, the conversation would stop at once. We did pick up an occasional sentence fragment: “The last time I saw him was on *Himmelstrasse* in Treblinka,” or, “She lost both her children in the first *Aktion*.”

Every day, at twenty minutes past one, there was a ten-minute program on the radio, in which a female announcer with a glum and rhythmic voice read the names of people searching for relatives lost during the war and in the Holocaust: *Rachel, daughter of Perla and Abraham Seligson from Przemysl, is looking for her little sister Leah’leh, who lived in Warsaw between the years... Eliyahu Frumkin, son of Yocheved and Hershl Frumkin from Stry, is looking for his wife Elisheva, née Eichel, and his two sons, Yaakov and Meir...* And so on and so forth. Every lunch of my childhood was spent listening to the sounds of this quiet lament.

When I was seven, the Eichmann trial was held in Jerusalem, and then we listened to the radio during dinner when they broadcast descriptions of the horrors. You could say that my generation lost its appetite, but there was another loss, too. It was the loss of something deeper, which we did not understand at the time, of course, and which is still being deciphered throughout the course of our lives. Perhaps what we lost was the illusion of our parents’ power to protect us from the terrors of life. Or perhaps we lost our faith in the possibility that we, the Jews, would ever live a complete, secure life, like all other nations have. And perhaps, above

all, we felt the loss of the natural, childlike faith—faith in man, in his kindness, in his compassion.

About two decades ago, when my oldest son was three, his pre-school commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day as it did every year. My son did not understand much of what he was told, and he came home confused and frightened. “Dad, what are Nazis? What did they do? Why did they do it?” And I did not want to tell him. I, who had grown up within the silence and fragmented whispers that had filled me with so many fears and nightmares, who had written a book about a boy who almost loses his mind because of his parents’ silence, suddenly understood my parents and my friends’ parents who chose to be mute.

I felt that if I told him, if I even so much as cautiously alluded to what had happened *over there*, something in the purity of my three-year-old son would be polluted; that from the moment such possibilities of cruelty were formulated in his childlike, innocent consciousness, he would never again be the same child.

He would no longer be a child at all.

When I published *See Under: Love* in Israel, some critics wrote that I belonged to the “second generation,” and that I was the son of “Holocaust survivors.” I am not. My father immigrated to Palestine from Poland as a child, in 1936. My mother was born in Palestine, before the State of Israel was established.

And yet I am. I am the son of “Holocaust survivors” because in my home too, as in so many Israeli homes, a thread of deep anxiety was stretched out, and with almost every move you made, you touched it. Even if you were very careful, even if you hardly made any unnecessary movements, you still felt that constant quiver of a profound lack of confidence in the possibility of existence. A suspicion towards man and what might erupt from him at any moment.

In our home too, at every celebration, with every purchase of a new piece of furniture, every time a new child was born in the neighborhood, there was a feeling that each such event was one more word, one more sentence, in the intensely conducted dialogue with *over there*. That every presence echoed an absence, and that life, the simplest of daily routines, the most trivial oscillations over “should the child be allowed to go on the school trip?” or “is it worth renovating the apartment?” somehow echoed what happened over there: all those things that managed to survive the *there*, and all those that did not; and the life lessons, the acute knowledge that had been burned in our memory.

This became all the more pertinent when greater decisions were at stake: Which profession should we choose? Should we vote right-wing or left-wing? Marry or stay single? Have another child, or is one enough? Should we even bring a child into this world? All these decisions and

acts, small and large, amounted to a huge, practically superhuman effort to weave the thin fabric of everydayness over the horrors beneath. An effort to convince ourselves that despite everything we know, despite everything engraved on our bodies and souls, we have the capacity to live on, and to keep choosing life, and human existence.

Because for people like myself, born in Israel in the years after the Holocaust, the primary feeling—about which we could not talk at all, and for which we may not have had the words at the time—was that for us, for Jews, death was the immediate interlocutor. That life, even when it was full of the energies and hopes and fruitfulness of a newly revived young country, still comprised an enormous and constant effort to escape the dread of death.

You may say, with good reason, that this is in fact the basic human condition. Certainly it is so, but for us it had daily and pressing reminders, open wounds and fresh scars, and representatives who were living and tangible, their bodies and souls crushed.

In Israel of the fifties and sixties, and not only during times of extreme despair, but precisely at those moments when the great commotion of 'nation-building' waned, in the moments when we tired a little, just for an instant, of being a miracle of renewal and re-creation, in those moments of the twilight of the soul, both private and national, we could immediately feel, in the most intimate way, the band of frost that suddenly tightens around our hearts and says quietly but firmly: *How quickly life fades. How fragile it all is. The body, the family. Death is true, all else is an illusion.*

Ever since I knew I would be an author, I knew I would write about the Holocaust. I think these two convictions came to me at the same time. Perhaps also because from a very young age I had the feeling that all the many books I had read about the Holocaust had left unanswered a few simple but essential questions. I had to ask these questions of myself, and I had to reply in my own words.

As I grew up, I became increasingly aware that I could not truly understand my life in Israel, as a man, as a father to children, as a writer, as an Israeli, as a Jew, until I wrote about my unlived life, *over there,* in the Holocaust. And about what would have happened to me had I been *over there* as a victim, and as one of the murderers.

I wanted to know *both* these things. One was not enough.

Namely: if I had been a Jew under the Nazi regime, a Jew in a concentration camp or a death camp, what could I have done to save something of myself, of my selfhood, in a reality in which people were stripped not only of their clothes but also of their names, so that they became—to others—numbers tattooed on an arm. A reality in which people's previous lives were taken away from them—their family, their friends, their profession, their loves, their talents.

A reality in which millions of people were relegated, by other human beings, to the lowest rung of existence: to being nothing more than flesh and blood intended for destruction with the utmost efficiency.

What was the thing inside me that I could hold up against this attempt at erasure? What was the thing that could preserve the human spark within me, in a reality entirely aimed at extinguishing it?

One can answer this question only about one's self, in private. But perhaps I can suggest a possible path to the answer. In the Jewish tradition there is a legend, or a belief, that every person has a small bone in his body called the *luz*, located at the tip of the spine, which enfolds the essence of a person's soul. This bone cannot be destroyed. Even if the entire human body is shattered, crushed or burned, the *luz* bone does not perish. It stores a person's spark of uniqueness, the core of his selfhood. According to the belief, this bone will be the source of man's resurrection.

Those of you who would like to find their own response to the question may, when they go home, choose to gather their thoughts and consider: What is the thing within me that is the true root of my soul? What is the quality, the essence, the final spark that will remain in me even when all other things are extinguished? What is the thing that has such great and concerted power that I will be recreated out of it, in an extremely private sort of 'big bang'?

Once in a while I ask people close to me what they believe their *luz* is, and I have heard many varied answers. Several writers, and artists in general, have told me that their *luz* is creativity, the passion to create and the urge to produce. Religious people, believers, have often said that their *luz* is the divine spark they feel inside. One friend answered, after much thought: parenthood, fatherhood. And another friend whom I asked, immediately replied that her *luz* was her longing for the things and people she missed. A woman who was roughly ninety at the time talked about the love of her life, a man who committed suicide over sixty years ago: he was her *luz*.

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The second question I asked while writing *See Under: Love* is closely related to the first one, and in some ways even derives from it: I asked myself how an ordinary, normal person – as most Nazis and their supporters were – becomes part of a mass-murder apparatus. In other words, what is the thing that I must suspend within myself, that I must dull, repress, so that I can ultimately collaborate with a mechanism of murder? What must I kill within me to be capable of

killing another person or people, to desire the destruction of an entire people, or to silently accept it?

Perhaps I should ask this question even more pointedly: Am I myself, consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively, through indifference or with mute acceptance, collaborating at this very moment with some process that is destined to wreak havoc on another human being, or on another group of people?

“The death of one man is a tragedy,” Stalin said, “but the death of millions is only statistics.” How do tragedies become statistics for us? I am not saying, of course, that we are all murderers. Of course not. Yet it seems that most of us manage to lead a life of almost total indifference to the suffering of entire nations, near and far, and to the distress of hundreds of millions of human beings who are poor and hungry and weak and sick, whether in our own countries or in other parts of the world. We are capable of developing apathy and alienation towards the suffering of the foreigners who come to work for us, and towards the misery of people under occupation—ours, and others’—and to the anguish of billions of people living under any kind of dictatorship or enslavement.

With wondrous ease we create the necessary mechanisms to separate ourselves from the suffering of others. Intellectually and emotionally, we manage to detach the causal relationship between, for example, our economic affluence—in the sated and prosperous Western countries—and the poverty of others. Between our own luxuries and the shameful working conditions of others. Between our air-conditioned, motorized quality of life and the ecological disasters it brings about.

These “Others” live in such appalling conditions that they are not usually able to even ask the questions I am asking here. After all, it is not only genocide that can eradicate a person’s *luz*: hunger, poverty, disease and refugee status can defile and slowly kill the soul of an individual, and sometimes of a whole people.

There are many terrible things occurring not far from us, for which we are unwilling to take any personal responsibility, either through active involvement or empathy. It is convenient for us, where the burden of personal responsibility is concerned, to become part of a crowd, a faceless crowd with no identity, seemingly free of responsibility and absolved of blame.

Perhaps it is only in this global reality, where so much of our life is lived in a mass-dimension, that we can be so indifferent to mass destruction. For it is the very same indifference that the vast majority of the world displays time after time, whether during the Armenian Holocaust or the Jewish Holocaust, in Rwanda or in Bosnia, in the Congo, in Darfur, and in many other places.

And perhaps, then, this is the great question that people living in this age must relentlessly ask themselves: In what state, at which moment, do I become part of the faceless crowd, “the masses”?

There are a number of ways to describe the process whereby the individual is swallowed up in the crowd, or agrees to hand over parts of himself to mass-control. Since we, here, are people of literature and language, I will choose the one closest to our interests and to our way of life: I become part of the “masses” when I give up the right to think and formulate my own words, in my own language, instead accepting automatically and uncritically the formulations and language that others dictate.

I become “the masses” when I stop formulating my own choices and the moral compromises I make. When I stop formulating them over and over again, with fresh new words each time, words that have not yet eroded in me, not yet congealed in me, which I cannot ignore or defend myself against, and which force me to face the decisions I have made, and to pay the price for them.

The masses, as we know, cannot exist without *mass-language*—a language that will consolidate the multitude and spur it on to act in a certain way, formulating justifications for its acts and simplifying the moral and emotional contradictions it may encounter. In other words, the language of the masses is a language intended to liberate the individual from responsibility for his actions, to temporarily sever his private, individual judgment from his sound logic and natural sense of justice.

To illustrate the encounter between one individual—a remarkably exceptional one, with a uniquely personal language—and “mass language,” or between tragedy and statistics, I enlist the case of the Polish Jewish author Bruno Schulz. I am referring to the story of his murder during the Second World War, in the ghetto of his town, Drohobycz. It is a well-known episode, one that is probably inaccurate and may only be a legend, a fictional anecdote, which emerged during the years when the “Bruno Schulz myth” was being constructed by his admirers all over the world.

But even if it is a fictional anecdote, it touches a profound and real place. “Anecdotes are essentially faithful to the truth,” writes Ernesto Sábato, “precisely because they are fictional, invented detail by detail, until they fit a certain person exactly.” And so even if this particular account of Bruno Schulz’s death is untrue, what it evokes is essentially faithful to the truth, certainly to Schulz’s own ironic, tragic truth, and to the horror of the encounter between “individual” and “mass.” And so I will retell it the way I first heard it:

In the Drohobycz ghetto during the war, there was an S.S. officer who exploited Schulz and compelled him to paint murals in his home. An adversary of this S.S. officer, a Nazi commander himself, who was involved in a dispute with him over a gambling debt, happened to meet Bruno Schulz on the street. He drew his pistol and shot Schulz dead, to hurt his patron. According to the rumor, he then went to his rival and told him: “I killed your Jew.” “Very well,” the officer replied, “now I will kill your Jew.”

I learned of this tale soon after I had finished reading Bruno Schulz’s stories for the first time. I remember that I closed the book, left my house, and walked around for several hours as if in a fog. My state was such that, quite simply, I did not wish to live. I did not wish to live in a world where such things were possible. And such people. And such a way of thinking. A world in which a language that enables such monstrosities as that sentence was possible.

“I killed your Jew.” “Very well, now I will kill your Jew.”

I wrote *See Under: Love*, among other reasons, to restore my will to live and my love of life. Perhaps also to heal from the insult I felt on behalf of Bruno Schulz—the insult at the way his murder was described and “explained.” The inhuman, crude description, as if human beings were interchangeable. As if they were merely a part of some mechanical system, or an accessory, which can be replaced with another. As if they were only statistics.

Because with Bruno Schulz, every sliver of reality is full of personality: every passing cloud, every piece of furniture, every dressmaker’s mannequin, fruit-bowl, puppy, or ray of light—each and every entity, even the most trivial, has its own personality and essence. And on every page and in every passage of his writing, life is bursting with content and meaning. It becomes worthy of its name, a colossal effort that occurs simultaneously on all layers of consciousness and unconsciousness, illusion and dream and nightmare, in all its nuances, in all the vessels of language and sensation and emotion. Every line Schulz writes is in defiance of what he calls “the fortified wall that looms over meaning,” and a protest against the terror of vapidity, banality, routine, stupidity, stereotyping, the tyranny of the simplistic, the masses.

When one reads Bruno Schulz, when one is willing to be exposed to the complete worldview imprinted on every page he writes, one can suddenly experience every phenomenon seeping back into its roots, into its initial meaning, its most authentic, bold pulse of life. Its *luz*—and ours, as we read it. We suddenly want more. We know that we *can* want more. That life is more than what dies with us ephemeral beings.

When I finished reading Bruno Schulz’s book, I realized that he was giving me, in his work, one of the keys to writing about the Holocaust. To write not about the death and the destruction, but about life, about what the Nazis destroyed in such a habitual, industrial, mass-minded way.

I also recall that with the arrogance of a young writer I told myself that I wanted to write a book that would tremble on the shelf. That the vitality it contained would be tantamount to the blink of an eye in one person's life. Not "life" in inverted commas, life that is nothing more than a languishing moment in time, but the sort of life Schulz gives us in his writing. A life of the living. A life in which we are not merely refraining from killing the other, but rather giving him or her new life, revitalizing a moment that has passed, an image seen a thousand times, a word uttered a thousand times.

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The world we live in today may not be as overtly and unequivocally cruel as the one created by the Nazis, but there are certain mechanisms at work that have similar underlying principles. Mechanisms that blur human uniqueness and evade responsibility for the destiny of others. A world in which fanatic, fundamentalist forces seem to increase day by day, while others gradually despair of any hope for change.

The values and horizons of this world, the atmosphere that prevails in it and the language that dominates it, are dictated to a great extent by what is known as "mass media" or "mass communication." The term was coined in the 1930s, when sociologists began to refer to "mass society." But are we truly aware of the significance of this term today, and of the process it has gone through? Do we consider the fact that, to a large extent, "mass media" today is not only media designed for the masses, but that in many ways it also *turns its consumers into the masses?*

It does so with the belligerence and the cynicism that emanate from all its manifestations; with its shallow, vulgar language; with the over-simplification and self-righteousness with which it handles complex political and moral problems; with the kitsch in which it douses everything it touches—the kitsch of war and death, the kitsch of love, the kitsch of intimacy.

A cursory look would indicate that these kinds of media actually focus on particular personas, rather than on the masses. On the individual rather than the collective. But this is a dangerous illusion: although mass media emphasizes and even sanctifies the individual, and seems to direct the individual more and more towards himself, it is ultimately directing him *only* towards himself—his own needs, his clear and narrow interests. In an endless variety of ways, both open and hidden, it liberates him from what he is already eager to shed: responsibility for the consequences of his actions on others. And the moment it anesthetizes this responsibility in him, it also dulls his political, social and moral awareness, molding him into conveniently

submissive raw material for its own manipulations and those of other interested parties. In other words, it turns him into one of the masses.

These forms of media—written, electronic, online, often free, highly accessible, highly influential—have an existential need to preserve the public's interest, to constantly stimulate its hungry desires. And so even when ostensibly dealing with issues of moral and human import, and even when ostensibly assuming a role of social responsibility, still the finger they point at hotbeds of corruption and wrong-doing and suffering seems mechanical, automatic, with no sincere interest in the problems it highlights. Its true purpose—apart from generating profits for its owner—is to preserve a constantly stimulated state of "public condemnation" or "public exoneration" of certain individuals, who change at the speed of light. This rapid exchange is the message of mass media. Sometimes it seems that it is not the information itself that the media deems essential, but merely the rate at which it shifts. The neurotic, covetous, consumerist, seductive beat it creates. The zeitgeist: the zapping is the message.

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In this world I have described, literature has no influential representatives in the centers of power, and I find it difficult to believe that literature can change it. But it can offer different ways to live in it. To live with an internal rhythm and an internal continuity that fulfill our emotional and spiritual needs far more than what is violently imposed upon us by the external systems.

I know that when I read a good book, I experience internal clarification: my sense of uniqueness as a person grows lucid. The measured, precise voice that reaches me from the outside animates voices within me, some of which may have been mute until this other voice, or this particular book, came and woke them. And even if thousands of people are reading the very same book I am reading at the very same moment, each of us faces it alone. For each of us, the book is a completely different kind of litmus test.

A good book—and there are not many, because literature too, of course, is subject to the seductions and obstacles of mass media—individualizes and extracts the single reader out of the masses. It gives him an opportunity to feel how spiritual contents, memories, and existential possibilities can float up and rise from within him, from unfamiliar places, and they are his alone. The fruits of his personality alone. The result of his most intimate refinements. And in the mass-culture of daily life, in the overall pollution of our consciousness, it is so difficult for these soulful contents to emerge from the inner depths and become animated.

At its best, literature can bring us together with the fate of others, distant and foreign. It can create within us, at times, a sense of wonder at having managed, by the skin of our teeth, to escape those strangers' fates, or make us feel sad for not being truly close to them. For not being able to reach out and touch them. I am not saying that this feeling immediately motivates us to any form of action, but certainly without it, no act of empathy or commitment or responsibility can be possible.

At its best, literature can be kind to us: it can slightly allay the sense of insult at the dehumanization that life in large, anonymous, global societies gives us. The insult of being described in coarse language, in clichés, in generalizations and stereotypes. The insult of our becoming—as Herbert Marcuse said—"one-dimensional man."

Literature also gives us the feeling that there is a way to fight the cruel arbitrariness that decrees our fate: even if at the end of *The Trial* the authorities shoot Josef K. "like a dog"; even if Antigone is executed; even if Hans Castorp eventually dies in *Magic Mountain*—still we, who have seen them through their struggles, have discovered the power of the individual to be human even in the harshest circumstances. Reading—literature—restores our dignity and our primal faces, our human faces, the ones that existed before they were blurred and erased among the masses. Before we were expropriated, nationalized, and sold wholesale to the lowest bidder.

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When I finished writing *See Under: Love*, I realized that I had written it to say that he who destroys a man, any man, is ultimately destroying a creation that is unique and boundless, that can never again be reconstructed, and there will never be another like it.

For the last four years I have been writing a novel that wishes to say the same thing, but from a different place, and in the context of a different reality. The protagonist of my book, an Israeli woman of about fifty, is the mother of a young soldier who goes to war. She fears for his life, she senses catastrophe lurking, and she tries with all her strength to fight the destiny that awaits him. This woman makes a long and arduous journey by foot, over half the land of Israel, and talks about her son. This is her way of protecting him. This is the only thing she can do now, to make his existence more alive and solid: *to tell the story of his life*.

In the little notebook she takes on her journey, she writes, "*Thousands of moments and hours and days, millions of deeds, endless acts and attempts and mistakes and words and thoughts, all to make one person in the world*."

Then she adds another line: "*One person, who is so easy to destroy*."

Dear friends,

This evening, at the opening of the International Literature Festival of Berlin we are allowed to remind ourselves, even with a modicum of pride, that the secret allure and the greatness of literature, which we will dwell upon during these days, the secret that sends us to it over and over again, with enthusiasm and a longing to find refuge and meaning—the secret is that literature can repeatedly redeem for us the tragedy of the one from the statistics of the millions. The one about whom the story is written, and the one who reads the story.

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