

NOTES ON FICTION

JOÃO PENEDA

TRANSLATION BY SOFIA SILVA

" Poetry is the authentic absolute real absolute. That is at the core of my philosophy: The more poetic, the truer."¹
Novalis

Fiction is opposed to facts, referencing a world that is not real. It follows both creation and composition (*fictio*) of a set of imaginary events. We can thus speak of the world of fiction, where various possibilities are rehearsed. Some, like Henry James,² argue that the purpose of fiction would be to create the illusion that it is reality; others, like Brecht, recommend the "distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*)" to stop that blur. In our most intimate experience the closest thing to fiction is dream, imagination, fantasy and, in some cases, even delusion. A private theater, some "other scene" (Fechner/Freud) where we elope to. On a collective level, fiction's greatest antecedent is the myth (μῦθος), "the nothingness that is everything", in the words of Fernando Pessoa in *Message*. The opposite of myth being forgetfulness, the absence of meaning. Whence the myth would be the first narrative (fiction), the original presentation of the meaning of things.³ Therefore, myth trails the flows of truth and falsity, representing a position of primordial sense. Fiction is also beyond the factual and historical truth; it is neither true nor false, for it does not refer directly to anything external or that is part of our reality.

In *Phaedon*, Plato states that "the poet, in order to be truly a poet, must create fictions and not arguments (ποιεῖν μύθους ἀλλ οὐ λόγους)". Art's purpose would be to create histories, narratives, tales, in other words: fictions. Because fiction is neither true nor false,⁴ it has no contradiction. It is mainly a

¹ "Die Poesie ist das echt absolut Reelle. Dies ist der Kern meiner Philosophie – je poetischer, je wahrer!" "Fragmente und Studien 1797-1798" in *Novalis: Werke*, Ed. Gerhard Schulz. Munich, Beck, 1981, p. 413.

² Cf. *Point of view in fiction*, 1965.

³ From a psychoanalytic perspective, Lacan mentions the "neurotic's individual myth", meaning: the kind of fiction that our lives' history turn out to be.

⁴ We can certainly speak of a sort of imaginary realism, as well as of a truth within fiction.

persuasive discourse seeking the listeners' approval. On the other side of the coin, art (fiction) has an immeasurable (ideological) power to mystify, to deceive, to simulate, namely when it serves certain religious, political, social or economic interests. This is why the question that was soon formulated, namely to Plato, was of a philosophical and political nature: What is fiction? And how to approach it? Particularly when it concerns the powerful effects on the audience, moral dismay, mediocrity and harmful content, etc. Despite the fact that the Greeks had invented democracy, Plato did not believe in self-regulation, nor in the best intentions of men, thus proposing, in the work *Republic*, that the political power took over art. He defended such an intervention in the name of a "more austere art" (αύστηρός), less pleasant (ἀηδής). According to the philosopher, only such an art would be faithful to the elevation of man, meaning: to what he understood by truth (ἀλήθεια) and virtue (ἀρετή). Actually, the art (fiction) that best corresponds to the Platonic model is his own philosophical-literary work, his prose, his dialogues.

Man is the only animal that creates and appreciates fiction. As far as we can perceive, all living beings halt at the facticity of life. Only human beings are able to go beyond reality, to embark on the world of representation, of the *as if* (als ob).⁵ In the work *Poetics*, Aristotle comments that "the imitative representation (τό μιμηθῆναι) occurs naturally (σύμφυτον) in men since childhood" and that everyone takes pleasure (χαίρειν) in imitative representations. Men would also lean towards harmony and rhythm (τῆς ἁρμονίας καὶ τοῦ ῥυθμοῦ). According to the philosopher, these would be the natural causes that gave rise to the poetic creation (ποιητική). Aristotle also points out that it is through this imitative representation that we learn the first lessons,⁶ which means that the imitative representation favors learning, that is, knowledge.⁷ Fiction would thus be a powerful medium for creating, exploring, and conveying new ideas, consequently having a didactic value.

⁵ Hans Vaihinger created a philosophy of the 'as if', meaning: an idea of life where man creates and admits innumerable fictions in order to make sense of a world full of contradictions, uncertainties and unknowns. Cf. *Die Philosophie des Als Ob. System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen der Menschheit auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus; mit einem Anhang über Kant und Nietzsche*. Reuther & Reichard, Berlin 1911.

⁶ Cf. *Poética*, 1448b.

⁷ Plato is not peremptory in denying the resource to fiction as a pedagogical means or instrument of learning. However, he argued that content should not be left to the creator's will.

Fiction is proof that the human is ready for a set of possibilities that exceed the mundane facts. Indeed, our temporal condition allows whatever comes to us to be able to transcend what is given. We are permanently in touch with the past, with future possibilities and even with alternatives to the present. In turn, fiction reinforces that ability to extract things out of time and space, of transience, elevating artistic content above the flow of life.⁸ The artwork is not situated in a given place or moment. Fiction is a world apart, allowing one to experience beyond the limits imposed by reality. By being able to create fictions, art transports us to the world of what is possible (plausible) and even impossible. The artistic representation rehearses and explores, in an imaginary register, the contours of the human condition and life in general. The human has a sort of freedom from which art arises to help him/her unveil his/her true nature, in order to overcome natural conditionings and increase his/her living conditions. Art's existence shows that man is no longer confined to the limits of nature and animal behavior. The one who creates reveals through that act that he/she does not depend exclusively on what is dictated or imposed. To create is a sign of emancipation, of self-unveiling and self-overcoming. Art is the sign of a non-fusion with life, a non-identification that in turn allows an identification with certain aspects (contours) of reality. Fiction was born out of that detachment. The result of artistic creation is therefore a kind of second nature capable of representing and interpreting life. A fiction that is so many times more meaningful and real than reality itself. To the point that art becomes the best metaphor for life.⁹

However, the art of our time was not limited to the representative register. It became more questioning and inquiring, problematizing its own condition: the origin and conditions of representation, its limits and even what lies beyond representation. In the late history of art there are two emblematic moments in which artistic creation's representative fate was put to test. In the exhibition *0.10*, Malevich dared establish a cut with nature as a reference and immemorial interlocutor of the artwork. On the other hand, the so-called "bioart" (George Gessert, Eduardo Kac) lays its cards on a direct manipulation of life, blurring the gap between representation (fiction) and life. If, in the former case, the result was an attempt to create an artistic language (suprematism) as pure fiction (without nature); in the later the

⁸ In *Seminar VII*, Lacan speaks about the place of art (fiction) as being "between two deaths," between physical death and symbolic death, between the inevitable collapse of existence and the effacement of the work and its author.

⁹ "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players". Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII.

efforts were directed towards transforming life's reality into a human fiction (without representation).
In the background, two symptoms of the current human drift.