

## History. Fiction. Literature. A Brief Presentation

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I wish to make it clear, from the very beginning, that from the triple articulation developed in the book *History. Fiction. Literature.*, I'll focus here on just a small part of the theme Fiction, which belongs to section 'b' of the same book— trying to explore it in a way not actually contemplated in the printed version.

When we reflect on the meaning and on the scope of the word 'fiction', the first thing that comes to our mind is the contempt with which, until recently, Western Thought has treated it. Thus, although classical Latin recognized in the term 'fictio' the double meaning that even today is found in the languages derived from it, 'fictio' meaning 'invention and creation' as well as 'lie and fraud', in truth the first and positive meaning was never emphasized. Two factors have been responsible for such a development: (a) the fact that, in the passage from the Greek to Latin, the double path opened by Aristotle, the analysis of poetics and rhetoric, differentiated even by the autonomy of the two treatises dedicated to both themes, Poetics and Rhetoric, is reduced, in Rome, to a single path, the rhetorical one. Rhetoric occupies itself with the assembling of the language capable of seducing and convincing. The subordination of poetics to rhetoric meant that the approach to beauty was reduced to the pragmatic purpose of producing a seducing text. Therefore, a criterion was established to the verbal art that only jeopardized it: beautiful is the text liable to be rhetorically decomposed, i. e., capable of displaying the "figures of speech" with which it operates. As a

result, the very questioning of the different function of poetry, the indagation of what it is, disappears from the Roman horizon. If this pragmatic reductionism doesn't prevent Rome from having prose writers and, specially, poets of great quality, it does create a void that will weigh upon the whole Western tradition. We can't avoid posing the question: how will its value be assessed if not by rhetorical manipulation?

The most immediate consequence of such a development was the confusion between narrative poetic texts and historiographic texts, since in both 'narration' was the common category. Undoubtedly we will find among the Romans, like Cicero, or among the naturalized Greeks, like Lucian, the assertion that the writing of history doesn't make it submitted to rhetoric. However their texts are not, from the point of view of thought, very significant and, as such, incapable of solving a problem that has been protracted up to the present: why isn't the historian a poet? Or rather, how to explain that, belonging to different discursive areas, history and poetry (after the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it would be more accurate to say 'literature') may- not in the wholeness of their texts but in passages, of variable extension - coincide? The very question would demand a speculative power that had been lost in the passage from the Greek to the Roman legacy.

Let's be briefer while considering the second factor: (b) the role of Christianity. How could a monotheist religion, one that attributes to God all positive proprieties, accept the fictional, in its meaning of 'invention, creation'? Considered in this sense, 'fiction' would mean either a redundancy with relation to the workings of the divine or, more frequently, an insubordination against the potency of the divine. It causes no estrangement, thus, that in the thought of the first thinkers of the Church, fiction, represented basically by the theater, would meet hostility or would be at the most just tolerated. Tolerated it was, as in the case of Augustine, because the reading of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, would attest to the existence of many passages that couldn't be



accepted literally. Hence the practice of allegorical reading, that will be expanded and will become pervasive not only in the Middle Age but in Renaissance as well.

From Dante on, an attempt at conciliation will make its appearance in the proposal of a theologian poet. I am referring to the discussion, contemporaneous of Dante and persisting through Petrarch, having to do with the hierarchic relation between poetry and theology. Of course theology would always have the upper hand. The risk wasn't that poetry would occupy an inferior position but that it would end up occupying no position at all. (This is one of the manifestations of what I call 'control'). The proposal, coming from Dante, of the poet as theologian, had the purpose of breaking up the dilemma. But since it placed the poet as an equal to the theologian it wasn't a fertile idea. So it is not by chance that the expression was never accepted. If the poet can be a theologian, how can theology call itself the peak of thought? This consideration *per se* would already demand a time and an amount of source research that I can't even calculate.

To make it short let's simply say: the first time someone decided to treat exclusively of 'fiction' was in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As far as I know, the first one to try this was Jeremy Bentham, famous, but not for this book, since this is a book that he never came to finish. The book that would later be called *Theory of Fictions* is composed of fragments, small passages that Bentham wrote between 1813 and 1815 and that he never came to put together in the book form. The book *Theory of Fictions* was published only in 1932, when a certain psychologist, C. K. Ogden, who was also interested in Literary Criticism, being a collaborator of I.A. Richards, in some inexplicable way came across Bentham's manuscripts. The fact is that he gathered these texts and published them with that title. Notice that Bentham, when focusing fiction, does not refer to literary fiction. Literature is to Bentham something that can be accounted for through Horace's old Latin phrase, that is, something which is good for teaching or for delighting, *prodesse aut delectare*.

What interests Bentham is something much more pragmatic: the chaos that, according to him, reigned in the British jurisprudence. Bentham is a lawyer who verifies the complete chaos which dominated the English consuetudinary law of his time and he makes an effort to give it some order. It is quite interesting to read Bentham's book, but even more interesting is to read Machiavelli's *The Prince*, thinking of the issue of fiction – we could say just *en passant* that Machiavelli didn't have this concern at all. In order to do it I will be taking into account a brief essay by Merleau-Ponty, "*Notes on Machiavelli*", included in the book "*Signes*"(1960). First of all I must add that neither Machiavelli nor Merleau-Ponty talk about fiction. So what I am going to do is, through the reading of Machiavelli via Merleau-Ponty, introduce the idea of fiction.

First remark made by Merleau-Ponty: According to *Il Principe*, men distinguish themselves from animals because in the realm of men fight cannot be reduced to a force struggle. The fight of a tiger against a lion consists very simply of a force struggle. With men, fight assumes distinct characteristics, because in man fight implies something that goes beyond what is offered to animal, that is, power. One cannot simply explain power based on a struggle of physical force. Well, says Merleau-Ponty, paraphrasing Machiavelli, power is not rooted in natural foundations; therefore power is always contestable, it can always be challenged. Using Machiavelli's own terms, one of the duties of the Prince is to solve the problems before they become insoluble. How then does the prince manage to accomplish it? How does the ruler deal with problems when they come up? He will try do solve them before they become insoluble. Let's take as an example the problem of Brazilian social inequalities. The problem which is posed to all Brazilian administrators and it is continually posed is that they present its solution before things become insoluble and we find ourselves in a dead end.

How does the prince solve such a dilemma? He solves it by stimulating the crystallization of opinions or, in Merleau-Ponty's words: (men agree to live within the horizon of the State and of the Law until injustice does not give them consciousness of the extent to which State and Law are unjustifiable (. . . )



Neither pure fact nor pure Law, power neither constraints nor persuades. It rather seduces. And the best way to seduce is to appeal to freedom, rather than appealing to terror).

So far I have balanced passages from Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty. And now we enter the terrain which is our own, the question of fiction. We might as well ask: what kind of advantage does man extract from his recognition that State and Law don't have a natural foundation? We could answer: the advantage that humans extract from the existence of State and Law is that State and Law introduce us in the field of politics. I return to Merleau-Ponty in order to clarify this passage: Politics displays a beginning of humanity emerging from the collective life as a quotient of power and seeks to seduce consciousnesses. The trap of collective life works in two directions, since liberal regimes are always a little less liberal than what we believe and the non liberal regimes are always a little more liberal than we can imagine.

You may have noticed that neither Machiavelli nor Merleau-Ponty refer to fiction. But now it is I who ask: what are they treating of, Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty, when they treat of power, if not of the function of fictions in society? Look at the whole train of thought. We started from the situation of the animal: each animal with its territory, with its natural arms; a fox knows that it will not be able to fight a lion, it knows that it will have to make use of artfulness in order to run away from it and if possible to make the lion fall in a trap. This is the animal field. The human field presents the variant of power, a distinguished element, since it doesn't present itself only as a matter of who has greater or lesser force, but a new element: power does not have a natural foundation. Let's say, if I am here addressing you it is not necessarily as a consequence of a power of my own, but of the institution that gathers us here. Let's take exactly our situation here in order to understand the problem of fiction. I have been saying: power does not justify itself, it doesn't have a natural foundation.

If it is so, why, then, does humanity always resort to it? Merleau-Ponty would answer: because through power humanity is introduced to politics. Then we must ask: and what does politics give us? I would simply say that politics is what makes it possible to combine material life with fictions which are necessary to a collective life. Politics makes it possible to combine a material element – a need, or a necessity, a lack – with an element given by the institutions that are made possible by the existence of a social power. Politics makes us combine these two things. And now let us reflect: what does fiction have to do with it? Fiction has to do with it exactly within the affirmation: ‘power is something not naturally justified and, if not naturally justified, it convinces much better by alluding to, indicating, referring to, suggesting freedom rather than terror; terror and freedom are two weapons of power, but the first is more effective than the second. Power convinces through seduction and it is through seduction that I want to introduce the problem of non literary fictions. You may have already noticed that I make a distinction between literary and non literary fiction.

Rather than having to do just with Literature, fiction has to do with our daily lives. When we don’t know anything about fiction we are unarmed with respect to our quotidian. The interest in fictions, in a theory of (non) literary fictions, is not exclusive to the professor of literature. The quotidian fictions are, as a rule, of the interest of all who have a quotidian to preserve.

Someone might object: but if so many centuries have passed without the need to theorize about it, why should we do it now? Doesn’t it demonstrate that fictions are not necessary? It could be, but at what cost? Power doesn’t justify itself naturally but results from the combination between material factors – I have a body, certain capacity of resistance and of aggression – and symbolic factors – the surrounding institutions, those which protect me or attack me; and power is exactly in the imbrication of these two elements.

It is possible that you have already guessed that I am trying to establish a relation between power and fiction. In order to do it I am going to use our present situation as an example. Lucila spoke, Sueli spoke, Anco spoke and I am



speaking now. We are all speaking here under the supposition that what we have here to say might interest you that are our audience, but none of us here can know for sure whether it really interests you, we can just suppose. Since we lack divinatory powers we will remain only with this supposition up to the end of this talk. Would this supposition be a hypothesis? No, this is not a hypothesis. We would be formulating a hypothesis – “ what we are saying here is interesting to the 150 people in this room” – if we could assess your opinion, asking, for example, that, when you leave, push a button confirming whether or not you have liked it, whether or not what we said was interesting at all. Since there is no way we can do this, since there is no such button out there, we speak here not based on a hypothesis but based on a conjectural fiction: the speech to the public justifies itself upon a conjectural fiction, upon the supposition that whatever it is that it is going to be said interests those who will hear. Like power, this situation is something that is not naturally justified. There is no way – physical, chemical, biological – of ascertaining whether or not a conjectural fiction has validity, whether or not it is successful. The speech to the public is based on the presupposition that that which will be said is of interest. But this is a conjectural fiction since there is no way of proving it.

Side by side with the conjectural fictions we must then pose an opposite fiction, the necessary fictions. An example of a necessary fiction, of which another pioneer in the theorizing of the fictional also dealt upon, a little after Bentham: Vaihinger. The whole Penal Code, the whole Criminal code is based in the fiction of freedom. For instance, if in one particular moment I had said: I am tired of having spent my whole life speaking about fiction for a few bucks; I spent my whole life making fiction and now I am fed up with it and then I had grabbed the microphone and, acting like a star, had thrown the guitar toward the audience; certainly there would be a consequence to my aggression, it would give place to a penalty of some sort, even if a light one. And in what would the judge base himself to condemn me? He would have to base himself in the fact that I would have all the freedom not to act in that way.



The whole Penal Law, the whole Idea of punishment, is based in the principle that there is a so called freedom. How many times this so called freedom is true? Criminal Law cannot a priori doubt that there is freedom and if Criminal Law cannot doubt that there is freedom this is a necessary fiction.

What Machiavelli presents us with, and whoever has read or has heard of the *Prince* will know it, is that the main concept in Machiavelli is the concept of *virtù*, which immediately reminds us of Christian virtue. In private contexts, *virtù* is for Machiavelli synonymous with honesty, but the prince's virtue is not honesty, the prince's *virtù* is exactly being capable of solving the problems before they become insoluble. In order to accomplish it the prince, advised by Machiavelli, will resort to all his weapons. It is necessary that he solve the matters before they become insoluble. Machiavelli will then tell him: if you, prince, fought for a city, won the fight and destroyed it, what shall you do? What you must do is to destroy the other half, destroy all your enemies, build another city, which will give you the fame of an excellent prince. This is *virtù*. Since *virtù* is no longer understood in its Christian sense, as long as it articulates itself to this autonomous field which is the political field, the field of power, *virtù* is the concrete means through which Machiavelli formulates the necessary fiction for the prince. As long as the term *virtù* can no more be understood in a Christian fashion, *virtù* is the necessary fiction of politics.

But we can't take advantage of the Holy Spirit. I don't want, thus, to take advantage of your patience. I had said in the beginning that I was going to address a small branch of the field of fiction, address non literary fictions, quotidian fictions, with the aim of showing you, like Bentham had already done, and Machiavelli likewise, that rather than having to do just with Literature, fiction has to do with our daily lives. When we don't know anything about fiction we are unarmed with respect to our quotidian. The interest in fictions, in a theory of (non) literary fictions, is not exclusive to professors and scholars. The quotidian fictions are, as a rule, of the interest of all who have a quotidian to preserve. However, in order not to limit ourselves to the branch that most



interests us, I would just add: literary fiction distinguishes itself from quotidian fictions ( conjectural or necessary) because, contrary to these, it tends to put itself in question, it is inclined to self-disclosure, i.e., to declare itself as fiction. The examples would be multiple. Let's just recall the theater within the theater, in Shakespeare, which was then already a traditional resource – it is the so called double plot.

All that I have said is, of course, only a brief outline of what I tried to develop in the book. In the case of literary fictions I would add only another bit of information: it is extremely common to hearsay how fiction is close to lies. Although frequent, this is one of the greatest absurdities I have ever heard. The difference, nevertheless, is easy to understand. A lie is an affirmation that can be undone at any moment; a lie supposes a truth; I don't lie if I don't know what the truth is. The first big distinction between lies and fiction is that fiction doesn't operate a priori with the idea of truth. Fiction intersects truth as far as fiction intersects the world because otherwise it would be a big paranoia or a big fantasy. Although the terms imagination and fantasy are taken as synonyms, fantasy is simply a compensatory mechanism. For instance, if while I speak to you I said to myself: how nicer it would have been if I could have stayed at the swimming pool of the hotel where there was a breeze and a nice view; if I had let myself to be swayed by this, I would become a dupe of my own fantasy. Here, on the other hand, I am not fantasizing; the only thing that one cannot do with conjectural fiction in the classroom is to fantasize. Lie belongs to a very pragmatic field: the liar knows what she/he is doing, she/he knows the truth that is being denied; he/she decides for it.

Second point: contrary to conjectural or necessary fictions, literary fictions tend to put themselves into question. I already spoke about the theater within the theater in Shakespeare. And I would add the scene of the Inn in Don Quixote, the battle of the two sword fighters in the puppet theater. Don Quixote's interference shows that the scene doesn't belong to the order of the pragmatic:

because he doesn't agree with the result of the fight, he intervenes, tears up the puppets while the landlord demands that he pays for his destruction. The reader, on his part, will laugh: Don Quixote lets himself be guided by his dementia. Sitting in her/his place, the sane and normal spectator will not confound the street noises with the confusion that he watches and hears in her/his television soap opera. (The fact that this is a poor fiction, an industrialized fiction, doesn't make it more likely to be confounded with street noises) The world of fiction is a world of make-believe, although a serious one. This seriousness makes it cross, in its way, truth and/or makes it disclose itself, makes it declare itself as fiction.

The truth of fiction is self-disclosure, it is the presentation of itself as fiction; it is the showing of itself as fiction. What we have called necessary fictions are not entitled to this, they do not have this right. Although the judge may know that among the 10 condemned men in front of him that little wrecked one quivering there at the corner was starving when he stole a bread, he would not be able to declare him innocent, since the whole criminal apparatus supposes that the act was practiced on the basis of the option exerted by free subjects. As freedom is the necessary fiction to criminal law, the judge cannot but condemn him. Given a certain society – in our example the Western Society- the necessary fiction imposes itself as a rule, i. e., manifests itself as a natural phenomenon. Literary fictions, on the other hand, pose themselves as fiction.

If, from the analysis of Machiavelli, we could envision power as a necessary fiction; if, on the other hand, literary fiction possesses this quality of self-disclosure, we may then add that the ultimate function of fiction is to present the true face of power. Which is the same as saying: fiction has the critical vocation for showing that which was seducing us. This, nevertheless, does not make it true; but it does say that fiction is the human means to make available, through a discourse that discloses itself as not truthful, the apprehension of truth.

