

THE NECESSITY OF FICTION IN BRAZIL TODAY:  
OR, HOW TO FIGHT FASCISTS  
WITHOUT BECOMING ONE<sup>1</sup>

Beatriz Bracher

**Abstract:** Developing considerations on fiction, its characteristics, its role in society, especially in 2018 Brazil, this essay is a renowned Brazilian writer's incisive exposition of ideas regarding the nature, effects and the conditions of production and reception of fictional literature. It vehemently defends the power of fiction over authoritarian positions and social prejudices such as those that were at play in the country before the Presidential elections.

**Keywords:** Fiction; characteristics; truth and verisimilitude; writing and reading fiction; effects; role against fascism; Brazil

**Resumo:** Desenvolvendo considerações sobre ficção, suas características, seu papel na sociedade, em especial no Brasil de 2018, este ensaio é uma incisiva exposição das ideias de uma renomada escritora brasileira a respeito da natureza, efeitos e condições de produção e recepção da literatura ficcional. Defende veementemente o poder da ficção sobre posições autoritárias e preconceitos sociais como os que estavam em jogo no país antes das eleições para Presidente.

**Palavras-chave:** Ficção; características; verdade e verossimilhança; escrever e ler ficção; efeitos; papel contra o fascismo; Brasil.

*I can only write what I am. And if my characters all behave in different ways,  
it's because I am not just one person.*  
Graciliano Ramos

## 1 Introduction

---

<sup>1</sup> Este ensaio foi apresentado como depoimento da escritora Beatriz Bracher na Brown University em outubro de 2018.

To speak of the necessity of fiction in Brazil in 2018 requires speaking about the relationship between reality and fiction--and this is a theme that has been discussed at least since Socrates. We won't get that far today. Instead I will attempt to outline a few characteristics of what we call fiction, with the caveat that there has never been consensus about how to define it. Nevertheless, I will describe the characteristics that seem--to me at least-- to make fiction especially necessary today, and above all in Brazil.

When it comes to recent events in my country, many other guests to this university have spoken here about the political, economic, and historical dimensions of the present crisis in Brazil. That is why I have chosen to speak about the definition of fiction and its relation to reality. In the final section of my talk, I hope to show why I believe that fiction is so necessary today, especially in Brazil.

To assist me in this task, I summon the voices of various writers who have accompanied me throughout my life as a reader: my life in fiction. I would like to think that today, right here, fiction will occupy this lectern, although it will do so in a nonfictional fashion.

First of all, when I use the word "fiction," I refer to a novel, short story, or narrative poem written by an author--or by three or five authors, or by an entire collective. All that matters is that the authorship is known. And this entity, the known authorship, I designate the author.

We have, then, the very first item for our list of fiction's characteristics:

- Fiction is an original work created by an author.

## **2 Lie and Verisimilitude**

Allow me to quote a companion from my literary life:

[...]The first premise in fiction is that it is not true. The story does not record events that took place. These people didn't exist. These things did not happen. That's the going in point of a novel. So, the novel tells you, flat out, at the beginning, that it's untruthful. But then what do we mean by truth in literature?

This is a question posed by Salman Rushdie in an interview. We'll leave aside the question of truth, for now, and first consider the question of untruth.

Aside from not referring directly to reality, what makes a good story count as fiction is that it has to *seem* real. This is what Aristotle called verisimilitude. We say that a story isn't convincing not because this or that element could never happen in real life-- such as a man who can fly. A story isn't convincing when a given fact doesn't cohere with the story's internal logic. As long as a story respects its own basic premises, a man, just like a magic carpet, can fly perfectly well, and the reader will still recognize the world the story creates, just as if it *were* real. And that is the crucial expression: "as if." It's an agreement between the reader and the author, or between the reader and the genre of the novel itself, which asks to be read as if it were real.

I return to Rushdie, who says,

Once you accepted that stories are not true, once you start from this position, then you understand that a flying carpet and Madame Bovary are untrue in the same way. As a result, both of them are ways of arriving at the truth by the road of untruth.

Similarly, the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas, in a recent interview, stated,

The most attractive thing about [writing fiction] is the marvelous way that language does not reproduce reality, but constructs and deconstructs reality from the standpoint of an inevitable subjectivity.

What Vila-Matas means by "inevitable" is that fiction originates from a personal space that is absolutely unique to the author, a place only she can access when she writes, and which the reader enters when he reads.

We now have three additional characteristics of fiction:

- The referent of a work of fiction is not factual reality.
- The enveloping power of fiction derives from a reality which is being constructed and deconstructed from the standpoint of

inevitable subjectivity

- Fiction is not refutable or verifiable.

Flaubert had already made a version of this last point in a letter to a friend, where he observed that "no great book ever arrives at conclusions. Homer never comes to conclusions, nor does Shakespeare, nor Goethe, nor even the Bible itself."

W.H. Auden believed this had to do with the vitality of the work of art. He stated: "A work of art is not about this or that kind of life; it has life."

And Humboldt, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift*, observes, sarcastically, that the business of educated people in modern societies "is to reduce masterpieces to discourse."

In keeping with these approaches, not only does fiction not portray the factual reality in which we live; it is also not a direct commentary on the world.

So we can add one more thing to our list:

- A story is not an argument: it doesn't hold or defend a point of view.

### 3 Authorial and Collective

Ezra Pound said that artists are the "antennae of the race." The common interpretation of this affirmation is that the artist's sensibility makes her capable of apprehending a future that is present in daily life, and of transforming that apprehended idea by representing it in her art, thereby offering readers insights of what is to come.

I do not understand an artist's sensibility in this way. In my view, the writer does indeed have a specific sensibility. Whether she's born with it or acquires it in the solitary hours of her work, I cannot say for sure. But the fact is that the writer takes up things that are not explicitly stated in her own time. She inserts them in her work,

where they function as a guiding thread. She often absorbs and transmits these unstated things without realizing what she does. In that sense, the writer is more of a sponge than an antenna.

Perhaps what the artist's sensibility manages to apprehend, even without our permission, is a substance that has not yet manifested in history, something that can be neither embraced nor contested, but which is nevertheless present and which interferes in our relations with one another--like a lens over the cornea, a weight tied to an ankle, or a very long but ultimately finite leash. The artist notices collective feelings that nevertheless remain elusive to daily consciousness. Sometimes we're even capable of hearing them or seeing them, but without art, there's no way to grasp them, and for that reason they slip out of our hands.

Rubens Figueiredo, one of the best Brazilian novelists working today, as well as a translator of Chekov and Tolstoy, said this when he was asked if translation were *also* an act of creation:

Yes, but its more accurate to say the opposite. When you write fiction, you're translating things that are present in forms that are prior to verbal language. They're other languages: the language of emotions, of images, of memory. This is translation. To me, the word creation doesn't inspire much confidence.

A similar description appears in *Elizabeth Costello*, a novel by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello* concerns the activities of a writer by the same name. In the final chapter, Elizabeth arrives at an unknown city and, in order to pass through the gate, she must write a declaration of belief for the judges.

What follows are lines from the dialogue that takes place between Elizabeth and the judges:

I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right. [...]

[...]

What I offer to those who read me, what I contribute to their humanity, outweighs, I would hope, my own emptiness in that respect.

Now we have two more characteristics for our list:

- Fiction is a solitary and arduous task. It is also the fruit of some kind of collective, which does not belong to the author and which he cannot totally dominate.
- The writer, aside from being herself, is also a sponge. She transcribes the connecting thread that runs through her times.

### 3 Literature in the world

Allow me to cite one of my countrymen:

What the crooked moralism of our times cannot conceive of is any difference between, on the one hand, a discourse of the hatred that reproduces prejudice and impoverishes feelings and social relations--and on the other hand, the corrosive and explosive power of hatred in literature. IN this latter case, the effect is the opposite of that narrowing of feeling. [...]

In the pages of the best literature, the force of hatred effects an elongation of feelings, which is an inversion of the commonplace assumption.

The citation is by the novelist Bernardo Carvalho, from an article written in August of this year. He proceeds to comment on the book *Ultra-Proust* by Nathalie Quintane:

Proust proposes a noise between these two heterogeneous elements (author and work), connected by thin, complex links. The work is always political, of course: it's not disconnected from the world. But its politics are not reduced to the identity or the location of the author.

The writer has the option of focusing on hatred, Carvalho mentions, of developing it--she can deepen and intensify the feeling of hate to such a degree that it begins to seem impossible that any other relation besides hate could exist between humans, unless they were relations based in cynicism and rage, as in some works by Celine, Mishima, and the brilliant contemporary French author, Marie Ndiaye. In works by these authors, it is possible for the reader to reach the limits of experience, a

near suffocation, and to emerge from the text into a different world than the one he lived in when he began. Something will have broken in the reader's perception of the world, altered just millimeters in one direction or the other. The transformed and transformational atmosphere is created by original narrative structures, in syntax that is distinct from what's used in newspapers and political speeches--different even from what we use to shape the narrative of our own past.

The experiences that modify a reader's personal world are not limited to extreme feelings. The near-immobility of the protagonist of *The Beast in the Jungle* by Henry James has the same effect as the anemic politesse of the characters in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. What happens is a provisional suspension of the real world, and the mental experience of another time and space.

It's a cliché to say that mankind can't tolerate chaos--such as the absence of a historical narrative that would organize and justify the past and the present. This is why people adhere to narratives that offer a clear view of the world, narratives that naturalize the world according to their own constructs. Another name for such a narrative might be "mechanism," in the sense that many times these narratives have the objective of maintaining the status quo "as if" it were natural. I cite Rubens Figueiredo once more:

The duty of literature is not to have a social role, but to offer an experience of questioning [social] mechanisms and demonstrating that they can be undone.

What fiction does, when it does something, is create a world into which we emerge disarmed, because we know it is just made up. In that world we can be solitary and unafraid of confronting different "natures"--different ways of being in the world. Fiction does not propose an alternate narrative. Its power is in the undoing of the myth of naturalness that is made to adhere to what already exists.

The story told in a fictional book might be considered feminist, sexist, or racist. Or it might favor a certain ideology. But none of this will make it a fictional narrative. The friction that fiction creates against the world, its unmasking and subsequent criticism of a certain ideology: it is not the sort that might be disclosed in a tidy speech;

the content alone is not sufficient to make something fiction. Rather, fiction requires a specific form, in which subjective originality is essential. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* do not threaten the patriarchal social system through which they speak, but they change the way it is spoken about. Celine, a declared anti-Semite, with all the petty rage of his books, makes us understand the deep, sticky broth in which this feeling proliferates. We are swept along by the feeling not because he "speaks" about it, but through the language of his interminable sentences and long silences. The return to the small tasks and the atrocious yet drama-less suffering that impregnates everyday life, like a fatty, unpleasant scent. I repeat once more: these works of fiction cannot be reduced to discourse.

To put it another way: fiction is not another narrative of the world. On the contrary, fiction can reveal the artificiality of our daily narratives, and that of the so-called grand narratives. Artificiality is not opposed to truth, but to nature.

To continue with our list:

- Fiction transports the reader to another mental time, often to a place where his beliefs, gender, and age are suspended.
- Fiction's ability to temporarily suspend reality causes what we might call noise, interference, or friction with that very reality.
- Fiction has the potential to denaturalize the prevailing narratives of our times.

#### 4 Character and truth

Let us return to Rushdie:

Clearly what we mean [by truth in fiction] is human truth, not photographic, journalistic, recorded truth. But the truth we recognize as human beings. About how we are with each other. How we deal with each other. What are our strengths, our weaknesses. How we interact. And what is the meaning of life.

At Elizabeth Costello's first lecture, she is interviewed by a young reporter who asks if it is easy for her to write from a man's point of view.

Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in. Making up an Australia.

Later, in the lobby of the hotel room where he is staying with his mother, Elizabeth's son and the reporter have a conversation.

'But my mother has been a man,' he persists. 'She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves; into other lives?'

When we read, the character is the one who carries us away: through the character, we can experience feelings that, here on the outside, might either be fatal or absolutely tedious. While immersed in the character, it is possible to feel ridiculous, inconsequential, authoritarian, mean, sweet, feminine, masculine, old--or be a parrot, a dog, a cockroach. Because nothing will happen to us on the outside, in the real world because reading is a solitary act and we can close the book whenever we choose and because everything in fiction is a lie, and at the same time, recognizable, I can chase after a truth which I would otherwise never have access to, even if I had the courage to try to attain it.

In the letter from Flaubert that I have already cited, he debates with a friend about the uselessness of investing her time in changing the world. He urges her instead to study and read. The passage I am about to cite was not written in relation to fiction, but about his ardor for studying. I cite it in reference to fictional characters because Flaubert's method of enveloping himself in his studies is very close to what I feel when I read a good novel.

With your thoughts, [...] associate yourself with your brothers of three thousand years ago, absorb all of their sufferings, all their dreams, and you will feel both your heart and mind expand; a profound and incommensurable sympathy will envelop, like a coat, all of your ghosts and your beings.

In my novel *Não Falei (I Didn't Talk)*, there is a passage in which I describe the sort of stories we create daily:

It happens every day. It's among strangers: that's where things emerge. It's how things become known. Stories are the shape we give things to pass the time on the bus, in line at the bank, at the bakery counter. [...] This is how we make people known and familiar, enclosed in a story that doesn't threaten us."

These infinite, everyday stories that, most of the time, we do not even realize we are crafting: they function as the obverse of fiction. They bring others into our personal universe and do not, as fiction does, dislocate us into a universe where our narratives do not apply.

Fiction does not domesticate the threat of chaos, but considers it from more than one perspective. The reader of fiction becomes an "I" whose self is really a series of many selves.

Todorov, the Bulgarian linguist and philosopher, wrote in his *Literature in Peril*:

Getting to know new characters is like meeting new people, except that we can get to know their interior selves right away, as each action is understood from the point of view of the author. [...] This apprenticeship does not change the content of our spirit, but it can change the very spirit of content: it has a greater effect on the perceptive apparatus than it does on whatever is perceived.

We can now add a few more things to the list:

- Writing fiction and reading fiction are solitary activities.
- Fiction allows us to feel "as if" we were people different from ourselves, which permits a change in the way we perceive reality.
- Truth in fiction is the truth of the human condition.
- The life we experience during the act of reading fiction alters our perceptive apparatus.

## 5 Effects of reading fiction

Following his analysis of Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Milton, and of Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Beckett in his book *The Western Canon*, the American critic Harold Bloom affirmed:

The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer [...] is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a more useful or more harmful citizen. (...) All that the Western canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude; that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality.

Todorov likewise wrote regarding the effect that fiction has on us, its readers. He stated:

[...] The literary work produces a tremor in the senses, it destabilizes our apparatus for symbolic representation, awakens our capacity for association, and provokes a motion whose shockwaves last a long time after the initial impact.

In the letter I have already cited, Flaubert wrote: "Humanity is the way it is: it's not a question of changing it, but of understanding it."

We can read Flaubert's phrase as a manifesto for political inaction, a statement of selfishness and lack of empathy for one's fellow men. But if we imagine that it is fiction which he refers to (and I do not think that is far off the mark), then we begin to approach the knowledge that will lead us to "a profound and incommensurable sympathy that will envelop, like a coat, all of your ghosts and your beings."

It is commonplace to hear someone say, "this painting contains a truth," or "this novel is sincere." It reminds me of a quip that was apocryphally attributed to Hemingway: "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."

This bloody surrender will meet its objective if it manages to weave a story that reveals a truth to the reader. The surrender is performed on both sides--by the writer and the reader--because fiction proceeds through intensities and complexities that would be threatening or paralyzing in reality. And in this way it arrives at what we call truth.

A few more things for our list:

- The utility of fiction is in learning the correct use of our solitude.
- Fiction destabilizes and expands our apparatus of symbolic representation.
- We write and read fiction in order to understand human nature, not to change it.
- Fiction is a path by which we can know the truth--each time a version of truth, and always a profoundly personal one.

This truth; fabricated with intensity, identification, solitude, and the surrender of the disarmed reader, is always and necessarily individual. It is an agreement between a work of fiction and the reader. As such, the effects of fiction are personal and not collective. What we experience when we read a book, what destabilizes and disorients us, demands from us a self who is separate from all others. For that reason I believe that another characteristic of fiction is that it exercises the reader's autonomy, his creative independence to feel and think. Autonomy in the sense of freedom, in the sense of understanding the world and of becoming capable of imagining other possibilities for the world in a sincere and complete way, without anyone else's assistance.

This brings me to my last item for my list of fiction's characteristics:

- Fiction strengthens our individuality.

A few characteristics of fiction (over which there is some controversy):

- Fiction is an original work created by an author.
- The referent of a work of fiction is not factual reality.
- The enveloping power of fiction derives from a reality which is being constructed and deconstructed from the standpoint of inevitable subjectivity.
- Fiction is not refutable or verifiable.
- A story is not an argument: it doesn't hold or defend a point of view.

- Fiction is a solitary and arduous task. It is also the fruit of some kind of collective, which does not belong to the author and which he cannot totally dominate.
- The writer, aside from being herself, is also a sponge. She transcribes the connecting thread that runs through her times.
- Fiction transports the reader to another mental time, often to a place where his beliefs, gender, and age are suspended.
- Fiction's ability to temporarily suspend reality causes what we might call noise, interference, or friction with that very reality.
- Fiction has the potential to denaturalize the prevailing narratives of our times.
- Writing fiction and reading fiction are solitary activities.
- Fiction allows us to feel "as if" we were people different from ourselves, which permits a change in the way we perceive reality.
- Truth in fiction is the truth of the human condition.
- The life we experience during the act of reading fiction alters our perceptive apparatus.
- The utility of fiction is in learning the correct use of our solitude.
- Fiction destabilizes and expands our apparatus of symbolic representation.
- We write and read fiction in order to understand human nature, not to change it.
- Fiction is a path by which we can know the truth--each time a version of truth, and always a profoundly personal one.
- Fiction strengthens our individuality.

## 7 Brazil, 2018

Today, in 2018, we witness in Brazil the resurgence of leaders who preach a return to authoritarianism. To oppose them adequately, forces from the progressive camp must unify and speak with one voice. Once more in our history, it is crucial that we stand together against the very real threat to the democratic state, that we construct a unifying narrative by annulling our differences, contradictions, errors, and the holes in the collective discourse that will become ours.

Fiction has a role to play here. As I have attempted to show, fiction is not apolitical. But its struggle is in the creation of a space that is opposed to narrative entrenchment: a space for the creative autonomy of the individual. In this sense, fiction is necessarily a counterpoint, a break from the authoritarian tendencies of contemporary discourses, both in defense of democracy and in opposition to it. This is fiction's political power.

But all this begs the question of whether fiction will aid or inhibit our commitment to the necessary struggles of our time.

I suspect that it will help us, and for two reasons:

First, the strategies of any group desiring to achieve a common objective have to be renewed constantly, because the environment will change, and there are subtleties that must be taken into account. Even when it is strategic not to question the basic premises of the group, nor its ultimate objective, the group will only remain agile, intelligent, and lucid, and therefore effective, if it can take advantage of the individuality of each of its members. And, if I'm right, this individuality will enjoy greater autonomy and clarity of judgment the more it is immersed in fiction, and strengthened by the experience of various selves.

Second, I think that every group easily tends toward becoming authoritarian and coercing its members. Often without anyone noticing, those who claim to combat authoritarianism quickly transform into authoritarian beings themselves: they become deaf and blind to the diversity of their

adversary, generalizing opponents to the point of abstraction. Thus lacking vision and hearing, we become one giant mouth that only knows how to yell. Whether we're victorious or defeated, we will have lost the battle against authoritarianism before it's even begun.

Defining the "they" against whom we struggle is therefore crucial. For feminism, "they" is not men, but the chauvinism present in both men and women, a chauvinism that binds, maims, and even kills very many of us women. For the racial justice movement, "they" are not simply white people, but the racism that perverts the thoughts and actions of many of us, the racism whose humiliating and cruel actions cheapens, and sometimes kills, the lives of very many black people. If we fail to make this clear, we transform ourselves into them, the "they" we think is so wrong: people full of certainties, without a single doubt to check our course.

In the same way, today, in the struggle against authoritarianism, "they" are not this or that politician or party; "they" are the impulses of acting and reacting as fascists. "They" are fear, hate, and the seduction of simple answers and solutions.

The first round of Brazilian elections will occur in just a few days. Whatever our expectations might be about the final results, the hate that this campaign has fomented will remain with us for some time. And it doesn't have to do with this campaign, or with political campaigns at all: it has only to do with us, Brazilians. Today, this hate is the plot of our social narrative.

It seems to me that to rebuild our country (in the event that someone from the democratic camp will be elected), or to resist fascism (in the event that Bolsonaro is elected), we must begin to talk to one another. Actually sit down and talk, not to win or lose a debate, but to understand one another. No democratic reconstruction or resistance will be possible unless we understand our authoritarian tendencies and then defeat them. To do this we require silence, solitude, and above all, doubt. We must betray the certainties that appear to prop up our world, betray the groups of which we are a part, and betray our origins--we must commit to this betrayal in order to unite ourselves creatively, and to construct the collective discourse that is

necessary to defeat racism, chauvinism, and fascism, along with every authoritarian movement.

To conclude, I will cite a phrase by an old and angry friend, Jonathan Swift:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is toward individuals.

**Beatriz Bracher** é formada em Letras, foi editora da revista *34 Letras*, de literatura e filosofia, e uma das fundadoras da Editora 34, onde trabalhou por oito anos. Foi roteirista de filmes como *Cronicamente inviável* (1994), *Os inquilinos* (2009) e *O abismo prateado* (2011). Estreou na literatura com o livro de contos, *Meu amor*, vencedor do Prêmio Clarice Lispector, da Biblioteca Nacional em 2009. Os contos de *Garimpo* mereceram o Prêmio da Associação Paulista de Críticos de Arte em 2013. Seu último romance, *Anatomia do Paraíso*, saiu em 2015 e recebeu o Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura. É traduzida na Alemanha, no Uruguai e nos Estados Unidos.

Ensaio recebido em 15/11/2018. Aprovado em 30/11/2018.