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FICTION AS EXCEPTION

Bernardo Carvalho

I have always mistrusted writers who talk about their own works. Thus, I would like to begin with a warning: I ask you to mistrust me, because I will be talking to you about my own books. It is true that I will use them as an excuse to introduce the subjects that, as a writer today, most concern me. But I also fear the backlash of this approach. So the warning is basically intended to save my books from me, from what I will be saying to you. This lecture has more to do with my assessment of my own books than with the books themselves. And since my own self-assessment cannot help but be biased, I am afraid it may cause more harm than good to the books themselves, making them appear to be the offspring of a conscious project, previously conceived, which they are not. So I would ask you to be kind enough to read them – if you ever had this in mind – even after listening to me.

You should be asking by now why I insist on talking about my books as excuses for the subjects that I am most concerned with as a writer since it can only cause them harm. The answer is simple: it began as an obsession that started when I realized a few years ago how little the general reader was attracted to literary fiction – and mostly to the kind of fiction I’m interested in. And, as with any obsession, from then on, I could not stop thinking about it. I am a little embarrassed to confess that it was only a few years ago that I realized, as if I had been blind all along, that the general reader was not really interested in the kind of fiction which some now call “experimental” in order to disavow it, but which has always interested me deeply. Just to avoid any major misunderstanding, let me make clear that I would include in this category very diverse writers, some of which have seldom been considered experimental, such as Melville, Kafka, Bulgakov, Borges, Beckett, Thomas Bernhard and the Brazilian Guimarães Rosa. At that time (it was ten years ago), and probably because of my naiveté, I was surprised to finally find out that the major publishers of the world survive basically on non-fiction books and the best-selling so called “non-serious fiction” – this despite the fact that what gives them their literary prestige is still what we call “serious fiction.” I
was surprised to find out that the international book market would survive mainly on non-fiction. If you had been paying attention to any book review from a major American newspaper ten years ago, you would have seen that the non-fiction section outstripped the fiction one by a great deal. This was no different elsewhere, and I presume it is still the case. Most important to me was to find out that even the literary reader was driven mostly to fiction that was either based on true stories or which, as an immediate effect of multiculturalism, would be perceived as the direct expression (or representation) of the author’s racial, social or gender background or reality.

When I began to think more systematically about this issue, I had just finished what I, retrospectively, ended up seeing as a trilogy. They were short novels that abided by the same kind of narrative structure. They were novels divided in two parts, the second one contradicting or denying the first. As in a mirrored structure, one part was the inversion of the other. It may sound very cerebral and contrived, but in fact they were melodramas in the closet. They were not based on true stories, neither were they the direct expression of the author’s racial, social or gender background – even if it is impossible not to be so, with any book, at least indirectly. One way or the other, they were the books I was interested not only in writing but also in reading myself. These were the books that, at that time, would make me happy as a reader. I still think of them as a very playful read – despite the fact that the general public, taken the number of copies sold, has not seemed to agree. In fact, when the last of these short novels was released, I realized not only that people were not really interested in this kind of literature, but that I was falling into a trap, turning what in the beginning could still be seen as an original, experimental, if I may say, narrative structure into a formula. So I desperately tried to turn myself away from it, toward new things.

I do not really know how conscious I was when I read, on a Saturday morning, in one of Brazil’s main daily newspapers, a review of the correspondence left by a German anthropologist killed among the Brazilian Indians in the first half of the 20th century. In the first paragraph, also written by an anthropologist, there was, in no more than one sentence, a brief mention to another violent death of a foreign anthropologist among Brazilian Indians, and that was Buell Quain’s suicide. I had never heard of Buell Quain before. At that moment, as if I had been waiting for this to happen for a long time, I became obsessed with him. Not only with the mystery of his death, but also with the potential of this story to comply with the current standards of the literary market and public taste that I felt so uncomfortable with. And that is when my research on this man began. I told you I did not know how conscious I was in the beginning, but soon enough I realized that if the reader wanted a non-fiction book, I had found something for him or her, but I would deliver it in a corrupted way, a sort of a trap, albeit a playful
one. I have been a reactive writer all along, someone that would write like a
child in tantrums, in reaction to a reality in which he does not fit, so I kind
of decided to use this story as a provocation.

As soon as I began my research, I read Quain's account of his work in
the Amazon region and was struck by the fear this man had experienced
among the Indians. Quain was a young, brilliant and ambitious anthropolo-
gist from Columbia University. He came from the Midwest, from Bismarck,
North Dakota. When he was offered a research post in Brazil, he knew he
would have to go after the most inaccessible subject, which would put him
among the legends of the ethnographic work of his time. Brazil, at that time,
was under a dictatorship and foreign scientists had to ask for authoriza-
tion in order to make any kind of research or fieldwork. Not only did they
have to be previously approved by the State authorities, but, depending on
the field research, they also would have to be accompanied by a local scien-
tist. What is which happened with Lévi-Strauss and the experience that he
related in Tristes Tropiques. So Quain elected the Trumai as his ethno-
graphic subjects. The Trumai were an ethnic group on the verge of extinc-
tion, deep in the most inaccessible forest in the state of Mato Grosso. Not
only was he denied the permit, but he also decided to go there by himself.
And it became a nightmare. He fell ill before reaching the Indian village,
he was morally devastated, and during his stay there, he suffered the onset
of a fever that weakened him even more. The Trumai had been a group of
brave warriors, but now they were reduced to a fretful population, victim
of its own fears and demons. They feared the dark, the forest, and other
ethnic groups around them. Reading Quain's log, I realized how deeply this
collective fear had affected him. After a few months, he was forced back to
Rio by the State authorities. He was deeply depressed and frustrated. Once
in Rio, he was offered a research post among the Krahô Indians. The Krahô
had been under the white man's influence for a long time, in a much more
accessible region than the Trumai, in Central Brazil. Quain had no choice
but to accept the job. So he took it. However, he despised the Krahô from
the start, and he ended up killing himself a few months later, while trying
to flee their village.

What interested me most, in part as a provocation, in a world that was
progressively reducing literature to the direct expression of the author's ex-
perience and background, was to make up my own experience as fiction. I
wanted to put myself in Quain's shoes in order to understand his death –
and, curiously, that drive pushed me to the most comical part of my novel.
I went to the Krahô with an anthropologist from São Paulo. I wanted to feel
the same fear Quain had recognized and experienced among the Trumai. As
soon as I got to the village, I began to feel that some kind of negotiation was
taking place between the Indians and the anthropologist who took me there
and that I was the unconscious subject at stake. They only wanted to baptize me in a ritual that would make me part of the village, part of the family, but, predisposed as I was (and paranoid as I am), I began to hallucinate that I was in danger and, maybe, something really bad was being concocted. Of course, my fear was totally grotesque (there was nothing to be afraid of), but retrospectively, it also became very funny. I should say that, taking notice of my state, the Indians took part in the game I was unconsciously playing. They began to tease me without my knowing it. And by the end the whole situation, had made me understand that I was recreating my own experience as fiction even before the novel had been written. It made me realize that once I put myself artificially into a reality which does not necessarily have much to do with my own, that reality begins to conspire with me in favor of the novel I am working on. It is not that the real thing had been abolished or banned from experience, far from it. You cannot ban what is real, but you can use artificial elements to provoke it and to distort it. And, most important, I found out at that moment that, in my case, fear is a very rich element for triggering this contamination of reality by fiction. I repeated this paranoid, artificial recreation of experience in the process of writing my following novels, and it became a sort of method. I have been desperately afraid and angry in Mongolia about cultural behavior that I could not understand. I have taken a simple dinner party by candlelight in Tokyo for a satanic ritual. I have been mugged and argued with thieves in St. Petersburg, and thanks to this technique, I could experience the romantic city as a mere façade to a terrible nightmare the characters of my novel were meant to live through. I wanted the reader to understand that literature is creation, invention, and that to reduce it to the direct expression of the author’s experience is not only misleading, but also impoverishing, since experience is something that you can create as well as suffer.

To my complete dismay, these books (mainly the one dealing with the American anthropologist and the Indians and the one written after a trip to Mongolia) ended up being read respectively as autobiography and as a travel log. And this was partially because I had related the anthropologist’s experience to my own childhood with my father in the Amazon and because I had really traveled in Mongolia before writing a novel called *Mongolia*. I realized that what I was trying to fight was much stronger than I thought. This is when I began conceiving, in reaction to all that, a book called *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (The Sun Sets in São Paulo), as an artificial, deliberate and manifest appraisal of fiction as a liberating tool. In this book, every single character is either Japanese or of Japanese descent, so there is apparently no trace of the author in what is related, no possibility of reducing the novel to the author’s immediate experience or background. It is a book about the powers of literature as we came to understand it through the
modern western tradition, as the potential creative strength of a radical and subjective singularity.

There was a subsequent experience aggravating the frustration of seeing *Nine Nights* and *Mongolia* read as autobiography and travel log that only made me more obsessed with this issue. Soon after I had published the novel set in Mongolia, I received a call from one of the avant-garde theatre groups that I most admire in Brazil, the Teatro da Vertigem. They invited me to write a play that would have to deal with three different locations in Brazil, linguistically rooted in the national identity: Brasilândia, a huge shantytown on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brasília, the country’s capital, and Brasiléia, a town on the border between the state of Acre, in northern Brazil, and Bolivia, in the Amazon. They also wanted to stage the play on the Tietê, the main river that cuts the city of São Paulo and that has become an open-air sewer as a consequence of industrialization and economic growth. For almost two years we worked together in relative peace, doing workshops in the shantytown on the outskirts of the city, traveling together, the whole group on a truck from São Paulo to the Amazon, and doing theatrical exercises and improvisations. The hate and the war within the group, however, began when I came back with the first parts of the text I was writing based on the whole experience. From then on, the group split in two and a group of actors, stage designers, assistants etc. began to work against me. Unlike the 60s, when similar avant-garde groups would abhor the idea of an author and struggle in the name of a collective and innovative work, what was happening here was the denial of a subjective author, the hate for the author as a creator capable of ruptures and radical singularities, since these could not be unanimously approved or shared, since these, being the product of an individual conscience, could not be recognized as their natural collective offspring. They would fight the arbitrary and subjective singularity represented by my text in the name of a shared consensual expression, less strange to them, albeit also less disruptive. They would fight against authorship in the name of representation and democracy. The quality of the work and the work itself did not matter anymore, as long as it represented them, as long as it achieved some kind of unanimity and that each one could recognize him or herself represented as the author of the text. They needed to kill the author associated with a despotic subjective individuality in order to proclaim themselves the rightful authors of a text that would represent their group experience. And the criteria for that action had to be, necessarily, extra-literary and non-subjective. I mean, in the case of this play, it did not have to do with the text itself as an end, but as a means. The whole premise was backed by a diffuse idea of representation and democracy in the arts.

The group’s former set designer once told me that his model for art would be the new terrorist cell, where you cannot find an individual author or
leader anymore, where the action is done anonymously, spontaneously, in a collective way, making it impossible to trace its source to an individual mind or a center. The same logic is behind the organized crime inside the Brazilian prisons, where a leader cannot be spotted or stopped anymore. The function of the whole system has taken over the idea of an individual mastermind, and we might also recognize a surprising analogy in the internet. The majority of personal blogs with literary ambitions, despite their narcissistic impulse, tend to blur subjective differences and evaluations of literary works in the name of a broader fellowship of self-proclaimed and mutually supported writers writing more or less the same journal. There is still, of course, a fierce individualism encouraged by the whole system, but it is a neutralized individualism, where singularity and rupture must be fought in the name of a blurred idea of democracy. It is an individualism addicted to its own consumption, self-absorbed, seduced by narcissism and celebrity against any kind of individual rupture or dysfunction, seen as elitism. This is not new, of course, but it may be more effective than ever before, since a new technological tool can now conjure the individual against subjectivity itself by simply encouraging authors to publicize their personality, by drawing directly from self. Through self-publicizing tools like facebook and personal blogs, and now twitter, subjectivity is channeled and rerouted from any unexpected creation, and opinions and self-expression gradually begin to be taken for literary work in a net of commonplace reproduction. The idea of not having a singular, dysfunctional, destabilizing author or work of art serves the presumption of a functioning system in which everyone can be a self-promoted artist or writer, equal and the same. The system has become more important and more original than any individual creation. The net is itself the new work of art.

A new ideology, akin to the Chinese “one world, one dream,” is therefore being spread against the idea of a singular exceptionality, in favor of a collective balance represented by the net. This has always been a corporate ideology, but it seems that now it also has pervaded the arts. It is mystifying to see the self-interested motives of powerful companies being elevated to philosophical and political benevolent principles. It is true that you can always use the internet as a tool to publish difficult, singular and innovative work that is unlikely to be published by the mainstream publishing houses, but the less mass appeal it has, the lower the chances that it will be read spontaneously through a massive scale net. I agree that there are many uses in which the internet has indeed served the cause of democracy, exchanging and circulating information at a speed and on a scale never seen before, spreading news out of censored environments and countries under dictatorships. But young corporations like Google, Microsoft and Yahoo, acting as the new heralds of democracy and freedom, are also making huge efforts
to master trends in order to make money out of them. They are interested in trends, not singularities, not exceptions. Sociologists have been hired to come up with a map of how trends are created, how they evolve and how they can be developed and exploited. One of these sociologists, Duncan Watts, from Columbia University, has supported the idea, endorsed by his own research within the net, that trends are created not by special individuals or leaders, capable of propagating their new opinions and ideas, but by the functioning of the whole net, like in an ant hill or a bee hive. The western romantic image of the genius has lost its place in this functional, pragmatic and objective world. The genius act would be in fact, according to this new ideology, the final result of an accumulation of anonymous acts hidden in time and guided by a collective interactive and reproductive system.

Striking evidence of this current way of thinking could be seen at the 27th São Paulo Art Biennial that same year when I was at the last stages of my work with the Teatro da Vertigem. Willing to show new political art, but unable to challenge and tackle the market which finances the art world, for obvious reasons, the curators, based on ideas that have been circulating in the last ten years or so, decided to fight the artist as an individual, associating its figure with a romantic and anachronistic 19th century ideology. In the place of this romantic artist, they would propose collective actions functioning in the same model of NGOs. It did not matter whether what was being produced and shown was cliché or a repetition of something seen two minutes ago. It did not matter that what once had been radical in its singularity was now reduced to collective craftsmanship. It only mattered that it looked more democratic and consensual (and therefore less strange and inadequate), and that it had a social function, albeit totally ineffective, with no real social consequence, other than to wipe the slate clean of the western romantic tradition and to ban the illusion of an individual author or creator. They had turned the utopian ideology of modern art as a medium prone to imagining the unimaginable and to conceiving the unconceivable into a more pragmatic and practicable trade of good and consensual intentions.

These examples seemed very eloquent to me. From what I have seen, heard and read in recent years, I realized that a new kind of sophistic struggle, opposing democracy to the subjective individual and, consequently, function to rupture, has taken hold of the arts. It began with post-modern relativism, was reinforced by multiculturalism and developed till subjective criteria had been disavowed as antidemocratic and elitist. Of course, there are many reasons for that, and I could stress them if I were a sociologist or a philosopher, which I am not. But it is obvious that both post-modernism and multiculturalism in the arts, and the spreading trend of self-promoted artists, claiming their right to be artists in an artistic democracy based on objective values that have more to do with extra-artistic elements than with
the originality of the works themselves, is the effect of a hangover, of the contingent excesses of subjective evaluation by an intellectual elite pushing arts and literary criticism to a dead end. Despite the truth in this affirmation, this is certainly not a reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

What I am trying to say here – and this is what I really believe in as a writer – is something quite evident, but which is progressively being questioned from different fronts and angles: literature is the result of a subjective, singular and individual act. It is created out of conventions and, in the case of the modern western tradition, conventions which were often conceived against conventions. The problem now is that a new generation is coming of age under the spell of a general corporate ideology in which you do not want to use art and literature as a means against conventions anymore, but rather against your own capacity to break with the conventions. You should not question the net. It has become a second nature. It aims at not having anything outside itself. You can be a self-proclaimed writer in the internet with no original writing, reproducing what is being done everywhere around you, publicizing your personality instead of going against the conventions of your own time (in which case you probably would not be read on the net). It has become more important to be socially recognized as a writer than to write unexpected work, to have a function than to create rupture. Functionally, it is as if there were no conventions anymore and art (or literature) was just a natural act of expression and creativity which could be done, democratically, by anyone, and evaluated and shared by objective and measurable criteria. Of course, these criteria can only be given by the market (how many people read and praise a book or a blog) or by the previous and palpable reality a book represents (thus the hegemony of non-fiction and of fiction that expresses the direct experience of its author). By this logic, what makes a good book is less the ability of an author to invent, to imagine and to create new unexpected things or to go against conventional consensus than the ability of the author to share his or her own life experiences and to represent and reassert the world we already share, see and understand.

Being a reactive writer, who often works out of tantrums, against what I see around me, I could not refrain from ending up associating fiction (a very particular kind of fiction, I must say, “experimental” fiction for the want of a better word) with authorship and rupture. I believe this is the main conscious motive behind my writings: to search for literature where it is least expected, to turn what would be considered flawed by collective standards into my own literary qualities.

Recently, after hearing another Brazilian writer say that literature does not search for truth, as science does, but that it is the representation and incorporation of different discourses of reality, I understood more clearly
that in fact the literature I am interested in is, on the contrary, the result of a search for truth, for a truth that is not in the world we see. It is a literature more interested in the invention of what has yet to be created than with representation of what we already recognize around us. Of course, this invention can sometimes only be conceived by allusion. It is a tentative act, which strives to say things that cannot be said, a literature (and now I am speaking about my books) that uses the conventions of realism to show the frailty of these same conventions. It is a literature that rejects the already established poetic and metaphoric standards, sometimes through apparently banal, neutral and non-literary language, as it tries to show literature where it is least expected. It is a literature, as you may have understood by now, fascinated by paradoxes. It is a working-process literature, as if truth could only happen in movement, before being said and understood, and could only make sense before making sense, before being unanimously accepted as truth.

Of course, there is in these books a consciousness of our time, of humanity as a self-destructive element. They are books informed by a kind of ill-resolved humanism, in which the consciousness of our own evil is not enough to make us refrain from it, since it is at the same time the reason for our immediate survival. Writing about Brazil, in his *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald, the late German writer, tells us that "Our propagation on earth comes with the carbonization of superior vegetable species and, in a more general way, the unstoppable burning of every combustible substance (...), everything is combustion, and combustion is the intimate principle of every object made by us." This consciousness of the human being as paradox is behind the narrative structures of my novels and the characters I am interested in, fighting their own conventions from within, in order to see what their condition forbids them to see. And it brings me to the place where I recognize the artistic act and its tragic nature, being the herald of a consciousness that is never enough, as if looking for an unconceivable truth that could save us from what we are.

I am not a religious person, I do not believe in any god, and I do not abide by any church, but I recognize the religious aspect of what I have just said. In fact, I would agree if you told me that it has to do with faith. Faith in literature as a way of transcendence, of widening the world we live in and its understandings – not necessarily with good will and good universal feelings that become commonplace and therefore can be easily marketed, but by tackling our most contradictory, paradoxical and obscure spots. This is what I call literary truth, the product of authorship, of an individual subjectivity that cannot be unanimously or consensually taken, nor can it be conceived before its own creation.
Notes

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