

# New Nonfiction from Fabrizia Faustinella: “Infinitesimal Possibilities”



You are in the stairwell, standing with a few of your fellow medical students, waiting for that door in the basement to be unlocked. The smell of formalin and paraffin emerge from the hallway below, penetrating your nostrils. You take shallow breaths, which adds to your slight anxiety. Your heart rate rises just enough for you to be aware of it and makes you uncomfortable. Your stomach growls. It must be hunger. You decide to eat that fruit bar which you've been keeping, just in case, in your white coat's right-side pocket. The fruit bar is filled with blueberry jam. Maybe not a good choice considering what's waiting for you, but you could not have known. The sweet, artificially flavored concoction melts in your mouth combined with the acrid taste of the preserving chemicals which impregnate the air. Your mouth fills with saliva. You feel somewhat nauseous. You hear the footsteps of the anatomic pathology assistant, the dull thumping sound of his prosthetic leg on the hard floor, unmistakable, accompanied by the jingling of a large ring of keys. He opens the door. The students, alerted by the noise, start walking downstairs with a mix of apprehension and excitement. Someone bumps against your shoulder, and a piece of that fruit bar you're still nibbling on falls. You pick it up with a Kleenex, the blue jam smearing on the step. You notice the purple undertone of the stain on paper. Your jaw clenches.

Everybody enters the large, windowless, high-ceiling basement room, artificially lit with tubular neon lights. Several metal tables are lined up, each with a white sheet on top. Instruments of dissection and sewing material are neatly

placed on movable carts: saws, scalpels, forceps, scissors, knives, bone cutters, needles, thread. Against the walls, to the right and to the left, two large wooden cabinets hold many jars of human body parts.

The students are divided in small groups. You are the only one assigned to go to a certain examining table. You notice that under the white sheet on that table, there isn't much. Usually, you can make out the shape of the corpse, thin, large, tall, short. Occasionally, a hand may stick out, and you are able to guess if that's a woman or a man, young or old. This particular heap seems too small to be of any significance. Is this a joke, a prank? Did the assistant place a tiny pillow under the white sheet just to break the tension, for a change, to make you laugh? Then the sheet is removed.

This is not a joke; this is not a prank; this is not insignificant. This is a corpse. The corpse of a baby. You see a beautiful baby boy lying on the cold steel table, naked, belly up, limbs spread, limp. You are told that it is a newborn. You think you have never seen a newborn that beautiful. A plump little body, with a round little belly. A head full of dark, glistening hair. His eyelids closed and hiding underneath are big, almond-shaped eyes. Thick eyelashes. Peaceful lips. A face so serene and healthy looking, you would have thought he was just sleeping, *un amorino dormiente*, if it wasn't for the strange bluish skin discoloration and the purple bruises on his scalp and on his puffy cheeks. You feel the sour taste of the fruit bar in the back of your throat.

What happened to him?

This is what happened: he was found in a dumpster a few hours earlier, wrapped in a blue blanket after his teenage mom, who had managed to conceal the pregnancy all the way to term, suffocated him with a pillow. The teenage mom apparently gave birth to this baby all alone, by herself. You don't know

anything about the life of that young woman or the circumstances of that conception. You are left to speculate all the different case scenarios, but then you realize that it all comes down to two possibilities: young, consensual love or the other option. Either way, a tragic unfolding of events ensued, leading to the suppression of a newborn life and the derailling of the mother's. So many promises, so much potential, all shattered.

It didn't have to end like that.

You wondered what would happen to the girl. Maybe she would be sent to a correctional facility for minors, a reformatory, to be *re-formed*. A word with Latin root, like in *re-shaped*, *formed again*, *changed*. You pray for her to stay sane and keep it together during the process of *re-formation*. You wonder what will happen to the *amorino dormiente*. Who will claim his little body? Will he wake up in heaven? You cringe at the idea that there might not be such a thing.

The autopsy room still haunts your dreams. At night, in your mind, you often walk down those steps with a sense of dread. You get lost in the dark basement hallway, lights flickering, nobody around, the footsteps of the assistant echoing in the distance. He never hears you calling out to him, asking him to wait for you. You don't hear your voice either. It swells up in your chest, but you can't push it out. You want to leave, but you open the wrong door. Inside, you see dreadful, unspeakable things: maimed bodies, severed heads, chopped limbs, putrefying corpses. You wake up in a sweat, and you are so relieved that it was just a dream.

But was it just a dream? After all, the forensic pathologist took you with him on rounds to teach you how to recognize firsthand the signs of strangulation; a bullet entry wound from an exit wound; a blunt blow to the head; the differences

between asphyxiation and a natural death; the various stages of decomposition. The more you think about it, the more you remember, the more you can see those bodies, although, somehow, the faces are often blurred. Victims of violent crimes, their lives abruptly ended. All possibilities disintegrated.

Then you start thinking about the others. Those who died of incurable diseases or curable diseases that went untreated. You remember that young woman, with pink nail polish and masculine features, which got you perplexed. She died of an arrhenoblastoma, a rare type of ovarian cancer in which the tumor cells secrete male sex hormones, causing virilization, the appearance in females of male physical characteristics. She had the only case of arrhenoblastoma you have ever seen throughout your clinical career. You think that it could have been you on that metal table and how unfair it was that she had to die so prematurely and so painfully. You think how terrible it must have been for her to fight the puzzling changes with the pink nail polish and the eye shadow and feminine clothes. You also think how horrible it is that those very organs destined for reproduction, for the survival of the species, can kill you in so many different and ugly ways. Mother Nature betrays you, punishes you, keeps you under her thumb. And yet you still have to show her, if not love, respect. Your rebellions are futile. She has no mercy.

Some of those you saw on the tables died of self-suppression to keep life from happening to them, to stop the thinking and the feeling.

You'll never forget that middle-aged man who jumped off a building, with a problem list that went like this: "anxiety disorder, unspecified; housing problems; economic problems; occupational problems; other unspecified problems related to psychosocial circumstances; problems related to social environment; unavailability and inaccessibility of health-care facilities; post-traumatic stress disorder." You wondered what

was the trauma that sent his life spiraling down. Were his parents still alive? Did they witness the demise of their own child? Did they cause it? How many times did they hope things would get better? Did anybody try to help him?

Then again, that twenty-three-year-old girl who died of an overdose, not accidental, whose medical record documented she was a “victim of sexual assault *when young*, marijuana smoker, Chlamydia infection, Gonorrhea infection, Syphilis, major depressive disorder, recurrent, severe, with psychotic features, schizoaffective disorder, foster care when young, problems related to primary support group, legal problems, poverty, homelessness, P3G3A0” (*three pregnancies, three births, no abortions*). You asked yourself what happened to her children, and you thought that the same cycle of destruction must have already been ignited.

Then there are those you didn't see but you heard of. There was that seventeen-year-old boy who hid himself in a cargo container on a ship sailing from a port in North Africa, looking for a better life somewhere in Europe. He was found dead, dehydrated, asphyxiated, when the container was finally opened upon arrival to its destination. Would his loved ones ever learn what happened to him? Would they at least get his body back? You wondered whom and what life he had left behind. You wondered what he was running away from. You wondered how he must have felt when the air started to run out, when the container got too hot, when the water was down to the last drop. Did he ever give up the hope of surviving? Could that have been you in that predicament? You found yourself holding your breath.

\*\*\*

*Infinitesimal vs. infinite.*

*Incalculably, exceedingly, or immeasurably minute; vanishingly*

*small vs. limitless or endless in space, extent, or size; impossible to measure or calculate, countlessly great; immense.*

*Infinitesimal, like a number that is closer to zero than any standard real number. Infinite, like the infinite mercy of God.*

The Infinite-Infinitesimal is the difference between those who are mainstream and those who are at the margins, those for whom the sky is the limit and those who have no sky, those with lives full of promise and those with no promise at all. All ripped away from them sometimes right at the beginning, sometimes early on or barely halfway through.

You find it puzzling that words with an identical root can mean something radically different, even opposite; that a minor change in the letters at the end can cause a catastrophic reversal in meaning. You are unsettled when you realize that life behaves very much the same way; how a shift in circumstances can subvert everything; and how easy it is to be derailed, left behind, forgotten.

\*\*\*

You often find yourself thinking of the *amorino dormiente* and his young mother.

You wonder what could have become of her and her little boy if she had help and support, if she was given the chance of welcoming him with open arms and raising him with love.

She could have been happy and proud of her little boy.

He might have been the one to save her. He might have been the one to save us all.

---

# Why Black Literature Matters

✘ “The Thankful Poor”, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1894

Last month in *The Atlantic*, Egyptian writer and activist Alaa Al Aswany wrote an excellent essay on [How Literature Inspires Empathy](#). He gives an example from a sentence in Dostoyevsky’s *The House of the Dead* (“He, also, had a mother”) to show how a single word makes the reader see a criminal and prisoner in a whole new light. As Al Aswany explains, “the role of literature is in this ‘also’. It means we’re going to understand, we’re going to forgive, we’re not going to judge. We should understand that people are not bad, but they can do bad things under particular circumstances.” Later, after mentioning how *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* help us sympathize with and not judge those titular unfaithful wives, he writes “Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities. It teaches us how to feel other people suffering. When you read a good novel, you forget about the nationality of the character. You forget about his or her religion. You forget about his skin color or her skin color. You only understand the human. You understand that this is a human being, the same way we are. And so reading great novels absolutely can remake us as much better human beings.” There is a case to be made that Dostoyevsky is not an author who always aspires much empathy in his readers (especially when compared to his counterpart Tolstoy). Likewise, it is impossible to claim that reading literature always improves the reader, which is just not the case.

My main interests of study and research have always been history, philosophy, and literature. I have two degrees in history, which helps me learn about and understand the world.

Philosophy helps me think about the world, sometimes too abstractly, as it is and ought to be. But literature is a way of feeling, understanding, and connecting with humanity in all its various guises on a personal and emotional level. It is a continuation of the oldest human activity of storytelling. I would argue that not only is literature at least as important as the other arts and sciences, including history and philosophy, but, at its best, it is one of the central things that symbolizes our shared humanity and, in the process of both absorbing old and creating new literature, shapes us as human creatures.

One reason for this is that, despite some self-appointed guardians of what constitutes high culture (or snobbish protectors of an exclusive and immutable "canon"), literature is and always has been primarily a form of popular entertainment appealing to people from all walks of life. We think of Shakespeare, rightly, as an almost godlike literary creator central to Western literature; in reality, a large part of his plays just barely survived in written form only through the foresight of two contemporaries who produced the Folios. If not for this, Shakespeare might today be known only to scholars as an Elizabethan playwright whose enormous popularity was due mostly to the lower and middle classes enjoying his over-abundance of wittily crude sexual jokes and double entendres.

According to my own rough formulation, all literature can probably be grouped into two categories based on the motives of both author and reader: escapism, and edification. Most genre literature falls under escapism—fantasy, science fiction, mystery, thriller, historical fiction, romance, western, travel, etc. The somewhat smaller range of books that intend to represent broad universal truths, dig into a particular philosophical discourse, or teach some important life lesson to the readers about the world fall under the category of edification—these are usually the "classics" that

are reread by every generation of reader. It is important to note that there is overlap between the two categories; that is, every type of escapist "genre" literature has its own exemplars of great literature due to the skill and depth of the writing. Tolkien is considered the greatest of the fantasy writers, and his work transcends that genre and becomes something valuable and worthy for all readers (I don't know if the Harry Potter series can be seen the same way since I have never read it; readers can let me know in the comments section). Similarly in science fiction, Asimov is one of the writers who pushed the boundaries of his genre into something greater and more universal. Most of Jane Austen's novels are basically simple romance (just like all Shakespeare's comedies), but that does not mean they are not also edifying literature in some capacity. I do not intend to attempt any wider comparisons on this theme of two types of literature, but I would be interested to read about other examples that come to mind (once again, you can let me know in the comments section).

Coming broadly around from this digression to my main point, literature can do many things, and one of the most important of these, to my mind, is to inspire empathy—something which has never been overly abundant in the world but which there can never be too much of. Because of the unique merits of literature, it has a power to reach people on a raw or emotional level that is rare in other media. In the most extreme end of the spectrum, it can cause readers to be so affected as to kill themselves in droves, as with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It can convey the feeling of shared humanity, such as Prince Andrei felt while mortally wounded on the field of Borodino in *War and Peace*. It can make us understand the lives of people who are totally different from us, and who we would otherwise never know anything about. This is especially true of the books by people who in the past were never represented in literature due to political and social circumstances—slavery, colonialism, poverty, and other

exploitations. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is considered the first important modern novel by an African writer, which shows the African rather than the European perspective of a Joseph Conrad or a Graham Greene. A similar example is the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, which describe the hardships of colonial Kenyan life and the Mau Mau rebellion in a much different way than the more idealized European vision of a Karen Blixen.

A writer does not have to be one of the excluded minorities or oppressed in order to write about them. Alan Paton was a white liberal South African who worked for penal reform in his country and founded the South African Liberal Party (which was outlawed by the Apartheid regime). His book *Cry, the Beloved Country* tells the story of a poor Zulu priest who makes a Dantean journey to Johannesburg to look for his missing sister and son. It is one of the most emotionally charged books I have read, and a book that cannot fail to create a strong sense of empathy in the reader for the injustices of racism in South Africa (and, by extension, the whole world).

---

"Black Lives Matter" is a new civil rights movement for Black people in America after the seemingly endless cases of police murder and injustice that have recently proven the existence and depth of entrenched systemic racism in the America of the First Black President. The reactionaries and enablers of injustice that have decried this movement say that it foments violence (it does not) or disregard for White people's lives (it does not). Despite the unique promise of its founding, America is a country whose relatively short history has had more than its share of horrific and unforgettable injustice. After decades or even centuries of hard-fought activism slowly bending the arc of history towards justice, much of the past has indeed been forgotten or misrepresented. In school textbooks, I fear that much of the true history is at least

partially white-washed, if not completely elided. The two grossest examples are the 400-year genocide of the Native Americans, and the 300-year terror regime of Black slavery. Both of these things allowed the United States to grow into the wealthy and powerful country it is today, and the latter's influence on the society and politics of 21st century America is still quite strong and cannot be forgotten, diminished, or excused. For every romantic apology for the South (such as the novel and film *Gone With the Wind*) or for every apologist who claims that slavery was "not so bad" for the slaves, there must be someone who refutes them immediately with the truth. If someone claims that things are fine for Black people now because of the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action, they need to understand that such relatively feeble legislation has barely put a dent in the centuries of heart-breaking brutality and relentless economic exploitation.

Luckily, there is a strong recent tradition in America of Black literature which tells stories that could never have been told even 100 years ago. For anyone doubting that White privilege is real or that Black Lives have not mattered as much as White Lives in America, I would recommend some of these books more than any history book. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I was thinking mostly of fiction—novels, specifically—as the focus of this piece, but there are numerous examples of literary non-fiction—especially autobiographies—that are worth reading and have lessons to teach: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. More than the superficiality of film and the flatness of art and photography, the depth of characterization, psychology, tragedy, and emotion contained in such literature can do more to create awareness of the joy and tragedy of human lives and inspire deep and long-lasting empathy for

other people.

In Al Aswany's article, he comments that "I don't think literature is the right tool to change the situation right now. If you would like to change the situation now, go out into the street. Literature, to me, is about a more important change: It changes our vision, our understanding, the way we see. And people who are changed by literature, in turn, will be more capable to change the situation." There is often a strong connection between writers and political activism, which has been especially clear in the case of writers coming from traditionally suppressed minority backgrounds; James Baldwin was a lifelong fighter for social and racial justice, and Alice Walker famously declared that "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

In a time when Liberal Arts and humanistic studies are coming under criticism for not being apparently linked to "real-world" skills, and budgets for education are being cut across the board, we need to ask ourselves if there are things important in society beyond profit-making. Is nation-building and money-making the most important thing in society, more than the lives of people it exploits? Are some people in society just a means for others and not an end in themselves? How can we enrich our culture and society to be not only good citizens but empathetic fellow humans? Reading literature is no panacea, but is certainly something that can do no harm. Only in such a world where we understand and feel compassion for people outside our own circle can a statement such as Black Lives Matter be both a true assertion and a reality. Where kids and teenagers are not murdered by the police for no reason other than that they were Black, where refugees and immigrants would be universally welcomed rather than treated like lower life forms. Only in a more empathetic world of shared humanity is this possible.