Rewriting the Past: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *A Maggot* and *Mantissa*

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Résumé: *Les œuvres de John Fowles présentent une des caractéristiques paradoxales de la fiction postmoderniste, c'est-à-dire l'assimilation et l'adaptation parodique des modèles littéraires du passé. Fowles revient constamment au canon littéraire, mais son approche de la tradition réaliste est toujours subversive et conteste les prémisses du roman réaliste et tout particulièrement du roman victorien. Deux romans de Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman et A Maggot sont considérés et même interprétés par les critiques traditionalistes comme des romans historiques, malgré le proteste de l'écrivain qui n'a jamais accepté cette opinion et s'est déclaré contre une telle catégorisation. Même si les deux œuvres se présentent, au moins au premier regard, comme des romans historiques, elles n'en sont pas, tout simplement parce-que Fowles reprend et réécrit le passé en utilisant d'une façon pas du tout innocente la manière d'écrire et tous les autres éléments caractéristiques du roman historique.*

Mots-clés: *John Fowles, fiction postmoderniste, canon littéraire, roman historique.*

On the contemporary literary stage, John Fowles's writing finds itself a place within a vast rank of fictions which had a constant evolution after the 1950's. This new kind of experimental writing whose main concern is to explore the complexities of the relationship between fiction and reality through the opposition between constructing and then destroying the mimetic illusion is known under the name 'metafiction', a term invented by William Gass in 1970. One of the main characteristics of metafictional texts which is the foregrounding and exaggeration of the tension existing between 'technique and counter-technique', 'frame and frame-breaking', 'construction and deconstruction of illusion' (see Waugh: 1984) may be attributed also to Fowles's novels. His fiction, as many other metafictional works, includes both 'innovation and familiarity' (Waugh: 1984) since it starts from a familiar ground or code, the conventions of the realist novel, which the writer employs and subverts through a parodic reworking. Thus Fowles challenges the

traditional conventions of the novel from within these very conventions trying to find new, more experimental forms, from inside the old ones. Amongst a host of metafictional experimentalists Fowles is considered to belong to a category represented by those who, although taking fictionality as a theme to be explored, still preserve the humanist value of communicating a meaningful message to the readers. This group of writers who do not sacrifice meaning altogether in favour of form differentiate themselves from those who create 'radical' fiction. If fiction which falls in the first category is still 'readable' at least at one level and despite its use of deconstructive strategies still offers the reader the possibility to recuperate a coherent meaning and to reconstruct the 'projected world', 'radical' fiction explodes or 'destabilizes the projected world' (McHale: 1996) to the point that it denies any meaning and ontological status.

However placing Fowles in one or another of these categories remains problematic. Even if his novels present some or all of the features inherent in all metafictional writings, they still resist classification being at the same time traditional and experimental, Victorian and neo-Victorian. Hence the difficulty faced by critics who seem unable to make up their mind between considering Fowles an experimentalist writer or a realist one. Consequently Fowles was ranged successively amongst writers of metafiction, neo-realism, historical novels, and even magic realism or fantastic postmodernism.

John Fowles's novels display one of the paradoxical features of postmodernism, namely its appropriation and parodic reworking of models of the past. Fowles returns constantly to the literary canon, but his approach to the realist tradition is always subversive and clearly challenges the realistic premises on which the nineteenth century novel was based.

The relationship between Fowles's fiction and Victorian literature remains a problematic one, since it presupposes a double, ambivalent attitude towards the 'crushing sort of literary tradition' Fowles was speaking of. This relationship, though implicitly stemming out of the writer's fascination for the great Victorian masters, has always a revisionist dimension and shows clearly his rebellion against the realist canon and his will to undermine it by breaching its rules. In his effort to break free from the norm of the conventional writing, Fowles uses parody as a playful and ironic reworking of the nineteenth century novel in order to reconceptualise and reshape the experience of the past into a new form. However his search of a new form of

expression for his novels takes place inside the old ones and this is one of the reasons why so many critics have mistakenly considered Fowles a realist writer, being misled by the realistic traps he so carefully displays. One of the most important of these realistic traps that may be found in all his novels is Fowles's use of the conventions of the realist novel, as well as of a series of reality-enhancing mechanisms.

Two of his novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* are considered by many realist-biased critics as pertaining to the historical genre, despite Fowles's declared disapproval and discontent with such a categorization. In spite of their apparently taking as a form of expression the historical novel, both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* only play with the modes of writing and constituents of the historical genre by a ludic and seditious rewriting of the (textual) past. Consequently none of these two novels is a truly historical one.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles places his story in the tradition of the Victorian novel. From the opening paragraphs, the omniscient narrator establishes all the elements of a realistic introduction: he describes the setting where the events of the novel will take place and delineates it in spatio-temporal terms; he introduces the characters, describes their physical appearance and habit in detail and makes allusions to a possible love relationship. If at a first glance, the beginning of the novel 'clearly' abides by the rules of literary realism, a more attentive reading discloses a series of subversive clues which take the text out of the Victorian context. The first of these clues is the ludic juxtaposition of intertextual allusions. In this respect, the first sentence seems to be 'borrowed' from Jane Austen, a literary reference which is made all the more transparent by mentioning her novel *Persuasion* whose events are also (partially) set in Lyme Regis. Then, the ironic comments on the characters' vanity definitely call to mind Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, whereas the criticism of woman's 'expected behaviour' seem reminiscent of George Elliot. But the most unusual of all these allusions is the anachronistic reference to Henry Moore, a twentieth century artist, as well as the narrator's commentary on the narrowness of Ernestina's skirt, a commentary which is surely addressed to a non-Victorian reader who is thus made to take an active part into the reading process.

Another device, usually employed as a reality-enhancing mechanism and whose main function is to authenticate the fictional

world to which it refers, is the use of epigraphs and footnotes. Fowles's novel begins by reintroducing the Victorian tradition of epigraphs. The first chapter opens on a fragment quoted from Thomas Hardy's poetry, which perfectly fulfils the traditional function of the epigraphs, 'as the sites of aesthetic ornaments and authoritative thematic announcements' (Gutleben 2001: 111). But when, in the second chapter, Fowles quotes from statistics indicating the impossibility for all women in the Victorian age to get married, the occurrence of this type of epigraphs raises some suspicions as to their 'authenticity' and their conventional handling by the narrator. Then, when further on, in chapter four, what the epigraphs cite are a local medical report and a letter from a prostitute, the subversion of the epigraphs is clearly identifiable. In fact it becomes obvious that epigraphs will not be handled in the traditional, old-fashioned way, but they will be used to connote in the exact opposite direction: that is instead of reinforcing the reality effect, they will point to the fictionality of the world projected by the text. All these paratextual samples, placed at the outward frame of the text, do not simply announce or introduce the diegetic world they accompany, but they criticise it, they do not pay homage to the famous voices of the past, but make audible voices of the silenced, repressed ones. Fowles's manipulative use of the epigraphs and openings illustrates his remarkable art of parody as 'a new synthesis' of an old and new code, as 'a repetition with critical distance', as imitation and then 'transfer and reorganization' of the conventions of the past (Hutcheon 1985).

The subversive play with genre may also be seen at work in the confusion and interplay of different modes of writing. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*[*] mixes the constituents of the Victorian novel with elements of the Gothic novel. The Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was first of all an expression of the revolt of passion against virtue. Liminal figures, like monsters, vampires or witches, stand in fact for the erotic desire – 'the black horses' of carnal passion – buried deep down in the human unconscious, but which, sometimes, threaten to take control over reason. It is in this context that Charles's fear to engage into the forbidden, as embodied by Sarah, should be interpreted. As in one of the famous Gothic tales, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the woman, in this

[*] All references will be made to the 1981 Triad/Granada edition of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman.*

case Sarah, represents such a temptation for Charles that he is no longer able to control his instinctual passion which leads to his making love with her at the Endicott Family Hotel. This is the reason why, after this climactic encounter with Sarah, Charles not only feels the satisfaction of sexual desire, but also 'a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality'(304). To his horror, Charles finds out a little later that Sarah is not the outcast maiden with no one to protect her, but an 'unnaturally' passionate virgin who seduced him and lured him in an irreversible situation. Charles's vision of Sarah as a succuba, a satanic figure whose only purpose is to destroy him, corresponds to the representations of women in the Gothic novel. The evil heroines of the Gothic are nothing but an embodiment of men's fear of being possessed and killed by women. Charles's thoughts are symbolic in this sense.

> And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mould them to their evil fancies … these, and a surging back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in the La Roncière appeal, filled Charles's mind with apocalyptic horror (307-308).

The interplay between the Victorian and the Gothic novel serves two purposes: one purpose is to undermine the seriousness of the 'great' realist novel by mixing its code with a minor one (abolishing the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture). The other purpose is to bring to the fore a different kind of representation of femininity than those in the Victorian era. Fowles's intention is to undercut the Victorian notion according to which women were not supposed to feel sexual pleasure. This concept had as a result the common Victorian representation and categorization of women as either virgin or whore. Sarah's behaviour defies the rules of Victorian society and seems to justify women's depictions as demon lovers in the Gothic novel.

A *Maggot*, like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, seems at first sight a historical novel. Again, the opening chapter situates the events in time and space. It is the eighteenth century England, 1736, which this time Fowles revisits. From the start, the narrator plays with the temporal dimension to which is added a mythic quality, since a story which begins 'In the late and last afternoon of an April long ago…' (*A*

Maggot[*] 1986: 3) may be very well said to take place in an *illo tempore* described as 'some strange doldrum of time, place and spirit' (11). The setting and then blurring of the temporal line is the first sign that the reader must not expect an accurate historical account of some events that took place in 1736. Though the details given in the first half of the opening chapter seem to re-create the atmosphere of that time, soon it appears that what is constructed is the 'feeling' or illusion of that world and that constantly the reader is made alert to the textual signs which unable him/her to see through the illusion. Again, Fowles uses the conventions of the novel against themselves, choosing this time the eighteenth century mode of writing. Fowles's choice is surely determined by the fact that the period saw the rise of the novel as a genre, fighting its way out of other modes or forms of literary expression, especially the romance. It is the time of Swift and Pope, a time when the novel strives for the recognition of its moral value and social utility. In order to hide its fictionality and claim that the events depicted are 'real', the novel takes various forms of expression, such as the letter, the memoir, the confession, enclosed between a prologue and an epilogue which are meant to reinforce the impression of the real.

In *A Maggot*, Fowles draws on all these literary conventions, the same way he has drawn on the narrative conventions of the Victorian novel in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Thus, Fowles opens his novel with a 'Prologue' and ends it with an 'Epilogue' that he signs with his name. Then he creates a fictional persona as the heterodiegetic narrator of the events who identifies with the twentieth century author of the Prologue and Epilogue. The narrator who takes the stance of a historian and objective witness of the events resembles very much its pedantic forerunner in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Even if he is historically accurate, the narrator cannot refrain from commenting on the social life of eighteenth century England from a twentieth century perspective and he is often anachronistic, as when he comments on the urban landscape which 'conveyed nothing but an antediluvian barbarism, such as we can experience today only in some primitive foreign land… in an African village, perhaps, or an Arab souk' (11).

Besides the two paratexts at the beginning and end of the novel, Fowles, apparently observing the laws of objectivity, hands over to the reader several 'genuine' documents from that time: several excerpts

[*] All references will be made to the 1986 Totem Books edition of John Fowles's *A Maggot.*

from *The Gentleman's Magazine* dated back in 1736 and 1737, letters, and the depositions of several witnesses to the events that led to the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Bartholomew and the death of his servant, Dick Thurlow. In an interview with James R. Baker, Fowles says that he used the chronicles from *The Gentleman's Magazine* 'to give the reader a taste of the real thing' (in Onega 1989: 139). Consequently, it turns out that the historical chronicles do not function as a device which authenticate the world that Fowles creates, but, on the contrary, they are meant to highlight the difference between the 'real thing' and its fictional projection. In the same way, the Prologue and Epilogue, which are expected to sustain the reality of the characters and events described in the novel, are used to the exact opposite purpose, expressing Fowles's refusal to enhance the reality of his constructed world. Once more, the expectations of the reader (and critic) are undermined, much in the same way in which the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* destroyed the carefully created illusion of reality by his infamous intrusion in the Chapter Thirteen of the book.

Another genre which *A Maggot* parodies is the detective novel, because the mystery of Mr. Bartholomew's disappearance and Dick's death are never solved. There is no answer to the riddle despite Henry Ayscough's efforts to find out the truth. As in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which in its turn distorts the pattern of the detective genre, Ayscough, the cunning barrister, has gathered all kinds of evidence about the journey undertaken by Mr. Bartholomew. This amount of evidence includes an analysis of a sample of the soil around the Dolling's Cave where Mr. B was seen for the last time. According to the traditional rules of the detective genre, the enigma of a murder is always solved out and the murderer is found and thus the ontology of the fictional world though destabilized is re-established with the discovery of the truth. But in *A Maggot* the expectations of the reader who believes that Ayscough's investigation will in the end have the desired outcome, leading to the discovery of a murderer, are betrayed by a continuous postponement of the answer to the question that haunts everybody: What really happened in the Dolling's cave? In fact the conclusion, formulated by Ayscough at the end of his research, in a letter-report he sends to the Duke, includes his own speculations about what might have happened, but not the absolute truth. Because, as the two competing versions of Rebecca's deposition point out, there is no absolute truth, as there is no absolute reality, but versions or

constructions of reality, or what we, humans, might understand as and take for reality. This seems to be the message that Fowles wants to convey to his readers through his writing of a novel that is and at the same time is not an eighteenth century novel.

Mantissa, the shortest of all Fowles's novels and the most unusual of them all, was intentionally left at the end of this article because it parodies the modern novel, as well as Fowles's own novels and the poststructuralist and deconstructive theory. Fowles's piercing irony is directed against the contemporary novel which takes itself too seriously. Several times his aversion is overtly expressed and comes to the surface with unrestrained vigour:

> 'The reflective novel is sixty years dead, Erato. … Even the dumbest students know it's a reflexive medium now, not a reflective one.' ….
> 'Serious modern fiction has only one subject: the difficulty of writing serious modern fiction… The natural consequence of this is that writing about fiction has become a far more important matter than writing fiction itself'.
> 'At the creative level there is in any case no connection whatever between author and text. … Our one priority now is mode of discourse, function of discourse, status of discourse. Its metaphoricality, its disconnectedness, its totally ateleological self-containedness' (Mantissa[*] 2009: 117-118).

But what Fowles attacks even more fiercely is the kind of unimaginative literary criticism which fosters and praises the kind of novel he criticizes and takes into derision. In one of his numerous dialogues with Erato, Miles Green's gives voice to his piercing irony against literary criticism:

> 'What I was actually rather wondering was this (colon) whether there aren't really … areas that merit further investigation by both the written and the writer (comma) or (comma) if you prefer (comma) between the personified as *histoire* and the personifier as *discourse* (comma) or in simpler words still (comma) by you me (comma) and as I feel sure we have at least one thing in common (colon) a mutual incomprehension of how your supremely real presence in the world of letters has failed to receive the attention … of the campus faculty-factories (comma) the structuralists and deconstructivists (comma) the semiologists (comma) the Marxists (comma) academic Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all (comma) that it deserves (semi-colon)' (64).

[*] All references will be made to the 2009 Vintage edition of *Mantissa.*

The strategies that Fowles applies in *Mantissa* are meant to undermine the contemporary criticism which has the tendency to over-intellectualise literature and suppress its more human purposes – to preserve some intelligible meaning, to educate, to entertain – which in Fowles's opinion are more important than experimentalism for the sake of experimentalism.

Though 'meant to be a joke', as Fowles himself explained in an interview with Susana Onega (1989: 182), the novel was taken very seriously by many critics who considered that the novel was 'a regression in the direction of the existential metafiction that William Palmer predicted for the writer' (Gotts, I. in Onega 1989: 124). In the light of Fowles's explanation, *Mantissa* should be regarded as a sort of 'jeu d'esprit', in the European tradition of light fiction. Constantly bringing to surface its intertextual play with other literary sources, including Fowles's own novels, and placed in the shadow of one particular writer, Flann O'Brien, as the cuckoo in Miles Green's hospital room clearly indicates, the novel expresses Fowles's playful and satiric feelings about the problems of being a writer he analysed very seriously in his previous novels, especially *Daniel Martin*.

Disrupting the conventions of the realist and of the 'serious' modern novel, by a parodic rewriting and by a playful fusion of their elements with other minor genres, Fowles manages to create a new form for each of his novels which defy categorization and restrictive interpretation.

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