

**➤ The maggot and the enigma: a brief incursion in John Fowles's works.**

Profa. Dra. Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira

UNIGRANRIO

Abstract:

This paper presents a proposal for a brief analysis of the thematic and formal recurrence in two works by John Fowles, *The Enigma* and *A Maggot*, in order to show that the latter is, in fact, the result of an appropriation the author makes of his own discourse.

Key-words: intertextuality detective fiction metafiction

Formal experimentation has been an important trend in the contemporary English novel, and, undoubtedly, John Fowles has been one of its most praised representatives. His novels are built out of a challenge: they deal with the main issues of human existence and also provide a critique of the methods of construction of literary fictional text.

As critics have exhaustively pointed out, the dilemma confronting the contemporary experimental novel has been the realization that the world as such cannot be "represented". "In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to "represent" the discourses of that world" .[i]

Fowles chose a specific way to solve the tension between his necessity of communicating a coherent message and his irresistible impulse to transform the medium into a literary artifact: the metafictional mechanisms, as well as parody or literary inversion.

One of the most striking traits of Fowles's creative ability is what has been called "his protean quality", that is, his astounding capacity to create different styles according to the different requirements of subject matter in every novel. Despite their stylistic differences, his novels show formal and thematic coincidences, which we are going to treat from now on as "intratextuality".

In Fowles's novels, themes and narrative strategies are intertwined to such an extent, with such expertise, that, despite the evidence of intratextual traits, each new literary tissue reveals particular features which contribute to confirm the premise that the originality of a work of art lays on difference, on the author's ability to re-tell stories that have already been told. By exercising his ability to create variations on the same themes, Fowles proves the endlessness of creative power.

This paper seeks to discuss Fowles's appropriation of his own discourse and his technique of producing alternative writings of one unique, polymorphous text, covering the range of his personal and literary experience. The aim is to be achieved by a more detailed exam of two of Fowles's works: *A Maggot* and "The Enigma".

"The Enigma" is one of the short stories of a collection entitled *The Ebony Tower*. At first, Fowles had wanted to call this collection *Variations*, being prevented from doing so by his publisher, who thought the title would be irrelevant for the series. According to the author, the reason for the intended title was that all the short stories were variations on the books he had previously written. In fact, the short stories within *The Ebony Tower* series are variations on *The Collector*, *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but above all they also foreshadow his later novels, notably *A Maggot*.

"The Enigma" contains, indeed, the seeds of *A Maggot*, not only in form but also in content. While *A Maggot* is a novel composed as a polymorphous text, which gathers characteristics from the historical

novel, legal documents, historical registers and science fiction besides the detective fiction, “The Enigma” is framed as belonging to the detective story genre, from the pattern of which the short story distances itself as much as it develops its metafictional strategies.

As for the content, “The Enigma” anticipates some of the themes to be treated in *A Maggot*: the elusive nature of truth, the endorsement of freedom as the highest human good, the lack of resolution for the mystery of a character’s disappearance and the metatheatrical godgame as a vehicle for self-understanding.

Underlying the weaving of both works there are female characters that are in charge of awakening in the reader the ontological doubts about the limits between reality and fiction.

#### A Maggot: the plot

At start, the novel seems to be a historical one. It is situated in 1736, and, from a rationalist point of view, it describes a real trip on horseback from London to Devon. The five travelers – four men and a woman – are referred by means of epithets at the beginning, and their “ names” are revealed as the story proceeds. Fragmentary scenes suggest that most of the facts that can be learned about that little group are untrue. The reader feels entrapped by the text. Their names, their social status, their relationship to one another are all shifting masks. After a night at an inn, they ride on. Within days, one member of the group is found hanged from a tree, another has apparently dematerialized in a paranormal occurrence, and the rest have scattered.

At this point, the narrative strategy changes and the narrator’s discourse gives place to a series of reports of an investigation led by a London barrister named Henry Ayscough, who acts on behalf of a duke whose son is the disappeared character. Those reports consist of the depositions of other characters. Most of the novel unfolds through Ayscough’s persistent inquiry. Among the recorded testimonies, there are nine Historical Chronicles from *The Gentleman’s Magazine*. There is also the register of the accumulated evidence that Ayscough sends to the duke in a series of letters, which, instead of providing a solution for the case, casts even deeper darkness on it.

Structurally, this mixture of different kinds of discourse, aims at showing that the reader is offered the “genuine” material exactly as it was obtained by the barrister from the mouths of the different witnesses. The testimonies prove to be contradictory, containing both factual and imaginary evidence. The truth stays obstinately buried. In the long run, at least three possibilities of solution are presented. The first is a satanic one, according to which the duke’s son, Mr. B., his manservant Dick, the man who has been found hanged, and the woman, Rebecca Lee, take part into a satanic ceremony in a cave beneath Devon moors, which results in Mr. Bartholomew’s disappearance and in Dick’s death. The second is a celestial one. According to this version, they are led into the cave where they found a strange maggot-like aircraft. In it, Rebecca has a vision of Heaven ( June Eternal) and sees Mr. Bartholomew’s metamorphosis into God’s son, becoming herself the counterpart of the Holy Ghost. The third one explains his disappearance as murder. However, the hypothesis of suicide cannot be totally discarded among a variety of personal interpretations of the facts.

#### “The Enigma”: the actual maggot

The prologue to *A Maggot* presents the author’s explanation for the title: “A maggot is the larval stage of a winged creature; as it is the written text, at least in the writer’s hope”[ii]. Considering that many of the themes expanded in *A Maggot* had been previously presented in “The Enigma”, the latter may be properly seen as the maggot that gave origin to the novel.

“The Enigma” is framed as a detective story, and shares with *A Maggot* the lack of solution in the end. Holmes points out that “in terms of Russian formalism, the effect of Fowles’s refusal to introduce a solution is to thwart the reader’s ability to deduce the whole fabula or story from its sjuzet or plot” [iii].

In the short story, Marcus Fielding suddenly disappears, and after some discreet investigation led by his

wife, the police are called and a sergeant is indicated to solve the case. Mike Jennings, the investigator, starts by inquiring the closest relatives, wife, son, sisters, as well as some friends and the son's girlfriend, Isobel. By talking to her, he finds out that, on the day of the disappearance, Fielding had been seen at the British Museum, supposedly to meet Isobel. Their personal relationship is not clear for the reader, who is led to suppose they had had a love affair.

During a conversation with Jennings, Isobel reveals herself as the fictionist's persona. By saying that nothing in life is real, everything is fiction, Isobel presents her version for the disappearance:

Let's pretend everything to do with the Fieldings, even you and me sitting here now, is in a novel. A detective story, yes? Somewhere there's someone writing us, we're not real. He or she decides who we are, what we do, all about us"[iv].

She justifies the encounter by saying that he wanted to anticipate the reason for his disappearance. She is contested by Jennings, who believes something far more serious has happened to Fielding.

"You mean detective stories have to end with everything explained? Part of the rules?"

"The unreality."

"Then if our story disobeys the unreal literary rules, that might mean it's actually truer to life?" She bit her lips again.

"Leaving aside the fact that it has all happened. So it must be true, anyway."

"I'd almost forgotten that."[v]

According to Isobel, "the open text" has been Fielding's option. In fact, she sees him as a rebel character that refuses the plot in which he is inserted. Instead of giving his story a predictable end, resulting in his death or coming back, he decides to disappear. In that case, the mystery, unsolved, will last forever.

"The one thing people never forget is the unsolved. Nothing lasts like a mystery (...) On condition that it stays that way. If he's traced, found, then it all crumbles again. He's back in a story, being written." [vi]

It is relevant to recall the famous chapter thirteen of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which the narrator refers to the character's independence:

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons(...) Only one same reason is shared by all of us: we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world ( a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live.[vii]

Fowles admits that his characters have a life of their own. Since they are not real individuals, they are a consequence of a filtered version of reality. Their existence in the fictional universe is a product of language, which retains in its realization the power of life and death. He recurs to the theme of disappearance- the presence through absence- successively in "The Enigma", "The Cloud" and *A Maggot*.

As well as Mr. Bartholomew, in *A Maggot*, Marcus Fielding has no influence on his family, and his presence, that is, his “self”, is only noticeable after his disappearance. From that point on, his family and friends start thinking about what he had once thought and wished.

“The Enigma” anticipates the use Fowles makes of the female protagonists in his fiction. It is the main female character that leads the narrative as far as she writes her “fiction”. There is something ludicrous in her way of telling her story. Her attitude repeats the author’s, who reveals the way he creates his plots in most of his novels. The story told by Isobel presents the seductive irony showed by Fowles in his novels, reproducing his particular way of revealing to the reader that he is involuntarily trapped by the author’s game.

There are similarities between Isobel, Sarah Woodruff and Rebecca Lee. All of them are in charge of producing some kind of story within the story, an instance of *myse en abyme*. All of them are involved in a circumstance of disappearance. All of them are part of a fiction in which there is no predictable end.

### Conclusion

Both, *A Maggot* and “The Enigma” deviate from the frame of the detective story, in the sense that they do not offer any solution to the case.

As Tania Shepherd has pointed out in her analysis of “The Enigma”, the pattern of detective stories usually provides a resolution.

Whatever the stance adopted, the hermeneutic code, in the Barthesian (1990: 17) sense of detective story is finalised with an ending, a solution to the original narrative puzzle. In other words, the delays, the obstacles, the deviations and the red-herrings between the setting up of the enigma and its resolution, motivate the reader to go on reading, but must, of necessity, bring the reader to a revelation, which is, significantly, not the case of the story under discussion.[viii]

As the short story was written before the novel, and contains many of the themes developed in the latter, it may be considered as “the fictional maggot” not only of the novel under discussion but also of other later works.

It is quite clear the use Fowles makes of intertextual references and the frequency with which he re-takes his own themes and narrative strategies and experimentation. His creative practice is usually highlighted by his personal belief in freedom of all sorts.

As readers, we are invited to make up the end of the story; we are free to figure it out; we are invited to co-authorize it.

By including an epigraph to the story, which is in fact a riddle[ix], Fowles challenges our capacity to deal with unexpected endings, to fill gaps and control our increasing anxiety about making things conform to the rules.

---

[i] WAUGH, P.(1984), p.3.

[ii] FOWLES, J. (1985)

[iii] HOLMES, F.(1991)

[iv] FOWLES, J. (1974) p. 232.

[v] idem, p.229.

[vi] idem, p.235.

[vii] FOWLES, J.(1969), p. 98.

[viii] SHEPHERD, T. 2001.

[ix] "Who can become muddy and yet, settling, slowly become limpid? Tao Te Ching"

Meaning: "Who is able to wait until the obscure things become clear?"

Referência Bibliográfica BAKER, James R. "An interview with John Fowles" Michigan Quaterly Review, Fall, 1986,

\_\_\_\_\_. "The art of fiction CIX: John Fowles. "The Paris Review, Summer 1989 v31, n 111, p. 40(24)

CHATMAN, S. Story and discourse: narrative structure in fiction and film. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978.

ECO, Umberto. Obra aberta. São Paulo, Perspectiva,1976.

FOWLES, John. A Maggot. Londres: Picador, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Ebony Tower. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_ The French Lieutenant's Woman. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.

\_\_\_\_\_ Wormholes. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

GENETTE, Gérard. Figures III. Paris, Éditions du Seuil,1972.

HOLMES, Frederick M. History, Fiction, and The Dialogic Imagination: John Fowles's A Maggot. In: Contemporary Literature, 1991, Summer, V. 32(2), p 229-43.

HUTCHEON, Linda. Poética do pós-modernismo. Rio de Janeiro, Imago Editora, 1991.

----- A Theory Of Parody: The Teachings Of Twentieth Century Art Forms. London, Methuen, 1985a.

----- Narcissistic Narrative. New York, Methuen,1985b.

HUTCHINSON, P. Games authors play . London, Methuen, 1983.

ONEGA, Susan. Self, world, and art in the fiction of John Fowles . In: Twentieth Century Literature, Spring, 1996, v.42, n1, p.29 (29).

SHEPHERD, Tânia. "Understanding The Enigma: a discourse heuristics for a (detective) story . In: Open to Discussion, Rio de Janeiro: UERJ, V.11, 2001.

<http://www2.uerj.br/~letras/op-tania.htm> TODOROV, T. Genres in Discourse. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

WAUGH, Patricia. Metafiction: The Theory And Practice Of Self-Conscious Fiction. London, Methuen, 1984.

WHITE, Hayden. Tropics Of Discourse. Essays In Cultural Criticism. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.