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The deceiving power of the narrator in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract:

In this essay, I intend to discuss the narrator's profile in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, focusing on his authorial control. Being so, I would like to question Fowles's hypothetical loss of control over the narrative, supported by critics that point him as an unreliable author/narrator. Adding to it, I not only aim at presenting Fowles's intention to introduce metafiction through digressions but also to point out his authorial intrusiveness as a postmodern strategy which elicits his total mastery, rhetorically denied in a large extent all over the novel.

Keywords: narrator; Fowles; metafiction

Resumo:

Neste artigo, pretendo abordar o perfil do narrador de *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, enfocando seu controle autorial. Sendo assim, gostaria de questionar a hipotética ausência de controle do mesmo sobre a narrativa, baseando-me em críticos que o apontam como narrador-autor inconfiável. Somado a isto, viso não só a apresentar a intenção de Fowles de convencionar metaficção historiográfica através de digressões, mas também apontar sua intrusão autorial como uma estratégia pós-moderna que denuncia a total maestria do autor, retoricamente negada em larga escala ao longo do romance.

Palavras-chave: narrador; Fowles; metaficção

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles narrates a story which, in spite of being set in the Victorian Age, contains postmodern narrative stances. As an intrusive author/narrator, he gives his novel a historiographic-metafictional approach by juxtaposing the values from the narrative time to his own perspectives, typical of the 20th and 21st centuries. This way, Fowles uses digression to dialogue with his reader and to present his unreliable self-reflexivity, playing with a never-ending wrestling between discourse and actuality. In such game, the elements I deliberately coin as 'strugglers' are not, as a matter of fact, opponents, literally speaking, but counterparts wavering in the same dynamic, ambitious and successful metafictional project.

What is at stake in my discussion is the rhetorical contradiction between the author/narrator's supposed loss of control over his characters and his subtle manipulating the text. Fowles apparently denies that the narrative is under his absolute power but his self-reflexivity may be trickier than it seems. In addition, I still pose the ambiguous position of the author/narrator as an intellectual whose view of the nineteenth century differs considerably from Victorian fictionists and historians. Considering these aspects, let us come to terms with some of Fowles's stratagems, used both to disguise and to display his mastership as a third-person narrator and/or a historian in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Before veering into the main point of the discussion, I must anticipate that Fowles's creation of an author/narrator who passes as a portrayer of past truths is linked to his purpose to convey historiographic metafiction. Firstly adopted by Linda Hutcheon, the term is a way to distinguish postmodern historical novels from the previous ones. Due to the fact that the postmodern fictionist looks back at the past from a critical contemporary perspective, historiographic metafiction does not aim at conforming to canonical historical reports (HUTCHEON, 1988: p. 43). Other than that, it defies the concept of 'truth' in the light of Friedrich Nietzsche, moving further into the difference between 'historical fact' and 'historical discourse', based on Hayden White's *Metahistory*: *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973).

A bold nineteenth-century thinker, Nietzsche became largely famous for relativizing 'truth' in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873). According to the German philosopher, the 'truth' is something culturally and socially constructed; a myth that becomes the law so long as collective forgetfulness effaces the randomness and subjectivity with which it is built. Following this reasoning, the truth may be read as an oppressive ideology since it can no longer be contested. As Nietzsche comments, "only

through forgetfulness man can ever suppose he owns a ‘truth’" (NIETZSCHE, 1982 [1873]: p. 33) [My translation]. During his lifetime, Nietzsche mostly contests against the Western religiousness, but in the chain of time, other discursive sources would begin to be checked out more carefully, above all, in the following century. Owing to the impacts caused by the two Great World Wars, numberless questionings would arouse in the second half of the twentieth century, deconstructing truths defended by the Enlightening philosophy, Eurocentricism, science, and, unavoidably, History.

Although History as well as fiction had already been intermingled in nineteenth-century texts – such as Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) or Alencar’s *O Guarani* (1857) –, allusions to documented events were used in past historical novels to provide this genre with a sense of veracity and credibility. Of course, in such texts, the blurring of borderlines between fancy and fact can be already noticed; but on the whole, the Victorian fictionist did not question the historian’s role as 'reporter of the truth', though the former might also manipulate factual information according to his/her conveniences.

Since the Enlightenment, the scholar had been meant to be impartial, objective, emotionally detached from the subject-matter at any rate, no matter what. Nonetheless, time would tell that the Cartesian model of rationality consisted of too heavy a burden to the subject (HALL, 1998: p. 14); which means: every individual reports events from a particular point-of-view. If so, it is not right to assume that the historian is ideologically neutral. I honestly doubt that, during the American Civil War, an abolitionist reporter would write similarly to another one who eye-witnessed the appalling condition of the Confederates in the South. Thinking about an up-to-date example, I wonder if an Iraqi scholar will portray the Americans’ conquering of his country in a ten-year time the same way US newscasters have broadcast Bush’s military policies in Iraq nowadays. Looking from this scope, it is not difficult to see how the documented data may differ from the historical fact in a large extent.

As Hayden White raises the discussion in *Metahistory*:The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (1973), an official paper is not supposed to correspond to a faithful deployment of the truth about a peculiar event, but to a linguistic construction on behalf of someone in charge of power. In addition, White maintains that both philosophy and history “contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be” (WHITE, 1973: p. ix). In this sense, fictionist and historian can be both tendentious and distrustful; in a way one will never know how much fancy there is in a document or up to what extent artist and reporter are different

story-tellers. Triggering food for thought, postmodern fiction highlights this point under the name of historiographic metafiction – a kind of text that, while defying the historian/narrator's reliability, revisits the past from a present critical perspective, also conveying narrative traps for the sake of aesthetic self-reflexivity.

All this confrontation between the historian's and the fictionist's roles brings us back to the core of the discussion, explaining why Fowles declares to be limited, even being a third-person narrator. On the one hand, his false modesty points to the historian's restricted view of the truth concerning given events; but, on the other hand, his narrator's humbleness fails because the story-teller not always acts like a contemporary scholar, aware of his restrictions. Otherwise, the third-person narrator reveals his overall knowledge about the text, similarly to the Victorian fictionist or historian's imposition of the truth. Being so, the author/narrator not only plays with narratologic principles but also presents the nineteenth-century English society from an angle not exploited by historians from that time.

First of all, let us get to Chapter 13, when Fowles instantly halts his story-telling to address his reader about his supposed authorial impotence before the characters. When declaring his incapacity to handle with every aspect of the text, the author/narrator both starts contacting the reader straightforward, conferring him/her an authority which is, indeed, illusionary. In a way, Fowles invites the reader to participate in a fictional creation as a voyeur, as if the latter could interfere in the elaboration of the narrative. Nevertheless, what he really intends is to sharpen his reader's critical perception of art and not to allow him/her interlope in his writing at all.

As Fowles mischievously claims, he is unaware of certain aspects of the text he is building, regards them as a set of abstract shapeless ideas still under construction, as if the ready-made text before the reader's eyes were unfinished, which is untrue. Of course, this narrative stance is an easily perceptible stratagem. After all, while confronting the book, the reader knows he/she cannot intervene in the text's structure and that, although he/she can interpret or interact with the narrative in a number of ways, his/her participation cannot affect the wording or diction of the narrative itself. But exactly because of this awareness, he/she is encouraged to go on his/her reading, engaging Fowles's pretense maxim that the story is unpredictable and still under discussion:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. (...) If I have pretended until now to know my character's minds and innermost thoughts, it is because (...) [there is] a

convention universally accepted at the time of my story; that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know *all*, yet he tries to pretend that he does[1].

In this part of the narrative Fowles vehemently states that he fails to be an omniscient, but instantly falls into contradiction when confessing that his characters have never existed outside his mind. As fruit of the author's imagination, these fictional personas depend entirely on his approach to characterization, being portrayed and carved out according to his intents and purpose. In this sense, Fowles's modesty is ironical and playful. Deep inside, he is actually placed in a godly position. From the start, his pseudo-carelessness works as a provocative pronouncement, a prompter, a means to make the reader reflect about the process of creation of the novel, to investigate what is concealed and not an accurate refusal to authorial power. Nonstop, he wants the reader to pursue his aesthetic elaboration, follow it little by little, and by doing so, he re-stresses his controlling position all over the reader. As Wayne Booth brilliantly poses in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2000), "the author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ" (p. 69).

Discussing Fowles's intentional antagonism in *The Fiction of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity* (1991), Pamela Cooper envisages the author as a perfect conductor; for, as he gradually orchestrates ambivalences of all sorts, he also convinces the incautious reader to accept his/her fragility. Despite eschewing his total maneuvering of the text, Fowles still understates he is domineering. So much so that Cooper describes him as a tyrannical author/narrator, fully able to restrict his characters' freedom. As she reckons, when the reader "admits that the novelist is by definition a god, he also implies that the best an author or narrator can do is try to avoid any tyrannical wielding of his power in (and over) the text" (COOPER, 1991: p. 108).

To corroborate this idea, Cooper still remarks: "The reader accepts the ultimate limitation of the principle of freedom as it operates with regard to both Fowles and his narrator" (Idem). Looking from this prism, rather than encouraging his characters' autonomy, Fowles stimulates metafictional reflections, foreshadowing his innovative approach to History in contemporary fiction, which means: all the time, discursive persuasion is what matters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

In "Carnival", Michèle La Combe affirms that the third-person narrator is extremely controlling and that, in general, he/she possesses unlimited knowledge, exerts absolute narratorial authority and makes choices in the narrative world. (1994: p. 601). Such consideration only confirms the current discussion, because one of Cooper's arguments

against Fowles's delegation of narrative control is that he "clearly emphasizes (…) absolute power [by avoiding the] first-person narrative" (COOPER, 1991: p. 103).

The elicitation of Fowles's sovereignty is easily illustrated in Chapter 48. In such part, Charles Smithson, one of the protagonists of the story, looks forlorn for not knowing what decision to make in life. Coming from a decadent aristocratic family, he is a young man of science, betrothed to Ernestina – daughter to a wealthy bourgeois – for financial reasons. But still, Charles feels infatuated with Sarah Woodruff, Mrs. Poulteney's governess and lady's companion, which confuses him strikingly. Now, when Charles feels desolate and appalled, he starts developing mental monologues through which Fowles's narratorial intervention is manifested.

With total disapproval of Charles's overreaction, the author/narrator describes his character's utmost indecision as stereotypically melodramatic behavior. Yet, the story-teller reveals his omniscience as he intertwines his own voice with Charles's thoughts in a free reported speech. By means of a dialogic stream of consciousness, Fowles introduces digression and ultimately privileges his own ideas, rather than Charles's. In this way, the postmodern fictionist builds a chapter in which he denounces his skillfulness to deploy psychological characterization, going against what he proclaimed in Chapter 13. Playing with polyphony, Fowles describes Charles's troubles as "the failure, the weakness, the cancer, the vital flaw that had brought him to what he was: more an indecision than a reality, more a dream than a man, more a silent than a word, a bone than an action. And fossils!" (*FLW*, p. 285).

To re-stress Charles's inexistence out of the fictional realm, Fowles portrays him as 'more an indecision than a reality', which leads us, more once, back to the discussion presented in Chapter 13. After all, if the narrator is indecisive, so is his character; and in this sense, the character's dilemmas work as a reflection of the story-teller's uncertainty to plot. But if the reader admits Charles's dependence on Fowles's faltering words, he/she has to acknowledge as well that the character's subordination to the narrator reassures the latter's *status quo* all over the text.

Another thing to consider is that, if Fowles is not omniscient as he claims. At least, he is aware of Charles's thoughts in Chapter 48. By unveiling his intrusive nature, the narrator reminds us that every character is hopelessly voiceless no matter how much he/she brings out his feelings. As a construct subjected to the narrator's wording, the personage only expresses what his/her creator allows him/her to. What he/she utters is not originally his/hers but functions an echo of the narrator's discourse in a way that the character's voicing paradoxically corresponds to silence and muteness.

As I have emphasized, what is at stake in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is Fowles's attempt to explore new approaches to novel writing by avoiding explicit guidelines. The critical reader is always led to look into interstitial spaces of the narrative, to struggle with the text while coming to terms with an unconventional third-person story-teller. Discussing the role of the narrator of historiographic metafiction in *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon confirms what has been problematized thus far, when pondering that a certain contradiction between what the narrator says and does is generally found in the postmodern text. Focusing on the issue in question, Hutcheon reckons that, deep inside, the postmodern story-teller is obsessive for power though he apparently refutes it; constituting, therefore, what she denominates 'anti-totalizing totalization'. That is, the more the contemporary narrator alleges to give freedom to the elements of his fictional creation, the more he strives to control it (HUTCHEON, 1988: p. 64).

So much so that, in an unpublished interview with Melvyn Bragg, Fowles confesses to play with the narrator's absolute power in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, explaining that the reader must be aware of the story-teller's overall control: "What I say on that subject (…) is really a little bit of eye-wash. And I'm afraid I'm playing a sort of double trick on the reader. Of course I control the text. We all do" (Apud COOPER, 1991: p. 107). Confessedly, Fowles suggests that the reader gaze at the text more carefully, not only paying attention to his/her relationship with the narrator but also admitting his/her surrogate condition in the narrative. Meanwhile, the fictionist expects the reading public to realize its role as indirect participant, partly in consonance with Hans Robert Jauss's ideas about 'Aesthetics of Reception' (JAUSS, 1982: p. 43).

Firstly cradled in linguistic circles from the University of Konstanz, Germany, and largely discussed by scholars like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Jauss, the 'Aesthetics of Reception' is a theoretical trend that focuses on the reader's part and his/her contribution to multiple interpretations of a particular text. Viewing the reading public from an idealistic standpoint, the reader, as a narratee or interlocutor, dialogues with the novel critically, perceiving, analyzing and delighting with aesthetic details. In short, theorists on the reader's reception thoroughly insist on the possibility that the text can be, up to a certain extent, reinvented by the public, in the sense that the reader can produce numberless readings of a particular novel, interpreting it in a myriad ways (ISER, 1978: p. 12).

In *Carnival*, La Combe uses *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to illustrate the interactive role of Fowles's reader, positing that, although the latter is not a fictional persona inside the narrative, he/she is invited to participate in Fowles's metatexual comments (1994: p.

598). As far as this matter is concerned, Gerald Prince adds in “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee” that the narratee/narrator relations in a text may “underscore one theme, illustrate another, or contradict yet another. If the narratee contributes to the thematic of a narrative, he is also a part of the narrative framework” (2000: p. 103).

Of course, when it comes to Fowles, the reader/narrator relationship is not as harmonic as it may seem at first. After all, his reader is attracted just to conclude that his/her participation does not interfere in any fictional game such as illusive chapters, anachronism or alternative endings. On the other hand, these tricks, in a way or another, cause the reader to interact with the author’s metafictional project, imprisoning him/her in an endless circle in which power and interaction are always in vogue. In Chapter 45, Fowles displays the reader’s powerlessness on overt, when he suddenly informs that Chapters 43 and 44 are part of Charles’s imagination and not fragments of his own text. By explaining that both chapters should not be taken into account, he makes clear that the narratee is also in his control, subverting, in a way, the reader’s freedom, prescribed by the Aesthetics of Reception.

Moreover, there are further implications involved. At the moment the author/narrator states that Charles’s subplots are not supposed to integrate *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Fowles raises some theoretical questions worth highlighting. First of all, he juxtaposes his text to reality, in the empiric sense of the term, as if the former were non-fiction. However, he soon falls into contradiction. Given that he has postulated in Chapter 13 that the whole narrative comes out of his narrator’s mind, it is nonsense to argue how far Chapter 45 is factual or fictional. Well, if Fowles composes every single discursive construction in the novel, how can the reader separate the story-teller’s fancy from Charles’s daydream, since the narrator himself has already confessed that it all derives from his imagination?

In fact, the reader only accepts that Chapters 43 and 44 are illusive because Fowles, as a God, labels them as such when remarking: “I had better explain that although all I have described in the last two chapters happened, it did not happen quite in the way you may have been led to believe” (*FLW*, p. 266). Hadn’t he stopped to intrude in Chapter 45 and to point out the two previous ones as part of Charles’s fantasy, the narratee would have taken for granted that Charles had married Ernestina and that Mrs. Poulteney had gone to hell. But when Fowles ridicules his protagonist’s approach to story-telling for “having brought this fiction to a thoroughly traditional ending” (*FLW*, p. 266), even the inattentive reader is suddenly forced to rinse his/her lens and to surrender to the author/narrator’s mighty position; mainly because Fowles himself admits portraying Charles’s story.

After the presentation of power relations in the novel, the author/narrator determines what is imaginative and accurate in his text, dictating what is 'true' and 'false' therein, as if he were a historian. In this fashion, he reinforces the idea that one's documental report is nothing but an emplotment, a version of facts, endorsing the premise that both fictionist and scientist unconditionally side with a particular ideology. As long as he reveals his unreliability, Fowles not only stimulates the reader to continue his/her task by surprising him/her with ongoing creativity and inventiveness but also sets a brilliant example to what Mark Currie discusses in *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1998): "that the postmodern narrator may not be reliable, but he is extremely innovative as far as narrative stances are concerned" (p. 118).

There is still another aspect of the novel I render quintessential to illustrate Fowles's intentional paradoxes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Recapturing the initial comments of this text, Fowles apparently proposes autonomy to Charles and Sarah when he says: "We (...) know that a genuinely created world must be independent on his creator. (…) It is only when our characters disobey us that they begin to live" (*FLW*, p. 81). But, on the other hand, the author contradicts himself, refusing to know Sarah's persona: "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come? (...) Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them." (*FLW*, p. 80).

Fowles's deliberate desire to neglect Sarah catalyzes certain limitations to the character. Similarly to Shahrazad's *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, Sarah's ability to plot stories is what makes her be noticed and admired. In spite of the heroine's skillfulness to narrate, her narrative ellipses are the most attractive details to Charles. Actually, what really draws him near her is, above all, the mystery about her past. Looking from this angle, Sarah's silence can ambivalently stand for different things. On the one hand, it may signify power before Charles, and yet, powerlessness before Fowles. Even so, if one infers that her character-building is really limited, provided that the narrator disregards her out of his free will, silence can signify restriction:

Certainly, I intended at this stage (*Chap*. *Thirteen – unfolding of Sarah's true state of mind*) to tell all – or all that matters. But I find myself suddenly like a man in the sharp spring night, watching from the lawn beneath that dim upper window in Marlborough House; I know in the context of my books' reality that Sarah would never have brushed away her tears and leaned down and delivered a chapter of revelation. She would instantly have turned, had she seen me there just as the old moon rose, and disappeared into the interior shadows (*FLW*, p. 81) [Emphasis in the original].

Up to a certain extent, Fowles' distancing from Sarah seems to work as a metaphor for his carelessness about her: a subtle way to put he has chosen not to depict her in depth, even if it may displease the reader. Such option, however, may not be coincidental because, if Fowles, who creates her, ignores her background, her past may be a mystery even to herself. Another paradoxical aspect in this context lies on the fact prefers to be unaware of Sarah's minute details because, according to his omniscience, Sarah would not appreciate his effort to know her better. In the end, the idea that silence can mean power or powerless remains unresolved. What can be attested, nevertheless, is that Fowles's pseudo-jealousy of Sarah justifies his endeavor to minimize the heroine's rhetorical persuasion. Mainly because, if he keeps power on high account, he will not suffer to eliminate anything that may threaten his divine position. As far as this subject is concerned, the narrator says: "Do not ask me [, Charles,] to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained" (*FLW*, p. 279). In her feminist reading of the novel, Cooper deems Sarah's enigma is one of Fowles's resources to castrate her narrative power. As she points out,

This is more than a refusal to allow Sarah to that omniscient authorial power which the novel repudiates; it is a way of undercutting Sarah as *creator* by placing her in the compromising perspective of Sarah as *created*. The accruing to her of the controlling power of authorship is thus made a problematic by her chronologically prior presentation – despite the book's moral commitment to freedom – as herself the object of such control, and by her status as an exposed illusion. The reader cannot experience Sarah as author without being aware of her function as an artefact (COOPER, 1991: p. 115)

As a matter of fact, Sarah's condition of an 'undercut creator' may be more meaningful that it seems. Most probably, her silence may figure as one of Fowles's strategies to draw one's attention to woman's voicelessness during the Victorian Age. Curiously, Sarah is forbidden to narrate from Chapter 47 onwards, which makes her even more shadowy ever since. In a way or another, the heroine's situation constitutes another awakening for the reader concerning Fowles's good-humored and critical imitation of the Victorian narrator's despotism. By making his discourse prevail over Sarah's subplots, the author/narrator provides his story with a hegemonic version of facts, also similarly to

nineteenth-century historian. As Hutcheon purports, the “narrator knows the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world” (HUTCHEON, 1988: p. 72).

After being silenced, Sarah’s body begins to work as an instrument in favor of manly aesthetic view, especially when she becomes a model at the Rossetis’. Unable to disobey her master, she remains in an object position, restrained to shortcomings in a novel whose overall theme focuses precisely on narratological reflections. If, for such reasons, Sarah passes as a usurper, her boldness to narrate is retained, interrupted, left ineffectual, incomplete and unaccomplished. In the end, she is doubly surrogated, posing like a ‘dummy’ for Mr. Rosseti, who, in his turn, may reflect Fowles’s narrator’s male power. So, by imitating the Victorian fictionist, Fowles leads us to historical questions, opening the reader’s eyes to the fact that domestication of female creativity really took place in nineteenth-century England.

Though Sarah’s participation in the text places her as a minor narrator, rhetorically speaking, her voicing does interfere in power relations. Even because, in spite of her limitations to story-telling, she uses Fowles’s fictional space to compose a narrative of her own. In different manners, Sarah resembles her master. She is tricky, persuasive and able enough to make Charles believe her lies. Taking advantage in his prolific imagination, the heroine constructs a discourse which, despite being fictional, passes as fact; a plot which not only seduces her listener linguistically but also on sexual terms. Once Sarah is convincing, Charles enjoys becoming a participant of her plot. Even as an outsider, he romantically concludes he is her only solution and, subsequently, stands for her ‘enchanted prince’. As the narrator reckons, “to Charles the openness of Sarah’s confession (...) seemed less to present a sharper reality than to offer a glimpse of an ideal world” (*FLW*, p. 143).

Feeling like a fairy-tale hero, the protagonist overestimates his importance to Sarah; but ironically, the more he projects himself, the more he is found under her deceiving report on the past. By then, Sarah tells Charles that she is now a fallen woman because Varguennes, a French Lieutenant, once seduced her to leave her afterwards. In the novel, one reads that, while she spoke, Charles could picture himself in Sarah’s story as a hidden observer indirectly accompanied by the reading public. When joining the couple in her narrative, Charles symbolically becomes an eye witness who would ransom her from the hideous implacable villain when the right time came: “He was at one and, at the same time, Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck down; just as Sarah was to him both an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman” (*FLW*, p. 143).

Charles's self-inclusion in Sarah's framed story, however, is not any ingenuous. It contains subversive undertones that subtly relativize the Victorians' decorum. From a distance, he watches a sex scene and does not save his heroine; in a way his derision comes more from feeling like a voyeur than a to-be hero. Rather than affection, sex appeal, emerging from her subplot, is what triggers physical contact between them. It suffices to say that Sarah only embraces him in Chapter 21 after he has mentally known her nudity. Inasmuch as he "felt she had almost been waiting for such a moment to unleash it upon him" (*FLW*, p. 150).

As expected, Charles chooses to victimize himself although he delights in yielding to seduction. To whitewash his demeanor, he deems himself a prey, blaming Sarah's bewitching look and smile for arousing his desire: "She smiled. It was a smile so complex that Charles could at the first moment only stare at it incredulously. And in those wide eyes (...) was revealed an irony, a new dimension of herself" (*FLW*, p. 150). The same way Sarah becomes Fowles's artefact, she subjugates Charles as well. In short, according to Cooper, "neither Fowles nor his narrating surrogate ever gives up entirely the power which undertakes or repudiates" (1991: p.108).

As highlighted, even though Sarah's silence can be read as powerless, it can ambiguously figure as power. In Chapter 47, for example, the minor narrator confesses to have invented she got sexual involved with the French Lieutenant; but still, she does not tell Charles what had actually happened to her before they first met. Maybe this aspect may have to do with the fact that Sarah, owing to Fowles's neglecting her, is ignorant of her own past, as aforesaid. What is known for certain, anyway, is that Charles is kept under her discursive control. On a metaphorical level, Sarah charms the hero up to (one of) the end(s) of the narrative, playing a role differently from what he expected: the witch's part. As Cooper ponders, Sarah is presented "as a cruel seductress who delights to twist the dagger in Charles's heart, as a witch-like figure" (1991: p. 109). Still under her influence, Charles confesses, in Chapter 60, to be linked to her, although he cannot explain why: "I don't know what I feel. I think I shall not know till I see her again. All that I do know is that (...) she continues to haunt me. That I must speak to her, I must, you understand?" (*FLW*, p. 344).

As a matter of fact, Sarah not only controls the hero through her silence but also plays with moral values to which Charles is attached. Albeit he breaks up his engagement with Ernestina, he does not entirely rupture with the Victorian tradition. After noticing he has defiled Sarah, Charles thinks he must marry her; but to his bewilderment, she promptly declines his proposal. Stricken by guilt, he gets extremely lost, especially when

she refuses to marry him: “I must [marry you]. I wish to. I could never look at myself in the face again if I did not” (*FLW*, p. 276). In the position of a Victorian aristocrat, Charles feels remorse for transgressing moral rules and finds it difficult to rationalize Sarah’s unusual procedure. Since they met, she has wished him to take her virginity but not to spouse her: “She had not given herself to Varguennes. She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis had been based on a lie. But for what purpose? Why? Why? Why? Blackmail! To put him totally in her power” (*FLW*, p. 277-8).

Charles’s inability to understand Sarah’s stratagem also reinforces Fowles’s intention to satirize Victorian habits. As long as the character feels guilty for his sexual misconduct, his naiveté and prudish behavior are ridiculed before the reader. On top of it all, Charles’s subjection to Sarah restricts his freedom and independence, contradicting again Fowles’s intention to delegate autonomy to his characters. On the whole, Fowles exerts his plain supremacy throughout the text. Especially for silencing Sarah and limiting Charles’s free will, the author continues being domineering all over the narrative.

Speaking of the author/narrator’s control, there is another narratorial aspect that reiterates Fowles’s contradictions about his characters’ freedom. Unlike most of the novels, the author creates two endings for the narrative; giving the reader the right to choose what closure best pleases him/her. In Chapter 60, one comes to terms with a more traditional *finale*, in which the reader can understate a probable ‘happy ending’. Even so, there is no clear reference concerning this issue. Whereas in Chapter 61, Charles and Sarah look like real strangers, having nothing in common. Charles both objects to be her friend and he complains about being framed. Finally, he rejects Sarah and their baby, deciding to settle down in America, where he seems to belong. In the end, closure is avoided for the sake of postmodern openness. Identically to a reality show, the novel reveals more than ever its dialogism with postmodern culture, mainly because the reader/spectator can make choices.

To give the reader a minimum sense of verisimilitude, at the beginning of Chapter 61, Fowles claims to depart, leaving the story under Charles and Sarah’s decision. Nonetheless, before going away, he makes Mr. Rossetti put his watch fifteen minutes backward, rewinding the story similarly a video tape:

He makes a small adjustment to time. It seems – though unusual in an instrument from the bench of the greatest watchmakers – that he was running a quarter of an hour fast. It is doubly strange, for there is no visible clock by which he could have discovered

the error in his own timepiece. But the reason may be guessed. He is meanly providing himself with an excuse for being late at his next appointment (*FLW*, p. 362).

By then, the reader takes for granted that the plot must be resumed at the end of Chapter 59 so that the events can be plausibly chained together. In spite of that, Fowles's palliative for skipping time backwards is not effective enough to give the story a sense of reality, reminding us that every piece of art is a subjective mode of representation, standing independently on non-fictional chronological parameters. In a large extent, the existence of two endings seems to stress what Jauss and Iser have theorized about the reader's reception. Even so, such consideration may be relativized if we recall that even the choices are dictated by Fowles.

Such strategy does not enhance the protagonists' freedom or diminishes Fowles's power over the text; but they affect the characters considerably. Taking into consideration that Charles and Sarah have to perform what Fowles determines in Chapters 60 and 61, they are still under the authorial control, totally unable to enjoy their liberty aforementioned. Just like other components of the novel, the two endings exemplify the author's mastership to approach closure according to his goals and aims. As a final reflection, I bring to light what Julia Brown reckons in *A Reader's Guide to the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1995). According to her, art illustrates and supports a particular purpose (1995: p. 38); and in Fowles's case, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seems to illustrate the narrator's unconditional power because, although there is a discourse in favor of the characters' freedom in the novel, there is, on the other hand, an anti-reactionary force which forbids them to practice their liberty, reassuring the author/narrator's sovereignty.

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[1]FOWLES, John. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, p. 80. New York: Signet, 1970. All the quotations from the novel belong to this edition, and they will henceforth be indicated by *FLW*, followed by the page number.