

**Poetics, Linguistics and History:
Discourses of Conflict in John Fowles' *A Maggot***
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Upon examination of the narrative macro-structure of *A Maggot* (1985), it is easily understood why John Fowles' historiographic metafiction about the eighteenth-century English society in which the Quakers lived has been described as a "heterogeneous mixture of various kinds of documents"¹ and as displaying a floating or "hybrid narrative structure."² This narrative, centred on the figure of the existential heroine, Louise-Fanny-Rebecca, the fictional mother of Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers' Movement of Dissent; on her aristocratic mentor, Bartholomew; and on Ayscough, the lawyer-interrogator, whose task is to discover the reasons behind His Lordship's secret journey through the far south-west of England and ensuing mysterious disappearance in a cave on May Day 1736, displays an unusual multiplicity of texts.

Thus, apart from the prologue (*M*, 5-6); the opening narrative passage which recounts the travellers' journey on horseback towards the enigmatic cave on the last day of April (*M*, 7-58); other narrative passages placed in the intervals of the remaining texts;³ and the epilogue (*M*, 455-60), *A Maggot* incorporates moreover four distinct types of texts. There are "Examinations and Depositions" - the sworn testimony of witnesses in the "Q" and "A" form⁴ -; personal letters written in the "first-person form" - some from Ayscough addressed to "Your Grace", Bartholomew's father, the duke, and others received by the lawyer from another colleague and two agents in the course of investigation⁵ -; a fictional newspaper report of the death of Bartholomew's manservant, Dick (*M*, 61); as well as several intertexts, that is documents from authentic eighteenth-century sources extracted from a periodical, named *The Gentleman's Magazine*, and reproduced in facsimile.⁶

The multiplicity and heterogeneity of texts offered in *A Maggot* - the prologue, eleven narrative passages, eight testimonies, eleven letters, a fictional newspaper report, eight intertexts, an epilogue - and the vast range of heteroglossic voices - Fowles', the twentieth-century narrator's, and those of twelve characters - create a polyphonic or dialogic structure which reminds us of Bakhtin's dialogic novel, one that is, as we all know, "constituted by texts which are not unitary in their discourse ("monological") but multiple, polyphonic ("dialogic")."⁷

In this paper my purpose is to examine the conflicting, clashing discourses of Fowles' eighteenth-century protagonists, focusing primarily on Rebecca and Ayscough who act as representatives of opposing ideologies, and the part played by the twentieth-century narrator in their presentation.

Considering the novel's deployment of multiple discourses and voices, I shall start with the writer's choice of dialogue and its "Q" and "A" form for the characters' *récits*. The witnesses' depositions are, in Genettian terms, "scenes" which realise "conventionally the equality of time between narrative and story (NT = ST)"⁸ and, more importantly, incorporate dramatic elements into the narrative. In *A Maggot* it is essentially through dialogue, namely the witnesses' depositions, and the analysis of these by Ayscough in his letters to the duke, his employer, that the reader's understanding of the action is gradually formed.

Having always been interested in the art of legal deposition, entirely based on the dialogue of questioning and answering with total exclusion of the narratorial or authorial intervention, Fowles makes usage of such a dialogue form which is, as Genette writes, "the most "mimetic" form ... where the narrator pretends literally to give the floor to his characters."⁹ It is then exclusively through speech acts, "Q" and "A", that Ayscough and the reader alike try to reconstruct all the happenings of May

Day and more crucially the events that took place in the cave. Dialogue in this form leaves the reader on his/her own, without the influence or help of the narratorial interventions, to evaluate and decide what to make of the information he/she is able to reassemble. In *A Maggot* dialogue is therefore the major meaning generating narrative device. It is in fact the mode through which most of the action of *May Day* is constituted and it will be the reader's task to provide his/her own answer. In Fowles' text, the reader is thus asked to become a producer instead of a consumer of meaning.

As before in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in this novel the writer is seen to manipulate the discourses and registers of a previous literary period. The illusion of an eighteenth-century text is strongly formed through the manipulation of language with eighteenth-century lexical and syntactic characteristics, highly foregrounded in the characters' discourses. This eighteenth-century English created by the writer is generally marked by terms such as "thee", "thou", "thyself", "thine", amongst others, and forms a contrast with the modern English, the contemporary jargon, employed by Fowles' extra-heterodiegetic, twentieth-century, self-conscious narrator.

Besides displaying temporal characteristics, the witnesses' *récits* are also rich in regional variations; these primarily pointing out the characters' low social status. For instance, the discourse of Jones, one of the travellers in Bartholomew's journey, incorporates Welsh expressions. Also, other dialectic elements are noticed in *A Maggot*. Thus in the depositions of Puddicombe and Dorcas, the landlord and maid of the Black Hart Inn, respectively, certain features of the Devonshire dialect differentiate their speech. When, for example, Puddicombe replies to the lawyer that Bartholomew's chest "Twas thrown in a goyal of thick bushes", Ayscough showing ignorance of this regional variation asks him: "A goyal, what is that?" The answer which is then provided explains that it is "A combelet, sir. A narrow sunken place". (*M*, 74) Dorcas' speech as well exhibits numerous idiosyncrasies. She uses expressions

which are according to her working-class status and enhance her lack of education, such as "I be sure", "But they told I to leave" (*M*, 81), "I knows their look." (*M*, 83)

Not only does *A Maggot* present specific aspects of regional dialects but more significantly a whole variety of other discourses. Whereas with Ayscough one is confronted with the language of the legal system, with Lacy, an actor hired by Bartholomew for the journey, we are offered that of the stage. In what regards Ayscough's language, Rebecca is shown to have difficulties in understanding the lawyer and needs to take time to answer "as if she must have Ayscough's words first translated from a foreign language before she can frame a reply." (*M*, 413) Whilst the epistolary form appears characterised by referential speech, Protestant dissent with its religious vocabulary, "brother", "sister", "more love" and "Christ's spirit be with thee", distinguishes Rebecca's discourse. Such pluralism of voices, of languages, "the linguistic variety of prose fiction, which Bakhtin called heteroglossia",¹⁰ has a specific function in the novel. As David Lodge considers:

There is an indissoluble link in Bakhtin's theory between ... heteroglossia and its cultural function as the continuous critique of all repressive, authoritarian, one-eyed ideologies. As soon as you allow a variety of discourses into a textual space - vulgar discourses as well as polite ones, vernacular as well as literary, oral as well as written - you establish a resistance ... to the dominance of any one discourse.¹¹

In *A Maggot's* diegetic world it is chiefly through the heteroglossic voices of the servants, and especially Jones' and Rebecca's, that an explicit critique is made to the inflexible dominant ideology of the eighteenth-century English society. Both these characters and the lawyer enact the confrontation between the working class and the middle class. Jones' interrogation serves Fowles' purpose of exposing Ayscough's racial and social prejudices. Since Jones is Welsh and comes from a poor background he is constantly called a liar. He is also humiliated for his Welsh dialect and is accused

of cowardliness. Greediness is likewise one of the many faults he is reproached with. When he tries to excuse himself, he receives one of Ayscough's venomous replies that precisely sums up the lawyer's class and racial prejudices: "I know thy friendship and thy religion, Jones. The first is all treason, the second all dissent. You are a plague among the decency of nations. A nauseous boil upon this kingdom's arse, may God forgive you." (*M*, 272)

But in *A Maggot*, in my belief Fowles' most overtly political narrative to date, class confrontation is not rendered exclusively through the depositions of the working-class characters. At the extradiegetic level in the novel's narrative passages, the contemporary, informed narrator continues his interventions offering a narratorial critique of the dominant ideology found in eighteenth-century England. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon correctly points out that

Postmodern metafiction has looked to both the historiographic and fictional accounts of the past in order to study the ideological inscriptions of difference as social inequality. In *A Maggot* the twentieth-century narrator fills in the background of the eighteenth century's sexism and classism as it is needed in order to explain the characters' actions.¹²

Now taking into consideration Fowles' heroine who is especially subject to class discrimination, while Ayscough is identified as the representative of the rich and of conservatism she, on the other hand, represents the poor and change. Moreover, being a female she is also subject to the lawyer's sexism and to the rigid patriarchal society such as that of the eighteenth-century England in which she lives. In her deposition, Rebecca refers to women's subjection in her society in these revealing terms:

A: ... As I was used when whore, so I may be used still. And all women beside.

Q: How, all women are whores?

A: Whores in this. We may not say what we believe, nor say what we think, for fear we might be mocked because we are women. If

men think a thing be so, so must it be, we must obey. I speak not of thee alone, it is so with all men, and everywhere (*M*, 421).

The lawyer's gender prejudice towards her is in addition aggravated by the fact that not only is she a working-class girl but also does she come from a dissenters' background, a Quaker family in Bristol. She had been a prostitute in a London brothel at Claiborne's and, like Jones, had dared to change her station in life. She had even married and now came forward as a Shaker prophetess, a dangerous dissenter who demanded change and, as the self-conscious narrator reminds us, the belief of the age was "that change leads not to progress, but to anarchy and disaster. *Non progredi est regredi* runs the adage; early Georgian man omitted the *non*." (*M*, 234)

Ayscough refuses to believe in Rebecca's personal transformation after her mystical experience in the cave; that she is changed, metamorphosed (as suggested by the novel's title) through personal growth, that she is Christ's reborn, and decides to humiliate her. Because she is a woman, she represents temptation and is to blame for male lust and for man's carnal faults. She strongly rejects this when she contends, "thee'd have me mirror of my sex, that thine has made. I will not suit ... Can thee not see that I am changed, I am harlot no more, I am Christ's reborn." (*M*, 426-7) Rebecca's defiance and forceful attitude is interestingly considered by the contemporary narrator in these terms:

But not once as she answers has she bowed her head or looked aside from his eyes. *A modern lawyer might have found a sneaking admiration for such directness; Ayscough does not.* She merely strengthens a long-held opinion in him: that the world grows worse, and especially in the insolence of its lower orders. Again we meet that unspoken *idée reçue* of his age. Change means not progress, but ... decline and fall.
[italics mine, except last expression](*M*, 319).

Here the differences that keep past and present separate appear emphasised in the twentieth-century narrator's discourse. Fowles, one critic observes, "leaves no room

for sentimental identification with the past: he snaps down the alienation effect with a brisk, no-nonsense finality." ¹³

The major confrontation between Ayscough, the male middle-class lawyer, and Rebecca, the female working-class dissenter, is explicitly demonstrated in the following passage:

In truth these two were set apart from each other not only by countless barriers of age, sex, class, education, native province and the rest, but by something far deeper still: by belonging to two very different halves of the human spirit, perhaps at root those, left and right, of the two hemispheres of the brain (*M*, 430)

Fowles' narrator then goes on to explain that those, such as Ayscough, who are left-lobe beings (right-handed) are "rational, mathematical, ordered, glib with words, usually careful and conventional; human society largely runs ... because of them". Conversely those, such as Rebecca, who are right-lobe beings (left-handed) must be considered "poor at reason, often confused in argument; their sense of time (and politic timing) is often defective ... They confuse, they upset, they disturb. So truly are these two human beings of 1736. They speak for opposite poles, though long before such physical explanations of their contrariness could be mooted." (*M*, 430)

Ayscough is clearly posited as a representative of eighteenth-century rationalism, an authoritarian, conservative and empirical man, whilst Rebecca is presented as a truly imaginative, democratic, visionary and intuitive woman. These two distinct beings who speak for opposite poles remind us of Fowles' belief, stated in *The Aristos*, that "We exist mentally in a world of opposites, converses, negatives." ¹⁴ The heroine's new faith makes her strive for a new and better world, for a society in which equality between the different social classes, between man and woman, would be achieved. Whereas Ayscough beholds this as "the rule of the common mob", for Rebecca "it is Christian justice." (*M*, 375) Making use of his contemporary stance and superior

knowledge, the twentieth-century self-conscious narrative voice pragmatically announces: "One knows she will not win, and cannot win; neither in this historical present, nor in the future. One knows, and she does not." (*M*, 434)

Fowles has commented that "You would talk in religious terms in the 1700's and 1600's but you were really talking politics."¹⁵ In those days religious dissension was therefore a major means of social protest. Rebecca's religious belief in the duality of God, in the Father and Holy Mother Wisdom manifested on this earth first through Jesus Christ, the son, and later through Ann Lee, the daughter, is deemed pure blasphemy by the lawyer. When he declares that "it is sin to rebel against the authority of man", she bravely replies that "'Tis reported so, by men" (*M*, 428) since the Bible has exclusively been written by men. Rebecca finally tells Ayscough that "Most in this world is unjust by act of man, not of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Change that is my purpose." (*M*, 429) It is because she is fighting to liberate herself, totally refusing "to believe what those in power would have us believe" (*M*, 459), that she is to be regarded an existential heroine. "She is the one who is willing to break out of the wasteland world to enact change."¹⁶ As Hutcheon argues, Rebecca's willingness to change brings her, at the end of the novel, close to Bartholomew:

In this she joins with the absent male "hero", known as His Lordship, ... who "would doubt all: birth, society, government, justice" ... in disobeying the laws of man and God (the Father) as incarnated in his own father. The challenges to patriarchy (Christian, familial, societal) are directly linked with the protests of class and gender, and here they come from men as well as women, but it is a woman who is given voice in this novel.¹⁷

In *A Maggot* Rebecca's voice is therefore in a constant opposition, a permanent clash with Ayscough's. Being aware that her visionary discourse, namely her deposition about the eerie happenings in the cave, does not conform to reality and so cannot fit the lawyer's rational empiricism, she tells him that theirs are conflicting discourses, in

fact that they have opposed "alphabets." Such a clash of languages is explicit on several occasions. When asked whether "His Lordship grows the Lord of All, the Redeemer?", her reply is that "Twill not fit thy alphabet, so be it." (*M*, 383) Also when the lawyer inquires whether Bartholomew might have left the cave through other means, "Can you deny that he may have left some otherwise than in your engine?", she retorts: "I cannot, in thy alphabet; in mine I can, and do ... he is returned." (*M*, 385) When pressured she finally explains: "Thee has thy alphabet, and I mine, that is all. And I must speak mine." (*M*, 317)

As observed, Ayscough's search for the truth is totally dependent on the information he manages to reassemble from the witnesses' depositions. From the first three witnesses what he learns regards mainly the stay of Bartholomew and his company at the Black Hart Inn, on April 30th 1736, and the subsequent discovery of Dick's corpse. In what concerns the first two witnesses, Puddicombe and Dorcas, what they had found out about the mysterious travellers had been essentially through Jones, who had "lied in all." (*M*, 67) The information of the third witness amounted to what he had learned from Lacy, which was little, and then revealed as false. Lacy's testimony was nothing else than a retelling of Bartholomew's riddles and lies. Claiborne's deposition brought about some new information regarding the heroine's poor background and her life in Claiborne's brothel; her pre-history, first as Fanny, the prostitute, and then as Louise, the maid hired by Bartholomew to join the travellers. Likewise, it was during this deposition that the true name of Fowles' existential heroine was revealed for the first time: not Fanny nor Louise, but Rebecca. What Ayscough discovers also is that Claiborne too had been deceived by Bartholomew. Jones' deposition was false, of course, as Rebecca had admitted having deliberately lied to him about having observed witchcraft, to have been raped by the Devil himself, witnessed a black wedding, and then brought before visions of Hell. Rebecca's mystical vision in the cave of "June Eternal", a religious experience of a heavenly place that brings about her

transformation, "which is more of gross fantasy than credible fact" (*M*, 448), the lawyer informs the duke, must be seen as "false in the substantial truth of what passed." (*M*, 441) Furthermore the assertion of John Tudor, Ayscough's clerk, that when in the process of transcribing the witnesses' testimonies "where I cannot read when I copy in the longhand, why, I make it up" (*M*, 347) enhances the unreliability of the depositions and thus casts further doubts as to any possibility of ever finding the truth. "In the different tellings", one critic remarks, "the journey keeps folding back over itself, and it is more like a Möbius strip than a straight line."¹⁸

In his final letter to his employer Ayscough offers his own construction of the events in the cave; one more version of what might have taken place. As a rational man with conventional beliefs he cannot acknowledge Rebecca's version and therefore, through his own deductions, presents his own conclusions to the duke. According to him, Bartholomew must have committed suicide because "he did seek wickedly to pierce some dark secret of existence, and moreover grew besotted by it, it may well be because he could not accomplish his grand design, as is most often the case" (*M*, 445-6). In his opinion the disappearance of the body is due to Dick's burial of it, "then only, that most direful task done, did he run off, and hang himself in his despair" (*M*, 444)

To conclude, the witnesses' depositions centred on the journey's and cave's events form, in Genettian terms, a "*repeating* narrative: *Narrating n times what happened once (nN/IS)*." This type of narrative "where the recurrences of the statement do not correspond to any recurrence of events" is one in which "the same event can be told several times not only with stylistic variations ... but also with variations in "point of view"."¹⁹ But the repetitive recounting of the same events does not help the lawyer in establishing the truth. The heteroglossic voices of the witnesses rather expose different

perceptions. Each teller has his/her own judgement of the events, his/her personal way of viewing the world. In fact they each construct different worlds.

Contrary to Ayscough's expectations the judicial form of interrogation, the "Q" and "A" form, instead of revealing one truth rather does foreground "the conflicts between truth and lies, differing perceptions of truth, facts and beliefs, and truth and illusion."

²⁰ Indeed to speak of "the Truth" is illusory. As Tudor explains to Rebecca: "There are two truths, mistress. One that a person believes is truth, and one that is truth incontestible." (*M*, 348) Hutcheon moreover argues that "historiographic metafiction suggests that truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction ... Postmodern novels like ... *A Maggot* openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths." ²¹ Truths that are "socially, ideologically and historically conditioned." ²²

Thus in *A Maggot*, by allowing the May Day events of the cave and Bartholomew's disappearance to remain unsolved through the presentation of so many conflicting, clashing discourses, points of view and judgements, Fowles leaves his mystery open-ended and incites his reader to produce his/her own solution to this enigma. Here, he is clearly revealed as a heuristic writer, a writer, as he has previously explained, who sees that "the true function of the novel, beyond the quite proper one of pure entertainment, is heuristic, not didactic; not instruction, but suggestion; not teaching the reader, but helping the reader teach himself." ²³

Notes

1. Frederick Holmes, "History, Fiction, and the Dialogic Imagination", p.229.
2. *Ibid.*, p.230.
3. The eleven narrative passages in *A Maggot* are: passage 1 (pp.7-58), passage 2 (pp.113-9), passage 3 (pp.232-7), passage 4 (pp.291-6), passage 5 (pp.318-23), passage 6 (pp.343-9), passage 7 (pp.387-96), passage 8 (pp.411-5), passage 9 (pp.429-34), passage 10 (p.439), and passage 11 (pp.451-4).

4. The witnesses' "Examinations and Depositions" are presented as follows: Puddicombe's (pp.63-76), Dorcas' (pp.79-89) and Beckford's (pp.93-103) on July 31st; Lacy's (pp.123-54) on August 23rd, (pp.167-85) on August 24th; Claiborne's (pp.155-65) on August 24th; Jones' (pp.199-232; 239-74) on September 9th; Rebecca's (pp.297-318; 323-41; 351-86) on October 4th, (pp.416-29; 434-9) on October 5th; and Wardley's (pp.397-407) on October 4th.
5. The letters might be divided in two groups. Those sent by Ayscough, all addressed to the duke, are as follows: Barnstaple, August 4th (pp.105-9); Licoln's Inn, August 27th (pp.187-91), September 8th (pp.191-2) and September 11th (pp.275-6); London, October 1st (p.289); and Manchester, October 10th (pp.441-50). Those received by Ayscough are: one letter sent by Mr Saunderson, Christ's College, Cambridge, September 8th (pp.192-5); three sent by Richard Pygge, Bristol, September 15th (pp.276-9), Bideford, September 20th (pp.279-86) and Bristol, September 23rd (pp.286-7); and one letter sent by Dr Hales, Corpus Christi College, October 1st (pp.287-8).
6. The intertexts selected from *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. VI, include a section devoted to historical information - the *Historical Chronicle* - and are presented as follows: *Historical Chronicle*, April 1736 (pp.59-60); *Historical Chronicle*, May 1736 (pp.77-8); *Historical Chronicle*, June 1736 (pp.90-1); *Historical Chronicle*, July 1736 (pp.110-1); *Historical Chronicle*, August 1736 (pp.120-1); *Historical Chronicle*, September 1736 (pp.196-7); and *Historical Chronicle*, October 1736 (pp.408-9). The reader is also offered "Pretty Miss's Catechism" (pp.320-2), a "literary memory" which acts as a satire, selected from *The Gentleman's Magazine* for August.
7. Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p.115.
8. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp.94-5.
9. Ibid, p.172.
10. David Lodge, "The Novel Now. Theories and Practices", p.22.
11. Ibid.
12. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism - History, Theory, Fiction*, p.196.
13. Holmes, p.242.
14. John Fowles, *The Aristos*, p.79.
15. Quoted in Holmes, p.233.
16. Carol Barnum, *The Fiction of John Fowles*, p.142.
17. Hutcheon, p.65.
18. Katherine Tarbox, *The Art of John Fowles*, p.142.
19. See Genette, pp.115-6.
20. Hutcheon, p.47.
21. Ibid., p.109.
22. Ibid., p.18.
23. Fowles, "Lettre-postface", p.54-5.

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