

Choice of Theme in John Fowles's *Mantissa*.

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Introduction

I have chosen the second chapter of my thesis (The Theme of Art and the Artist in John Fowles's *Mantissa*) as opposed to any of the remaining five for publication because I believe it to be largely self-sufficient. However, a short note on the study as a whole is, I think called for here.

The basis of the thesis is the discussion of the major thesis of John Fowles's novel *Mantissa* (1982), with special emphasis on the literary devices which the author chose to use in order to develop it.

Chapter II in particular is an attempt to examine the significance of such a choice of theme in the context of existing postmodernist trends and especially of John Fowles's own work to date. This prior to a discussion of the literary devices themselves, namely choice of character, narrative structure and dialogue, each of which is dealt with in a further chapter.

I feel I should also point out that the whole study works towards a reading of *Mantissa* as a formal as well as thematic exception to the rest of Fowles's work since the reader will understand this chapter work fully if he bears this in mind.

In the process of creating a work of art an artist is continually making choices which will determine the nature and quality of his artefact. However, in order to appreciate the significance of each choice, one must first place the artist in his tradition. Clearly, for example, the use of the technique of the omniscient author by a novelist writing in the second half of the twentieth century, and its use by an eighteenth or nineteenth century writer will evoke different critical comments. Whereas the latter is adopting a technique typical of the age, the former is deliberately ignoring the quarrel of all postmodernist writers with the validity of this technique as a narrative device, and as such his choice acquires special significance. In some cases,

it may also be interesting to examine these choices in the light of the writer's other works. This is, I believe, the case with John Fowles's choice of theme in *Mantissa*.

In Fowles's own words, *Mantissa* is about "the process of writing" or more specifically, about the relation of the writer to the written in the creation of a literary text. Viewed in the light of all metafictional novels from those of John Barth to those of B. S. Johnson and Jorge Luis Borges, this particular choice of theme would not seem to warrant any critical attention. Almost all metafictional writers deal with it exclusively, although from various angles and with varying degrees of emphasis. As Miles Green, Fowles's surrogate in *Mantissa*, quite succinctly puts it, 'Serious modern fiction has only one subject: the difficulty of writing serious modern fiction'.

However, one has only to examine briefly the themes that John Fowles explores in his other novels to realise that although he had dealt with this theme before, it was always given secondary importance and invariably featured as part of a more widely human context.

In *The Collector*, *Daniel Martin* and *The Ebony Tower*, where artists feature as major characters, they never appear in the process of creating their work (as is the case in *Mantissa*). Their development as artists is always seen within the context of their development as human beings. In *The Ebony Tower*, for example, Breasley's traditionalist stand against the fashionable notions of abstract art is brought out through the human relationship which develops between him and David Williams (as representative of abstract art). The reader is not made directly aware of the effect that his conflict has on Breasley's painting. His landscapes are distant objects in the background of the story. The foreground is taken up by the two men themselves, and increasingly by the two men as human beings rather than as artists.

In *The Collector*, the central drama is not Miranda's development as an artist as evident in her relationship with G. P., but her development as a human being as evident in her relationship with Clegg. Her being as an artist heightens and makes more poignant this drama but does not constitute it.

Similarly, it is Dan's sensibility as a human being which is focused on in *Daniel Martin*. No special emphasis is put on his artistic sensibility. Dan is a script-writer, but he is also father to Caro, ex-husband to Nell, lover to Jenny and friend to Anthony. The only character in *Daniel Martin* who is shown in the process of producing a text is Jenny, and she plays a relatively minor role in the novel.

A more subtle exploration of the theme of the

artist and his relation to the work of art appears in *The Magus*. Conchis's role is not overtly that of an artist. However, Fowles points towards an understanding of his role as such a one when he compares him to a novelist at various points in the novel. As such, therefore, the understanding of Conchis's role as a quasi-artistic one serves to give the reader a clearer understanding of the true nature of his role — that of a kind of demi-god playing a godgame with Nicholas, much as a novelist does with his characters. However, the ultimate aim is not the artistic one of creating a text but the human (albeit at times cruel) one of liberating Nicholas from the petty bourgeois mentality of which he was formerly the victim.

Strangely enough, it is in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the short story *The Enigma*, where the theme of the artist and his relation to the work of art seems to have been most neglected, that Fowles comes closest to *Mantissa*.

In *The Enigma*, John Marcus Fielding, a prosperous and dedicated Member of Parliament disappears without a trace. The police investigate his case without success. Finally, a young sergeant takes up the case. In the course of his investigations he meets Isobel Dodgson, the girlfriend of Fielding's son Peter. They become friendly and she is induced to put forward a theory of hers explaining Fielding's disappearance. The first sentences that she utters, 'Nothing is real. All is fiction.', are the basic premise on which all of *Mantissa* is built. In *Mantissa*, Fowles deliberately plays tricks on the reader by exploring the notion that there is no such thing as an ultimate 'reality'. Every time the reader thinks that a screen of illusion has been stripped to reveal the reality behind it, he is made aware that the 'reality' is only another screen which is successively stripped to reveal another one until the reader comes to the conclusion that there is no underlying plane of reality at all. Hence, 'Nothing is real. All is fiction.' This is very much the basis of Isobel's explanation of Fielding's disappearance. She asks the sergeant to imagine that both they and Fielding are characters in a novel (which the reader knows they are), thus bringing into question their existence as "real" human beings. They are all being written into a novel by an author and are therefore controlled by him, she says. The problem is: How absolute is the writer's control of them? Isobel posits the theory that Fielding has disappeared because he can no longer stand being the victim of this system by which his every move is controlled. He has retaliated by disappearing out of the text altogether, thus asserting his ultimate freedom.

It is therefore in *The Enigma* that the idea of a writer not having absolute control over the characters that constitute his fiction is first explored. In *Mantissa* this is played out to the full in Part II,

where Erato and Miles are presented arguing about which one of them is master. In other words, who decides what in the writing of a text. Erato's complaint that she is tired of having to obey all the rules laid down by Miles, who has written her into existence, is much the same as the one that Isobel imagines caused Fielding to assert his freedom by disappearing out of the text.

Fowles is here making a point about the nature of the freedom that a character in a book has which is basic to an understanding of *Mantissa*. It is stated clearly in Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

'We (novelists) 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.'

He then explains how Charles (one of the major characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) has just gained his freedom by 'disobeying' him, and goes on:

'It is not only that he has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it, and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real.... There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition.'

Fielding 'died' (disappeared textually) because he was not given enough freedom to exist. This notion forms the crux of a heated argument that Erato (the character) and Miles (the writer) have about the nature of her existence. Miles says:

'You are viciously and sadistically breaking all the rules.'

Her face flares round. 'Your rules!'

'All right. My rules.'

She looks away again. 'I'm sick to death of them. Of having to pretend I exist in a way I never would, if I did.'

'You damn well exist for me, anyway. Just as you are.'

'Heil Hitler.'

'Okay. For the sake of the argument: Hitler says you exist. As you are.'

'He can't. You have to have certain elementary freedoms to exist.'

However, it is important to realise that there is a significant distinction in the way in which the relation between a writer and the characters he creates in a given story is presented in *The Enigma* and the way it is presented in *Mantissa*. In *The Enigma* its existence as a *theory* is made obvious. It is a hypothetical case which a young lady with a literary bent (she is trying to write a novel) is making as a possible explanation to a given fact, namely John Marcus Fielding's disappearance. She admits herself that 'it's very wild' and 'only a hunch' with no proof at all to support it. Since John Marcus Fielding is never found, and the 'theory' is never

proved wrong or right, the reader can equally accept or reject it. This is not the case in *Mantissa*.

In *Mantissa*, the reader is not asked to *imagine* that there is a novelist who is writing a story in which there features a certain character called John Marcus Fielding.... The reader is actually *presented* with an author, Miles Green, and a character, Erato, and a text which is in the process of being written, but of which the reader is never given the final version, only some of the endless versions which it goes through. It is not a story within a story (as is the case in *The Enigma*), it is not an explanation of the behaviour of a character given by the author in a long aside (as is the case in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), it is *the* story, *the* text, itself.

It is possible to say that Isobel Dodgson's 'theory' in *The Enigma* and Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* constitute the germ out of which *Mantissa* grew, but it remains the germ of an idea which was only fully developed later, in *Mantissa*.

There is no doubt, therefore, that a definite shift in emphasis takes place as far as the importance of this theme is concerned, with the writing of *Mantissa*. *Mantissa* is unique in giving it prominence. Its choice as a major theme is therefore a significant one because it indicates that whereas in his former novels, Fowles had some reason to 'question his modernity', since he gave supreme value to the representational function of art, he has now (but only in *Mantissa*) turned the tables to give major importance to its reflexive function.

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