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# Transgressing Fiction in John Fowles' Novels

**PhD Thesis. Abstract**

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This study analyzes John Fowles' major novels: *The Collector* (1963), *The Magus* (1966, revised 1977), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), *Daniel Martin* (1977), *Mantissa* (1982), and *A Maggot* (1985), focusing on the implications of metafictional strategies, possible-worlds theory, deconstruction, the subversion of the fantastic, and the theories of psychoanalysis. The innovation is represented by the manner of analysis of these texts.

The analysis envisages the status of the relations established among reality – fiction – metafiction, with respect to the reorienting of the mimetic focus from the outcome to the creative process and the modifications determined at the narrative level, the impact of the possible-worlds theory on the textual universe, the totalisation of the fantastic in postmodernism, culminating with a journey into the unfathomed depths of the unconscious in order to reveal its subversive nature, revealing the complex process of individuation, and the manner in which the texts can be deconstructed.

The thesis includes six chapters, preceded by Preliminary Remarks, and envisages the problematic status of the author, *mimesis*, possible worlds, metafiction, the strategies of deconstruction, the postmodern fantastic, the psychoanalytic approach, followed by Conclusions which highlight the particularities of the British author's work.

Each chapter represents an argumentation on the manner in which John Fowles' fiction is transgressed, revealing the subtle mechanisms that generate the crossing of boundaries. The British author's novels are considered the junction of many postmodernist strategies and the place of structural and formal diversity, each chapter of the thesis reflecting these dimensions.

The first chapter – *Postmodernist Hallmarks* – reveals theoretical aspects, aiming at clarifying and highlighting the paradigmatic shifts which occur in postmodernism. The chapter which opens the study reveals the reorientation of the mimetic focalization from the outcome to the creative process, in other words activating the critical function of parody.

In the realist novel, the focus was on the relation world-text, which meant that the text was supposed to reflect the world accurately, illustrating a relation of causality, a clear connection between those two entities. On the other hand, the metafictional novel foregrounds the relation text-reading, namely that part of the world which in a relation of reciprocity with the text, establishing a dialectic connection between these two spheres, reuniting them into a whole. The relation world-text gains the aspect of a game on a parodic base and the metafictional mirroring lies under the precarious balance created by means of parody.

This chapter reveals the specificity of postmodernism in a postmodern era. Being considered by some critics just another face of modernity, along with modernism, avant-garde, decadence, and kitsch, postmodernism is characterized by disturbance of temporality, of the linear progression of time, lack of centre, alterity, otherness, indeterminacy, a multiplicity and dispersal of centres, origins, presences. Moreover, language constructs reality, by organizing, structuring, categorizing it. Our ideas of author, audience, reading,

writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself have become lately very relative. It is an age in which fragmentation or decentralization is the paradigmatic characteristic of postmodernity, announcing a highly fragmented, dispersed, and unstable discourse.

As Fredric Jameson notes, postmodernism recycles the past as the postmodern culture cannot produce any new cultural forms of its own as a result of the death of originality. Therefore, it constantly recycles cultural forms, genres, films, music, etc. from the past such as the constant recycling of previous styles of fashion. The recycling of the past is one of the reasons why postmodernism is often referred to as a culture of reproduction because postmodernity simply reproduces or recirculates already existing images, texts, and products.

Aspects related to ambiguity and paradoxes in modernism are considered in postmodernism in terms of undecidability. Undecidability undermines the principle of unity, establishing the era of multiplicity, heterogeneity, difference; it splits the text, disorders it, and dislodges the mechanism of a single final meaning in

a literary text. Accordingly, representation, mimesis, and temporality have become highly relative.

The announcements of the 20th century related to the death of God, man, and the author contributed to the dissolution of authority. Traditionally conceived as a transcendental signified, standing behind the work as God is thought to stand behind the material universe, the figure of the author has gained new features in the past few decades. Along with theories of Wayne C. Booth, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Seán Burke, Eugen Simion, Wolfgang Iser, and others, the literary works of the 20$^{th}$ century reveal paradigmatic shifts regarding the status of the author.

The displacement or the destabilizing of the author determined poststructuralists to explore for other sources of meaning, especially readers. Accordingly, the key of the text is no longer held by a single person because meaning becomes collective and in constant play. Seán Burke even speaks of centers and margins which are dissolved, the fixed giving way to the fluid, meaning is seen as illimitable, textuality becomes an open sea; authorial intention and the order of the book

are swept aside by intertextuality and the interactivity of the reader. The author is still a catalyst in the crystallization of meaning, the problem is that his trace is dissolved and substituted to such extent that one can identify several sources of meaning, and they are not reflected only in the text, but also in the reader's consciousness.

Mişcarea care destabilizează autorul are în vedere, de asemenea, deconstrucţia reprezentării. Astfel, în această eră post-reprezentaţională (daca împrumutăm unul dintre termenii lui Burke) tendinţa actuală se manifestă în încercarea de a crea mai degrabă decât a reprezenta realităţi.

The movement which destabilizes the author envisages also the deconstruction of representation. Thus, in this post-representational era, to borrow one of Burkes' terms, the current trend is to attempt to create rather than represent realities.

Considering the fact that modern society is characterized by incessant shifts in the structures of knowledge and power, one might argue that contemporary reality is continually being reappraised and

resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities. Moving *through* this reality involves moving from one reality to another. As reality is habitually experienced, the movement between levels is disguised, determining an apparent homogeneity on social experience. However, there are cases when such conventions are exposed and the gaps between levels are revealed.

The problem posed by the concept revolves around the dilemma whether mimesis can cover or explain such a complex phenomenon as metafiction. There are theorists who postulate the end of mimesis. For instance, Liviu Petrescu points out that postmodernist novel is defined not only by a poetics of fragmentariness, but also by a non-mimetic one.

The strategy used in the contemporary experimental writing envisages the problematization of the relation between textual reference and reality and the questioning of the novel's ability to mediate reality in order to defamiliarize forms of representation, as more and more novelists have started to reject the forms

reflecting the ordered reality, such as the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence.

Whereas modernism is characterized by monism and dualism, postmodern pluralism reveals an innovative side by admitting the fact that there are many irreducible principles, and therefore many worlds. This is the focus of the second chapter which reveals the configuration of possible worlds in the textual universe.

The basis of this theory relies on the fact that reality (including all possibilities of the imaginable) illustrates a universe constituted of the multitude of different elements. The core of this hierarchically structured universe is an element commonly associated with the actual world, and the satellites are just possible worlds. The most important aspect of this theory is that it makes relative the relation between the fictional world and reality which is no longer defined in connection to imitation or mirroring.

Moreover, according to Brian McHale, the feature that marks a break in the system is constituted by the appearance in fictional worlds of elements that are not *reflected* in fiction, but *incorporated*, creating enclaves of ontological *difference* within the otherwise ontologically homogeneous fictional heterocosm.

The mentioning of Walter Scott is the first among the other enclaves that are incorporated in *Mantissa.* The strategy highlights the interpenetration of worlds because a character in a novel identifies himself with a real writer, namely John Fowles. This is definitely an enclave in this satellite world, revealing an ontological short-circuit.

All references to real people, intertexts, and enclaves establish relations which connect the real world with the textual actual world and with the satellite worlds. All these are interconnected and their boundaries are weakened.

Ingarden identifies four strata of a literary work. It is worth mentioning here the stratum of presented objects which constitute an "ontic sphere" of their own – a world. Unlike real-world objects that have no indeterminate points, objects depicted in fiction have

ontological gaps. By projecting paradoxical objects the respective world achieves an effect called by Ingarden "iridescence" or "opalescence." Therefore, entire worlds can flicker, lacking the epistemological density of real objects.

Another strategy used in destabilizing fictional worlds is represented by the interview *topos*. The general case presents the reader with an author asserting his prerogatives over some characters, or looking for them, or characters are in search of an author.

Umberto Eco perceives the narrative text as a machine for producing possible worlds. In Eco's view, these worlds fall into three categories: the possible world imagined and asserted by the author which consists of all the states presented as actual by the *fabula*; the possible subworlds that are imagined, believed, wished (etc.) by the characters; the possible subworlds that the reader imagines, believes, wishes (etc.) in the course of reading which the *fabula* either actualizes or counterfactualizes by taking another fork.

Marie-Laure Ryan further divides the private worlds of characters into representations of existing material or mental worlds (beliefs), static model-worlds, which capture how the actual world should or will be (obligations, desires, predictions), dynamic model-worlds, or intention-worlds, which project courses of events leading to goal states (the active plans of characters), and fantasy worlds which outline new systems of reality, complete with their own actual and possible worlds (dreams, hallucinations, acts of imagination, fictions-within-fictions).

In Marie-Laure Ryan's view regarding fictional worlds, there are always elements that create what she names accessibility relations. She also introduces the notion of *recentering* which illustrates the selection of another world as centre of reference by stepping aside from reality by means of various mental activities. The process can also occur in the fictional discourse – in a system which has as a centre an alternative possible world functioning as a referential point for characters.

These accessibility relations envisage the organization and reorganization of the fictional worlds.

They are either "transuniverse relations" or "intrauniverse relations." The former relates the real world to the textual one by means of recentering. The latter illustrates the way in which recentering functions in the fictional world, connecting it with other satellite worlds. The procedure explains the use of *mise-en-abyme*, intertextuality, framed story etc. and even characters' visions and dreams.

Marie-Laure Ryan argues that narrative texts create a world by depicting particular entities and events and they make that world coherent and intelligible by evoking a network of relations – causal links, psychological motivations, goals, plans - among entities and events. All these aspects are thoroughly analyzed by operating with concepts such as the disnarrated, the nonnaratable, and the nonnarated.

The disnarrated is present in metafictional novels in which it operates at the level of discourse in order to emphasize their own artificiality, by multiplying signs of arbitrary power in narrative articulation and signs of contingency in narrative explanation. This is the case of *Mantissa* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* novels in

which the disnarrated foregrounds the construction of a world by language.

Marie-Laure Ryan introduces the principle of minimal departure which explains the adjustments made in the process of reading. This principle enables the reader to form reasonable representations of the fictional worlds, even if their verbal representation is always incomplete. Ryan argues that the gaps in the representation should be viewed as withdrawn information and not as ontological deficiencies of this universe itself.

Along with Roland Barthes' theory proclaiming the death of the author and the birth of the reader as the locus of textual meaning, the concept of reader has been highly debated over time and achieved an entire array of dimensions. The third chapter highlights the manner in which the 20$^{th}$ century critique emphasizes the role of the reader in the creation of meaning and dilutes the role of the author, by finding new ramifications and features with every new theory.

Iser argues that communication between these two entities determines the dissolution of the textual

borders due to the reader's participation in the articulation of the sense of the narrative. As a result, the reader perceives his implication as being fictional: "He is bound to look on his reactions as something real, and at no time is this conviction disputed. But since his reactions are real, he will lose the feeling that he is judging a world that is only fictional. Indeed, his own judgments will enhance the impression he has that this world is a reality.

This chapter reveals how an overt act of self-impersonation in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is significant for the denial of the ontological boundary between the real world in which the characters of the novel are creatures of the author's own mind, and the fictional world in which characters exist as autonomous individuals. Ryan considers this strategy as a form of ontological paradox. Since we can only meet face to face with members of our own level of reality, the encounter of author and characters denies the imaginary status of the latter, and abolishes the ontological boundary that defines their relation. The author and Charles actually share the same compartment and this represents a great

opportunity for the author to disclose some of the artifices he used in creating his characters, deciding on their evolution throughout the story, manufacturing the end of the course of events.

These interventions function as frame-breaks as the theorists of metafiction describe them. This happens when rules or conventions that dominate a certain type of experience are transgressed. Usually, the process reveals what the reader is supposed to conceal – the invented nature of characters and actions.

Furthermore, the fourth chapter highlights the features that the fantastic gains in postmodernism. There are many postmodern novels that reunite the conventions of the fantastic, genres such as the historical novel, and postmodern literary techniques which generate a new form of fantastic. Accordingly, postmodernism and the fantastic are a reaction to prior and current literary forms working by parody and imitation, and most of all they question power structures and ideologies, consolidating the marginalised figures of history and society.

This chapter reveals the way in which elements of the traditional fantastic combine with ones from the

contemporary fantastic, determining the totalisation of the fantastic in postmodernism. Critics have argued that there are two techniques of subversion in the postmodern fantastic: the former attacks religion, realism, the idea of linear time, of the unity of space, of the unity of character etc. and the latter envisages the totalisation of the fantastic in postmodernism, influenced by postmodernism's own features of subversion.

Taking into account that *A Maggot* is a metafictional the analysis reveals the mechanisms which establish the connection between metafiction and the postmodern fantastic, such as subversion. *A Maggot* is the perfect example to illustrate the collision between the world of fiction with that of the extraliterary reality. It also stands for the subversion of genre which manifests itself at the level of the fantastic subversion of the detective novel.

All these effects are acquired through the combination of elements from the traditional fantastic with features of the postmodern fantastic. The pivotal point emphasized by Todorov is the fact that the reader's hesitation gives birth to the fantastic, while in the

postmodern fantastic one of the characters reaches a conclusion based on events. The suspension of meaning characteristic for the traditional fantastic is extended in the postmodern fantastic and is visible in the disappearance of characters.

As Daniela Carpi argues Mr. Bartholomew's disappearance reflects the fact that he transgressed the boundary between fiction and fact and entered another world in a fantastic manner. Finally, the sense conveyed to the reader is that of a non-ending (McHale) and all the features contribute to the articulation of the pure fantastic, of elements from traditional fantastic that are extended in the postmodern fantastic reinforcing their characteristics and adding new features to them. *A Maggot* is a valuable testimony of the fact that meanings reside in the structures of the fantastic.

The fifth chapter explores very interesting features such as narratorial madness, the realms of the self, and forms of delusion. Narratorial madness and its mechanisms are part of a wider concept of narrative unreliability outlined by Wayne C. Booth. Narratorial madness induces suspicion and creates an atmosphere of

instability. These aspects also institute an incongruity between the literary voice of the narrator and that of the author. It is important to mention that there are multiple types of unreliability such as: intellectual impairment, a child's perspective, illiteracy, dysnarration (Robbe-Grillet), manipulation or falsehood.

Furthermore, one might argue that there are two types of narratorial madness that have to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the obvious and unequivocal kind of madness which is depicted in various ways. Its symptoms become transparent at a critical and clinical level. Their main function is to destabilize the connection between reality and representation. On the other hand, there is another form of madness which is only suspected, arising as a possibility within the text. It is insidious and creates an intimate crack within an apparently sane discourse.

Carl Gustav Jung develops Freud's triad (Id – Ego – Superego) by introducing a new element – the Self – a concept which includes conscious and unconscious features and its realization is the result of individuation. The Self represents a symbolic image of the entirety of

the *psyche*, marking the development of the Ego from a collective and idealized entity, by means of individuation, to an Ego centred on the Self, reinforced by a heterogeneous process involving the integration of the Shadow and complexes along with the archetypes.

Furthermore, delusion may take various forms and it has many synonyms, each of them adding a new feature which contributes to the formation of the overall image. It is often described as chimera, hallucination, illusion, misapprehension, phantasm, self-deception, psychotic belief, and even madness. In a world in which normality cannot be standardized and one can never know where it begins and where it ends, there are some characters in John Fowles' universe that control and configure other characters' realities.

The last chapter illustrates some aspects of the psychoanalytic approach. The journey into the unfathomed depths of the unconscious faces the interpreter with various features of this controversial part of the *psyche*. First of all, the attempt to define the structure of the *psyche* leads us to different perspectives such as Freud's, Jung's or Lacan's. The most important

aspect is that these three psychoanalysts contribute with their knowledge and research in the field to reveal the complex process undergone by any individual during his/her lifetime in order to achieve wholeness.

The analysis takes into consideration the formation of the Ego during the mirror stage, when the child is faced up with his/her image in the mirror. Unable to understand the gap between its own fragmented perception of his / her body and the specular image, the child enters the Imaginary order in which he/she is both Self and Other.

The entrance in the Imaginary order marks the beginning of a stage specific to the formation of identifications between the Ego and the Imaginary features which the child will attribute to the objects around him/her over a lifetime, establishing the dynamics of the Self. Nonetheless, the boundaries of the Imaginary are going to be transgressed as soon as its contents become conscious, being structured by the Symbolic.

The imaginary register is restructured, rewritten, or "overwritten" by the symbolic, by the words and phrases. The new symbolic or linguistic order supersedes

the imaginary order. Lacan talks about the dominance and determinant nature of language in human existence. This imaginary identification serves to deconstruct the binary between Self and Other.

In the process of individuation, some characters' Self reifies. The etymology of *reification* is related to the Latin word *res, re* which means thing. Reification appears when a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing. The core of the process relies on the deviation of perception a subject has upon life, pertaining to a social shift which unravels the pathological characteristics in our life practices. Reification is "the process whereby people are induced to forget that they themselves continually produce everything, including society and its rules and structure – that human decisions and actions generate the world.

Jung describes the central concept of his psychology as the idea that all human beings should strive to achieve individuation. Individuation is a term which illustrates the complex process of personal transformation that occurs over a lifetime.

In a few words, the process can be resumed to several stages: differentiation of personal values from collective values, relinquishing the grip of the persona, or mask, that many people present as a defensive self-representation in social situations, experiencing the activation of personal complexes to realize their inherent opposition and gradually relinquish their sovereignty, which was maintained by their remaining unconscious.

.        Jung considers that this process typically starts at mid-life, after a person had met the culture's demands to form an ego, become an adult, establish a career, attract a mate through instinctual processes, and raise a family. Nevertheless, there are people who even if they achieved their goals can often experience a vague lack of satisfaction. Little by little, dissatisfaction turns itself in a mid-life identity crisis and prompts the self-exploration that starts the quest for individuation.

All these concepts and strategies are reunited in order to depict a complex picture of John Fowles' novelistic universe. The British author's novels display the manifestations of these concepts in a perfect articulation, creating a brilliant atmosphere and an

impressive medium in which ontologically different entities transgress the boundaries of fiction.

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