UNIVERSITATEA "ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA" DIN IASI

ABSTRACT

TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT

VIOLATION OF CODES IN JOHN FOWLES'S WORK

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ABSTRACT

If we think of how literary or cultural trends emerge as reactions against previous trends, then we could infer that the literary phenomenon can be viewed as a confirmation of already existing codes on the one hand, and on the other as a continual renewal of codes – an extremely intricate process by means of which, starting from already-existing conventions without which communication in general and literature in particular would not be possible, new codes are being created.

It is important to notice that codes are dynamic systems of signs and therefore they change over time. With each period or literary trend, writing seems to have privileged certain codes. If plot is essential in 19th century literature, 20th century modernist novels are interested in it to the extent to which narrative incidents reveal something essential about characters and about their identity. Postmodernist fiction goes even further – traditional narrative conventions such as characters and plot are no longer relevant in themselves; the illusion of fiction is shattered and the act of writing fiction is exposed.

Similar things can be said about the generic code or about genre in general – particular genres were privileged during particular literary periods – the Renaissance writers preferred the dramatic mode; the romantics preferred poetry whereas the end of the 18th and the 19th centuries chose the novel form to express their views. Generic conventions have constantly undergone changes so that the postmodernist text has come to be a hybrid construct in which genre boundaries are most of the time blurred.

What there results out of all these is that literature as a phenomenon is characterised by dynamism; it does not stagnate, but, on the contrary, it evolves and with it there also evolve the sign systems by means of which we make sense of it, namely the codes used in encoding and decoding literary texts.

Thus any study of literature should also be a semiotic study.

The structure of the paper is three-fold.

The first part *Sign, Code, Semiosis* represents the general theoretical backbone of the paper on which the other two parts inform.

The first two chapters, *Codes and Types of Codes* and *Literary Codes and Literary Semiotics*, deal with theoretical issues such as: codes and semiosis in general semiotics (Jakobson; Levi-Strauss; Jameson; Hall; Chandler) as well as in literary semiotic theory (Eco, Barthes, Eagleton, Fokkema).

The third chapter *Towards a Definition of Postmodernism* approaches *postmodernism* (Lyotard, Jameson, Lacan, Baudrillard, Derrida, McHale, Ihab Hassan, Hutcheon, Eagleton, etc.) seen as the *aesthetic code* (in Chandler's acceptation) or *period/group code* (in Fokkema's acceptation) to which John Fowles belongs. The chapter is also concerned with issues such as (*historiographic*) *metafiction*, *parody* (Waugh, Hutcheon, Onega) and *intertextuality* (Kristeva, Genette, Barthes) as either postmodernist subgenres or forms of

fictional writing, or as essential characteristics of postmodernist fictional writing in general, and of Fowles writing in particular.

Starting from the premise that a semiotics of literature must necessarily include a semiotics of reading and that codes in themselves do not mean anything if they are not seen in relation to the "actors" of the literary semiosic process (the writer and the reader), the second part of the paper *Codes in performance* includes what I have called six "reading exercises" of Fowles's six novels. If the first part is linked to what a structucturalist theory of literature would call reader's competence (knowledge of relevant codes), this part is thus connected with the performance of codes.

Instead of identifying codes and treating them separately, we have preferred to deal here with the issue of codes and code violation by approaching each novel at a time. The motivation for such an approach is three-fold:

- ✓ the chronological order in which John Fowles's novels were published has been the structural criterion of most book-length critical studies on Fowles. It seems natural therefore to use (for now) the same structuring or organizing principle as the analysis may facilitate the comparing of critical outcomes;
- ✓ the Fowlesian novels are as many examples of a varied, quite complex type of textuality so that the identification of overarching sets of codes that are violated may privilege some texts while disadvantage others;
- ✓ an analysis that uses as a criterion only an overarching structural principle may make it difficult to see the way in which John Fowles has evolved as a writer and may wrongly deny him any artistic progress.

Although referring to an issue approached by other critical studies as well (the collector mentality), *Chapter II.1. The Collector: Issues of Identity and the Other Self* brings new insights into this problem as the analysis is not made only on the basis of Fowles's writing (fictional, essayistic or philosophical), but it is made through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's theory of systems of collecting. Offering "a paradigm of perfection" (Baudrillard 1994), collecting becomes a means of completing Clegg's incomplete self by creating around himself a narcissistic territory populated by collected objects that emerge as "ideal" mirrors of himself.

In chapter II.2. *The Magus: Aberrant Decoding of Existence and Textuality*, we explore issues such as identity and textuality starting from Eco's syntagm "aberrant decoding" (Eco 1972). Making extensive use of intertextual elements, *The Magus* is not only a novel about existence and identity, but also about art, a novel by means of which John Fowles "teaches" us that there is no "final truth" / no preferred reading of either life or textuality.

Chapter II.3 The French Lieutenant's Woman: Cultures in Interaction investigates the way in which various cultures playfully interact both within and without textual boundaries, focusing mainly on the interaction between 19th century masculinity and 19th century femininities. Being a text that tries to repeat 19th-century mentality/mentalities or (un)reality/(un)realities with a critical difference, narrated by a 20th century postmodern

consciousness, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* may undoubtedly be called an "open work" (Eco 1989), a *writerly* text (Barthes), best rendered by the metaphor of the lias strata. Used to refer metaphorically to the "edificiality of time", the lias strata also become a metaphor for the "edificiality" of the text.

Chapter II.4 Daniel Martin or in Search of the Novel deals with violation of narrative syntax in *Daniel Martin* as well as issues such as paratextuality and metatextuality. A novel that can be read as a variation of previous Fowlesian texts (it repeats at a thematic level and at the level of the narrative texts such as *The Collector*; *The Aristos*; *The Magus*; *The Ebony Tower*, etc.), a novel about writing, *Daniel Martin* is even more about re-writing – about the rewriting of history, the rewriting of Daniel's history, the re-writing of the novel as genre, and, ultimately, about the act of reading as re-writing.

Chapter II.5 Femininity and Textuality in Mantissa approaches John Fowles's fifth novel as a scriptible text that refuses closure and multiplies voices/perspectives and that is thematically concerned with issues such as language, signification, the act of writing fiction, intertextuality and deconstruction. A plural novel no doubt in which nothing should be taken literally, transgressing discursive conventions in a very explicit way, *Mantissa* is ultimately a critique and a parody of postmodern theories such as deconstruction or Barthes's "death of the author". The effacement of lisibility by means of an aggressively and excessively intertextual self-conscious discourse is, as a matter of fact, ironic and it is meant to produce a reversed effect as Fowles still believes in the "positive medieval illusion" that writers of fiction still write their texts.

Chapter II.6 A Maggot as Ultimate Variation deals with the ways in which Fowles's last fictional text defies and violates the conventions of the classic realist novel. *A Maggot* becomes Fowles's last declared novelistic attempt at revigorating a fixed, static, dormant genre, "a superseded skeleton" that "must be destroyed, or at least adapted to a new world" (*Maggot* 460).

The third part *III. Metaphor or Otherness of/in Language* is also concerned with the codes at play in John Fowles's text, but, instead of the sequential, chronological structuring criterion used in the second part, we have attempted to identify an overarching principle by means of which to approach the recurrent elements accumulating in John Fowles's fictional texts. Not only do we use a different organizing principle, but we also refer here to other writings of John Fowles (namely the short stories in *The Ebony Tower;* the texts of *The Aristos* and *Wormholes. Essays and Occasional Writings*) as they are also important elements in establishing Fowles's place on our "literary maps".

We have found this overarching principle in the conceptual metaphors John Fowles uses in his texts.

Taking metaphor, on the one hand as an "otherness" of language, as a deviation from or violation of literal language, and, on the other, as the representation through language or in language of the self's otherness/difference, we have identified a series of conceptual metaphors recurring in John Fowles's texts.

Prominence is given to what we have called a "polyhedral" metaphor – the island metaphor (*Chapter III.2. Polyhedral Metaphors: The Island Metaphor*) which becomes with

Fowles a very complex semiotic sign as it has at least a triple-fold signification: first, the island as a particular type of space regulated by a particular type of temporality (fictional islands or islanded spaces, sacred combes, lost paradises or domains where fossilised existence is rejuvenated); second, the island as a metaphor for the self – "the island of the self" (a paradigm Fowles himself uses in his essay *Ebenezer le Page*); and third the Fowlesian text as an island.

In approaching this metaphor, Algirdas J. Greimas's semiotic square has been of much use to us as, on the one hand, it helped us analyse and highlight the relational nature of the construction of identity (the self constructs its identity in relational to the others and to its other selves, but also in relation to time and space as categories of the mind); on the other, it has helped us suggest its polyhedral, plural nature.

The identification of binary oppositions in John Fowles's texts seems to be an insufficient, inadequate tool; it is a far more restrictive analytical method incapable of representing/"mapping" the complexity of the Fowlesian fictional universe as it puts forth an opposition only between two terms. On the other hand, the semiotic square puts forth/generates a conceptual network that allows us to multiply the number of oppositions or of terms: from two to at least eight, being thus more appropriate for analysing such a multilayered vision of identity and textuality as that of Fowles.

Our main point in chapter *III.2.b. The Architectonics of Identity: The (No)-Man-Is-an-Island Metaphor* is that the Self constructs its identity relationally: on the one hand in relation to the other and to its other selves; on the other hand, in relation to time and space.

To analyse the way in which the Self builds its identity in relation to the Other we have superimposed Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage on Greimas's semiotic square (*Figure 1*).
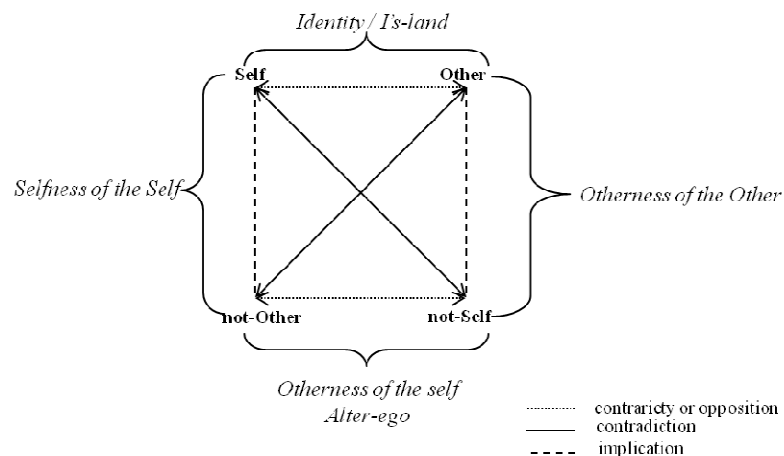

Figure 1

The second semiotic square is a representation of the way in which the Fowlesian Self constructs its identity in relation to time and space (*Figure 2*).
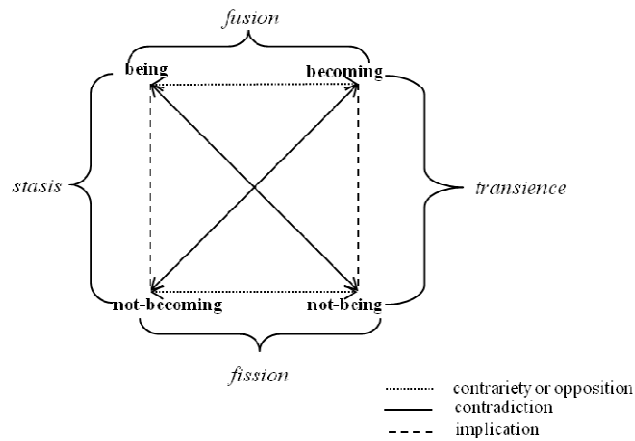
Figure 2

The third semiotic square (*Figure 3*) moves the analysis from the diegetic level to a textual/metatextual level and it analyses the issue of textuality taking into consideration various levels of textuality. For this, we have superimposed an extended notion of textual transcendence (Genette) on Greimas's square. Although approached somewhat separately, the eight mapped terms are in fact inseparable levels or aspects of the Fowlesian textuality.
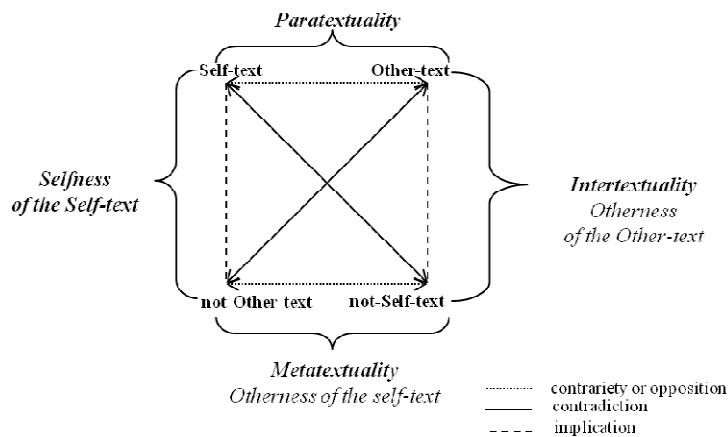

Figure 3

As this paper will prove it, it is not an easy task to establish where John Robert Fowles belongs on "our conventional literary maps".

The refusal to create hierarchies together with the use of a vast array of strategies that violate narrative conventions and destroy the "illusion of fiction",[1] make of John Fowles a postmodernist writer no doubt.

The highly intertextual character of his highly metaphorical, narcissistic fictional constructs; the use of paratextual elements such as footnotes, epigraphs, newspaper facsimile reproductions; the hybrid nature of some of his texts, the use of irony and parody, of play and games identify him as a postmodernist as well.

Thematically, Fowles's texts approach postmodernist themes such as plural, polyhedral, fragmented identity.

Through all the above mentioned elements, through their openness and plurality, Fowles's novels are part of this postmodern consciousness that conceives the subject as the product of language, but they also allows us a glimpse at something running counter postmodernist tenets for Fowles writes "both roads"; it allows us a glimpse at a recontextualised humanism that emerges as a result of a Fowlesian postmodern epistemological, ontological and artistic crisis.

John Fowles has constantly and obstinately refused to accept that the postmodern condition involves on the one hand the acknowledgement of a postmodern subject forever fragmented, completely lacking agency, incapable of altering the outside world and, on the other, the acceptance of what Rolland Barthes has called "the Death of the Author".

John Fowles's texts show us that no matter how fissioned the self may be, fusion is still possible; one can still find points of fulcrum, when being and becoming are one, when "whole sight" or "totality of consciousness" are attained.

Inhabiting a world that is "so wrong, so inadequate and unimaginative" (Fawkner 1984: 9), himself a victim of the "butterfly (d)e(f)fect, John Fowles finds in writing that point of fulcrum that will ensure him "totality of consciousness". Writing comes with Fowles from a desire to "correct" and "supplement" the outside world, from "a sense of loss", of "insufferable incompleteness" (*idem*).

As a consequence, his whole work can be interpreted as an attempt at resuscitating the subject back to life – the subject not as a possessor of objective, transcendental truths, but a subject that is not entirely an artifice or a product of language; as an attempt of bringing back to life the writer as creator of his own fiction, the writer as source of textual originality and authenticity; the writer able to give back language, and implicitly life, something of the magic hinted at in the short-story *Poor Koko*.

The Fowlesian subject is no doubt brought back to life, but not under the Cartesian "Cogito, ergo sum" form; nor under the Lacanian "Je pense où je ne suis pas, donc je suis où je ne pense pas", but under the "Scribo, ergo sum" form hinted at in the essay *I Write, Therefore I Am*.

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[1] In semiotic terms, John Fowles's novels may be described as marked, under-coded texts as they deviate from conventional expectations. Such texts seem to require more interpretive work done from the part of the reader as they do not follow a "fairly predictable formula" as conventional, 'over-coded' texts (Chandler 2007: 98).
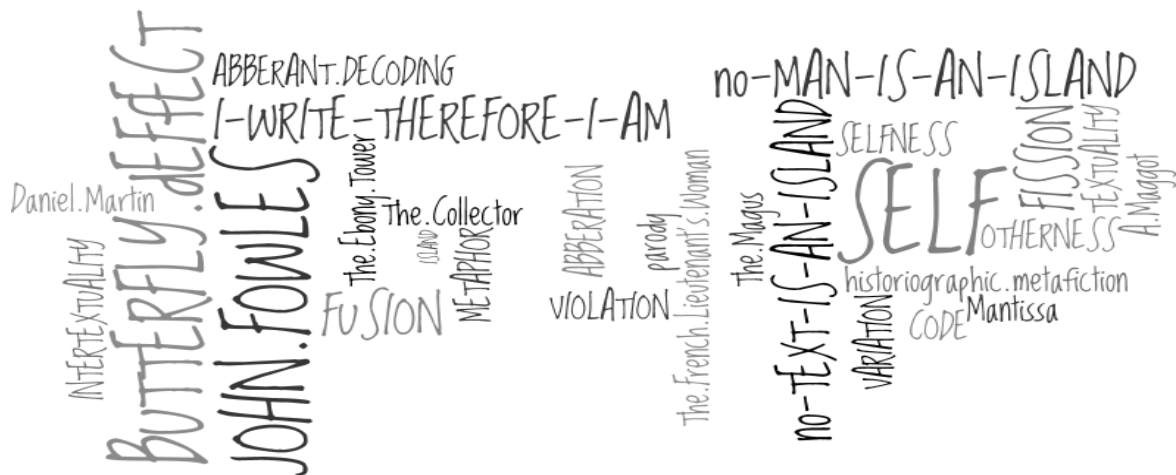
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