

John Fowles's 'Manchester baby': forms of radicalism in *A Maggot*

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Abstract: *A Maggot*, John Fowles's last published novel, reflects the author's disrespect for conventions both as a man and as an artist. Its formal structure is unorthodox. Besides, the choice of the birth of a radical sect, the Shakers, as a subject matter allows him to explore the limitations of social conformity, while his subversion of the codes of the historical novel questions the constraint of traditional literary conventions. This paper explores the way in which John Fowles plays with history and the past in order to impose a desire for radicalism in the reader.

Keywords: *A Maggot*, John Fowles, radicalism, the Shakers, historical novel

A Maggot (1985), John Fowles's last novel, is as unusual as his other works and the multiplicity of meanings in the title creates this impression from the beginning. The whole work offers numerous different interpretations to the reader, none of them entirely satisfying. This is a part of Fowles's radicalism and the way he tries to encourage the reader to resist conformism. Indeed, through the development of the plot and the confusion raised by the structure of the novel, the reader is invited to emulate the Dissenting character in their radical principles.

The novel starts by narrating a late April afternoon in 1736, when five travellers arrive in a city in Devon. Through the dialogue, we learn that nobody is who he seems to be. Mr Bartholomew, a gentleman, has hired two actors, Francis Lacy and David Jones, to play the roles of uncle and soldier. Louise, the French maid, is Fanny, a famous London prostitute who is ordered to have sex with Bartholomew's deaf-and-dumb servant, Dick. Then, all of a sudden, the narrative breaks and a newspaper article informs the reader that the servant was found hanged in a wood and that nothing has been heard of the rest of the group for two months. Aside from reproductions of authentic newspaper pages of the time which are interspersed throughout, most of the rest of the book is composed of letters and transcriptions of depositions, in which the aim is to discover what happened to Mr Bartholomew. As the witnesses appear one after another in front of Henry Ayscough, the lawyer, the reader understands that something mysterious happened in a cave not far from where Dick was found, which involved either a satanic ritual, or a meeting with three holy women who had come from the future in a spaceship shaped as a maggot, one of the meanings for the title. There, Rebecca, alias Fanny, was supposedly given a vision of the

Shakers' ideal community (June Eternal) as well as seeing televised images of the horrors of the twentieth-century wars. Whatever happened in the cave transformed her into a saintly woman. The few narrative sections, told from an external point of view, do not lift the veil from the mystery but only help the reader better to understand the personalities of the characters and so stress the discrepancy between the two time periods. At the end of the novel, Rebecca, now married to John Lee, gives birth to a daughter she calls Ann. Only the epilogue makes clear that this infant is destined to become the real historical person Mother Ann Lee, founder of American Shakerism or the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming.

The religious sect Mother Ann Lee initiated was quite radical in its beliefs and way of life, advocating celibacy, but also equality between men and women. In 'I write therefore I am', Fowles states that 'my first ambition has always been to alter the society I live in; that is, to affect other lives... Society, existing among other human beings, challenges me, so I have to choose my weapon. I choose writing' (Fowles 1998, 6). History thus becomes a tool for Fowles, who fictionalizes it in order to have the reader reflect on the past, but also on the present. As such, the novel is radical in the political or social sense, that is 'advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social change' (Fowles 1998, 6). Through the story, Fowles advocates some sort of radicalism, an escape from conformism.

Indeed, John Fowles's interest is in the founding moments of such Dissenting groups, how a few people chose to go against tradition and social norms and become 'revolutionaries' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 457). As a result, *A Maggot* ends with Ann Lee's birth – the 'Manchester baby' – and does not narrate her life. Following Walter Scott's example – the 'traditional historical novel' according to Lukács – John Fowles focuses his story around minor fictional characters rather than a real historical figure (Lukács 1983 [1962], 35). Yet, he warns the reader in the prologue that,

[t]his fiction is in no way biographically about that second woman, though it does end with her birth in about the real year and quite certainly the real place where she was born. I have given that child her historical name; but I would not have this seen as a (*sic*) historical novel. It is maggot (Fowles 1996 [1985], 5-6).

In this sentence, the term 'maggot' refers to a whim from the author's imagination and is still another meaning for the title. Despite this refutation, *A Maggot* has been considered an historical novel for more than thirty years. Fowles himself later admitted that he had written two historical novels. Yet this demonstrates Fowles's desire not to be confined to a category or literary tradition. As such, it proves his own radical approach, i.e. the fact that his writing is 'characterized by independence of or departure from what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox or innovative in outlook' (*Oxford English*

Dictionary). I will thus consider the way in which the novel is also radical in its structure and form.

When combined in *A Maggot*, Fowles's social and literary non-conformism provide the reader with a guide to express his or her own radicalism or transgression of the norm. I shall try to demonstrate how Fowles's playing with history is radical both in its intent and its impact, especially on the reader. Indeed, his choice of subject matter, i.e. the Shakers, is consistent with his own radical principles as a man and as an author, and this shows through the unorthodox views that he tries to impart to the reader, but also through the originality of the novel itself. But, before stating how Fowles transgresses the conventions of the historical novel, we must first examine what these norms are.

'I feel exiled from many present English conceptions of society, social behaviour and so on' (Vipond 1999, 70).

This particular last day of April falls in a year very nearly equidistant from 1689, the culmination of the English Revolution, and 1789, the start of the French; in a sort of dozing solstitial standstill, a stasis of the kind predicted by those today who see all evolution as a punctuated equilibrium, between those two zenith dates and all they stand for; at a time of reaction from the intemperate extremisms of the previous century, yet already hatching the seeds... of the world-changing upheaval to come (Fowles 1996 [1985], 16).

From the very beginning, the narrator stresses the stillness of the period in between two momentous revolutions, the English Revolution and the French one, thereby encouraging the reader to expect some sort of movement during the story. This culminates in the last sentence of a rather long paragraph: 'Certainly England as a whole was indulging in its favourite and sempiternal national hobby: retreating deep within itself, and united only in a constipated hatred of change of any kind' (16). The hyperbolic language, the redundancy of generalising terms ('as a whole', 'sempiternal', 'national'), together with the oxymoronic association of 'united / only' and 'constipated / change' create an impression of unease rather than peacefulness. In those circumstances, the reader will welcome any form of reaction against such apathy, which they will find in the situation – a mysterious Lord disappearing, a servant hanged, a prostitute turned chaste, a spaceship coming from the future – as well as in the ideas advanced by the characters.

Throughout the novel, the author plays on opposites and contradictions to elicit a radical response from the reader. Therefore, the character of Ayscough, the lawyer, becomes a type, a representative of conformism. The stress laid on his puny stature – for instance, he is referred to as 'the very small, frail and bewigged man' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 113) or 'the diminutive lawyer' (114) – prompts ridicule as it contrasts with his haughty attitude towards people he

considers to be his social inferiors. His attachment to a hierarchical social order is emphasized in different ways. He expects humility and obeisance from the lower orders, such as Rebecca or Jones, while he plays the dutiful subordinate to nobility, as the obsequious language of his letters to Bartholomew's father demonstrates. These letters are addressed to 'Your Grace', a term he uses and abuses (no less than twenty-nine mentions in one letter; 105-109); they are brimming with Latin phrases and generally end on an acknowledgment of his subservience with such expressions as 'with that every diligence which Yr Grace's past favours have lain as a hallowed duty upon ever his most humble and obedient servant' (109). In the depositions, however, according to the social status of the person interrogated, they may be addressed with 'thou' or 'thee' for the maid Dorcas (81), 'sir', 'Mr Beckford' or 'you' for the curate (95), or simply 'Jones' (201) for the Welsh actor. Language is thus a means to impose social order.

Ayscough is portrayed as the representative of all that is prejudiced in society. Retracing his reaction to Defoe's pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, which proposed to hang or deport all Dissenters, the lawyer had failed to see the irony underlying the text and 'backed the idea of ridding England of seditious conventicles and meetings by depositing them all in the convenient dustbin of America' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 236). As the narrator stresses, '[a]ll ancient and established professions must be founded on tacit prejudices as strong as their written statutes and codes; and by those Ayscough is imprisoned as much as any debtor in the Fleet by law' (236). Consequently, the laws and conventions are presented as another constraint for the man, just as the Bible confines the believers in a set doctrine. This is why, when Rebecca evokes a female goddess, Holy Mother Wisdom, Ayscough cries out, voicing the traditional patriarchal view that, 'this is rank blasphemy. 'Tis writ clear in the Book of Genesis that Eve came of Adam's seventh rib' (380). The lawyer cannot accept any religious belief that is not consistent with the Bible, underlining the importance of the written word for Protestant Christian faith.

Language becomes constraining when one cannot escape from its content. Regularly Rebecca stresses her inability to make herself understood by the lawyer as they do not speak the same 'alphabet': 'Thee hast thy alphabet, and I mine, that is all' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 317). Ayscough speaks the language of the law; his letters to the lord are redolent with obsequiousness, while Rebecca speaks the language of emotion and tries to impart her experience but does not have the words for that, since they do not exist yet (television, napalm, planes, etc.). On the contrary, Dick and Bartholomew are able to understand each other without words. This leads Tarbox to conclude that '[t]he very medium of expression – language – tends to obscure meaning and inhibit understanding' (Tarbox 1988, 140). The plurality of meanings of the title 'maggot' is proof of the unreliability of language.

Furthermore, with his conformism and devotion to statutes and conventions, the lawyer is the embodiment of reason. Everything must be explained by science. As a consequence, he cannot accept Rebecca's version of events, but, as Foster argues, he 'fails utterly to make her also reject it and to arrive at some truth he can find plausible' (Foster 1994, 165). So, at the end, he is unable to give a satisfactory explanation to Bartholomew's father and he can only propose hypotheses. Yet he is convinced that 'she lies little in any ordinary sense, that is, as to what she believes of these events and their nature and meaning; as *non obstante* [he is] persuaded that her evidence is false in the substantial truth of what passed' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 441). This demonstrates his inability to arrive at a rational conclusion, as the oxymoron 'false / truth' and the emphasis on reason ('ordinary sense', 'substantial') express. This leads him to conclude that, 'it is most (if at all) to be believed because it is impossible to be believed' (441). The contradiction inherent in those words emphasises the limitations reason imposes on the mind.

In all this, Fowles aims at a reflection on his contemporary world. He concludes the novel stating that 'in so much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question – what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human society? – we have not progressed one inch' (459). Therefore, Fowles makes use of history, and the particular history of Dissent, to reflect on the past as well as the present. Indeed, this novel may have resonated particularly with a reader of 1985, as the United Kingdom was undergoing a time of political turmoil. Fowles, whose political inclinations were towards the left-wing, could not have failed to disagree with Margaret Thatcher's policies. In his diary, he writes after her second election victory in 1983:

the one firm leader and power-manipulator on the scene (that the 'scene' has allowed to be so, of course) is so popular because she aims and thinks backwards; in British terms, is safe. Nothing can change, under Thatcher. All may wait, all may stagnate – and no one will see (Fowles 2006, 275).

This chimes with what Bartholomew affirms at one stage: 'We moderns are corrupted by our past, our learning, our historians; and the more we know of what happened, the less we know of what will happen' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 150). History is stifling, we are imprisoned by the past. By pointing this out, Fowles highlights not only the confines enforced by society, religion, history or reason in the 1730s, but also those still present for the modern-day reader.

As a matter of fact, the lawyer is set as an example of the norm, of conformism, so as to better highlight the extremes, the radicals. This accords with Fowles's philosophy, based on that of Heraclitus, which he expounds in *The Aristos*. He thinks the population can be divided into two categories; the Many, the masses who conform to social standards and follow the norm

established by religion or political power, and the Few, some enlightened persons who are intellectually superior, like artists, and whose duty it is to educate the masses. Interestingly, in *A Maggot* Ayscough embodies the Many, the *hoi polloi*, while Rebecca, an illiterate working-class woman, stands for the Few, the *aristoi*. He describes their difference in terms of the human brain:

Those whom the left lobe (and the right hand) dominates are rational, mathematical, ordered, glib with words, usually careful and conventional;... those dominated by the right lobe... like Rebecca... are poor at reason, often confused in argument; their sense of time (and politic timing) is often defective. They tend to live and wander in a hugely extended now, treating both past and future as present, instead of keeping them in control and order, firmly separated, like honest, decent right-handers. They confuse, they upset, they disturb (Fowles 1996 [1985], 430).

The accumulation of words relating to the lexical field of order, highlighted by the rhythm, together with the redundant adjectives 'honest, decent', strike a note of irony, especially when contrasted with the more disorderly phrases concerning the other group. Besides, the caricatured presentation of Ayscough enhances the ironic note. As a consequence, the asyndetic auxesis 'they confuse, they upset, they disturb' reveals Fowles's inclination. Indeed, the writer despises the conventional as he admits in an interview; 'I was brought up in an intensely conventional suburb not far from London by, in social norms, conventional parents. I have tried to escape ever since, and have admired the unconventional, the breakers of rules' (Vipond 1999, 193). The novel is thus a means for him to express this radicalism, to teach the reader not to conform.

**'I suppose I have a liking for people who are outside society'
(Fowles 1996 [1985], 18)**

John Fowles, as a writer, sees himself as an exile, an outcast from society. But he also believes it is the role of the artist to teach the reader, to open his or her mind. In an interview, he admits that '[a]ll artists are born contrasuggestibles, odd persons out. But no society can stay healthy without their criticism' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 63). Writing is therefore an instrument he uses to change our vision of society and he inscribes himself in that tradition. In 'I write therefore I am', he seems to hint at the fact that he chose writing for this reason: 'My first ambition has always been to alter the society I live in; that is, to affect other lives. I think I begin to agree with Marx-Lenin: writing is a very second-rate way of bringing about a revolution' (Fowles 1998, 6). This suggests that, although it must necessarily be in a mild form, writing is radical in its intent. And indeed, *A Maggot* has been criticized for being too didactic. In *The Guardian*, Robert Nye argues that 'there are two writers in John Fowles', one who is the poet, 'who trusts his unconscious and has something of the genuine mythopoeic imagination at work in him. The other Fowles, alas, is didactic, a

preacher/teacher with an incurable lust to inflict his views upon us' (Nye 1985). The reviewer thus dubs the epilogue the 'Author's Sermon' and judges it as a failure in an overall pleasant narrative.

Bruce Woodcock contends that '*A Maggot* is Fowles's most political novel' in that it implies 'an exploration of the diction and folklore of the period, and crucially a recovery of the ideological and political significance of dissent and the powerful critique it provided of the established social hegemony' (Woodcock 2013, 161). His tale is therefore a means to enlighten his readers and encourage them to express difference, as the Shakers did in their own time. They are the model upon which he bases his story, but it does not directly deal with the sect. Rather, John Fowles reinvents the history surrounding the birth of its founder, so as to sow the seeds of their creed in his narrative. As he says in an interview,

it's mainly concerned – in my mind that is, not in textual terms – with the rise of an extraordinary sect called the Shakers. The woman who founded it was a working class woman in Manchester called Ann Lee – I don't say anything directly about her, but the novel ends with her birth. It's really about the rise of primitive Dissent in the 1730s (Vipond 1999, 133).

What appealed to him in their origins was their 'revulsion from the injustices and vulgarities of the Church of England and the other established sects of the time' (Fowles 2006, 240), that is to say, their radicalism. Only one community remains today, the Sabbathday Lake Shakers in Maine, USA, which numbered only nine members in 2000 (Paterwic 2008, xxiii) and only two today according to their official website (<https://www.maineshakers.com/>) – a direct consequence of the celibate life they promote – but the cult counted up to 4,500 Shakers in the 1840s. Rebecca is the main vessel through which their beliefs are conveyed, and, contrary to Ayscough, she represents an extreme, for, in Fowles's mind, extremes are transgressive while ordinary people conform. Here, we can recognize the writer's fascination with women who are breaking free from patriarchal and social fetters – like Sarah in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Carol Barnum suggests that Rebecca 'is the one who is willing to break out of the wasteland world to enact change' and that 'in this she is the existentialist heroine. Fowles gives her a religious part to play because a radical religious belief, one that isolates her from the world and makes her different, is the only means by which she can achieve freedom' (Barnum 1988, 142). Indeed, in 1988, he defined freedom as 'the ability to withstand the appalling brainwashing that we all get now through the media, to think of yourself and know yourself' (Vipond 1999, 161). In the 1730s, the brainwashing corresponds to the Bible, the laws and the conventions the lawyer lives by. Consequently, as Rebecca defies society and the lawyer, she expresses her individuality, for the only way to do so at the time is through unorthodox religion. This is what Fowles makes clear in his epilogue:

unorthodox religion was the only vehicle by which the vast majority, who were neither philosophers nor artists, could express this painful breaking of the seed of the self from the hard soil of an irrational and tradition-bound society – a society not so irrational it did not very well know how much it depended on *not* seeing its traditions questioned, its foundations disturbed (Fowles 1996 [1985], 457).

Foster further links this to political radicalism and the birth of modern society. He suggests that Fowles positions the founding of movements like Shakerism and Methodism as ‘the birth of the modern sense of Self’ and that the rise of Dissenting Protestantism, which placed heavy emphasis on the individual believer, went hand in hand with the rise of the democratic ideal, which placed emphasis on the individual citizen. Foster suggests that, ‘If *A Maggot* is Fowles’s least overtly existentialist novel, it is nevertheless the work that examines the historical framework that ultimately makes existentialism, with its total emphasis on the individual, possible’ (Foster 1994, 166).

That Fowles chose a woman to be the bearer of his radical message coincides with his belief in women’s superiority as regards emotion and sensibility. Fowles’s female characters are always those that dominate his works, for he sees ‘man as a kind of artifice, and woman as a kind of reality. The one is cold idea, the other is warm fact. Daedalus faces Venus, and Venus must win’ (Fowles 1998, 23). Thus, she is set in opposition to the lawyer and together, they embody the male/female, reason/emotion, conformism/individuality, consumerist/communal dichotomies.

This antagonism is suggested from the beginning with the expression of equality Rebecca’s use of the pronouns ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ demonstrates. As Ayscough exclaims, ‘Enough. Watch thy tongue. None of thy thouing and theeing’ (Fowles 1996 [1985], 301), using those pronouns himself to assert his superiority. She calmly proclaims equality between them; ‘All are brothers and sisters in Christ... We are equal in this, if not in the world’ (301). Her language reflects language use among Shakers, calling each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, and sharing all they have in a communal life. Fowles’s talent shows through his ability to reveal in a simple question-and-answer form the superiority of Rebecca in the dialogue. The lawyer, who tries coaxing and bullying in turn, loses control on several occasions while she never does. Even at the end, Ayscough has been asked to give Rebecca a guinea, which she refuses. He then threatens that she might still be hanged, to which she replies: ‘I give thee more love’ (Fowles 1996 [1985], 439), the traditional greeting of the Shakers. She opposes money and the consumerist symbol it represents with love, voicing the pacifism and communism of the sect.

Moreover, the Shakers’ ideal community life is glimpsed in the vision that Rebecca gets while in the maggot. She also witnesses men and women separated, which reflects the celibacy they advocate. This is why Rebecca, a

prostitute, refuses sexual intercourse with Jones after the events in the cave. She also declines to answer the lawyer's question about her marital life with her husband, suggesting they remain chaste. In fact, the sect rejects sex as the arch sin, following a vision Mother Ann had had of Adam and Eve coupling. This trait of their creed is made even more emphatic with Rebecca, a former prostitute – famous for acting the innocent virgin part, 'the Quaker Maid', at the brothel – becoming a Virgin figure at the end of the novel. By incarnating such extremes in the same person, Fowles renders the change more exceptional. He also spans the whole array of femininity in one character, exemplifying in one both the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, 'the diptych of Christian patriarchy's idea of woman', as Marina Warner points out (Warner 2013, 239). That God could have chosen a prostitute to give birth to the woman who would receive Christlife – their equivalent of the holy spirit – renders even more subversive the feminism heralded by the Dissenters in Fowles's tale.

This feminist approach is also exhibited in the duality of God, viewed as 'Father-Mother'. God has, Stephen Paterwic suggests, 'the traditionally male characteristics of strength and power and the traditionally female characteristics of compassion and mercy' (Paterwic 2008, 214). In *A Maggot*, this is given shape through the woman called Holy Mother Wisdom, standing beside God the Father in Rebecca's vision of June Eternal. She is, in her words, 'She without whom God the Father could not have made His works' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 379). Furthermore, the baby Rebecca is expecting, Ann Lee, was sometimes thought of by her followers as the 'second embodiment of the Christ spirit' (Wergland 2011, 21), therefore an equal to the first male Christ. Indeed, at the end of the story, Rebecca confronts her husband over the name of the baby. He wants to call her Mary and she Ann. She tells him, 'I tell thee, John Lee, when the Lord Jesus come again, He shall be She, and the mother must know Her name' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 453). In this, she is claiming to be another Virgin Mary, having given birth to a new female Jesus.

However, the other radical figure in the novel is a man – the absent, and yet ever present, Mr. Bartholomew. The rebellious son of an aristocrat who, in his own words, has 'no liberty unless [he] steal[s] it' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 43), he appears, in turn, as a 'modern skinhead' (21), a sadist with a 'demonic face' (49), and then, as a 'Buddhist monk' (55), all in the space of a few pages. He remains unknowable until the very end, and his real name, which all the characters seem to know, is denied the reader. He is the male pendant of Rebecca, and the one who teaches her to break free from her tethers, be they cultural or social (here Fowles inverts his usual dynamics of a woman teaching a man existentialist freedom). A dual figure, in Rebecca's first version of what happened, he has formed an alliance with Satan and couples with witches, while in her second version, he is a Christlike figure, taken away to June Eternal on board the spaceship. He is a pure entity, while his deaf-and-dumb servant is endowed with all the carnal sins. Therefore, as she states at the end:

now do I see they were as one in truth, Dick of the carnal and imperfect body, his Lordship of the spirit; such twin natures as we all must hold, in them made outward and a seeming two. And as Jesus Christ's body must die upon the Cross, so must this latterday earthly self, poor unregenerate Dick, die so the other half be saved (421).

This also implies that the baby she is expecting – against all hopes, for she was barren – was conceived of Christ through her sexual relations with Dick. Such extraordinary circumstances would cohere, in Fowles's imagination, with the extraordinary destiny of the Manchester baby. This Christlike quality of Bartholomew is emphasized by the appearance of his ghost at the end of the interview with Rebecca, which mirrors the visions the real-life Ann Lee had which prompted her to found the movement in America (Paterwic 2008, 126-127). At the beginning, Bartholomew is the one who pinpoints the imprisonment of people in history and stresses the advantage of the builders of Stonehenge over our time: 'they who set and dressed those stones lived before the tale began, Lacy, in a present that had no past, such as we may hardly imagine to ourselves' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 151). Therefore, his escape into another dimension or time represents a fictitious liberation from the chains of the past.

The didactic intention of the novel is thus to invite the reader to break free from the fetters of the past, of history. The fact that the mystery of Bartholomew's disappearance remains unsolved, or rather left to the reader's choice, is a way for Fowles to encourage this breaking away from an established historical past. According to Holmes, he means to impart an existential truth to the reader by leaving the mystery unresolved; '*A Maggot* resists unambiguous interpretation and closure... [I]t suggests that to impose finality on narratives is to falsify the existential uncertainty which is an inescapable part of being alive' (Holmes 1991, 233). Here Holmes links this to existentialism, as Barnum does, for they try to interpret this novel in the light of the others. However, if Fowles had instilled that philosophy in his earlier oeuvre, by 1985, he admits that he now rather believes in determinism, that man is free in very little of his actions (Vipond 1999, 121). This is why I see it more in terms of an appeal to become radical, that is, to become independent from conventions and social standards.

Finally, it is also a means to assert the power of fiction over reality, fiction over history. While Ayscough's language is stultified for being too pedantic and obsequious, Rebecca's appears as simple, honest, and truthful, the language of emotions. And as such, the power of literature over science is asserted, since there may not be any logical argument sustaining her story, yet one believes her. Frederick Holmes thus assimilates her narratives as art for, compared with Ayscough's accounts, 'Lee's stories are more richly textured, suspenseful, and thematically suggestive. In short, they are aesthetically superior as narrative literature' (Holmes 1991, 237).

In the epilogue, Fowles links Shaker's ideology with fiction writing, saying:

Something in Shaker thought and theology (not least in its holding that a Holy Trinity that has no female component cannot be holy), in its strange rituals and marvellously inventive practical life, in its richly metaphorical language and imaginative use of dancing and music, has always seemed to me to adumbrate the relation of fiction to reality. We novelists also demand a far-fetched faith, quite often seemingly absurd in relation to normal reality; we too need a bewildering degree of metaphorical understanding from our readers before the truths behind our tropes can be conveyed, can 'work' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 456).

Therefore, one may argue that choosing a radical religious movement as a subject is also related to Fowles's radicalism as a writer, for he tries, as always, to depart from the conventions of novel-writing, and certainly here, to depart from the traditional historical novel genre.

'I would not have this seen as a historical novel. It is maggot.'
(Fowles 1996 [1985], 6)

In the prologue and the epilogue, the author disavows the assumption that *A Maggot* could be an historical novel, as he had once done with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He warns us; 'Readers who know something of what that Manchester baby was to become in the real world will not need telling how little this is a (*sic*) historical novel' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 455). However, in interviews, he repeatedly states that he wrote two historical novels. This may relate to the difficulty in defining what a historical novel is. Contrary to what Georg Lukács deems to be a traditional feature of the historical novel (Lukács 1983 [1962], 41), Fowles does not represent a time of crisis for the nation. Indeed, from the beginning, he insists on the opposite. In the 1980s, Linda Hutcheon created a new category for such novels, namely historiographic metafiction. Through parody and the narrative voice where it is present, the novel plays on a vast number of 'unresolved and unresolvable paradoxes', such as 'the conventions of history and fiction', or 'the conflicts between truth and lies' (Hutcheon 1988, 47), which are paradoxes fascinating to the postmodern author in Hutcheon's view.

Lately, the terminology has evolved. *A Maggot* is set in 1736, thus in a definite historic timeframe. Yet, the presence of time travel, i.e. science-fiction, as well as Satanic rituals with Gothic overtones, place the novel more in the category of what Bryony Stocker calls 'historically-set speculative fiction', for she concludes her examination of the theoretical approaches to the historical novel genre with the definition: 'a novel is historical when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history' (Stocker 2017, 78). However, if the reader does not believe any of the tales proposed by Rebecca and adheres to the lawyer's point of view, then this may be an historical novel.

Moreover, although Fleishman cites the inclusion of a real character as necessary to the genre (Fleishman 1971, 3-4), when real personages are inserted but their life is almost completely made up, does this still count? In fact, with every novel he writes, Fowles tries to challenge established conventions and can thus be seen as radical in that sense. Here, he distorts historical elements in order to suit his purpose. At the end of the novel, he insists that he did not do any research and that real characters such as Wardley or Lacy are 'almost all invention beyond their names' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 455). He knows that Ann Lee was born, in reality, on the 29th February 1736, that is before even the beginning of the story. Besides, Ann Lee was the second of eight children, and she herself gave birth to four children who all died in infancy, which is not at all in keeping with the plot and the celibacy advocated by Rebecca. One may wonder why Fowles deliberately places the story after Ann Lee's real birth, while she was really born in Toad Lane in Manchester, unless it would be to fit his insertion of the *Gentleman's Magazine's* pages, which are real historical documents (available online). As they relate the Porteous affair in Edinburgh, they may be a disguised allusion to Walter Scott's traditional historical novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, according to William Stephenson, who argues that, 'Fowles's choice to make his novel run simultaneously with the Porteous affair, and to announce this through the *Gentleman's Magazine* excerpts, suggests that he is aware of his own work's connection to a canonical historical novel' (Stephenson 2003, 60). Besides, Fowles explains that these pages add a touch of authenticity to a fictional recreation of the past. It is 'useful because it does give you many authentic facts of the time, and shows how they were printed... And an impression of the cruelty of the time, because the English had a barbarous judicial system' (Vipond 1999, 178). This is why Onega describes the novel as:

an all-inclusive patchwork, made up of both fictional and historical material, stitched together by the wonderfully accurate imitation of diverse eighteenth-century styles; so accurate indeed that the Historical Chronicles – supposedly reproduced in order to act as foils for contrast with them – in practice work in both directions, establishing differences but also psychologically reinforcing the illusion of realism of the created world (Onega 1989, 140).

Thus, reality and different layers of fiction become mixed, but, as a postmodern novelist, this may be precisely his aim. Where is the truth to be found? Is it in the historical pages of the *Magazine*, in the real characters, or in the plot itself? Maybe nowhere. Indeed, as Jerome De Groot affirms, 'historical writing, and indeed all the ways in which we understand and engage with the past, are innately partial' (De Groot 2010, 112). They are rewritings of the past seen through the author's own perceptions and beliefs. Jenkins adds that 'texts are not cognitive, empirical, epistemological entities, but speculative, propositional

invitations to *imagine* the past *ad infinitum*' (Jenkins 2003, 49). Therefore, Fowles's rewriting of the past may be as valuable as another.

But it goes a step further. Indeed, inside the novel itself, a plurality of versions of the same story are offered, none of them reliable. As the witnesses succeed each other in front of the lawyer, one thinks one gets part of the mystery solved, until it is proved a lie by the following witness. Bartholomew invented a reason for the trip for each protagonist he hired, each one being the most appropriate to convince the person concerned – a romantic version for Lacy, a mercenary one for Jones, a sexual one for Rebecca and her employer. Then, what happened inside the cave takes on diabolical undertones when Jones retells the story he got from Rebecca. As she later admits, she had to lie, to give a version her contemporaries could believe. But it is in no way one that a twentieth-century reader could accept as true. Then, when she tells her truthful version, of what a reader might recognize as a space-ship travelling through time and televised images, she lacks the vocabulary and knowledge of the future to understand and interpret what she experienced. It is not something Ayscough could believe in his own time, but it is something which the contemporary reader can believe. This has a further consequence for the reader, for as Brian McHale suggests, 'it obliges us to reconceive the storyworld of *A Maggot* as a *science-fiction* world. The novel asks us – in fact, compels us – to accept UFOs, space- or time-travelling aliens, and alien abductions as realities in this world' (McHale 2013, 183). This leads the reader to reconsider the genre of the novel as science-fiction rather than the supposed historical novel. Of course, no version being really satisfactory, in a manner typical of Fowles, the mystery remains unsolved. In fact, by the very unreality of the possibilities offered, the writer points to the insubstantiality of history. De Groot argues that postmodern historical novelists have manipulated the crisis of representation inspired by postmodern historiography, for 'the very insubstantiality inherent in our relation to 'History' has provided them with a set of tools for challenging legitimating narratives and locating radical dissent' (De Groot 2010, 112). Rewriting Ann Lee's pre-birth history is certainly a means for Fowles to force the reader into a questioning of history, reality, and the emergence of radical movements.

It has a further impact, according to Foster, when considering the dichotomy formed by Rebecca and Ayscough between reason and unreason. He links that to the postmodern revolution:

How can a mode of fiction best suited to capturing the quotidian, the average, be made to accommodate the uncanny, without relegating it to some demeaned category of fable, fantasy, tale? Ayscough, while not a literary creator, represents the turn of mind that led to literary realism being the favoured mode for more than a century. Fowles is the literary creator who seeks to work in the realistic tradition without being dominated by it. His struggle... involves his attempt to account for the

uncanny, the numinous, while working within a tradition designed to reveal the everyday, the phenomenal (Foster 1994, 165).

This had already been prefigured in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* where he parodied the realism of the nineteenth century only to subvert its conventions, thereby creating one of the first postmodern novels. With *A Maggot*, Fowles goes back to the origins of the novel in the eighteenth century. He parodies the style of Thackeray or Defoe, as well as the language of the time. However, the narrator's contemporary point of view reminds the reader that it cannot be a novel written two centuries before, and as such, it has a 'polysemic value', as Onega points out, for it inscribes itself in a long tradition of writers, and recasts 'not only the inheritance of the eighteenth-century pseudo-historical novel, but the bulk of the Western literary tradition' (Onega 1989, 141). Through more or less explicit references, Shakespeare or Richardson come to the reader's mind and Fowles skims over and incorporates the genres of romance and science-fiction, Gothic or detective stories, so much so that the unconventional structure partakes in the subversion. Apart from the fact that one is carried through what appears to be an historical novel, which turns out to be a sort of detective story before its time, to finally become a science-fiction novel, one also has to contend with a multiplicity of voices and points of view, figuring a Bakhtinian polyphony of discourses which form the essence of the novel.

In the first part of the novel, an external point of view is given on the events of the day preceding the mysterious abduction of the Duke's son, but, through dialogue, the reader already understands that nobody is really who they seem to be. Moreover, the reader's confusion is increased by the proliferation of names relating to one and the same individual. Rebecca is first known as Louise, in her role as a maid, then she is Fanny or the Quaker Maid in her bagnio, and finally her real name is revealed. Mr Bartholomew's however, never is. Only Dick's name (a very apt one considering his procreative role) remains the same all through the story. The letters offer the point of view of the writer, either Ayscough or a subordinate, Richard Pygge. But most interesting are the transcriptions of the depositions. This was part of the challenge Fowles set himself in this novel, as he explains:

I've always liked that as a technique, because I'm a collector of books, and I've always loved eighteenth-century trials. And this is where the business of what you don't write comes in. A lovely thing about the Q and A form is that you're cutting off an arm in fact. Because in most novels, you can say, "she smiled", or "she looked sad", or "she went to the window", or whatever. And, of course, you forbid that once you enter this form. So you have to make your dialogue work pretty hard, certainly harder than an ordinary straightforward novel's dialogue. And that kind of challenge always pleases me. I think also, in the novel, you've got to find something you know you're not sure you can do (Vipond 1999, 142).

This technique also removes the narrator from the novel, to give a more ‘trustworthy’ account of what was said. Nevertheless, even this assumption is cut short by the clerk’s telling us that ‘where I cannot read when I copy in the long hand, why, I make it up. So I may hang a man, or pardon him, and none the wiser’ (Fowles 1996 [1985], 347). Once again, the reader is refused any certainties about what was said and language is denied any truthfulness. It seems as if John Fowles has put into practice what was advocated by Roland Barthes in ‘The Death of the Author’:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash... To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*... writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning (Barthes 1977, 146-147).

Fowles had stated earlier that one cannot completely erase the author from a text, saying, ‘and not even the most aleatory avant-garde novel has managed to extirpate its author completely’ (Fowles, 2004 [1969], 97). However, here he certainly tried to erase at least the narrator and offer a multiplicity of meanings to the reader, none of which is satisfying. What follows is even more striking, for Barthes goes on:

In precisely this way literature... by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law (Barthes 1977, 146-147).

Therefore, the very structure of the novel can be seen as radical in its impact, for, by being denied one truthful version, the reader’s own certainties may collapse, even in the real world he or she inhabits. In such circumstances, the epilogue, with its lesson on Shakerism, somewhat undermines the effect, by reaffirming the presence of the author.

The clerk’s statement, ‘There are two truths, mistress. One that a person believes is truth; and one that is truth incontestible. We will credit you the first, but the second is what we seek’, is challenged in the novel (Fowles 1996 [1985], 348). What is sure is that we never get that ‘truth incontestible’. In fact, the various tensions in terms of genre, ideas, didacticism, and language, make the text as a whole both worthwhile and subversive. History is made use of only to underline this fact. Even defining the novel as an historical novel becomes doubtful, which leads Holmes to call it an ‘unconventional historical novel’ (Holmes 1991, 229). Thus the reader is led to refuse conformism in literature as

well as in society. Yet, all this is in keeping with Fowles's philosophy as expounded in *The Aristos*:

We are in the best possible situation because everywhere, below the surface, we do not know; we shall never know why; we shall never know tomorrow; we shall never know a god or if there is a god; we shall never even know ourselves. This mysterious wall round our world and our perception of it is not there to frustrate us but to train us back to the now, to life, to our time being (Fowles 2007 [1964], 10).

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