

# Cumulative strangeness without and within A Maggot by J. Fowles

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **5 (1990)**

PDF erstellt am: **16.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99881>

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## Cumulative Strangeness Without and Within *A Maggot* by J. Fowles

Pierre E. Monnin

John Fowles's 1985 novel, *A Maggot*, has been by and large enthusiastically reviewed and found both dazzling for the mastery of its author and baffling for the strangeness that accumulates in its form as well as in its content.

The novel is a genre that has evolved into a great variety of sub-genres with respective conventions. A mere combination of some of these sub-genres, as found for instance in the fiction of Umberto Eco, would no longer be considered as disruptive of norms; yet Fowles's novel manages to create oddity not so much because it mixes different conventions but rather because it wilfully violates these after having observed them in the most convincing way.

Thus in *A Maggot* the conventions of the *historical novel* are altogether carefully followed, the action being firmly set in a specific slot of time, April to October 1736. Claiborne's deposition, as well as Ayscough's second letter indicate that Fanny, the prostitute, was introduced to his Lordship, the younger and, as is soon revealed, prodigal son of a Duke, at the beginning of April, and Judge Ayscough's ultimate letter to His Grace the Duke, who had hired his services, is dated October 10th of the same year. The chronology of events is clear, precise and apparently faultless.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yet an unsettling discrepancy, which has prompted a reviewer to state that "Fowles is disarmingly vague about chronology" (Rogers 1027), has to be pointed out: the ultimate scene — Rebecca's delivery, actually an addendum to the narrative — is dated "this twenty-ninth of February" (451). Unless it is an editorial slip, which could be explained by the dating "on 29 February 1736," found a few pages below in an opening paragraph too, namely that of the "Epilogue" where the

Documentation about the period is moreover abundant and the text of the novel interspersed with genuine issues of the "Historical Chronicle" from the monthly *Gentleman's Magazine* reproduced in reduced and (for the paperback reader at least) all but illegible print. Such historical documents are called "intertexts" by Linda Hutcheon, who finds their parodic use typical of postmodern fiction. And the comment of a reviewer, D.A.N. Jones, is that their presence in the book makes it look as if the author had prepared a kit for a school project.

A major source of inspiration for Fowles in *A Maggot* is Shakerism, which, as he himself states, "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" (456). Mixing facts with fiction is indeed no novelty and is therefore strangeness tamed, since the term "faction" has already been coined for that technique of documentary fiction which is characteristic of some of the novels by contemporary American writers such as Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*, 1966) and Norman Mailer (*The Armies of the Night*, 1968). And Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) could be viewed as a witty instance of a cinematographic counterpart for literary faction.

Terry Eagleton (1–2) has demonstrated the irrelevance of a distinction between facts and fiction in literature, and the reader of *A Maggot* is likely to take more delight than offence at realizing how cleverly the blend is brewed by Fowles, who has truly historical figures play minor parts within the narrative, such as the physiologist Stephen Hales (1677–1761), whose expertise is required for the chemical analysis of a "piece of baked earth" (287), in connection with the inquiry about the cave episode, and who writes from Cambridge a letter (fictitious, of course) to Judge Ayscough (287–88). Francis Lacy, who plays the part of the uncle in the mysterious cavalcade the novel opens with, is also historical, and introduced at the head of his "Examination and Deposition" (123) as "an actor, grandson

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actual birth of the historical Ann Lee is mentioned (455), this is double nonsense, since 1737 may not have been a leap year and pregnancy would have lasted for over ten months — provided Dick is indeed the father of the child, of course! Has the author indulged in another overlap between fiction and history, thus creating a whimsical circularity in the chronology of a work he himself introduces as "maggot" (6) and thus regards as essentially experimental?

to John Lacy, whom King Charles favoured" (125). But in my opinion the most brilliant use of "faction," indeed a second degree one, is found when the author recalls how Defoe's famous pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), still rankled in the mind of Judge Ayscough, a major and fictitious character who, like many other humourless Tory extremists at that time, had misinterpreted the practical joke, thus confusing fiction with fact (236)!

An intruding narrator, who keeps commenting on the differences between his own time (ours) and the time of his fiction, had already endangered "realism" in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), but in *A Maggot* the very plausibility of the narrative is forcefully ruined by the author's casual acknowledgement, in his "Epilogue," of a chronological discrepancy: Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker community in America and, in the novel, daughter of the heroine, was actually born on February 29th 1736, that is to say some two months before the beginning of a story that ends with her nativity.

This deliberate slippage seems to be not only diachronic, but also synchronic. The geography of the events first appears "true to life," the journey westward from London to a mysterious shrine can be followed with precision.<sup>2</sup> Yet when the party arrives at C., the town keeps its mystery and consequently seems purely fictitious, since it proves impossible to locate on any map (no matter how detailed), or to identify in any guidebook for the district.<sup>3</sup>

The same blurring applies to the location of the cave, where the major event of the story takes place on the following day; somewhere on Exmoor it certainly ought to be, but no precision is provided.

Bridges with historicity, that is to say with a plausible reality in the past, are thus ruthlessly cut, both in time and space, and the reader is forced to

<sup>2</sup> Any Chaucerian would feel tempted to see in the strange trip an ingenious reversal of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and Fowles's interest in Medievalia could hardly be limited to introducing and to translating Marie de France (see his foreword to the *Lais*, as well as "Eliduc" in *The Ebony Tower*).

<sup>3</sup> This is at least the tentative conclusion reached both by a colleague, Dr Chr. Gertsch, of Berne University, and by myself; two candidates for the C. township, Chittlehampton and Chumleigh, both in Devon, share some characteristics with C. but do not exactly correspond to the rather detailed description provided in the novel.

stay on an island of make-believe. This is all the stranger when a writer shows such a propensity for realistic story-telling; yet his volte-face in front of plausibility seems a current policy practised in art as well as in literature. Fowles's contemporary and countryman Francis Bacon, for instance, negates an obvious talent for realistic portrayal through blurred features and additional, geometrical lines. If one ever "took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe," as Henry James contends when presenting A. Trollope (1343), then Fowles's pleasure in violating the rules of realism when writing *A Maggot* must have reached orgasmic peaks!

This last ejaculation may well serve as a transition for considering *A Maggot* as another type of fiction, the *erotic novel*. The heroine, first introduced as Louise, a respectable maid, is soon revealed as Fanny, a London prostitute whose love-making with a servant in the presence of his presumably impotent master is explicitly recalled, and the mentioning of the large erected penis of the servant, appropriately named Dick, seems to lead the reader on the downhill road to hardcore pornography. The first account of the subterranean May Day occurrence deals with a sabbath where Fanny is forced to copulate with the Devil while His Lordship turns potent with another female of the party. And later on, in her deposition, Claiborne, the madam, discloses similarly seamy sides of London life. Moreover, the shadow of potential sodomy — a constant concern expressed by Judge Ayscough, on behalf of His Grace the Duke, regarding the relationship between His Lordship and his deaf-and-mute servant Dick — hovers over the whole work.

The name "Fanny" itself is just as appropriate as "Dick" with its sexual overtone. It represents one stage, or one aspect of the proteiform female character so typical of Fowles's works of fiction and, besides, may well have been just a wink (a dirty one, of course) at *Fanny Hill* (1748–49), which was actually to be published some 12 years after Fowles's storytime. The author of *A Maggot* has elsewhere stated his admiration for these *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, which he considers "Cleland's masterpiece in the genre" (Dusuzeau 91).

Though much less high-spirited than Cleland's, Fowles's eroticism soon gives way to resolutely more elevated considerations. Indeed, with the heroine's conversion and subsequent sanctity, the novel seems to aim for the high spheres of *hagiography*. A life of renunciation, the ecstasy of revelation, and a sense of holy fellowship are experiences eloquently



disclosed by the narrator, who, with Rebecca — the former Fanny and now demure wife of John Lee, a blacksmith connected with the "French Prophets," and dutiful daughter of Amos Hocknell, a respectable Quaker — becomes a spokesman for Protestant Dissent, for the faith at the origin of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, better known as Shakerism. Through the symbolism explicitly conferred on some major characters and on their relationship — for example Bartholomew and Dick, united like soul and body — the reader may furthermore tend to interpret the work as an *allegory* climaxing with a vision of the New Jerusalem granted to Rebecca in the cave episode.

Yet proselytism or religious edification could hardly be the real intent of a writer who strangely ends his novel with the paradox of Shaker values incorporated in his creed as an unshakable atheist. If defending freedom of thought is primordial here, then the whole narrative is to be regarded as an oversized *exemplum* within a *lay sermon*.

One man hanged and another one mysteriously done away with also give the novel a serious claim to the *detective story*. In fact the structure of the work looks promising in that respect, with a first part keeping true identities unrevealed and a second part, much longer (perhaps even somewhat lengthy), aimed at finding out what has happened and who has done it through a series of "Examinations and Depositions" carefully transcribed in the language of the time (a remarkable linguistic feat). Many clues are given, often of contradictory order, and since no conclusion is either explicitly validated or definitely invalidated, it becomes progressively clear that no evidence will be decisive and that the mystery will be solved only through the reader's own imagination. A "do-it-yourself" pseudo-historical thriller is perhaps what Fowles's work should be labelled, which points to its strangeness rather than explains it away.

The author's fondness for mystery and dislike for a reductive rational solution are actually acknowledged in his afterword to the 1974 edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, where he complains that "however fantastic and far-reaching the first half of the detective mystery, the second half is bound to drop (and only too often flop) towards a neat and plausible everyday solution" (Jones 27). To which the reviewer of *A Maggot* adds that, not unlike Roman Catholic mystery writers, "Fowles is keen to avoid the flap into rationalism" (27).

"The one thing people never forget is the unsolved. Nothing lasts like a mystery," the novelist had moreover written when first giving literary shape

to his reaction against the conventions of mystery-telling in "The Enigma," a short story included in *The Ebony Tower* (234) and which could, retrospectively, be subtitled "the larva of a larva," since it undeniably contains the embryo of *A Maggot*! Both works in turn refer to the disappearance of an important person, to routine — and therefore utterly ineffectual — investigation, and both express the same keen interest for interaction between life and fiction.

"Then if your story disobeys the unreal literary rules, that might mean it's actually truer to life?" is the question asked by Isobel Dodgson, the girl who is trying to write a novel and who is obviously Fowles's spokeswoman in "The Enigma" (*Ebony Tower* 232). In *A Maggot*, as seen above, disobedience is manifold; it extends to the literary codes of several types of novels, indeed of conventional fiction altogether. And beyond the resulting strangeness, it is possible to interpret the work as a radical departure from conventional unreality towards a truer expression of life through fiction purged from obsolete traditions. *A Maggot* may thus embody Fowles's unorthodox, yet rejuvenating, faith in the novel as a genre not deprived of a future.

Within the work, that is to say within its narrative, blatant violations of plausible reality also occur, as witnessed by the event in the Devon cave and its prelude at Stonehenge a few nights before, which are revealed as encounters of another type.<sup>4</sup> Strangeness of form is thus matched with strangeness of content; rules are broken "within" as well as "without," and odd manners are there to express odd matters.

Two versions are given of this core occurrence in the cave and of the preceding episode at the heathen temple, both of which stem from the same person, that is to say from Rebecca.

The first one, actually reported by Jones, alias Sergeant Farthing, in his deposition, is revoltingly satanic. He has it from the girl, whose justification for having "lied" to the gullible Welshman is twofold: she saw it as a strategy to make him keep his peace, because the horror of the tale would endanger the teller, since His Lordship's involvement could, "for the great of this world . . . bring scandal on their name" (247). Moreover, she

<sup>4</sup> In connection with the first instance of supernatural experience in the narrative, it is interesting to note that Fowles has contributed to a non-fiction publication entitled *The Enigma of Stonehenge*.

intuitively knows that a man of his nature could not possibly grasp the true meaning of what she claims to be the real version. Thus adjusting to the mental and spiritual level of her addressee, she may be showing a superior power of understanding perhaps not unlike that of Jesus in his use of parables.

Might she in fact be aware of Northrop Frye's theory of modes in *Anatomy of Criticism*, when feeding the so-called sergeant a "comedy without humour," more precisely the "Gothic thriller" that a type of *alazon*, the *miles gloriosus*, as Fowles himself explicitly calls him (35), would get involved in when, as "a deceiving or self-deceived character in fiction" (Frye 365), he is taken at his own valuation? The strangeness of the other version is not less, with its tale of initiation through space and time, a trip to the New Jerusalem via "June eternal" on a maggot-shaped engine chartered by three silver ladies, mother, daughter and grand-daughter of a female trinity. Through the catalysis of divine grace, spiritual alchemy may have produced the account which Rebecca claims as the authentic one. The master of ceremonies, who had so far been viewed as a lewd libertine, undergoes a metamorphosis. While in the first version he had appeared as an overreacher ultimately punished, — the cave episode may be reminiscent of Don Juan's *festin de pierre*, Fowles having adapted Molière's play — His Lordship is now a benevolent godlike figure, a hero of a superior *kind*. Provided the framing of the narrative is ignored, one may wonder whether the author is not in the process of achieving here a full return, in Fryean terms again, from the lowest mode of fiction, irony, to the highest one, that of myth. Simon Loveday views Fowles's creative writings as "romances," the category just below "myths," but his publication came out too soon for *A Maggot* to be taken into consideration. Would the religious, hence mythical, character of this later narrative hint at a turning point in the present evolution of Western fiction?

Extensive analysis of its mere title may yield a few clues about the strangeness of Fowles's work. "Maggot" has three meanings, as the author somewhat bookishly states in his Prologue. It is at the same time "the larval stage of a winged creature," a "whim or quirk" as well as "by extension . . . in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century . . . dance-tunes and airs that otherwise had no special title" (5). He might have been even more tediously bookish, though, and point out that the etymological meaning of the term is that of "worm" (IE *math-*), and that the cognation with "moth" is attested. He might have moreover signalled that "maggot" belongs to the



enumeration of "Hobby-Horses" eloquently defended by Sterne at the end of Chapter 7 of Volume I of *Tristram Shandy*, defended "so long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King's highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him" (12). He might, but then he would have ruined the effect of strangeness while he too readily disclosed the workings of the beautifully imaginative mind of a writer of fiction who, not unlike his heroine, belongs to one of the "two very different halves of the human spirit . . . dominated by the right lobe" and who are regarded as "far less desirable, except in one or two very peripheral things like art and religion, where mysticism and lack of logic are given value" (430). "Maggot" is a double pun, and the metaphoric power of its triple meaning is moreover tremendous. What about, for instance, the association with "hobby-horse," that leads to Morris dancers, to Mummers, and to May Day celebrations with less than innocent origins (see Oakleaf). Furthermore, the double significance of May 1st is not ignored by Fowles — a powerfully anachronistic feature of the novel — since the only known survivor of the ritual will become, through her religious commitment, an *avant la lettre* representative and defender of the future working class, the *mob* that Fowles introduces in connection with the Welshman Jones. "The word . . . was not fifty years old in the language at this date; a shortened slang version of *mobile vulgus*, the common rabble. Mobility of movement meant change; and change is evil" (236).

The pre-Christian nature of May Day leads the imagination to ancient Celtic rituals, hence to the "celto-gothic" terrors of the cave, perhaps satanic because hobby-horses have sticks, just like broomsticks, the ones that three silver witches might use, and thus the contrivance turns into a carefully described, yet hardly identified, flying object, in fact a space and time machine monstrously shaped like another meaning of "maggot."

A stream of consciousness whirlpools around a noun, around a title, and one might fancy an addendum to the "Pirandellian and Brechtian Aspects of the Fiction of J. Fowles" (see Gaggi) that would allude to this "Proustian" characteristic in the associative gestation of the narrative meant to become *A Maggot*.

It is thus evidenced that oddity does not preclude consistency; firmness of intent is not at stake and Fowles's narrative is brilliantly unified through constant and creative reference to its title and to its metaphoric values.

Such a wealth of connotations embedded in one word is a painful reminder of the precariousness, even the indigence, of translation. *A*

*Maggot* is undoubtedly a work that deserves an audience not restricted to the English-speaking community, but how will *Die Grille*, a translation by H. Wolf adapted in 1989 as a two-and-a-half-hour radio play by Chr. Gertsch, or *La créature* (A. Saumon tr.), both of which came out two years after the original publication, convey to German- and French-speaking readers the plurality of meaning so crucial for the understanding of the novel?

*Grille* is ingenious and paronomastic enough to keep a "double entendre" close to that of "maggot," yet it loses its significant "larval" character. As for *créature*, its obscurity does not make up for the loss of the original acceptations; it may either be understood as a trite title for a mere tale of terror or even prompt an unfortunate shift of focus from the maggot-shaped object in the cave to the heroine, a *créature* of a sort with her past as a prostitute. Besides, Fowles's Prologue has been silently omitted, presumably because the discussion of the threefold significance of the title no longer has any relevance for its French so-called equivalent. Nobody, at least among reviewers, has minded this lack of intellectual honesty. Is it that impunity is tacitly granted to any *traduttore* who, owing to circumstances, cannot help turning *traditore*? Yet the sin is not really a venial one since it amounts to blurring tracks, hence to increasing the oddity of a work that is already strange enough in its original version. Translation, with its unavowed shortcomings, here cuts the thin thread the author had provided with his title and its brief explanation for a less erratic journey through the maze of his narrative.

In the story, Bartholomew does not ride his hobby-horse "peaceably and quietly along the King's highway," and he moreover compels others "to get up behind him" and share in his mysterious and dubious quest. The author is no gentleman either and he drags his readers on a strangely absorbing errand. "Readers of Fowles's fiction are accustomed to the extraordinary demands he makes of them, but *A Maggot* may be his most demanding piece of fiction yet," an American critic, Nancy Bishop Dessommes, remarks in her somewhat reticent review of Fowles's novel (290). The ordeal has its compensation, though; a reader does not always get a chance to ride behind such a gifted author, across so strange a story.

The subjectivity of the equivocal information conveyed about the occurrence in the cave is blatant, and its strangeness is answered by the subjectivity of readers, hence of reviewers and critics, who struggle for meaning through their respective points of reference.

A Swedish critic, O. Larsmo, for instance, in a 1986 article that translates as "Down the Spiral," takes it readily for granted that the "maggot" in the cave is a futuristic gadget, which enables him to draw a comparison with *Den femtionde frälsaren*, "The 50th Saviour," by P.C. Jersild (cited in Larsmo as a novel that came out about a year before *A Maggot*) and to see in the two postmodern works instances of anachronistic science fiction that, in his view, proves reductive of the careful historicity displayed otherwise. A colleague of mine, Dr J. Savarit, has drawn my attention to a striking similarity between the "maggot" scene and the Celtic monstrosities described in "The Novel of the Black Seal," part of the *Three Impostors* by Arthur Machen (65–124), which contains a hair-raising and esoteric version of the myth of the Serpent.

Readers of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* are also likely to hear in the Devon cave an additional echo from the Indian one where another imaginative English female, Miss Quested, may have been assaulted, and at best experienced a traumatic initiation into the mystery — or muddle — of another world.

*A Maggot* could well be apprehended as Fowles's fictionalized response to the Platonic metaphor of the cave, and additional parallels with other pieces of fiction, particularly with various literary tales of terror, may undoubtedly be drawn. But such references and comparisons are unlikely to explain away the strangeness of the events, which indeed, to the best of my knowledge, no reviewer or critic has attempted so far to regard as anything but mere fancy.

A symposium on "Strangeness" provides an ideal opportunity for pleading in favour of more openmindedness in criticism and less partitioning in fields of investigation. Paranormality cannot just be ignored by science, facts cannot be dismissed simply because no rational, Cartesian, explanation is found for them, and in our postmodern age, which may well be also "post-scientific," a diehard attitude like that of Judge Ayscough means blindness to important aspects of human experience. Not unlike "official" medicine confronted with and therefore threatened by healing that goes beyond the scope of its own system, literary criticism may be imperilled when remaining merely self-referential in the face of paranormality. Publications on supernaturalism of all sorts proliferate nowadays, many of which do not lack serious supporting evidence, and it would be absurd to take for granted that creative writing does not borrow from them. A fuller evaluation of literature has always

stemmed from knowledge acquired outside literature, and that knowledge ought not to limit itself to well-established disciplines such as history or psychology. Authors of fiction are not likely to refrain from finding inspiration outside the stronghold of the "intellectual establishment," in those marginal fields where critics apparently fear to tread.

Indeed, an "alternative criticism" could, without a guilty conscience, see more than mere psychological entities in the ghosts, say, of *Hamlet* or of *The Turn of the Screw* . . . and, to come back to *A Maggot*, suggest that Rebecca's experience in the cave is a typical "astral projection," while the stigmata of "dematerialization" are upon His Lordship's disappearance. Further knowledge in the multifarious forms of occultism and other irrational manifestations, including numerology as well as tarot cards, would certainly prove fruitful when applied to Fowles's novel; it might not only provide some explanation for the mysterious narration, but also reveal important esoteric sources used by the author.<sup>5</sup>

In the opening sentence of his Prologue, Fowles compares the written text with "the larval stage of a winged creature," and adds: "at least in the writer's hope" (5). This is a wish come true, thanks to great mastery achieved not only through an outstanding power of evocation, but also through extensive documentation and genuine commitment to past and present political issues. What strange flies, butterflies, or mere moths, Fowles's "maggot" has produced and will produce in the mind of readers is hard to assess. But the paper-winged creatures that reviewers and critics have already bred since the 1985 publication are numerous and undoubtedly foretell more. Though it has merely reached the stage of a strangely spun cocoon, the present endeavour bears witness to it.

<sup>5</sup> In a student paper, Brigitte Mischler (Berne University) finds interesting relations between major characters in the novel and the symbolism of some specific tarot cards. In *The Magus*, associations of characters with tarots are obvious, and the unquestionable filiation from Conchis to Bartholomew — besides phonetic similarities that may be more than coincidental in the titles of the two novels — makes such an approach of *A Maggot* all the more justified.

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