

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK JOHN FOWLES AFTER HAVING READ HIS NARRATIVE

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When I was preparing my doctoral thesis on John Fowles there were some questions I wished the author himself could answer me. That was made possible in Zaragoza in December 1986. He had been invited to attend the X Congreso A.E.D.E.A.N. and the following conversation took place there on that occasion. I never intended this to be a rigid interview, only a conversation about some facts of his narrative that worried me.

Q. After finishing your studies in Oxford you went to France and Greece. Do you use the resort of travelling only in a metaphoric way or was travelling so important for you at that stage of your life that it won a real and deep meaning for your characters afterwards?

A. It was at that age I think that every young writer needs to travel a great deal. At my age you do not need to travel any more. That's simply because in novel writing you have to know about the world you can write about. This is what most young novelists can't do, because they do not have present a different world and it is simple: a quick way to learn a new world is to travel. From travel you get a general knowledge of the world and how you represent the world. Very important to a young writer is keeping a diary. English writers need to get out of England. It is a process, then later in your life you can get back. You always feel in exile when you live in the country. It is a kind of strange exile.

Q. How far was Greece important for you?

A. Very important. 1) It is the most beautiful country in Europe, no doubt about that. 2) It was important because it was far. I did speak Greek a little, but never well.

And also it was rather like this need we were talking about. Beckett and his going out of Ireland and writing in another language, to do what

he wanted. I think it was very important for me to be absolutely remote from England and really with no English influence. I'm a great believer in internationalism. You don't get that by living in England.

Q. I would like to ask you if you underwent a similar experience to that of Nicholas's while being in Greece. Metaphorically speaking, of course, because you started writing in Greece. Then perhaps writing helped you to have a deep knowledge of yourself.

A. Yes, I mean, the first person to benefit from a book is the writer, always, without exception. You clarify your ideas. That's dangerous: if you have stupid ideas you fix them, obviously. Yes, certainly it was useful. You know the ancient Greek: "Know yourself".

Q. You read *Le Grand Meaulnes* when you were very young and you paid a homage to Alan Fournier in *The Magus* as you have said. But I also think you paid a homage in the figure of Conchis. Perhaps Conchis was to Nicholas what Alan Fournier had been to you?

A. Well, I had never really thought of this. This is new.

Q. I say that, because they both fought in the First World War. I've found some similarities between Conchis and Alan Fournier.

A. True. They both fought there, though Alan Fournier was killed very early. I have just introduced his book in England. It's just come out. In English we call it *The Lost Domain*. But it's difficult to explain. It has not a normal literary influence. It had really a psychological influence. The French are beginning to realize that he was a great writer of poetic prose. His descriptions are really still a model for young writers. He's popular now.

Q. Miles Green says in *Mantissa*: "Fiction is only fiction, can only be fiction, will never be anything but fiction; and therefore has no business at all tampering with real life or reality".

A. That comes in a passage that is sarcastical, ironical. You have to understand it upside down of what he is saying. There's a dark point we're always talking about. The whole deconstructionists' view, I mean, they just guy, they mock it by parody. *Mantissa* is a tease; here and there I do say things are tease. My idea was to write a novel with two characters that change. That's difficult to understand. People think characters must have a certain shape, but in that novel Erato and Miles are changing shape the whole time. The same as Picasso's *Las Meninas*. That put an idea in my head.

Q. I understood the novel as the world of the novelist: The writer, his muse, the readers and the critic.

A. Yes, that's it. I mean so much built biographically. This book is really what it is to write a novel. Do you know Flann O'Brien? He wrote an extraordinary novel in which the characters turn round on the author

telling him what to do. In a way *Mantissa* is dedicated to Flann O'Brien. He's not so well known but he is a marvellous novelist.

Q. I also find some parallelism between Daniel and Nicholas: both study at Oxford at the same years and they have a similar attitude towards people around them.

A. That was perhaps a little bit deliberate inasmuch as Daniel Martin is a little bit as Nicholas thirty years older. I want to write about a forty or fifty-year old man or woman. You write about your own age. You feel really happy when you write about your own generation.

Q. There is something I have been appreciating in your work. I mean, you first attempted suicide in *The Magus*: Nicholas had the idea of shooting himself; later in "The Enigma" you let us believe that Fielding had probably committed suicide. Afterwards in "The Cloud" the suicide is clear: Peter, Kate's husband, kills himself.

A. With "The Cloud" you have to be very careful. The girl who is telling the story when I wrote it, in spite of the way it was written, I thought that girl hadn't died and the story she tells the little girl is an account of the day when she would have liked to die. I'm very fond of the ambiguous ending.

Q. But in *Daniel Martin* that suicide appears clearly. Anthony kills himself and in *A Maggot*, last of all, Dick apparently commits suicide because he appears hung.

A. When you create a character deaf and dumb it is difficult to get a mental novel, he wants to say something so there comes a point when you say let him be killed or he kills himself. That introduces mystery in the novel. Anthony, I think, is different; because he is a Catholic who is dying and he knows that he has only a few more weeks or months to live. I think when you know you are dying you want to get out. And in *Daniel Martin*, you see, I wanted Daniel to be back in England with Jane and his own wife, Nell. So, it was necessary.

Q. Regarding your characters, I know you are totally for the feminine principle. But one of the aspects I would like to know is why you often make use of two female characters and why they are sisters and even twins.

A. The idea of twin sisters or twin women... I couldn't tell you why. I like twins; you don't know why you like coffee and not tea. I had an American who came to visit me last year and he was very pressing on this point. When you are writing a book unconsciously there are forks in the road, telling you go to right, go to left. You have nobody to take decisions, you don't know what readers would like so you work out your own novels in a certain way.

Q. In *A Maggot* there are two male characters that help Rebecca to

search for knowledge: Mr. Bartholomew and Dick. So there isn't any special reason for the use of male and not female characters, is there?

A. They were a twin soul, as two parts. I wrote about a very handsome man, the son of a duke. Somebody very interested in new sciences. I gave him a deep knowledge in mathematics, but the character in *A Maggot* is an extraordinary real woman, a working class woman, Anne Lee.

Q. We know in your fiction it is the process that matters, not the end. Nevertheless in *A Maggot* I think that the process suffered by Rebecca is as important as Mr. Ayscough's reaction to that process. Which is more important in the novel, Rebecca's awareness or the process which is about to start in English society represented by Mr. Ayscough?

A. Process matters more than the end; never end books. Yes, Mr. Ayscough personifies the whole conservatives, in this case he is a lawyer. In fact nothing was changed, because there was a mob party at that age and they hated the mob. The girl was a working class revolutionary. In this age she would be a terrorist.

Q. I realized it was important the fact that he stood from his seat, went to the window and looked through it at the people outside.

A. Yes, that was when there were a few men and women staring at him. Something outside his imagination is happening. He is having a supranational experience. That's why he is lost.

Q. There are some characters with a small part in your novels but very important ones because they help our main characters to achieve freedom: George Paston, Dr. Grogan, the German professor Dan and Jane met in Egypt, who do they stand for?

A. Dickens, though I don't like Dickens at all. Every English novelist always envies this facility in creating marvellous characters. He was a master of characterization. *Great Expectations* was a marvellous novel though I am not very fond of him.

Q. A last question I would like to ask you is if you have a novel in mind:

A. I have one in mind at the moment. Have you ever heard of "Hellasugalia"? It is made up. It comes from "Hellas" Greece and "Ugalia" Portugal. I want it to be an imaginary country. Do you know Picasso's *Tauromaquia*? I saw some sketches in Barcelona. I would like to show some bullfighting in this novel, in this imaginary country, although I don't want to introduce death in the book; something of bullfighting. I want it to be all imagination. It is an idea in my mind.