

## **Homage and a Kind of Thumbed Nose to a Very Old Tradition: John Fowles's "The Ebony Tower"**

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The predominant atmosphere of the novella is shaped by various approaches to apocalypse, a theme which has always been an exciting asset of John Fowles's art. This charismatic artist defines apocalypse as the triumph of ignorance over knowledge and John Fowles describes comprehensively the 'soft' terror that emerges from the above state of affairs. In John Fowles's interpretation neither knowledge nor ignorance can be described in traditional ways. The only chance of understanding and recycling these evergreen conditions is provided by variations. In the works of John Fowles variations threaten with some sense of anarchy, so, there is need for a constant, a point of reference which is, as usual, provided by woman in "The Ebony Tower" as well.

At the surface level of the novella, the main characters are the two male characters who stand for traditional and abstract art respectively, yet it is woman (and her many possible interpretations or impersonations) who offers the author, his characters and the readers the chance to interpret the above situation. For John Fowles woman is nature, intellect, past and present, in short life itself, and she can help man overcome ignorance and escape the hypnotic power of apocalyptic tradition. The above definition might sound a bit pompous, so, I have amended it with the help of the title I have chosen for this paper: woman teaches man that art and life can be reconciled if he pays homage and also shows a kind of thumbed nose to an evergreen tradition and in this context sex, or rather sexuality becomes a central metaphor expressive of both the eternal and the momentary variations or revelations of creativity.

A comprehensive interpretation based on a close reading of the short pieces included in the collection exceeds the space I can afford in the present paper, so, I have decided to discuss some relevant aspects of the methods by way of which John Fowles handles archetypes, legends and myths in *The Ebony Tower*. Through the analysis of "Eliduc A Personal Note" I hope to reveal the nature of John Fowles's intentions to marry very old traditions and contemporary themes in his novella "The Ebony Tower."

The heterogeneous quality of the material imposes some central themes around which it can be comprehensively discussed, so, I chose the themes of quest and freedom to support my interpretation. The volume is dominated by variations on the themes of freedom, art and life in the context of both homage

and a thumbed nose to a very old tradition. The basic principle is easy to demonstrate if I alter, or rather re-establish the (tradition bound) correct order of the stories, as the structure reveals the nature of the ‘authorial manipulation’ of the declared organizing rationale.

The ‘misplaced’ introductory section of the collection reveals John Fowles’s attitude towards collecting, classifying and ordering a complex theme well known from *The Collector*. That early novel set the example of the way in which John Fowles’s self-reflexive meta-fiction feeds on myths, legends, icons, art experiences, or intertexts, which thus contribute to a specific Fowlesian fiction and serve an authorial/artistic intention to create freedom(s) that allow for other freedoms to exist as it is theoretically set forth and exemplified in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

It is also important to remember that the initial title of the collection *The Ebony Tower* was *Variations*, but professional readers discarded it on grounds that they could not see justification for this title as they considered the variation-principle a private mirage in the writer’s mind, and right they were, at least with regards to the nature of the authorial intention. This is so as the result of this mirage is easy to spot in the very structure of the collection as “Eliduc A Personal Note” sounds very much like an introduction, yet it is only the second piece of the collection. The nature of the mirage or manipulation principle is relatively easy to grasp if I reinstate the ‘logical’ chronological order of the first pieces and search for the major themes formulated in “Eliduc A Personal Note.”

The central themes are easy to identify. Eliduc suggests the theme of quest as a principal concern, yet the novella “The Ebony Tower” which introduces the collection employs more dimensions of literary and art experiences than the one suggested by the medieval romance ‘adapted’ rather than translated by John Fowles, which means that the roots are remembered only to be cut. At this point I have to agree with Pamela Cooper who demonstrates her thesis that John Fowles ‘repossesses’ Marie de France rather than translates her story by quoting Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante’s comments regarding the ‘popular’ translation John Fowles offers. Naturally she argues in favour of creative freedom and states that “an academic translation is as subject to distortion as any popular one.” (Cooper 166–167) John Fowles also asserts that Eliduc is his attempt to ‘resurrect’ the mood of the collection, which is that of infinite variations based on the principle of freedom from and reverence towards tradition and the contemporary, but this statement gains in meaning if I take into consideration the fact that the medieval story explains, or rather functions as a kind of prologue-epilogue to, the twentieth century prose writer’s aims.

Yet, the ‘mirage,’ the ‘mystery’ reinterpreted in “Eliduc A Personal Note” is telling of John Fowles’s honest reverence towards the influence of great minds on his fiction as expressed by Henry Breasley in “The Ebony Tower” when he tells David Williams that the roots have to be cut. John Fowles takes the ‘blame’ for having severed the ‘umbilical cord’ much more neatly than was his intention and he reformulates the above principle stating that there is a far more emotional

than structural relationship between genuine works of art, which reads as superimposition, that is, the solution does not imply the repetition of structures or methods, rather it employs their spirit and transforms it through their creators' – (in the case of "The Ebony Tower," Marie de France's and John Fowles's) – spiritual and sentimental filter.

The method will be defined by John Fowles in *Mantissa* as 'reforgetting,' but it is also contained by the title and the introductory notes of his collection of non-fiction *Wormholes*. In his preface to the 1998 edition of *Wormholes* John Fowles writes that he hit upon the title with the help of Peter Bonson, and that he decided on that title because he found the *OED* definition, which describes the concept as "a hypothetical interconnection between widely separated regions of space-time," metaphorically appropriate. And because all serious writers are endlessly seeking for the wormholes that will connect them to other planes and worlds. (*Wormholes* Xii) "Eliduc A Personal Note," the re-forgotten medieval tale clearly adds to meanings formulated in the twentieth century novella of the collection and is compatible with all the other short pieces which in their turn discuss mainly contemporary issues. This is possible as "Eliduc A Personal Note" illustrates John Fowles's intention to 'reforget' the birth of the contemporary novel and novelist and suggests that the enigma which accompanies this return is an essential element as far as the freedom contained in the creative process is concerned. The meta-fictional and postmodern aspects of the novella entitled "The Ebony Tower" are implicit and their presence can only be explained with the help of the above rationale.

The tone of "Eliduc A Personal Note" is nostalgic and reverent and if one asks what happened to the existentialist thinker he or she is likely to gain a new point of reference through which the inconstancies inherent in the Dianne Vipond-like interviews can be explained.

But I believe that we also owe – emotionally and imaginatively, at least – the very essence of what we have meant ever since by the fictional, the novel and all its children, to this strange northern invasion of the early medieval mind. One may smile condescendingly at the primitive technique of stories such as *Eliduc*; but I do not think fiction can do so with decency – and for a very simple reason. He is watching his own birth. (*Eliduc A Personal Note* 118–119)

Yet, to demonstrate that his reverence is not restricted to the imaginative and the emotional, John Fowles offers us a research material on Marie de France's possible identity, her family ties and of the *Lais*, the collection in which the original "Eliduc" was included. John Fowles also demonstrates his intention to continue a task undertaken by Marie de France, that is, to save a Celtic story from oblivion. Furthermore, John Fowles marries the reverence of the great follower with the accuracy of a philologist when he explains methods, 'means' that he is incapable of using in his material because they could not meet his ends.

Another similarity is much harder for us to detect today, and that is of humour. Because her stories are so distant from us we tend to forget that much

of their matter was equally distant from her own twelfth century; and we grossly under – estimate both her and her contemporary audience’s sophistication if we imagine them with totally straight faces and credulity. (Eliduc A Personal Note 120–121)

John Fowles is aware of the enormous responsibility that befell him when he decided that he would tell a genuine Marie de France tale, and some twentieth century shadows of this art, to his twentieth century readers and cautions them of the ‘real-life systems’ which sustain her and unavoidably his material as well. The first one is the relationship of vassal and lord with the implication that the power structure depended on a man being as good as his word, because all civilized world depended on it. The Christian element is identified as being responsible for the ending. Courtly love is the third ‘real-life’ system where the same stress of keeping faith was applied to sexual relations. The above ‘real-life’ situations are, of course, related to other major themes of pieces included in the collection, as well as to other Fowles works. The formulation rather explains the ‘roots’ that on other occasions are ‘cut’ than render them exclusive themes for consideration. The first ‘real-life’ situation will illustrate a ‘primitive’ glimpse at the sources of exile of any form, a contemporary continuation of ‘a man being as good as his word’ with the possible analogy: an artist is as good as his art is true.

The ‘Christianity’ motif demonstrates the unpredictability of the outcome to human fate and ‘infant’ fiction’s preoccupation with variations about possible ends even in its cradle. Stress on keeping faith applied to sexual relations as well is central to many of John Fowles’s novel.

It is also important to remember that John Fowles’s genuinely ‘archaeological’ interest is complemented with the gesture of giving away authorial secrets. The gesture certainly fascinates the reader of the contemporary re-telling of the twelfth century tale and urges him to feel free and re-tell its atmosphere.

The fact that the initial title of the tale was “Eliduc” is relevant on many accounts. It reminds one of characteristics more general than the love element in the verse romances of the tenth and the eleventh centuries, as medieval romances in opposition to the general belief are not restricted to a prevalent love element. It is true that the most popular romances like Tristan and Iseult, Cretyen de Troyes and the like are concentrated round the motif of love, yet nearly all subordinate the love element to adventure. Most romances are narratives of heroic adventure where love connects, or compensates for the lack of unity of action and not too convincingly defined characters. The simple and skilfully managed plot uses poorly differentiated characters who stand rather for a type than for the individual.

This freedom is employed by John Fowles as well as his characters re-forget their typicality to gain flexible, variable identities. In romances the hero conforms to the pattern of the ideal knight with very limited possibility of variation. Furthermore, the fact that John Fowles adopts the earlier title of the tale demonstrates that he has the intention of re-creating the variant

concentrating on heroism. The touch of the master's hand in spite of the reverence set forth in his introduction to the tale transforms it into a research-material in process.

His imaginative freedom demonstrates the power of intellect to re-assimilate old Celtic faith in heroic attitude and Marie de France's love tainted interpretation. Thus, John Fowles's contemporary vision of the shifting emphasis of the tale leads to the mirage of the possibility to tell a story based on multiple earlier tellings. For John Fowles re-forgetting is certainly not chewing on an old straw and it demonstrates a principle by which the artist's earlier books can be revisited. This is also relevant as "Eliduc" argues that neither love nor heroism was entirely equivocal at the time of the writing of the variants of the tale.

The declared authorial will to link "Eliduc" to "The Ebony Tower" allows for further relevant interpretations. Following the quotation taken from Marie de France's original text, John Fowles introduces his version of the tale in a fashion, which will not disappoint any of his readers. "I am going to tell you the full story of a very old Celtic tale, at least as I've been able to understand the truth of it." (Eliduc 123)

This appears to be a very strange introduction after the pedantic personal notes one has to read before starting to read the tale proper. First the promise that we are going to read the full story, not a part or any of the medieval variants of it then as much of it as the author is able to understand.

Ability to understand and the possibility to interpret are central issues regarding the consistency of "Eliduc A Personal Note" and the actual story. Celtic is used to define the meaningful origins of the story and by virtue of the author's research it reveals a cultural duality burdened with mystery and legend and an inapt historiographic expertise relevant in "Eliduc A Personal Note." Yet John Fowles's promise can refer to an unchanged original, unauthorized version of the Marie de France tale being offered up.

John Fowles promises the true story of the tale, of the variants handed down to us, and as a philologist he tells us that this story contains significant changes in the genuine authorial intention and position announced. In fact, John Fowles offers up his readers his authority over Marie de France's already questioned authority regarding the tale. This is a rather sophisticated democratic act, which at the same time means that the intention could be interpreted as a warning that the personal note will be followed by a personal variant of that tale.

The details are of the domain of the Celtic tale. John Fowles's choice of the initial title suggests, as I have already mentioned, that the narrative will follow the medieval model, but the perspective will be determined by at least two fictional authors' discourse: that of Marie de France and that of John Fowles's memory of the earlier discourse. It should be noted that John Fowles's memory includes the statement that most of the medieval ideals have a false quality.

The examples with respect to this tenet are genuine and convincing. Heroic attitude is not sufficient to prevent the knight from falling into disgrace. A king's devotion to his defender is not sufficient to prevent him from betraying him in

the name of love. A knight's promise to stay faithful to his wife is not sufficient to prevent him from falling in love with another woman. A knight's true love is not sufficient to prevent him from telling her that he has already got a wife. There is need for a spiritual dimension to bridge the fissures of the heroic ideal. Consequently we are told that it is only the wife's love that stands straight in the storm of lies and betrayed feelings. Her love and understanding is only equalled by divine revelation of some sort that smoothens down the waves of passion that return regularly to the storm-torn shores where people seem to believe in everything that is currently being betrayed.

John Fowles shares his intentions with his readers in the conclusions to the story. "If I managed to render the message of my assessment poetic and deceiving enough I achieved my goal." (Eliduc A Personal Note 143) It is this confusing and confused world about which John Fowles promises to be true, at least as he understood it.

One cannot tell whether he is trying to be a nice and decent re-teller, like in "The Enigma," or something of the sort dictated by the very spirit of the material he is using. The secret might be incorporated in the possibility to participate in the creative act because with John Fowles one has to be prepared for an invitation like: the cards are on the table, the characters are given the rules of the game and the play can go on.

Although John Fowles offers his readers a brief summary, he intentionally fails to mention the real case for Eliduc's exile and certainly does not mention exile itself. He also avoids mentioning the Christian element closing down the story. It is then a second variant of 'at least as I've been able to understand the truth of it'. Predictably we have the promise that we would be offered a third and not only very accurate but also 'exact' version of the tale in the continuation of the story. At least this is the impression one gets after a short inventory because the 'research material' offered up in "Eliduc A Personal Note" which in its turn managed to chart the adequate theoretical implications and historical background. The opening passage of "Eliduc A Personal Note" sets the method, the second section discussed offers a selective preview and the third larger portion promises to tell us "exactly how it all happened." (Eliduc 123)

As I have already mentioned John Fowles chooses a very interesting principle when he organizes his short fiction into a collection. The typical authorial manipulation of the fictional material is obvious and emphatic because, although the collection includes "Eliduc," John Fowles's 'adaptation' or liberal translation of a Marie de France story, the medieval story is preceded by a sort of introduction entitled "A Personal Note." The personal note and the very old French story follow the novella of the twentieth century artist, while "The Ebony Tower" is constructed upon the major principles of the medieval romance.

"Eliduc A Personal Note" should introduce the collection and it could be followed by the writer's example of a very old form of fiction. Yet, historicity, clockwise chronology, predictable logic are not John Fowles's concern. Once again John Fowles is consistent in not being consistent in his declared intentions.

Of course, John Fowles's admiration for the domain, which is a world of mediaeval legends, simple yet impressive aesthetics is well known and, so, is his conviction that literary experience can be assimilated and employed freely by twentieth century artists.

Thus, the logic of "The Ebony Tower" repeats, and typographically actually precedes the scheme of the Celtic story. An artist is as good as his art, the divine element can bring life and faith together if it allows for various/flexible endings/meanings of origins and contains/reveals cultural multiplicity to reformulate legend and myth/archetype and all previous and future historiographic expertise. Art is a continuous flow of tellings, a process of re-assimilation of real life situations.

This means that comprehensive interpretation of the opening piece, of its metafictional and postmodern elements woven into a simple plot, supported by myth and archetype, is only possible following a retrospective reading of "The Ebony Tower." Thus, it becomes clear that the novella employs a popular mediaeval theme and David Williams can be interpreted as a contemporary variant of the knight-errant who wants to rescue the beautiful princess(es) from the monster's captivity. The contemporary flavour of the story is increased by the inherent duality thus revealed: the knight-errant is actually an abstract painter, the princess is a former art student, and the owner of the 'magic domain' is a world famous painter. "Eliduc A Personal Note" makes it clear for the reader that David Williams' visit to the mysterious domain, a place governed by 'pagan' admiration for art and life will reveal powerful sources of fertility based on myths and legends. Uccelli's, Braque's and Henry Breasley's paintings can be, and are in certain ways compared in the context of Ovid's version of the Actaeon-Diana legend. Richard Bevis attempts to give a comprehensive treatment of the above implications in his "Actaeon's Sin: The Previous Iconography" of John Fowles's "The Ebony Tower," but I consider that the relationship between the legend and its contemporary variant can and should be further explored. (Bevis "Actaeon's Sin")

Naturally the above mentioned legend is haunted by Marie de France's interpretation of a similar situation, and John Fowles's list of life situations can be of great help when interpreting the twentieth century story.

David Williams' heroic attitude is not sufficient to prevent the knight from the realisation that he is falling into disgrace. The support of abstract art (a king's support) of its defender, is not sufficient to prevent him from betraying it in the name of love and admiration for a still viable older tradition. David Williams' (the knight's) promise to stay faithful to his wife is not sufficient to prevent him from falling in love with another woman, a muse, and actually a form of art which is incompatible with his status. David's (the knight's) experience of an eternal form of love is not sufficient to prevent him from returning to London via Paris to his wife and enjoy his actual social and academic position.

Yet, the dilemmas formulated create a spiritual dimension which can bridge the fissures of the two variants of the heroic ideal. Consequently, we are told that both dimensions are burdened with some sense of betrayal and art is the only agent, that can marry betrayal with loyalty due to its capacity to understand that generation after generation seem to have believed in everything that is currently being betrayed. The novella is a telling example of this complexity.

The structure, the mode, the style of the novella contribute to representational fiction rich in the extreme in pictorial details due to the 'art experiences' it feeds on as the young abstract painter plunges "straight into the legend. (The Ebony Tower 12) The domain and the old man's paintings are dreams (the equivalents of the mirage) and his subject matter is mysterious and archetypal further obscured by a sort of intellectual exile. The comparative interpretation of Uccelli's *Night Hunt* and Henry Breasley's *Moonhunt* will reveal the self-exiled master's genuine interpretation of artistic heritage. Both paintings are pictorial representations of Acteon's tragic end. David is Acteon's equivalent and he surprised Diana/Artemis and is/was cruelly punished for what Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* calls misfortune, an innocent mistake interpreted as crime.

This clearly means that David's innocence is also interpretable as crime, while Breasley's ars poetica is "both homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition." (The Ebony Tower 23)

The old faun's private forest sets free intertexts, which help John Fowles 're-direct the play' which abounds in icons: the mystery of island Britain, Chretien de Troyes, wandering horsemen and lost damsels and dragons and wizards, Tristan and Merlin and Lancelot, Marie de France and "Eliduc."

The old man explained in his offhand way the sudden twelfth- and thirteenth-century mania for romantic legends, the mystery of island Britain [...] Chretien de Troyes, [...] wandering horsemen and lost damsels and dragons and wizards, Tristan and Merlin and Lancelot ... (The Ebony Tower 57)

Everything is designed to contribute to yet another re-telling of the archetypal elements on which the novella is built, the brown breasts of the girls returning from their bath invoke Gauguin and the Garden of Eden, and art, myth, legend repeatedly impose themselves as unavoidable details of the 'reality' of Coet.

Another echo, this time of Gauguin; brown breasts and the Garden of Eden. Strange, how Coet and its way of life seemed to compose itself so naturally into such moments, into the faintly mythic and timeless. The uncontemporary. And then yet another such moment had come. The girls had stood. (The Ebony Tower 61)

The source of David's ordeal is specified: he does not understand the presence of the timeless in the momentary and he certainly fails to sense the vital importance

of iconicity for the contemporary. The way in which John Fowles employs 'The Fall of Man' described in *Genesis* 3:14 in "The Ebony Tower" demonstrates the novelist's faith in the associative power and adaptability of the great narrative to very contemporary contexts.

In the John Fowles text it is Adam who is tempted, and the apple becomes a pear, Henry Breasley is both God and the serpent, he tempts David into realizing that one's status as man, in terms of creativity can equal that of the divine. The non-biblical register with which he explains the biblical reference helps him elucidate some moral stereotypes that could change David's understanding of the situation. The Garden of Eden becomes a nudist colony suggesting that innocence has been reclaimed and was begotten. The girls walk back to the two men naked and David observes the 'Eve' in them. David is essentially the fallen man in a quite liberal variant of the Garden of Eden.

The young man discovers that his pagan instincts are provoked from under the civilised mask he is wearing. The marriage of the story of Diana, the Garden of Eden and the very contemporary mystery play directed by Henry Breasley naturally leads to yet another literary reference. To no surprise of the reader the Freak is reading John Fowles's *The Magus* by the lake. The reader will certainly halt for a moment and reconsider the fictional situation in its possible reference to *The Magus*.

The centrality of *The Magus* in Fowles's fiction needs no demonstration. In his introduction to the 1976 edition of *The Magus* John Fowles discusses "the nature of human existence – and of fiction" and concludes that true freedom lies between the metaphysical (supernatural) and the scientific "in each two, never in one alone, and therefore it can never be absolute freedom. All freedom, even the most relative, may be a fiction." (*The Magus* 10–11) The conflict remains centred around the dispute of the book we are reading as it was only the title of *The Magus* that the author needed and not the possibility to intrude into both texts.

The twentieth century story is invaded again by tradition as the M-O-USE and David become characters in a romantic tragedy, and Alfred Tennyson's monodrama, *Maud*, adds to the series of epiphanic peripetia in the sylvan domain "Where everything is not possible." (The Ebony Tower 97) Magic is just an impression as Diana tells David that fairy tales about sleeping princesses and their princes with whom they could live together afterwards all avoid telling the truth as they don't mention the notable exception that they couldn't.

The paradox instantly invites new icons and they remember Tristan and Yseult and their nonsensical insistence on chastity and the sword between them. David, the twentieth century knight errant loses his armour and is dominated by incredulous despair, senses "an anguish, a being bereft of a freedom whose true nature he had only just seen." (The Ebony Tower 102)

When David interprets his journey to the domain he refers to himself as an artificial man, he senses that he can "only look back through bars, like caged animals, born in captivity, at the old green freedom." (The Ebony Tower 109)

Acteon/Adam/David defines his earlier interpretation of freedom as non-freedom and he turns against those false prophets who were trying to bury the not yet quite extinguished awareness of frustration. Those false prophets are part of art education in Britain, and the young man's rage against those who lead the academic world is as convincing as it is true:

That notorious diploma shows where the Fine Arts students had shown nothing but blank canvases – what truer comment on the stale hypocrisy of the teaching and the helpless bankruptcy of the taught? One could not live by one's art, therefore one taught a travesty of its basic principles; pretending that genius, making it, is arrived at by overnight experiment, histrionics, instead of endless years of solitary obstinacy: that the production of the odd instant success, like a white rabbit out of the hat, excuses the vicious misleading of thousands of innocents; that the maw of the teaching cess-pit, the endless compounding of the whole charade, does not underpin the entire system. When schools lie ...

Perhaps it was happening in the other arts... (The Ebony Tower 110)

David feels that the injustice is that art is fundamentally amoral and all goes to the pigs nothing to the deserving and understands that he was born to be an eternal fugitive trying to escape the dangers raised by truth and beauty. It seems that a heritage of vital importance, mostly inaccessible has been offered to him and he deprived himself of this knowledge. In the twentieth century Garden of Eden this is a fatal sin that could lead to the extinction of the only torch burning true: knowledge. The death of knowledge brings in the image of total apocalypse, the extinction of all mankind, without hope of redemption, of free will. In his vision he sees the lights of the runaway as "all the boats burning," and he tries to run for salvation. "But the boats proof to all flame, the ultimate old masters, kept the tall shadow of him where he was; static and onward, returning home, a young Englishman staring at a distant row of frozen lights." (The Ebony Tower 113)

Although the apocalyptic images are overwritten by his return to normality, the betrayals he and many of his contemporaries committed do not mean the end of the quest. David returns to his dividends, Henry rages against avant-garde art and the reader discovers the conclusion to the contemporary story in the medieval one. The new story precedes the old one it is prior to it, which means that all that has elapsed between the two periods can be repeated and reformulated. Ignorance, or lack of knowledge, the betrayal of innovation and tradition in the arts and life can be referred to older situations of the kind. "Eliduc A Personal Note" follows the twentieth century variant of the quest and the possible is impossible, ergo the impossible is also possible, old tradition and contemporary desire reclaim the freedom of art and artist in the name of both homage to and a thumbed nose to a very old tradition.

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