

Re-Reading the Reforgotten Text: John Fowles' *Mantissa*

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I start from the assumption that John Fowles' novel entitled *Mantissa*¹ published in 1982 in Paris can be interpreted as a book which sums up its author's earlier approaches to the theme of freedom, and that the hypothesis refers to the freedom of the author, of his characters, of his texts, the genre and his readers. I intend to follow the guidelines formulated by authorised interpretations of John Fowles' art, to which I add my interpretations based on a close reading of the novel in the hope that the conclusions will justify the compatibility of my statements with some relevant theses formulated by contemporary theories.

The methods by way of which I approach the above mentioned thesis are determined by the complexity noticed by Pamela Cooper in her excellent survey of John Fowles' works entitled *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity Femininity*. She asserts that the novelist's latest work repeats themes more convincingly formulated in his earlier works, but observes the original quality of the artist's handling of his material in *Mantissa*:

As a whole, Fowles' *Mantissa* is a reconfirmation of the woman in her passive, instrumental role relative to art, language, and narrative, a kind of 'road not taken'. (193)

The complexity of the novel attracted the attention of Mahmoud Salami as well who in his book entitled *John Fowles Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism* formulates the thesis that the novel foregrounds the subjective authority behind the illusion of objectivity and defines the novel as a book which is about nothing else but itself:

By and large *Mantissa* is a novel that challenges its own narratological making. Indeed it is a linguistic fantasy, a self-contained text that reflects nothing but itself. (191)

¹ Fowles, John. 1982. *Mantissa*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. All quotations are from this edition.

Katherine Tarbox' praises John Fowles for the spirit of exuberant playfulness and the well-developed sense of comedy in *Mantissa*:

The plot is constantly being rewritten before our eyes by the characters themselves, who change both shape and identity with the snap of the finger. The only thing that is sure is that the action (if indeed action can be said to take place inside a brain) represents the monumental struggle between the author and his protean Muse, whose actual existence is highly suspect. (120)

John Fowles' fiction does not deny the presence of the absurd quality of existence in the fictional world, but, Samuel Beckett's definition of life/existence and both writers suggest that if we manage to defer the finality of life as journey its variations are desirable, possible and actually timeless.

In *Mantissa* these variations are performed in a form which contradicts the conventional requirements of fiction as the alternation of descriptive and conversational passages, and telling and showing collapse into one dynamic flow of dramatised performance designed to defer the finality of the (spiritual) world and to deny its limits. If we were to apply John Fowles' principles to Samuel Beckett's famous metaphor we could say that death, life, mother and child are performing an incessant ritual which is a permanent beginning of an end. Understandably John Fowles shifts the emphasis from the act of giving birth to the act of creation or conception.

Thus man and woman are accessible as impersonations of the powers at work, they are ideal enemies whose encounters can lead to conception and they are also conventional symbols that can stand for the two basic elements which contribute to the spiritual dimension that constitutes the 'real life' quality of any work of art. Mahmoud Salami speaks about the same aspect of the novel although his intentions are definitely of another nature:

Generally, Erato represents the archetypal anima who helps to create Mile's own subjectivity; she teaches him the ways of regaining his sense of creativity. [...] The figure of woman is constructed in *Mantissa*, as indeed in all Fowles' fiction, as a "kind of reality," an existential figure who leads the man through difficult passages into self-discovery and authenticity, and indeed an enigmatic and erotic muse who inspires her writer. (Salami 200-01)

We can state then that in *Mantissa* John Fowles opts for an incessant dialogue between an imaginary artist and the different impersonations of his Muse as a technical solution and in that novel the fact that the artist is a man and the muse is a woman has obvious advantages because this way John Fowles can discuss

the state of contemporary fiction against the variations of a weird 'history' of this genre from the time of the creation of the Greek alphabet to present supported by the image of woman and man uniting and confronting each other in the name of a process which can be interpreted as conception. John Fowles achieves this by wiping out the limiting power of objective time as traditional time dimensions are excluded from the novel and they are replaced by meaningful subjective dimensions, which refer to the creative process and the aesthetic dimension.

These subjective dimensions are not rendered meaningful by way of flashbacks or other experimental techniques, but through a process John Fowles terms 'reforgetting.' The tension between talent and inspiration stems from the permanent desire to be seduced in a spiritually creative process of both parties involved. This kind of 'conflict' has no intention to develop, its progress is closely related to John Fowles' idea that the artist is tempted to think of himself as a myth.

We witness a 'spiritual duel' where none of the challengers can or even has the intention to win. John Fowles supports the logic of this permanent desire to be seduced by giving talent male identity and shaping inspiration as a perpetually transforming woman. Man accumulates the identity of all possible males from Zeus, via Homer, Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot to Miles Green while woman reveals an identity which includes the identities of a Greek goddess, the Dark Lady, a punk guitarist, a late twentieth century poetess or Dr. Delfie.

The two influences at work in any creative process are thus envisaged as man and woman and their permanent desire to be seduced defines the sexual encounter as central metaphor. Consequently the only 'action' that can be described in conventional terms is interpretable as the two characters are trying to seduce the other sexually with the intention of dominating the process of (artistic) creation. Under the given conditions all transformations are rendered emphatically rational and consequently the 'unquestioning' presentation of the inexplicable becomes a central principle.

In view of the above preliminary statements a quotation taken from Descartes can be taken as announcing the theme of the novel. The quotation reads as follows:

Then, carefully examining what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body, that no outer world existed, and no place where I was; but that despite this I could not pretend that I did not exist. (No page number.)

The Descartes paragraph specifies a relevant aspect of the work. It is an inner space, where separation from the material world is desirable, possible and

ultimately it is a fictional fact. This means that that the setting is 'spiritual' and that the character(s) is (are) kind(s) of variations and 'appear in different attire.'

The time of the action cannot be interpreted conventionally either: first because the setting has no connection whatsoever with the exterior world, second because the passing of time is 'measured' by pages. The general mood or atmosphere of the novel is 'coded' privately as well: it is dominated by 'a luminous and infinite haze.' Thus the initiatory perspective is obscure in the extreme and it invites precaution. We discover that it is not only that it is formulated in the negative: "Not language, not location, not cast" (M.3), but the identity of the source of the speaking voice is 'forgotten'. The dominant pronoun is 'It,' or as the text formulates it 'It' was bereft of pronoun: "It was conscious, evidently; but bereft of pronoun, all that distinguishes person from person; and bereft of time, all that distinguishes present from past and future." (M.3) At this point we tend to disagree with Mahmoud Salami who asserts that the novel's illusion of objectivity is maintained "by the third-person narrator who appears as an omniscient "he," although it is Miles Green himself who writes this fantasy" (191).

The conflict between reality, fictional reality and what is beyond is inherent, but it denies interpretation. The way in which this double fictional remove from reality functions is demonstrated by the reverse process employed by the protagonist who intends to achieve 'a kind of' identity. The protagonist defined by 'It' becomes an 'I of sorts' (M.4) and this 'I of sorts' desires to 'reforget' instead of to remember.

All its/his answers continue to be formulated in the negative: "Name! No name. Nothing. No past, no whence or when" (M.5). What is more: "He would have liked to close his eyes, to have peace to reforget, to be once again with the sleeping blank page oblivion" (M.6).

The 'blank page oblivion' refers to authentic non-existence as a form of existence, because it refers to a page that can be 're-populated.' The element of motivation identified at this phase is the desire to regain this 'blank page oblivion.' The 'doctor' achieves some progress by challenging it/him with interpretable, memorable 'pages'. Miles can and does tell her that *Pickwick Papers* was written by Dickens and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare. He can even remember protagonists which exist on those pages: he mentions Bottom and Titania. This is the first step to Miles Green's sense of male identity: memories of spiritual power belong to the 'he' who also happens to have a name.

The 'locus' is the skull of the fictional artist which hosts the grey cells, which become after all, the setting, time, and characters of the novel is defined as a ward. If space is identified in terms of the spiritual reflection of the idea of space contained in a ward-like skull, time is interpreted in the context of another dimension, which is presumably a fictionally material one. We suspect that the

pages that measure time are the ones we are reading. To further complicate the situation, the protagonists pretend to be ignorant of the situation and their own statuses.

The 'doctor' offers us a vague and quite evasive definition of the conflict yet the attentive reader senses that if there is hope to grasp the conflict it can be identified as a kind of 'dis-cordia' - a kind of tie which both links and separates - between the spiritual and the spiritually (fictionally) real: "You've mislaid your identity, Mr. Green. What I have to work on is your basic sense of reality" (*M.*14).

The erotic interlude shocks and horrifies the 'patient' but the doctor addresses him in a strict and cold voice and orders him to take an active part in the less than conservative treatment. Miles Green, a decent gentleman, wants to escape the uneasy situation created by his own subconscious, but he cannot resist his imagination. His mental experience tries to retain decency and respond to temptation simultaneously and ignores the fact that the 'rape the other way round' is a metaphor of the creative process in which the muse is trying to inspire the artist to discover a new identity for himself. The conventional logic, the prudery of the artist stands for the conscious and his attempt to overcome the unconscious will be ridiculed dryly by the latter: "Couldn't I ... on my own?" "We're not testing your ability to produce mere *sperm*, Mr. Green" (*M.*20).

Miles' attempt to "reforget" the game and exclude the Muse/ Dr. Delfie only inspires a second 'agent-provocateur': the Muse doubles and her 'incarnation' is Nurse Cory. The Muse/Dr. Delfie/ Nurse Cory are/is there to liberate Miles Green's creative imagination from the yoke of his conscious.

Green Miles tries to reject the sexual provocation of the two muses with no success and the Nurse manages to appeal to his instincts. The discourse, the words used to describe the sexual teasing belong to the realm of art and indicate that the act has to be interpreted in terms of the creative process. "To the now quite unashamedly suggestive synecdoches of her tongue were added quiverings and tremulous little borings" (*M.* 31). Mahmoud Salami discusses a number of feminist critiques of *Mantissa* and he hits upon the idea that the freedom of the Muse is both desirable and avoidable in the context of the novel:

In *Mantissa* the woman figure is constructed as the fertile mother, the mystic virgin, the attainable muse for the recreation of Miles's own subjectivity, and the "lacuna," the linking space among his split imagination, his divided self, and his fragmented texts [...] Miles's subjectivity seems trapped within the textual limits of his fantasies [...] that is why he wants to free himself from the determination of the author [...] he wants to achieve unique identity rather than to remain as a device in someone else's text. (213)

Of course there are a number of texts which have to be avoided as the artist's visions or illusions of the Muse follow one another in the flow of the creative process. The Muse uses her variability as inspiration to bring out the desired result. She explains to Miles that their only role is to provide him with a source of erotic arousal and offers him the choice of positions from the Kama Sutra, Aretino, the Hokuwata Monosaki, Kiney, or the Sjöstrom. Miles loses control over the events and the Muse orders talent to "stop verbalizing" (*M.* 41), as words can create another kind of reality and that reality is subservient to the conscious.

Miles Green 'falls victim' to what he interprets as 'rape, the other way round.' We have already been warned that the sources of this situation are ancient pages as the Muse/Dr. Delfie/Nurse Cory mention(s) those famous guides to sexual satisfaction.

It is when Miles Green decides that the whole 'treatment' was not that bad after all that he is congratulated by The Muse/Dr. Delfie/Nurse Cory for having written the pages we have just read: "Hey Mr. Green, who's a clever boy? Who's in luck?" "It's a lovely little story. And you made it all by yourself" (*M.* 44). The very moment the sexual intercourse is consummated it loses its permanence and becomes a topic for discussion.

We have already mentioned that the formal elements of fiction were refused their traditional authentic status. The last variation of the Muse testifies that we are reading a curious novel about the conception of fiction in which both context and experience provided by literary texts seem to refuse traditional interpretation. Miles Green, who is at the same time a 'he' and an 'it,' is a traditionally interpretable artist-image rather than artist, and is 'more' emphatically an idea than a fictional embodiment, a surrogate of John Fowles. The Muse(s) declare(s) that it is the 'id' of the 'idea' that needs treatment, and she/they 'act out' the secret desires of the idea. The Muse exploits her advantage and cannot resist temptation to hint at her divine quality.

'Look, Mr. Green. Listen....It was conscious of a luminous and infinite haze, as if it were floating, godlike, alpha and o-me-ga ...' She flashed him a vivacious smile. 'Is that how you pronounce it, Mr. Green? It's Greek, isn't it?' She did not wait for a reply, but went back to her reading. ' ... over a sea of vapor and looking -' (*M.* 45)

Dr. Delfie and Nurse Cory vanish, an event, which is explicable and logical as they are shown as inspiration-like participants in the writing process, so they quit "leaving nothing but a flutter of falling white typescript" (*M.*50). Nemesis, for this is the name given to the apparition who bursts into the ward calls Miles Green a 'bastard, fuckin' chauvinist pig.' The two don't quite share the same discourse and register and the artist has no other choice but to tame the twentieth

century variant of 'inspiration' by 'reforgetting' her to her initial status and as a result the woman wearing the symbols of three contemporary subcultures metamorphoses into an archetypal muse.

Her right hand begins to pick a scale, a remote one, the Lydian mode.
The transition is melting rather than instantaneous, yet extraordinary.
... (an) unmistakable and immemorial divinity. (*M.57*)

This dreamlike figure warns the author that most men fall to their knees when they see her, the daughter of Zeus resolves to give the artist ten sentences to make a full, proper formal apology or she will ask for divine revenge. The immortality of the Muse provokes a text, which displays the artist's talent to avoid finality, that is, to reproduce divine quality by way of the creative process. The apology documents the presence of a famous literary experience, namely that of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Mahmoud Salami quotes Faulkner when trying to establish the silent discourse quality characteristic of the whole novel, which links with our earlier identification of the artist's attempt to replace the voice of the silenced muse. We should remember that he silenced her because the artist wanted to avoid being caught in somebody else's text, which of course was also of his own invention.

And so for a two-page paragraph in which Miles attempts to break the novel's silent discourses by actually 'voicing' the narrative's mechanical devices. ... mechanical devices or a system of signs that reflect nothing but other signs; there is no corporeal reality behind these systems. (198)

When it dawns on Erato that she has been trapped she tries to put the blame on the chaotic character of the genre and supports her infallibility by telling the artist that her divine family considers contemporary fiction to be a huge joke and she declares that contemporary theories of fiction are worse than the worst joke ever invented.

Of course the whole genre is a mess. Death of the novel, that's a laugh.
I wish to all my famous relations it was. And good riddance. ... It's
what I loathe about this rotten country. And America, that's even
worse. At least the French are doing their best to kill the whole stupid
thing for good. (*M. 66*)

The Muse protests saying that there has been enough pornography in the ward and the artist has to tell her that it is impossible to switch the light off in the

ward because he wants to keep an eye on inspiration. The Muse is enraged by the artist's lack of confidence in her and she sets on to demonstrate her contribution to the making of the text which reads "both demure and provocative, classical and modern, individual and Eve-like, tender and unforgiving, present and past, real and dreamed, soft and [...]" (M. 71).

The Muse formulates the quality of the classical literary influences as intertexts and she prepares a later intervention by way of which she mislays the identities of virtually all the great artist's of the past to demonstrate the importance of her metamorphosed impressions over authentic interpretations of the great works of literature. The Muse speaks of her contribution to the works of the 'frog poet' whom she identifies as Verlain, The artist reacts by giving an interesting definition of fiction and decides to call the Muse by her authentic name.

'You know perfectly well why you were landed with fiction. It was nothing to do with picking the short straw. It's just that you could always lie ten times better than all the rest of your sisters put together.'
'What sisters? I haven't got any sisters.'
'Oh sure. And your name isn't Erato and -'. (M.84)

The Muse does not like being stuck with authenticity and she uses the advantages offered by her multiple statuses as a series of fictional characters and inspiration, of course her basic strategy is once again deceit. She complains that she is just one "miserable fantasy figure" the artist's "diseased mind is trying to conjure up out of nothing." (M. 85) Deeply hurt the Muse announces that she wants to quit the ward, to which the artist announces to her that it is his will that determines the length and quality of the fictional intermezzo.

Talent and inspiration discover that although their equally important participation in the creative process is incontestable they are in the spiritual sphere of an author yet they sense the possibility of another 'somebody' "who's pulling *his* strings?" (M.88)

The artist suspects the Muse of knowing something of the nature of those strings and the Muse cannot help calling him naive, and 'outdated' and provides proof of her capacity to 'update' the creative process she is just visiting.

My God, when I think in this day and age ... it's pathetic. The world's full of highly pertinent male-female situations whose fictional exploration does subtend a viable sociological function – and yet this is the best you can come up with. Muses ... I mean, Christ. As if any contemporary woman who actually existed would talk in that revolting fey, coy way about shepherds and pipes and – (M. 88)

The Muse admits that she is breaking the artist's rules because she is sick of them and she is fed up of pretending that she exists in ways in which she never would if she did exist and her attitude leads to the artist's questioning the possibility of her desire and he replies that she cannot not exist and actually be because the two concepts are mutually incompatible. The principle is that of existence by way of 'reforgetting' non-existence in the form of an existence that can be conceived as the denial of its availability in conventional terms, much in the way suggested by the Descartes motto we discussed earlier.

This means that the existential is dominated by the aesthetic, but this dominance as we have seen can only be explained through situations taken from the 'domain' of life. The Muse is asking for 'marketable' impersonations.

Moreover, she ought – if she did exist – to do a little market research on herself. Try knocking on a few doors. 'Hi. My name's Erato. I sell inspiration on the never-never. Can I interest you in an epithalamion? May I show you our new bargain line in personalized alcaics? They'd just laugh in her face. If they didn't think she'd escaped from the nearest nuthouse. ... Any way, they can do all she used to do by computer and word-processor now, ten times better. I could even feel faintly sorry for her, poor old milked-out cow. If she did exist. (*M.* 91)

The Muse proposes partnership in a new novel, this time one that appeals to contemporary criticism and public expectations and she opts for a more realistic external context, a casual friendship, going to the theatre, discussing books and instead of writing about talent and imagination she suggests more modern topics. "Politics. Issues like abortion and street violence. Nuclear disarmament. Ecology. Whales. White bread." (*M.* 101)

What follows is an inverted satire of contemporary best-sellers about a Cambridge graduate in English, a businessman who make love in the steamy pouring rain. The Muse becomes a 'Messalina de nos jours' who makes love to everybody out of despair.

The 'poor old milked-out cow' inspires solutions that she thinks would make the book marketable. She could become a nun, because the Vatican scenes sell well, the businessman could go to Rome for the beatification ceremony with his new lover, a homosexual one, because thirteen per cent of the readers of English-speaking 'buyers' are gay, and because Catholics represent twenty-eight per cent of the readers the businessman has to be a Catholic and the last scene would show the statue of the Muse, or lady poet, or rather a nun and the businessman would place unripe bananas at the feet of the statue in secret.

Her 'fiction' is actually prostituting through the 'symbols' she uses the vary nature of the metaphor which supports the greater narrative context in which they exist. The loose 'moral and ethical' principles of inspiration provoke talent

to pretend that he accepts the Muse's version of the creative process, so he pretends to join the irresponsible attitude of the Muse by employing the vulgar banana-penis symbolism of her fiction, yet the scene he creates is telling of the risks serious talent might face had he accepted the help of inspiration indiscriminately.

Miles Green incorporates the primitive symbol into his mock suggestion and pretends that he has accepted the rationale and he says that he could drop a banana at the top of the steep flight of steps leading up to the church and the result would be a spectacular catastrophe because he would slip and break his spine on his way down, as the story invented by the Muse 'breaks the neck' of aesthetic dignity.

The Muse instantly tries to put the blame onto the artist implying that it is talent that has no taste but the artist denounces her hypocrisy and as if to remind her of her more noble standing with respect to fiction he asks for some explanation for the twenty-four black querillas he suspects could stand for the twenty-four letters in the Greek alphabet. Finally he calls Erato "a goddess of a very inferior and fifth-rate kind" (*M.114*).

Disgusted by the fictional environment created by inspiration Miles Green wants to leave the uneasy partnership:

Well ... The sex was just a metaphor, for heaven's sake. There has to be some kind of objective correlative for the hermeneutical side of it. Even a child could see that. (*M.116-17*)

Katherine Tarbox argues that the reality of the novel is altered when the two protagonists disappear to have their one perfect sexual congress, because as she suggests the quality of fiction is a function of the quality of the sexual meeting between the two voices of the novel. "Good lovemaking is a metaphor of good writing, a symbolic harmony of writer and Muse" (Tarbox 125). The Muse is told that people are very serious about fiction and the artist tells the muse that her pagan education gives her a false sense of priorities and her task, as a muse responsible for fiction should be understood as a grave mistake because she must have realised that fiction is a "profound and difficult field for inspiration" (*M.117*) and the responsibility it means exceeds the possibilities of a Muse whose previous experience was with 'love ditties.' The Muse creates the medium for an ironic critique of theories, which stress the exclusive right of the reflective or the reflexive mode in fiction. "I can't understand, if there's place for humor in ordinary life, why there can't also be in the novel. I thought it was meant to reflect life" (*M. 118*).

The artist's answer touches upon a problem often discussed by John Fowles, the ironic quality of the context expresses the author's attitude regarding

fashionable theories of fiction and their pernicious effects on contemporary narrative modes and of course he employs inverted irony.

Oh God. I honestly don't know where to begin with you. The reflective novel is sixty years dead, Erato. What do you think modernism was about? Let alone post-modernism. Even the dumbest students know it's a *reflexive* medium now, not a reflective one. Do you even know what *that* means? (*M.*118)

Yet, as Pamela Cooper states it the novel is designed to simultaneously mystify and enlighten the process by way of which works of art are produced.

In this way *Mantissa* is a very ambiguous document; at once self-mocking and self-ingratiating, it is a text that seeks, ... to expose and to protect itself simultaneously – and to effect that very protection through exposure. (Cooper 210)

The Muse also learns that the classical realist novel failed to meet the expectations of the fashionable theories of serious contemporary fiction and its artistic techniques were banished to less serious forms of entertainment.

If you want a story, character, suspense, description, all that antiquated nonsense from pre-modernist times, then go to the cinema. Or read comics. You do not come to a serious modern writer. Like me. (*M.* 116-119)

The alternative for these conventional assets is stress on mode of discourse, 'metaphoricality,' 'disconnectedness,' and 'ateleological self-containedness.' The interesting aspect of this lecture is that we are reading a book which meets the above mentioned expectations in that it stresses the importance of its own discourse, it is constructed on the possibilities created by the metaphorical implications of man-woman relationship and evolves by way of refusing its connection with reality.

Miles Green recommends Erato to read 'Jong' (*M.*121). It is Miles Green's turn to dismiss inspiration of the classical kind and he does so on both the account of contemporary fiction and contemporary reality.

You still go on as if the world's a pleasant place to live in. There's no more flagrant giveaway of superficiality or approach to life in general. Every internationally admired and really successful modern artist of recent times has shown it's totally pointless, black and absurd. Complete hell. (*M.*121)

Erato can't believe her ears when she is told that life is a complete hell even if one is an internationally admired and really successful artist, but is not really shocked when she is offered a contract: "And one last thing. I also think, I'd be happier if in the future we operate on a financial basis. I'll give you a little fee for anything I use, right? I can always claim it against tax as research" (M.132). Mahmoud Salami remarks that the novel is a critique of itself and compares it to John Barth's short story "Title" in *Lost in the Funhouse*.

This story is a critique of itself, a story about a story dealing with its own social construction and the writing of its own love story. [...] Indeed *Mantissa* deals with the ways stories can be imagined and Miles practices these fantastic constructions in relation to Erato, who is equally important to these constructions. [...] Thus in *Mantissa* Fowles is making fun of such fiction and of the important role given to critical theory. In relation to self-reflexive fiction, Miles (and Fowles) stresses ironically that there is no place for humor in the novel. [...] There is also a sense of anxiety within both the character and author about the prominence given to criticism and critics rather than to fiction itself. (Salami 198-99)

Yet deceit is consistent in the novel and the 'realistic preamble' collapses in the very moment the artist discovers that the Muse has removed the door an event, which seems contrary to his intentions so he answers her magic with magic, and clicks his thumb and finger, but the wall remains unchanged. He walks back to the Muse to be reminded that the basic rule of the play is that neither talent nor inspiration can leave the creative process, or more plainly the Muse announces to the artist that he cannot walk out of his own brain.

The artist announces that the Muse has no power to change his feelings. And formulates his criticism of the role inspiration played in the creative process.

'I mean every word I said just then. You've ruined my work from the start ... I was going to follow in Joyce and Beckett's footsteps. ... Again and again you've made me cut out the best stuff. That text where I had twelve different endings – it was perfect as it was no one had ever done that before. Then you get at it, and I'm left with just three. [FLW] (M.128)

Inspiration dictated all his texts and he was functioning like a typewriter so the French theoreticians' dilemmas concerning the question whether the writer himself is written or not could be answered through their case.

In part three an old sister joins Dr. Delfie in the ward where Miles Green is about to recover from his former knock out (the Cretan mode) and the matron disagrees with her methods of treatment and threatens to report to Mrs. Thatcher about the fact that she employs Dr. Lawrence's new mastectomy incision, a method demonstrated with surgical crayon on the muse's naked bosoms.

The enraged Muse starts kicking the artist the moment the intemperate sister disappears from the ward, the door of the ward opens to reveal the same room in which his solitary double suffers and the Muse announces that she joined him out of pity because for her his superficial level of intelligence, mental instability, indebtedness to a "cheaply iconoclastic spirit of a talentless and self-destructive culture" (M.145) inspired pity.

The Muse starts enlisting her contributions to works of art that praised her beauty and mystery.

'Black girl, that's a joke. Who do you seriously think you're talking to? Who do you think was the Dark Lady of the *Sonnets*, for a start? You name them, I've known them. And not just Shakespeare, Milton, Rochester, Shelley. The man who wrote *The Budoir*. Keats, H. G. Wells. ... I even spent an afternoon with T. S. Eliot.' (M.148)

She seems not to have enjoyed the company of the great talents too much and she formulates her discontent in the context of her permanent desire to be seduced. She explains this desire by way of juxtaposing the sexual dimension onto the scene of temptation. The artist wearing his 'Adam's costume' has to listen to the Muse's reinvention of the Biblical scene: "Any woman could tell you what the serpent really stood for. He just wasn't up to the job" (M.149).

The artist, like his ancestor Adam, is not up to the job so imaginary Eve is telling him that he is a tenth-rate hack and that she finds it natural that the *Times Literary Supplement* calls him "an affront to serious English fiction" (M.150). The Biblical formula for the permanent desire to be seduced, excludes the possibility of the intrusion of authentic 'exterior' material into the spiritual dimension of the novel. The Muse after being transformed into a visible woman makes love with the artist on the old rose carpet.

The detachment of the aesthetic dimension from the existential one is documented by the closing passages of the third section as talent and inspiration are in a room with glass walls where they are watched, while making love, by nurses, doctors, cleaners, porters, staff of all kinds and their attitude convinces the reader that participation in this chaotic love-hate argument which is the creative process is a privilege envied by many.

And there they watch, with a sad and silent concupiscence, as the dispossessed contemplate the possessed; or the starving, at a restaurant

window, the fed and feeding. The only thing private still left sacrosanct, is the word. Not that words are now being sounded inside that room, but only fragments of alphabet. The situation only lasts a second and then once again all external is excluded. (M.156)

The motto of the fourth part is taken from Marivaux's *La Colonie* and promises further conversation "deux beaux yeux n'ont qu'a parler" continues with Flann O'Brien's slightly adapted words: "By God she can do the talking. She has seen more of the world than you and me, of course, that's the secret of it" (M.158).

Yet the motto does not elucidate the problem of who is being written in the book by whom that is it suggests that the plausibility factor remains a function of authorial will in the last part of the novel as well. But authorial will can only be defined as the permanent desire to be seduced because the narrative 'I' has been consistently split between the different impersonations of Miles Green and Erato. Miles Green and Erato, man and woman, talent and inspiration are involved as the partners who are complementing each other on the sexual performance they managed to provide. It is useful to remember that earlier in the novel Miles Green explained Erato that sex was an objective correlative for the creative process behind the conception of a work of art.

Reforgetting brings about a nostalgic tone as Miles speaks about the evening when the Muse first visited him and the two agree that they need each other, and that although they were both sick of imagining they managed to challenge the curse of fiction and write the absolutely impossible, the unwritable, the unfinishable, the unimaginable, the endlessly revisable text without words that allowed them to be their real selves at last.

The text they are discussing is of course the text we are reading. Making love is maintained as a central metaphor for the creative process as Miles Green defines the curse of fiction as the boring stretches between the sexy bits. A return to pagan liberalism regarding sex is supported through the Muse's complaint that she hadn't been seduced for almost seventeen centuries before she made love to Miles Green because of the awful Christian morality that became dominant. Erato confesses that it was the artist's seductive charm that attracted her, not his genius in turning his ideas into art.

At this point the temptation to associate the artist with John Fowles is stronger than anywhere in the novel, since John Fowles has repeatedly formulated his difficulties with turning his ideas into words. The above possibility fuels the suspicion that John Fowles is formulating a mock-ironic critique of his doubts. The Muse is doing her best to reveal her permanent role in the artist's desire to participate in the creative process. "And if it was the other thing, and you *could* write it all down, I just couldn't be with you at all. I'd have to go back to being a shadow on the brain-cell stairs, a boring old ghost in the machine" (M.170).

Erato announces her commitment to free the world of words from under the yoke of platitudes and she supports the necessity of abandoning the existential offering a weird history of literature. She demonstrates her contribution to the freedom of the 'alphabet' by invoking 'the historical fact' that 'ghastly Clio' regarded the alphabet as the inland-revenue's best friend and doomed letters to express only platitudes but as the other Muses decided that the mortals needed an example that the alphabet could be used for literary accounts as well she "did once scribble a little something down" (*M.*171).

The 'little something' she is speaking about is *The Odyssey* she calls a 'kind of fluke best-seller,' of somebody, who had something to do with her nose (Publius Ovidius Naso), to whom she attributes some famous odes, which were actually written by Horace. Then she seems to remember a 'lovely thing' written by Horace, which actually was written by Catullus, whose Livia she was. The artist reminds her that the name of the woman who inspired Catullus was actually called Lesbia. Mahmoud Salami interprets the above passage as proof of the woman's attempt to construct her independent self, but of course the misinterpretation of this private history of universal literature can be interpreted in other ways as well.

Thus the power she claims to have is illusory and the reader knows that she is the product of Miles's deluded mind. (Salami 209)

On page one hundred and eighty-three the muse announces that all they do nowadays is talk in his unwritable non-text that could be one hundred and eighty-three pages and the artist promises to find something more pleasant next time. On page one hundred and eighty four the leading point of view is handed over to, or taken over by the omniscient narrator. The author whose creativity is a function of talent and inspiration paradoxically sets to explain to the reader what his standing in the given situation, or rather in the text which has just been declared a non-text, is. The omnipotent voice announces that all male sympathies must go to Miles Green, then cunningly softens the tone by adding "or so Miles Green himself overwhelmingly feels" (*M.*184).

The authorial voice acts as an intermediary between text and reader for most of the remaining part of the novel. We are told that Miles Green realises "The notion that the muses are shy and fugitive is one of the grossest deceptions ever perpetrated on man." (*M.*186) The realisation admits that the conversation between talent and inspiration is unavoidable although talent should vary the target of his permanent desire to be seduced. This means that the 'Delphi Dancing Girls' did not help the artist and everything that was good literature produced by the artist was "not because of, but in spite of, Erato" (*M.*186).

The statement is meant to point at Erato's errors but does not deny her power. We are told that she can inspire if she wants to as illustrated by the good

job she did when she impersonated the Dark Lady, Lesbia, Calypso or even when she contributed to the writing of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Contemporary literature seems to be a more complex problem and inspiration fails to provide for twentieth century fiction because she cannot cope with her spiritually female dimension in the artist's creative 'reality,' and yet she feels resentment at being physically attracted to him. Her attempts at interpreting the creative process in terms of carnal desires being met could explain her lack of style adequate to a divinity, what's more her "being just one, more brainwashed, average twentieth-century female" (M.187).

The authorial voice tells us that carnal desires lead to variations that are physical, passionate, free of dialogue, experimental, and supremely irreproducible in text, yet the permanent desire to be seduced has nothing to do with physical reality except that sex can function as an interpretable objective correlative. At this point the logic of the authorial voice fails to be consistent, yet this is certainly one more possibility employed by John Fowles in the spirit of freedom which keeps the fictional material together:

And now! It is her fault entirely. With women one always in a bog of reality, alias words. [...] It could be seen as a huge conspiracy, really; and who was at the heart of it? Who else but this totally slippery, malicious and two faced creature beside him? (M.188)

The closing lines reforget the atmosphere of the opening scene:

The oblivious patient lies on his hospital bed, staring, in what must now be seen as his most characteristic position, blindly at the ceiling; conscious only of a luminous and infinite haze, as if he were floating, godlike, alpha and omega /and all between/, over a sea of vapor. (M. 196)

Most of the novel is, technically, a dialogue between 'inspiration' and the 'creative medium.' Descriptive passages are rare, and when they are employed their sources are wrapped in utmost obscurity. Similarly the dialogue confers an inauthentic status on the artist and the Muse and we were trying to suggest this by using different definitions when speaking about them like artist, talent, patient, lover for Miles Green and muse, inspiration, doctor, nurse for Erato.

The theme itself is declared and deconstructed repeatedly with the result that we are to understand that the artist who is traditionally the individual endowed with creative talent and normally seeks the help of the Muse creates his own Muse and yet their relationship is not without problems mainly because the freedom to exist is defined as the right to participate in their encounter with each

other and the different spiritual reflections of both the existentialist and the aesthetic dimensions they continuously deny and acknowledge.

Katherine Tarbox when discussing John Fowles' game with pornography states that the apparent inconsistencies of the game create much of the 'comic bickering' and entitle both participants to accuse each other of being pornographers. She also argues that physical parallels match the many rhetorical parallels and identifies the fugal manner behind the structure of the 'plot'.

Fowles interweaves the characters' identities in his fugal manner. [...] The ability of each to perform magic sets up an equivalence between them.[...] The two voices go around in a closed pattern and, as in a fugue, reveal themselves to be one voice shattered into variations. (Tarbox 124)

The basic constituents of fiction are also suspended between two states of 'blank page oblivion,' which conventionally could be defined as the frame of the 'nonfiction' we are reading, but as we have stated, 'blank page oblivion' is the source for the freedom to 'reforget.' This means that we have access to our private codes, only if we allow for the private codes formulated in the 'paging' course of the conversations between characters, characters and sources, or characters and artist.

If one does not want to go on ad infinitum, in the way in which Miles Green is trying to 'please' the muse in a sentence that 'lasts' eight pages, one has to use traditional referents to define the participants in the conversation. We may say that the conversations are between the variations of the artist and muse figures in a head dominated by the thought that the dimensions of time and space, of life as determined by the material world and the spiritual one, might be accessible. John Fowles expressed his conviction that "there may be a way for all of us, for you and me, to go back in time, so we could theoretically say, I feel like a talk with Shakespeare" (Mihaies23).

John Fowles' protagonists are not searching for an authentic identity, or an author. They do not want to achieve their individual freedom because they are actually elements of the process of 'reforgetting' into a 'blank page oblivion,' which can theoretically be equated with an eternal novel of freedom, which undermines its own generic conventions as Katherine Tarbox observes.

The work's theatricality, its prodigious amount of dialogue, its boastful adherence to the unities of time and place, and its stage conventions indicate that once again Fowles is undermining generic conventions (Tarbox 125)

The theoretical and imaginary quality of Miles Green' and his Muse(s)' identities, the privately code system they employ generate a process Lavers calls 'work' (202) but Barthes's definition seems more intelligible.

Woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent to contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, is itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources,' the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation, the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas. (160)

This attitude is also telling of the artist's determination to deny the possibility that stereotypes, literary or non-literary may lead to singular truth or representation of reality. Thus John Fowles' *Mantissa* significantly reformulates the author's interpretations of major themes like the relationship between art and reality, author and character, showing and telling and the author's different identities are topics discussed by the characters; the novel 'exists' in the fictional artist characters' mind.

The conflict is between the artist and his Muse(s) who (is) are trying to seduce (her) their partner and have good sex. Yet sex is a metaphor, which stands for creativity and the plot consists of a series of encounters between the artist and his muses which both describe and are the creative process. This means that both the fictionally presented narrative and rhetoric are 'doublevoiced.' Instead of explaining at length what I mean by 'doublevoiced' I quote a section of Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the subject in 'poetic' writing. Kristeva perfects her interpretation of Ferdinand de Saussure's thesis regarding 'ambivalent,' 'unassimilable' scientific writing:

The minimal unit of poetic language is at least double, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms one and other ... The double would be the minimal sequence of paragrammatic semiotics to be worked out starting from the work of Saussure. (Kristeva 69)

Julia Kristeva writes about a language conceived as 'beyond logic'. She argues that Aristotle's assertion that something is either 'A' or 'not-A' is declared '0' and the 'double' of this relationship '0-2' produces an element which questions the traditional division between signified and signifier and she argues that poetic language foregrounds the "inability of any logical system based on zero-one sequence (true-false, nothingness-notation." (Kristeva 80)

This is roughly the equivalent of John Fowles' 'second remove,' a weird acknowledgement of the above mentioned 'gap' between art and reality and the 'reality' of art. This authorial intention results in the intricate relationship between basic elements of narrative like setting, time, character and conflict and the theme of freedom in the works of John Fowles.

Paul Cobley notes the problematic nature of 'side-trips' characteristic of fictional narrative and argues that these modifications, which traditionally are termed diversions or delays, cannot be explained in themselves because they actually construct the 'space' in which traditionally defined conflict, time and setting merge.

(They) might be said to possess 'space' in the movement from beginning to end, and that narratives enact in this movement a relation to time. (12)

He also suggests that in contemporary fiction we have to observe 'narrative space' which is the result of the simultaneous advance of narrative and its continuous delay of progression. Cobley refers to Roland Barthes who expressed this dynamic in *S/Z*. (1974.) Barthes's fifth code has a dual function in relation to the establishment of narrative space as it pushes the narrative forwards towards disclosure and simultaneously retards progress by false promises. Cobley's interpretation dislocates the notion of time by appropriating it roughly to the notion of suspense.

I consider this to mean that the traditional notion of time conventionally employed to describe the linear development of the protagonist's career comes to be so closely associated with the concept of the progression of the narrative that the two are essentially interchangeable.

As the above analysis showed, for John Fowles the concept of freedom itself is problematic and the conflict emerges from the competition of conflicting opposites, which also construct the notion of time and space and the specific sense of situatedness is both maintained and undermined with the result that both objective time and setting are rendered subservient to their subjective reflections in a fashion that matches Paul Ricoeur's definition.²

On the basis of the above I can conclude that the dimension of time is both stated in a conventional sense and it is deconstructed; the process, which results in this dislocated sense of time is often revealed at the level of the plot, and is thus organically linked to other elements of John Fowles' fiction. For example, John Fowles' intrusion into the fictional world of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* dislocates the conventional sense of time-continuum, the symbolic

² Ricoeur, Paul 1981. 'Narrative Time' in Mitchell, W. J. T. (ed.) *On Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 167

quality of the setting in *The Collector* describes a contemporary underworld, Nicholas Urfel journeys or side-trips, the detours³ reveal the relevance of art and can be interpreted as John Fowles's corrections on the conventional function and interpretation of setting, and dislocated setting and time. John Fowles' *Mantissa* also documents the importance of this continuous reworking of the concepts of time and setting in the contemporary British novelist's fiction.

In *Mantissa* the original definitions of space, time and character allow for an equally 'free' interpretation of other basic elements of fiction like cause and effect or consistency. If space is identified in terms of spiritual reflection of the idea of space contained in a ward-like skull, time is interpreted in the context of another dimension. The situation could be used as a brilliant illustration of Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of time with which he sets out to demonstrate in *Time and Narrative* that time is not just a part of the narrative apparatus, but time and narrative are on intimate terms precisely because narrative is the human relation to time.

In the novels of John Fowles the mobility of the narrative point of view imposes the flexibility of the narrative structure and vice versa. Paul Cobley recognizes the difficulty of coping with the different definitions of narrative and argues that the greatest problem is that conventional interpretations tend to wipe the difference between narrative and story. His suggestion in this respect can be of some help.

Put very simply, 'story' consists of all the events, which are to be depicted. 'Plot' is the chain of causation, which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. 'Narrative' is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. (Cobley 5-6)

In the novels of John Fowles showing, telling and the mode of selection are depicted in relation to author, character and the modifications of 'causation.' Fowles manipulates the larger structure of his fiction and it is sufficient to remember the simulacrum of dual narrative, the 'diary in fiction' he employs in *The Collector*, the multiple endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the speculative principles which are characteristic of *The Ebony Tower*, the 'metatheatre-in-fiction' solution in *The Magus*, the portrayal of competing forms of art in *Daniel Martin*. *Mantissa* is also an excellent example regarding John Fowles' experiments with story, plot and narrative.

In *Mantissa* an incessant dialogue emerges from blank page oblivion and succumbs to the same re-forgotten state creating a frame, which constructs a

³ See Brooks, Peter. 1982. "Freud's master plot," in Felman, S. (ed.) *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading Otherwise*. Baltimore and London: Yale University Press.

fictional space. The structure that regulates sexual encounter which is the central metaphor of the book and the dialogue present the process by way of which art has been created for centuries with the help of the image of love making, which can be interpreted as conception resulting in a novel and demonstrates the validity of the wormholes principle.⁴ The existence of parallel dimensions of life and of all the notions associated with human existence has been explained through recent theories in the field of quantum physics which suggest the possibility that we have to cope with multiverse instead of universe and in *Mantissa* the 'objective correlative' that brings the individual, universal and 'multiversal' notions together is sex.

In *Mantissa* the 'flexible' frame implements a specific logic and this allows for the inexplicable to assume the status of the rational and Erato's statement that she is divine makes her divine. This flexibility produces an infinite variety of points of view, there are at least two 'centres of consciousness,' which occasionally are identical, but very often contradict each other and so I have to accept the explanations or the guidelines otherwise formulated by the novel. The overall effect might be termed the 'mirror in the mask' and results in partial revelation of the distortions produced by the pretended intimacy of the whole process which constructs and deploys the 'space' in which author, character and aesthetic correlatives coexists.

I am trying to explain the term by 'bringing together' Nancy Miller's interpretation of the subordinate protagonist and Barthes's theory regarding the death of the author. Miller writes:

Only the subject who is both self-possessed and possesses access to the library of the already read has the luxury of flirting with the escape from identity (...) promised by an aesthetics of the decentered (decapitated, really) body. (Miller 83)

Barthes draws our attention to the conventionally hierarchized, filial relationship between author and reader the following in the conclusion to 'The Death of the Author.'

A text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost, a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet, this destination cannot any longer be personal: the

⁴ See Deutsch, D. 1997. *The Fabric of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

reader is without history, biography, psychology, he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. (Barthes 148)

In nearly all the novels of John Fowles the fictional character's identity is problematic. The alternatives John Fowles invents result in open structures, which could be interpreted on the basis of its loose analogy with what Gerard Genette calls the architext: "The architext, is then, everywhere – above, beneath, around the text, which spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architexture" (Genette 83-4). *Mantissa* is equivocal in this respect because the novel is a fictional monologue written in the form of dialogue and thus the dominance of the subjective element does not allow for a traditionally conceivable conflict between the subjective and the objective dimensions.

I am speaking of monologue because the novel is a 'brainscript' in which the fictional artist-figure and his muses can be multiplied and re-imagined continuously. This solution contributes to the greater mobility of the already flexible concepts of space and sequentiality and reminds us of the fact that storytelling is intentional and illusory and produces a number of representations of the characters. Referring to the way in which representation works Wolfgang Iser has stated that "no rendering can be that which it renders" and thus countless representations of a character's and fiction's identities are possible (251).

Consequently we can state that in *Mantissa* John Fowles does not even suggest that once the 'blank page' freedom is granted the participants have achieved a spiritual, heavenly harmony, rather, a blank page has to be 'written' so as to allow for yet another beginning, another 'blank page.' Intertexts abound, but the most convincing example of the intentional misinterpretation of earlier narrative is the 'little something' the Muse terms a 'kind of fluke best-seller' which turns out to be *The Odyssey*. The situation and the discourse remind one of Kristeva's 'doublevoice': text, character and conflict assume a 'double' identity which functions on the 0:2 principle, that is they are both 'A' and 'not-A'. This is relevant because it contributes to the freedom provided by paradox in situations when the Muse deploys a vast array of literary forms and thus registers the novel's dependence on established forms of representation, or what Barthes calls doxa.

Finally, the most eloquent authorial intention, which supports these original solutions can be formulated on the basis of the literary allusions John Fowles employs. Literary allusions provide some sort of justification for both the novel and the fiction within the novel. Ben Porat considers that allusion is "a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts" (107) mainly through correspondence and *Mantissa* is also about similar possible correspondence

between texts and how the 'aesthetic correlative principle' can and does construct the 'inner space as text' reflected in the 'mirror in the mask.'

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