

DIALOGUE AND CONSTRUCTION OF WOMAN IN JOHN FOWLES’S *A MAGGOT*

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Abstract

This article explores how John Fowles, in his last published novel *A Maggot* (1985), has depicted the figure of woman in a strong dialogical position, as a matriarch leading the entire dialogical narrative of the novel. For Fowles, the woman has metamorphosed from being a fallen and problematic woman into a successful and sacred historical mother of Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. Indeed through the dialogical confrontations of the Shaker woman, Rebecca Lee, with her multi-faceted challenges of the lawyer Henry Ayscough, the patriarch, who has constantly constructed her as a fallen woman, Fowles deployed a very problematic construction for women, thereby challenging all the traditional discourses of female forbidden behaviour and quizzing the decidedly patriarchal perception of women within the seventeenth-century English culture (the novel is a late twentieth-century text about the seventeenth century) in terms of sexuality, education, and the corruption of law system, and also to reconstruct the Shakers’ weird idea of redemption. This article focuses on the question of how Fowles sees the woman; how she should be perceived: the fallen figure and the female sexuality is a masculine construct within a patriarchal society, whereas in reality and for the Shakers, she is an immutable sacred matriarch. For Fowles, this “divine matriarch” is Rebecca Lee (aliases Fanny, Louise), the former Quaker woman forced by circumstances into prostitution. She was the poor woman hired by Mr. Bartholomew to accompany him on his journey, and she was the only living witness of the mysterious events in the cave, and the one who went on to become the fictional mother of the historical Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. Indeed *A Maggot* attempts to resolve such ambiguities and paradoxes of the role of woman within the cultural and ideological limitations of her society.

Keywords: John Fowles, *A Maggot*, Dialogue, woman

When the central female character of John Fowles’s last published novel *A Maggot* (1985) has metamorphosed towards the end of the narrative

from being a fallen woman into a She-Christ figure, the historical mother of Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, the novel exhibits its radically dialogical representation of woman in a problematic but successful way. Through dialogue and dialogism the figure of woman in this novel, Rebecca Lee, has dramatically shown herself to be a stronger subject than the man, her original manipulator. Rebecca has embodied what it turned out to be one of the major issues and events in Christian eschatology about the afterlife, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the New Heaven and the New Earth of the World to Come as embodied by the Shakers. Indeed through the Shakers as a Christian sect, and through such eschatological beliefs in the Second Coming of Christ, and through the various notions of dialogism and subjectivity employed in the narrative, Fowles has deployed a very problematic construction of woman, thereby challenging all the traditional discourses of female forbidden behaviour and quizzing the decidedly patriarchal perception of women within the seventeenth-century English culture (the novel is a late twentieth-century text about the seventeenth century) in terms of sexuality, education, and the corruption of law system, and also to reconstruct the female idea of redemption. This article focuses primarily on the question of how Fowles, through the various dialogical narrative representations, sees the way woman should be perceived: the fallen figure is a masculine construct within a patriarchal society, whereas in reality, and for the Shakers, she is an immutable “Divine Matriarch”. This “divine matriarch” is Rebecca Lee (aliases Fanny, Louise), the former Quaker woman forced by circumstances into prostitution. This woman was hired by Mr. Bartholomew to accompany him on his journey, and she was the only living witness of the mysterious events in the cave, and she went on to become the fictional mother of the historical Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. *A Maggot* attempts to resolve such ambiguity and paradoxes in the role of woman within the cultural and ideological limitations of her society.

Initially, the novel’s dialogical narrative structure embodies these elements of female sexuality and free subjectivity. As the narrative opens one of the first things that the reader notices is the fact that this novel has a radical form of narration, a plot that depends on dialogue, a form of question-and-answer technique. The novel seems to be divided into two main parts, and each of which is characterised by a specific point of view or a specific narrative technique. In the first part, which comes closest to a traditional third-person narrative, the reader is presented with the last moments in the lives of a group of five travellers, all of whom are on horseback, making their way along a remote upland in the northern parts of Devon, Fowles’s favourite locale. The time is in the late afternoon of the last day of April 1736. The identity of these travellers appears at first to be anonymous, or they are in disguise: Mr. Bartholomew (a duke’s son) is

playing the role of nephew to Mr. Brown (the known actor Francis Lacy); there is also his deaf-mute servant Dick Thurlow; the servant Sergeant Farthing (David Jones, another minor actor/rascal from Wales) is playing the role of guard to protect them from thieves along the journey; Fanny-Louise-Rebecca (a Quaker maid from Bristol) is also hired from a London brothel as a whore to attend to Mr. Bartholomew's sexual need, and secretly to Dick's; when Lacy reports to Bartholomew that he saw her sleeping with his servant Dick Bartholomew retorts: "May a man not lie with his own wife?"¹⁰ Their declared mission is to go to Bideford in order to rescue a girl with whom Bartholomew is supposedly in love, and whom he wants to marry against his father's wishes. But when they arrive at an inn in "the small town of C—," (14) Barnstaple, they spend the night there and soon their dubious relationships become more complicated when in the next morning Lacy and Jones's mission comes to an end and they go their own separate ways, whereas Mr. Bartholomew, his servant Dick, and Fanny go on to a cavern in Cleeve Wood, two or three miles above the Bideford road near the parish of Dacombe, where the entire mystery of the narrative lies. It is near that cave that Dick was found hanged, the horse of Bartholomew being tied to a mast, and Bartholomew and Fanny had disappeared. This traditional narration stops within the space of sixty pages of the novel. The second section or the remainder of the novel is dedicated to the lawyer, Henry Ayscough, who is appointed, seeming by the duke, to investigate the disappearance of Bartholomew and the murder of his servant Dick. The central cave episode in the novel dramatically alters the destinies of all three characters involved and leads indirectly to the birth of a great woman prophet, Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers.

This means that most of the novel is mediated to us through the interrogation conducted by Ayscough and by means of so many historical meta-texts as letters, interview transcripts, and facsimile pages from contemporary issues of *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Indeed the problem of point of view in the novel is problematized because Fowles both invokes as well as undermines the standards and procedures of a traditionally omniscient narrator. In addition to the "Q" and "A" technique, he uses, for instance, the present tense rather than the past, as if to suggest that his characters' future is something he has not yet witnessed and is therefore unable to reveal to us. In addition, he makes it clear that he knows no more about the novel's characters than anyone else who might have met them on the road for the first time. In one instant, Fowles gave us a very limited point of view when, at one point, Ayscough sends his clerk Tudor to go and fetch

¹⁰ John Fowles, *A Maggot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 44. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text of this paper.

some water for Rebecca, he makes Tudor leave the room, and then the text is interrupted, because it has been Tudor himself who has written down the conversation of Rebecca and Ayscough. In a *Tristram-Shandy*-like manner, we are almost presented with a blank page, to suggest that the act of writing is interrupted for the period of one-page length (p. 318). Such game is repeated with changing roles as Tudor and Rebecca leave the room to have something to eat: this time, the reader is not being informed about what Ayscough might be doing during their absence (p. 324). This change once again invokes the presence of an omniscient author, who no matter what he claims of innocence and not interfering in his dialogical narrative his game will always be clear to the reader. This is of course identical to the postmodernist critique that a total absence of author and/or narrator is virtually impossible. That is why Fowles leaves it to the reader to speculate whether or not Rebecca is a free person: “and how different from them she has chosen, or has been chosen, to be” (320). What really Fowles is saying in this novel is that a lot of the traditional tasks of the writer are actually transferred to the reader.

The main part of the novel is then devoted to the proceedings of the lawyer Ayscough, who on the request of Bartholomew’s father, questions all the travellers, as well as the persons they encountered during their journey, in order to try and find out what had happened to Bartholomew, who has completely disappeared. As readers, we are presented with the protocols made by Ayscough’s clerk, John Tudor, which constitute the main body of the novel. Nothing of the possible explanations for the disappearance of Bartholomew is ultimately convincing. The most likely interpretation, which is provided by Rebecca, is that he has undergone a profound religious or esoteric experience which comes close to a revelation, but which in the narrative of Rebecca, by then a member of the Shaker community, also reads like an enduring purgatorial trip. Indeed this novel contains the theme of a woman helping a man to overcome his esoterical/quasi-religious convictions (evidenced by the mysterious papers in his box). It is clear that Rebecca’s testimony makes him question the validity of rationalism, but it is not clear that she helps him towards more knowledge about himself or authenticity. She does this despite how badly she was treated by Bartholomew; through her virtues she was able to realize that her past construction as a prostitute was wrong and evil.

At the beginning of the novel Fanny-Louise is constructed as an evil seductress Eve, who seems to be enjoying the forbidden pleasures of wild nature, of life. Whereas religious myths had it that Eve really ate the forbidden fruit in order to be like God, prideful, not lustful, to become an “Eve”, “Mary”, and “Mary Magdalene”. Louise thus represents female sexuality, the forbidden pleasures and the paradoxically reasonable and yet

the forbidden fruit of life and knowledge. At the end of the novel she becomes the Eve that attempts to redeem her action of eating from the Tree of *Knowledge* of Good and Evil. On the whole, Fowles steers away from equating female sexuality with sinfulness, which in itself is a radical move in the way sexual pleasure was forbidden to seventeenth-century women. Instead he gave women such a divine position as a she-Christ. Rebecca's trials in the second half of the novel is a judgmental trial, a divine trial of the Judgment Day, conducted by the Patriarch, the symbol of law, against the sinful female who passed off this trial to become a saint, a Matriarch, the Holy Mother Wisdom, the She-Christ, Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. The novel represents indeed this link between spiritual redemption and social reformation as a whole.

Such a great position of woman is thus built through dialogue, as Fowles himself has once emphasised about the heavy use of dialogue in his novel.¹¹ Dialogue becomes the basis upon which the novelist establishes his evaluations of both the narrative and the characters. Dialogue operates as a narrative variant, a direct encounter with the action rather than a means through which the narrator reflects it. As Norman Page argues, the "strength" of any dialogue "lies in its being more direct and dramatic than authorial exposition": that is, the structure of catechism or cross-examination "has a directness, a sureness and a sense of purpose."¹² Such directness and sureness of dialogue can be seen throughout the novel but one example here will be sufficient as the dialogue between Ayscough and Jones:

Q. Saw you no horse, no attendant?

A. No, sir. She alone.

Q. In what manner stood she?

A. As one who awaits, sir.

Q. She did not speak?

A. Not that I spied.

Q. How far apart were they?

A. It might be thirty, forty paces, sir.

Q. Was she fair in appearance?

A. I could not tell, sir. (223)

This type of dialogue is identical to that of drama where the "Q", question and "A", answer signify the speakers and their directness in a play.

Indeed Fowles believes that "dialogue" actually generates meanings more and expostulates characters more vividly than in normal narratorial

¹¹ In an interview with Robert Foulke, Fowles declares: "the dialogue especially is very important in a novel. As I grew older, I've come to think that's really one of the most important aspects of a successful work." Robert Foulke, "A Conversation with John Fowles," *Salmagundi* 68-69 (Fall 1985-Winter 1986): 370.

¹² Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (London: Longman, 1973), p. 14, 18.

expositions. Fowles elaborates this narrative choice through his admiration for the art of legal verification, which is solely dependent on dialogue, and which is closer to dramatic than to narrative art:

I've become more and more interested in the problems of dialogue writing in the novel. To me this is the crucial thing, because it's the difficult area for all novelists. But it so happens that, for many years, I've had a particular fondness for old trial reports. Before I wrote *A Maggot* I tried to work out why I particularly liked old murder and treason trials, whatever they might be, which are all in the "Q" and "A" form. I decided it was because they left out one important branch of novel writing, which is describing how people look and what they do: you know, "He opened the window, lit a cigarette, had another whiskey," or whatever it is. All novelists secretly like difficulties, we set ourselves difficulties, and I thought that this was a nice one to set. You're throwing out half your weapons, in fact.... So that was the main reason for that choice; trying to prove I can do with one arm, what, in the past, I've done with both.¹³

This suggests that the importance of dialogue is thus to help the reader overcome the mystery of the narrative, the absence of everything but the language itself, to make him/ her see the power of the language itself. Dialogue enables the reader to formulate the meanings of the situations that are in the text instead of receiving them from an authorial narrator. Indeed with dialogue the text becomes "open" for different interpretations, hence its refusal of a monologic and single meaning. In this way, the reader becomes the master of the text, where he is able to determine his own position away from the "intention" of the author. Such authorial "intention" becomes an illusion when the eerie power of the cave and what actually happens there, towards which our attention is always drawn and redrawn, is constantly foregrounded in the dialogue and becomes the subject for speculation by the reader.

The best critic to elaborate this question of "dialogue" and to use it in its best form is the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin in two of his best books *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination*. He deploys the term "dialogic" to mean a way of negotiating the range of voices that constitute the narrative in a novel. Whereas dialogue is only concerned with an aspect of the structural mode of narration, dialogic, according to Bakhtin, always embodies a range of mutually antagonistic social discourses. It is the dialogic that constitutes the social confrontation between the speakers designated in a text, and this can usually be read in terms of class opposition.

¹³ James Baker, "An Interview with John Fowles," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25, no. 4 (1986): 671.

This conflict, which is inherently concretized in *A Maggot*, for instance, through the dialogue itself, impinges upon the related problems of form and meaning in the novel. Bakhtin's definition of dialogic involves the coexistence in a text of many voices, "of several consciousnesses, of which no one fully becomes the object of any other one."¹⁴ He insists, "no one fully becomes the object of the other" because what is posited as a narratorial metalanguage cannot, in the final analysis, occlude these other antagonistic discourses. Dialogic indeed is represented by the multiplicity or plurality of discourses that resist, reject, and subvert the single, monolithic, monologic, and authoritative discourse, which is in its turn attempts to impose its own overarching position. Bakhtin argues that authors are able to choose either to let the novel discourses intercommunicate and mediate themselves without authoritative interference, or to control these discourses by imposing a privileged authorial metalanguage. Ultimately, for Bakhtin dialogic means that the authority of such a metalanguage, or the dominant narrative discourse, is constantly undermined from below, creating what is in effect a polyphonic text.

This undermining of the authority of the dominant and monologic discourse, maintained in the novel by the masculine figure, Ayscough, and the surfacing of the female position, embodied by Rebecca, and strengthening her power nicely reflects Fowles's deployment of a polyphonic juxtaposition of rival discourses in the novel. Again, as Bakhtin reveals, if dialogism ends, "everything ends."¹⁵ "Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence."¹⁶ Dialogism is "multiply enriching", it opens new possibilities for each culture, promotes "renewal and enrichment" and creates new potentials, new voices, that may become realisable in a future dialogic interaction. Thus, the novel's dialogism offers an arena of communication between otherwise alienated and marginalised social groups who not only gain a voice during such social clash, but they also say something about the ideology that seeks to silence them. Such juxtaposition of multiple voices in *A Maggot* then forbids and subverts all the attempts made by Ayscough to incriminalize Rebecca, who ultimately proves herself to be equal to him, if not better than him when she turns out to be the mother of a She-Christ. Rebecca and Ayscough seem to be in a carnival, and in this carnival, as Bakhtin also argues in support of cultural history, "a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Michigan: Ardis/Ann Arbor, 1973), p. 14.

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), p. 252.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.”¹⁷ The dialogic structure of the novel then opens up an arena of communication between the Self and the Other; it serves to emancipate characters from the hegemony of any one totalizing discourse; it signals its essential role in subverting monologic and totalizing narratives always maintained not only by the male figure in the novel but also by his rich class.

The novel’s dialogue strongly embodies this class-confrontation between Rebecca and Ayscough, between all those working-class representatives and those rich ones. The lawyer Ayscough always continues his aggressive attitude towards his working-class witnesses Rebecca and Jones. He tells Jones not to speak in his incomprehensible Welsh tongue and warns him to stop using his “vulgar” language in his testimony (205). He is always constructed by Ayscough as a “barbaric,” working-class, “evil” man, whose language is also inscribed as “vulgar”: “And enough of thy barbarous gibberish” (213), Ayscough rebukes him. Ayscough hates the Welsh, and this contempt shows plainly his unsympathetic and racist treatment of Jones: “Jones, I warn thee. Thou reek’st of lies as thy country’s breath doth stink of leeks” (210). But this contemporary reproach is then heavily qualified, and we are even invited to see Ayscough in more positive terms: “The lawyer’s crudely chauvinistic contempt for his witness is offensive, but it is stock, and really has to do little with poor Jones’s Welshness” (232). Similarly, Rebecca speaks a different language from Ayscough, and she maintains: “thee hast thy alphabet, and I mine, that is all. And I must speak mine” (317). Thus both Rebecca and Jones are marginalized through Ayscough’s social prejudice despite their resistance and their irrepressible voices that reject this “inferior” position allocated to them. But such conflict between these alphabets, these discourses, results in a kind of interaction between them, creates, as Bakhtin argues, a “dialogized hybrid”, where “within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another.”¹⁸ That means the interaction between the classes is deployed here in this novel not only to reproduce and criticize the eighteenth century but also to reveal how dialogue is seen as a kind of concrete confrontation that is coterminous with the social inequality between classes. Indeed *A Maggot* embodies what Bakhtin says of dialogue, a “novel dialogue is determined by the very socioideological evolution of languages and society.”¹⁹ That is to say, middle-class and working-class languages constitute a dialogue of social forces, and enable us to detect a spirit of dissent against all established religions and social and cultural systems in eighteenth-century England. The

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 10.

¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex. and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 76.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 365.

novel as a whole is a dialogic confrontation, and a dialogue of the working class, the middle class, and the state apparatuses that sustain the latter's superior position in the social and political hierarchy. Indeed, all Ayscough's ideals seem to be "unnatural" and against what Rebecca stands for: "[Nature] was aggressive wilderness, an ugly and all-pervasive reminder of the Fall, of man's eternal exile from the Garden of Eden; and particularly aggressive, to a nation of profit-haunted puritans, on the threshold of an age of commerce, in its flagrant uselessness" (15). He instead defends such materialist type of life that can be described as factual.

A Maggot represents in various ways these issues of culture and class-culturation maintained by Rebecca through the evocation of linguistic differences, class, and gender, as embodied in the working-class's struggle to gain positions in social life and to gain identity and equality in society. As Stuart Hall argues in a different context, the human practices (as those of Rebecca) are struggles to make history but in conditions not of one's own making; they take place within a certain "contested terrain".²⁰ Indeed Rebecca aims at a middle ground about the ongoing struggles of domination in which Ayscough is constantly trying to bend her into and how she exercises her desires to win a bit of space and some power for herself and for her own class and society. For Hall, society is a complex unity, "always having multiple and contradictory determinations, always historically specific, and always culturally ideological and hegemonic"; and therefore "identity or any structural unity emerges out of historical complexity, difference and contradiction."²¹ This is true in how Rebecca and Dick, for instance, and their lot, try to define how life is lived and experienced, to assert their struggle over necessity, to produce their own social structures, meanings, signs and discourses, and to define the ways they make sense of them, and how to resist domination. All this for them means to preserve their own culture.

To elaborate this question of identity and to reject its negative inscription, it is quite interesting to see how *A Maggot* criticizes the 18th century as a whole, and how Rebecca (as the narrator says), on the surface of things, seems to accept some demeaning characterization for her husband John Lee, as "an ignorant mystic", while in her deep heart, she rejects it:

To speak so is anachronistic. Like so many of his class at this time, he still lacks what even the least intelligent human today, far stupider even than he, would recognize – an unmistakable sense of personal identity set in a world to some degree, however small, manipulable

²⁰ See Lawrence Grossberg, "History, politics and postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies," in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*

and controllable by that identity. John Lee would not have understood *Cogito, ergo sum*; and far less its even terser modern equivalent, *I am*. The contemporary I does not need to think, to know it exists. (389)

The point of being able to say “I”, the question of “subjectivity”, and to be the “subject” of one’s actions, as this whole paper attempts to prove, is at the heart of Rebecca’s social and political endeavours throughout the novel. Here in this quote we see how Fowles compares the different respective conceptions of “personal identity” in both the 18th and 20th century. Fowles is suggesting here that Rebecca and many other 18th-century people actually reject such description and that there were some people (not necessarily “common” people as John Lee) who *had* a sense of personal identity:

To be sure the *intelligentsia* of John Lee’s time had a clear, almost but not quite modern, sense of self; but the retrospective habit we have of remembering and assessing a past age by its Popes, its Addisons and Steeles, its Johnsons, conveniently forgets how completely untypical artistic genius is of most human beings of any age, however much we force it to be the reverse. (389)

Indeed *A Maggot* embodies the cultural and ideological clashes between such representatives of different and conflicting cultures or ideologies. As generally defined, ideology is the struggle to articulate certain codes into a position of dominance, to legitimate their claim, not only to define the meaning of cultural forms but to define the relation of that meaning to reality as one of representation. Ideological practices are then those through which particular relations, particular chains of equivalences, are “fixed”, “yoked together”. They construct the necessity, the naturalness, and the “reality” of particular identifications and interpretations (and of course, the simultaneous exclusion of others as fantastic, contingent, unnatural or biased): Ayscough constantly threatens Jones “I’ll have thee swung for a horse-stealer, if not for murderer” (213). Ideology is the naturalization of a particular historical cultural articulation. This reflects to a great extent Ayscough’s rich or bourgeois ideology as practiced against Rebecca and Dick who represent the working-class in some form. What is natural for Ayscough and Mr. Bartholomew is taken for granted; dominating Dick as an obedient servant and using Rebecca as a whore is seen or defined as normal and “common sense”. Ideology is thus the naturalization of the unnatural. In fact, ideology constructs our social identities as handicapped subjects who have no power but to submit to it. Ideology always positions the individual within ideological practices as being free, as if he has a choice. Ideology is always marked by such contradictions and struggles, and therefore the individual is already defined or chained by its equivalences and

contrasts, either/or dictum, which always ushers him into structures of domination and resistance.

Moreover, ideology means *hegemony* as advanced by Antonio Gramsci, who believed that ‘the masses’ are incorporated into the scene of culture by exposing them into a larger struggle between them and the ruling bloc. Hegemony means winning the consent of the masses to the ruling bloc’s definition of reality and securing its economic domination and establishing its political power. Indeed, hegemony involves not *coercion* but *consent* on the part of the dominated,²² as particularly practiced by Ayscough and Bartholomew who seem to have “consented” to their inferior positions constructed for them in the novel. And this, in many ways, reflects what was termed by Michel Foucault as a form of “governmentality”, that is, “a means to produce conforming or *docile* citizens, most of all through the education system.”²³ Indeed Foucault argues in a similar context, that individuals are able to work out strategies by which to advance in a field or to reconcile themselves to their current position. How, for instance, poor working-class people, unable to afford certain goods in society, may make a virtue of necessity by saying they do not like them anyway. But there are cases when this scarcity is rejected through “transgressive” undermining or “carnavalesque” overturning of routines and hierarchies through passive resistance, ironical mimicry, “symbolic inversion”, “orgiastic” letting go, and even day-dreaming.²⁴ This is very close to what happens in *A Maggot*, how Rebecca tries to overturn the workers’ hierarchies through her making of the various stories and plots connected to what happens in the cave, and how she rejects Ayscough’s constant abuse in the rest of the narrative. Her power of fiction-making and story-telling, which makes Ayscough and the reader in an epistemologically similar position of difficulty, can be supported by a random example from the novel:

- A. I told tales everywhere we went, sir. Mirrors for larks, as they say.
Q. You tell me, you are now positive you was mistaken?
A. Yes, sir. Was I not?
Q. Why ask you?
A. That you should seem to doubt it, sir. ’Twas whist, whist, I smell a bird’s nest. A fancy I took, that was wrong.
Q. You are positive she was not what you thought?

²² Stuart Hall, "Encoding, decoding," in Simon During, ed. *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 90-103.

²³ During, p. 5.

²⁴ See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, “Bourgeois hysteria and the carnivalesque,” in During, pp. 284-292; Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in During, pp. 271-283; also Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); see also Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

A. I took Mr Bartholomew's word, sir. Or rather, Mr Lacy's taking of his word as to who she was. 'Twas well for him, 'twas well for me. (204)

Rebecca's plots represent the old traditional and extraordinary value and aura that she tries to give to her national culture and to her working-class society as a whole. Rebecca offers only a religious explanation for the disappearance of Bartholomew, claiming that he has gone to "June Eternal", a religiously inspired other world ruled by "Holy Mother Wisdom", a kind of female godlike principle, which is probably dangerous from the point of view of Ayscough, because there, as Rebecca reports, "it seemed all did live in common, without distinction nor difference" (373). Because Ayscough is interested in a rational explanation of the disappearance of Bartholomew, and in the maintenance of the prevailing social order, such explanation given by Rebecca actually frustrates all of his expectations. Indeed Rebecca is categorized as "irrational" and "fantastic" in the way she describes the maggot and "June Eternal": Rebecca confesses as having told Jones not the truth, but rather a fantastic story that she invented for the sake of plausibility: "I told him what he may believe" (304). In her answers to Ayscough, Rebecca does not seem to act on a similar principle, as is evident by the obvious incredulity that he shows as far as the more fantastic elements of her testimony are concerned. She replies that his failure to understand might be due to the fact that he is applying the wrong standards:

Q. I may sooner believe thee thy three witches that was told to Jones, and the Devil at thy tail, than this.

A. That is, thee art men. Thee'd make me mirror of thy sex. Dost know what a harlot is, master Ayscough? What all men would have all women be, that they may the easier think the worst of them. (360)

Initially, and strangely enough, Ayscough does not threaten her as he does with his male witnesses, and this might be due to the fact that she is a woman to whom he owes more respect and decency; another reason, which is as plausible, is the fact that Rebecca's evidence baffles him, and therefore invites her to recant her testimony:

Now I ask you mistress, you were hot, were you not out of your wits with the sun and your walking? I do not say you lie, yet that there was some disorder in your spirits, and you saw what was never there in front of you, but had pushed forth from your heated mind in the semblance of reality? (357)

It is Ayscough's ideological preconceptions that keep him from seeing the truth of Rebecca's testimony; indeed there is a considerable difference in the respective meta-narratives of Truth adopted by Ayscough and Rebecca. While the first will have only empirical and/or rational truth,

what matters for Rebecca is religious truth, a truth that cannot be empirically tested: “There are two truths, mistress. One that a person believes is truth; and one that is truth incontestable. We will credit you the first, but the second is what we seek.” “I must tell what I believe” (348). In this way Rebecca succeeds in undermining, even destroying the hegemony of his “truth” and his bourgeois ideology that seeks to have the final word about her world. Her stories also help to renew, to shed light upon life, the meanings they harbour, to elucidate potentials; they project, as they do an alternate conceptualisation of reality. In a rather similar way, and because of his disability as mute, Dick is mocked by the other characters, especially Jones, who makes fun of him and calls him an idiot. With the exception of Bartholomew and Rebecca, everybody treats him as an idiot, and simply because he cannot articulate himself in their manner. That Dick is really an idiot is far from clear, as the intrusive narrator reveals: “Yet there is nothing of the idiot about his own face. Beneath its regularity, even handsomeness - the mouth is particularly strong and well-shaped - there lurks a kind of imperturbable gravity, an otherness” (33). Bartholomew seems to have more sympathy for him: “Without me he would be a wild creature, no better than a beast, the butt of the village clowns - if they had not long before stoned him to death” (170). However, Bartholomew constructs Dick in an animal simile in the way he tames, dominates, and subjects him as an eternal servant:

I could stab him to death and he would not raise an arm to defend himself. Flay him alive, what you will, and he would submit. I am his animating principle.... Without me he’s no more than a root, a stone. If I die, he dies the next instant. He knows this as well as I. I do not say by reason. It is in his every vein and every bone, as a horse knows its true master from other riders. (171)

Indeed, as a subject, and like Rebecca, Dick is dominated by a superior patriarchal authority, and by what Althusser describes as, an “Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God.” Thus, as a “subjected being”, and as a “*free subject*,” Dick appears to be “*submitting (freely) to the commandments of the Subject*,” his master the Christ figure, and also appears to be “*(freely) accepting his subjugation*” and the inferior position drawn to him, as if he chooses “all by himself.”²⁵ David Jones, in the same way, is condemned and imprisoned within the same low social system:

Jones is and must be made to remain below the line; his ‘sentence,’ never to change, always to remain static. His movement from a Welsh nowhere (in which he was born to die) to a great English city is already an unspoken crime; if not, under the Poor Law, a definite

²⁵ Lois Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” in his *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 52, 56.

one. The word *mob* was not fifty years old in the language at this date; a shortened slang version of *mobile vulgus*, the common rabble. Mobility of movement meant change; and change is evil. (236)

Because of the dialogic texture of the novel, because of the difference between the linguistic forms as maintained by the characters, and because of the multiplicity of voices in it, *A Maggot* seems to conform to most of the characteristics of the interrogative text. As Catherine Belsey argues, the interrogative text is a text that “disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the ‘author’ inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory.”²⁶ In *A Maggot* the interrogative form of “Q” and “A” effaces the author’s role or the narrator’s as a “name” that serves to position his own situation. Indeed the interrogative technique of the novel “literally invites the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises,” as well as leaving the reader free to locate his/her own position in the text.²⁷ In order to illustrate this claim I will give a random example from the novel’s predominant dialogue:

Q. Had you seen them before stare in this manner?

A. Yes, once or twice, not so long.

Q. It was not as master and man?

A. More as two children will stare at each other out.

Q. Then with a seeming hostility?

A. Not that, either, not as an ordinary look. As if they spoke, tho’ their mouths moved not. (338)

Here the reader is invited to produce an answer to the question of why Mr. Bartholomew and Dick stare at each other before they arrive at the cave. Rebecca does not reveal to Ayscough or to the reader the meaning of this stare or the nature of their relationship till later in her testimony. Thus the reader has to go backwards and forward in the narrative in order to resolve the ambiguous relationship between Dick and his master (backwards, to what Lacy has already said about it on pp. 170-71, and to what Rebecca is going to say later on pp. 420-25) and in so doing s/he is able to decide on his/her own position in the text. Indeed in *A Maggot* the reader is always decentered in relation to the novel’s various discourses: the novel deploys religious polemics, historical chronicles, journalistic texts, Puritanical texts, fantastic texts, political and juridicial testimonies, and literary allusions to the drama of the age. Hence, decentering implies that the reader cannot possibly achieve a single position in relation to all heterogeneous discourses, in the same way that s/he will never know what really happens in the cave.

²⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Decentering thus means that both the reader's position and the authority of the narrative are being interrogated, questioned, and problematized, with no answers being produced at the end.

Indeed the novel's ending supports this element of "openness" and that there is nothing definitely given to the reader. When Ayscough finally writes to Bartholomew's father that all his efforts have remained fruitless, the narrator enters the story in a sudden and ambiguous way, in the form of an epilogue, to warn us not to adopt the interpretation that the baby that is mentioned as Rebecca's would later, and in the real world, become the founder of the Shaker community: "Readers who know something of what that Manchester baby was to become in the real world will not need telling how little this is a historical novel. I believe her actual birth was two months before my story begins, on 29 February 1736" (455). The obvious vagueness of this quote rather supports the novel's fictionality; it serves to make the reader who does not know what became of the baby in the real world will now be on the track to find that out, even if he is warned against it. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Fowles wants us to occupy ourselves with the theme of the Shaker movement, but not for its religious, but for its social content: "In so much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question—what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human society? –we have not progressed one inch" (459). This social injustice is in fact what Rebecca has constantly attempted to highlight in her narratives and adamantly to reject it

The multiplicity of voices in *A Maggot* then and the employment of dialogue or what is termed as the interrogative text enhances further how Bakhtin characterises his notion of dialogue, as being an important part of all those ideological positions and interdependent relationships that he believed were a reflection of all human thought:

The idea lives not in one person's isolated individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others. Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice, that is, in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice-consciousness the idea is born and lives.²⁸

For Bakhtin, true thought is not to be found in the isolated minds of individuals, but at that point of dialogic contact between people engaged in

²⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 88.

discourse as a whole. Indeed, as if reflecting *A Maggot*, in describing the nature of the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin sees the entire scope of human life as a dialogic process whereby we find meaning only through our interactions with others:

Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally. And this is so because dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance.²⁹

Fowles seems to me as one of the very good examples of writers who confuses this mixture of languages or dialects as marks of contrasts between the rich and the poor. The various obstacles faced by Rebecca and Dick and their poor class by Mr. Bartholomew and later Ayscough may seem like forged attempts at assimilating the disparate utterances of a certain language or class. Again Bakhtin theorises on this:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.³⁰

Ironically enough, the ideological official language or the “authoritative” and “internally persuasive discourse,” of Ayscough ultimately fails in such assimilation when we see how Rebecca was finally the winner against them all. Indeed Rebecca does succeed at emancipation when she has constantly centralised her marginalised discourses. She seems to have conformed to how Gérard Genette defines “discourse.” For Genette discourse constitutes the whole novel, and any narrative is a product of the interaction of its different component discourses, levels, categories or characters. And the power of narratology lies in the interrelated relationships among these discourses.³¹ In this way, Fowles succeeds in connecting and may be conscripting all the historical or realistic inter-texts in order to support Rebecca's case, discourses. The reader is always asked to perceive, navigate, and even transcend such discourses, and to understand how they

²⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 294.

³¹ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, 2nd ed, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); also his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 2nd ed. trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); also his *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation: Literature, Culture, Theory*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

acquire a communal memory of knowledge, attitudes, and maybe a repertoire of human experience, a collective authority.

All this focus on dialogism as an arena of communication between the Self and the Other, as always attempted by Rebecca, enhances further her radically-free emergence as the Great Mother, Ann Lee, the She-Christ of the Shakers. As if reflecting the Lacanian theory of the “subject” and “subjectivity,” Rebecca embodies the urge to give her “subjectivity” a place from which she can speak. She has always been constructed as the marginalised “other” facing and challenging the “self,” Ayscough. Rebecca builds up her subjectivity as “self,” not to be always the neglected “other”. The central opposition operative, according to Lacan, is that there is always some split in the human subjectivity. He insists that the individual’s “corporeal” condition (needs, urges, wants, requirements, emotions, desires, and enjoyments) inevitably propels him/her to enter into a socio-symbolic order organized by trans-individual systems of representation and exchange. The ‘subject’ is made and re-made in our confrontation with the Other, a concept which in turn shifts with context. The Other is “the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks along with he who hears, what is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding, in hearing it, whether the one has spoken or not.”³² The Other is that which speaks across the split we carry within ourselves between the unconscious and conscious. For Lacan, the total unity and wholeness is in itself an illusion for we will continually misperceive ourselves. Human beings, for Lacan, are fundamentally and constitutively maladapted in relation to their “reality,” to their natural/material as well as social/cultural milieu. This is very close to how Catherine Belsey defines the Lacanian ‘subject’, whose “contradictions” are “perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation.”³³ Thus, as Terry Eagleton would put it, and as if echoing Rebecca’s efforts at self-transformation, “the whole field of the ‘Other’” is what generates the self.³⁴

Rebecca’s “subjectivity” is thus embodied in acknowledging the existence of her female sexuality, and rejecting the way it is constructed as “womanly lust” by Ayscough and his class of men not only during the 18th century but also in the modern one:

Q. Did Dick come privately to you?

A. Yes.

³² See Jacques Lacan, “The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis”, (1955), in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 358.

³³ Belsey, p. 65.

³⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 174.

Q. And you lay with him?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you not tired by then of his attentions?

A. I accepted them as before, tho' not as harlot.

Q. Out of pity, you would say?

A. Yes.

Q. Did he not arouse thy womanly lust?

A. That is not thy business. (331)

Rebecca often reproaches Ayscough for transgressing the limits of her privacy, and she sees it as her task to make him aware that some of the clichés in his mind are not factual truths about women, but rather constructs that men have found pleasing. It is because men have power over the representative media as well as the ways in which women articulate themselves that a “womanly truth” can neither be uttered nor established:

Q. How, are all women whores?

A. Whores in this. We may not say what we believe, nor say what we think for fear we be mocked because we are women. If men think a thing be so, so must it be, we must obey. I speak not of thee alone, it is so with all men, and everywhere. (421)

In this way Rebecca embodies a strong form of dissent in the novel, not only a religious dissent but also social and political. Rebecca seems to be advancing her revolutionary Shaker doctrine which emphasises the equality of both men and women, which she advances throughout the novel. The narrator of the epilogue at the end of the novel suggests a definition of “dissent”: “a refusal to believe what those in power would have us believe—what they would command and oblige us, in all ways from totalitarian tyranny and brutal force to media manipulation and cultural hegemony, to believe” (459). Her aims are indeed to maintain her Shaker reformatory doctrine that represents the “right” interpretation of religion:

Lee is the more strong in her perversity, Yr Grace will devine, for that the rota fortunae did bring her greatly above her destined station, notwithstanding it were by vice and immodesty. She was never, as is the commonality of her sex, brought to know God's wisdom in decreeing for them their natural place as helpmeet to man, in house and home alone (442).

Indeed Rebecca believes that those in power, in her 18th-century society, as well as does her creator in late 20th century, position on the margins any form of religious dissent as “a hypocritical cloak for rebellious sedition and political subversion.”³⁵ That is why Rebecca (through Fowles's

³⁵ N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), p. 29.

narrator) stresses the importance of dissent as a valid and strong form of abolition of old structures in our society today as it was in the past:

But in essence [dissent] is an eternal biological or evolutionary mechanism, not something that was needed once, merely to meet the chance of an earlier society, when religious belief was the great metaphor, and would-be conforming matrix, for many things beside religion. It is needed always, and in our own age more than ever before. (459)

This is a clear warning for the modern reader simply not to assume that our own century has overcome the fundamental flaws of 18th-century society: “In so much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question— what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human society? –we have not progressed one inch” (459). This may also explain why Rebecca believes that Mr. Bartholomew is a Christ figure and Dick is his worldly part; and in order to pass his purgatorial trial Dick has to go through slavery and humiliation in the service of “His Lordship”:

I spake this yesterday of his Lordship and his man, how in much they seemed as one. And now do I see they were as one in truth, Dick of the carnal and imperfect body, his Lordship of the spirit; such twin natures as we all must hold, in them made onward and a seeming two. And as Jesus Christ’s body must die upon the Cross, so must this latterday earthly self, poor unregenerate Dick, die so the other self be saved. I tell thee now again I believe that other self shall be seen no more upon this earth, no not ever as he has been; yet is he not dead, but lives in June Eternal, and is one with Jesus Christ. (421-22)

Rebecca is so pleased that she, as well as Dick, is saved through death and suffering: “my heart rejoices he is dead; and that for his sake, not mine. Now he shall rise again, without his sins” (426). Rebecca rejects Ayscough’s accusations by foregrounding her ultimate Shaker aim as a whole: “I’ll tell thee my evil purpose. Most in this world is unjust by act of man, not of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Change is my purpose.” She is so “determined to be obdurate, to concede nothing” (429) to such patriarchal powers. Thus, she resists, humiliates, and condemns Ayscough as an Antichrist who will be punished in Hell; she describes him as a blind and “evil dwarf”:

I tell thee a new world comes, no sin shall be, no strife more between man and man, between man and woman, nor parent and child, nor master and servant. No, nor wicked will, nor washing of hands, nor shrugging of shoulders, nor blindness like thine to all that breaks thy comfort and thy selfish ways. No judge shall judge the poor, who would steal himself, were he them; no, nor greed shall rule, likewise

not vanity, nor cruel sneers, nor feasting while others starve, nor happy shoes and shirts while any go naked. (431)

This passage really summarises the whole novel; it epitomises the principles of change that Rebecca and all her poor class and Shaker ideology attempt to advance throughout the novel. In fact, Fowles's interests in the Shakers and in their socioreligious, political, and existential principles stem from his humanism and his deep convictions in the freedom of the individual and of society as a whole.

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