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ART AND LIFE IN JOHN FOWLES'S "THE EBONY TOWER"

The second half of the twentieth century brings chaos and disorder in all spheres of life. Man's ideas of freedom and selfhood are questioned, modern psychology becomes incomprehensible and the notions of art and life are easily confused as having incoherent meanings. Artists who are excessively preoccupied with form devalue thought in result of which expression dominates what is being expressed. There are no longer only two contrasting approaches – one advocating equation of life and art and the other separating them definitely from each other. From the multiplicity of attitudes arise different concepts of the artist. John Fowles as a theoretician and practitioner deals with art on the pages of his novels and short-stories which are peopled by painters, writers, musicians who differ not only in their craft but in their vision of art as well. There is a broad panorama of artistic creeds in Fowles's books including that of the author himself which is perversely simplified in *The Aristos*:

Inside this fundamental relationship with time, the artist has used his art, his ability to create for three main purposes. . . . His simplest purpose is to describe the outer world; his next is to express his feelings about that outer world, and his last is to express his feelings about himself.¹

Fowles states in his "self-portrait in ideas" that man's superiority lies in the ability to make unscientific judgements, to give answers to the questions maths and physics cannot answer. While making a decision man is helped by philosophy and art, science with its complexities and specialisations blurs the human context. It is embedded in human nature to believe in hazard and intuition, to deal with mysteries which cannot be solved and it is only art that can offer it. In *The Aristos* Fowles glorifies art and presents the artist as superior to a scientist. Hence the two

¹ John Fowles, *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 189.

characters in *The Collector*² cannot understand each other as Miranda revels in art without explaining it and Clegg follows only objective scientific knowledge. She tries to draw him into the world of art but she fails in the same way as the narrator of "Poor Koko" – the third story in *The Ebony Tower*³ collection. Inability to communicate through art leads to conflict and disaster which in *The Collector* is Miranda's death and in "Poor Koko" is a cruel act of biblioclasm – destroying the writer's life work. *The Magus*⁴ throws a different light on the relation of art and life, it presents Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* reversed. In the novel life imitates theatre whose actors are real people and a director – an unknown manipulator playing god. The master-player Conchis makes it impossible for his puppet Nicholas to establish coherent unities of reality and unreality. Likewise it is not easy to distinguish between reality and fiction in the short-story "The Enigma." Having defied the rules of the detective story and common sense the author lets his character walk out on the reader and he makes life and art overlap. The same happens in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*⁵ where the participation of the reader in the lives of the novel's heroes makes the novel a living work of art.

How intricate a problem art in Fowles's fiction is can be seen in "The Ebony Tower" – the title story of the collection. Art appears here on many levels. Most obviously the story's characters are artists, namely painters whose lives and careers are focused on painting, organising exhibitions, teaching Academy students and writing critical reviews of others' works. It is not only Williams and Breasley, the main heroes, who are painters in the story, but there are some women who share the same profession as well, namely Diana, one of the girls in the manor and Williams's wife. Consequently there is some room for comparison of attitudes and styles. John Fowles, however, does not only use approaches to art as a means of constructing his characters, he uses artistic metaphors and images to create the world of the story. The world presented in "Poor Koko" is verbalised, it is enclosed in language devices, the narrator uses epigraphs, metaphors, similes as he himself is a man who lives "by books", earns his living using a written word. Quite differently, the world of "The Ebony Tower" is visualised, the scenes of the story remain in parallel with the pictures in Breasley's studio. The painter works on the medieval series and

² John Fowles, *The Collector* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 75.

³ John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1986). All references in the text are to this edition.

⁴ John Fowles, *The Magus* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1987).

⁵ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1978).

the whole manor has the air of medieval Brittany; he paints a forest with a clearing and this becomes symbolic for Williams's transgression into a new state of awareness. The scenes of the story arrange themselves into famous paintings, like the one when the host takes his companion for a picnic, becomes similar to *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. This device is repeated a couple of times in the story when Williams feels he has already seen these things before. Thirdly, and most importantly the story is a debate on what art really is and what the key to full understanding of it is. "The Ebony Tower" is an attempt at answering the question whether life and art are interconnected or if they have no relation at all.

"The Ebony Tower" is a record of a meeting of two artists. The very frame of the situation is very simple, too simple, one might say, for so perverse a writer as John Fowles. One of them is old and conventional in his art, the other is young and keen on abstract style. They meet, they talk, they disagree, after a couple of days they part and on the surface nothing happens. The change takes place in the mind of one of them and the encounter makes his *credo* shattered in the end. The narrator prepares the reader for a conflict drawing carefully the background of the two men, presenting their different attitudes to life and referring to their biographies. When the young artist David Williams arrives at Henry Breasley's house, everything there seems mysterious and builds up atmosphere of the enigma. To his surprise he finds an impressive collection of famous paintings. There is a Derain, three Permeke drawings, the Ensor and the Marquet, an early Bonnard, a Jawlensky, a Dufy, an early Matisse. When Williams is watching the collection of the hall, the owner appears "as if to solve the enigma" but not by means of his words but by means of his behaviour. He is an old Englishman living abroad who sneers at everything that is English, who shares his house with two twenty-year-old girls, he probably has sex with them, allows them to lie naked outside and encourages Williams to swim with them with nothing on. Later on Williams finds out that Breasley actually proposed to one of the girls and, in fact, does not pretend he would mind David's going to bed with her. The young painter is shocked as much as he is surprised by the way his interlocutor talks about art. The old man's language is simple and rude, it resembles the old slang and is strikingly vulgar in comparison with the young man's cultivated expressions like: "arricio", "intonaco", "sinopie". "I'm not a scholar, dear boy" (25) – the old man says. David perceives the old man's language and behaviour as terribly crude, they seem to be all "out-of-date British upper-class mannerisms" (26). Breasley's studio is also not as it should be, in David's opinion, it is littered with sketches and papers, it is in a terrible mess. The studio looks much different from the studio David enters later where Diana works. This, in contrast, is meticulously clean and tidy. The

mess in Breasley's studio remains in parallel with the apparent mess in his life. It disgusts David, altogether, everything in Henry lacks harmony and order, he seems to defy any conventions in life. The young painter is shocked as long as he does not see Breasley's painting in the studio. The painting springs from a very obscure recollection of early childhood – a desire of a child to take pleasure in being at a fair. Suddenly David sees something much more elaborate and sophisticated than he expected. It is as if a vulgar literalness of the way the old man spoke was slowly replaced with refinement. Then David says to himself: "too great a dissonance between the man and his art" (34). His pictures are all produced with a mixture of being humble and being assertive. David suspects he is standing in front of "a paper tiger," who wants to shock people using the ridiculously old-fashioned notions of making them disgusted. He was playing "matador to a blind bull" (32) and only a fool can be cheated by his life-style. It becomes clear that Breasley's ignorance of techniques of painting is faked, he knows them very well and uses with great dexterity.

Although the reason for the meeting is collecting materials for the book on Breasley, Williams selfishly directs discussion towards his own painting. He feels a desire to be recognised as an artist. The question comes up at last: "Footsteps of Pythagoras, that right?" (41) It contains Breasley's attitude towards abstraction and starts a direct confrontation. Instead of the word "abstracts" Henry says "obstructs", uses expressions like "synthetic cubist nonsense." For him abstraction has become a meaningless term, it is "the greatest betrayal in the history of art. The triumph of the bloody eunuch" (45). Abstraction means art castrated. What is significant, the same metaphor of castration is repeated at the end of the story, but then David uses it in relation to himself. Full abstraction is a form of escape from being human and social responsibility, abstractionists quarrel about the theories and they are afraid of what is closest to them – human body. Henry calls them destroyers, accuses them of selling art out. He tends to be vulgar about it because he does not want to tolerate what he hates. Toleration for Henry means sitting on an English fence – one leg on the one side and one on the other. This is another slap on the cheek of England. He says: "Art is a form of speech. Speech must be based on human needs, not abstract theories of grammar. Or anything but the spoken word. The real word" (49). Depriving art of human fact will lead to destruction like depriving politics of human fact led to fascism. "Bloody geometry" in art does not give people freedom, with its right angles and bold lines it builds enclosures for people, limits their thoughts and sensitivity. "Footsteps of Pythagoras" are closer to science than art and art should have a superior position in the world. David quarrels with Henry. In his opinion, philosophy needs logic and so art needs its fundamentals, needs

the verbal texture to explain. Art is not only a painting, a sculpture or a piece of music – art is also an artistic manifesto, a creed of an artist. In a painting man can express everything he can think about and that is the freedom offered by abstraction.

The two artists in the story differ not only in their complexity of techniques, they also differ in their means of expression. Like Salvador Dali, Breasley says that painters should not talk, they should paint. Good painters must be intelligent but their intelligence must be given vent to in painting, not words. Breasley himself feels an almost total inadequacy with words – when he tells the story of Eliduc he makes a farce of it. David gets annoyed easily at the old man's misuse of words. The gap between the ability to express in words and in painting is enormous. The pictures "predicated a sensitive and complex man; and almost everything outward in him denied it" (58). What Henry lacks is words, but what he abounds with is a kind of magic.

Henry Breasley's attitude to modern art is visualised by the symbol of the Ebony Tower which is the Ivory Tower corrupted. The Ivory Tower has often been used in culture as a metaphor of artistic isolation – a place of a recluse who ponders on higher things, remote from the down-to-earth existence. The artist of the Ivory Tower does not have much in common with everyday problems of life; in fact, he does not know life. Ivory is a symbol of virtue, virginity and innocence. Such is art advocated by the romantic artists: pure, innocent, sublime, yet distant from life. Man creating in isolation cannot be a true artist, as he does not understand the core of humanity. The Ebony Tower is soiled and contaminated, it is neither aesthetically beautiful nor filled with human thought. Both towers are entirely self-purposive and form a kind of enclosure for men. David lives in so hopeless an enclosure and the encounter with Breasley is to make him realise that. Another element of this metaphor which is very telling is the tower. From the times immemorial, a tower has been a symbol of aspiration to heaven. All the vertical objects like trees, towers, roods have been considered to be *axis mundi*, elements connecting heaven and earth. "Presumptuous people used to build towers to reach God, the example of which was the Babel Tower whose top may reach up to heaven."⁶ In this respect the artist in Fowles's story aspires to be the God of creation, a *homo creator* "playing puppet-master to their creation"⁷ Monotheistic cultures accept only one God of Creation and thus the meeting of two Fowlesian artists inevitably leads to a conflict.

⁶ Genesis 11.4.

⁷ John Fowles, 'Foreword', in: *The Timescapes of John Fowles* by H. W. Fawkner (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 10.

The meeting takes place in Brittany which is the source of all medieval tales, and Arthurian spirit still inhabits the forest of Coët. The old man is fascinated with Arthurian legends and morality of the people of the past ages. Not only do his paintings reveal traces of this fascination but so does the story of Eliduc he tells at on point as well. Significantly, all medieval legends used a motif of forest as a place where wild and natural dominate over what was civilised and cultivated. In the legend of Sir Gawain unknown powers are visualised by trees and stand in contrast to the homeliness of the court, yet it is man's fate to travel through the unknown. In the Renaissance the motif of forest was also used to describe a dwelling place of spirits who cast spells on people (*The Midsummer Night's Dream*) and as a mirror in which man can see his natural self (*Faerie Queene*). If one does not get lost in the forest he is allowed to reach the clearing – the core of the forest. This is the journey Williams has to make. At the beginning he sees the gate with the signboard nailed to it: "Strictly no visitors except by prior arrangement" (10) and he realises he is one of the few to get there. The warning sounds almost like a notice above the gates of Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* ("All hope abandon ye who enter here").⁸ Like Dante with Virgil and Beatrice step into the darkness of Hell, David enters the property and walks bravely among huge oaks and beeches. The manor is islanded and stands in a clearing and for Williams to get there means to be initiated into a new self:

To someone like David, always inclined to see his own life (like his painting) in terms of logical process, its future advances dependent on intelligent present choices, it seemed not quite fair. Of course one knew that the way to the peak was never by the book, that hazard and all the rest must play its part, just an action and aleatory painting formed an at least theoretically important sector in the modern art spectrum. (56)

Williams who has so far been so rational and reasonable learns how to perceive the mysterious and understands how intuition and hazard may become superior to the book knowledge. He imagines "a smirking old satyr in carpet-slippers, delightedly damning all common sense and calculation" (56) – a symbol of some superior power behind logic. It is easy to find a trace of the idea of manipulation which is ever-present in *The Magus*. No matter whether it is a personified god or a magus, he sneers at people and their helplessness in their earthy endeavour.

David feels infatuated by Diana, one of the two girls living at Coët. He is fascinated by her womanhood and the artistic charm she emanates. Being under the spell of medieval Brittany he feels like a knight in front of his damsel and at the same time he wants her in physical sense. When

⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Vision; the Hell, Purgatory and Paradise* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1890), trans. Rev. H. F. Cary, A. M.

the mutual feeling requires him to forget about his marriage, he hesitates and escapes from the moonlit garden. Having realised his mistake he returns to Diana's bedroom only to find the locked door. It is too late, the act of escape has already been committed and Williams remains faithful "by the benefit of a turned key" (108). Technically he stays innocent but this innocence becomes his failure. Withdrawal from his real emotions and desires into the safety of his marriage means opting for mediocrity. He compares himself to Breasley and realises that the old man lives much more bravely and thus his experience is much broader. As a result his art is filled with human context, it is a product of a human being who is not afraid of experience. The old man has understood the importance of sin as a necessary component of life, an act of bravery and imagination. Man sins out of nature, likewise man runs risks out of nature. Williams's art is uprooted from life as his perception of life is limited. He looks only for what is sublime and high and he loses contact with what is real. His dedication to abstraction, to avant-garde, to pop art is a symptom of "rootlessness, orbiting in frozen outer space" (110), it imprisons him in the ebony tower. He is lost in theoretical assumptions and a variety of technical devices in which he escapes.

All his life Williams sheltered behind the notions of contemporary art and its form and renounced "an umbilical cord to the past" (109) as a sign of regression. The sad conclusion at the end of the story explains the meaning of the metaphor of the ebony tower:

David and his generation, and all those to come, could only look back, through bars like caged animals, born in captivity, at the old great freedom. That described exactly the experience of those last two days: the laboratory monkey allowed a glimpse of his lost true self. One was misled by excess in vogue, the officially blessed indiscipline, the surface liberties of contemporary art; which all sprang from a profound frustration, a buried but not yet quite extinguished awareness of non-freedom. (109)

Williams does not want his life to be reflected in what he paints because his life is so compromised and uninteresting, the hollow reality must be hidden under craftsmanship and theoretical ideas. Having lived a riskless life, on the way home Williams runs a risk of driving too fast. He has been challenged and has not faced the challenge due to the fear of hazard. The pun on the word "Muse" suggests that Diana is a Muse whom he has rejected, hence he has rejected the Great Art. His life is doomed to be dull, enlightened only with the illusion of excellent technique and good taste. He is enclosed in book knowledge, he paints for theories not people, not even for himself. Art is an institution for Williams, it is full of words which are as banal as his life. Initially disgusted with Breasley's inadequacy with words he later feels unable to write and speak about art, perceives

words as full of pretence and banality. As a painter he chose painting for his medium of communication and his tragedy is that he has nothing to communicate. Breasley lives bravely and enjoys life, his existence is intensive and filled with meaning, so is his art. The lesson the young painter is taught is that one cannot refuse "a chance of a new existence" (112) which he has just done, and opt for being a decent man in all situations. "Art is fundamentally amoral" (112) – he states in the end as an echo of Oscar Wilde's: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."⁹

At one point in the story Diana says that what she learns at Coët is how to live not how to paint and this is exactly what Williams feels, however, his situation is tragic rather than optimistic. He feels castrated, deprived of its primal naiveté, as his life will not change at all, it will stay dull as it has been so far, the only difference being his realisation of how more meaningful it could be, had it not been for his fatal indecision. To some extent he reminds Platonic man in the cave who has seen the light and cannot come to terms with the necessity to look at its reflection.

Underlying all this there stood the knowledge that he would not change; he would go on painting as before, he would forget this day, he would find reasons to interpret everything differently, as a transient losing his head, a self-indulgent folly. A scab would grow over it, then fall away, and the skin would be as if there had never been a wound. He was crippled by common sense, he had no ultimate belief in chance and its exploitation, the missed opportunity would become the finally sensible decision, the decent thing; the flame of deep fire that had singed him a dream, a moment's illusion; her reality just one more unpursued idea kept among old sketchbooks at the back of the studio cupboard. (112)

Having experienced the spirit of medieval Brittany Williams sees his failure "both in contemporary and medieval sense" (107). The story of Eliduc becomes the source of the mood in the final phase of the young man's experience. Eliduc is a knight who travels from Brittany to England leaving his faithful wife behind. In England, however, he falls in love with a princess, a daughter of an English king who does not know about his previous engagement. He takes her to Brittany and on the way home reveals the truth to her. On hearing that she falls as if dead and is taken to an old chapel where her beloved visits her every day. When his wife learns about his misery she decides to revive the girl. She sees a weasel reviving another one by placing a red flower in its mouth and tries this with the girl. She succeeds and lets his husband live with the girl. Unlike Eliduc, Williams opts out of passionate love with the young girl and returns

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Illustrated Stories, Plays and Poems* (London: Chancellor Press, 1995) p. 3.

to the life which is "settled-for-the-safe" (109). The story explains his failure in the medieval aspect, his refusal of the challenge makes him denounce real passions and emotions.

The great art is the expression of the very essence of life, it speaks more about the artist's self than his words. It is not only the sublime that provides material for the masterpiece, nor is it only the modest, but the low and nasty as well. Miranda, another Fowlesian character, defines it in *The Collector* saying:

Every great thing in the history of art and every beautiful thing in life is actually what you call nasty or has been caused by feelings that you would call nasty . . . By passion, by love, by hatred, by truth . . .

An artist deprived of rich human experience who escapes from reality of life and existence into the world of art will never be able to create a masterpiece. Art does not exist in a vacuum, it is mutually inclusive with life. Neither does it play a complementary part nor is it less real than life. To some extent life and art having an equal status mirror one another so narrow-mindedness in life leads to mediocrity in art. "The Ebony Tower" presents a lesser artist in a painful moment of realisation of the truth. The realisation is partly due to the encounter with a greater artist and partly due to the understanding of the nature of life, unfortunately it does not result in a dramatic change of attitude, it results in reconciliation with mediocrity. One has to live, to be able to create. An immoral art, however bad, also constitutes a part of experience and thus enriches the artist's creation. In one of the interviews Fowles tells a Greek folk-legend in which a mason of Arta had to build a bridge, but it always fell down. One day he realised that the bridge would stand only if he buried his wife alive in the foundations of the bridge. So he did and it stood. The mason is probably a better artist, not necessarily a better person. Later on Fowles adds: "Good moral behaviour and good art have no relation at all"¹⁰ and this can be inferred from the story.

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¹⁰ Carol M. Barnum, "An Interview with John Fowles," *Modern Fiction Studies* 1 (1985): 196.

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SZTUKA I ŻYCIE W OPOWIADANIU *HEBANOWA WIEŻA* JOHN FOWLESA

Opowiadania Johna Fowlesa ze zbioru *Hebanowa wieża* stanowią ciekawy głos w dyskusji nad znaczeniem sztuki i jej relacji z życiem. Utwór tytułowy jest zapisem spotkania dwóch artystów malarzy, diametralnie różniących się od siebie stylem twórczości i postawą życiową. Starszy z nich – żyjący pełnią życia, bulwersujący niejednokrotnie opinię publiczną swoim zachowaniem – opowiada się za konwencjonalnością w sztuce, odrzuca abstrakcję, która, jego zdaniem, obca jest człowiekowi, gdyż go ogranicza. Młodego malarza natomiast cechuje konformizm, ciągła ucieczka przed ryzykiem i korzystaniem z radości życia. Wieża hebanowa jest symbolem artystycznego odosobnienia, odrzucenia tego, co ludzkie w imię dobrego smaku i wyrafinowania technik malarskich. Jest ona współczesną wersją wieży z kości słoniowej, w której romantycy upajali się swoją samotnością. Spotkanie to uzmysławia młodemu człowiekowi, że lęk przed życiem prowadzi do przeciętności w sztuce, że zamknięcie się na wszelkie przejawy człowieczeństwa musi skończyć się zubożeniem malarskiego wyrazu. Dokonując wyboru między bezpieczeństwem stałego związku a uleganiem prawdziwym emocjom i pragnieniom, młody malarz skazuje się na przeciętność, zarówno w życiu, jak i w swej twórczości. Kieruje się nakazami moralnymi, a nie własnymi uczuciami. Sztuka i życie pozostają bowiem w ścisłej zależności, co dzięki pobytowi w tajemniczej posiadłości uświadamia sobie bohater opowiadania.