ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA LITTERARIA ANGLICA 6, 2003

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

OUTDECONSTRUCTING DECONSTRUCTION IN JOHN FOWLES'S *MANTISSA*

Although John Fowles has asserted that *Mantissa* was not meant as a serious novel but as a kind of literary *jeu d'esprit*,[1] this disclaimer does not seem to sound absolutely convincing. The critics agree to a point that this work is not "typical Fowles," mainly in the sense of narrative structure; nevertheless, most of them attach far-reaching significance to it. David Lodge called the novel "an intriguing metafiction," and for Martin Amis it "seeks to explore the nature of reality and creativity." Indeed, the reader will find *Mantissa* hardly as engrossing as *The Magus* or *The Collector*; still, the novel employs literary motifs (though at some points utterly reversed) already present in *French Lieutenant's Woman*, for instance.

The hero of the book, the novelist Miles Green, is first introduced in a hospital, as he is recovering from amnesia under the care of an autocratic neuropsychologist Dr Delfie. In spite of Green's protests, she imposes on him a kind of sex-therapy – which soon turns into a rape on the patient. In the following chapters, as a result of numerous metamorphoses, Dr Delfie takes on miscellaneous guises: from a doctor, through a nurse, a punk girl, a geisha, she develops into Erato, the muse. Concurrently, the abusive treatment ripens into an animating debate on literary theory. In the dispute, Erato speaks for "old style" traditional literary approaches, while Green is shown as an advocate of self-conscious writing from the era of deconstruction.

From the very beginning the reader is notified that the usual presuppositions for "a novel by John Fowles" should, in the case of this narrative, be put aside. The setting of the text – a small grey hospital room with quilted walls and padded domed ceiling – is overtly metaphorical:

[1] Cf: Michiko Kakutani, "Where John Fowles Ends and Characters of His Novels Begin". *New York Times*, October 5, 1982. All quotations from *Mantissa* are from: John Fowles, *Mantissa* (London: Triad, 1982).

the reader is to deduce that the narrative takes place in the novelist's mind. If we, like Erato, fail to draw this conclusion, the information is disclosed straightforwardly, in a slightly reproachful manner:

> 'I bet you haven't even cottoned on to what these grey quilted walls really stand for.... Grey walls, grey cells. Grey matter?'
> 'It's all... taking place inside your brain?'
> 'Brilliant.' (114)

In this way, among others, Green places himself on an ontological level superior to the one of Erato and the events narrated. Thus, he seems to employ a rather common postmodernist technique in which, using Brian McHale's words, "by breaking the frame around his world, the author foregrounds his own superior reality."[2] Thus the text's artificiality is laid bare in this way and there remains no sense of any illusory reality of the events recounted.

A further way of accentuating the ontological status of *Mantissa* as a book is the foregrounding of its physicality by means of spatiotemporal references. At the beginning of the treatment, Dr Delfie explains to disoriented Green that he has been in hospital for "just a few pages" (19). Even though this statement is later disguised as checking his "basic sense of reality" after the amnesia, the reader is acutely stirred with its frank genuineness – indeed, as a character in the book that we are reading, Miles Green *has* been with us for a few pages (nineteen in my edition). Later on, even Dr Delfie – Erato succumbs to the system of measuring passing time in pages, using phrases such as "from the very first page of my existence" (97), or "I feel so terribly conscious I'm only a few pages old" (104). Green shares her awareness about the physicality of the book, as he remarks that the text which is being created is "one hundred and eighty pages at least" (178) at the moment of this declaration. Such allusions not only set the axis of time-flow against an opposing dimension of spatial units, they also indicate the fact that *Mantissa* is a physical object, which, again typically of postmodernism, "has the effect of foregrounding the presence and materiality of the book."[3]

The "object" that the reader is presented with consists of four parts-chapters. The first of them markedly stands out, being recounted in the past tense in opposition to the remaining three present-tense portions of the narrative. It is at the end of this chapter that the identity of Miles Green as the author becomes established. The nurse assisting in the controversial therapy shows a bundle of papers to Green, and tells him

[2] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routlege, 1989), p. 197.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 181.

"It's a lovely little story. And you made it all by yourself" (47); then she reads aloud a few sentences which appear to be identical with the sentences that open the novel itself. In a metafictional paradox the fictionality of the text is foregrounded and the character of Green acquires authorial powers. Or, which may sound more convincing, he becomes a self-conscious author in the eyes of the reader.

Having validated this position, Green can enjoy the freedoms which naturally spring from it. He recognises himself not only as a novelist, but as a postmodernist novelist, with all due rights. According to McHale's observation, postmodernist writers are obsessed with the analogy between the author and God, and Green seems to exemplify the already quoted statement: "The postmodernist author arrogates himself to the powers that gods have always claimed."[4] Provoked by Erato, he self-assuredly announces: "I could always drag in a *deus ex machina*" (97), and ventures to practice the art of a conjurer, creating an ashtray, a lighter and a box of cigarettes with "three quick snaps of thumb and forefinger" (98). In the course of the narrative, Green is able to bring various objects in and out of existence, proving his divine, or perhaps just authorial, omnipotence.

Green's asserted control over the world of the text manifests itself not only in his ability to create *inanimate objects*, but also in bringing to life *characters* appearing in the narrative. He consistently claims to have created his female interlocutor in all her guises, from a neuropsychologist to the muse. He invokes the process of creating a character labelling her image an "idea" and a "sketch" (53). Moreover, Green flaunts the demonstration of his creative abilities to the object of his divine fertility: he informs Erato that she is a "fictional representation" (63), referring to her and himself respectively as to "the written and the writer" (64). Such an overt manifestation of godlike powers focuses the reader's attention on Erato's status as a character in a text produced by an omnipotent, and boastful, author.

As for the muse, she frequently seems to reconcile herself to this position in the narrative, even if it requires acknowledging a hardly reconcilable fact that "the real 'real me' is imaginary" (159). Speaking from her neuropsychologist's knowledge, Dr Delfie – Erato conceives that her physical presence results merely from electro-chemical reactions taking place in Green's right cerebral lobe (137). This declaration, however, seems to contain an internal contradiction, since in the light of the fact that the whole story takes place in a metaphorical, not literal, setting, the "physicality" of her presence appears rather dubious. Nevertheless, when Green rather provokingly remarks: "You've just shown you've a will of your own," she submissively sighs: "Hardly a will, I'm afraid. Just a whisper of an instinct"

4 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

(102). Thus she attests to Green's omnipotence and his ability to manipulate her, as a character from his text, in the manner of a puppet-master.

However, at some points, Erato's attitude is not at all that of humble resignation. She can be bold enough as to reproach her author that having been created by him is a "misfortune" (89); further, her firmness leads her to a daring declaration: "I'm just one more miserable fantasy figure your diseased mind is trying to conjure up" (85). The reader can clearly detect Erato's dissatisfaction with Green's manner of structuring the plot, as she expresses disapproving comments on his methods ("I'm sick to death of... having to pretend I exist in a way I never would, if I did." [88]), stressing, at the same time, his superiority. When she compares their powers and potentials she turns rather feminist, declaring "I have absolutely no rights. The sexual exploitation's nothing beside the ontological one" (93). H. W. Fawkner notes that "Erato is totally dissatisfied with her author-parent Miles Green, accusing him first of modern authorial indifference in allowing the text to write its immoral self, and then ... of the old-fashioned male novelist's Machiavellian totalitarianism."[5] In the opinion of the critic, the muse blames the writer not only for the actions that he *made* her perform, but also for those that he *let* her perform according to her, or the text's itself, own whims. Finally, Erato even wishes Green were a character in a story as well, so that she could take revenge on him for all her calamities (55). In this explicit way she expresses her envy concerning his authorial powers and her vexation caused by the lack of them; her aspiration is to achieve a higher status, so that she could equal Green on the ontological level. When unable to fulfil her wishes, she directs her anger at the whole genre, pointing out its disorderly state and expressing her pity that, contrary to the opinion of many, the novel is not dead (67). This notion, led to the extreme, develops into a universal statement that literature is mental illness (140), which is supplemented by the muse's modest longing for the marvellous time in the past before the alphabet and writing were invented (75).

Surprisingly for the reader, at some points of the text, Fowles provides the relation between Green and Erato with yet another twist: the muse becomes herself equipped with authorial powers. Given the metaphorical setting of the narrative, she is able to self-consciously disregard the laws of nature (123), and at some points she approaches the issue of omnipotence in a playful way: she can disappear physically from the surface-story, while controlling Miles at the same time (138), she can make various elements of the textual world emerge or vanish (52, 150), or, finally, she even

[5] H. W. Fawkner, *The Timescapes of John Fowles* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 136.

possesses the ability to change the writer into a satyr (184–186). She tries to impose her authority on Green, either by the aggressive, self-assured enforcement of her role as a master of ceremonies (56), or by threatening to dematerialise him (66). According to Fawkner, Miles Green is being manipulated, hence the critic considers him "a victim of the conspiracy of the text led by the muse."[6] Correspondingly, the reader also feels somewhat deceived when Erato, recounting the story of her sexual initiation vacillates in giving her age: she starts from fifteen (73), through fourteen (repeated twice 74–75), thirteen (78), twelve (79), to finally reach the figure of eleven (80). However, some of Erato's authorial powers are used to a different end than manipulation: prompted by the writer, she invents an alternative story of her life and narrates part of it in detail (101–105). This demonstrates her ability as a tale-spinner, which is admired even by Green: "It's amazing how you open up a whole new world in a few broad brushstrokes" (111).

In spite of this, Green's appreciation for Erato's talent at some points develops into an aversion. Aware of the fact that he is being manipulated, the novelist discerns the deficiencies in his own alleged omnipotence. When he tries to bring back to existence the door evaporated by the muse, he finds to his surprise that flicking his finger and thumb does not work. The textual reality of the narrative, which is supposed to be his own, will not yield to his wishes. Fawkner asserts that "the novelist unwrites himself,"[7] and that, contrary to *French Lieutenant's Woman*, "it is not a question of author intruding into text, but of text intruding upon author."[8] A similar case is put forward by Burke, when the critic discusses the inadequacy of the author-God analogy. Pointing out that the all-embracing infinite attributes of God (such as omnipotence or omnipresence) are not always valid for authors, Burke declares that "we can, without contradiction, conceive of authors... who do not hold a univocal mastery over their text."[9] Miles Green seems to utterly exemplify such sort of an author.

Furthermore, the conspicuous lack of Green's control over the world of his text suggests an analogy which could vividly delineate the interdependence between two elements of the narrative process: the author is given the characteristics of a pregnant woman, the text – that of an unborn child in her womb. Fowles evokes this icon to the reader in the passage preceding the already quoted moment when Miles Green is presented with the papers containing the text and informed about his authorship. Prior to that, he is undergoing a "therapy" for his amnesia which takes form of

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[9] R. Burke, *The Death of the Author. Criticism and Subiectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 25.

a sexual intercourse with Dr Delfie. To his utmost astonishment, he is told to keep "a good steady rhythm" (44) of movements, though not for mere carnal pleasure, but for the sake of his *baby*. From this point on, the scene of a sexual act becomes ambiguous: it can be alternatively read as that of labour, during which Dr Delfie acquires the status of a midwife. The nurse assisting her shows the text to Green in a manner that she would show an infant to the mother, "using the finger to trace the words, as she might have touched a new-born nose or tiny wrinkled lips" (48). Thus the writer becomes acquainted with his work, and the reader is given to understand that his responsibility for it is, after all, limited. As Fawkner has observed, "Miles Green has no more conscious influence over the shaping of the text than a pregnant woman has over the formation of features in the growing foetus."[10] He has even less influence since the text has already been born.

At this point there is to be noticed a striking analogy with Barthes's conception divulged in his "The Death of the Author." After the author (mother) has written (given birth to) the text (baby), he or she loses control over it. Cutting the tie with the author is equivalent to cutting the umbilical cord, from this point on the text becomes free and self-responsible. In Barthes's words "As soon as a fact is narrated ... this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins."[11]

However, to be more precise, in *Mantissa* it is not the text itself that evades Green's control, but rather the character of Erato, incited by her authorial inclinations. The dialogue between them, constituting the bulk of the novel, amounts to an extended argument over the creative power, in which, as McHale puts it, "both parties ... claim to be the author of the other party, Green insisting that Erato is a character in his writings, Erato countering that all his inventions come ultimately from her."[12] The critic then tries to speculate which of them is ontologically superior, whose fictional world is on a higher level; he postulates that the last chapter reveals both of them to be co-authors, who pool their resources in an effort to produce the script. In point of fact, the reader can construct the image of collaboration, given substantial textual evidence to this hypothesis. They are both definitely seeking compromise when they uniformly declare: "If we could only find some absolutely impossible ... text ... we could both be our real selves at last" (156–157). Nonetheless, a detailed analysis of the discourse may lead to the observation that the balance between both parties is not perfect – the scales are tipped in favour of

[10] H. W. Fawkner, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

[11] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in: *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 142.

[12] B. McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

Green. It appears that he sets main routes for the story to follow, Erato is only responsible for technical details. Alternatively, she may be perceived as an *actor* performing in Green's scenario. This hypothesis is feasibly corroborated with the fact that a single female personality in the novel corresponds with several, utterly distinctive, characters. The writer frequently comments on fluctuations of her identity depending on which ego she is currently occupying – which may as well be read: which role she is playing. She herself confesses: "I've done my best ... to adapt myself to your ploddingly literal imagination" (142), in a manner of a star unhappy with the part she has had to play.

In the view of the foregoing judgements, *Mantissa* can be inferred to demonstrate that, depending on the discourse structure, the author figure – Miles Green – need not necessarily construct the character – Erato – but may as well be the product of her creative powers. Obviously, the two personalities may be created by yet another party, external to the discourse. McHale suggests that the third party is John Fowles, "ultimately responsible for *both* of them and everything they do, say, write."[13] For Fawkner, "Fowles conceives Green and Erato as a series of masks or postures related to a conglomeration of selves."[14] The muse seems to possess some awareness of this, which she even discloses to the writer, hinting to him that he is also a character and somebody is pulling his strings (87). Thus, the consideration over the question whose ontological status is superior may as well be pointless, if we take into account the observation of Erato "We're two people who happen to be locked in the same prison cell" (127), which sets both on a par with each other. Still, the third party, imagined to have created the writer and the muse, remains concealed in the discourse; *Mantissa* is narrated covertly in the third person, with no outward signs of the narrator's identity.

In fact, Erato's supposition that both of them are characters in somebody's story appears to be directly noticeable from the simplest possible perspective of reading: if we open the book by John Fowles, we find both names in the text, and the spontaneous natural reaction is to treat Miles Green and Dr Delfie – Erato as characters. Thus Green has to suffer from the common postmodernist affliction experienced by *all* authors who resolve to short-circuit the ontological levels and appear in their text. In her study on metafictional writing, Patricia Waugh observes:

> What happens ... when [the writer] enters [the world of the narrative] is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The 'author' discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text.[15]

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

[14] H. W. Fawkner, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

[15] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 133.

McHale considers this one of the crucial aspects of John Fowles's novel:

> *Mantissa* ... foregrounds a fact [that] the inscribed author is always a fiction, a "paper-author" as Barthes says. ... As soon as the author writes himself into the text, he fictionalises himself, creating a fictional character bearing [his] name ... who is formally transworld-identical with himself, while the author himself withdraws to a further remove from the world of the text. ... The ontological barrier between an author and the interior of his fictional world is absolute, impenetrable.[16]

Waugh has even tried to evaluate the extent of authorial presence in metafictional texts, and her conclusion that "[t]he more author appears, the less he or she exists"[17] shows Miles Green in a quite uncharitable light.

Indeed, since the moment when the position of Green as the author is established towards the end of the first section of the novel, his presence on the ontological level of the text becomes perpetual, even despite the fact that this level is apparently alien to him. Fawkner notices that in *Mantissa* the proportions between narrative and intrusion are reversed, accentuating the unconventionality of the situation in which "it is the polymorphic character who interrupts the novelist."[18] In point of fact, only the first chapter is organised according to a linear plot, the rest of the novel consists of a prolonged debate on writing and verbal struggle for authorial powers between the two individuals. Fowles pushes to extremes the standard that "[m]etafictional novels which hand on to the concept of author as inventor of the text ... exaggerate authorial presence in relation to story or information"[19]: in *Mantissa* there is *hardly any* story, and there are *hardly any* passages free from authorial presence. In this way, the structure of the novel comes forth as an additional factor testifying to the absurdity of Green's, or Erato's, position as the author. Surprisingly enough, both the writer and the muse are also inclined to perceive the lack of balance of proportions within the text. In their case, however, the emphasis is laid on a different aspect: their impression is that the literary debate is an intrusion, and core of the narrative lies in experiencing various alternatives of a sexual act: "There were whole stretches today with hardly a whisper of sex. I sometimes feel we're losing all sense of priorities" (162).

Likewise, for Fawkner "the infinite number of possible erotic positions comes to mirror the infinite number of narrative alternatives, the terrifying freedom of an endless amount of authorial postures. ... Fowles focuses on the difficulty of choosing a single path."[20] In truth, *Mantissa* does concentrate

---

16 B. McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

17 P. Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

18 H. W. Fawkner, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

19 P. Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

20 H. W. Fawkner, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

on having various potentialities of leading the story. The text abounds in references to the variations of the plot which the reader is not given in the novel, but which are well remembered and discussed by Green and Erato (160, 182), and some of them are even given reference numbers. However, none of the numerous options present in the surface story is fully accomplished, and the story remains recursive. This quality of *Mantissa* brings to mind the branching of narrative in Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," though in Fowles's novel none of the paths is really taken.

As we can see, Fowles systematically deconstructs his narrative, depriving the reader of all customary footholds expected in the world of fiction. Unsafe and unsound, we are left to the whims of two capricious surrogate authors, whose aim is also to produce an "unwritable ... unfinishable ... unimaginable ... endlessly revisable ... text without words" (157). The result of their concerted efforts is "an unwritable non-text" (178), a hopeless precipice for the reader who tries to approach the novel in a non-absurd way. Deciding to reverse standard metafictional schemes, Fowles has managed to achieve a substantial result. As Fawkner observes,

> If the trend in the genre has been to write fiction about writing fiction and to write fiction about the difficulty of writing fiction, *Mantissa* would seem to carry this movement to its uttermost extreme in being fiction about the impossibility of writing fiction. Certainly failure is an important motif, for the narrative structure is that of an endlessly interrupted nontext.[21]

Fowles shapes the character of Miles Green as that of anti-author, exaggerating in his personality the traits of authors, or non-authors, imposed on them by the tenets of deconstruction. Green pronounces himself an advocate of this theory, and tries to persuade Erato of its relevance; he makes himself very explicit, instructing her almost in the form of a quasi-lecture:

> Serious modern fiction has only one subject: the difficulty of writing serious modern fiction. First, it has fully accepted that it is only fiction, can only be fiction, will never be anything but fiction, and therefore has no business at all tampering with real life or reality. ... Second. The natural consequences of this is that writing *about* fiction has become a far more important matter than writing fiction itself. It's one of the best ways you can tell the true novelist nowadays. ... Third, and most important. At the creative level there is in any case no connection whatever between author and text. They are two entirely separate things. Nothing, but nothing, is to be inferred or deduced from one to the other, and in either direction. The deconstructivists have proved that beyond the shadow of doubt. The author's role is purely fortuitous and agential. (117)

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

However, following the guidelines laid down by deconstructionists does not seem a very promising path for Green. Trying to pursue these principles, he produces an absurd and incoherent non-narrative which does not necessarily reflect the absurdity and incoherence of human existence, but merely its own infertility. Fawkner interprets Green's efforts to overcome his amnesia and recollect his identity as a metaphor for "the contemporary novelist's attempt to define and recover that creative autonomy which the deconstructionists would seem to deny him."[22] Nonetheless, it can be postulated that, even when the writer regains his original self, not quite through his conscious exertion, he applies its creative powers to producing an *unsubstantial non-text*.

Consequently, it becomes perceptible that Fowles is using a considerable supply of irony against Miles Green. He takes up Green's line of argument and lets it develop freely, but only within strictly set boundaries of logical reasoning. The inevitable result is absurd: Green is proved to be a barren author, the text composed by him – an example of unproductiveness. Contrary to the model "serious modern fiction" prescribed in Green's post-structuralist opinion, *Mantissa* is a text about the *absurdity of writing about the impossibility of writing fiction.*

Actually, Fowles's literary oeuvre proves to his readers that creating fiction *is* a conceivable task. In his previous novels (as well as in *The Maggot* which follows *Mantissa*), the writer demonstrates that the well-structured "story" is a crucial aspect of his writing. All his books have remarkably elaborate plots, abounding in unpredictable turns; his characters are well-developed and convincing; the world of the narrative is always pleasingly meticulous, overflowing with richness of detail. The reviewers praise Fowles for being "admirable and immensely successful as a suspense-engineer,"[23] and, what is also worth pointing out here, his novels are sold in millions copies around the world, not necessarily by lowbrow audiences. For all those reasons, we are far from wrong if we assume that when Erato, contrary to the widely-accepted opinion, denies the death of the novel, she speaks for Fowles's mind.

In the light of the foregoing arguments, it can be postulated that John Fowles is an adversary of a post-structuralist conviction that "the author is dead;" he stresses the importance of authorial presence in the text, as well as authorial reading of it. Fowles's viewpoint on the deconstructive approach to literature would rather tend to come closer to that of Graham

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[23] Benjamin De Mott, "The Yarnsmith in Search of Himself", *New York Times*, August 29, 1982.

McCann who defies the key role of free critical reading in creating the text, noticing its excessive arbitrariness:

> Deconstruction is not incorrect in saying that the critic is creative; where it *is* disastrously wrong, however, is in its assumption that creativity means freedom from constraints and from standards of judgement operating on its results. ... To be creative is not let one's imagination run wild: it is to use one's imagination productively.[24]

It has to be observed, however, that Fowles's disparagement of deconstructive theory in *Mantissa* does not take form of a theoretical treatise, nor even of polemic discussion. In trying to be as "reader-friendly" as possible in this context, the novelist employs irony and sense of humour in place of argumentative discourse. Fowles simply ridicules the notion that the text can write itself, he makes fun of the conception that the author is non-author. Given the absurdity which results from the appearance of such a self-writing, unwritable non-text, together with the critical opinions that emphasise the artificiality of the author inscribed in the narrative, we can concur with Fawkner's opinion that in *Mantissa* "the deconstructivists are outdeconstructed."[25]

Department of English Literature and Culture
University of Łódź

[24] Graham McCann, "Distant Voices, Real Lives: Authorship, Criticism, Responsibility," in: *What Is An Author?*, eds. Maurice Biriotti, Nicola Miller (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 65.

[25] H. W. Fawkner, *op. cit.*, p. 133.