

A PROMPT CRITICAL RESPONSE – REVIEWS PUBLISHED SHORTLY AFTER THE ROMANIAN TRANSLATION OF FOWLES’S NOVELS

O REACȚIE CRITICĂ PROMPTĂ – RECENZII PUBLICATE LA SCURT TIMP DUPĂ TRADUCEREA ÎN LIMBA ROMÂNĂ A ROMANELOR LUI FOWLES

Narcisa ȚIRBAN

Facultatea de Științe Umaniste, Politice și Administrative
Universitatea de Vest „Vasile Goldiș” din Arad

Abstract

Most Fowles translations which appeared after the 90s are accompanied by afterwords worth mentioning in the context of Fowles’s reception in Romania. Seemingly contradicting Patapievici’s discussion of cultural non sequitur in Romania, each of the translations of Fowles’s novels has been accompanied by at least one book review in our country. As soon as a novel was translated, literary magazines like Romania literara, Steaua, Cronica or Familia would publish reviews, which further testifies to the complex Romanian response to Fowles’s fiction.

Cuvinte cheie: *traducerea, romanul, studii critice, tehnica postmoderna, discursul, recenzii, articole*

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Most Fowles translations which appeared after the 90s are accompanied by afterwords worth mentioning in the context of Fowles’s reception in Romania. An example in this sense is Dan Grigorescu’s afterword to the 1994 translation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* by Mioara Tapalaga. One of the most interesting aspects of this survey is the critic’s analysis of the main differences between British, American and Continental writers and literatures. Dwelling on Malcolm Bradbury as a prominent example, he notes: “[...] cand e in America, scriitorul englez e inclinat sa se considere european, cand e in Franta sau in Germania, se considera anglo-american.” He hereby points to the tremendous difficulty of the contemporary writer to “feel at home” anywhere and at the consequent ambiguity and pluriperspectiveness of his fiction. Grigorescu also mentions the conservatism of British fiction in relation to Fowles’s concern with postmodernism: “[...] putini au fost scriitorii britanici care sa-si fi aratat interesul fata de inovatiile de pe Continent, si fata de bazele lor teoretice; exemplele cele mai vrednice a fi luate in seama sint potrivit acestei istorii, Samuel Beckett si John Fowles.”

A very well-informed and original article, Grigorescu’s contribution dwells on such aspects as Fowles’s studies of French literature (materialized for instance in the Frenchified impresario in the final chapter of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*) and a possible parallel between Fowles and Durrell in terms of both biography and literary style. Both writers started their literary careers in Greece, their novels evince the same magic atmosphere and scenery (*The Magus* and *Alexandria Quartet*), the same multiplication of possible versions of reality. These multiple versions could be related to the Greek concept of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is the graphic, often dramatic description of a visual work of art. In ancient times it referred to a description of any thing, person, or experience. The word comes from the Greek ‘ek’ and ‘phrasis’ (‘out’ and ‘speak’), meaning to proclaim or call an inanimate object by name. Fowles’s novels are in more ways than one an example of ekphrasis: in representing the world, they are a testimony to Fowles’s self-proclaimed credo of contemporary art being a matter of reflection and not of creation. Finally, he also compares *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* to Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*.

A highly similar comparison is established by Mihaela Anghelescu Irimia in the afterword to the Romanian translation of *Mantissa*, this time between *The Name of the Rose* and *Mantissa*. Her point is that both Eco and Fowles are literary theoreticians and writers of fiction at the same time, which inevitably leads to a double-perspectiveness in their works.

Cosana Nicolae's afterword to *A Maggot* dwells on the various complex layers of Fowles's fiction. An interesting point she makes is Fowles's ability to split his readership into low- and high-brow, without the readers' being aware of it: "[...] cu sau fara voia lor, de la low- la high-brow, alegandu-i pana la urma pe spranceana", and the parallelism he establishes between nature and the literary work both being a matter of perception, of direct experience and evaluation. The maggot therefore becomes in Nicolae's view a powerful metaphor of literary creation, where each reader is enabled to metamorphosize the literary work into whatever suits his mood or esthetic desires at a given moment in time.

We have already mentioned other critics' comparison between Fowles and writers like Lawrence Durrell, Malcolm Bradbury and Umberto Eco. Cosana Nicolae establishes this type of parallelism between Fowles and Julian Barnes. We share the author's view, as Barnes can be said to evince the same humanistic concerns as Fowles, carefully disguised by intricate and revolutionary narrative devices. Let us commit to mind that Fowles was especially fond of Barnes's fiction, calling *Flaubert's Parrot* "a delight ...handsomely the best novel published in England in 1984". A further common trait between Fowles and Barnes could also be their openly expressed reluctance towards public life and criticism of their works. In *Wormholes*, Fowles states:

At a literary party. Frogs and oxen. The frogs are the magazine and newspaper men, the agency men, the publishers, who rather pathetically try to equate knowing writers with actually creating something; the oxen are the writers, who are castrated by their own self-interest, their own vanities, their "shop." Both frogs and oxen are very well by themselves; but the syzygy is fatal. Their chatter deafens me, and I feel like Alice at the tea party. They are not even good "material." [...] I don't think of myself as "giving up work to be a writer." I'm giving up work to, at last, be. [...] This is the wretched loneliness of writing: constantly having to judge between judgments--other people's and one's own--and never really knowing what standards others judge by. But fearing the worst. [...] I have a special complaint. It is that so many practicing novelists review novels. In music and art such judgment by interested rivals is almost unheard-of, and I wish it were so with books.

The really bad reviewers so stand and posture in front of the books they are supposed to be reviewing that the books themselves are totally obscured; and on the principle that naked devils aren't dangerous, one needn't worry too much about them. The reviewers I can't stand are the ones who give the impression that all novel writing is a more or less reprehensible exhibition of infantilism. Adults write reviews; children write novels.

Apparently contradicting Patapievici's discussion of cultural non sequitur in Romania, each of the translations of Fowles's novels has been accompanied by at least one book review in our country. As soon as a novel was translated, literary magazines like *Romania literara*, *Steaua*, *Cronica* or *Familia* would publish reviews, which further testifies to the complex Romanian response to Fowles's fiction. Such a reviewer is for instance Alexandra Vranceanu who dwells on *The Collector* (a novel which although being the first Fowles wrote was published in Romania only in 1993) in a critical essay entitled *Shakespeare redivivus*. As the title suggests, Vranceanu favors the interpretation of the novel by relating it to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As compared to most of the studies mentioned before, the present one favors the actual interpretation of the novel over the discussion of various narrative devices and techniques and focuses on character names, their search for freedom and the possible readings of the work [1-5]

An interesting review of *The Magus* is offered by Traian Stef who notes that each reader is offered at least one theme or motif to identify with in this novel. That is the main reason why according to Stef the narrated events are translated in the end into human experience. Olga Stroia insists on an important aspect in Stef's review – the one of relating Fowles to a Romanian writer:

Besides the influence of Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meulnes*, the reviewer also mentions the image of a young woman entering the water, a metaphor that – he writes – has already been used by Joyce, Tolstoi and Marin Preda. So, once again the name of a Romanian writer is associated to Fowles's fiction. [6].

In *Oxford versus Phraxos* Traian Ungureanu considers Fowles's fiction a complex semantic and lexical mechanism, which makes it increasingly easy and necessary to appreciate the Romanian translation of *The Magus*:

Traducerea acestui labirint, transpunerea sa nu atat de fidela cat de o maniera verosimila cultural este o incercare fundamental. Livia Deac si Mariana Chitoran au reusit tocmai transpunerea cultural a codurilor si subtilitatilor lingvistice sau narrative ale lui John Fowles, sacrificand unde era cazul fidelitatea abrupt ai permitand spiritului fowlesian sa-si gaseasca echivalentele romanesti.

Another critical study worth mentioning is Nicolae Manolescu's *Insula misterelor*. Just like Traian Ungureanu, the prominent Romanian literary critic deals with *The Magus*, analyzing it from the point of view of the various literary and non-literary influences which played a crucial role in the writing of this novel. Worth mentioning is also Manolescu's openly declared disagreement to Fowles's credo according to which the meaning of the novel is identical with the reaction it brings about in the reader, a statement which he considers dangerously relative [7].

The quality of the translation of *The Magus* is appreciated by Livia Szasz, who also discusses the major themes and motifs identifiable in Fowles's fiction, among them the conflict between reality and illusion or the intricate issue of human freedom: "La urzirea firelor destinului uman nu prezideaza nici un olimp auctorial: gestul supremei libertati – puterea de optiune – se desfasoara sub privirile oarbe ale unui panteon de persoane, proiectii iluzorii ale propriului nostru eu". [8] We slightly disagree with this view, as in *The Aristos* Fowles repeatedly mentions hazard as one of the principal driving forces of human existence. "Hazard has conditioned us to live in hazard. All our pleasures are dependant upon it. Even though I arrange for a pleasure; and look forward to it, my eventual enjoyment of it is still a matter of hazard. Wherever time passes, there is hazard. You may die before you turn the next page", he states. In the context of hazard defining and affecting each and every one of our acts, free will and self-determination become vague concepts.

Andreea Deciu's book review of the 1994 translation of *The Magus* highlights the enormous impact Fowles translations have had on the cultural milieu in Romania:

La data publicarii sale in Romania, 1988, romanul Magicianul a facut, cum se spune, senzatie, desi nu era primul semnat de John Fowles (scriitor deja cunoscut de publicul roman), [...] Pe de alta parte, la data respective artificiile cuceritoare ale scriitorilor postmodernisti erau mai putin cunoscute la noi, cel putin pentru cititorul obisnuit, care nici nu avea acces direct la literature straine si nici nu asimilase complet variant autohtona a optzecismului [9].

It is interesting to note that according to Deciu the huge success *The Magus* enjoyed in Romania was a result of its translation and not of the inherent qualities of the work itself. Moreover, she condemns not only *The Magus* but most of Fowles's novels (the only exception being in her view *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) as over-intellectualized and somewhat arid writings. This view is seemingly contradicted by John Gardner in an interview where he listed Fowles among the creators of what he calls "moral fiction" – which is essentially opposed to the type of discourse Deciu accuses Fowles of:

Interviewers: John, you criticize academics for their over-intellectualization of fiction and for writing fiction for other scholars. Yet in *On Moral Fiction* you appear to aim your book for this clique instead of your normal audience. Why?

Gardner: Right. I think probably you're right that I'm aiming at professionals. I think probably the kind of people who would normally read my books also read that book because after you've built up a reputation with a certain following, then they kind of trust you. I mean, all the lawyers' wives and the doctors who come home, you know, and read a few novels and aren't professional literary people but do read books. They see my name in the book and they think, you know, maybe that's interesting and they pick that up. Because a lot of the mail that I have gotten

about *On Moral Fiction* is from people who have read my other books and aren't very familiar with contemporary fiction, partly because they've quit reading. And a great many people everywhere I go--and I think it is true of most people--say, I just don't read fiction anymore. I read nonfiction. And the reason is very simple. Fiction has gotten boring and stupid and depressing, and shoddy, in many ways. There are always good writers. There are great writers, like John Fowles whom I mention in *On Moral Fiction* [10].

Andreea Deciu also expresses her skepticism regarding the future responses to *The Magus*, even after its uncensored publication in 1994. She appreciates nevertheless, as previously mentioned, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as Fowles's finest work especially in terms of its construction and the limited amount of "disturbing intellectualism" identifiable in the book. She critically evaluates also the Romanian translation of *The Ebony Tower*, accusing the translator, Livia Deac, of making the short stories unintelligible. In *De-a literatura*, she analyzes Fowles's short stories comparing them to miniature novels bearing resemblance to *The Magus* and *Daniel Martin*.

We will also briefly turn our attention to Irina Burlui's review entitled *John Fowles si virtutile proteice ale romanului*, a review concerned with fiction and metafiction in *Daniel Martin*. Burlui manages to capture Fowles's humanistic concerns, an aspect also noticed by Olga Stroia:

[...] Irina Burlui tells the readers that in spite of the closed ending – very different from Fowles's other novels – fragments of metafiction are to be found in *Daniel Martin* too, so that the real-imaginary dichotomy, so frequently used by postmodern authors, "atât de prezenta în concepția tuturor postmoderniștilor, capată în formularile lui Fowles implicații noi ce depășesc simpla afirmare". She exemplifies with the ambiguous letter sent by Jenny (from the United States) to Dan. The reviewer concludes by suggesting that through the sincere and serious tone, through the steady confrontation of the characters' destinies with their century's permanent dilemmas, Fowles demonstrates once again that in his conception, a novel means life not only metaphorically [11].

Irina Grigorescu also chooses to write about *Daniel Martin*, taking the novel's seemingly closed ending as the main focus of discussion. Grigorescu compares Fowles's fiction to Eco's in that both writers share the view according to which life is not progress, evolution, but an endless horizontal repetition. She also does not fail to praise the Romanian translation by Mariana Chitoran and Livia Deac as "modele de competență și bun gust".

In *Importantă de a scrie bine* Dan Stanca dwells on the numerous cultural and literary allusions in *Mantissa*, thereby being the second critic to contradict Felicia Antip's opinion (expressed in 1983) according to which Fowles evinces lack of erudition. We can infer from this that the Romanian world of criticism and reading public had become more acquainted with postmodern techniques in the meantime, and therefore more accurate in their description and evaluation of Fowles's work.

Grete Tartler appreciates *The Maggot* as a highly complex novel, evincing multiple levels and options of reading: "De altfel s-a afirmat că Fowles ne introduce în magie și pare să steie mai mult decât un magician, în matematici, ca un profesor de specialitate, la fel în fizică, astronomie, ocultism asiatic, vechi religii s.a." [12]. The erudition and "intellectualism" condemned or at least questioned by other critics are praised in this study and even considered Fowles's literary trademark. The Romanian critic also appreciates Veronica Focșeneanu's efforts as a translator, considering, as other critics before her did, that the success of Fowles's novels should be seen in direct relation to the quality of the translations which enabled the reading public to connect to the works.

Conclusions

The present work is devoted to the reception of this author in Romania, to the way in which the Romanian reading public, exegetes and translators have filtered the message of Fowles's novels, adapting it to our country's paradigms, *weltanschauung* and philosophy.

The various re-issued translations of his major novels also point to the fact that he is still one of Romania's favorite foreign authors. As compared to Julian Barnes, for instance, whose work has

been translated, but remains largely unknown to the Romanian reading public, Fowles enjoys a popularity which has stood the test of the time and shifting literary, social and political paradigms.

Fowles exegesis prior to 1989 differs dramatically from the one published in the time-span 2000-2007. First of all, it evinces a tendency of operating loosely with postmodern terminology – a proof of the fact that in pre-revolutionary communist Romania critics were still painfully separated from the theoretical judgments and findings taken for granted in the Western world. Nevertheless, most of these scholarly papers are examples of accuracy, complexity and genuine scientific research, offering sometimes new and surprising perspectives on Fowles's major novels.

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² Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 365, cited in John Fowles, *Iubita locotenentului francez*, 546.

³ <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Flauberts-Parrot-Picador-Julian-Barnes/dp/0330289764>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/f/fowles-wormholes.html>

⁵ The other example of a comparison established between Fowles and a Romanian writer can be found in Silvian Iosifescu's study *De-a lungul unui secol*. Here, Fowles is compared to Camil Petrescu: "Mai directe sint interventile auctoriale in notele destul de abundente. Multe dintre ele au – evident, fara filiatie posibila – functia pe care au capatat-o la Camil Petrescu, in atat de indraznet inovatorul lui *Patul lui Procust*."

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