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THE ABDUCTION FROM THE IMBROGLIO:
FOWLES’S A MAGGOT AND SOME ASPECTS OF THE
STORY-DISCOURSE DISTINCTION

Story and discourse

In April 1736, a young man walks into a cave somewhere on the Devonshire moors with two companions. Only the companions come out. Whatever it was that happened in the cave, it has terrified one of these companions into suicide, and effected something like a religious conversion in the other. A classic locked-room mystery. Indeed, John Fowles’s 1985 novel A Maggot most obviously sets itself up as a mystery story. As in Todorov’s description of the mystery genre, it has a twin narrative, one concerning the events which have taken place and the other concerning the reconstruction of those events: the young man’s father is a peer of the realm who hires a London lawyer to trace what has happened to his son, and characteristically this double motion shuttles backwards and forwards throughout the narrative to approach, with ever-decreasing oscillations, the central and unwitnessed mystery.

Like any mystery story, A Maggot has a complex chronology. It would be tempting to suggest at first that this chronology is the result of imposing a narrative of detection over a story of events, were this not to beg the obvious and general question that these events are accessible only through the narrative of detection. The narrative, the discourse, not the story, is primary. That is precisely the problem, and for the lawyer Ayscough as much as for the reader. Ayscough’s task of gathering and sifting information is, after all, foregrounded in the text. In the various depositions, he is presented with an elaborate set of narratives from which he must unravel the events according to certain generic rules of the discursive practices which make up eighteenth-century British law. Now on the one hand the story derived from the testimonies must have the ability to account for all the events narrated in the testimonies. At the same time, though, it is accountable to those narratives: it must, in effect, observe the principles of Ockham’s Razor, introducing in its turn nothing that cannot be verified from the original testimonies. The discourse must allow the construction of a single, necessary and sufficient story, one which can be seen in retrospect to link all of the recounted events along the linear thread of chronology and causality. Discourse and story must in other words be a one-to-one mapping, the pieces from one fitting rearranged into the space of the other, with no overlap in either case.
But there are, of course, difficulties, and nowhere more so than in this story of a failed investigation. There are obvious conflicts in evidence; pitfalls for Ayscough to negotiate. The key witnesses are all unreliable, and at least one gives evidence which, though it is nothing but the truth by her own strict lights, makes no sense at all within the legal and forensic framework of the examination. Furthermore, as the narrative approaches its central events, the number of those able to testify dwindles in number until only one is left to tell of what actually happened within the cave, and even here there is a crucial and central gap—not only is she the witness the lawyer will find the least reliable, but she was also unconscious during the actual vanishing. The narrative leads to the story, just as the road the party takes leads to the Exmoor cave; but en route, in the very act of following those leads, and in following most exactly, one is led astray, led away just when one is closest, when one has successfully negotiated all the dangers of untruth. The lawyer is searching for the origin of a sequence of events: a historical, geographical, mundane origin—the events in question happened beyond doubt in this cave in the wilds of Exmoor, on this day, between these hours—but it's an event to which all direct access is nevertheless blocked. This blockage may be more than just happenstance (unreliable and absent witnesses, etc.): it may be more a matter of structural necessity. Not only the young man but perhaps the very possibility of story has been abducted. And in the very attempt to determine it. It's that blockage I want to examine here, as a way of asking the pragmatic question: "What then?"

Here we have a dilemma. On the one hand, story lies before discourse, which recasts and expresses it; on the other hand, story lies after discourse, a hypothesis made on no other possible basis than that of discourse. On the one hand, discourse effaces itself before the recollection of the already-there; on the other, the already-there of story is a ghost effect of the recasting and recollection of discourse. Here, the terms begin to blur one into the other in an oscillation which is indeterminable and interminable. Each term makes the other possible. Neither story nor discourse are thinkable without each other: no tale without a telling, no telling without a tale. The difference between story and discourse is the difference of each term from itself, difference itself. Sjuzet becomes fabula, fabula in its turn sjuzet. It is precisely this interdependence and textual indecidability of story and discourse which is staged in A Maggot: en abime, but also—and we shall return to this—placed within a certain and governing pragmatic and even historico-political context.

The mystery of the chest

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's go back for a while and complicate the matter a bit more. A Maggot begins with the image of travellers.
on horseback on the moors, and immediately spins a flurry of stories about
who they might be: a younger son who, with his entourage, is going to pay
court to a wealthy maiden aunt at Bideford; a journey to make a forbidden
love-match, or to a Devon water-cure for impotence, or to a licentious weekend
on a country estate; an elopement. Three of the party, it seems, have been hired
to play their parts: two actors and a prostitute. The young man, oddly enough
for a suitor or rake, spends all his time in the evenings with what seem to be
mathematical calculations and astronomical instruments, and drops veiled
hints about piercing the secrets of time.

In itself, all of this is a familiar and generic gambit which sets an enigma in
motion and hints that the course of the narrative will be towards its solution.
But the narrative is further destabilised in other, less conventional ways, by the
narration itself. The first sixty pages—as well as eight later intervening sections
and a coda—are a series of novelistic third-person accounts which at times
recall the narratorial disquisitions of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, with their
wealth of reconstructive detail, slight syntactic archaism, and their deliberate,
intrusively anachronistic commentary. After the party installs itself in the
rooms in the Black Hart Inn, for example, we are told that the young man

has also taken his wig off, revealing that he is shaven-headed to the apparent point,
in the poor light, of baldness; and indeed looks like nothing so much as a modern
skinhead, did not his clothes deny it. (Fowles 21)

The narration insistently points to a future which has no part in the story. In
itself, this could well indicate nothing more than the wisdom of hindsight
generic to the historical novel; but here (and, curiously, despite the
meticulously researched period detail the novel so richly displays), the
hesitations, qualifications and negations which so hedge virtually every
sentence of these passages suggest a lack of knowledge rather than the
superiority of vantage point. The emphasis is always on the externality and
partiality of what is observed: the limits of the observation. The dominant trope
in these passages, never less than frequent and sometimes thickly clustered, is
the qualified simile, the hypothesis: the *as if*, or even—yet more qualified—the
almost *as if*. Such figures occur with particular frequency when it is a question
of reading faces or actions for what they may reveal of the actors. Take, for
example, the description of the deaf-mute manservant Dick, and his fascinated
observation of the maidservant Fanny:

He seems to search every inch of that faintly waxlike facial skin, every
curve, every
feature, *as if somewhere* among them lies a minute lost object, a hidden symptom, an
answer; and his face grows mysterious in its intensity of concentration, its absence of
emotion. The *impression* is of a profound innocence, such as congenital idiots
sometimes display, of in some way seeing her more sustainedly, more wholly than normal intelligence could. 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. (Fowles 33: emphases added)

Here, this thicket of doubts which hedges the narrative results in a strange doubling between what Barthes calls the actional and narrational levels: the narrative voice which is supposed to speak and know is figured in its own narrative as Dick, who neither knows nor speaks.

The problem is compounded in passages such as that in which “Mr Bartholomew” and Dick, in the inn, are burning the trunkful of papers they have brought with them:

Mr Bartholomew makes a step to look down into the chest beside the hearth, to be sure that it has been properly emptied. It seems it has, for he bends and closes its lid . . . (Fowles 46: emphases added)

The lack of knowledge here has, of course, the effect of suddenly bringing into relief the position of such an observation: it is as if the narrator is far from omniscient, but positioned somewhere determinable in the room, unable to see into the chest any more than, say, into the soul of the young man who has just been presented as such an enigma. But there is also a different, concomitant and more strictly textual effect at work here. That is, while the object itself, that chest, is metonymised and made to stand for what it contains and which will itself never be seen, those unseen contents now suddenly behave as though they were themselves a figure of everything that is unseen and unknown in this text, including that enclosed, unknown space central to the mystery—the cave. Doubly figurative, the figure of a figure, the chest is thus something like a metalepsis of the text itself, the text which contains it, like a set of Chinese boxes.

Margins

Not only, in other words, does the text deny a knowledge or a position from which to know (which in itself need be no more than modesty), but it incessantly figures in its own narrative its own non-knowing and non-position. It seems we shall have to ask some questions of, or make some remarks on, the remarkable margins of this remarkable, self-re-marked text, and, in doing so, of the (critical) textual apparatus which can remark on such a text. I will borrow a voice, some voices, a certain style of so-called “deconstructive criticism,” which for the moment I want neither to deny nor affirm.
First of all, there is of course the title: A Maggot, and its repetition in the lines which open and close the novel's own brief Prologue as a complex apparatus of framing. Opening:

A maggot is the larval stage of a winged creature: as is the written text, at least in the writer's hope. But an older though now obsolete sense is that of whim or quirk.

and closing:

... I would not have this seen as a historical novel. It is maggot. (Fowles 5,6)

These two statements mark out the limits of that pre-text from which the narrative to follow will appear to grow: the larval stage of the text, we could say, the maggot of A Maggot. A Maggot will be, it seems, not only a text bearing that title, but also an example of maggotry. A Maggot is not only the title of this text, but the text's own description of what it does, of its own performativity. Let me emphasise this aspect, amid the whirligig of A Maggot as maggot, text as maggot, maggot as text.

A lot more could be said about this maggot, which is obviously—entomologically if not etymologically—a close cousin to a certain well-known parasite. As larva, on the one hand, the maggot is simply a transitory stage in a continuing series. Neither egg nor imago, what it was nor what it will be, it bears within itself the traces of its past and its future. It belongs to—oddly—chronology, inevitability, causality. But as whim or quirk, on the other hand, the maggot owes allegiance to none of these: inconsequential, contingent, part of no series, it seems spontaneously generated, coming from nowhere and leading nowhere. Necessity, continuity, succession, development, and the transparency of teleology, versus contingency, errancy, the inexplicable, the opaque, the luck of the draw, the wild card: that which must happen versus that which just happens. On the one hand what unfolds from within as the development of an internal logic which gradually unfolds itself into the visibility of the actual and external world, and on the other hand what arrives from without as pure and unforeseeable contingency, disrupting internal economies. Maggot resists maggot, maggot generates maggot: each of the two apparently antagonistic senses of the word depends on the other; "maggot" in the one sense is what eats away at the other, but is also what makes that other "maggot." Maggot maggot maggot. The two senses dance around each other in an indeterminate choreography: a third sense, "used in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century of dance-tunes and airs that otherwise had no special title" (5) ... Mr Beveridge's Maggot, My Lord Byron's Maggot, The Carpenter's Maggot, Fowles's Maggot...
This is, of course, not the final appearance of “maggot” in the novel. Not only a figure of the margins of the text, it is there also at its very heart, the heart of its mystery. When the young man and his two companions enter the cave, they are met there by something which (in Rebecca’s description)

floated in the inner cavern, like a great swollen maggot, white as snow upon the air. . . . Yes, like a maggot, tho’ not. . . . Of white, yet not of flesh, as it were wood japanned, or fresh-tinned metal, large as three coaches end to end, or more, its head with the eye larger still; and I did see other eyes along its side that shone also, tho’ less, through a greenish glass. And at its end there was four great funnels black as pitch, so that it might vent its belly forth there. (Fowles 359–60)

This “maggot” has no place here, and yet is here. Once inside the device, Rebecca is to see, from within as if looking out through windows, images of an unknown city, an idyllic pastoral, wars of unprecedented devastation. It is as if the cave impossibly contains something which is not only bigger than the cave’s sole entrance (as both Rebecca and the lawyer Ayscough realise), but bigger than the cave itself. This cave within the text which calls itself and describes itself as A Maggot contains: what? Precisely a maggot, or A Maggot. The outside which contains the inside is smaller than and contained within the inside: the maggot is, fortuitously but precisely, a figure of Derridean textual “double invagination.” The investigation nestsles within itself en abîme, parasiting itself ad infinitum. The abduction which has led to the investigation appears to be not just unhappy fortuity, but absolute.

Abduction and primal scenes

The deconstructive turn now leads us to a fortuitous digression.

C.S. Peirce isolates three possible types of inference (Peirce 2.623). Two are familiar enough: deduction, where I know the initial state of affairs, and from these can induce the rule linking them. But there is also a less familiar mode Peirce calls hypothesis, retroduction, or—interestingly enough, for our purposes—abduction: I know the result, and the rule which has led to this result, and from these two I abduce the initial state of affairs. Abduction is a convergence towards a missing initial term, in other words. It is the very movement one finds in the tale of detection, whose narrative is one greatly elaborated trope of abduction; in fact, and particularly given the doubling with which A Maggot figures its own process of figuration, it is the very type of logic which is involved in both Ayscough’s investigation and in the story-discourse distinction in general.

At this point a detailed argument would need to be made about Peircean semiotics in general, and in particular about the relations of abduction
to the sign. Here, I shall restrict myself to only two observations and their consequences.

First: deduction is the only one of these figures to be logically complete. Given the case and the rule which governs its transformations, finding out the single possible result is simply a matter of correct syllogistic application of the rule. Induction and abduction both lack this guarantee. Rather than provide logical proof, they provide hypotheses which can and need to be worked on further from extra-syllogistic, empirical material. Neither induction nor abduction can be proved in the purely logical sense in which deduction can; they may only be confirmed to a higher and higher degree as material is discovered in accordance with their hypotheses—or, of course, disproved by counterexamples. Logically incomplete, induction and abduction open out beyond the syllogism into certain activities of conformation or disproof. Abduction, that is, leaves the strict realm of logic for a praxis of testing.

The second point concerns the nature of the relation between deduction and abduction. Unlike induction, both deduction and abduction assume the generating rule; but where deduction uses that rule to work from a present state of affairs to a future guaranteed by the rule, abduction uses it to work back from such a present state to a far from certain past which nevertheless gave rise to that present. A paradox: the deductive future is certain, but the abductive past is uncertain.

Abduction, then, is retrospective and logically incomplete. On the one hand, it seeks to reconstruct a state of events: something which is there, before the reconstructing investigation, as the very possibility of the present from which the investigation takes place. On the other hand, this state of events is now only available through the logic of hypothesis. But then—and here the argument flips back again—this particular form of hypothesis is logically incomplete, and cannot be guaranteed on purely logical grounds.

The key here is in many ways the tripartite structure of the Peircean sign, and in particular the remarkable status of the object of that sign. I can only gesture towards a more thorough investigation here. On the one hand, the Peircean sign would appear to lead us to an infinite regression: the representamen of the sign is always separated from its object by the interpretant, which is in turn itself a sign whose representamen is separated from its object by a further interpretant, and so on, ad infinitum. But it also leads us somewhere other than into a textual aporetics, by a complex logic of limits rather than oppositions or outsides. Without for a moment forgetting that regression, and without turning the object into a simple outside of semiosis, Peirce can insist that “an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived
to have an absolute object as its limit . . . ” (Peirce 1.339: qtd. in Eco 169). The object of the sign, that is, is both factitious and factual: like the movement of the abductive hypothesis, it refuses to recognise any simple separation between the semiotic and the real, and brings us back incessantly to the limits of semiosis as a sort of *semiotic praxis*. The Peircean question is one not of the vanishing of logic but of its extralogical non-formal determinants.

This is an important structure—or rather, it is precisely the point at which structure and structural narratology find their limits. I have suggested that it is precisely the logic involved in the story-discourse distinction, as well as in Ayscough’s investigation. It is also the logic of what Ned Lukacher, following Freud, calls the *primal scene*:

an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between historical memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive free play. . . .

The primal scene is a circumstantial construction that is predicated where there is a *need to interpret* but at the same time a fundamental concealment or absence of the sort of evidence that could definitely substantiate a particular interpretation.

(Lukacher 24, 330: emphases added)

I emphasise that *need to interpret*: it is precisely what brings us, again, to praxis. Psychoanalysis (at least with Freud, though we may want to argue differently about its status since) is an intervention before it is an epistemology: if it knows, it is because it needs to know in order to cure.

I will not go into the psychoanalytical richnesses of the primal scene in *A Maggot*, though—given that it involves an enclosed womblike space in the earth, which is entered by an impotent (castrated?) man and two companions called Dick and Fanny—this clearly begs to be done. What interests me here is purely the abductive logic of the primal scene which, in its resultant instability of story and discourse, imbricates the scene told and the scene of the telling one onto another. Lukacher again:

The wolf dream is the *fabula* or event that the Wolf-Man narrates to Freud; the primal scene is the *sjuzet* or narrative reconstruction that Freud narrates to the Wolf-Man. But these terms can be turned around just as easily as the terms “cause” and “effect”: the primal scene is also the *fabula* or event that is reworked in the *sjuzet* or dream. In constituting the primal scene, Freud transforms the very status of the *fabula* or dream from which he had begun. Like cause and effect, *fabula* and *sjuzet* are terms that are at once distinct and indistinguishable. (Lukacher 37–38)

The primal scene is the story which underlies and is expressed by the discourse of the analysis, but, paradoxically, the scene of analysis is also secretly the
story behind the discourse of the primal scene. Ventriloquy: it is really the Wolf-Man who has been speaking of Freud all along, and of the analysis. Roy Schafer suggests that the narrative structures of psychoanalytic theories present or imply two coordinated accounts: one, of the beginning, the course, and the ending of human development; the other, of the course of the psychoanalytic dialogue. Far from being secondary narratives about data, these structures provide primary narratives that establish what is to count as data. Once installed as leading narrative structures, they are taken as certain in order to develop accounts of lives and technical practices. . . .

The sequential life historical narration that is then developed is no more than a second-order retelling of clinical analysis. (Schafer 29–30: qtd. in de Lauretis 130)

I would add only that this is not, as Schafer suggests, just a matter of two parallel narratives, but much more a matter of the instability of limits of a single doubled narrative structure as it everts between story and discourse, énoncé and énonciation.

The text speaks of its edges, on edge. If, as Lukacher says, the primal scene is "a circumstantial construction that is predicated where there is a need to interpret," then the text may also be made to speak of that edge where, under the need to interpret (here, now), it is made to speak. Space is pressing here: I can only gesture, as if by parable, to some of those edges, and take a big leap.

Law

Here, I will only point out very briefly how Ayscough, as a lawyer, has an entire apparatus of discourse to guarantee the testimonies he extracts. He has, for example, constant recourse to a psychology of types to judge and sift the trustworthiness of his informants: in his view, Welshmen are habitual liars, actors are skilled deceivers, prostitutes have taken leave of all morality, and dissenters are, at least potentially, politically dangerous enthusiasts. The law demands a speech which can be judged for truth from each of its deponents, with no recourse for silence; Ayscough is at pains continually to remind those he finds less credible that there is harsh punishment for perjury. The testifying word must continually be weighted and corrected against its known and predictable biases, filtered through an array of discourses, from the juridico-legal through to the received wisdom of human types, all of which function as discourses of the proper. Establishing, differentiating, circumscribing and allocating the proper, such discourses are performative rather than simply constative: like the initial oath taken by each of the deponents and its binding of the utterance to its proper subject, they constantly enmesh, constrain and enjoin all parties of the exchange in the very act of utterance. The discourses of
property (and the novel often seeks to remind us that eighteenth-century English law is essentially property law) are not a series of statements about truth, where it is to be found and to what degree, so much as a series of apparatuses to guarantee truth, to place it in certain positions and not in others, to give rise to subjects who, whatever the truth-value of their individual or typical utterances, cannot help but be truthful subjects. They are assigned to their truthfulness—their property, their propriety—by the law, for which alone there can be such a thing as possession.

And this, we should note, is law (with a small \( l \)) rather than Law (with a capital). A *Maggot* is not concerned with a serenely transcendent Law whose manifestation within the world is a guarantee of social order, or an inescapable Symbolic which calls its subjects into being and subjection. Instead, it unravels Law into law, a series of discourses, practices and strategies which are founded on nothing more than their own claiming and maintenance of power. It does this at all stages and at all levels of the novel, too: from Ayscough’s carefully graded bullying or patronisation of his deponents to his obsequiousness towards his powerful client; from his passionate equation of religious enthusiasm and political sedition to the narratorial ruminations on the eighteenth-century sense of selfhood and property; from the anachronistic and arbitrary distance of the narrational focalisation, to the coup by which the novel finally refuses the twentieth-century reader any explanatory hypothesis which is not, if anything, even more preposterous than the obviously inadequate one to which Ayscough is forced. As story of detection, A *Maggot* is not concerned with the logical induction of a Law behind and governing all phenomena (the name of the father is, after all, precisely what we don’t learn), but with the abduction of what is the case. The outcome of Ayscough’s investigations may not satisfy criteria of Truth, but it satisfies the law even as Truth disappears into a vortex. On such edges, I would suggest, the proleptic Grand Narrative of the History of Truth, and of the Laws of Texts, shivers and splits into a multitude of genealogies of a multitude of discourses.

What is done with texts

In trying to outline certain mechanisms of textual margins, I have said little of how this text, the one I write, is imbricated with and onto *A Maggot*, or indeed all the other texts it draws on; or of its role and that of literary criticism in general as a sort of policing. All I can do in this present space is claim retrospectively that in a most important sense that is precisely what this paper has been talking about, as partly-reconstructed *fabula* still to be dug from its *sjuzet*.

What I have been trying to do is ask questions of what deconstruction may do, other questions than those which have been asked and put in a certain
institutional place by deconstructive criticism. If deconstructive criticism is capable of locating, with unparalleled subtlety and ingenuity, certain aporias in the textual fabric, what it leaves us with, I would argue, is not the endless spectacle of textual implosions, but, in those very moments where language and logic themselves seem to founder, some valuable insights into the nature of the articulation of texts with what lies "beyond" them. I put that "beyond" in quotes, because it is of course no longer simply a matter of an outside, of what happens when we shake the dust of academia from our feet and, looking down, notice that our boots are newly, magically, cleanly, and for the first time, really just there, on the ground. For if the possibility of meaning is confounded at these very points which found it, and is founded by that very confounding, I think we must take this neither as a nihilism (as if "nothing has meaning") nor as a newer, higher-powered version of the spectacle that the literary has always been, even for some of the most politically acute criticisms. Instead, I think, it implies that at such points what happens is no longer just a matter of the generation of meaning, in the terms which are internal to meaning itself; that at such points we do not only have a textual indeterminacy, but in some sense an indeterminacy about whether what is happening is even any longer textual in any strictly linguistic sense. Such points translate us to the limits of textuality, as they appear fractally within texts, and mark not just where the text disappears into its own aporia but, precisely, the very points at which a text takes on what we could only call a performativity. Abduction, we remember, is logically incomplete: the struggle within the word is always, too, a struggle over the word. I will have to let that spill over the edge of this text.

Works consulted


