

The Diaries of John Fowles as a Creative Biography of the Writer

T. L. Selitrina

The diary of John Fowles is a kind of a chronicle of the writer's life, which reflects the circle of his reading, the formation of his philosophical and aesthetic views, the search for his own original path in art, as well as the story of a difficult and dramatic love for a married woman. We turn to the first volume of Fowles's diary as a reliable recounting of the formation of the creative quest of the English prose writer.

Fowles himself made a characteristic entry on April 28, 1958, about what a diary should be. He said that the diary "must preserve—the attitudes and nature of the diarist" (411). He stressed that "all excision, amendment, clarification, cleaning; one must think. The language can be cleaned," but "every change from the written word is a lie" (411).

The editor of John Fowles's diary, Charles Dreisen, noticed that he omitted a number of fragments that were written in illegible handwriting, but in general he characterized his diary as the last novel that the writer had created, an opinion upheld by authoritative English criticism. Fowles's diary reflects the life and creative process of an Oxford University student, then an English teacher on one of the Greek islands, an aspiring writer, and finally the famous author of *The Collector*.

During his studies at Oxford, he seriously reflected on his purpose in life and on his desire to become a writer. These were years of learning—literally and figuratively. Psychological self-realization goes hand-in-hand with the selection of life material, the assessment of others, and the desire to recreate the images of their friends in the French house. We have a whole gallery of portraits in front of us. These characteristics are embedded in a certain system of moral values professed by Fowles. For example, he characterizes one of the young men who served during the war in the British Air Force as follows: "Dapper, impeccable, and fairly well off. Conventional and sociable, but without great originality except for a certain facility of wit" (8). There will be quite a lot of such brief portraits, in which the very essence of the personality is expressed, on the pages of the diary. Fowles himself strives for inner harmony, peace of mind, and respect for others. But his main concern is to create beauty, to strive to do good by creating beautiful works and

constant concern for the improvement of his skills. He believes that there are objectivist writers who write for a potential reader, and subjectivists who write exclusively for themselves—that is, classicists and the Romantics. In his opinion, any creative activity tends to these two poles, just as there are memoirists and people writing diaries.

Throughout the first volume of the diary, the reader systematically gets acquainted with the titles of Fowles's plays: *Pandarus*, *The Passenger*, *Young Man* and many others, but the content of the plays in the diary is not disclosed despite his intense interest in the dramatic genre.

On January 5, 1950, he listens to Chekhov's play *Three Sisters* on the radio, on this day he is especially lonely. He admits that he felt a lot, changed his mind about a lot, and got great pleasure from feeling the optimism extracted from absolute pessimism, from the absurd atmosphere of life. These phrases in particular sunk into his soul: "There is no happiness; only the longing for it," and "My soul is like a piano, whose key has been lost." He is sure that Chekhov "knew how out of the sisters' misery, so typical, so universal, so timeless, would come the beauty, the joy and tragedy, catharsis, the strangest help" (15). But it seems to Fowles that Chekhov understood "a realization of man's position in an indifferent world, the glow of full consciousness vaguely felt" (15).

Fowles explains that the general can be understood only through personalities—otherwise it does not exist. And then, in a completely Aristotelian way, Fowles's final phrase resonates: "Tragedy should create pity, should broaden, deepen, emancipate the sympathetic imagination into a realm where the consequent will to creation, action, can be realized; should create ghosts with the will to climb into real life" (15). But in our opinion, nothing contradicts Chekhov in this judgment. Moreover, this conclusion of Fowles comes very close to the concept of the Russian playwright.

Soon Fowles happened to attend a performance by an Experimental Theater Troupe, whose production of Chekhov's *The Bear* left a mark on his soul: "Rather over-acted, and both pieces far from faultless, but an enjoyable evening," he noted in his diary (19). Equally impressive for him was Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*, which is, according to his definition, "A strange plotless play, without beginning or end" (132). He described the characters as "mysterious, unreal, but their mood I recognize at once" (132). Fowles emphasized that the play conveys the mindset of the whole city: "the ubiquity of futility;

the genteel descent into oblivion, where no one is capable of saying what their heart says” (133). Fowles also had a chance to see another Chekhov play, *Uncle Vanya*, performed by the Moscow Art Theater in 1958, when the Moscow Art Theater performed on tour in London on the stage of the Sadler’s Wells Theater. He was captivated by the technique of acting, so perfect “that it disappears” (413). He notes the “conflict of stage personalities always implicit in English casts,” but then observes: “The Russians are a team—there is a level at which they must acknowledge superiority or inferiority, but it is beyond the level of technique” (414). Fowles regrets that none of the critics noticed this. He drew attention to the *mise en scene*, in which the role of each performer obeying the director’s discipline is visible. In his opinion, the production corresponds to the sphere of realism. Fowles had been sympathetic to socialist ideas since his youth, so he explains the success of the play and the interpretation of the characters by the fact that the production itself comes from a socialist society. He only doubted that Astrov was in the center of the play, and the role of Uncle Vanya was reduced to the image of a weak-willed minor character. “By and large,” notes Fowles, “this is a tragedy, not a farce. And the characters deserve pity, not laughter” (414). According to Fowles, Chekhov himself created this play as a tragedy and the term “farce” should be understood metaphysically. At that time, Fowles himself did not dare to present his play *Pandarus* to the public, realizing that it was far from perfect, that there were many weak points in it.

During his student years, Fowles studied the experience of many writers: he was not satisfied with Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* with its claims to wisdom, but nevertheless Fowles is convinced that this is a classic with an exhaustive and verified style. Fowles was also distrustful of E. M. Forster: sometimes he thought he was too mannered, but after reading *A Passage to India*, he admitted that Forster creates “a kind of dry barrier of objectivity” (46). He described Graham Green’s novel *The Man Inside* as a historical thriller with many errors but admitted that such writings activate their own creative impulse. Putting brief remarks about Graham Greene and Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* in his diary, he noted with satisfaction that it gives him pleasure to critically evaluate the predecessors, their miscalculations, and cunning plans.

Reflecting on the styles of prose narration, he does not spare himself, believing that the problems of style are one of his own shortcomings. He is disturbed by his own stylistic

“wobbles.” He is aware that the shadows of D. H. Lawrence, Henry James and Faulkner constantly loom in his creative workshop, but he tries to reflect upon “whether it is such a fault” (94). He seems to be arguing with an invisible interlocutor, wondering, “is a single tonality so good” (94). Fowles believes that he can use the technique of Joyce, and sometimes Graham Greene. In this diary entry, he sketches verbal pictures of the urban landscape that he has just recreated on canvas. The landscape depicted the foothills with clouds floating across the sky, the outlines of the city were visible in the distance. Fowles himself noticed that this is quite a realistic landscape. In the foreground he placed two figures in black, white and carmine colors. He is aware that there are probably flaws in the picture, but he himself does not see any dissonances. For him, there is no violation of stylistic unity on the canvas.

At the same time, he began to master a new poetic form: “Very sparse, taut, old words, phrases, precise, correct, with occasional very small bursts of rhyme and music” (101). Moreover, he tries to follow the same path in painting—he struggles “against prolixity,” thus getting rid of verbosity and innate sentimentality. Fowles is trying to create his own prose style.

While on an internship in 1950 in France, reflecting on the ways of his own creativity, he turns to the artistic heritage of Kafka and Camus for examples. In his diary of May 2, he expounds upon the well-known thesis of existentialism. He is sure that these writers “mark a boundary. They have cut through to the bone, laid bare the one truth” (107). They showed that “Whatever we do is only temporary. The only sort of ‘afterlife’ that could exist is on the time-space level—a repetition of the life in which we seem conscious. In fact, even after death we can’t escape from the limitations of the life we seem to have lived” (107). In this note, Fowles reflected the very essence of the new philosophy.

But, on the other hand, in his opinion, there is “art to amuse, and art to relieve” (107). But these functions, Fowles believes, should belong to the sphere of “the realm of the fantastic and the romantic, the beautiful, the strange” (107). Fowles thoughtfully notes that “in other attempts” there appears to be “no effort at denying the full horror. Torches in a black cave. The cave is not dismissible. It exists behind and beyond all torches” (108). In this phrase, one can feel reminiscences from Plato, although indirect.

Even as a student, he wrote that he was trying to be an existentialist. According to him, this philosophy has been “forming since I went to Greece—and which I can only now begin to sense as clearly active in me” (302). In 1951, when Fowles the artist was being formed, he continued to be concerned about the differences between the artist as a creative person, from a non-artist, any ordinary person. For a non-artist, according to Fowles, the world is one-dimensional and real, the functions of people are obvious and definite, and for any creative person, the world is indefinite, transparent, full of pretense and secrets. He tries to imitate either Maugham or Maupassant, convincing himself that imitation of the great is the natural path of any artist, be it a writer or a painter.

He is especially fascinated by Maupassant, whom Fowles is ready to read endlessly. He is attracted by the depth of talent of the French author, who does not interfere with the fabric of the narrative with thoughtful comments, exhibiting the “power of fluidly concentrating his colours, of extended thoroughness in the painter,” revealing “a water-colour fluency of alternate elaborations and barest suggestions” (273).

In 1954, Fowles reflects on his supposed place in the writing community, very subjectively placing authors who have achieved world fame in their places. In his opinion, “there are two kinds of writer: those who have genius for some genre, Molière, Racine, Dostoevsky, Mansfield” (341). On the other side, Fowles placed Gide, Goethe, D. H. Lawrence, who “have merely a universal mind and find the written word their best means of expression” (341). They, according to Fowles, can be considered intellectual writers. He ranks himself in the last row, stating: “I’m a mind-writer” (341). From Fowles’s point of view, intellectual authors are those who are primarily concerned with ideas, not words. He wants to be a living artist, not a “classified museum” (342). Later he would add that “the writer wants to include the whole world; all the whole world expects of a writer is some new flavour” (344). At that time, everything that Fowles created did not resonate with publishers. But he continued to work systematically.

On August 25, 1956, he writes in his diary that he reworked half of *The Joker*—later he called this work *The Magus*. He is satisfied with the composition of the book, but the style raises some doubts. He sets himself the task: to subject each sentence to careful stylistic editing, it should be capacious, clear, honed. In his opinion, the style should be close to the spoken language, energetic, bold, like Rousseau, Hemingway, Kingsley, Amis. Suddenly

Fowles had associations with Shakespeare's *Tempest*: "Prospero, Caliban, Miranda, Antonio"—these parallels will appear later in the novel *The Collector*. On May 10, 1958, reflections on the very process of artistic creation appeared in his diary. He often comes across the concept of "natural genius" when it seems that the work is created as if in one breath, without much difficulty. And the creation created by daily incessant work is perceived as something unworthy. He notes that Dylan Thomas "laboured as hard as Mallarmé over his poems" (412). According to Fowles, the process of artistic creation, declared a "mystery," can long be considered a museum exhibit. Art in such beliefs becomes a symbol of the "mysterious" (412). For Fowles, the process of artistic creation is the interaction of will and labor.

In general, according to Fowles, books are documents of the era. He himself searches for information on psychology, sociology, anthropology, history. Sometimes, in his opinion, some weak novel of 1857 can talk more about history than a glorified masterpiece. But he is curious about modernity: "Because it is the latest, it must, potentially, be the best time, with the most material for artistic creation, philosophical analysis, scientific discovery" (385). Working on his own compositions did not prevent him from turning again and again to high classics, in particular, to the work of Jane Austen, which, in his opinion, prefigured the development of literature in the twentieth century.

Fowles is captivated by the natural kindness of Austen's heroines, their "absolute moral perfection": "She does this better than anyone else in English (in world?) literature—that is why, beyond all her great gifts of selection, dialogue, psychological shrewdness, she is great" (409).

Jane Austen becomes for him the benchmark against which the novel of the nineteenth century is evaluated. He even encroached on indisputable authorities, stating that, in comparison with her, the rest were "flash monkeys and macaronis beside her, all the Dickens's and Thackerays" (435). However, the late Dickens ("Our mutual friend") causes him genuine admiration and "one of the most delicious aesthetic experiences," because a human voice sounds there "with so fantastic a determination to kick an inhuman age into humanity" (455). Even the "delightful" Victorian novel *Middlemarch* is considered by Fowles lacking in comparison with Jane Austen's prose. Noting the skill of characterization and drama in George Eliot's work, Fowles remarks that the writer condescends to her

characters, playing the role of a preacher. IN contrast, “Jane doesn’t condescend, she simply fabricates a world,” but “her world is more whole and in the highest sense more real” (441).

In 1960, he began writing the novel *The Collector*. On the second of December, with a brief entry in his diary, Fowles expresses the essence of the book. For him, the concept of a “collector” is intended to symbolize the mediocrity of the current society, in which “hope and true vitality, pointlessly, maliciously crushed” (452). Fowles explained that the idea of the book is symbolic, it is “intended to be Platonic”: “Gold against lead ... the leaden-souled,” which can be sympathized with in metaphysical terms (459). However, the movement of civilization and progress is determined exclusively by “gold souls”—this is Fowles’s position. He stressed that Miranda embodies Aristos. Fowles explains that the word “Aristos” is borrowed from ancient Greek, it is used in the singular and means approximately the supreme good.

Simultaneously with the publication of the novel, the possibility of its adaptation arises, so Fowles briefly outlined the essence of the book to the alleged film director Karel Reisch. The idea of “women in prison” had long worried the writer and took shape after he got acquainted with Bela Bartok’s opera *Bluebeard’s Castle*. The idea of a woman in prison allowed Fowles to “attack the money-minus-morality society (the affluent, the acquisitive) we have lived in since 1951” (514). Fowles wanted to create an image of a “character who is articulate and intelligent,” as well as draw the opposite image of an “inarticulate and nasty” person, who seems to have taken hold “in post-war fiction and whose inarticulateness is presented as a kind of crowning glory” (514). There is an absolute hint here of the prose of “angry young men” and the so-called “working-class novelists.”

Soon, responses to the novel *The Collector* begin to appear. The overall assessment is positive. The book is called “Quite a little masterpiece of suspense” (556). Fowles adds his interpretation: “Heraclitus: a heavy debt is acknowledged” (632). In 1964, he also completed the first complete version of *The Magus*. For him, this is a time of a kind of summing up. Art remains for Fowles “a symbol of the mysterious” (412). He compares art and science, believing that the function of science is the destruction of the mysterious, and art is its preservation. Fowles is still concerned about the problem of literary skill, for example, the relationship between the author’s concept of the image of the hero and the dialogues in which the character participates. It is believed that there should be no discrepancies

between these positions. But the true skill, according to Fowles, lies in the unpredictability of the characters' behavior and dialogue. This, in Fowles's interpretation, is the peculiarity of human verisimilitude, which characterizes truly every great writer. He adds that not all Dickens characters belong to this category, but only unforgettable ones. And now the palm d'or is given to Jane Austen, however, Fowles also notes the skill of Thackeray, as well as Evelyn Waugh and Greene, because they have "the ability to create out-of-character dialogue and get away with it" (621). Fowles refers to artistic activity as acts of creation. The artist of the word, in his opinion, turns into a demiurge.

Fowles is far from striving to see himself in the spotlights: "I hate that sort of public attention" (122). He strives to create something eternal that will remain for centuries. This is his goal for the creative process.

Of particular importance in Fowles' diary is the concept of time. It seemed to him that he himself had an unusual sense of time. On December 3, 1949, he thoughtfully remarked: "The vital thing is time. It is the fundamental problem of life, around which all metaphysical speculation ought to turn" (10). Fowles considers the category of time to be a conditional concept, an artificial invention. For him at that time of his life, the main thing was the formation of personality and dynamism. In the spirit of Lessing, he talks about static and dynamic forms of art. Therefore, for Fowles, painting and sculpture are static, and poetry, music, and cinema are dynamic. The time factor itself makes the future writer talk about the categories of death and life. In his opinion, "Death kills time and enthrones, enhances place," therefore, space begins to dominate, the role of which increases. Life as such, Fowles believes, gives an understanding of time, thus an individual comprehends his own personality. Sometimes he wants to escape from time and merge with nature, to feel godlike. The most poetic pages of the diary are devoted to the nature of England and Greece. For Fowles, nature is a thinking entity. Following the revered Rousseau, he creates a cult of feeling and nature in his works. In one of his early recordings, Fowles writes about his characteristic worship of nature, when, late at night, returning home along a forest road, watching the visual effects of pinkish spots of clouds rushing across the sky, he was seized with a joyful sense of unity with nature. He feels pantheistic delight. The artistic continuity with Rousseau is palpable in many pages of the diary. In Fowles, the predominance of reason over feeling is noticeable. The reader gets acquainted with the modification of the

author's mental states, with unpredictable impulses of behavior and psychological secrets. A special place in the diary is occupied by a dramatic story of his love for a married woman and the relationship between imagination and sensual experience. His diary is romanticized, he tends to literary status.

Fowles's diary is distinguished by the diversity of the narrative. Specifically, the everyday is replaced by the social and philosophical. The intimately lyrical voice reveals different kinds of love generated by the primary elements of Fowles's character. Making daily notes became a need for him, bordering on an irrepressible thirst for creativity.

He continuously repeated that he defends the institution of humanism and the novel as a humanistic enterprise. Fowles does not agree with those who believe that the purpose of art is self-expression and form-making. On November 9, 1958, he visited a Jackson Pollock exhibition, where giant canvases splattered with paint were on view. The public peered into this modern painting, trying to understand its meaning. Fowles saw in these canvases the attraction to "non-art" and "absolute rejection of all inhibition" (419). He notes that at the moment people put the concept of "interesting" into the definition of "great," which opens the way to an infinite variety of interpretations. He himself saw in Pollock's painting "intolerably decadent art" (419). In his opinion, it was not even about breaking with traditions, but about the overthrow of classical art from its pedestal. Fowles calls Pollock's art extreme, where anyone can interpret art canvases as he pleases. In his opinion, such art does not touch the soul of the viewer, who looks with curiosity at such a curiosity. However, one canvas still caught Fowles's attention. It had the name *The Deep*. The very selection of the color scheme, the deep abyss above the void and the clouds floating high up caused a number of psychoanalytic associations in Fowles. The picture evoked associations with eternity in him.

Fowles himself did not recognize "gloomy, hopeless works of art." In his opinion, genuine art should serve as "a guiding star in the existence of people" (7:3). The opinion has erroneously been confirmed in Russian literary criticism that Fowles belongs to postmodernism. He has been characterized, because of the playful, parodic element of his prose, as a signatory of the postmodern method. It is known that postmodernism focuses on the perception of the world as chaos, devoid of causal relationships. The fact that Fowles uses the technique of the game and the layers of culture of the eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries as a starting point for his favorite concept of personal freedom does not mean that Fowles belongs to a postmodern situation. In fact, the creator made it possible to treat the republican conversion in all the diversity of the creator's manner in the twentieth century.

Work Cited

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