

*John Fowles's Variation on Angus
Wilson's Variation on E. M. Forster:
"The Cloud," "Et Dona Ferentes," and
"The Story of a Panic"*

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THE WORKING TITLE of John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower* was *Variations*, and Kerry McSweeney has shown that the short fictions which make up the volume do present variations on the techniques and themes of Fowles's own novels and on the works of other writers (101-50). One of those writers is Angus Wilson. McSweeney remarks that in its methods of characterization and narrative presentation Fowles's story "The Cloud," in particular, is reminiscent of Wilson's fiction. McSweeney goes on to say that "the social and professional background of the characters, their fatuities, banalities, and self-deceptions, and the skilful use of children as reflectors of adult behaviour all recall Wilson's short fiction, as does the way in which the narrator of 'The Cloud' slips in and out of the minds of several of the characters" (112). I would argue further that one particular story of Wilson's, "Et Dona Ferentes," bears such a close resemblance to "The Cloud" that Fowles might have been consciously influenced by it when writing his more expansive story, which was published twenty-five years after Wilson's.

It is interesting that Wilson's story also reveals the possible influence of an earlier fiction (in addition to Virgil's famous poem, from which Wilson's title is taken): E. M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic," which was written in 1904.¹ The basic likeness is that both stories depict the incarnation of Pan in an adolescent boy who disrupts an outdoor gathering of family and friends. As a

consequence, a dramatic conflict develops in both stories between the primitive and the civilized, between anarchic sexual energies and the restraining influence of a refined culture. However, Forster and Wilson employ disparate narrative modes to develop this conflict along very different thematic lines. In fact, the parallels between Fowles's and Wilson's stories are closer and more numerous than those between Wilson's and Forster's. What is perhaps surprising, though, is that "The Cloud" seems no less distinctive and fresh for being so seemingly derivative than do the other two stories. Indeed, Fowles has built on Wilson's techniques to create a fiction which is not only original but also more rewarding artistically than "Et Dona Ferentes."

That all three stories bear the idiosyncratic stamps of their authors challenges the currently fashionable axiom of semiology that literature is the creation, not of authors who make deliberate choices, but, in the words of Jonathan Culler, "of writing itself" (38). Of course, it is true that every text is necessarily composed and read within a pre-existing and partially determining linguistic and cultural matrix or "discursive space" (Culler 38). Every text is a potentially infinite intertext of codes and conventions whose presence is discernible in previous texts but "whose origin can scarcely ever be located" (Barthes 39). However, one need not demonstrate that authors create the linguistic codes they use or the contexts within which their works acquire meaning in order to argue that they can exercise deliberate control over how their works are situated within the intertext. Authors have the power to ignore some pre-existing conventions and select others more congenial to their purposes. Because those formulae can be deployed in an infinite variety of configurations, writers can achieve a degree of originality. Indeed, as Frank Kermode notes (102), the only meaningful novelty in literature is that attained by texts which make use of shared conventions, since communication is impossible without them. Such originality can be manifested even when authors focus narrowly on a small segment of the intertext, on one or more identifiable, precursor texts which can be singled out as influences. As I hope to show in this paper, even in such cases, intertextuality can facilitate the creativity of individual writers rather than negate it.

I

The similarity between the dramatic situations created by Forster and Wilson in "The Story of a Panic" and "Et Dona Ferentes" is readily apparent. Both stories show the effects of a primitive force of nature on a group of educated people who have planned a decorous outing in a picturesque rural location. Set in Italy, "The Story of a Panic" depicts the contagion of uncontrollable anxiety amongst a genteel set of English tourists: the narrator, his wife, and daughter; Mr. Leyland, an artist; Mr. Sandbach, a clergyman; and the two Miss Robinsons and their fourteen-year-old nephew, Eustace, in whom the god Pan is incarnated. Wilson's characters are Edwin and Monica Newman; their adolescent children, Richard and Elizabeth; Monica's mother, Mrs. Rackham; and one outsider, Richard's Swedish chum, Sven. The latter, Eustace's counterpart as an avatar of Pan, is the source of the emotional turbulence which disrupts the family picnic occurring in the Dorset countryside.

The ways in which Forster and Wilson depict the manifestation of an ancient god in a modern setting underscore the differences between the fictional modes in which the stories are cast. Whereas the identification of Sven with Pan is only figurative, a passing fancy in the mind of the sexually stirred Edwin Newman (188), the visitation of the god in Forster's story is presented as a literal event. Although never visibly present, Pan leaves footprints behind in the appropriate shape of a goat's (11). As do a number of Forster's short fictions, "The Story of a Panic" takes the form of what Lionel Trilling calls "mythical fantasy" (35) and exhibits the spirit, not of a mystical reversion to pagan beliefs, but of "natural and naturalistic piety" (45). That is to say, the supernatural element serves the creation of a parable illustrating the alienation of an effete, over-refined social class from natural sources of vitality and freedom (Summers 237-38; Cavaliero 43). Wilson is also interested in his characters' separation from nature, but he employs social and psychological realism rather than fantasy. Their methods contrast interestingly. While Forster generates dramatic irony by presenting a marvellous occurrence from the limited perspective of an uncomprehending narrator with an ordinary, mun-

dane world view, Wilson creates an undramatized narrator capable of godlike feats of omniscience who nevertheless restricts himself to everyday experiences, who is content to record the thoughts and social gestures of characters leading unexceptional lives.

These differences in fictional mode and point of view aside, there is a basic similarity between the ways in which the two writers conceive of the elemental natural forces associated with Pan. In both stories the primitive energies manifest themselves as a peremptory homoeroticism which plunges all of the characters into emotional turmoil by threatening to overturn socially accepted relationships and codes of behaviour. The homosexual desire is overt in Wilson's story and latent in Forster's, in which the narrator condemns the friendship of Eustace and the Italian waiter Gennaro only as a transgression of social barriers, not sexual ones (16). However, as Judith Herz points out (57), Forster acknowledged retrospectively that in the story he had unconsciously implied the existence of an erotic attraction between the youths. Eustace's greeting of Gennaro after the picnic is especially suggestive in this regard:

Eustace sprang to meet him, and leapt right up into his arms, and put his own arms round his neck. And this in the presence, not only of us, but also of the landlady, the chambermaid, the facchino, and of two American ladies. . . . Gennaro, instead of attending to the wants of the two new ladies, carried Eustace into the house, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. (16)

The most significant difference between the two stories is that Forster's is more affirmative than Wilson's concerning the value of atavistic, Dionysian urges. As Claude Summers indicates (240), "The Story of a Panic" celebrates, although not unambiguously, the transforming, liberating power of elemental nature. Eustace's possession by Pan is an ecstatic revelation of the unity and primal vigour that connects him to the universe at large. The vision, though, is achieved at a cost which the story does not gloss over: an inability to function socially. Eustace tells Gennaro, "I understand almost everything. . . . The trees, hills, stars, water, I can see all. But isn't it odd! I can't make out men a bit" (25). Nevertheless, a reading of the story leaves no doubt that the civilized

adults who remain oblivious to the wonder of Eustace's experience and who try to suppress his new potency represent an insensible culture cut off from the natural sources of its own life. The sacrificial death of Gennaro is meant to underscore the essential destructiveness of this society. Fundamentally, the story equates the primal instincts with freedom and vitality. P. N. Furbank supports this contention in avowing that the story communicated Forster's own "feeling of standing in the sunlight at last and possessing his own soul" (1:92).

In "Et Dona Ferentes," on the other hand, the emphasis is on the destructive rather than the redemptive potential of primitive desires. The story associates Edwin's lust for Sven, not with freedom and enhanced awareness, but with shame, selfish motives, and the suffering of others. There is no sense, as there is in Forster's story, that the panic and discomfort which the characters undergo is a deserved retribution for their denial of their own natures. In Wilson's story it is human nature itself, not the puritanical mores of polite society, which is dangerous. While "Et Dona Ferentes" never implies that Edwin's homosexuality is in and of itself base or immoral, its eruption has devastating consequences for his wife and children which are not compensated for by any growth on the part of Edwin or Sven. The latter's resemblance to Pan amounts only to physical grace and attractiveness, not to any nobility of character or largeness of vision. The response to that beauty in Edwin is not accompanied by Eustace's rapturous insight into the nature of things; it only reacquaints him with a shameful weakness. Whereas Forster imbues the relationship of Eustace and Gennaro with dignity and tenderness, Wilson makes Edwin's infatuation with the shallow and calculating Sven seem pathetic. One might summarize the essential difference between the two stories by saying that in Wilson's middle-age is reined in and chastened by the very force of nature which sets youth triumphantly free in Forster's.

II

It is obvious from the foregoing analysis that, despite a core likeness which suggests the possibility of direct influence, "Et Dona

Ferentes" is markedly different from "The Story of a Panic" in many important respects. However, the case is quite otherwise with the very close relationship between "The Cloud" and "Et Dona Ferentes." The numerous parallels between these two stories give rise to evaluative considerations which do not emerge in a treatment of the first pair. In other words, because the stories are so similar, the characteristics which make one work artistically superior to the other come to the fore. I want now to demonstrate qualitative differences by showing how Fowles builds on Wilson's techniques to create a fiction which is in every way more subtle, complex, and rich than "Et Dona Ferentes," a fine piece of work though it is.

The basic narrative situations, settings, and themes of the two stories are clearly alike. Each dramatizes the interactions of a group of family and friends who are having a picnic in the country on a hot summer day. Set in France rather than England, "The Cloud" features a slightly larger and less homogeneous group of characters: Bel and Paul; their two small daughters, Candida and Emma; Bel's sister, Catherine; and Paul's friend Peter, his girlfriend, Sally, and his son, Tom. In each story, the harmony and beauty of the vividly evoked pastoral setting is intended to contrast ironically to the discord lying just beneath the surface of the human festivity. To highlight this disjunction, both stories mention that the colours of garments which characters wear clash with those in nature (Wilson 190; Fowles 221). Forces which break the ties of family and community and isolate the individual in the prison of the self are important themes in both stories.² These destructive forces precipitate crises which are punctuated in both stories by violent changes in the weather. In "Et Dona Ferentes," the thunderstorm signals the threat posed to the Newman marriage by the resumption of Edwin's homosexual desires. And in "The Cloud," the storm which looms at the conclusion symbolizes the dissolution of Catherine's identity and her possible suicide.

The two stories are also similar in associating the conflicts presented, not only with the common misunderstandings which arise on account of the imperfections of well-meaning people, but also with the destructive behaviour of extremely egocentric and shallow characters: Sven and Peter. Sven does not quite belong in

Wilson's gallery of such characters as *Hemlock and After's* Hubert Rose, who seems motivated by a transcendent power of evil, but, dominated entirely by vanity and greed, he is the only character in the story whose inner life is intended to be repugnant to the reader (193-95). Peter's selfishness is associated with evil by Fowles, through the symbolism of the adder about which he warns Catherine prior to sodomizing her (293), an act which she invites in her despair in order to defile herself. Of the two destructive male characters, Peter is more fully and interestingly developed than Sven, who is, despite the authentically stilted cadences of his English speech, a rather superficially drawn character defined entirely by callowness and narcissism. Peter, on the other hand, the energetic, professionally charming BBC producer with his eye on the main chance, is a fascinating variation on a familiar type in Fowles's fiction: the inauthentic male who is afflicted with what William Palmer calls "collector consciousness" (45), the tendency to categorize and control rather than to experience living reality. Catherine, the character whose views most closely approximate Fowles's, identifies Peter as one to "whom the real, the living, the unexplained is the outlaw; only safe when in the can" (242). Although he seems very different in personality and circumstances from Clegg in *The Collector*, Peter also exemplifies the banal evil which can result from an outlook on things which is essentially life-denying.

In neither story, however, are the dissonant human relationships attributed primarily to what could broadly be defined as evil. Sven turns Edwin's homosexual desires to his own venal purposes, but he does not create those longings; nor is he responsible for the inability of the family members to empathize with one another, although his disruptive effect on Edwin and Monica's marriage does occasion those problems. And in Fowles's story, Peter is even less to blame for all of the crossed purposes and unhappiness. It is not Peter but the death of Catherine's husband which causes her breakdown, although her morbid sensitivity to Peter's shallowness does increase her despair. But the sibling rivalry of Emma and Candida, the inability of Sally to minister successfully to Tom's needs, the wrangling of Bel and Paul, and their failure to assuage Catherine's grief have nothing to do with Peter.

Both Wilson and Fowles stress commonplace difficulties which hinder their characters from bridging the gaps of age, gender, and differing values in order to make connections of sympathy and love with one another. "Fond as I am of Monica," her mother thinks, "I wouldn't be able to help, whatever may be wrong" (189), and, after Monica's hysterical outburst following Edwin's departure with Sven, her son chastises himself as follows: "I've failed again," thought Richard. "When I was reading about Stefan Trofimovich's death, I wanted to be there so that I could make him happy, to tell him that for all his faults I knew he was a good man. But when my own mother is in trouble I can't say anything" (198). In "The Cloud," which is a deeper exploration of human estrangement, Catherine is not only cut off from others by her own individuality and the mortality of someone she had loved, but also, owing to the extremity of her condition, from the very continuity of her own experience:

So now everything became little islands, without communication, without farther islands to which this that one was on was a stepping stone, a point with point, a necessary stage. Little islands set in their own limitless sea, one crossed them in a minute, in five at most, then it was a different island but the same: the same voices, the same masks, the same emptiness behind the words. (229)

One reason why Fowles's fictional investigation of what isolates people is more penetrating than Wilson's is that, in addition to doing what Wilson does, creating memorable representations of people failing to communicate, he shows what is problematic about the processes of communication themselves, including those of his own story.³ This comes explicitly to the fore in Catherine's synopsis of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (244-47). Her discussion of the deviousness of sign systems and the corruptions to which they are susceptible attunes the reader to what is poisoning the interpersonal relations of the story's characters. The connection between the story itself and the types of communication employed by its characters is that all, Fowles would hold, are fictions. For him all human reality is metaphorical and, in some sense, humanly created, and hence fictions such as those which he writes are not really distinct from other, supposedly more empirical, interpretations which people communicate to one another ("Notes on an Unfin-

ished Novel" 139). McSweeney expresses Fowles's position succinctly: "one's perception of reality, one's phenomenological world, is the work of the imagination" (110).

The problem with which Fowles's story grapples, though, is that the conditions of modern life have interfered with our capacity to be nourished and linked to one another through fictions, whether they be the images of the self which individuals project or, in this age of the *crise de roman*, stories such as "Et Dona Ferentes" and "The Cloud." Such fictions are of vital importance, but we have learned to think of them as decentred, inconclusive structures of words cut loose from any legitimating origin or transcendent authority. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," says Joan Didion in *The White Album*, and her essay describes a difficult time "when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself" (11-12). This is exactly the plight of Catherine, who is pathologically aware of the baselessness of all of the fictions which structure life. "One is given to theories of language," she broods, "of fiction, of illusion; and also to silly fancies. Like dreaming one is a book without its last chapters, suddenly: one is left forever on that last incomplete page" (230). Her words foreshadow a convergence of the plot of her life with the plot of the story she inhabits, which is also suspended without resolution or closure. At the finish, with the storm impending and the others ready to leave, Catherine has still not returned from the forest. Her fate never is disclosed.

Unlike "Et Dona Ferentes," then, "The Cloud" turns its interest in the relationship between literature and life reflexively back upon itself. Wilson does raise this theme through the references of some of the characters to the books which they are reading, and he relates the issue to the difficulties which his characters have in relating to one another. But his treatment of this theme is less rich than Fowles's, and it does not extend to his own attempt to affect the lives of his readers through his story. It amounts to little more than the recognition that some people, such as Richard and his grandmother, Mrs. Rackham, live too much in literature to be effective in dealing with real people, while others, such as Sven, live too little in books and have under-developed imaginations as a consequence. Fowles, however, goes one step further and inter-

rogates the capacity of his own story to enrich the lives of his readers. He makes "The Cloud" self-conscious in this fashion by creating within it a story-telling surrogate for himself, Catherine. The charming fairy tale which she creates for Emma is an idealized, ironic version of the story which she inhabits. Catherine would love to believe that the tale of the lovely princess waiting to be rescued by the heroic prince represents her own condition, which is also one of suffering and loss. But her fate is a cruel reversal of the princess's expectations, for shortly after Catherine tells the story Peter, the ironic counterpart of the prince, arrives to deepen her despair and, perhaps, to precipitate her suicide.

The implications of this conclusion with regard to the ameliorative or redemptive power of the story itself are obviously bleak, and consequently it would seem that Fowles's treatment of this theme is not only more extensive but also more pessimistic than Wilson's. The conclusion of "Et Dona Ferentes" offers at least the possibility that the forces of isolation need not prevail. At the story's finish, Edwin and Monica agree to take a vacation together in an attempt to overcome what is driving them apart. While less hopeful on the level of plot, however, "The Cloud" is more optimistic than its ending suggests inasmuch as Catherine's inability to sustain herself by means of fictions is itself embodied in a fiction of considerable potency. By casting her harrowing experience into the form of a moving, imaginative fiction, Fowles paradoxically surmounts the barriers to communication by affirming their reality.

Narrative technique is another area in which "The Cloud" is more complex and artistically refined than "Et Dona Ferentes." To a greater degree than Wilson's, Fowles's method of telling the story reflects and helps to develop the themes. It also bears witness to his desire to make his form an aspect of his content and to explore the relationship between those themes and the story which incarnates them. In this respect, the differences between the two men's methods of narrative presentation are even more significant than the similarity which McSweeney mentions: the extensive use of several characters as centres of consciousness for an undramatized voice. The technique by which Fowles's narrator provides access to the thoughts and feelings of his characters is more arch and elusive than that of Wilson's narrator. The reader has no

trouble discerning the points at which Wilson's omniscient narrator enters and leaves the minds of the characters, and, despite his intimacy with them, it is always clear that his voice is distinct from theirs. But Fowles's narrator employs free indirect discourse more frequently than does Wilson's. Consequently, one finds it difficult to tell just when he is recording the perceptions of one of his characters and when he is speaking in his own voice. It is also hard to tell at certain points which character the narrator is inhabiting. Throughout the story the focus of narrative consciousness jumps without warning or transition from one character to another. The effect of such free indirect discourse, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan says, is to enhance the "polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes" and ultimately to dramatize "the problematic relationship between any utterance and its origin" (113). And the reader is unsettled even more because, as Barry Olshen shows (103), Fowles withholds crucial expository information about the sources of the tensions amongst the characters. Unlike Wilson, Fowles thus builds into his narrative method the jarring nature of the social intercourse which the story dramatizes, and he buffets the reader to make him feel the effects of the conflicts which set the characters at odds.

The means by which Wilson and Fowles tell their stories affect the way in which they develop their characters, and, again, as McSweeney observes, there is a basic similarity. Both expose and to some extent satirize the limitations of their characters, who are drawn from the same social class. But here, too, there is an important difference which, to my mind, testifies to the superior richness of "The Cloud." The relation of Wilson's narrator to his characters is one of omniscient superiority. He understands their foibles perfectly and can plumb their depths to expose the inner workings of their psyches. But one feels that this is possible in part because the characters are too easily known, too little more than the sum of their weaknesses. In fact, all of the characters, with the exception of Monica and Edwin, seem to be rather flat caricatures who are defined almost totally by their predictable blind spots and flaws. Although Fowles's narrator is also psychologically omniscient, his relation to the characters of "The Cloud," like his method of exhibiting the workings of their minds, is, at first, more enigmatic.

He is less evenhanded with his characters than is Wilson's narrator, whose point of view is noncommittal. Against this position it could be argued that Wilson sympathizes most with Monica, since, as Averil Gardner rightly notes, the story's Virgilian title represents her perspective (25). It is she who has a motive to fear the significance of the gift over which Sven maliciously gloats near the story's conclusion. The ring identifies him as the object of Edwin's passion. Despite the title, though, Monica no more embodies the story's point of view than do any of the other characters. Given her situation, her waspish shrillness is understandable, but it seems intended by Wilson to repel the reader. In any case, she elicits no more sympathy than does Edwin. Their marriage perfectly exemplifies Wilson's dictum that "apprehensions of moral ambiguity in relationships should be the stuff of short stories; at any rate, they are of mine" (*The Wild Garden* 98).

Fowles's narrator exhibits a less ambiguous attitude to his characters. It gradually becomes apparent that he identifies most with Catherine, who, as McSweeney notices (112), has an imaginative quickness and openness to mystery which accord with Fowles's existentialist values. And through her consciousness Fowles's narrator aims more venom at Peter than Wilson's narrator does at any of his characters, Sven included. And yet, despite a seemingly more restricted point of view, "The Cloud" has more respect for the complexity and otherness of its characters as representations of people who do not exist merely to serve the author's thematic purposes. Even the under-developed Sally, for whom Fowles manages to generate a surprising amount of sympathy, bursts the stereotype of the empty-headed, sexy starlet. She proves to be a rather ordinary, conventional woman who suffers because she is unable to interest Peter in any but a sexual way or to establish a real bond with his son. Out of her cultural and intellectual depth with Catherine, Bel, and Paul, Sally is also a victim of the isolation which destroys Catherine's emotional balance. In contrast, Wilson's Richard, for example, never seems more than the too-predictable stereotype of the bookworm who is ineffectual with real people.

It has not been my intention in this essay to denigrate the artistry of Angus Wilson, whose excellence as a novelist is well established.

Wilson's canon contains works such as *No Laughing Matter* which are every bit as distinguished and artistically sophisticated as Fowles's best fiction. And one should note in fairness that "Et Dona Ferentes" was an early piece published before structuralism was developed and self-conscious fiction became popular, whereas "The Cloud" was written long after Fowles's apprenticeship as a writer. What I have tried to show is not that Fowles is a better writer than Wilson but that Wilson's apparent influence on Fowles no more resulted in mere imitation than did Forster's apparent influence on Wilson. Rather Fowles turned his countryman's methods and concerns to his own distinct purposes in order to create a subtler and more compelling story.

NOTES

- ¹ I am indebted to Dr. John Stape of the University of Western Ontario, who first directed my attention to the similarities between "Et Dona Ferentes" and "The Story of a Panic."
- ² Peter Faulkner observes that the title of *The Wrong Set* is particularly apt because in all of its stories Wilson's "central concern is with characters who find themselves with wrong sets of relationships; can there be relationships, the volume asks, which allow and help all concerned to grow and develop, or are they necessarily props for some and prisons for others? The somberness which underlies the wit comes from the fact that the answer suggested is negative" (4).
- ³ For a discussion of this issue in relation to the collection as a whole, see Holmes.

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