

The Magus

A biographical essay by

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March 6, 2018

The Magus and the Metafiction

I always account for the bewildering attitudes of young people by observing that they've been introduced to the Beatles' albums out of the order of their release dates. My opinion about this is sympathetic: It has to mess with your mind to hear *Sergeant Pepper* before *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, or, for that matter, even before *Revolver*. Apparently, I was onto something because first reading in the early 1980s John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (published in 1969), followed by his *Daniel Martin* (published in 1977), and only then traveling backwards to read *The Magus* in 2018 (the 1977 revision, not the original 1965 version) set me up for big problems. I have to admit to a memory of picking up this long novel in the late '60s, but it seems that I have suppressed most of that experience. And while I'm confessing things – mostly to myself – I should add that I also vaguely remember having seen the 1968 movie made of *The Magus*, but except for a close-up of a torn mouth screaming, "Elutheria!" I may, again, have buried that film memory. We all know what they say: if you can remember the '60s, you probably weren't there.

Despite the fact that Fowles began composing *The Magus* in 1953 and worked on it for 12 years before publishing it after *The Collector* (1963) and *The Aristos* (1964), it seems to have resonated with his earliest reviewers. Eliot Fremont-Smith of the *New York Times* saw it in 1966 as

"at once a pyrotechnical extravaganza, a wild, hilarious charade, a dynamo of suspense and horror, a profoundly serious probing into the nature of moral consciousness, a dizzying, electrifying chase through the labyrinth of the soul, an allegorical romance, a sophisticated account of modern love, a ghost story that will send shivers racing down the spine... -it is, in spite of itself, convincing." It has held a respectable place on official book lists and in canons both in the UK and the USA for the many years since that time. As recently as 2009, Jo Walton

reviewed it for *Tor.Com*, a journal of science fiction and fantasy, identifying it with defiant enthusiasm as:

“... one of those books that ought to be science fiction and is ultimately less satisfying than it could be because it isn’t. Fowles himself admits in the introduction that it is a book with problems, and that the people who really like it are adolescents.

He’s right: I adored this book when I was a teenager. ... I like it rather less now ...”

Perhaps if I had read it when it was first published, I would have adored it, too. But I did not read it in the right season, as a proto-hippie; I read it in the last month, as a newly retired literature professor. And my critical take on *The Magus* is that it is an immature and dated work. Though it contains the seeds of the author’s later, more successful novels, I am dismayed to find the narrative design and effects that I so enjoyed, particularly in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and to a just slightly lesser extent in *Daniel Martin*, in such confusing disarray in this first novel.

The Magus has been called an early postmodern novel, but despite my tendency (and that of other, more prestigious critics) to blame the postmodern for everything that goes wrong in contemporary life and arts, I don’t really blame it for what I see going wrong in Fowles’ novel. Like art, theater, music, and dance that can be identified as such, postmodern literature features a pastiche of multicultural appropriations, a free mix of high and low forms, and creates frictions and ironies by deploying certain strategies to destabilize not only the reader’s attempt to interpret a given text, but the ultimate formal properties of narrative itself. Narratives feature, probably from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, stories and storytellers drawing on cultural master narratives (like *The Odyssey*) to create new narratives (like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) containing subtly woven shadow narratives, repeating narratives, contesting narratives, and jammed narratives (such as one finds in *Don Quixote*). The wavering form of truth at the center of a narrative is nothing new. Postmodern narratives just like to push the reader’s ability to invest in the book by making it necessary to engage on the metalevel, to walk the high wire between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic, throughout the act of reading. But if postmodern metafiction may shapeshift in these ways, how does the earnest reader locate the purpose or the moral compass of the storyteller? And why bother to search for the moral point of a narrative that is a labyrinth designed to obscure or obliterate it?

Metafiction often afford contemporary writers the chance to use the narrative dissonances that they create to call the question on received ideas (wartime morality, for instance) or to make the case for a new approach to an old problem

(redefining the beauty standard is an example), or to create a space between narrative levels for a hidden social practice or behavior to be discovered and better understood (hybrid fiction was, in fact, invented in the late '70s for that purpose). A postmodern metafiction that manages to complicate both narrative and moral structures and yet to throw the reader a line at the end is Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), with which some of you may be familiar. The story's central character and narrator is a German spy during World War I who completes a mission by killing an innocent man because he has become convinced that time is proliferative - that for every outcome of human action, an infinite number of event sequences exist concurrently and continuously, each path leading to different outcomes, and that this view of time therefore obviates questions raised within any given moral binary. Borges' notion, that is, of proliferating sequences of human action, as stories, threatens to smash both the possibility of meaningful storytelling and the human moral compass. But Borges, who admitted that he didn't really like this story of his, ended it with his narrator waiting in prison to be hanged, alone with his "innumerable contrition," thus salvaging value of the compass, at least.

The lengthy tales of both World Wars that Maurice Conchis shares with Nicholas Urfe are similar to those of the narrator of Borges' story in aspects of character, plot, and moral compromise. Conchis shares self-serving lies, self-justifying cowardice, and shameless exploitation of philosophy in the service of self-preservation, always with the effect of making Nicholas question moral values that - never having fully identified with them to begin with - he gains new justification in questioning. Likewise, Conchis' confided youthful posturings to appear worthy of Lily Montgomery newly spark and cultivate a subterranean callowness in Nicholas. The old man's narratives of love and war spin out and color the young man's experiences of romance and adventure on Phraxos, ennobling, and so enabling, the ethical issues Nicholas uses to screen the deeper moral issues of his Greek passage. Unlike Borges, Fowles gives us almost nothing as to his purpose in having stirred up the dust in his young central character. How did he change? What did he learn? What regrets shaped him for Alison after Phraxos and his own version of Lily? What else could he have learned at the knee of a man who would desert his fellow soldiers in a war as savage as the Great War, and who would sacrifice the lives of eighty people to an idea that was not his, an idea that his primary personal interest and project required that he sacrifice, in any event? Borges' moral view, though obscured through his narrative's events, is seized and recuperated at the end of the tale. Fowles questions wartime morality in weaving Conchis' narrative web, but denies his readers any means for navigating the moral choices raised, or even for recuperating the facts of Conchis' stories themselves. *The Magus* is a long narrative, and therefore does not have the

advantage that short stories possess in revealing their effects clearly. Borges' spy is clearly sorry that he killed his friend in all of the act's possible branching paths, while Nicholas, having discovered that he loves Alison after all, can only forswear any lovers' promises and slap her in the face to answer the question of their future together. The difference that I find between the two postmodern narratives has little to do with literary postmodernism and less to do with the authors' relative ages, as they were both in their early 40s when they composed their two respective works, but much more to do with the disparity between the creative development of the two writers. Fowles was simply not the seasoned writer that Borges was at the same age. In the forward to the revised edition, he characterized the original version as "an endlessly tortured and recast cripple" that even in revised form "remained essentially where a tyro taught himself to write novels" (*The Magus*, 1977 6).

Given metafiction's usual purposes, I searched some of the cultural and historical contexts that Fowles appropriates for his novelistic pastiche, hoping to find a larger interpretive framework for my reading. Among them are the high cultural status of the subject of the human mind (seen in the primacy of psychoanalysis in the European and American metropolis in the 1950s-70s, and also in the period of social experimentation with human subjects that spanned the center years of the twentieth century), the history of the masque as a cultural form used to convey socio-political messages (seen during the Renaissance period), and the looser, yet pervasively layered intertextuality of the work, all of which promised to lend some aid to my reading of Fowles' book. I wanted to pursue the connections between the novel and the masque, the human-subject experiment, and the psychoanalytic practice of that time, to discover at the very least the immediate social underpinnings of the narrative's events.

As it flourished during the Tudor (1485-1603) and Stuart (1603-1714, excepting 1649-1660 Commonwealth) reigns, the masque was a type of court performance intended to "celebrate the monarch and the monarchy" by narrated or dramatic enactments of royal histories, and by involving willing kings, queens, and court members in its performances. Despite its disappearance during the British Civil War, it was revived by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s for purposes mirroring those of the original masques: to provide an official dramatic narrative of the ruling government's authority. As seen in *The Magus*, the masques witnessed by Nicholas are dramas, rather than narratives, featuring mysterious mythological characters and vaguely threatening tableaux. Their obscurity as masques confuses Nicholas more than they confirm any kind of power structure that might or might not be in place at Bourani. The purpose of the masquers is unclear to him, and their disguises seem fragile: he begins to be able to identify the company of actors

taking different parts in the masquerades. In the absence of a clear message in the dramas and a successful spectacle from the performers, he is, as we, too, are, left off balance, unable to read or believe what he has seen. His skepticism – despite Conchis’ suggestion that he damp it down for the sake of a better experience – stays with him through his participation in the final masque (and un-masking) of the trial. Whether Nicholas uses his twentieth-century habits of mind actively to resist Conchis’ teachings or he simply cannot successfully gain access to and benefit from the messages of the masques, he does not process them as metafictional devices that might release him from any idea of self or belief that are impeding his maturation. His confusion allows him to remain impervious to their messages, seeking (but never really believing he can find) a way to remain the person he was before he went to Greece.

If Nicholas clings to his thinking paradigms, he is also quite proof to Conchis’ attempts to reshape his behavior with hallucinogens administered without his permission. It is easy to see the novel’s scenes involving him as an unwitting or unwilling human subject of drug experiments as imagined with the help of the plenitude of “scientific” inquiries performed on duped or nonconsenting humans from the 1930s to the 1970s in Europe, America, and the Empire of Japan. Many of these horrific experiments are well known: sterilization of certain populations in Germany in the 30s; concentration camp experiments during WWII; experiments with disease inoculation in the Japanese Empire in the 30s and later in the 50s by the State of Japan; the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in the United States between 1932 and 1972; the existence, also in the United States, of Project MK Ultra on “mind control,” in operation from the 1950s to the 1970s. The cultural narratives of this criminal science activity must have been very compelling during the years – 1953-1977 – that Fowles was working on this novel. Possibly, it was difficult for him to resist exploiting the broad familiarity of these stories featuring the scientist as antagonist, especially one claiming to be involved in the pioneering study of the human mind. Fowles’ Dr. Frankenstein seems patterned after the mid-50s psychologist stereotype, as described in the Wikipedia pages on the history of psychoanalysis: “These “Ego Psychologists” of the 1950s paved a way to focus analytic work by attending to the defenses (mediated by the ego) before exploring the deeper roots to the unconscious conflicts.” Conchis’ attentions to Nicholas’ defenses are perhaps a bit darker than our understanding of typical mid-century psychotherapies, but that doesn’t seem to make them any more effective. Fighting hard against the lessons of all of his experience at Bourani, fighting hard to retain all of his preconceptions about love and truth, Nicholas finally becomes the hard-boiled protagonist who can’t add up his own story because he can’t make Conchis’ stories add up.

It is as if Fowles didn't stand far enough back from his own life's narrative and its post-war contexts to allow his characters independent movement as created beings, and so the novel ends in a perplexing standoff between the old trickster and the young egotist. As he has described being stuck while writing the book, struggling over decades for the needed creative growth, Fowles' first book feels to this reader stuck in a narrative phase it can't grow out of. The novel's intertextuality even feels immobile: the references and allusions to Greek myths such as the story of Theseus, and Nicholas' constant use of comparative narrative structures in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Othello* suggest a burgeoning understanding of his situation at Bourani, but one finds that he makes these references naively and applies them only shallowly. And his prejudices, subconscious fears, and acceptance of uncomfortable social behaviors that he encounters during his Greek odyssey reveal him as a person without much awareness of how his attitudes align with those of his peers. He almost seems like a time traveler who doesn't realize that perspectives about gender, race, and war were mutating over the postwar decades in public discussion, and that his assumptions about Lily's coquettish desirability in comparison to Alison's (what would he call it? sexually "loose" ways, his horror of Lily's lovemaking with a black man, or his expectation that moral questions have similar answers in both war and peace time, all make this work seem dated to the contemporary reader.

Finally, the book deprives its readers of narratability, the joy of a story well told, with intriguing mysteries, beckoning revelations, suspense and surprise enough to engage the interpretive process. If on one level, reading a book is a search for narrative coherence, I found my search blocked by Fowles at a critical mass of points. The last quarter of the novel, as Nicholas searched for the answers to Conchis' true identity and motives, was burdened with too many coincidences to be believed. The notion of rational thinking detailed by the Society for Reason was so conceptually strict that it defied human psychological capability. The novel's sequences of events trace an arc of causality that is not only out of the character's hands, but seemingly also out of the writer's. The net effect is an off-putting flavor of paranoia that only justifies Nicholas' self-involvement. Everyone loves a dastardly unreliable narrator, but following the ping-pong match of lies and self-delusions between protagon and antag in this book made me ... queasy. Given the broad definition of narratability, these problems in *The Magus* may have contributed to my having picked it up in '68 and then dropped it until 50 years had passed. Reading it has not been as much fun as I had hoped it would be when I volunteered to write this paper on it, but at least I'm now clear about why I loved *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. That, though, is a topic for another critical paper.

Discussion Questions for *The Magus*

- 1. Nicholas is certainly a familiar type of character – a disaffected young man, wounded, but not yet a warrior, spoiled by his physical attractiveness and the responding attentions of his female peers. He is easy to recognize as the man who doesn't know enough, and who needs a good lesson. Did he, indeed, find and absorb the lesson that he needed? Did Conchis and Bourani change him? If so, how and to what extent?**
- 2. Conchis is also a character type: the trickster, the con man, the enigmatic older man. He has been a soldier, a politician, has gained a fortune, and pursues the subject of human psychology. Do you end the novel satisfied that you have understood what motivates him to orchestrate Nicholas' experiences at Bourani? Do you see a connection between his constant deception of Nicholas and a wisdom that he may possess or be willing to share with Nicholas?**
- 3. Aside from having himself taught in a Greek boys' school when he was a young man, why do you suppose Fowles set the novel in Greece? How does this setting nourish the narrative, give it narratability (if it does)? How does it prepare us for or confuse us about the novel's symbolic layer? Do we learn about Greece from Fowles' story, or about his story from its setting in Greece, or none of those?**
- 4. In observing his play with his "guests'" perceptions of reality, how can we characterize Conchis' conception of reality? Of all of the stories he tells Nicholas, which most illuminates the older man's notion of the real?**
- 5. Do you find the "work" done at Bourani, and the people who do that work, credible? What aspects of the narrative (characters, contexts, plot events) serve to motivate or justify such work?**
- 6. Fowles ends his narrative without concluding it: how does a reader reach closure in this novel? What rationalizes closure in a novel that ends inconclusively? How do you think Fowles rationalized having abandoned a traditional novelistic ending?**