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**"THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN":  
A DISCUSSION**

JOHN FOWLES'S *The French Lieutenant's Woman* IS BOTH AN EXPERIMENTAL novel and a historical novel, focusing on England in the 1860's. Its double role has allowed its reviewers to praise it on one level while criticizing it on the other, though there are things to praise and to blame about both its shapes. As an experimental work, it paradoxically assumes the form of a Victorian novel. Fowles goes crab-backwards to join the avant-garde, imitating George Eliot as a way to emulate "Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes." At the same time, as a historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents us with allusions and even footnotes to everything from evangelicalism to evolution, from imperialism to Marxism. Fowles's narrator is so crammed with Victoriana that he verges on pedantry. Whether we view it from one perspective or the other, and whether we choose to think it an artistic success or an aberration, Fowles's story presents us with ideas and questions that appeal both to literary critics and to historians; and while it has stirred up no tempest of controversy, it has aroused much interest.

Its sources of intellectual attraction, however, do not explain its great popularity; for besides being an experimental and a historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has also become a bestseller, with sales in 1970 probably exceeded only by Erich Segal's *Love Story*. If anything, its complicated experimentalism and its heavy historical background would seem to argue against its popular success, but such has not been the case. Fowles's novel presents us with that rare phenomenon — a highly intellectual work of fiction that is also a highly popular work of fiction. It may be that the reading public is not so anti-intellectual as I am sometimes inclined to think, but even so it is clear that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has a source of appeal that does not depend on Fowles's knowledge of fictional esthetics or on his knowledge of Victorian history. For what it will tell us about current notions of "Victorianism" and about the flourishing "neo-Victorian" subculture that has

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grown up in our midst,<sup>1</sup> it is worth asking what that source of popular appeal has been. For an audience of thousands over the last two years, Fowles has played the role of pundit and tour guide into the nearly prehistoric realm of Edwin Chadwick, the Jumblies, and Majuba; and to understand how he has managed to do so will help us to understand something about modern conceptions of our Victorian roots.

The central plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be easily summarized. Charles Smithson, a young, pleasant, well-educated Victorian, is engaged to Ernestina Freeman, a pretty but shallow girl who represents the Victorian ideal of womanhood — that is, she is chaste, repressed, and ignorant. From the outset there is nothing exciting about “Tina,” and it is not surprising when Charles finds another woman more attractive. This is Sarah Woodruff, the French Lieutenant's Woman, who seems to be a “fallen woman”—but only because her impulse towards freedom and her instinctual knowledge of sexuality lead her to appear as one, and not because she really is “fallen.” Drawn to Sarah, Charles abandons Ernestina. But Sarah eludes him, preferring freedom to any sort of confining relationship; and no matter which of the three possible endings of the story we accept, Charles is left dangling between “Victorian” repression and “modern” freedom, having lost Ernestina but not clearly having gained Sarah. Although it is possible to interpret what happens to Charles as positive gain, he has still been torn between two women who stand for two opposed sets of values; and the resolution is suspended if only because Fowles gives his story several endings, a bad Victorian habit which he turns to experimental use.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the popularity of Fowles's story is that it is a product of recent interest in Victorian sexuality. It is a fictional exploration of “the other Victorians,” although like all such explorations, including Stephen Marcus's, it raises the question of which is stranger — “other Victorianism” or the modern interest in “other Victorianism.” The study of the sexual attitudes and practices of the past is an important aspect of social history, but with Fowles's novel there is not much question of social history as an objective endeavor. Under the guise of an interpretation of the Victorian age, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is really a myth for now. One might call this the myth of the overthrow of “Victorianism,” entailing the ritual exorcism of Duty and Work and Chastity — abstractions we like to identify with the last century, but whose diehard ghosts we must frequently lay in our own. “We meet here, once again,” says Fowles's narrator, “this bone of contention between the two centuries: is duty to drive us, or not?” (p. 56). “Duty,” interpreted mainly as sexual repression and personified in the horrible Mrs. Poulteney, a symbol of British imperialism generally and a sort of priestess of the rites of castration, is clearly something we can overdo. The story of Charles Smithson's pursuit of the French Lieutenant's Woman shadows forth the collapse of “Victorianism” (“Duty”) and the supposedly modern escape into freedom. When at last Charles and Sarah embrace, their sexual climax forming the climax of the novel, we are led to believe that the tyranny of an age has broken down:

<sup>1</sup> Besides the spate of “Victorian” pornographic fiction coming from the Grove Press and elsewhere, I mean everything from movies like *Oliver* to historical novels like Delderfield's *God Is an Englishman* to popular studies like Altick's *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*.

He strained that body into his, straining his mouth upon hers, with all the hunger of a long frustration—not merely sexual, for a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality, all these coursed wildly through him.

(p. 360).

This is the unleashing of energies which all “Victorianism” has worked to leash. Fowles subscribes to the theory that the chief accomplishments of the Victorian age came about because energies tightly buttoned up by sexual taboos had to be released somehow, and so found outlets in industrialization, imperial expansion, and the arts — a theory which hardly explains the aggressive creativity of some other ages.<sup>2</sup>

There is no disputing the fact that the Victorians were sexually repressed and superstitious, but to use this fact to suggest that the twentieth century is sexually free and enlightened is nearsighted. The Victorians were slaves to their taboos, Fowles's narrator tells us, and the nineteenth century was a moral Stone Age in comparison with ours. Perhaps we should blame the narrator rather than Fowles for this, but the effect is a kind of modern Podsnappery almost as insufferable as the original. For example, Fowles's narrator says condescendingly of Charles Smithson:

After all, he was a Victorian. We could not expect him to see what we are only just beginning — and with so much more knowledge and the lessons of existentialist philosophy at our disposal — to realize ourselves: that the desire to hold and the desire to enjoy are mutually destructive. His statement to himself should have been, “I possess this now, therefore I am happy,” instead of what it so Victorianly was: “I cannot possess this forever, and therefore am sad.”

(p. 78)

As usual, there is some truth in this: much Victorian culture was elegiac in mood. But the other side of the statement shows Fowles's narrator as a latter-day Macaulay, praising his own small acre in Middlesex. It is true that he finds several reasons to prefer the Victorian age to the modern age, but the main focus of the story is on sexual mores; and in this zone of experience, he suggests, we are light-years ahead of our Victorian forefathers. Further, the notion that sexuality is the “primum mobile” of history is a peculiarly modern, post-Freudian, and apparently popular form of lopsidedness. I do not mean that Fowles ignores other sorts of historical causation, but his story and his main theme spin on the one axis of sexual repression or, to use Fowles's synonym, Victorian “duty.” The result is a view of history which is appealing because of its simplicity (it explains everything) and also because, most obviously, the idea of sex still has the tang of forbidden fruit, no matter how much we try to accuse the Victorians of being the forbidders and to praise ourselves for being the liberators.

If the exorcism of Duty and Chastity, by now an ancient ritual of modern literature, had led Fowles to express more profoundly our *current*

<sup>2</sup> See p. 277, where Fowles's narrator states his qualified belief in the “sublimation theory” of Victorian progress. He goes on to question it partly, but he says that since the Victorians weren't able to express themselves very well sexually, they “poured their libido into . . . other fields; as if some genie of evolution, feeling lazy, said to himself: We need some progress, so let us dam and divert this one great canal and see what happens.”

need for freedom and existential authenticity, his achievement might have been a fine one. But his story of escape from Victorian sexual frustration seems only to disguise, by its own “cryptic coloration,” a pattern of modern sexual frustration. Charles Smithson has his “precisely ninety seconds” (p. 361) of sexual union with Sarah Woodruff, and then loses both Sarah and his fiancée, Ernestina. The moral seems to be that this is authentic love and that Charles should learn to say, “I possess this now, therefore I am happy,” without struggling to possess Sarah forever, although he regains her, as well as his illegitimate daughter, Lalage, in one of the endings. “Ninety seconds,” however, strikes me as being close to a sort of modern average.

But at my back from time to time I hear  
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

Early in his story Fowles’s narrator argues that time for the Victorians went very slowly (p. 19), but in love, apparently, time goes at a quicker rate. Seriously, the brevity of the union of Charles and Sarah seems to disguise a great fear of intimacy.

On a conscious level, Fowles shows us passionate love leading Charles and Sarah at least part of the way towards freedom; but on an unconscious level, what we receive seems to be only brief sex followed by an emotional and physical disengagement. Add to this the scene in which Charles, about to make love to a prostitute named Sarah, gets sick instead, and the unconscious pattern becomes clearer. In his pursuit of the merciless lady of our dreams (Sarah is presented fairly explicitly as a Jungian “anima” figure), Charles abandons “Duty” and Ernestina and becomes, at least according to the final ending of the story, a lifelong celibate. Of course we are to think that Charles’s problems stem from his “Victorian” inhibitions; but his situation resembles the wholly modern one in Fowles’s *The Magus*, where Nicholas Urfe, also weak and confused, jilts his ordinary girlfriend for the illusory Lily. It is not clearly Victorian “Duty” and inhibition that Charles struggles against; on an unconscious level it seems to be emotional intimacy instead, for his pursuit of Sarah is also a flight from Ernestina, and all that he gains is bachelorhood with, at most, only an extramarital relationship with Sarah. I am reminded of love among the spies in James Bond movies, or of the numerous “family” shows on television in which the “family” consists of a single man or woman with beautiful children. Charles is another, partly unintentional Prufrock, whose hearkening of mermaid music is praised as at least an approach towards liberation from the bondage of “Duty.” And the identification of his abandonment of Ernestina for Sarah with sanity and with modern superiority to “Victorianism” is, it seems to me, one source of the popularity of Fowles’s story, because it is always pleasing to have our weaknesses presented to us as strengths. Probably all bestsellers flatter us in some way, and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* seems to do so by identifying our present-day fear of emotional intimacy with progress. As Edward Glover put it, several years before the study of “the other Victorians” came into vogue:

Confusing youth and modernity with progress, we seek to comfort ourselves for the unacknowledged sexual deficiencies of our own period by castigating the pruderies

and lubricities of our forefathers. So much is certain: until the Edwardians die off we cannot expect to be objective about the Victorians, least of all about their sexual habits.<sup>3</sup>

And if *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is any indication, the Edwardians among us may never die off.

The Victorian novelists themselves had a great deal to say about "Duty," and what they said is usually more substantial than the "existential" point-and-potatoes which John Fowles serves up. Charles Smithson resembles, for example, Hardy's Angel Clare, for both characters are trapped by their conventional ("Victorian") attitudes towards sex. But it is difficult to imagine for Charles any fate sadder than that of a lonely, grumpy bachelor, living for his hobbies and his memory of Sarah, whereas Angel Clare, entering the ring of Stonehenge with Tess, enters also the realm of tragedy and myth. Again, Charles and Sarah violate convention much as Maggie Tulliver and Stephen Guest violate the proprieties of St. Ogg's. Fowles implies that the trouble with Charles is that he is incapable of complete liberation from "Duty," but this is suspiciously like suggesting that he ought to behave even more selfishly than he does. After all, both his fiancée and his illegitimate daughter are casualties of his partial liberation. Fowles doesn't worry about these casualties; all he seems to think essential is the overthrow of "Victorianism." George Eliot, however, shows that the problem of "Duty" is much more complex than a choice between repression and self-indulgence. In the story of Maggie Tulliver, she makes a crucial distinction between authentic duty to others and phoney convention — a distinction absent from Fowles's story. When Maggie leaves Stephen at Mudport, it is not in response to a fallacious sense of public propriety, but only in response to the knowledge that she and Stephen are betraying Lucy and Philip. George Eliot shows us false convention in the shape of scandalized St. Ogg's; she also shows us authentic duty and moral courage in the difficult choice which Maggie makes to return to St. Ogg's despite scandal. As Maggie says to Stephen:

Faithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasanter to ourselves. They mean renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in us — whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us.

Although it may seem very "Victorian" to say so (and I hope it does), George Eliot's moral realism is much nobler than the faintly tinny and trite existentialism which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offers. In wrestling with the bugaboos of Mrs. Poulteney and "Victorian" sexual repression, Fowles seems to forget that responsibility to others is a kind of "Victorianism" from which we should not seek release. And it is our constant "duty" to keep such responsibility as distinct as possible from the notions of Bowdlerization and moral emasculation with which we like to confound it, and which we like to pretend are all part of a distant Victorian past.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Glover, "Victorian Ideas of Sex," in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), p. 359.

AS AN EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL *The French Lieutenant's Woman* IS DISARMINGLY old-fashioned. Without any evident worry about imitative form, Fowles chooses to write within the literary conventions current at the time of the novel's Victorian setting. We see extended pictorial description of place and character, plot-mirroring in parallel master and servant romances, internal narrative, the sensational suspension of meaning or event, and especially omniscient comment used in a manner interesting enough to challenge the views of those who see the history of the novel as a process of continuous obsolescence. It is almost as though fiction were following a conservative strain in criticism: here, after Wayne Booth, is a novelist who will declare his personal values, here is someone who will give us a story to read instead of symbols to hunt. It is not, however, quite like that; Fowles sometimes uses the conventions ironically, as in Chapter 44, which provides us with the least significant of the three endings he gives the novel. He does not strew his path with symbols but provides some compensation in one super-symbol, Sarah. And, finally, he frequently makes his omniscience sound like omnignorance, and of course differs from the Victorian novelist in the modern content of both his comment and informing perspective.

The omniscient commentary makes for the most interesting experimental feature of the novel, not only by its mere introduction in 1969, but also by the new uses to which it is pushed. If its primary function, as many have suggested, is to establish a link between the microcosm of the fiction and the macrocosm of reality, to provide, as it were, editorials for grown-up people not interested in illusions, then Fowles' novel demonstrates that this function is by no means a necessary one. He often uses the convention to blur rather than reinforce the distinction between the fictive and the real, most emphatically perhaps in those passages where the novelist takes on the attributes of a character, or the characters those of a novelist. An outrageous time-traveller on a Victorian train, Fowles stares at the sleeping Charles in Chapter 55, while in Chapter 13 we are told that Charles, with a will of his own, has taken the path to the dairy against the wishes of the author. Related to this is his habit of referring to the characters' lives outside the novel, and to the novelist's familiarity with them: we are told, for example, of his purchase of Sarah's Toby jug, or of Ernestina's death on the day Hitler invades Poland. Fowles obviously delights in the paradoxes he raises, and while one cannot here discuss their implications at length, they would seem to highlight the need for reconsideration of such terms as "author," "character," "persona" or "illusion." And while Fowles is obviously not going to write a commentary on the *Rhetoric of Fiction*, his novel does provide indications that the problems of confusion of meaning in the novel of open commentary may be very like those of impersonal rendering, given a commentator who does not always see himself as an authority. Can we finally interpret Sarah any better than we can interpret Stephen Daedalus of the *Portrait*?

As a historical novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents us with a picture of the 1860's which, as Mr. Brantlinger suggests, is not bad, and I would add, more than commonplace — at least so I would interpret such tid-bits as the rough dating of the last appearance of the Great Bustard on

the Salisbury Plains. But there is more to the "history" of the novel than documentation. Fowles' novel is full — some would say too full — of topical references and discussions of topical matters, but there are many places where a sense of history is conveyed implicitly or with minimal explication. There are some vivid extended descriptive passages, particularly of London and the Undercliff, which establish the characters in a setting which quietly reinforces the historical placing of the comment. Even more significant is the rendering of the characters themselves, who give a sense of thorough rootedness, voicing the preoccupations of the age in varied and seemingly authentic tones ranging through Sam's 1860's Cockney and Mr. Freeman's brusque speech to the relative formality of Charles. The dramatization tends to take place through a series of private conversations, usually between Charles and another: Grogan, Ernestina, Sir Robert or Mr. Freeman, probably for no more profound reason than that this is a novel about a series of private crises faced by Charles and containing hardly any more public material. It is perhaps a tribute to the characterizations that they curiously invoke the age's own embodiment of its types: Ernestina — George Eliot's Rosamond; Mr. Freeman — Arnold's Philistine; Sam — the immortal Weller; and a minor character like Serjeant Murphy — Serjeant Buzfuz. Certainly there is no sense of the literary pastiche or the merely derivative: there is always a difference, either in facets of character exposed, which one may say without condescension would not be so exposed by a Victorian (as in the record of Sam's private ambitions and resentment of his role), or in something not associated with the literary type evoked (as in the "shallow" Ernestina's not wanting the final pound of flesh for Charles' betrayal).

I do not want to suggest from the above that Fowles should have written a Jamesian novel, staying with the facts of history and making them present through dramatic rendering, but rather that had he done so, as he did in *The Magus*, there might be less disagreement, or disagreement of a different kind about his work. For it seems to be Fowles and especially Fowles as revealed through the omniscient convention who is the main target for criticism. Some of this is directed towards his "cleverness," a term which reflects a certain impatience with his experimental effects, and an impatience whose source may lie in the author's sometimes irksome pedantry. Whatever its source, however, the description invoked seems to coarsen effects which might be more variously described: sometimes as playful (as when Fowles, now dandified, looks over Mr. Rossetti's house in Chapter 61), sometimes as interesting embodiments of aesthetic questions (as in his attempt to destroy our sense of an ending), and sometimes as failing for reasons other than a simple striving for effect (however interesting the link between Charles and the author in a taste for bad puns, the puns remain bad). But more to the point here lie the objections raised by Mr. Brantlinger. It is Fowles' use of and attitude towards his material which is objectionable. He has suggested that Fowles exploits an interest in the "other Victorians," and is patronizing to the Victorian age. I am more in sympathy with the second criticism than with the first.

The suggestion is not, of course, that by merely writing about the

sexual life of the Victorians Fowles is appealing to a somewhat distasteful source of contemporary self-congratulation. If that were the case then no novelist doing the same could escape the charge. Nor would it appear that the choice of a "fallen woman" as a central figure is so conceived: novelists may choose any kind of central figure they want. The objection seems to be to Fowles' treatment of these subjects, and it seems to me that this is serious rather than exploitive. Indeed, in the case of Sarah, there may be too much seriousness, a question on which I would like to reserve discussion, concentrating here on the other matter, which is largely contained in Chapters 39 to 41, describing Charles' descent into London's underworld and culminating in his encounter with the prostitute. In these chapters (if we except Fowles' playful presentation of the extract from the eighteenth century pornographic *History of the Human Heart*) we find that the emphasis is almost entirely on character, on Charles' mixture of sexual irritation and revulsion, both in Ma Terpsichore's brothel and later in the sequence in the prostitute's room. In the latter we may note, as has Mr. Brantlinger, Charles' fear of intimacy; the point of the scene, however, is not to rationalize the fear, but to show how it is overcome, as the commercial transaction becomes replaced by the human one when Charles cares for the wakened child.

Charles's was the very opposite of the Sartrean experience. The simple furniture around him, the warm light from the next room, the humble shadows, above all that small being he held on his knees, so insubstantial after its mother's weight (but he did not think at all of her), they were not encroaching and hostile objects, but constituting and friendly ones. The ultimate hell was infinite and empty space; and they kept it at bay. He felt suddenly able to face his future, which was only a form of that terrible emptiness. Whatever happened to him such moments would recur; must be found, and could be found.

(Chapter 41)

This seems to be a much more effective statement of Charles's discovery of freedom and human reality than his extended self-examination in the church after the encounter with Sarah, and is not the less moving for occurring in what is clearly underlined as a context of human waste.

In Fowles' defence against the second charge one might cite from the several passages where he states his envy of the Victorians and commends their age for possessing what we do not. One might further add that the Victorians made many of the criticisms he voices, and that their insights are not unacknowledged. But there remains a complacency at being modern, a self-congratulation too easy to expose. In a not unrepresentative passage (Chapter 49) Fowles speaks of the "schizophrenia" of the Victorians "which led them to see the 'soul' as more real than the body," manifest, among other places, in "the mania for editing and revising" seen in its authors. This seems strange from an author who has turned revision (and in this work, editing) virtually into a first principle of composition. One might ask too if it is merely Charles (the subject of the passage) who separates the soul of Sarah from the body, and spiritualizes her, especially in the light of Fowles' references

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to Charles as a surrogate for himself. One could, I suppose, resort to that old dodge, the Even-More-Subtle-Irony, but it seems more to the point to recognize a limitation in many interpretive passages which are not otherwise lacking in perception and perspicuity.

At least some of the disagreement between myself and Mr. Brantlinger is little more than a matter of emphasis. We both see the novel as containing worthwhile experimental work and historical reconstruction and both sense a vitiating self-complacency in the author, but our sense of the relative force of these in strengthening or weakening the novel appears to be roughly inverse. There are, however, more fundamental differences. The defence against the charge that Fowles exploits the "other Victorians" for the market is one of these, and I should state that it is, at least in part, inspired by an undeclared major premise: I am less sympathetic to the Victorian moral code than Mr. Brantlinger appears to be. On the central event of the novel, for example, I find myself thinking that Charles in rejecting Ernestina erred at least no more than did Lydgate in accepting Rosamond. Further, while I agree with Mr. Brantlinger that the "existential" morality advanced by Fowles is not a very persuasive alternative to Victorian morality, its degree of theoretic validity seems to me less important than its dramatic effectiveness. Here, I think, we have one partial success in Charles, a figure whose attempts to reconcile the determining past with a visionary future, commitment with growth, are rendered with a sense of the complexity of the issues — in a word, without glibness. But I do not think the same can be said of the novel's other central embodiment of the existential theme, Sarah.

She is, of course, someone about whom much is suggested and may be said. She can be described as a Magus-figure, with an analyst's insights into the inauthenticity of others, and like him using those insights to undermine their self-concept for their own good. She can also be seen as Dr. Grogan sees her, as an hysteric liar disrupting others' lives in the quest of a tragic destiny of her own. Or she can be viewed, perhaps as a result of combining these interpretations, as the *Mystery of Woman*, a view supported by Fowles at several points. Clearly, too, she is an anti-character, both in the sense of being liberated from the past conditioning which defines the identity and destiny of others, and in Nathalie Sarraute's sense of being underlined as a fragment of the "all-powerful I," acknowledged as a projection of some aspect of the author's being. But perhaps my misgivings about Sarah lie in this fact that so much may be said about her in theoretical terms and not enough in more ordinary ways, about say, her tastes, habits, history, antipathies or desires. The possibility of such ordinary discussions, certainly in realistic fiction and perhaps in all fiction, provides us with much of our sense of a character's reality, but the material for Sarah is given sparsely and usually equivocally, and the results are predictable. The quarrel becomes not one with an existentialist heroine but with her existence. My final reservation about an important novel is aesthetic rather than moral.

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*The French Lieutenant's Woman* IS INTERESTING TO ME FOR TWO REASONS. First of all, it is deeply historical in spirit and character.<sup>1</sup> By that I do not mean that this novel is a true account of certain families of the Victorian era, any more than *The Last Days of Pompeii* is a true narrative of first-century Roman superstition. Nor do I mean that Fowles has written an historical novel in the sense of a story set in the past with characters distinctly of the past, thinking as they are supposed to think at the time, living as surviving evidence of the period tells us they have lived. There is no need to single out Fowles for having achieved this, for the historical novel is a genre that many writers have succeeded in doing well. What I mean is that Fowles has done something that is close to what the practising historian does or wants to do and in fact always has done, whether monk, positivist or Hegelian: compared past and present in order to understand one by the other. One of Fowles' aims is to explain why his characters are Victorians and why we are not. And by showing us what we are not, he has helped us to see ourselves as we are. This may sound faintly negative, but it is precisely what the historian means by perspective. The present brings a problem to the attention of the historian, and he turns to the past for insight into it. The best historical works usually show some kind of preoccupation with the present.

The second reason why I am interested in Fowles is that he has tried to reconcile what are from the historian's point of view irreconcilables. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, while by no means original in every respect, is nevertheless in certain critical ways experimental in the mainstream of twentieth-century art. Yet the vision of the world which permeates the novel is intelligible and not absurd. The form and purpose of the novel may not be obvious, but neither are they obscure. For these important reasons the historian can live more comfortably with Fowles than with other writers of the new novel, Robbe-Grillet and Burroughs, for example, Fowles is so historical in outlook that this novel is especially useful for exploring the estranging distance that has appeared between history and literature – really art in general – in the twentieth century. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can also provide us with a basis for discussing the ways in which the two forms of writing can be brought more closely together.

There are many explanations for the separation of historical from literary writing. These are in general fairly well understood, and I do not wish to review at any length the familiar reasons. I would like to stress, however, that the development of academic professionalism with its central concern for the independent discipline has certainly been a prominent factor. The appearance of a specialist clientele has meant the loss of a popular audience, or at least an audience that was seen to be popular, and the result of these changes has been a fundamental shift in the *form* of historical writing from the narrative to analytic and technical expositions. As the story telling function of historians was gradually superseded, history conceived on an epic scale became a rare enterprise; and historians ceased to associate themselves with

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my wife Barbara and to my friends and colleagues, Gene Brucker, Robert Middlekauff, Irwin Scheiner and Norma Landau, for their thoroughly unpatronizing comments.

notions of national purpose, destiny or mission. Other kinds of writers took over these tasks.

The objection must be raised, however, that narrative epic or rise-and-fall romance are after all only several of many different forms of literary writing. The pretty phrase, mighty line, sentence antithesis, dramatic or colorful description do not exhaust the possibilities for prose expression or literary form. If these sound contrived and mechanical to the historian, so that he regards them as decorative or external and not substantial, then it is principally because they are showing their age. We cannot and should not write in the grand manner which belongs to more prideful historical ages or periods of the history in which Aristotle's definition of tragedy still held meaning. And furthermore, why should the historian retain literary forms and styles which the modern writer himself has rejected?

This should be a compelling line of reasoning, but most historians would not be persuaded by it. In order to understand more fully the widespread if not absolute disregard by historians of literary and artistic innovations, I believe we must seek other reasons. These are subtle and largely unstated, but nevertheless central in my estimation. They have to do with the vision of the world that is expressed in the forms of modern imaginative literature and with the groups that have embraced that vision, groups that are usually classified as *avant-garde*.

One of the programmatic characteristics of the *avant-garde* has been a rather violent and quite conscious repudiation of the past in all its institutional forms and values. Renato Poggioli, in his recent discussions of the typology of the *avant-garde*, dwells on the antagonism toward all cultural survivals manifested by twentieth-century writers, poets, painters and theorists of art movements. Dress, manners, conventions of social behavior, the language of everyday life, the thoughts of everyday life, are subjected to the scorn of the *déracinés*. Out of this terrifying scorn, with its strong components of nihilism, fright and dream fantasy, has come a perception of human relationships which we call absurd. It is an attitude that the world, physical or social, makes no sense whatsoever, in fact can make no sense, that basic human desires and essential psychological drives cannot be accommodated in any social arrangement, and that communication is a fiction, superficial at best. This prevalent and extensive interpretation of the possibilities of human achievement has had a profound influence on the practice of modern art. No matter what historical precedents we may find, there can be no doubt that in their total impact the experiments of art have been revolutionary. Surrealism, cubism, dadaism, expressionism, the theater of the absurd, automatic writing, "furniture music," stream of consciousness prose, even the rearrangement of type on a page, have succeeded in disrupting classical canons of style. The importance of sequence, imitation and the careful relation of parts to each other has been vehemently denied.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Besides Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), see Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York: Random House, 1968), Chapter 11. The only current historian I know whose work incorporates the phoenix spirit of the *avant-garde* is Robert Brentano. See, e.g., *Two Churches* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), and the stunning autobiographical

It takes no effort to see that a vision of the world as absurd can only be an embarrassment to the historian: absurd history is a contradiction in terms. The historian may and usually does recognize that others see the world as absurd. He may even experience a pull in that direction. But his role as historian is to explain the conditions that allow a belief in absurdity and to avoid adding to the confusion. Like the theologian or the artist the historian recognizes that intellect has its limitations, that much in human affairs is incomprehensible; but unlike them he remains uneasy in the presence of mystery. At the very least he makes certain that mystery stays the subject and not the product of his research.

Vision is inseparable from form. The rejection of the absurd has meant the rejection of those literary forms created to express the absurd, has meant, *a fortiori*, virtual dismissal of the subject from the discourses of historians. Hence, the discussions about history and literature have mainly continued along Victorian lines of narrative versus analysis. These discussions are uninteresting because they are out of date and beside the point. Small wonder that social or behavioral science should have increased its holds on the methods and forms of historical inquiry and should have reinforced, in quite stimulating ways, the vision of the world that the historian prefers — the vision that science provides. The important and challenging ideas in the historian's repertoire in the last one hundred years are (to name but a few): French positivism, demography, and now, structuralism; German philosophy and sociology of knowledge; the second Manchester School of administrative and institutional history; American functionalism and other work on social structure; Marx, of course, with or without the teleology; and psychology and psychoanalytical theories, Freud, Erikson and the Frankfurt School. Some of these same influences have, of course, gone into art and literary criticism.

In a strong sense historians are scientists, and scientific modes of comprehension are deeply positioned in the traditions of historical thinking. This is a complicated subject in which an impressive amount of sophisticated qualification is available, and I do not wish to ignore or oversimplify the thinking of philosophers and historiographers on the characteristics of scientific knowledge, the truth of a hypothesis, the reality of a theory or the use of working assumptions. Few today can believe in the absolute certainty of scientific knowledge. Scientists themselves have described the platonic characteristics of their work, and Heisenberg has even pointed in a more subtle direction. Yet the methods and assumptions of modern science still direct the historian's mind, make up his daily grammar and guide the form of his explanations. In practice he still follows scientific methods of acquiring knowledge even though he knows the knowledge thus acquired may not be absolutely true.

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essay, "Bishops and Saints," in *The Historian's Workshop* (New York: Knopf, 1970), ed. L. P. Curtis, Jr., page 25: "What I wanted to do . . . was to break something. I wanted to protest against everything 'vague and arranged and fine' on the dead surface of contemporary historical writing. . . . Most particularly I wanted to object to the sugary good taste that seems to me to dominate historical writing, at least in America. . . . Good taste protects the reader from experience and the writer from experiment."

In order to write historians must assume some high degree of regularity in social events; regularity implies a reliable truth, and the existence of a reliable truth suggests methods for apprehending it, principally the systematic collection of evidence and its logical arrangement. Once an event has occurred, the historian has faith that he can make sense of it. It would be tempting to say that truth-telling has been the governing objective of historical inquiry in all periods where science has been a major intellectual activity, especially an autonomous intellectual activity, but that is of course naive. In the past — and the practice is unfortunately not dead — historians have been partisans for party, class, nation and state; they have been ideologues and publicity agents. But the dominant concern is to identify the truth, and the truth is not a special or private kind of truth; it is not a poetic truth, or, as Brecht cynically offers in *Galileo*, a social truth. The historian's truth demands the presentation of proof, and his argument must be accessible to verification. I agree with David Levin's statement in his book on the literary criticism of history that no amount of writing skill can make untruthful history into good history. If the history is false, it becomes opinion, propaganda or deceit.

Theories of relativism have perhaps made it more difficult for a historian to prove a point; but relativism does not imply that one history is therefore as truthful as another, or that if we cannot ultimately prove, we are therefore helpless to disprove. If there is no certain truth, there are nevertheless discernible errors. Perhaps this too sounds faintly negative, but it is in my estimation an altogether admirable professional ethic and essential in maintaining the ideal of a critical mind. Especially does the historian's ideal seem urgent when we look at the unseemly development in the twentieth century of the validity of the big lie: the justification of the utility of myth, the attack on objectivity, the appeal by more than one ideology to all the destructive impulses of men, and the astonishing variety of contemporary forms of propaganda and persuasion.

The separation of historical writing from the mainstream of artistic and literary creativity in our century, the corresponding rejection of historical methods of understanding by artists, are apparent, then, in the quite opposite visions of the world held by historians and leading innovative writers. And these visions have been embodied in forms appropriate to them. The result has been a quite remarkable experimentation in language, style and structure for artists; while historians, periodically reinvigorated by the conceptions of social science, to which they too have contributed, have valued most highly forms of explanation which have little to do with aesthetic modes of perception. Essentially the historian has remained loyal to the academic writing traditions of the late nineteenth century.

Another characteristic of the literary and artistic avant-garde has been its contempt for an audience or public. If the world is absurd, why bother to communicate?<sup>3</sup> Here too there is a sharp contrast with the historian. For if

<sup>3</sup> Again Brentano, p. 26: "My talk of audience is something of a red herring. I am of a generation some of whom grew up believing those of its predecessor's poets who talked of creation rather than communication. I do not believe much in communication." For the difference between writing and teaching, however, see the concluding sentences in the same paragraph.

scientific ideals sustain historical inquiry, the didactic tradition still influences historical presentation. The historian is a teacher. It is hard for him to resist Nestor's role, especially as wisdom is so much less an emotional strain than prophecy, which slides easily into Cassandraism. Proof of the pedagogic aims of the historian lies in the kinds of conclusions he seeks: lessons, patterns, laws, preconditions, analogies, precedents, origins, causes and so on, generalizations that connect the past to the present. These words and aims are not merely listless survivals from periods of monothetic or moralistic history. The historian is still interested in the total configuration of past experience, in how the particular builds to the general, so that he may summarize for the use of the present his understanding of the past. His detachment from his subject is never as pure as that of the antiquarian, from whom he differs dramatically. For if I may offer a paradox, it is the antiquarian who is truly objective, truly disinterested, truly absorbed in the past for its own sake. History for history's sake, for the purely intellectual stimulation of the work he undertakes, rarely satisfies the historian.

This being the case, the historian much more than the artist requires a public. It would be a mistake to think that the end of historical inquiry is the sort of detail that can only interest a specialist; but it is not a mistake to discern a tension in the historical profession between the didactic traditions, which suggest a large if indefinable lay audience, and the principal direction of historical writing, which assumes a small and definable specialist readership. The tension between roles has been unsatisfyingly resolved. Its usual form is the textbook, which does not enjoy the same professional prestige as original research. Next come popular books which shade into bits and pieces of journalism. Here the nonacademic writer is more conspicuous. I suspect that increasingly some historians will make passes at television and classroom films in order to compose the role conflicts.

There is no doubt that an enormous amount of general education for a wide audience can be achieved by the historian with the use of analytic techniques which every day come into greater refinement. Much can be accomplished in the way of combatting errors and simplifications. Yet I have reservations about the future success of the historian's twofold role of telling the truth and communicating that truth to a non-specialist readership. I wonder if it is possible to tell the truth without taking into serious consideration the unique characteristics of twentieth-century thought and without attempting to experiment with the forms of writing as modern writers have done. I have long believed that only lip service is paid to Collingwood's famous conclusion that each generation must write its own history. I do not see how this can be done if the language, ideas and forms that the historian uses derive from only one half of the intellectual culture of the twentieth century and represent only one half of its vision. I admit there is a dilemma here, for the absurd cannot logically or philosophically be the basis for historical reconstruction. But this disconcerting vision is nevertheless an extremely intricate and important part of the self-perceived condition of twentieth century man. Certain global tragedies have given it a terrible reality, and I am at a loss to see how the historian can be completely truthful or how he can derive meaning from the history he writes unless he acknowledges the prevalence of the absurd

vision and even its influence on himself. In other words, how can the historian pursue his task of comparing past and present if he does not deeply understand the present?

In a remarkable way Fowles raises these questions about the relation of form to vision and vision to truth in what is at first glance a Victorian novel of manners. Here I must quickly disagree with the other members of this symposium. I do not believe the principal intention of the author is to laugh at our residual prurience or to praise our enlightened carnal knowledge. I do not think the novel is fundamentally about Victorianism past or present, or about the chic other-Victorianism of current interest and notoriety. The novel describes the crashing absurdity that comes into the life of its protagonist as one by one the institutions that give support and meaning to him fall away. The hero becomes an anti-hero who must pick his way through unforeseen disappointments, somehow finding purpose in his experiences. How different Charles is from the characters of Robbe-Grillet, who cannot be sure they have had experiences, who are finally dehumanized to abstract states of emotion, and how different from Portnoy, who is at war with himself and similarly disadvantaged psychically.

The lonely, embittered, estranged man of feeling and intelligence, alienated from himself and from society, has long been a stock figure of literature, but how often is the reader allowed to follow the history of that condition? Like the historian, Fowles sets out to develop the total context. He starts with the opposite situation, the adjusted, well-integrated personality and the conditions responsible for that, a pre-Darwinian world in which science, theology, social conditions and institutions have achieved a certain equipoise. If even in that world absolute certainty does not exist, at least several conventions of belief and behavior are widely agreed upon (this is Fowles, not necessarily the actual early Victorian situation). There is even a temporary standoff between class rivals, old titled money and the new, potentially more powerful money of — in this case — Oxford Street. Charles the protagonist enjoys every conceivable advantage of fortune and privilege. Of good family, heir presumptive to a coveted title, he has status, style, money. Naturally he believes the world was created especially for him. In Camden or Kentish Town, in the wet disgust of the industrial north, life is a struggle for survival. But in London and Lyme Regis Charles is comfortable, confident, liberated — or would have been had he kept to his place. He is betrayed by his education, by his intellect, which set him apart from the ignorant fox-hunting squires to whom he is related by birth. Charles has been to Cambridge, he calls himself a scientist; he is civilized, independent of mind. He is modern: he has doubts, not only about himself, although that is the beginning of his difficulties, but about conventional values and behavior. Consequently he goes a-whoring after the strange gods of biological determinism. Victorian Charles makes the fundamental error of thinking that because the intellect is free, the person is also free. He does not see that it is social convention that provides him with his advantages and not his intellect nor his personal merits. Even his emotions are of little consequence. Dr. Grogan — canny, compassionate, free-thinking Grogan — tells him that.

Charles may have thought that in the 1860's a liberated man should

be a Darwinian, but he soon learns the limits of intellect. He interpolates into Darwin an assumption that is not there: that he, Charles, privileged and intelligent, is the end purpose of natural selection and therefore the fittest who survives. Like Weber's Puritan, he finds the sign of salvation in the worldly success he enjoys. But he ignores that other sign, the sand dollar washed ashore by the punishing sea. This primitive creature has survived but lies helpless in a pool of water. Charles has never read Malthus who suggests an even closer parallel of how the least fit survive: in misery and sin. These levels of meaning escape Charles until suddenly his world collapses, his privileges disintegrate, his self-doubts increase, his name is public scandal. Gone are status, the expected "Bart." after his name, his servant (a deserter to the other class). Charles descends into the underworld in the company of disreputable companions who come as close to being declassed as is possible in the English social structure. Outcast and fossil, Charles is ruthlessly bypassed as the inevitable processes of natural selection push the stronger organisms past him to the top.

Now comes his gradual self-enlightenment, through experience this time, not intellect, and without the help of social connections. There is some money left to him, but it is money that can purchase no advantage. Bereft of position, influence, name, honor and assurance, he rushes to embrace wildly the mystery that has dethroned science — Sarah. Perhaps he will be reborn, at least into a firmer understanding of the condition of man. At any rate, he now knows what it means to be free: the pilgrim's freedom, the rebel's freedom to search and to suffer, alone. Charles' reason and then his passion forced him into exile. The choice was his. He could have come to terms with his situation by following the rules, most of which were stacked in his favor; and undoubtedly he would have lived a reasonably content or at least satisfactory life. The majority of men have been in worse situations. Although born a gentleman, Charles decided to become an outsider, and he had to live with this decision. Charles suspended intellect on behalf of emotion. We can say that experience restores this intellect. Now he understands Darwin, for what Darwin said was that it cannot be predetermined which organisms will adapt, nor in what direction, nor for what moral purpose. The mind can comprehend — belatedly. It cannot control, and to a large extent life consists of following not anticipating events. Modern man does not believe in his institutions: they oppress him. He cannot stand social conventions: they repress him. He finds tradition a nuisance: it restricts his choice. If that is the case, modern man has no right to expect help from society or history. He must manage with what he has left: his intellect, his searing sense of self and perhaps — it is a romantic idea — Cyrano's white plume.

Readers may not be satisfied with this existential conclusion, especially as it is familiar from so many other philosophical, theological and literary writings. Perhaps it is, as Brantlinger suggests, a cheap ending to the book. It is difficult in a faddist age penetrated so deeply by a sense of absurdity for us to find satisfying personal meaning in any novel or work of history, even when the intention of the work is to find an alternative to the absurdity. Nevertheless, the existential conclusion was the right choice for this novel, because it is one important twentieth-century response to absurdity, a

condition to which it is also related. As far as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is concerned, the importance of existentialism is the way it is used. It is part of the structure, the form of the novel, active at every moment and bringing past and present into juxtaposing significance. A good wind will not blow it off.

The form selected by Fowles is in keeping with the innovations of twentieth-century art. He has followed the lead of more revolutionary writers, the surrealists, the novelists of stream of consciousness and the playwrights of the theater of illusion, in breaking down the distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, between the perceived world and the perceiver. The idea that reality and knowledge are limited to what the mind can make of personal experience is found in early nineteenth-century utilitarian thought, but it is the present century that has truly dared to employ it. For art the idea has produced a marvelous experimentation involving the use of the unconscious, the juxtaposition of unfamiliar or unlikely situations and objects, new ways of handling concepts of time and of exploring levels of complexity. Of course not all twentieth-century art evinces this interpenetration of objectivity and subjectivity, but it can be plausibly argued that the very existence of the practice is even responsible for the most rigorously detached artistic work. In one way or another the breaking of the barriers has produced an unbelievable self-consciousness which can also be regarded as the development of individualism to a point feared if advocated in nineteenth-century liberalism. Certainly it allows the artist the fullest participation in his own work and provides him with the justification for doing that work.

Fowles, because he is an artist and is writing fiction, can insert himself directly into his novel to make explicit the relationship of the two utterly different situations of past and present. The *ich erzählung* technique is an old one — Maupassant, Turgenev, Max Beerbohm, Virginia Woolf offer many versions of its use. Fowles experiments with a kind of schizophrenia device, becoming both commentator and character. Sitting opposite Charles in the railroad car he is stern, reproving, evangelical, a Victorian stock figure. The pose is unconvincing in a twentieth-century person, so later in the Chelsea scene he is a beringed dandy-impressario. He glances at his watch and leaves. Twentieth-century Fowles is too busy and detached to become involved. Instead he is amused. The characterization is a trick of Pirandello's, a confession that Fowles the novelist cannot help Charles (as he warned us in the beginning), except to present that wretched man with an invitation to notice the absurdity of the situation. Fowles the dandy is a parody of Charles the aristocrat, aloof and self-composed as his station in life requires. The author has traced his own moral decline and offers himself as a parallel to Charles.

If Fowles makes himself into a parallel of Charles, a parody of him, he does the same for the historian. The figure in the railroad car is the historian as Victorian moralist who judges the situation without seeing it in all its complexity and ambiguity. The dandy-impressario is the objective historian of the twentieth century, the passive observer of the historical scene. His objectivity renders him incapable of explaining the human condition. By refus-

ing to become psychologically and emotionally involved in what he sees, he becomes conscious of his helplessness and therefore of the absurdity of the situation. Because he cannot find meaning in his own life, he cannot find it elsewhere and so takes refuge in decadence and perfume.

Another kind of warning is also suggested by these formal devices of the artist. In fact, it is implicit in all twentieth-century art. Too much preoccupation with the self, too much interest in theories of the unconscious, too much experimentation with the interchange of subject and object, reality and illusion, will not produce meaning, but confusion and gimmicks. Once the historian completely opens himself up to the perspectives of the absurd, he may never be able to crawl out of his own mind. He may even end up further from the truth than he began. Form seduces. Art is its own justification and does not particularly value historical truth. Perhaps realizing this, Fowles has provided an antidote to himself in his novel. I suspect this is why his message and techniques are not altogether convincing.

Nevertheless, risks may have to be taken if every generation is destined to rewrite history. It is peculiar that the historian would not want to take risks, should work so hard to exclude himself from the process of recreating past experience. His subjects and materials are after all closer to the artist's than to the scientist's. Actually, if I have correctly interpreted his traditions, he does seek involvement although professing detachment. He is ambivalent about his personal role in the reconstruction of history, wishing quite correctly to preserve honesty even while he knows that the evaluation of his evidence is an incredibly intricate, sometimes intuitive intellectual and psychological enterprise. The present, and the historian's perception of himself in relation to the present, continually break in upon his attempt to see the past whole and to see it clearly.

Only a handful of twentieth-century historians have struggled to make Collingwood's observation a directive, and nearly each of their attempts to put self-perception into history has broken down over the question of form. Today, however, it may be finally possible to learn from some of the achievements of the avant-garde. Historians live in the midst of an extraordinary knowledge explosion. They have a new psychological and sociological basis for understanding themselves as well as others. They have a marvelous range of vocabulary and concepts and a good understanding of language and symbol. They have a large public which has grown up in the century of the absurd and desperately requires the perspective history provides. The knowledge and methods now available to the historian can be incorporated into different forms of historical writing to make explicit the historian's role as intermediary between past and present. The guarantee that the story he tells is true is the knowledge he has of who he is and why he thinks and acts as he does. Self-knowledge expressed in experimental forms may provide the historian with another sense of his possibilities as a teacher without sacrificing that verifiable truth which is and should remain the cardinal goal of historical scholarship.

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VICTORIAN STUDIES