

The Novel, Illusion and Reality: The Paradox of Omniscience in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Frederick M. Holmes

Some readers have found *The Magus* more compelling than *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,¹ even though the latter is clearly the more controlled and shapely novel. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is also a more successful blending of a traditional narrative, presented with documentary realism, and self-conscious devices which disrupt the illusion of reality in order to permit an investigation of its status as fiction. It is a superior novel in this regard because it surmounts a difficulty Fowles encountered in *The Magus*, where Conchis's dual role as realistic character and novelist-surrogate necessitated that he perform in action what the novelist does with language. In other words, because he exists within the illusion of real life created by Fowles, Conchis carries out a facsimile of the novelist's task by creating for Urfe "real" as opposed to literary experiences. Because the reader recognizes that *The Magus* employs many of the conventions of the thriller, the exotic setting and implausible action do not inhibit his willingness to suspend disbelief. A problem does arise, however, from the fact that, in order to demonstrate to Urfe that his enterprise is, like a novelist's, fictional, Conchis must destroy the reality of each stage of the godgame before moving on to create a new illusion involving his company of actors. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to submit imaginatively to successive illusions inasmuch as he becomes increasingly aware that they will soon be punctured.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, on the other hand, the illusionist element does not strain our credulity because its fictionality is exposed in a way that does not require its destruction. The self-conscious narrator-novelist is not a character in the same sense that Conchis is. Rather, the narrator identifies himself as the author,² and, accordingly, it is apparent from

the start that he does not exist within the confines of his narrative (although at two points he does enter it briefly as a character). Consequently, he can periodically point up the artificial nature of his story without destroying it.³ Having momentarily dispelled the illusion that his characters have a reality apart from the book, he can then continue to delineate the plot without needing to create an entirely new set of fictional circumstances. The reader, therefore, soon forgets the narrator's warning, once again becoming immersed in the verisimilitudinous account of a Victorian love triangle and its effects on the lives of the characters.

The adjective "Victorian", of course, suggests an important respect in which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is paradoxical, for as Patrick Brantlinger explains, its modernity is achieved from its pastiche of old-fashioned novelistic practices: "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.'" ⁴ This statement requires qualification in that Fowles' novel is as much a critique of the assumptions of the French new novelists as it is an application of them.⁵ Fowles is able to have it both ways; in the very act of resurrecting an outmoded sort of novel, he indicates that it is an anachronism, and so manifests the kind of uneasiness about the activity of fiction writing that we have come to recognize as characteristic of contemporary writers. By exposing the artificiality of the form in the very act of using it, by showing that he does not view it as transparently representational, he avoids writing in bad faith. And yet simultaneously he is able to exploit the very facets of the novel that he is questioning by imitating the Victorians—morally sensitive omniscience, plot, character, and the illusion of an objective reality, a set of historical circumstances open to empirical investigation. He is interested, as Bradbury claims, in preserving "as much humanism for the novel as can be got,"⁶ while at the same time confronting the forces which have threatened both humanistic beliefs and the elements of fiction allied with them.

Fowles's strategy is like John Barth's. A similarity is apparent between the double-edged use Fowles makes of an antiquated fictional form and Barth's experiments with the conventions of the picaresque novel. *The Sot-Weed Factor* in particular bears comparison with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: not only do both employ narrative conventions derived from earlier historical periods, but both are set in the past as well. There are significant differences, of course. The most obvious is that Barth's is the more comical and blatantly parodic novel. Another is that Fowles's narrator, far more intrusive than Barth's, brings an explicitly modern understanding to bear on his nineteenth-century subject matter, whereas Barth's authorial voice pretends to be of the historical period during which the action takes place. Of course, *The Sot-Weed Factor's* ignorance of modern history is disingenuous since the book uses its turn-of-the-eighteenth century content as a metaphor for twentieth-century concerns. Fowles's narrator, on the other

hand, juxtaposes nineteenth- and twentieth-century modes of thought, feeling, and behaviour, enabling each to comment upon and qualify the other. His intention in doing so is to make them converge for the reader in an intensely alive fictional present.

These differences aside, the two novels treat history in a somewhat similarly ironical fashion. Neither aspires simply to weave a narrative into a historically accurate representation of a bygone age. For both the evocation of history is a means, not an end in itself.⁷ Each ostensibly aligns itself with the documentary tradition of the novel in recreating a densely particularized social milieu and alluding to (and even incorporating into the story) real historical events and personages. Yet, having done so, each paradoxically dissolves the illusion of solid actuality that the conventions of formal realism were designed to create. Both novels thereby try to persuade us, not simply that the versions of history they present are fictional, but that all conceptions of objective reality are in some sense human fabrications with no underlying solidity. For Barth, whose sense of life's ephemerality is more developed than Fowles's, this is a terrifying state of affairs. But for Fowles it is potentially redemptive because it means that all of life can be invested with the significance of good art, for which he makes exalted claims.⁸

By imitating the Victorian novel Fowles is able to create the paradoxical effect of a narrative at once credible on a realistic plane and self-consciously artificial. He exploits the anomaly that, although the nineteenth century is usually regarded as the great age of realistic fiction, many of the conventions of the Victorian novel have fallen into disfavor, even amongst writers committed to social realism. Fowles's use of out-of-date conventions enables us to perceive their conventionality; they remind us that we are reading an unusual sort of novel, not witnessing the unfolding of actual events. That novelistic practices have shifted from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries is understandable, since history has so altered the political, social, and cultural structures of England that the mental and social landscapes depicted by modern writers are quite different from those of their Victorian predecessors. As L. P. Hartley writes in the opening sentence of *The Go-Between*, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."⁹ In short, both the forms of life and the literary conventions fashioned to represent them have altered radically since the 1860s, and Fowles exploits this shift for his own purposes. He even exaggerates the strangeness of the Victorian world, as his comments on the novel's dialogue attest:

the genuine dialogue of 1867 (in so far as it can be hard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old. It very often fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians – it is not stiff enough, not euphemistic enough, and so on; and here at once I have to start cheating and pick out the more formal and archaic elements of spoken speech.¹⁰

The word “cheating” is instructive here, for Fowles is intentionally duplicitous in elaborating a fictional world which on the one hand is realized with documentary realism but which on the other hand bears slight resemblance to contemporary social realities. By doing so he invites the reader to feel that he is entering a solid, factually-based environment and therefore to delude himself that he is responding in a morally engaged way to serious human concerns. But, as Dwight Eddins claims, the book actually raises within the reader the desire to experience history “as romanticized and archaic ideation,” implicitly lulling him into believing “that he is embarked on nothing more threatening than a field trip into the safely-frozen past.”¹¹ He is in actuality comfortably removed in time and circumstances from the Victorian subject matter and might even feel immune from the moral plight of the more sexually repressed central characters. Accordingly, Fowles dispels the reader’s complacent security by dissolving the solidity of the narrative, exposing the fictionality of the work by discursing on the processes of its creation and by providing multiple endings.¹²

By making the reader sensitive to the work as a fabrication composed of words rather than as a transparent window to a real-seeming human drama, the novel’s literary self-consciousness enables him to see that the apparently solid, historically accurate evocation of the Victorian age is as much a product of our collective imagination as it is of fact. Fred Kaplan shows that the novel’s mood, themes, and character types are derived, not directly from life, but from nineteenth-century literature, and he also remarks that Fowles’s portrait of the era is constructed more from his use of excerpts from imaginative literature than from historical documents. Kaplan’s conclusions are incisive:

The history, then, is more in the fiction than in the fact, more in the literary products of the age than in the factual documents of the historians. Fowles has succeeded in writing a fiction, a historical novel of sorts, that is true to our knowledge of the period revealed through the period’s imaginative literature. . . . The premise seems to be that we know an age not through its so-called facts but through the impact its imaginative literature has on us. It is as if Fowles wants to redefine ‘facts’ in the light of his attempt to relate the past to the present. The past that exists, in this case the Victorian past, is the product of our present immersion in the only aspect of the past that still has life, its art.¹³

But the ultimate effect of the novel’s alienating devices is not merely to expose the story’s fictitiousness, its basis in letters rather than in life. Rather, it is to intensify the significance of the fiction for the reader. Fowles punctures one illusion, then, only to create another: that the reader is collaborating in the fashioning of a story involving, not quaint Victorian men and women whose problems are safely distant from the reader’s experience,

but two proto-existentialists inhabiting his moral universe, sharing a living present made anxious by the burden of choice, and facing an equally uncertain future.¹⁴ Although Linda Hutcheon seems not to notice that the reader is meant periodically to feel removed from the quandaries of Charles, Sarah, and Ernestina in order to give his eventual moral engagement more force, her description of the ultimate thrust of the book seems apt: “The real and the imaginary, the present and the past merge for the reader.”¹⁵ And if the novel suggests that the real and the imaginary are in the last analysis indistinguishable, it also implies that the imaginary may constitute the highest form of truth.

The importance of the authorial voice in creating the paradoxes described above cannot be overemphasized. The intrusive narrator is, of course, standard in many Victorian novels, the Fowles’s imitation of this convention is no less paradoxical than the previously discussed aspects of the book. In the work of writers such as George Eliot or Trollope, the narrator is the medium through whom novelistic authority is established. The source of this authority is the narrator’s omniscience—his access to the inner lives of the characters—and the confidence, reasonableness, subtlety, and withering irony with which moral, cultural, and psychological generalizations are advanced. Fowles provides the reader with this sort of guidance, broaching a wide range of topics from the follies of clothing styles to the scientific and moral importance of the discoveries of Darwin and Lyell. Kaplan comments aptly on the way the narrator’s seemingly digressive remarks expand the book’s significance without detracting from the main plot: “entire chapters imitate the Victorian proclivity for incorporating historical and sociological generalization into the fabric of their fictions, amplifying the dimensions of the novelist’s interests, creating a fiction that is almost encyclopedic in its absorption of all aspects of culture.”¹⁶

While availing himself of the benefits of the intrusive narrator, however, Fowles simultaneously undermines his authority in the very act of making him speak at times as a Victorian figure who veritably proclaims himself an anachronism with his formal, courtly locution. Listening to his voice, the reader is keenly aware, not only that he is reading an imitation Victorian novel, but also that he is doing so in an era when, for certain reasons, Victorian-style novels are no longer written. In this respect, Eddins’s description of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as “a ‘Victorian’ novel that is a contemporary novel ‘about’ the Victorian novel” is just.¹⁷ It is not only the narrator’s antiquated practices and idiom which make one suspicious. Because he also speaks from a modern perspective, the narrator can tell the reader explicitly what is no longer viable about the Victorian novel: the convention “that the novelist stands next to God” (p. 80). Since Fowles believes that the metaphysical assumptions about the universe upon which the analogy is based have broken down, leaving man in a position of uncertainty, he believes that the analogy has lost its usefulness and that it should be altered:

The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (p. 82).

Fowles' treatment of the narrator, then, is reminiscent of his penchant in *The Magus* for building up Conchis as a figure of wisdom and power only to make the reader doubt him in this respect. About both there is a suggestion of the charlatan, the flashy impresario orchestrating baseless illusions. Indeed, late in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the narrator appears overtly in this role in order to expose the illusory nature of the penultimate ending by introducing a final one (p. 362). If both Conchis and the narrator are gods, they are so only "in the new theological image:" "There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist" (p. 82). Accordingly, the function of the author-surrogates is paradoxical in that both seek authority only to eschew it. Both manipulate others in order to bestow the freedom which must of necessity terminate their control.

Of course, as Fowles says, the novelist can never actually cease to manipulate his characters; he can only create the illusion of having done so. Since inspiration cannot be commanded at will, however, there is a sense in which the development of a novel's characters may actually be beyond a writer's conscious control. Novelists, states Fowles, "cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live" (p. 81). But this sort of independence of the created from the conscious intentions of the creator is not the same as the absolute freedom espoused by the narrator. His argument here seems deliberately specious. After all, the fictional worlds of the great Victorian novels surely are organic in Fowles's terms, but their narrators do not for this reason reject the convention of omniscience and proclaim the autonomy of their characters.

Fowles, however, desires to create a sense, not only that the springs of his characters' motivations and actions lie too deep within himself for rational understanding, but also that they are free of his control. Although whenever it suits his purposes his narrator provides a god's-eye view of his characters' innermost thoughts and feelings and draws our attention to his primacy as creator of the novel's world, he nonetheless adopts a posture opposite to that of Thackeray's puppet-master-novelist in *Vanity Fair*. While Fowles' strategy is not as extreme as Flann O'Brien's in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (where the characters plot to end the despotism of the novelist-persona at night as he sleeps), Fowles' narrator does at times trumpet the recalcitrance of his characters. Moreover, by providing three separate

endings he tries to convey the suggestion of indeterminacy, impart the notion that the characters have been freed from the tyranny of his plot. But Christopher Ricks argues rightly that this liberation is more apparent than real:

Once the novelist says 'I'm in no position to insist that such-and-such happened,' he is in no position to insist that either such-and-such or such-and-such happened. For there would not be, in life, two possibilities, but virtually an infinity of them. To reduce this infinity to two alternatives is no less manipulatory or coercive... than was the Victorian novelist's reduction of the infinity to one eventuality.¹⁸

Furthermore, as Elizabeth Rankin observes, even the illusion of indeterminacy is undermined inasmuch as the final ending is both a logical resolution of the novel's themes and the only one not vitiated by the narrator's irony.¹⁹ Fowles only seems, then, to grant his characters and readers an equal partnership in the creative process. Bradbury perceives what he actually does, which is to demonstrate the importance of freedom, not literally to bestow it: "Authorial authority is relativized, not in order to lighten responsibility for the characters, thrusting it on the reader, but rather to take full responsibility for showing their freedom, their faculty of choice."²⁰

Fowles is, naturally enough, fully aware of these contradictions, the artful management of which contributes to the book's success. They are meant to be perceived by the attentive reader. The narrator-novelist informs us explicitly that he has the look of "an omnipotent god" (p. 317), and his absconding in a landau shortly before the last ending is acted does not blind us to the fact that in the act of setting his watch back fifteen minutes he has ordained Sarah's rejection of Charles. He is no less the god-like novelist in pretending not to watch the scene he has written played out.

The word "paradox" also comes to mind if we think of Fowles's sleight-of-hand, not in terms of the extent of his control over the characters, but in relation to the way he invites the reader to surrender to or disengage himself from the illusion of an actual human drama unfolding. One quality of the Victorian novelist which Fowles lacks is an unself-conscious faith in the truth and significance of his own fictional representations of life. This confidence is manifested in, not belied by, the way the nineteenth-century novelists characteristically use the convention of the omniscient author. One might think that authorial intrusiveness necessarily interferes with a verisimilitudinous narrative by reminding the reader of the story's fictionality.²¹ But with Victorian writers the practice actually strengthened the illusion of reality because intrusive commentary was used typically to make connections between life as the reader knew it and the fictional world, broadening its base and suggesting its factual solidity and moral relevance. In places Fowles employs authorial commentary in this fashion too, but his narrator also intrudes to distinguish between modern reality and his Victo-

rian story, thus underscoring its character as a fabrication. Or perhaps one should say that he pretends to discriminate between fiction and reality in the process of actually doing the opposite: confusing the two. This is certainly the intent of one of his apostrophes, bearing echoes of Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot, to the reader, here imaged as a no-nonsense devotee of facts:

A character is either 'real' or 'imaginary'? If you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it. . . fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf—your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo sapiens* (p. 82).

Like the Victorian writers, Fowles here links his book with the world outside of it, but he achieves an opposite result. Whereas the Victorians appealed to their readers' sense of reality in order to validate the reality of their fictions, Fowles sensitizes the reader to the fictionality of his work in order to emphasize his view that all of life is a web of fictions.

The point of the disruptive commentary is finally illusionist, "part of the prestidigitation,"²² as Barth would say, not anti-illusionist. "You are not the 'I' who breaks into the illusion," Fowles reminds himself, "but the 'I' who is a part of it."²³ It originally seems that the purpose of the intrusive narrator in pointing up the fictionality of the work is simple if paradoxical. The paradox is that he seems to be violating what was originally designed as a realist mode of fiction because it does not do justice to reality: "The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (p. 80). This seems at first simply to be a philistine objection issuing from a preference for hard, factual realities over art, which is fanciful and untrue in a literal sense. But Fowles goes on to overturn this implication: "I have disgracefully broken the illusion? No. My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. Fiction is woven into all" (p. 82). By seeming to belittle the significance of his fiction as ephemeral illusion, Fowles actually begins to establish its relevance to the reader's life, which he also portrays as a tissue of fictions. He thwarts the reader's urge to take "flight from the real reality," the ever-present need to claim one's freedom and confront the attendant dangers and responsibilities. This he does by frustrating the reader's escapist desire to submit whole-heartedly to the reality of a safely distant narrative presided over by a comforting omniscient god who provides certain knowledge and sees to it that things work out. He establishes a context within which the reader becomes aware of the potency of the fiction as a fiction in a world of fictions and, conversely, of the destructiveness of fictions created in bad faith, those which have come to be, to use one of the novel's dominant metaphors, fossilized, accepted as unambiguous realities. The ultimate effect is to heighten, not diminish, the immediacy and power of the Victo-

rian subject matter and to foster the illusion that the reader is participating in its creation.

By concentrating mainly on only a few pages of authorial commentary, my analysis to this point might seem to distort the essential nature of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the bulk of which is a traditional narrative. Walter Allen, for example, who believes that Fowles' real achievement in the novel is the evocation of history, states: "The significance of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* doesn't lie in its 'experimental' features. These are much more apparent than real, and in my view, are a boring red herring."²⁴ In its vividness, rightness of detail, and assurance of tone, Fowles' recreation of the Victorian past is, as Allen avows, a triumph in its own right. But it is worth reiterating that Fowles' purpose in reviving the Victorian fictional traditions is, in part, anti-traditional. Moreover, the matter of the fiction mirrors the manner of its telling. Bradbury is simply wrong in asserting of the novel's resolution that "the substantial action seems to end in one world and the substantiating *machinery*, the technical modes and means, in another." Neither is he persuasive in arguing that the novel "has something of the air of forcing itself towards a formal self-consciousness of surface, rather than inherently needing it."²⁵ William Palmer more astutely observes that the meta-fictional concerns raised by the narrator are woven into the very fabric of the story itself: "the plot and the characters. . . comprise a metaphor for Fowles' aesthetic theme. It is a novel about the past and future of the novel genre."²⁶ In Barth's terminology, then, Fowles' novel is "a paradigm of or metaphor for itself."²⁷

As in *The Magus*, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles turns to his own advantage a potentially debilitating circumstance by building into the novel apocalyptic forces antagonistic to a human-centered world view which fosters the creation of art. In his essay on writing the novel he identifies this threat, its implications for Victorian society, and what he takes to be its modern equivalent:

The great nightmare of the respectable Victorian mind was the only too real one created by the geologist Lyell and the biologist Darwin. Until then man had lived like a child in a small room. They gave him—and never was a present less welcome—infinite space and time, and a hideously mechanistic explanation of human reality into the bargain. Just as we 'live with the bomb' the Victorians lived with the theory of evolution. They were hurled into space. They felt themselves infinitely isolated. By the 1860's the great iron structures of their philosophies, religions and social stratifications were already beginning to look dangerously corroded to the more perspicacious.²⁸

It is through Smithson, the amateur scientist and champion of Darwin, that Fowles makes these concerns explicit in the novel. Charles uses his insider's knowledge of the then very recent theory of natural selection as a

refuge from his vague fears of a misspent life and entrapment in a sterile social order. As the quoted passage would suggest, there is considerable irony in finding solace in Darwinism, for its implications reduce the importance and dignity of man in the overall scheme of things. Moreover, there is dramatic irony in an awareness shared by the narrator and reader but lacking in Charles: that the Darwinian principle of general extinction can be used to explain the near demise of Smithson's own social class in our own century. Rankin sees that it is the process of evolution which forces upon Charles the painful ordeal of choosing to become a social outsider, an existentialist before his time.²⁹ At first Charles mistakenly believes that he has been naturally selected as the fittest to survive, that his way of life and social status are sanctioned by immutable natural laws (p. 45). He misinterprets the full import of evolution, conceiving of life along discredited Linnéan lines as a fixed order in which his own place is exalted rather than as a ceaseless, mysterious flux (p. 45). This propensity the novel depicts as characteristic of the era, and, despite the comfort derived from its "iron certainties," the narrator presents this aspect of the Victorian age as life-denying (p. 285). It finally is doubly paradoxical that, as in *The Collector* and *The Magus*, confronting the hazardous uncertainty of existence proves to be the means of attaining authenticity. As long as Charles deludes himself that he has a clear and reassuring insight into the truth about life, he exhibits, in existentialist jargon, *mauvais foi*.

The process whereby Charles learns to question and reject some of the rigid Victorian conventions and structures of thought corresponds to the narrator's determination to overturn the canons of the Victorian novel, to reveal the fiction *as* fiction and to deny the reader at times the certain knowledge of an omniscient guide. Both cases involve the refusal to treat products of the imagination as if they had a prior objective existence, a rock-bottom reality. Charles has an insight into the illusory character of all interpretive structures in conjunction with his discovery that evolution is horizontal, not vertical: "Time was the great fallacy; existence was without history, was always now. . . All those painted screens erected by man to shut out reality—history, religion, duty, social position, all were illusions, mere opium fantasies" (p. 165).

What Charles must learn in the novel, however, is not to do without the "painted screens" of fiction, but to reinvigorate them, to employ them to enhance life, to bring out its vibrancy and mysteriousness and infinite significance. Again, this is analogous to what Fowles hopes to achieve by altering, rather than abandoning, the conventions of the Victorian novel. He may assert the unreality of history, but, because he knows that we cannot dispense with it, his response is not to repudiate it but to evoke the Victorian past in a way that lets us see its relevance to the present. Despite his championing of hazard, he has no intention of entrusting his novel—which is in fact highly structured and planned—to contingency. Fostering the illusion that his novel has been freed from the tyranny of artistic structuring is a

way, not of doing away with, but of bringing new life to the forms of art, making them flexible and open to the surprises hazard brings. Fowles does not believe one can or should discover a reality more substantial than the fabrications which he imposes on experience. This is not an available option. Kerry McSweeney describes the choice that is, according to Fowles, open to man—to live by inert, dead metaphors or to create of one's life a rich and vital fiction: "one's perception of reality, one's phenomenological world, is the work of the imagination. The failure to replace culturally and socially conditioned metaphors of reality by one's own, or to move beyond stale metaphors, is an imaginative failure."³⁰

The novel makes clear that it is also an imaginative failure to endeavor to use metaphors to evade the flux and contingency of life, to impose a fixed order and certainty where in reality there is mystery and unending change. This destructive urge, appropriately called "collector-consciousness" by Palmer,³¹ is the desire for a proprietary relationship to the truth. It is the wish to possess, to control, to understand totally; this is the sort of mentality Keats denigrated as lacking negative capability.³² The central symbol for this flight from reality, Smithson's collection of fossilized tests, conveys what Fowles believes to be its deadening, life-denying character. By seeking absolute knowledge and control, one kills whatever life made the object under scrutiny desirable in the first place. "We murder to dissect,"³³ said Wordsworth, and Fowles would certainly agree. Indeed, in *The Collector* the demented Clegg literally kills Miranda in an attempt to possess her.

A woman is also the focus for Smithson's less extreme form of "collector-consciousness," his inclination to fictionalize in bad faith. As Palmer explains, because Charles fears his broadly sexual attraction to Sarah, he at first tries to conceptualize her in a framework which will make her entirely comprehensible in a negative way and so defuse her mysterious power over him: "Charles wants to dehumanize his relationship with Sarah and turn it, as Dr. Grogan would, into a neatly labeled psychological 'case'."³⁴ The profile constructed by Grogan, in which Sarah's behavior is unambiguously pathological, is in actuality a hypothesis or theory, a species of fiction which is at best a partial and metaphoric explanation of the workings of her psyche, but both men would like to accept it as factual. In a like manner, the townspeople who categorize her as the French Lieutenant's whore mistake a faulty hypothesis for a fact, and Mrs. Poulteney confuses her lubricious fantasies about Sarah's misbehavior in the Undercliff with reality. But Sarah slips through the conceptual nets Charles and others would trap her in, forcing him to perceive them as destructive fictions.

Sarah's thematic function in the novel has been identified by several critics;³⁵ it is to embody a mysterious vitality which defies rigid intellectual formulation. "I am not to be understood" (p. 354), she tells Charles, and certainly the narrator and reader fare no better in this respect than he does. Even after Charles succumbs to her blandishments, he continues to try to dispel Sarah's mystery, to possess her by creating around her an explanatory

fiction which he hopes to realize in action. This is how he fantasizes about the joys of a honeymoon abroad with Sarah: "The Alhambra! Moonlight, the distant sound below of singing gypsies, such grateful, tender eyes . . . and in some jasmine-scented room they would lie awake, in each other's arms, infinitely alone, exiled, yet fused in that loneliness, inseparable in that exile" (p. 313). Hutcheon notes that Charles' use here of romantic clichés tonally undercuts his dream of the future, which, in any case, is soon to be shattered by Sarah's disappearance.³⁶ Charles' fantasy of a beautiful marriage which could mitigate the essential loneliness of life corresponds exactly to the happy ending, which is first parodied by means of excessively romantic rhetoric (p. 360) and then revoked by the narrator (pp. 362–366). Once again the novel's content and its meta-fictional form reflect each other.

Finally, because his attempts to control and possess Sarah fail, Charles does come to recognize that his ideas about her are not literal truths: "he became increasingly unsure of the frontier between the real Sarah and the Sarah he had created in so many . . . dreams" (p. 336). Granting her the freedom to be autonomous does not diminish the positive effect she has on his life. Indeed, painful though it may be, Smithson's growth depends upon his willingness not to treat Sarah as a goddess who can be commanded to solve all of his problems and make him happy. Like the speaker of Tennyson's *Maud*, with whom Charles identifies (p. 334), he must leave the garden (symbolized in the novel by the Undercliff) and make his way alone in the world. He must face the anxiety of freedom by himself, without the intervention of a protective, quasi-divine presence. Analogously, by means of the techniques of literary self-consciousness, Fowles tries to foster within the reader the illusion that he must undertake the creative chores without the novelist's god-like aid.

The positions of Charles and the reader on the one hand and Sarah and the narrator on the other are, as Rankin states,³⁷ clearly parallel. Hutcheon describes Sarah's relationship to the narrator succinctly: "Sarah is the narrating novelist's surrogate within the fictional world."³⁸ Unlike the other characters, she is aware that the fiction she creates (that she has been seduced by Varguiness) is a fiction, and her motivation differs as well. Whereas the other characters often fictionalize in order to produce comforting delusions which will relieve them of the burden of their own freedom, Sarah designs a fiction to move herself beyond the pale of conventional Victorian morality. Her purpose in deliberately courting the pains of social ostracism is to claim her uniqueness, to grow as a free individual. In the process, as Eddins remarks,³⁹ she spurs Charles on to pursue his own human potential. Her effect on him is similar to Conchis' influence on Urfe, and it is equally paradoxical. Both magus-figures knowingly use, manipulate, and lie to their disciples in order to liberate and enlighten them. Sarah is perhaps less disinterested and aware of the possible consequences of her actions, but her effect in the end is the same as Conchis'. The intent of the narrator is, of course, identical; his self-conscious trickery, duplicity, and

manipulation of the reader is aimed at leading him to the truth and making him choose to be free. The illusion is fostered that both Charles and the reader, in assuming responsibility for their destinies, become authors of their own lives. Paradoxically, life is most real, then, when art is perfected, not when it is transcended. The view that a reality more real than art can be attained is in this context a delusion created in bad faith.

The French Lieutenant's Woman resolves itself so as to insist upon the ambiguities and paradoxes surrounding the relation of art and life, not to repudiate them. Paradoxically, the novelist undermines his own authority as a sage who has a special insight into reality in the ultimate interest of establishing that authority. Because Fowles broaches the meta-fictional concerns from the outset, explores them interestingly, and makes them a part of the living tissue of the narrative in a way that increases its dramatic intensity and significance for the reader, the success of his novel is inseparable from its reflexive character.

The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

NOTES

1. Malcolm Bradbury, for instance, states that *The Magus* is the more mysterious and commanding of the two novels. "The Novelist as Impresario: John Fowles and His Magus," *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 263.
2. It would be a mistake, however, to equate the narrator narrowly with Fowles, as he himself states in his essay on writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: "the 'I' who will make first-person commentaries here and there in my story, and who will finally even enter it, will not be my real 'I' in 1967; but much more just another character, though in a different category from the purely fictional ones." "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," reprinted in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Great Britain: Fontana, 1973), p. 142.
3. For example, at one point the narrator justifies his refusal to enter Sarah's consciousness by explaining that he does not at this moment have access to her thoughts, which in any case have no existence apart from his own: "These characters I create never existed outside my own mind." *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (New York: Signet, 1969), p. 80. All future references to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will be to this edition.

4. Patrick Brantlinger, Ian Adam, and Sheldon Rothblatt, "The French Lieutenant's Woman: A Discussion," *Victorian Studies*, 15 (1972), p. 339.
5. In this respect, see Fowles' criticisms of Robbe-Grillet's argument in *Pour un Nouveau Roman*. "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," p. 139.
6. Bradbury, "Novelist as Impresario," p. 263.
7. The following comment by Fowles on *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is instructive in this regard: "I don't think of it as a historical novel, a genre in which I have very little interest." "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," p. 136.
8. See *The Aristos*, rev. ed. (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 184.
9. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book, 1958), p. 7.
10. Fowles, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," p. 139.
11. Dwight Eddins, "John Fowles: Existence as Authorship," *Contemporary Literature*, 17 (1976) p. 219.
12. He also explicitly debunks the notion that our own supposedly enlightened sexual attitudes and practices are superior to those of the Victorians (pp. 212–213).
13. Fred Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3 (1973), p. 111.
14. See Fowles' comment on Charles and Sarah as existentialists before their time. "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," p. 141.
15. Linda Hutcheon, "The 'Real World(s)' of Fiction: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*," *English Studies in Canada*, 4 (1978), p. 84.
16. Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists," p. 113.
17. Eddins, "John Fowles," p. 217.
18. Christopher Ricks, "The Unignorable Real," *New York Review of Books*, 12 Feb. 1970, p. 24.
19. Elizabeth Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3 (1973), p. 205.
20. Bradbury, "Novelist as Impresario," p. 257.
21. Such was the view of Ford Madox Ford, for example, who held that the novelist's job was "to render and not to tell." *The English Novel: From*

- the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad* (London: Constable and Co., 1930), p. 122.
22. Joe David Bellamy, "Having It Both Ways: A Conversation Between John Barth and Joe David Bellamy," *New American Review*, 15, p. 143.
 23. Fowles, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," p. 142.
 24. Walter Allen, "The Achievement of John Fowles," *Encounter*, 35 (1970), p. 67.
 25. Bradbury, "Novelist as Impresario," p. 257 and p. 263.
 26. William Palmer, *The Fiction of John Fowles: Tradition, Art, and the Loneliness of Selfhood* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 30.
 27. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," reprinted in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Great Britain: Fontana, 1977), p. 78.
 28. Fowles, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," pp. 140-141.
 29. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration," p. 199.
 30. Kerry McSweeney, "John Fowles's Variations in *The Ebony Tower*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 8 (1981), p. 311.
 31. Palmer, *The Fiction of John Fowles*, p. 51.
 32. John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, 21, 27(?) Dec. 1817, *Selected Poems and Letters by John Keats*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 261.
 33. William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," *Selected Poems and Prefaces by William Wordsworth*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 107.
 34. Palmer, *The Fiction of John Fowles*, p. 51.
 35. See Ian Adam, "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: A Discussion," p. 347, and Eddins, "John Fowles," p. 220.
 36. Hutcheon, "'Real World(s)' of Fiction," p. 88.
 37. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration," p. 197.
 38. Hutcheon, "'Real World(s)' of Fiction," p. 90.
 39. Eddins, "John Fowles," p. 222.