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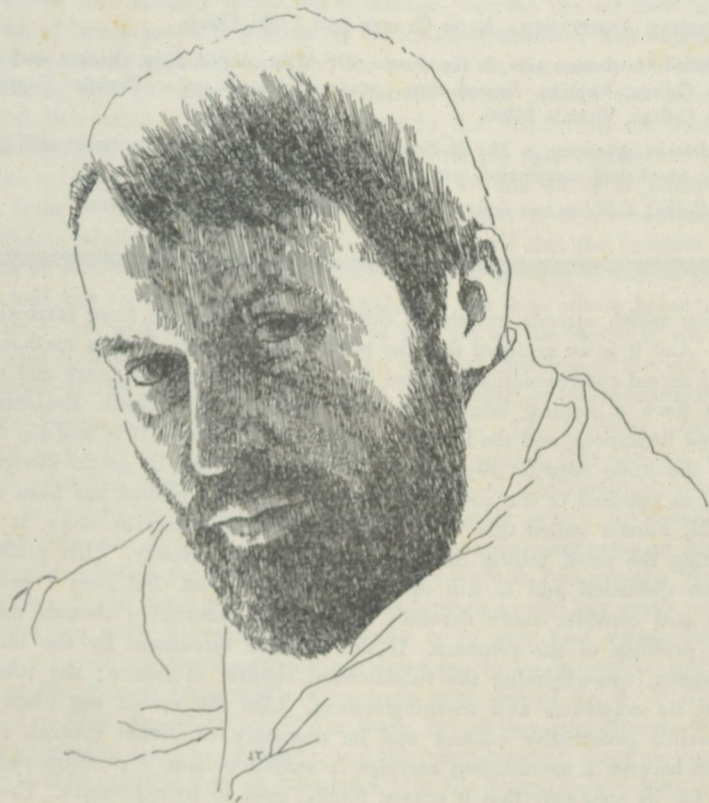
The Hollins Critic

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The Orgastic Fiction of John Fowles



The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. In saying this I do not mean merely to remind the reader of the connection between all art and the erotic in human nature. Nor do I intend simply to suggest an analogy between fiction and sex. For what connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself. When we look at fiction with respect to its form alone we see a pattern of events designed to move toward climax and resolution, balanced by a counterpattern of events designed to delay this very climax and resolution.

The Hollins Critic

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Fiction which attends mainly to this formal pattern we have learned to call romance. And it is no accident that the pattern of romance is often used to present a story of sexual consummation delayed by events. Romance structure and romantic situations have a natural affinity for one another. The Greek Romances, The Elizabethan Romances, and the French Romances of Honoré d'Urfé and his followers all share the same orgasmic rhythm and the same interest in erotic intrigue. For the novel, as opposed to the romance, the great literary problem has been to adapt what E. M. Forster called this "low atavistic" form, the orgasmic story, to the job of spreading the news, telling the truth about man in society. This problem has been much discussed and is still of considerable interest, but here I propose to ignore it and consider more carefully the equally interesting though much less discussed problem of the romance. If the novel is threatened by the inundation of phenomena, overwhelming the fundamental rhythm of fiction; the romance is threatened by emptiness and meaninglessness. Like the sexual act when purged of its possible procreative content and its necessary emotional content, romantic fiction can become a meaningless exercise in sensationalism, a pleasure pursued so narrowly for its own sake that it ceases, finally, even to be a pleasure. The crucial question for the romancer, then, becomes how to avoid emptiness and mere sensationalism. Here I think we need to distinguish between two kinds of content or rather between the content of the fictional work and the meaning of the fictional act. Content has to do with the ideas and attitudes that are embodied in the language of fiction. But meaning in this special sense has to do with the shared experience of the writer and reader in the fictional act.

Like the sexual act the act of fiction is a reciprocal relationship. It takes two. Granted, a writer can write for his own amusement, and a reader can read in the same way; but these are acts of mental masturbation, with all the limitations that are involved in narcissistic gratification of the self. In the full fictional act, however, writer and reader share a relationship of mutual dependency. The meaning of the fictional act itself is something like love. The writer, at his best, respects the dignity

of the reader. He does this by assuming a sensitivity and intelligence "out there" which will match that of his own best writing self. The reader, at the same time, respects the dignity of the writer. He does not simply try to take *his* pleasure and *his* meaning from the book. He strives to mate with the writer, to share his viewpoint, to come fully to terms with the sensibility and intelligence that have informed this particular work of fiction. When writer and reader make a "marriage of true minds" the act of fiction is perfect and complete.

However, this meaning of the act of fiction—because the act itself is a verbal act, an act of language—is dependent on the meaningfulness of that language which is shared by reader and writer. The two partners in the act reach their mutual understanding *through* the ideas and attitudes which present themselves as the content of the fiction. The things discussed in the fiction are the basis for the deeper meaning of the fictional act. Just as two people may discuss art or politics, not so as to reach conclusions about politics or art but so as to understand one another better, a reader and writer may share a subject matter, a content, in order to establish a relationship. To see this is not to assume that the function of fiction is to lead all readers to Holden Caulfield's position of wanting to call up his favorite authors and talk to them directly. The writer is the man whose being is implied by the book, not necessarily the person you will get on the phone if you call him. But Caulfield's impulse is a response to the essential meaning of the act of fiction. The strength of the impulse is a measure of the validity of the experience.

John Fowles has written four books. His first, *The Collector*, demonstrated his devotion to the dynamics of story-telling. His second, *The Aristos*, was not a work of narrative fiction at all but a collection of philosophical workpoints—pensées, materials for a tractatus. In the two books which have followed *The Aristos*, Fowles has sought a form that can be equally responsive to his fictional and his philosophical concerns. His latest, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, has been getting its due from the reviewers, and I mean to add my small contribution there. But my main intention in this essay is to give that extraordinary work *The Magus* something like the attention it deserves. In his perceptive and laudatory review of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* on page one of the *N. Y. Times Book Review*, Ian Watt paused to ask, "Was there any deeper commitment than a currently fashionable nastiness behind . . . the mind-blowing manipulations of *The Magus*?" This question can be translated into the terms I have been using here to talk about orgasmic fiction. In these terms the question asks whether Fowles's passion in *The Magus* is equal to his virtuosity, whether the book is merely sensational or truly meaningful. It is a fair and important question.

In answering it, first of all I must assert that for me, personally, reading *The Magus* was a meaningful experience. This, of course, can only be asserted, never proved. In the crucial questions of critical value we are all merely prejudiced advocates; none of us is a judge. But I can document my critical advocacy of the book by talking about the richness and intelligibility of its content, as this content is presented through the orgasmic rhythm of the narrative. This will involve, necessarily, a certain amount of plot-summary of an interpretive kind. For that reader who has not yet read the book, I must admit that such a summary is bound to spoil some of the pleasure proper to a first reading, by revealing things that are meant

to be discovered only at the appropriate moment. Therefore, I urge such a reader to put this critical essay down and pick up the book. But I should add, while being personal, that I found my own second reading as absorbing as my first, though in different ways and at a different pace. Now, to the question.

It is interesting that what should be called into question is the presence or absence of ethical commitment to justify the esthetic virtuosity of *The Magus*, because it is precisely the relationship between the ethical and the esthetic which is the central theme in the book's structure of meanings. Speaking of his behavior at Oxford, the narrator observes,

we argued about essence and existence and called a certain kind of inconsequential behavior existentialist. Less enlightened people would have called it capricious or just plain selfish; but we didn't realize that the heroes, or anti-heroes, of the French existentialist novels we had read were not supposed to be realistic. We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behavior.

The literary advice offered here is very important. The passage insists that French existentialist fiction should be treated as metaphor rather than as description. It implies, by extension, that we should be careful to take *this* book with its "anti-hero" in a metaphorical (or allegorical) way. And it presents succinctly to us the existential problem of its anti-hero, Nicholas Urfe: he is confused about the relationship between art and life. Nicholas, of course, is both the protagonist of the book and its narrator. As narrator he is no longer confused; in fact he can present his life to us fictionally, as a meaningful metaphor, precisely because he has learned the difference between fiction and existence. But the character Nicholas starts in confusion, and the narrative is the story of his education. The distance between Nicholas as character and Nicholas as narrator is expressed in the double meaning of the word "enlightened" in the passage just quoted. Nicholas as character thought of himself as really enlightened, but as narrator he uses the word to mean something like superficial and dilettantish. Urfe may be related, as he tells us, to the historical Honoré d'Urfé, the author of the massive seventeenth-century pastoral romance, *Astrée*. Knowing this, we can see Nicholas-as-character victimized by his romantic vision of life as art, and we can see Nicholas-as-narrator accepting the conventions of orgasmic romance sufficiently to prevent us from taking his narrative as a transcript of reality. But Nicholas the character is not merely confused about how to take his reading. He is also guilty of a more fundamental error: he uses his misreading of literature as an excuse for mistreating life as if it were art. In older language he is a cad, a Don Juan. He is Kierkegaard's seducer of women, using them and discarding them as one might use and discard a drugstore paperback book: "I mistook the feeling of relief that dropping a girl always brought," the narrator says of his earlier self, "for a love of freedom." Freedom is a word charged with meaning in the vocabulary of existentialism, and that word along with such others as "choice" reverberates powerfully throughout the book.

John Fowles

Born in England in 1926, John Fowles graduated from Oxford University with honors. After service with the Royal Marines, he pursued his teaching career in France, Greece, and England.

Fowles' first novel, *The Collector*, was placed on best-seller lists and greeted with wide critical acclaim. The *Times Literary Supplement* commented, "Here is a . . . novel of much talent . . . Mr. Fowles brings to it the proper gifts of the novelist. His storytelling transcends the difficult and limited structure which he has imposed on himself . . . a haunting and memorable book." (May 17, 1963)

Mr. Fowles' avocations include writing poetry and collecting old books and antique china. He is married and lives in London.

—LEILA M. DAVIS

The action of the novel centers around the intrusion of two people into Urfe's selfishly comfortable esthetic world: first Alison, a woman capable of love; and then Conchis, the Magus of the book's title. Alison is, as Nicholas later understands, cast as "reality" in the psychodrama which is his life and our story. Conchis is a teacher, a Prospero who schools his student with masque and magic, playing the godgame with him until he completes his initiation and achieves his real freedom, his responsibility for himself.

This action commences quietly when Nicholas, at a loss for what to do with himself, accepts the job of teaching English at a boy's school on a Greek island. Before leaving London he lives with Alison for a time. Both Nicholas and Alison are sexually experienced and used to casual affairs, but for Alison this particular affair becomes a matter of love. For Nicholas, it is simply a more pleasant thing than usual. As she tells him later,

"I think you're so blind you probably don't even know you don't love me. You don't even know you're a filthy selfish bastard who can't, can't like being impotent, can't ever think of anything except number one. Because nothing can hurt you, Nicko. Deep down, where it counts. You've built your life so that nothing can ever reach you. So whatever you do you can say, I couldn't help it. You can't lose. You can always have your next adventure. Your next bloody affaire."

Alison diagnoses Nicholas's ailment perfectly, but she cannot cure it herself. Because Nicholas is so insulated in his esthetic world, he can only be reached esthetically, and Alison is too "real" to reach him on this level. This is where Conchis comes in. He is the magician who can break the spell and restore Nicholas to reality. But he must use all his artful magic to do this. Conchis lives on the island of Phraxos, where Nicholas goes to teach but actually becomes a student.

Phraxos is derived from the Greek word ΦΡΑΞΩ, which in one of its forms means to devise or plan for a person, to design or intend something for him. And Conchis tells Nicholas to pronounce his name with the "ch" soft (which would sound like conscious). In one of their talks Conchis presents to Nicholas this version of himself and his activities:

"Before the war we used to amuse ourselves with my private theatre here. And during the war, when I had a great deal of time to think, and no friends to amuse me, no theatre, I conceived a new kind of drama. One in which the conventional relations between audience and actors were forgotten. In which the conventional scenic geography, the notions of proscenium, stage, auditorium, were completely discarded. In which continuity of performance, either in time or place, was ignored. And in which the action, the narrative was fluid, with only a point of departure and a fixed point of conclusion." His mesmeric eyes pinned mine. "You will find that Artaud and Pirandello and Brecht were all thinking, in their different ways, along similar lines. But they had neither the money nor the will—and perhaps not the time—to think as I did. The element that they could never bring themselves to discard was the audience." He spread his arms. "Here we are all actors. None of us are as we really are." He raised his hand quickly. "Yes, I know. You think you are not acting. Just pretending a little. But you have much to learn about yourself. You are as far from your true self as that Egyptian mask our American friend wears is from his true face."

By involving Nicholas in a situation in which art and life are really and deliberately confused for an ethical purpose, Conchis succeeds in making Nicholas ultimately hungry for reality. By making the esthetic game painful enough, Conchis teaches Nicholas to accept the pain of life. The primary agent of this education is not Conchis himself, the Prospero of the island, but Lilly, the beautiful girl who plays the role of Miranda to Nicholas's Ferdinand—but with consummate duplicity which leads Nicholas to a richly ironic betrayal. Lilly, in a way, represents ideal beauty—an unattainable ideal. In his pursuit of her, Nicholas turns his back on Alison and reality, for Lilly seems to be what he has always wanted. Her artificiality and unattainability, of course, make it safe for him to want her. She represents a narcissistic gratification rather than a real engagement with another person. It has been the reality of Alison, her capacity for genuine love, that has prevented Nicholas from wanting her entirely. The news of Alison's suicide after she and Nicholas have met briefly on the mainland of Greece (the episode in which Alison finally confronts Nicholas with his inability to love—in the passage quoted above) is an important stage in the education of Nicholas. One of the results of this news is that Nicholas flees reality even more frenetically, and throws himself desperately into Conchis's masque, both in pursuit of Lilly and in an attempt to fathom Conchis's game:

So I sat at the foot of the ladder and seethed, trying to plumb Conchis's duplicities; to read his palimpsest. His "theatre without an audience"

Books by John Fowles

THE COLLECTOR

Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963.

New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963 (pa.)

THE ARISTOS: A SELF-PORTRAIT IN IDEAS

Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964.

THE MAGUS

Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965.

London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1966.

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969.

London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1969.

—ANNE GRAUER

made no sense, it couldn't be the explanation. The one thing all actors and actors craved was an audience. Perhaps what he was doing sprang from some theory about the theatre—he had said it himself: *The masque is only a metaphor*. A strange and incomprehensible new philosophy? Metaphorism? Perhaps he saw himself as a professor in an impossible faculty of ambiguity, a sort of Empson of the event. I thought and thought, and thought again, and arrived at nothing.

What Nicholas cannot see at this point is that Conchis is playing a "godgame" with him for his own sake. And the purpose of the godgame is to teach Nicholas to become a Magus in his own right. As Lawrence Durrell has put it, "The purpose of art is to grow a personality that will enable one to transcend art." One of the clues left for Nicholas to find in his futile attempt to understand the masque while still enmeshed in it is the manuscript of a fable called "The Prince and the Magician," which is in its way a metaphor for the whole giant fabulation which is the story of Nicholas and the Magus. The fable is too long to quote here in its entirety, and too tightly organized to summarize clearly, but in its conclusion the prince learns that "there is no truth beyond magic" and after despairing and being confronted by death he decides, "I can bear it." Whereupon his father, king and magician that he is, declares, "You see, my son . . . you too now begin to be a magician." A magician, finally, is one who accepts the reality of the appearances around him as sufficient. He abandons metaphysics for existence. And by becoming a magician he accepts *responsibility* for those appearances. To be a magician in a world where there is no truth beyond magic, is a fictional metaphor for becoming a responsible individual in a world where there is no truth beyond existence.

It should be emphasized that the kind of existentialist thought which animates the pages of this book and informs its structure is in one crucial respect quite at odds with the variety of existentialist phenomenology which aggravates the nausea and deadens the pages of the French *nouveau roman*. For the French novelists, the banality of quotidian existence is an unquestioned first premise. Their work is to capture it in a form that will expose it. But for Fowles reality is not banal. Here

is the way Conchis describes it in narrating to Nicholas one of the (metaphorical) experiences of his life:

"But in a flash of terrible light all our explanations, all our classifications and derivations, our etiologies, suddenly appeared to me like a thin net. That great passive monster, reality, was no longer dead, easy to handle. It was full of a mysterious vigor, new forms, new possibilities. The net was nothing, reality burst through it. . . . That simple phrase, *I do not know*, was my own pillar of fire. An ultimate, a metaphysical, I-do-not-know."

The world is not dead and nauseating. It is alive and unknowable, and therefore invigorating. To accept its unfathomable mystery one must become equally unfathomable, one must accept one's own mystery and become a magician.

While Nicholas works fruitlessly at unravelling Conchis's mysterious masque from inside it, the reality of Alison and her meaning in his existence pursues him:

Staring out to sea, I forced myself to think of her not as someone doing something at that moment, sleeping or breathing or working, somewhere, but as a shovelful of ashes, a futility, a descent out of reality, a dropping object that dwindled, left nothing behind except a smudge like a fallen speck of soot on paper. . . .

I did not pray for her, because prayer has no efficacy; I did not cry for her, because only extroverts cry twice; I sat in the silence of that night, that infinite hostility to man, to permanence, to love, remembering her, remembering her.

But the masque continues, with Lilly leading Nicholas on to that stupefying anticlimax of humiliation which is also a ritual of initiation, capped by the mock-trial in which Nicholas is made to face the shame of his existence. After this he begins to understand what Alison was:

. . . what had she called herself? Coarse salt; the candor of salt. I remembered how we had got in the car, how I had talked about my father, had even then only been able to talk to her like that because of *her* honesty; because I knew she was a mirror that did not lie; whose interest in me was real; whose love was real. That had been her supreme virtue: a constant reality.

And he begins to understand what he himself has been:

. . . all my life I had tried to turn life into fiction, to hold reality away; always I had acted as if a third person was watching and listening and giving me marks for good or bad behavior—a god like a novelist, to

Moon Stone

When the gloved hand
Reached down and took hold
Of its dusty rind,
It had lain for sixty million years
In light and dark, heat and cold
Only, without incident,
Missed by the rain of meteors,
Breathed on by the solar wind.
Lumpish and swart,
It had remained, for that part
In almost forever,
Superbly competent.

Sixty million years of time
Or of timeless calm
Will seem short
Or merely irrelevant
When the bulldozers come
And, some work years thereafter,
Caught in the hazy breath
Of the life environment vent,
A Juicy Fruit gum wrapper
Scuds like a leaf
Across the vinyl floor
Of the first moon port.

—JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN

whom I turned, like a character with the power to feel pleased, the sensitivity to feel slighted, the ability to adapt himself to whatever he believed the novelist-god wanted. This leechlike variation of the superego I had created myself, fostered myself, and because of it I had always been incapable of acting freely. It was not my defense but my despot. And now I saw it, I saw it a death too late.

In this state of mind, carefully led by Conchis to that situation of existential despair which can be the beginning of wisdom, Nicholas sees Alison again in Athens. She is alive; her "suicide" has been a part of the masque. This "betrayal" revives both hope and anger in Nicholas, and he pursues Alison to England, feeling the pangs of love, and its possibilities, for the first time. In London Nicholas reaches his final understanding and accepts the ethical responsibility for his life and the lives of those around him. He now *feels* this responsibility. "Now," he says,

I *felt* it; and by "feel" I mean that I knew I *had* to choose it, every day, even though I went on failing to keep it, had every day to choose it, every day to try to live by it. And I knew that it was all bound up with Alison; with choosing Alison, and having to go on choosing her every day.

The "it" which Nicholas is accepting here is a kind of eleventh commandment which supercedes all the others: "Thou shalt not commit pain." In accepting it and living it, Nicholas is able to accept and respect the human dignity of the clownish females Jojo and Kemp. He can finally treat Jojo in a brotherly fashion, and he can let Kemp mother him, thus assuming his place in the human family. But he has a further lesson to learn. Following a "thou shalt not" is too easy. He must learn finally the necessity of judging as well as choosing, so that ultimately his most loving gesture in the narrative is his striking Alison in the face, accepting the responsibility for causing that pain in violation of the "commandment" and with it the responsibility for Alison herself.

Feeling that Alison has in some sense been captured by Conchis and his masquers, Nicholas sees himself in a new role, that of an Orpheus who must try to rescue Eurydice/Alison from the underworld constituted by Conchis and his friends. Though he is ready to accept responsibility for her in reality, he must convince her of this and persuade her to leave the masque. When he is finally allowed to confront her in Regent's Park, he plays his Orphic role beautifully, assuming that Conchis and his friends are still watching him and Alison. The role, of course, requires that he leave her without looking back, so that she will have the freedom to choose him or not. At this point having declared himself unmistakably, he begins to sense that they are not being watched, that they are alone:

I was so sure. It was logical, the characteristic and perfect final touch to the godgame. They had absconded. I was so sure, and yet . . . after so much, how could I be perfectly sure? How could they be so cold? So inhuman? So incurious? So load the dice and yet leave the game? And if I wasn't sure?

I gave her bowed head one last stare, then I was walking. Firmer than Orpheus, as firm as Alison herself, that other day of parting, not once looking back. The autumn grass, the autumn sky. People. A blackbird, poor fool, singing out of season from the willows by the lake. A flight of gray pigeons over the houses. Fragments of freedom, an anagram made flesh. And somewhere the stinging smell of burning leaves.

This freedom, the true freedom which Nicholas has finally found not in dropping a girl but in keeping one, also involves his final acceptance of a universe in which no one is watching his gestures and keeping score. The godgame is over. Conchis is not there. His own conscience and his own consciousness are his only judges. The fiction is finished and so is the book. And the structure of the book, as we can

Christmas

Trees that have loved
In silence, kiss,
Crashing; the Douglas firs lean
Low to the brittle embrace
Of a lodgepole pine.

In cities at night
Tin canisters eat
Their cookies; the bed,
Asleep, tossing,
Brushes its curtain of bead.

My wristwatch grows
Obscurely, sun-
Flower-big. Across
America, cameras gaze
Astonished, into the glass.

This is the hour
God loosens and empties.
Rushing, consciousness comes
Unbidden, gasping,
And memory, wisdom, grace.

Birds come running;
The curtains moan.
Dolls in the hospital
With brains of coral
Jerk, breathe and are born.

—ANNIE DILLARD

finally see it looking back from the conclusion, is very similar to the tradition of orgasmic romances from Heliodorus to Urfé. Even the interpolated narratives which are a traditional way of delaying and enriching the course of the story are used by Fowles. But these narratives of Conchis's life are integrated into the structure of ideas and images of *The Magus* with extraordinary care and great allegorical skill. For instance, the image of Conchis, gun in hand, confronting the mutilated Cretan terrorist who is still struggling to utter the terrible Greek work for freedom, establishes with extraordinary power the quintessential moment of existentialist choice—a moment which is mirrored (with significant differences) by Nicholas as he holds the cat-o-nine-tails and faces the tempting back of Lilly and again as he strikes Alison in the last scene of the book. There are too many images of this sort to trace them all through the book, but this one should serve to illustrate the

way that Fowles uses the traditional device of the interpolated tale to enrich the content of the book. Finally, we should consider one crucial alteration of the traditional pattern of orgastic romance. In the Greek romances and their imitations, hero and heroine fall in love to begin the story but are prevented from consummating their union until the end. In *The Magus* we begin with sexual union and it is love which must wait for consummation until the end of the book.

The French Lieutenant's Woman is neither a more or a less meaningful book than *The Magus*. In fact, when we encounter in its closing paragraphs the statement that "life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, is not a symbol," we should feel that we are on familiar intellectual ground, encountering an ethical attitude that was advanced, neither more nor less seriously, in the earlier book. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents itself as more of a novel and less a romance than *The Magus*. It is, in fact, an imitation of a Victorian novel in much the same way that John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is an imitation of Fielding and Smollett. But beneath the richly documented surface of Fowles's latest work the same orgastic rhythm pulsates just as powerfully as in its predecessor. Surprise, reversal, false anti-climax, climax, and even post or alternate climax—such familiar manipulations as these shape our responses to this more somber fiction. The difference between *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be seen as in many way parallel to the difference between *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*. *The Magus* and *Giles* are more fantastic and more philosophical in their orientation than the other two, which share a strong concern for an actual historical past. There are plenty of tonal and other differences between the work of Barth and Fowles, which should make us wary of pushing this comparison too far. But there is enough validity in the comparison to make one notice it. These two men have successfully undertaken the most ambitious fictions produced in their countries in recent years. And they have both done so not by turning their backs on the low and atavistic dimension of fictional form but by embracing it.

Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.

—ROBERT SCHOLES

<p>SECOND CLASS POSTAGE PAID at Roanoke, Virginia</p>
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