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FICTIVE FREEDOM THROUGH
THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

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*History is a nightmare from
which*

I am trying to awake.

—Stephen Dedalus

*When we dream that we
dream, we*

are about to awake.

—Novalis

The title of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* hints at some sort of servitude or at least dependence, but an epigraph from Karl Marx's *Zur Judenfrage* marks freedom as the earliest theme of the work: "Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself." Though betrothed to the ironically named Ernestina Freeman, Charles Smithson is, from the opening pages, fatally drawn to Sarah Woodruff, who is popularly known not only as "the French lieutenant's woman," but also as "Tragedy." An amateur paleontologist, Charles sees himself as a disciple of Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell, whose theories aspired to reveal laws determining every phenomenon in nature. Charles's fondness for collecting ammonite fossils is responsible for his encountering Sarah in rough woods, and the fossils themselves come to function as a kind of poetic conceit, somewhat in the manner of Henry James's golden bowl, throughout the novel. By the forty-third chapter of the book, the metonymic link between the static fragments of the past and their collector is made explicit: "There was no doubt. He was one of life's victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history, stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil."¹ While examining the possibility of freedom of choice and action in the lives of Charles and Sarah, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* makes use of a highly self-conscious fiction in order to force us during our reading to experience the tension between freedom and necessity that is the novel's central concern.

A sense of the individual's ammonite vulnerability to huge impersonal forces is thoroughly worthy of Thomas Hardy. It is reinforced by

Fowles's decision to set his 1967 novel in 1867 Lyme Regis, a section of that bleak Wessex landscape of which Hardy became novelist laureate. In a professional salute to *il miglior fabbro*, an invocation of "the shadow, the very relevant shadow, of the great novelist who towers over this part of England of which I write" (215), Fowles himself calls attention to the fact that it was in 1867 that Hardy finished his architectural studies in London, returned to Dorset, and fell momentarily in love with his cousin/niece Tryphena. Along with such contemporaries as Arnold, Clough, Darwin, Marx, and Tennyson, Hardy furnishes epigraphs to several of the chapters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. His characters, solitary human beings among elemental settings, are helpless victims of an indifferent cosmos. As poet, Hardy repeatedly capitalized the noun "Time," personifying it as a callous villain who imposes his own cruel necessity on human lives. Fowles is attracted to Hardy as "the perfect emblem of his age's greatest mystery" (216); in his own life, as well as in his writings, he is seen as the focus of a rich tension "between lust and renunciation, undying recollection and undying repression, lyrical surrender and tragic duty, between the sordid facts and their noble use" (216). In his own complex fashion, Hardy is a champion of emancipation from Victorian repression. Fowles's own novel is informed by a sense of history as an overpowering mechanism, and it is appropriate that he turn to the inspiration of this particular figure from the past. A recognition of time's despotism, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is at the same time an attempt to liberate us through the weapon of narrative.

Fowles focuses much of his scorn and terror of "the petty provincial day" (11) of the Victorians on the figure of the tyrannical hypocrite Mrs. Poultenay. An emblem of duty as despot, she embodies the repressive conventions of 1867 that the narrator contends still govern Anglo-Saxon culture, especially in the area of sex. He sees the Renaissance as "...an end to chains, bounds, frontiers....It was all, in short, that Charles's age was not" (60). Charles Smithson is caught in another time zone and within the limited universe of discourse, but the narrator hopes that by making us aware of the constraints which defeated the Victorians he can at least free us from them. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* provides a confrontation of 1967 with 1867, two moments possessed by remarkably similar preoccupations. Fowles's manifestly polemical intent is to liberate the reader twice—both from the confines of a fictive 1867 and from the parochialism of 1967. He

purposes to employ the story of Charles's love for Sarah as an alarm to awaken us from the nightmare of history still intimidating us. Lord Acton's familiar adage about the study of the past casts historiography in the role of emancipator, as if narration were a means of transcending time. Aware, we need not be condemned to repeat anything. The nineteenth century's own discovery of the Middle Ages can be viewed as an effort to escape from a banal, sordid present to an epoch viewed as more exciting and more free. And the historical novel created by authors like Scott, Vigny, Gautier, Pater, or Reade is an exhilarating experience because, like time travel, it *temporarily* unshackles us from the fixed patterns of the present and immerses us in another, more vibrant world.

Fowles entertains no Victorian illusions about the attractiveness of an earlier era, least of all the Victorian. For him, it is a picturesque prison whose shackles still bind his 1967 reader. Although he depicts the Victorian period in particular as *oubliette*, all historical periods are now irrevocably finished. The past is not only deadening but dead as well, inert to any Orphic gestures of the future. It is too late for its residents, "adrift in the slow entire of Victorian time" (19), to exercise any options, and they are frozen for eternity into the particular patterns they have enacted. It is not yet too late for us, though, so long as we have the capacity, provided by self-conscious histories, to keep moving and to determine our own relationships to time. Perhaps more satisfactorily than for Emma Bovary, literature emerges as escapism for the reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

The preeminent tense in literature is the perfect tense. The preterite, used to construct a determinate discourse with beginning, middle, and end, is not free precisely because it is over and done with, because no options remain for the actors trapped in a claustrophobic past. It is a closed book. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, however, begins with and often reverts to the conditional—"a person of curiosity could at once have deduced several strong probabilities about the pair who began to walk down the quay at Lyme Regis" (9), "However, if you had turned northward and landward in 1867, as the man that day did, your prospect would have been harmonious" (10), "and why she knew a little more about sin than one might have suspected at first sight of her nineteen-year-old face; or *would* have suspected had one passed through Dorchester later that same year" (216). The conditional mood stands outside the finite structure of past, present, and future. Suggestive of Vaihinger's "as if" concept of fiction,² the conditional resists

the forces of determinism, whether Darwinian or Homeric. Hypothesis is an emancipation from thesis; if indeed the poet nothing affirmeth, then he is free to range over a wide expanse of possibilities. By refusing the glib hypostasis of past tense assertion, Fowles stresses the insurgent spirit which he in any case finds latent in the very genre of the novel. In an article published in 1968, he declares:

The truth is, the novel is a free form. Unlike the play or the film script, it has no limits other than those of the language. It is like a poem; it can be what it wants. This is its downfall and its glory; and explains why both forms have been so often used to establish freedom in other fields, social and political.³

The railroad train is an important *machina ex deo* throughout this novel, a device by which Fowles both transports his major characters between Dorset and London and reminds his readers of how easy it is to become tracked in time. In Chapter 55, in fact, the novel's fictive author, later depicted with Breguet watch in hand, even shares a railway compartment with his protagonist Charles. Throughout the book, Charles, fearful of being trapped within fixed limits, is a compulsive traveler. Like the contemporary poets whose quickening challenge to the deadly constrictions of bourgeois society is "L'Invitation au voyage," Charles finds his freedom in movement, a denial of the immobility that is fatal and is the mark of fatalism: "That was why he had traveled so much; he found English society too hidebound, English solemnity too solemn, English thought too moralistic, English religion too bigoted" (107). Yet it is the railroad that Charles most conspicuously employs as a tool to assert his independence. For all the melancholia of the Byronic wanderer earlier in the century, his travels were depicted through organic metaphors, while Charles's journeys are, ominously, on a machine.

An integral part of the Industrial Revolution transforming nineteenth-century Europe, the train is an appropriate emblem for the engine of history impelling the individual in directions he might not choose. It is the railroad, seen in *Dombey and Son* transforming the face of Britain, that, from the opening pages of Tolstol's novel, signals Anna Karenina's doom and that serves as the instrument of her destruction. Frequent allusions to *le nouveau roman* suggest that Fowles is probably familiar with Michel Butor's *La Modification*, a novel whose main character is able to assert his individual freedom precisely by stepping outside the railroad compartment he occupies throughout the book. And it is in pushing Fleurissoire off a train that

Lafcadio bids to perform his celebrated *acte gratuit* in Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican*.

If the image of the train, then, points to time as an impersonal and irresistible mechanism, the possibility still remains of constructing another, unusual apparatus that would enable us to move at will within time and thereby assert human independence of mechanical laws. The late-Victorian H. G. Wells based an entire novel on the premise that it is not necessary to remain captive of one epoch, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* often recalls *The Time Machine* in its invention of a device to transcend temporal barriers. Fowles's narrator deliberately refuses to mesh with the mechanism of history. His weapon of rebellion is the narrative equivalent of traveling shots.

Much of this novel conveys the sense of a guided expedition through a quaint, remote setting. In Chapter 39, for example, we tour Victorian London's red light district, and Chapter 16 provides those of us who are curious with a side trip to observe how evenings were spent in a middle-class Victorian home—"Those gaslit hours that had to be filled, and without benefit of cinema or television....So let us see how Charles and Ernestina are crossing one particular such desert" (94). Fowles persistently plays on the illusion that we are indeed seeing such nineteenth-century fauna in their natural habitat, that, a creature of the twentieth century, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is to be our Baedeker to the Victorian world, a lively companion "on our travels back to the nineteenth century" (288). Such expeditions should be no less an act of transcendence for us, confined to our own moment and milieu, than Charles's journeys through Europe and America are for him. Similarly, Sarah Woodruff, by choosing to be associated with a foreigner—"I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people *should* point at me, *should* say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore" (142)—hopes to escape the Victorian prison, "that claustrophobia we see so clearly evidenced in their enveloping, mummifying clothes, their narrow-windowed and -corridor architecture, their fear of the open and of the naked" (143).

Fowles's narrator perpetually flaunts his autonomy from time, his ability to move freely back and forth through history. When a clock strikes in Act II:i of *Julius Caesar*, it only underscores how much a product of the Elizabethan age Shakespeare really was. When, however, in the process of recounting a story set one hundred years ago, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* coyly alludes to such later figures as Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, Freud, or McLuhan, he

aspires to elude any temporal nets. For him, and for those readers willing and able to follow his example, freedom is anachronistic, precisely in the individual's ability to defy historical sequence. On the very first page of the novel, in the description of The Cobb as "as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo" (9-10), the willful telescoping of prochronism and parachronism immediately challenges time for sovereignty here. We are gleefully informed that, though the word might apply to Charles, "agnostic" was not to be coined until 1870 (18) and that, however much a perambulator might fit the scene at the opening of Chapter 57, it would still be a prochronism by ten years. When, moreover, in a description of the martinet Mrs. Poultenay, we are told that "There would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady" (23), we are safely removed from both oppressors.

Such playful movements into and out of historical verisimilitude prevent us from being stranded in either 1867 or 1967. A similar strategy is involved in transporting certain characters to the modern world. Speculations over how many children Lady Macbeth suckled confound distinctions between art and life; so, too, does parachronistic mention of the fact that Ernestina "died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" (28), that her servant Mary's "great-great-granddaughter, who is twenty-two years old this month I write in, much resembles her ancestor; and her face is known over the entire world, for she is one of the more celebrated younger English film actresses" (65), or even that Sarah's Toby jug "was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged" (220). This narrator, however, like the narrator of *Walden*, seems to be most triumphantly proclaiming that: "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in." The solitary angler is in control, in this case by means of narrative anachronism.

The French Lieutenant's Woman begins with a sighting of Charles and Ernestina at The Cobb through the lens of an imaginary telescope. As with a cinematic iris effect, we are thus immediately distanced from the unfolding drama, as we are from this antique setting. Later, when Sarah reads to Mrs. Poultenay from the Bible, we are told that she did not create "an unconscious alienation effect of the Brechtian kind" (51). The novel about her, however, exults in the multiple opportunities for *Verfremdungseffekt*; and this prochronistic reference to the modern German playwright is itself certainly one of

them. Lest we lose ourselves in the melodramatic love story of Charles and Sarah, the narrative is continually interrupted by a variety of epigraphs, footnotes, commentaries, and digressions whose effect is to foreground the work, to prevent us from ever forgetting that this is only a novel. As if he were a research scholar compelled to acknowledge bibliographic debts and not an artificer trying to project the illusion that his creation arrived fully formed from the Muse, Fowles at the outset salutes E. Royston Pike's *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*. He confesses to frequent borrowings from that collection and commences his fiction by reminding us that that is indeed what it is: "I recommend this brilliant anthology most warmly to any reader who would like to know more of the reality behind my fiction" (8). Later authorial intrusions editorialize about the actions of the major protagonists, but they also furnish what is in effect a network of diverse treatises on such topics as Victorian fashions, paleontology, psychotherapy, birth control technology, slang, and social structure. When Sam begins contemplating the blackmail of his employer Charles Smithson, we immediately jump to an entire paragraph of etymological speculation on the word "blackmail" as an import from Old Norwegian into Old English by means of the Vikings. The narrator prefaces this digression by archly soliciting our indulgence—"if I may add to your stock of useless knowledge" (169).

By proceeding to insert such wondrously extraneous material into his book, the narrator blithely defies accepted notions of "relevance." But "revelance" was, after all, more an obsession of 1967 than of 1867, when the fiction of Eliot, Meredith, or Thackeray provided an encyclopedic compendium of observation and information, a Procrustean bed capable of keeping a drowsy Empress of India awake. By aligning himself with the traditions of Victorian fiction, Fowles declares independence from his own age of suspicion. By choosing the freedom of impertinence, however, Fowles likewise extricates himself and his reader from the restrictive nineteenth-century world in his fiction. His novel aspires to be the "free form" he proclaims the genre to be.

Yet freedom from a specific time and place and from specific social and literary conventions is expanded into a freedom from fiction itself. Just as Fowles's next published work, *The Ebony Tower*, features a character reading Fowles's own earlier book *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* frequently calls attention to its own status as artifice and thereby liberates us from yet another possible enthrallment. Lewis Carroll is another Victorian who furnishes epi-

graphs to chapters here, and his 1865 masterpiece *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* concludes with Alice's liberating realization that the threatening figures she has been taking so seriously are "nothing but a pack of cards." With that, she and we are able to awaken from our nightmare, as the book ends, and we can each take our solitary way beyond what the author has invented for us.

Like *Jacques le fataliste* or *Great Expectations*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offers more than one conclusion. Chapter 44 declares: "And so ends the story" (264) and follows with an account of how Charles married Ernestina and never saw Sarah again. The next chapter informs us that this was only the fantasy of Charles, "what he spent the hours between London and Exeter imagining might happen" (266). Fifteen chapters later, Charles has a final interview with Sarah, but the novel concludes with two distinct accounts of that meeting. In fact, the most appropriate punctuation at the end of this period piece would seem to be ellipsis.

Fowles's refusal to delimit the options of his novel, even on its final pages, is a final affirmation of liberty, both for his characters and for his readers. Wolfgang Iser argues that all works of literature are to some extent indeterminate, that they all contain some gaps which the free reader must contend with as he will:

In other words, a literary object can never be given final definition. This is borne out, for example, by the endings of many novels which often resemble a *tour de force* simply because the book must come to an end. Indeterminacy is then counterbalanced by the author himself with an ideological or utopian solution. There are other novels, though, which articulate this inconclusiveness at the end.⁴

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is just such an articulate novel. Iser suggestively concludes his own essay with an affirmation of that relationship between narrative indeterminacy and human possibility that makes this particular novel so engaging: "Thus it is perhaps one of the chief values of literature that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives."⁵

Ultimately, Fowles's allegiance is to the party of Heraclitus. His last written paragraph has Charles facing "The river of life....out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" (366). Throughout

the novel, movement represents a positive value, as if mobility in itself were transcendence. The villains are constriction and stasis, and, if life is indeed a flow, they are lethal. Charles Linnaeus' system of classifying species is attacked as "a foredoomed attempt to stabilize and fix what is in reality a continuous flux" (45). Faced with a mechanism of containment, life becomes synonymous with disobedience, a fact which Fowles himself emphasizes during a digression on literary theory. The metaphor of machine becomes inaccurate as a description of the dynamic world within and without fiction:

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. (81)

The prescription is for literature as a moving experience.

A portrait of the nineteenth century which itself refuses to stand in either the nineteenth or the twentieth, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* becomes an historical novel which vigorously denies history. At the conclusion of Chaucer's poem, Troilus, transported to the eighth sphere, is able to gaze back down on our petty planet and realize what an abject slave to time and place he had been. Through its energetic shifts in time and in subject matter, Fowles's novel, too, asserts a Boethian view of all delusion and frustration as merely *temporary*. The imagination is fluid and sovereign, and in Fowles's changing cosmos its need to rescue us from paralysis is chronic.

NOTES

¹ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (New York, 1970), p. 262. All numerical references within the text are to pages of this edition.

² See Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden, 2nd ed. (New York, 1952).

³ John Fowles, "Notes on Writing a Novel," *Harper's*, 237(July 1968), p. 92.

⁴ Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in J. Hillis Miller, ed., *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York, 1971), pp. 10-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.