



## FROM METAPHYSICS TO TECHNIQUE: THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE MAGUS*

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From the very beginning of the 20th century, and with the extraordinary progress of science (and especially of the New Physics), the confident realistic conception of life based on two absolute, fixed categories —the spatial and the temporal—, is completely shattered and as a consequence, rejected.

After Einstein's fourth new dimension, or space-time continuum <sup>1</sup>, the theory of relativity and the equation that by identifying mass to energy everything is reduced to the latter, the new modernist cosmivision becomes far from being an objective, knowable ontology. On the contrary, Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy and the disruption of the Aristotelean either/or category, among others, are the main pillars upon which the whole universe is sustained. Consequently, and from then onwards, any metaphysical assumption will be subjected to the rule of hazard, probability and chance.

Although from a different perspective, from the beginning of the century some philosophers have come to similar conclusions about an unstable and uncertain reality. Some new conceptions of time such as W. James's view of the "specious present" (which so well explains the flux of ideas of the mind by presenting the continuous flow of the retrospect into anticipation), H. Bergson's concept of "durée", or M. Proust's presentation of the past as contained in the present in *A la recherche du temps perdu* appear to confirm its subjective quality. It is the individual mind, as Berkeley argues (1980:60), the sum of our inmost experiences, that maintains the blank world of phenomena:

...las varias sensaciones o ideas impresas, por complejas y múltiples que sean las combinaciones en que se presenten (es decir, cualesquiera que sean los objetos que así formen) no pueden tener existencia si no es en una mente que las perciba...

To sum up, from a world of objective existence —as maintained by Aristotle and classical physics— we are drawn to contemplate a polymorphous reality which the limited, restricted human perceptual system can no longer fully comprehend.

Finally, it would be worth pointing out that, as a consequence, the most important tool for man to categorize and understand ontological issues, that is, language, turns out to be inappropriate and inaccurate to grasp it. Perception being confused and semiotic signs contradictory and even meaningless, we are inevitably led to a state of epistemological uncertainty and to the impossibility of absolute knowledge. As F. Holmes puts it:

...there is no discoverable reality beyond the precarious structures which man creates to interpret life. (1985:349)

Bearing in mind all these previously stated ideas, we may see how John Fowles's *The Magus* conveys and faithfully mirrors an uncertain, relative vision of a never graspable universe. And not by chance its protagonist Nicholas Urfe undergoes a "voyage into the unknown" (p. 48), a mythical quest for knowledge which is mainly aimed to make him understand that "the basic principle of life is hazard" (*The Magus*, p. 628).

Portrayed at first as an over-idealistic ["like a medieval knight" (p. 46)], a pseudoexistential (let us remember that he belongs to the mock society called Les Hommes Revoltés), and an intellectual prig with no sensitivity to appreciate true feelings, he is unwillingly forced to become part of a fantastic world, a metaphorical metatheatre controlled by the figure of the magician Conchis.

Through this experience, however, the "Campbellian" hero of this monomyth will not be capable of obtaining the Jungian integration of his own personality<sup>2</sup>, but rather the metaphysically despairing realization of the paradoxical nature of his "real" world. It is in the illusion, dream-like realm of Bourani (it significantly stands for "skull") and by means of the magus (whose name we are twice told to pronounce as "conscious") that Nicholas will learn to go beyond the rational conception of external reality, and to both physically and psychically experience the doubtful validity of the world of appearance. Or as M. Bradbury explains:

...the hero is led towards a state of exposure or self discovery, led out of one state of consciousness into another, in a world in which the historical determinants of consciousness are extremely significant, and in which the capacity to learn through fictions is central. (1970:262)

At the very beginning of his mythical journey the hero's sense of meaninglessness, futility and confusion is explicitly referred to in the narrative. Although he at first thinks that the mysterious island of Phraxos suggests a "sense of timelessness and of incipient myth" (p. 8)<sup>3</sup>, he starts questioning the reality of the world he has just left:

The outer world, England, London, became absurdly and sometimes terrifyingly unreal. (p. 56)

This feeling of insecurity after contemplating uncertain phenomena leads him to idealistically compare himself to Alice in Wonderland, a world upside down, where every single perception seems to be subverted. Similarly, the reality of Bourani appears to be possible, yet not entirely reliable. To this respect, his mock heroic and romantic attempt at committing suicide confirms his unstable and not yet defined personality. On the other hand, he unconsciously feels the sense of an incipient change within himself:

...I felt myself filled with nothingness—a metaphysical sense of being marooned. It was almost tangible, like cancer or tuberculosis. (p. 58)

Amidst this oppressive, isolating landscape of metaphoric icons and mysterious signs (the bell's tripartite calling Ni-cho-las, a passage from Eliot's *Little Gidding* he finds in the beach, the Salle d'Attente sign, the statue of the Priapus,...) and after having met Conchis, Nicholas tries harder and harder to make sense of it, to frame it within rational patterns. However, and as he will later realize, "*the masque is only a metaphor*" (p. 458) that he must translate so as to learn to perceive the fictional component of everything, to accept both the real and the unreal. P. Waugh's comment (1985:111) could help us to clarify the issue:

It is continually indicated that Bourani, like the novel itself and Conchis's masques, is explicitly an art-world, a metaphor. The reader is warned early on of this. Nick, looking back at his inauthentic existence at Oxford, reflects that he misinterpreted "metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward presentation of behaviour". (p. 17)

Anyhow, the aristos-to-be finally starts accepting the difficulty in distinguishing between the metaphorical and the literal, the fictional and the real. To this respect, his own poem symbolically displays a still unconscious awareness of an incipient change of point of view in reference to his own cosmovision:

From this skull-rock strange golden roots throw  
Ikons and incidents; the man in the mask  
Manipulates. I am the fool that falls  
And never learns to wait and watch  
... .. (p. 95)

As far as the figure of the magus is concerned, the protagonist's (operating as internal focalizer) portrayal of Conchis reminds us to a great extent of *The Collector* and Clegg's obsession with being threateningly looked at by a superior being such as Miranda:

The most striking thing about him was the intensity of his eyes; very dark brown, staring, with a simian penetration emphasized by the remarkably clear whites; eyes that seemed not quite human. (p. 79)

On the other hand, if we consider Conchis from a narratorial perspective, his role as a story-teller or author's surrogate is of paramount importance, since his fictional creation or iconic episodes metaphorically foreshadow what is going to come about later. As a matter of fact, the mysterious world Conchis inhabits could be easily equated to a metatheatres; masques, psychic experiments, music, film, books, paintings, sculptures and narrations stand all of them as multifarious faces of a complex polysemic reality that cannot be fully understood. Subsequently, the boundaries between fiction and imagination vs. reality become successfully blurred throughout the magus's richly allusive, eloquent, and minutely detailed style. Let us consider Wainwright's next remark (1983:113) as a faithful example of how both realms have finally merged together:

One moment she [Lily] is at dinner with him [Nick] and Conchis (where Nicholas can, for just a moment, feel sure she is an "actress"), and the next she is clad in a chiton, carrying a bow-Artemis-Diana holding the hand of her brother Apollo. This sudden transformation upsets Nicholas's rational perception of reality and he never again feels that he is on completely firm ground with Lily.

It is no wonder that Nicholas's deepest conscious sense is starting to assimilate and accept that nothing is certain, that it is impossible to know the world of appearance once the failure of senses has become factual. R. Huffaker clarifies it with further precision:

Nick's role in the metatheatres exposes his own fantasy existence, which Conchis's flashbacks illuminate the meaning of freedom, humanity and existence. (1980:47)

Freedom to choose, humanity to establish firm, mature relationships, and the awareness of an insecure, untrustful existence ruled by hazard are, above all, the most relevant targets in the protagonist's quest to turn into a magus. Yet, how is Nicholas's process of learning through fiction, or in his own words, his "obscure metaphysical lesson" (p. 387) developed at the level of the narrative? As I have mentioned before, an innumerable and varied series of metaphorical icons, hypertextual references and "mise-en-abyme" stories or fragments of Conchis's fictionalised/authentic autobiography create a perfectly woven and highly allusive net of symbolism whose main purpose is to enhance hidden meanings that otherwise would never come to light.

For instance, and with respect to the question of existentialism, Nicholas is also taught that neither the Count Alphonse de Deukans's excessive materialism (to the point of committing suicide after his French castle of Givray-le-Duc and his huge collection are destroyed by the fire) nor Henrik Nygaard's belief in divine cruelty —"chosen to be punished" (p. 302)— and fanatic religiosity are the correct attitude towards life. On the contrary, and as Conchis himself had hinted at before, the most advisable posture stands right up in the middle of both extremes, at the



“point of fulcrum” (p. 109), at which opposites integrate in a perfect well-balanced union.

From then on, the protagonist is slowly learning to perceive an ambiguous, chaotic reality which can no longer be sustained upon rationalistic structures or patterns; and not by chance (Conchis gives him a pamphlet of the Society for Reason), he is suggested to discover that even language turns out to be imprecise to describe reality:

Words had lost their power, either for good or form evil; still hung, like a mist, over the reality of action, distorting, misleading, castrating... (p. 190)

While trying to decipher a cryptic meaning, he thinks of Conchis’s linking the two narrative fragments as too farfetched and therefore suspiciously trustful:

There was an unusual shade of vanity in his voice as if in fact he believed he had in some way precipitated both events and their common timing. I sensed that the coincidence was not literally true but something he had invented which held another, metaphorical, meaning... (p. 311)

Later, Nicholas’s mental digressions about both episodes lead him to the awareness of how reality is subjectively —therefore unreliably— constructed. It is what Rackham defines as “a frightening labyrinth of reality in which rational explanations break down and almost every turning leads to a dead-end” (1972:89). Let us observe the protagonist’s acute understanding of the fables he has been told:

Just as the story of De Deukans had thrown light on Conchis himself, this threw on the hypnosis —that image he had used, *reality breaking through the thin net of science* ...I had myself recalled something too similar from the hypnosis for it to be coincidence. (p. 311)

That story last night. About Seidevarre. I think that’s some kind of clue. The place of mystery in life. Not taking anything for granted. A world where nothing is certain. (p. 339)

For the first time in the narrative, the protagonist consciously discovers how his Newtonian, rationalistically grounded frames within which his own vision of the universe was embedded are now completely broken into pieces or, as T.S. Eliot would say, into “a heap of broken images” (*The Waste Land*, line 22). Thus, he is unwillingly caught amidst a sea of uncertainties, at the brink of an abyss of meaninglessness, and as a consequence, his innermost sense of identity also becomes threateningly confused:

I was drowned in a sea of mistrust —not only of outward appearances but of deeper motives as well. For weeks I had had a sense of being taken apart, disconnected from a previous self —or the linked structures of ideas and conscious feeling that constitute self; now it was like lying on the workshop

bench, a litter of parts, the engineer gone... and not being quite sure how one puts oneself together again. (p. 387)

Besides, his already shattered personality will have to learn later on a new lesson in order to mature. To this purpose, Conchis's episode of colonel Wimmel's forcing him to choose between shooting eighty villagers or dying with the guerrilla aims at teaching Nicholas what "eleutheria", or the freedom to choose, stands for.

Nonetheless, once we have come to this point, it would be worth remembering one of the most significant icons of the whole novel: a stone head with a triumphant smile, "so full of the purest metaphysical good humour" (p. 147). And here is when Conchis himself explains how man's restricted freedom to choose in a universe ruled by hazard and chance is to be stoically endured, with an ironic smile of self-contempt:

... what humor is. It is a manifestation of freedom. It is because there is freedom that there is the smile. Only a totally predetermined universe could be without it. In the end it is only by becoming the victim that one escapes the ultimate joke —which is precisely to discover that by constantly slipping away one has slipped away. One exists no more, one is no longer free. (pp. 437-438)

As the novel progresses, Nicholas's "thin net of reality" (p. 466) is being progressively dissolved and blurred by "an uncanny pale-violet light" (p. 484). However, his final shock comes when, after knowing not only that Alison is also involved in the metatheatre, but rather that she has committed suicide because of his refusal to establish a mature relationship between both of them, he unexpectedly sees her. The next excerpt cannot be more explicit about the inevitable dissolution and impossibility of knowing a subjectively created reality:

My head began to swim. Faces and objects, the ceiling, receded from present reality; down and down a deep black mine of shock, incomprehension and flailing depths of impossible revenge. (p. 490)

Afterwards he is forced to enter an underground room, a metaphorical unconscious level where a process of individuation and the assimilation of what he has learned up till then will take place. Mockingly dressed as if it were an occultist or rossicrucian ritual of initiation, he is revealed the truth of the godgame he has been elected to undergo. The mysterious metatheatre turns out to be a psychological or psychiatric experiment. Nevertheless, the final task for the hero to perform is still waiting for him; after the trial has finished, he is left with absolute freedom to inflict pain on Lily-Dr. Vanessa Maxwell, so as to take revenge for all he has suffered. And at this very precise moment the hero makes once again connections with the last "mise-en-abyme éclatée" he has been told:

I was in a sunlit square 10 years before and in my hand I held a German sub-machine-gun. And it was not Conchis who was now playing the role of Wimmel. Wimmel was inside me, in my stiffened, backthrown arm, in all my past; above all in what I had done to Alison. (p. 518)

If we compare him to Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we may easily conclude that both have passed through a quest after self discovery so as first, to assimilate their own identities and second, to decipher the hidden meanings of a polymorphous, complex reality. And it is within it that the elect, the "aristoi", are free to choose; yet, freedom will always be restricted by the preeminent power of hazard. As the narratorial subject of this second novel reminds us at the very end of it:

...life... is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone or to be given up after one losing throw of the dice; but is to be, however inadequately, empty, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, p. 399)

Nicholas's mind seems to further on this idea when he finally understands the hidden significance of the stone head's smile. Not only does he discover that the world of phenomena is to be grasped beyond the limited human perceptual system or even beyond such an arbitrary and restricted code as language is, but rather that both fiction and reality become blurred, which subsequently lead us to the dark void of metaphysical confusion. This is what the protagonist had referred to before as:

... an enormous and vertiginous sense of the innumerability of the universe; an innumerability in which transience and unchangingness seemed integral, essential and uncontradictory. (p. 239)

Once his quest for knowledge and maturity has come to an end, once he seems to be an "elect", a magus, he wisely becomes aware of the painful realization of the fictionality of reality and the reality of fiction, which unwillingly deprives every human being of a significant existence:

... the smile was not so much an *attitude* to be taken to life as the *nature* of the cruelty of life, a cruelty we cannot even choose to avoid, since it is human existence. (p. 531)

Similarly, Bourani, this alternate world constructed upon fiction and an elaborate web of symbols, has served Nicholas to appreciate the paradoxical nature of appearances, the subjective condition of the real through every single human mind. Then, reluctantly aware of the inability to fix things as explicable, and trapped within a world of improbabilities, of indeterminacy, of both either and or, he recognizes in the absurdity of Phraxos the fictional quality he was so fond of attaching to his own life in London. If the imaginary world Conchis has created

may be real, Nick's real one is confused with fiction as well. At this very point the hero thereby discovers the true secret of life, the knowledge that, as P. Waugh states (1985:51):

Contemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities.

To sum up, Nicholas has been taught so far that the frontiers between illusion and reality, between the physical and the mental realms have been blurred, that "reality, as the new physics also proclaims, is subjective" (Nadeau 1981:67). Yet, has he consciously assimilated it? In any case, by means of the technique of infinite regress, the narrative itself seems to enhance such an important epistemological issue. The ordeal being over, he is left alone and goes back to Bourani, where he finds some significant clues which confirm his experience has merely been a painful godgame: Lily's costumes, the horn that Apollo called with, Foulkes's costume, the uniform of the 1st World War captain, a "typewritten copy of *The Tempest* passage Lily has recited" (p. 548) and some scraps of paper with annotations. Among them, he also discovers a fairy story of a prince who did not believe either in princesses or in islands or in God; yet, having found out that such things really exist and that on the contrary, his real father is a magician, the prince learns that reality and illusion cannot be separated any longer, that their limits are undistinguishable. The prince, then, finally accepting both the illusory and the real, becomes a magician as well.

If we draw parallels, the masque's repeated emphasis on the uncertainty in knowing phenomena shows Nicholas that he must accept a double-folded external world, and subsequently question the ontological status of a reality subjectively apprehended and described through the arbitrariness of language. To this respect, R. Nadeau's foregoing commentary (1981:72) is absolutely remarkable:

Nicholas concludes, therefore, not only that language is ill-equipped to define a universe in which every entity exists in relation to and in some sense in every other entity, but also that all our speculations upon the character of fundamental reality in language can only "taint the description" of its actual nature.

Thus, caught amidst a dark, devoid-of-significance gnoseology, the heroic figure experiments a sense of isolation, a feeling of nothingness, of fragmentariness or, in other words, an epistemological vacuum of complete uncertainty. J. Fowles himself further explains this idea in *The Aristos*:

We are in the best possible situation because everywhere, below the surface, we do not know; we shall never know why; we shall never know tomorrow; we shall never know a god or if there is a god; we shall never even know ourselves. This mysterious wall round our world and our perception of it is

not there to frustrate us but to train us back to the now, to life, to our time being. (p. 19)

Back to London, Nick, unconsciously realizing all he has learnt up to then, meets M. de Seitas, whose close connection with Conchis (he was her lover and the father of her twin daughters Lily and Rose) seems to suggest that the metaphoric godgame of part two is still being performed. This woman will be his last helper—or rather teacher—before being psychologically prepared to his final reencounter with Alison.

First of all, Lily de Seitas gives him a symbolic china plate depicting a family, implicitly suggesting that he should learn to handle fragile objects, and by analogy, more valuable yet fragile human beings, so as not to inflict pain upon them. Secondly, she not only reminds him metaphorically that language is imprecise for describing any perception of external reality —“An answer is always a form of death” (p. 626)—but she also stresses again that the fantastic and the commonplace coherently intermingle, consequently offering us a chaotic perspective or cosmovision. Finally, by paradoxically announcing him that the godgame had ended up because “there is no God, and it is not a game” (p. 625), she didactically concludes that a final metaphysical understanding should not be grounded upon rational or conventional bases:

“Nicholas, if one is trying to reproduce, however partially, something of the mysterious purposes that govern existence, then one also has to go beyond some of the conventions man has invented to keep those purposes at bay. That doesn’t mean that in our ordinary lives we think such conventions should be swept away... they are necessary fictions. But in the godgame we start from the premise that in reality all is fiction, yet no single fiction is necessary”. (p. 627)

However, the final philosophical lesson comes when a metaleptic intromission on the part of an implied author now become a superior narrator, tells us that Nicholas is left to do what he wishes with his life. The intrusion of this superior narrative voice (which, as also happens in chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, suggests the idea that the flesh and blood novelist can also exist in his fictional world) breaks the boundaries between the different narrative levels established within the novel. Once more, we are insisted upon the dissolution of frontiers between the fictional and the real orders. Subsequently, in the same way Nicholas is left locked within the “ebony tower” of his own self, the voice says:

...we too are waiting in our solitary room... waiting for this girl, this truth, this crystal of humanity, this reality lost through imaginations, to return... (p. 645)

Conchis had earlier alluded to the point of fulcrum, the time one must accept oneself. And now comes the moment when the hero, left at the crossroads, must

choose the way to continue his existential quest; yet, the journey is endless since, as the superior narrator says, “the maze has no centre” (p. 645). In this infinite quest where every end is a new beginning (let us remember here the passage of *Little Gidding*), Nick seems to be waiting amidst a world where nothing has fixed values, and where fantasy merges with reality. In the same way the protagonist is thrown into an abyss of epistemological contradictions, or what the narratorial subject of *The Ebony Tower* defines as “a vicious spiral, a vortex, a drain to nothingness” (p. 110), the reader, at the end of the novel, is similarly left waiting for a conventional ending; yet, on the contrary, we discover that:

She is silent, she will never speak, never forgive, never reach a hand, never leave *this frozen present tense*. All waits suspended. (p. 656; emphasis added)

Therefore, has Nicholas, as the representative of modern man, become aware both of the existential void in a world of hazard, and of the impossibility of a thoroughgoing sense of reality? Or on the other hand, is he still “becoming”, wandering along the endless road of mystery? Like Nicholas, we as readers are free to choose our own ending, and like Conchis, we are offered the possibility to participate in the creation of fictions, of alternate worlds which, as we have also been taught all throughout the novel, are as real as ours.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Nadeau 1981: Chapter 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Jung 1971: 3-53.

<sup>3</sup> Which so much reminds us of David's thoughts about Coëtminais as “faintly mythic and timelessness” (*The Ebony Tower*, p. 61).

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