

Two Novels: Notes on the Work of John Fowles

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by Michael Tatham

Even in our present state of enlightenment it is relatively uncommon to find a novelist who can treat the physical climax of a love affair so brusquely—‘A few moments later he lay still. Precisely ninety seconds had passed since he had left her to look into the bedroom.’ It is the more remarkable if the girl stretched on the bed has not only engineered the loss of her virginity and purchased a small Toby jug—now in the author’s possession—but is actually a divine enigma. Place such an episode in the shadow of a West Country cathedral in the middle years of Victoria’s reign and it becomes as ironic as it is pleasing.

It has been my recent experience on belatedly reading *The Collector*¹ and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* to realize that there is something to be said for not reading books when they first appear. There is the chance that one may more easily recognize the development of a coherent attitude, and it is the essence of my discovery that John Fowles is writing a more unambiguously religious novel than has been generally appreciated. Primarily, his treatment of his material differs in a marked degree from the methods of such writers as Graham Greene, Salinger or Mauriac, in that he creates in his characters a dimension of allegorical potential which cannot be precisely distinguished from their ordinary humanity. It appears to be a new approach, and one that stands—if at some remove—in the line of Bunyan² and the medieval Morality. Throughout *The Collector*, Fowles’ first book, the allegory is implicit and muted; and this, I think, is an attitude one would expect in a writer who had still to establish his narrative powers and was perhaps less than fully aware of the ultimate direction of his abilities. In his preface to the new edition of *The Aristos*³ Fowles tells us that his purpose in *The Collector* was to ‘attempt to analyse through a parable some of the results’ of what he sees as a ‘confrontation’ between ‘the Few and the Many’.

Although I do not propose to consider *The Magus* in these notes it is nevertheless interesting to see that Fowles remarked of his second novel: ‘I was trying to tell a fable about the relationship between man and his conception of God.’ Exactly what he meant by this may well be a matter for doubt and, since positions change and *The Aristos* was written some time before *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, it may be unhelpful to suppose that earlier definitions necessarily hold good. However, we learn from *The Aristos* that Fowles prefers God in inverted commas and defines him—in part—as ‘a situation in which

¹Published by Jonathan Cape and Pan Books Ltd.

²John Fowles was educated at Bedford School!

³Published as above.

there can be both entity and non-entity'. He qualifies his rejection of the label atheist by asserting that 'our necessary masterlessness obliges me to behave in public matters as if I were'. Yet whatever the ambiguities and uncertainties of his position it is clear that the idea of a religious novel had already taken shape, at the very latest, some time between *The Collector* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

This apparently obvious development appears to have gone virtually unremarked. Walter Allen concluded his account of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:¹

'a remarkably solid historical novel in which Fowles recreates a large part of the ferment in English life a century ago, the intellectual ferment, the class ferment, the shifting of classes, the shifting of power, and the effects of these on the assumptions by which men and women live. It is a quite considerable achievement.'

Certainly there is nothing here to disagree with: the question is whether there is not something more, and something different. Moreover, in other respects Mr Allen is surely correct when he says that those critics who are bewildered by the hindsight which enables Fowles to discuss the world of 1867 in terms of 1967 are making unnecessary difficulties for themselves. Indeed, the experiments in technique may be, as he suggests, a 'boring red herring'. (Although I have reservations: for in stepping into the story himself—as in shifting our gaze from the Cobb of 1867 to the beach huts of today—I am inclined to think that Fowles is concerned to make us more aware than we should otherwise be that the anxieties of today assumed a recognizable form a century ago. Equally, in choosing as his hero the 'advanced' Charles Smithson he provides a further bridge between ourselves and our grandparents.) But whatever may be said about techniques, the interest is never simply historical. His microcosm of Victorian England may owe much to Mayhew and E. Royston Pike's *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*, but it owes at least as much to our own loss of faith and our conscious identity as heirs to a dying tradition.

The Collector is the story of Clegg, a self-righteous lower-middle class clerk who escapes from the Town Hall Annexe by means of a win on the pools and attempts to enrich his empty life by kidnapping an attractive art student. She had always been his dream, his symbol of the unattainable—'A Pale Clouded Yellow, for instance. I always thought of her like that, I mean words like elusive and sporadic, and very refined—not like the other ones, even the pretty ones. More for the real connoisseur.' Clegg is an ardent lepidopterist and the same basic techniques of chloroform and killing-bottle are readily available. Miranda is held by Caliban—the joke is hers—in the cellar of a Sussex cottage where she destroys both her beauty and her image by fluttering ever more desperately against the blank walls of her jailer's soul. Caliban realizes that he prefers his specimens properly

¹*Encounter*, August 1970: 'The Achievement of John Fowles', by Walter Allen.

mounted, 'The photographs (the day I gave her the pad), I used to look at them sometimes. I could take my time with them. They didn't talk back at me.' Or as Fowles puts it elsewhere: 'The actual evil in Clegg overcame the potential good in Miranda.' In taking Miranda to represent the Few Fowles is anxious to insist that she is not perfect. Common humanity demands no less. And yet he continues—'if she had not died she might have become something better, the kind of being humanity so desperately needs'. The story is told with an obsessive realism and a narrative skill that carry us compulsively through the early improbabilities: the pools win and the isolation of that fortuitous cellar.

There are similar initial problems of credibility in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* which are perhaps less easy to overcome until we accept Sarah Woodruff's extra-natural dimension. She is the 'woman' of the title, a governess in her middle twenties who has been jilted by her lover, the lieutenant, and who evokes the curiosity, pity, and, eventually, the love, of Charles Smithson. His gradually awakening passion carries him away from the security of his engagement to Ernestina, heiress to a fortune founded on an expanding London store, and alienates him from the comfortable ease of his intelligently cultured existence. The extent of his fall is marked by a horrific episode in which Ernestina's parvenu father compels him to sign a form of affidavit that by his behaviour he has 'for ever forfeited the right to be considered a gentleman'. As Charles' degradation commences so Sarah, for whose sake he has ruined himself, disappears. In one of his most interesting innovations Fowles has provided us with several different endings; the first of these preserves Charles' engagement and security at Sarah's expense, but the later alternatives are less easily understood and must depend largely on our 'reading' of Sarah.

Sarah is clearly an enigma. The circumstantial evidence for her existence is slight, and the mysterious quality of her motivation is a difficulty even when we accord her the status suggested by Walter Allen—'For Charles she is the anima figure, in Jungian terms, whereas Ernestina belongs wholly to his persona'. Thus in both books we are faced with a Kafkaesque improbability: the difficulty of accepting some essential ingredient. Possibly the problem is one which can best be resolved by using the concept of Grace; for if it is accepted that the normal everyday framework of our existence on earth appears to preclude the direct experience of Grace, so it is reasonable that a novel which seeks to reveal the operation of Grace should display characteristics difficult to reconcile with daily reality. Indeed, the terms of an allegory—even when these are clothed in apparent humanity—must inevitably differ from those of a novel which does not attempt to go beyond humanistic concepts. In this context I am a little surprised that Mr Allen should find Miranda 'the stereotype of a stereotype . . . frank, fearless, "emancipated"',

etc., decorously swinging', while apparently accepting Sarah, whose circumstances, to say the least, are unusual. As if acknowledging the problem Fowles remarks within the story:

'Who is Sarah?

Out of what shadows does she come?'

To some extent the problems of clothing an allegory in flesh and blood are eased by skilful manipulation of time and place. We may retain a suspicion that Charles Smithson would very likely have remained, at any rate outwardly, faithful to Ernestina—if he had ever involved himself with Sarah at all—but our doubts are partially allayed by Fowles' re-creation of 1867 and the precise relationship of this segment of time to all the intellectual and social ramifications of Victorian life. We are distracted by history. And in an equally impressive bid for our credence Fowles includes the medical hypotheses of Dr Grogan and an interesting selection of case histories involving hysteria. It is reasonable to suppose that without Charles' direct experience we shall be more likely to question Sarah's mental state—who today is not his own amateur psychologist?—and Dr Grogan's intervention is a very effective prophylactic. Similarly, the greater part of *The Collector* takes place in the confined setting of Miranda's cell, and our progress through a kind of suspended time is marked only by the clerk's bleak reminiscences, transmuted and reinforced in the pages of Miranda's diary. Fowles' detached description of the cellar and its elaborate preparation is a suitably claustrophobic device to concentrate our minds and it could be that the basic form of the book, its predetermined quality, owes something to the techniques of the tape recorder as this has been used in such social documentaries as *The Children of Sanchez*.¹ Before leaving the question of realism I should like to add that for me there are qualities in Miranda which distinguish her from a mere stereotype; her unpretentious chastity, her sheer incomprehension, her anxiety to make something of Caliban, and above all her slow unwilling despair. She is certainly unusual; but not, I think, incredible.

It is when we turn from character to circumstance that the two novels begin to reveal unusual parallels: in both we find a young woman in a dangerous and vulnerable position, her future dependent upon the positive behaviour of one man. No-one else can help her. She is totally isolated. In so far as Miranda dies and—in the first variation—Sarah fades into oblivion, we realize that this failure to respond is the 'ending' with which we are most familiar. Sarah herself expresses the agony and dilemma of the situation when she tells Charles a little incoherently 'I married shame' for the only alternative was to 'be truly dead'. It is not without irony that whereas, in *The Collector*, Miranda never finds a way to escape, the position in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is apparently reversed, 'they stood, the woman who was the door, the man without the key'.

¹*The Children of Sanchez*, by Oscar Lewis, published by Secker & Warburg and Penguin Books.

But the irony is complex; for it is Caliban rather than Miranda, who is the real prisoner, trapped for ever in the moribund emptiness of righteousness and fear—just as Charles Smithson is held in the pleasantly anaesthetizing expectations of his class and personal rectitude. The comparison is a possible end. We may recognize that there is a common fact in Caliban's failure to accept life, his sad preference for all that is safely dead—the cabinets of Chalkhill and Adonis Blues—his last shots of the dying girl, 'the tied hands to the bed made what they call an interesting motif, I can say I was quite pleased with what I got', and the tests (Echinodermia) so carefully gathered by Smithson. And we may further agree that when Smithson renounces his secure existence and stops collecting the tests we have moved into liberated territory, a vital and sensual region easily to be distinguished from Caliban's sex-in-the-head. But perhaps at this point we shall not really have gone far enough, for Smithson's 'success' has united him to a presence that was already more than feminine, 'an oblique shaft of wan sunlight . . . lit her face, her figure standing before the entombing greenery behind her; and her face was suddenly very beautiful, truly beautiful, exquisitely grave and yet full of an inner as well as an outer, light. Charles recalled that it was just so that a peasant near Gavarnie, in the Pyrenees, had claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary standing on a deboulis beside his road. . . 'and perhaps what is really involved is a cryptogram of religious experience; a story on a theme of Crashaw or Herbert. (One thinks especially of the poem¹ a young English Catholic told Simone Weil about at Solesmes in 1938:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.)

God approaches the soul in the guise of a woman and appeals for the response which only the soul can give. (So accustomed are we to the Cupid-Psyche myth that there is an inherent difficulty in accepting God as feminine, or the soul as masculine, although presumably there is no logical objection to this reversed symbolism.) The appeal is one of total weakness. Miranda has no physical means of escape. Sarah can only fall on her knees as Charles is about to turn from her. There can be no appeal to force either in the cellar or on the open shore. Except when Love turns to Love, annihilating the carefully protected self, there is only the externalized self-destruction of death.

'God is he who bends over us, afflicted as we are, and reduced to the state of being nothing but a fragment of inert and bleeding flesh. Yet at the same time he is in some sort the victim of misfortune as well, the victim who appears to us as an inanimate body, incapable of thought, this nameless victim of whom nothing is known. The inanimate body is this created universe.'^{2*}

¹Love: George Herbert.

^{2*}*Waiting on God*, by Simone Weil, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd and Fontana. All subsequent quotations are from her two essays *The Love of God and Affliction and Forms of the Implicit Love of God*.

Once the interpretation has been made the parts fall readily into place. God clothes suffering and weakness in an apparel of Beauty. The merchant's youngest daughter is lured to the lion-prince by the gift of a rose. Demeter's daughter is carried off by Hades as she gathers flowers, 'The soul's natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high'.* Once in the underworld Koré accepts the tiny gift of a pomegranate seed as Smithson accepts Sarah's gift of tests: 'Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. . . . We have the power to consent to receive him or to refuse. . . . If we consent, God puts a little seed in us and he goes away again. . . . We have only not to regret the consent we gave him, the nuptial yes.'*

'Will you not take them?'

She wore no gloves, and their fingers touched. He examined the tests but he thought only of the touch of those cold fingers.

'I am most grateful. They are in excellent condition.'

'They are what you seek?'

It is a measure of Fowles' control of imagery and symbolism that he can move so easily between from one religious tradition to another; we have no sooner become aware of Blake than we notice how the Undercliff at Lyme is a type of Eden, yet with hints, not of Genesis, but of older rites still celebrated on a Midsummer Night on Donkey's Green. (And what a splendid pagan Glory to set beside the dustless Christian Hell's ante-chamber of Marlborough House, or the airless cellar piled by Caliban with all the consumer goods that modern technology can supply.) Nevertheless, and in the least restricted sense of the word, it is the Christian tradition which informs the book: Sam is surely an Everyman—a common denominator—as we have seen him beside the Property basket in *A Man For All Seasons*, or shaving in the morning? And Caliban does not believe in God (in the wrong way of not believing) and Mrs Poultney tumbles from the ivory steps to expiate all but that touch on Sarah's shoulder as the weeping girl reads aloud to her: *Lama, lama, sabachthane me*. Fowles' conception of this tradition is not one that would be widely accepted and for the reader in 1970 this is probably one of his assets. As Sarah distributes tracts with the formula: 'From Mrs Poulteney. Pray read and take to your heart' it is her eyes which enable the ungrateful recipients to benefit. There are a number of indications that the traditional assurances and values of formal Christianity are seen as ultimately irrelevant to the soul's relationship with God. Nowhere is this more explicit than when Charles kneels in the empty Anglican church in Exeter and comes to accept the terrifying consequences of his love for Sarah:

'But escape is not one act, my friend. It is no more achieved by that than you could reach Jerusalem from here by one small step. Each day, Charles, each hour, it has to be taken again. Each minute

the nail waits to be hammered in. You know your choice. You stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honour, self-respect, and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified. Your only companions the stones, the thorns, the turning backs; the silence of cities, and their hate. . . . He could barely make out the features of the Christ, yet a mysterious empathy invaded him. He saw himself hanging there . . . not, to be sure, with any of the nobility and universality of Jesus, but crucified.

'And yet not on the Cross—on something else. He had thought sometimes of Sarah in a way that might suggest he saw himself crucified on *her*; but such blasphemy, both religious and real, was not in his mind. Rather she seemed there beside him, as it were awaiting the marriage service; yet with another end in view. For a moment he could not seize it—and then it came.

To uncrucify.'

As Charles leaves the church he goes across to the curate's house to return the key, and is offered the 'assistance' of confession—'he bowed and refused, and went on his way. He was shriven of established religion for the rest of his life.'

In its climax the story's religious symbolism is entirely convincing, love will not compel even by her presence. The sense of deprivation of which Sarah has made him aware has become an abyss, an unappeasable longing. The blind can see.

'She knew he loved her; and she knew he had been blind to the true depth of that love. The false version of her betrayal by Varguennes, her other devices, were but stratagems to unblind him; all she had said after she had brought him to the realization was but a test of his new vision.'

Within minutes of giving him her virginity Sarah had told him that she could not marry him, and when he returns to find her she has disappeared on the London train. All the grief of total separation which was formerly hers, her eyes filled beyond 'the reason for such sorrow', even the mockery of her nickname, has become his—

'in order that a new sense should be formed in us which enables us to hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God, the transforming power of suffering and joy are equally indispensable.'* Where Sarah gazed out to sea he must journey across continents into a new darkness; 'A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to love but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God.'* Or, as Simone Weil says elsewhere in the same essay, 'love is a direction and not a state of soul'.

In neither book is the ending a disappointment, or out of harmony with either the characterization or the elements of allegory and symbol. Rejected in *The Collector*, God can only die as a woman, a woman whose beauty has also been destroyed. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we can 'read' it as we please. Either we follow

Charles as he rediscovers the mortal Sarah amid the Pre-Raphaelites on the Chelsea Embankment, or else he may walk alone from the house: 'The river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice, flows past a deserted embankment; and along that other deserted embankment Charles now began to pace, a man behind the invisible gun-carriage on which rests his own corpse. He walks towards an imminent, self-given death? I think not; for he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build; has already begun, though he would still bitterly deny it, though there are tears in his eyes to support his denial, to realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, 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, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.'

Contemplation and Mission

Simon Tugwell, O.P.

The Church is both called and sent by God: called to sanctity and to salvation, and sent to preach the gospel to the whole creation (Mark 16, 15), healing the sick and driving out demons (Matt. 10, 8). It is only where action and contemplation have become secularized (or, for that matter, sacralized—it comes to the same thing), that any contradiction appears; that is to say, it is only because we try to apprehend and to practise prayer or good works without seeing how they proceed from the mission of Jesus Christ, that the hoary problem of reconciling and balancing the two arises.

'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.' 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit' (Acts 1, 8; John 20, 21f). In their different ways, each of the evangelists (even the unexpanded Mark) concludes with some kind of experience of the risen, exalted Lord, coupled with a command to go and tell people, to bear witness, whether by word or by example. Luke's Pentecost story is but the most dramatic version of this.

Now, as I have suggested,¹ for those who did not live with Jesus on earth, baptism is the appointed way into the whole event of Calvary to Pentecost. In baptism we die with Christ and rise with

¹'He will Baptize you in the Holy Spirit.' *New Blackfriars*, June 1971.