

# ENTREVISTA

## “FOWLES ON FOWLES”\*

**John Fowles interviewed by Susana Onega**  
*University of Zaragoza*

*It is not every day that we have the opportunity to listen to a writer speaking about his work. This act is, then, in itself a very special occasion, which becomes a real event when the writer in question is one of the greatest living English novelists and one who, like his male protagonists, values his privacy so much.*

*Readers of his novels have often stressed his protean quality, his astounding capacity to create different styles according to the different requirements of the subject matter of each novel; they have also often drawn attention to his fertile imagination, and his unusual ability to blend personal experience with fantasy, giving his novels a mythical scope. By virtue of his art, the countries he describes in his novels, whether exotic, like Greece or Egypt, or familiar, like England or the United States, invariably acquire a special quality, the timeless, changeless beauty and power of the land of romance or myth.*

*The best justification I can find for having temporarily drawn him away from his garden in Dorset and his draft-work is the hope that the love he has always felt for the eastern Mediterranean countries may extend to include Spain, despite the hazards of walking down Las Ramblas on a Sunday afternoon. And, who knows?, such a prosaic place as the scene of a national conference may some day be immortalized as the setting for some deeply engaging plot.*

*Ladies and gentlemen, it is an extraordinary pleasure and honour for me to introduce to you Mr. John Fowles and to give him our warmest welcome.*

**—I have lots of questions I would like to ask you, as, I expect, many people in the audience have. I shall start with a question of my own but anyone who wants should feel free to take part at any moment.**

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**In an interview published in *Counterpoint* in 1968 you placed Frederick Clegg, the protagonist of *The Collector*, at the end of the line of “angry young men” which starts with *Lucky Jim*. Have you ever thought of yourself as a member of “The Movement”?**

—Could I please start by saying that if we had been in China I should get up now and clap you back. It is lovely for any novelist, even something of a hermit or recluse like myself, to see such an audience as this. I have been in Spain before but it is very pleasant to be back again, after a long interval in my case.

Angry young men. I was never really an Angry Young Man myself and I do not think I could be put into that movement. If we are talking about it in general, I am grateful that it did happen. The typical novelist, I suppose, of that movement was Alan Sillitoe, of whom I spoke rather badly in one of my novels, but that was because of the needs of the novel. It was not really my personal opinion. The Movement had an important effect in the English theatre and the English cinema; it was really a kind of “cleaning” of English art in general, and a valuable one, working-class in its inspiration and with a tiredness for all the old classical ways of English thinking about the arts. It was like a kind of minor fire in a house and it burnt some rooms which needed burning. I come from a small town in Dorset which had a bad fire a hundred years ago. The fire is now regarded as a blessing; it completely destroyed the abominable poor quarter of the town. Things that are tragedies in one way can be very beneficial in another.

The trouble with the Angry Young Men is that unfortunately, because I am really a socialist of a kind by conviction, there is a richness in the middle classes and the middle-class field of life, for the novelist especially, that confining yourself to the working-class view of life, the proletarian one, rather restricts. This was the case with Alan Sillitoe, for example; another English novelist, David Storey, is another case. They tended to get themselves into a corner and found they lacked a richness of subject. This I regard as less political than biological; it is just for me that, perhaps unfairly, the middle classes lead richer, wider lives. This will not satisfy any Marxists or Communists who are here today but the Angry Young Men are for me a historical movement. It performed a useful function but now it is over. Is it not a phrase you hear any more in contemporary discussions of English literature.

**—In an interview with Lorna Sage you talk about a tension in your work, an opposed pull between the English, realistic tradition, and your French, experimental background. What are the basic ideas you have accepted from each and to what extent have they conditioned your literary evolution?**

—When I was much younger I taught in a French university for a

year and I was supposed to teach English there. Now I was a disaster as a lecturer at that university because I really knew nothing about English literature. I did know a little, I had been to Oxford and had studied French literature and I knew French novels and that country historically quite well, but when I suddenly had to get up and start talking about Shelley, Keats, Byron and Rupert Brooke, whatever was on the French syllabus in the English Faculty, I was absolutely at sea. I ought never to have been appointed. In fact, at the end of that year the university said good-bye to me with no regrets at all.

I then went to Greece, and the school in Greece where I taught also said good-bye to me at the end of my stay there—in other words, I was sacked, or fired. That was for rather different reasons but I think, in general, it is quite good for novelists to have failures like that early in life. What you have to do if you are to be a novelist is *not* to be a teacher.

There is a theory in England that if you want to be a novelist—and it is even stronger in the United States—that all would-be writers go “on campus”. They go to university and they do not earn their living from books, they earn it from some job they have in a university. I think teaching is a very bad thing for a creative writer to do, if we are talking about it as a career, and whenever young novelists in England say “What advice have you got?” I always say, “Anything, but don’t be a teacher”. It is curious because obviously teaching a language with its literature and writing might seem to be parallel and close activities, but in some ways teaching literature is a very bad basis for actually writing or creating literature. This is why you do not get many professors of literature who are really good writers in a creative sense. There have been one or two. We have two famous professors of English in England at the moment who are also good writers. One is Malcolm Bradbury and the other is David Lodge, but they are exceptions to the rule. There have been one or two in America, too. Lionel Trilling in America was a famous critic and teacher of English as well as a novelist, but on the whole you do not learn to write books by being good at analysing them and explaining them. That may seem strange to you, but, believe me, it is true.

**—Do you think every novelist, even the most experimental one, should write only about things and places he has first-hand knowledge of? Or to put it another way, do you think that real life experience is as necessary a genius?**

—I think for the young writer it is important. I am greatly in favour because I am an internationalist by spirit. I think it is very important for young writers, I would say for all young people really, to travel. I travelled a lot when I was young, but I am now at an age when I have a little bit of that complacent syndrome, I have seen everything and I have read everything. This is a danger when you get to my age. I am sixty years old

at the moment. You think you have travelled everywhere and you will get no new experiences, but this is not true, as I have just learnt in Spain [S.O.: Yes, Las Ramblas, unfortunately]. It is really more than that. I am at the moment thinking, no more than tossing around in my mind, an idea for a new novel and I find coming to Spain lovely and fertile for the writer. All feeds in, objects you see suddenly attract you and you think, "My goodness, I could use that!" or "That's something I must remember". So, this is why I am always persecuting my very kind hosts here about strange words I see, or habits. Novelists are magpies and steal objects if they can. We really have to be magpies, and amass masses of information we will never put in our book and perhaps will never use. If you have a novelist's mind it is rather like owning a junk room in a house or an old *brocante*, an old second-hand dealer's. In some way you have got to have this room full of old furniture, in our case events and characters, characters you have never developed. Then suddenly one day you feel there will be a place for such and such a character or event. This, I think, is one important way we really are very very different from professors, teachers of English. I feel I am a sheep among goats here in Zaragoza, or a goat among sheep. A novelist is truly very different from an expert on literature. We do not have to have ordered minds, we do not have to know Derrida or Barthes or the great theorists backwards, we have very loose ideas, a mass of mixed information that is really of no use to us or anybody else, but we have to carry round our minds stuffed with these facts. You have to have a private treasury, a house which is full of objects or memories that one day may be useful, may be useful, you may use them, or they may disappear and sink out of sight. It is by writing like this that we get an important response with that other person the reader. The novelist does not have a relationship with readers, in the plural. We have to remember it is always with one reader and that reader you have to tickle as you "tickle" a trout, you have to evoke a world, to tease their emotions. You are appealing in most novels, I think, to the corresponding junk-room nature of the reader's mind from your own. It is not by theory, by logic, by order, as a rule, that you establish this communion with this one reader who is your brother or sister in the experience of reading a book.

—You have often explained that some of your novels developed from a single image: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example, developed from the image of a woman standing on the quay at Lyme Regis, and looking out over a rough sea; or *The Collector*, from a piece of news in the papers about the kidnapping of a young woman who was held prisoner in an air raid shelter in London. Did any of the other novels also originate in a similar way?

—It used to happen to me by something like a cinema "still". I used

to get one vision. In another novel, one of my favourite novels in fact, *Daniel Martin*, I did have an image that in the novel is at the very end of the book. It was of a woman standing in a desert somewhere. I did not at that time even know where it was. She seemed to be weeping, to be lost, a moment of total desolation. It is from tiny images like that, very like cinema stills, say good Buñuel stills or Eisenstein stills, the way they can evoke the whole film even though there is only one frame, one picture... and that seems to have some effect on me. I do not think this is true of many novelists... it is just a peculiarity of my own. I am a visual person in other ways, I would normally much rather go to an art gallery than sit on a literary discussion. Pictures have always spoken to me, in emotional terms anyway, and I think that is all I can answer.

—In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the narrator protests that he cannot control his characters, and that once created, they are free to choose what they do; if you agree with your narrator, the obvious conclusion is that you do not have a preconceived plan when you start writing a novel, that you haven't decided the ending beforehand. Is that right?

—Yes. Again please remember this is one person speaking to you and that you must not take this as applying to all novelists. I know others do write to carefully preconceived, prepared plans, and if you read books on how to write a novel, usually they will say, "Make a careful plan and keep to it". I am completely different. I am, I suppose, a wanderer or a Rambler. *The Rambler* was a famous eighteenth-century periodical in England and the title has always attracted me. The wanderer, the person who strolls and deviates through life. I always think the notion of the fork in the road is very important when you are creating narrative, because you are continually coming to forks. Now, if you write to an elaborate, prepared plan, the choice is taken out of your hands, your plan says you must take this fork to the right, you must take this fork to the left, but I do not like that. I like, in the actual business of writing, this feeling that you do not know where you are going. You have in this to know deep principles or feelings that guide you very loosely, but on the actual page you often do not know when a scene is going to end, how it is going to end, or if you end it in one way is it going to change the future of the book. This, you see, is a state of uncertainty, or in terms of the modern physics, indeterminacy... you are never quite sure where the concrete facts and characters that the narrative develops in a book are going to lead. You sometimes have extraordinary mornings and these are the only times in my life when I would, very modestly, claim a genius. That is when ideas flow in on you with such force that very often you cannot write them down, they come so fast, in my case often fragments of dialogue, so fast that you literally cannot write them down. They are very rare, these

moments; you pray for them, you can't create them in any way, they just come; and I have noticed, rather oddly, usually when you are feeling ill and depressed. I do not know whether you know the French religious philosopher Pascal, but Pascal once had a religious experience like this which he could never describe. He just had to say "Fire! Fire! Fire!" He means "I was flooded with fire and it was beyond description". Very occasionally you have these feelings, almost visions, when you see the whole book. You see all sorts of developments and these moments give you an extraordinary feeling of euphoria, of happiness. Very often later on, when you look at things you have scribbled down frantically, you realise they were nonsense, but usually you get one or two grains, sometimes much more, that are important in your book. This is another distinction between creative writers, poets, and teachers of literature. These are not rational moments, they are much more shamanistic. A shaman, if you remember, in Stone Age and earlier times, was a kind of tribal magician, a tribal priest. Somebody in England at the moment, a writer called Nicholas Humphreys, who is really a zoologist, he studied animal behaviour, has recently written a book suggesting that playwrights, poets, novelists can all be associated with the notion of the shaman speaking both to and for the tribe.

—**But if this is so, how do you explain the structural perfection of your novels?**

—I do not think they are perfect.

—**Yes, for instance, the symmetrical embedding of Miranda's and Clegg's complementary narrations in *The Collector*. This cannot happen by chance. Or can it?**

—Well, perhaps I could answer rather obliquely. There are two stages in writing a novel; there are many stages but there are two broad ones. One is the slightly shamanistic first draft. To say that one is inspired by the muses, as they used to in the eighteenth century, is ridiculous, but this is an area where you have to suppress the teacher, the censor, the critical part of you. Many very clever people linguistically cannot write novels because you have to learn to be two people. One has to be innocent, self-hypnotised, and the other has to be very stern and objective, a kind of professor of himself. I once had a letter from America from an American student who said, "Dear Mr. Fowles, I understand you are something of an expert on the fiction of John Fowles". Now that amused and interested me, because he obviously thought there must be two different people. One was a kind of unofficial professor of John Fowles and there was this other chap, Mr. Fowles, who he had to write to. But that schizophrenia he had, you need yourself. In that second period or self you have to be very stern, you have to have your blue pencil in hand. The old rule in English is, if you are going through a page of your own prose, the first thing you strike

out is what you think is the best sentence in it. There is some sense in that. You very often get so attracted by one single phrase or sentence that you cannot see it is distorting the whole page, or even a chapter. The best solution is often to drop it.

—**Thank you. And the open endings of *The Magus* and of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, aren't meant to echo the thesis of the novels that the existentialist hero's quest is the quest itself?**

—Yes, I was when I was younger, when I was well below half of my present age, we all were in England at that time... we were on our knees before Camus and Sartre and French Existentialism. It was not because we truly understood it but we had a kind of notion, a dream of what it was about. Most of us were victims of it. I quite like that philosophy as a structure in a novel and in a sense I still use it. I would not say now that I am any longer an existentialist in the social sense, the cultural sense. I am really much more interested, in terms of the modern novel, in what fiction is about. I read quite recently most of Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist. That had a considerable effect on me because I felt he was doing what I am trying to do, or what I have tried to do. We writers are of course always slightly jealous and envious of each other and we can stab each other in the back very often, but there are some writers with whom you feel a brotherhood, a fraternal or even sisterly feeling, and Calvino is one of those. I feel great sympathy for Márquez, too, for Borges, the whole South American influence on the current European novel. I think this is for me the major influence on fiction today. It is much more important than that of Beckett or the black novel, the absurdist novel and also the existentialist novels, Sartre's theatre and so on. I really feel that has passed, that is gone.

—**In *The Collector*, *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the heroes are invariably left in a "frozen present", but this is not so in *Daniel Martin*. Would you say that the happy ending at the end of this novel expresses your jump beyond existentialism?**

—Well, this is slightly difficult. When I was writing that book I had got very fed up, very displeased with the whole black, absurdist strain in European literature. I do sincerely admire Beckett as a writer, but I suppose Beckett would be the obvious representative of that, Ionesco and so on. I suddenly felt, "This novel I am going to end happily", and believe me, in our age it is a difficult thing to force yourself to do because the whole drift of modern intellectual European life is that life is hell, it is absurd, it is tragic, there are no happy endings. God knows it has been tragic in a very literal sense, but I somehow thought I would like to end the book happily, just as the Victorian novelists did. The Victorian novelists often tied themselves in knots so that they could have a happy ending, but I felt I would like to try that in a modern British novel. *Daniel*

*Martin* was very much against Britain because, like all good English writers, I hate many aspects of my country. It seemed right somehow that at least it should end happily when I said so many things against Britain, and America also, incidentally. It was a very anti Anglo-Saxon book.

—**The hero, Daniel Martin, finally decides to give up script-writing in order to write a novel, after he has succeeded in recovering the love of Jane: are love and creativity the two antidotes against the void?**

—Well, love, obviously, I should have thought. But creativity, you see, is so unkind. I mean, we can talk about how good democracy enhances many things, but, as I know from the manuscripts I get from other would-be writers, very often they are very handicapped. They have defects of body, or of mind, or of career, they have had to leave school early or whatever it is. Clearly life is cruel, you can only say, “I have sympathy for your problem”. But when it comes to actually judging the novel, I am afraid aesthetic justice is without feeling. You have to say, “You can’t write” or “This is badly written” or “This is a cliché”. Only the Marxists allow clichés, political in their case, to count. Really, I do not know how you deal with this, but there are points when you have to say to people, “You can’t write”, “You can’t think”, or even more important, “You can’t imagine”, because this is a part of the human mind we know very little about: why some people can imagine vividly and why some people can organise that imagination, because creation does need a certain amount of organisation. Why some people can do these things and also learn to suppress themselves, because novelists cannot do everything they like. You soon learn when you write novels that you are in a prison. I do not deny for a moment that I am in a prison when I am writing a book, but it is really like being in a prison that is perhaps six by four and you think, “How could I make it a little bit larger?”, perhaps seven by five. In other words, you try to create a little bit of freedom, as a prisoner might do in prison circumstances. It can be intolerable when you are writing a novel, when you know you are in this cell, you do not know how to get out of it. Occasionally the escape attempts are what makes the novel, you have got yourself into a kind of fixed code, a fixed theorem, like a geometrical theorem, and it is escaping from that which, I think, often produces remarkable books. Beckett is a good example of trying to get out of the prison we are all in.

—**At a given point in the novel Daniel Martin says: “I create, I am. All the rest is dream, though concrete and executed”. Would you say that *Mantissa* fictionalises this statement?**

—*Mantissa* was meant to be a joke. It was first going to be published by a Californian private printer, he prints very nice books, but unfortunately I was under contract with large British and American publishers: they turned cruel on me, they said, “No, we want this”, and



this nice little Californian publisher was just pushed out by these large publishing houses. In America and Britain it was really taken much too seriously. I like the French idea of the *jeu d'esprit*, the lighter book. Something you suffer from in America is this belief that your novels must get larger and larger, longer and longer, more and more important, bigger and bigger in every way. This is blowing up a balloon of hot air. I liked the much more European idea of producing very minor works, something you enjoy doing perhaps, do not spend a great deal of time on and that you will not go to the stake for. You will not be martyred for this book. *Mantissa* was really meant to be a comment, no more, on the problems of being a writer. I have always had a kind of belief in the muses. Of course there is not a muse of the novel, but I chose Erato, the muse of lyric love poetry in ancient Greece. The notion that she was locked up with a would-be novelist and of course they really hate each other.

You get this kind of problem when you are writing, or at least I get it, because I am a man often very attached to women characters. You just do not know when you are writing dialogue —dialogue is the most difficult part, technically, of any novel— you do not know what they are going to say. I had a famous case in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. I remember spending a whole day, I needed one sentence that Sarah, the heroine of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, was saying. I tried sentence after sentence, all in the wastepaper basket —and then I realised she was actually saying, inasmuch as a literary character can be real, “I don't say anything at this point”. She was saying, “Your mistake is thinking that dialogue here is necessary. It isn't necessary”, and so, that is how it is in the book. She is silent. This relationship you have with main characters is slightly like the dialogue I put in *Mantissa*: they often seem to be fighting you. They say, “I'm not going to walk down this road”, “I'm not going to be burgled” whatever it is. In a strange way you have to listen to this. It is a little bit as it is with schoolchildren. Occasionally you have to smack them and say, “No! You're going to do what I tell you to do!” but, like schoolchildren, occasionally they are telling you something which you had better listen to if you are going to be a good teacher.

**—What was your real aim in writing *Mantissa*? How consciously did you have Roland Barthes' *Le plaisir du texte* in mind when you were writing it?**

I do not think particularly. Dr. Federman yesterday was giving his views on Derrida, Lacan, Barthes... I am exactly like him. I have read quite a lot of them on deconstruction and post-structuralism and all the rest of it. I really do not understand what it is all about. I speak French and I read French quite well but I am afraid most of it is absolutely over my head. A much more scholarly English novelist than myself is Iris Murdoch. I heard her saying only the other day that she regarded it as

philosophical nonsense, very largely. Of course it can be very elegantly expressed; especially Roland Barthes I think is a good writer, but I am really very doubtful whether all of that has had much influence on me. In *Mantissa* I was making fun of it, rather crude fun in places. But I was really expressing the old English view that most of French intellectual theory since the war has been elegant nonsense... attractive nonsense. This is the old business of the practical English never understanding the very rhetorical and clever French. France and England are undoubtedly the two countries in Europe that are furthest apart, although they are so near geographically. The English are much nearer to Spain, Italy, Greece, than England and France will ever be.

—*Mantissa* also brings to mind the deconstructivist theory that there is a unique, all-enveloping written text, a text that is prior to the writer himself. This reduces the role of the writer to a mere “scriptor”, somebody whose only task is to endlessly re-write this unique and polymorphous text. Would it be right to say that, for all their thematic and stylistic differences, all your novels are simply “variations” of the same novel?

—Yes, in one sense. I have often said I have only written about one woman in my life. I mean, I feel that. I do not put it in the novels but I feel when writing that the heroine of one novel is the same woman as the heroine of another novel. They may be different enough in outward characteristics but they are for me a family —just one woman, basically. Novels, where they come from in your mind, whether they come from some prior unconscious text, I think I would really not like to say. I am not sure. I think also we are touching on an area where it is dangerous for the novelist to be too clever. It is like the old story of your watch being slow and you take it to bits to improve the time— and of course you have finally no watch any more. By trying to repair it you have lost it. Usually, when I am asked this kind of question, I say I would rather let others judge, as they certainly have in the past. I think this is a job for the critics. They can say that I have certain characteristics of fictional literary behaviour and structure and so on. It is not for me to discover that I am a poor conditioned guinea pig or rabbit. It is safer that I keep that at a distance.

—Most of your novels seem to have been written with a view to parodying more well-worn literary traditions: the “confession” and epistolary technique, in *The Collector*, for example; the historical romance, in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; or the “Examinations and Depositions” of convicts in *A Maggot*, which strongly echo the reports made by Daniel Defoe or at Newgate. Also, in all your novels there is an explicit reference to certain writers of the past, like Shakespeare, Dickens, Thomas Hardy or T.S. Eliot, and they even include literal quotations from their works. Why do you do this?

—Do you mean in *A Maggot*?

—**In general; specifically in *A Maggot*.**

—*A Maggot* is set in the year 1735 and what I did, although the novel itself is fiction, I suddenly thought one day, I have never liked historical novels —why I have written two I am not quite sure but in general I am much more interested in real history. I would much rather read the historical texts of the period. It occurred to me that in *A Maggot* it would be nice, because I am imitating eighteenth century dialogue, to give the reader passages from a well-known magazine of the time called *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which all educated people once read. It is also useful because it does give you many authentic facts of the time, and shows how they were printed. English printing was then different. And an impression of the cruelty of the time, because the English then had a barbarous judicial system. If you stole a handkerchief or a spoon then you would probably be hanged in eighteenth-century London —an awful system. I have also always liked the old trial report, where trials are reported in dialogue alone: purely question, answer, question, answer. That is quite common. It did not start with Defoe by any means but I like it, as a novelist, because it sets you an enormous problem. This is another strange thing that novelists have to do to themselves. They have to set themselves difficult situations. If you use this trial technique —question, answer, question, answer— you lose half your arms, half your weapons as a novelist. There is no description of what people are doing... “She smiled”, “She lit a cigarette” (not in the eighteenth century!); but anything you can say in an ordinary novel is forbidden by using this technique of the trial report. I like that because it also makes your dialogue much better. You have to express far more through your dialogue than you will in an ordinary conversation. A friend of mine in England is the playwright Harold Pinter, and I think he is the chief exponent of this in English. That is, really cutting down to an incredible degree —that is why he is such a good scriptwriter in films—unnecessary dialogue by making every line of his dialogue really work. Every word of it works, even the silences, in his best plays, work. I really wanted in *A Maggot* to use that difficult power of pure dialogue a little, although he is a playwright and of course I am a novelist. I think that the novel has not caught up with the modern world in the sense of what the novelist can leave out. This is one of the great qualities a novelist must have, knowing what to omit, what to leave out. Many novelists, I am afraid I would accuse the Americans a little bit here, write far too many words. They do not let the reader do any work. You must, you see, get the reader on your side and the way to get people on your side is to give them pleasant work or intriguing, interesting work. Therefore, all that you leave out, all the gaps in your text, are so much fuel for this one-to-one relationship you have with the reader. I am guilty

of this fault myself. I look through old texts I have written and think I ought to have left many things out. You realise you are much too fat, you are much too rich always; you can be sparer. I was reading a little bit of Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, the other day. Of course that is historical, but I was tempted even then to pick up my blue pencil. There are whole passages where you think, "Well, he doesn't really need that". He is a great writer and of course it is historical and enjoyable, but from a strictly modern point of view—the same is true of Defoe in England—it is their prolixity, their unnecessary prolixity, that strikes me personally when you re-read them.

—Another recurrent feature in your novels is the existence of two complementary and opposed worlds. One seems to be described in realistic terms, while the other is symbolic and mythical. Invariably the mythical realm is an untrimmed garden, a valley or a combe. This dichotomy between the city and the green world is a traditional one in literature, but in that delightful little autobiography of yours, *The Tree*, you describe the green world as something real and at hand, you even use proper names, such as Ware Common or Wistman's Wood. Should we take it that there are no boundaries, then, between the real and the unreal?

—Well, the real in the general sense, the real for me does not lie where we are now, in other words, in cities. It lies for me very much in the countryside and in the wild. They had a phrase in medieval art, the "hortus conclusus", that is, the garden surrounded by a wall. Very often the Virgin Mary and the unicorn would be inside this wall and, you see it in medieval painting, everything outside the pretty little walled garden is chaos. I must not get on to ecology and conservation terms. We have ruined the nature of Europe very largely and of course we are busy ruining it in South America and elsewhere now. Man really hates everything outside the "hortus conclusus", this walled garden. We do not like the wilderness, the chaos. The Church was against it for centuries because it was where sin took place. In England, for instance, it was hated because of the Puritan ethos; because man could not get profit, he could not make money out of the chaos, the wilderness. This has always hurt me very profoundly, that we have this profound schism, the schism between us and wild nature. I loved the countryside on the way here to Zaragoza from Barcelona. That, for me, is a kind of paradise still, bare fields (not enough trees, though), a few shepherds, sheep. I really prefer that, I am afraid, to great congregation of human beings. I do not really like speaking to you like this. I do not like crowds of people. If it were possible, I would rather have had half an hour alone with each of you here because that, for me, is where all the reality is. It is in small groups of human beings, ideally in the "I-thou" two-persons confrontation. I really fear for Europe, its

increasing cultural and economic madness, the greater crowds, the greater masses, the appalling tendency all over Europe to go to the big city. I know there are wage reasons and all the rest of it, but I am all for getting back to the country. I am all for depopulation. I should not say this in a Catholic country but I find the world population growth abominable. It is one of the worst problems the world has at the moment.

—Women also seem to have a double nature in your novels: Alison's "oxymoron quality", for example, expressed in the splitting into twins, in *The Magus*; Sarah's baffling double nature, alternatively innocent and corrupt, like Rebecca Hocknell in *A Maggot*, etc. Are women as complex and polymorphous as reality, or literature?

—I have always found them quite exceptionally difficult to... well, "handle" is rather an ambiguous word in English. Let me say, to have relations with. I am not a "feminist" in the fiercely active political sense it is usually used in England and America nowadays, but I have sympathy for the general "anima", the feminine spirit, the feminine intelligence, and I think that all male judgments of the way women go about life are so biased that they are virtually worthless. Man is really being a very prejudiced judge of his own case and of course when judging against women. It is counted very bad taste in England now to talk favourably of women's intuition. The real feminists in England do not like this sentimental talk of female intuition. I am afraid I still have some faith in that. Women cannot, I think sometimes think as logically or rationally as men can, but thinking logically or rationally often leads you into error. It is by no means certain that the result is any worse in a woman, if you like, muddling her way through to a decision, or feeling her emotional way to a decision, than that of a highly rational man. My impression in Spain is that feminism has not really quite got here to the same extent it has with us... Perhaps that is to come.

—There are so many more things I would love to ask you, but I'm afraid the old tyrant, time, won't allow me more than one question before I hand over the microphone to the audience. Let's make it a naughty question: At the end of *Mantissa*, the mental walls of Martin Green's hospital room become solid again, trapping the staff Sister within them. Assuming that she stands for the prototypical literary critic, do we have any reason to hope that there is, after all, a little corner reserved for her within the creative mind, that she is creative in a way?

—Well, the whole of this book, *Mantissa* takes place in a cell, but of course the cell is the human brain. It all takes place in the brain. It is supposed to be a lunatic asylum and this is where the hero, or anti-hero, of the book is incarcerated. If I could just say, there is an Irishman—we talked a lot about Joyce and Beckett yesterday, but there is a third Irish novelist who I could put very near their level—I do not know if he is

known here, his name is Flann O'Brien. He was a journalist, a very funny, humorous journalist also. He had several pseudonyms. Flann O'Brien, I think, was a genius at really absurd humour and that book was behind *Mantissa*. If I went in for dedicating books to other writers, I would have dedicated it to Flann O'Brien. I suspect his humour is very difficult indeed if you are not Irish. Even the English have a little trouble with it. The Irish are a marvellous literary race. Everyone who is not Irish issues a secret little prayer, "I wish I were Irish". They really have superb writers. We owe them a great deal in England, Wales and Scotland. Sorry, now I have forgotten the question.

—No, that was a very diplomatic answer. I was asking whether the literary critic has a right to have a corner within the creative mind.

—Yes, yes, I think so. If you remember, a part of the muse herself is a critic. Whatever inspires you also usefully criticises what you are.

—A lot of critics have spoken about the importance of the literary allusions to Victorian novels, particularly in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. But don't you think that perhaps the literary allusions to the poetry of the age are the key to the novel? I mean, to the development of the characters, such as Charles, for instance. I am referring to the allusions to the poetry of Hardy and Tennyson, the epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. Don't you think they are the key to the development of the characters in the novel?

—No. The answer is "no" because the novel was already written when I fitted in the epigraphs. I picked them just as in the last novel I wrote, *A Maggot*. It was really to give the general feel of the period. They were all well-known writers. They were people who were like illustrations, almost like literal illustrations from the Victorian period, from something like the humorous magazine *Punch*. Certainly now and again, when I was reading generally, I would think, "That would be a good allusion", and I would note it down. But such allusions certainly did not affect the story at all.

—Just a very simple question. I would like you to explain why there are two different endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

—Why did I put a double ending in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*? That was purely personal because I knew the novel required the hero and the heroine to part, to separate, yet I was slightly in love with both of them and I wanted them to come together and be happy. This is very familiar when you are writing a novel. You like two characters and you want them to come together and you want a happy ending; but some twentieth-century part of you, who is really the victim of black, absurdist art in a way, says they must split, they must separate. All that happened to me was that I thought, "Why don't I put both endings?" In a way it is so like life. Life also has forks. Very small matters sometimes do bring

people together or separate them. We cannot control the present, let alone the future. It was simply that I had the idea that it would be interesting to use both possible ends and leave it to the reader to decide. Lazy readers do not like this; they want clear and definite endings. Many readers, you see, write to me and say, "Did they get together?" or "Please will you write an addition to the novel?" With *The Collector* I have had that last, especially from South America. They obviously like the idea of English kidnappers of attractive young women. That was the reason, quite simply. A personal problem of my own, which then I thrust on to the reader.

—Any other questions?

—Question from audience: A very short question. You have said that novelists are sick, obsessive creatures. What about the "Bluebeard syndrome" and the "Camelot syndrome"? How do they relate in your novels?

—I can assure you we are very far from normal creatures. *The Collector* story obsessed me, because by chance a girl was truly kidnapped in South London. This was told in a minor news item, which not only I saw but curiously enough one of the French *nouveaux romanciers*, Simonne Jacquemard. She wrote a novel also about it, much more metaphysical and abstract than mine. It was a strange case and I suspect quite a lot of novelists who happened to see it were struck by it. A young man captured a girl and he put her in an air-raid shelter, he made her undress to her underclothes and he told her to dig a hole through to Australia; a hole through the entire Earth in this tiny air-raid shelter, not much bigger than this table. The curious fact is he did not molest her sexually at all. I do not know all the details of the real case but I have the impression that something about the girl had made her a willing victim and the man was obviously mad. The girl did not seem to make any attempt to escape and of course this has become a well-known syndrome now of the relationship that develops between kidnapper and kidnapped. For some extraordinary reason they almost fall in love, certainly into mutual respect, in some of these more outrageous cases. I also saw the Bluebeard in Bartok's opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*. I was very fond of Bartok's music at the time and it had not occurred to me, the Bluebeard connection. I did not really use it in the novel very much, but it had an effect when I was writing it. And of course Miranda and *The Tempest* parallel. That was an obvious twist, really, a symbolic twist.

—Thank you. Any other questions?

—Question from audience: A short question. Do you actually enjoy writing? There are writers who feel a need to write but do not enjoy the business of writing. Do you find it pleasurable?

—Do I enjoy life?

—No, do you enjoy writing?

—Oh, yes, I am sorry. I thought you were asking if I enjoyed life. I was going to say that no writer really enjoys life. It is an impossibility. We enjoy it occasionally but writing novels you have to be a moody person, you have to be up and down, gullible one moment, cynical the next. So that is answered. Writing, very largely, is an “up” moment. Some writing is just boring. It is like digging a long trench or making a road; in other words it is largely mechanical... I suppose “bureaucratic” would be a better word for it. First draft writing, when you are first writing, even a simple piece, is always a pleasure because words are so complicated, there are so many ways to handle them. You can feel happy with just a single page or a paragraph, if you are lucky you have solved some little problem, you have made something shorter, you have made it crisper, you have made it more poetic, whatever it is. I cannot imagine not being a writer. I was once on a TV programme in America with Truman Capote... I will not say “God bless him”. I foolishly said that even if I would never be published I would still go on writing just because the activity of writing was for me miraculous, marvellous in the old sense. He mocked me; he said he wrote only for money. The only near parallel I know to it is what I feel in nature watching plants, birds occasionally, but writing is really on a level of its own. I am not in the least a religious person, but it is the nearest you get to religious experience, that shaman thing, speaking for the tribe. So the answer is “Yes”. If you do not enjoy writing, do not be a novelist. It is also essential that you love it because a lot of it is so long, so time-consuming; and it is very psychedraining, that is, it drains your psyche, your private soul. After you have finished a novel you feel totally drained and you think you will never write again, you do not want to write again, you never want to hear the word “literature” again. It is very strange. You are like an empty cistern, gradually the water, some kind of rain falls and the water seeps in and it begins to fill again. That side of writing is rather terrifying, the way it empties you psychologically.

—And the last question, if there is one?

—**Question from audience: The narrator appears twice in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The first time he is described as a Victorian preacher and the second time as a modern person, I think you say “rather frenchified”, with a touch of the modern impresario about him. Do you identify yourself with one of these descriptions?**

—The answer to that is very simple. Yes, with both. I put myself in that book first of all as a hellfire preacher. You would not, well, I suppose you might, know them in Spain. They were a feature of Victorian England. They were the preachers who used to thunder at people and warned them of the terrible penalties of hell if they drank gin or if they even looked at a woman. I was really a speciality of the dissenting sects, the Protestant sects, not the Church of England, far more narrow and



puritanical than that is. Then I put myself in as a kind of opera impresario because he has features of the novelist. One is always torn, whether the novel is a pulpit or not. It is very difficult in England because people hate being preached to. When I started in England I used to get this dreadful word, "didactic", used of me, always in an insulting way. I was "that dreadful didactic writer", trying to teach people how to behave in their morals, their politics and all the rest of it. That, I think, was really why I made myself into this parody of a hellfire preacher; and of course in another way novelists are, although our operas are for one person only, not unlike impresarios. We have these characters who are not quite flesh and blood but we hope to convince people by telling lies that they are real. When I say that all novelists are liars, of course you have to ask another question back at me, which is "Is the lie always a bad thing?" I think a lot of human pleasure has to do with lying, and so has a lot of human civilised behaviour. We even have in English a nice expression for that... the "white lie" —the lie told by a good person to be kind to somebody else. "Have you read my latest novel?" You answer that you find it excellent, although you truly think it is absolutely awful. There are all sorts of situations where I think the word "lie" is much too clumsy-blanket a word to mean much. Fiction is the business of telling falsehoods about people who do not even exist. So, in that sense, you are lying.

**—I am afraid we will have to put an end to this engaging discussion. We are all sorry, I know, but "that is life". We have to go. Thank you very much indeed.**

(Transcription from the tape by Richard Pilcher)