

**FORM AND MEANING IN
*THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN***

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When *The French Lieutenant's Woman* first appeared in 1969 the critics immediately welcomed it as an extraordinary example of the revival of the historical novel in England, while at the same time lamented John Fowles's inexplicable indulgence in what seemed an uncunning and haphazard sort of literary experimentation. Thus Walter Allen (1970), while admitting that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was «a most interesting novel (and) a genuine achievement» (p. 66), held the view that «it is, first and foremost an historical novel, and for all its up-to-date asides, an historical novel of an old-fashioned form.» (p. 66)

Allen denies Fowles any «innovatory inventiveness», stressing the fact that the use of a twentieth century narrator to focus a nineteenth century story is a well-worn literary device:

In fact, Fowles here is merely taking advantage of hindsight in his interpretation of character and scene as historical novelists have always done, as Scott, for example, does in *Rob Roy* and George Eliot in *Adam Bede*. (p. 66)

Walter Allen reserves a final rebuff for those critics —mainly American— who had applauded the appearance of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a breakthrough in narrative technique:

One can only assume that an acquaintance with classic English fiction is no longer a pre-requisite for reviewing novels.
(p. 66)

Walter Allen's impatient remark is absolutely to the point: it is true that when John Fowles makes his twentieth century narrator omnisciently comment on his nineteenth century protagonists he is drawing on a

convention as old as the novel itself. Indeed, the point of interest is not the newness of the devices used, but the particular aim that lies behind Fowles's use of them in this concrete novel, and this is something Walter Allen fails to realize:

The significance of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* doesn't lie in its «experimental» features. These are much more apparent than real and, in my view, are a big boring herring. (p. 67)

Similarly, Prescott Evarts, Jr. (1972) fails to see any consistent or intelligible purpose in Fowles's experimentalist flights, beyond a mere mannerism:

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a mannerist tragedy set in Victorian times. It is fraught with the distortions and lack of symmetry that are associated with Mannerism, as it revolted against Renaissance form. Fowles has followed many of the Victorian conventions while at the same time making them obscure, troubled and illogical. (p. 57)

and he concludes:

A retrospective authenticity is achieved in spite of and in conflict with the self-conscious modernism of the narrator. One is tempted to admire the historicity at the expense of the total experience. (p. 58)

If Prescott Evarts contents himself with admiring «the historicity at the expense of the total experience», stricter Victorian specialists are much more reluctant to accept the intrinsic value of even this aspect of the novel. Thus, Patrick Brantlinger (1972) castigates John Fowles for confusing Victorian Duty with sexuality, charging him with the sin of anachronic distortion:

The notion that sexuality is the «primum mobile» of history is a peculiarly modern, post-Freudian, and apparently popular form of lopsidedness. (p. 341)

while Ian Adam (1972) in his section of the same article, accuses the author of «irksome pedantry» and expresses his surprise that although «as an experimental novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is disarmingly old-fashioned», he finds that John Fowles doesn't seem to feel «any evident worry about imitative form.» (p. 344). No more than Cervantes imitating the books of chivalry, one might add.

The implicit accusation that John Fowles openly and shamelessly imitates old conventions, trying to cheat us into accepting them as new, springs from one common misunderstanding, the insistence on viewing *The French Lieutenant's Woman* primarily as a historical novel on which futile and illogical attempts at experimentation have been made at random. Significantly, Prescott Evarts, Jr. realizes that «Fowles is ironic about everything», but he dismisses the insight by adding that «the narrator renders the whole experience ironic, making the Victorian seem overclever and pedantic, being aggressive and assertive for no clear reason at all.» (p. 58)

As Robert Burden (1979) among others, has pointed out, every work of art must solve in one way or another the tension created by the opposed pulls of two elements at work in its creation: tradition and innovation, that is, the pressure on the work of art of the inherited past and the simultaneous necessity to break new ground. Burden quotes from Claudio Guillén to support his thesis:

A cluster of conventions determines the medium of a literary generation—the repertoire of possibilities that a writer has in common with his living rivals. Traditions involve the competition of writers with their ancestors. These collective coordinates do not merely permit or regulate the writing at work. They enter the reading experience and affect its meaning. The new work is both a deviant from the norm (as crime is based on an attitude toward accepted social custom) and a process of communication referring to that norm.

(Burden, p. 133)

Burden's contention is that in the case of the contemporary English novel «this tension is often solved through a self-conscious relationship of the new work to past forms» (p. 133), and indeed, we may say that this is the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Instead of trying to judge the achievement of John Fowles by his ability to create new fictional devices, we should judge his capacity to use the well-known devices inherent in the particular literary tradition the author happened to select for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and above all the effects of their use on the novel, for only through them will we be able to grasp the author's real aim.

From the beginning John Fowles places his tale within the tradition of the Victorian novel, choosing for it an omniscient narrator. As the first chapter opens up we are confronted with a narrator who freely addresses himself to the reader, and who carefully situates the action of the novel on «one incisively sharp and blustering morning in the late March of 1867»

(p. 1). The morning, we shall soon learn, is that of the 26th. At the same time the narrator locates his action spatially by describing the quay of Lyme Regis, which he further situates on the south coast of England. With a somewhat pedantic but enthusiastic erudition, the narrator digresses then on the beauty of the Cobb, only to stop to address the reader:

I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write; though the town of Lyme has, and the test is not fair if you look back towards land.

(p. 1)

In Book III of *The Republic* Plato refers to two narrative modes: one in which the poet himself is the speaker and does not attempt to hide his presence; and another in which the speaker tries to efface himself, by assuming the personality of some character. The first type Plato calls «pure narrative», the second «imitation» or *mimesis*. Although Plato clearly held the former to be the only real narrative mode, the twentieth century, influenced by the ideas of Henry James and his epigones, has become increasingly used to regarding the hiding of the narrator as a *sine qua non* for producing an effect of realism.

Henry James's angry question, referring to the Victorian novel, «What do such large loose baggy monsters with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*?» (1934) sums up the rejection by the new era of Victorian literary craft and also points to their failure to grasp the real aim of the Victorian novel. The Victorians were above all realists. If they wrote a novel they had to show in it a perfect replica not only of the actions of men but also of these actions set against their proper social background. And they thought that this task was possible. The technical solution to their endeavour was twofold: They invented the multiplot, and sublimated the role of the omniscient narrator. The dialogical form of the multiplot (Garret, 1980) allowed the Victorian novelist to create a fictional microcosm in which the actions of the different members of a given community were allowed to develop quasi-simultaneously. The omniscient narrator, with his God-like capacity to alternatively adopt the point of view of every one of his characters, ensured an 'objective' rendering. For all the complaints of Henry James (and of the Modernists after him), absolute objectivity was the aim the Victorian novelist strived after, with very much the same seriousness of purpose to be found in Henry James himself. This is the basic concern behind the opening paragraph of Chapter 29 in *Middlemarch* when George Eliot puts an end to her description of the growing differences arising between Dorothea and her husband, which the narrator has so far been describing from the heroine's perspective, in order to allow Casaubon to express his own point of view about the matter:

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Locwick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will be faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungred like the rest of us. (Ch. 29)

If we accept, then, that the primary aim of the Victorian narratorial frame-breaks was to give an impression of realism, we should agree that the breach of narrative level produced by the narrator's rhetorical question in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, «I exaggerate?», functions in a seemingly Victorian fashion. Indeed, rather than breaking the illusion of realism, the narrator's aside enhances it, producing what Barthes has called *un effet de réel* (1968), as it makes the 1867 fictional Cobb appear historically real, a mere ancestor of the actual Cobb everyone can still see standing in 1967.

Fowles's breach of the narrative frame in this case is aimed at blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. By making us accept the action of the novel as part of the historical past of Lyme Regis, we as readers implicitly accept the reality of such action, and what is more, the reliability of the narrator, who presents himself to us as an impartial – if somewhat erudite and pedantic – historian.

Many other minor narratorial intrusions in the novel function in the same way, and there is no doubt that it is this kind of frame-break that Walter Allen and the other critics mentioned above had in mind when they said Fowles's experimentation was painfully old-fashioned. Similarly, a great number of footnotes in which the narrator undertakes to explain to the reader some detail of the Victorian world, have the same general aim: to suggest the objectivity of the narrator, by stressing the strictly historical quality of his interest in the events. Thus, for instance, when, after having said that Charles Smithson had returned from his journey abroad «a healthy agnostic», he adds:

Though he would not have termed himself so, for the very simple reason that the word was not coined (by Huxley) until 1870, by which time it had become much needed.

(p. 18)

The effect of this footnote may be twofold: it may either anger the reader, if he happens to be a Victorian scholar, as an unnecessary and platitudinous comment whose only justification is the narrator's desire to show off; or it may baffle the unknowing reader with the wealth and accuracy of the narrator's historical knowledge. But in any case the digression will work toward the building of the illusion that the narrator is first and foremost a historian who has undertaken to narrate events that really took place in the historical past.

Evidently, minor breaks of the frame like the ones so far discussed do not work to destroy the illusion of reality but paradoxically to reinforce it. In Patricia Waugh's words,

Although the intrusive commentary of 19th century fiction may at times be metalingual (referring to fictional codes themselves), it functions mainly to aid the readerly concretization of the world of the book by forming a bridge between the historical and the fictional worlds. It suggests that one is merely a continuation of the other, and it is thus not metafictional. (1984: 32)

Soon, however, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seems to be intent on furthering as far as possible our «willing suspension of disbelief.» Thus, when he proleptically comments on the longevity of Ernestina Freeman, a fact her parents were never to know, and says:

Had they but been able to see into the future! For Ernestina was to outlive all her generation. She was born in 1846. And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland.

(p. 29)

Only by an enormous effort of the will can the reader accept the coincidence of dates as historically accurate. In the same way the appearances of Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Earl of Surrey and numberless other historical figures in *The Unfortunate Traveller* undermine its realism, the allusion to «the day Hitler invaded Poland» has the faint smack of that devilish irony Prescott Evarts, Jr. found so irritating and gratuitous, and we start to wonder what is Fowles's narrator really at. Patricia Waugh may again help us to guess his real purpose.

One method of showing the function of literary conventions, of revealing their provisional nature, is to show what happens when they malfunction. Parody and inversion are two strategies which operate in this way as frame-breaks. The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction. (1984: 31).

If we still entertain doubts about whether Patricia Waugh's words apply to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or not, we only have to wait till we reach the often-quoted first paragraph of Chapter 13. The narrator has ended the previous chapter with a rhetorical question in the best Victorian fashion:

Who is Sarah?

Out of what shadows does she come? (p. 84)

His answer in Chapter 13 acts as a major frame-break, shattering to its foundations the illusion of realism created so far:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Ronald Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (p. 85)

After so much care to even assume «some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of» the Victorian period; after the mass of historical detail and reference with which the narrator has tried to bury the fictionality of his created world, this paragraph in Chapter 13 destroys the painfully built illusion as a draught of wind would scatter a house of cards. «One method of showing the function of literary conventions, of revealing their provisionality, is to show what happens when they malfunction», has said Patricia Waugh, and we should agree that this is one clear example of the malfunctioning of the convention of the omniscient narrator.

In agreement with post-modernist metafictional practice, John Fowles has built an illusion only to break it, to show us its provisionality, its intrinsically fictional character. But as he undermines the realist convention, his novel turns into something else: «if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word» (p. 85). For the new something he is creating, the narrator offers us several labels.

So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game. Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them. Or perhaps I am trying to pass off a concealed book of essays on you. (...) What you will. (p. 85)

The reader, who has been flung out of the convention as remorselessly as Mrs. Poultney was flung out of Paradise, stares incredulous and hurt at the new possibilities the narrator seems to be offering: all of them hide a new treachery, a further blurring of the boundaries between reality and illusion, but focussed from a wholly unexpected angle. First, the narrator tries to make us believe he is John Fowles in person, by saying that «perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction», something we know to be exact: John Fowles wrote the manuscript of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in a house in Lyme Regis described in the novel as «The Dairy». But surely John Fowles and the narrator, like Ernestina and Hitler, belong to two different ontological levels, and we know, with the help of Wayne Booth, that we cannot and should not confuse the blood and flesh writer called John Fowles with the implied author in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Neither should we confuse the narrative levels to which the narrator and the characters respectively belong, a snare the narrator tries to lure us into when he adds, «perhaps Charles is myself in disguise».

By trying to blur the boundaries between the narrative levels within which the narrator and the characters respectively move, and between the narrative level and the ontological level of the flesh and blood writer, the narrator is implicitly conferring on author, narrator and writer the same, fictional status.

But, of course, taking *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as simply a transposed autobiography, or, identifying John Fowles with the narrator and the narrator with Charles Smithson, is not the only alternative:

Perhaps it is only a game (...) what you will.

By breaking the Victorian frame John Fowles had been building as far as Chapter 13, the author is making us reflect on this literary convention as what it simply is: a provisional frame, created by the combined work of the author and the «willing suspension of disbelief» of the reader. By offering us as alternatives the possibility that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* be either the autobiography of a flesh-and-blood writer called Charles Smithson disguised as John Fowles, the author is pointing to a basic post-modernist and specifically deconstructivist contention: the advisability of seeing the everyday reality as a construct similar to that of fiction, and as such, similary «written» and «writable». This is why the narrator shamelessly said that Ernestina died the same day that Hitler invaded Poland, mixing up the historical and the fictional futures. This is why, too, when the narrator describes Mary's beauty, he refers incidentally to,

Mary's great-great-grand-daughter, who is twenty-two years old this month I write in, (and who) much resembles her ancestor; and her face is known over the entire world, for she is one of the more celebrated younger English film actresses. (pp. 68-9)

or again, when later on Sarah buys a Toby jug and the narrator says that it is the same one that came to be his own:

Those two purchases had cost Sarah ninepence in an old china shop: the Toby was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged. But unlike her, I fell for the Ralph Leigh part of it. She fell for the smile.

(p. 241)

Patricia Waugh has written of this episode:

Sarah and the Toby jug appear to have the same ontological status as the narrator. This brings the reader up against the paradoxical realization that normally we can read novels only because of our suspension of disbelief. Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not 'real', but we suppress the knowledge in order to create our enjoyment. We tend to read fiction as if it were history. By actually appearing to treat fiction as a historical document, Fowles employs the convention against himself. The effect of this, instead of *reinforcing* our sense of a continuous reality is to split it open, to *expose* the levels of illusion. We are forced to recall that our 'real' world can *never* be the 'real' world of the novel. So the frame-break, while appearing to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, in fact lays it bare.

(p. 33)

A similar effect is again obtained when, describing Millie's poverty-stricken two-room cottage, the narrator remarks:

A fashionable young architect now has the place and comes there for week-ends, and loves it, so wild, so out-of-the-way, so picturesquely rural. (p. 138)

or when John Fowles makes Sarah live in the house of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and work there as a model and an assistant. But perhaps the most baffling confusion of ontological and narrative levels is obtained when the author in person appears as a character in the novel, a stranger who sits in front of Charles in the first-class compartment of his London train and scrutinizes the hero while he is asleep, trying to make up his mind about

the appropriate ending of the novel. Like John Fowles, the stranger is a bearded fellow in his forties, and has «something rather aggressively secure about him.» (p. 346) At the beginning the narrator describes this man from the perspective of Charles, referring to him in the third person, but then, all of a sudden, he surprises the reader by using the first person, and identifying with the stranger:

(The stranger's look) is precisely, it had always seemed to me, the look an omnipotent god —if there were such an absurd thing— should be shown to have. Not at all what we think of as a divine look; but one of distinctly mean and dubious (as the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman* have pointed out) moral quality. I see this particular clarity on the face, only too familiar to me, of the bearded man who stares at Charles. And I will keep up the pretence no longer. Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is not quite the same as the two above. But rather, what the devil am I going to do with you? (p. 348)

By introducing this bearded fellow as the author, only to identify with him later on, the narrator is challenging our assumptions about the convention of omniscient narration, trying to lure us into believing that narrator and author are one and the same. But, as Elizabeth D. Rankin (1973: 197) has remarked,

It is a mistake to assume, as Allen does, that behind that *persona* is the naked face of John Fowles. What is actually exposed when the narrator's *persona* is dropped is simply another *persona*: the novelist's. That is, Fowles has created a «novelist» who acts as a «narrator» but from time to time speaks openly as «novelist». An implied author, to use Wayne Booth's term, is discernible in the ironic distance which separates John Fowles from the «novelist.»

Elizabeth D. Rankin is drawing here the same conclusion we intuitively drew, when at the beginning of chapter 13, the narrator said that «perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction» (p. 85), that is, we may understand the narrator is simply referring to an «implied author», not to John Fowles himself. But on the second occasion this implied author appears in the novel, when he is made to stand «leaning against the parapet of the embankment» in front of the residence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and is adjusting his watch to gain an extra quarter of an hour that may enable him to give us a second version of the ending, the narrator explicitly refuses to identify with him. More than that, he presents the bearded fellow as belonging to the same ontological level as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, despite the identity given him in the novel, is primarily a historically real Pre-Raphaelite painter.

And, furthermore, the narrator protests that while he is a man «who refuses to intervene in nature», the author is «the sort of man who cannot bear to be left out of the limelight (and...) has got himself in as *he really is*», adding, «I will not labour the implications that he was previously got in as he really wasn't.» (p. 394)

That is, giving a final turn of the screw, the narrator tries to convince us now that, although the first bearded stranger was simply another *persona* for himself, i.e., an «implied author», it is now John Fowles in the flesh who has been able to find his way into the fiction, even though «in spite of appearances, (as) a very minimal figure.» (p. 394)

As with Rossetti, Hitler, the architect who owns Millie's cottage or Mary's film-star great-great-grand-daughter, the author's stepping into the fictional world of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* functions as a major frame-break, underlining Derrida's contention that all is included within the text, that even the author is born with the text and lives as long as the text is being written, a theme Fowles will develop at length in his fifth novel, *Mantissa*.

One way in which John Fowles undermines the conventions of the omniscient narrator, then, is by confusing ontological and narrative levels, giving the writer, the narrator and the character the same, fictional, status. Another, more ironic way of obtaining the same effect, is to show the real limitations of his avowedly omniscient narrator, who is likely to remark openly on his inadequacy as such, either by admitting that he doesn't know what happened at a certain moment, or by stressing his lack of skill as a writer. Thus, for instance, when, referring to Sam and Mary's intended meeting at Coombe Street, he says:

Whether they met that next morning, in spite of Charles's express prohibition, I do not know. (p. 117)

In this example the reader may take the remark as overscrupulosity on the part of the narrator, who would want to make clear his purpose of limiting his report to the objective facts he has had access to, very much in the same way a Victorian novelist would pretend to open a door and enter a room before allowing himself to describe its contents. But on other occasions the narrator's remarks seem strangely unfit, as when, after quoting from a florid and enthusiastic article published in the *Edinburgh Review* on a Victorian best-seller, *The Lady of La Garaye*, the narrator adds,

Surely as pretty a string of key mid-Victorian adjectives and nouns as one could even hope to light on (and much too good for me to invent, let me add.) (p. 100)

Here the bracketed remark works to convince us of the authenticity of the poem, but only by simultaneously stressing the fictionality of the rest, as it presents the narrator as primarily an «inventor», i.e., a creator, if of somewhat diminished powers.

Again and again the narrator speaks to affirm the fictionality, instead of the reality, of his created world:

But at last the distinguished soprano from Bristol appeared, together with her accompanist, the even more distinguished Signor Ritornello (or some such name, for if a man was a pianist he must be Italian.) (p. 112)

The narrator's insecurity about the name of the pianist produces a nagging effect, as it turns what we were willing to believe to be a sort of overscrupulousness into wantonness and irresponsibility not completely devoid of playfulness. A playfulness that comes to the fore when, after cheating us into believing that Charles and Ernestina eventually married, he says:

They begat, what shall it be – let us say seven children. (p. 292)

In all these examples the insecurity the narrator shows works to undermine one particular aspect of the Victorian convention of omniscience: according to it, the narrator's role is that of the faithful historian —as he always narrates in the retrospect, the reader may assume that he knows beforehand the course events will take as well as the consequences derived of his characters' actions. By denying the reader this security of knowledge about the past, the narrator is both undermining our confidence in his reliability as a historian and stressing the radically fictional and polymorphous nature of his reported world.

In all these examples, then, as in many others to be found throughout the novel, the narrator turns the Victorian convention of the omniscient god-like narrator upside-down, or in more technical terms, he uses the convention parodistically. Robert Burden (1976: 135) has defined parody in contrast to pastiche, as «a mode of imitation in subversive form», while pastiche is defined as «a non-subversive form of imitation, one which depends on systems of borrowing: a patchwork of quotations, images, motifs, mannerisms or even whole fictional episodes which may be borrowed, untransformed, from any original in recognition of the 'anxiety of influence'».

The task of parody, therefore, is to assume well-known forms or styles of the past in order to underline their obsolescence and limitation.

This is precisely the function of the narrator's asides and footnotes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and no other is the intentional confusion of ontological and narrative levels. Only by admitting that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a sustained parody of the Victorian novel can we properly account for the narrator's pedantry and overbearing erudition. Indeed, the narrator's elaborate style, denounced by the early critics as a naïve and immature attempt to imitate the Victorian idiom, appears now as sustained and deliberate pastiche, that is, pastiche used as such to stress, in Robert Burden's words, «the ironic awareness that language, literary form, themes and motifs regularly come to the writer in, so to speak, second hand form.» (p. 135)

The nineteenth century Victorian novel rested on the assumption that the external world could be described univocally, that the accurate artist could draw a faithful replica of Nature which could be apprehended intelligibly by everybody as such. The contention of Modernism in the early twentieth century was that it was impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed, that he could only aspire to give a personal and therefore subjective version of one's own relation to Nature. Writing in «the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes» —and we should add, of Jacques Derrida— John Fowles feels the necessity of stressing even the uncertainty of this process:

Perhaps you suppose that a novelist has only to pull the right strings and his puppets will behave in a lifelike manner; and produce on request a thorough analysis of their motives and intentions. Certainly I intended at this stage (Chap. Thirteen —unfolding of Sarah's true state of mind) to tell all— or all that matters. But (...) I know in the context of my book's reality that Sarah would never have brushed away her tears and leant down and delivered a chapter of revelation (...)

(p. 85)

Fowles denies here the capability of the author to create his fictional world according to his particular whim: once created the characters behave according to their own personality:

It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. (p. 86)

The Victorians believed that the created world was perfectly ordered; that it was continuously watched over by an all-knowing Providence; that not even a sparrow fell without God's acquiescence and knowledge. The God-like narrator of Victorian fiction was built on similar premises. But for John Fowles «there is only one good definition of God: the freedom

that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition.» (p. 86)

Clearly, then, Fowles is offering us the only possible version of the God-like narrator he can give: one who, like the twentieth century post-existentialist God, asserts his existence by his non-intervention:

The novelist is still a God, since he creates (...); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (p. 86)

Chapter 13 must be viewed, then, as a sort of enormous reappraisal of our assumptions: a convention has been destroyed only to allow another convention to take its place. Fowles has given us the criteria by which we should judge his ability to conform to the newly chosen frame: instead of a replica of the «real» world we are offered now a wholly fictional world, but we must not forget that for Fowles fiction and reality enjoy the same status:

Fiction is woven into all (...) I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid (...) You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker it ... fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf —your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo Sapiens*. (p. 87)

Having stated the real aim underlying the devious use John Fowles makes of the Victorian convention of omniscience, we may turn to the question of whether Fowles's ideas on the nature of reality and God are also reflected at the thematic level. As John Fowles himself commented to Richard B. Stolley (1971), the plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* sprang from

no fixed plan, (I had) only a vague idea of the way it was going. There was the outcast woman and a respectable man would fall in love with her. That was the first stage. Then it happened that the respectable man was engaged to another girl, and all sorts of things came out of that. (p. 59)

The Victorian theme of the seduced and rejected woman, visualized in the image of a mysterious woman looking out over a rough sea at the end of the Cobb, seems to be the pivot around which the whole novel developed. This theme, which goes back to Richardson and the Gothic romance, developing later into the historical romance, has been pointed out by Ronald Binns (1973) as the novel's major source:

Fowles's third novel contains all the characteristic properties of the historical romance, including the Persecuted Maiden, the motif of flight, and dramatization of 'history-real history, as distinguished from legend and myth', backed up by an impressive array of documentation. (p. 331)

As Ian Watt (1957) has amply demonstrated, the myth of the seduced and abandoned maiden is closely linked to the rise of the middle class and reflects the impact of the new mercantile philosophy: woman is regarded as a property of man and virginity the only means of assuring the legitimacy of the descent. When Pamela rejects the advances of Mr. B., she assumes a totally new middle-class behaviour, utterly foreign to the rural medium, where virginity didn't have any particular significance. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the sub-plot focussing on the engagement of Sam and Mary is partly meant to highlight this difference in sexual behaviour. Referring to Mary's long lost virginity, the narrator comments with his accustomed pedantic accuracy:

The prudish puritanity we lend to the Victorians, and rather lazily apply to all classes of Victorian society, is in fact a middle-class view of the middle-class ethos (...) The hard —I would rather call it soft, but no matter— fact of Victorian rural England was that what a simpler age called 'tasting before you buy' (premarital intercourse, in our current jargon) *was the rule, not the exception.* (p. 234)

Allied to the middle-class myth of the necessity of virginity were two other closely related notions: the puritan's literal interpretation of the biblical words, «flesh of one's flesh», which in practice meant that a woman should either marry the man who had taken her maidenhead, or no other, even if, as in the case of Tess of the d'Urbervilles the man was a rake and a rapist. And what Ian Watt has called «the double standard of morality», that is, the belief that only man was by nature subject to physical passion, while woman was immune to it. John Fowles points to this biological discrimination in the summary of Victorian traits he makes at the beginning of Chapter 35.

Where it was universally maintained that women do not have orgasms; and yet every prostitute was taught to simulate them. (p. 232)

In the novel, Ernestina Freeman embodies all the clichés attributed to the Victorian middle-class maiden: she is not only technically a virgin,

she regards sex with such disgust that she has developed a mechanism to stop her mind from digressing into anything connected with sex: «I must not» (p. 30). As the narrator remarks,

It was not her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all that gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles (...) Ernestina wanted a husband, wanted Charles to be that husband, wanted children; but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive.

She sometimes wondered how God had permitted such a bestial notion of Duty to spoil such an innocent longing. (p. 30)

Ernestina's assumptions neatly sum up the nineteenth century middle-class attitude to marriage that Ian Watt has described as the combination of «a tremendous fascination for marriage and every detail connected with it for the heroine (...and) an equally striking horror of any sexual advance or reference until the conjugal knot is tied» (1957: 155). For Watt this attitude to marriage is typical of Puritanism, and reflects «the assimilation of the values of romantic love to marriage», attributing «supreme spiritual importance to the relation of man and wife» (1957: 155), a relation which thus is surrounded by the halo of idealization conferred to celibacy by Catholicism.

Drawing on the ideas of the double standard of morality and of the biological difference of woman, the fictional heroines stemming from *Pamela* and *Clarissa* develop a new stereotype of the feminine role:

The model heroine must be very young, very inexperienced, and so delicate in physical and mental constitution that she faints at any sexual advance; essentially passive, she is devoid of any feelings towards her admirer until the marriage knot is tied —such is Pamela and such are most of the heroines of fiction until the end of the Victorian period. (Watt, 1957: 161)

If her nature was not distorted, the passionless Victorian maiden would never give way to the temptation to yield to a socially inappropriate partner: her natural lack of sexual appetite protected her, while man could at best hope to learn to control his impetuous lust with the help of his intelligence and his notion of duty, or, even better, to find a legal outlet for it through marriage. Thus matrimony was inextricably bound up with economic and social status. A woman would only make that payment which seemed so excessive to Ernestina if it ensured a rise in the social scale. For, as Ian Watt remarks, quoting Dr. Johnson's words, it was «regarded as a 'perversion' for a woman to marry beneath her» (1957: 164)

Ernestina Freeman stands in the novel for the Puritan ideal of the middle-class woman, and Sarah Woodruff for its reverse: she is the fallen woman, one who has distorted her nature, allowing passion to obfuscate her reason and her notions of morality and propriety. For such a woman, the only course left was repentance, never redemption. Accepting her lot with incomprehensible alacrity, Roxana says after refusing to marry one of her lovers:

After a man has lain with me as a Mistress, he ought never to lye
with me as a wife.

(1724: 192)

Defoe's novel is a faithful report of the only course open to the scarlet woman: a fallen woman can only be redeemed by marrying the man who has seduced her, but such a man would be a fool to do so. Initially free from the torments of remorse, Roxana takes the only course of action left to a woman in her situation: she progresses in her corruption, making the best economic profit she can out of it.

Roxana's motives were understandable by eighteenth century standards: greed for money could pervert a woman to the point of making her silence her conscience and feign a passion she could not possibly feel. But no amount of money would satisfy the more sensitive, romantic and pathetic Victorian woman: as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, seduction and abandonment always provide the turning point in the development of tragedy.

At the beginning of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we find Sarah in the familiar role of the seduced woman, but, as we are going to learn a little later, not only does she not hide her shame, but she seems to take a positive pleasure in being the butt of contempt and rejection. Sarah's behaviour is indeed shocking and her motives incomprehensible and obscure.

Just before he gave up further pretence of omniscience, the narrator ended chapter 12 by asking himself: «Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?» (p. 84). This is the same question Charles will try to answer from the very first moment he saw her facing the wind, enveloped in her dark clothes, «a figure from myth» (p. 9) oddly out of place in the quay of Lyme Regis. Mrs Talbot, the affectionate lady for whom Sarah used to work as a governess, often sees her in her mind's eye as one of the heroines of the romantic literature of her adolescence and specifically as the protagonist of «an actual illustration from one of Mrs Sherwood's edifying tales (which) summed up her worst fears. A pursued woman

jumped from a cliff. Lightning flashed, revealing the cruel heads of her persecutors above, but worst of all was the shrieking horror of the doomed creature's pallid face and the way her cloak rippled upwards, vast, black, a falling raven's wing of terrible death» (p. 49).

From the start, then, Sarah is presented in wholly literary terms both as «a figure of myth» and as the stereotyped persecuted maiden of Gothic romance. When Charles meets her for the second time, the medium where he finds her is again described in strictly literary terms. The place is that part of the Lyme Regis wood called The Undercliff, and more precisely the eastern part of it, known as Ware Commons. Charles has gone to The Undercliff in search of ammonites for, like all John Fowles's immature heroes, he is still a collector; Sarah habitually goes there to enjoy its solitude.

The narrator describes The Undercliff as «an English Garden of Eden» (p. 62) and to express its beauty uses images borrowed from Renaissance art:

It is the ground that Botticelli's figures walk on, the air that includes Ronsard's songs. (p. 63)

However, if from the narrator's and Charles's points of view The Undercliff was a nineteenth century English version of the Garden of Eden, for the Puritan inhabitants of Lyme Regis and especially for Mrs Poultney, Ware Commons inevitably evoked Sodom and Gomorrah, not only because it was the «nearest place to Lyme where people could go and not be spied on» (p. 80) but also because «the cart-track to The Dairy and beyond to the wooded common was a *de facto* Lover's Lane». (pp. 80-1) On top of that, Ware Commons was the place where on «Midsummer's Night young people should go with lanterns, and a fiddler, and a keg or two of cider (...) to celebrate the solstice with dancing» (p. 81). And, although in the narrator's words, the Donkey's Green Ball was «no more than an annual jape», in the minds of «the more respectable townfolk one had only to speak of a boy and a girl as 'one of the Ware Commons kind' to tar them for life. The boy must thenceforth be a satyr; and the girl, a hedge prostitute.» (p. 81)

Thus, the Undercliff is both the idyllic *hortus conclusus* of medieval romance, and the heathen wood of the satyr and the nymph; an Arcadia of bucolic chivalry and the meeting place for dionysiac orgies.

It is in this atmospheric place that Charles finds Sarah at the brink of the abyss, but peacefully asleep:

There was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay; it awakened a dim echo in Charles of a moment from his time in Paris. Another girl, whose name he could not even remember, perhaps had never known, seen sleeping so, one dawn, in a bedroom overlooking the Seine. (pp. 64-5)

Charles's contradictory feelings of simultaneous tenderness and sexual attraction fittingly correspond to the double image we have been given of The Undercliff: like the wood, which is Sarah's natural environment, Sarah has in herself the double nature of the pathetic yet provoking persecuted maiden imagined by Mrs Talbot and, as we are later to learn, consciously assumed by Sarah herself.

The second time Charles meets Sarah in the wood something significant happens: as he approaches her, she slips on the muddy path and falls to her knees, thus giving Charles the Opportunity to put into practice his as yet unconscious desire to help her. But as he chivalrously steps forward to raise her from the mud, he contemplates her face and again associates it with the faces of «other foreign women—to be frank (much franker than he would have been to himself) with foreign beds.» (p. 105)

So, again Charles's noble and not-so-noble sentiments are simultaneously aroused. From the start, too, Charles senses a sort of ambiguity in Sarah, a feeling that «the girl's silent meekness ran contrary to her nature; that she was therefore playing a part.» (p. 92), a realization that, for all her tears and subdued talk, her eyes revealed «an intelligence, an independence of spirit, (...) a silent contradiction of any sympathy; a determination to be what she was» (p. 105). Alternatively, Charles thinks of Sarah as Emma Bovary (p. 106); as the Virgin Mary (p. 121); as a tempting Calypso (p. 125), and increasingly as he becomes more interested in her, he becomes uneasily aware of his being «about to engage in the forbidden (... and that) she was a woman most patently dangerous.» (p. 128)

Charles's first reaction to his bafflement is to try and find a rational explanation. He discusses Sarah with Dr. Grogran, the village physician and, like him, a convinced darwinian. According to Dr. Grogran, Sarah's behaviour can only be explained as madness: she is subject to masochistic fits of «obscure melancholia» (p. 134), that is, as the twentieth century narrator later explains, «the mental illness we today call hysteria (...): a neurosis or psychosis almost invariably caused, as we now know, by sexual repression.» (pp. 201-2)

The rational side of Charles immediately accepts this explanation: and moreover, he uses it as a pretext to cover his less rational, more instinctual and pleasurable impulses towards Sarah:

He had been frank enough to admit to himself that it contained, besides the impropriety, an element of pleasure; but now he detected an element of duty. He himself belonged undoubtedly to the fittest; but the *human* fittest had no less certain responsibilities towards the less fit. (p. 144)

The eighteenth century rationalists and the Victorians after them, viewed man in Platonic terms as the combination of rationality and the passions, where, in Pope's words,

Passions, like Elements, tho' born to fight,
 Yet, mix'd and soften'd, in his work unite:
 These 'tis enough to temper and employ;
 But what composes Man, can Man destroy?
 Suffice that Reason keeps to Nature's road,
 Subject, compound them, follow her and God.

(Poems, III, i, 68-9)

The balanced, rational man was one who managed to control the black horses of passion with the iron fist of rationality directed by Nature and God. Hence allowing reason to yield to the impulses of passion was both unnatural and sinful. The Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was primarily a fictionalization of the revolt and rebellion of passion against virtue. It is in this context that we should interpret Charles's foreboding that he is entering forbidden and dangerous territory.

As in the tale of Laurentini in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, or that of Beatrice in *The Monk*, the temptation Sarah represents for Charles is primarily the release of the hold of rationality on the brutish instinctual passions inherent in the nature of man. That this is so is clear from Charles's reaction after the climatic sexual encounter with Sarah at the Endicott Family Hotel: the consumation brings him not only the satisfaction of sexual desire, but also «a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality» (p. 304), and this is why, too, when he recovers his senses, he is seized by «an immediate and universal horror.» (p. 305)

As the narrator ironically remarks («precisely ninety seconds had passed since he had left her to look into the bedroom» (p. 304), Charles only loses control for ninety seconds, but this minute and a half will be enough to change the whole course of his existence. The effects of his act are described by the narrator in apocalyptic terms:

(It) was like a city struck out of a quiet sky by an atom bomb. All lay razed; all principle, all future, all faith, all honourable intent. Yet he survived, he lay in the sweetest possession of his life, the last man alive infinitely isolated... but already the radioactivity of guilt crept through his nerves and veins. (p. 305)

Still, Charles believes that Sarah has only yielded to his impetuous lust, that he is the possessor, and she the victim, for

Charles was like many Victorian men. He could not really believe that any woman of refined sensibility could enjoy being a receptacle for masculine lust. He had abused her love for him intolerably. (p. 307)

So his real catharsis comes a little later when he realizes that all his assumptions about her were illusory, that she was no outcast maiden with a turned ankle and nobody to protect her, but on the contrary, an unnaturally passionate virgin who had lured him into an irreversible situation for her own private and devilish ends. In short, that he was not the possessor but the possessed:

But for what purpose. Why? Why? Why?
Blackmail!
To put him totally in her power! (p. 307)

Charles's first reaction after this realization is wholly Victorian: he sees Sarah as a succuba, a satanic figure, similar to the fiendish heroines of Gothic fiction, bent on his possession and destruction:

And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mould them to their evil fancies... these, and a singing back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in *La Roncière* appeal, filled Charles's mind with apocalyptic horror. (pp. 307-8)

As in so many plots and subplots of the traditional Gothic novel, Charles sees Sarah's tremendous fascination as that of a demon lover who hides her real nature behind a pathetic and weak appearance in order to draw the hero's sympathy, eventually to put him in her power.

So far Charles has believed in his free will. The realization that Sarah has been playing the role of victim and outcast in order to possess him has the effect of plunging Charles into a fit of deterministic despair. Like Lieutenant Emile de la Roncière, he feels trapped and played with by a

dangerous neurotic. Led by the tempting hand of Sarah, Charles has fallen into the hellish realm of passion only to find his naked self surviving in a world deprived of «all principle, all future, all faith, all honourable intent.» (p. 305)

But, just as the experiences undergone by Miranda and Nicholas in *The Collector* and *The Magus* brought about their existentialist awareness of the nature of the self, so Charles's rejection of the Augustan principles of rationality conveys a similar intuition. For all his feeling that he has been tempted and used for ignoble and selfish reasons, Charles comes to see Sarah as the necessary cross on which man has to be crucified to be truly himself:

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! (p. 315)

As was the case with Nicholas d'Urfé, Charles eventually reaches beyond the feeling of betrayal to the notion of necessary pain as prerequisite to the fruition of human freedom. During his trial, strongly reminiscent of the above quoted passage, Nicholas underwent a «cure of disintoxication» through which he achieved his emotional separation from Julie/Lily. Without the benefit of anything of the sort, Charles initiates his painful existentialist journey towards self-knowledge mistaking Sarah for freedom, or rather, believing that he would only be able to achieve freedom with and through her:

Sarah on his arm in the Uffizi did stand, however banally, for the pure essence of cruel but necessary (...) freedom. (p. 317)

The rest of the novel is a fictionalization of the way in which Charles completes his transformation from the Victorian gentleman into the modern existentialist. Drawing on the ideas of the epoch, the narrator presents his process of maturation wholly in Darwinian terms: The last heir of a long line of landed aristocrats living at the ebb of the industrial revolution, Charles Smithson is presented in the novel as the last exemplar of a species in danger of extinction. If he is to survive he must adapt to the new conditions which seem to be especially appropriate for the proliferation of the middle class. From this point of view, his plans to marry Ernestina Freeman, the wealthy heiress of a self-made middle-class tycoon, appears to be the inevitable liaison of blue blood to money, above all after Charles loses all hope of ever inheriting the title and the fortune of his uncle when Sir Robert decides to marry.

Before he knew Sarah, marriage to Ernestina seemed the only possible course of action, although it inevitably entailed his transformation from a gentleman into a businessman, a possibility that threatened to materialize after the interview with Mr Freeman, in which he offers Charles a partnership in the family business. Just before he takes the crucial step of visiting Sarah in Exeter, Charles imagines his future with Ernestina: they have a long, quiet, happy life together, they found a large family and he finally becomes a businessman:

His own sons were given no choice; and their sons today still control the great shop and all its ramifications. (p. 292)

It is to this drab foreseen future that Sarah seemed to be offering an alternative. Indeed, as Charles was painfully to learn, Sarah's offer never went beyond the realization that he was free to choose Ernestina, convention, safety and rationality, or reject them and so choose damnation. Although Charles comes to understand the theoretical principle of necessary freedom during his tormented soliloquy in the church at Exeter after the climatic encounter with Sarah, he will be made to wait, again like Nicholas d'Urfé, to learn the real implications of this liberty. Deprived of the presence of Sarah, Charles will undergo one after another the ordeals decreed by social convention: he will lose Sam, the respect of his social equals, and will have to face the revenge of Mr Freeman, signing a document which precludes his ever marrying again and, most significantly, denies him the right to be called a gentleman. Only after two long years of desperate waiting will Charles be allowed by a combination of fortune and remorse (Sam sees Sarah and anonymously informs Charles's prosecutor of her whereabouts) to contact Sarah again.

A lot has been written about the two versions of this last meeting. Once again breaking the illusion of verisimilitude, the narrator openly informs us that he has decided to give us two alternative versions of the novel's ending in order to preserve his objectivity, thus taking to its final consequences his former contention that

I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control (...) your children, colleagues, friends, or even yourself.
(p. 87)

But, as Christopher Ricks (1970: 24) has pointed out, two alternatives are as restrictive as one, given the infinite possibilities of behaviour of the characters, free from the narrator's coercive hand:

To reduce this infinity to two alternatives is no less manipulatory or coercive —though because of its quasi-abnegation it is far more congenial to modern taste— than was the Victorian novelist's reduction of this infinity to one eventuality.

That is, for all his protests of non-intervention, the narrator can only hope to produce an *illusion* of freedom, above all when, as he ironically concedes,

It is futile to show optimism or pessimism, or anything else about it, because we know what has happened since. (p. 348)

To deprive us of any clue that might help us to guess which of the two is the «real» ending, the narrator tosses a coin, allowing hazard to decide for him the order in which the two versions shall be reported. But, of course, nobody is there to see on which side the coin has fallen.

The version the narrator tells in the first place has been called by the critics the «romantic» or «happy» ending. According to it, Charles's intuition that Sarah was not at all mad, that she loved him truly and deserved to be pitied and loved, turns out to be correct. In this light her dragging Charles down into the gutter, making him an outcast as she herself was, is to be interpreted as the necessary bitter pill that would put them both on the same footing, and the two years of painful wait and reliance on hazard to reunite them, as an unshakable faith in the justice and watchful care of a pitiful God:

'But why? What if I had never...'

Her head sank even lower. He barely caught her answer.

'It had to be so.'

And he comprehended: it had been in God's hands, in His forgiveness of their sin. (pp. 392-3)

The version the narrator tells in the second place presents what the critics have called the «modern» or «existentialist» ending. In it Sarah remains the satanic figure of Charles's worst fears. Like Frederick Clegg, she is obsessed with possessing, with exerting power over other creatures:

She could give only to possess; and to possess him —whether because he was what he was, whether because possession was so imperative in her that it had to be constantly renewed, could never be satisfied by one conquest only, whether... but he could not, and would never, know— to possess him was not enough.

(p. 397)

According to this ending, Sarah is one more version of John Fowles's manipulator, and the novel a «variation» on John Fowles's recurrent theme, as Rosemary M. Laughin (1972: 71) points out:

In *The Collector*, a man exercises power over a woman in a physical way only. In *The Magus* a man manipulated another man physically and psychologically primarily through women. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it is a woman, Sarah, who captures and controls a man, Charles, psychologically and sexually.

In *The Collector*, as we have seen, the outcome of physical force on Miranda is death, but we must not forget that Miranda dies only after she refuses to give Clegg a second blow with the axe, thus freely choosing death to the alternative of violence. In *The Magus* the effect of Conchis's manipulation of Nicholas is to allow him to grow from a collector of women into a mature existentialist hero. In the second ending of *The Lieutenant's Woman* Sarah's exertion of power on Charles will likewise provide the means for Charles to reach beyond convention to the ultimate truth of the existentialist intuition:

To realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fix 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.

(p. 399)

If in the first ending chance is presented in Victorian terms as the means by which a watchful Providence works to punish and reward, in the second ending action becomes a matter of personal choice: the painful revelation of Sarah's egotism works as his «cure of disintoxication»: Charles abandons Sarah and chooses unhappiness and freedom.

With these considerations in mind, Robert Burden (1979: 151) has written that «the second of the two endings fulfils the logic of the narrative at a deeper level» and that for this reason this second ending must be viewed as the «real» ending of the novel. Elizabeth D. Rankin (1973: 205) takes a similar line, observing that:

1) It is the only ending which is not undercut by the novel and 2) it is the logical conclusion toward which the novel has been moving since page one (...) It is also the ending which the rest of the novel requires, for it completes the evolutionary process Charles has had to go through to become an existentialist.

In «Ambiguously Ever After» (1981) David Lodge makes his, Jonathan Culler's suggestion that every narrative operates according to a «double logic»:

Namely a logic of events, according to which a novel pretends to unfold a sequence of events that have already happened, revealing a chain of cause and effect, and a logic of coherence, according to which the characters and their actions confirm or complete a certain pattern of meanings. (p. 153)

We may adopt Jonathan Culler's useful terminology instead of the tentative expressions of Robert Burden («the logic of the narrative at a deeper level») and Elizabeth D. Rankin («the logical conclusion toward which the novel has been moving» or «the ending the rest of the novel requires»), for all of them point to the same thing, the realization that John Fowles's second ending conforms to the logic of coherence instead of conforming, as the traditional realist novel usually does, to the logic of events.

In Fowles's first ending the actions of the characters are presented as the result of a chain of causes and effects: repentance and suffering winning God's pardon, Lalage unites Charles and Sarah. But in the second, existentialist ending, the actions of the characters wholly conform to a different logic: the necessity to trim the characters' actions to the subtle pattern of meaning John Fowles has been weaving from the very first page: the novel proposed the fictionalization of the way in which a Victorian gentleman was able to metamorphose into an existentialist, and this is what we are left with in the second ending: a mature hero, free and with fully developed new qualities which will allow him to survive in the new medium.

At the thematic level the logic of coherence displaces the logic of events; at the structural level the narrator's contention that God is revealed in His non-intervention is further reflected in the fact that the last ending is the only «open-ended» one.

Both the «Victorian» ending imagined by Charles during his train trip to Exeter, and the «romantic» ending offered by the narrator, are closed endings projecting themselves into the future, whether this future is plastically realized as a large family and Charles's turning into a businessman, as happens in the first case; or whether it is left to the reader's imagination to draw a picture of the happy future of the triangle formed by Sarah, Charles and Lalage, as happens in the second case.

In the last ending past and future merge into the present moment: Charles walks out of the residence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with no

preconceived ideas about his future, knowing that every step he will take from now on will be the result of a personal, though difficult choice:

And at the gate, the future made present, (Charles) found he did not know where to go. It was as if he found himself reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories. But with the baby's helplessness —all to be recommenced, all to be learnt again! (pp. 397-8)

Charles's discovery that life is a succession of nows is one he had already intuited in London, after the frustrating and disgusting episode with the prostitute named Sarah:

Now he had a far more profound and genuine intuition of the great human illusion about time, which is that its reality is like that of a road —on which one can constantly see where one was and where one probably will be— instead of the truth: that time is a room, a now so close to us that we regularly fail to see it. (p. 278)

By reducing Charles's future to the present moment the second ending presents itself as one containing within itself all those infinite alternatives Christopher Ricks referred to when he accused the narrator of manipulation. In this sense, this ending may be said to function as the abrupt time breaks at the end of *The Collector* and *The Magus*, opening up for the characters a whole range of alternative possibilities of behaviour, thus making true the narrator's desire of non-intervention.

By starting as a Victorian novel and then developing from this into a post-modernist metafictional parody of Victorian conventions, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* may be said to occupy a somewhat isolated position in the history of English fiction. Echoes of the sentimental novel, of Tennyson, Jane Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Arnold, Stuart Mill and a hundred other Victorian writers and thinkers massively press on the novel with the shameless pleasure of conscious and deliberate pastiche, but only one Victorian novelist is openly acknowledged as a direct, major influence: at a certain moment in the novel, the narrator refers to Thomas Hardy and to the unhappy triangle formed by the writer himself, his cousin Tryphena and his wife Lavinia. As the narrator points out, Hardy had to choose between an obscurely unnatural and socially disadvantageous marriage to his beloved Tryphena or a socially appropriate match with Lavinia Gifford. For reasons not yet fully revealed, Hardy chose the second course of action, only to repent it the rest of his life. As the narrator further observed, the personal drama provided Hardy with one recurrent theme for his novels, and, we may add, for his *Wessex Tales*.

As I have shown elsewhere (Onega: 1983), five out of the seven tales in this series are stories of matrimonial unhappiness in which frustration and disharmony are the outcome of a mistake in the choice of partner. Recurrently a hero or a heroine faced with having to choose between love and social advantage, mistakes social profit for happiness and condemns himself or herself to a sterile and frustrating marriage. On other occasions, when the hero falls in love and decides to attach himself to the beloved one, tragedy often arises due to social and psychological barriers. It seems as if in Hardy, no matter how you choose, human happiness is always threatened by the combined forces of social convention and bad luck.

The French Lieutenant's Woman reproduces, then, a wholly Hardian situation: if Charles chooses Ernestina his felicity will be blighted by the memory of Sarah, as he well understands in his mental reconstruction of this possibility; but choosing Sarah does not necessarily imply choosing happiness, as he is painfully to learn. Charles's inability to foresee how miserable he will be by choosing Sarah is similar to Jude's inability to fully understand the terms of his relationship with Sue Brideshead: Jude and Charles make the same mistake of trying to make the women they love conform to their own idea of them. Charles becomes aware of this fact at the end of the novel, after his solitary journeys abroad, when,

He became increasingly unsure of the frontier between the real Sarah and the Sarah he had created in so many such dreams.

(p. 367)

Sarah's baffling double nature, her ability to appear both as victim and manipulator, can be interpreted then as the expression of the radical ambiguity of woman, an ambiguity John Fowles has also tried to express in, for example, the «oxymoron quality of Alison» or, more elaborately, in the splitting into twins, in *The Magus*. This ambiguity is present throughout in *Jude the Obscure* and, as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we may say that the source of strain and unhappiness stems in them from the man's inability to fully grasp the complexity of the woman, and from his insistence that she conform to his own illusory idea of her.

We may carry further the parallels between *Jude The Obscure* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: Both Sue and Sarah are unusually intelligent, they consider themselves equal to men, care nothing for conventions and are at a given point identified with the prototype of the New Woman. Both of them provoke tumultuous passions in their respective lovers, but would only yield to them as a means of keeping them in their power: Sue to make Jude forget about Arabella; Sarah to separate Charles from Ernestina. At the end of the novels, both of them

abandon their lovers after they have turned the situation up-side-down, placing their lovers in the position they themselves were in, and most important of all, they are both responsible for their lover's leap into the void, having seen the radical absurdity of life, which causes Jude's lapse into nihilism and suicide and Charles's conversion to an existentialist.

The echoes of Hardy in John Fowles's novels are deep and pervasive. Not only, as we have seen, at the thematic level, but also structurally in the way *The French Lieutenant's Woman* unfolds always showing Sarah in the penumbra, a mysterious figure only imperfectly drawn, and most frustrating to women readers, much more the product of the mental—or literary—fantasy of a man than a real human being. Sue's unexpected *volte face* at the end of *Jude the Obscure*, when she adjures her ideas in order to go back to her first husband, has often been denounced by the critics as little consistent with her temperament, as essentially contrived. Yet, it shows in practice the full extent of her unpredictability and, like Sarah's unexpected disappearance from the Endicott Family Hotel, has to remain unjustified.

If we are to place *The French Lieutenant's Woman* somewhere in the history of English fiction, it is here, after Hardy, that it naturally comes. After the happy ending of «The Distracted Preacher» that Hardy wrote in April 1879, we find a note he added in May 1912 which may help us to understand why Hardy remains in so many senses a direct forerunner of the fiction of John Fowles. The note reads:

The ending of this story with the marriage of Lizzy and the minister was almost *de rigueur* in the English magazine at the time of writing. But at this late date, thirty years after, it may not be amiss to give the ending that would have been preferred by the writer to the convention above. Moreover it corresponds more closely with incidents of which the tale is a vague and flickering shadow. Lizzy did not, in fact, marry the minister, but much to her credit in the author's opinion—stuck to Jim the smuggler, and emigrated with him after their marriage, an expatrial step forced upon him by his adventurous antecedents. They both died in Winsconsin between 1870 and 1860. (Hardy, 1976: 143)

Hardy yields here to the temptation of breaking the Victorian convention to give us a less happy, but more «real» and «historically truthful» version of his tale. This is exactly what John Fowles does in the second ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and for the same basic reason, with the only difference that, since Hardy was a Victorian, his second ending is as neatly closed as the first.

By rejecting an ending which conforms to the logic of events, in order to give his readers a more «truthful» ending organized according to the logic of coherence, Hardy proves to be, besides the thematic forerunner of Fowles's, the sharer of his intuition that breaking the rules of one convention is both necessary and profitable.

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