

Fictional Self-Consciousness in John Fowles's "The Ebony Tower"

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JOHN FOWLES HAS STATED THAT *The Ebony Tower's* working title was *Variations*,¹ and Kerry McSweeney has demonstrated convincingly that the fictions do present variations on the themes, motifs, dramatic situations, and narrative techniques of the three preceding novels.² That Fowles intentionally reworked certain features of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Magus*, and *The Collector* in *The Ebony Tower* suggests another respect in which the novella and short stories are variations. In varying ways they all manifest a high degree of fictional self-consciousness and make their forms as works of art aspects of their contents. As Robert Alter states, such works to some extent "draw our attention to fictional form as a consciously articulated entity rather than a transparent container of 'real' events."³ In other words, the fictional reflexiveness dispels the illusion of a believable human world and directs our attention to the artificiality of the stories as fabricated structures composed of words. This foregrounding of the contrived nature of the fictions undermines the traditional view that the novel and its briefer kin — the novella and the short story — have a privileged relationship to reality, a special openness to the stuff of life.

Fowles's strategy, then, is defensive; it betrays his feeling that the significance of narrative art has somehow been called into question. The self-consciousness of his stories reflects the fear prevalent amongst contemporary writers that the resources of fiction no longer lend themselves to the discovery of important truths about life, the fear that fictions can no longer serve a redemptive purpose. Fowles goes so far as to liken the novelist's situation to a collapse of religious faith:

we're all so self-conscious these days. We can't believe in our own fiction. Only the Victorians believed in their own fiction. The distancing is symptomatic of a crisis of faith that's happening in the novel as it already has in religion.⁴

Fowles is obviously not saying here that Victorian writers believed in the literal truth of the stories they invented, whereas he cannot. Presumably George Eliot no more believed in the actual existence of Dorothea Brooke than Fowles does in that of Sarah Woodruff. What Fowles means is that contemporary writers have lost the confidence of their nineteenth-century forebears that fictions may comment in an important way on life and have a deep effect on readers. This is what Fowles's self-conscious violations of the illusion of reality signify: not the trite recognition that his stories have no basis in history, but rather that they might have no significant metaphoric relationship to life.

One symptom of the crisis of faith of which Fowles speaks is the erosion of the novelist's sense of his own authority. He no longer has the assurance that fictionalizing can be undertaken in good faith, since, as Alain Robbe-Grillet assures us, the novelist writes in a general atmosphere of doubt concerning the philosophic assumptions which once sanctioned novel writing.⁵ Plot, for example, which once seemed to be an indispensable convention of the novel, has come under fire on the grounds that it is a relic of an age when people believed in destiny, in a God who ensured that things ultimately worked out. Fowles, in fact, has voiced his unhappiness with the traditional analogy of the novelist as a god presiding over a fictional world. Since he believes that the metaphysical assumptions upon which the analogy is based have collapsed, leaving man in a position of uncertainty, he would like to reject the comparison. But he cannot. "The novelist is still a god," states his narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, "since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely)."⁶ But if Fowles in his capacity as creator cannot help but play god, he can, by employing alienating devices, disrupt the illusion that his fictional worlds are real and solid. By so doing, he questions the validity of the very enterprise he is engaged in.

Fictional self-consciousness, though, is not just a method by which Fowles affirms the reality of his predicament as a writer; it is also a way of trying to overcome the dilemma. For, if the overt artificiality of his stories expresses doubt about his capacity as an artist to represent important facets of human life, the self-referentiality also amounts to a form of self-exploration in which the quest to capture a meaningful reality is renewed. While seeming to despair of the redemptive power of his own imagination, then, Fowles actually celebrates its capacity to engage life in an important way. In writing the kind of fiction which exposes its own artifices, he only seems to suggest that his work is alienated from life's reality. What he actually implies is that there is no discoverable reality beyond the various kinds of structures which man creates to interpret life. One "cannot describe reality," Fowles states in an essay, "only give metaphors that indicate it,"⁷ and in *The Aristos*, his self portrait in ideas, he makes the following comment:

The 'real' reality is a meaningless particularity, a total incoherence, a ubiquitous isolation, a universal disconnection. . . . Our interpretations of reality are not 'the' reality, any more than the blankness of the paper is the drawing. Our drawings, our equations, are ultimately pseudo-realities, but those are the only realities that concern us.⁸

"Reality," then, is not an *a priori* condition which art strives feebly and unsuccessfully to approximate. Rather, Fowles holds that "reality" consists of a complex of perceptions, interpretations, and structurings, of which art is one of the most prominent and significant. If art is finally just baseless illusion, then so is life, but Fowles does not believe that this state of affairs should trouble us. On the contrary, he celebrates what he believes to be the fictional nature of reality and emphasizes the potential that this awareness affords to imbue all of life with the beauty, power, and heightened significance of good art. He self-consciously offers his own stories as paradigmatic images of the sort of imaginatively rich fictions which can compose life.

The recognition that the world which confronts us is a creation of the imagination and not a *donnée* is liberating because, Fowles believes, it allows us to replace received ideas and lifeless

metaphors with rich and vital ones. *The Ebony Tower* suggests that it is an imaginative failure to impose a fixed order and certainty where in actuality there is mystery and unending change. Because Fowles believes that mystery stimulates creativity, he subverts the reader's escapist desire to submit naively and whole-heartedly to the reality of his stories. He uses self-conscious devices to jolt the reader out of his complacent desire to absorb the fictions passively, as though they were unalterable records of objective fact. Fowles is concerned that his work serve, not as an alternative to the reader's imaginative activity, but as a stimulus for it. The metafictional aspects of *The Ebony Tower* periodically make the reader acutely aware that the book is a fabricated artifact, the product of one man's imagination, and not a transmission of actual events involving real people. But this knowledge has a paradoxical effect. Rather than destroying our capacity to enjoy and discover significance in the human dramas represented, a sensitivity to *The Ebony Tower's* artifices guides interpretations of the stories and, ultimately, enhances our pleasure in them.

The novella which gives the volume its title deals overtly with art, dramatizing how it may be used either to make life more vital or to deaden it. Although the story conforms to the strictures of formal realism, "The Ebony Tower" parades its own character as a fiction by intentionally revealing that it is patterned after earlier works of literature, those written both by Fowles himself and by others. Medieval romance, and in particular Marie De France's *Eliduc*, is an important influence.⁹ Another obvious influence is *The Magus*, which, like "The Ebony Tower," features an elderly preceptorial character who initiates the protagonist into erotic experiences which have the power to transform his life radically.¹⁰ As mouthpieces for the author, both Conchis and Breasley are ironic novelist-surrogates. Both subvert the authority of the writer whom they represent, and so manifest Fowles's anxieties concerning the significance of his art form. Conchis, whose status as a sage is weakened by suggestions that he is a charlatan, explicitly repudiates the novel as a potentially meaningful art form; Breasley is not a writer but a painter whose childish posing and out-of-date bohemianism diminish him as a

figure of wisdom. Moreover, he is not, as a novelist must be, adept with words: "He's not verbal at all" (p. 32), says Diana, who must translate Breasley's inarticulate ideas on art for David at the dinner table, as if they were spoken in a foreign language.

Nevertheless, just as Conchis, notwithstanding his dishonesty and trickery, does actually impart the ideas and values Fowles desires the reader to accept, so Breasley, despite his superficial absurdity and lack of fluency, is an embodiment of an approach to art which is, in its essentials, championed by Fowles.¹¹ Moreover, just as the godgame Conchis sets in motion on Phraxos is a reflexive image of *The Magus* as a whole, so Breasley's Coëtminais paintings, as the narrator describes them, constitute self-conscious incarnations of the sort of vital, mystery-laden experience which David Williams undergoes at Breasley's *manoir* and finally rejects:

There was a feeling . . . of a fully absorbed eclecticism, something that had been evidenced all through his career, but not really come to terms with before Coëtminais; a hint of Nolan, though the subject matter was far less explicit, more mysterious and archetypal . . . 'Celtic' had been a word frequently used, with the recurrence of the forest motif, the enigmatic figures and confrontations. (p. 12)

Like Breasley's paintings, Fowles's fiction is eclectic, manifesting an awareness of its place in the literary tradition and defining itself in relation to particular works. Williams's story similarly occurs in the middle of a forest and features "enigmatic figures and confrontations." Breasley and the two girls are ciphers whose inter-relationships must be puzzled out by Williams. And, like the scenes painted by Breasley, the situation Williams encounters at Coëtminais is mysterious in a way that suggests a deep significance.

Fowles's transposition of his metafictional concerns into the terms of painting is an oblique way of drawing attention to the story's fictionality without detracting from its realism. Since all of the characters are practitioners of the visual arts (even the Freak is a former graphic art student [p. 37]), the numerous allusions to the productions of famous painters occur naturally as the narrative unfolds. Indeed, so appropriate to the novella's

dramatic situation are the constant references to paintings that only in retrospect does the reader become aware of the great extent to which Fowles has appealed to the history and values of art, as opposed to the reader's "direct" experience of life, to mediate the story. Because Williams, "The Ebony Tower"'s centre of consciousness, has a painter's eye and sensitivity as well as an art historian's erudition, he instinctively draws upon his knowledge to provide a vocabulary and scale of values with which to interpret his experiences. For example, during the picnic in the forest he perceives the naked girls and the idyllic setting in the following manner: "Another echo, this time of Gauguin; brown breasts and the garden of Eden. Strange, how Coët and its way of life seemed to compose itself so naturally into such moments, into the faintly mythic and timeless. The unctemporary" (p. 55).

This passage details an experience of a kind connected throughout the story with the authentic exercise of the imagination. Art is not, of course, always associated with the paradisaical, but the novella does consistently present artistic modes of perception as means of heightening reality and enhancing the capacity to live fully. For those who have been exposed to the artifacts which constitute it, the artistic tradition which stretches back over the centuries can be called upon to aid in disciplining and focusing the imagination. Invoking works of art — which are from one perspective artificial and unreal — is, as Fowles is well aware, a paradoxical way to make life more real, and the story's reflexiveness underscores this paradox by making the reader conscious that the novella itself is an artifice. The reader is thus reminded that the story's only true function is to spur his own imagination, not to serve as a comfortable substitute for its exercise.

The fate of David Williams, which is intended as a negative example for the reader, illustrates how difficult and risky it is to live an intensely creative life. There is considerable irony in the fact that Williams's education and vocation as a painter are designed to facilitate just the sort of liberating imaginative activity to which he finally proves unequal. His failure as an artist to tap the sources of mystery and vitality is crystallized for

both himself and the reader in his aborted love affair with Diana. It might initially seem that, in emphasizing the transforming potential of this erotically-charged encounter, Fowles is reductively and naively espousing the redemptive powers of sex. But, as Williams's agonized response to his failure makes explicit, this is not the case:

Even as he stood there he knew it was a far more than sexual experience, but a fragment of one that reversed all logic, process, that struck new suns, new evolutions, new universes out of nothingness. It was metaphysical: something beyond the girl; an anguish, a being bereft of a freedom whose true nature he had only just seen.

For the first time in his life he knew more than the fact of being; but the passion to exist. (p. 95)

Williams's sexual attraction to Diana releases and concentrates broader energies and stimulates insights which transcend their sexual origins. McSweeney notices that in each of Fowles's books a woman serves as the point of contact with mystery and the unknown and so stimulates the protagonist's imagination.¹² In this connection we remember what Breasley explains to Williams about the derivation of his nickname for Diana, the Mouse: that it is a disguised version of the word "muse" (p. 74). Having missed the opportunity to establish a sexual relationship with her, Williams, both as an artist and a man, is denied access to the world of freedom and enlarged possibilities associated with her. It is worth reiterating that the sexual aspect of his failure is, as he himself comes to realize, "merely the symbol, not the crux of the matter. . . . Bungling the adventure of the body was trivial, part of the sexual comedy. But he had never really had, or even attempted to give himself, the far greater chance" (p. 101).

A paradox similar to one apparent in *The Magus* is evident in Williams's situation: just as the danger Conchis builds into the godgame finally proves beneficial to Urfe rather than destructive, so the threat to the carefully established order of Williams's life, to his safe marriage and comfortable self-image as painter and critic, has the capacity ultimately to promote his own personal and artistic growth. A personable, intelligent, and articulate young man who has achieved outward success as an artist,

teacher, critic, and husband, Williams seems at first to have achieved an admirable integration of the various facets of his life; but he comes to realize that he lacks wholeness of being. There is irony in the ostensible gap between Breasley's life, outwardly vulgar and ridiculous, and his work, distinguished and profound, for, both as a man and an artist, Breasley, even in old age, can tap a fount of mystery, vibrancy, and passion which is closed to Williams. It is true that Williams's reticence with Diana stems in part from his moral decency and sense of fair play. Consequently, his failure to begin an affair with her should not be viewed as wholly negative.¹³ It is equally true, nevertheless, that the novella focuses on Williams's existential defeat, not his moral success. Unlike Urfe, who begins the demanding process of joining Conchis as one of the elect, Williams lacks the courage to put Breasley's lessons into practice.

The second story, "Poor Koko," is a self-conscious fiction which overcomes forces hostile to its existence by incorporating them. As he does in *The Collector* and *The Magus*, Fowles extends the boundaries of the thriller by evoking the sense, not only that his protagonist is in danger, but also that the story itself is menaced. By so doing, Fowles is able to turn a felt threat to the worth of his vocation to creative use by building what troubles him into the form and content of the story. The book burning, which constitutes the narrative's climax, is an image of the apocalyptic assault on the novelist's enterprise which we have come to expect contemporary authors to register.

Whereas Fowles signals the reflexiveness of "The Ebony Tower" by making Breasley's paintings reflect what Williams experiences, the self-awareness of "Poor Koko" as a fiction is communicated by its literate, highly self-conscious narrator. Placed in an extreme situation, he is forced to examine his most basic values and beliefs, especially those pertaining to the role of art in life. The story as a self-referential entity, then, reflects the situation of its protagonist, who also derives creative energy from a hostile force. McSweeney argues that the effect of the calamity on the narrator, whose narrow range of experience has stunted his existential growth, is ultimately beneficial: he "is precipitated

into at least some awareness of mystery, contingency and enigma. And that is surely all to the good."¹⁴

Upon realizing that he is the victim of an inarticulate burglar who cites Marx in a ludicrous attempt to justify his crime, the narrator believes that the only positive result will be the acquisition "of a story to dine out on for months to come" (p. 150), one which, presumably, will denigrate the thief and affirm the narrator's own superiority. But rather than confirming his self-righteous and inadequate world view, the narrator's frightening experience actually broadens his outlook. His confidence in his own understanding of life shaken, he is driven to make sense of his misfortune by casting the incident into imaginative form, not as a trivial anecdote, but rather as a short story with real depth and resonance. His work as a man of letters is enriched as a consequence of his experience, and as a person his wisdom is increased. The burning of his Peacock manuscript energizes his art, which in turn informs his life. And of course the story's reflexiveness never quite permits the reader to lose sight of the paradox that the narrator's life is Fowles's art. We are reminded that the real-seeming encounter between the bookish narrator and mysterious young thief belongs, not to the realm of "life" or objective fact, but to that of imaginative literature. The hoped-for result is that the reader, who, like the narrator, craves the certainty of absolute truth, will be moved to sharpen his insight through his own imaginative confrontation with mystery and hazard.

The situation of the narrator prior to the burglary in one respect resembles that of Urfe in *The Magus*. The narrator, who confesses openly "that books . . . have been my life rather more than life itself" (p. 139), has arrested his own personal development by using literature to isolate himself from certain aspects of life. In particular the narrator fears and tries to keep at bay what he considers to be the sins of our own age, "all that was not humane, intelligent and balanced" (p. 140). His ideals are worthy, but finally inadequate; McSweeney is right to avow "that the narrator has made himself smugly secure in a cocoon of stale metaphors and hand-me-down mandarin values."¹⁵ Just as Conchis's godgame in *The Magus* breaks through the protective

aesthetic defences Urfe has erected against what is vital and morally challenging, so "Poor Koko" 's narrator is invaded, in the person of the young thief, by just what he has used literature to avoid, the chaotic forces of modernity. As a consequence, he is spurred to exercise his imagination in order to enlarge his understanding sufficiently to incorporate the burglar's apparently wanton act of destruction.

It is interesting and thematically significant that the thief's method of making sense of experience seems to err in a manner which is at once similar to and different from the narrator's. Like the defenceless man of letters, his assailant protects himself from threatening aspects of life by refusing to come to terms with them intellectually or emotionally. Whereas the narrator uses his literary activities as a refuge from what he fears, it is the world of literature, ultimately of language itself, from which the thief is alienated. His evasion of what he does not understand is evident in his cultivation of a clipped, abbreviated conversational style reliant upon jargon, clichés, and stock ideas and in his militant, philistine denial that writing which departs from factual reality can body forth truth. Both symptoms of his mistrust are revealed in his explanation of why (even though he would like to) he has not written a book about his experiences:

'I'd tell it how it really is. Not just this. Everything. The whole scene.'

'Then why don't you try?'

'You're joking.'

'Not at all. Crime fascinates people.'

'Sure. Lovely. Then look who comes knocking on my door.'

'You'd have to disguise actual circumstances.'

'Then it wouldn't be how it is. Right?' (p. 160)

There is considerable irony here, for the burglar's rejection of fiction's claims to truth only serves to underscore that this champion of the factual has no objective reality apart from the story, entirely fictional, which he inhabits. This manifestation of the story's self-referential character does not negate the powerful illusion Fowles creates of the actuality and enormity of the young man's crime. But the self-consciousness of "Poor Koko" as fiction does make the reader aware that its realism is bound up with a

paradox: the illusionistic narrative climaxes with the destruction of a manuscript which, if it is not exactly a reflexive image of the story itself, nonetheless reminds the reader that "Poor Koko" is also a book, or part of one, and not unmediated reality.

The function of the story's self-consciousness as fiction is not simply to illustrate the ambiguous relationship between art and reality. In order to unsettle our habitual assumptions about the nature of things, Fowles desires to create an awareness of the paradox that our conceptions of reality are in the final analysis fictions. But his intention in doing so is to convince the reader of the truth of a second paradox: that in promoting an awareness of the artificiality of art in order to sensitize us to the fictionality of our notions of reality, a work of fiction can ultimately enlarge, rather than diminish, our understanding of what in life is significant and important. Fowles's story does not imply the belief that the fabricated character of our structures of reality necessarily renders them ineffective as means of attaining genuine knowledge about ourselves and the world. Indeed, Fowles suggests that interpretive structures serve our interests best when we recognize their metaphoric nature.

Both the protagonist and antagonist of "Poor Koko" initially lack a real awareness that their conceptions of the world are not objectively true. Owing to his harrowing experience, the narrator, however, does come to a realization of the limits of his understanding, which is broadened as a consequence. The story he narrates is the embodiment of his expanded wisdom. There is irony in his rebuff to the thief's suggestion that his elderly victim write about him ("I'm afraid I couldn't write about something I don't begin to understand" [p. 161]), for the reader sees that the narrator has, in fact, retrospectively begun the process of writing about his tormentor. In doing so the narrator confesses his continuing ability to understand the young man (p. 169) and thus tacitly admits that his account of the thief's motivations is an imaginative speculation, not the literal truth. The reader is thereby reminded that, not merely the narrator's thesis concerning the ultimate cause of the destructive act (the thief's alienation from language itself), but also the entire story is a construct of the imagination. It becomes clear that "Poor Koko" implicitly

pretends to be the narrator's belated attempt to accomplish what he had failed to do earlier: open his world to the thief and aid him in attaining the liberating "gift of word-magic" (p. 175). Behind this illusion stands Fowles, who bestows, in the form of a self-conscious fiction made of words, a like gift to the reader in the hope that it will animate his imagination and broaden the scope of his awareness.

The most overtly self-conscious of all the stories in *The Ebony Tower*, "The Enigma" is a *bravura* performance which infuses the tired mystery story genre with serious artistic purpose. The story proceeds along conventional lines until Jennings, the detective investigating Fielding's mysterious disappearance, interviews Isobel, the girlfriend of the missing M.P.'s son. As a would-be novelist, she is a surrogate for Fowles, and her overt fictionalizing exposes his hidden artistry, reminding the reader that the seemingly authentic story has no factual basis. In the process of telling Jennings her theory that Fielding has secretly committed suicide, Isobel directs attention to the story's fictional status by fantasizing what the reader knows to be actually the case: that "everything to do with the Fieldings, even you and me sitting here now, is in a novel. A detective story. Yes? Somewhere there's someone writing us, we're not real" (p. 221). As McSweeney shows, the analogy Isobel draws between the social and familial roles which have enslaved Fielding and the plotting of a novelist "turns 'The Enigma' into a self-referential story that merges the existential theme and the aesthetic theme into a subtle parable about imagination, mystery and freedom."¹⁶ As in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles fabricates the illusion of an autonomous character beyond his control. His own plotting, then, becomes an image of the deterministic forces against which Fielding has to rebel in order to claim his uniqueness and freedom. But, as in the story which precedes it, Fowles has it both ways in "The Enigma," imparting the illusion of an open ending in order to spark the reader's imagination through the suggestion of mystery, but actually supplying, in the form of the scenario created by Isobel, a resolution which satisfies the requirements of the genre and the reader's desire for finality and clarity.

The story is cleverly double-edged in another aspect as well. A sense of apocalyptic urgency surrounding its composition is suggested in the fact that the central character, absent from beginning to end, has defied his author by vanishing. There is a dark significance in the fact that Fielding apparently chooses to mirror his creator's activity in the act of suicide. And yet, anything but sombre in mood, the story is optimistic in its implications. Fielding's mysterious disappearance serves the interests of life by bringing Jennings and Isobel together and catalyzing their romantic involvement with each other. Like Diana in "The Ebony Tower," Isobel embodies an emotional honesty, sexual attractiveness, and imaginative quickness which make her a source of vitality for her suitor: "He had an immediate impression of someone alive, where everyone else had been dead; of someone who lived in the present, not the past" (p. 209).

The different orientations of Jennings and Isobel regarding the use of the imagination set up a tension between them which Fowles exploits to suggest the paradoxical relationship between fiction and reality. Having run out of leads, Jennings, whose profession dictates that he live by facts, is surprised to find himself enlightened by the theory created by Isobel, a writer at home in the world of the imagination. The effort of the pair to make sense of the only unambiguous fact in their possession — that Fielding has disappeared — by pretending that it is a fiction serves to point up that everything to do with the case really is fictional. But the story's self-consciousness is achieved without the violation of its realism of presentation, and this makes "The Enigma" 's reflexiveness delightfully ironic. Proceeding on the premise that the literary convention requiring mystery stories to conclude with a solution is unrealistic, the following sample of dialogue is dizzily paradoxical in its implications:

'You mean detective stories have to end with everything explained? Part of the rules?'

'The unreality.'

'Then if our story disobeys the unreal literary rules, that might mean it's actually truer to life.' She bit her lips again. 'Leaving aside the fact that it *has* all happened. So it must be true, anyway.'

'I'd almost forgotten that.' (p. 223)

Whereas they pride themselves in concocting a story which breaks unreal literary rules in order to conform to reality, the reader knows that what they take to be reality is an illusion created by the story they are in. The irony is compounded in that the story they create — their account of Fielding's suicide — constitutes a solution to the mystery of the story they inhabit, making it, according to their own criterion, less realistic.

The playful self-referentiality of "The Enigma" serves a serious thematic purpose. As John Barth, following Jorge Luis Borges, holds, when characters become aware of or direct attention to the fiction they are in, it troubles the reader ontologically by sensitizing him to the fiction he is in.¹⁷ In other words, Fowles hopes that the reader's complacent assumptions about the nature of his world will be mirrored in his passive acceptance of the reality created by the story, and that both will be shaken when the fictional machinery is exposed. Employing the analogy used by Isobel, one could say that Fowles hopes that the reader will seize his freedom by rejecting ready-made plots — socially conditioned thoughts and behaviour patterns — and becoming the author of his own narrative. Such a programme is fraught with risk, as the extreme and self-destructive behaviour of Fielding is meant to show, but Fowles's fictions all imply that only by confronting such dangers can one achieve a life of fullness and vitality.

Unlike "The Enigma," which overturns its initially dire implications regarding the current state of fiction, the last story in the volume, "The Cloud," suggests that the crisis often said to afflict narrative art in our time is both real and grave. "The Cloud" describes a breakdown in the capacity of fictions to help us make sense of life, to aid us in discovering who we are and how we should live. "The Cloud" also suggests that it is when fictions lose their capacity to nourish life that we become conscious of how vitally important they are to us. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," says Joan Didion in "The White Album," and her essay recounts a troubled period "when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself."¹⁸ By casting this disturbing sort of experience into the form of a moving, imaginative fiction, Fowles accomplishes the paradoxical feat of surmounting the difficulty by affirming its reality.

The collapse of the power of fictions to impart meaning to life is focused in the plight of Catherine, whose recent bereavement and insight into the hollowness of the conventional sources of consolation available to her make her especially vulnerable. Like Fielding's, her dilemma apparently leads to suicide; but her situation is in two respects the opposite of his. Until his disappearance Fielding had passively accepted, as if they were inevitable facts of nature, the deadening narrative patterns imposed on him by his social class; Catherine, on the other hand, is morbidly conscious of the baselessness of all the fictions which structure life. And, whereas Fielding's self-destruction is positive in the sense that it is the expression of his desire to reject the meaningless roles imposed by society and create his own destiny, the fragmentation of Catherine's personality is the result of her inability to discover a plot which can impart significance and shape to her life. "One is given to theories of language," she broods, "of fiction, of illusion; and also to silly fancies. Like dreaming one is a book without its last chapters, suddenly: one is left forever on that last incomplete page" (p. 224).

"The Cloud," then, is directly concerned with the inadequacy of the fictions available in modern society as vehicles for self-discovery, and the story also describes a breakdown in communication owing to the incompatibility of the various fictions by which the characters order their lives. The presentation of Paul as weak and ineffectual seems designed to complement the suggestions that his best-selling novels do not provide meaningful imaginative experiences. His wife Bel, although not unattractive as a person, is also unable to underpin her life with imaginative structures which the reader can take seriously. As McSweeney notices,¹⁹ the story satirizes her fuzzy and rather smug conception of "a beneficent order of things" presided over by "some dim equivalent of herself" (p. 275). The fictions by which Peter lives emerge as both trivial and abhorrent. Bound by crass notions of status and success, he wastes his energy on barren television productions in order to use and dominate others and aggrandize himself: "One didn't really care what people thought, cutting through other people's crap was what one was about; getting

things done, flannelling here, riding roughshod there; have the game played by one's own quick rules" (p. 277).

The story's thematic concern with failures in communication comes explicitly to the fore in Catherine's synopsis of Roland Barthes's theories (pp. 259-62). The following discussion of the deviousness of sign systems and the corruptions and distortions to which they are vulnerable attunes the reader to the misunderstandings which poison the inter-personal relations of the story's characters, who are perpetually at odds with one another. This discord lies just beneath the surface of what seems to be a harmonious picture of a group of relatives and friends enjoying a picnic in the lovely French countryside. In fact, "The Cloud" builds the jarring nature of the social intercourse it depicts into its very form and texture through its disjointed, mannered method of narrative presentation. Barry Olshen describes how the story initially unsettles the reader by withholding crucial expository information and hinting at unresolved conflicts amongst the characters.²⁰ Throughout, the focus of narrative consciousness jumps without preparation or warning from one character to another, buffeting the reader to make him feel the effect of the buried hostility amongst the characters even as it reveals the sources of these tensions.

The storytelling substitute for Fowles within "The Cloud" is, of course, Catherine, and the charming fairytale she creates for her niece is an ironic image of Catherine's own circumstances. She desperately wants to believe that the story of the solitary princess who awaits imminent aid from the heroic prince conforms to her own situation, which is also one of loss and suffering. But Catherine's fate cruelly reverses that of her heroine, who expects the arrival of her lover "any day now. Very soon" (p. 274). Shortly after Catherine tells the story, the ironic counterpart of the prince appears in the form of Peter, warning her about adders. (This detail associates Peter with evil.) Rather than coming to her rescue, he sodomizes her, thus increasing her despair and, presumably, precipitating her suicide. Bereft of sustaining fictions, she suffers a grim fate, but her plight is itself material for a story with the power to impart clarity to our lives.

As my analysis attempts to show, the richness of *The Ebony Tower's* fictions is owing in no small way to the varied and creative forms their self-consciousness takes and to the thematic meanings Fowles derives from them. He makes his stories explore and comment upon themselves, not because it is a fashionable literary procedure, but because such a method enables him to express his deepest imaginative concerns in a way that actively involves the reader in their significance.

NOTES

- 1 John Fowles, "A Personal Note," *The Ebony Tower* (Scarborough: New American Library of Canada, 1974), p. 109. All future references to *The Ebony Tower* are to this edition.
- 2 Kerry McSweeney, "John Fowles's Variations in *The Ebony Tower*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 8 (1981), pp. 303-24. See also Barry N. Olshen, *John Fowles* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1978), pp. 92-93, 100, 102-03.
- 3 Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1975), p. x.
- 4 Laurence O'Toole, "Fowles' Maddening Books an Escape from an Ugly World," *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, Saturday, 1 October 1977, p. 44.
- 5 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel," *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 22-23.
- 6 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (New York: Signet, 1969), p. 82.
- 7 John Fowles, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," reprinted in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Great Britain: Fontana, 1977), p. 139.
- 8 John Fowles, *The Aristos*, rev. ed. (New York: New American Library, 1979), p. 154.
- 9 See McSweeney's discussion of "The Ebony Tower" as a conscious variation on *Eliduc* and medieval romance in general and also on Fowles's earlier novels. "Fowles's Variations," p. 321. For a discussion of the parallels and differences between *Eliduc* and *The Ebony Tower* see Constance B. Heatt, "Eliduc Revisited: John Fowles and Marie De France," *English Studies in Canada*, 3 (1977), p. 357.
- 10 Fowles has stated explicitly that "The Ebony Tower" "is a kind of realistic version of *The Magus*." See Robert Robinson, "Giving the Reader a Choice—a Conversation with John Fowles," *Listener*, 92 (October 31, 1974), p. 584, col. 1.
- 11 Like Breasley, for instance, Fowles opposes the tendency of many modern artists to exalt themselves by developing personal styles at the expense of humanly significant content. Fowles's nostalgia for the medieval tradition of anonymity on the part of artists is echoed by Breasley: "Never forget

a good picture in my life. . . . "The names, yes. But what's a name. Bit of fiddle in a corner. That's all'" (p. 72). See *The Aristos*, p. 192.

- ¹² McSweeney, pp. 308, 311.
- ¹³ In a recent interview Fowles commented that if Williams had chosen Diana "he might have become a better artist, but he would have betrayed his moral being." Joshua Gilder, "John Fowles: A Novelist's Dilemma," *Saturday Review*, October 1981, p. 39, col. 3.
- ¹⁴ McSweeney, p. 320.
- ¹⁵ McSweeney, p. 319.
- ¹⁶ McSweeney, p. 316.
- ¹⁷ James McKenzie, "Pole-Vaulting in Top Hats: A Public Conversation with John Barth, William Gass, and Ishmael Reed," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22 (1976), p. 145.
- ¹⁸ Joan Didion, "The White Album," *The White Album* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), pp. 11, 12.
- ¹⁹ McSweeney, p. 313.
- ²⁰ Olshen, p. 103.