

stand that rooting this text in the specific context of Canadian poetry is vital to Banting's body of work.

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WORK CITED

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Thomas C. Foster. *Understanding John Fowles*. Columbia: U. of South Carolina P, 1994. Pp. ix, 186. No price.

A few weeks before writing this, I was driving in Dorset and was drawn into making a detour away from the main road via Lyme Regis—partly, no doubt, to revisit the complex and compressed town centre, with its steep hills, crazy twists and turns, roads no wider than the car. But as I looked out at the Cobb, half hoping to see a solitary woman standing at the end, then drove close to John Fowles's house, I realized it was more than a desire to see the town. I have been reading and teaching Fowles for thirty years now, and persistent rumours of his bad health—the book under review mentions the "mild stroke" in 1988 which resulted in the end of his career as a novelist (3)—with the realization that there may well be no new fiction from him, had somehow pulled me to pay a useless tribute, to thank him. There, on the B3052, I felt both loss and gratitude as well as anger that Fowles was only 59 when his last novel appeared and already 39 when his first was published. Too short. Too short by far for a writer with such a brimming imagination, who once said that his fantasy was to "write a book in every genre" (Olshen 2). There must, one feels, be so much more unwritten.

If we had to sum up Fowles as writer, which I cannot begin here, we would have to cover wide territories—Jung, Freud, reason, socialism, existentialism, mysticism, mythology, authorial responsibility, feminism, game-playing, trickery, spatio-temporal tension, visual imagery, didacticism, rootedness and exile, history, daring trapeze-acts with narrative, Alain Fournier, hazard, levels of education, elitism, the health of society, freedom in its widest senses. And more. Fowles is a complex fictioneer, rich, challenging, wide-ranging, and it is sad that today his name is invoked less and less in discussion of the contemporary novel.

It could be, I suppose, that people have forgotten, or never known, the incredible cult of Fowles (from 1965 to 1978 especially), an intense popularity which extended from graduate seminars to the commuter bus, from MLA sessions to the beach. Well over three million paperback copies of both *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have been sold—I do not know hardcover figures—and *The Collector*,

*Daniel Martin*, and *The Ebony Tower* all did extremely well. *Mantissa* and *A Maggot* probably less so, I would guess, but still will have outsold most novels of their time. Fowles was a gigantic literary figure just ten years ago. Has this been forgotten? More likely, I think, is that today's silence derives from an inability to position him within the obsessive theoretical debates which still rack our discipline.

A postmodernist before his time, an experimenter with narrative, a feminist, a gesturer towards anti-realist ambiguities—it might seem easy to place him. But Fowles, playing the “god-game,” remains slippery and elusive. He is too playful and too rooted in realism—in character, mimesis, the delights of pure story-telling—to quench the avid new theorist's thirst, for all his games, his questioning of fictional authority, his rigorous examination of the limits of realism. He insists on rejecting, while simultaneously taunting us with, mystico-chemico-astrologico-Foucault poetics and beliefs. He is always a rationalist and a socialist. Like a balloon on a drafty floor, he will not settle long enough to be examined, put into one place.

Foster's book belongs to a series called “Understanding British Literatures”—others discuss Paul West, Wesker, Lessing, Greene, Murdoch and Amis (père, I'm glad to say)—“aimed at a level of general accessibility . . . identifying and explicating . . . material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism and response to experience” (ix). In other words, something to satisfy everybody except the advanced scholar, expert, or theorist. The problem with such a mandate is, of course, finding and sustaining a useful and consistent level.

It would be easy to take this book to task for some omissions in the Bibliography, for Foster's refusal to pursue various half-formed but juicy insights, for the amount of plot-summary, for the under-use of Fowles's *The Aristos*, for explaining too much or too little, for making the knee-jerk and not very useful comparison with Hardy. Whoever reads this will find some frustration, but most of these problems come with series territory, and, all in all, Foster has done a very commendable job.

Above all, he likes and responds deeply to Fowles. A major novelist is here—in that word now unfortunately sneered at by so many—*appreciated*. Foster examines the life, the critical responses to Fowles, and then, in order, the novels and stories. He cannot be expansive, but he is careful and thorough. He misses nothing major. His comments are illuminating and often subtle and incisive as he works through the development of thought and technique, putting each work (and Fowles as novelist) in useful context. He is particularly strong on *A Maggot*, arguing persuasively that with its overlapping narratives it “calls little attention to itself as postmodern gamesmanship. Rather it reminds readers of the origins of the novel” (141). His pulling together of the rich web of *Daniel Martin* is masterly. His comparisons of Sarah and Ernestina take us right to the quick of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

In short, this is a useful, sensible book, which will help students negotiate and enjoy the seductive meanderings and mysticisms within Fowles's domains. Nowhere does Foster cross lines of sense. Not for him the rhapsodic peelings of John Gardner, who claimed in 1977, in *The Saturday Review*, that Fowles is "the only writer in English who has the power, range, knowledge, and wisdom of a Tolstoi or James" (22). Foster insists more quietly on the delights of the reader's journey through Fowles's enormous inventions, mysteries, and at times loosely and confusingly fenced imaginative kingdoms. He finds, and explains, the real toads in the imaginary gardens.

I am reminded of a letter Fowles wrote to a student of mine—ah, the writer's lot—recommending that the student be less pretentious and that he study the first three letters of Conchis's name, as he is "a trickster with a purpose"; and of a graduate teaching assistant who hitch-hiked to Lyme, found the author's house, rang the bell, and was given a drink and an hour of discussion—an epiphany in his life, and, as with the student who wrote, something which freed him to read and write and teach in a new way. So appropriate that, since Fowles's concern, as Foster knows, is, overwhelmingly, whatever else decorates and weaves around it, baffles, gives wonder, for individual freedom and how to bestow it and receive it. This is the centre for him—"once artists ran to the centre; now they fly to the circumferences" (*Aristos* 52)—however bizarre and fertile the ambiguities and the flirtations with non-realist modes.

The B3052, through Lyme Regis, is a magic road, full of twists, steep plunges, exhilarating and unexpected sights, surprising places. The journey cannot be made quickly, but the delights are real, unique, and lasting. Those who want a quick, direct, and much less unorthodox route should avoid this road, avoid John Fowles's fiction, and join the crowds in the diesel fumes of the A30.

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