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# A Twentieth-century Sense of "Election" : The Works of John Fowles

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# A TWENTIETH-CENTURY SENSE OF "ELECTION": THE WORKS OF JOHN FOWLES

BY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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Jerry Cooley

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# INTRODUCTION

Unanimous praise for a writer's work is very rare, and probably non-existent. The differences of opinion regarding the work can take several forms: evenly divided between positive and negative, or weighted in favor of one or the other. The latter is the case with the novels of John Fowles.

Although the early criticism of such works as The Collector (C), The Magus, and The French Lieutenant's Woman (FLW) was predominantly negative, the emphasis now is mostly positive. The early criticism was commonly a review, which usually offered only a superficial outline of the plot. The trend, however, has been to examine Fowles's work in depth--theses and dissertations are being written about it, numerous books are being published, and numerous journal articles are appearing (the entire Spring 1985 issue of Modern Fiction Studies was devoted to Fowles). Critics are beginning to take Fowles seriously.

The primary subject for this study is Fowles's first-written but second-published novel, The Magus. With the possible exception of Mantissa (M), it seems to be Fowles's most baffling work. For some critics the confusion caused by the novel's convoluted plot and seemingly endless series of illusions is a point against it. The reviewer in Time, for example, writes that "The

Magus fails because [Fowles] spins a flimsy, far-flung net of narrative and then gets all tangled up in it" ("Spidery Spirit" 92). Other critics have been more sardonic. The reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement calls it "a silly book and an unhealthy one" ("No Wise" 381). Walter Allen calls it "pretentious" and "grossly self-indulgent" (65). Barry Olshen comments that

> The themes do not require quite so much exposition and mystification. There is definitely too much hocus-pocus, even for the experienced magician, and Fowles seems to overindulge his delight in playing with the reader, in leading him down blind alleys to dead ends. (57)

Olshen, however, is not a "one-sided" critic described earlier, for he amends his negative mood with these positive comments:

> It is eclectic and synthetic, associative and densely allusive. Woven together to create its intricate fabric are the elements of a variety of literary forms, including the thriller, the Gothic novel, the traditional quest story, the erotic romance, and the philosophical novel. . . . This extraordinary amalgam of content and styles still manages to function as a relatively cohesive whole. (56)

Joseph Epstein calls it simply "an exceptional novel" and "a civilizing act" (29). Eliot Fremont-Smith describes it as "a stunner, magnificent in ambition, supple and gorgeous in execution." He also writes: "Lush, compulsive, richly inventive, eerie, provocative, impossibly theatrical--it is, in spite of itself, convincing" (45).

These comments are merely superficially descriptive. The significance in Fowles's work is unrelated to whether the novel is overly long or leads the reader down too many blind alleys or even whether it is too "self-indulgent." These seem to be only minor annoyances. The main thrust of any examination of The Magus should determine if Fowles is saying anything of value or using form creatively. That opinion, too, is divided.

In his review, G. Davenport writes that "The Magus is as entertaining as a circus, but it tells us nothing about the nature of humanity" (696). Martin Shuttleworth disagrees, saying:

> One sees exactly what Mr. Fowles is trying to do: how he is trying to make the connections between the real horrors [of] our times and the swamps at the bottom of each man's mind. (668)

Glendy Culligan writes that if we take the novel as a metaphor, then we must see it as a failure because

> as a metaphor it is not only overextended but hopelessly mixed, a jumble of vast platitudes neither systematized nor disguised by their elaborate staging. If, in last resort, we simply judge the novel at face value as a story of sin and redemption, we can grant it originality and yet find that it lacks the dimension implied by its massive paraphernalia. At this level the novel fails in elementary human terms, for Nicholas never justifies the care lavished on him by heroine, magician, or author. From first to last, he is mean, petty, commonplace, a bore. (58)

In Fowles's fiction and his philosophy, which are the subjects of his non-fiction book The Aristos (A), central themes emerge: the use and abuse of power, love and responsibility, freedom of will, and, as Donald Hall notes, "freedom from domination." Hall sees The Magus as a "battlefield of will and freedom" (101).

How well Fowles deals with these concerns in The Magus is the subject of this thesis. Chapter 1 presents Fowles's concept of freedom--what it is, what its limits are, what its responsibilities are. Chapter 2 explains how freedom is obtained or how a person, as Conchis puts it, becomes "elect." Chapter 3 examines the use of power by Conchis over Nicholas. If a person asserts his right

to personal freedom, he exerts power over someone else who might disagree with that right of freedom. Before he comes to Phraxos, for example, Nicholas imagines himself free--free to begin and end relationships with women as he chooses. He holds the power to dictate the terms of the encounters. On Phraxos, after meeting Conchis and becoming involved in the masque he has established, Nicholas believes he is being manipulated--someone else with power is controlling him. To some critics, this "treatment" of Nicholas is unacceptable. To them, the end does not justify the means. This chapter attempts to illustrate not only the benefit of such power, but also its necessity. Chapter 4 examines the results of Nicholas's experience on Phraxos. Opinion is divided on the question of whether Nicholas has learned anything from his ordeal. This chapter attempts to answer the question: Was it all worth it?

This study is based on the original version of The Magus. In 1977 Fowles, never having been completely satisfied with the novel (and perhaps because of comments from readers and critics), republished The Magus. Fowles says of the Revised Version in its Foreword:

> Though this is not, in any major thematic or narrative sense, a fresh version of The Magus, it is rather more than a stylistic revision. A number of scenes have been largely rewritten,

and one or two new ones invented. (5)

Fowles cites two particular areas that he revised: two romantic scenes in which the erotic element was made stronger, and the ending. The change in the erotic content was made to correct, as Fowles puts it, "a past failure of nerve" (7). The other change was made because many readers found the ending too ambiguous. Of their contention, he says:

> Though its general intent has never seemed to me as obscure as some readers have evidently found it--perhaps because they have not given due weight to the two lines from the Pevigillium Veneris that close the book--I accept that I might have declared a preferred aftermath less ambiguously . . . and now have done so. (7)

Ronald Binns notes many stylistic changes in the revised Magus--a tightening up of phrases and a "tidying up" of allusions. For Binns, the revisions have "purified and generally improved" the novel (83).

The original edition of The Magus was chosen for this thesis because the changes in the Revised Version apparently do not alter the content (the new ending, for example, only seems to clarify the original ending). The main reason for choosing the original version, however, is that until 1977 when the Revised Version was published, the criticism, obviously, was based on the 1965 version.

To address the comments of the critics, it seems logical that the version of the novel they used in making those comments should be consulted.

What follows is an attempt to demonstrate that John Fowles is more than a "brilliant storyteller," as Allen calls him (64). As Ines Kraft notes:

> Fowles . . . [is] committed to [his] craft and to [his] readers, and those critics who have dismissed [him] as overly didactic or purely sensational tend to obscure the genuine contributions [he has] made to contemporary literature. (3589-A)

Fowles's concerns about humanity make him an author to be taken seriously.

# CHAPTER I

## THE NATURE OF FREEDOM

John Fowles is a writer concerned with many issues facing modern man: hazard (the unpredictable events that befall man), the existence or non-existence of God and the related concept of life-after-death, the over-dependence on money, the existence of and continual battle against the nemo (Fowles's term for the state of "nobodiness"), the aims of education, the importance and necessity of art, performing what are viewed as "good acts", and how a person attains and retains freedom.

Fowles's non-fiction book The Aristos explores these issues. Although all of these concepts concern him, the last one--freedom--is of prime importance. In fact, in the "Preface to a New Edition" of The Aristos, Fowles writes: "My chief concern, in The Aristos, is to preserve the freedom of the individual against all those pressures-to-conform that threaten our century . . ." (7).

The Aristos, then, presents the ideas that are embodied in the novels, short stories, and non-fiction works. As Olshen writes:

> While The Aristos presents the issues [of freedom], the novels are predicated on the supposition of individual free will and the ideal of self-realization. Their conceptual

> focus remains on the nature and limits of human freedom, the power and responsibility that freedom entails, and the cruelty and necessity of conscious choice. The conditions of freedom and self-knowledge are everywhere conjoined in Fowles's work. Self-knowledge is the goal of life experience and formal education. It is the end toward which all of his protagonists grope. (11-12)

The method Fowles employs to present his concept of freedom varies from work to work. Some situations involve physical freedom. In The Collector, for example, the obvious struggle pits Miranda Grey, a kidnapped art student, against Fred Clegg, her kidnapper. Clegg admires Miranda and desires to possess, or more accurately, "collect" her. He keeps her locked in his cellar. She attempts unsuccessfully to escape and eventually dies in captivity, just like the butterflies that Clegg also collects.

The Collector also describes the struggle between the classes of people Clegg and Miranda represent--he, the Many (the poor, the ill-educated, the "collectors"), and she, the Few (the monied, the privileged, the "artists"). During her captivity, Miranda writes in her diary:

> I know what I am to him. A butterfly he has always wanted to catch. I remember . . . G.P.

> [Miranda's mentor] saying that collectors were the worst animals of all. He meant art collectors, of course. . . . But of course, he is right. They're anti-life, anti-art, anti-everything. (C 116)

In the short story "Poor Koko" from The Ebony Tower, a couple offers the use of their country cottage to a writer so he may work undisturbed on his book about Thomas Love Peacock. A burglar enters the cottage, finds the man, and ties him up, after which he robs the house. The man attempts to persuade the burglar not to tie him up (he promises not to contact anyone until after the young man is safely gone), but his request is denied. His freedom is denied.

"Poor Koko" is concerned with Fowles's distinction between true freedom of will and merely "gratuitous acts." In The Aristos, Fowles defines these acts as "sudden decisions without rational motivation [that] are supposed to prove absolute freedom of will" (69). In the story, the burglar, as a finale to his performance, burns all the research his captive has collected on Peacock. One may argue that the burglar did so because he was "free" to make that decision. Fowles, however, writes that what these acts actually "prove is contempt for convention" (A 69). The subject of this man's work--a "definitive biography and critical account" of Peacock ("Koko" 138)--

seems appropriate to Fowles's view on freedom versus gratuitous acts. The character in the story says that what Peacock "stood against [was] all that was not humane, intelligent and balanced" ("Koko" 140).

Fowles says that these gratuitous acts "spring from the heresy that all restriction is analogous to imprisonment; as if everything we know, from the observable cosmos to the meson, is not restricted" (A 69). Fowles goes on to say that "a world of irrational actions would not constitute an absolutely free world because for human beings anarchy is only freedom when everyone wants anarchy" (A 70).

Another of Fowles's works involves the freedom of the mind. The reader of Mantissa is introduced to four characters, only to have their identities change several times in the course of the novel. Mantissa represents a sort of "freedom to create." The protagonist, Miles Green, is an author; the other characters represent components of his own imagination, which continually add their own ideas on what should be written and how. Simon Loveday writes that Mantissa is "not in the normal sense a work of fiction." Rather, he says "it belongs . . . to the genres of confession (Fowles's revelation of his own creative processes) and critical theory (his pointer to how his works should be read)" (6).

Ian Gotts describes Mantissa as "an allegory of literary creation" (87). It is Fowles telling the story

of an author creating a story. It is presumably the process Fowles encounters when he writes--one idea leads to another, one idea is discarded in favor of another. The author and his Muse go round and round, attempting to obtain a satisfactory product.

On his second point about how to read Fowles's works, Loveday notes that what Mantissa reveals is "the pattern governing Fowles's fictional treatment of women" (6). In this novel, the female character, as Loveday points out, is "one of many incarnations of Erato, the muse of lyric poetry" (6). She contributes to the literary effort by suggesting her own pertinent ideas and changes in Miles's ideas. Loveday also notes that even though she is a product of Miles's imagination, she will be his superior because he "will die, but she will be immortalised in art" (6). In Mantissa the female is stronger than the male. Gotts agrees, saying that "woman is the complexity and mystery that the male narrative drive has to pursue" (85).

What is true in Mantissa is also true in Fowles's other works. His male characters are mostly collectors who meet "uncollectable, unclassifiable" female characters. Conchis tells Nicholas: "'Men see objects, women see the relationship between objects'" (373). Men see only the objects they pursue, be it butterflies or art or property to be stolen. If that drive goes too far, women become those objects, as are Miranda in The Collector and

"Nicholas's women" in The Magus. Fowles's women enlighten their male counterparts with their vision. "Woman," Gotts writes, "functions symbolically as initiator of a more enlightened consciousness in man" (84).

In The French Lieutenant's Woman (FLW), it is Sarah who ultimately emerges as the dominant force. Charles Smithson meets, befriends, and attempts to understand Sarah Wodruff, and then falls in love with her. He sees himself as being superior to her and it is, therefore, his duty to assist her in overcoming her illness. Charles decides to help her because

> [he] now saw a scientific as well as a humanitarian reason in his adventure. He had been frank enough to admit to himself that it contained, besides the impropriety, an element of pleasure; but now he detected a clear element of duty. He himself belonged undoubtedly to the fittest; but the human fittest had not less certain responsibility towards the less fit. (FLW 134)

Charles, like Nicholas in The Magus, must make a choice. As Lee Edwards writes:

> Charles Smithson . . . is a 19th-century version of Nicholas Urfe, trying to decide between Ernestina Freeman, the childish reality out of which the dream of Lily was born, and

> Sarah Woodson [sic], the spiritual grandmother of Alison. (607)

Nicholas and Charles are similar with respect to the lessons they learn--that is, choosing reality over, in essence, fiction (although with the two endings of The French Lieutenant's Woman, Charles actually chooses both). The dissimilarity occurs because Charles sets out to enlighten Sarah and is enlightened himself, whereas Nicholas is helped, even though he is acting strictly on personal motivation.

The main concerns of novels such as The Magus are freedom of will and freedom of choice. In The Magus, Nicholas believes he is free. His parents' lives were very regimented. His father believes that such organization should extend to Nicholas's life also. When his parents are killed in a plane crash, Nicholas "felt an almost immediate sense of relief, of freedom" (12).

At last "free" from the influence of his father, Nicholas continues to consider himself equally "free" in relationships with women--"free" to begin and end them as he pleases. Of himself he says, "I became as neat at ending liaisons as at starting them" (17). Olshen says that as Nicholas begins by mistaking the "relief" over his parents' death for "freedom," he similarly "will continue to confuse being unattached with being free" (34).

Nicholas begins the novel confused about himself and his life. By the novel's end, he is still confused (although much less so). Olshen characterizes Nicholas as being

> deluded about the kind of person he is, uncertain about what or who he wants to become, and unaware of how to effect a change in himself. He understands little of the nature of love and freedom. For the former he substitutes sex and power; he confuses the latter with irresponsible escape from emotional entanglement. (35)

Likewise, he confuses the women he encounters with each other. When he and Julie are bathing, he says:

> I thought of other baths shared: Alison. Of how all naked women become the same naked woman, the eternal naked woman; who could not die, who could only be celebrated as I was going, in an obscure way, to celebrate Alison in Julie; almost to mourn her as I remet and remade her. (433-34)

Some of Fowles's characters, then, believe they possess greater freedom than they actually do--the kind of freedom that approaches "absolute freedom," the existence of which Fowles does not acknowledge. In The Aristos, he writes:

> Even if we could establish . . . total free will . . . we are still limited, since to be completely free we should need an absolutely free field of choice as well as the freedom to choose in it. (68)

In The Aristos, Fowles likens life to a game of chess. He points out that each has its rules. No player in the chess game can move "absolutely as he likes." The "player" in life cannot either (68-69). Fowles writes:

> The gifts, inherited and acquired, that are special to me are the rules of the game; and the situation I am in at any given moment is the situation of the game. My freedom is the choice of action and the power of enactment I have within the rules and situation of the game. (69)

Fowles analogizes our limited freedom to being in prison: "We are in a prison cell, but it is, or can be made to become, a comparatively spacious one; and inside it we can become relatively free" (A 68).

In an interview, Roy Newquist asks Fowles what influence existentialism had on his work. He responds by addressing the "problem of free will":

> This is the question of whether you can discover enough about yourself, whether you can accept enough about your past, to become what we call

> an authentic character; someone who is in control of his own life, able to withstand all its anxieties.
>
> To me, any novel which doesn't have something to say on the subject of whether and why the characters are authentic or unauthentic is difficult to take seriously. It is merely an entertainment. (224)

Fowles echoes Sartre, who says: "Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose" (54). In the Newquist interview, Fowles explains how people can live authentically:

> [Y]ou become an existentialist by temperament as much as by reasoning. You <u>feel</u> it as much as think it. Your life is harried by constant anxieties, fears of things, nauseas, hatreds of things. Life is a battle to keep balance on a tightrope. To live authentically is not giving in to the anxieties, not running away from the nauseas, but solving them in some way. . . . [Existentialism] allows you to face reality and act creatively in terms of your own powers and your own situation. (225)

This is the lesson that Conchis teaches Nicholas.

One question addressed by this thesis is: Does

Nicholas resist these anxieties and become authentic by the novel's end? Chapter 4 attempts to establish that he does, but not without much difficulty. One of Nicholas's shortcomings is that he cannot, in the beginning of the novel, clearly understand the concept that Fowles states in the Foreword to the Revised Version of The Magus: "that true freedom lies between each two, never in one alone, and therefore it can never be absolute freedom" (10).

Nicholas assumes that his freedom lies in behaving as it suits him, without regard for the other people with whom he deals. Each person in a relationship must be willing to negotiate a compromise for each situation. This will not necessarily be completely acceptable to either person, but it is the only viable alternative--it is the relative freedom Fowles speaks of.

There is, then, no absolute, only relative, freedom. Total freedom does not exist, despite the rationale promulgated by some that gratuitous acts prove its existence. To exist under conditions of this relative freedom of will and of choice, one must "authenticate" oneself.

For Fowles, there is another act that "is the most convincing proof we shall ever have that we do possess a relative freedom of will," and that is the "good action" (A 80). In The Aristos, Fowles defines the "good act"

as one that benefits society, instead of gratifying the individual. He writes: "Doing good for some public reward is not doing good: it is doing something for public reward" (79).

He compares the necessity of doing good to the carrying out of natural bodily functions. The "reward" from these actions "lies in the performance" (A 80). He says:

> Non-performance means illness or death, just as the non-performance of good actions finally means the death of society. Charity, kindness to others, actions against injustice and inequality should be acts of hygiene, not of pleasure. (A 80)

The existence of these "good actions" benefits not only society as a whole, but each individual as well. Of this relationship, Fowles writes:

> If the intention of a good action is not finally to institute more freedom (therefore, more justice and equality) for all, it will be partly evil not only to the object of the action but to the enactor, since its evil aspects will limit his own freedom. (A 82)

Some of Fowles's characters perform "good acts"; others should perform more. Clegg should not have kidnapped Miranda. After he did, he should have released her, as well

as called a doctor when she was ill. Clegg should have sent the money that Miranda asked him to give to Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Miranda should have paid more attention to people like Clegg when she was free to do so (C). The burglar should not have stolen things from the cottage or destroyed the research material ("Koko"). Mrs. Poultney should have been more understanding with Sarah (FLW).

Nicholas should have been more understanding in his relationships with women. Because he is not, Conchis intervenes. Jeff Rackham notes:

> The Magus . . . simply sets out to teach Nicholas about love and honesty, two interrelated values by which he must learn to live if he is to find any meaning in life at all. (96)

All of Fowles's characters struggle to apply the precepts they learn in finding meaning in their lives. For Nicholas in particular, the road to such understanding is long and painful; yet he finally realizes how one obtains such freedom and, by having the lessons inculcated, how one becomes "elect."

## CHAPTER II

## HOW ONE BECOMES ELECT

Marvin Magalaner observes that The Magus "is essentially and patently the story of a human being and his quest for the true path to fulfillment" (81). No doubt the "fulfillment" Magalaner refers to is the quality of being "elect."

For Fowles, to be "elect" is to be "authentic." The elect know and accept enough about themselves to control their lives. They assume responsibility for their actions. As Lee Edwards puts it: "[M]an creates himself anew when--and only when--he acts on a conscious decision about himself and his world" (605).

One of the theological forerunners of Conchis's method of election is the Calvinists' Doctrine of Election. According to André Biéler, John Calvin believed that a break in communications existed between God and man. Biéler writes: "Man by himself cannot find God. Only God can communicate God to his creatures" (13). This theory parallels Conchis's role in Nicholas's education: Nicholas cannot attain that higher level of understanding by himself. Conchis, in Calvinst thought, would be God, and through him, as one of his creatures, Nicholas would receive knowledge.

According to Calvin, the Word of God presents five "aspects of man" that help define man and his relationship

to God (Biéler 13). The second of these aspects "shows what man is now in his actual humanness and in relation to his primordial nature" (Biéler 14). Conchis's task is to show Nicholas the difference between his present behavior and that expected of him after his education.

The fourth point of God's Word, as seen by Calvin, "teaches man what fallen man becomes on earth when man lets God take him in hand and benefit him with the restoration of humanness in Christ" (Biéler 14). Conchis's task here is to further illuminate for Nicholas the benefits of following his examples that lead to authenticity.

One marked difference exists, however, between the two methods of election. Biéler writes that Calvinists believe that man is free only when he is perpetually subservient to God. If man attempts to find "himself and a freedom of his own," he will not find freedom, but rather he will "fall . . . into slavery" (14). This view of freedom through election differs from the one employed by Conchis. It seems to be Conchis's opinion that one need only be "subservient" to a god-like figure during the learning process. After the disintoxication, Conchis disappears, leaving Nicholas to apply the lessons he has learned and become this god-like figure in his own right, making decisions about his freedom for himself.

For Fowles, to be elect today is to strive for and obtain the freedom necessary to exert one's own choices

concerning his life, to respect others' freedom to act as they wish, and to be willing to mediate these individual freedoms to achieve a harmonious accord. These are the lessons Nicholas is to learn. Conchis alludes to them when Nicholas says he envies Conchis's house. Conchis says he envies Nicholas because "'you have all your discoveries before you'" (78).

There is no "how-to" book to consult on becoming elect. In fact, Fowles would probably discourage its publication. Fowles's characters seem to need a more "personal" approach to their education on freedom. While at Oxford, for example, Nicholas misreads the French existentialist writings he studies. As Nicholas says: "We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behavior" (13). Education left to one's own devices does not guarantee success. Nicholas needs--and gets--"personal" training in behavior from Conchis. After their first meeting, Conchis asks Nicholas if he is elect. Nicholas says he is not. Conchis says he might be, then adds: "'Hazard makes you elect. You cannot elect yourself'" (83). Conchis implies that personal determination and resolve are not sufficient to attain this status; one must have guidance. Conchis defines hazard for Nicholas:

> "There comes a time in each life like a point of

> fulcrum. At that time you must accept yourself. It is not any more what you will become. It is what you are and always will be. You are too young to know this. You are still becoming. Not being." (105)

Nicholas discovers his "point of fulcrum" during his confrontation with Alison at Regent's Park. Until then he is, as Conchis says, "becoming." Similarly, Fowles writes in The French Lieutenant's Woman that Charles "surrendered" to the way of life he was about to engage in, but Ernestina was "one [who] learned to be what [she] was" (264). Charles was becoming (although it was something he did not want to become), while Ernestina was being.

Although Fowles seems to separate "being" and "becoming" into two distinct categories (one undergoes a process of becoming; the end result of that process is a state of being), he apparently acknowledges the need for employing both. In The Aristos Fowles writes of the need to alternate these two poles in order to survive:

> The purpose of hazard is to force us, and the rest of matter, to evolve. It is only by evolving that we, in a process that is evolving, can continue to survive. The purpose of human evolution is therefore to recognize this: that we must evolve to exist. (42)

If a book were written on becoming elect, it would include a number of precepts on behavior--the precepts that are "taught" to Fowles's characters. They include the unacceptability of lying and deceiving for selfish reasons; the illumination of faulty character traits; and the necessity of not only recognizing these traits for oneself, but also acting on them.

After spending several weekends at Conchis's home on Phraxos, Nicholas concludes that "every truth at Bourani was a sort of lie; and every lie there, a sort of truth" (273). These "lies" put forth by Conchis for Nicholas's benefit cannot be labelled as "unacceptable," for they are not told for selfish reasons. One might argue that lying is lying, and it should not matter who does it or for what reason. Conchis's "lies," however, serve a purpose: they instruct Nicholas in the ways of the elect--preparing him to accept the new responsibility toward others that the experience at Bourani dictates.

In those lies and truths at Bourani, one might see a parallel with literature, especially with respect to paradox. A paradox is a statement that at first appears to be contradictory, yet turns out to have some truth in it. Nicholas suggests that Conchis may have "fun" writing a novel. Conchis replies: "'Words are for truth. For facts. Not fiction'" (92). On the surface, this statement may seem absurd, since both works of fiction and

non-fiction are composed of words. Yet looking at it another way, Conchis appears to say that those words--the tools of communication--should be reserved for truth, that is, for the purpose of establishing mutual understanding between individuals.

Both Conchis and Nicholas lie, yet Nicholas's lies and deceits serve no purpose, save his own selfishness. Shortly before Nicholas meets Lily, he receives a letter from Alison. He writes one in return, striking "the right balance between regretful practicality and yet sufficient affection and desire for her still to want to climb into bed if I got half a chance" (154-55). He merely wants to regain the sexual part of their relationship--the "non-threatening" part. Nicholas aptly describes his attitude toward sex (which he is free to perform with anyone he chooses) and love (which represents a commitment to one person) when he says: "In our age it is not sex that raises its ugly head, but love" (30).

Nicholas and Alison rendezvous in Athens and they drive to Mount Parnassus, then climb it. On the way down they pause to rest, and they make love. Nicholas says: "And we did make love; not sex, but love; though sex would have been so much wiser" (256).

Mount Parnassus is symbolic of the way Nicholas feels toward love and sex. Parnassian (derived from the mountain's name) refers to a group of French poets of the

19th century who emphasized metrical form in their poetry rather than emotion. Nicholas also refuses to acknowledge the importance of emotion, which is why he cannot maintain satisfactory relationships with women.

Nicholas equates sex, rather than love, with freedom. As he struggles to know himself--to become elect--he will begin to equate love with freedom. Olshen writes that "heterosexual love and the nature of freedom . . . are inextricably bound" in Fowles's novels. Olshen points out that "the realization of love brings with it a sense of freedom, and the responsible assumption of one's freedom allows for the full realization of the possibilities of love" (14).

When Nicholas meets Lily, he is attracted to her. Since he wants nothing more to do with Alison, he wants to eliminate any thought of Alison from Lily's mind. He therefore dismisses her as a "'rather messy affaire'" (324). To make himself attractive to Lily, he "presented a sort of ideal self to her, a victim of circumstances, a mixture of attractive raffishness and essential inner decency" (323-24). In his selfish manner, Nicholas gives Lily "an edited version of the relationship" with Alison, "one in which Alison got less than her due and I got a good deal more; but in which the main blame was put on hazard, on fate . . ." (324).

Upon hearing of Alison's suicide, Nicholas

continues to hedge about the true nature of their relationship. He writes to Alison's former roommate, Ann Taylor, to thank her for sending the newspaper clippings about the death. He says: "[T]rue to my new resolve [I] took as much blame as I could . . ." (362). But Nicholas does not take enough blame. He has not yet reached the point of accepting responsibility for his actions.

Nicholas wants his freedom at any price. This price is paid by the people who are caught up in his machinations. In The Collector, Miranda desires her freedom, also at any price. She herself, however, is the one who, in the end, pays with her life. Before that time, though, she is ready to give up almost everything else to obtain her freedom. She writes in her diary:

> Therefore with generosity (I give myself) and gentleness (I kiss the beast) and no-shame (I do what I do of my own free will) and forgiveness (he can't help himself).
>
> Even a baby. His baby. Anything. For freedom. (218)

Because of his selfishness, Nicholas is blind to the way he should act. Campbell calls it a "kind of moral blindness" that prevents Nicholas from understanding other people--he cannot "see clearly" (45). Sarah admits to Charles that she also was blind when it came to judging Varguennes' "real character" (FLW 140). And Charles

confesses to Sarah about their situation: "I am wholly to blame. I knew when I came here . . . I chose to be blind. I put all my obligations behind me" (FLW 276).

Even from very early on, Nicholas makes statements that lead the reader to believe that he knows what course of action is correct. He later ignores that insight and reverts to his established behavior. He does not grasp the analogy between examples of "unacceptable" behavior presented to him during the masque and his own. The examples Conchis gives Nicholas are designed to make him aware of his failings toward himself and society. According to Campbell,

> the purpose of Conchis's manipulation of Urfe's perceptions is not to bring Urfe and Alison together, but to rid Urfe of the moral blindness which made it impossible for him to sustain a relationship with anyone, Alison not excepted. (52)

During Nicholas's first visit to Bourani, Conchis attempts to start him thinking about his past. Conchis tells Nicholas that "if you are wise you will never pity that past for what it did not know. But pity yourself for what it did'" (144). At a later meeting, Conchis advises Nicholas that "'all that is past possesses our present'" (290). All the memories of what we have done, all the emotional baggage we transport through time are present at

all times, ready to be either changed or repeated.

Conchis and Nicholas talk about communicating with other worlds. Nicholas asks what language the people there speak. Conchis answers:

> "They speak emotions."
>
> "Not a very precise language."
>
> "On the contrary. The most precise. If one can learn it." (162)

Conchis is assuring Nicholas that when two people enter a relationship, each bringing to it variegated feelings, a harmony among those feelings can be satisfactorily achieved.

At that first meeting, Conchis not only attempts to show Nicholas how the past and present are interrelated, but he immediately begins giving Nicholas analogies between his stories and Nicholas's life. Conchis's first example is the story of himself and Lily Montgomery, his fiancée. He had deserted his unit in World War I and returned to England. When Lily learned that Conchis had deserted, she was upset. Conchis says: "'I had deceived her. That was the unforgivable. Not that I had deserted. But that I had deceived'" (146). Conchis characterizes Lily and himself this way:

> "Lily was humanity bound to duty; unable to choose, suffering, at the mercy of social ideals. Humanity both crucified and marching

> towards the cross. And I was free, I was Peter three times to renounce--determined to survive, whatever the cost." (147)

Conchis is true to his determination to survive. Rather than returning to the war, he takes a ship to South America. Conchis is pointing out to Nicholas his own turnings from authenticity and how they correspond to Nicholas's turnings. Conchis deceives Lily (as Nicholas deceives Alison), and he runs away to South America (as Nicholas does to Phraxos).

Conchis introduces Nicholas to the Lily he has described, or rather the young woman who believes herself to be Lily. Conchis says she suffers from amnesia and mild schizophrenia. After Nicholas talks to Lily, Conchis asks Nicholas if he has noticed anything unusual about her condition. When Nicholas replies he has noticed nothing pathological, Conchis asks a question, aimed not at extracting information about Lily, but designed to force Nicholas to think about himself. Conchis asks if Nicholas has not noticed in Lily "'the obsessive need to assume disguises. To give herself false motivations'" (213). Conchis then tells Nicholas:

> "Lily is susceptible and very dangerous--both things without realizing it herself. Like a very fine blade, she can easily be hurt--but she can also hurt. She can hurt you . . . because

> she can deceive you again and again, if you are foolish enough to let her. We have all had to learn to remain completely detached emotionally from her. Because it is on our emotions that she will prey--if we give her the chance." (218)

Nicholas does not yet understand the implication.

Just as Conchis describes Lily's condition for Nicholas, in The French Lieutenant's Woman Dr. Grogan speculates about Sarah in an attempt to warn Charles about the trap she is setting for him:

> "I am a young woman of superior intelligence and some education. I think the world has done badly by me. I am not in full command of my emotions. I do foolish things, such as throwing myself at the head of the first handsome rascal who is put in my path. What is worse, I have fallen in love with being a victim of fate. . . . And now . . . enter a young god. I see he is interested in me. The sadder I seem, the more interested he appears to be. . . .
>
> "Now I am very poor. I can use none of the wiles the more fortunate of my sex employ to lure mankind into their power. . . . I have but one weapon. The pity I inspire in this kindhearted man. Now pity is a thing that takes

> a devil of a lot of feeding. I have fed this Good Samaritan my past and he has devoured it. So what can I do? I must make him pity my present. One day, when I am walking where I have been forbidden to walk, I seize my chance. I show myself to someone I know will report my crime to the one person who will not condone it. I get myself dismissed from my position. I disappear, under the strong presumption that it is in order to throw myself off the nearest clifftop. And then . . . I cry to my savior for help. (177-78)

Whereas Conchis tells Nicholas about Lily to illuminate for him what his own behavior is like, Dr. Grogan tells Charles about Sarah so he may avoid becoming involved with her before it is too late.

When Nicholas and Lily are alone, she reads his palm. She tells him he is

> "quite sensitive, but you are also very treacherous. There are . . . there are many treacheries in your life. Sometimes you betray yourself. Sometimes you betray those who love you." (191)

He wants to know why he betrays; she replies, "'The palm says what is. Not why it is'" (191). Since Lily is a part of the masque, she knows of Alison. She then makes

this prediction: "'You will make love to many girls, but you will love only one, and you will marry her and be very happy'" (191).

Rod MacLeish, commenting on Fowles's work, describes its structure:

> [R]eality is unpeeled one translucent layer at a time. What appears to be true about people and their lives turns out to be the subject of a different truth the next layer down. And a different one still on the layer after that. (NPR Interview)

Lily has now been revealed, on that next layer of reality, to be Julie, an actress who is helping Conchis with the masque. She tells Nicholas:

> "It's as if--with even the nicest men, men like you--I can't help suspecting that they're just using me. As if everyone else was born able to distinguish love and lust. . . . If you could just be patient with me." (326)

Nicholas responds: "'Infinitely patient'" (326). Being patient, however, is something he has not been able to do in the past. Julie says: "'You must teach me. I'll be your pupil'" (326). Again, this prescription for an education is one Nicholas should follow. He is not ready, though, to admit the need for such instruction.

In addition to his other faults--callousness,

selfishness, irresponsibility, cynicism--Nicholas does not perceive any anomalies in his behavior or, therefore, the necessity of changing that behavior. He is given examples in the form of stories and casual remarks and requests that are mirror images of his life and the questions he should be asking himself. Despite fleeting thoughts of something being amiss--very early in the novel he says, "I began to be sick of the way a mere bodily need [sex] threatened to distort my life" (18)--he is "blind" to the hints that are presented to him.

All the metaphors Nicholas has been given throughout the novel have been subtle. Following the disintoxication, however, Mrs. Lily de Seitas (Julie's and her twin sister June's mother) tells Nicholas point-blank about the experience he has endured:

> "You are really the luckiest and the blindest young man. Lucky because you are born with some charm for women, even though you seem determined not to show it to me. Blind because you have had a little piece of pure womankind in your hands. Do you not realize that Alison possesses the one great quality our sex has to contribute to life? Beside which things like education, class, background, are nothing? And you've let it slip."
>
> "Helped by your charming daughters."

"My daughters were nothing but a personification of your own selfishness." (550)

In an interview, James Campbell suggests to Fowles that his male characters are "blind" at first, but later have a greater awareness of their real selves. Fowles responds that "this is the sort of existential thesis of the books--that one has to discover one's feelings" (465).

In order to become authentic, a person must first discover his feelings. "The freedom to choose and to change," writes Olshen, "must be exercised and the full responsibility for ourselves must be accepted. This, however, is only half of the mature human condition" (12). "The other half," says Olshen, "recognizes just as plainly the tremendous force of all that has brought us to the present moment, and the power of the past to keep us moving in the same direction" (12).

To become elect, then, one must first recognize one's feelings, and then he must employ that knowledge to enact a change--in short, he must <u>want</u> to change. Olshen writes:

> To choose to change is no easy task. Accordingly, Fowles's fiction tends to focus upon those crucial moments when important choices are made and when they are set in motion by ensuing actions. The fiction stresses the existential shock so often necessary to jolt us

> into a full awareness of the moment of choice and the need to act upon this awareness. Freedom is generally explored along two paths simultaneously: the ethical or moral path, by involving us in the quest of the fictional characters; and the aesthetic, by illuminating the liberating possibilities, for reader and writer alike, of fiction itself. (12)

Although Nicholas does not always see the error of his ways or the necessity of change, he is not the completely-blind traveler he frequently seems--a traveler racing through a pitch-black tunnel, impervious to all outside input, whose rescue comes miraculously upon reaching the light at the tunnel's end. There are those moments when he does realize he must take the necessary steps to become authentic.

For example, shortly after arriving on Phraxos, Nicholas destroys the poems he has written because he feels they are worthless, and, because he feels his life is worthless, he contemplates suicide--an act that he fails to carry out. Olshen writes that after these two incidents, Nicholas

> re-evaluates himself and concludes that, although he has been genuinely depressed, he has "also been, and always would be, intensely false; in existentialist terms, unauthentic."

> His attempt at suicide, as well as his pursuit of poetry, are now recognized for what they were, attempts to escape, to construct a romantic and narcissistic self-portrait which might substitute for a life of genuine relationship with others and responsibility for himself. (38)

Nicholas contemplates suicide and destroys his poems. He does not feel he is worth much. This is Fowles's "nemo"--that sense of "nobodiness"--at work. Like other critics, however, Saari sees hope for Nicholas:

> Once Urfe can master the negative and destructive force of the nemo within him, he will be a member of the elect who accepts the responsibility inherent in the existential nexus of freedom and choice. (40)

To Olshen, Nicholas has taken a step toward acknowledging a problem. Olshen goes on to say, though that "recognizing one's faults, however necessary, is not sufficient for insuring the ability to alter them . . ." (38). This may be true, but one needs at least a "first step" in that direction, and Nicholas takes these steps, tentative as they may be.

Nicholas returns to Phraxos after seeing Alison in Athens. He says, "I had chosen my own way; the difficult, hazardous, poetic way; all on one number" (265). He

acknowledges that his way was based on that one number, that is, on "number one"--himself.

At their second meeting, Conchis tells Nicholas of "meeting his [Conchis's] future" and of "being balanced on a fulcrum" when he arrived at Bourani. Nicholas says:

> I was experiencing what he meant; a new self-acceptance, a sense that I had to be this mind and this body, its vice and virtues, and that I had no other chance or choice. It was an awareness of a new kind of potentiality, one very different from my old sense of the word, which had been based on the illusions of ambition. The mess of my life, the selfishness and false turnings and the treacheries, all these things could fall into place, they could become a source of construction rather than a source of chaos, and precisely because I had no other choice. (159-60)

Again, this represents a positive step toward assuming responsibility for one's life. Granted, Nicholas does say at the same time that this "was certainly not a moment of new moral resolve, or anything like it," but he also says "it felt like a step forward--and upward" (160).

Perhaps one of the most decisive acknowledgments of his unacceptable behavior comes when he is sent the newspaper clippings about Alison's suicide. He says:

> And a great cloud of black guilt, knowledge of my atrocious selfishness, settled on me. All those bitter home truths she had flung at me, right from the beginning . . . and still loved me; was so blind that she still loved me. (361)

Ralph Berets writes: "[The Magus's] concern and focus is with those who are or who might in the future be able to control and create a meaningful pattern of existence for themselves and others" (96). Despite his many flaws, Nicholas is one of those people Berets describes. There are gains and losses, progress and back-sliding, painful self-awareness and the sensation that the time and effort lavished on him is doing absolutely no good. Because Nicholas possesses the beginnings of understanding about his responsibility toward himself and others, and because of the guidance afforded him by Conchis's tutelage, he succeeds in overcoming his faults, even though the journey is difficult and painful. As Olshen writes:

> Before his story is ended, Nicholas will come to know himself better and to understand the existentialist philosophy he at this point so pathetically mimics. He will learn that the only pattern of destiny is hazard, that there is, in fact, no other destiny other than the one which each of us must try to shape for himself. (38-39)

Partly because of his own desires and motivations, Nicholas will succeed. Yet he cannot accomplish this destiny on his own. As Conchis tells him: "'You cannot elect yourself'" (83). There must be another force working in cooperation with the individual to achieve the desired result.

## CHAPTER III

## THE NECESSITY OF POWER

The power one human being exercises over another brings to mind a kind of tyranny. Wars are fought because one person or group desires more power than others are willing to relinquish or exist under. If confronted by a choice to support either the established "good" society or the threatening, "power-hungry, evil" society, most people would probably defend the underdog, since it is not our concept of freedom to be dominated in this manner.

The use and abuse of power exists everywhere. Power is inherent in the struggle between the Few and the Many, the Manipulators and the Manipulated, the Elect and the Masses. The use of power for either good or evil purposes depends upon who possesses it. "Poor Koko" presents an example of power exercised for purely selfish reasons. In The Collector, Clegg (the Many) holds Miranda (the Few) in his power. Clegg's motives, however, are selfish and evil. On the other hand, Miranda represents a magus figure, although her attempt to educate Clegg fails. In The French Lieutenant's Woman, Sarah lures Charles into her forbidden world, from which he emerges (in one of the endings) with greater insight into his own (and perhaps one day into Sarah's) humanity. When he leaves Sarah "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 learned again" (365).

Fowles's characters thus use and abuse the power they possess. Is this use or abuse of power always evil? For Fowles, it seems not. The Magus illustrates the application of beneficent power. It is true that from the moment Nicholas sets foot on Phraxos (and surely even before that) he is under Conchis's power. Being subjected to the masque presided over by Conchis is a painful, frustrating ordeal. One might argue that Conchis is as tyrannical to Nicholas as Clegg is to Miranda. The difference is that Clegg is motivated by selfishness, not by the wish to do good for Miranda in particular or society in general. Conchis has no such motives, although the reviewer in Time writes that Conchis attempts to either "kill or cure Nicholas" ("Spidery Spirit" 92, my emphasis). Although James Madachy says the experience Nicholas endures is "painful," he maintains it is "beneficial" (67). Mrs. de Seitas explains to Nicholas that the masque is not some evil plot to destroy him, but rather an attempt to make him (like others before him) more responsive and responsible toward society. She says: "'Do you really think we do this just for you? Do you really believe we are not . . . charting the voyage? . . . All that we did was to us a necessity'" (552). It is

necessary for Conchis and his followers to instruct people like Nicholas in order that they act responsibly toward others. On the surface they are teaching him to be more understanding of women. On a deeper level, if they can change his attitudes toward women, this newly-found maturity can instill in him responsible attitudes in other areas. This idea is found in the pamphlet from The Society for Reason that Conchis gives Nicholas to read. One fundamental point of the Society is: "The world can never be better than the countries that constitute it, and the countries can never be better than the individuals that constitute them" (184).

Fowles knows first-hand of power similar to Conchis's. Olshen relates the time Fowles spent at the Bedford School. During his first term there he was "unable to cope with the social and academic pressures." He dropped out for a term, and upon his return he "proved an excellent scholar and athlete." He attained the position of "head boy," one that made him "principal disciplinarian over hundreds of younger boys." Fowles had power and used it, coming

> to understand very well and experience intensely the ruthless exercise of power, the manipulation of the law, and the whole system of reward and punishment, conformity and dissent. (4-5).

Fowles tells Donald Hall about his Bedford days: "'I was

totally brainwashed. Little English boys were taught that serving King and Empire--and all that rubbish--was the only true goal in life'" (96). Fowles, critical of the power he possessed, says that in Bedford "'a clique of senior boys are given complete license to discipline (tyrannize) the rest'" (Hall 96). If Fowles disapproves of such power and its uses, why does he permit Conchis to wield this power? Again, the motive for using the power must be considered. Conchis's motives seem beneficent.

Olshen, however, has difficulty assessing Conchis's motives. To him, because we lack the understanding of his motives and his actions, "it is not easy to believe in the eccentric millionaire as a credible character at the realistic level of interpretation" (58). Fowles says in "Why I Rewrote 'The Magus'":

> I did intend Conchis, the part sham and part shaman . . . to exhibit a series of masks representing human notions of God, from the supernatural to the jargon-ridden scientific, that is, a series of human illusions about something that does not exist in fact: absolute knowledge and absolute power. The destruction of such illusions seems to me still an eminently humanist aim. (30)

Conchis attempts to explain to Nicholas the meaning of his experience:

> "The masque is a metaphor. I told you that. . . . You are never quite sure whether you are my guest or victim. You are neither. You are something else." (290-91)

Nicholas wants to know what he is. Conchis replies: "'If you must speculate, explore other possibilities. But remember. What it is, has no name'" (291). Conchis does not give a name to what Nicholas is because that would diminish its power. Nicholas asks Mrs. de Seitas if the experiences Conchis describes actually happened. She would only repeat what Conchis had told her: "'An answer is always a form of death'" (575). If, for example, Nicholas knew that the events did not take place, he would wonder why Conchis had told him about them. What should concern him is not their authenticity, but rather their relevance to his situation.

Nicholas must know everything about what is happening to him. He upsets Lily when he asks the circumstances surrounding the events at Bourani. She asks:

> "Why must you always know where you are? Why have you no imagination, no humor, no patience? You are like a child who tears a beautiful toy to pieces to see how it is made. You have no imagination . . . no poetry." (193)

He constantly wants to know <u>why</u> these things happen, but fails to see the more important factor of <u>what</u> is

happening to him. Nicholas fails to see the mystery of life and the power it engenders. Conchis tells him of how his own perceptions of life had changed. Since he was a scientist, he "pursued" and "worshipped" the meaning of life rather than the mystery in it (370). But then the change occurred. Conchis says:

> "I saw that the attempt to scientize reality, to name it and classify it and vivisect it out of existence, was like trying to remove all the air from atmosphere. In the creating of the vacuum it was the experimenter who died, because he was inside the vacuum." (370)

Conchis seems to imply that once a thing is named it is known; once it is known, its significance is likely to be forsaken in the quest for other knowledge.

Nicholas discovers this thing with "no name" when he meets Alison in Regent's Park. After he strikes her, they "stared wildly at each other for a moment. Not in love. No name, no name, but unable to wear masks" (604). If Nicholas knew the name of what was transpiring between him and Alison its power--its mystery--would be lost. Without knowing what it is, Nicholas must concentrate on its effect on him and his relationship with Alison. This need for mystery parallels Conchis's loss of interest in his nature studies and his subsequent preference of "the mystery of birds' voices to any scientific explanation of them" (370).

The masque is a metaphor; Conchis also seems to be a metaphor, acting as mediator between the individual and his environment. Conchis's "realistic level of interpretation" is that of a human agent for his metaphorical role. Of metaphors Fowles says:

> One cannot describe; only give metaphors that indicate it. All human modes of description . . . are metaphorical. Even the most precise scientific description of an object or movement is a tissue of metaphors. ("Notes on an Unfinished Novel" 165)

Madachy is concerned with whether Conchis's motives are "benevolent" or "malevolent." He believes that end of the godgame justifies the means. He writes:

> It does not matter what Conchis' motives are since the end result for Urfe, though painful in the process, contributes markedly to his maturity. . . . Conchis is above good and evil in his motivation but should surely be considered benevolent in intention. (83)

Conchis and Sarah <u>use</u> power; Clegg and the burglar <u>abuse</u> power. Miranda writes about Clegg in her diary:

> I hate the way I have changed.
>
> I accept too much. To begin with I thought I must force myself to be matter-of-fact, not let his abnormality take control of the situation.

> But he might have planned it. He's getting me to behave exactly as he wants. (C 121)

Later she writes:

> The sheer joy of having me under his power, of being able to spend all and every day staring at me. He doesn't care what I say or how I feel--my feelings are meaningless to him--it's the fact that he's got me. (C 150)

The use and abuse of power is omnipresent. Rosemary Laughlin writes:

> For Fowles . . . the process or the evolution of one individual's attempts to exert his personal power over another's body or spirit or heart--either for good or evil--is of primary importance. (88)

She goes on to say, in reference to The Collector, The French Lieutenant's Woman, and The Magus, that all three are alike in their concern with power--"the power that one person can wield over another to violate him, annihilate him, or even, ironically, to help him achieve a fullness of personality and humanity" (71).

Madachy also sees Conchis's manipulative qualities. He writes:

> Conchis recognizes the need for hazard, and he teaches Urfe this need. The experiences that Conchis describes to Urfe are often matters of

> hazard, but once they are used to instruct or influence Urfe, they become instruments of manipulation. (83)

This manipulation by Conchis is necessary for several reasons. One is that it ultimately benefits Nicholas; another is that to successfully accomplish the objectives set forth by Conchis and his associates in "charting the voyage," an outside force such as Conchis must be employed. Robert Scholes writes:

> Alison diagnoses Nicholas's ailment perfectly, but she cannot cure it herself. Because Nicholas is so insulated in his esthetic world, he can only be reached esthetically, and Alison is too "real" to reach him on this level. This is where Conchis comes in. He is the magician who can break the spell and restore Nicholas to reality. (5)

Scholes continues by saying that after Nicholas is put through the masque, he is left "hungry for reality." Scholes explains that "by making the esthetic game painful enough, Conchis teaches Nicholas to accept the pain of life" (6). Nicholas--self-centered and callous--is brought to Conchis to "be taught a lesson," just as Miranda wants to teach Clegg. She writes: "I feel I've got to show him how decent human beings live and behave" (C 122). This represents the distinction between the Many

and the Few. Miranda writes that the way she feels is that she is a member of "a sort of band of people who have to stand against all the rest" (C 192). Sarah has also been teaching Charles. At their final meeting in Exeter, when he discovers there was no French lieutenant, Charles realizes that Sarah's actions were designed "to put him totally in her power" (FLW 278). After reflecting on her conduct, he determines that Sarah stands for "cruel but necessary . . . freedom" (FLW 287).

Fowles's novels thus point to this relationship between the "teacher" and his or her "pupils." In The Magus, Madachy also sees manipulation and hazard as key themes. Hazard, he says, is more than simply fate or chance. Here it is closer to a mystery. But, he says: "Regardless of the process, the end result of mystery and hazard becomes a benevolent force in that these elements are necessary for an authentic existence" (81-82). Conchis confronts Nicholas with hazard, or the unknowable, and forces him to accept its dictates.

Fowles is influenced by existentialism, but Scholes writes that the existentialism in The Magus is not quite the same as that advocated by the French nouveau roman. The French found that "the banality of quotidean [sic] existence is an unquestioned first premise" (8). But Scholes writes that to Fowles,

> reality is not banal. . . . The world is not

> dead and nauseating. It is alive and unknowable, and therefore invigorating. To accept its unfathomable mystery one must become equally unfathomable, one must accept one's own mystery and become a magician. (8)

Conchis tells Nicholas:

> "Greece is like a mirror. It makes you suffer. Then you learn."
>
> "To live alone?"
>
> "To live. With things as they are."

Ellen McDaniel states:

> The godgames of Sarah and Conchis prove to be valuable devices for educating the two men [Charles and Nicholas]. However, the godgames are still games. They are limited, contrived experiences that, though instructive, cannot be substituted for life in the real world of human action. Conchis and Sarah have helped Nicholas and Charles see through their first mistaken identities, but the two men still must separate their real identities from their roles in the godgames. (37)

The question is: Has Nicholas separated himself from the game, and is he capable of changing his life in light of the game's heuristic instruction?

Laughlin sees "the greatest power one can exercise

over another is to make him aware of his freedom, his identity through choice" (82). Conchis has attempted to define or redefine "freedom" with other subjects prior to doing so for Nicholas. He was successful with John Leverrier, but unsuccessful with Sandy Mitford. Conchis has now woven his spell on Nicholas Urfe, and is apparently successful.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS OF THE EXPERIENCE

Tests and experiments and even games produce results--this is one reason they are conducted. Sometimes these results are expected, sometimes only anticipated, and sometimes a complete surprise.

Nicholas Urfe has been a part of a game--The Godgame. He has been tested and experimented on to determine how his present attitudes can be modified for the good of himself and of society. The intermediate results (those encountered during the game) could probably be called predictable--a vascillation between his current attitudes and those impressed upon him by the Godgame. The end result, however, is not that simple to predict. A positive result depends upon the person in the game, whether or not he is willing to assimilate the instruction and apply it. Mitford was incapable of doing this, whereas Leverrier succeeded.

Because of the novel's ambiguous ending, the critical question is: Did Nicholas learn what Conchis attempted to teach him? Critical opinion is divided, although more critics share the opinion that Nicholas did indeed pass Conchis's test. Scholes explains the purpose of this test:

> What Nicholas cannot see . . . is that Conchis

> is playing a "godgame" with him for his own sake. And the purpose of the godgame is to teach Nicholas to become a Magus in his own right. . . . A magician . . . is one who accepts the reality of the appearances around him as sufficient. He abandons metaphysics for existence. And by becoming a magician he accepts responsibility for those appearances. (7)

To this point in his life Nicholas has not taken responsibility for his actions. Rackham describes Nicholas's situation:

> By participating in a seemingly meaningless series of experiences . . . a pattern begins to emerge and Nicholas realizes that he has been playing a game all his life, a veritable godgame in which we all participate, casting our fellow human beings into artificial roles and demanding they act out their parts, without regard to honesty or inner feeling. (95)

Saeeda Khan, however, is cautiously optimistic about Nicholas's future. He writes: "Nicholas may become one of the 'elect' if he can learn from his experiences and not continue to labor under delusions" (40, my emphasis).

Early in their relationship, Conchis tells Nicholas that he is "still becoming. Not being" (105).

At the time Nicholas is certainly unaware of the difference. Saari believes that after Nicholas distinguishes between "becoming and being . . . he will be elect, responsible and free in a world that values the opposite" (52).

All through the novel Nicholas is "becoming." There is a constant vacillation in Nicholas's attitudes. At one time he says he is "sick of the way a mere bodily need threatened to distort my life" (18), yet he continues to exploit women in satisfaction of that need. When he meets Alison, he wants to be with her only until she begins "getting serious," then he leaves her. He is attracted to Julie, but is "re-attracted" to Alison following news of her suicide, for which he feels guilty. Madachy describes this forward/backward movement: "Although agonizingly slow, Urfe's progress and growth are steady. He often reverts to his selfishness but continues a gradual vacillating movement toward personal freedom" (67).

Several critics see no movement (or only limited movement) toward becoming elect. Saari writes that Nicholas "is capable of making the choice of the elect" since he refuses to strike Julie with the cat, but Saari notes that Nicholas "has not yet made it a moral imperative that will change his behavior" (70). Saari also says that after Nicholas's meeting with Mrs. de Seitas, his "hostility toward her and Conchis will not abate" and the meeting ends "in name-calling which further

proves he cannot accept and learn from his mistakes" (70).

But is the situation such that he cannot learn from those mistakes, or is it that he has not had enough time? Nicholas is "becoming" right to the end. Just as he begins to accept one of Conchis's lessons, something unexpected occurs that causes him to momentarily forget what he has learned. For example, he is angry at Alison when they are in Athens. When he learns of her death, he feels guilty and recognizes her for what she was. He examines photos of Alison and him when they were in Greece that Ann Taylor had sent him. He recalls:

> [H]ow I had talked about my father, had even then only been able to talk to her like that because of her honesty; because I knew she was a mirror that did not lie; whose interest in me was real; whose love was real. That had been her supreme virtue: a constant reality. (487)

If Alison is reality, then Lily is illusion, or fiction. Nicholas's life has been comprised of relationships based on a fiction, a false assumption that one lives entirely as one wants. With Lily changing her identity from Lily, Conchis's dead fiancée, to Julie the actress to Dr. Maxwell the psychologist, Nicholas finds nothing on Phraxos he can believe in with certainty. What he comes to believe in is Alison. He says of her: "Her special genius, or uniqueness, was her normality, her reality, her

predictability; her crystal core of nonbetrayal; her attachment to all that Lily was not" (502). Because she represents "constant reality" to Nicholas, that would seem to negate Fowles's important quality of life: mystery. If something is steady and predictable, how can it have mystery, too? Mystery exists in reality probably because reality is not "handed" to anyone. He must work for it. As Peter Wolfe points out: "The existentialist discovers reality by acting on it" (25). Wolfe certainly uses the term "existentialist" to refer to anyone concerned with finding his or her own individuality. Since freedom runs between individuals, each new situation is intrinsically mysterious.

As he examines the photos, he admits to himself his failings:

> What was I? Exactly what Conchis had had me told: nothing but the sum of countless wrong turnings. . . . [A]ll my life I had tried to turn life into fiction, to hold reality away. . . . And now I saw it, I saw it a death too late. (487)

These feelings change, however, when he finds Alison is alive. Upon seeing her he "angrily cried her name" and, after searching unsuccessfully for her, is "unable to think, unable to do anything but say her name and crush it savagely between my teeth" (510).

Nicholas returns to London to search for Alison and to unravel the mystery of Phraxos. Madachy notes that as he searches for her "he becomes aware of the changes within himself and comes to appreciate what Conchis' machinations have accomplished, despite the pain" (69). Nicholas reflects on the events that took place on Phraxos:

> Slowly I came to realize that my dilemma was in fact a sort of de facto forgiveness, a condonation of what had been done to me; even though, still too sore to accept that something active had taken place, I thought of "done" in the passive sense. (525)

Conchis has "done" these things to Nicholas to help him. In Mantissa, Erato gives Miles a suggestion for changing his text after he had labored unsuccessfully to create a heroine. Erato tells Miles she made the change because she "was only being cruel to be kind" (160). That seems to be Conchis's aim also: in order to help, one must, to a certain extent, hurt another. Fowles echoes this thought in The Aristos when he says:

> What we call suffering, death, disaster, misfortune, tragedy, we should call the price of freedom. The only alternative to this suffering freedom is an unsuffering unfreedom. (18)

Although he may not be ready at this point to

admit that the experience on Phraxos was completely beneficial, Nicholas senses that something positive has taken place. He goes to an Italian restaurant in London that he and Alison frequented. He notes that "the clientele had not changed, but I had" (522). He has "a dim conviction of having entered some deeper, wiser esoteric society" after undergoing the experiences (467). Following the disintoxication, he is set free at Monemvasia and sees himself "being free again, but in a new freedom . . . purged in some way" (481).

This new freedom Nicholas has acquired permits him to see what errors he commits very soon after he commits them, rather than long after, as with Alison. In London, Nicholas spends time with a young girl named Jojo. He wants nothing of her but companionship. She, on the other hand, begins to want more than that from him. He hurts her feelings when he is adamant that he does not want to sleep with her, that he is waiting for a girl to return from Australia. After he tells her about Alison and Julie, he thinks about hurting people:

> It was the only truth that mattered, it was the only morality that mattered, the only sin, the only crime. Once again I had committed the one unforgivable: I had hurt an innocent person. (589)

As he sits with Jojo, Nicholas thinks about the new

commandment Mrs. de Seitas has admonished him to learn about hurting people:

> I had had it whispered in my ear only a few weeks before; I had had it demonstrated to me in a way at my "trial"; for that matter I had even paid lipservice to it long before I went to Greece. But now I felt it; and by "feel" I mean that I knew I had to choose it, every day, even though I went on failing to keep it, had every day to choose it, every day to try to live by it. And I knew that it was all bound up with Alison; with choosing Alison, and having to go on choosing her every day. (589)

He goes on to say that the commandment was a "signpost to my future. Adulthood was like a mountain, and I stood at the foot of this cliff of ice, this impossible and unclimbable: Thou shalt not commit pain" (589-90).

Nicholas thus progresses, with advances and retreats, to the end of his ordeal. Madachy sees Nicholas progressing "steadily toward maturity, greater humanity, and self-awareness . . ." (70). Madachy emphasizes, though, that Nicholas's

> final position at the end of the novel is but a beginning. He has learned a great deal, but Fowles allows only his potential for freedom not full blossoming of that freedom. (70)

In The Collector, Miranda finds herself at a beginning near the end of her ordeal. In her diary she writes:

> I would not want this not to have happened. Because if I escape I shall be a completely different and I think better person. Because if I don't escape, if something dreadful happened, I shall still know that the person I was and would have stayed if this hadn't happened was not the person I now want to be. (229)

Rackham also finds Nicholas has acquired a potential for freedom. He writes:

> For Nicholas the total pattern of foreshortened experiences artificially created by Conchis in his godgame stimulates a response that changes him from an intellectual prig into at least the beginnings of a more sensitive human being, willing to risk everything on one final illogical act. (95)

Similarly, in The French Lieutenant's Woman, Charles is brought to a beginning by Sarah. After her numerous deceptions, Charles realizes that her actions "were but strategems to unblind him" (288).

The fact that Fowles did not give Nicholas a "full-blossoming freedom" apparently disturbs some critics. Frank Novak writes that Nicholas "is fundamentally the same person at the end of the experience

that he was at the beginning: isolated, selfish, indecisive, lacking moral or spiritual commitment" (76). Novak also writes:

> Nicholas fails to respond constructively to the godgame: he does not change significantly, nor does he acquire any enduring values. He can neither understand nor extricate himself from the complex predicament that threatens him. The godgame is meaningful to Nicholas only because he becomes the center of the artificial world it creates. He participates in it and becomes obsessed by it because the experience promotes the illusion that he is significant, that events occur and other people exist merely for his amusement and benefit. (77-78)

Malcolm Bradbury offers similar comments:

> The final pages are ambiguous; we do not know whether Urfe has been saved or damned by his experiences, whether the mysterious powers have withdrawn or remain in his life, whether he accepts Alison or ends the novel in renewed isolation. (267)

Christopher Mulvey is likewise disappointed that Fowles does not show whether or not Nicholas has learned his lesson (61).

Fowles seems to defend the basic concept of the

ambiguous ending (as well as the multiple ending of The French Lieutenant's Woman). Mantissa traces a story's development from idea to page to revision. Miles and Erato discuss what fiction should be and what structure it should assume. They discuss the acceptability of the inconclusive and the multiple ending. Mantissa itself ends inconclusively. Throughout the book Miles and his muse talk about literary possibilities. At the end, she (now back in the guise of Dr. Delfie) and Nurse Cory leave Miles unconscious on the bed. The reader is not certain if she has won their battle over words and had her ideas accepted, or if Miles, as author, has simply reached an impasse because this idea didn't work and will go on to another.

A footnote defines mantissa as "'An addition of comparatively small importance, especially to a literary effort or discourse'" (188). If the entire work shows no great importance, perhaps its individual elements do not do so either. Perhaps it does not matter that a novel ends ambiguously (although Fowles does not feel that the original version of The Magus did) or has multiple endings or if its subject is one that is not considered appropriate by some serious authors. For example, Miles, as a serious modern writer, says to Erato: "'If you want story, character, suspense, description, all that antiquated nonsense from pre-modernist times, then go to the cinema. Or read

comics'" (119). For Fowles it seems that the form of the novel is not as important as the message.

Various media in which a story is related--movies, television programs, other literature--frequently employ a conclusive ending, which indicates precisely what takes place upon resolution of a problem or situation. The Magus is more subtle than that. This subtlety is sufficient to indicate progress, without resorting to a neatly-tied, decisive ending. Nicholas has had twenty-five years to develop his attitude; several months of an experience, even as enlightening as Conchis's godgame, cannot produce such immediate, "full-blossoming" results that some critics desire.

Fowles is a firm believer in the power of mystery. In The Aristos he writes: "Mystery, or unknowing, is energy. As soon as a mystery is explained, it ceases to be a source of energy" (28). The following observation by Wolfe addresses Fowles's "need" for mystery. It also can be applied to the comments of those critics who want a decisive ending for The Magus. Wolfe writes: "The existence of mysteries is more important than their solution because solutions block thought. To keep ourselves alert and nimble-witted we need all the mystery we can get" (36-37). To those critics, Wolfe appears to say that if they demand a neatly-tied ending, they do not allow for all the possibilities that exist in each situation. Loveday

echoes this thought when he writes:

> For like Conchis on Phraxos, The Magus offers us freedom, not as an element of its content, not as words within it, but as an element of its form. Responsibility and love are its content, its message. But in its multiple ironies it embodies freedom: and in these ironies, as likewise in its open ending, it forces the reader to exercise this freedom, to take up his necessary critical task rather than lazily assenting to a series of ready-made assertions. By placing itself under the sign of the magus, The Magus reminds us that it is illusion: and by abolishing itself when it has completed its task, the book, like the godgame itself, demonstrates by its elusive and illusive nature that "an answer is always a form of death. . . ." (45-46)

As Madachy and others point out, the significance in the experience Nicholas undergoes lies in accomplishing a beginning. Olshen notes:

> The emphasis of The Magus is quite clearly on beginnings, not endings; on the moment of choice initiating action, not on the outcome of that action. It is the quest that the novel promotes, not the destination; living in the

> labyrinth of life and deriving strength from its mysteries, not finding a way out. (55-56)

Berets elaborates on the idea of the labyrinth when he parallels The Magus with the story of Daedalus and the Minotaur. Berets says that Nicholas must

> learn to act like both Daedalus and the Minotaur. First, he must try to understand and attempt to solve his own predicament, while later he is asked to view the whole experience as if he, himself, were the creator and manipulator of his environment. The objective of this novel is then not to reorient man so that he will be more able to cope with his feelings of alienation and impotence, but to construct an individual myth that will consequently enable an "elect" individual to impose a meaningful pattern on his existence. (90)

McDaniel comments that "what Nicholas is only beginning to realize at the end of The Magus is that he does possess a guiding structure to help him choose and act" (38). She goes on to say that before coming to Bourani to participate in Conchis's godgame,

> he was rigidly fixed in his selfish pursuits and convinced that he could never be different from what he was. But the godgame assists Nicholas

> to develop a moral being capable of dominating the shallow egotist he had been. (38)

Nicholas realizes that he possesses no more than a beginning of understanding. At the novel's end he tells Alison:

> "[Conchis] said something to me one day. About males and females. How we judge things as objects, and you judge them by their relationships. All right. You've always been able to see this . . . whatever it is . . . between us. Joining us. I haven't. That's all I can offer you. The possibility that I'm beginning to see it. That's all." (602)

That acknowledged beginning, brought about by participation in the masque, coupled with positive actions based on the realization that he is "beginning to see," points to the godgame's success. Nicholas has been given the ability to understand what freedom is--that it runs between individuals and can, therefore, be only a relative freedom. According to Madachy, "Fowles suggests that in order to survive, man must determine to be free to choose and must choose not to harm other human beings" (88).

Freedom of choice involves more than merely choosing <u>to</u> <u>do</u> something. Madachy writes that the masque leads Nicholas "to a position where he has complete freedom to choose to commit an act and has he ability to choose <u>not</u>

to commit it" (84). Nicholas has learned this lesson as well. He learned it in part from Leverrier. After seeing Alison alive in Athens, Nicholas returns to London, stopping briefly in Italy to see Leverrier. He asks Leverrier about Conchis, but is told: "'I must ask you once again to believe that I am silent for your sake as well as mine" (520). Nicholas then does the same for the American John Briggs, who is taking the same position on Phraxos that Nicholas had. Nicholas decides "not to spoil his experience" (568). Nicholas says that again he "was standing with the cat in my hand, unable to bring it down" (568).

The revelation following the disintoxication is probably the quintessence of the freedom one has in not committing an act. Nicholas stands ready to strike Lily/Julie/Dr. Maxwell with the cat-o'-nine-tails. He thinks:

> I tried to determine whether once again I was preconditioned not to do it, by Conchis; but I knew I had absolute freedom of choice. I could do it if I wanted. Then suddenly.
>
> I understood what I had misunderstood.
>
> I was not holding a cat in my hand in an underground cistern. I was in a sunlit square and in my hands I held a German submachine gun.
>
> And my freedom too was in not striking,

> whatever the cost. Whatever they thought of me; even though it would seem, as they had foreseen, that I was forgiving them, that I was indoctrinated; their dupe. That eighty other parts of me must die. (466)

The story about the square and the submachine gun, like the other stories Conchis tells him, parallels Nicholas's own life and the situations that Conchis brings about.

Nicholas has learned about choosing to do and choosing not to do. While Nicholas is waiting for Alison to come to him, he thinks Conchis and his followers are still watching them. At this point, angry at them again for what they have done, he says:

> I wanted to show <u>them</u>--if they had eyes present to be shown, and I could never be sure that they hadn't--that I could live without affaires; and less consciously I wanted to show myself the same things. I also wanted to be able to face Alison with the knowledge that I had been faithful to her, though I partly wanted this knowledge as a weapon, an added lash to the cat--if the cat had to be used. (581)

When Nicholas and Alison finally meet in Regent's Park, Nicholas gives Alison his conditions for continuing their relationship: he walks away; she calls his name; he stops and turns; she comes to him; he continues walking; she comes

after him, taking his arm; he shakes himself free; he slaps her; he leaves by one gate, she by another; she goes to the waiting room of Paddington Station, communicating with no one. Saari speculates that Nicholas is devising a test in which Alison must choose between him and Conchis--a test similar to his own in choosing between becoming authentic and remaining unauthentic (69).

One by one the conditions are carried out. As soon as Nicholas slaps Alison, however, the realization hits <u>him</u>: no one is watching. He thinks:

> And suddenly the truth came to me, as we stood there, trembling, searching, at our point of fulcrum. There were no watching eyes. The windows were as blank as they looked. The theatre was empty. It was not a theatre. They had told her it was a theatre, and she had believed them, and I had believed her. To bring us to this--not for themselves, but for us. (604)

Scholes describes Nicholas's new freedom:

> This freedom, the true freedom which Nicholas has finally found not in dropping a girl but in keeping one, also involves his final acceptance of a universe in which no one is watching his gestures and keeping score. The godgame is over. Conchis is not there. His own conscience

> and his own consciousness are his only judges. (10)

Nicholas has made it through his instruction. After being released at Monemvasia, he says: "The all-important was that I had survived, I had come through" (481). He now possesses the knowledge necessary to define and utilize his freedom. At the novel's end, Nicholas is at a beginning--he begins to see how the godgame was played for his benefit. With this insight, we can assume that he applies it in his relationship with Alison. As Loveday points out:

> [W]hile we are not told in so many words that Nick and Alison leave the novel together, we are given a pretty hefty pointer in that direction (provided that is, that we can read Latin). (134)

Loveday refers to the two ending lines, which translate:

> Tomorrow let one who has never loved, love.
> One who has loved, let him love tomorrow.

# CONCLUSION

The Magus, one of John Fowles's most perplexing novels, ends not with a definitive, "neatly-tied" resolution which emphatically states that the great truth which Nicholas discovers will be immediately put to use. Rather the novel points out that a great truth is perceived and its effects constitute the beginning of understanding and the beginning of the implementation of that understanding. Nicholas must take what he now knows about himself and use it. As Wolfe writes:

> Now whereas all knowledge comes from self-knowledge, the goal of both freedom and self-knowledge is integration. Man is a social creature, and so long as he detaches himself from other people his perceptions run to waste. However urgent our revelations, they need sharing. They have to prepare us for commitment to something outside ourselves. (26)

At the start of the novel, Nicholas is "blind" to the motivations for his actions and to the proper method for establishing meaningful relationships with people; by the end he begins to "see" the lessons he has so painfully endured as necessary to counteract his self-centered attitudes.

Madachy writes that Nicholas, at first, appears to

be "merely a stereotyped example of a modern young man: restless, alienated, cynical." Upon examining him closer, Madachy says, Urfe is found to be "an Everyman . . . a symbol not only of modern man but of contemporary life and its values" through whom Fowles illustrates the contemporary world and how man must "re-establish his humanity" (62). Olshen comments that The Magus "concentrates on the possibilities, not the limitations, of human nature" (33).

Nicholas, as Scholes points out, is both the novel's protagonist and narrator. Scholes writes:

> As narrator he is no longer confused; in fact he can present his life to us fictionally, as a meaningful metaphor, precisely because he has learned the difference between fiction and existence. But as a character Nicholas starts in confusion, and the narrative is the story of his education. (4)

Nicholas no longer needs to present his life to others as fiction; he can embrace reality, rather than hold it away, for now he realizes what constitutes reality. Berets sees the need for Nicholas to "accomplish . . . a transition from the world of myth to a world of reality without sacrificing the personal awareness he has attained in his search for himself" (95).

Nicholas is now in a position similar to

Conchis's, that is, of a magus. Conchis tells Nicholas following the disintoxication: "'I come to tell you that you are now elect. . . . You have no choice'" (479). As Berets writes:

> It is suggested at the end of The Magus that Nicholas has attained that intermediary position between God and the common men that allows him to become creator of his own psychological universe. (96)

Nicholas understands what freedom is and how it is obtained; he understands the commandment Thou Shalt Not Commit Pain; he is prepared to make his new-found responsibility towards others something that he must choose every day.

"So the novel ends," writes Berets, "with a confirmation of love and the necessary interrelationship of people who sought through their experiences to discover this interdependence of human behavior" (97). Despite dissenting viewpoints, The Magus does establish a method for bringing Nicholas Urfe and readers of the novel to a beginning of the understanding necessary to become and remain authentic.

The final passage in The Aristos expands on the book's title (which means the best for a given situation), and applies to modern man and his world: all situations we encounter should be guided by the principles found in The

Aristos so that we may harmoniously coexist with our fellow man. It also seems to apply to The Magus: just as the whole of man's actions are to be so guided, each individual event--or series of related events as in Nicholas's case--must similarly be guided. That final passage states:

> To accept one's limited freedom, to accept one's isolation, to accept this responsibility, to learn one's particular powers, and then with them to humanize the whole: that is the best for this situation. (214)

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