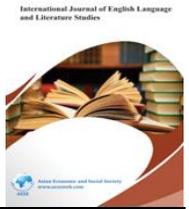




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### THE DIALECTIC OF PAST AND PRESENT IN JOHN FOWLES'S "THE MAGUS" EVERY CULTURE CANNOT SUSTAIN AND ABSORB THE SHOCK OF MODERN CIVILIZATION. THERE IS THE PARADOX: HOW TO BECOME A MODERN AND TO RETURN TO SOURCES. (PAUL RICOEUR)

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#### ABSTRACT

*It is noticeably that one of the unresolved contradictions of representation in postmodern novel is that of the relation between the past and present. This issue generates a wide variety of critical hues, exploring how present circumstances shape a historical narrative. This article attempts to consider John Fowles's well-known novel *The Magus* Fowles (1965). This Article investigates the importance of historical texts produced in contemporary fiction and of being displayed in the act of narration. Fowles has not been tied down to one narrative technique, that he has winnowed the chained narrative of its conventional techniques. The past permeates the present, just as the present spins the representations of the past. Fowles thus traces the language, the texts and the material culture of the past to produce a critical representation of the past. Such novel disavows the traditional boundaries between historical fact and fiction. There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically in recent times is to think critically and contextually. Consequently, the meaning and shape are not in the 'events', but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical facts.*

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the unsettled contradictions of representation in postmodern fiction is that of the dialectical relation between the past and present. This issue generates a wide spectrum of critical

hue, from the nineteenth century historicity to our current fiction. But the increasing prominence of historical themes in current fiction suggests that the novel's perennial valence for history has acquired a new strength in recent years. However, it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art; and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms; and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; moreover, they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. Jameson (1988), in his attacks on postmodernism insists that "History is not in any sense itself a text or master text or master narrative, but that it is inaccessible to us except in textual or narrative form, or in other words, that we approach it only by way of some prior textualization or narrative (re)construction" (150). Jameson castigates postmodern synthesis of history as a text and deviates the attention away from the actual events of the past towards the interpretation of those events. Jameson ascribes the void that triggered between the actual lived past and its representation to postmodern historicity. Jameson (1991) further proclaims that "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (18). He refutes the proclamation of postmodern historicity about the past that has resulted in nostalgia for the past, without significant interest in its substance. Thus, the past as historical referent is dissolved in self-reflexive textuality. The postmodernists' representation of the past is deviant from Jameson's in that they project the contemporary culture on the bygone eras, history is not denuded of its specific cultural resonance. The past becomes a treasure trove to be mined for pertinent connections and similarities to the present. This approach creates a false continuity between past and present for Jameson (1981) who claims that "using history responsibly means reading it for traces of the uninterrupted narrative of class struggle, and bringing to the surface of the text this repressed and buried reality" (20). In effect, he sees the past and the present as having continuity from the Marxist's perspective which is rejected by postmodernists.

Francese (1997) has stated that:

Benjamin has written of the need to reenter into legibility latent traces of the past so that a new situational value, relative to the present, may be assigned to them. Oppositional postmodernism's restoration to the present of latent, disparate elements of the past subverts all strong, exclusionary historical narrative. Within the present there are traces of the silenced and marginalized "detritus of history," to use Benjamin's term. For Benjamin the present is a "constellation" of "dialectical images" - that is to say, the historicity of the present is the sum of the textualized past and its unwritten detritus. When the "dialectical images" of the forgotten past are displaced from their context and re-inscribed into the present, they gain focus within the present and constitute its "potentially revolutionary antithesis. (108)

What appears here is that the historicity of the present is illuminated not only in recuperating the substance of bygone eras, but also their styles. It takes a revisionist approach to the past to explore how present circumstances shape a historical narrative, and yet it is also indebted to earlier cultural attitudes towards history. Moreover, it tries to create a pastiche that plays with our certainties about history while simultaneously delighting in what can be retrieved of the past. In postmodern historiography, the historical record is in itself understood as a text always already processed into the narrative, and not merely as "an unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities" (Murray Krieger, 1974). The novels of historiographic metafiction are actually aware that both history and fiction are human constructs, and use this awareness to rethink the forms and contents of the past. Such novels disavow the traditional boundaries between historical fact and fiction. There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually. Both history and fiction are discourses, both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. In other words, the past pervades the present and irrevocably shapes it, just as the present shapes the interpretation of the past. Nevertheless, this fluidity of temporalities does not efface the historical truth, but is an acknowledgement of the meaning making function of human constructs. Consequently, the meaning and shape are not in the 'events', but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical facts. This is not a dishonest refuge from truth as much as Jameson might fear, but a heraldic amalgam of the two discourses that have always been notoriously porous genres. Linda (1989) holds that "Postmodern novels raise a number of specific issues, regarding the interaction of historiography and fictional issues surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; and the ideological implications of writing about history" (117). Linda Hutcheon has also defined 'Historiographic Metafiction':

As one kind of postmodern novel which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity, and particularity of the individual past event. It also suggests a distinction between 'events' and 'facts' that is shared by many historians. Since the documents become signs of events, which the historians transmutes into facts, as in historiographic metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. Finally, historiographic metafiction often points to the fact by using the paratextual convention of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations (122-123).

This is what Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction', a new kind of innovative genre which is obviously capable of rendering the exigencies of postmodernism. It demonstrates concerns about the knowledge of the past and the supremacy that narrative has bestowed on that knowledge. It has patently determined among the literary and cultural convergence studies that the postmodern novel is paradoxical, contradictory and metaphysical as well. And it is part of the postmodernist's stand to confront commonality which offers a conjoining of performance in the present and recording of the past, more broadly, the presence of the past. The common

denominator of the 'historiographic metafiction' is that it investigates the contradiction of history; this contradiction is played out in terms of parody and metafiction versus the conventions of realism.

A number of contemporary novelists who are not exclusively or even principally known as writers of historical fiction have been similarly immersing themselves in the language, the texts, and the material culture of the past to produce some remarkable works of fiction. What distinguishes their novels from conventional or classic historical fictions and labels them as postmodern fiction are their resistance to old certainties about what happened and why; a recognition of the subjectivity, uncertainty, self-reflexivity, provisionality, multiplicity of truths inherent in any account of past events, and a disjunctive, self-conscious narrative, frequently produced by multiple narrating voices. Linda (1988) takes these stereotypes up, where she refutes the denominators of fiction to history:

This self-reflexivity does not weaken, but on the contrary, strengthens and points to the direct level of historical engagement and reference of the text. Like many postmodern novels, this provisionality and uncertainty (and the willful and overt construction of meaning too) do not 'cast doubt about their seriousness', but rather define the new postmodern seriousness that acknowledges the limits and powers of reporting or writing the past, recent or remote (117).

## 2. THE MAGUS ANALYSIS

Fowles began writing *The Magus* in the early 1950s; *the Magus* is an exercise in the multiple uses and meanings of imagination and creativity. This strange and compelling novel is about Nicholas Urfe, the narrator of the story, who suffers from existentialist bad faith, and undergoes a series of trials set for him by "The Magus". Maurice Conchis, with the help of two mysterious twin sisters, becomes involved in a strange psychological game, each new revelation by Conchis turning out to be another stimulus to his experimental subject Urfe. John Fowles has treated the discrete, particular and heterogeneous temporal parameters as horizontal, not linear and progressive. This suggests that time is an intrinsic product of dynamic representation of Nicholas' psychological world and thus, it represents certain systematic aspects of reality to him. The Magus is narrated in the first-person where the narrator is presented as a character in the story narrative. The use of the past tense is enough to make the narrative subsequent, but it does not indicate the temporal intervals which separate the moment of narrating from the moment of story. The contemporarily of story time and narrating time is disclosed by the use of the present tense at the end of the story. Thus the final convergence lessens the interval, separating it from the moment of the narrating due to the length of the story. Fowles makes the temporal isotopy evident as a result of those final convergences between the story of Magus and its narrative as a character in the story.

The narrator continues using the simple past. Four days later he is standing on Hymettus, looking down over the great complex of Athens – Piraeus. It is like a journey into space. Fowles in "*Behind The Magus*," Fowles (1996):

I have always been deeply interested, obsessed and absorbed by nature, and fell headlong and hopelessly in love with that of Greece, literally at first sight. I remain deeply attached to that difficult, devious and hospitable, sometimes monstrous yet almost always charming people, the Greeks, and have long said that in fact I have three homelands, my own England (not Britain), France and Greece. My love for all three of them may seem rather strange, since it is above all of their rural, "natural history" aspects and little, or not at all, of their cities and larger towns. I have a sort of nickname for these aspects of both France and Greece that attract me: *La France Sauvage* and *Agria Ellada*, the wild sides of both countries. (3)

Nicholas Urfe regards the Greek landscape as his own mistress. Even before he leaves England, he says "I was like a medieval King, I had fallen in love with the picture long before I saw the reality" (M 40). He soon realizes that it is "Like a journey into space. I was standing on Mars knew deep in thyme, under a sky that seemed never to have known dust or cloud. I looked down at my pale London hands." During his first six months on Phraxos, Nicholas finds the school claustrophobic but Phraxos (island) is beautiful: "It took my breath away when I first saw it, floating under Venus like a majestic black whole in an amethyst evening sea, and it still takes my breath away when I shut my eyes now and remember it." (M 50) Fowles shifts the tense from the past into present, using a denotative adverb of present time, "now", jumping fifteen years back in a moment when he began writing it in the early 1950s. Thus the trajectory of the mobile time is given all at once, and all past and present is spread out instantaneously. The narrator goes on describing his unhappy feeling on the island, the whole island seems to feel like an exile from contemporary reality; yet the island is beautiful. He begins writing poetry about the island and about Greece. He realizes that he cannot write good poetry and that he is having difficulty forgetting Alison. In a funk, he visits a brothel in Athens and contracts a venereal disease. He seriously contemplates suicide, but Nicholas is called back by romantic mystery and music: "From the hills behind came the solitary voice of a girl... It sounded disembodied, of place, not person... It seemed mysterious, welling out of solitude and suffering that made mine trivial and absurd" (M 61). The first of the novel's three parts ends at this point. Nicholas is the Fowlesian protagonist who tries to find his freedom by rejecting religious beliefs and British social expectations. He is isolated familiarly and metaphysically. At the university, Nicholas forms a group of college students called "*Les Hommes Revoltes*" (M 17). They take up French existentialism and argue about being and nothingness. Later he goes to Greece and falls in love with a woman, but it is only a metaphorical woman:

I fell totally and for ever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence, as if Greece were a woman so sensually provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her. (M 49)

Thus, this is the beginning of the mystery and disruption of Nicholas's world by Otherness. The narrator starts chapter Nine with — "Years later I saw the gabbia at Pidenza" (M 62). Fowles makes a sudden shift to the future, from the past, by disrupting the narrative continuity and keeping the reader in an alert frame of mind, thus the constant shift in time from the past to the future in narrative decreases the element of suspense. Fowles in each part of the novel starts with an epigraph from "De Sade, Les Infortunes de La vertu". Thus Fowles in *The Magus* reflects the ideas, characters and events of past literature and alienates that past literature in the context of the twentieth century world. He inscribes past literature and subverts it. The mysteries begin as Nicholas goes swimming and someone leaves a book of poems, evidently meant for him to find. As he looks in the woods nearby, he finds a gate to a villa with a nearby sign "Salle D' attente" (M 71) French for waiting room. In this sense, Nicholas is waiting to descend into his interior space from outer space, into his mystic journey that was into interior space. One of his colleagues, his name is Demetriades, explains that the villa is owned by a rich recluse named Maurice Conchis. Nicholas decides to look him up and becomes very curious about Conchis. He writes a letter to Alison in which he told her about the waiting room: "On the island he is driven back to the past, there is so much space, so much silence, so few meetings that one easily sees out of the present, and the past seems ten times closer than it is" (M78). Fowles's purpose is to present a juxtaposition of different moments in time in our mind. [Mercier \(1971\)](#) states that "To telescope time so that we see everything at once instead of in succession, to convert narration in time into a picture in space" (M 277). In time, Nicholas is drawn into an intricate web of play and trickery.

It is obvious that the tension is between the linear-temporal nature of its medium (language) and the spatial elements pointed by its nature as a work of art. Thus, the spatial form continues to evolve. It should be noted that the spatial form in Fowles's fiction has departed from pure temporality, causal and temporal sequence. Hence, his fiction has not ignored time completely. It clearly involves simultaneity, jumps in time and flashbacks. As a result of the violations of chronology and the disruption of the conventional causal/temporal syntax of his fiction, the reader must work out a new connection or fill out a relationship by considering the novel as a whole in a moment of time. To make sense of the narrative, the linguistic and the structural considerations must be completely correlated and connected to the reader's perception. Thus, the significance of events is initiated only by the reflexive relationships among the units of meaning. [Sukenick \(1974\)](#) says, "the collapse of illusionary time in realistic fiction parallels the collapse of illusionary space in perspective painting and serves a parallel function: the assertion of the validity of the work of art in its own right rather than as an imitation of something else" (433).

In *The Magus*, Fowles also has played a game of opening up a space, nothingness, encountered between a single self- a young man in need of education- and another teacher of "magus". In practice, Fowles has led his protagonist into Greece where he is disrupted by a kind of otherness; otherness is represented here by Greece and later by Conchis. Nicholas Urfe regards the Greek landscape as his own mistress. Even before he leaves England he says, "I was like a medieval

King, I had fallen in love with the picture long before I saw the reality." (M 40) He soon realizes that it is "like a journey into space. I was standing on Mars knew deep in thyme, under a sky that seemed never to have known dust or cloud. I looked down at my pale London hands." (M 49)

From the first moment that he arrives in Greece, he fell in love with the Greek landscape:

I feel totally and forever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence and inferiority, as if Greece were a woman so sensually and provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her, and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her. (M 49)

Nicholas Urfe tried to seek a space for his freedom by rejecting religious beliefs and British Social expectations. This Fowlesian hero excavates a secret place, a place where he can generate a genuine freedom for the self. It is Greece, specifically the small island of Phraxos, where he experiences a lightness of being and realizes the latent potentialities within the external space of the island. The intersection of these spaces form an entangled network heads toward transcendences of the self. Nicholas was caught by the magic of the island, its timeless, motionless and fragrant wind of knowledge that lit the ancient Greece; and in his mental space, a memory of all those grey streets, those grey towns, that grayness of England. This shows plenty of jumbled spaces at a time, transpose transversally across an intricate web of play and trickery, conducted by Maurice Conchis. Such experiences come in a very brief space pregnant with existingness. Despite their evanescence and shadowing, they are consecutive in a streamlined juxtaposition. [Francese \(1997\)](#) claims that "The conflict of order and disorder forces the immanent narrator to choose between interior calm coupled with exterior disorder or its opposite, exterior order coupled with interior disquietude" (39).

Fowles does not use space as a relief from the ongoing action of time; rather, his spatiality lies in the composition and the purpose of his fiction. In discarding the linearity of narrative, juxtaposition is the substitute. The juxtaposition of disparate spatial images creates a synthesis of meaning between these spatial images and this supersedes any sense of temporal discontinuity. [Sukenick \(1974\)](#) has argued that, "the art field is a nexus of various kinds of energy, image, and experience. What they are, and how they interact may in the long run be the most profitable area for criticism: the study of composition." (435) In view of this, the reader loses track of the linear time in the dense, slow and close-up attention to detail; for this, the passage of time from one point to the next is unimportant, the relevant dimension is spatial. [Genette \(1966\)](#) observes in his essay that "Language, thought, contemporary art are spatialized"; Language spaces itself so that space, in itself, becomes language, is spoken and written" (101). In this view, Fowles has suffused extended imagery, complicated syntax, word-play and attention are drawn to spatialize the narrative. He offered brilliant spatial images that blur the trajectory of narrative order and act of narration. Nicholas tried to create his own space, so he succeeded in stepping out of the boundaries of the textual universe into his own space. Nicholas as a transformative man wanders blindly through the dark labyrinth of the experiments of the Godgame. In time, Nicholas is drawn into an intricate web of games, so he becomes involved in these games for which he loses sense of time and the unconscious seems real and conscious. This episode apparently drives its own time and

space. Nicholas establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now". This means that past is contained in present or that past, present and future all commingle under some horizon of interpretation. Fowles has intimated the contrasting notions of time, the intimacy among past, present and future: all three dependent upon the logical priority of the realization that the protagonist is free to shape his life as he likes. This realization of personal freedom brings about his maturation or transformation of time into spatial categories through displacement and annihilation. Each category about Conchis's activities is interesting, for all the ingenious ways which unsettle our earlier ideas about the truth behind what he is doing, and lead us to question both the reality of our own lives and the relationship between a work of fiction and reality. It goes further to unsettle and trivialize itself. The constant pulling out of the rug from under the reader's feet is the principal way in which Fowles's self-indulgence is manifested. The Magus is a massive tour de force that simply creates space. Nicholas's escape into the exterior space is shattered by Conchis's henchmen. They tear Julie away and slam the lid, leaving Nicholas alone in the underworld of his interior space where he will undergo his "disintoxication" (M 445). Nicholas thinks that he is winning Lily/Julie over to his side. She, too, seems to be a victim of Conchis's manipulations. Nicholas wishes to rescue her and secure her love, but he is never sure where truth begins and pretense ends. Nicholas starts thinking of Lily's betrayal of him to the kidnapers, and comes to realize what Alison means to him and how deeply he misses her. He ponders the difference between love and sex, love and possession, real relationship and fantasized triumphs: "I found myself thinking of Alison, for the first time... I almost wished she was there, beside me, for companionship"(M 387). Fowles shifts the exterior space, to internal and the psychological space (mental state) of his protagonist. Nicholas has fallen into several psychological pits, wandering into abysses of nothingness. The events of the masque become increasingly complex, yet all is not over. Nicholas succeeds in possessing Lily sexually and in that moment, when he finally believes she loves him, she reveals that this behavior, too, is part of the psychodrama. He is suddenly seized, imprisoned, and eventually put on trial before a group of mock psychologists. He descends into his heart of darkness, into this underground space and he is judged by the living Tarot deck that metamorphoses into an international panel of Freudian psychoanalysts. Then, he is disintoxicated by Lily;

Above all there was the extraordinariness of the experience; its uniqueness conferred a uniqueness on me, and I had it like a great secret, a journey to Mars, a prize no one else had. Then too I seemed to see my behavior; I had woken up seeing it, in a better light; the trial and the disintoxication were evil fantasias sent to test my normality and my normality had triumphed (M, 533).

Nicholas moves from one underground room to another. All these dislocations serve to obliterate Nicholas's romantic deceptions about himself from England to the peace and tranquility of a sun-kissed Greek Island – the kind of Journey John Fowles himself took–forced to descend into inner space. Nicholas's disintoxication leads him to the discovery that 'Julie' is a fraud through his attendance at the fierce trial, his viewing of a silly 'blue' movie, followed by an act of one-stage intercourse between Lily and her black lover and his tour of the earth.

### 3. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the ending of *The Magus* is especially enigmatic, and it is like jigsaw puzzle. The last chapter starts with a spatial image. The first represents the dilemma of Fowles's protagonist who is "at a crossroads, in dilemma, with all to lose and only more of the same to win" Fowles (1965). And Fowles has intended to "let him survive, but give him no direction, no reward, because we too are waiting; in our solitary rooms where the telephone never rings, waiting for this girl, this truth, this crystal of humanity, this reality lost through imagination, to return" ( 645). There is no doubt that Nicholas has changed as a result of his experiences in the Godgame, but it remains to be seen whether Nicholas, as representative of western modern man, has within himself the desire to complete his metamorphosis. He is the judge; he is in control of his destiny; the decision is his; the door is open; and a road is taken or not taken. Thus, it can be concluded that the past is not articulated into the present in the nexus of cause and effect and the documental images of the past are dialectically recuperated into the present according to the needs of the present. This is what would characterize postmodernism fiction would be what is called 'historiographic metafiction'.

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