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JOHN FOWLES, JAMES ANTHONY FROUDE, AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF INNOVATION  
AND TRADITIONALISM IN THE BRITISH NOVEL

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The British novel since the Second World War represents to many critics at best paradox, and at worst bathos. In spite of the centrality of British-domiciled writers to the early Modern movement, more recent novelists in Britain seem explicitly or covertly traditionalist.<sup>1</sup> However much an Amis or a Sillitoe might once have appeared to be the voice of a new generation, by the fourth or fifth novel our authors become unmistakably the inheritors of bourgeois realism. One might instance for the unbeliever the remarkable development of William Golding from the fabulation of Lord of the Flies to the latter-day Trollopianism of his latest novel The Pyramid. One can pose the question as to why this should happen in aesthetic terms, as most literary critics do, and then one sees such development as a failure of nerve, of authorial independence, in a society which has far more social continuity within its cultural elite than most participants are happy to admit. Or one can pose it in political terms, and ask, with Amis himself, "Why Lucky Jim turned Right?", for it is hard to name a major British novelist since the Second World War who has not become, at least tacitly, conservative in social, especially educational, attitudes. But the paradox, the phenomenon itself, is hardly debateable, that by contrast with the professed critical attitudes of the majority of reviewers, and by contrast with the aims and practice of so many French or American novelists, British post-War writers have, by and large, remained perversely loyal to the ancien roman.

Ten years ago, John Fowles would have appeared a notable exception to such generalisation. On the evidence of his early works, and with the help of his own frequent proclamations of indebtedness to post-War French philosophy, Fowles was often seen as one of the most modern of British authors, a mythic novelist, a self-conscious existentialist as well as a professed Socialist, a writer conditioning rather than conditioned by the culture of the past. This image of Fowles as cultural innovator particularly affected, and mistakenly to my mind,

the ~~reception~~<sup>e</sup> critical reception of Fowles's third novel, The French Lieutenant's Woman, on its first publication in 1969. Critics then emphasised the anti-Victorianism behind, say, Fowles's explicit sexual knowingness as contrasted with the innocent repressions of his middle-class Victorian characters, and praised the contrived innovativeness of his narrative structure, with its constant reminders of the work's fictionality, and its multiplicity of conclusions. Partly, no doubt, for rhetorical simplicity, and partly from the pedagogic imperative to explain what one suspects readers or students will not already know, the majority of critical writing on The French Lieutenant's Woman has fallen into a pattern, where first Fowles's Victorian borrowings are listed and called allusions, and then the saving modernism of his philosophy and narrative method are introduced, to prove that the work's Victorianism is clever counterfeit or playful pastiche, and not a covert tribute to that discredited age. ~~In the summary of the article~~ One critic may stand for many in making the assertion that Fowles's "major concern is for the art of the future . . . while still able to look back down the traditional novel, he strikes off in new experimental directions, moving towards existential metafiction".<sup>2</sup> Such claims are, of course, an implicit condemnation of the majority of British novelists who have been moving in the other direction.

There is, one would be foolish to deny it, ample evidence for such an approach to the work, in Fowles's earlier novels, in the climate of literary ideas within which he has worked, and in his own comments on his art. In the famous chapter 13 of French Lieutenant's Woman, for instance, Fowles reminds the reader that his omniscient-author pose is a Victorian convention, and that he and we live "in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes".<sup>3</sup> In his essay on the novel's composition, he claims that in it he "was trying to show an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible".<sup>4</sup> The aphoristic memoranda Fowles made for himself to guide his writing of the work included the note, "remember the etymology of the word: a novel is something new".<sup>5</sup>



But such evidence of authorial intention is peculiarly tricky to handle. Perhaps, one might suggest, Fowles's references to Robbe-Grillet are teasing and ironic in tone, and are to be regarded as the sign of playful dispute between two educated equals, author and reader, rather than as rather simple-minded critical signposts to direct the hapless pedagogue -- after all, even at that stage of his career, Fowles elsewhere described Robbe-Grillet's nouveau roman essay, however interesting it might be, as polemically fallacious in its central assertion that the novel is a search for new form,<sup>6</sup> and in a more recent interview he has admitted that though he once tried to write a nouveau roman, he soon "suppressed" it.<sup>7</sup> The very variable fictionality of the authorial 'I' voice in The French Lieutenant's Woman is linked by Fowles himself to the playful irony of Lovel, one of Thackeray's less-read works;<sup>8</sup> the building of a novel from cinematic images Fowles himself traces back to Faubert;<sup>9</sup> his multiple endings have their origin in the mid-narrative conjectures of many Victorian novels, as well as real precedent in the modern reader's dilemma over the multiple extant endings of such works as Great Expectations, The Light that Failed, and Handful of Dust; while Fowles's acknowledgment of indebtedness to the post-War French existentialist philosopher fashionable in his undergraduate days in the brave Socialist Britain of the late 1940s had by 1968 become so heavily reinterpreted as to be nearly a disownment: "One can almost", he wrote, "invert the reality and say that Camus and Sartre have been trying to lead us, in their fashion, to a Victorian seriousness of purpose and moral sensitivity".<sup>10</sup> Am I alone in detecting behind phrase "in their fashion" an Arnoldian dismissiveness?

Fowles's subsequent development, since The French Lieutenant's Woman, has tended to confirm one's impression that the modernism in that Janus-work was the surface allusion, and that the traditionalism -- character, plot, bourgeois moral seriousness -- was the substance. Both the debate about art in The Ebony Tower, and the narrative traditionalism of Daniel Martin, come down unmistakably on the side of that engagingly muddled and moralistic realism which

which has been the dominant mode of post-War British fiction. In his poems, as early as 1958, Fowles had cast gentle scorn on any "view of life/ Despising old Victorian words/ Like domesticity and balm".<sup>11</sup> Even in Fowles's most pretentious period, just after the publication of The Collector, he had acknowledged in an interview that his literary antecedents included, not only Sartre, but those notable British existentialists Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene.<sup>12</sup> By 1974, in a little-known essay I have not seen picked up by any of the Fowles bibliographies, he could write a description of his favourite reading which mentions no work at all of modern philosophy, and no twentieth-century publication other than the 1938 Souvenir Programme of the Cornish Gorsedd of the Bards.<sup>13</sup> It is a very comfortable, and conventional, sort of existentialism that can celebrate, as Fowles has recently done, the positively Betjemanian figure of the Victorian High Church Cornish vicar, Hawker of Morwenstow.<sup>14</sup> We are far indeed from the common image of Fowles, from the sixties reviews and the academic critics, when a chapter in Daniel Martin can end with the heart-felt exclamation, "To hell with cultural fashion; to hell with elitist guilt; to hell with existentialist nausea".<sup>15</sup> The teasing references to novel theory left by the mature Fowles are no longer to Robbe-Grillet and the nouveau roman, but to Georg Lukacs and his defence of the "great and progressive traditions of realism" over mere ~~XXXX~~ "formalistic experiment".<sup>16</sup>

Nor is it for nothing that Fowles's latest novel moves from gratuitous act and hollow marriage, through serial infidelities, to the tremulous idyll of a new marriage commitment. It would be frivolous to see this simply as the manipulation of literary precedents. Like Amis, in Girl, 20, or like Malcolm Bradbury in The History Man, though with more gentleness than they showed, Fowles in Daniel Martin seems to divine some deep absurdity, in the image of a middle-aged man, self-styledly progressive, in escapist liason with a younger girl-friend. Fowles's new hero stops struggling to step beyond his parentage, or family, or past, or age, or country. Whatever Fowles's own protests about the continuity of his existentialist beliefs (the very phrase has an oddly dated ring), the



whole balance of tones in his work seems now to have shifted: he is no longer a modernist aware of tradition, but rather a traditionalist redefining his relation to modernism. Much criticism of Fowles, as of other post-War British fiction, is simply beside the point because it persists in seeing the task of the novelist as the achievement of a brand-new (or at least imported), self-contained, apocalyptic vision, rather than as the exploration of the inescapable social, cultural and generic continuities within which British novelists necessarily work.

The process by which young novelists discover and adjust themselves towards these continuities is at root as much social as it is aesthetic or political, and Fowles's development can, I would argue, be better understood if we compare it with that of other innovators-turned-traditionalist. There seems to me a recurrent pattern of this kind in British writing; prefiguring the swing right of Amis or Fowles, one can see the development of Evelyn Waugh between, say, the Firbankian inventiveness of Decline and Fall in the late twenties to the three-volume dignity of Sword of Honour in the fifties. But much further back one can find other anticipations of the same phenomenon. Some years ago, Phyllis Grosskurth drew attention in print to the similarities between Fowles's French Lieutenant's Woman, and a little-known Victorian work by James Anthony Froude, The Lieutenant's Daughter, first published in 1847.<sup>17</sup> Froude's work is the kind of tricksily innovative writing one might well expect from an under-employed and rather alienated university teacher in his late twenties, and I dwell on it here, not to try to prove that it is the source or even a source for Fowles's novel, but to point up the social origin of this kind of innovativeness. Froude starts from an acute awareness of the fictionality of the writing endeavour; he does not claim, he warns us, that the incident he relates "befell me externally, but it befell me internally - a phenomenon of mind" (p.196). The novel itself is built on the given that the narrator has found himself "outside, and independent of", his own contingent circumstances, and that he could travel "backwards and forwards along the time river" (p.202),

seeing aged patriarchs gathering up their children again into their loins, great ships returning from wreck on the sea-bed to return stern-foremost into port, and even tea coiling back from the cup to the tea-pot spout (p.203). The story itself, about the pretty daughter of an old naval lieutenant, who may end up wither a suicidal fallen woman or a happily married wife, is told first backwards, from the inquest, to the suicide, to prostitution, to seduction in a Victorian London brothel, to social dependence as an orphan and governess, and back to youthful innocence with her father, and then it is reversed and told in an alternative version forwards, towards husband, children, and idyllic happiness. This extraordinary structure Froude compares to a book in which a European translation is interleaved with some Hebrew original, a comparison fit for a nouveau romancier. Froude's story, like Fowles's, is set in the West Country, but involves a contrast with the moral iniquity of London. The story closes with the narrator asking which of the two endings is "true", and receiving for answer only the gnomic imagery of the "cool sea breeze" and the "wide sheet of the Atlantic" (p.287), rather as Fowles manipulates Victorian sea-imagery in his novel. One passage of Froude's story, in particular, seems to anticipate the philosophic debates in Fowles's novel over the relation between moral choice and historical determinism: when Froude's narrator first sees even moving ~~towards~~ backwards through time, he comments "what struck me most, was the very comical idea [people] all had, that they were quite at liberty to do or not to do, that they were perfectly free agents with uncontrolled volition, when they were . . . going along a course so rigidly determined, uncoiling, and uncoiling everything, so exactly as it had been" (p.204).

Now it is not, of course, a new point that part of Fowles's attraction to the Victorian period was that in it he could identify with a group of like minds, young educated elite Victorians, who like himself had looked beyond the provinciality of English culture to Europe, to France and Germany, for many of their ideas; who like him, had been troubled by official Victorian attitudes to



sexuality; and who, again like him, had written of the <sup>apparent</sup> loneliness of moral choice in a society of inadequate moral conventions. The sheer number of Fowles's allusions to and epigraphs from mid-Victorians like Arnold, or Clough, is evident enough.

What has not, I think, been pointed out is the common social pattern that lies behind such an identification, and this is partly because much academic criticism presents too simplistically modern a picture of these innovative and alienated Victorians. The Froude instance, in particular, suggests that these precursors might tell us more about Fowles than is usually learnt, because Froude himself goes through a very similar development to Fowles's own, from innovation to traditionalism. Froude was the younger son of a West Country clergyman, rather badly educated at a public school, finding himself at Oxford (where he became a fellow of Exeter), and then, in reaction from brother Hurrell's Newmanism, becoming the bright and alienated radical of The Lieutenant Daughter and The Memesis of Faith.<sup>18</sup> In the late ~~eighteen~~-forties he was rejecting alike the traditionalism of the Church, of the University, of marriage, and of narrative convention. But his subsequent career shows, under the influence of Carlyle (whose biographer he was), a steady move back again into narrative history, especially the history of the West Country sea heroes of the sixteenth century, and <sup>to</sup> highly tendentious essays on the thought of his own time, until eventually he was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History in the same university he had abandoned in his period of youthful revolt. Only a few years after the radical fictions of the late forties, he could write of the reality of human society that its "whole complex frame . . . is a meshwork of duty woven of living fibre, [where] the condition of its remaining sound, is, that every thread of it of its own free energy shall do what it ought".<sup>19</sup> Chic speculative openness had given way to the exploration of the given, philosophy had given way to history.

[The same pattern again can be seen at work in the life of Arthur Hugh

Clough, too, before his early death in 1861, at the age of forty-two. Fowles quotes from or alludes to Clough no less than fourteen times in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Clough had been a prize pupil of Dr. Arnold at Rugby, and a fellow of Oriel; he had abandoned Oxford in a large moral gesture in 1848, and his poetry from the late forties has attracted recent attention because of its apparent anti-Victorianism in literary, sexual, and philosophical attitudes;<sup>20</sup> but his subsequent career, much to the embarrassment of his recent champions, shows a steady pattern of reassimilation in marriage and work and moral judgment to the society and culture from which he had once tried to escape.]

John Fowles's development in the mid-twentieth century has so far run strangely parallel to that of his Victorian precursors. As a boy he was clearly extremely successful in traditional terms, and had been head prefect at his very conventional public school; he later admitted that his early fiction was in some ways an attempt to escape that success.<sup>21</sup> Initial socialisation to traditional elite patterns, commissioned rank in the Marines, reading French at Oxford (at the same college, incidentally, as those other two lost leaders of the literary left, Amis and Larkin), ~~was~~ followed by a period in the rather ambiguous and ill-defined social position of an English language crammer; it was ~~then~~ <sup>in</sup> this period that Fowles's existentialist position was formulated, and ~~in which~~ <sup>then that</sup> he wrote the books which show no evident interplay with the contemporary literary culture of British society. With age, however, he, like his precursors, has found the inevitability of social and cultural continuities in Britain. He has come to recognise that what he thought ~~was~~ innovative freedoms were simply part of the culture of his early manhood, that unhappy endings are as much the sign of the modern cultural hegemony as happy endings may once have been. In the language, in social attitude and in the sense of place, let alone in the people you know and who know you, there can be in Britain no absolute discontinuity. For the mature Fowles, as for the Victorian quasi-radicals he had once rather sentimentalised, authentic meaning is socially accumulated, felt between people and within a culture, not proclaimed



by some individual vision. The very ironies of his later novels have come to rest, not on a romantic-ironic dissociation from the past, but in the recognition that between author and reader there is not just a common philosophic problem, but also a shared cultural ~~and contemporary social inheritance~~ inheritance and a shared social experience.

There has long been, I would argue, in British culture, a socially-induced need for writers, especially Oxford-educated writers of the second rank, to proclaim their separateness and independence. But such separateness goes against the grain of their previous education, against the necessarily social basis of the complex allusiveness in language on which the contemporary British novel subsists; brave gestures in the literary dark come for many of them, with age and experience, to feel like a betrayal of the inherited, if subarticulate, morality with which the best novels are still concerned. The writers themselves, Victorian or contemporary, seem to have gone through a process of reassimilation to their inheritance, but critics, caught by the romantic model of the free and innovative artist, fasten on the period of youthful revolt as the "real author". The critical reception of The French Lieutenant's Woman shows how ~~much~~ reluctant critics are to recognise or praise a return to traditionalism. The more recent developments in Fowles's fiction suggest that his brave existentialist stance was always relatively superficial, the product of an elite education without an obvious social role to assume, and suggest that he is discovering, as others have discovered before him, the strengths of the high bourgeois culture he was once thought to have repudiated.



<sup>1</sup> On this phenomenon, see the brilliant revisionist work of David Lodge, in the last chapter of his The Language of Fiction (1976), and in ch.1 of The Novelist at the Crossroads (1971).

<sup>2</sup> William J. Palmer, The Fiction of John Fowles (Columbia, Mo., 1974), pp.28-9; cf. Ian Watt's review in New York Times Book Review, Nov.9 1969, pp.1,75. From my general strictures must be omitted Peter Wolfe's chapter on the novel in his John Fowles, Magus and Moralist (Lewisburg, Pa., 1976).

<sup>3</sup> French Lieutenant's Woman (London, Panther, 1971), p.85.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas McCormack, ed., Afterwords (New York, 1969), p.165; Fowles's essay, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel", is on pp. 160-175.

<sup>5</sup> ibid., p.164.

<sup>6</sup> ibid., p.165.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Lorna Sage, in New Review, I, 7 (October 1974), 33.

<sup>8</sup> McCormack, Afterwords, p.168.

<sup>9</sup> ibid., pp.161-2, 171.

<sup>10</sup> ibid., p.166.

<sup>11</sup> John Fowles, Poems (New York, Ecco Press, 1973), p.59: for Fowles's satire on academic liking for literary innovation, written during the time he was writing FLW, see Poems, pp.90-92.

<sup>12</sup> Interview in Roy Newquist, Counterpoint (Chicago, 1964), p.224.

<sup>13</sup> Fowles wrote the forward to Piers Brendon, Hawker of Morwenstow, Portrait of A Victorian Eccentric (London, 1975), pp.15-21.

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Raphael, ed., Bookmarks (London, 1975), pp.53-57; p.56.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Martin (New York, Signet/NAL, 1978), p.432.

<sup>16</sup> ibid., p.533, quoting Georg Lukacs.

<sup>17</sup> Phyllis Grosskurth, Victorian Studies, 16 (1972), 130-131; [James Anthony Froude] "Zeta", "The Lieutenant's Daughter", in Shadows of the Clouds (London, Oliver, 1847), pp.192-287; future references in text.

<sup>18</sup> Waldo Hillary Dunn, James Anthony Froude, A Biography, vol I: 1818-1856 (Oxford, 1961).

<sup>19</sup> Froude, Essays on Literature and History, intro. Belloc (London, Dent, n.d.), pp.122-3; orig. in Fraser's Magazine, 1853.

<sup>20</sup> For comment on the existentialist elements in Clough, see, e.g., E.B. Greenberger, Arthur Hugh Clough, the Growth of a Poet's Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp.170-180; for a counterview, see my "The Victorianism of Clough", Victorian Poetry, 16 (Spring-Summer 1978), 32-42.

<sup>21</sup> Newquist, as in n.12 above, p.219.