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INDICE

THE WRITER AS SHAMAN: A TALK BY JOHN FOWLES, AND AN INTERVIEW

Transcribed and edited
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This is a reduced and slightly edited transcription of a talk given by John Fowles and a much longer interview with him that took place in Tenerife (Canary Islands) on 5 November 1991 during a course on the contemporary European novel, organized by the University of La Laguna. John Fowles contributed to this course with the following talk on his own writing and the art of the novel, and answered many questions asked by Susana Onega and Fernando Galván, who chaired this session, as well as by members of the audience. Some fragments of the interview were also broadcast by Radio Nacional de España in its cultural programme "El ojo crítico" (7th November 1991, 22.00 hours).

I

A TALK ON THE ART OF THE NOVEL[1]

Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait; that was said two and a half centuries ago by Voltaire. I think it is one of the wisest things that any human being has said. It's something everybody knows: if young people only knew, if old people only could . . . do things. It's relevant on this course about the European novel, since what is happening in Europe, if vaguely, is that we are trying to become one cultural entity. America is beginning to realize that everything may be better in America, but possibly some things in old Europe are still

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[1] This talk was given extempore, before a young audience, so pray forgive its incoherences and improvisations [A note by John Fowles].

worth their taking notice of. This is particularly true in the art of the novel, and especially in terms of the kind of experimentation one is discovering here and there all over Europe. I did not study English at Oxford, I did French, and that is one reason my writing is perhaps rather different from most other English writers. I am deeply influenced by the whole of French history. When I left Oxford I went and taught in a French university; then I went to teach in a Greek school, a very bad school. I went there because in a way that's what writers should do, they should go into careers which will both allow them to write and yet not absorb them too much in whatever they are teaching. So Greece was very valuable to me as an experience for a writer. That's still so, and I really rate places by how much richness they have for me as a human being.

The Canary Islands I have always known a good deal about —I could not believe how beautiful they are, and now I understand why they are called the Blessed Islands, the Fortunate Islands and all the rest. One of my main interests in life has been in botany, in flowers, in fact in all nature, in birds, insects, flowers, everything else, and of course Tenerife is a kind of dreamland, a paradise for naturalists. I will talk a bit more about that in a moment.

When I was at Oxford I thought it was quite clear I was not going to be anything so stupid as a novelist. I was quite clear I was going to become a poet. This again is a very useful thing for a novelist to be. Poetry and the novel may seem a long way apart, but they are not. Having some kind of ear for euphony, some sense of the rhythm of words, are essential. So I am glad that I was a poet when I was at Oxford, and went on for several years with the illusion that I must be a great poet. It haunts me that I'm not, but I know that it is very important in the formation of prose that you should at least know what poetry is about. Another thing I started at Oxford was keeping a journal or a diary; that again is as important for a novelist as bar exercises for a ballet dancer. Just as a ballet dancer has to practise raising her legs, doing pirouettes, and practising the steps they have to learn, so is it vital for a novelist; and the best way to do so is in trying to keep a journal, a diary. It doesn't mean that it should necessarily be exactly about what has happened to you; the

purpose of a diary for a novelist is discovering how you can invent. It's flexing your arms, really. How you can create people, even if you're not being physically exact to what they are in reality; you learn that you can *fictionalise* people.

Fictionalise is an important word. I wish there were a better one. But how can you make fictions from other human beings? One important part of that fictional process is the ability to imagine. Now, I'm a novelist because my ability to imagine, by no invention, by no skill, no work on my side, but by pure hazard, is rather strong. I can go into any situation. In a word, I can imagine all kinds of possibilities, and that's a key part of what it is to be a novelist, this ability to imagine alternative after alternative after alternative. And it can be irritating, because it means that you can become overworried, neurotic, in the ordinary circumstances of life; but this ability to fictionalise really rather cuts you off from the rest of mankind. Not because the rest of mankind can't do it, of course, but you have to have it to a rather intense degree to be a novelist. There's a great difference between these two charming people beside me and myself;[2] they are professors, they are eminent professors, they are eminent academics, and you must remember that I am like a clod of earth beside two beautiful pots (if you don't mind being called pots). In other words, I am the earth, I am uncultivated; putting it in another language: I am not really very interested in the highly intellectual academic side of literary criticism, everything that you are here for, since you are all trying to get a degree or licence of some kind.

You must remember that all of us writers belong to a different species from you non-writers. A book came out not too long ago, in England, by a man called Nicholas Humphrey (*Consciousness Regained*).[3] His theory was that writers, novelists, and all artists in fact, but novelists and poets in particular, were shamans. A shaman

[2] This is a reference to Professors Susana Onega and Fernando Galván, who chaired the session in which this talk was delivered.

[3] Nicholas Humphrey. *Consciousness Regained.* Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1984.

comes from an earlier stage of mankind, and is most often associated with the Stone Age. Very primitive tribes of the world still have the shaman among them; the shaman may have various roles, he can be a medicine man, he can be a chieftain, he can be the source that remembers the tribe, or who says its songs, music; Homer's *Odyssey* was probably some ancient shaman's memory of some even older folk-poem. The shaman, in other words, is a kind of semi-magical mystical figure. Now Humphrey's theory was that this type exists even in our modern highly sophisticated societies in people who write novels, who write poetry, who paint, who write music, who express themselves through all the arts. This theory for me is a valuable one. It explains to me why I am such a peculiar person. Most artists are peculiar people. They may be peculiar because they are psychologically bent; most of them also are very difficult for ordinary people to get to know. And one problem which every novelist has is that he cannot know all the people who read him.

This is another very important thing for the novelist. He is dealing in an art not like the other arts. Other arts, you see, are one person addressing something, a painting, a symphony, a sonata, whatever it is, to a whole group of other people. But the novel is from one person, me, to another one person, you. You, you, you, you, you . . . In other words, this extraordinary relation is between one person on one side and one person on the other side. A great problem is that the novel is often written about as if the whole audience is really that one person. All the people who read the book constitute one person; but they don't of course. When you read a book you become the one person for whom the book is written. That can affect your writing. You must always remember I'm really writing not for an audience of critics, of learned professors, or certain other kinds of select audience; I am always writing for just *one* other person; and the thing you've got to do as a writer is to discover how to make that bridge between you and you, and the other you. Martin Buber, the German philosopher, used the expression "the I-Thou relationship". For me that is the essential one for any novelist to remember, that he is dealing with one other person.

Some great threats surround the novel at the moment, in my

view. Perhaps most obviously they come from the cinema; it's under threat from the cinema, and now especially from television. People, especially younger people —I'm sorry to say—, have forgotten how to read. They expect to *see* any book —I get this said to me quite often nowadays: "How marvellous to have films of your own books, how wonderful it must be!"; and these silly people, they really are silly to say this, think that it must be wonderful to go to Hollywood, one of the most horrible towns in the world, without exception, it must be wonderful to meet the stars . . . the stars is a significant word. The stars are a long, long way off, and you're not likely to meet a real star face to face (either in reality or Hollywood), nor to enjoy either kind of meeting. The thing we ought to remember really is —I'm sorry, I've lost my place. I had a stroke three years ago, and my memory, my mind, is awful.

It's terrible that people now cannot read books and therefore see them. I have a friend who is a teacher. One of her students came up to her two years ago and said, "I'm sorry, madam, I can't see the book, I can't *see* it". What she really meant was "it's not on television, it's not on a video, and looking at these funny little squiggles we call print means nothing to me". This inability to visualize, we all know, is becoming universal now; we are all TV addicted, television is becoming a drug. What I hope we'll gradually realize is the great difference between the novel and the cinema. The cinema is imprecise, you think it's real, yes, it's real. But it is imprecise in terms of what is written behind the cinema. You see, if you say in a novel "the man crossed the road", "the man put on the kettle", everyone of you here, everyone in the world, who reads that simple sentence, will see it differently. Reading is always coloured by the store of knowledge, your own memory, your images, that you have in your personal mind. The nasty thing about the cinema is that it is fascistic. It proclaims "this is exactly how it was, precisely delineated and all the rest of it". In other words, the cinema does have a great inadequacy, much as we all may love it. I'm not different, I love the cinema as well.

The other thing I would like to tell you a bit about —it's about myself, I suppose— is that I live in Dorset, the nearest to the Canary

Islands in England. It's in the south-west of England. It's not like this at all, I'm told that the temperature is freezing there at the moment. I'm very glad to be here and not there. In Dorset I have a garden, a large garden, which I don't look after, because I don't believe in well-managed, polite and public gardens. I study natural history and I follow that whenever I can. Recently I became the curator of our little local museum. Lyme Regis, where I live in Dorset, is famous for geology. We don't have dinosaurs, but enormous extinct marine lizards called ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs. Most people think they're dinosaurs. These ichthyosaurs, these dinosaur relations we have in Lyme are getting on for two hundred million years old, and that is something to do with the novel. The novel also is very intimately and closely linked with our concept of time. I find having been interested in geology —I'm interested in it as one is interested in poems— affects me, it touches me. I'm not interested in it scientifically in particular, although I do know something about it. What is important is your feeling that you can best understand what life is through time. It's as important as *si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait*, if young people only knew, if old people only could. Time is very dense in all our lives, in a way I think that at your age, in the twenties, you can't even realize. You have to be my age really to understand that time's the great mystery of life. I will give you the name of one book which you may be pleased to have; it is by an American geologist called Stephen J. Gould. He recently wrote a remarkable book, *Wonderful Life*,[4] about a small group of fossils that were found at the beginning of this century. They were from the Pre-Cambrian Age, six hundred million years ago, and what they showed was an extraordinary prolixity, an extraordinary richness of shapes and functions, in a very humble group of animals, small crustaceans and the like. What Gould then went on to suggest is how fortuitous it is that we're sitting here and discoursing, how fortuitous everything about humanity is, and how this stems from Darwin's theory of evolution. There have been

[4] Stephen J. Gould. *Wonderful Life*. London: Hutchinson, 1990.

countless battles in America for and against evolution, but for me this is a convincing book, and a frightening one. I don't know if you should tell people of this age "a frightening book", but it really suggests that this is a hard, cruel world we live in, very hard and inhuman. Humanity exists in it in a dominant position at the moment, but that is a pure fluke, that is hazard. This is a way to warn you that I'm not a Christian. I'm an atheist, in fact, I do not believe in God, though I'm not violently against people who do. I fully understand why many people like to believe in God, but certainly this has affected my novels. I cannot accept that there is someone active to whom we could turn for consolation or comfort in any normal religious sense.

When I had my cardiac stroke, and was in hospital in London, I saw a well known brain surgeon. He came to see me and clapped his hands as if it were all really a joke. Then he said, "Of course you will have lost your *righting* ability". I nearly got out of bed and hit him, because you can't lightly tell a novelist he may not be able to write any more. I wonder whether there is anybody here who knows English well enough to realize a curious homonymic confusion between the verbs *to right* and *to write*. When a boat capsizes it rights, that is, it comes up, the mast to the top again . . . and that was what he meant. And he was quite right; I had lost my righting ability, which is the ability to keep on balance. I kept on falling to one side as if I were dead drunk. So now I forgive him telling me that I had lost my *righting / writing* ability.

The novel itself. Sorry, I'm not talking about the novel. I'm a great believer in the importance of teasing, making fun of the reader, really making the reader think what you are trying to say. Am I being serious, am I lying, am I being funny, am I being ironic? This of course is a common trick in English fiction, being ironic, but I'm a great believer in it, since it helps to make the reader think.

The old word used for a writer was *a clerk*, and behind *clerk* is *cleric*, a priest, because priests were once the only people who could write. I think this *clerk* self also is important in a writer; in other words, I do believe I have something I can teach you; now you can stand up and say "Go away, what right have you to tell us to do

anything? What right have you to speak to us as a priest?" I've just told you I'm an atheist, but part of me really does remain a little bit priest-like. I think it is my duty, my difficult duty, to tell people how *I* think they should behave. I don't mean of course being very moralistic, forbidding them all the sorts of nice, innocent things they might want to do. It is really to suggest that just as a road sometimes splits into many forks, there is often one totally clear right road for most of mankind; and that 'good' road I think one does have some right to proclaim. That really is assuming the function of the priest in older times.

Another thing I'm often accused of in England is using words nobody understands, using words people have to look up in a dictionary. I have very angry letters from readers. They say: "I'm only a poor person, I was never able to go to University, I don't know any Latin or French, why do you keep using those horrible words nobody understands?" Now, I'm a socialist, politically, but I believe in this case that my duty is to preserve language, to keep language alive, and to keep language alive you must keep it rich; and that to avoid a word because I'm afraid that nobody will understand it . . . I'm sorry young people are poorly educated and for the weaknesses in society that cause that. But preserving language is more important. In other words, that's another proper function of the novelist: to keep the language rich, keep it subtle and fertile, make it valid as you make wine or brandy valid, by maturing it.

I think I'm beginning to talk too much. I'll just briefly mention the novelists I like at the moment. One I do like —I believe Susana doesn't quite share my view on him, but I think Fernando does, his name is Ian McEwan. He is, I think, probably the best young novelist writing in England at the moment. The best older novelist writing in England at the moment is called William Golding, and I can't quite recommend him to you because probably he is difficult for foreigners always to understand. For me he is monolithic, like some tall stone, a Stone Age monument, in modern English literature, very serious, but somehow appealing. He wrote only quite recently a trilogy about a voyage to Australia from Britain, one of the best

novels we've had for some years. I'm sure you know other well known names, Greene and so on.

One other name I've just read myself is called Martin Amis. His book is called *Time's Arrow*; but he does prove something I said earlier: that Europe is now a place of experiments. The Americans are beginning to realize that, that they have to look at some English, British, Italian, French novels, to understand what's happening in the novel. *Time's Arrow* is about a bestial man, he was doctor in a concentration camp, so most of his life was spent torturing Jews in awful medical experiments; but the experiment here is that this novel is told in reverse, from the end to the beginning. You begin with the death of the man and then gradually it works back until you're with the man at the very beginning, in fact when he's barely more than an idea in his mother's womb. This novel is difficult to understand but it is certainly interesting to read. Martin Amis is probably doing something that ought not to be possible, that's telling a story absolutely upside down. That's an example of the thinking that does go on not only in the English novel, but in the French, German and Italian ones also. The Italian novel . . . did I mention Calvino? Calvino I would truly recommend, because he is an outstanding —he is dead now, poor man—, *was* an outstanding novelist, with a marvellous imagination, who shows what the novel can do in good hands, in clever hands. But now I'm going to shut up.

II

THE INTERVIEW

Q. Mr. Fowles, you have become one of the best known and distinguished fiction writers of the last three decades in Britain, since the publication in 1963 of *The Collector*. May I ask you how do you see yourself at the present moment?

A. I see myself as slightly old-fashioned because the novel moves very quickly in England and it changes; you must remember

that English is also spoken in America, and therefore we have really a kind of a double culture, the American and the British ones; and we have countless smaller countries all round the world: South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and so on. It's really a whole family. You can't talk about the *English* novel, but rather the novel *in English*, and English really covers the whole world.

Q. How do you see the English, or rather the British novel, at the moment, as well as the European novel?

A. I think it is at a time of crisis and that is because of the monster of television, which really is taking over the capacities —the demands and interests— everyone once had towards fiction. Fiction has become visual; I'm a novelist and I like the way you get images from the print on the page. That, among many of the youngest, is something that doesn't happen any more. They cannot visualise from printed words, and that —I'm afraid— has to do with the technological revolution that has come over the world.

Q. As you have mentioned that "double culture", the American culture and the British culture, can you tell us whether you see important differences between the fiction written in Britain and the fiction written in America?

A. English fiction is simpler and shorter. The Americans go in for very long novels, and we don't, thank goodness, as a rule. I think also we are perhaps more experimental. Of course the French are markedly more experimental still and the Italians also; a great favourite writer of mine is Italo Calvino, who was a marvellously imaginative novelist. I think in that way the Americans can only learn from Europe. I hope the balance is beginning to leave America and come to this side of the Atlantic.

Q. Do you see your own work as a link between classic Modernism and Postmodernism?

A. Well, I was very affected when I was younger by the great Irish novelist James Joyce, and certainly he has always haunted me. Joyce is the great novelist of this century, not only Irish or English, but of any country. There's no greater modern novelist than Joyce.

Q. And Beckett?

A. Beckett I don't really like totally. That is because he belongs to a trend which I also connect with Ionesco, the absurdist trend; in fact, for them everything is black, there's no real sense or meaning in anything; and not necessarily just in Beckett. In many lesser writers the notion of this century seems that life equals hell on earth, everything on it is bad, everything on it is black. This pessimism is what I have against Beckett, but he is a great poet, a great handler of language.

Q. American critics usually include your name in their lists of American fabulators. And there's one American critic, called Robert Nadeau, who connects your work with the findings of the new physics. Are they right to do so?

A. Which findings do you mean?

Q. With the new physics, with things like the time-space continuum, concepts of entropy . . . He analyses your novel *The Magus* from that point of view.

A. I don't think I would agree with him, but I don't know Nadeau. I am a member of a very interesting American society, called "The International Society for the Study of Time". It has eminent mathematicians, physicists, Chinese scientists, and they talk about the nature of time. They will next month start publishing a magazine, *Time and Society*, to which I look forward. Time is a very difficult subject, not least in the way they discuss it, but they have many Nobel Prize winners, some very intelligent members. But that I personally believe in all the new physics, I don't know. I believe in

relativity in a loose sense. I'm still an Einsteinian relativist but I wouldn't say I'm a scientist at all. I cannot even add up the bill for lunch, mathematics is beyond me.

Q. You have mentioned time. Is that the reason why you have written some historical novels? Why have you written historical novels, because of that preoccupation with time primarily?

A. Good question! Yes, well, once I said I hated historical novels. So why ever write one? And yet I have written two since then. The trouble with historical novels is language; when I wrote my first historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, I thought "You can't go back beyond the 1860s because trying to reproduce its normal dialogue becomes impossible". The last one I wrote, *A Maggot*, uses the language of the 18th century and I meant to get back to that period. I don't mean I succeeded, but I tried to get back to it. I would really like to do an Elizabethan novel (late 16th century, the time of Shakespeare), but then the language problem would be enormous. What I hate, I loathe, is boys and girls in ancient Greece or ancient Egypt, Cleopatra, Augustus, or Nero, or something like that, that read like boys and girls from an English boarding school. That kind of novel I've got no time for . . . I greatly admire real history, the real intimations we do have about the past. At the moment I've got a new bee in my bonnet, the Guanches of these very Islands; I don't find enough is known or proclaimed about who the Guanches were, and I feel a lot more should be discovered about them.[5] Time always haunts me because I love going into the past. Paradoxically this is why I love plants. Plants are marvellous; it may be like the drago here, it may be several thousand years old as a species, but it reproduces its flowers every new year. So you have this extraordinary species age and this extraordinary reproduction every year; that is one aspect of time that haunts me about nature and

[5] The Guanches were the primitive inhabitants of the Canary Islands, before the Spanish conquest, which took place in the fifteenth century.

I realize now that's why I had to write these two novels, I really wanted to get back to the Victorian age and to the middle of the eighteenth century and to see what it was like to re-enter them.

Another thing you mustn't forget is that all writers write for one person alone, that is, themselves. It's an extremely egotistical thing, you write for yourself, partly to see whether you can write, can you explain something you can't normally explain? Can you develop mysterious guilts in yourself? So it's really a form of self-exploration. Writers are very good at pretending it's not so, that they are talking about society, or philosophy, or all sorts of other great things. But really, underneath, all they're really interested in is themselves. We are all egotists and egocentrics.

Q. Do you use irony as a way of keeping the attention of the reader?

A. Yes, in part. Irony is a very common technique in English fiction, and indeed in American fiction also. I think it is one obvious way you can convince the reader that he is intelligent. He may see that this chap is ironic, he is joking. Irony used to be a very important thing at Oxford; it's quite common among the educated class in England. They like irony. They don't shout or lose their temper; they try being ironic. If you go to America you can have awful problems. I remember a day in New York: the rain was pouring down and it was bitterly cold, and I got into a taxi and I said what would have been normal in London. I said grimly "Lovely day", but the New York taxi-driver looked at the sky in a puzzled way and said "Yeah, yeah, if you say so", or something like that. It would have been clear to any cockney taxi-driver in London, that I was being sarcastic, ironic. You have to use irony carefully; you can always be sure that there'll be some people in some places who won't realize that what you truly mean is in fact the opposite, or partly the opposite of what you are saying.

Q. Is the creative act something totally spontaneous, because we critics tend to label everything and use sophisticated terms, like

metafiction, and so on? Do you think that it is inappropriate what we do and that the whole process is much more spontaneous?

A. If I could go back to Humphrey's theory that writers are shamans . . . , I strongly believe in spontaneity, instinct. If I could go back to how you write novels, there are always two important stages; there's what I call the first draft stage, when you first write the book down, and then there's the second draft stage, when you revise what you've written. Now the first draft stage is for me the miraculous and the magical portion of the whole process; it's when the idea comes into your head; it can come into your head in extraordinary ways. You have very rare days when what you are writing seems almost alive; it's like an animal, and every gesture of your narration immediately suggests hundreds of other gestures; you can't even write them down sometimes. You jot them down, and in fact you very often can't read what you have jotted down. And really it's the moment of what the poets call inspiration. It's not common, you have it perhaps one or two days a year, one or two nights. And that for me is what I call shamanistic. You are possessed by something outside yourself, or it seems to come from outside yourself. That is a marvellous experience, believe me, when you have it. That you have this tumultuous flux of ideas, you can't control it or stop it. You really feel out of this world, it drags you out of this world. And after it's done you usually feel very flat. It's like having a bottle of champagne or something; the morning after you have an awful sort of slump. But it's a wonderful experience, and what I call shamanistic. Every artist has it; musicians have it, painters have it; and that's why drugs have become so —I want to say so popular, but so used. Some people believe that if you take the right kind of drug you can have that experience more or less when you want. I think that has been disproven; you don't, actually you can't bring it on through drugs, including alcohol. You can only bring it on by some miracle inside your organism, and by genes, and so on . . . Have I answered the question? Probably not.

Q. Yes, you have, beautifully. May I ask you also how important

is the didactic element in your fiction, as compared to the spontaneous process of creation?

A. The spontaneous process of creation is infinitely more important. But I feel I have a duty under the "teaching side", yes, to be slightly didactic, or at least to tell people what I think, you know, I hate telling people do this, do that; obviously you can't do that, but I think you can hint. I've talked of a road; fiction, you see, is choosing between forks; all novels are really a road that constantly forks; every page has twenty, a hundred, forks: I might have gone this way, I might have gone that way. And so this ability to choose which direction you're going in really is very vital also for a novelist. The shamanistic experience, when marvellous ideas tumble down, is very like a kind of map: you are standing alone in this road in the dark and you are not sure which way to go. It's like a flash of lightning over a dark landscape, you suddenly see what it is. The didactic side . . . I don't think it's very important.

Q. Some critics have commented on the didactic aspect of your work, your tendency to explanations, that you are over-anxious, reluctant to let things go out of your vision, that you somehow control and manipulate the reader's response to the novels. To what extent do you really exert that kind of control?

A. Well, I probably control the response in as much as I do want people to know what *I* think; which may be bad. But I don't think a novel is like a work of philosophy, which would probably try to justify principles, to prove that there is, or isn't, a God, and so on. But I'm not going to impose any fixed view. I don't think a novelist really can be in that business. He is trying to express what *he* feels and suspects, rather than what he definitely knows, and so if I'm guilty of that, yes, I am guilty.

Q. There's a certain loss when you turn a novel into a film. Do you feel like that with your works, with *The Collector*, with *The Magus*, with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*?

A. Very, very strongly. The trouble is that everybody thinks how marvellous it must be that your miserable novel has been made into a glorious film. They do not realize your heart always slightly sinks when this happens. It's glamorous, it's exciting, it sometimes means many dollars, but it really does very little for your self-esteem as a novelist. I enjoy it for the money it brings, but I don't enjoy it at all for most artistic reasons. I've had very bad films made of my books, but you cannot control studios. We used to have ichthyosaurs, iguanodons and dinosaurs, but now we have Hollywood studios, that's the modern equivalent.

Q. Was it very difficult for you to accept the idea of having your novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* turned into a film?

A. As I have just said, I've had very bad films made of my books; *The Collector* was not very good, and *The Magus* was the worst film of the 1960s. There's another English novelist, Lawrence Durrell, and it is difficult to decide whether his novel *Justine* or *The Magus* was the worst film of the 1960s; they were both awful. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was made by a director I liked, the script was written by a writer I admire, Harold Pinter, and we really went into it all like three friends; we had plenty of discussions about it, and I think the actors . . . specially Meryl Streep —Meryl Streep is American, but she went to great efforts to learn to speak something like decent Victorian English. She should have spoken with the local accent where I set the book. But the studio said "no, you can't give Americans a Dorset accent", the only dialect accents they allow are ones that Americans can understand; that is, their own. I quite like that film; in fact I very much like it, and I think the way Harold Pinter told the script was clever. I was well aware that if you want to be in real trouble in a film you only have to meet a director who says this simple sentence to you: "Don't worry, I won't change a word in the script". You know then that it's as if he were putting a gun to your head and threatening to shoot you. The film is so different from the novel that you *have to change* a great many of the words and concepts. But they've made another film of *The Ebony Tower* which

I quite like. Laurence Olivier played a part in it; but on the whole I'm not mad about the cinema, you know. At the moment I am just writing a new script; that must seem mad, having said all this: they have asked me to do a script of the famous French novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alan Fournier. It is a marvellous novel with the beginning of the discovery of magic realism. It was published in 1913, just before the First World War. It has many flaws and faults, but I've always loved it.[6]

Q. When in your talk you spoke about the novelist having strange experiences outside his mind, I remembered the beginning of the novel *A Maggot* and the preface signed J.F. (John Fowles). I would like to know whether the voice that tells the novel is the same John Fowles.

A. Good question! The answer there, I'm afraid, is a crude one. All of that novel was written by me, but what you really mean is "are all those ideas mine?", "do I hold those ideas?", and certainly not, not in most cases. Sometimes you have to be you and sometimes you have to be someone else. That's why most people do not write novels, they've not got this trick of slipping out of themselves, you when you are you and you when you are someone else. It's something quite difficult to learn how to do, and then there's the case of evil characters in fiction, where you feel the writer fell deeply in love with these outwardly evil people. Very strange. It's something like the way girls feel sometimes: they are kidnapped by someone, and they fall in love with their kidnapper. This is a well known phenomenon of kidnapping, and I thought about it when I wrote *The Collector*, which was about some of the same themes. That is partly the case for the novelist, to fall in love with the monsters you create yourself. In that case, yes, I did fall in love with one of my monsters, the dreadful lawyer in *A Maggot*; I rather liked him, just as I rather

[6] John Fowles has just told me (August 1992) that the venture has disappeared into the great dustbin of a Hollywood studio.

liked the creation of another character, a Welshman, who was engaging but who was always lying and exaggerating.

Q. Talking about historical novels, I wonder whether you try to rewrite history from a distorted point of view, that is, altering the real facts, the traditional view of some particular events. Do you do that when you write a historical novel? Do you freely change historical facts according to your necessities?

A. No, I'm a great believer in straight, real, history, and I don't know I'm betraying it at all. Normally I haven't done it, when I'm dealing in a strict context of realism or naturalism. I don't quite understand what you mean . . .

Q. For example, in your latest novel, you focus on one particular age, the Age of Enlightenment, from a different point of view because you show us the rise of a new religious community, which is something that is peripheral, that belongs to the fringe of that society. So in a sense you are altering the traditional vision that we have of the period of the Enlightenment . . .

A. If anyone read *A Maggot* and supposed that that was in any sense a full picture of the 18th century, certainly not. I just found that there was an interesting special "situation" in the 18th century, among many others. *A Maggot* is about an extreme Protestant sect called the Shakers. One thing that my European publishers said when they read it was "they'll hate this all through Europe", because of Europe's Catholic cultural bloc. (One of the proudest moments in my life was when I won a first prize for new novels in France, of all countries.) The French and the English, as you may suspect, are not the greatest friends in the world. I studied French at Oxford, and one problem is that the French and the English are the two most opposed countries in Europe. They are also the two closest in geographical terms, and this is the heart of the enigma. We're really much closer spiritually and psychologically to Spain than to France. This is the reason why an Englishman expects to be hated, or disliked, in

France. Yet some Englishmen have fallen rather blindly in love with the French intellectuals, like Derrida, Roland Barthes, Lacan and all the rest of them. The French themselves have given up many of these ideas, I gather, in France itself, but still in America and England they are extremely popular and "smart" . . . and that affects both.

What interests me in the Shakers is that parts of their curious theology had very strange ideas about the nature of the cosmos, the nature of heaven, the nature of some perfect world which must be just around the next corner. I found that touching and in some ways extremely novelistic. It's almost as if the Shakers, the sect, were a kind of one single novelist with those strange ideas . . . this affects you. I talked of the Guanches just now, and I can feel that there's a marvellous novel subject. Because we don't know who the Guanches were, we have just these little hints, these little suggestions of what they were. That's what novelists love, such subjects give lovely, clean, courts with nice obscure nets so you can play this particular kind of tennis called the novel on it. Rich, richness, that's why I've been anti-science all my life, yet part of me loves science; I love it when science can tell us exactly what things are, that that peculiar shrub I saw yesterday in Puerto de la Cruz is: *Caesalpinia.* It's nice to me to know there's a Latin name for it, there is somewhere a precise homeland for it.[7] It doesn't mean anybody has to be like this. It's just my peculiarity, liking to know the exact scientific names of things.

Q. I think another part of that question was "what is your relationship to magic realism, if there is any"?

A. Well, I greatly admire Borges, the Argentinian writer, I admire Márquez, especially a novel of his called *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, which I think is the best book that has been written on South America, and I did quite like his last one as well. It's a

[7] A reference to the Botanical Gardens in Puerto de la Cruz, a town in northern Tenerife, that John Fowles visited on the 4th of November 1991.

literary territory I think is very interesting and it certainly has had a great effect in England; you smell it, you sniff it in many novels. And you can guess that so-and-so read Márquez, or he's read Borges. Borges is probably the most admired in England. And who is the man who wanted to be President of Peru? — Vargas Llosa. I know some of his novels. They are good.

Q. Can you give your opinion about Salman Rushdie? Do you think that magic realism and the manipulation of history can become *dangerous* for the writer?

A. Well, I'm one of . . . probably not many people have met Rushdie since the Iranians proclaimed the death warrant on him, but I have. I feel very sorry for him as a person, because his life has become absolutely impossible. My real feeling is that he must be allowed to write what he wrote in that book; and it's not sufficient to say he has insulted and angered most of Islam, most of the Muslims of this world, and that because he has done that, he should not have written the book. It's certainly not right to go from there and say that because of such an insult someone must go and kill him. I'm not fond of Islam —there won't be any Muslims here—, I'm not fond of Islam mainly because of its damnable attitude to women. That makes it a disgrace to me among the world religions. Rushdie in a way is a little bit . . . he likes seeking fame, the glamour of fame, having, you know, his name all over the world. About Rushdie himself I don't quite know what I feel; but I still think the main principle is that you cannot forbid anybody to write about anything.

Q. You are not only a novelist; you are also a thinker, as your books show very clearly. Can you tell us how do you see the *fin de siècle*, not only in literary terms, but in general terms?

A. Enormous changes which we are not really yet prepared to accept, but that we will have to. This is partly to do with the technological revolution. I recently bought a video machine and I said "I'll never understand how to use it". The salesman said "Oh,

ask any child; they'll show you". In other words, I now feel as a dinosaur myself, my generation is dead or dying and probably the younger generation thinks "Thank God, they are going!". In brief, there're going to be enormous social changes, but I think we cannot quite cope with them at the moment.

Q. You mean social changes for the better?

A. I think there are obviously some social and political changes for the better. Here in Spain there's been one very recently, but whether there'll be more such social changes I cannot tell. I find at the moment too much technology, too much money, too much chasing after money, and really a kind of insecurity in the world. It trembles.

Q. A final question. How do you see the future of the novel in general terms?

A. Bad. I hate having to say this, but I think that the predominance of the visual, the cinema and television, the fact that people more and more seem unable to visualise from those little symbols we call print . . . it does begin to worry me. It's not only me; there are many teachers I've talked to who comment that this happens; children, especially, are not able to read anymore. They cannot, they've lost the trick, they are unable to imagine from print. And that does worry me, because I can see a time when reading becomes totally bizarre. It will be like reading Egyptian hieroglyphics, not immediately so of course. Still there are many novelists in the world, there are many who would like to be novelists. I'm sorry, I won't say bad; I'd take "bad" back, I'll say gloomy. It's like a sky where you see a lot of dark clouds on the horizon. Or Pompeii, with Vesuvius hanging over it.

Q. But people still want to write novels, don't they?

A. Yes, of course they do, of course they do. I did write about

this somewhere recently; I said this was the one hopeful prospect, that people really will not give up the ability to write their feelings of the world. If they want to express their feelings of the world in another way, it's still so expensive in technological terms. You've got to have a video camera and you still have to write a script for it. And I think that will to write is marvellous. I don't wish to discourage anyone from writing books, absolutely not. But if you ask me that question, yes, I feel at times a bit sad. This is the end of an age, not least because it has learnt how to end all ages.

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. Fowles!