

# John Fowles: Why I Rewrote "The Magus"



by John Fowles

**W**HEN RECENTLY I told a literary journalist that I had rewritten *The Magus*, he said, with one of those leaps to the worst possible imputation so dear to his kind, that it sounded an ingenious way of getting a second bite at the royalty apple. He knew the book had already made a lot of money. I reminded him that successful novelists who still live in England may have every other sin laid at their door, but not that of finan-

cial greed. Not to be thwarted, he then sympathized with me for running out of ideas—a matter on which he probably decided this past autumn, since I rewrote *The Magus* while finishing another and, I am afraid, even longer new novel.

The real motive was something much simpler: a guilt. Most novelists feel a death as soon as a text is in print. The living metal turns cold and cast, the private myth becomes only too public, incriminating evidence. But I felt something worse than that quite normal postnatal depression. I well

remember receiving the first bound copy, opening it at hazard, and seeing a flagrantly unnecessary word in the very first sentence my eyes lighted on; then a clumsy repetition a few lines down—four or five bumbles

*John Fowles studied French at Oxford and then lived in France and Greece for several years. His most recent novel is Daniel Martin. The revised version of The Magus (including the introduction, from which this article is adapted) will be published by Little, Brown next month.*

just on that one page. I knew I had committed a very ancient literary crime. Obsessed with story, I had neglected its articulation. I had published before I was ready.

Perhaps this is a fault most writers are wise enough to avoid; it certainly seems so, because so far as I can discover, what I have done is a rare thing. If there is another reason, beyond the little faith of publishers, it may lie in a peculiar truth about art, and in particular with long forms like the novel. Rewriting assumes that one has learned something about one's craft in the intervening years, but I suspect that very often this means little more than a learning to be more careful—or more conforming. This is why film remakes so seldom improve on their first avatar. Original failings often have a bizarrely positive role to play. I have for instance always thought one of the most attractive things about Jane Austen is her erratic level of performance. It is a kind of invert-Philistine myth that she is never trite or dull, never puts a foot wrong. Page by page she often is, and does; her genius (Mozart is a similar case) lies in those marvelous lifts to the most perceptive of wits, the most delicately stated moral truths, the passages of faultless dialogue. But her virtues must have vices to lift *from*, and in my opinion, Irish though it may seem, she would not be half so good were she consistently better.

So here I am doubting perfectibility, yet trying to issue an improved text. This further perversity has mainly to do with the odd public reception *The Magus* has had. I have long learned to accept that the fiction that professionally always pleased me least (a dissatisfaction strongly endorsed by many of its original reviewers) persists in attracting a majority of my readers most. I know this from their letters, which by now would make a book in themselves. The greater part have not discussed the novel in literary terms at all; their writers most often sound like people who have had, or dream of having, a similar experience to my protagonist's. Many have betrayed a pitiful lack of faith in the powers of the unaided imagination. I have lost count of the inquiries as to whether I use acid or mescaline when I am writing, how long I studied under Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and so on.

Another familiar kind of letter is less brainwashed. The most touching of the sort I ever received was an endless scrawl written one San Francisco dawn by a young man who had told his family the previous evening that he had decided to go to Canada rather than answer his draft for

Vietnam. His father had said he never wanted to see him again, that from now on he was as dead as if he had trodden on a Vietcong mine. The boy had ended up in some all-night café, with only *The Magus* for company. Having used it as Nembutal, he wrote me the things he had not been able to say to his father: about love, personal conscience, growing up, learning what one is, because he thought I "might understand." It was not in any sense a fan letter—in some odd way, much more addressed to the unheroic hero of the book than to myself.

However, the net result of many such letters—and also of some academic studies of the novel—has been to make me feel that the book's text has some mysterious soporific effect on normal critical standards. I do not believe that the intention matters more than the craft, idea more than language; and I do believe that almost all major human evils in our world come from betrayal of the word at a very humble level. In short, I have always felt with *The Magus* like an insufficiently arrested murderer.

The story appeared in 1965, after two other books, but in every way except that of mere publishing date, it is a first novel. I began writing it in the early 1950s, and both narrative and mood went through countless transformations. In its original form there was a clear supernatural element—an attempt at something along the lines of Henry James's masterpiece, *The Turn of the Screw*. But I had no coherent idea at all of where I was going, in life as in the book. A more objective side of me did not then believe I should ever become a publishable writer; a subjective one could not abandon the myth it was trying, clumsily and laboriously, to bring into the world; and my strongest memory is of constantly having to abandon drafts because of an inability to describe what I wanted. Both technique and that bizarre face of the imagination that seems to be more like a failure to remember the already existent than what it really is—a failure to evoke the nonexistent—kept me miserably aground. Yet when the success of *The Collector* in 1963 gave me some literary confidence, it was this endlessly tortured and recast cripple that demanded precedence over various other novels I had attempted in the 1950s, at least two of which were, I suspect, more presentable and might have done my name, at least in my own country, more good.

In 1964 I went to work and collated and rewrote all the previous drafts. But *The Magus* remained essentially where a tyro taught himself to write novels—beneath its

narrative, a notebook of an exploration, often erring and misconceived, into an unknown land. Even in its final published form it was a far more haphazard and naïvely instinctive work than the more intellectual reader can easily imagine; the hardest blows I had to bear from critics were those that condemned the book as a coldly calculated exercise in fantasy, a cerebral game. But then, one of the (incurable) faults of the book was the attempt to conceal the real state of endless flux in which it was written.

Besides the obvious influence of Jung, whose theories deeply interested me at the time, three other novels were of importance in the writing. The model I was most conscious of was Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, indeed so conscious that I suppressed a number of too overt references to it. The parallels may not be very striking to the literal-minded analyst, but *The Magus* would have been a profoundly different book if it were not for its French forebear. The capacity of *Le Grand Meaulnes* (for some of us, at any rate) to provide an experience beyond the literary was precisely what I wanted to instill in my own story. Another failure in *The Magus*, which again I cannot now remedy, was my inability to see that this longing is characteristic of adolescence. At least the adolescence of Augustin Meaulnes is open and specific.

The second influence may seem surprising, but it was undoubtedly that of a book which haunted my childhood imagination, Richard Jefferies's *Bevis*. I believe novelists are formed, whether they know it or not, very young indeed; and *Bevis* shares a quality with *Le Grand Meaulnes*: that of projecting a very different world from the one that is—or that was to the middle-class suburban child I had outwardly to be. I cite it as a reminder that the deep pattern, and mood, of such books remains long after one has graduated from them in more obvious ways.

The third book that lies behind *The Magus* I did not recognize at the time and can list now thanks to the percipience of a student at Reading University who wrote to me one day, years after publication, and pointed out the numerous parallels with *Great Expectations*. What she did not know is that it is the one novel by Dickens for which I have always had an undivided admiration and love (and for which I forgive him so much else I dislike in his work); that during the earlier writing of my own novel I was even teaching it, with great enjoyment, as a course book; and that I had long toyed with the notion of making the

magus himself a woman—an idea whose faint ghost, Miss Havisham's, remains in the figure of Mrs. de Seitas. One small new passage in the revised text is in homage to that unseen influence.

If I had a working device during the original writing, it was Alain-Fournier's "I like the marvelous only inside the real," an ambition much more simply stated than attained, as he himself was to discover. Most of the new or rewritten scenes, especially in the island part of the book, have remained in pursuit of that elusive goal. I now see that I made my task even more difficult by equating "the real" with a surface realism in style. It may well be that the events of the story would be more plausible veiled behind a poetic unrealism, an allegorical manner; but I am too long wedded to the plain road to attempt anything different now. I should, too, have added another name to my list of masters: that of Raymond Chandler.

One thing I fumbled telling my literary journalist was that the erotic element is stronger. I know what he would have thought of that, but I regard it as merely the correction of a past failure of nerve—or perhaps just of inability. Our century has so fudged the frontier between the erotic and the pornographic that the "area" has become notoriously fraught with problems. I see nothing at all wrong with Eros—and very little right about the two currently fashionable ways of slaughtering him: by mechanical brutality or by a puritanical algebra.

**N**O WRITER will happily disclose the deeper biographical influences on his work, which are seldom those of outward date and occupation, and I am no exception. But my island of Phraxos (the "fenced" island) is the real Greek island of Spetsai, where I taught in 1951 and 1952 at a private boarding school—not, in those days, very like the one in the book. If I had attempted a true portrait of it, I should have been committed to a comic novel.

The well-known Greek millionaire who has now taken over a part of Spetsai is in no way connected with my fictional one: The arrival of Mr. Niarchos came much later. Nor was the then owner of the villa of "Bourani," some of whose outward appearance and whose superb site I did appropriate, in the least the model for my character, though I understand that this is now by way of becoming another local legend. I met the gentleman—a friend of the elder Venizelos—only twice and very briefly. It was his house that I remembered.

It is probably impossible today—I speak from hearsay, never having returned there—to imagine Spetsai as I have pictured it just after the war. Life there was lonely in the extreme, though there were always two English masters at the school, not the one of the book. I was fortunate in my chance-brought colleague, and now old friend, Denys Sharrocks. He was exceptionally well read and far wiser in the ways of the Greeks than myself. He first took me to the villa. He had recently decided to kill a literary ambition of his own. "Bourani," he declared wryly, was where he had on a previous visit written the last poem of his life. In some peculiar way this fused a spark in my imagination—the strangely isolated villa, its magnificent setting, the death of a friend's illusion—and as we approached the villa on its cape that first time, there came a very anomalous sound indeed for a classical landscape: not the august Pleyel harpsichord of my book, but something much more absurdly reminiscent of a Welsh chapel. I hope the harmonium is still there. It also gave birth to something.

Foreign faces on the island—even Greek ones—were then great rarities. I remember a boy rushing up to Denys and myself one day to announce that another Englishman had landed from the Athens steamer—and how we set off, like two Dr. Livingstones, to greet this unheard-of arrival on our desert island. On another occasion it was Henry Miller's Colossus of Maroussi, Katsimbalis, whom we hastened to pay our respects to. There was still a touching atmosphere of a one village about Greece then.

Away from its inhabited corner Spetsai was truly haunted, though by subtler—and more beautiful—ghosts than those I have created. Its pine forest silences were uncanny, unlike those I have experienced anywhere else; like an eternally blank page waiting for a note or a word. They gave the most curious sense of timelessness and of incipient myth. In no place was it less likely that something would happen; yet somehow happening lay always poised. The genius loci was very similar indeed to that of Mallarmé's finest poems of the unseen flight, of words defeated before the inexpressible. I am hard put to convey the importance of this experience for me as a writer. It imbued and marked me far more profoundly than any of my more social and physical memories of the place. I already knew I was a permanent exile from many aspects of English society, but a novelist has to enter deeper exiles still.

In most outward ways this experience



*"Here in a tiny, third-floor hotel room strewn with cardboard globes, lecture reprints, and fan mail, I had begun a guided tour into the inner space of 'Bucky' Fuller—that American visionary said by Marshall McLuhan to be 'the Leonardo da Vinci of our time.'"*

In a two-page spread The Christian Science Monitor published a gently probing interview which shed new light on the many facets of this man who thinks of himself as a verb. After reading it, you still may not fully understand Buckminster Fuller (does anyone?) but you couldn't help loving him.

In interviews like this, the Monitor lets the subjects shine through, revealing them as they are without relying on gossip or sensationalism. This approach helps make the Monitor a daily world newspaper read and valued wherever people seek excellence in print.

Enrich your own inner space Monday through Friday. Try an introductory 13-week subscription for \$12.50. Simply call toll-free 800-225-7090 (in Mass., call collect 617-262-2300). Or write: THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR®, Box 125, Astor Station, Boston, MA, U.S.A. 02123.



# Ever wonder about \* and #

With \* and #, new telephone services will soon be at your fingertips. These services will be possible because technological innovations from Bell Laboratories and Western Electric are transforming the nation's telecommunications network.

For example, with \* and #, you may be able to arrange distinctive ringing for incoming calls from telephones you designate.

You'll be able to protect your privacy by having callers get a "do not disturb" signal when they dial your number; or, when you dial a call and reach a busy signal, you'll be able to set up a callback system that will wait until the line is free, then ring your phone and the one you're calling automatically.

---

## A New Kind of Network.

---

New telecommunications technology designed by Bell Labs and manufactured by Western Electric is bringing you this versatile network. Its main elements are an array of electronic switching systems (ESS) interconnected by high-capacity

transmission links, and a new "signaling" system to carry call-handling information.

---

## Stored-Program Control.

---

At the heart of each ESS is something called stored-program control. With it, the system's calls are controlled by coded instructions, stored in a memory and executed by a central processor. New features can be added by updating the stored instructions rather than rewiring or making complex equipment changes.

The new signaling system that will connect these switching systems operates like a high-speed private intercom. It carries all the information needed to handle each call and frees time on the voice circuits that previously carried such information.

Over 1000 local and long-distance ESS's are already in service, and twenty regional centers for the new signaling network are in place.

These innovations are possible largely because of advances in solid-state

electronics. Because of their decreasing cost, low power consumption and speed of operation, today's integrated circuits are enabling engineers to design more capability into communications systems at lower cost.

Building on Bell System accomplishments such as Direct Distance Dialing, digital communications and high-capacity transmission systems, modern electronics permits the new network to handle a wide variety of communications needs.

---

## Continuing Innovation.

---

All these technical achievements, and their integration into the telecommunications network, result from the close collaboration of Bell Labs, Western Electric and Bell System telephone companies.

Because of this teamwork, Bell telephone companies will give you the innovative services represented by \* and # and continue to provide the world's most reliable telephone service for the least \$ and ¢.



**Bell Laboratories**

was depressive, as many young would-be writers and painters who have gone to Greece for inspiration have discovered. We used to have a nickname for the sense of inadequacy and acedia it induced—the “Aegean Blues.” One has to be a very complete artist to create good work among the purest and most balanced landscapes on this planet, and especially when one knows that their only conceivable human match was met in a time beyond reentry. The Greece of the islands is Circe still; no place for the artist voyager to linger long, if he cares for his soul.

No correlative whatever of my fiction, beyond the above, took place on Spetsai during my stay. What ground the events of the book have in reality came after I had returned to England. I had escaped Circe, but the withdrawal symptoms were severe. I had not then realized that loss is essential for the novelist, immensely fertile for his books, however painful to his private being. This unresolved sense of a lack, of a missed opportunity, led me to graft certain dilemmas of a private situation in England

on the memory of the island and its solitudes, which became increasingly for me the lost Eden, the *domaine sans nom* of Alain-Fournier—even Bevis’s farm, perhaps. Gradually my protagonist, Nicholas, took on, if not the true representative face of a modern Everyman, at least that of a partial Everyman of my own class and background. There is a private pun in the family name I gave him. As a child I could not pronounce *th* except as *f*, and “Urfe” really stands for “earth”—a coining that long preceded the convenient connection with Honoré d’Urfé and *L’Astrée*.

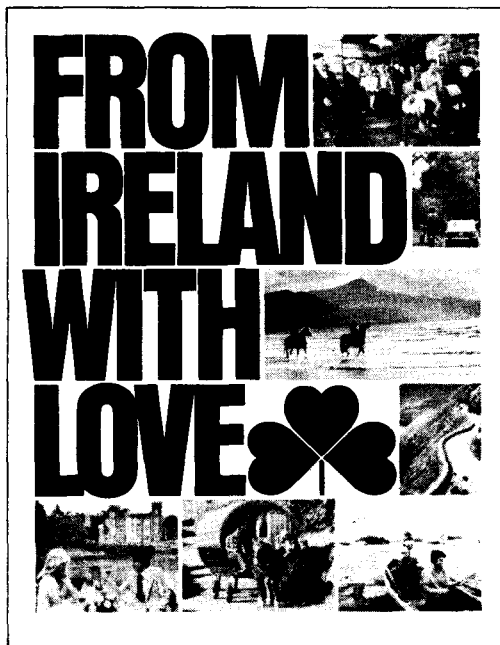
Novels, even much more lucidly conceived and controlled ones than this, are not like crossword puzzles, with one unique set of correct answers behind the clues—an analogy (“Dear Mr. Fowles, Please explain the real significance of...”) I sometimes despair of ever extirpating from the contemporary student mind. If *The Magus* has any “real significance,” it is no more than that of the Rorschach test in psychology. Its meaning is whatever reaction it provokes in the reader, and so far

as I am concerned there is no given “right” reaction.

In revising the text, I have not attempted to answer the many justified criticisms of excess, overcomplexity, artificiality, and the rest that the book received from the more sternly adult reviewers on its first appearance. I now know the generation whose mind it most attracts and that it must always substantially remain a novel of adolescence written by a retarded adolescent. My only plea is that all artists should range the full extent of their own lives freely. The rest of the world can censor and bury their private past. We cannot, and so have to remain partly green till the day we die—callow-green in the hope of becoming fertile-green. It is a constant complaint in that most revealing of all modern novels about novelists, Thomas Hardy’s agonized last fiction, *The Well-Beloved*: how the much younger self still rules the supposedly “mature” and middle-aged artist. One may reject the tyranny, as Hardy himself did, but the cost is the end of one’s ability to write novels. *The Magus* was also (though quite unconsciously) an out-of-hand celebration of acceptance of the yoke.

If there is some central scheme beneath the (more Irish than Greek) stew of intuitions about the nature of human existence—and of fiction—it lies perhaps in the alternative title, whose rejection I still sometimes regret, *The Godgame*. I did intend Conchis, the part sham and part shaman of the used title, to exhibit a series of masks representing human notions of God, from the supernatural to the jargon ridden scientific, that is, a series of human illusions about something that does not exist in fact: absolute knowledge and absolute power. The destruction of such illusions seems to me still an eminently humanist aim, and I wish there were some supermagus who could put the Arabs and the Israelis, or the Ulster Catholics and Protestants, through the same heuristic mill as Nicholas had to endure.

I believe God and freedom are totally antipathetic concepts; and men revere their imaginary gods most often because they are afraid to believe in the other thing. I am old enough to realize now that they do so sometimes with good reason. But I stick by the general principle, and that is what I meant to be at the heart of my story: that true freedom lies between each two, never in one alone, and therefore it can never be absolute freedom. All freedom, even the most relative, may be a fiction; but my own fiction, and still today, prefers the other hypothesis. ●



**FROM IRELAND WITH LOVE**

Ireland... friendly, unspoiled, inviting, exciting. From sight-seeing to shopping, from castles to cottages, to the Abbey Theatre. And it's described to perfection in this beautiful 32-page full color book. Take the first step toward a perfect vacation by writing, then see your travel agent.

IRISH TOURIST BOARD  
Box 1200  
Long Island City, New York 11101

**IRISH TOURIST BOARD, BOX 1200, LONG ISLAND CITY, N.Y. 11101**

Please send me your free, 32-page color book, "From Ireland With Love."



NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

MY TRAVEL AGENCY IS \_\_\_\_\_ AA-81

# From Here to Immortality

## Paradise I

by Alan Harrington

Little, Brown, 372 pp., \$9.95

Reviewed by Bruce Cook

**N**O AGE CAN definitively rank its own artists; somebody always seems to get misplaced. Robert Southey was generally thought by his contemporaries to be the greatest of the first generation of Romantic poets—Coleridge was considered too bizarre and erratic; and Wordsworth, too much given to flights of fancy. The pompous Southey, staunch moralist that he was, had the firm grip on life that nineteenth-century England admired.

Even our own age, obsessed as it is with discovery and list-making, is no less myopic than the rest, for it has consistently ignored an important writer named Alan Harrington. The difficulty is that Harrington fits no convenient category. In a literary era of would-be individualists, he is the oddest and quirkiest of the lot. He may not be our Wordsworth or Coleridge, but he has our Southey beaten by a mile.

In his new novel, *Paradise I*, the fundamental difficulty is again one of classification. The publisher is calling this a "utopian novel." That's usually no more than a euphemism for science fiction written by an established novelist outside the field, but in this case the label is both apt and accurate, for the book is a utopian fantasy that posits a world in which man has achieved immortality by scientific means. And the publisher does well to warn off

regular readers of science fiction because this is a curious, devious, almost arcane book, with literary devices that might tend to exasperate them. (Of all Harrington's contemporaries, the only one who might have written anything even remotely like it is Norman Mailer.)

*Paradise I* should remind readers who may know Harrington only from his last two books that he began as a novelist and is essentially that still. His first novel, *The Revelations of Dr. Modesto* (1955), caused a stir among critics as an ironic flank attack on the quietism of the Fifties. His second novel, *The Secret Swinger* (1966), dealt with events that played a part in the creation—by certain identifiable Beat Generation personalities—of the new Sixties sensibility, events to which Harrington, by then an old-timer on the New York scene, had been a witness. Between these two novels, he published a work of nonfiction, *Life in the Crystal Palace* (1959), which was almost the last, and in many ways the best, of the numerous studies of the life of the individual in the American corporation.

The book for which Harrington is best known, *The Immortalist* (1948), is a wild, mind-stretching shocker that deals with those faltering steps now being made by science—cryogenics, cloning, genetic engineering—toward the infinite extension of human life. Accepting their success as his premise, Harrington seeks to develop a philosophy of immortality, and he succeeds in a way that would have done credit to Albert Camus, a writer who I think has influenced him considerably. Harrington's last book, *Psychopaths* (1972), is just as bold, for it examines the psychopathic personality not just in the context of criminal behavior but also, in a more sinister way, in the familiar world of our day-to-day contacts. Psychopaths are all around us, he assures us—and, brilliantly, he convinces us that he is right.

Something of all of these books can be found in *Paradise I*, though it derives most directly, of course, from *The Immortalist*. In the new novel, Harrington gives us a vision of the kind of social structure that might exist in the artificial eternity he proposed in his earlier book. That society, however, turns out to be dismayingly like the structured corporate world of *Life in the Crystal Palace*; it is also a society in which individual personality is largely ex-

Bruce Cook, a free-lance writer, is the author of *The Beat Generation*. His most recently published work is *Dalton Trumbo*.

## Answer to Middleton Double-Croctic No. 140

(Judith) Viorst:  
A Visit from St. Nicholas

With a little old driver  
So lively and quick,  
She knew in a moment  
It must be St. Nick  
Although...the reason she knew...it must  
be St. Nick had nothing whatsoever to do  
with the attribution of liveliness and  
quickness—as distinct from, say,  
passivity—to a member of the masculine  
persuasion.

# BIGOTRY AND BLOOD

Documents on the  
Ulster Troubles  
CHARLES CARLTON

Places the present Ulster  
conflict in historical per-  
spective allowing all sides  
to speak for themselves.

Nelson-Hall  
Publishers

AT YOUR BOOKSELLER  
CLOTH \$8.95  
PAPERBACK \$5.95

325 W. Jackson, Chicago 60606

"The only reliable guide for  
the tourist in Great Britain  
and Ireland. And you can  
quote me."—RAYMOND SOKOLOV

**Egon Ronay's  
Lucas Guide**  
1978 Hotels, Restaurants & Inns  
Great Britain & Ireland  
\$7.95

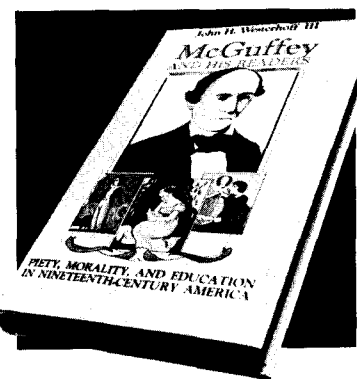
**PENGUIN BOOKS**  
625 Madison Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10022



# McGUFFEY AND HIS READERS

PIETY, MORALITY, AND  
EDUCATION IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
AMERICA

John H. Westerhoff, III examines  
William Holmes McGuffey's life, his  
scarce writings, and his first four  
*Eclectic Readers*. \$9.95



**abingdon**

at your local bookstore