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## "THE EBONY TOWER":

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### TEXT AND INTERTEXTS<sup>1</sup>

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READERS of the fiction of John Fowles have often pointed out Fowles' ability to transcend the barriers of classical realism, combining in his novels and short stories the realism-enhancing mechanisms of the traditional novelistic conventions with a much more mythopoeic and fantastic tendency, expressed in the archetypal nature of his characters, situations and landscapes.

In a much-quoted interview, Fowles explained to Lorna Sage (1974: 33) that his writing was the result of his double background in the English and the French literary and critical traditions, and that, when writing, he often felt "an opposed pull" between the "crushing sort of [the English] realistic tradition" and the more experimental French temptation.

This constant pressure on Fowles' writing may account for his desire to reject an art that, in Daniel Martin's words, "does not say, not only in, but behind the images, the real" (1977: 454), counterbalanced by the simultaneous tendency to undermine the reality-enhancing mechanisms he has just created, thus giving his novels and short stories a baffling contradictory nature: stylistically clear and easy to read and realistically set in

well-known places, at the same time his novels and short-stories manage to call into question the very reality they depict, offering beneath the literal interpretation, other alternative readings, according to which the apparently simple style becomes disturbingly complex and multilayered and the realistically-drawn situations turn out to be more archetypal and mythical than realistic and commonsensical.

A good example of this duality is provided by Fowles' collections of short stories, *The Ebony Tower*, first published in 1974. As is well known, this collection consists of four short stories ("The Ebony Tower" [pp. 7-113], "Poor Koko" [pp. 143-84], "The Enigma" [pp. pp. 185-239] and "The Cloud" [pp. 241-99] ) as well as Fowles' translation of the twelfth-century Brythonic Celtic romance by Marie de France, *Eliduc* (pp. 117-41), which is preceded by "A Personal Note" (pp. 117-22).

In "A Personal Note" Fowles explains that his intended title for the collection was *Variations*, "by which I meant to suggest variations both on certain themes in previous books of mine and in methods of narrative presentation," adding that "[o]ne reason the working title was discarded was that the first professional readers, who do know my books, could see no justifications for *Variations* whatever . . . beyond a very private mirage in the writer's mind." (ET 117).

Likewise, in an interview broadcast in 1974 by B.B.C. 2 within *The Book Programme*, Fowles explained to Robert Robinson that the short stories "were variations on the books I had previously done. I wrote them all in two or three months, and I certainly didn't think, 'I'll do a variation on some past story,' but that is how they came out" (ET 584).

Fowles' insistence that the four short stories were variations both on the themes and on the narrative methods employed in his previous novels interestingly contradicts the reaction of the first professional readers, who were unable to see these avowed connections, even though, as Fowles himself said, "they do know my books."

In "John Fowles' *The Ebony Tower*: Unity and Celtic Myth" Raymond J. Wilson III (1982: 305) sums up the position of this kind of early reviewers. Rene Kuhn Bryant, for example, would typically remark in the *National Review* that "[w]hether others would recognise a common base and see a web of intricate relationships among these five stories, without the prompting proffered in 'a personal note' inserted in the middle of the book, is debatable." Jan B. Gordon complained in *Commonweal* of the fact that "[t]here is

invariably a contrived incompleteness" in the short stories, while Foster Hirsch, in *America*, pronounced himself convinced that Fowles' short-story technique "probably could not be sustained over the length of a novel," thus openly disregarding Fowles' statement that the short stories are variations on the books he had previously done. As Wilson explains, the reason why these reviewers felt irritated and frustrated with the collection was that they did "not perceive that Fowles uses the myth of the quest for rebirth" as a recurrent pattern knitting together the short stories and the romance that make up *The Ebony Tower* collection.

It is my purpose in the remaining pages of this study to analyse the short story that gives the whole collection its title, simultaneously focusing on the intratextual form and meaning of the short story proper and on its intertextual<sup>2</sup> connexions with Fowles' avowed sources: medieval romance and Fowles' own earlier parody of it, *The Magus*.

In general terms, a narrative may be defined as a semiotic representation of a series of events linked in a temporal and causal way and a narrative text as a narrative which makes specific use of one particular semiotic system: language. As a complex linguistic sign considered in isolation the narrative text can be analysed on two different axes: horizontally, dividing the narrative into a number of successive parts arranged along a longitudinal structure of time and actions. And vertically, regarding the narrative as a sign analysable at different levels of abstraction. A third level of analysis is further suggested by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982) when he says that the narrative text should be considered as a sign related to other such signs within the same semiotic system.

Now, if we focus our attention on "The Ebony Tower" with these notions in mind, we will find that, at fabula level (in Mieke Bal's terminology [1977]), the short story may be summarised as the uneventful three-day circular journey from London, via Paris, to Coëtminais in Brittany and back, undertaken by the young art critic and painter, David Williams, in order to interview the older, world-famous, British painter, Henry Breasley, with a view to writing a book of criticism on his work. At the level of the story, we may say that the novella follows the Aristotelian formula of unity of action (*mythos*). It begins *in medias res*, with David Williams on the point of arriving at Coëtminais and, after a brief analepsis summarising Williams' and Breasley's personalities and respective backgrounds, it develops in chronological order through three days in "early September" (ET 1) of a year

we soon learn (*ET* 19) is 1973, that is, a year before *The Ebony Tower* itself was first published and so, very near Fowles' own present. It ends with Williams' return to Orly, where he meets his wife Beth, who was to have accompanied him to Coëtminais, but who was delayed in London due to the realistic enough chickenpox (*ET* 13 and 34) of one of their daughters.

As a text, "The Ebony Tower" is literally sandwiched between an epigraph taken from the eighth-century Brythonic Celtic romance by Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, and Fowles' translation of *Eliduc*, thus reinforcing the writer's open statement in "A Personal Note" that "The Ebony Tower" short story is a "variation" on Brythonic Celtic romance in general and on Marie de France's love story, *Eliduc*, in particular.

At the same time, Fowles refers to *The Magus* as a "variation" on another twentieth-century romance, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, even though, as he ironically comments, "[a] number of young thesis-writers have now told me they can see no significant parallels between *The Magus* and *Le Grand Meaulnes*. I must have severed the umbilical chord—the real connection requires such a metaphor—much more neatly than I supposed at the time; or perhaps modern academic criticism is blind to relationships that are far more emotional than structural" (*ET* 118).

Fowles' metaphor of the umbilical chord accurately points to the kind of indebtedness that exists between his fiction in general and the romance, for it underlines the fact that it is carried out more in *generic* than in any narrowly *thematic* terms. That is, translating Fowles' remark into narratological terminology, we could say that his claim is that the literary critics should be able to recognise between his fiction and *Le Grand Meaulnes* the type of relationship Genette (1982:11) calls "archtextuality," that is, an abstract kind of relationship, very often implicit, or at most, only barely mentioned paratextually, and which basically serves to orientate and determine the "horizon of expectation" of the reader by alluding to its generic status.

In the case of *The Magus*, the relationship Fowles claims to exist between his novel and *Le Grand Meaulnes* is already implicit in the title of the novel, the word "magus" immediately guiding the readers' expectations towards one particular kind of fiction: the romance. But the relation also appears explicitly in the novel's structure, which neatly follows the pattern of the hero's quest of the traditional romance. And indeed, although Fowles attributes the incapacity of young thesis-writers to see the relationship between *The Magus* and *Le Grand Meaulnes* to the fact that this connection

is "more emotional than structural" (*ET* 118), in fact Fowles' complex intertextual game is neither simply emotional nor even simply generic, but rather complex and operates simultaneously between Fowles' fiction and the romance in general and between each of his novels and short stories on both the thematic and the structural levels.

The first clear glimpse we have of this far-from-innocent game in "The Ebony Tower" appears both paratextually and archtextually in the double meaning of the title. As Wilson, following Barnum, has pointed out,

The ebony tower of the title can be connected with the dark tower of Browning's poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark." Browning had drawn the image from an earlier literary work, a scene of the mad Lear expressing something akin to despair. Both Shakespeare and Browning make the dark tower an unquestionably negative image: for Lear the pathetically ironic figure where the defeated, anguished former monarch washes like a piece of flotsam; for Childe Roland, the object of his dangerous quest, the place toward which he must steel himself to approach despite his knowledge that many knights died approaching it. (1982:304)

Generically, then, the black ebony tower visually stands in parodic relationship to the pure white ivory tower of traditional romance; but it simultaneously evokes the "ivory tower" seclusion of the Modernists, with its implications of elitism, cosmopolitanism and rejection of representational art in favour of abstraction, a meaning which, of course, points to the literal message of the short story:

'What on earth did the last thing he said mean?'  
'Oh'. She smiled. 'Nothing. Just one of the bats in his belfry.' She tilted her head, 'What he thinks has taken the place of the ivory tower?'  
'Abstraction?'  
She shook her head. 'Anything he doesn't like about modern art. That he thinks is obscure because the artist is scared to be clear... you know.' (*ET* 53)

So, apparently, the title suggests at least two different fields of connotation: contemporary art and the romance, delimiting from the start the "horizon of expectation" of the attentive reader, who is thus warned by the title to expect a (parodic) romance about contemporary art. But the "ebony tower" also evokes another dark tower, that of the sixteenth card in the major arcana of

the Tarot, "the Tower," described by Alfred Douglas (1988: 93) as a "sturdy tower, erected on a grassy rise [and] struck by lightning." As Douglas further explains, the lightning-flash

is a symbol of the overpowering light of truth in which all falsehood, and ultimately all duality, is destroyed. It is the flash of inner illumination which brings the freedom of enlightenment. . . . The devastating impact of this fire can free the mind from its fetters and open the way that leads to the centre; but if the conscious mind is not prepared, not strongly built on firm foundations, it may end in catastrophe. In psychological terms the outcome will be dissociation, the division of the mind against itself. . . .

In mundane terms the Tower suggests the destruction of an outdated philosophy which is unable to adapt to new conditions . . . the lesson here is that any structure is only defensible as long as it remains flexible and capable of evolution. (1988: 93-95)

Originally, each of the twenty two Tarot trumps were meant to represent one crucial grade or stage in a hermetic system of initiation, the whole set symbolising the initiate's quest for enlightenment in spiritual terms. The Tarot symbolism of the tower, therefore, reinforces the romance idea of the hero's quest, adding to it a spiritual or psychological dimension, according to which Williams' quest becomes both an artist's quest for maturation and a psychological quest for individuation. Interestingly, the Tarot symbolism of the title also connects "The Ebony Tower" with *The Magus*, a novel entitled after the first greater arcanum, "the Magician," and whose structure neatly follows, as Ellen McDaniel (1980/81: 247-260) has pointed out, the pattern formed by the twenty-two card pack as a whole.

In *The Magus* Fowles used the pattern of the greater arcana of the Tarot as a way of expressing both the Jungian idea of the individuation of the self in psychological terms and also the existentialist idea of life as road for, as he explained in an interview,

when I was well below half of my present age, we were in England at that time ... we were on our knees before Camus and Sartre and French existentialism. It was not because we truly understood it but we had a kind of notion, a dream of what it was about. Most of us were victims of it. *I quite like that philosophy as a structure in a novel and in a sense I still use it.* (Onega 1988: 64; my emphasis)

So, the title of the novella, "The Ebony Tower," hides a whole wealth of connotations pointing at diverse hypertexts and hinting at a multiplicity of layers of meaning underneath the apparent simplicity and chronological linearity of the short story.

Again, immediately after the title, the epigraph that precedes the short story reproducing a few lines from the Brythonic Celtic romance by Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, explicitly refers to the medieval knight's *dangerous journey* through strange and heavily forested places, thus hinting at a possible relationship between the adventure undertaken by the hero of the novella and the archetype of the hero's quest of the traditional romance. This epigraph, like the novella's title, acts not only paratextually, but also archtextually, implicitly determining the generic status of "The Ebony Tower":

. . . Et par forez longues et lees  
Par leus estranges et sauvages  
Et passa mainz felons passages  
Et maint peril et maint destroit  
Tant qu'il vint au santier tot droit . . . (ET 9)

The implicit parallelisms that run between both paratexts (title and epigraph) and the short story proper are further developed hypertextually: although, as happens in *The Magus*, the setting of "The Ebony Tower" is contemporary and although at the level of the fabula the purpose of the journey appears in principle to be a straightforward one —the interviewing of an elderly world-famous painter by a young painter and art critic— the atmosphere in which the journey and actual meeting take place is much more suggestive and complex, constantly generating intertextual and archtextual perceptions with concrete romances and with the genre as such. So, for example, it is easy to realise that both Breasley and Williams are of Celtic origin, as, "David knew [Breasley's] mother had been Welsh" (ET 26) and, as Ruth Morse points out, "there is an unmistakable, if unemphatic, Welshness about 'David Williams'" (1984: 18). Furthermore, it is easy to see from a comparison of "The Ebony Tower" and the romance following it, Fowles' translation of Chrétien des Troyes' *Eliduc*, that the journey Williams undertakes from Britain to Brittany and back to Britain again neatly reproduces in parodic inverted form the journey undertaken by Eliduc from Brittany to Britain and back. Like Eliduc (and also like Nicholas Urfe in *The Magus*), David Williams has undertaken a journey which will prove both exhilarating and dangerous, a hero's quest

for maturation through "one of the last large remnants of the old wooded Brittany" that fills the young painter with a strange "sense of discovery [and] a pleasant illusion of bachelor freedom" (ET 9).

In the course of this journey David Williams will have to meet a series of ritual tests set by another character in the story, a magus-like figure who, as John B. Humma points out, cannot be found in *Eliduc* "or in the *Lais* of Marie generally, with the exception of *Lanval*" (1983: 33). As Humma further explains "one has only to compare the deliberate, indeed systematic, testing of Nicholas Urfe in *The Magus* with the same deliberate and systematic testing of the hero in the English Celtic romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to note how provocative the parallels are" (1983: 33-4).

It seems, then, that the intertexts of "The Ebony Tower" are not only those explicitly alluded to by Fowles in "A Personal Note," namely Brithonic Celtic romance and *The Magus*, but also other unmentioned Celtic romances, either Brythonic or English, like *Lanval* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the text, the only explicit allusion to English Celtic romance comes as a passing reference to the Arthurian cycle in connexion with Pisanello's *Vision of St Eustace* (ET 19), but we should not forget that, as David Williams finds out by contemplating Henry Breasley's Coëtminais series, his work, like the old painter's own personality, was, behind the French mask, truly and radically English:

It began to seem almost the essential clue; the wily old outlaw, hiding behind the flamboyant screen of his outrageous behaviour and his cosmopolitan influences, was perhaps as simply and inalienably native as Robin Hood. (p. 82)

As English as Fowles' work, no doubt.

Analysing the title of the novella we found that the ebony tower echoed and parodied not only the medieval topos of the ivory tower but also the Tarot, Shakespeare's, Browning's, and the Modernists' earlier versions of the same concept. Similarly, the novella itself recasts the theme of the archetypal hero's quest for maturation but taken, as Raymond J. Wilson III (1982: 302) points out, not directly, but "as modified by T. S. Eliot."

Following Weston, Wilson synthesises this myth as the quest to restore fertility to the waste land. In the Grail legends of Celtic romance, he adds,



the quester enters a waste land, the troubles of which stem from the fact that its ruler, the Fisher King, is dead or excessively aged or suffering from a sexual wound; and to cure the Fisher King, restoring fertility to the land, the knight must pass a series of tests [involving] a temptation by a fiend, in the form of a fair maiden on a luxurious barge. [In the Indian version of the same myth a] hermit-youth must succumb to the temptation in order to restore fertility to the land, while to attend the same end, [the Christian knight] must resist the temptation. (Wilson 1982: 303).

Coming at the end of a centuries long literary tradition, therefore, Fowles will attempt to recast in his novels and short stories the archetypal myth of the hero's quest for maturation simultaneously absorbing the cumulative emotional drive of both the Western and the Eastern versions of the quest theme with their opposed solution of the hero's dilemma, i.e., either resisting or yielding to the temptation, using as sources not only the Tarot and romance versions of the myth but also its most important contemporary parodic version: that developed in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot.

Fowles attempted to carry out this complex experiment for the first time in *The Magus*. In it, an upper middle-class young man called Nicholas Urfe, named after his French ancestor, "Honoré d'Urfé, author of the seventeenth-century best-seller *L'Astrée*" (Fowles 1977: 15), undertakes a journey from England to Bourani in Greece in order to take up a job as school teacher and to get rid of "a girl he was tired of" (1977: 18). There, contrary to his expectations, he will undergo a complex process of manipulation at the hands of Conchis, a baffling magus intent on teaching his chosen pupil the difference between real life and a fake life of appearances. So, Urfe will be made to encounter two beautiful and disquieting identical twins: Lily/Julie and Rose/June, and will eventually be made to choose between one of the two. In order to help Urfe make the right choice, Conchis will lecture his pupil, will tell him stories with a moral and episodes of his own life story that interestingly echo Urfe's present situation and will organise for him the "Godgame," a kind of living "metatheatre" in which Nicholas himself will be asked to play the leading role, hand in hand with Lily and Rose. As I have shown elsewhere (1989: 35) *The Magus* follows the threefold pattern of a hero's quest for maturation. The first section, from chapters 1 to 9, shows the hero still in his homeland, at the crucial moment in his evolution from adolescence into manhood when he has finished his university training and is trying to orient his life. The second section goes from chapters 10 to 67, and takes place in Bourani, a mysterious domain set in Phraxos, a remote island

in the Aegean. In it the hero undergoes the different phases of trial and testing that constitute his ritual initiation into knowledge. The third section, covering chapters 68 to 77, constitutes the hero's return, his maturity now achieved. "The Ebony Tower," likewise, follows a threefold pattern: David Williams' dangerous journey from Britain to Brittany and back to Britain again takes place over three days and includes the passing from "the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder" (Campbell 1973: 30) through the crossing of a most straightforward archetypal threefold threshold:

He turned off down an even smaller forest road, a deserted *voie communale*; and a mile or so along that he came on the promised sign. *Manoir de Coëtminais. Chemin privé.* There was a white gate, which he had to open and shut. Half a mile on again through the forest he found his way barred, just before the trees gave way to sunlight and a grassy orchard, by yet another gate. There was a sign-board nailed to the top bar. Its words made him smile inwardly, since beneath the heading *Chien méchant* they were in English: *Strictly no visitors except by prior arrangement.* But as if to confirm that the sign was not to be taken lightly, he found the gate padlocked on the inner side. . . . Guard-dog or not, one couldn't ... he went back to his car, switched off and locked the doors, then returned to the gate and climbed over. (ET 10)

The paragraph echoes Urfe's penetration of the barbed-wire fence that offered a token protection to Conchis' domain. Like Williams, Urfe encounters a notice in French with the incongruous words *Salle d'attente*, which stood "in the sort of position one sees *Trespassers will be prosecuted* notices in England" (1977: 71). And again like Williams, who dismisses the danger of finding the "*chien méchant*" in his way, Urfe disregarded the notice's advice and crossed over into the domain. As invariably happens to the archetypal hero, Williams will soon after discover that Macmillan, the dog, is well tied up and that the padlocked gate was in fact open (ET 13), and so, that, like the archetypal guardian of the threshold, in truth the dog simply offered a token protection, and was in fact harmless for the daring visitor. So, he finds himself in an orchard "whose aged trees were clustered with codlings and red-cider apples" (ET 10), that is, he enters an ancient apple orchard, brimful with codlings, which are unsuitable to eat, but also with tempting — and intoxicating— red cider-apples. With admirable accuracy, then, Williams

is offered the edible and the inedible apples that inevitably evoke the double nature of the paradisaal apple tree.

Purblind to the subtleties of this archetypal symbolism, however, Williams crosses the orchard, registers the sight of two "old climbing roses [and] a scatter of white doves" (*ET* 11) and, as he had done with the white codlings and the red-cider apples, he completely disregards the color symbolism of the (red ?) roses and the white doves although, ironically, he considers himself a "colour painter" (*ET* 20). He then arrives at the front of the manor-house, where he finds that the main door is open, tempting him for the second time to trespass over a threshold: "[h]e hesitated, aware that he had arrived sooner than suggested; then tapped on the massive main door with his knuckles. A few seconds later, realizing the futility of the weak sound, *he stepped over the threshold.*" (my emphasis, *ET* 11)

When Williams decides to step over the threshold of the main door, he finds, like Urfe in Bourani, the atemporal world of art, and beyond it, protected by a high pink wall, the heart of the heart of Coëtminais: the *hortus conclusus* proper, with its single tree springing up in midlawn, a "catalpa pruned into a huge green mushroom," beyond which "in a closed pool of heat, two naked girls lay side by side on the grass. The further, half hidden, was on her back, as if asleep. (p. 12).

With characteristic accuracy, Williams' painter's eye registers the "warm tones" of the scene:

the two indolent female figures, the catalpa-shade green and the grass green, the intense carmine of the hat-sash, the pink wall beyond with its ancient espalier fruit-trees. Then he turned and went back to the main door, feeling more amused than embarrassed. He thought of Beth again: how she would have adored this being plunged straight into the legend ... the wicked old faun and his famous afternoons. (*ET* 12)

And, ironically enough, although he himself uses a metaphorical language that evokes the world of the romance with its legends and fauns, Williams is unable to go beyond the mechanical optic recording of what he sees. He considers only the effect of green that the catalpa-shade casts and misses the clear dual sexual symbolism of the tree, standing at the centre of the garden, with its (feminine) heart-shaped leaves and (masculine) trumpet-shaped flowers. He also notices the "ancient espalier fruit-trees" and again dismisses them, although in fact, as he himself later reflects, the whole countryside

reeks of "fecundity [ with] so many ripening apples" (*ET* 34). Interestingly, he tries to convince himself that he is more amused than embarrassed by the sight of the two naked girls, but refuses to cross the third threshold that separates him from them and, returning to the main door, rings a bronze handbell that was standing on the stone-floor and "waited on the threshold" (*ET* 12). Although he concludes that what he has seen has to be interpreted simply as evidence of Henry Breasley's famous sexual promiscuity, he cannot help associating the naked girls with his own wife and so, with the memory of what makes him feel "a little guilty to be enjoying himself so much, to be here so unexpectedly alone, without Beth" (*ET* 9). Just before he leaves Coëtminais for ever, two days later, this little feeling of guilt will have metamorphosed into "terror" (*ET* 98).

The ambiguity of the literal and the symbolic readings of fabula and story are enhanced at text level. At first sight, "The Ebony Tower" appears to be the realistic account by a traditional external (or hetero-extradiegetic, in Genette's terminology [1972]) narrative instance who focalises its retrospective narration through the mind and eyes of David Williams. This narrator never makes any comments of its own, preferring to show the actions and thoughts of the characters either through Williams' own perspective or by allowing them to speak in their own voices. As we begin to read, therefore, we are offered an account of the journey in Williams' own matter-of-fact terms: the business-like reason for his journey, the triviality of the reason why Williams' wife was not able to accompany him, the accurate and detailed explanations of why and how Williams was commissioned to write a book on Breasley's painting, the apparently objective and detached description of Williams' family and artistic background—all function as powerful realism-enhancing mechanisms, working to convince the reader that s/he is witnessing the narration of an action that could perfectly well have taken place in the real world of 1973. Indeed, the "touches" of realism go to the length of making Williams' wife, Beth, a brilliant ex-student of his, who had given up her career for motherhood and who had subsequently come to resent the drabness of comfortable middle-class married life, until she found an outlet for her creativity in the illustration of children's books:

His marriage had been very successful, except for one brief bad period when Berth had rebelled against 'constant motherhood' and flown the banner of Women's Liberation; but now she had two sets of

illustrations for children's books to her credit, another commissioned and a fourth in prospect. (ET 21)

David Williams himself is described as the brilliant, energetic, ambitious and successful painter, capable of combining critical activity, teaching and lecturing with painting in a way that would please both the critics and the general public, so that

his own work began to get enough reputation as it moved from beneath the Op Art umbrella to guarantee plenty of red stars at his exhibitions [...and] to put it crudely [his paintings] went well on walls that had to be lived in, which was one good reason (one he knew and accepted) that he sold; another was that he had always worked to a smaller scale than most non-figurative painters. (ET 20-21)

But we must not forget that the narrative instance is focusing the narration through David Williams' perspective, and so that it is in principle simply reporting in indirect speech Williams' own version of the journey and of himself. As the action progresses, we begin to realise that, in fact, Williams' deeds break quite away from his original intention and that, like the Aristotelian tragic hero, he is the victim of a basic ignorance, a *hamartia* that precludes his interpreting his and the other characters' actions in their true light. So, for example, when he arrives at Coëtminais, the narrator tells us that Williams had

only one small fear: that Breasley had not realized that he was a painter —to be precise, what kind of painter he was— as well as writer on art [and that] since he lived so far from the London art scene, [Breasley] was genuinely unaware of the partial snake he had taken to his bosom. (ET 21-22)

As the reader will soon learn, however, the situation is precisely the contrary, for Breasley not only knows what kind of painter he is, but has, in fact, as Conchis did with Urfe in *The Magus*, chosen him as the subject of a sophisticated experiment aimed at re-educating him and at making him grow out of abstract art. In this light, Williams' metaphor of the "snake in his bosom" acquires added irony and becomes a pointed "amorce" or hint (Genette 1972: 112), anticipating Williams' incapacity to see that Coëtminais is a replica of the Garden of Eden, with Breasley, not him, playing the role of snake and offering Williams the tempting apple of (true artistic) knowledge.

So, the function of the heterodiegetic narrator in "The Ebony Tower" is comparable to that of the homodiegetic narrator in *The Magus*: although both narrators restrict their knowledge to the perspective of their respective heroes, an ironic tension is also established on the one hand, between the often wrong and biased knowledge of the heroes, whose awareness of the events is partial and limited by their *hamartia* and can, obviously, only improve progressively, after they actually live the events, and on the other, the better knowledge of their respective narrators, who enjoy the advantage of knowing the whole story in advance, including their *dénouements*.

The similarity of this ironic tension can be further explained through the fact that, from a characteriological point of view, Nicholas Urfe and David Williams have striking traits in common. Both are brilliant upper-middle class, University-trained young men with artistic inclinations, who are, nevertheless, in a sense, wasting their potential, due to a flaw in their characters. Interestingly, Urfe is a rake and a woman-chaser while Williams, who considers himself a monogamist, may be seen as Urfe's mirror-opposite. Urfe, as a woman "collector," is totally ignorant of what true love is and tends to see women as sex-objects. This character flaw has led him to reject Alison and to take the complete love she offers for a sexual pastime. Williams, on the other hand, considers himself "a crypto-husband before he married" (*ET* 54) and is reluctant to cheat on his wife, although he is deeply stirred and tempted by Diana. However, his reason for being faithful to Beth is simply the fear that "if he was unfaithful, then she could be" (*ET* 97). Furthermore, he envisages matrimony just as a satisfactory arrangement based on a relationship of friendship and concord, not love: "David had always admired his parent's marriage. His own had begun to assume that same easy camaraderie and co-operation" (*ET* 21).

From the archetypal point of view, then, Nicholas Urfe, like the medieval Celtic knight, must restrain his sexual impulses and resist temptation, while Williams, like the hermit-youth of the Indian version of the quest myth, must give up his fear and succumb to it.

In this sense we can say that, although Urfe and Williams apparently champion opposite qualities (the former sexual promiscuity and the latter perfect monogamy), they really suffer from the same deficiency: an inability to live and love truly that effectually thwarts their attempts at creative expression: while Nicholas Urfe confesses himself incapable of accomplishing his ambition to become a poet, David Williams limits his

potential as a painter by neglecting representative painting for abstraction. The aim of the teaching they will receive from the magus-like figure they will encounter at the end of their journeys, therefore, will be to shatter their assumptions about love as a necessary prerequisite to their true understanding of life and art.

Henry Breasley, the old man Williams encounters, like Maurice Conchis in the former novel, has the baffling complex nature of the archetypal magus. With Tiresias, the magus figure in *The Waste Land*, both Conchis and Breasley share an ambiguous ambivalence. At one point in the novella Williams is astonished to see how Breasley's "disingenuous mask of ignorance slipped and the face of the old cosmopolitan that lay beneath began to show" (ET 32); at another, the old painter is described as a living "paradox" with his

straight white hair, brushed across the forehead in a style . . . which Hitler had long put out of fashion . . . . It gave him a boyishness; but the ruddy incipient choleric face and the pale eyes suggested something much older and more dangerous. (ET 26)

Furthermore, Henry Breasley's oxymoronic dual traits: ignorant / cosmopolitan, boyish / older, ruddy-choleric / pale-eyed, inoffensive / dangerous-Hitlerian, are simultaneously combined with a protean capacity for metamorphosis that also recalls Conchis' ever-changing personality: he is "an old demon" (ET 43); a *senex iratus* full of "[h]atred and anger" (ET 48); the girls' "tyrant" and lover, and "a smirking old satyr in carpet-slippers" (ET 56). To match his multilayered personality, his language is muddled and fragmentary: he has

a quirky staccato manner, half assertive, half tentative; weirdly antiquated slang, a constant lacing of obscenity; not intellectually or feelingly at all, but more like some eccentric retired . . . admiral. (ET 26)

In *The Magus* the first-level narrator, the older and mature Urfe, would occasionally relinquish his narrative role in favour of Maurice Conchis who, in order to carry out his task of re-educating the young and purblind hero, undertook to narrate a series of episodes of his own past life that shockingly resembled recent events occurring to Urfe at Bourani. Other times Conchis would narrate a series of allegorical tales with a moral that also prefigured Urfe's present situation. As I have shown elsewhere (1989: 50 ff.), these

iconic tales and the episodes of Conchis' life function as proleptic warnings meant to help Urfe succeed in the role of trials of his hero's quest for maturation. From the narrative point of view, the handing over of the narrative roles by the older Urfe to Conchis means that a second level of narration has been created: Conchis turns from character into second-level internal narrator addressing the young Nicholas in his new role of second-level narratee. From this point of view, the iconic tales and episodes of Conchis' life have a certain autonomy, they are tales within a tale reflecting in allegorical form complementary aspects of the primary story, that is, functioning as elements of what Mieke Bal, following Ricardou (1977: 107), has called a *mise en abyme éclatée*, that is, a *mise en abyme* whose elements appear scattered and intertwined with the elements of the main story and with each other.

If we turn our attention to "The Ebony Tower" we will see that the first-level external narrator also relinquishes its narrative role in favour of the magus-like figure in the novella, Henry Breasley who, like Maurice Conchis in *The Magus*, will undertake to narrate to his pupil, David Williams, brief episodes from his past life and work as well as a summary of the plot of Marie de France's *Eliduc* which, like Fowles, Breasley considers a "[d]amn' good tale [he has read] several times" (ET 58).

On the very first page of the novella, the external narrator had warned the reader that Coëtminais was at the heart of

the forest of Paimpont, one of the last largest remnants of the old wooded Brittany. Later on, Henry Breasley explained to Williams that the forest of Paimpont was nothing less than "the Brocéliande of the *lais* of Chrétien de Troyes (ET 57),

that "Coët- meant wood, or forest: *-minais*, of the monks" and that the surrounding forest had once been abbatial land (ET 43). As he explained, this part of the Haute Bretagne was the very land that had filtered to the rest of Europe the twelfth- and thirteenth-century romantic legends and the "mystery of island Britain" (ET 57), and Coëtminais was literally in fact the same forest and abbatial land that once belonged to Eliduc in Marie de France's romance. In an attempt to give the inattentive Williams the clues and links he needs to understand the situation he is living, Henry Breasley even takes the trouble to point out the parallelism between the two women in *Eliduc* and the two girls in Coëtminais:



Then he went off on Marie de France and *Eliduc*. "Damn good tale. Read it several times. What's that old Swiss bamboozler's name. Jung, yes? His sort of stuff. Archetypal and all that."

Ahead, the two girls turned off on a diagonal and narrower ride, more shady. Breasley and David followed some forty yards behind. The old man waved his stick.

"Those two girls now. Two girls in *Eliduc*." (ET 58)

Now, the fact that Henry Breasley feels this fascination for *Eliduc* has interesting implications. First of all, it suggests an intellectual identity between Fowles himself and his literary creation, thus equating Breasley's opinions about life and art with the author's own opinions, and so allowing for the interpretation that Breasley is the author's *persona*, a mere spokesman of Fowles' own ideology and morals. This suggestion is strengthened by the parallelism that exists between Breasley's and Fowles' roles: the former is a magus-like teacher with omniscient control over his domain and over the creatures that inhabit it, the latter a God-like writer with overall control over the fictional universe of his own creation. By summarising the plot of *Eliduc* and by pointing at a possible parallelism between the Freak and the Mouse and Guilliadun and Guildelüec Henry Breasley hopes to open up the eyes of Williams to the perception of a richer and more complex reality than the reality of commonsense observation. But Henry Briesley's metaphorical suggestion is also addressed to the reader, who is asked to ironise and complete David Williams' short-sighted and too literal interpretations of what he is living and experiencing at Coëtminais. Indeed, when the old painter begins to tell the story of *Eliduc*, Williams, like the thesis writers and early reviewers Fowles mentioned in "A Personal Note," is bored and cannot see the connection:

his distinctly shorthand manner of narration was more reminiscent of a Noel Coward farce than a noble medieval tale of crossed love, and once or twice David had to bite his lips. Nor did the actual figures of the two girls, the Freak in a red shirt, black dungarees and Wellingtons, the Mouse in a dark green jersey (all bras were not burnt, David noted) and pale trousers, help. (ET 58)

So, dismissing Breasley's hint that the connection between the Freak and the Mouse and the story of *Eliduc* has to be read in archetypal and symbolic terms, Williams insists on carrying out a flat, literal interpretation of the girls.

Typically, "David detected [but was incapable of interpreting] a difference between the two girls. One wanted to play down the sexual side, the other to admit it" (*ET* 68). Observing the Freak, he realised that "[s]omething about her, perhaps just the exotic hair and the darkness of her tan, was faintly negroid, aboriginal, androgynous" and that [p]sychologically she still repelled something in [him]" (*ET* 62), while the Mouse "had a much more feminine figure, long-legged, attractively firm small breasts . . ." (*ET* 62-3); and when during the trip to the lake, he contemplated Diana peeling an apple, David noticed her "Quattrocento delicacy" which he paradoxically found "antiseptic; and disturbing." (*ET* 63).

At the same time, David belatedly detected, beneath the girls' temperamental and physical differences, a paradoxical "closeness between them, a rapport that did not need words" (*ET* 40). As the second day elapsed, he intuited that the Mouse had a complex, multilayered personality as "he glimpsed a different girl beneath the present one" (*ET* 77) and he found himself correcting his first negative impression of the Freak, reluctantly admitting that she was not simply the absurd sex doll with a past of promiscuity and drugs he had thought her to be, and guessing "at an affectionateness beneath the flip language —an honesty . . . something that had been got the hard way, by living the 'bloody mess'" (*ET* 72).

If Williams had listened to Henry Breasley's advice that he should see the girls in the light of Carl Jung's archetypal symbolism, he would have immediately realised that the Freak with her "frizzed-out hair that had been reddened with henna [and her] singlet, a man's or a boy's by the look of it, dyed black" (*ET* 25) and the Mouse, with her "brown and gold hair" (*ET* 13) and her "plain white cotton *galabiya*" (*ET* 12), appear as simultaneously opposed and mutually dependent, because each embodies one of the two antagonistic qualities that, put together, make up the archetypal concept of *anima*, expressed in the duality virgin/whore, or the pure white lily/red rose of passion of Browning's poem. But the most powerful "amorce" hinting at the *anima* complementarity of the Freak and the Mouse appears in the fact that, when Williams sees them for the first time, one girl is awake and the other asleep, thus literally following the archetypal symbolism that equates the conscious with a state of vigilance and the unconscious or instinctual with sleep. In this sense, the scene foreshadows a similar one in *A Maggot* (1986) in which Rebecca Lee, in a vision of Heaven, discovers a young man and his twin, one awake and the other asleep.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the archetypal

complementarity of the Freak and the Mouse echoes and parallels not only *A Maggot* but John Fowles' fiction *en bloc* for, as I have shown elsewhere (1989: 172), from *The Magus* onwards every heroine of John Fowles has in herself the archetypal duality of the *anima*. This duality is expressed in the splitting into twin characters in *The Magus*: in accord with their names, Lily is spiritual and virginal, and Rose down-to-earth and sexually aggressive. This archetypal dichotomy reappears in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, where Sarah is alternately seen as an innocent, virginal maiden, and as a succuba; in *Daniel Martin*, in the parodically Victorian "Heavenly Twins," Nell and Jane; in the "Fairy Sisters" Marjory and Miriam; and in Nancy Reed's twin sisters, Mary and Louise; in *Mantissa*, in the splitting of the muse into (the white) Dr. Delfie and (the black) Nurse Cory; and in *A Maggot*, where Rebecca Hocknell, a barren prostitute, mysteriously transforms herself into a pious visionary and the mother of a religious reformer.

The Jungian archetype of the *anima* lies, therefore, at the back of Fowles' picturing of woman but we should not forget that this archetypal dichotomy also recurrently appears in the Brythonic Celtic romances that act as intertexts of Fowles' works. Indeed, the complementarity of the Mouse and the Freak echo the medieval romance topos of the two women who turn out to be one, expressed in *Eliduc* in the figures of Guilliadun and Guildelüec, the sleeping virginal bride and the rejected haggish wife. and also implicitly alluded to in the epigraph from *Yvain* for, as Robert Huffaker explains,

The epigram [sic] describes the archetypal quest of the knight who, often leaving a lover behind, reaches some mysterious master's castle and gains entry against dubious odds . . . . Once inside the castle, the knight usually becomes somehow involved with at least one nubile damsel—more often two—rarely more. Of the customary two, one is distant and desirable, the other accessible and less attractive—occasionally not pretty at all, but haggish instead. Sometimes the hag is transformed; sometimes the two maids prove to be one; but the hero usually discovers to his eventual surprise that the master is not as mysterious, nor the princess as distant, as he had supposed. Almost inevitably, she at last becomes available whether he decides to keep her or not. (1980: 117)

Like *Eliduc* in the Brythonic Celtic romance, and also like Urfe in *The Magus*, Williams will be asked to choose between one of the two women. One, matter-of-fact and experienced, will offer him fun and "a quickie" (*ET*

105); the other, pure and romantic, a unique moment of fulfilment, involving commitment and renunciation.

Anne, with her sexual promiscuity and her red hair, embodies the quality of the whore or red rose but, as her flat breasts and her negroid, androgynous bodily features simultaneously suggest, she also stands for the masculine facet of the *anima*, the *animus*. Diana, on the other hand, with her blond hair, her delicate beauty and her "antiseptic" (ET 63) sexuality, stands for the virgin, or white lily and so for the feminine facet of woman; but she is also the muse, the artist's source of inspiration, as Henry Breasley explains to William with his pun on her nickname:

"Know why I call her the Mouse?"

"I did rather wonder"

"Not the animal"

The old man hesitated, then reached and took a sheet of notepaper from a drawer beside him. Standing at his shoulder, David watched him . . . print in pencil the letter M and then, after a space, the letters U, S, E. In the space between the M and the U the wrinkled hand drew, in five or six quick strokes, an O-shaped vulva. Then Breasley glanced drily back up at David; a wink, the tip of his tongue slipped out like a lizard's. Almost before David had grasped the double meaning the piece of paper was crumpled up. (ET 80-1)

As the critics have pointed out, the real names of the girls, "Anne" and "Di-ana," implicitly allude to their archetypal complementarity. But the names suggest more than that. As a prefix indicating reduplication, the "Di-" in "Di-ana" also seems to suggest that Diana is like two Annes or rather, that Anne is just one single (recessive) facet of Diana's complex wholeness, as Williams intuits: "[the Freak] seemed so much a mere parasite of the other girl's poise and honesty." (ET 62). Diana has the timidity (or should we say, coyness?), characteristic of the little animal. But, as Breasley's pun on her nickname indicates, she also has the strong sexuality of the pure woman, a sexuality which, when properly understood and shared is much stronger and more fulfilling than that offered by Anne, a sexuality capable of raising her status from woman to muse, and that of her lover from man to artist, for as Breasley explained, love and passion are the true prerequisites of real art: "Don't hate, can't love, can't love, can't paint" (ET 49).

This synthetic message constitutes the core of Breasley's teaching, as can be seen from the discussion on painting that takes place during the first

dinner. Williams tries to defend abstract art by comparing it to philosophy and mathematics, insisting on viewing it in logical terms as a search for pure forms. Breasley's dismissive answer is interpreted by Diana:

"Pair of tits and a cunt. All that goes with them. That's reality.  
Not your piddling theorems and pansy colours. . . ."  
Once again the Mouse interrupted, in an absolutely neutral voice. "You're afraid of the human body."  
"Perhaps simply more interested in the mind than the genitals."  
"God help your bloody wife then."  
David said evenly, "I thought we were talking about painting."  
(*ET* 45)

David's answer evinces his conception of art and life as distinct and separate. He cannot understand why Breasley is always speaking about women and sex in connection with painting or why he thinks of abstract painting in terms of castration and destruction (*ET* 46). The episode foreruns a similar one in *Daniel Martin*, when having made up his mind to abandon script writing for novel writing, Daniel Martin makes the momentous decision to reject cultural fashion, imposed feelings and prescribed recipes for his novel in order to create an art capable of expressing "behind the images, the real" (1977: 454). Daniel Martin rejects "elitist guilt" and "existentialist nausea" and toys with the possibilities offered him by the Marxist social realism of Georg Lukács. In "The Ebony Tower," likewise, David Williams interprets Breasley's defense of representational art as a return to socialist realism, which he rejects with the argument that it presupposes the acceptance of totalitarian restrictions of freedom (*ET* 46). The dialogue, which is pretty long, synthesises the respective positions of teacher and pupil. Williams thinks that abstract art is the result of creative freedom and of a post-atomic world-view (*ET* 47), while for Breasley the apparently free election of abstraction hides at heart a crucial fear: the fear to accept life and commitment: "[t]oo many people die for decency. Tolerance. Keeping their arses clean" (*ET* 46).

As we have seen, Diana translated Breasley's incoherent remarks on Williams' views on abstract art saying that Breasley thought that he was afraid of the human body. According to the old painter, Williams' art—and contemporary abstraction in general—is barren and lifeless because behind the refusal to represent the human body lies a castrating fear of life. In order to overcome this sterilising limitation, therefore, Williams will have to undergo a complex process of re-education. Firstly, he will be invited to

Coëtminais, a remote "domain" hidden from the rest of the world by the very same forest that was "the Brocéliande of the *lais* of Chrétien de Troyes" that had been peopled by "wandering horsemen and lost damsels and dragons and wizards, Tristan and Merlin and Lancelot . . . " (ET 57). That is, Williams is invited to cross a threshold that separates the barren and sterilising world of common day from the richly suggestive world of literature. On contemplating the two girls for the first time Williams immediately thinks of his wife and of how "she would have adored this being plunged straight into the legend" (ET 12). His thoughts are meant to be metaphorical but, ironically enough, will prove to have literal meaning, for David Williams is, like Nicholas Urfe, literally plunged into a fictional world paradoxically made up, again like Conchis' "metatheatre," of real objects and flesh-and-blood people. After this, Williams will be made to participate in a series of picture-like scenes: first, as we have seen, he will be offered a sight of the two girls, one awake and the other asleep, in the centre of an edenic garden strongly reminiscent of the medieval *hortus conclusus* with its high pink walls and its ancient apple trees. Next, Williams will be invited on a trip by the lake that, as Breasley hints, amounts to a re-enactment of Manet's controversial picture: "[g]els suggest a little *déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Good idea, what? Picnic?" . . . "Rather proud of my forest. Worth a dekkko?" (ET 54).

With his critical eye trained to detect the influence of earlier painters in contemporary pictures, Williams had detected behind Breasley's *Kermesse* the echo "of the Brueghel family and even a faint self-echo, of the *Moon-hunt* " (ET 29). Now, during the trip to the lake, David finds himself applying the same technique to what he is living and finding to his astonishment that each stage of the trip reminds him of a concrete painter. Just as he enters the forest he has the strange feeling that he had seen it before, that "[t]he place had featured in two of the last-period paintings, and David had a sense of familiarity, of *déjà vu* " (ET 59). After the girls undress for swimming, the association with Breasley's paintings gives way to "[a]nother echo, this time of Gauguin; brown breasts and the garden of Eden" (ET 61) and then "Gauguin disappeared; and Manet took his place" (ET 62). The painting Williams is now thinking of is, of course, Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, originally entitled *Le bain*. Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* is an oil painting portraying two men dressed up in the contemporary fashion of the mid-nineteenth century, leisurely sitting on a blanket on the grass and sharing a picnic with a beautifully serene and strangely detached stark naked woman.<sup>4</sup>

Williams' lake trip follows Manet's picture with remarkable accuracy: like the two men in the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Breasley and Williams sit in their contemporary clothes and watch the archetypal Venus and her *animus* serenely undress and bathe. Watching them bathe David is for the first time seriously tempted by "the ghost of infidelity" (ET 63). He compares Beth to Diana and, although the night before he had been angered by the old painter's insistence on mixing sexuality with art, he finds himself incongruously comparing Diana's poise and dignity with "something that he aimed at in his own painting, a detachment and at the same time a matter-of-factness" (ET 63). Williams' first temptation ends with a mockingly parodic Eve-like scene: Diana peeled an apple and "passed a quarter back to the old man, then offered another to David" (ET 63).

Still, like Sir Gawain, Williams rejects the temptation as "a safe impossibility and a very remote probability" (ET 63) but, later on, when Breasley is asleep, he gathers courage to undress and swim "out after the distant head" (ET 74). And, as a result of this swim, Williams suffers a second, much more erotic, bout of temptation that sends him daydreaming of "the primeval male longing for the licitly promiscuous, the polygamous, the caress of two bodies, sheikdom" (ET 75) and he even "had a complete knowledge of a brutality totally alien to his nature: how men could rape" (ET 76). But he again manages to overcome this temptation by thinking of Beth, although this time he feels much more alienated from her: "[h]e would tell Beth, because sooner or later he told her everything; but not till they had made love again" (ET 76).

After this second temptation Williams is again offered the paradisaal apple, this time in an even more matter-of-fact parodic form. On their walk back home through the forest the girls suddenly insist on taking a slightly different route in order to pick blackberries to make "a good old-fashioned English blackberry-and-apple pie" (ET 76), thus casting on the paradisaal connotations of the apple the more playful and merry shade of Chaucer's locution, "goon a-blackeberied" in "The Pardoner's Prologue" (line 118), (and also of the popular French expression, "aller aux fraises"). In what structurally is a proleptic "amorce" prefiguring the *dénouement*, Williams sadly reflects that "he would not be there to enjoy the eating" (ET 76).

After the trip to the lake Williams is still, technically speaking, faithful to his wife, but his attitude towards women has gone a long way from the sexless camaraderie and friendship he felt for Beth. And although he knows that in another setting "as a contemporary arrangement, a *ménage à trois* of beautiful young uninhibited people, it would very probably fail" (ET 81), he

even indulges in the dream that he would be able to recreate the whole experience with Beth, not in contemporary England, but "perhaps [in] Wales or the West Country" (ET 81).

In *The Magus*, Urfe rejected Alison motivated by an egotistic instinct of self-defense only to fall under the spell of Lily's purity apparently being offered to him at Bourani. In *Eliduc*, the knight deceived both his wife and his new bride, breaking his oath of fidelity and eternal love to the former and promising what in truth was an impossible marriage to the latter.

In the medieval romance *Eliduc*'s mistake lay not so much in his choice of woman as in the fact that he had allowed his passion to lead him to a breach of faith. Consequently, redemption, when it comes, must arrive from the hand of *Eliduc*'s wife, *Guidelüec* who, giving proof of a much more constant and impressive capacity for love, would bring about the miraculous awakening of *Guilliadum* from her sleeping death, and would retire to a convent, thus allowing her husband to marry again. Interestingly enough, *Eliduc* and *Guilliadum* marry only to separate for ever: the penitent knight sobered up by his former wife's sacrifice of love, decides to give up his property and enter the Church, renouncing *Guilliadum*, whom he sends "to join his first wife." (ET 141).

At the end of *The Magus*, betrayed by Lily and abandoned by Conchis, Nicholas Urfe is allowed to meet Alison again. His whole process of maturation has taught him to abandon his womanizing and to distinguish reality from unreality, true life from flattering illusion. Although the open ending of the novel leaves the reader undecided about whether Nicholas will be able to start a new project of life in common with Alison, there is no doubt that his schooling at the hands of Conchis, like *Eliduc*'s teaching at the hands of *Guidelüec*, has had a sobering effect.

In "The Ebony Tower," however, we are offered the contrary situation. After the trip to the lake Anne will offer David sex and Diana will offer herself utterly, demanding from him complete commitment and renunciation of the past in exchange for true love. When on the night before leaving, Diana and David kiss in the dusk, he is struck by the realisation that "[h]e was wanted physically, as well as emotionally; and he wanted desperately in both ways himself" but feels at the same time "the terror of it, the enormity of destroying what one had so carefully built" (ET 98) and so fails the test:

He watched her go into her room, the door close; and he was left with all the agonized and agonizing deflation of a man who has come to a



momentous decision, only to have it cursorily dismissed . . . . The horror was that he was still being plunged forward, still melting, still realizing . . . he knew it was a far more than sexual experience . . . it was metaphysical . . . an anguish, a being bereft of freedom whose nature he had only just seen.

For the first time in his life he knew more than the fact of being: but the passion to exist. (ET 102)

So, in an episode that closely recasts Urfe's bathetic sexual encounter with Lily, Williams undergoes a cathartic experience which brings about for him, on the one hand, a bout of existentialist nausea as he finds himself unfree and trapped and understanding the true nature of freedom. On the other hand, as he intuits for the first time the possibilities of a full life, Williams has a paradoxically exhilarating experience he describes as "the passion to exist" (Urfe's *feu de joie* or *deliriums vivens* [Fowles, 1977: 129, 534]), the dazzling realisation that man is free to choose whatever he will if he is ready to risk all, from loss of comfort to damnation itself.

At the end of the novella, Williams is left at the Orly visitor's lounge (ET 112) —Urfe's "*Salle d'attente*" — in a scene that strongly echoes the ending of *The Magus*, frozen in the present moment and sadly reflecting, in words that recall the opening movement of "Little Gidding," on "the collapsed parallel of what he was beside the soaring line of all that he might have been" (ET 112). However, Williams is also simultaneously aware of something that G. P., the mature painter and magus figure in *The Collector*, had always taken for granted, that "art is fundamentally amoral" (ET 112).

At Orly David Williams feels the anguish, expressed by John Fowles in *The Aristos*, of knowing that he is conditioned by his education and temperament to behave like "a decent man" (ET 112) and so, that he will never have the courage to burn "every boat" in order to affirm his "free will" (ET 113). He also knows, however that although he has "a numbed sense of something beginning to slip inexorably away," he will always recall the dream-like "shadow of a face, hair streaked with gold" (ET 113) pointing, like the thrush in "Little Gidding," to the rose garden.

Therefore, although we can say that, by rejecting Diana, Williams failed the test and so lost the chance of starting a new, fuller life both artistically and emotionally with the woman and the muse, the painful realization of his own failure and of the possibility of personal freedom he had let slip also works in the contrary direction. It opens his eyes to the true, uncompromising, nature of life and art and so paradoxically succeeds (like

Charles Smithson, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) in bringing about the (existentialist) hero's maturation or, in Jungian terms, his psychological "individuation."

With the aid of Anne and Diana, then, Henry Breasley has succeeded in explaining to his pupil the possibilities and true nature of life and art. The other lesson he has tried to teach him is how to express this fuller life through his art. In order to do so Breasley showed him his Coëtminais pictures. Williams' reaction recalls Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence":

There hung the huge Moon-hunt, perhaps the best-known of the Coëtminais *oeuvre* . . . . As with so much of Breasley's work there was an obvious previous iconography—in this case, Uccello's *Night Hunt* and its spawn down through the centuries; which was in turn a challenged comparison, a deliberate risk... just as the Spanish drawings had defied the great shadow of Goya by accepting its presence, even using and parodying it, so the memory of the Ashmolean Uccello somehow deepened and buttressed the painting before which David sat. It gave an essential tension, in fact: behind the mysteriousness and the ambiguity (no hounds, no horses, no prey... nocturnal figures among trees, but the title was needed), stood both a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition. (*ET* 23)

David Williams looks at the picture and is quite unsure whether "it was a masterpiece" (*ET* 23) or not. First of all, he realises that the *Moon-hunt* is so different from its hypertext that he would have been unable to trace the influence of Uccello's picture without the help of the allusive title ("the title was needed"). He, then, establishes a parallelism between the kind of indebtedness to Uccello he finds in the *Night Hunt* and the kind of indebtedness that exists between Goya's paintings and Breasley's Spanish pictures: both Uccello and Goya are openly acknowledged and parodied, thus establishing "an essential tension" between the old and the new, simultaneously accumulating and recreating the emotional drive of the previous pictures.

Rimgaila Salyshas pointed out how "[t]he medieval paintings of 'The Ebony Tower' . . . in both their style and subject reveal the heart of Fowles' thinking on nature and the depiction of nature in art" (1983: 11). To this might be added the observation that Henry Breasley's multilayered absorption and recasting of the Western tradition of painting iconically reflects Fowles'

own approach to the literary tradition he stems from. Like Breasley's recasting of Uccello's *Night Hunt* and also like Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, John Fowles' "The Ebony Tower" is meant to stand both as "a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition." This is the more technical lesson Breasley has tried to teach David Williams, the young, successful painter and critic, who has given up intuition for technique, the response of the general public for specialised applause and representational art for abstraction, a man who "always inclined to see his own life (like his painting) in terms of logical process" (ET 56), instead of, as Breasley does, in terms of intuition and passion: "Don't hate, can't love. Can't love, can't paint" (ET 49).

With the image of Breasley's *Moon-hunt* in mind we can better understand Fowles' technique in writing "The Ebony Tower." Right through the novella David Williams, and the reader with him, has been offered a series of clues some of which look quite trivial; others, clumsily overdone: so, for example, as we have seen, just before he meets the two naked girls for the first time in the back garden, Williams sees a colourful display of (white) codlings and (red?) cider apples, and notices "two old climbing roses [and] a scatter of white doves." Later on Williams notices a dark blue daisy tattooed in the hollow of the Freak's armpit (ET 42) and also a little "healed scar" the Mouse has "on one of her toes" (ET 63). While the red and white colouring of the apples, the doves and the roses and the Freak's blue daisy could easily have been interpreted by Williams, had he cared to listen to Breasley's recommendation to read Jung, as symbols of the archetypal complementarity of the girls, the tiny scar on Diana's toe could not possibly be interpreted by Williams in the same way, for it doesn't have any intrinsic symbolic or archetypal meaning. At an intertextual level, however, Diana's little scar echoes the scar on Lily's wrist through which Nicholas Urfe was able to distinguish her from Rose, her identical twin. So, while its symbolism escapes the diegesis-bound character, it strikes the attentive reader as a self-reflexive blink underlining the artificiality of the reality created within the boundaries of the literary text s/he is reading.

Indeed, the whole "Ebony Tower" is clotted with intertextual allusions binding the novella to *The Magus* and to *Eliduc*. We have already pointed out the striking structural analogies of romance, novel and novella: the three have the same three-fold quest structure and, in the case of "The Ebony Tower" and *The Magus*, the structural, situational and characteriological analogies are taken to such extremes that we have the overall impression of deliberate pastiche. We have already pointed out the similarities between, for example,

the threefold barrier enclosing Conchis' and Breasley's domains, with even the same type of notice in French forbidding the crossing of the threshold. We have also mentioned the characteriological parallelisms that exist between Conchis and Breasley; between Eliduc, Urfe and Williams and between Guilliadun / Guildelüec, Lily / Rose and Anne / Diana. These analogies are often consciously overdone, working as reality-deflating mechanisms aimed at underlining the unrealistic and overtly literary nature of the novella. So, for example, Diana's Edwardian blouse (*ET* 36) refers back to Lily's portrait in her Edwardian dress in *The Magus* (1977: 104); Diana's "Quattrocento delicacy" (*ET* 62) echoes Lily's "Botticelli beauty" (1977: 115), Williams' "passion to exist" literally translates Urfe's *delirium vivens* and *feu de joie* (1977: 129, 534), while Williams' accidental killing of the weasel openly parodies the symbolic sacrifice of the weasel in *Eliduc*. When Williams sees it on the road, he first thinks it is a mouse, then that it was "too big for a mouse, and oddly sinuous like a snake, but too small for a snake" (*ET* 106) and when he runs over it and kills it he finds that "a tickle of blood, like a red flower, had spilt from the gapping mouth" (*ET* 107). As if the mention of the mouse and of the snake were not obvious-enough clues for the reader to associate the weasel with Diana, and so Diana with Guilliadun and Guildelüec, the external narrator still feels obliged to report the meaning this episode has for his hero: "[t]he key of the day had been set" (*ET* 107). Now, the insistence on interpreting the episode figuratively, as well as the careful statement that the blood oozing from the weasel's mouth was "like a red flower," signifies that the text is clogged with "annonces" or announcements (Bal 1977: 65-66): explicit allusions whose signification appears evident from the start and so work to undermine rather than to enhance the realism of the novella.

However, besides these overt intertextual references to *The Magus* and to *Eliduc*, "The Ebony Tower" also contains, as we have seen, an important number of "amorces" (Genette 1972: 12), a much more subtle kind of anticipation or hint, whose presence is so unobtrusive that it is usually ignored in a first reading. A very interesting instance of this appears just as Williams discovers that the book the Freak is reading is entitled *The Magus*. Watching her reading it by the lake, Williams suddenly "had a brief and much more absurd recall of a painting: two little boys listening to an Elizabethan sailor" (p. 64). Williams does not know why he has had this vision in his mind's eye of that particular Victorian picture, but the reader

who has also read *The Magus* knows very well that the painting is the same one Urfe considers his favourite Victorian picture: "I remembered that favourite Victorian picture of the bearded Elizabethan seaman pointing to sea and telling a story to two goggle-eyed little boys" (1977: 311). Coming as it does exactly at the same time as Williams manages to read the title of the Freak's book, Williams' association functions as an ironic hint for the knowing reader, pointing, on the one hand, at the identity between Urfe and Williams, who are made to share characteriological traits, flaws, situation and even thoughts. In this sense, the shared mental association works to underline the fact that Urfe and Williams are not human beings but rather two actants fulfilling similar roles in their respective fictions. On the other hand, the picture also has further interesting structural implications: For Urfe, the Victorian picture of the seaman explaining the mysteries of the sea to two avid children iconically reflects his own situation at Bourani, with Julie/Lily and himself playing the roles of pupils and Maurice Conchis that of teacher. As a synthetic pictorial reflection of Urfe's situation at Bourani, therefore, the Victorian picture functions as a proleptic icon pointing at the true nature of *The Magus*. Like Nicholas Urfe, David Williams also intuitively associates the situation he is living with this picture, but while Urfe acknowledges the meaning of the association ("[i]n some way we were both cast now as his students, his disciples" [1977: 311]), Williams dismisses the intuition and, reading the title "guessed at astrology, she would be into all that nonsense." (ET 64).

Throughout the novella David Williams, and the reader with him, have seen the Freak engrossed in this novel. Eventually, he learns that the novel is entitled *The Magus* and has an "absurd recall of a painting." Ignoring it, the young rationalist, who has never before heard of this novel, allows his prejudices to come to the surface and, instead of guessing at its archetypal or symbolic meaning, wrongly "guessed at astrology [because] she [the Freak] would be into all that nonsense" (ET 64). By so doing he lets slip the unique opportunity of asking the Freak for the novel and even perhaps of reading it himself, and so of discovering his own fate in advance, and even of changing it, as he could have learned from Urfe's mistakes how to pass his own tests for, in Gabriel Josipovici's words: "[c]losed, the book becomes an object among many in the room. Open, and read, it draws the reader into tracing the contours of his own labyrinth" (1971: 309). This is precisely what Roderick Usher did, in Edgar A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." He read Sir Launcelot Canning's the *Mad Trist* and learnt, with enough time to save his life, from the striking coincidences between his own situation and that of the

medieval knight in the romance, that the House of Usher was going to collapse.

As we can see, then, the appearance of *The Magus* within the diegesis of "The Ebony Tower," an apparently innocent and simple author's joke, has unexpected implications. At a superficial level, David Williams' mistake about the real contents of the novel the Freak is reading may be interpreted simply as evidence of his inability to understand the real value of other human beings regardless of their physical appearance: Williams is wrong about both the contents of *The Magus* and the Freak's personality.

Another possible interpretation, however, is that Williams' mistake is partly caused by his own ignorance of the original, archetypal, meaning of the word "magus," so the episode would iconically reflect the kind of devaluated twentieth-century culture Williams champions and against which the painter Henry Breasley, the archetypal magus figure in the novella, fights. In this sense, the fact that Williams' own choice of books is thrillers (*ET* 53), acquires ironic and also iconic significance.

A third reading of Williams' mistake about the Freak's novel is to see it as a prolepsis, prefiguring Williams' major mistake at the end of the short story when, blinded by his prejudices and his shallow cultural background, he finds himself incapable of adequately responding to the decisive test set by the Mouse.

Fourthly, if we take into account the fact that David Williams is presented both as painter and critic, and one who, according to Henry Breasley, has gone astray by sacrificing art to technique, we can conclude that, at an intertextual level, Williams' failure to make the right guess about *The Magus* neatly echoes and prefigures the blindness of Fowles' critics to establish the "emotional" connexion between *The Magus* and *Le Grand Meaulnes* and between "The Ebony Tower," *Eliduc* and *The Magus*: in brief, a metatextual ironic comment on the subtle complexities of contemporary fiction.

But the embedding of *The Magus* within "The Ebony Tower" also functions in a different direction. First of all, it provides evidence for Fowles' contention that *The Ebony Tower* short stories were a series of variations on "certain themes in previous books" (*ET* 117) and secondly, it helps the reader qualify the relationship of hypertextuality that exists between both texts.

As we have seen, hypertextuality is the relation established between two different texts through transformation or imitation by text B of text A. We

can, then, see *The Magus* and "The Ebony Tower" as two different texts, written and published separately, united by a relationship of hypertextuality where text B ("The Ebony Tower") functions as hypertext of text A (*The Magus*), or hypotext. By embedding *The Magus* within "The Ebony Tower", however, *The Magus*, without losing its condition of pre-existent hypotext, simultaneously and paradoxically becomes subordinated and dependent on "The Ebony Tower," although the short story was generated as the novel's hypertext, that is, as the thematic and stylistic transformation and imitation of *The Magus*.

At the same time, it becomes clear from Ruth Morse's specialist article, "John Fowles, Marie de France, and the Man with Two Wives" (1984: 17-31), that Fowles' translation of *Eliduc* is not the literal translation of a philologist, but rather, in Morse's words, "his own creative misreading [as] Fowles found in the haunting Old French poem just those emotional ghosts he brought with him" (1984: 29). This means that, like *The Magus*, Fowles' *Eliduc* enjoys a paradoxical double status: *qua* romance it is the hypotext of "The Ebony Tower," and *qua* creative translation it is the hypertext of Marie de France's *Eliduc*. But it can *also* be seen as both hypotext and hypertext of *The Magus*: on the one hand, as Brythonic romance, it may be said to have influenced Fowles' novel generically; while on the other, as creative translation, it was undoubtedly influenced by *The Magus*. Once this double status of *Eliduc* is thoroughly grasped, Fowles' decision to place his translation after, and not before, "The Ebony Tower," as one would have expected, acquires added significance.

Similarly, by including *The Magus* within the diegesis of "The Ebony Tower," Fowles is reversing their relative positions and turning *The Magus* into what Lucien Dällenbach (1977) would call a paradoxical or aporistic *mise en abyme*, that is, a kind of reflexion where the reflected text is supposed to contain within itself the work that contains it, thus producing what is now considered by the critics to be one of the characteristic effects of the postmodernist text: an ever-involuting structure endlessly pivoting within itself, incapable of getting out of the prisonhouse of fictionality, a never-ending parodic text simultaneously capable of absorbing within itself all pre-existing texts and of yielding new "variations" on the same. The only opportunity Williams is given to escape the logic of events of his own story is that of transcending the boundaries of the fictional world within which he exists by crossing over into the literary world of *The Magus* and returning, like the mythical hero, with the cherished hidden knowledge he needs to succeed in the test. This becomes pointedly ironic, acting as a further

potential *mise en abyme* of the mythical hero's quest, the first one of a self-begetting and endlessly prolongable *mise en abyme ad infinitum*.

At the intertextual level, therefore, "The Ebony Tower" appears immersed in an ever-more involuting structure of analogies where the categories of hypo- and hypertexts are easily reversed, and so, by implication, levelled to the same category. Thus, thanks to John Fowles' magus-like games of intertextuality, original romance, translation, short story and novel become aspects of the same, unique and yet polymorphous text, appearing as interchangeable variations of what (David Williams is astonished to discover) is the only possible theme, both in real life and in art, a story of love and death that goes back to the myth of Tristram and Yseult:

You read about Tristram and Yseult. Lying in the forest with a sword between them. Those dotty old medieval people. All that nonsense about chastity. And then... (ET 99)

This is the myth around which centuries of artists have incessantly developed their numberless variations, both in painting and in literature, and the one we can glimpse at the bottom of the whirl of mirror games, the endlessly prolongable interplay of *mises en abyme ad infinitum*, that Fowles' novella in truth is.

So, analysed vertically and intertextually, the horizontally straight and simple narrative appears as a multilayered palimpsest of echoes which, like the *Moon-hunt* reveals its indebtedness both to Fowles' own earlier fiction and to other earlier authors in the same tradition, all of whom have variously attempted to create their own "variations" on the same myth: a simple story of love. And yet, for all these echoes, Fowles' "The Ebony Tower," like Breasley's *Moon-hunt*, is primarily a unique work of art, the product of the mastery and unique genius of the man that created it. a



## NOTES

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education (DGICYT: Programa Sectorial de Promoción General del Conocimiento, no. PS90-0117). This essay takes up and develops *in extenso* the scheme drafted in Onega 1991.

2. Or "transtextual" in Genette's terminology (1982).

3. "These two men were one, the only one, the man of men: our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us . . ." (Fowles 1986: 379).

4. This painting, which was first exhibited in Paris in 1863, provoked a tremendous scandal not because it contained a nude, a common-enough topic in nineteenth-century painting: for example, Cabanel's *Venus*, erotically stretching on the waves, was exhibited in the same "Salon" the very same year Manet's painting was exhibited and received widespread praise by the same critics who denounced the immorality of Manet's picture. What the critics and the general public alike found immoral was the presentation of a classic theme in a contemporary context: the parodic juxtaposition of the classic, ideal Venus and the contemporary men and picnic. Also offensive for the critics was the somewhat chaotic arrangement of the figures that seem hardly related to each other, awkwardly standing against a toneless and depthless background.

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