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"UNCRUCIFYING" THE SELF: JOHN FOWLES AND THE MOTIF OF THE HANGED MAN

Like most novelists, John Fowles has his doubts about academic criticism. He is bemused by "the thesis writers," as he calls them, who "demand that I have some sort of 'plan' to my work. Actually, I write without calculation" (McCullough 7). He is even less enthusiastic about deconstruction, which, he objects, turns the engendering author into "a mere irrelevant detail" (Tarbox 195). Fowles seems to prefer readers and critics who appreciate a writer's personal stake in a work. He once suggested that "literary criticism ought to devote more time to its subjects' ethology: how living writers (off the campus) actually feel and behave" ("My Recollections" 32); so Fowles probably liked the essay Donald Hall wrote for *Esquire* in 1980, based on first-hand observation of Fowles in his Lyme Regis "habitat," writing and gardening in isolation from literary society.

The academic works that Fowles has praised are not based on interviews, as his remarks might lead one to expect, but they do inquire into his psychological makeup, using his novels as evidence of how he must "actually feel and behave." One is H.W. Fawkner's *The Timescapes of John Fowles*, which discusses brain hemispherics and Fowles's so-called "ambidextrous" mind (9), to which Fowles has written an appreciative foreword. Another work he likes is Gilbert J. Rose's article about *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, subtitled "The Unconscious Significance of a Novel for its Author." This article relies on a Freudian model of the creative process, during which "the artistic product is located in the space between the individual and the world, originally between infant and mother, at the point of the initiation of their separateness"; a novelist rediscovers that original "lost world by creating one of his own, peopled with products of self" (174). Fowles pays tribute to this article with a long synopsis in his essay on Thomas Hardy, where Fowles notes that Rose confirms some of his own, intuitive conclusions about writing ("Hardy" 31).

Fowles does not consider himself to be "a total Freudian," however (North 4). He describes his view of the traditional schools of psychology in an interview with Kathrine Tarbox:

> I owe a great deal to Freud and Jung. I've often said that if I felt I needed psychiatry I would certainly go to a Freudian. Freudian theory does interest me....Whether it's actually true or not, I don't know, but I like its mechanical structure. I think for a writer, Jung is actually the best person to read. He's very fertile and fruitful" (188).

Fowles seems aware of the limitations of Jungian theory, or the long-standing objection that it lacks structure to constitute a scientific, dynamic theory, with the concomitant view that Jung

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* Part II of this article will appear in the subsequent issue of *JEP*.

was "a good anthropologist" and a good "conscious psychologist, but not a depth psychologist" (Glover 193-94). The value of Jung, for Fowles, lies in the way Jung engages a creative writer productively with resonant images and ideas that enrich one's writing. Fowles does not seem to believe that such images emerge from a collective unconscious, as Jung would account for archetypes in art, but are learned from reading, the way a "fertile and fruitful" crop can be encouraged by agriculture.

One of the images that Jung considered an archetype appears with remarkable regularity in Fowles's writings: the hanged man. Jung would not have found surprising the frequent emergence of such an image in the novels of a writer like Fowles, who composes first drafts quickly, "without calculation." However, Fowles warns psychological critics not to draw hasty conclusions:

> Strange sea changes take place when the novelist himself is very well aware of Freudian and Jungian theory....It becomes less and less certain nowadays that his symbols and 'echoes' necessarily reveal anything of the author's private psyche. ("For the Dark" 222).

Whether unintended or deliberate, the representations of hanged men in Fowles' novels are consistent with Jung's discussion in *Symbols of Transformation* of the hanged man as a "symbol of unfulfilled longing or tense expectation ('suspense')" (323). According to Jung, the important "suspense" for an artist is between the inner and outer worlds, and "longing" to escape from the outer world into the imagination--like socially prohibited regression to a forbidden, infantile past--generates tranformative symbols such as the archetypal hero, who must be born again in the mother (255). One way to effect this rebirth, symbolically, is to hang the hero from a tree. The tree is itself a symbol of the mother, so the regenerative power of the image is especially strong as, for example, in medieval depictions of the cross as a tree growing out of Adam's grave (see Figure 1 at the end of this article). Jung calls this image of the hanged man part of a "circle of ideas" where the cross is the Tree of Life and at the same time Tree of Death," and on which "the dead are delivered back to the mother for rebirth" (233, 247, 271).

John Fowles has never commented on this aspect of Jungian theory, nor have critics noted the recurrence of images and ideas related to hanged men in Fowles' work, but the motif seems important to Fowles and illustrates a particular way in which Jung may have influenced his thinking. In his introduction to the revised edition of *The Magus*, Fowles remarks that Jung's "theories deeply interested /him/ at the time" he was writing that novel, which he began in the early 1950's (5-6). This 1977 comment implies that Fowles has since grown less interested in Jung, but it also indicates that any debt he owes to Jung is of long standing. Whether or not the motif of the hanged man in Fowles's work derives from Jung, the circumstances in which the images appear make them a fairly consistent trope for certain dilemmas faced with particular intensity by a novelist.

The verbal image of a hanged man appears several times in Fowles' 1985 novel *A Maggot*. Early in the narrative, which is set in 1736, a mute character named Dick Thurlow, servant to a

gentleman known as Bartholemew, is found hanging from a tree in some woods near Exmoor (55). The circumstances of his death are unclear and are never finally revealed. As the narrative proceeds, questions about Dick's motives become displaced by speculation about the fate of his master--whose even more mysterious disappearance may have prompted Dick to commit suicide. In an epilogue, Fowles reveals that their companion, a prostitute named Rebecca who undergoes a religious conversion, went on to give birth to Ann Lee, historical founder of the Shakers. Fowles also explains that the historical Ann's birth took place in February 1736, before the events of the novel take place; however, he does not explain why he did not, then, set his novel a year earlier, in 1735, when the historical mother of Ann Lee must have become pregnant (449).

Since Fowles could easily have avoided the one-year anachronism by setting the novel a year earlier, he must have had a reason for being un-historical, and one reason may have been his wish to include particular facsimile experts from *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1736. These monthly, non-fiction news reports appear between chapters, like Dos Passos newsreels. A recurrent topic is one Captain Porteus who, having fired into a mob of spectators after a hanging in Edinburgh (54), is charged with murder (86), found guilty and sentenced to be executed (106), granted a six-week reprieve (116), only to be hanged himself by a mob two weeks later (191). Fowles has commented that he included the facsimile excerpts to give the reader a sense of what the language of the time sounded like and looked like (Baker 664). However, he probably selected the particuoar excerpts he did for their reports of the Porteus lynching and other hangings of turnpike levelers (53), actions which indicate a social rebelliousness paralleling the religious Nonconformity of Rebecca Lee. Such varieties of dissension would have been of thematic interest to Fowles, who typically examines issues of human freedom when he writes.

In addition to its thematic implications, the historical hanging of Captain Porteus echoes the fictional hanging of Dick Thurlow. These hanged men, one central to the narrative and one peripheral, indicate the variety of ways that such images can figure in a Fowles novel. Hanged men also appear in his non-fiction and his poetry. In *The Tree*, for example, as he prepares to describe Wistman's Wood in Dartmoor, Fowles remarks that he "had forgotten about" the wood for more than thirty years until he began writing the book, but one of the associated memories which came back to him is having been told by a moorland farmer than an escapee from Dartmoor Prison had been found "frozen to death there--or self-hanged" (82). Another memory of a hanged man which Fowles has written about is of having looked at engravings by Thomas Bewick, four of which he describes in his preface to *Land* (xiv). The Bewick vignettes can be found in his *A General History of Quadrupeds*, and two of the four contain a hanging motif, one an empty gibbet in the background and the other a hanged human matched by a hanging dog (see Figure 2, at the end of the article). Since *Land* was published in 1985, the same year as *A Maggot*, Fowles may have been working on both books--and thinking of their various hanged men--at the same time. The genesis of these works aside, Fowles's recollection of these particular illustrations, from the hundreds avail-

able in Bewick's books, like his mentioning of the hanged man of Wistman's Wood or the selection of the Porteus materials, is an indication of his fascination with hanged men.

One occurrence of the hanged-man motif in his fiction includes an interpretation by Fowles of its symbolic implications, in Chapter 48 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. At what will be a turning point in Charles Smithson's awareness, he enters a church and tries to pray, still in shock from learning that Sarah has lied to him as well as seduced him. At first when he stares at the crucifix, "instead of Christ's face, he saw only Sarah's" (359). Reflecting further, Charles realizes that he must choose between Sarah and his fiancée, Ernestina:

> You know your choice. You stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honor, self-respect, and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified. Your only companions the stones, the thorns, the turning backs. (362)

Facing ostracism even more complete than Sarah's if he breaks off his engagement, Charles then imagines himself on the cross, "not to be sure with any of the nobility and universality of Jesus, but crucified." The image brings on an insight:

> To uncrucify!
> In a sudden flash of illumination Charles saw the right purpose of Christianity...was not to celebrate this barbarous image...but to bring about a world in which the hanging man could be descended. (363)

In this passage Fowles uses and interprets the crucifix as a symbol, more philosophical than religious, with the crucified Christ-Sarah-Charles as embodiment of the potential for emancipation from social tyranny, which the book's epigraph from Marx establishes as a central theme of the novel. In terms Fowles elsewhere refers to as the "Sartrean concept of authenticity and inauthenticity" (Campbell 466), Charles's struggle is to make authentic, unconditioned choices.

The idea of the hanged man as representative of the conditioned, unemancipated self who must be killed to free the new, better self also structures crucial scenes of the first novel Fowles wrote, *The Magus*. Much as Sarah does in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Maurice Conchis mysteriously but benignly manipulates the male protagonist, Nicholas Urfe, into becoming aware of his freedom, even his obligation to make moral choices unconditioned by systems of thought or belief--including the belief that he is being manipulated.

In Chapter 57, Nicholas encounters a doll and a skull suspended from the branch of a pine tree (459). The wooden doll, painted black with bits of white cloth around its ankles, hanging from a noose around its neck, Nicholas immediately interprets to be a representation of Julie, whom he has fallen in love with. As he examines the skull, he thinks about the disembowelled corpses of two women whom Conchis has described earlier, hanged by the Germans during World War II (430). Then Nicholas thinks of something he has read in *The Golden Bough*: "I tried to remember, What was it? Hanging dolls in sacred woods" (460). He may be remembering Frazer's description of Artemis, "anually hanged in effigy in

her secret grove" (318), the goddess whom Julie has impersonated in an earlier episode with "striding huntress walk, her silver bow held in one hand by her side" (183). Fowles's fiction-making here owes an obvious debt to mythology, and an acknowledged debt to Frazer; for the symbolic implications of such hangings, Fowles probably owes a debt to Jung, too.

Conchis goes on to teach Nicholas about responsibility by staging a trial in which Nicholas is bound to a throne and told that he is to be the "judge and executioner" of Lily, for having pretended to be Julie, her twin sister (515). During World War II, in circumstances parallel to those Nicholas finds himself in, Conchis had chosen to die rather than to execute three Greek freedom fighters tied to a fence; he managed to survive but pretended to have died and went on to live under a new identity. Nicholas similarly chooses not to "execute" Lily when he is handed a cat o' nine tails, overcoming his impulse to avenge himself upon her while she is "crucified against" a flogging frame (515). Immediately afterward, however, Conchis turns the tables on Nicholas, tying him to the frame and forcing him to watch Lily perform sex acts in what is described as "a metaphorical, if not a literal flogging," advising Nicholas that this is his "final disintoxication" from the poisonous systems of thought he has allowed to manipulate him (521).

Although Nicholas' flogging is metaphorical, the binding of Nicholas is a literalization of his conditioned status prior to his becoming unbound, or uncrucified during the process of personal liberation he undergoes in the novel. Early in the novel, he reflects: "/ w/hat was going to become of my life I didn't know... I felt myself in suspension" (77). Nicholas is the hanged man who, like Charles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, has the potential to un-hang, or uncrucify himself. In the film version of *The Magus*, for which Fowles wrote the screenplay, Conchis shows Nicholas the Tarot card of the hanged man in an early scene and, later, places a hangman's noose around Nicholas' neck when he is seated as the supposed judge of Lily. Only after he has freed himself from the idea that he is the one being judged, according to his conformity to illusory systems of thought, can Nicholas become authentically free--as if he has shaken off a noose or climbed down from a cross. Conchis explains the situation to Nicholas with a parable about choosing to become a magician rather than a deluded prince in some land of "unreal but beautiful princesses" (552). Conchis' own role as such a magician is explicit in the epigraph to the original version of *The Magus*, which quotes from Arthur Edward Waite's interpretation of Tarot card number one in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*: "The magus, Magician, or Juggler, the caster of the dice and mountebank in the world of vulgar trickery." If Nicholas is on a Tarot journey as The Fool of card number zero, as one critic has argued (McDaniel 260), then an important stage of his journey to enlightenment must be represented by card number twelve, The Hanged Man (see Figure 3, at the end of this article). The contented-looking man hanging from the Tau cross of living wood suggests "life is suspension, but life and not death," notes Waite (118), who adds this general comment:

> He who can understand that the story of his higher nature is imbedded in this symbolism will receive intimations concerning a great awakening that is possible, and will know that

> after the sacred Mystery of Death there is a glorious Mystery of Resurrection. (119)

Perhaps coincidentally, the fact that the man hangs upside down prompts most beholders to turn the card around, symbolically enacting the reversal or potential transformation the hanged man is said to embody. Whether or not Fowles was influenced by his reading of Waite, his use of the hanged man in *The Magus* and his interpretation of its meaning in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* accord with Waite's--and Jung's--interpretation of the image.

In these two novels, Fowles seems to be using the image of the hanged man for some of its established meanings as a symbol. In addition, the idea of "suspending" his male protagonist as, simultaneously, a judge and a criminal may have a more personal meaning for Fowles, related to events in his adolescence. In *The Magus*, Nicholas serves as Lily's judge and executioner but is himself judged and punished; Charles initially judges Sarah harshly, then is condemned by everyone he knows for abandoning his conventional life in pursuit of her. Both Nicholas and Charles must choose whether to "uncrucify," or free themselves from lives constructed for them, whether by desire and illusion or by a Victorian social code. On a meta-fictional level, both novels put the reader in a similar situation, first participating as voyeur in the illicit activities of the characters and then, upon reaching the novel's open endings, having to render judgments on those same characters. On a biographical level, the novels re-enact a situation Fowles found himself in daily at age 17-18, when he was required to judge his fellow students at Bedford School, as the appointed "Head Boy" with disciplinary authority over some 800 other students aged 13-18. Fowles and his prefects "held court every morning and flogged the guilty (Amory 33), a ritual of the traditional public school system Fowles now condemns as "evil, terrible," for its providing an eighteen-year-old the power to prosecute, judge, and "beat on average three or four boys a day" (Boston 2). Like the title character of *Daniel Martin*, who talks of "the horrors of my own boarding-school" (336), Fowles now disapproves of the traditional system he once played a key part in--evidently with considerable success ("School" 95-96). The person Fowles is now sees the person he was then as an inauthentic player of a socially conditioned role, like Nicholas and Charles before they uncrucify themselves and begin to lead authentic lives. Fowles's youthful judgments of his schoolmates later turned into judgments of himself and his school as they were then; his present self is a transformation of his younger self, the one-time Head Boy and judge whom Fowles now considers to have been an unwitting criminal. Stated metaphorically, Fowles hanged his criminal self and un-hanged his mature self as he became conscious of the determining forces and possible freedoms which were manipulating him. Now more aware--like a magician rather than a fool--Fowles is able to do the manipulating.

It is possible to read his first published novel, *The Collector* in a similar way, as Fowlse's rejection of an even younger self, who avidly caught and mounted butterflies as a pre-teenager (Amory 34; Fowles and Erwood). In *The Collector*, literal

"hanging" takes place on the pins of an entomologist--Clegg. On an obvious metaphorical level, Clegg "collects" Miranda, an art student, as if she were a specimen of exotic butterfly. In another way, both she and Clegg behave like specimens of their respective classes, both captives of social forces which prevent them from behaving authentically. From this perspective, Miranda's intelligence gives her the potential to un-pin herself; had she not died, she might have gone on to live authentically. Clegg, on the other hand, is incapable of self-transformation and, at the end of the novel, is undertaking to repeat his obsessive collecting. In biographical terms, writing *The Collector* may have seemed to Fowles an exploration of regrets over his boyhood enthusiasm for collecting butterflies and killing wildlife ("Weeds" 95, Baker 675). In less personal terms, the text represents struggles between art and pornography, life and death. But all these struggles relate to the process of self-definition--Fowles' central theme--in which the old self is "hanged" in order to free a new, more authentic self.

The notion of choosing oneself presents itself to novelists in a particularly vivid way, for a writer of fiction must constantly make choices for the characters of the fictional world, in addition to the choices of his or her own life. Fowles has discussed this aspect of writing-as-constant-choosing in *The Tree*, where he likens reading to exploring a wood, not knowing what will be revealed. He elaborates that reading fiction differs from writing it, however, because the written text offers the reader only one path through its domain. A writer on the other hand, like an explorer of a pathless wood, constantly chooses from many possible directions:

> /M/ultiplicity of choice, though it cannot be conveyed in the frozen medium of the printed text, is very characteristic of the actual writing; of the constant dilemma--pain or pleasure, according to circumstances--its actual practice represents, from the formation of the basic sentence to the larger matters of narrative line, character development, ending. Behind every path and every form of expression one does finally choose, lie the ghosts of all those that one did not. (66)

Perhaps Fowles's comments here illuminate what he means in "Hardy and the Hag" when he observes that "creating another world, however imperfectly, is a haunting, isolating and guilt-ridden experience," an experience "heavy with loss--of all the discarded illusions and counter-myths as well as of the desires and sensibilities that inexorable adulthood (or artistic good form) has no time for" (29). As Fowles writes a novel, then, the act of writing becomes a guilt-inducing, even a vaguely criminal-seeming activity, requiring constant destruction of alternative aspects of the cherished, fictional world he is creating.

In interviews, Fowles has often used the similar analogy of a fork in the road to represent the choices that "the writer is continually faced with" (Foulke 374; *cf.* Tarbox 170). Daniel Martin describes a dilemma in his life in such terms: "He was approaching a fork, the kind of situation some modern novelists met by writing both roads. For days now he had been split, internally if not outwardly, between a known past and an unknown future" (542). Dan later uses the Term "murdered" to describe

what Jane has done to alternatives by making them impossible (590). Fowles uses both the road and the murder metaphors as he meditates on some lifelong oppositions he has felt toward his father's values: "I thought of all the crossroads in our two lives where I had murdered him" (*Tree* 14). The context is his father's deathbed, where Fowles has been describing how his own values have sometimes conflicted with his father's. With his allusions to *Oedipus*, in which the murder of Laius takes place "where the three roads meet" (19), Fowles reminds us how universal that situation is where the son defines himself by rejecting the father. The crossroad metaphor, then, is Fowles's preferred vehicle for the idea of choice. A crossroad is also a site for hanging criminals, as Fowles reminds readers of *A Maggot* when Lacy mentions having parted from the other travelers on the road as they "came to a fork, where there stood a gallows" (176). And the tradition of the crossroad as site for hangings provides a convenient metonymic reinforcement to any reverberations of guilt associated with the rejecting that accompanies choosing--perhaps increasing the appeal to Fowles of the road intersection as metaphorical dilemma. His somewhat autobiographical character Daniel Martin seems to draw on this cluster of figures when, pushed for a screenplay, he mentions feeling the "Hangrope around a writer's neck" 277. Anyone must choose, but for writers, especially, choosing may mean rejecting cherished alternatives in order to free their most authentic selves.

Fowles has provided an additional, if unusual piece of evidence of the hold this idea of the forked road has on him as an emblem of self-definition. When asked to contribute to a collection of visual self-portraits by "book-people" such as himself, Fowles did not send the usual, roughly representational sketch in the unfamiliar medium but, instead, an abstract line drawing labeled "JOHN FOWLES" and signed with the phrase "*De loin*" (see Figure 4, at the end of this article). Rather than the erect, gaping-mouthed snake the drawing can suggest at first glance, Fowles may have intended his odd self-portrait to represent a forked road, with himself as the small dot on one fork, seen *de loin*, or from a distance--in this case a distance above--having made his choice of road, having defined himself by choosing one path and rejecting the alternative.

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Part II of the above article will appear in March 1993.

Figure 1

The Cross on Adam's Grave, West door, Strassbourg Cathedral, France. In C.G. Jung: *Symbols of Transformatio* (New York: Pantheon, 195 Plate 37.

Figure 2.

Thomas Bewick, *A General History of Quadrupeds* 4th ed, (London, 1792), p.270. Reproduced by arrangement with Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.

Figure 3

Tarot Card #12.
The Hanged Man.
Arthur Edward Waite,
The Key to the Tarot
(1910; New York: Multimedia
Publishing, 1971), p. 117.

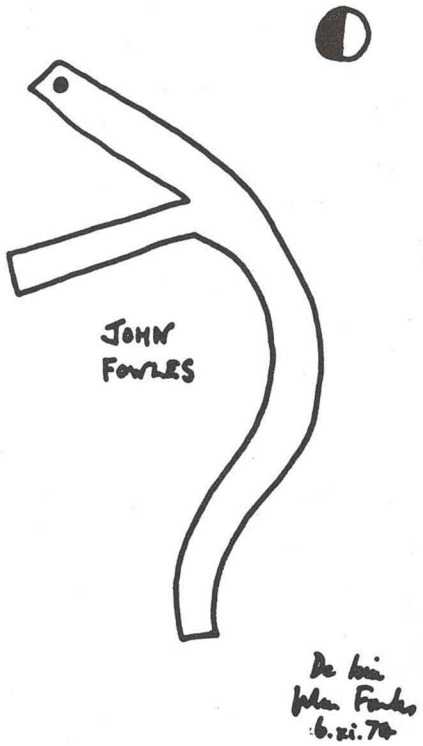

Figure 4

John Fowles, drawing,
Self-Portrait: Book People
Picture Themselves,
ed. Burt Britton (New York:
Random House, 1976), p. 215.

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