ISSN 0737-4828

Journal of Evolutionary Psychology

VOLUME XIV NUMBERS 1 & 2

MARCH 1993

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

PART TWO*

Fowles's sense of being haunted by "ghosts" of excluded alternatives helps to account for his frequent portrayal of a male character who must choose between two female characters who are paired, or twinned, with one another. The most obvious example is Nicholas and the twins, Julie/Lily and June/Rose, in *The Magus*. In *Daniel Martin*, Dan loves both Jane and Nell--also twins. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Charles must choose between two quite different women, Sarah and Ernestina, but they are paired in his mind as alternative embodiments of mystery and convention, respectively. Sarah Woodruff has another "twin," the London street prostitute named Sarah, who represents the alternative Sarah Woodruff might have chosen to become instead of the merely reputed sinner known in Lyme Regis as "the French Loot'n'nt's Hoer" (86, 315). In "The Ebony Tower" David Williams has opportunities to bed either Ann or Diana, the similarly named pair of girls living with the artist he has come to interview. In *Mantissa*, too, Miles Green finds himself attracted by turns to the dark lady and the pale nurse, evidently personifications--or Jungian *animations*-- of Green's creative energies. As Daniel Martin thinks of Jane but watches her double, a Lebanese bar-prostitute, he fears relapsing to "his oldest and worst self" (575), a self-characterization which implies a dualistic, Jekyll-Hyde model of the personality. Fowles has been criticized for this kind of psychological simplification by Karen Lever, who wishes that he would outgrow what she views to be a "madonna-whore complex" of attitudes toward women (90, 99). Adolescent or not, Fowles's fascination with the dilemma of choosing between paired personas indicates not simple-mindedness so much as a tendency of his mind to work dialectically and his fiction to be self-reflexive. His pairings of characters recall his observation that a writer chooses from a succession of alternative forks, not from a myriad of divergent paths (Singh 192; cf. Foulke 374). Fowles is aware that reality is more complex--more like a dark forest than a series of crossroads--but he does not think that way as he writes, when choices seem to present themselves as a sequence of alternatives. Perhaps, too, Fowles's pairing of characters allows him to feel that he is exploring both sides of a situation, deferring one of those continual choices that "kill" a potential character in much the same way that an open ending to a narrative alleviates the pain he says that he experiences when he locks himself out of his own fictional paradise in order to publish a book (Bigsby 125).

Part I of the above article was published in Vol. XIII, #3 & 4 August 1992.

The situation of a male attracted to twinned, female characters may also appeal to Fowles in a personal way. His fictional love triangles reenact a marital relationship Fowles claims to experience when he writes: a divided loyalty between his wife and her rival in his imagination, what he has called "the unattainable muse-figure that haunts every male novelist" (*Lais* xi). Fowles has characterized his marriage as "happy and satisfying" (Hauptfuhrer 59), but he has expressed concern over Elizabeth Fowles's difficult role as wife of the famous novelist, having every morning "to sit down and see letters that have come in telling me what a great writer I am" (Gilder 39), or having to creep about the house while he writes (Stolley 57). Fowles once told an interviewer, "When you're writing hard you really are locked up in another world, and I think that goes against everything our culture requires of a decent marriage" (Barnum 197). He elaborates on this conflict between the profession of writing and the institution of marriage in his essay on Thomas Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, where Fowles uses the phrase "marital guilt" to describe the tension between Hardy's longing to "transcend present reality" and Hardy's implicit rejection of that reality, which would have included his wife. Fowles notes that if a male novelist's wife "is potentially the strongest ally of his conscious, outward self, she can equally seem the greatest threat to his inward, unconscious one." An actually-present companion is the last thing a writer at work needs, of course, for that person "stands against the cherished dream" of the fictional world ("Hardy" 32-33). Fowles makes an interesting psychological-biographical case for Hardy's having felt an obsessive attraction for unattainable women, fictional and otherwise, which affected his marriage. Fowles's sympathy for Hardy's wife's "predicament" as the companion of a famous novelist suggests that Fowles, likewise, feels some of this "marital guilt," and putting his own male characters in a parallel situation--in love simultaneously with a pair of women--may express the feeling of divided loyalty constantly in the back of Fowles's mind. This feeling may even help to account for what Fowles calls his "dotty interest in the Mormons" (Monaghan 2), whose belief in polygamy legitimates the possibility of avoiding the choice between alternative, erotic possibilities, and for Daniel Martin's fascination with the polygamist household of Assad, in whom the narrator tells us he sees himself (572).

In his book *John Fowles*, Robert Huffaker suggests, with delicate indirection, that there may have been some unattainable woman in Fowles's personal history, whom he rejected when he chose to marry Elizabeth in 1953 but whom he prefers not to discuss (26-28). Whether this woman is some remembered, beloved female in Fowles's life or the imagined female muse of his writing world, this dilemma of the married artist indeed seems to fascinate Fowles. Unfaithful to his wife with his fictional creations, and unfaithful to them with his wife, Fowles must sometimes feel like the hanged man who appears in his fictions, simultaneously judge and victim, free to decide between worlds--indeed, condemned to choose--and guilty of rejecting the alternative.

Fowles's fascination with this particular dilemma not only

contributes to the shaping of his writing, but also seems to affect his reading preferences. Fowles's admiration for Hardy has led Fowles not only to write "Hardy and the Hag" but also to offer an interpretation of Hardy's broken engagement to his cousin Tryphena as a life-long obsession and source of imaginative energy. The fact that Fowles argues this case in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (271-72) constitutes an invitation for us to see parallels between Hardy and Charles Smithson in his pursuit of Sarah, as well as between Hardy and Fowles in pursuit of the female muse. Indeed, the similarity may explain part of Hardy's appeal to Fowles, and it may also help to explain Fowles's strong affection for two other writers who also became obsessed with unattainable, flesh-and-blood females who inspired their work: novelist Alain-Fournier and poet John Clare. Fowles has declared each of those writers to have been a formative influence on him, and each one invokes in art a remembered, idealized woman whose loss is expressed in ways that parallel Fowles's view of literature as a domain in which a writer can temporarily recapture a lost, blissful state.

In his afterword to Alain-Fournier's *The Wanderer*, Fowles tells the story of the author's life-long devotion to Yvonne de Quievrecourt, a tall, blonde woman he saw leaving an art exhibit in 1905, when he was eighteen. Fournier followed her home and managed to converse with her on one occasion the following week, but was not to see her again until 1913, by which time she was happily married. Her image haunted Fournier, however, and inspired the character of Yvonne de Galais in *The Wanderer*. Fowles observes that "it would be nice to think that she did some faint glimpse of the future: how this rather absurd specimen of calf-love would one day immortalize her" (215). Despite the patronizing sound of this remark out of its context, Fowles is clearly intrigued by the whole story. He devotes more than half of his essay to it, and with reference to the story's place in the history of love Fowles comments, "One has almost to go back to Dante and Beatrice to find its equal" (212).

Fowles's admiration for John Clare, in a similar way, may involve sympathy for Clare's obsession with "Mary," whom he calls "the muse of every song I write" and who appears in poems such as "The Return," "The Exile," and "What is Love?" as a personification of ideal, unattainable beauty. Mary Joyce was Clare's childhood playmate as well as adolescent love, but they never married (*Selected Poems* xix; Howard 16-18). During his later years, Clare came to believe that Mary was his present wife and wrote the following letter, despite the fact that he was still married to Martha Turner, and despite the fact that Mary had died three years before:

> My Dear Wife Mary
>
> I might have said my first wife first love & first everything--but I shall never forget my second wife & second love for I loved her once as dearly as yourself & almost do so now so I determined to keep you both for ever--& when I write to you I am writing to her at the same time & in the same letter.... (*Letters* 289)

Pathetic as this letter is, written from an asylum, it reveals

the mind of a poet lost in the imaginary world of his ideal love, confusing it with the real world of his earlier, married life. Clare's mental conflict resembles the aspect of Hardy's psychology which Fowles has written about, so his sympathy must surely have been aroused by Clare's having been declared insane for remaining in an imaginary world--not so different from one of the fictional worlds that Fowles relishes entering in order to write, but exits in order to live in the world of domestic "reality." Not to confuse the two worlds is the curse of sanity; incomplete happiness in either world may be the writer's condition.

This biographical information about John Clare can also help to account for Fowles's creation of the hanged man in *A Maggot*, for the character of Dick in that novel constitutes, on one level, an homage to Clare. A bizarre aspect of Dick's suicide is the presence of violets growing out of the mouth of his hanged corpse, evidently placed there in despair by Dick out of love for Rebecca, who had been wearing a bunch of violets under her nose as they rode together (6). Violets are also the flowers that Fowles dedicates to Clare, in his poem "John Clare," because violets appear so early in the season--as Clare's poetry appeared before his contemporaries were ready to appreciate it fully (*Poems* 89). Another similarity between Dick and John Clare is Dick's uncomprehending devotion to Rebecca, like Clare's for Mary Joyce. And like Clare's supposed insanity, Dick's suspected lunacy is ambiguous. Even Dick's muteness may parallel Clare's incapacities with language as an untutored, farm laborer-poet, prone to errors of style (*Selected Poems* xi). Fowles writes of Clare's "ignorance/ of commas, colons...you were no/ Orthographer" (5-7). Clare's limitations are probably part of his appeal to Fowles, for they led Clare to express his observations of nature more directly than conventional discourse would have permitted, As for Clare's becoming lost in the world of his own imagination, Fowles may recognize in Clare an alter ego, a potential self Fowles must "hang" by choosing to withdraw after a while from the pleasurable, fictional worlds of beautiful but unreal princesses. In *A Maggot* the fact that Dick and his aristocratic master were born on the same day and nursed at the same breast (166), so close as children that "they were as one person" (317), makes them male versions of the female twins so common in Fowles's other fiction. When Fowles removes these "brothers" from the world of *A Maggot* simultaneously, one hanged and the other evidently invited away by extraterrestrials, he may be indicating on a meta-novelistic level the authorial alternatives of escape into realism or escape into romance--either of which is a dying to the world of ordinary reality.

Fowles uses this idea that a hanged character can be an emblem of the artist's temptation to escape in several of his poems. "A Definition" begins, "The highwayman never hangs" and uses the idea of the criminal's rescue to represent a comic sense of life or art, which the poem goes on to reject in favor of tragedy (*Poems* 57.1). That a highwayman will conveniently be saved at the last moment from hanging by some intervening agent is the pleasing fantasy of some "unhanged god" (11), whether divine or authorial. Reality, or realism in art, is an alternative:

...the human art is the awe
Of the unrepeatble act,
The absolute death of dreams.
what is, and not what seems. (13-16)

Authentic life is informed by the tragic sense of choices and sacrifices irrevocably made, as in an earlier stanza Oedipus, "the crippled king/ Appears, self-damned, on high" (5-6) and is not prevented from blinding the self who has murdered his father at the crossroads. Sacrifice of the old self is necessary, much as the mythic King of the Wood must be replaced (Frazer 3). In life or in serious fiction, the authentic self can be liberated, that is, unblinded or unhanged, only after a painful struggle for freedom from the tyranny of the social conventions represented by old kings--and fathers.

In two of his other poems Fowles uses a different image of a suspended man, borrowed from Book 12 of Homer's *Odyssey*, to convey the idea of the imaginative self sacrificed to the forces of social conformity. The image is of Odysseus tied by his crew to the mast of his ship so that he can hear the Sirens but not be lured to destruction by them. The allusion is explicit in "During the Voyage," whose male speaker is experiencing the Fowlesian marital dilemma:

I am
Men who tie themselves to masts.
You are
Sirens with delicate eyelids.
Penelope is white with lust. (*Poems* 88.2-6)

A similar allusion in the poem "Julia's Child" indicates the tension between the worlds of imagination and responsibility, with Odysseus this time "a brilliant company man/ and crucified upon the mast" (*Poems* 108.47-48). Like Homer's Odysseus (or Eliot's Prufrock), Fowles's businessman hears the mermaids singing but is prevented from responding by the constraints of his conditioned status; he knows that his erotic fantasies about his secretary will remain merely dreams. Analogously, Fowles hears the song of idyllic, fictional worlds, populated by Siren-princesses and accessible by means of artistic illusion-making; however, he knows that he will never completely abandon the less delightful world of quotidian reality. Fowles's use of the word *crucified* to describe Odysseus' situation, tied to his mast, places this image in the constellation of images involving the hanged man; and it similarly involves the sacrifice of one aspect of the self for another.

Fowles's evident belief that the life of an artist is a precarious balance between alternatives of destructive conformity and destructive escapism, reveals itself as well in several passages from "The Ebony Tower." Early in the narrative, art critic David Williams prepares to interview renowned painter Henry Breasley, an artistic"king of the wood," at his manor called Coetminais in a forest of northern France. Williams explains than an important influence on Breasley has been Pisanello's *Vision of St. Eustace* (13), a painting which illustrates the conversion of the prospective saint when he encounters a

stag bearing a hanged Christ in its antlers (Fig. 5). Williams does not yet realize that he, too, will undergo a conversion in Breasley's forest, and acquire new knowledge of his own limitations. At one point during the interview, Breasley tries to remember another influence on his painting. Eventually he recalls that it was the woodcuts in an old edition of Fox's *Book of Martyrs* which terified him as a child, but first he remembers only an image: "'Hanged man. Not the Verona thing. Fox. I think. Can't remember now'" (77). There are two woodcuts in the 1684 Fox which show a single hanged man (*e.g.*, Fig. 6), but identifying the precise original would be a matter of indifference to Breasley--or to Fowles. For the critic Williams, however, these artistic sources are the stuff professional articles are written about, and his articulate comments contrast with the fragmentary utterances of Breasley, whose artistic sensibility is visual rather than verbal. Williams narrates an art-historical reading of "the Verona thing" which reveals his temperament and verbal skills as an art crtic:

> /Breasley/ was talking about a detail in the background of the Pisanello *St. George and the Princess* and an echo in one of the most somber of the Coetminais series, untitled, but *Desolation* would have done; a wood of hanged figures and of living ones who seemed as if the wished they were hanged. (77)

The background "detail" of the painting must be the pair of men hanging from a gibbet, who seem to serve no particular narrative purpose in the painting (Fig. 7).

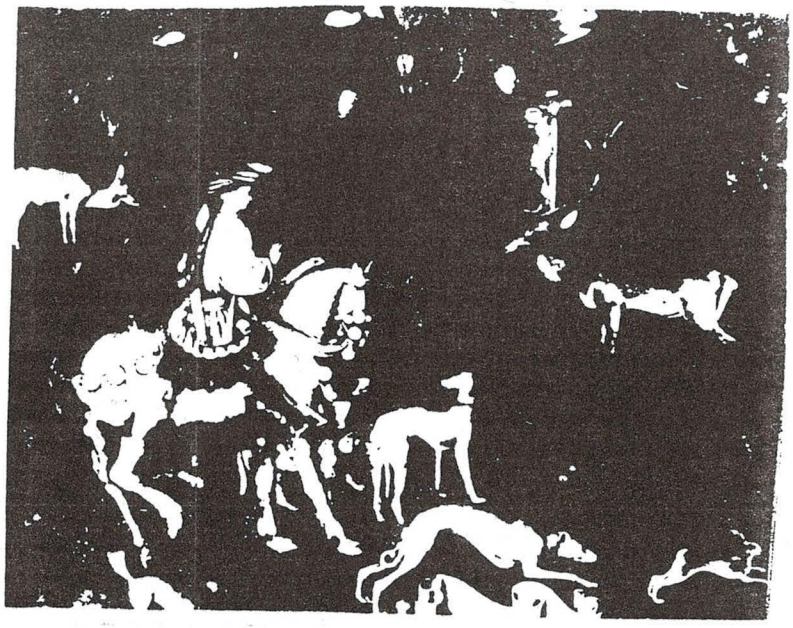

Fig. 5. Antonio Pisanello. *Vision of St. Eustace.* National Gallery, London. In *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Abrams, n.d.), pl. 45

Fig. 6. "The Martyrdom of Master George Wisehart." In John Fox, *Acts...Against the True Martyrs*, 9th ed. (1563; London, 1684), vol. 2, p. 525. Reproduced by arrangement with Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.

Fig. 7. Antonio Pisanello, *St. George and the Princess*, Museo Civico, Verona. In Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* New York: Abrams, n.d.), fig. 400

Williams later thinks again about the Pisanello painting, just after he has passionately kissed Diana. As he wrestles with the question of whether to remain faithful to his wife, Beth, or to perform what he imagines will be an act of service to free Diana from her dependence on Breasley, Williams imagines their situation in terms of *St. George and the Princess*:

> ...the extraordinary averted and lost eyes of the patron saint of chivalry, the implacably resentful stare of the sacrificial and to-be-saved princess of Trebizond. She had Beth's face now. He read meanings he had never seen before.
>
> The slight figure of the girl cast as dragon turned, a small smile on her face. She held out a hand.
>
> "Shall we pretend this never happened?" (99)

Williams is reading the painting with himself as the knight "lost" in a chivalric fantasy that he will rescue the princess from the dragon-like Breasley. Diana does not wish to be rescued, however; indeed, she is doubly "cast as dragon" as well as princess; to rescue her, David will have to slay the dragon of her present self, and doing so will only return Diana to what in *The Magus* was called a land of "unreal but beautiful princesses." As Diana momentarily takes on Beth's face, David realizes that he will also have to destroy his conventional marriage in order to save Diana from Breasley. Parallels with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are evident, in particular with Charles's urge to save Sarah from Rossetti at the end of the novel (349), or with the way Sarah's martyr-persona reminds Mrs. Poulteney of "figures on a gibbet she dimly remembered from her youth" (60). Also typical of Fowles is his feminist reading of Pisanello's painting as an allegory of misguided male chivalry. Most Fowles-like, however, is the calling of readers' attention to the background of the painting, with the hanged men. By making the detail an important part of Breasley's psychological development, yet making it an image whose origin Breasley cannot quite remember, Fowles constructs a literary representation of a Jungian archetype, an image supposedly embedded deeply in Breasley's personality, from which he draws inspiration. By having Williams call attention to the image as a formative influence on the painter Breasley, who resembles Fowles in many ways, Fowles makes fairly clear his own awareness that this image recurs in his own fiction. This awareness indicates, in turn, that Fowles's use of the motif elsewhere is deliberate, as an emblem for painful sacrifices in choosing an authentic self.

Novel writers, according to Fowles, feel an "obsession to create lost worlds"(Amory 36). In "The Sacred Combe" chapter of *Daniel Martin* (270-76), Fowles discusses the act of writing as a mental retreat into imaginary forests, and it may be this felt analogy between fictional worlds and woods which makes him so fond of his two-acre "wild garden" in Lyme Regis (Hall 102), a private world which Fowles can inhabit when he is not writing. When he is writing, Fowles associates trees and hanged men with the production of art and the liberation of the self.

A Jungian reading of Fowles's texts would point out that the motif of the hanged man is a manifestation of the collective unconscious. It would note that a tree can be a symbol of the

mother, separation from whom signifies man's leaving his animal unconscious (271) and retreat to whom triggers "the incest prohibition and its correlates," including marriage laws (235). The prohibitions attached to such regression to this ideal (and unmarried) state, according to Jung, help to generate symbols of transformation such as the hanged man--whether on tree, gallows, gibbet, mast, or cross. "If the conscious mind now succeeds in interpreting the constellated archetype in a meaningful and appropriate manner, then a viable transformation can take place" (236). Writing novels is one such socially-acceptable transformation of a child-like longing. Choosing to publish a novel may constitute a kind of death to its alternative, but publication can also provide Fowles the occasion to begin yet another novel and to repeat the process of defining himself as a writer.

Fowles's knowledge of psychology and his consistent use of the hanged-man motif make it more likely, however, that he is drawing on Jungian theory rather than exemplifying its validity. It is true that his fascination with this particular motif may indicate some unique dynamic shaped in Fowles's infancy and structuring his personality. Regardless of what deeper explanation is valid, however, Fowles's acknowledged debt to Jung indicates that Fowles has long been attracted to, has absorbed, and now consciously replicates culturally-derived meanings of the image of the hanged man--in particular the association of the hanged man with the dilemma felt by an artist, "suspended" between inner and outer realities, choosing himself as he creates.

James R. Aubry, Ph.D.
Dept. of English
Metropolitan State College
of Denver
P.O. Box 173362
Denver, CO 80217-3362

WORKS CITED

PART II

Amory , Mark. "Tales out of School." *Sunday Times Magazine* 22 Sept. 1974: 33-35.

Bigsby, Christopher. "Interview with John Fowles." *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists*. Ed. Heide Zeigler and Christopher Bigsby. London: Junction Books, 1982. 114-25.

Barnum, Carol M. "An Interview with John Fowles." *Modern Fiction Studies* 31 (1985): 187-203.

Clare, John. *The Letters of John Clare*. Ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble. London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1951.

--------. *Selected Poems of John Clare*. Ed. James Reeves. New York: MacMillan, 1957.

Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, 1971: 3-7.

Foulke, Robert. "A Conversation with John Fowles." *Salmagundi* 68-69 (1985-86): 367-84.

--------. *Daniel Martin*. Boston: Little, 1977.

--------. *The Ebony Tower*. Boston: Little, 1974.

--------. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Boston: Little, 1969.

--------. "Hardy and the Hag." *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*. Ed. Lance St. John Butler. London: MacMillan, 1977.

--------. Foreword. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante. New York: Dutton, 1978, ix-xiii.

--------. *A Maggot*. Boston: Little, 1986.

Jung, C.G. *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series 20. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, 5. New York: Pantheon, 1956.

Lever, Karen M. "The Education of John Fowles." *Critique* 21.2 (1979): 85-99.

Managhan, Charles. "Portrait of a Man Reading." *Book World* 4 Jan. 1970: 2.

Singh, Raman K. "An Encounter with John Fowles." *Journal of Modern Literature* 8 (1980-81): 181-202.

Stolley, Richard B. "The French Lieutenant's Woman's Man: Novelist John Fowles." *Life* 29 May 1970: 55+.

* * * * * * * * * * * *