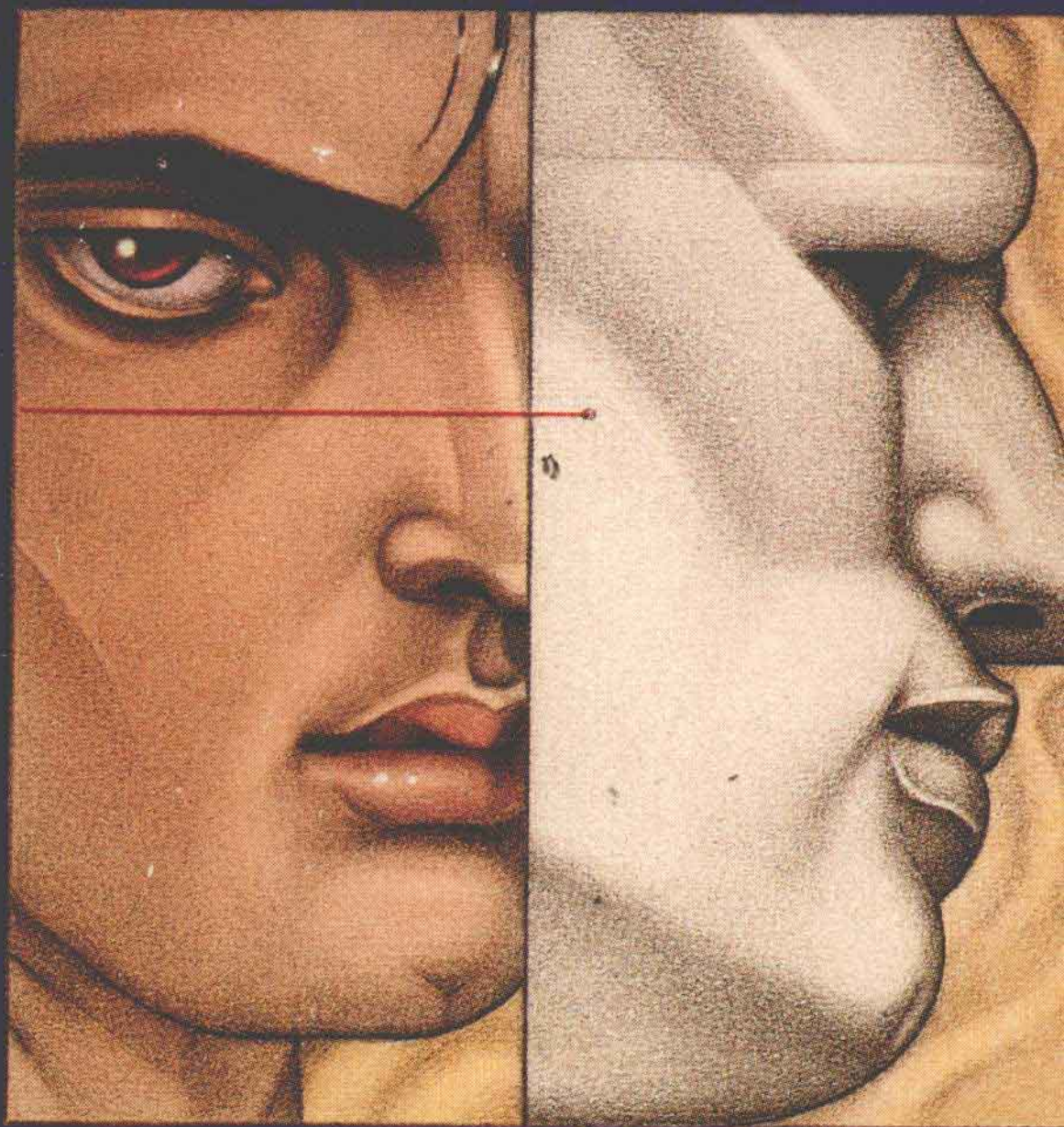


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Foreword

Though this is not, in any major thematic or narrative sense, a fresh version of *The Magus*, it is rather more than a stylistic revision. A number of scenes have been largely rewritten, and one or two new ones invented. I have taken this somewhat unusual course not least because—if letters are any test—the book has aroused more interest than anything else I have written. I have long learnt to accept that the fiction that professionally always pleased me least (a dissatisfaction strongly endorsed by many of its original reviewers) persists in attracting a majority of my readers most.

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

presentable and might have done my name, at least in my own country. more good.

In 1964 I went to work and collated and rewrote all the previous drafts. But *The Magus* remained essentially where a tyro taught himself to write novels—beneath its narrative, a notebook of an exploration, often erring and misconceived, into an unknown land. Even in its final published form it was a far more haphazard and naïvely instinctive work than the more intellectual reader can easily imagine; the hardest blows I had to bear from critics were those which condemned the book as a coldly calculated exercise in fantasy, a cerebral game. But then one of the (incurable) faults of the book was the attempt to conceal the real state of endless flux in which it was written.

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

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

The third book that lies behind *The Magus* I did not recognize at the time, and can list now thanks to the percipience of a student at Reading University, who wrote to me

one day, years after publication, and pointed out the numerous parallels with *Great Expectations*. What she was not to know is that it is the one novel of Dickens for which I have always had an undivided admiration and love (and for which I forgive him so much else I dislike in his work); that during the earlier writing of my own novel I was even teaching it, with great enjoyment, as a set book; and that I long toyed with the notion of making Conchis a woman—an idea whose faint ghost, Miss Havisham's, remains in the figure of Mrs. de Seitas. One small new passage in this revised text is in homage to that unseen influence.

Two other more considerable changes need a brief word. The erotic element is stronger in two scenes. I regard that as merely the correction of a past failure of nerve. The other change is in the ending. Though its general intent has never seemed to me as obscure as some readers have evidently found it—perhaps because they have not given due weight to the two lines from the *Pevigilium Veneris* that close the book—I accept that I might have declared a preferred aftermath less ambiguously . . . and now have done so.

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

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

*Another, and curious, novel about the school exists: Kenneth Matthews, *Aleko* (Peter Davies, 1934). The French writer Michel Déon has also published the autobiographical *Le Balcon de Spetsai* (Gallimard, 1961).

Venizelos—only twice, and very briefly. It was his house that I remembered.

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

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

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

physical memories of the place. I already knew I was a permanent exile from many aspects of English society, but a novelist has to enter deeper exiles still.

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

No correlative whatever of my fiction, beyond the above, took place on Spetsai during my stay. What ground the events of the book have in reality came after I had returned to England. I had escaped Circe, but the withdrawal symptoms were severe. I had not then realized that loss is essential for the novelist, immensely fertile for his books, however painful to his private being. This unresolved sense of a lack, a missed opportunity, led me to graft certain dilemmas of a private situation in England on the memory of the island and its solitudes, which became increasingly for me the lost Eden, the *domaine sans nom* of Alain-Fournier—even Bevis’s farm, perhaps. Gradually my protagonist, Nicholas, took on, if not the true representative face of a modern Everyman, at least that of a partial Everyman of my own class and background. There is a private pun in the family name I gave him. As a child I could not pronounce *th* except as *f*, and Urfe really stands for Earth—a coining that long preceded the convenient connection with Honoré d’Urfé and *L’Astrée*.

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

reaction it provokes in the reader, and so far as I am concerned there is no given "right" reaction.

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

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

I do not defend Conchis's decision at the execution, but I defend the reality of the dilemma. God and freedom are totally antipathetic concepts; and men believe in their imaginary gods most often because they are afraid to believe in the other thing. I am old enough to realize now that they do so sometimes with good reason. But I stick by the general principle, and that is what I meant to be at the heart of my story: that true freedom lies between each two, never

in one alone, and therefore it can never be absolute freedom. All freedom, even the most relative, may be a fiction; but mine, and still today, prefers the other hypothesis.

1976

JOHN FOWLES

The Magus

1

Un débauché de profession est rarement un homme pitoyable.

De Sade, Les Infortunes de la Vertu

