The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960’s
The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960’s

Edited by

Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau

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I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing I should come nearer to reality and truth: adapting to refute, in fact, the ancients: *Artis est monstrare artem.*
B. S Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*
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INTRODUCTION

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Ethics have been on the mind of many in the community of researchers in literary criticism, over the last decade, to say the least. This is all the more surprising as, concomitantly, some of the traditional genres which had been entrusted with carrying the ethical component, through the ages—i.e.: satire—almost disappeared from the critical agenda over the same period. In fact, one has simply to look for satire-related books or articles in any specialised database or catalogue to notice an obvious dearth of entries. Not that no more satires are being published. Quite on the contrary: one has only to read the novels of a Martin Amis, a Jonathan Coe, a Will Self or a Jeanette Winterson, all of them to some extent the inheritors of John Fowles or Anthony Burgess, to realise that they are partly (when not wholly) written against a whole outlook or world order, very much dominated by such values as those of materialism and violence. Satire looms large in the minds of contemporary British novelists, to say the least. And its eviction from syllabuses and critical studies is only marginally related to the eclipse of the theory of genre that has dominated the last two or three decades.

More specifically, one of the reasons why satire has disappeared from the computer screens of academia is that it is related with morals, a term which, from the late 1960s onwards and the advent of the permissive society, youth culture and all sorts of counter cultures has virtually become taboo. It seems as if in the novels of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, the possibility to discriminate between good and evil or, more appropriately, right and wrong, were still possible, an opportunity that has deserted the world of contemporary letters. Secularisation and the end of the political utopias have notoriously ushered in a period of relativism and widespread distrust that have come to be associated with the postmodern worldview and have filtered into the mainstream
of contemporary cultural and epistemological doxa. Despite the turn to political correctness that swept over the 1990s and the emergence of historicist methodology and feminist or postcolonial studies (among a spate of others), in a world that is as much polarised in the early twenty-first century as it was in the last decades of the previous millennium, a world of Manichean monochrome division, crusades against various versions of total evil have come to thrive. But paradoxically, morals still sound old-fashioned, certainly too twentieth-century, so much so that, in the provinces of literary criticism, they are but tangentially associated with the works of critics favouring a Marxist approach, like Terry Eagleton or Fredric Jameson.¹

As might be expected, the demise of morals has been correlated with the rise of ethics. And it has become some sort of a commonplace of literary criticism to underline a distinction between two ethical modes. On the one hand, what can be called a (neo-)humanist ethics, of a rather normative, deontic type, implying an overall moral dimension, generally associated with “the stable ego of the character” as present in classic realist texts based on linguistic transparency, a category that corresponds to supposedly hackneyed morality, and a morality that cannot be named. On the other hand, a newer, Levinasian and post-Levinasian ethics, of a non deontic, non foundational, non cognitive, and above all non ontological type, expounded by critics like Zygmunt Bauman, Andrew Gibson, Robert Eaglestone or Drucilla Cornell², to quote but a few of them, i.e.: what could be called after Andrew Gibson “a discursive ethics” very much at home with experimentalism and that has come to be identified with the practice of postmodernism to such an extent that some critics, taking their lead from Zygmunt Bauman, have called it a “post modern’ ethics”.

These Levinas-inspired ethics have only nominally turned their back on old-fashioned, deontic morality. What they do is in fact either implicitly or even explicitly condemn evil, as is the case of the French Marxist and ethical thinker Alain Badiou, one of the staunchest exponents of what is known as an ethics of truths.³ And what they also do is advocate right and good, as is clearly the case with the ethics of alterity based, in Levinas’ terms, on the non violent encounter

1 Obvious examples of such a practice would be Terry Eagleton’s The Ideology of the Aesthetic (1990) or the more recent The Function of Criticism (2005). On the other side of the Atlantic, one might wish to refer to Fredric Jameson’s seminal study The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (2002).
2 Drucilla Cornell, The Philosophy of the Limit (1992); Zygmunt Bauman, Postmodern Ethics (1993); Adam Zachary Newton, Narrative Ethics (1997); Robert Eaglestone, Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas (1997); Andrew Gibson, Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Levinas to Leavis (1999) are studies that have been consistently and increasingly influential in the fields of academe over the last decade.
with the face of the other. Said differently, ethics in their new garb are not so incompatible with the more hackneyed morality, but for the prescriptive, deontic dimension which they generally eschew. Besides, at the same time as they have moved away from the prescriptive towards the more tentative and open (open or exposed to the unknown, to the other), postmodern ethics have become more labile and seem to have proliferated into a multitude of applications and colourings. Under the wider banners of the ethics of truths (highly compatible with the powers of defamiliarisation) and the ethics of alterity, specific and context-sensitive branches have appeared, so much so that it is not rare nowadays to find various and sundry categories like the ethics of reading—one might thinks here more particularly of J. Hillis Miller’ works, especially *The Ethics of Reading* (1989)—or the ethics of affects, place, spectrality or pleasure, among many others, all of them being oriented towards some wider opening, some greater sensibility and a surrender of the same in favour of the other/the infinite, that which is otherwise than being, that which is not here, with correlative notions like vulnerability and disinterestedness.

Now, the fortunes of ethics seem to have run a course very unlike that of experimentation or experimentalism, since the 1960s. This is a period that is generally accepted as some sort of a watershed in contemporary cultural history, performing a transition from consensus to fragmentation, as Patricia Waugh (1995) reminds us, a period in which the formal experiments practised in France by the advocates of the *nouveau roman* and elsewhere in the world from South America to the United States through Britain came to fruition. In Britain, the pressure to experiment made itself conspicuous in the novels of such authors as B. S. Johnson, Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose and a bit less so (though not that less) in the narratives of John Fowles and Muriel Spark, to quote but a few representative examples, ushering in a period of experimentation that seemed to become the norm before petering out, in the 1980s and 1990s.

And again, as with satire, it is certainly no easy task to find works devoted to the related notions of experiment/experimentation/experimentalism. There are a few volumes devoted to modernist experimentation, in the field of the visual arts or poetry, or—more rarely—fiction, most of them centring on the notion of abstraction and of course the modernist avant-gardes are scrupulously documented. Yet, when it comes to a discussion of contemporary

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4 Perhaps Levinas’ most influential studies in the definition of an ethics of alterity are *Totality and Infinity* (1999); *Humanism of the Other* (2006); *Time and the Other* (1987) and *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence* (1999).

5 A quick look at Peter Burger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Theory & History of Literature) (1984) or at Rosalind E. Krauss’ *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1986) will be sufficient to get an overview of the situation, as far back as the mid 1980s.
experimentalism, one is confronted with very little material (apart from the fields of drama and, more especially, poetry\(^6\)). Similarly, the main glossaries and handbooks of literary terms remain equally discreet on the matter. The first conclusion that may be derived from this, it seems, is that experiment(alism) is a category that is more or less taken for granted in general, and in the analysis of contemporary aesthetic manifestations in particular. Said differently, from the modernist revolution onwards, artefacts (among which texts figure prominently) are generally considered to be open and susceptible to experimentation, but the modalities of such a phenomenon (what could be called a poetics of experimentalism) are rarely accounted for otherwise than in the most cursory of ways.

True enough, there were a series of studies devoted to narrative experimentation and its avatars but the production seems to have stopped somewhere in the mid-1980s\(^7\), and one has the distinct impression that the topic is far from being fashionable any more. It would be excessive to say that it has fallen into disrepute, but it can certainly be asserted that it has fallen into oblivion. Most reviews of recent and contemporary production will quote authors like B. S. Johnson as an arch experimentalist and mention his typographical obsessions, true enough, but they seem to be content with the label and they rarely open the box on which it is pasted. So we must start with some sort of a working definition of “experimental”, and such a definition will be necessarily contradistinctive. What is experimental is that which tries to do away with conventions (those of the classic realist text, in the case of modernism) so as to impose new formal constraints which may in turn become conventions. In other terms, experimentation defines itself against what is perceived as a stabilised aesthetic norm which it purports to subvert. This it can do provisionally (thus remaining subversive), or more permanently (in which case a revolution will have taken place).

Modernist experiment has been well documented owing to the critical scrutiny devoted to the modernist avant-gardes (a term used by Bakunin, one may remember, as a call for revolutionising aesthetics to achieve political and social revolution). In the field of fiction, modernist experiment is associated with a fairly stable set of poetical characteristics: chronological dislocation,

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impersonality, impersonation—three categories associated with psychological realism—and perhaps also, thanks to Joyce, what is known as the “mythical method”. Besides, the commonly accepted view of literary history has it that the last century was characterised by a series of shifts of the pendulum: after a period of modernist experimentation, came a period of anti-modernism (i.e.: of a return to the aesthetic staples of realism as expressive of a fairly stable moral perspective), before the onslaught of what is termed “postmodernism” which was originally associated with formal experimentation. One of the early commentators of the phenomenon on this side of the Atlantic put together a list of devices that he saw as characteristic of postmodernism: contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit. This is the list that David Lodge provided in The Modes of Modern Writing back in 1977, and it would be easy to agree that while the most extreme items (randomness, permutation) did not fare particularly well in the production of the following years, contradiction, discontinuity, excess and the short circuit (or metalepsis) became staples of the production of the 1980s and 1990s. But of course, most of them except for metalepsis perhaps) were already not only present but also widespread in some texts that have come to represent the canon of modernist fiction. This is one of the reasons why experimentation and postmodernism are often considered to walk hand in hand, which does not mean that all postmodernist fiction (whether of the “highbrow” or the “lowlbrow” type, or of the intermediary “genre fiction” category) is experimental; and this does not imply either that it has a monopoly on experimentation. What can be suggested though is that it privileges a few poetic traits: fragmentation, discontinuity, metafiction, metalepsis, intertextual games, generic instability, and also more specific modes of investigation like the posthuman, contemporary fiction being prone to take on board the technological, scientific and epistemological innovations of its time.

In other terms, the aesthetics of contemporary experimentation may well be associated with a poetics of disruption, linguistic opaqueness (as opposed to the myth of realistic transparency) and excess. Now, this does not imply that contemporary experimental texts jettison all realism but, on the contrary, that they construct a new realism. Experimentation as practised in a radical way, in the triumphant 1960s and 1970s (conceived then as an attack on the anti-modernist bias of the morally committed realists, among which the Angry Young Men), or in its more subdued, more recent manifestations, is of necessity a way of devising a new way to express, at times forcefully, most often tentatively, a new truth about its context of production.

Of course, this raises a certain number of problems, not the least of which presents itself under the guise of a double bind. For in fact, if we try to remember Levinas’ suspicion of representation and rhetoric as inherently
condusive to the neutralisation of the other and their infidelity to otherness, what are we to make of the fact that as literary critics we cannot escape representational schemes? And this all the more so when formal artifice is pushed to its most extreme manifestations, in some experimental excesses reminiscent of a Decadent fascination with form that could be evocative of the doctrines of art for art’s sake. This of course is a way of reminding us that the practice of ethical criticism, when applied to any corpus, requires the constant consciousness of the provisionality, tentativeness, restlessness and unease in our position as critics. In other terms, if we accept to work within the framework of Levinasian ethics (as is the case with most authors dealing with ethical criticism), we must be conscious of this impediment, which in turn constitutes some call for acceptance and responsibility/accountability. The double bind that has just been mentioned would then be intrinsically compatible with the practice of ethical criticism.

As to the apparently too strict separation between neo-humanist ethics reserved for a realistic corpus, as opposed to postmodern ethics that would be reserved for a postmodern, experimental corpus, it may be relevant to specify that perhaps the recent ethical turn in literary studies, associated with critical and theoretical debates on the nature of postmodernism, has tended to promote this type of strict polarisation. However, there seems to be little reason why we should accept and maintain this divide. Said differently, the practice of ethical criticism in the wake of Levinas may well be channelled into the probing of more classical, non experimental texts, that privilege openness and reject totality, that court unease and favour a liminal ethics, albeit under an often prescriptive, morally edifying surface (this could apply to the works of E.M. Forster for instance). Conversely, and correspondingly, there is very little reason why the uncertain, provisional, volatile component of Levinasian ethics be deemed acceptable within a moral framework, since in terms of content and value they buttress an overall sense of what is good. And incidentally, there is no reason why a text should be either prescriptive and deontic or tentative, liminal and restless in its indications of openness. One has only to think of the way in which Jeanette Winterson proclaims the imperative of openness and sensibility to the other to be convinced of this point.

In the field of experimentation as in the field of ethics, it would thus seem that we are less confronted with rupture that with continuities, and perhaps it would be relevant to see all categories and notions with which we are concerned here as positioned on a double spectrum, *i.e.*: one that goes from deontic morality to liminal ethics, and one that goes from stark realism (if there is such a thing as that) to postmodern subdued experimentation through the experimental acmes of high modernism and early postmodernism.
One way to account for the situation of the contemporary novel with its inclusion and naturalisation of experiment would thus be to contextualise its practice both diachronically (in terms of literary history) and synchronically (compared with contemporary media available on the contemporary market of representation). As has been analysed by influential critics (such as David Lodge, in the above-quoted study), the history of the last century’s literary production can be mapped up in terms of a series of swings of the pendulum operating between the poles of transparent realism and opaque formalism. Roughly speaking, then, modernist experimentation is seen as a reaction against a realistic norm, i.e.: that evinced in the staples of Edwardian production. It was succeeded by an equally strong response and return to transparent realism in the anti-modernist aesthetics of pre- and post-WW2 fiction, dominated by a mimetic imperative. This in turn triggered off a backlash under the guise of the experimental craze of the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, this subversive type of rhythm seems to have given way to a less radical shift in recent years, as mentioned above, in a literature that is both reference-oriented and highly self reflexive, as is demonstrated in the novels of an A. S. Byatt or a Julian Barnes—to quote but two obvious examples—so much so that an aesthetics of subversion seems to have given way to one of compromise or, better said, accommodation.

If we have a look at contemporary artistic and cultural practices, then, we are bound to realise that experiment has become the stamping ground for other forms than the novel. It may become apparent to any observer of the contemporary artistic scene that the fields that can still qualify as belonging and contributing to some sort of avant-garde are contemporary art and the new media (with the help of video and now computer-related installations), and perhaps architecture. Then would come such literary forms as drama and poetry, traditionally less comfortable with realism. At the other end of this synchronic spectrum would appear fiction and film. If this spectrum has any validity (as we think it has), the conclusion would be that the novel, as has been the case for quite a few decades now, has entered into some competition with film, both specialising in mimetic narrative. Under such (market) pressure, the novel has little choice but to fight against marginalisation so as to retain some sort of hold on the narrative market. Truly enough, film achieved hegemony a long time ago, but as narrative in print, the novel must resist.

In such conditions, it would be tempting to see how fiction accommodates realism and experimentation in a fairly efficient way so as to fight for survival. For in fact, what the remains of experimentation in the recent novel perform is some sort of resistance. Said differently, as with the modernist avant-gardes, the experimental component in contemporary fiction would be the trace of some code of honour. The novel would thus necessarily and consciously act as some sort of a repository (and not yet reliquary) of some ethical consciousness.
through the alienating, opening, disquieting presence of experimentation. For, familiar as this may have become, it still acts as a means to prise open the realistic idiom and make it clear that two truths are simply better than one. Despite appearances, or more precisely underneath appearances, the contemporary resort to an experimental component would smack less of compromise than of accommodation, a reminder that in between film and contemporary art, on the spectrum of artistic practice, the novel lies, admittedly closer to the former, but ceaselessly tending (both nostalgically and prospectively) towards the latter, in a spontaneous impulse that certainly partakes of resistance but that is also reminiscent of excendance. The experimental component would thus act as the ethical spectre of contemporary fiction, a spectre in the Derridean conception of the term, i.e.: both coming from the past and oriented towards the future.

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Works Cited


CHAPTER ONE

SHAKESPEARE’S PASTORAL ROMANCE THE TEMPEST AND THE LEVINASIAN COMPONENT IN THE ETHICS OF JOHN FOWLES’ THE MAGUS

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to explore the ways in which the articulation of a vision of ethics of a recognisably Levinasian bent in John Fowles’ novel The Magus is tied in a relationship of mutual interdependence with the hypertextual transposition in the novel of Shakespeare’s pastoral romance, The Tempest. The rearticulation of the latter is seen as the medium through which an essential aspect of the novel’s ethical project is communicated.

One of the most prominent and persistent strands in John Fowles criticism has been readings of his works that seek to elucidate their ethical stance. Drawing an analogy between the author and one of his most memorable characters—Conchis from The Magus—Peter Wolfe has entitled his book-length study of Fowles’ œuvre John Fowles: Magus and Moralist. More than once and in different interviews, Fowles himself expressed his allegiance to the “moral, ethical function” which, he believed, writers inherit from literature (Vipond 1996: 18).

The fact that Fowles was convinced that the best way of conveying a moral message is by telling a good story was determinant in the shaping of his attitude to experimentalism. As a University student of French philology, Fowles was well aware of the experimentalist trend that was radicalising the French literary scene in the 1950s and the 1960s, and he was also familiar with the issues raised by one of the most powerful continental cultural contexts at the time,
existentialist philosophy. His commitment to issues central to existentialist philosophy and to the ethics deriving from its different strands has consequently been widely acknowledged in literary criticism. At the same time, however, the critics have often detected an “opposite pull” towards realism (Sage 1974: 31) and the refusal to yield to “the inverted pathetic fallacy of the French nouveau roman” (Conradi 1982: 27) and its “form[al] obsessiveness” (Huffaker 1980: 54). The critics agree that Fowles’ experimentalism lies mostly in a characteristic conflation of diverse literary genres and modes whose proximity to each other provokes the mutual interrogation of their legitimacy. Linda Hutcheon has signaled this metafictional practice as characteristically postmodern.1

In *The Magus*, the juxtaposition and also the superimposition of diverse frames of reference can be seen at work on more than one level and is characteristic of both Nicholas’ and Conchis’ discourses. However, the strategies employed in each discourse to appropriate this diversity are significantly different. Nicholas’ narrative shows a tendency to harmonise the story of his life with the patterns of the Bildungsroman, the detective novel, the medieval romance quest and the pastoral romance. These patterns are superimposed on each other and the totalising drive behind the narrative tends to smooth over the seams and stitches knitting them together. By contrast, in Conchis’ masque, the strategy at work is the foregrounding of the clash between the different frames of reference informing the genres and modes employed. This strategy serves the purpose of making the masque into the vehicle for communicating the novel’s ethical vision. As Conchis himself notes, the masque is structured as a metaphor for the world as it is (Fowles 2004: 166). His conception of the masque coincides with the existentialist vision of the universe as the space from which God has absconded and where hazard reigns (186). In this world, man has to accept his ontological freedom and the ethical responsibility it entails.

Criticism of the novel’s implication in existentialist philosophy and ethics has generated several in-depth analyses of the influence of various existentialist trends—mostly Sartrean, but also Camusian and Kirkegaardian.2 In what

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1 For a comprehensive discussion of Fowles’ implication in the poetics of postmodernism as elaborated by Linda Hutcheon, see Salami (1992).
2 Besides critical studies specifically focussed on the influence of existentialism in *The Magus* and/or in his early fiction (Onega 2005, Rackham 1972, Wolfe 1976), the existentialist element in Fowles’ work in general is also acknowledged in some of the more comprehensive surveys (Conradi 1982: 26-8, 49, 56, Foster 1994: 38-66, Huffaker 1980: 50-52, 54-5). Further, discussing the existentialist views expressed by Fowles in both his fictional and non-fictional writing, Peter Conradi has noted how Fowles, in a
follows I will attempt to characterise the novel’s ethical stance by taking into account those aspects of the novel that seem to take it beyond the boundaries of existentialism. My contention is that these aspects are germane to an ethics that has come to be identified as characteristically postmodern—the ethics expounded by Emmanuel Levinas and further elaborated by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics* (1994).

I will further argue that this particular aspect of the novel’s ethics has been borne out by the rewriting of Shakespeare’s pastoral romance, *The Tempest.* Both Nicholas’ and Conchis’ discourses employ it and the radically different ways in which they do so carry significant ethical import. In Nicholas’ narrative, the play is integrated as an ideal aesthetic pattern that exerts a totalising pull on the events of the protagonist’s life by demanding that they conform to it. In Conchis’ discourse, the masque is revealed as a pattern that can be infused with new life, reinvested with new meanings and made the vehicle for a new kind of ethics. Furthermore, the discussion of the play’s rewriting in the novel creates a context within which to look at the rearticulation of such notions as magic, mystery and art. Already in *The Tempest*, these notions are closely tied to ethical issues. The analysis will thus be aimed at demonstrating how, in the novel, these notions are made to acquire new meanings, the very same meanings they have in Levinasian ethical discourse.

Before proceeding to the analysis proper I will briefly outline the insights gained from the analyses of the novel endorsing an existentialist ethics. In this type of critical approach, the protagonist-narrator, Nicholas Urfe, is shown as gradually evolving out of a state of existential inauthenticity, manifested in his superficial and misguided posturing as existential rebel, alienated man and nihilist (Foster 1994: 39). Nicholas’ experience in Conchis’ villa, Bourani, is seen as the means by which the protagonist is confronted with his false conception of freedom. Nicholas’ opportunist understanding of freedom as sanctioning his libertinism is differentiated from existential freedom, with all the implications of ethical responsibility entailed in man’s choices and actions. An existentialist reading of the novel allows the reader to identify as bad faith Nicholas’ excuses for his defeatism and his cynical attitude to life—his protests

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3 According to Peter Conradi, the combination of realistic narrative and romance is a characteristic trait of Fowles’ writing resulting in the infusion of mystery into real life and the moralising of romance (1982: 17). I would here like to lay special emphasis on the generic hybridity of *The Tempest*, its being not simply a romance but a pastoral romance. This emphasis will allow me to bring into prominence and to discuss the pastoral *locus amoenus* in the novel—Conchis’ villa—the site where the key ethical insights are communicated.
that he cannot help but behave the way he does: “It’s not all me. It’s in the age. In all my generation. We all feel the same” (Fowles 2004: 146). From the same critical perspective, Conchis’ masque, as already mentioned, is said to recreate in art the existential universe as it is—“incoherent and indifferent” (Rackham 1972: 98).

Among the many external texts present in the novel, the paratextual quotations from the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* that precede each of the novel’s three parts have been considered to cast particular light on Nicholas’ character. Set against the sadomasochist background of Sade’s text, Nicholas’ treatment of Alison is exposed in all its cruelty. According to Susana Onega, these epigraphs point to Nicholas as a Sadeian nihilist, one of the kinds of metaphysical rebels as defined by Albert Camus (Onega 2005: 424-25).

Focusing the novel from an existentialist perspective, Onega contends that, in *The Magus*, Fowles is searching for an answer to the Camusian question of the meaning of life in the face of the absurd. She interprets Nicholas’ evolution as a life quest “from nihilism to existentialist commitment”, or, in Fowlesian terms, as a life journey involving Nicholas’ transformation “from selfish ‘collector’ of objectified women into a true Camusian creator of good with the god-like capacity to restore the unity between self and world” (439-44). The way out of nihilism and existential angst goes through the experience of love, sympathy, suffering and compassion for the weak (Foster 1994: 49; Onega 2005: 438-39).

Thomas Foster, whose chapter on *The Magus* in *Understanding John Fowles* analyses the novel’s endorsing of existentialism, has recognised this move towards an ethics of love, although he does not identify it as congenial with Levinasian ethical discourse:

> It is through the mysterious Other that the Self begins to acquire understanding in Fowles’ thought. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, Fowles does not believe that the Self can develop or heal in isolation, but, rather, that it requires interaction with outsiders, with the Not-Self. Too much isolation, in Fowles’ thinking, leads to narcissism and destructiveness. Since he writes chiefly from a male perspective, the Other has a strong sexual element: his masculine protagonists struggle to understand their female Others. (1994: 49)

For Foster, relating to the other means opening up the possibility of escaping from solipsism, but I will go on to add that the description of this relationship in the novel suggests more than that since it also underlines the ethical responsibility of the self towards the other. Further, Sartre saw the relationship between self and other as utterly incompatible with the preservation of subjective freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discussed love as the relationship through which the self may try and acknowledge the other as a
subject and may also prevent one’s own objectification by the other’s gaze. However, he went on to finally deny this possibility (Sartre 1966: 490). This is one reason why we should look at Fowles’ notion of love, compassion and responsibility beyond the boundaries of Sartrean existentialism.

Developing Dianne L. Vipond’s contention that the evolution of all Fowlesian heroes is characterised by “a numinous progression from passion to compassion” (2002: 33), Susana Onega has argued that Nicholas Urfe’s leap to existentialist commitment is mediated by the experience of Camusian compassion for the weak (2005: 437). She also contends that Alison’s reappearance at the end of the novel gives Nicholas a new chance to evolve into an ethical being. The point that I would like to make is that these relationships of love and compassion are couched in the Levinasian terms of the unknowability, the mystery that the other posits for the self.

Two key concepts pertaining to the discourse of Levinas and Bauman need to be mentioned at this point, firstly because the dialectical dynamic that binds them can be perceived as replicated in Fowles’ novel, underpinning the experience to which Nicholas Urfe is subjected in Conchis’ masque and secondly because their metaphorocity relates them to a notion central to both the novel and the play: magic. These two concepts are the “disenchantment with the self” (Gibson 1999: 25), which is how Gibson has rendered Levinas’ “dégrisement du Même enivré de soi” (Levinas 1991: 24) and Bauman’s “re-enchantment of the world” (Bauman 1994: 33). The first, as Andrew Gibson has noted, was employed by Levinas in La Mort et le temps to denote the disillusionment with subjectivity and with the capacity of the self “to contain everything within its perspective” —a crucial step in the act of constituting the ethical (Gibson 1999: 25). The French “dégrisement” can only metaphorically be translated as disenchantment. However, it serves the purposes of the analysis in this paper as it can be argued that words such as magic and enchantment are also used metaphorically in the novel. What is more, it is through this shift from literalness to metaphorocity that the magic and mystery of Shakespeare’s Prospero are rearticulated in Fowles’ novel.

The second notion of “re-enchantment of the world” was used by Bauman in relation to the rehabilitation of mystery in the postmodern world: “Dignity has been returned to emotions; legitimacy to the ‘inexplicable,’ nay irrational, sympathies and loyalties which cannot ‘explain themselves’ in terms of their usefulness and purpose” (1994: 33. Original emphasis). The Levinasian other, a concept that Bauman has appropriated, is also a figure of mystery. As Levinas himself explains, its

hold over my existing is mysterious. It is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light. [. . .] the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery. The other’s entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity, for
exteriority is a property of space and leads the subject back to itself through light. (1995: 75)

Mystery comes to denote the other’s alterity, in other words, the other’s irreducibility to predetermined moulds and definitions, the other’s excess with regard to the ego’s attempts to understand it. The surrendering to this mystery, which signals the event of the re-enchantment of the interpersonal space, is for Levinas part of the process in which the ethical subject is constituted. It is in this sense that the notion of re-enchantment is to be referred to in the course of the analysis here. The latter will be aimed at substantiating the claim that Nicholas Urfe’s disenchantment with his rationalising ego which impels him to unravel mystery and his initiation into the enchanted space between self and other form a significant part of the ethical vision of the novel.

Disenchantment and re-enchantment cohabit in the same semantic field with magic and in both *The Magus* and *The Tempest* disenchantment and re-enchantment are brought about as a result of inquiring into the ethical implications of magic wielded by the play’s and the novel’s magicians, Prospero and Conchis. The distinction between the different kinds of dis- and re-enchantment needs to be drawn for, while *The Magus* can be seen as exploring in fiction what was being theorised in contemporary ethical and philosophical discourses, *The Tempest* has to be looked at within its own context—early Modernity, which Michel Foucault saw as the period that witnessed the beginning of the constitution of the subject and the time of a radical shift from the episteme of semblances to that of classical thought (1994: 46-77). Prospero cannot go through the phase of Levinasian disenchantment with subjectivity. He belongs to the period that heralded the constitution of that rational objectifying subjectivity with which, Levinas argued, we should be disenchanted if ethics is to be given a chance. However, what he experiences is also akin to disenchantment though probably it is not so radical and is not as explicitly stated. It is the uncertainty the magician comes to feel regarding the moral justification of his magic and of the pattern used to steer events on the island: that of pastoral romance. This uncertainty is provoked by the duality of perspective on both Prospero’s magic and the pastoral romance scenario that the play allows for. The doubling of the perspective on pastoral romance in the play was part of a larger-scale change that took place in the Renaissance, namely, the “dispersal of semblances” in the episteme. Thus, pastoral romance could still be seen as ontologically inscribed within the fabric of the universal text/the

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4 I borrow this notion from Evgenia Pancheva’s study of Renaissance culture *Dispersing Semblances: An Essay on Renaissance Culture*. In it she employs the phrase to refer to that point at which the “inner tensions within the neat systems” this period created led to “the destruction of the Renaissance world of mirrors” (2001: 227).
exualised universe, held together by similitude. But it could also be seen as having lost its ontological being and, consequently, as having been reduced to the status of a floating signifier that could be attached to different signifieds. The implication of this shift for the moral order that Prospero seeks to re-establish through the manoeuvering of events in the pastoral romance is that it is no longer automatically legitimised.

The irreversible disenchantment with pastoral romance and its disparagement as the breeding ground for idle fantasies were, however, forestalled by the newly emergent perception of literature as the space of fictionality. The Sidneyan notion of the “golden” world that the poet creates out of nature’s “brazen” world is a notable illustration of this perceptual shift (Sidney 1982: 24). Significantly, it is Renaissance pastoral and pastoral romance in particular that Wolfgang Iser saw as providing a paradigm for literary fictionality par excellence. While he acknowledged its relatedness to an ideal state embodied in the notion of the Golden world, he also identified the green world of pastoral as the fictional space that offers the refracted image of the sociohistorical world as it should be (Iser 1993: 22-87). This new perception, Iser claimed, took the relation between the two worlds beyond mere opposition and posited them as two mutually exclusive semiotic systems that can be fully understood only in the light of their interconnections (46-8). Iser recognised that the thematisation of the crossing of boundaries between the sociohistorical and the artificial world of fiction provides “a vivid portrayal of literary fictionality” (48).

A similar view of Renaissance pastoral has been elaborated by Harry Berger, who saw its green world as coinciding with the newly emergent idea of the second world. The latter came to denote a new awareness of literature and the arts as creating a second-order world. This Berger saw as a step away from the tendency in the Middle Ages to present the fictionality of art “in the guise of history, actuality, philosophy, theology, etc.” (1998: 12). As he further explained, “[i]ts essential quality is that it is an explicitly fictional, artificial, or hypothetical world” (12). Pastoral romance thus may be said to evoke a fictional world that, because of the different laws on which it operates, allows for the exploration of options unavailable in the real world. It is this property of The Tempest as pastoral romance that has made it very inviting for artistic re-appropriation and Fowles’ novel is a case in point.

Going back to The Magus it can be said that, in what can be described as an early gesture towards a postmodernist poetics, Fowles’ novel experimentally engaged with an artistic convention, otherwise obsolete and inadequate to the artistic agendas of twentieth-century literature, and made it the vehicle for a new non-deontic ethics. As I will try to demonstrate, this is a version of that ethics which Andrew Gibson, drawing on Levinas, has seen as informing the narrative
content, techniques and hermeneutics of the twentieth-century novel in general and most conspicuously in its postmodern developments.

The play itself has often been mentioned as one among the numerous intertexts in the novel, but the premises of my analysis are that *The Magus* can be seen as what in Genette’s terminology would be called a hypertextual transposition of the play, one that, in the course of rearticulating the play, is considerably emancipated from the play as well. The question likely to surface at this initial stage is why, of all the intertexts, *The Tempest* should be seen as central to the novel’s articulation of ethics. My answer, with all the awareness of the massive simplification entailed in trying to render it in a single sentence, is that in Fowles’ novel there is a replication of the play’s central situation. In it a magician engages in the task of morally edifying the less enlightened sojourner(s) on the island where the former lives and in the course of which he also gains in self-knowledge. There is, indeed, much more to both Prospero’s and Conchis’ magical practices but the parallel here drawn gives solid ground for a comparison of the ethics articulated in both works. The analysis intended is to probe into the manner in which this articulation has been carried out and to point out the impact this has had on the pastoral mode as both a vehicle for and a repository of an ethical vision.

The course along which this paper will proceed from this point onwards involves a brief demonstration of the play’s hypotextual presence in the novel. This will draw attention to textual evidence in terms only of direct quotations and allusions to the text of *The Tempest* in the novel, which is what Genette would call intertextuality. My intention is to use this intertextual evidence as the foundation on which the large-scale rewriting of the play in the novel will be discussed. The next step will be to trace the novel’s tendency to dismantle the play and, through it, pastoral romance as a frame of reference that is inadequate in providing an all-encompassing cognitive model for reality. It is, however, not pastoral romance in general but a particular version of it that the novel will be shown to dismantle: the type of pastoral romance which, emptied of its original moral content, is reduced to a mere vehicle for self-indulgent aestheticism and escapist longing for a mythical Golden world. The third move of the analysis will then engage in the identification of the simultaneous reverse tendency in

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5 The one work that to my knowledge has offered an analysis of the novel as a transposition of the play, albeit not from the perspective of Genette’s taxonomy of transtextual relations, is Chantal Zabus’ *Tempests after Shakespeare* (2002). Her argument that Fowles’ novel, together with Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea* offers versions of Prospero that are debilitating in their attempts to ape Shakespeare’s magician I consider as not convincingly substantiated.

6 An instance of transtextuality which, by virtue of its episodic nature, signals a less than consistent engaging of a text with another text (Genette: 1-2).
The Magus to reinvigorate pastoral with new meanings—a move that has made it one of the major vehicles for communicating the novel’s ethical vision.

I see the latter as fleshed out not only in Conchis’ discourse but in the kind of relationship that he establishes with Nicholas Urfe, the novel’s narrator-protagonist. This relationship and the setting in which it is engendered and evolves are reminiscent of the pastoral situation of *otium*—it is at weekends that Conchis and Nicholas meet—in which shepherds, or characters that can be seen as modified versions of the shepherd figure, gather to discuss matters of love, friendship and the adversities of life—what Paul Alpers has summarised as the “representative anecdote of pastoral” (1982: 21).

**The Hypertextual Transposition**

The introduction of the play in the novel is first explicitly signaled when on first welcoming Nicholas as a guest to his villa Conchis enigmatically refers to himself as Prospero and thus seduces Nicholas into presuming that he himself is being regarded as a latter-day Ferdinand to whom Prospero will soon introduce his beautiful daughter Miranda (Fowles 2004: 83). This is quite a logical reaction on the part of Nicholas, who, up to this moment in the narrative, has persistently defined himself as a figure of exile and a romantic quester. Yet, this is also the moment when the protagonist is forewarned from jumping to easy conclusions: “‘Prospero had many things.’ He turned a dry look on me. ‘And not all of them young and beautiful, Mr. Urfe’” (83).

Nicholas receives the next hint that he may have presumed the wrong role from Lily/Julie. In the revised version of the novel, the poem Lily recites about the frog that went *a-wooing* is replaced by Caliban’s poetic “the isle is full of noises” speech (204). To Nicholas’ comment that she makes a “rotten Caliban”, Lily replies with the suggestion that he take the role. Her remark is more than the teaser Nicholas takes it to be. It casts him as an embodiment of a new notion of Calibanity: new because Nicholas’ infatuation is not with the kind of natural magic—a property of Prospero’s island—that Shakespeare’s Caliban talks about. Rather, his infatuation is with the artificially constructed island-space of villa Bourani, a place whose aestheticism is emphatically foregrounded. In the course of novel it is exposed as symptomatic of the protagonist’s inability to cope with life, as masking an emotional sterility which makes him incapable of establishing relations with any woman unless she conforms to the aesthetic

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7 The novel was first published in 1966, but Fowles went on rewriting it for years until he put an end to the process by publishing the definitive version in 1977. All references to the novel here are to the revised version.
mould he intends for her. Nicholas’ aestheticism in which he finds excuse for relegating ethics to a state of redundancy is a symptom of the rearticulation of Calibanity in the novel.

On a later occasion, it is again Lily who draws Nicholas’ attention to another correspondence between Shakespeare’s play and Prospero’s masque:

‘Yesterday afternoon, after my little scene. Another magician once sent a young man hewing wood.’
‘I missed that. Prospero and Ferdinand.’
‘Those lines I recited.’
‘He also brought it up on my very first visit here. Before I even knew you existed.’ I noticed she was avoiding my eyes. It was not, given the end of *The Tempest*, difficult to guess why. I murmured, ‘He can’t have known we’d . . .’
‘I know. It’s just . . .’ she shook her head. ‘That I’m his to give.’ She added, ‘Not you.’
‘And he certainly has a Caliban’
She sighed. ‘I know.’ (341)

One of Lily’s roles in the masque is thus to alternately encourage Nicholas’ identification with Ferdinand and to frustrate it.8

Most other references to the play (on pages 136, 184, 353, 371, 383, 458) are then made by Nicholas himself. Till the very moment before the trial scene, he believes that Conchis, despite the many deviations into other scripts, has most consistently kept to that of the play. The trial, however, is another episode inviting an interpretation that shatters Nicholas’ identification with Ferdinand. Namely, it is the possibility of regarding the trial as the equivalent to that moment in Act 3, Scene 3 of *The Tempest*, when Ariel makes the banquet vanish from the sight of the starving castaways and delivers his speech in the guise of a harpy. This time, however, Nicholas has been allowed to sate his sexual appetite and in the trial scene Ariel/Lily/Julie appears as the harpy/Dr Vanessa Maxwell who delivers a most severe statement on Nicholas’ personality.

In thus bringing to crash Nicholas’ whole conception of his experience in Bourani, Conchis’ masque quite impressively dismantles its own original convention-dictated content—a blend of pastoral, romance and myth and, by implication, its historically-bound moral vision.

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8 Michael Boccia has commented on Nicholas’ dual identification as both a Caliban and a Ferdinand figure in “Visions and Revisions: John Fowles’s New Version of *The Magus*” (1980/8: 239-40).
Counter-pastoral

The manner in which pastoral of an exclusively aestheticist nature has been exposed as incommensurate with the ethics of the novel is a multifaceted one. One of the ways in which this has been done can be identified by looking at how the dramatic conventions of masque and pastoral romance have been employed in both *The Tempest* and *The Magus*. In the first, pastoral romance provides the pattern along which Prospero shapes the events on the island. For him, the play he stages is still one that mimaetically retraces the course which nature, if left to her own resources, would have followed, but at a slower pace, effecting the same restitution of a God-granted political, social and moral order, which Prospero’s magic is presumably capable of achieving in a shorter time. The masque within this play has an episodic but crucial role: it is a form of entertainment, it celebrates a festive occasion of royal significance—the betrothal of Miranda and Ferdinand—and it is also the magical ritual meant to reunite the historical, temporal world to the mythical world of a pastoral Golden age.

In *The Magus*, on the other hand, there is a shift of balance as the reader is made to witness the expansion of the masque as a form to encompass the whole sequence of events not only in Bourani, but also in Athens after the trial, and in London on Nicholas’ return to England. The result of this shift is that the pastoral romance in the novel is rendered by means of the presentational alienating techniques characteristic of the masque as a genre. Reciprocally, this leads to the thinning out of the mimetic representational elements in it. This process has been facilitated by the fact that the defamiliarising presentational techniques, counterbalancing the illusionist effect of representational techniques, have from the very beginning been part of the masque’s technical repertoire. They were the result of the practice of creating roles for members of the court with a view to suiting the former to the respective courtier’s personality. The consequence of this was the characteristic simultaneous visibility of both the fictional character impersonated on the stage and the actor impersonating them. In Conchis’ masque, presentation is made to almost obliterate representation, thus sustaining the masque on the edge-thin liminal space between fiction and

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9 In her study of Shakespeare’s romances, Boika Sokolova employs the terms *presentation* and *representation*, taken from Brechtian theatre theory, to characterise the techniques through which the plays carry out an interrogation of their ideology. She points out the relevance of Brecht for a discussion of Shakespeare’s romances, referring to Brecht’s argument that Shakespeare’s plays lend themselves to what he termed *epic* theatre (1992: 21). My argument here is that the placing of the pastoral romance pattern of *The Tempest* in Conchis’ masque heavily tips the balance between presentational and representational techniques in the play in favour of the former.
reality, where fiction often stands for an ethically vacuous, escapist vision of pastoral.

Conchis’ use of the masque as the structuring form of his metatheatre marks yet another shift. The masque is divested of the original functions it used to have in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, which, according to Stephen Orgel, are basically two:

on the simplest level as an entertainment of the court, and on the most complex level as a celebration of the court it entertained. The more elaborate the work, the more likely it was to contain allegorical or symbolic representations of its strictly occasional subjects, so that the court was diverted with idealizations of itself and hymns to its own glory, in which particular moments were translated into myth. (1993: 362)

The aesthetic role of the masque as socially circumscribed entertainment and its ideological role in absolutising the power of the monarch are replaced in the novel by an ethical function, working as it does in the direction of disenchancing Nicholas with his escapist aestheticism and of leading him to embrace the mystery that life and the other hold for the self. This move is meant to facilitate Nicholas’ transformation into a magus of the kind that he is to encounter in “The Prince and the Magician” tale.

The discrediting of purely aestheticist pastoral as symptomatic of disengagement with ethical responsibility is reinforced by yet another historically contextualised description of the pastoral masque—that which Nicholas finds earmarked in a book on eighteenth-century French masques, recommended to him by Conchis:

Visitors who went behind the high walls of Saint-Martin had the pleasure of seeing across the green lawns and among the groves, shepherds and shepherdesses, who danced and sang, surrounded by their white flocks. They were not always dressed in eighteenth-century clothes. Sometimes they wore costumes in the Roman and Greek styles: and in this way the odes of Theocritus and the bucolics of Virgil were brought to life. It was even said that there were more scandalous scenes—charming nymphs who on summer nights fled in the moonlight from strange dark shapes, half man, half goat. (Fowles 2004: 165)

The three aspects foregrounded by this description are: the status which the masque has retained as a privilege and a favourite pastime of the French aristocracy; its conscious artificiality (no pretence here of replicating anything more than a literary convention); and the morally compromising ambivalence of the masque allowing for behaviour that would have been considered morally reprehensible outside of it, even under the guise of innocent entertainment.
When staging the masque at Bourani Conchis picked up and further enhanced the artifice made prominent in the quoted excerpt. The effect of defamiliarisation produced by the dramatic techniques is further enhanced by setting the masque in the art-pervaded space of the villa.

From what has been said so far, it can be inferred that the version of pastoral romance demystified by Conchis’ masque in particular and by the novel in general is of a naïve, escapist, and most artificial type. This is not to say that either *The Tempest* or the whole of eighteenth-century pastoral romance fall within this category. Rather, the implication is that Nicholas has acted the imperfect, biased reader in turning a deaf ear to those self-reflexive tendencies in both instances of pastoral romance that justify their recognition as sophisticated instead of naïve. For him, the self-reflexive doubts raised in the play about the premises of its moral vision are non-existent. The severely impaired vision that Nicholas demonstrates in regard to the ethical implications of this more complex kind of pastoral romance explains the exclusively aestheticising bent of his interpretative methods.

**Pastoral Romance and the New Ethics**

At the same time as it exposes and frustrates Nicholas’ biased reading of events in Bourani as a frivolous amoral pastoral, the masque also works within the pattern of Shakespeare’s play to achieve, within the locus of the pastoral sojourn and through the magic of its magus, the articulation of a new ethics. This re-engagement with the play taps the resources of the overlap, mentioned earlier, of the green world of pastoral with the second world of fiction that originated in the Renaissance.

Crucial to this second element in the dynamic binding of the play and the novel is the revalorisation to which the character of Prospero is subjected, for he is the figure in whose discourse the key notions of the play—magic, art, love, nature, nurture—are validated. In the novel, the magus appears reinvested with qualities which make of his magic a power feeding positive energy into life.

One of the ways in which Shakespeare’s magus is reevaluated is through remotivation. Conchis’ role in the masque as a manipulative whimsical god turns him into a caricature-like projection of Prospero. At moments, very much like his prototype, Conchis gives vent to that irascibility which undermines his image as a benevolent, justice-dispensing, god-like magician. It is important to note, however, that this behaviour is differently motivated in the case of Prospero and Conchis. In the former, it is a trait of character that marks him as less than perfect and, consequently, makes the providential justification he claims for his magic rather suspect. In the latter, it is a histrionic performance,