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Constructing Reality

Constructivism and Narration in John Fowles's *The Magus*

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The Brain - is wider than the Sky

For - put them side by side -

The one the other will contain

With ease - and You - beside -

Emily Dickinson

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1. Introduction

> A word [...] is never the destination, merely a signpost in its general direction; and whatever transient physical, psychological, or moral body that destination finally acquires owes quite as much to the reader as to the writer.[1]

In John Fowles's *The Magus* the number of signposts is large. These, however, do not point in a certain direction, but rather indicate from many different angles possible ways to an understanding of that complex novel. Accordingly various are the approaches by which literary research has tried to analyze and interpret *The Magus*.

John Fowles considers the novel to be his first work for he already started writing down the first drafts about strange events on a Greek island in the early fifties. But it was as late as 1965, after the publication of *The Collector and The Aristos*, that he published the revised manuscript. However, the increasing academic interest in *The Magus* is probably not least due to the fact that in 1977, more than a decade after the first publication, John Fowles published the novel in an extensively revised edition. As the decisive reason for his decision to rework the first version Fowles mentioned a sense of guilt: "I knew I had committed a very ancient literary crime. Obsessed with the story I had neglected its articulation. I had published before I was ready."[2] That feeling of guilt is further explained:

> I do not believe that the intentions matters more than the craft, idea more than language; and I do believe almost all major human evils in our world come from betrayal of the word at a very humble level. In short, I have always felt with *The Magus* like an insufficiently arrested murderer.[3]

In his comparison of both versions Ronald Binns summarizes the alterations Fowles undertook: "The style is clarified; unintentional ambiguities are removed; the masque is opened up to a more sceptical

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[1] John Fowles (1984): "Foreword by John Fowles." In: H. W. Fawkner: *The Timescapes of John Fowles.* London, Toronto: Associated University Press, p.11.

[2] John Fowles (1986b): "Why I Rewrote *The Magus*." In: *Critical Essays on John Fowles*, ed. by Ellen Pifer. Boston: Hall, p.94.

[3] Fowles (1986b), p.95.

analysis."[4] The new version, Binns concludes, is clearer without the mysterious atmosphere having been destroyed.[5]

Before introducing the approach underlying my own study, I should like to start with a brief survey of research on *The Magus* in order to give an impression of those aspects of the novel which have mainly been elucidated up to now.[6] Robert Scholes's essay, first published in 1969 in *The Hollins Crititic,* in which he remarked that *The Magus* "has been denied the attention it deserves"[7], can be regarded as the beginning of the academic discussion of the novel. His analysis starts at the question whether there is an ethical commitment and meaningfulness to justify the formal virtuosity of the novel. According to Scholes this is a very interesting question "because it is precisely the relationship between the ethical and the esthetic which is the central theme in the book's structure of meanings."[8] His approach, i.e. the problem of the relation between art and life, has been taken up by literary researchers again and again. William J. Palmer, for instance, suggests that this relation is not only one of the central concerns of *The Magus* but that it is even one of the basic themes of each of Fowles's novels. As Palmer concludes, Fowles emphasizes in his novels that "[l]ife and art must imitate each other."[9] Picking out this problematic relation as a topic of his fiction has earned John Fowles the reputation of an author "whose emphases and concerns are very much of a piece with aesthetic speculation in the novel elsewhere, especially in the American novel."[10] Thanks to, above all, the

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[4] Ronald Binns (1977): "A New Version of *The Magus*." In: *Critical Quarterly 19.4*, p.79. For a comparison of both editions of *The Magus* see also Michael Boccia (1980-81): " 'Visions and Revisions': John Fowles's New Version of *The Magus*." In: *Journal of Modern Literature 8*, pp.235-246.

[5] See also Robert Huffaker (1980): *John Fowles.* Boston: Twayne, p.45. According to Karen M. Lever, however, the revised version is "not more polished than the earlier work; [it is] simply duller. New infelicities of language have crept in" (Karen M. Lever: "The Education of John Fowles." In: *Critique 21.2*, p.86).

[6] For a more comprehensive survey of the studies on John Fowles see James R. Aubrey (1991): *John Fowles. A Reference Companion.* New York, Westport, London: Greenwood. See also William J. Palmer (1985): "John Fowles and the Crickets." In: *Modern Fiction Studies 31.1,* pp.3-13.

[7] Here quoted from Robert Scholes (1979): *Fabulation and Metafiction.* Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, p.37.

[8] Scholes (1979), p.37.

[9] William J Palmer (1975): *The Fiction of John Fowles. Tradition, Art, and the Loneliness of Selfhood.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, p.77.

[10] Malcolm Bradbury (1973): "The Novelist as Impresario: John Fowles and His Magus." In: M. Bradbury: *Possibilities. Essays on the State on the Novel.* London: Oxford University Press, p.259.

explicitly self-reflexive strategies in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the metafictional approach has become one of the most established approaches in literary research on John Fowles's work. As a consequence, *The Magus*, too, has increasingly been studied with regard to metafictional aspects.[11]

The numerous allusions to myths and symbols indicate another direction from which to approach the novel. Roberta Rubenstein regards the mythological and mysterious as the basic motif as well as the underlying structure of the whole novel:[12]

> Fowles uses "mystery" in the novel in two ways: the unknown manifests itself as mystery in the sacred sense (the deeply symbolic aspects of experience, often conceptualized through myth) and in the profane sense (the "mystery" story).[13]

Avrom Fleishman understands *The Magus* as a modern version of the Orpheus myth, also acknowledging, however, a connection between Nicholas's quest and the Odyssey. Furthermore, he points out clear parallels to the Greek mystery cult of Eleusis, suggesting that the Eleusinian mysteries became a model for the ritual of education in Fowles's novel.[14] Moreover, Ellen McDaniel observes, „John Fowles in *The Magus* is looking for a new set of mythic symbols.“[15] These he finds in the symbols of the Tarot. Both the figure of the Magus and of the Fool, the latter being an expression Nicholas repeatedly uses to describe himself, are figures from the set of Tarot symbols. The fool, McDaniel explains, “is the principal in the Tarot, for he is the persona who must travel the circuit of cards through a calibrated progression out of ignorance and frivolity into enlightenment.”[16] According to Barry N.

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[11] Aside from Malcolm Bradbury see also, among others, Frederick M. Holmes (1985a): "Art, Truth, and John Fowles's *The Magus*." In: *Modern Fiction Studies 31.1*, pp.45-56; and Barbara L. Hussey (1983): "John Fowles's *The Magus*: The Book and the World." In: *International Fiction Review 10.1*, pp.19-26.

[12] Lucien de Bouille interprets the mythologies in *The Magus* as allegories "of the second or third degree [...], implying successive initiations" and suggests that "mystery is the axis" which connects all of John Fowles's works (Lucien de Bouille (1980-81): "John Fowles: Looking for Guidelines." In: *Journal of Modern Literature 8.2*, p.204).

[13] Roberta Rubenstein (1975): "Myth, Mystery, and Irony: John Fowles's *The Magus*." In: *Contemporary Literature 16.3*, p.329.

[14] Cf. Avrom Fleishman (1986): "*The Magus* of the Wizard of the West." In: *Critical Essays on John Fowles*, ed. by E. Pifer, pp.83. See also Huffaker (1980), pp.62.

[15] Ellen McDaniel (1986): "*The Magus*: Fowles's Tarot Quest." In: *Critical Essays on John Fowles*, ed. by E. Pifer, p.108.

[16] Ellen McDaniel (1986), p.108.

Olshen, the Tarot provides Fowles “with a fund of ready-made symbols and a framework with which to personify and dramatize the various aspects and stages of the process of individuation."[17]

Nicholas’s initiation to self-realization is based on the psychology of C. G. Jung, whose influence John Fowles emphasizes in his preface to *The Magus.* This influence becomes even more obvious in the revised edition, where Conchis reveals that he was a student of Jung’s. Robert Huffaker sees Conchis's 'godgame' as a conversion of Jung’s analytic psychology and regards this as the key to the understanding and the plausibility of the novel.[18] Julius R. Raper not only bases his interpretation on Jungian psychology but also approaches the character of Nicholas from other psychological perspectives, falling back, additionally, upon the theories of Sigmund Freud and Heinz Kohut.[19]

Another realm of literary approaches consists of studies concerned with the influences of existentialist philosophy. These studies analyze the way in which John Fowles deals with existentialist terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘ethics’ in his novels.[20] Barry N. Olshen points out parallels between existentialist psychotherapy and C. G. Jung’s process of individuation and suggests that “Conchis’s injunction concerning the point of fulcrum [provides] the simultaneous suggestion” of both of these theories.[21] In *The Aristos* John Fowles emphasizes his attachment to existentialism,[22] supporting this statement in "Notes on an Unfinished

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[17] Barry N. Olshen (1976): "John Fowles's *The Magus*: An Allegory of Self-Realization." In: *Journal of Popular Culture 9*, p.922.

[18] Cf. Huffaker (1980), p.58, and Olshen (1976), pp.920-922. Carol M. Barnum interprets this connection of mythology and Jungian psychology as the structuring of a modern, new myth with the aim of moral instruction (Carol M. Barnum (1988): *The Fiction of John Fowles: A Myth for Our Time.* Greenwood: Penkeville Publishing, pp.150).

[19] See Julius R. Raper (1988): "John Fowles: The Psychological Complexity of *The Magus*." In: *American Imago 45*, pp.61-83.

[20] See for instance Jeff Rackham (1970-72): "John Fowles: The Existential Labyrinth." In: *Critique 13.3*, pp.89-103; Peter Wolfe (1975): "John Fowles: The Existential Tension." In: *Studies in the Twentieth Century 16*, pp.111-145.

[21] Olshen (1976), pp.919. For an illustration of existentialist psychoanalysis see Jean-Paul Sartre "La Psychoanalyse Existentielle." In: J.-P. Sartre (1943): *L'Être et le Néant. Essai d'Ontologie Phénoménologique.* Paris: Gallimard, pp.616-635.

[22] See John Fowles (1993): *The Aristos. Revised Edition.* London: Picador, pp.121-123. In this collection of aphorisms first published in 1964 and subtitled "A self-portrait in ideas", Fowles expounds his philosophical views and principles, mainly referring to and elaborating basic thoughts of Heraclitus. In his monograph on John Fowles, however, James Acheson traces the development of Fowles’s fiction, pointing out that by the 1970s, the author‘s interest in existentialism had begun to wane (James Acheson (1998): *John Fowles.* London: Macmillan).

Novel" by admitting that his novels are based on "more or less disguised existential premises"[23].

A great amount of literary research deals with tracing central themes throughout John Fowles's complete works. These studies have frequently pointed out that though at first sight his novels seem to be hardly comparable, they nevertheless take up again and again certain ideas and structures.[24] With regard to John Fowles's major concern *The Magus*, according to Susana Onega, holds a very central position, for it contains all the fundamental ideas Fowles deals with in his novels. She concludes that

> [It] is no exaggeration to say that he has spent the rest of his literary career trying to rewrite *The Magus*, for, with its neat threefold structure of the (existentialist) hero's quest for maturity, *The Magus* may be said to constitute the nucleus of the writer's thought around which the other novels grow.[25]

A new approach to *The Magus* was introduced by Ernst von Glaserfeld. His fascination with that novel, Glaserfeld wrote in his review of the novel in 1979, had a single source*:*

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[23] John Fowles (1977a): "Notes on an Unfinished Novel." In: *The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.140.

[24] For William J. Palmer, for instance, these central themes in John Fowles's fiction are art and life as well as aesthetics and existentialism (Palmer (1975), p.2), while Robert Detweiler mainly emphasizes the opposition of "obsessive possession versus freedom" (Robert Detweiler (1971): "The Unity of John Fowles's Fiction." In: *Notes on Contemporary Literature 1.2*, p.3). Simon Loveday names four fundamental thematic fields: "the Few and the Many; the domaine; the contrast between the masculine and the feminine character; and the importance of freedom" (Simon Loveday (1985): *The Romances of John Fowles.* London: MacMillan, p.3).

[25] Susana Onega (1989): *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles.* Ann Arbor, London: UMI Research Press, p.9. According to Karen M. Lever, however, the recurrence of themes indicates that John Fowles has failed to develop. She points out two basic patterns in his novels, which are intertwined: "first, Fowles has obsessively written and rewritten the novel of education with which it is natural to begin a career, to the exclusion of almost all other themes; second, he has [...] at the same time remained unregenerate in regard to precisely those 'philosophical lessons' his protagonists must learn" (Lever (1980), p.87). Again I should like to refer to James Acheson's study, in which he tries to demonstrate the development in John Fowles's works.

> [It] is one of a small number of literary works into which I can read, without apparent effort on my part, a view of the world and a constructivist theory of knowledge that I have worked at for a good many years.[26]

Ernst von Glaserfeld is regarded as one of the most distinguished representatives of constructivism.[27] On the basis of discoveries of cognitive biology as well as cognitive psychology,[28] constructivist philosophy assumes that any experience of reality is dependent on the experiencer. Constructivism proposes a changed comprehension of the relation between knowledge and reality: it is not possible to create a *representation* of an objective reality but only to construct a *model* of reality as we experience it. This assumption is the reason why the constructivists are no longer interested in questions concerning the ontological nature of reality, instead they only focus on questions concerning cognitive processes. Along with Ernst von Glaserfeld Heinz von Foerster, Paul Watzlawik, Humberto R. Maturana, and Francisco Varela should be mentioned as further important representatives of constructivism.[29]

The fundamental epistemological principles of constructivism have been taken up by the only recently developed discipline of empirical literary studies.[30] Ansgar Nünning, however, complains that 'traditional' literary studies have very much neglected constructivist ideas and approaches. And yet it is literature above all else that opens up an unrestricted area to construct alternative models of reality. For a literary theory following constructivist conceptions, Nünning declares, all fictional

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[26] Ernst von Glaserfeld (1979): "Reflections on John Fowles's *The Magus* and the Construction of Reality." In: *The Georgia Review 33*, p.444.

[27] This philosophical movement is also referred to as 'radical constructivism'. It was Ernst von Glaserfeld who coined that phrase, and it is meant to express that constructivism breaks radically with the traditional idea of epistemology that there is an iconic relation between knowledge and reality. See Ernst von Glaserfeld (1997): "Einführung in den radikalen Konstruktivismus." In: *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit. Wie wissen wir, was wir zu wissen glauben? Beiträge zum Konstruktivismus*, ed. by Paul Watzlawik. 9. edition, Munich: Piper, p.19.

[28] Humberto R. Maturana was the first to use the results of cognitive biology to strengthen the ideas of constructivism. The fundament of cognitive psychology is mainly due to Jean Piaget's studies on the cognitive development of children. See, for instance, J. Piaget (1937): *La Construction du Réel chez Enfant.* Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé.

[29] For details concerning the historical origins of constructivist ideas see Ernst von Glaserfeld (1995): *Radical Constructivism. A Way of Knowing and Learning.* London: Falmer Press, pp.24-52. Glaserfeld names the pre-Socratian Xenophanes as the first philosopher to doubt the correspondence of knowledge and reality.

[30] For an introduction see Siegfried J. Schmidt (1980-82): *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft.* 2 vol., Braunschweig, Wiesbaden: Vieweg.

texts are of interest that convey the idea of the constructive nature of reality, past, and identity, as well as of the subjectivity of perception, knowledge, meaning.[31]

The approach this study is based upon follows the opinion held by both Ernst von Glaserfeld and Ansgar Nünning that John Fowles's *The Magus* is a constructivist novel. In the first chapter of my study, which is divided into four main parts, I, therefore, shall expound the fundamental principles and concepts of constructivism as well as the consequences resulting from that concept of reality.

The second part starts with a description of the initial situation and the state of personality characterizing the protagonist Nicholas Urfe before he enters the mysterious world of Maurice Conchis, the 'Magus' of the novel. The emphasis of that chapter is on Nicholas's want of orientation, on his relation to other people, in particular his relationship with Alison Kelly, and on first indications of a change in outlook provoked by the new surroundings in Greece.

What follows is an analysis demonstrating the way in which the characters in the novel construct reality. I will begin by looking at the artificial world Conchis creates for Nicholas. The main interest of that part of my study, however, will then be on analyzing the conflict Nicholas finds himself in through the confrontation of his own concept of reality with Conchis's unreal world. This aspect is subdivided into three fields. First, I shall describe Nicholas's futile attempts to make sense of the situation he finds himself in. After that, a close examination of his relation to the figure of Lily-Julie will allow us to look at the protagonist's concept of women in general, which is closely linked with his romantic self-image. The constructive character of Nicholas's identity, therefore, provides the third field of analysis. Here the focus will also be on pointing out Nicholas's development towards a realization of the relativity of his concept of reality.

In the ensuing third part of this study, I will point out the way in which the concept of the 'godgame', as well as John Fowles's employment of metafictional strategies, not only demonstrate to the reader the constructive nature of the novel but also the active part they play themselves in the process of this construction.

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[31] See Ansgar Nünning (1989): "Bausteine einer konstruktivistischen Erzähltheorie. Die erzählerische Umsetzung konstruktivistischer Konzepte in den Romanen von John Fowles." In: *DELFIN 13.3*, p.3.

Thus the aim of my study is to detect the translation of constructivist ideas into practice in *The Magus*. The fourth and concluding part, then, is meant to bring together constructivist thoughts and the results of my own analysis of the novel. Over and above that, however, the main focus is on suggesting what it is that John Fowles implies with the concept of reality he illustrates in *The Magus*, and on indicating clear parallels between the consequences of a constructivist world view and John Fowles's major concerns.

In the following text I will quote very frequently from both John Fowles's works *The Magus* and *The Aristos*. In order not to detract from the readability of the text, the page references will be inserted at the end of the quotations in question, preceded by (*M*...) for *The Magus* or (*A*...) for *The Aristos*.

2. Man and Reality

2.1 Perception

Constructivism is not interested in analyzing reality as such but focuses on the relation between man and the reality he lives in. The existence of some kind of ontological reality[32], though, is not at all denied. A very important starting-point for constructivist thinking is the examination of the physiological fundaments of our relation to the world. For it is only via the perception of our senses that we are able to have access to the world around us.

Here, one major aspect is that among the numerous stimuli acting on our organisms there are only a limited number of them that have an effect on our sense organs.[33] Moreover, physiology distinguishes two different ways of processing these stimuli. While it is possible to analyze the effect of the stimuli influencing the sense organs as a chain of physico-chemical events (this field therefore being called 'objective physiology of the senses'), the ensuing sensory impressions are already subjective and as such elements of sensation. Usually, we try to interpret these sensations of our senses immediately, classifying them in accordance with what we have previously experienced and learned. Thus sensation is turned into sensory perception. The field of subjective physiology of the senses, then, takes these subjective sensations and perceptions to examine the achievements of our sense organs.[34]

The problematic nature of the belief that we are able to create an objective picture of reality, then, is already apparent in the field of physiology. Heinz von Foerster gives some vivid examples of the fact that

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[32] The term 'ontology' I will use only to refer to the world of *being* in the sense of a world already structured, existing independent of our experience. Ernst von Glaserfeld points out the ambiguity of the term within the philosophical discourse, with the second meaning also including all those more or less well-founded premises necessary to put forward hypotheses. He employs the terms 'ontologogy' and 'ontologigal' only in the first sense, for, as he puts it, constructivism does not conceal that the construction of its epistemological model is based on a whole range of assumptions not to be proven, which, however, it tries to justify with the coherence of the model it suggests. See Ernst von Glaserfeld (1987): "Siegener Gespräche über Radikalen Konstruktivismus." In: *Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus*, ed. by Siegfried J. Schmidt. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987, pp. 401).

[33] Cf. H. Handwerker (1989): "Allgemeine Sinnesphysiologie." In: *Physiologie des Menschen*, ed. by Robert F. Schmidt, Gergard Thews. Berlin: Springer, p.186.

[34] Cf. Handwerker (1989), p.186.

a stimulus is only perceived if the sensory sensation becomes interpretable on the basis of former experiences. He outlines situations where people hear or see what is *not* 'there', or do not perceive what *is* 'there' if the interaction of sensory impression and movement does not enable them to understand what seems to be there.[35]

Though the stimuli around us act directly on our sense organs and activate them, sensory perception does not take place within the receptors in question but in specific sensory regions of the brain where the sense organs send their signals. These neural impulses as such, however, are sensorily unspecific signals, i.e. it is impossible to differentiate whether, for instance, they have been provoked by visual or acoustic excitation, since sensory stimuli are transformed into electric impulses in the sense organs. In other words, the diverse external influences are translated into a bioelectric 'standard language', the only language the brain is able to understand.[36] Thus, having access to the outer world only through the sensory receptors, the brain is not environmentally open, but is a functionally closed system, i.e. it is only able to understand its own 'language', which is independent of the external world, and only works with its own conditions.[37] Gerhard Roth summarizes the consequences resulting from these discoveries as follows: "Wahrnehmung ist demnach Bedeutungszuweisung zu an sich bedeutungsfreien neuronalen Prozessen, ist Konstruktion und Interpretation."[38]

This suggestion is based on the fact that in the brain, the area of processing signals is also in charge of creating meaning, which in turn implies that impulses can only have the meanings that have been assigned to them by the part of brain in question. Gerhard Roth therefore calls the brain a functionally and semantically self-referential or self-

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[35] Cf. Heinz von Foerster (1997): "Das Konstruieren einer Wirklichkeit." In: *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit*, ed. by P. Watzlawik, p.43.

[36] Cf. Gerhard Roth (1987): "Erkenntnis und Realität: Das reale Gehirn und seine Wirklichkeit." In: *Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus*, ed. by S. J. Schmidt, p.232.

[37] Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt (1987): "Der Radikale Konstruktivismus: Ein neues Paradigma im interdisziplinären Diskurs." In: *Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus*, ed. by S. J. Schmidt, p.14.

[38] "Perception, therefore, is the assignment of meaning to neural processes, that are as such free of meaning, it is construction and interpretation" (my translation). Gerhard Roth (1986): "Selbstorganisation - Selbsterhaltung - Selbstreferentialität: Prinzipien der Organisation der Lebewesen und ihre Folgen für die Beziehung zwischen Organismus und Umwelt." In: *Selbstorganisation. Die Entstehung von Ordnung in Natur und Gesellschaft*, ed. by A. Dress et al. Munich: Piper, p.149.

explicative system.[39] That such a closed system as the brain can acquire the 'knowledge' about its environment necessary to survive is, to begin with, based on innate organizing principles, i.e. principles developed in the course of evolution, as well as on organizing principles developed in mould-like learning processes during early childhood.

In addition to that, the brain checks to what extent pieces of information that are simultaneously transmitted by different sensory areas correspond, a process which Roth calls "parallel consistency check" ("parallele Konsistenzprüfung"[40]). 'Knowledge' about the external world, though, can be acquired, above all, with the help of what Roth calls "consecutive consistency check" ("konsekutive Konsistenzprüfung"[41]), which is undertaken by memory. Memory carries out this check by comparing presently acting sensory excitations with earlier excitations and the consequences of their interpretation. In contrast to checking stimuli on the basis of innate organizing principles or with the help of a parallel consistency check, the consecutive consistency check is flexible and, what is even more important, offers the chance of correction.

The assumption that the brain is a self-referential system which, though it can be influenced by external stimuli, can only fall back upon its own resources to assign meanings to them, is one of the fundamental aspects of constructivist theory. For if external influences are accessible to the brain only as unspecific electric impulses, it is hardly possible to ascertain to what extent the pictures composed in our brains can be representations of the world around us. This final indefiniteness is the reason why constructivist thinking does not deal with analyzing the nature of the ontological world independent of the observer. Instead, the constructivists are interested in questions concerning the cognitive processes which enable the brain to create such a diversified and apparently complete picture of reality. Thus, the self-referentiality of the brain, from a constructivist point of view, suggests that the world around us as we perceive it is our own construction.

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[39] Roth (1987), p.240. According to Gerhard Roth, functional self-referentiality of a system means that any state of that system results from the interaction of former states and cannot be controlled externally therefore. This, however, does not imply complete isolation since self-referential systems, as Roth points out, can be influenced from outside. The effect of these external influences, though, are completely determined by the system itself. Semantic self-referentiality implies that the meanings that are assigned to the own states come from the system itself (see Roth (1987), p.241).

[40] Roth (1987), p.242.

[41] Roth (1987), p.243.

2.2 Cognition and Knowledge

The assumption that the brain constructs our pictures of reality has some consequences as regards our conception of knowledge and cognition. The constructivist point of view must not, however, be equated with solipsism, for there is at least one major difference: While solipsist epistemology is based on the idea that the external world only exists within the consciousness of the self and that the self that creates that image is the only reality, constructivism does accept the existence of an ontological reality.[42] It doubts, however, that it is possible to create a complete representation of that world beyond our consciousness, because the external world can only act on the closed cognitive system of the brain as an external stimulus, whereby certain independent processes may be triggered off.

Thus knowledge does not arise from passive acquisition but is the result of organizing the activities of active individuals.[43] This organizing activity Heinz von Foerster has in mind when he speaks of "calculating a reality". He uses the term 'calculating' to refer to any (not necessarily numerical) operation with the help of which physical objects or their representatives, i.e. symbols, can be transformed, altered, arranged, or rearranged.[44]

Just as children, in the course of development, acquire a more and more complex view of the world through the reciprocal assimilation of ideas and new experiences – supported by certain maturation processes, of course - adult knowledge is also based on experience. The impression that the knowledge of adult persons is, in contrast to that of children, 'true' knowledge results from the fact that it is based on a much greater amount of empirical knowledge. For with regard to the everyday knowledge of adults the criteria for 'truth' is, too, only based on successful assimilation of former and new experiences. As long as we do not come across contradictions within our view of the world, we are convinced that our knowledge is true. How questionable this idea of absolute, 'true' knowledge is becomes obvious if we dare to look back into human history when one 'knew', for instance, that the earth was a flat disc and the centre of the universe and when that 'knowledge' was sacrosanct. The fact that anyone who dared doubt this world picture had

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[42] For a clearly put distinction between solipsism and constructivism see Foerster (1997), pp.58.
[43] Cf. Glaserfeld (1997), p.30.
[44] Cf. Foerster (1997), p.45.

to die not only illustrates our helplessness in the face of contradictions that may become obvious with new experiences, but also demonstrates the all too human tendency to pay any price in order to ignore those contradictions and be able to keep to traditional convictions, especially if the new experiences call not only for some minor modifications but rather a completely new construction of our world picture.

What is also questionable, as I have mentioned above, is to what extent our knowledge of the world and the ontological reality correspond. Our attempts at explaining the phenomena we find ourselves confronted with do not allow for conclusions as regards their real nature, but are based on functional assimilation. That means that the function of knowledge is not to reflect objective reality, but rather to enable us to act and reach our aims in the world we live in.[45] The fact that we may have been able to maintain a cognitive construct for many years or even generations, however, does not at all imply that we are allowed to pretend that we know know the nature of ontological reality, but it simply implies that we know *one* possible way towards a destination we chose under certain conditions of the world of our experience. It tells neither anything about the number and existence of other possible ways nor about the connection between the experience in question and the world beyond that experience.[46]

What we call knowledge always arises from hypotheses, theories, and ideas we put forward on the basis of experiences we have had within the range of our life or which we received as an innate behaviour pattern. However, we are never able to say for certain what the world outside of our perception is really like, neither how close our own ideas are to this external world. The only thing we can do is determine, on the basis of failing models of explanation, what the objective reality obviously cannot be like. Our knowledge, then, is not something that is determined in the world outside of the range of our experience and can thus be discovered there, but it can be defined as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics.[47] Knowledge, in other words, cannot be *discovered*, it can rather be *invented* and exists in our own conviction that our invention must be right.

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[45] Cf. Ernst von Glaserfeld (1991): "Abschied von der Objektivität." In: *Das Auge des Betrachters. Beiträge zum Konstruktivismus*, ed. by Paul Watzlawik, Peter Krieger. Munich, Zürich: Piper, p.24.

[46] Cf. Glaserfeld (1997), p.23.

[47] Cf. Peter L Berger, Thomas Luckmann (1966): *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* New York: Doubleday, p.1.

As a consequence*, knowledge is always interpretation*. From a constructivist point of view, knowledge does not concern any 'objective' ontological reality but only the arrangement and organization of the elements of the world of our own experiences.[48] We do not discover relations in the ontological world but we interpret our subjective perceptions by assimilating them to a model of reality based on former experience, which is partially handed down from our antecedents. Thus, knowledge is active construction. It cannot be judged 'true' in the sense of 'corresponding with ontological reality', since it is not possible to check that relation. The only criteria of valuation can be its functionality and applicability. Absolute knowledge of the ontological world as sometimes proclaimed by science, then, cannot be acquired, since we cannot assume that there is a more or less one-to-one correspondence between our knowledge consisting of hypotheses and the world beyond our experiences.

2.3 Experience and Organizing Principles

It is only on the basis of our ability to store what we perceive and then to reflect on this contents of the brain, i.e. on the basis of our consciousness, that we are able to put forward hypotheses. This gives us the advantage of risking our hypothetical constructions before risking our lives. The tendency to put forward theories about our environment and our actions therein is conditioned by evolution.[49]

Furthermore, the co-ordinates we can use to shape our view of the world are innate, too. Thus, for instance, our ideas of time and space, as Immanuel Kant expounded as early as in the eigteenth century, "sind nämlich beide zusammengenommen reine Formen aller sinnlichen

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[48] Cf. Glaserfeld (1997), p.23. Jean Piaget studies which prove the necessity of motor activity when children learn to deal with their environment show that the organization of experience has to be active. Only active experience and interaction with the objects of the environment, that is an interaction of intelligence and environment, enable the development of conceptions like time and space: "L'intelligence [...] organise le monde en s'organisant elle-même" (J. Piaget (1937), p.311).

[49] For an illustration of the extent of that human tendency to put forward theories, see Watzlawik's examples of 'noncontingent reward tests'. In these experiments the subject has to put forward hypotheses without knowing that there is no relation between the subject's achievement and its evaluation by the experimenter. On the basis of this arbitrary evaluation, the subject elaborates his theory, which does not prove completely correct but, since positive echo is based on the bell curb, seems to become more and more reliable (Watzlawik (1983): *How Real is Real?* London: Souvenir Press).

Anschauung"[50] and are as such the co-ordinates for all our thinking. That they are not at all founded in the world beyond our imagination, however, but that these co-ordinates enable us to capture the structures of the external world only very roughly was proved by Albert Einstein's discovery of the time-space-continuum. According to Einstein's studies the world consists of a four dimensional curved space.[51] Though the existence of that space can be physically proved, it is beyond the limits of human comprehension. The discovery of the time-space-continuum, then, revealed the traditional forms of our view of the world to be rough approximations.[52]

Along with the ability to put forward hypotheses about our actions within the frame of certain imaginative patterns goes a fundamental determination of human consciousness. This determination does not refer to aims in the outside world, but is concerned with the evaluation of our experiences and the resulting endeavours to repeat or avoid certain experiences. Our cognitive constructs are meant to serve the purpose of systematizing experiences and their consequences. This idea of determination, however, is based on the assumption that it must be possible to ascertain regularities and, above all, causal connections in our world.[53] For Watzlawik, though, this basic assumption of causality is already a human invention. He calls it the most universal of all constructions of reality, which is not based on provable facts, but rather on wishful thinking, since the idea of living in a completely chaotic world would be unbearable.[54] Without this fundamental belief in causality, i.e. the conviction that we are able to draw conclusions from the past for future behaviour, any experience would be useless. In order to find regularities and consistency in the world of one's experiences, it is necessary to relate two or more events, that is, to compare them. The result of any comparison, however, is based on the criteria that are considered to establish similarities or dissimilarities. But then it is the examiner who chooses the criteria in question, that is, they are not

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[50] ("They are the two pure forms of sensory perception") Immanuel Kant (1781): *Kritik der reinen Vernunft.* 1. ed., p.39.

[51] According to Einstein time and space are not independent of one another, they constitute the time-space-continuum. In order to determine an event it is necessary to give not only the three spacial dimensions but to add also the dimension of time.

[52] Cf. Rupert Riedl (1997): "Die Folgen des Ursachendenkens." In: *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit*, ed. by P. Watzlawik, p. 75.

[53] Cf. Glaserfeld (1997), p.31.

[54] Cf. Paul Watzlawik (1997): "Wirkung oder Ursache." In: *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit*, ed. by P. Watzlawik, p.61.

implied by the examined phenomena themselves. On this principle of criteria selection any form of establishing categories and classes is finally based.[55]

If, then, we draw conclusions from our experiences because we assume that there is a basic principle of regularity in the world we live in, these conclusions, in turn, constitute the basis for the interpretation of new experiences. This implies that whatever we conclude from our experiences, i.e. anything we call *inductive*, is necessarily based on our own experiences and not on that mythical external reality the metaphysical realists dream of.[56] Our conclusions, however, are always dependent on the context in which we consider our experiences, that is, they are always dependent on what we relate them to, and on the features the comparison is based on. Since this, however, is a completely subjective procedure, our picture of the world is by and by constructed out of separate, self-made elements, which are conditioned by one another. For what we expect of our experiences always determines the way we interpret them.[57]

Thus, besides the forms of sensory perception such as time and space, which according to Kant are innate and form the frame beyond which thinking is altogether impossible, there are our own constructions to which we have to assimilate our experiences. That implies that we can only move within the limits of our own capacity for insight. The idea that we can draw conclusions from our constructions as regards the nature of the ontological world is rejected by constructivist philosophy, since we can only think and speak in terms that are elements of the world of our own experiences. We are not able to discover the problems that make our actions and theories fail. The only thing we are able to discover is that

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[55] See Glaserfeld, who in this context points out the necessity of distinguishing the terms 'identity' and 'equivalence'. On the basis of these criteria, he says, one determines whether the events in question will be considered as the occurrences of a single object or of two separate objects even before the comparison itself begins. These decisions determine what is regarded as an 'existing' unity (one object) or as a relation (between two or more objects), and in doing so they establish a structure in the flow of experience. This structure constitutes what the conscious cognitive organism experiences as 'reality' (Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), p.36).

[56] Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), p.31.

[57] Even in physics it has been acknowledged that the observer always influences the experiment and that, moreover, it is the theory an experiment is based on that finally decides what there is to be observed at all. (This principle has been put forward by both Werner Heisenberg and Albert Einstein. See, for instance, Werner Heisenberg (1959): *Physik und Philosophie.* Stuttgart: Hirzel. Cf. Watzlawik (1997), p.97).

an action or theory does not work. The reason for that failure, however, can only be expressed in terms that are based on successful actions.[58]

Paul Watzlawik, therefore, distinguishes two kinds of reality. First there is the level of perception, which he calls first-degree reality. As has been mentioned above, perceptions are constructions of the brain and not representations of the ontological world, but they can nevertheless be regarded as correct insofar as they are 'objective' in the sense of repeatable, scientific confirmation.[59] From that, a level of reality can be distinguished that Watzlawik calls second-degree reality. This level is the one where meaning, sense, and value is assigned to first-degree reality. It is impossible, however, to determine objectively to what extent these attributions are correct. Nevertheless, as Watzlawik points out, we are generally convinced that our way of looking at the world is a reflection of the nature of the objective world. And we never account for ourselves that it is we who assign meaning to that world.[60]

2.4 Intersubjectivity

The reason that we never account for ourselves that it is we who assign meaning to the world by relating things and experiences to each other and thus constructing a picture of reality, is based on the fact that we are just not conscious of these processes. Moreover, in everyday life there is usually no need for becoming aware of these self-made constructions. For the conviction that we experience the world in its essence has its origin exactly in the experience that our own picture of the world apparently corresponds to that of the people around us. Though in dealing with other people obvious misunderstandings arise again and

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[58] Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), p.410. Werner Heisenberg has very similar thoughts: "Alle die Begriffe, die sich in der Vergangenheit durch das Wechselspiel zwischen der Welt und uns selbst gebildet haben, sind hinsichtlich ihrer Bedeutung nicht wirklich scharf definiert. Damit ist gemeint: wir wissen nicht genau, wie weit sie uns dazu helfen können, unseren Weg durch die Welt zu finden. Oft wissen wir, daß sie auf einem sehr weiten Bereich innerer und äußerer Erfahrungen angewendet werden können, aber wir wissen niemals ganz genau, wo die Grenzen ihrer Anwendbarkeit liegen. Dies gilt selbst bei den einfachsten Begriffen wie Existenz oder Zeit und Raum. Daher wird es niemals möglich sein, durch rationales Denken allein zu einer absoluten Wahrheit zu kommen" (Werner Heisenberg: *Physik und Philosophie.* Stuttgart: Hirzel, Heisenberg (1959), p.78).

[59] Cf. Watzlawik (1983), pp.140.

[60] Watzlawik (1992): *Vom Unsinn des Sinns oder vom Sinn des Unsinns.* Vienna: Picus, p.51.

again, they can usually be resolved as soon as they are noticed. Thus, the appearance of sharing a common reality is re-established.

Here I have mentioned two fundamental factors which condition our illusion that we are capable of having a realistic picture of the external world. The first factor is that we have to become aware of misunderstandings before being able to resolve them. In other words if no insuperable contradiction surfaces, it is impossible to know to what extent we have understood correctly what our interlocutor meant and, consequently, we do not take the trouble to reflect whether our interpretation is 'correct'. The second factor is that there have to be other people to interact with. Following the Aristotelian thesis of man as "zôon politikón"[61], according to which man is a social being that cannot live in complete isolation,[62] it is impossible for an individual to construct his or her reality arbitrarily. As a social being, he or she is forced to subordinate his or her picture of reality to a certain societal reality, or rather to assimilate the two. The society one is born into, then, provides the basic skeleton around which one's own reality has to be constructed:

> I apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter. The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is constituted by an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my appearance on the scene.[63]

This pre-existing order, which serves as the basis of the construction of one's own picture of reality, is transmitted only through language. According to Berger and Luckmann, the language used in everyday life continuously "provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me"[64], i.e. it provides certain categories to assign our experience to and thus "orders the world into

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[61] Aristotle:*The Politics* I, 2; 1253a ll.2.

[62] See Aristotle: *The Politics* I, 2. 1253a 27ff.: "The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god." (The translation follows Aristotle:(1995): *The Politics*. Trans. by Ernest Barker. Oxford: Oxford University Press.)

[63] Berger/Luckmann (1966), p.21.

[64] Berger/Luckmann (1966), p.21. The term 'objectification' is derived from the Hegelian term 'Vergegenständlichung'.

objects to be apprehended as reality."[65] Similar to the way in which our forms of sensory perception, time and space, form limits beyond which, at least in everyday life, we are not able to think and act, language constitutes the co-ordinate system of life in society and fills it with meaningful objects, Berger and Luckmann suggest.[66]

Since, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguistic sign is arbitrary, i.e. since there is no natural relation between the form (*signifiant*) and the content (*signifié*) of the linguistic sign, but their union is exclusively a matter of convention, the idea that with the help of linguistic signs we are able to create a true picture of reality becomes more and more questionable. Even in the fundamental elements of language, then, it appears that the term 'reality' cannot refer to an ontological reality but that it is dependent on our own social conventions. What we call reality is based on the correspondence of our own experiences as well as on their correspondence with the experiences of our fellowhuman beings. Agreement, however, is based on communication.[67]

Therefore, communication is one of the keywords of radical constructivism since it offers the possibility to approximate objectivity. Ernst von Glaserfeld points out expressly, however, that communication is never transport in any sense but always interpretation[68] that consists of the application of one's own cognitive constructions to what one has perceived. Of course, by doing so, what has been perceived must not

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[65] Berger/Luckmann (1966), p.62. The question of the capacity of language to influence, structure, and direct our thinking is one of the basic themes of postmodernism and is dealt with in metafictional self-reflexive texts, above all. I do not want to go into further detail here since a closer look at this problem would deviate too far from my actual argumentation. Yet I should like to point out that the basic ideas of metafictional authors such as Raymond Federman and John Barth, for instance, are very close to those of radical constructivism since these authors also question reality as such and call it fiction because it does only exist in a verbalized form. See for instance Raymond Federman(1993): *Critifiction. Postmodern Essays.* New York: State University of New York Press; *Surfiction. Fiction Now ... and Tomorrow*, ed. by R. Federman. Chicago: Swallow Press. See also chapter 4.2 of this study.

[66] Cf. Berger/Luckmann (1966), p.21. I should like to emphasize that I do not at all intend to provide a solution to the problem of the relation between thinking and language. I should rather point out that the example of the formation of political terms over the centuries shows that this relation is far from being one-sided but that language has been used, partly even consciously, to influence and even shape social thinking. For an introduction to these processes see, for instance, Reinhart Kosellek (1979): "Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte." In: *Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte*, ed. by R. Kosellek. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp.19-36.

[67] Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), pp.404.

[68] Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), p.406.

conflict with one's own experiences. Thus interpretation is based on the elements of one's own world of sensation, i.e. on attributing them to the interlocutor.[69] Communication, then, is a chance for testing one's hypotheses and theories. If an interpretation meets a contradiction, the theory which has been constructed up to then has to be revised. The more reliably applicable one's own structures of interpretation seem to be to other people's experiences, the more objective that picture of reality proves to be, since its usefulness has reached a second level in this way. It does not only show, then, that one's own structures can be successfully applied, but also that they can be successfully attributed to the other.[70]

Thus, the term 'objective reality' in the constructivist sense does not refer to ontological reality but to the reliability and viability of the construction of reality, which can only be acquired by the intersubjectivity of the experiences interactive partners have within the limits of their own worlds.[71] This aspect obviously constitutes the main difference between constructivist and solipsist philosophy. Accepting the idea that the 'I' that constitutes the world of my imagination is not the only reality, but that there are other beings besides myself that not only live in my imagination, but are autonomous beings who think themselves real just as I do and thus create their own worlds, implies that I can no longer claim that my own reality is the only true reality. From this fundamental assumption Heinz von Foerster concludes that aside from the two interlocutors there has to be a third element, which serves as a central measure of comparison. This measure is the relation between the two interlocutors, i.e. between the 'I' and the 'you', and this relation, Foerster says, is called identity:

reality = community[72].

2.5 Social Interaction

Assuming that an objective picture of reality can only be acquired together with others by attributing our own constructions to them, we must not forget that any conclusion we draw from that attribution can only

[69] Glaserfeld uses the term 'das Eigene dem Anderen unterschieben', which he takes from Kant.
[70] Cf. Glaserfeld (1987), p.417.
[71] Cf. Glaserfeld (1995), p.119.
[72] Foerster (1997), p.59.

be based on interpretation. Therefore, above all else, it is this mutual attribution of our own assumptions and interpretations to other people of all things that causes new problems. Watzlawik takes these difficulties, which are inherent to any human communication, as the starting point for his studies, not least, probably, because during the many years of his work as a psychotherapist he has been confronted again and again with cases of disturbed communication. Thus he has intensely studied the effects of such disturbances, and on that basis has analyzed to what extent communication plays a part in the construction of our reality.[73]

A very important aspect here is to realize that the relationship between interlocutors is always more complex and of a different kind than the sum of the interlocutors' characteristics.[74] This is mainly due to the fact that people never live in complete isolation but always in a system that has an influence on their concepts as well as on their behaviour. Nevertheless, they are individuals and thus themselves have an influence on the system they live in. It is this constant interdependence in particular that constitutes the relationship between interlocutors, and since this relation can never be one-sided but is always based on some kind of interaction, we can assume that it follows some circular pattern where any cause has an effect which in turn causes an effect itself.[75] The problems which may arise from that principle can be illustrated by the term 'vicious circle', which not only implies the infinite continuation of the circular situation but also illustrates the impossibility of differentiating cause and effect.

If we assume that every one of us constructs his or her own reality, that is, we cannot take an ontological reality as an objective reference but need our fellow men in order to acquire a comparatively stable picture of reality, the reciprocity of cause and effect becomes quite a complicated matter. For, as has been mentioned above, we draw conclusions from the experiences we have had before, and because of these interpretations we tackle any new experience with certain expectations as regards their effects. As a consequence these expectations serve as a model for interpreting new experiences. Since we are not aware of the relativity and subjectivity of these models, however, we usually try to fit the behaviour of others into our own concept of reality. If we meet an unexpected

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[73] In *How Real is Real?* Watzlawik describes with the help of some examples how certain communicative situations determine different pictures of reality in the interlocutors and that consequently conflicts are often pre-programmed (Watzlawik (1983)).

[74] Watzlawik (1992), p.27.

[75] Watzlawik (1983), p.63.

reaction on the part of the interlocutor, it becomes more difficult to fit it in, but we still try to find an explication that is compatible with our picture of the world. Usually we do not reflect at all whether the other person's inappropriate behaviour might be due to his having a different concept of reality, which would imply that from their point of view their behaviour is absolutely natural.[76] Dealing with foreign cultures, we are generally aware in advance that difficulties might arise out of the different cultural backgrounds, i.e. we expect some misunderstanding, in particular if we deal with cultures very different from our own. Yet this awareness does not save us from applying our own categories to evaluate the other's behaviour, even more so, of course, if our interlocutor behaves in a way that would generally be possible according to our own concept.

We should not, however, labour under the illusion that in everyday contact with other people, similar problems arise only rarely, i.e. misunderstandings that are based on the fact that everyone approaches the other with a prefabricated picture the world. Because of misinterpretations on both sides, behaviour and resulting expectations influence each other mutually without the interlocutors being aware of it. This illustrates what has been described above: A relation is always of a different kind and more complex than the single phenomena involved. A certain level of objectivity can, therefore, only be acquired by attempting to look at a situation as a whole and never by taking into account only the single factors in question.

2.6 Consequences of a Constructivist World View

After introducing the model of constructivist thinking - that it is merely a model is emphasized by the constructivists again and again - I will now discuss the consequences such a working hypothesis implies.

First I should like to summarize the most important aspects of constructivism. What must be emphasized in principle is that constructivism does not deal with ontological questions, but is only interested in cognitive processes, since man has no criteria for judging his knowledge of the world 'true' or 'false'. It is not possible to make a definite statement about the true nature of anything without first making it a subject of perception; we are only able to relate our perceptions to the

[76] For some graphic examples of such misinterpretations see, for instance, Watzlawik (1992), pp.24.and Watzlawik (1983).

ones we have had before, or to perceptions of other people. Knowledge, therefore, does not refer to ontological reality but, from a constructivist point of view, must be taken as the search for viable ways of thinking and behaving.[77] Thus it is not important whether what we know is 'correct' in the sense of being a true picture of world, but whether it 'fits' in different situations, meaning that it enables us to act successfully in the world.

Since we can only approach the world via our own sensory perceptions, and since the brain is a closed system, which organizes the sense units independently and assigns meaning to sensations on the basis of former experiences and interpretations, we all construct our own realities. Nevertheless - or rather just because of this - we are dependent of other people in order to stabilize our self-constructed picture of the world. Yet misunderstandings are inevitable in human interaction. As long as we do not notice them they inevitably influence our behaviour and thus further the mere subjectivity of our concept of reality. This shows that we must become aware of the relativity of what we think is reality, since as long as we believe that our constructions of reality reflect the world in its essence without ourselves as observers influencing our perceptions because of our own expectations and theories, we will still try not only to attribute our own patterns of thinking to others, but even to force these patterns on them. But by acting in this way, a higher level of objectivity cannot be acquired, since this is only possible with the help of intersubjectivity.

Heinz von Foerster formulates an "ethical imperative" for human behaviour as a consequence of constructivist thinking: "Handle stets so, daß weitere Möglichkeiten entstehen."[78] What he means is that nobody should restrict other people's activities, but should attempt to behave in a way that enlarges the freedom of others as well as of the community. For along with an increase of freedom goes an increase of the number of choices that can be made, and thus, Foerster says, the chance to accept

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[77] Cf. Glaserfeld (1997), p.37.

[78] "Always act in a way that opens up further possibilities" (my translation), Foerster (1997), p.60. Ernst von Glaserfeld emphasizes that the realm of ethics "is no less opaque for constructivism than for other rational theories of knowledge. Nevertheless, the fact that the individual needs the corroboration of others to establish the intersubjective viability of ways of thinking and acting, entails a concern for others as autonomous constructors. If we force them in any way to conform to our ideas, we *ipso facto* invalidate them as corroborators" Glaserfeld (1995), p. 127). In order to construct an ethics it is necessary for epistemological reasons and not ethical ones to take other people into account. Constructivism, then, has answered one of the fundamental questions of any ethics on the basis of epistemology, and ethics can start from a different point than usual (Glaserfeld (1987), p.417).

responsibility for one's own actions increases. He emphasizes that freedom and responsibility go together. Only someone who is free and could therefore always act differently can act responsibly. This implies, according to Foerster, that restricting someone's freedom means taking away that person's chance to take responsibility for his actions. And this, in turn, is irresponsible.[79]

One of the main conclusions constructivism draws from its ideas is that people who accept and live up to the conviction that they are themselves the ones who construct their realities would distinguish themselves by the following three qualities:[80]

1) First, such persons would be free in the sense of not thinking themselves determined by external circumstances or some predetermined destiny. They would rather know and accept that it is only they who create their realities and that therefore they are able to restructure and improve their concepts;

2) they would be responsible in a deeply ethical sense since they would know that they have to decide completely alone on their actions and that, as a consequence, they cannot blame or hold responsible anyone else for the consequences of their actions;

3) last but not least, people who accept the constructive nature of what they experience as reality would be tolerant, since they would be aware of the relativity of their own pictures of reality and therefore would accept the potential equality of differing constructions of reality.

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[79] Cf. Heinz von Foerster (1998): "Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners. Der Philosoph und Physiker Heinz von Foerster im Gespräch mit Bernhard Pörksen." In: *Die Zeit*, 15. Januar, p.42.

[80] Cf. Watzlawik (1992), pp.74.

3. Construction of Reality in *The Magus*

3.1 The Initial situation

3.1.1 Nicholas's Want of Orientation

Nicholas Urfe is the first person narrator who tells his story years after what happened and, what has to be kept in mind, on the basis of what he learned through the experiences he had in Conchis's 'godgame'. He nevertheless allows the reader to take part in his learning process by not anticipating interpretations or explanations of the events from the point of view of his present knowledge. Thus, he presents his experiences only from the perspective from which he saw and interpreted them at the time of experiencing them. Yet it is obvious that he has become sufficiently detached from his own former behaviour. In the first part of the novel, then, he portrays himself, with the self-irony of the years that have passed since then, as an egotistical young man, who has not yet found his proper place in life and, as a result, is somewhat discontented with himself: "I began to discover that I was not the person I wanted to be" (*M*15).[81] According to Carol M. Barnum, therefore, young Nicholas represents the typical mood of a modern Everyman, "his discontent at the novel's opening mirrors the discontent of the age."[82]

Being a brigadier's son, Nicholas's education has been very authoritarian in spite of his father being rarely at home, for his mother "always behaved as if he were listening in the next room, even when he was thousands of miles away" (*M*15).[83] During his father's long absences, Nicholas again and again builds up "a more or less immaculate concept

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[81] The page numbers indicated by (*M*...) refer to quotations from the following edition: John Fowles: *The Magus. A Revised Version.* London: Vintage, 1997.

[82] Barnum (1988), p.10. She supports that suggestion by referring to the meaning of his first name: "Nicholas, meaning 'warrior of the people', hints at his responsibility as quester" (Barnum (1988), p.10). His experiences at Bourani he has as a representative of mankind. This representative function, then, answers the great question that both Nicholas himself and probably many a reader pose about the reason of the enormous efforts Conchis takes,: "But why the colossal performance just to tell one miserable moral bankrupt what he is?" (*M*626). In the preface to *The Magus* John Fowles writes that Nicholas "took on, if not the true representative face of modern Everyman, at least that of a partial Everyman of my own class and background" (*M*9).

[83] This description shows a clear parallel to what Nicholas realizes after his 'disintoxication': "always I had acted as if a third person was watching and listening and giving me marks for good or bad behaviour" (*M*539). For a closer analysis of this statement see chapter 3.3.3.

of him" (*M*15), but this concept is just as often completely destroyed as soon as his father returns home.[84] Because of the omnipresent authority of his father, young Nicholas is not at all used to taking free decisions.

Very soon he learns to lead two different lives to avoid conflicts: on the one hand, he plays the "wartime aesthete and cynic" (*M*16), on the other hand, he is the obedient son of a brigadier, who - "Tradition and Sacrifice pressganged me" (*M*16) - has to join the regiment. How unfamiliar he really is with the concept of freedom becomes obvious from his reaction to his parents' death in a plane crash: "After the first shock I felt an almost immediate sense of relief, of freedom" (*M*16).[85] He takes this newly acquired freedom as the longed-for chance finally to develop what he thinks is his real self. That not only his conception of freedom must be regarded sceptically, but also the self-image this notion is based on, is indicated by the narrator Nicholas himself from his ironical retrospective view. He gives such hints again and again in the course of his narrative by using critically distant phrases:

> I now had no family to trammel down *what I regarded as my real self*. I may have been weak in filial charity, but I was strong on the discipline in vogue. At least, along with a group of fellow odd men out at Magdalen, *I thought I was so* (*M*16-17, my italics).

The group of "fellow odd men out" call themselves 'Les Hommes Révoltés'. Their revolt, however, is restricted to their moodiness and selfishness and is based on the need to be different from their fellow students (*M*17). To Nicholas that group offers a chance to put up resistance to his father's conception of the world. Only towards the end of his time at Oxford, though, does he realize that he is far from having found his true self, but that he has rather created an artificial identity which has arisen from an unconscious protest against his father:

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[84] Nicholas's tendency to build up ideal concepts or images he tries to make other people correspond to, then, is apparent already in his childhood.

[85] Barry N. Olshen emphasizes that the protagonists of Fowles' *The Collector* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Frederick Clegg and Sarah Woodruff, respectively) are orphans, too. He concludes that "the elimination of the parents allows Fowles more easily to present his characters in the same way he views people, that is, as fundamentally isolated" (Barry N. Olshen (1978): *John Fowles.* New York: Ungar. p.34). In John Fowles's later novels *Daniel Martin* and *A Maggot*, this isolation is also present: Daniel Martin is an orphan, too, later emigrating to the USA, while Rebecca Lee, one of the protagonists in *A Maggot*, has been repudiated by her parents.

> I was still no less under his influence. The truth was I was not a cynic by nature; only by revolt. I had got away from what I hated, but I hadn't found where I loved, and so I pretended that there was nowhere to love (*M*17).

When he finishes his studies, he has neither learned much about himself nor has he any particular idea of how he would like to organize his life. Rather, he finds himself in some kind of personal no man's land without any particular ambition, but merely with the "first-class illusion: that I was a poet" (*M*17). He takes up a teaching job he is offered since this is the only one of his applications that is successful, in spite of his plain disorientation and lack of commitment ("I didn't feel obliged to show the eager enthusiasm our world expects from the young executive", *M*18). Having worked for only a year at the school, Nicholas hands in his notice for that job because he thinks the school's atmosphere is unbearably depressing - "And it was real boredom, not my modish ennui" (*M*18). He regards the school as a "toy model of the entire country" and thus decides "that to quit the one and not the other would be ridiculous" (*M*18).[86] This argument, however, is qualified by the narrator's apparently casual remark "[t]here was also a girl I was tired of" (*M*18). Nicholas's desire to organize his life differently, then, does not really arise from a need for personal development, but rather from a feeling of helplessness in a certain situation and the resulting need to run away. Susana Onega summarizes Nicholas's situation as follows:

> Urfe presents himself as an intelligent but spoiled young man who wants to lead a full, creative life, but for the wrong reasons and primarily for the sake of impressing others.[87]

This discontent with himself that characterizes Nicholas's life is based on what John Fowles in *The Aristos* calls "the nemo"[88]. Following Sigmund Freud's division of the human psyche into the three parts 'id',

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[86] Susana Onega interprets this urge to escape from the restrictions of his home country "in search of transcendence", a sensation he shares with many Modernist and Postmodernist authors as, "in mythological terms, [...] the origin of his 'call to adventure'" (Onega (1989), p.40). She points out that *The Magus* shares the traditional quest structure, diverging from it, however, in the characteristics of the hero and his quest with Nicholas's journey taking place simultaneously on two levels: "the physical journey moves forward and echoes the traditional mythological hero's quest, whereas the mental journey follows its own psychological logic and is best described as a fictionalization of the process of individuation of the self, in Jungian terms" (Onega (1989), p.35). See also Olshen (1976), p.918.

[87] Onega (1989), p.40.

[88] Cf. Huffaker (1980), pp.50-52.

'ego', and 'super-ego', Fowles defines the 'nemo' as the fourth psychic element of each human psyche. The term not only means " 'nobody' but also the state of 'nobodiness' [, ...] an anti-ego" (*A*47). It works as a negative force on the human self since it is "a man's sense of his own futility and ephemerality; of his relativity, his comparativeness; of his virtual nothingness" (M49) The 'nemo', Fowles says, is the fear to fail and to be forgotten, in short, the fear to be a Nobody:

> And our nemo gains power over our behaviour to the extent that we believe that were it not for the faults of the human condition, or of society, or of our education, or of our economic position, then we might be what we can imagine. It grows, in short, in strict relation to our sense and knowledge of general and personal inequality (*A*48).

This description applies to Nicholas. He is not content with his life and blames his parents for his not being able to develop in the way he would like. He has no concrete idea, though, of what that development should have been like, for he does not have a clear concept of his own character but is a slave to his own delusions. About his future he has just as few ideas. It is due to this uncertainty and disorientation that he is not able to change either his life or himself.[89] The fact, however, that he does not realize his own inability to act, but regards himself as restricted and captivated by external circumstances explains his feelings after the plane crash. Nicholas thinks that his parents' death solves all the problems that kept him from self-realization. But his behaviour after the plane crash shows plainly that he is still controlled by his nemo, for in the club of 'Les Hommes Revoltés' he by no means finds his true self. The way he behaves in that apparently elitist community rather resembles what John Fowles in *The Aristos* describes as one of the principal ways of defeating one's nemo:

> I can encounter my nemo by conflicting; by adopting my own special style of life. I build up an elaborate unique *persona*, I defy the mass. I am the bohemian, the dandy, the outsider, the hippy (*A*50).[90]

Thus, playing the lone wolf, a behaviour Nicholas puts on especially with women to receive attention (see 3.1.2) is just as little his real self as his cynicism, which he himself admits is artificial. This artificial

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[89] Cf. Olshen (1978), p.35.

[90] Aside from this possibility of fighting one's nemo, Fowles mentions that of conforming to the society one lives in order to identify with the masses and to guarantee social acceptance by using the agreed symbols of success, that is the status symbols (Cf. *A*50).

self, though, keeps him from finding his own way around the world and prevents him, above all, from leading a meaningful life. Since he blames his surroundings for that lack of meaning just as he blamed his parents before, he thinks the only way for him to get away from the emptiness and monotony is to flee from his home country:

> I didn't know where I was going, but I knew what I needed. I needed a new land, a new race, a new language; and, although I couldn't have put it into words then, I needed a new mystery (*M*19).

3.1.2 Nicholas and Alison

Aside from the reaction to his parents' death, Nicholas's relation to women illustrates very clearly his incorrect notion of freedom, which is connected with the influence of his nemo. He is neither prepared nor able to get emotionally involved but is always searching for merely short-term and, at least as far as he is concerned, superficial relationships. In this respect he has gathered ample experience during his time as a student, and although he denies it ("I didn't collect conquests", *M*21), he regards his love affairs as some kind of sport. He does not regard his inability to become emotionally involved as personal incompetence, on the contrary, it even boosts his ego, for he thinks that it makes him stand out from the masses: "It was like being good at golf, but despising the game" (*M*21).

On the one hand, then, he uses women to polish up his self-confidence while, on the other hand, he takes his routine with finishing relationships as evidence of his supposed independence. Just as he regarded his parents' death as a liberation, he interprets every affair he breaks off as an affirmation of his freedom: "I mistook the feeling of relief that dropping a girl always brought for a love of freedom" (*M*21). This notion of freedom is completely detached from responsibility, exclusively restricted to his own needs, and as such incompatible with the concept of freedom Conchis wants to bring home to him in his godgame.

In order not to endanger his misunderstood love of freedom, that confusion of freedom with the irresponsible escape from emotional entanglement,[91] Nicholas reduces his relationships to women to the level of a mere game. What is important to be successful in that game is not emotions but technique and tactics, and Nicholas's special '"technique' was to make a show of unpredictability, cynicism, and indifference. Then,

[91] Olshen (1978), p.35.

like a conjurer with his white rabbit, I produced the solitary heart" (*M*21).[92] In order to keep his distance to women or rather in order not to give rise to a feeling of closeness altogether, Nicholas employs another device: He classifies women according to certain categories and has put forward his own theories and rules by which to assess their behaviour.[93]

As early as his first meeting with Alison, however, it is plain to see that she does not fit into any of his categories at all: "She was bizarre, a kind of human oxymoron" (*M*24). She breaks his routine and thus forces him to deviate from the usual scheme of his overtures by breaking through his carefully heeded reserve with her candour. Despite his wide experience with women, Nicholas is helpless in the face of Alison since he finds himself in a completely new situation. Whereas he is usually the one in control of the situation (cf. *M*21), Alison now makes him feel self-conscious, and just because she has managed to get closer than anybody else before, he is not able to show his usual harshness:

> Perhaps if I had been farther away from her, on the other side of the room, in any situation where I could have avoided her eyes, I could have been decisively brutal. But those grey, searching, always candid eyes, by their begging me not to lie, made me lie (*M*30).

Thus Nicholas finds himself against his will in a situation that he does not feel up to. On the one hand he is fascinated by Alison's ambiguity and quite aware of her extraordinariness, on the other hand, however, he feels threatened by her candour for she sees through him

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[92] Julius Rowan Raper suggests that it is this technique of presenting the 'lonely heart' that of all things illustrates a certain ambiguity in Nicholas's behaviour: those women who feel attracted to him "*must* possess - in addition to the cynical, easy-sex exterior that initially engages a man psychically potent enough to tolerate only the sensual dimension of a woman - a strong maternal side capable of tender feelings" (Raper (1988), p.64). Using a Freudian categorization, Raper classifies Nicholas as "one of those men who have no desire for the women they love and no love for the women they desire" (Raper (1988), p.62). According to Raper, then, Nicholas's technique is contradictory, and thus "his own doubleness booby-traps all his relationships" (Raper (1988), p.64). Without doubting Raper's interpretation I suggest that Nicholas's equivocal behaviour is, above all, an unconscious attempt at winning the game he always plays with other people, since in this way the emotional involvement is much stronger on the side of his partner.

[93] At Oxford, for instance, he knows that "a certain kind of girl"(*M*21) is due to fall prey to his technique. Furthermore, he distinguishes "uninteresting-looking girls" (*M*22) from women that are interesting most likely in the sense of knowing "the difference between coupling and marrying" (*M*21). The theories about women he names explicitly - once he speaks himself of "an old Urfe law" (*M*485) - are, for instance, that ugly girls are always the first to arrive at parties (*M*22), and "that girls possess sexual tact in inverse proportion to their standard of education" (*M*485).

much better than he does himself.[94] Moreover, she is looking for a support in him ("She was always asking me if she made sense", *M*33), which he is not able to give, since he has not even found his own way through the world yet. All his efforts to support her are nothing more than attempts to re-form her according to his own image:

> Out of bed I felt I was teaching her, anglicizing her accent, polishing off her roughnesses, her provincialisms; in bed she did the teaching. [...] She was teaching me other things, besides the art of love; but that is how I thought of it at the time (*M*35).

Nicholas is not able to learn more than the art of physical love from Alison since, as Alison herself accuses him, he is unable to see anything in her but "a whore" (*M*35), anything but "Alison who slept around. That Australian girl who had an abortion" (*M*275). Restricting his concept of her to that image, he manages to build up the reserve he needs and is thus able to keep up the isolation he himself has chosen.[95] In spite of knowing that his relationship to Alison is of a different nature than all of his affairs so far, he cannot reconcile his feelings towards her with what he thinks is his urge for independence and freedom, which really is nothing but his fear of responsibility and commitment:

> I suddenly had a feeling that we were one body, one person, even there; that if she had disappeared it would have been as if I had lost half of myself. A terrible deathlike feeling, which anyone less cerebral and self-absorbed than I was then would have realized was simply love. I thought it was desire. I drove her straight home and tore her clothes off (*M*35).

The more he becomes aware of the sincerity of Alison's love for him after being accepted by the school in Greece, the easier it is for Nicholas to take this love as a self-affirmation and at the same time direct all his feelings to that new adventure, thus distancing himself from Alison. Her attempts at covering her pains of parting give him the chance of pretending to feel upset about her apparent indifference, and this he uses to bring their relationship back to a very superficial level, which provides

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[94] In contrast to most other women, for instance, Alison does not fall for his supposed loneliness but can only laugh at his "favourite metaphor: the cage of glass between me and the rest of the world. [...] 'You like it,' she said. 'You say you're isolated, boyo, but you really think you're different.' She broke my hurt silence by saying, too late, 'You are different' " (*M*35).

[95] Cf. Robert D. Newman (1982): " 'An Anagram Made Flesh': The Transformation of Nicholas Urfe in Fowles's *The Magus*." In: *Notes on Contemporary Literature 12.4*, p.9.

him with the well-known triumph at separating. Once again he can regard himself as the winner, and his farewell letter - "It was supposed to sound spontaneous, but I had been composing it on and off for days" (*M*48) - as well as the cheque and the little going-away present he leaves with it, prove - not only to Alison - what kind of picture of her he wants to keep in mind to enjoy his freedom perfectly.

3.1.3 Greece – a Relentless Mirror

Greece provides Nicholas with completely new and unspoilt surroundings which he can approach without bias. It opens up to him possibilities for acquiring a new way of perception.[96] In England he has already been fascinated by the image of this mysterious foreign world: "like a medieval king, I had fallen in love with the picture long before I saw the reality" (*M*40). Before his departure Alison simply does not stand a chance against that 'woman', as he puts it himself, he has betrayed her with - "the woman [who] was Greece" (*M*39). Alison lives in the sphere of reality, where Nicholas cannot accept the feeling of love, whereas he is quite able to fall in love with an ideal without risking his own self-image. In the same way he will soon fall in love with the picture he creates of Lily-Julie. Yet it is his need for superiority and self-affirmation - which is stirred up by his nemo, to refer once again to this Fowlesian term - it is that need of all things, then, which has so far moulded his relationships, that is now endangered when he is confronted with the Greek landscape:[97]

> already my old self began to know that it wouldn't be able to hold out. It was partly the terror, the stripping-to-essentials, of love; because I fell totally and for ever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence and inferiority, as if Greece was a woman so sensually provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her, and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her (*M*49).

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[96] See Katherine Tarbox (1988a): *The Art of John Fowles.* Athens, London: University of Georgia Press, p.14: "The setting facilitates the abandonment of the familiar to the possibilities of mystery."

[97] See Tarbox (1988a), p.14: "Greece, with its associations of myth and archetype, is a projection of everything Nicholas is afraid of - the going back, the going deep, the excavation of frightening, hidden things - and an evocation of the real human condition where nothing is absolute."

There is a plain discrepancy between his feelings towards the picture he has formed himself and the sensations he has at direct encounter. Dreaming of far-away Greece, Nicholas feels powerful and sure of his conquest, which is illustrated by his comparison with the medieval king. Being really confronted with the Greek landscape, however, he realizes that his feeling of power is just an illusion. His own metaphor of Greece as a woman he is in love with in spite of feeling inferior indicates the alteration that will take place within Nicholas during his stay, for at this time he already senses that his self-conception is not compatible with these feelings. At the same time, however, he seems to have a presentiment of how delightful it might be to get away from his isolated self in order to strive for an equal, reciprocal relationship with someone else, since it is the inaccessibility of Greece in particular that makes him feel inferior. The comparison of Greece with a beautiful but unapproachable mysterious woman, though, also reflects the relationship he will have with Lily-Julie, with the "stripping-to-essentials" indicating what will happen to Nicholas in the course of the masque.[98]

At first, however, he feels as if he were in a world of dreams completely detached from his past, "already [Alison] seemed far away, not in distance, not in time, but in some dimension for which there is no name. Reality, perhaps" (*M*49). The isle of Phraxos, above all, which being completely cut off from the outside world seems to exist in a different age, raises the image of a mythical world.[99] Initially, out of the boredom of his isolated life, Nicholas is fascinated by an apparently new kind of self-awareness he experiences at the encounter with the unspoilt nature around him:

> I began for the first time in my life to look at nature [...] in a new way [...] - these things made me feel healthier than I had ever felt before. I began to get some sort of harmony between body and mind; or so it seemed. It was an illusion (*M*52-53).

This feeling of harmony proves to be a self-delusion since Nicholas is not able to feel a part of the nature that impresses him so deeply. Again he regards himself as an isolated, uprooted being, and the very harmony all around him, "the unflawed natural world" (*M*56), makes him distinctly aware of his inner conflicts. Out of this mood he plunges into the

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[98] Cf. Onega (1989), p.42.

[99] William J. Palmer takes Phraxos as a symbol of Nicholas's self, of his "interior space, which must be defined and understood before he can go outside himself and establish a truly human relationship with another person" (Palmer (1975), S.87).

next illusion: he starts writing poems he thinks "philosophically profound and technically exciting" (*M*57). Yet what urges him to write is more his hope for success and fame than an inner need for self-awareness. He holds fast to his self-image as a poet, to that "onanistic literary picture of myself I caressed up out of reality" (*M*57), and once again he blames other people, in this case the claustrophobic atmosphere at the Lord Byron School, for his failure to live up to his own self-concept.[100]

But the flawless beauty of Greece destroys this illusion, too.[101] "Greece is like a mirror. It makes you suffer. Then you learn [...] [to] live. With what you are" (*M*99). What Conchis will later express in these words, Nicholas already experiences before making Conchis's acquaintance, for one day he suddenly realizes that his poems are worthless, and because of this self-realization his self-image and together with it his self-confidence are broken into pieces. As a result, he feels self-hatred and desperation and thus decides to commit suicide, for "it seemed to me that my own death was the only thing left I could create [...]. It would stand, and be remembered, as a final dark victory" (*M*60). Finally lacking the will to pull the trigger of the gun, he realizes that what he is really trying to do is not to kill himself but rather to stage-manage his own death:

> All the time I felt I was being watched, that I was not alone, that I was putting on an act for the benefit of someone, that this action could be done only if it was spontaneous, pure - and moral. Because more and more it crept through my mind with the chill spring night that I was trying to commit not a moral action, but a fundamentally aesthetic one; to do something that would end my life sensationally, significantly, consistently. It was a Mercutio death I was looking for, not a real one. A death to be remembered, not the true death of a true suicide, the death obliterate (*M*62).

He is not acting responsibly and honestly towards himself, but is rather trying to escape from himself out of the fear of being forced to realize his real self after the aesthetic self-image[102] he has nursed up to now has fallen apart, "that *gabbia* I had constructed for myself out of light,

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[100] Peter Wolfe remarks that Fowles's "naming the school after Lord Byron touches on Urfe's self-image as a poet and romantic exile. It also hits a parallel between Byron's rampant sexuality and Urfe's [...]. Just as sex may have compensated for Byron's limp, so does it cloak a wound in Urfe [...]. Also suggested by the Byronic parallel is a contrast between art and morality and between intellectual detachment and emotional involvement. Greece Urfe sees as an escape through art" (Peter Wolfe (1980): *John Fowles, Magus and Moralist.* 2.ed., London: Associated University Press, p. 89).

[101] Cf. Huffaker (1980), p.54.

[102] For a closer analysis of Nicholas's self-image see chapter 3.3.3 of this study.

solitude, and self-delusion" (*M*62), an appropriate metaphor that only the narrator Nicholas can employ.

The distinction of 'aesthetic' and 'ethical' that is introduced in the paragraph quoted above has its origin in the history of philosophy. In *Either/Or* Soeren Kierkegaard, who is regarded as the founder of existential philosophy, tried to distinguish the aesthetic from the ethical and the religious and presents them as different stages of human existence.[103] Kierkegaard regards human existence not as being of a completed, unchanging nature but as a development, a process in the course of which the unity of thought, will, feeling, and activity has to be re-established over and over again. According to Kierkegaard existence means behaving towards both our fellow men and God in such a way that the individual can decide independently who he should be, and thus tries, in a process of self-realization, to surmount the typically human contrast between what one is and what one should be, that is the contrast between reality and ideal.[104]

For this process Kierkegaard constitutes three different stages of developing the existential self-relation: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious existence.[105] The aesthetic existence constitutes the first stage of human existence, which is characterized by the striving for pleasure.[106] This striving is not a productive behaviour but is characterized by passivity because at this stage one is just taking in impressions. Therefore the aesthetic type is the one who is the least his real self, because:

> [T]he one who says he wants to enjoy life always places a condition which either lies outside the individual or is in the individual in such a way that it is not [set] by the individual himself.[107]

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[103] In "Notes on an Unfinished Novel" Fowles indicates himself the influence Kierkegaard's existential philosophy had on his works (Cf. Fowles (1977a), p.140).

[104] Cf. Annemarie Pieper (1985): "Sören Kierkegaard." In: *Klassiker der Philosophie*, ed. by Otfried Höffe. 2. ed., Munich: Beck. p.158.

[105] According to Kierkegaard only the religious existence constitutes the stage of perfection, for it unites all the three stages. Since in the context of my study the religious stage is of no importance, however, I will not go into further detail. For an illustration see, for instance: Pieper (1985), pp. 164-166.

[106] The term 'aesthetic' in the Kierkegaardian sense is not restricted to the theory of beauty and art but is derived from the Greek meaning of the word (gr. *aisthétós* =sensorily perceptible) and refers to the physical endowment of man as a sensory being. Cf. Pieper (1985), p.162.

[107] Soeren Kierkegaard (1986): *Either/Or*. Ed. by Steven L. Ross, trans. by George L.Stengren. New York: Harper & Row, p.184.

Poetic imagination can very well serve the aesthetic principle, namely when it degenerates into aesthetic self-gratification instead of being used actively as a means of reflection to find one's real self. This distinction shows quite clearly that Nicholas lives on an aesthetic stage of existence, for, as he realizes himself in retrospection, both his poetic attempts and his suicide attempt were "attempts at escape" (*M*63), that is they were not attempts to cope with reality.[108]

According to Kierkegaard every aesthetic attitude towards life is despair because the aesthetic person builds his life on transitory things.[109] The realization of that way of life depends on external things, i.e. on things that are beyond one's own power, and thus the despair is based on the fear that those conditions might disappear. However, it is this despair that offers an opportunity to reach the second stage of existence: the ethical stage. This is the case if out of despair an aesthetic person chooses him- or herself by liberating him-/herself of the principle of pleasure and thus becoming independent of the external conditions that have determined his or her life.

This act of choosing himself takes place within Nicholas when he starts accepting himself and realizes:

> I had [...] been, and always would be, intensely false; in existentialist terms, inauthentic. I knew I would never kill myself, I knew I would always want to go on living with myself (*M*62).

The 'leap', however, by which according to Kierkegaard this transition from an aesthetic to an ethical form of existence takes place as a conscious decision in favour of one's real self, has not yet taken place within Nicholas as his behaviour during the masque shows. Nevertheless, with the self-knowledge he has acquired through his suicide attempt Nicholas is now prepared for taking in what Conchis intends to teach him with his masque to help him outgrow the aesthetical stage of existence.[110]

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[108] Cf. Olshen (1976), p.921. See also Alan Kennedy (1974): *The Protean Self. Dramatic Action in Contemporary Fiction.* New York: Columbia University Press, pp.253.
[109] Cf. Kierkegaard (1986), p.186.
[110] Cf. Kennedy (1974), p.254.

3.2 The Artificial World

Conchis's domain, Bourani, is a world where the usual rules and laws have been repealed. There is no boundary between fiction and reality,[111] conventional patterns of explanation prove not only to be insufficient but also misleading as Nicholas has to realize again and again.[112] And yet Conchis's realm is not merely a fantastic world completely separated from the outside world and existing only within the borders of the estate.[113] It rather expands more and more outward from Bourani and insinuates itself into all aspects of Nicholas's life.[114] Of this boundlessness, however, he only becomes aware when one night, on his way back to the school, he meets German Third Reich troops: "from then on I knew. The masque had moved outside the domaine" (*M*373). But that Bourani is not a completely isolated realm has been indicated even earlier, namely during Nicholas's first visit there. The barbed wire separating the area from the rest of the island is not a real impediment for intruders, but rather has a symbolic function. It indicates that Bourani is not public land. The symbolism can also be interpreted on another level, though. Thus during his visits Nicholas lives in a mysterious world that is not compatible with his concept of reality, and yet he has to learn that it is not possible to draw a clear-cut borderline between reality and unreality, just as the barbed wire is not an insurmountable barrier. Rather, the distinction between real and unreal has been artificially created by man in order to organize his world, just as the boundaries marked by barbed wire are artificial while the land on both sides is the same.

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[111] Cf. Onega, pp.46. See also Wolfe (1980), p.99, and Olshen (1978), p.44.

[112] The confrontation with experiences going beyond the protagonist's ability to categorize them is a fundamental theme of all of John Fowles's novels (Cf. Tarbox (1988a), p.5). Thus, for instance, Miranda's fear is not only due to the threatening situation she has to cope with but is increased by the fact that Clegg does not behave as she would have expected a kidnapper to do: "This isn't just a fantastic situation; it's a fantastic variation of a fantastic situation. I mean, now he's got me at his mercy, he's not going to do what anyone would expect" (John Fowles (1986a): *The Collector.* London: Picador. p.129). Rebecca Lee's mysterious journey culminates in her encounter with the 'maggot', an experience she can only try explain herself and of which she says to Henry Ayscough during the interrogation: " 'Twill not fit thy alphabet, so be it. Yet so was it not mine" (John Fowles (1991): *A Maggot.* London: Picador. p.383).

[113] This is indicated by the sign Nicholas comes across when first entering Bourani: "SALLE D'ATTENTE" (M71).

[114] Cf. Silvio Gaggi (1986): "Pirandellian and Brechtian Aspects of the Fiction of John Fowles." In: *Comparative Literature Studies 23*, pp.324.

Very soon Nicholas begins to sense this inseparability. By and by he orientates his life to that fascinating world so completely unfamiliar to him, and thus that world becomes a new dimension of reality in his life, just as his life with Alison in London belongs to a different dimension of reality (cf. *M*49, see above). Thus a shift of emphasis as regards his categories of 'real' and 'unreal' is gradually taking place. After the first weekend he has spent with Conchis at Bourani he still has the feeling of returning from a world of dreams to reality:

> In a sense I re-entered reality as I walked. The events of the weekend seemed to recede, to become locked away, as if I had dreamt them; and yet as I walked there came the strangest feeling, compounded of the early hour, the absolute solitude, and what had happened, of having entered a myth (*M*157).

Yet only a little later he has been captivated by Conchis's world to such an extent that the ordinariness of his everyday life at the school seems to him to be the less real since less exciting thing: "they [the pupils] were like things in a mist, real yet unreal; obstacles in limbo" (*M*242).

The world Conchis has created for Nicholas is "a polysemantic world" (*M*280). The ambiguity is mainly sustained by the fact that Nicholas is not only completely at a loss as regards assessing Conchis's character and intentions, but also that Lily-Julie always presents him with a version of their situation which is not compatible with Conchis's statements. In this way it is impossible for Nicholas to make himself a complete picture out of these contradictions, since both Conchis's and Lily-Julie's versions, looked at in isolation, seem to be credible.

Aside from these perspective reflections of the situation, Conchis also emphasizes the artificial nature of his world by illustrating his stories and statements with several performances. He does not seem to mind that these performances are very easy to make out as not being supernatural events but human productions.[115] On the contrary, Conchis does not at all conceal from Nicholas that he is in an artificial world where categories such as truth or falsity do not count because there are only roles to be played:

[115] In this obvious artificiality, by the way, the new version differs from the original, as Fowles emphasizes in the preface to the revised edition of *The Magus*: "In its original form there was a clear supernatural element" (*M*5).

> We are all actors here, my friend. None of us is what we really are. We all lie some of the time, and some of us all the time (M404).

> [P]romises are worth nothing. All here is artifice (M406).

Conchis, then, even stresses that Bourani is a world of illusions and that the apparitions he conjures up for Nicholas are just as real or unreal as everything else in this place. Even Conchis's playing the harpsichord, for which he retreats without advance notice the first time and which is, though apparently rather practice than a concert, obviously meant especially for Nicholas to listen to it, indicates that at Bourani everything is stage-managed for Nicholas. About this Conchis becomes even plainer speaking of his model of the 'meta-theatre':

> I conceived a new kind of drama. One in which the conventional separation between actors and audience was abolished. In which the conventional scenic geography, the notions of proscenium, stage, auditorium, were completely discarded. In which continuity of performance, either in time or place, was ignored. And in which the action, the narrative was fluid, with only a point of departure and a fixed point of conclusion. Between those points the participants invent their own drama (*M*404).

The single scenes that he is presented with, and that serve as a means to illustrate of Conchis's stories, Nicholas not only recognizes very soon as performances, but he also accepts them as so regular an element of Conchis's game that he even expects such an illustration at the end of a new episode ("I half expected to hear a voice calling from Moutsa, or to see some brilliantly contrived pillar of fire rise out of the trees" (*M*310); " 'No illustrations in the text tonight?' " (*M*312)). What he does not realize, however, is that the boundary between the stage and the audience has been abolished so that he is not only a member of the audience, but also an active actor constantly in the middle of a stage-production at Bourani, for fiction and reality cannot be distinguished in this game. Thus Nicholas correctly realizes that Conchis intends the apparitions to make him see his confidence in his perceptions in relative terms:

> The incidents seemed designed to deceive all the senses. Last night's had covered smell and hearing; this afternoon's, and that glimpsed figure of yesterday, sight. Taste seemed irrelevant - but touch ... how on earth could he expect me even to pretend to believe that what I might touch was 'psychic'? (*M*143-144).

The answer to Nicholas's question as to how Conchis should possibly be able to put his sense of touch to the test has its roots in the fundamental artificiality of Bourani, where nothing is what it seems to be. Thus Conchis indeed manages to deceive Nicholas's sense of touch, for even Lily-Julie is just a fictional character; she only exists in the way Nicholas perceives her, she is nothing but a figment of his own imagination.[116] The sexual level of their relationship, culminating in sexual intercourse, Nicholas regards as an affirmation of the honesty of Lily-Julie's love for him. That the physical contact is also just part of her role in Conchis's stage-production, that he has just touched an illusion, Nicholas does not and cannot understand. While he has accepted the deceptions of his other senses as part of a fascinating game this final deception he sees through only very late; it contradicts his sense of morality, and thus makes him question the integrity of the masque as a whole.

Conchis, thus, creates a world where everything seems to be arranged to the single purpose of initiating a process of learning and self-knowledge in Nicholas.[117] Even the furnishing of the house serves this aim: the Bonnard paintings, that arouse in Nicholas a sense of the magic of everyday life and at the same time memories of Alison (*M*97), but also the collection of curiosa in the music-room, the obscenity of which repels him. Between two of these objects Nicholas notices a photo of Lily-Julie, and though he asks himself why Conchis has chosen such an inappropriate place for a picture of his supposed fiancée - "whether with perversion, with humour, or with simple bad taste, I couldn't decide" (*M*104) - it is just Nicholas's own image of women that is reflected by this arrangement.[118] The same is true for the pornographic books he finds on his bedside table: "It was much too obsessive to be erotic" (*M*101). He is not aware of the parallel between the limited angle of vision of the

[116] Cf. Onega (1989), p.59.

[117] Katherine Tarbox points out Conchis's great skill at exhausting the symbolic possibilities of stage properties, timing, pace, and lightning in his 'drama': "The luxurious minutiae of the masque are calculated to shed light on various aspects of the drama" (Tarbox (1988a), p.15). According to her the priapus in the garden, for instance, reflects Nicholas's deformed sexuality, while the portrait of Conchis's mother, expressing a filial bond, symbolizes a sense of family Nicholas has never known.

[118] Onega interprets this arrangement as a warning Conchis gives to Nicholas as well as to the reader that Lily-Julie's virginal appearance is not to be trusted. "Thus the display of the 'curiosa' and the pictures of the Edwardian girl already forerun the essential meaning of the metatheater (Onega (1989), p.51).

illustrations and his own habit of reducing women to sex objects, his inability to see women as entire human beings.[119]

In order to shake Nicholas's fixed concept of real and unreal, Conchis confronts him with a complex net of, as Nicholas thinks, authentic[120], autobiographical stories[121] and parables. A major part in this confusion, however, is played by the lavish scenic representations since they facilitate immediate, spontaneous experiences, i.e. experiences without thought. Nicholas describes this effect of immediacy at his encounter with Joe, who is dressed up as a black jackal: "It certainly touched on some terrifying archetype, but it shocked common sense as well as the unconscious" (*M*199). To what extent the different genres Conchis employs finally merge becomes particularly obvious during Nicholas's disintoxication: Here the 'judges' appear dressed up in mythical costumes, they are introduced as famous psychologists and scientists from well-known universities; they present the result of an analysis which seems to be not only extremely authentic with regard to technical terminology but also offers a description of Nicholas's character that seems to be true in many points, and finally Nicholas has to watch Lily-Julie, a "living painting" (*M*528), and Joe make love.

Without doubt this playing with another person's emotions is hardly in accord with our Western, fundamentally Christian morality. Conchis's behaviour at the execution in World War II, as well as his kidnapping and repeatedly anaesthetizing Nicholas in the course of the disintoxication also give rise to doubting if Conchis's end justifies the means. But this ambiguity of all things is a typical feature of Conchis's world. 'Good' and 'bad' are categories that do not function as opposite poles at Bourani. Nicholas becomes aware of this, for instance, after being hypnotized by Conchis:

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[119] For a discussion of the relation between pornography and art as motif in John Fowles's novels see Palmer (1975), pp.29-77.

[120] For instance, Conchis gives Nicholas the pamphlet of the 'Society for Reason', that "had obviously once been pinned up" (*M*188), just as the treatise 'On Communication With Other Worlds' seems to be proven authentic, for its "browning paper and the old-fashioned type showed it to be unmistakably a genuine pre-war relic" (*M*190). Remembering, however, that Conchis, as Nicholas later discovers, is able to fake newspaper articles and letters the authenticity of which Nicholas has been convinced of, the authenticity of the documents of Conchis's past becomes most questionable, too.

[121] Because of the outstanding parallels between Conchis's story and his own life, the suspicion that Conchis must already have told the same story to Nicholas's predecessors, and the feeling that this supposed life-story seems to be "patently more concealed lesson than true confession"(*M*133), Nicholas, as well as the reader, doubts its autobiographical nature.

> The richness of what I remembered; the potential embarrassment of what I could not; the good of it and the evil of it; these two things made me sit for minutes with my head in my hands, torn between resentment and gratitude. [...] I tried to assess the experience; why, though it was so beautiful, so intensely real, it seemed also so sinister (*M*241).

Thus Conchis not only dismisses conventional morality, but also indicates, by demonstrating their inapplicability and limitations within the boundaries of his own world, that moral values are human conventions and therefore artificial, not absolute, universal values. It is this idea of the relativity of moral standards Mrs. de Seitas tries to bring home to Nicholas when he calls her daughter "a girl with as much morality as a worn-out whore from the Place Pigalle" (*M*601). To this accusation Mrs. de Seitas answers: "Of course, if you wish to live in the world of received ideas and received manners, what we did, what my daughter did, is disgusting" (*M*603). It is a question of point of view whether to judge a person as 'good' or 'bad', and what Nicholas still has to learn is that the only responsible point of view depends exclusively on one's own self "that must not be betrayed" (*M*132). The meaning of that statement is impressively illustrated by Conchis's decision at the execution of the hostages and summarized by Katherine Tarbox as follows: "in a complex moral world (of which this story is a microcosm), the only recourse one has is to the essential sanity of his self"[122]

Yet, in spite of having realized the relativity of moral values and categories, Conchis's aim is not to unmask them as being useless in general. This is also emphasized by Mrs. de Seitas, who at the same time reveals the actual objective of the godgame:

> [If] one is trying to reproduce, however partially, something of the mysterious purposes that govern existence, then one also has to go beyond some of the conventions man has invented to keep those purposes at bay. That doesn't mean that in our ordinary lives we think such conventions should be swept away. Far from it. They are necessary fictions. But in the godgame we start from the premise that in reality all is fiction, yet no single fiction is necessary (*M*627).

[122] Tarbox (1988a), p.29.

3.3 Nicholas's Constructions

3.3.1 Theories and Hypotheses

Even before meeting Conchis for the first time, Nicholas faces a very ambiguous and complex image of him, which arouses his attention: collaborator or freedom-fighter, outcast or recluse? Furthermore, Nicholas is not sure about the relation of his predecessors to Conchis, and thus that mysterious man captivates him irresistibly. The search for the key to Conchis's mystery, then, is Nicholas's driving force, and Conchis proves to be a master in nourishing that drive again and again. The idyllic atmosphere, the association with Prospero's kingdom,[123] the feeling of having found an enchanted island, all this ties Nicholas to the mysterious domain. Katherine Tarbox explains Nicholas's fascination with that place as follows:

> The notion of the domain appeals to Nicholas because he feels that any world fit for him to inhabit must be a world outside dull, bourgeois reality. He is in self-imposed exile from what he sees as 'mass-produced middle-class' England. At Bourani Conchis simply literalizes Nicholas's escape fantasy.[124]

Even at their first meeting Nicholas senses something artificial in Conchis's behaviour. He does not behave as Nicholas would expect a host to do, and thus Conchis confuses his guest with his unpredictable and unusual behaviour because Nicholas is not able to get a clear picture of him:

> Then he changed, as if what had happened between us till then was a joke, a charade, that had been rehearsed and gone according to plan, but could now be ended. And I was completely off balance again (*M*80).

The perfumed woman's glove, the poetry anthology with the marked lines he finds as if by coincidence at Conchis's beach on one of his trips over the island, Conchis's strange behaviour that Nicholas cannot make sense of, all those things he cannot bring into line, make him begin to put forward theories about their potential coherence. The highly imaginative possibility that "a weak-minded wife was the most likely answer" (*M*90) would account for Conchis's secluded life and the discretion of his staff,

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[123] For an illustration of the parallels between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Magus* see Peter Conradi (1982): *John Fowles.* London, New York: Methuen. pp.50.

[124] Tarbox (1988a), p.19.

just as Nicholas can find some evidence to account for the theory that Conchis might be a transvestite. In the face of Conchis's disturbing allusion to Nicholas being elect and having all his discoveries before him, Nicholas considers one explanation particularly plausible, "it could mean only that he was mad" (*M*90).

Since in that way the incoherence does not endanger his own concept of the world but rather confirms it, that explanation helps him to deal very easily with the situation because a logical coherence does not necessarily have to be established. Instead, the problem of the incoherence between the situation and his own concept of reality can be attributed to a deficiency of his interlocutor's world picture. The opportunity to hold someone else responsible for failing to solve a situation completely contradictory to his own standards will be taken up by Nicholas later once again. When after having spent the night with him Lily-Julie leaves the bedroom and Nicholas is overcome by some men dressed in black, there is again only this one way of mental flight: "Trial, flames ... they were all mad, they must be, and she the most vicious, shameless, degenerate ..." (*M*489) Interestingly enough, Conchis introduces Lily-Julie in her second role as a schizophrenic. This time, however, it is the alleged mental illness of all things that Nicholas is not prepared to believe, since he cannot reconcile the love-affair he dreams of having with this beautiful woman with such an illness.

Lily-Julie's appearance on the scene confronts Nicholas with a further dimension of Conchis's world. What Nicholas has to cope with is now no longer merely Conchis's ambiguity and the feeling that underlying everything he does there is "an air of stage-management, of the planned and rehearsed" (*M*109), but above all Lily-Julie's unfathomable shifting between opponent and ally. From their first meeting onwards, Nicholas sees in her a chance to find out the mystery behind Conchis and his masque. While Conchis is unattainable for him since he cannot see through his behaviour and character, Lily-Julie seems to be more familiar because she is about his own age and has the same social background as he recognizes immediately from her accent. This is the first thing at Bourani he feels confident of classifying definitely: "I could place this [accent] exactly. It was my own" (*M*168). Thus there is a connection that goes beyond the boundaries of Bourani and even of Greece and reaches straight back to the characteristics and conventions of English life he is so familiar with. This is the reason that he does not regard Lily-Julie as merely one more product of Conchis's masque, but that he tries to discover the real person behind the mask. She becomes the connecting

link between the strange world Conchis has created and the 'real' world Nicholas is so sure of knowing. Therefore his insatiable desire to find "the reality behind all the mystery" (*M*157) is at once transmitted to that mysterious and attractive woman, since he believes that she can help him to get access to Conchis and his mysteries.[125] More and more he sees in Lily-Julie the very centre of Conchis's activities so that all his efforts are directed towards winning her: "I was now deep in the strangest maze in Europe. Now I really was Theseus; somewhere in the darkness Ariadne waited; and perhaps the Minotaur" (*M*313).

But since she is also just one of the illusions created by Conchis, every hope of having seen through her part can only be a misapprehension and thus end in a false sense of certainty. The more Nicholas manages, apparently with her support, to put forward a coherent hypothesis about her character and the reason for her stay at Bourani, i.e. the more he thinks his own theories being proved by her, the more he gets tangled up with this false certainty. And yet it has been pointed out to him from the very beginning that his attempts at constructing a coherent picture of the situation can never result in a definite solution. He realizes that his assumptions are dependent on the point of view he is confronted with directly at any one time. Thus, on the one hand, he has difficulties in not believing what Conchis tells him about Lily-Julie's schizophrenia since he cannot doubt the psychological knowledge Conchis obviously has, on the other hand, however, being together with Lily-Julie he is convinced that her supposed disorder is merely a part she has to play.[126] Again and again, though, he has to find out that some of the clues he has taken as evidence for the one theory can just as well be taken to prove the other theory in question. When, for instance, Lily-Julie, having thrown her tea into his face, winks at him he interprets her behaviour as an indication of her playing the schizophrenic merely to please Conchis: "I was not to believe a word of this scene" (*M*292), while later it is exactly the same scene that makes him wonder whether Conchis might be right after all about

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[125] This hope of getting access to Conchis's world through a woman is not at all an exception due to the unusual situation Nicholas finds himself confronted with. It is rather a behaviour typical for him as he realizes later: "my only access to normal humanity, to social decency, to any openness of heart, lay through girls" (*M*608).

[126] Katherine Tarbox suggests that Lily-Julie's playing the schizophrenic is meant to show Nicholas "how the mind is able to put on and take off different identities" and at the same time reflects his "split personality, [for he is] the one who presents well-rehearsed masks to the world, the un-Nicholas" (Tarbox (1988a), pp.19).

> the high intelligence of some schizophrenics. The tea-throwing scene had seemed too far out of character if she was cunning-mad; but cunning-madder still might have precipitated it just to plant the wink at the end (*M*315).

Moreover Nicholas realizes that her apparent inexperience with men, which arouses his sexual fantasies ("a delicious ghost of innocence, perhaps even of virginity; a ghost I felt peculiarly well equipped to exorcize", *M*210), could just as well have other reasons than shyness and also agrees with Conchis's statement about her having no contact with men of her own age because of her schizophrenia.

Thus it is pointed out to him again and again that there is never only one explanation for the events he has to cope with, that behind all the contradictions and mysteries of Bourani there is no consistent, unambiguous reality. However, in spite of all those clues given by Lily-Julie, as well as by Conchis, about his being in a world where "[w]e are none of us what we look" (*M*228), and the plain warning not "to jump to conclusions" (*M*170), Nicholas is not able to resist his urge for trying hard to solve the mysteries. It does not agree with his concept of reality that there should be no superordinated coherence that can be fitted together to form a consistent picture, "it's one's sense of reality. It's like gravity. One can resist it only so long" (*M*209).[127]

That in this context he twice uses the pronoun 'one' is very meaningful, since, when after finally leaving Phraxos for good he participates at the dinner with the British ambassadors, he regards the omnipresence of this little word as symptomatic for the anonymity and the superficiality among the guests:

> Nobody said what they really wanted, what they really thought. Nobody behaved with breadth, with warmth, with naturalness [...]. It was symptomatic that the ubiquitous person of speech was 'one' - it was one's view, one's friends, one's servants, one's favourite writer, one's travelling in Greece, until the terrible faceless Avenging God of the Bourgeois British, One, was standing like a soot-blackened obelisk over the whole evening (*M*560).

That pronoun represents the conventions an individual can hide behind without risking being forced to defend his or her own opinions and ideas. When Nicholas speaks of "one's sense of reality", his choice of words

[127] Peter Conradi suggests that Nicholas's identification of his sense of reality with gravity might echo "Nietzsche's prescient observation that the death of God makes all weightless" (Conradi (1982), p.55).

indicates that for the time being he is not able to detach himself from the conventional categories of reality and unreality. His world picture is moulded by generally accepted concepts. He is not prepared to get involved with Conchis's game with the polymorphous nature of reality, for he is afraid of losing his footing without the familiar concepts, and therefore he constantly tries to make his experiences at Bourani fit into the concept of reality 'one' usually has.

3.3.2 Lily-Julie and Alison - Ideal and Reality

In her first role, as the spirit of Conchis's dead fiancée, Lily-Julie's relation to Nicholas is most in accordance with the real circumstances as Nicholas finally discovers himself: "I started to think of her as Lily again, perhaps because her first mask now seemed truer, more true because more obviously false, than the others" (*M*492). During the masque she constantly embodies merely different illusions. Nicholas, however, being on his tireless search for the reality behind the things at Bourani, does not recognize the metaphoric nature of that apparition, but interprets the plainness of the deception as a hint that behind the false apparition there has to be an attainable person. Because of his forced chastity for weeks, but also because, as has been mentioned above, women seem to be his only access to the world, his - not least sexual - interest in Lily-Julie is immediately aroused.

As early as the first sight of the apparition, the opposition in which he more and more places Lily-Julie and Alison shows Lily-Julie as the virgin who rouses his desire to conquer her in contrast to Alison, the prostitute who can be taken at any time.[128] From his romantic dreams, in which he idealizes the image Lily-Julie ("The more I thought of that midnight face, the more intelligent and charming it became", *M*158), and that turn into "various romantic-sexual fantasies with that enigmatic figure" (*M*158-159), he goes over to erotic thoughts about Alison, now dreaming "of the dirty week-end pleasures of having her in some Athens hotel bedroom; of birds in the hand being worth more than birds in the

[128] Dividing women into two classes, "those who are meant to be loved and those who are meant to be used" (Tarbox (1988a), p.22; see also Raper (1988), pp.62) is Nicholas's general attitude towards women. This suggestion is supported by the fact that within the masque this opposition is also present, as Katherine Tarbox points out: "The twin sisters [...] are employed to personify Nicholas's schizophrenic attitude toward women - that is that there are only virgins and whores" (Tarbox (1988a), p.23).

bush" (*M*159). Thus even before Nicholas gets involved in the affair with Lily-Julie those dreams mirror what will later be so painful for him to realize: his idealistic image is nothing but an unattainable dream which cannot be integrated into his life, while Alison is attainable and a true relationship with her is therefore possible. For that, however, he still has to learn that he must not also force her into a fixed image, but has to acknowledge and respect her individuality.

First it is Lily-Julie's inaccessibility of all things that irresistibly captivates Nicholas because, while Alison always seemed predictable to him, the mysteriousness of that other woman becomes the very essence of her female charms:

> What had always attracted me in the opposite sex was what they tried to hide, what provoked all the metaphorical equivalents of seducing them out of their clothes into nakedness. That had always been too easy with Alison (*M*387).

This demonstrates quite plainly Nicholas's attitude towards interhuman relationships: he regards them as some kind of competition he has to win, which shows itself not only in his numerous affairs but also in the triumphant feeling that overcomes him when leaving Alison to go to Greece, "she loved me more than I loved her, and [...] consequently I had in some indefinable way won" (*M*48).[129] Lily-Julie's play, then, awakes Nicholas's ambition to win that game by solving her mysteries, and only his failure opens his eyes to his limited point of view and arouses the need for establishing an honest and truthful relationship.[130]

Nicholas's conviction that underneath the surface of Lily-Julie's roles there is a true nature to be found and his theory that "all games, even the most literal, between a man and a woman are implicitly sexual" (*M*202) determine his attempts to make a picture of the 'real' Lily-Julie. Influenced by her appearance Nicholas, thinking himself a "connoisseur of girls' good looks" (*M*169), immediately recognizes Lily-Julie as an ideal, "one to judge all others by" (*M*169), he infers from her flawless beauty a correspondence as regards her character. The reserve and shyness she has already presented when embodying Conchis's deceased fiancée Nicholas interprets as a characteristic of the real person behind the role.[131] Even her coolness during the Apollo scene, which

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[129] Cf. Olshen (1978), p.36.
[130] Cf. Barnum (1989), p.23.
[131] According to Katherine Tarbox Lily-Julie's habit of pulling away "is meant to signal that her role is symbolic, and therefore impersonal" (Tarbox (1988a), p.23).

he himself thinks so shockingly obscene, does not raise doubts about his conviction that her innocence is not just part of her role. Thus Nicholas sees in Lily-Julie the complete opposite of Alison, who has a "natural aura of sexuality" (*M*32), and does not fit into an ideal of beauty or any other image: "She would be ugly one moment, and then some movement, expression, angle of her face, made ugliness impossible" (*M*31).

Nicholas's search for the 'real' woman he is sure of seeing shine through her role is doomed to failure. He cannot accept the allusions Conchis as well as Lily-Julie herself constantly make more or less overtly to warn him that she does not really exist, but is just a pawn in Conchis's game. He rather believes he recognizes in her behaviour again and again indications of her real nature. The more attainable Lily-Julie seems to become, the more he assigns her behaviour to the realm of reality:

> I found her new, her real self, a simplicity and seriousness in her expression, even more delectable than the previous ones. I realized that it was what had been lacking: a sense of her ordinariness, that she was attainable (*M*330).

The only clues to this absurd attempt at discovering the 'real' woman behind the different masks is, paradoxically enough, his own illusion of an ideal Lily-Julie, since this image is the basis for the expectations he directs towards her. If her reactions meet his expectations he is sure of having discovered her self behind the role she plays.[132] That his interpretations influence that game actively and that in this way, without leaving the realm of illusions, it is Nicholas himself who gives the masque the new turns he is confronted with, becomes obvious, for instance, when he tries to force Lily-Julie to give up playing her role and to tell him her true story. The new role she immediately adopts is much more in accordance with his own ideas about her, since at his urging she tells him a new, supposedly real name - though the name Lily is one of the few correct details of the masque. With Lily-Julie now adopting the role

[132] When, for instance, he accuses her of being Conchis's mistress he has "the impression that for once I had shocked her out of acting" (*M*196). (See also *M*285, *M*289 etc.) This tendency to believe what is in accordance with his own expectations is not restricted to Lily-Julie's behaviour, but is one of Nicholas's general characteristics. This suggestion is affirmed by his meeting with Rose-June after Lily-Julie's sudden disappearance from the hiding place. First Nicholas is very suspicious towards Rose-June. But when he finally plays his trump-card telling her of Alison's suicide, she shows the appropriate shock and sympathy he has expected. Since as a result she announces the immediate breaking off of the experiment, which according to Nicholas is a very appropriate reaction, Rose-June from that moment on is credible to him (*M*472-474).

Nicholas has insinuated, namely being one of Conchis's hired actresses, this new role seems credible to him.

This new credibility, however, is not least due to her bashful allusions that Nicholas's "sentiments are not altogether unshared" (*M*206), a statement he not only accepts as an honest remark independent of her role, but that he even interprets again and again as evidence that he will be successful at solving the mysteries by and by. This reaction, again, indicates to what extent his interpretations are based on his own hopes and expectations. He does not question the sincerity of those statements. Being very flattering and, above all, in accordance with his own picture of the situation they rather stimulate him to extend his image of Lily-Julie further and thereby also to raise his promising expectations:

> [A]bout her I was getting, if not many factual, at least some psychological and emotional answers ... I imagined a girl who had perhaps been a little bit of a blue-stocking, despite her looks; certainly more an intellectual than an animal creature, but with a repeated and teasing hint of something dormant there, waiting to be awakened; for whom acting at university must have provided some sort of release. I knew she was still acting in a way, but I felt it was defensive now, a way of hiding what she felt about me (*M*216).

His expectations, then, are the basis on which to interpret Lily-Julie's behaviour and just because he regards her as a pure, innocent young woman he falls prey to his own conviction that her feelings towards him must be sincere no matter to what extent she might otherwise deceive him on Conchis's instructions: " I had discovered the essential thing: that she was on my side" (*M*294).

Lily-Julie's mysterious aura and Nicholas's conviction that her shy affection is sincere make him regard her as the embodiment of femininity and thus arouse romantic sensations in him he has not known at all before. Her mysteriousness makes him see the relation between men and women in a new light. Up to then the relation between the sexes has been a mere sexual matter to him:

> I had always believed [...] that a man and a woman could tell in the first ten minutes whether they wanted to go to bed together; and that the time that passed after those first ten minutes represented a tax, which might be worth paying if the article promised to be really enjoyable, but which nine times out of ten became rapidly excessive (*M*242).

Lily-Julie's ambiguous behaviour, however, in which he discovers an unfamiliar reserve as well as "a certain exhalation of surrender [...], as if she was a door waiting to be pushed open" (*M*242), opens his eyes to the charm of slowly discovering another person. Thus she not only makes him realize the limitation of his point of view as regards human relationships ("she shook my whole theory", *M*242), but also seems to arouse a need in him to establish more than a mere sexual relationship. His rather cynical attitude has now turned into a romantic one:

> [A] nostalgia for that extinct Lawrentian woman of the past, the woman inferior to man in everything but that one great power of female mystery and beauty; the brilliant, virile male and the dark, swooning female. (*M*242)

Nicholas does not see Lily-Julie as a mere sex object, but idealizes her, regarding her as the prototype of mystery and beauty, an angle no less limited and one-sided. Besides, this new angle enables him to feel superior to Lily-Julie, and thus he regards his relation to her not in the usual terms of competition. He has no longer to fight to be the winner but in this new situation, "where a woman was a woman and I was obliged to be fully a man", he can see himself as the winner from the very beginning, since because of that distinct role allocation there is no need for competing. Because of his revised ideas, his relationship with that stylized image of Lily-Julie is something new for him, is completely different from the affairs he has had before, so that for the first time in his life he believes that what he feels is love : "I had been enchanted into wanting sex often enough before; but never into wanting love" (*M*242).

It is just at this point when Nicholas admits to himself that he is enchanted by Lily-Julie that Alison re-appears in the life of a Nicholas who is more and more being carried away by illusions and dreams of the unattainable feminine ideal. According to Barry N. Olshen Alison's re-appearance is meant "to introduce the very important element of reality into Nicholas's life."[133] Disappointed and "furious that Conchis could spirit his world away" (*M*243) at the weekend Alison wants to meet him in Athens, Nicholas starts to have new doubts about Lily-Julie since he does not understand why Conchis should have retreated so suddenly. The fundamental question about the intention of that mysterious man is raised anew, so that Nicholas wonders whether indeed Lily-Julie's alleged schizophrenia might be the reason for Conchis's activities, since "[i]f it had been only an amusement" (*M*244) this abrupt termination of the

[133] Olshen (1978), p.46.

masque would have been completely illogical. The sense of certainty as regards Lily-Julie's health he has only just acquired because of her apparent sincerity begins to sway again, he cannot understand this new situation, and thus Bourani once again proves to be a world without any logical coherence. On the one hand, therefore, Nicholas finally embarks for Athens to meet Alison "for my lack of a better" (*M*244), on the other hand, however, he also regards it:

> [A]s a kind of test: of both my depth of feeling about Julie and my doubts. Alison could stand for past and present reality in the outer world, and I would put her secretly in the ring with my inner adventure (*M*245).

Even before meeting her, then, he restricts Alison to representing both Lily-Julie's and his own opponent. It is not his interest in Alison as a person that induces him to meet her, but her function as representative of the world outside Bourani. In her he tries to find a confirmation of his love for Lily-Julie, and consequently his whole awareness is exclusively focussed on contrasting Alison with his ideal and thus on detecting flaws in her:

> Her hair was short, too short. [...] I could see she was tired, her most bruised. Pretty enough body, pretty enough clothes, a good walk, the same old wounded face and truth-seeking eyes. Alison might launch ten ships in me; but Julie launched a thousand (*M*246).

Thus right from the beginning he puts up a barrier hardly surmountable for Alison. At the same time he uses his images of Lily-Julie and Alison to confirm the images he has created of each other: in Alison's behaviour he always sees the complete opposite of the way he believes Lily-Julie would behave. In the refuge at Parnassus, however, once again trying to distance himself from Alison by invoking his image of Lily-Julie, he realizes that "somehow it was a situation that Julie could never have got into" (262). Becoming aware, then, of the impossibility of comparing the two, he nevertheless tries to see in her the exact opposite of the provoking behaviour that according to his point of view characterizes Alison, thus stylizing Lily-Julie to a pure, angelic figure "silencing everything, purifying everything; not provoking and adding to the vulgarity" (*M*251). Inversely it is also the image of the pure virgin he has evoked in this way that allows him to restrict his image of Alison to a merely sexual and amoral level. From his retrospective point of view, incidentally, the narrator Nicholas hints at the limitation of his own angle

at that time which enabled him to see in Alison exactly what he needed to confirm his preconceived opinion about her: "*I thought* I could see in her walk a touch of that old amoral sexuality" (*M*251, my italics).[134]

Critically observing Alison's behaviour, a fact she is quite aware of ("Don't always sit so in judgment on everything I say, everything I do", *M*252), Nicholas is satisfied to be able to find that she "did everything that Julie would never have done; then called, in her characteristic way, her own bluff" (*M*251). That statement, however, ironically demonstrates the distorted image he has of the situation. While Alison acts out a sham of boisterousness in front of Nicholas to hide her real emotions without being able to keep up that false happiness, Lily-Julie plays her part up to the disintoxication, so that finally it is especially Lily-Julie's behaviour he will later call amoral.

Against his will he has to realize that by and by Alison manages to break through the distant attitude he has adopted towards her. This is the reason for his constantly looking for new ways of seeing her in an unfavourable light to keep himself from regarding her a rival to his image of Lily-Julie, since after all he intends their meeting to be a test of his depth of feeling about the mysterious girl on the island. But in the face of Alison's liveliness, his attempts at restricting her to his negative image of her are doomed to failure, and Conchis's description of what he realized after watching Henrik is also true for the relation between Nicholas and Alison:

> [A]ll our explanations, all our classifications and derivations [...] suddenly appeared to me like a thin net. That great passive monster, reality, was no longer dead, easy to handle. It was full of mysterious vigour, new forms, new possibilities. The net was nothing, reality burst through it (*M*309).

It is in that sense that Alison's part in the masque is that "she was cast as Reality" (*M*647). She cannot be classified according to preconceived categories but bursts through the net Nicholas has meshed out of his own ideas of reality in order to prevent her from endangering his own self-conception as well as his illusions of Lily-Julie. Nicholas becomes himself

[134] As has been mentioned above, phrases like this run throughout the whole novel, indicating again and again the distant attitude of the mature man towards his own behaviour and attitude as a young man. With Nicholas's certainty and apparent knowledge in certain situations proving again and again to be self-deceptions, the conspicuously frequent phrase 'I knew', Nicholas often employs when putting forward his theories about the events as well as about his evaluation of people, can be taken as critical commentaries on the all too strong confidence in his own reason.

aware of this ability of Alison's, and describing that impression he employs a metaphor conspicuously similar to Conchis's: "she had, had always had, this secret trick of slipping through all the obstacles I put between us" (*M*266).

An important trait of Alison's character is "her companionability" (*M*252); this as well as her honest interest in him soon make Nicholas feel the familiar closeness again:

> [I]t came to me that she was the only person in the world that I could have been talking like that to; that without noticing it I had slipped back into something of our old relationship ... *too close to need each other's names* (*M*254).[135]

Though it is her mysteriousness and the mysteries around her that attracts Nicholas to Lily-Julie, it is especially those components that force him to maintain a certain standard of suspicion. And it is his idealization of Lily-Julie, regarding her as the embodiment of female beauty and unfathomability, that make a component of friendship beyond the sexual level of their relationship, i.e. a comradeship as with Alison, inconceivable.

First, however, Nicholas manages to regard his encounter with Alison as a game. On the one hand, he tries to prove his faithfulness towards Lily-Julie by persuading himself of feeling "no attraction and no tenderness" (*M*249) for Alison. On the other hand, however, he plays a game against Alison by serving her with a false story and thus inducing her to feel sorry for him. Thus he creates an artificial situation he seems to have under control which enables him to keep up the distance towards Alison since he is consciously playing a role. Apart from that, he can also find a kind of vicarious satisfaction in that game by substituting "aesthetic pleasure; [...] beauty in decadence" (*M*249) for emotional impressions: "I was unexpectedly filled with a pleasure of duplicity" (*M*249).

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[135] While closeness is here characterized by the fact that names are no longer necessary, in Lily-Julie's game names play a very important part since each name implies a new role: Lily Montgomery, Julie Holmes, "Astarte, mother of mystery" (*M*205), Dr. Vanessa Maxwell. Nicholas finally learns her real name, Lily de Seitas, from her mother. As has been mentioned above, however, he tries to force Lily-Julie to tell him her 'real' name. That urge for using her name, hoping to make her more graspable in this way, and the fact that he only knows a false name can therefore be taken as a hint that no closeness with her is possible. For an illustration of the meaning of the names John Fowles employs in his novels see Sue S. Park (1980): "John Fowles's *The Magus*: The Godgame as Wordgame." In: *Proceedings of the Conference of College Teachers in Texas 45*, pp.47-49.

By assigning a role to Alison that enables him not to take her seriously, he manages indeed at first what he has planned, namely to keep the meeting "safely antiseptic" (*M*245) while at the same time enjoying her pity. The superiority he feels at doing so is reminiscent of the triumphant feelings he had during his time at college about being "as neat at ending liaisons as at starting them" (*M*21). This time, however, he interprets this feeling of elation differently: "It seemed almost marvellous, to be so without desire; at last in my life, to be able to be so faithful" (*M*250). In this way he betrays Alison in order to confirm, ironically enough, in particular his ability to be faithful at her expense. He does not realize, however, that he does not have to pass the test the meeting with Alison presents to him, since instead of really putting himself to the test he simply ignores her. Nevertheless he is himself the one who establishes the first physical contact between them and, "[a]fter a moment's swift calculation" (*M*248), puts his arm round her. Yet just at the moment when he is afraid of not being able to resist her, pretending a sense of duty ("I would have to kiss her", *M*248), he tells her of his supposed disease. Thus he undermines at once both the temptation and any potential overtures on Alison's part. His 'faithfulness' to Lily-Julie, then, does not go so far as telling Alison the truth, on the contrary, he even denies that there is another woman in his life.[136]

In spite of his attempts to see Alison in a bad light by comparing her to Lily-Julie and constantly searching for reasons to keep up his negative attitude towards her ("But I had, so to speak, to be irritated [...]. I thought she ought to have been more subdued, and much sadder" (*M*252)), thus keeping her at the necessary distance, the atmosphere during their trip on Mount Parnassus becomes more and more intimate.[137] The more Nicholas feels attracted to Alison, however, the more he tries to fight his feelings, putting the blame on the situation, thus denying the effect of Alison's personal aura and lowering her to the level of being just any person, being merely someone whose presence smoothes his lone-

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[136] Mrs. de Seitas will later explain to him that his behaviour has nothing in common with faithfulness, for "the real infidelity is the one that hides the sexual infidelity. Because the one thing that must never come between two people who have offered each other love is a lie" (*M*603). In Athens, then, Nicholas not only deceives Alison but also betrays Lily-Julie more than on a mere sexual level.

[137] Katherine Tarbox points out that their "ascent of Mount Parnassus comes at the exact midpoint of the chapters, suggesting, in this symbolic novel, the possibility of a turning point" (Tarbox (1988a), p.21) that Nicholas does not take, however. See also Wolfe (1980), p.103: "Urfe's returning Alison's love might have ended the Godgame on the spot."

liness in the dark wilderness. While resting on their search for the refuge he cradles Alison "in a completely unsexual embrace" (*M*260), he cannot put forward a mere physical urge as a pretext and explanation of his feelings. And yet he is neither prepared to accept nor to name the feeling of love that flows through him: "I felt ... it meant nothing, it must mean nothing. I told myself I would have felt the same with anyone" (*M*260). In the romantic atmosphere of the refuge, however, where he feels helpless, and even invoking an image of Lily-Julie is not sufficient to bring back that marvellous feeling of being "so without desire" (250), he blames Alison for what he justifies as being an absolutely natural reaction:

> I began to feel that she had exploited the whole situation, engineered everything to place me in this predicament: this silence in which it was only too clear that she was in command, not myself; only too clear that I wanted her - not Alison in particular, but the girl she was, any girl who might have been beside me at that moment (*M*263).

At this moment, then, he places Alison in a position that allows him to regard her as a mere body and not as an individual, whereby he reassures himself of not betraying his feelings towards Lily-Julie. The anonymity he thus establishes in his mind between himself and Alison even goes so far that he manages to soothe his conscience by persuading himself that "it's like being with a prostitute, hands as adept as a prostitute's, nothing but a matter of pleasure" (*M*263). In doing so he not only rejects any responsibility for the situation but also ignores Alison's sincere feelings.

That scene demonstrates to what extent Nicholas's interpretations of different events are dependent on his preconceived opinions and his own desires, for he imagines that with Lily-Julie, the same situation

> would be infinitely disturbing and infinitely more passionate; not familiar, not aching with fatigue, hot, a bit sweaty ... some cheapened word like randy; but white-hot, mysterious, overwhelming passion (*M*264).

Yet it is just his own attitude, his effort at repressing emotions, that make the word 'randy' appropriate; while thinking of Alison as a prostitute soothes his conscience since from this perspective being with her is now simply a physical matter, "a matter of pleasure", the parallel scene with Lily-Julie, the seduction in the sea at midnight is of completely different significance to him. In both scenes, he is the passive one being

seduced,[138] but while regarding Alison's behaviour as being completely independent of her feelings towards him, he interprets Lily-Julie's seduction as evidence of her love. Moreover, he regards the latter not only as a one-sided pleasure but rather has "an intuition it had meant more for her ... it was a kind of discovery, or rediscovery, of her own latent sexuality through the satisfaction of mine" (*M*370). In contrast to that interpretation, however, he is quite annoyed when after his surrender to her seduction Alison regards this as the new beginning of their relationship:

> It irritated me still that she put so much reliance on the body thing, the shared orgasm. Her mistaking that for love, her not seeing that love was something other ... the mystery of withdrawal, reserve, walking away through the trees, turning the mouth away in the last moment (*M*266).

Nevertheless it is Lily-Julie's changed attitude - her no longer representing the mysterious, unattainable woman but a physically available creature - that of all things makes him believe that he has finally seen through her and knows her now: "Her face seemed softer, simpler, maskless now" (*M*370). So in this case Nicholas is the one who mistakes "the body thing" for love and will later have to realize to his horror that for Lily-Julie of all persons these two are separable aspects.

The relativity of and dependency on perspective according to which Nicholas classifies situations is even further elaborated in that context. At the refuge, out of a sense of duty towards Lily-Julie, he regards his seduction by Alison as a mere physical affair, i.e. as something free of emotions, that therefore, in his opinion, has neither for him nor for Alison anything to do with love.[139] The "passionate wave of desire" (*M*269) for Alison that runs through him the next day when resting at a little lake he, however, interprets as love. Thus at this moment his up to then strictly

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[138] According to Katherine Tarbox Nicholas is "essentially a masturbatory personality" (Tarbox (1988a), p.24). She verifies this with the sunbathing scene with Lily-Julie and Rose-June's at the beach. Rose-June shocks Nicholas by wearing a bikini the top of which she soon takes off, presenting herself very provokingly to him. According to Katherine Tarbox it is Rose-June in her role as whore who excites him, but Lily-Julie, the virgin, "to whom he turns for relief. Thus his lust has nothing to do with Lily or his lust for her. His lust is bound up purely in himself, disconnected from the object, hence masturbatory. Lily's masturbation of him later at Moutsa serves as the logical conclusion of this scene" (Tarbox (1988a), S.23).

[139] In doing so he disregards Alison's feelings in a very ignorant manner for, note, she acts in spite of believing that he has syphilis, i.e. she is prepared to take the risk of catching it from him.

separated notions of physical and spiritual love blend into one: "And we did make love; not sex, but love; though sex would have been far wiser" (*M*269).[140] Finally admitting that his alleged disease is a lie and that there are other reasons for his reserve out of a sudden need for being honest towards Alison, he nevertheless tries to present Lily-Julie as a very minor aspect of his experience at Bourani, as "an asexual thing, a fascination of the mind" (*M*270). When Alison shows that she is deeply hurt and considers their affair finished Nicholas adopts exactly the behaviour he has accused Alison of the day before: he equates "the body thing" with love. From his changed perspective he tries to reverse those categories he employed to cheapen Alison to his own advantage:

> Perhaps after all there was a solution; to get her back into the hotel, make love to her, prove to her through the loins that I did love her ... and why not, let her see that I might be worth suffering, just as I was and always would be (*M*272).

Contrary to his expectations, however, Alison shows neither sympathy for his situation nor gratitude for his honesty, but understands immediately that the main attraction for Nicholas at Bourani must be a woman. Her reaction shows plainly how inappropriate Nicholas's image of her is: She is not at all the indifferent prostitute he has tried to see her as. Thus his hopes "to have both" (*M*269) Lily-Julie and Alison, the mysterious, unattainable one and the predictable, available one, are shattered. His one-sided mind, that restricts each of the two women to the representation of the complementary image of the other, arouses his desire for both, since in Alison he hopes to find the satisfaction of his sexual needs while Lily-Julie promises an aesthetic adventure. When in addition to the intellectual level Lily-Julie also seems to offer the fulfilment of his sexual fantasies, he idealizes her in these terms, too. In addition to her pureness and the mysteriousness of the "Lawrentian woman of the past" Nicholas now also projects on to her the perfected skills of the female image he restricts Alison to:

> I imagined a Julie who had acquired all Alison's experience and adeptness, her quick passions, her slow lubricities, but enhanced, enriched, diversified by superior taste, intelligence, poetry (*M*371).

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[140] The clip of that scene is the last section of the pornographic film Nicholas has to watch at his disintoxication. According to Palmer, that last part is the most pornographic section of all since all that weekend "Nicholas was using Alison's body, exploiting her emotions in order to bolster his own ego" (Palmer (1975), p.48).

When he receives the news of Alison's suicide, bothered by pangs of conscience, Nicholas suspects for the first time that he has never recognized her personality as a whole, that he has never taken seriously her unusual ability to love him from the bottom of her heart in spite of all his flaws, but that instead he has always tried to impose a picture on her that was favourable to himself: "My monstrous crime was Adam's, the oldest and most vicious of all male selfishnesses: to have imposed the role I needed from Alison on her real self" (*M*400). Just as he used her in London to prove to himself his superiority and independence, he used their meeting in Athens to confirm and perfect his image of Lily-Julie.

Yet realizing that he used to find self-affirmation in imposing certain roles on Alison does not open his eyes to the fact that he does just the same with Lily-Julie. On the contrary, now he needs even more the idealized woman of his imagination to acquit him of his guilt by telling him that he acted honestly towards Alison when he betrayed her in favour of the mysterious world of Bourani: "Her forgiveness was the only possible justification now" (*M*400).[141] Trying to use Lily-Julie to justify his cruelty towards Alison he plays with his role models once again. Thus he contrasts Alison, who gave him what he thought an absurd ultimatum, with an image of Lily-Julie, who distinguishes herself by kindness and infinite understanding. Yet he decides against telling her of Alison's suicide at once in favour of waiting for "the right time and place, when the exchange rate between confession and the sympathy it evoked looked likely to be high" (*M*402), using Alison one last time for his own benefit in this way.[142]

He realizes only very late that all the time he has restricted his image of Lily-Julie to the characteristics he wanted to see in her at any one time, that he has created his ideal on the basis of hallucinations and, above all, on the basis of misinterpretations determined by his restricted angle. This becomes particularly obvious during the longed-for night with her: in her behaviour and the expression on her face he recognizes the strange blend of innocence and sensuality she embodies in his imagination:

> [A] kind of intent seriousness, like a child undressing a doll. [...] something both sensual and innocent [...], a growing abandon to passion that was also a willed attempt to be what she felt I must want: feverish, strained, not playful at all. (*M*484).

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[141]Cf. Olshen (1978), p.49.
[142] Cf. Michael Thorpe (1982): *John Fowles.* Windsor: Profile Books, p.19.

First he interprets her smile at him and the look in her eyes when she leaves the bed after the sexual act as an expression of naïvety and inexperience, but finally her leaving him so suddenly and her mysterious words make him register "the change in her voice, its now patent lack of innocence" (*M*488). Only now that he realizes that he has been deceived by her and is now forced to take up a new point of view, does he recognize in her eyes something else than "the naïvety I first took it for" (*M*488):

> I realized at last what Julie's final look at me had been like. It was that of a surgeon who has performed a difficult operation successfully; peeling off the rubber gloves, surveying the suture (*M*489).

That this interpretation, too, is determined by his own angle, by his horror and feeling of humiliation, is indicated by Lily-Julie's request to Nicholas always to remember one thing about that night: "That it's also how, not why" (*M*487).

It is this situation that makes Nicholas realize for the first time to what extent he has attributed other people with characteristics and features according to his own images of them. Realizing that Lily-Julie is far from being the ideal woman he has created in his mind, he now begins to think of Alison again, craving for the one characteristic he has always thought typical of her and that so far had only bored him: "her inability to hide behind metaphor" (*M*266). Yet after his experiences at Bourani he is no longer able look at her in the way he used to. Always having felt superior to her when he lived with her in London, when he finally meets her in a London tea pavilion after his return from Greece he is the one who feels "uncouth beside her" (*M*648) now. The lesson he has learned from Lily-Julie has made him realize that he not only created her as the embodiment of femininity by endowing her with all the ideal features he connected with that ideal image, but accordingly turned Alison into the complementary image of his ideal:

> From my first glimpse of her I realized, and it seemed to aggravate my irritation, that the image, idealized by memory, of a Lily always at her best had distorted Alison into what she was only at her worst (*M*648).

Just as he added certain characteristics of Alison to his image and dreams of Lily-Julie, he now discovers traits in Alison he has never noticed before and which he thought were the special charms distinguishing Lily-Julie. Now Alison is the one who appears to be

unattainable, "so cold, so calm" (*M*648). "She was mysterious, almost a new woman; one had to go back several steps, and start again; *and know the place for the first time*" (*M*650). Nicholas's quotation of this line from 'Little Gidding', however, indicates that it not so much Alison who has changed, but rather Nicholas himself, and that his change enables him to discover features in her he could not or would not see before. Thus he now does more justice to her personality.[143]

3.3.3 Nicholas's Self-Image as Self-Protection

Nicholas's new attitude towards Alison is only possible on the basis of the self-knowledge he has acquired in the course Conchis's godgame, since the ability to "learn to see through the roles we give ourselves in ordinary life" (*M*409) is a requirement of seeing through the roles we assign to other people.[144] According to Conchis this is the essential feature that decides whether one's life turns into a personal tragedy or comedy. The intention of his metatheatre, therefore, is "to allow the participants to see through their first roles in it. But that is only the catastasis" (*M*409).[145]

This catastasis (the apparent halt of the dramatic action at its climax) takes place when Conchis finally seems to break off his game with Maria and Joe relinquishing their roles. At that moment Nicholas gets another chance to accept finally that everything at Bourani is just a matter of stage-management. At the same time he is given the opportunity to realize that he has also just played a part in that play. Nevertheless he is not yet able to recognize his own role, thus bringing about the catastrophe, which consists in his disintoxication. This situation is the crucial turning point of the hero's destiny.

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[143] Cf. Tarbox (1988a), p.32.

[144] According to Michael Thorpe the aim of the masque is "to understand and accent [sic] love, which necessarily involves self-understanding and self acceptance, and an acceptance, perhaps without full understanding, of the other (the loved one)" (Thorpe (1982), p.18).

[145] In an interview John Fowles explains this relation between the individual and society further: "Life does condition us so frightfully that it's terribly difficult to sense [...] the underlying nature of existence. You know, we are caged more and more by present society in roles, and I think being able to see through the roles is most important. I once suggested it was as if we were all acting players. What we've lost the trick of is seeing through these public roles and discovering the actor's true self underneath - the experience every real actor has to deal with" (Katherine Tarbox (1988b): "Interview with John Fowles." In: Tarbox (1988a), p.183).

The catastasis, Conchis explains, is "what precedes the final act, or catastrophe, in classical tragedy. [...] Or comedy. As the case may be" (*M*409). Which is the case as regards Nicholas, which turn his destiny will take, depends, as Conchis has announced, on whether Nicholas will succeed in seeing through his roles in the metatheatre as well as in everyday life.

For an illustration of what Conchis tries to express with his metaphorical statement about the potential turns in the course of his metatheatre, a brief comparison of the concepts of tragedy and comedy might be helpful. Moreover, on the basis of this distinction I will suggest which turn Nicholas's life will take. In tragedy man's conflict with the arbitrary chances of fate is represented, i.e. a conflict with the moral order of the world. This conflict leads to the breakdown of the action and culminates in the hero's final defeat in the face of his inevitable fate.[146] In contrast to this, comedy is based on a merely apparent conflict which is finally dissolved after the sham values and insufficiencies of human life have been unmasked and thus overcome.[147] Keeping in mind those potential endings of the drama it is possible to analyze whether the metatheatre will turn into a tragedy or a comedy for Nicholas, i.e. whether he will succeed in seeing through his roles.

When at his 'trial'[148] Nicholas is confronted with an analysis of his own psyche that represents him as an egotistic, irresponsible person, he realizes in spite of the cruelty of the report and of feeling degraded and furious: "There was some truth in what she was saying" (*M*511). By accepting the basic statements of this evaluation, then, Nicholas takes the first step towards self-knowledge at that moment, and his decision against punishing Lily-Julie, despite his power to do so, proves that he

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[146] Cf. Gero von Wilpert (1989): *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur.* Stuttfgart: Kröner, p.960.

[147] Cf. Wilpert (1989), S.468.

[148] The allusion to Kafka's *Der Prozeß (The Trial)* is most likely no coincidence. This is indicated, for instance, by Nicholas's comment when he is arrested, just like Josef K., "ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte" (Franz Kafka (1991): *Der Prozeß.* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer. p.7.): "I still couldn't accept that this was not some nightmare, like some freak misbinding in a book, a Lawrence novel become, at the turn of a page, one by Kafka" (*M*489). In an essay on Kafka Fowles suggests that Kafka's work is centred on the representation of "frustration and victimization" as central human experiences and calls him "a pioneer [...]in existential sociology - in being and nothingness" (John Fowles (1970): "My Recollections of Kafka." In: *Mosaic 3.4*, p.34). As regards *The Magus*, Fowles is especially conscious of having been influenced by Kafka (cf. Fowles (1970), p.37). That, in contrast to Josef K., Nicholas not only survives his trial but even accepts his responsibility for his own life, is an indication of Fowles's basically more optimistic view of the world and of mankind.

has accepted his own freedom of decision-making in all his actions, "the freedom to do all", that is always qualified by "the prohibition not to do all" (*M*434). Thus Nicholas decides against his personal tragedy, accepting the responsibility for his own life, consequently ridding himself of the idea of an inevitable destiny and not submitting to a higher order of the world which he might blame for his failures. Thus he reveals his own false values and shortcomings, which is a typical feature of comedy, and replaces his idea of a determined destiny with a readiness for acting responsibly.

For Nicholas to attain and accept that knowledge, however, it takes quite some effort on the part of Conchis's masque, since Nicholas is not prepared to give up so soon the security his egocentric concept of the world and his self-image provide him with. He is not aware that with his self-image as the lonely intellectual, helplessly at the mercy of the world, he has chosen a role that acquits him of his responsibility for and duty towards others.[149] Alison, however, having always seen through him, recognizes that role and its function quite clearly:

> I think you're so blind you probably don't even know you don't love me. You don't even know you're a filthy selfish bastard who can't, can't like being impotent, can't *ever* think of anything except number one. Because nothing can hurt you, Nicko. Deep down, where it counts. You've built your life so that nothing can ever reach you. So whatever you do you can say, I couldn't help it. You can't lose. You can always have your next adventure. [...] You can't even tell a simple fact straight. [...] There's some girl on your island and you want to lay her. That's all. But of course that's nasty, that's crude. So you tart it up. As usual. Tart it up so it makes you seem the innocent one, the great intellectual who must have his experience (*M*274).

[149] This becomes particularly obvious when he tells the twins about his life: "So we talked about Nicholas: his family, his ambitions, his failings. The third person is apt, because I presented a sort of fictional self to them, a victim of circumstances, a mixture of attractive raffishness and essential decency" (*M*347-348). This artificial self he creates for others as well as for himself on the one hand releases him of responsibility and on the other hand serves to "produce the image of himself which may be to his best advantage" (Robert Burden (1980): *John Fowles - John Hawkes - Claude Simon. Pro-blems of Self and Form in the Post-Modernist Novel. A Comparative Study.* Würzburg: Könighausen und Neumann, p.44).

Here Alison not only presents an apt description of Nicholas's behaviour, but is also right about his unawareness of this self-deception.[150] Yet she is not able to open his eyes with her candour - or rather especially because of that candour, for, as Robert Scholes puts it, "Nicholas is so insulated in his esthetic world, he can only be reached esthetically, and Alison is too 'real' to reach him on this level."[151] What Alison's words do not succeed in becomes the function of the Magus, "the one who dramatizes the metaphors of experience when words will not suffice."[152]

Though Nicholas has realized, as has been mentioned above, that he is not a poet and that his suicide attempt was not a real act of desperation but rather an aesthetic one, he is not conscious that he has always regarded and lived his life on an aesthetic level.[153] 'Aesthetic' in this context means that Nicholas loves his life for its artistic form, its beautiful shape. As a consequence acting is no longer interaction but becomes an end in itself. The allusion to Mercutio in his description of his attempt at suicide indicates that Nicholas intents to direct a drama which, according to Alan Kennedy, "is false because it operates on the level of art for art's sake."[154] Thus his suicide attempt is a stage-management for the sake of the artistic form, a consequence of his "retreat from content into form" (*M*402). To Nicholas it is important to pursue a certain *style* of life. His skill at ending affairs, for instance, he regards as "calculating, but [...] caused less by a true coldness than by my narcissistic belief in the importance of the lifestyle" (*M*21). According to John Fowles, however, this escape into form, into style, is a separation of art and life. In his

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[150] According to Peter Wolfe, Nicholas "cannot be indicted for self-deceit. A redeeming honesty he acquires at Oxford lets him face his failures directly" (Wolfe (1980), p.86). This self-knowledge acquired at Oxford, however, does not go beyond realizing that he is "not a cynic by nature; only by revolt" (*M*17), while only the narrator Nicholas, looking back, can state that "nothing could have been less poetic than my seeing-through-all boredom with life in general and with making a living in particular. I was too green to know that all cynicism masks a failure to cope - an impotence, in short; and that to despise all effort is the greatest effort of all" (*M*17). His behaviour during the masque and, above all, his behaviour towards Alison show only too plainly that he is not aware of the illusions he labours under. Thus what Conchis states about the schizophrenic Lily also applies to Nicholas: "When she says such things, she believes them. That is why her lies can be so convincing" (*M*229).

[151] Scholes (1979), p.39.

[152] Olshen (1978), p.48.

[153] Peter Wolfe points out that Nicholas reduces his life to a literary game especially when he is in difficulties, for "an artistic problem is easier to cope with than a human one" (Wolfe (1980), p.89). This is particularly obvious as regards his dealing with Alison's suicide, an important aspect I will shortly go into in more detail.

[154] Kennedy (1974), p.254.

opinion, style and form in art are not meant to be an end in themselves but are intended to be a means to the end of aptly expressing a certain content: "The artefacts of a genius are distinguished by rich human content, for which he forges new images and new techniques, creates new styles" (*A*201). Yet it is a widespread fallacy, Fowles continues, to believe that "the style is the man" (*A*202), so that the obsession with form has become a means to "conceal the triviality, banality or illogic of [the] self" (*A*194).

Nicholas retreats to that level of art. He tries to escape the frustration and futility of his life by escaping into a closed world of art.[155] He loves art and looks at it

> in a characteristically narcissistic and barren way. He enjoys form rather than content; style rather than meaning; vogue rather than social significance; fastidiousness rather than strength. [...] He becomes a connoisseur, a collector, a hypersensitive critic [...]; and all the rest of his humanity becomes atrophied and drops away (*A*112).

From this limited perspective Nicholas has developed his style of life in order to conceal the meaninglessness of his life, his "seeing-through-all boredom with life" (*M*17) in this way. Thus he confuses art with life.[156] Even during his time as a student, just like the other members of 'Les Hommes Révoltés', he abuses literature to justify his selfish behaviour:

> [We] argued about being and nothingness and called a certain kind of inconsequential behaviour 'existentialist'. Less enlightened people would have called it capricious or just plain selfish; but we didn't understand that the heroes, or anti-heroes, of the French existentialist novels we read were not supposed to be realistic. We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behaviour (*M*17).

No wonder, therefore, that he is at once captivated by the events at Bourani, especially since his first encounter with Conchis's world is a literary one in the true sense of the word. An anthology of poetry with marked verses serves as the first bait. At the same time, however, it

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[155]Cf. Palmer (1975), p.35.

[156] Robert Huffaker regards this confusion of art with life as the reason for Nicholas's suicide attempt: "Living and literature are so mixed in Nick's mind that his existence almost collapses when he sees his inadequacy as a poet, a failure caused by his rejecting natural reality as banal. Instead of recognizing art as a part of life, he has tried without success to make it a substitute" (Huffaker (1980), pp.53).

indicates that the events Nicholas will face have to be taken as an artistic shaping of experience just like the poems.

Nicholas indeed feels his stay at Bourani to be a literary experience: "It's like being halfway through a book" (*M*273). He regards it as a game in which he thinks he can discern two elements: "one didactic, the other aesthetic" (*M*162).[157] In spite of several warnings to understand the events only in a metaphorical sense, Nicholas gets more and more entangled with the pictures of this world where it is not he who confuses art with life, but where both forms are mixed up independently of and inconceivable to himself. While Nicholas unconsciously misuses his confusion of these two realms "as an excuse for mistreating life as if it were art"[158], however, Conchis creates a situation where "art and life are really and deliberately confused for an ethical purpose"[159], because this is the only approach Nicholas responds to since he has retreated into a world of aesthetics. Art is the only way to reach Nicholas's inner self, as is demonstrated by his feeling when looking at the Bonnard painting, for instance (*M*97).[160]

He can assimilate his experiences only on the basis of aesthetic similes.[161] Thus, for instance, he describes Lily-Julie on several occasions by comparing her to different paintings (see, for instance, *M*155; *M*194).[162] Alison, in turn, during their trip on Mount Parnassus, becomes irresistible to him only at that moment when she arouses literary associations in him:

> She did not know it, but it was was [sic!] at first for me an intensely literary moment. I could place it exactly: *England's Helicon*. I had forgotten that there are metaphors and metaphors, and that the greatest lyrics are very rarely anything but direct and unmetaphysical. Suddenly she was like such a poem and I felt a passionate wave of desire for her (*M*269).

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[157] The didactic element refers to his moral education, i.e. the distinction Nicholas discerns is the Kierkegaardian one of ethical vs. aesthetic.
[158] Scholes (1979), p.38.
[159] Scholes (1979), p.40. See also Palmer (1975), p.61.
[160] According to William J. Palmer, Nicholas's reaction on the paintings in Conchis's room indicates that only when he is confronted with those impressive works of art "does he stop exploiting art and start seeing its human significance" (Palmer (1975), p.58).
[161] Cf. Tarbox (1988a), p.18.
[162] Cf. Palmer (1975), p.57.

Using that literary image he moves her out of the realm of reality into an area of aesthetics,[163] and it is only that transfer that awakens feelings in him he is able to interpret as love.

With regard to his situation in Conchis's domain, however, Nicholas also falls back upon literary models again and again to assess his feelings and experiences. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (*M*141), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (*M*70), Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (*M*281), and repeatedly William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, (*M*83 and others), a literary reference inspired by Conchis himself despite his dislike of fiction, to name just a few examples. Usually Conchis rather indicates mythological parallels, just as Nicholas, too, often uses mythological figures, such as Theseus, Orpheus and Eurydice, in order to describe situations and experiences.[164] In this way Nicholas detaches himself from his experiences and, above all, from his feelings, moving them onto an aesthetic level, and thus being able to establish an abstract relation between those experiences and his life without really experiencing the depth of feeling.[165] According to Katherine Tarbox "Nicholas's greatest problem is his inability to see the distinctions between fiction and reality, real feelings and posturings, identity and persona."[166] Conchis despises this misuse of art as a means of abstracting experience: "Fiction is the worst form of connection" (*M*111).

The isolation Nicholas has chosen for himself and into which he retreats again and again is part of his role as non-conformist aesthete. On Mount Parnassus, however, he sees through the superficiality of his self-image for a short moment. He feels the profound harmony between aesthetic experience and intense, immediate impression:

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[163] Cf. Tarbox (1988a), p.18: "Nicholas appreciates the experience not for its reality, but for its symbolism."

[164] Nicholas refers to Theseus, for instance, when he wanders about Conchis's labyrinth of contradictions without a clue. The prospect of winning his Ariadne he interprets as the only indication of a centre or direction in this maze (*M*322). Comparing himself to Orpheus mainly refers to Alison, who after her alleged suicide he hopes to bring back into his life from the world of Conchis and Mrs. de Seitas: "Something was expected of me, some Orphean performance that would gain me access to the underworld where she was hidden ... or hiding herself. [...] I had apparently found the entrance to Tartarus. But that brought me no nearer Eurydice" (*M*606). Nicholas's being capable of leaving Alison without looking back in the last scene of the novel, just as she did in London, implies, however, that he has finally managed to leave the aesthetic level.

[165] Cf. Thorpe (1982), p.20. See also Palmer (1975), p.58.

[166] Tarbox (1988a), p.18.

> It didn't touch the emotions; it was too vast, too inhuman, too serene; and it came to me like a shock, a delicious intellectual joy marrying and completing the physical one, that the reality of the place was as beautiful, as calm, as ideal, as so many poets had always dreamed it to be (*M*258).

This experience moves him deeply, and when having lost the path at the descent, he holds Alison in his arms so that they can protect one another from the cold, looking at the grim landscape, "an accurate enough simile of my life", he realizes "that wolves never hunt singly, but always in a pack. The lone wolf was a myth" (*M*260). Yet this intuitive self-awareness is soon forgotten when Nicholas feels that the seclusion of the mountain hut is turning out to be a dangerous situation for him in so far as Alison's presence endangers his image of Lily-Julie.

When after Nicholas has confessed his lies Alison offers to come with him to Phraxos to share a normal life with him there, she offers him a chance to turn the poetic feelings that overcame him at the lake into reality. Interestingly enough, the actual words Alison employs to express her ultimatum ("I'll come on your island and live with you", *M*275) are a clear echo of the poem by Marlowe from *England's Helicon* that came to Nicholas's mind at that special moment at the lake: "Come live with me and be my love." The idea of really translating what he has felt at that literary moment into action, "this brutal demand for total commitment" (*M*276), however, asks too much of him. Thus he decides against a realistic future with Alison in favour of returning to his mysterious aesthetic world. When he gets the news of her alleged suicide, he opens his poetry book at the page in question in order to recreate this image of Alison and thus let himself be completely taken by remorse and the resulting self-hatred. At the same time, however, this is his first step towards shifting her to an aesthetic level.

He even tries to regard his decision against Alison as an individual act true to himself in order to relieve himself of remorse, and, moreover, to boost his ego: "I had chosen my own way; the difficult, hazardous, poetic way; all on one number; though even then I heard Alison bitterly reverse those last two words (*M*278).[167] This behaviour is clearly reminiscent of the way he proved his sense of freedom by ending relationships. This time, though, it is not so easy for him to deceive himself. This is indicated by the echo of Alison's words that are still in his

[167] The decision Nicholas is so proud of now was not really taken by himself but rather by Alison, since he was not capable of answering her ultimatum but tried to evade a clear answer. It was Alison who articulated his no.

mind ("anything except number one", *M*274). Trying to assimilate her suicide he proceeds in just the same way: "I had begun to absorb the fact of Alison's death; that is, had begun to edge it out of the moral world into the aesthetic, where it was easier to live with" (*M*401):

> By [...] this slipping from true remorse, the belief that the suffering we have precipitated ought to ennoble *us*, or at least make us less ignoble from then on, to disguised self-forgiveness, the belief that suffering in some way ennobles *life*, so that the precipitation of pain comes, by such a cockeyed algebra, to equal the ennoblement, or at any rate the enrichment, of life, by this characteristically twentieth-century retreat from content into form, from meaning into appearance, from ethics into aesthetics, from *aqua* into *unda*, I dulled the pain of that accusing death (*M*401-402).

With the help of this change of categories, then, he frees himself of his remorse and thus confirms what Alison had anticipated in London: "If I killed myself, you'd be pleased. You'd be able to go round saying, she killed herself because of me" (*M*42). It is his self-image as aesthete that enables him to regard everything around him as external phenomena without feeling responsible in any way for whatever happens, for, as he puts it, "isn't it a poet's, to say nothing of a cynic's, moral duty to be immoral" (*M*54)? He makes himself believe that it his duty to go his own way, predetermined as it were, a fact that is indicated by statements such as "suddenly everything during that last week-end seemed, if not justified, necessary" (*M*279). This perspective makes it possible for him to distance himself from the pain he has inflicted on Alison, provoking her alleged suicide, by moving it onto an aesthetic level, generalizing it to the pain of the world man is incapable of influencing consciously. Just as Alison has told him outright in Athens, Nicholas manages in fact to detach himself from the extent of the tragedy by convincing himself of not having been capable of influencing the events, so that he can console himself by saying: 'I couldn't help it'.

In *The Aristos* John Fowles calls this attitude "a romantic perversion of existentialism" (*A*163). Doing wrong and accepting this without remorse, according to Fowles, is thus reinterpreted as evidence of one's own uniqueness by rejecting the established order of society, the conventional world of the others. It is exactly this false interpretation of existentialism that allows Nicholas to turn his remorse into a feeling of self-affirmation. But, John Fowles continues,

> I prove I exist not by making senseless decisions or committing deliberate crimes in order that they may be 'accepted' and then constitute a proof of

> the 'authenticity' and uniqueness of my existence, because by so acting I establish nothing but my own particular sense of inadequacy in face of external social reality; but I prove I exist by using my acceptance of past and bad actions as a source of energy for the improvement of my future actions or attitudes inside that reality (*A*163).[168]

To John Fowles one important aspect of existentialist thinking is its concept of culpability.[169] He points out that from an existentialist point of view being conscious of one's own guilt and being responsible for the pain one has afflicted cannot be atoned for by anything at all, neither by remorse nor by punishment or penance. Therefore any wrong a person afflicts on someone else always adds to the guilt this person has already burdened himself with; crime is indelible. John Fowles thinks this view of crime invaluable "because it encourages freedom of will; it allows the criminal to believe he can choose, he can shape and balance his life, he can try to be his own master" (*A*163).

Only after his disintoxication does Nicholas realize that his life is by no means predetermined, but that he is responsible himself for organizing it the way he wants to. His life is "nothing but the net sum of countless wrong turnings" (*M*539) for which he can hold only himself responsible. He is the one who has turned his life into what it is by confusing art and life:

> all my life I had tried to turn life into fiction, to hold reality away; always I had acted as if a third person was watching and listening and giving me marks for good and bad behaviour - a god like a novelist, to whom I turned, like a character with the power to please, the sensitivity to feel slighted, the ability to adapt himself to whatever he believed the novelist-god wanted. This leechlike variation of the super-ego I had created myself, fostered myself, and because of it I had always been incapable of acting freely. It was not my defence; but my despot (*M*539).

Turning himself into a merely fictional character in the story of his life without being aware of being his own author at the same time, he has denied the existence of an independent freedom of action and of decision-making and thus has bowed to the role he has allotted to himself. In this way he has been able to restrict his notion of freedom to

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[168] What John Fowles describes here is of course not a conventional moral notion. The attitude he describes has to be seen in the context of his examination of the existentialist position on culpability and represents a misunderstanding of the existentialist suggestion that one has to accept one's past bad actions. This misinterpretation he accuses some modernist writers of.

[169] In *The Aristos* he devotes a whole subchapter to this concept (*A*160-164).

"the freedom to satisfy personal desire, private ambition" (*M*440), a notion so contrary to Conchis's concept of freedom. The 'novelist-god' Nicholas has created controls all his actions, but while the 'super-ego', the term he employs to name this 'being', is a moral instance in Freudian terminology, Nicholas's own version of the 'super-ego' functions as an aesthetic instance. Speaking of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, then, he does not refer to ethical values. Going by those standards he has created himself without being aware of it he is, on the one hand, free to act according to his own needs while, on the other hand, he is able to reject responsibility for his own actions. Though he does judge others by conventional standards, as I have mentioned in the comparison of Alison and Lily-Julie, he views himself as a lone wolf ignoring conventions. On this point, too, Alison sees through him: "You say you're isolated, boyo, but you really think you're different" (*M*35). By subordinating himself to the judgment of an author figure that exists for him alone, Nicholas retreats to an isolation of complete subjectivity and thus creates an egocentric world picture which is independent of other people.[170]

[170]Cf. Wolfe (1980), pp.26.

4. *The Magus* as Construction

4.1 'The Godgame'

Nicholas, who calls himself an atheist (*M*110), realizes that he has unconsciously orientated his life to a god he created himself. In order to make him aware that in this way he places himself ina dependent relationship, that this dependence, however, is just an illusion that condemns him to passivity and irresponsibility, Conchis involves Nicholas in his godgame. In the preface to *The Magus* John Fowles explains the central significance of this idea on which the novel is based:

> 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 (*M*10).

Watching the destruction of Nicholas's illusions, the reader participates in John Fowles's godgame. The novel confronts the reader with a world as fictitious as the one Nicholas has to cope with. The protagonist's disillusionment as well as the open ending demonstrate the fictionality of the world of the novel. Thus the reader is not only made aware of the manipulation by the author, but also finally dismissed from John Fowles's manipulative game just like Nicholas is from Conchis's.[171]

Just like the author John Fowles, Conchis is the master of his world. He not only creates the figures of his fictional world and arranges encounters, phenomena, and dialogues, but also has the power to make his world disappear. The more Nicholas suspects that Conchis has turned "real human beings into *his* puppets" (*M*322), the more fascinated he first is. Convinced that Conchis must pursue a certain aim, that he has some kind of script for his stage-management, however, Nicholas tries to behave according to that presumed plan. Thus he turns himself into one of the pieces of Conchis's game. What he is not aware of, though, is that Conchis does not have a certain role in mind for him, but rather that Nicholas always plays the part he allots to himself at a time. Out of this ignorance he orientates his behaviour more and more to his considerations about what Conchis might expect of him. The reason for

[171] Cf. Ellen McDaniel (1985): "Games and Godgames in *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." In: *Modern Fiction Studies 31.1*, p.41.

this is that Nicholas enjoys the game so much that he is afraid of hurting Conchis by behaving incorrectly and thus provoking him to break off his experiment early, i.e. without finally being told the mysterious background of the events as Conchis has promised (*M*234).

Despite that worry Nicholas sees one of the special charms of his experiences at Bourani exactly in the double game he thinks he plays against Conchis. So while on the one hand he regards winning Lily-Julie as the aim of his actions, he is convinced, on the other hand, that he has to play the part Conchis apparently expects him to play. In doing so he feels an excitement just as a child that tries to test his parents' limit of tolerance. This almost childish pleasure shows, for instance, when at a secret meeting with Lily-Julie he thinks that they are being watched:

> From then on we walked rather self-consciously apart; almost guiltily. It was a guilt one part of me despised, since the better I knew the real girl beside me the more artificial became the situation that kept us apart; and yet which another side of me, the eternal deception-relishing child, tolerated. There is something erotic in all collusion (*M*345-346).

Nicholas's conviction that for all the events at Bourani there has to be some reason that makes Conchis's effort worthwhile in some way makes him believe he is indispensable in that game. At the same time he assumes that there must be some prize for him to win in the end. This prize he sees in Lily-Julie, and the conviction of finally being able to win her makes the game so attractive to him:

> There returned that old excitement - let it all come, even the black Minotaur, so long as it came; so long as I might reach the centre, and have the final prize I coveted (*M*322).

Even when Conchis has completely disappeared from his life and Lily-Julie is snatched away from him leaving him back alone in the darkness of the underground hiding place, Nicholas dispels the doubts about Conchis as well as Lily-Julie and Rose-June that overcome him at first, since he is not able to see any plausible coherence in the way the events around him have developed. Instead he reassures himself of his conviction that no "girl [could] do what she had done [...] and not mean an iota of it" (*M*459). This picture is the basic assumption that enables him to construct a whole sequence of arguments, that is exemplary of his way of dealing with the hardly amenable events of the godgame. He knows that the twins are just as little to be trusted as Conchis. He is aware that they

still act according to Conchis's instructions, and this, he makes himself believe,

> must mean that they knew, had known from the beginning, what lay behind it all. But if that was one reasonable assumption, I had to add another one: that Julie did feel a very real attraction for me. Put the two together, and I had to conclude that she was in some way playing on both sides ... deceiving me for the old man's sake, but also deceiving him for mine. That in turn meant she must know I was not to be denied her in the end, that the teasing would one day stop (*M*465).

This demonstrates plainly how one assumption leads to the another. The hypothesis the whole argumentation is based on, however, is in turn based on a conventional moral idea, on a world picture "of received ideas and received manners" (*M*603).[172] In the same way Nicholas manages to make himself believe that he is quite able to cope with that intricate world. The certainty he believes he has as regards Lily-Julie's affection to him thus turns into the conviction of being the winner of this game in the end.

In *The Aristos* John Fowles speaks about the significance of games for people. According to him the reason that games are such an important element of human life is

> that a game is a system for achieving superiority. It is moreover a system (like money getting) that is to a certain extent a human answer to the inhuman hazard of the cosmic lottery; to be able to win at a game compensates the winner for not being able to win outside the context of the game (*A*158).

Nicholas has regarded his whole life as a game; his relation to other people he has understood as a competition, thus being able to interpret his inability to gain confidence in anyone as evidence of his independence and individuality. Therefore he belongs to the group of "ends-orientated " players, which constitutes one of the two categories of people John Fowles suggests with regard to the fundamental function of the games in question:

> There are means-orientated societies, for whom the game is the game; and ends-orientated societies, for whom the game is winning. In the first, if one is happy, then one is successful; in the second, one cannot be happy

[172] The moral idea Nicholas's argumentation is based on is, as I have mentioned above, very one-sided. To judge his own behaviour, he applies a completely different moral standard, a fact Mrs de Seitas finally makes him aware of when she tells him that her daughters "were nothing but a personification of your own selfishness" (*M*601).

> unless one is successful. The whole tendency of evolution and history suggests that man must become means-orientated if he is to survive (*A*159).

According to Fowles, ends-orientated behaviour is based on the mistaken belief that human existence strives for a purpose, for perfection. But "a terminus of perfection breeds a cancer of now. For perfectibilitarians, perfect ends tomorrow justify imperfect means today" (*A*19). The final ignorance of the origins and the sense of life as well as of the future, however, is typical of the human situation. Fowles, though, regards this as the special reason that makes that situation "the best possible situation," since this "mysterious wall round our world and our perception of it is not there to frustrate us but to train us back to the now, to life, to our time being" (*A*20). Conchis's godgame reconstructs such a situation of ignorance. Nicholas's experiences at Bourani are meant to teach him to value every moment and not to confuse success and happiness with triumphing over a loser or the prospect of winning a prize. In contrast to ends-orientated games, then, playing for the sake of playing, 'means-oriented games' in John Fowles's terms, undermines any search for absolute truth or absolute knowledge.[173]

Ellen McDaniel emphasizes that Nicholas has spent his life mainly with hobbies and pleasures, and that neither had any moral function or special purpose nor were pursued seriously. What is typical for Nicholas is rather that he has "always played in the same way and for the same reasons, and always according to precisely defined rules within orderly, fixed boundaries."[174] These defined rules and boundaries provide him with a sense of security and moreover serve as a justification of his behaviour, as an excuse for always acting to his own advantage, since this enables him to attribute anything that happens to those external rules.

Nicholas's behaviour is determined by rules, then. As the psychoanalytic report during the trial claims, he is "environment-motivated":

> [B]ehaviourally the victim of a repetition-compulsion that he has failed to understand. In every environment he looks for those elements that allow him to feel isolated, that allow him to justify his withdrawal from meaningful

[173] Cf. Wolfe (1980), p.30.

[174] McDaniel (1985), p.33. She analyzes the game metaphor in *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* on the basis of the theories of human games of the anthropologist Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens*). The aspects I have mentioned are typical features of what Huizinga calls 'nonserious play'.

> social responsibilities and relationships and his consequent regression into the infantile state of frustrated self-gratification (*M*510).

In other words, Nicholas has always looked for a social environment to revolt against in order to prove to himself his individuality. But just because he consciously rebels against his environment, his behaviour is not self-determined but is just as orientated to social conventions as if he were a conformist. Both types, "the rebel with no specific gift for rebellion" (*M*510) and the conformist reject to take responsibility for their own actions by justifying their behaviour with the rules and conventions of society. In both cases decision-making is superfluous, since how to behave is prescribed by preconceived rules in so far as one either acts in accordance with them or principally revolts against them.

At Bourani Nicholas's behaviour is also determined by rules since he is convinced that Conchis pursues some purpose and that, behaving in accordance with Conchis's plans, he will win a prize. The conviction that their has to be a deeper sense behind the events leads Nicholas to assume that there are defined rules he has to orientate to. Consequently his behaviour is completely determined by his assumptions about what he might be expected to do. The problem with this is, of course, that he does not know what the director Conchis regards as correct or incorrect behaviour. In addition to that there is the conflict between his definite intention to win Lily-Julie and the uncertainty whether this desire contravenes Conchis's rules, and thus might risk a sudden termination of the game, or whether she has been meant to be his prize from the beginning. Therefore he constantly feels that he is watched, and his uncertainty, this alternating between believing in Conchis's good intentions and doubting his motives, keeps Nicholas from taking the usual attitude of revolt. He is not able simply to keep to Conchis's rules because he does not know them; for just the same reason, however, he is incapable of opposing them. The feeling of being watched is a notion that, as Barry N. Olshen mentions,[175] reverberates throughout the novel. It results from the idea that his behaviour is evaluated by others and from the resulting fear that taking one wrong step might lead to the exclusion from the game. When, for instance, after Lily-Julie's midnight seduction in the sea Conchis forbids Nicholas to come and visit Bourani again and retreats from the island, Nicholas nevertheless returns to the prohibited domain. There he believes he is being watched, "not because I actually

[175] Cf. Olshen (1978), p.38.

felt I was being watched so much as because I felt I ought to be feeling it. They must be watching me" (*M*384). He is sure that it is a test he has to pass in order to make the events to proceed.

He has not yet learned what Mrs. de Seitas will later have to tell him explicitly: "It is you who make our situation. You must have been told that. You come here telling me lies. [...] I tell you lies back" (*M*598). In *The Aristos* John Fowles suggests that the godgame is the only possibility to govern equally and fairly to all:

> The Divine Solution is to govern by not governing in any sense that the governed can call being governed; that is, to constitute a situation in which the governed must govern themselves. If there had been a creator, his second act would have been to disappear (*A*19).

Conchis tries "to reproduce, however partially, some of the mysterious purposes that govern existence" (*M*627), and Nicholas's impression that Conchis has no real interest in him as a person (*M*91), but that he is even indifferent to Nicholas (*M*85), is a reflection of John Fowles's opinion that life "is intrinsically a situation in which the principles and the events are all, and the individual thing is nothing" (*A*23). This indifference to the individual in favour of the continuation of a universal whole, however, is according to Fowles the basic requirement of human freedom of will. This freedom he regards as "the highest human good" (*A*26).[176] Being conscious of the general indifference of the process of the universe to the individual, and rejecting the idea of an intervening divinity calls for the realization that the individual must act on his own without hoping for support from some divine instance. According to Fowles the individual's contingency therefore is "evidence of a universal sympathy" (*A*25), and this proof finally

> lies in the fact that we are - or can by exercise become - free to choose courses of action and so at least combat some of the hostile results of the general indifference of the process to the individual. Freedom of will is the highest human good; and it is impossible to have both that freedom and an

[176] Cf. John Fowles regards existence as an eternal conflict between two opposing principles: "Law, or the organizing principle, and Chaos, or the disintegrating one" (*A*14). Those two processes guarantee the continuation in existence of the universe but are "equally indifferent to the individual. [...] In the whole, nothing is unjust. It may, to this or that individual, be unfortunate. There can be no power or god in the whole that is concerned for any one thing, though there may be a power concerned for the whole" (*A*15). Moreover Fowles emphasizes the infiniteness of the cosmos; this implies that consequently "there can be no end it is serving. Its only end must lie in its means. It exists in order to exist" (*A*21).

> intervening divinity. We, because we are a form of matter, are contingent; and this terrifying contingency allows our freedom (*A*26).

By apparently stopping his godgame several times Conchis conveys the impression to Nicholas that he is not an important element of the game. The latter "had assumed the 'experiment' needed my presence above all" (*M*386), and being left alone with his questions and confusion just for a short moment, a sudden idea about what Conchis intents to convey to him flashes through his mind:

> Perhaps the clue lay in dispensability. I was being taught some obscure metaphysical lesson about the place of man in existence, about the limitations of the egocentric view (*M*386).

Yet he is not able to draw the conclusions Conchis or Fowles associate with that knowledge, for to Nicholas "it seemed more like a piece of gratuitous cruelty, closer to tormenting dumb animals than any true teaching" (*M*386).

At his disintoxication he proves that he has accepted his freedom of decision-making. Above all, however, he has understood that freedom does not mean the unlimited right to satisfy one's own desires, but that it mainly consists of responsible actions that even require us to put our own interests last.[177] When Nicholas decides against his feelings of bitter resentment as well as his wounded pride and does not hit Lily-Julie in spite of knowing that nobody would stop him, he understands Conchis's concept of freedom:

> *The better you understand freedom, the less you possess it.* And my freedom was in not striking, whatever the cost, whatever eighty other parts of me must die, whatever the watching eyes might think of me (*M*518).

Though Nicholas becomes aware of the extent of his freedom of will, back in London he does not manage to free himself of the idea that

[177] David H. Walker points out that Nicholas's decision demonstrates that he has understood the limitedness of absolute freedom. According to Walker, Conchis's refusal to execute the rebel "was an expression of the absolute freedom that takes no account of morality, pragmatic calculations or the opinions of others; it was entirely irresponsible, in the sense that *eleutheria* knows no responsibility" (David H. Walker (1986): "Remorse, Responsibility, and Moral Dilemma in Fowles's Fiction." In: *Critical Essays on John Fowles*, ed. by E. Pifer, p.61). Nicholas, however, acts responsibly when he decides against punishing Lily-Julie, so that this is why after making his choice he perceives in Conchis's eyes that "something besides *eleutheria* had been proved" (*M*519; cf. Walker, p.61).

Conchis still determines his life. All the time he feels that he is being watched, suspects any passer-by of being a spy who has to observe whether Nicholas behaves correctly, for he makes himself believe that he has to earn Alison's return. When they finally meet in the park, he is still convinced that they are being watched, that Alison plays a role Conchis has allotted to her. At the very moment he slaps Alison, however, thus contravening everything the suspected observers would expect of him, for the first time he acts in full awareness of his responsibility and in doing so forces Alison to take a conscious decision, too. At this moment he realizes: "There were no watching eyes. [...] The theatre was empty. It was no theatre" (*M*654).

Although Mrs. de Seitas has told him before that "[t]he godgame is over" (*M*625), it is at this moment of self-determined action that he becomes aware of the necessity to take his own decisions. Yet he cannot imagine being so contingent that Conchis is able to disappear from his life so suddenly, even though

> [it] was logical, the perfect climax to the godgame. They had absconded, we were alone. I was so sure, and yet ... after so much, how could I be perfectly sure? How could they be so cold, so inhuman - so incurious? So load the dice and yet leave the game? (*M*655).

This final uncertainty remains, for the definite solution of the mysteries Nicholas has hoped to learn at the end of the game does not exist. His hope of getting to know why Conchis involved him in his godgame and what he intended by it is not fulfilled. There is no absolute truth behind the events but only the messages Nicholas extracts himself from that complex playing with illusions. He realizes that he no longer lives in the isolated world of his own illusions but that "reality was endless inter-action" (*M*239). He is now capable of applying the experience he had during his hypnosis of what this interaction means to his life by committing himself to Alison; he is now prepared to construct a common reality on the basis of a relationship to another person instead of retreating to the lonely world of his illusions.

The term 'godgame' Conchis has chosen "[b]ecause there is no God, and it is not a game" (*M*625). There is no divinity in this game for Conchis only embodies the omnipotence Nicholas wants to see in him. "There is no plan. All is hazard" (*M*129) in Conchis's game. There is neither a defined script nor a fixed order of the events at Bourani, on the contrary, it is only Nicholas who sets the way of proceeding and the direction in particular by not being aware of his freedom to influence the

events. The basis of any game, however, is fixed rules every player has to keep to. According to Ellen McDaniel:

> Games are substitutes for life, representing worlds in which absolute order reigns. In games, life is radically stylized to remove complex, illogical, or unsymmetrical elements.[178]

In Conchis's godgame, however, this absolute order does not exist. Nicholas's behaviour is only conditioned by his conviction that there have to be such rules he must not contravene. Yet Conchis says explicitly that there "is no place for limits in the meta-theatre" (*M*406).

According to McDaniel's description of the characteristic of games, the godgame is not a game. Moreover, though it is true that at Bourani Nicholas is in a stylized world, this world is nevertheless far from being free of complex and illogical elements. Besides there is no end of the game that the players have agreed on, as is usually the case, just as there is no field with fixed boundaries. Leaving the island after the disintoxication Nicholas is still under influence of Conchis so that game and life are finally mixed in an inseparable mass. So Conchis's paradoxical statement that in his godgame there is no god and that it is not a game is true in a way. Yet Ellen McDaniel is not wrong in stating that Conchis's godgame *is* a game in so far as it provides "limited, contrived experiences that, though instructive, cannot be substituted for life in the real world of human action"[179]. This substitution is exactly the mistake Nicholas makes. He prefers that imaginary world to reality, and still has to learn to realize "the nature of the artificial situation we are creating together here," and to say: "This is not the real world. These are not real relationships" (*M*282).

As I have mentioned above, John Fowles plays such a godgame with the reader, too. In "Notes on an Unfinished Novel" he explains that in contrast to a film a novel has one major advantage:

> For all its faults, it is a statement by one person. In my novels I am the producer, director, and all the actors; I photograph it. [...] There **is** a vanity about it, a wish to play the godgame, which all the random and author-removing devices of avant-garde technique cannot hide.[180]

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[178] McDaniel (1985), p.35.
[179] McDaniel (1985), p.37.
[180] Fowles (1977a), p.144.

Making the reader accompany Nicholas on his way through the maze of Conchis's mysterious world, giving him no additional information except for some self-critically or ironical statements of the first person narrator, Fowles forces the reader to follow every step of Nicholas's hypotheses, and consequently to realize the relativity of what Nicholas 'knows' at any one time from the destruction of those illusions. With John Fowles allowing us to look at his characters only from the perspective of his protagonist, our attitude to Conchis, above all, changes with Nicholas's disappointments or positive experiences that determine his point of view and interpretations of the characters and ways of behaviour of those enigmatic figures.[181] Conchis is a strange mixture of shaman and mountebank, whose motives are inscrutable for both Nicholas and the reader. But while Nicholas's statement towards the end of the novel, that "Conchis's truths, especially the truth he had embodied in Lily, matured in me" (*M*646), demonstrates that he has gained self-knowledge from the complex game, the extremely conflicting attitudes literary scholars have towards the figure of Conchis shows,[182] that it is just as well for the reader as for Nicholas "to reject or accept what was suggested" (*M*280).

At the moment in the park with Alison Nicholas finally realizes that he is not being watched, that, as Ernst von Glaserfeld puts it, "[l]ife is not a performance."[183] He is the one who has to determine and judge his own actions, who is responsible for his own way of life.[184] Alison's choice will

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[181] Cf. Olshen (1978), p.41.

[182] Frank G. Novak, for instance, regards Conchis as "a sadistic god" (Frank G. Novak, Jr. (1985): "The Dialectics of Debasement in *The Magus*." *Modern Fiction Studies 31.1*, p.74), whose "godgame fulfils no discernible purpose beyond debasing and confusing Nicholas and providing a perverse sort of gratification for Conchis and his associates" (Novak (1985), p.76). Rubenstein, calling Conchis morally ambiguous, "wonders if such a lesson can be a 'humanizing' one when the teacher disregards the morality he tries to inculcate in his student" (Rubenstein (1975), p.337).According to her the problem of the novel is that John Fowles declines to comment on his characters, but she takes this equivocal posture as an invitation to the reader, since Fowles thus "moves the existential choice out of the novel's invented world into the reader's real world" (Rubenstein (1975), p.338). Ernst von Glaserfeld, on the other hand, regards Conchis as "the worldly, civilized, and immensely versatile and gifted Magus [whose] purpose is to awaken, to change attitudes and ideas, and, ultimately, to instil what I would call wisdom" (Glaserfeld (1979), p.445).

[183] Glaserfeld (1979), p. 446.

[184] Roy Mack Hill points out that Nicholas's participation in the godgame "becomes the means by which he overthrows not only the myth of divine governance, but also the social myths which had dictated to him his attitudes" (Roy M. Hill (1980-81): "Power and Hazard: John Fowles's Theory of Play." In: *Journal of Modern Literature 3*, p.212).

not change this knowledge,[185] and "this frozen present tense" (*M*656) of the open ending in which John Fowles leaves the reader calls us back from John Fowles's magic world into our own present.[186] Thus Fowles leaves Alison's decision to every single reader, demonstrating that there is no 'correct' ending. There is no final solution, no "unique set of answers behind the clues" (*M*9), just as for Nicholas there will never be a solving of Conchis's 'real' intentions. It is Nicholas who has to interpret the events himself and try to give them some meaning in his life. The same is true for the relation the reader is supposed to establish between his/her life and the novel. This is implied by what John Fowles says in the preface to *The Magus*: "Its meaning is whatever reaction it provokes in the reader, and so far as I am concerned there is no given 'right' reaction" (*M*9).

4.2 Fiction and Reality

With Nicholas, the protagonist of John Fowles' novel, realizing that he has orientated his actions to the direction and judgment of an author-figure he has himself created, thus escaping from reality and turning his life into fiction, the reader is confronted with a game being played with the narrated reality and his/her own reality. He watches Nicholas being involved in a game where it is impossible to discern reality and illusion, since each time Nicholas thinks he has discovered the real facts behind the strange events, they prove to be illusions in the end. Just as Nicholas, however, the reader is also made aware of the fact that the world he is presented with is just an illusion, like fiction. Before going into detail about the way in which John Fowles reveals the fictional nature of the world he has created in his novel and to what extent this technique is linked with the message of the novel, I should first like to refer briefly to

[185] For the novel, it is not important whether Alison and Nicholas will finally get involved in living together. What Conchis intends with his manipulations is not to rejoin the two, but to provide Nicholas with a new way of looking at the world and the people around him. Cf. Robert Campbell (1983): "Moral Sense and the Collector: the Novels of John Fowles." In: *Critical Quarterly 25.1*,p.52. See also Barnum (1989), p.35.

[186] Cf. McDaniel (1985), p.41.

the notion of metafiction, a term that has been established to describe literature that deals intensely with the problem of its own fictional status.[187]

The awareness of its status as an artificial construction is expressed, on the one hand, by creating a fictional illusion that draws the reader into a different reality, while, on the other hand, unmasking this reality as being an illusion. According to Patricia Waugh "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction."[188] The metafictional novel is no longer supposed to be a picture of reality, with the fictional world being represented as a continuation of the real world, as was the intention,in particular, of the realistic novel of the 19th century (Charles Dickens, George Eliot). The reason for this turning away from attempting to represent a common, coherent reality in the novel is the increasing conviction of many novelists that such a coherent reality does not exist for people. According to this point of view the world only exists as a form of human experience. Consequently, as Raymond Federman puts it:

> [R]eality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version. The experience of life gains meaning only in its recounted form, in its verbalized version.[189]

It is not possible, however, to describe an objective world, since the observer always influences what he observes, a fact which is also suggested by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, as has already been mentioned.[190] From this Raymond Federman concludes:

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[187] Robert Siegle prefers the term 'reflexivity', since according to him the term 'metafiction' implies a restriction to a mere self-contemplation of literature: "to confine reflexivity to the term 'metafiction', a fiction that is *about* fiction rather than, presumably, about other things besides, risks circumscribing reflexivity to relatively overt examples and its significance to mainly aesthetic issues" (Robert Siegle (1986): *The Politics of Reflexivity. Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture.* Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, p.3). His use of 'reflexivity', however, "suggests that reflexivity uncovers a great deal about the whole narrative circuit" (Siegle (1986), p.3). In the following analysis I will use the term 'metafiction' in order to emphasize the parallel to Conchis's metatheatre, though without excluding the broader sense Siegle suggests.

[188] Patricia Waugh (1984): *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* London, New York: Methuen, p.6.

[189] Raymond Federman (1975): "Surfiction - Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction." In: *Surfiction. Fiction Now ... and Tomorrow*, ed. by R. Federman, p. 8.

[190] Cf. Waugh (1984), p.3.

> [F]iction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY - an autonomous reality [...]. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth.[191]

Less radically speaking the aim of metafiction is to emphasize the relativity of the realities and truths conveyed in literature by revealing the techniques used to create the illusion of reality and refusing the figure of an omnipotent narrator. Novels which invert the notions of 'real' and 'unreal' in the narrated worlds, Christine Brooke-Rose points out, "dramatise the *theme* of the world's non-interpretability."[192] Drawing the reader's attention to its own artificial status, metafictional literature does not claim to make universal statements about reality but poses questions and thus intends to encourage the reader to think about the relation between fiction and reality.[193] According to Thomas Irmer the dominant factor of metafictional texts therefore is the representation of *relations* in the process of experiencing and narrating reality.[194]

As a result of these processes, fiction and reality become hopelessly entangled. Dwight Eddins sees a consequence in the central concern of metafiction with "the reanimation and expansion of the commonplace that each man's life is a novel of which that man is the author."[195] Accepting this commonplace implies

> that almost all novels are about "novels"; and that a novel in which the problem of fictiveness becomes explicit will be required in order to satisfy

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[191] Federman (1975), p. 8.

[192] Christine Brooke-Rose (1981): *A Rhetoric of the Unreal. Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the Fantastic.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.364.

[193] Cf. Waugh (1984), p.2.

[194] Cf. Thomas Irmer (1995): *Metafiction, Moving Pictures, Moving Histories. Der historische Roman in der Literatur der amerikanischen Postmoderne.* Tübingen: Narr, pp.29: "Das Dominante in metafiktionalen Werken ist die Repräsentation von *Beziehungen* im Erfahren und Erzählen von Wirklichkeit (damit auch Repräsentation vermittelter Wirklichkeit, fiktionalisierter Wirklichkeit oder als Wirklichkeit des Werkes angenommener Fiktion) gegenüber der traditionellen (im überlieferten Sinne mimetischen) Signifikation von Wirklichkeit (des fiktiven Werkes)."

[195] Dwight Eddins (1976): "John Fowles: Existence as Authorship." In: *Contemporary Literature 17.2*, p.204.

> the thirst of the ironic consciousness for an adequate complexity of treatment.[196]

In John Fowles's work such a complex treatment of the difficult relation between art and life becomes explicit. As I have mentioned above, Fowles emphasizes the fictional nature of his literary world and with Nicholas speaking of "a god like a novelist" reminds us of the fact that the world he has created in the novel is not a representation of reality, but an artefact that has to be regarded as such.[197] Every time Nicholas thinks he has found the truth behind the appearances in Conchis's godgame he must learn soon after that this apparent reality is just another illusion. Accordingly the reader is made aware of the fact that he/she is at the author John Fowles's mercy just like Nicholas is at Conchis's. Nicholas has finally to accept that Conchis's world is an artificial one through and through - everything has been arranged and nothing is what it seems to be.

The intention of playing with the illusions in that way is to make Nicholas realize that just because of his restless attempt to try to find an absolute truth and a 'real' reality he has fallen prey to his own illusions. Ernst von Glaserfeld describes Nicholas's situation as follows:

> Of course the Godgame was played with loaded dice, but it was not the throws of the Magus, diabolical though they seemed, that drove Nicholas nearly out of his mind. It was the way he, Nicholas, interpreted the events. He himself had loaded the dice long ago by unquestioningly accepting a

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[196] Eddins (1976), p.204. Patricia Waugh points out that art always has to face a dilemma that originates from two opposing impulses: "the impulse to communicate and so to treat the medium of communication as a means and the impulse to make an artefact out of the materials and so to treat the medium as an end. The expression of this tension is present in much contemporary writing but it is the *dominant* function in the texts defined here as metafictional" (Waugh (1984), pp.14).

[197] William J. Palmer regards this as a metaphor for the problem of the novel as an art form. He refers to John Fowles's statement that "the novel is a free form [...], it has no limits other than those of the language. It is like a poem; it can be what it wants" (Fowles (1977a), p.144). According to Palmer this aspect contains the chance to revive this genre Conchis regards as a dead art form. Nicholas, however, "can write only dead novels because he has cut his real life off from his art and has taken away the freedom of his central character, his living self. His life, which he orchestrates at arm's length, is merely a dead novel. As a novelist-god he imposes an essence upon his central character, himself, and thus that character cannot exist" (Palmer (1975), p.67). Moreover this subordination to a 'novelist-god' indicates that Nicholas has not yet accepted the authorship of his own life Eddins has in mind.

naïve, commonplace view of the world. Like so many of us, he thought he *knew* what the world was like.[198]

In the preface to the revised edition John Fowles calls *The Magus* a "stew of intuitions about the nature of human existence - and of fiction" (*M*10). In the novel, then, he tries to convey something of his philosophy of life as well as of the significance of literature and its relation to reality. One of the techniques he uses to emphasize this relation consists in the numerous allusions to other works of literature. By means of this alienation technique the reader is repeatedly reminded of the artificial status of the novel he is reading.[199] Another device John Fowles employs to emphasize the fictitiousness of his work is to create a picture of Conchis as a novelist in terms of creating artificial worlds and manipulating the characters of his world. For instance, Nicholas regards Conchis "as a sort of psychiatric novelist sans novel, creating with people, not words" (*M*242). Malcolm Bradbury calls Conchis a "substitute author-figure" who represents the ambivalent role of the novelist. The ambiguity of Conchis, this mixture of shaman and charlatan, represents the status of the novel and of fiction in general: "Fictions are not existence; hence an element of the charlatan exists in the novelist's own role."[200] Another effective alienation technique Fowles employs only in the last chapter is breaking off the continuity of the action. He undermines the illusion that his narrative is an authentic story by a change of point of view and of tense. With an authorial voice commenting on the events of the novel from outside, leaving the first-person narrator's point of view and establishing a relation to the reader's reality, the narrative convention is violated.[201]

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[198] Glaserfeld (1979), p. 446.

[199] Cf. Holmes (1985a), pp.45. Günter Klotz points out that "most of the authors Fowles refers to in his novels - not in postmodernist pastiche but as poets and writers legitimizing a realistic tradition - were imaginatively experimenting with new modes of representation running counter to contemporary fashion and to the official textualisations of life: Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, James, Woolf and others " (Günter Klotz (1986): "Realism and Metafiction in John Fowles's Novels." In: *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 34.4*, p.300).

[200] Bradbury (1973), p.264.

[201] I will soon go into that point in more detail. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* this game with the narrative levels and the break with narrative conventions is much more elaborated, and is even turned into a central theme. The narrator interrupts the action to insert a discourse on fiction, inserts himself as a character into the novel, or relates the action to 20th century events in order to destroy the illusion that it is a Victorian novel.

In addition to this the stories Conchis tells constitute an important structural element of the novel, for the relation between the allegedly authentic episodes and Conchis's real past cannot be discerned. Conchis presents a fictional version of his life and thus gives Nicholas a chance to see through the fictions out of which he has composed his own life. At the same time, however, the reader is reminded of the fact that Nicholas's apparently autobiographical report of his experiences in the masque is just fiction, too; that the relation to reality is not the authenticity of the events, but lies in the relation the reader establishes between the fictitious events and his own life. Thus Nicholas discovers a parallel between Conchis's stories and his own situation at Bourani. Moreover he recognizes an inner structure that links the episodes Conchis tells him:

> I sensed [...] that the two episodes were linked in significance, that we were to use both to interpret him. [...] Everywhere in the masque, these inter-relationships, threads between circumstance (*M*311).

While Nicholas interprets Conchis's stories just as metaphorical descriptions of his own presence at Bourani and his relation to Conchis, the parallels in fact reach far beyond this artificial situation.[202] Susana Onega suggests parallels between Nicholas's life with Alison in London, his relation to Lily-Julie at Bourani, and Conchis's story about his fiancé Lily. She refers to Conchis' stories as metadiscourse, and according to her the analogies between the three situations are so plain "that both the metadiscourse and the metatheater may be considered as inverted *mises en abyme* of the primary discourse."[203] Lucien Dällenbach defines "mise en abyme" as an internal structure reflecting a whole narrative discourse in mirror image.[204] Thus the formal structure of the narrative is revealed and the intelligibility of the literary work is enhanced. According to Susana Onega the structure of *The Magus* is based on the principle of these internal mirror images:

> [If] we take the main story (Alison and Nick) to represent the material; and the masque (Lily and Nick) to represent the psychological aspects of reality; and we add to them Conchis's story (Lily and Conchis) as an inverted mirror

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[202] The numerous analogies in the life stories of the two characters are the basis for John A. Fossas' approach, for instance. He interprets John Fowles's novel as a modern fairy tale and equates Nicholas with Conchis: "Nicholas is not only a magus, but he must also be *The Magus* of the title of the novel" (John A. Fossa (1989): "Through Seeking to Mystery: A Reappraisal of John Fowles' *The Magus*." In: *Orbis Litterarum 44*, S.167).

[203] Onega (1989), p.36.

[204] Lucien Dällenbach (1977): *Le récit spéculaire.* Paris: Editions du Seuil, p.52.

> image of the first, we may understand *The Magus* as one tale containing three variations of the same story, told from the complementary perspectives which, when mixed in the all-enveloping literary text, offer a polymorphous unique whole.[205]

The fact that the three variations are so difficult to separate, Onega continues, points to "one important structural characteristic of the novel, namely that the *mises en abyme* it contains are not 'concentrating,' but, on the contrary, are *mises en abyme eclatées.*"[206] In contrast to the *mise en abyme concentrante*, a story that according to Mieke Bal is contained in the main narrative as some kind of résumé of the whole, the *mise en abyme éclatée* works the other way round, by spreading single elements of the résumé throughout the whole main story.[207] In John Fowles's novel, Susana Onega suggests, the masque as well as the metadiscourse function as such dispersed mirror images that seem to be intertwined with each other as well as with the main story and thus form an inextricable unity.[208]

The "inter-relationships" Nicholas feels in Conchis's game, then, are also reflected for the reader in the structure of the novel. But the links between the single levels are partly so subtle and ambiguous that the reader must search for connections as actively as Nicholas. Thus the complex structure of the novel mirrors what Conchis intends to convey with his godgame: the polymorphous nature of reality. In the story "The Prince and the Magician" that Nicholas comes across after being released by Conchis, the young prince learns to accept that "[t]here is no truth beyond magic" (*M*552). This knowledge turns the prince into a magician, since he learns no longer to strive for absolute truth, which does not exist, and yet not to desperate of the consciousness of this non-existence. Rather the prince can only become a magician by starting to summon up from this knowledge the strength to organize his own reality actively.[209] Therefore, to stay with the terminology Onega has chosen, I regard this story within the novel as a *mise en abyme concentrante*, since it sums up the main message of the novel. The passage from Eliot's 'Little Gidding' is also such a concentrated reflection of the basic motif of the novel, so that I agree with Peter Conradi, who calls it "an encapsulation of

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[205] Onega (1989), p.36.
[206] Onega (1989), p.36.
[207] Cf. Mieke Bal (1977): *Narratologie. Essais sur la significance narrative dans quatre romans modernes.* Paris: Editions Klinsiek, p.107.
[208] Onega (1989), p.37.
[209] For an interpretation of this story within the story see Wolfe (1980), pp.119.

the moral action of the book which epitomizes its tendentious circularity."[210] In order to visualize this I should like to quote those verses here:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time (*M*69).

On the one hand John Fowles makes a statement about the theme of his novel in a very concentrated manner, and on the other he emphasizes, with the help of complex images that illuminate different aspects of both Conchis's game and Fowles's novel, the ambiguity in *The Magus*. In this way he indicates the fictitious character of the medium he has chosen to convey his ideas. These only become meaningful if they are intertwined with the reader's life in the way the stories within the story are intertwined with the protagonist's life. Moreover Nicholas's futile attempts at categorizing his experiences imply that John Fowles's ideas must by no means be taken as definitive statements about life: "Human truths are always complex" (*M*231).

Conchis's warning that Nicholas must interpret the events at Bourani metaphorically can be related to Nicholas's misunderstanding of existential literature, which he does not regard as "metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling" (*M*17), but as realistic descriptions. On the basis of this relation Conchis's warning acquires a significance that reaches beyond the inner structure of the novel. We as readers should not make the same mistake as Nicholas and take *The Magus* as a realistic description of reality. That Nicholas has finally managed to distinguish fiction from life John Fowles demonstrates by making him the author of his own story. According to Robert Scholes, Nicholas "can present his life to us fictionally, as a meaningful metaphor, precisely because he has learned the difference between fiction and existence."[211]

In "Why I Rewrote *The Magus*" John Fowles explains that he tried to keep to a maxim of Alain-Fournier's, who said "I like the marvellous only inside the real." Fowles admits that this turned out to be much more difficult than he had imagined. Moreover he realizes:

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[210] Conradi (1982), p.46.
[211] Scholes (1979), p.38.

> I made my task even more difficult by equating "the real" with a surface realism in style. It may well be that the events of the story would be more plausible veiled behind a poetic unrealism, an allegorical manner; but I am too long wedded to the plain road to attempt anything different now.[212]

Peter Conradi on the other hand does not regard John Fowles's novel as realism, but calls it a "metanovel about 'realism'," with Conchis acting as "an avant-garde but omniscient novelist, who, naturally, suspects novels."[213] Thus the novelist has been inserted into the text and demonstrates the methods of fiction at work. What Conradi implies with this is that Conchis is omnipotent in his godgame, manipulating his figures just as the omniscient narrator of realism usually does and trying to create a realistic atmosphere for each of his scenes. Yet the apparently realistic details, such as Lily-Julie's umbrella, prove to be fakes, and the symbolism of the Apollo scene makes it clear that the otherwise realistic representation of Conchis's fictions is just a question of the *form* of representation he has chosen. As I have mentioned above (cf. 2.2.3), however, form in itself, used as a merely narcissistic device, is of no interest to John Fowles because "good ideas are more important than good words":[214]

> I soon lose interest in novelists who do not show their prejudices and their opinions; who do not try to sell me something beyond entertainment, wit, clever technique, exquisite prose ... not that those aren't added pleasures.[215]

Therefore he does not fight against being called a didactic novelist,[216] but explains that his particular ambition is to change society,

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[212] Fowles (1986b), p.96.
[213] Conradi (1982), p.53.
[214] John Fowles (1964): "I Write Therefore I am." In: *Evergreen Review 8.33*, p.17.
[215] Christopher Bigsby (1979): "Interview with John Fowles." In: *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition. Interviews with English and American Novelists*, ed. by Heide Ziegler, Christopher Bigsby. London: Junction Books, p.125.
[216] Cf. Bigsby (1979), S.125. In the epilogue to an essay-collection on *The French Lieutenant's Woman* he expresses his attitude differently: "The true function of the novel, beyond the quite proper one of pure entertainment, is heuristic, not didactic; not instruction, but suggestion; not teaching the reader, but helping the reader to teach himself" (John Fowles (1977b): "Lettre-postface de John Fowles." In: *Études sur 'The French Lieutenant's Woman' de John Fowles, e*d. by Jean-Louis Chevalier. Caen: Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique, pp.54).

> that is, to affect other lives. I think I begin to agree with Marx-Lenin: writing is a very second-rate way of bringing about a revolution. But I recognize that all I am capable of is writing.[217]

Therefore his predilection for realism as the basic structure of his works is understandable, because in this way he enables the reader to recognize his own world.[218] Since the relation between the fictive world of the novel and the reader's world is, as I have mentioned above, a metaphorical one, this imitation of life in the novel bears "an uneasy consciousness of lying" to John Fowles. In the introduction to his poetry collection *Poems,* Fowles suggests that this uneasiness is the reason

> why in the great majority of novels the novelist apes reality so assiduously; it is why giving the game away - making the lie, the fictitiousness of the process, explicit in the text - has become such a feature of the contemporary novel. Committed to invention [...] the novelist wants either to sound 'true' or to come clean.[219]

By drawing attention to the fictive nature of the world he presents, a novelist can pursue his inventions without deceiving, while assuming the role of a god in a game, he admits that he is just a player.[220] Conchis symbolizes this function of the novelist. He assumes a godlike role in order to convince Nicholas that the Magus's power is restricted to the illusions he has created. Thus he makes Nicholas aware of having just the same power over his own illusions, and that consequently he is able to free himself from his defined self-image and preconceived ideas about his life. In just the same way John Fowles employs the illusions that are at his disposal as a novelist's devices to provide the reader with "an experience beyond the literary" (*M*6), at the same time breaking with

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[217] Fowles (1964), p.16. It has to be pointed out that this article was published as early as in 1964, just before the publication of the first edition of *The Aristos*. In an interview about twenty years later he refers to that statement: "I said that a long time ago, and would now call it a totally unfulfilled hope. I know I may have helped a little in altering people's view of life - if I can believe their letters. I now think that this is the only practical 'political' ambition a novelist can have" (Carol M. Barnum (1985): "An Interview with John Fowles." In: *Modern Fiction Studies 31.1*, p.188).

[218] In an interview with Christopher Bigsby he announces that the "omnipotent power of gravity in the novel form is realism" and then expounds his definition of realism as follows: "The attempt to reflect life, both in style and content, as it is *seen* by the majority; though not necessarily, of course, as it is *valued* by the majority" (Bigsby (1979), p.123.).

[219] John Fowles (1973): *Poems.* New York: Eco Press, p.VII.

[220] Cf. Ellen Pifer (1986): "Introduction." In: *Critical Essays on John Fowles*, ed. by E. Pifer p.7.

those illusions, though, in order to re-establish the relation to the reader's reality. This becomes particularly obvious towards the end of the novel, when in the last chapter he unmasks the illusion maintained till then that the novel is an authentic report. He leaves the level of the first-person narrator to comment as an outsider on Nicholas's situation, thus revealing himself to be the real narrator of Nicholas's story:

> The smallest hope, a bare continuing to exist, is enough for the anti-hero's future; leave him, says our age, leave him where mankind is in its history, at a crossroads, in a dilemma, with all to lose and only more of the same to win; let him survive, but give him no direction, no reward; because we too are waiting, in our solitary rooms where the telephone never rings, waiting for this girl, this truth, this crystal of humanity, this reality lost through imagination, to return; and to say she returns is a lie. But the maze has no centre. An ending is no more than a point in sequence, a snip of the cutting shears. [...] So ten more days. But what happened in the following years shall be silence; another mystery (*M*645).

Nicholas *is* a fictional character dependent on his narrator, the latter alone can decide up to which point he wants to narrate the story. Nevertheless John Fowles does not leave his protagonist in this dilemma but leaves his characters at a point that suggests their autonomy.[221] Eddins does not regard this change of narrative level to be an interruption by the novelist, since such an intervention is so unusual with regard to this novel. Instead he suggests that one should " consider a narrator who has acquired a godlike perspective on that 'plot' of his own life that he has been recounting."[222] Thus Nicholas has turned into an "existentialist author", a term Eddins uses to describe a person who is completely responsible for the 'novel' of his life. According to Eddins, Nicholas has replaced the "leechlike variation of the super-ego" (*M*539) with this existentialist author. The fact that the narrator addresses the reader directly, be it the narrator Nicholas or an omniscient author, is a warning not to subordinate oneself to such a dependent relation as Nicholas has outgrown. Those who are engrossed in Nicholas's world, hoping to find some polished form of final truth about their own world, are cut off from

[221] Cf. Eddins (1976), p.216. Fowles is quite aware of the fact that the freedom he apparently gives to his characters through the open endings is also just playing with illusions: "I do try to give them freedom,[...] but only as a game, because pretending your characters are free can only be a game. The reality of the situation is that you're sitting with a pencil and at any point you like you can strike out developments in the book" (James Campbell (1983): "An Interview with John Fowles." In: *Contemporary Literature 17.4*, p.456).

[222] Eddins (1976), p.216.

reality through 'imagination'. The change of the narrative level at the end of the novel drags the reader away from the fictive world of the novel, just as the open ending establishes a relation to the level of the reader's reality. It is up to every single reader to decide whether Alison will return to Nicholas or not. Just as Nicholas is prompted by Conchis's godgame to become the author of his own life, the open end provides an encouragement to the readers to continue writing that novel on their own. Moreover John Fowles believes:

> [T]here is some sort of metaphorical truth in the use of alternative situations - that is, it suggests to the reader a possible method of escape in terms of her or his own life and its fictions and realities. It can't of course offer the actual escape itself.[223]

In this sense the open ending of *The Magus* can be interpreted as a metaphorical truth about the indeterminism of the fictions and realities of human life.

In an interview John Fowles admits that "*The Magus* was of course a deliberately artificial, model-proposing novel, and a good deal more about fiction than any 'real' situation."[224] However, it is beginning to show that this work is far more than just a novel about fiction and art. *The Magus* expresses an intense examination of the relation between fiction and reality. According to Barbara L. Hussey the novel "can be seen as a paradigm of the relationship between art and life and as such implicitly self-critical."[225] This relation is symbolized by the twofold structure of the novel: on the one hand Alison and London representing reality, and on the other hand Conchis's domain representing the maze of the fictional world within the real one.[226] The dubious wisdom with which John Fowles endows his representative Conchis Frederick M. Holmes interprets as an expression of undermining his authority as author. According to Holmes, this doubt about his own function as an artist is based on "the fear that [his] work lacks any foundation in truth"[227], "a fear that his narrative might

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[223] Bigsby (1982), p.118. Fowles makes this statement with regard to the alternative ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* .

[224] Bigsby (1982), p.120.

[225] Barbara L. Hussey (1983): "John Fowles's *The Magus*: The Book and the World." In: *International Fiction Review 10.1*, p.19.

[226] Hussey (1983) p.21.

[227] Frederick M. Holmes (1985b): "Fictions, Reality, and the Authority of the Novelist: Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Fowles's *The Magus*." In: *English Studies in Canada 11*, p.348.

have no significant metaphoric relationship to life."[228] Nevertheless Holmes acknowledges that John Fowles is convinced that the novel is still a viable instrument "to investigate large areas of profound importance to human life".[229] Fowles's statements in *The Aristos* about the significance of art for people[230] suggest, however, that Holmes's apparently paradoxical results as regards the novelist's self-consciousness do not apply to Fowles. The crucial point that is made through the ambiguous character of Conchis is not to express any doubt about the meaningful relation between his own work and reality. The ambiguity rather serves as a means of representing both the limits and the possibilities of art as a model of experiencing reality. Barbara L. Hussey suggests that John Fowles feels confronted with the paradox situation that on the one hand literature can serve as a means of instruction, while on the other it threatens to divert the reader from reality:

> [By] tempting us to substitute their forms for contingent reality (Julie for Alison), they impede the very commitment they advocate. [...] Both alluring and deceptive, such constructions can imprison us, [...] if we take them for reality.[231]

In the figure of Nicholas, John Fowles demonstrates how this confusion of art and life can detach a person from reality. He also shows, however, the way in which Conchis's artificial world opens Nicholas's eyes by involving him in such a complex game with illusions that Nicholas realizes that he is about to lose touch with reality. Thus Conchis makes him "ultimately hungry for reality."[232] Achieving this with the help of his masque Conchis, as the representative of the author John Fowles, shows that art must not be misused as an escape from reality, but that it is meant to enhance reality by providing a chance to acquire self-knowledge, and so to become integrated into life.[233]

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[228] Holmes (1985a), p.47.
[229] Holmes (1985b), p.346.
[230] To this topic he devotes a whole chapter ("The Importance of Art", *A*184-211), explaining that "Literature [...] is the most essential and the most valuable [of the great arts]" (*A*204).
[231] Hussey (1983), p.23.
[232] Scholes (1979), p.40.
[233] Although Nicholas tries to escape into the fictive world, that literature cannot and must not replace reality is indicated by the book metaphor he introduces himself when leaving Alison in favour of his adventure at Bourani: " 'This experience. It's like being halfway through a book. I can't just throw it in the dustbin.' - 'So you throw me instead'"(*M*273).

The metafictional component of *The Magus* implies much more, however. The complex structure of stories within the novel, the different levels of reality between which Fowles moves (London, the metatheatre, Conchis's stories) and their questionable authenticity, an aspect that culminates in revealing the fictitiousness of the novel, all this is intended to initiate a changed attitude to reality in the reader. What Nicholas's futile search for the significance of the events indicates becomes more obvious in the fairy tale of the prince who turns into a magician. It is not possible to define reality clearly, it is a polymorphous phenomenon. By playing with the reader's readiness to identify with the reality created in the novel and interpret it as a representation of the real world and finally calling off this illusion, Fowles points out the possibility that in 'real' life the reader might also fall prey to such illusions. Nicholas's attempts to organize the chaos of his experiences suggest a general human tendency to structure the reality we perceive. In this sense it is true to say that "[n]othing is real. All is fiction."[234] Patricia Waugh's statement about metafiction expresses explicitly the kind of relation between art and life that can be established on the basis of this angle:

> In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'.[235]

John Fowles's *The Magus* conveys this idea in two respects, since Fowles not only reveals his novel to be an artificial construct, but with the help of his protagonist Nicholas also demonstrates explicitly the way in which these constructions are built up, as well as the fact that they have to be assimilated over and over again.

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[234] John Fowles (1996): "The Enigma." In: Fowles: *The Ebony Tower.* London: Vintage, p.229.
[235] Waugh (1984), p.18.

5. *The Magus* - a Constructivist Novel

Constructivism attempts to define reality in a way that is independent of the questions of ontology. This idea is based on the constructivist conviction that we are not capable of making isomorphous *representations* of reality, but that we can only construct subjective *models* of reality. To what extent these models correspond to ontological reality cannot be definitely proved. As a consequence factuality cannot be a sensible criterion to evaluate human knowledge. Rather it is necessary to check the model of reality in question in terms of its viability and usefulness with regard to everyday life. Analogies of John Fowles's world view to this constructivist concept of reality show plainly in *The Aristos*, which contains many passages that are clearly reminiscent of constructivist theses. An obvious example is the following quotation:

> Neither the scientifically nor the artistically expressed reality is the most real reality. The 'real' reality is a meaningless particularity, a total incoherence, a ubiquitous isolation, a universal disconnection. It is a sheet of blank paper; we do not call the drawings or equations we make on the paper the paper. Our interpretations of reality are not 'the' reality, any more than the blankness of the paper is the drawing. Our drawings, our equations, are ultimately pseudo-realities, but those are the only realities that concern us because they are the only realities that can concern us (*A*154).

Elsewhere in the same book John Fowles quotes the Austrian physician and philosopher Ernst Mach: "A piece of knowledge is never false or true - but only more or less biologically and evolutionally useful" (*A*102). The parallel to the constructivist concept of reality and the implications as regards human knowledge resulting from this attitude are obvious; and even the discoveries of cognitive biology, on which constructivism is based, play an important part in Fowles's ideas: "There is no thought, no perception, no consciousness of consciousness, that cannot be traced to an electrochemical event in the brain" (*A*37).

Following the subtitle of the first edition of *The Aristos*, "A self-portrait in ideas", Barry N. Olshen calls *The Magus* a "self-portrait in fiction"[236] which takes up the key terms and fundamental ideas of Fowles's philosophical reflections. This applies in particular to the novel's representation of the relativity of the way we experience reality, on the basis of which the human illusion of absolute knowledge is rejected. Ansgar Nünning points out that this concept of the constructive nature of

[236] Olshen (1978), p.32.

reality shows not only in *The Magus*, but also in John Fowles's other novels and narratives. Therefore he attempts to establish from an analysis of John Fowles's complete works a basis for a constructivist theory of narrative. Before presenting the results of my own observations, I should like to introduce the fundamental principles of his analysis.

Nünning names two basic ways of converting constructivist ideas into narrative: self-reflexivity and perspectivity. The criterion of self-reflexivity is meant to check if and to what extent constructivity and subjective determinedness of cognition are chosen as a central theme.[237] The gradation within the realm of this criterion is based on an analysis that examines how explicitly constructivist concepts are expressed, which aspects of constructivism are chosen, and who is the textual voice that discusses them.

Aside from this method of self-reflexivity, Nünning suggests perspectivity as a second way of converting constructivist concepts into narrative. This aspect appears in the structural way in which the narrative is represented; by presenting several conflicting narrative point of views this aspect can convey an idea of the relativity of the fictional world. On the one hand, then, the constructiveness of reality can be the more emphasized the more the fictive world is presented through different perspectives. On the other hand, the formal shaping of the artificial world conveys the constructive nature of experience: by the opposition of differing perspectives the form is endowed with meaning.[238] While the subjectivity of cognition can be emphasized by restricting the narrative point of view to the perspective of just one character, to be confronted by several individual perspectives within a narrative can in turn undermine the idea of an objective reality that is independent of perception.

The criterion of self-reflexivity is particularly obvious in *The Magus*. One of the fundamental constructivist ideas is also one of the central concerns of the novel: The events at Bourani and the way in which Nicholas deals with them indicate over and over again that there is no iconic correspondence between our perception of the world and reality, but that knowledge is always based on interpretation and as such cannot

[237] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.7.
[238] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.10: "Durch die Kontrastierung diskrepanter Perspektiven kommt es zu einer Semantisierung der Form."

be objective.[239] Nicholas, however, is convinced that there has to be such a correspondence. He compares his "sense of reality" (*M*209) with gravity and thus expresses his certainty of knowing an objective reality that can be scientifically proved. According to Ernst von Glaserfeld this conviction is "a widespread ailment [...] causally connected with the belief that 'reality' is what it is, quite independent of us."[240] Conchis's fictional world forces Nicholas to doubt his sense of reality, though (*M*241). Instead of being brought down to the facts by the 'gravity' of reality he feels "like a man in space, whirling through madness" (*M*241). The theories and hypotheses with which he repeatedly tries to put his experiences together to make a coherent picture of reality prove to be insufficient and futile. Nicholas is not able to put forward reliable theories about the 'real' composition of the mysterious world, and thus he only finds out what the world around him is *not* like. According to a constructivist point of view this is the only knowledge about the real world that we are able to acquire.[241] The great explicitness of the self-reflexive statements in *The Magus* that can be easily related to central concepts of constructivism is due to the fact that Fowles describes the process of development and disillusionment the protagonist goes through, and in the course of which Nicholas attains insights that correspond to the central concerns of constructivist theory.[242] Trying to cope with Conchis's world Nicholas learns from his failing hypotheses that he is not able to discover an objective truth behind the events, but that he can only ascribe meaning to his experiences and perceptions. Cognition is always interpretation; interpretation, however, is the construction of apparently sensible connections. It is always the observer who creates the 'facts' he observes by relating things or events to each other and thus establishing the structures he or she regards as 'real'.

The opposition of the stereotypical images of Lily-Julie and Alison is evidence of the fact that Nicholas not only assigns meaning to events, but that the characters of the novel are also described as figments of his imagination. According to Ansgar Nünning the polarization of these two female figures consists in their being assigned to the realm of mystery

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[239] At this point I should like to refer once more to Paul Watzlawik's distinction of first grade and second grade reality. The first grade reality refers to direct sensory perceptions, the second grade reality comes to existence on the basis of the meanings that are assigned to those perceptions (Watzlawik (1992), pp.50.).

[240] Glaserfeld (1979), p.446.

[241] See, for instance, Glaserfeld (1997), p.37.

[242] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.8.

and reality respectively. This, Nünning says, demonstrates Nicholas's general tendency to dichotomize phenomena, people, and explanations in terms of 'fictional' and 'real'.[243] Though generally agreeing with Nünning with regard to this tendency to dichotomy, in my opinion this opposition of his images of Lily-Julie and Alison particularly demonstrates Nicholas's confusion of art and life. He fictionalizes Lily-Julie, stylizing her to his ideal, and yet he does not assign her to the same level of reality as Conchis's other constructions, but even thinks that she is the reality that will continue to exist even after all the other illusions have been revealed. The futility of Nicholas's habit of classifying his experiences as 'real' or 'unreal', however, is obvious, since he classifies everything according to his own desires and advantage. Just because he sees in Lily-Julie the ideal woman he is convinced that she must be real, and the more she behaves in accordance with his expectations, the more he is convinced of having discovered the 'real' woman behind the mask of her fictional role.

When his illusion about Lily-Julie's origin in the objective world collapses, Nicholas's distinction between reality and unreality becomes invalid. Since his life has got tangled up more and more inseparably with the fictional world mainly through the involvement of Lily-Julie and Alison, he learns from his misinterpretation of Lily-Julie that the constructivity of his experiential reality not only applies to Conchis's fictions, but is also the basis of his perception of the real world. Moreover he realizes that his picture of reality is determined by his egotistic, aesthetic self-image. Thus he finally becomes aware of the fact that just as in the case of Lily-Julie he has imposed a role on Alison that he has constructed himself according to his own needs.

The first-person narrative situation in *The Magus* emphasizes the subjectivity of cognition. Yet I do not agree with Ansgar Nünning's opinion that the focus of the novel is restricted to only one point of view.[244] On the one hand Nicholas tells the story from the point of view he had at the time of having his experiences at Bourani, on the other hand, however, there are numerous allusions to the distant attitude the narrator now holds towards his past perspective which thus qualify this point of view. Moreover in the figure of Conchis a perspective is inserted into the novel that is in sharp contrast to the world view of young Nicholas. Only with the help of Conchis's stories and his metatheatre does the protagonist manage to attain a new concept of reality.

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[243] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.9.
[244] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.10.

A very significant scene as regards the introduction of constructivist ideas through Conchis's point of view is the scene in which Conchis claims that Henrik Nygaard's meeting god, and the devastating fire in de Deukan's castle happened at the same time. By making his character Conchis explain the concept of coincidence, John Fowles expresses the central issue of constructivist epistemology.[245] Nicholas's doubting question "You're not suggesting ..." is interrupted by Conchis as follows:

> I am suggesting nothing. There was no connection between the events. No connection is possible. Or rather, I am the connection, I am whatever meaning the coincidence has (*M*311).

Constructivism not only regards coincidences as the observer's products, but also the events that happen to coincide at a time as well as the concepts time and place, causality and objects:

> [T]hey all come about through the experiencer who relates, who institutes differences, similarities, and identities, and thus creates for himself a stable world of sorts.[246]

For this reason Ernst von Glaserfeld regards *The Magus* as a classic example of the way in which constructivist concepts can be conveyed in narrative and thus can grow beyond the theoretical aspects: "Fowles has focused on its pragmatic and its ethical aspects."[247]

In this sense *The Magus* can be called a constructivist novel; but it is not only the description of the subjectivity of the protagonist's experiences, be it on the level of his self-perception or with regard to the way he deals with the outside world, that demonstrates the novel's correspondence to constructivist concepts. Above all, I see parallels between the ethical implications of constructivist epistemology and the main concern John Fowles intends to convey by means of the narrative conversion of his concept of reality. The difficulty to classify his novels is probably based on his intention to convey not only the uncertainty of all human experience, but, above all, also the creative possibilities that result from the acceptance of the complex nature of reality. Thus his affinity for realistic means of representation is obvious, while on the other hand the metafictional strategies he employs as well as the doubts he

[245] Cf. Glaserfeld (1979), p.447.
[246] Glaserfeld (1979), p.447.
[247] Glaserfeld (1979), p.447.

expresses about the existence of a coherent reality put him in a line with post-modern literature.[248] The awareness of the uncertain structures we establish to shape and organize our reality, however, does not convey to John Fowles the negative mood that has increasingly influenced literature especially since the end of the 19th century. Rather he emphasizes the positive implications that result from such a perspective.[249] Thus *The Magus* is not only a formal model of the process of constructing human experience and the subjectivity of the concept of reality resulting from that; in addition it suggests possibilities that result from this awareness and might enable us to live a richer life.

The parallels between the conclusions constructivism draws from its theories and those John Fowles suggests in The *Magus* as well as in his other novels can be seen in three areas. The first consequence that, according to constructivism, results from the consciousness of the constructive nature of reality is freedom. Freedom in this sense means the counter-notion of determinism. People who accept the idea that it is they who construct their realities have realized that as a consequence it can only be they who determine their actions and lives. One of the main concerns of Conchis's masque is to convey to Nicholas that his life has been completely determined by conventional ideas that he has always accepted without thinking as an objective standard. The premise "that in reality all is fiction, yet no single fiction is necessary" (*M*627) implies the freedom that is related to the notion that reality is fiction. Realizing that he has orientated his life to a "god like a novelist", Nicholas takes the first step towards accepting his own freedom and accordingly towards

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[248] Cf. Nünning (1989), p.4. Ernst von Glaserfeld suggests: "From a self-consciously contemporary critic's point of view, *The Magus* might well be considered an old-fashioned novel - as old-fashioned as Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* or the work of Pirandello. Seen in the framework of the history of ideas, it belongs to the front of constructivist thought that is today considered modern because it is found to be thoroughly compatible with the theory of knowledge that has grown out of the great revolution in physics" (Glaserfeld (1979), p.447). Christine Brooke-Rose recognizes in *The Magus* "the old split between form and content. [...] There is indeed not a line, not a formal device [...] in the book that does not belong to the most traditional realistic novel - which is why of course, it is so 'readable' despite its plot's complexities" (Brooke-Rose (1981), p.366).

[249] Frederick M. Holmes shows parallels between John Fowles's and John Barth's concepts of reality. He points out, however, that the conclusions they draw from the idea of a subjective world differ: "By offering his own novel as an example, [Fowles] emphasizes the potential that this awareness affords man to invest life with the beauty, power, and heightened significance of fine art. Barth, more pessimistically, concentrates on the fragility and arbitrariness of man's structures of reality" (Holmes (1985b), p.349).

becoming the author of his own life, as Dwight Eddins describes this autonomy.

From this freedom of will and decision-making results the second consequence of constructivism: absolute responsibility for one's own actions. People who regard themselves as the constructors of their realities cannot claim to be constrained by circumstances, or blame others for their own mistakes. Nicholas's conventional world view has kept him from developing into an independent person. He has always blamed the circumstances of his life and the restrictions of his surroundings for being what he is. Thus he has neither accepted responsibility for himself nor has he behaved in a responsible way towards other people. The decision against taking revenge on Lily-Julie, however, he takes out of an understanding of a concept of freedom that is inseparably linked with responsibility. The commandment Mrs. de Seitas gives him visualizes this limitation of absolute freedom of will by the responsibility for others: "Thou shalt not inflict unnecessary pain" (*M*641). Towards the end of the novel Nicholas begins to get an idea of what this commandment implies and also of the necessity that goes with it to choose his freedom anew again and again:

> I knew that at last I began to feel the force of this super-commandment, summary of them all; somewhere I knew I had to choose it, and every day afresh, even though I went on failing to keep it (*M*641).

The third quality that distinguishes a person who has really understood that his or her reality is just a construction from interpretations of his/her own experiences is tolerance. Someone who accepts the constructivity of his/her world picture is also aware of the relativity of this construction. Accordingly he/she is prepared to tolerate other people's concepts of reality and to recognize them as being of the same value, since he/she knows that there is no absolute truth. In *The Aristos* John Fowles emphasizes the necessity of tolerance as the counter-principle to the striving for power:

> [T]olerance, a general scepticism towards the [...] belief that might is right [,...] is the most valuable for society [...,] and tolerance, as we have still to learn, is the most fundamental of all human wisdoms (*A*166-167).

John Fowles's comment in the preface to *The Magus* that there is no 'correct' interpretation of his novel also emphasizes the idea of tolerance. Differing interpretations cannot be classified according to some sort of

scale that ranges from 'correct' to 'incorrect'; they all are of the same value. In the novel Nicholas's urge to give up his isolation and share his life with other people indicates his new ability to show respect and tolerance. This is exemplified in particular by his choice of acquaintances in London. Both of his new friends belong to a different social stratum than Nicholas, and in so far provide a potential contrast to his own world view. Moreover, both Kemp and Jojo are female; neither of them, however, fits into the picture he has made himself of the women he used to be interested in before. The lack of the sexual level his relationships were usually restricted to, implies that Nicholas has access to an intersubjective world where he no longer regards his concept of reality as the only true one. According to the constructivist theory, intersubjectivity is the only way to approximate a relatively objective level of reality. It is only on the basis of the dialogue between different constructions that the individual's isolation can be compensated for, and the constructed reality can attain a high level of viability. In the masque Nicholas is made aware of the fact that by keeping to his egotistic view he is not able to create a coherent picture of the events. Since he is not honest towards other people, he is in turn not able to use their statements to put forward sensible hypotheses. He becomes aware of this when he has to realize that because of Lily-Julie's apparent support he has got even more entangled in his own attempts at constructing logical coherences. A viable concept of reality, however, can only be attained on the basis of intersubjectivity, and this in turn must be based on mutual honesty.

In the last chapter of *The Aristos* John Fowles summarizes the qualities that distinguish the "Aristos in the individual" (*A*212), the ideal person that tries to achieve the best for the human situation. These qualities are very close to the characteristics that according to constructivism distinguish people who have completely integrated the awareness of the subjectivity of experiential reality into their lives:[250]

> To accept one's limited freedom, to accept one's isolation, to accept this responsibility, to learn one's particular powers, and then with them to humanize the whole: that is the best for this situation (*A*214).

Though towards the end of the novel Nicholas has not completely acquired a complete awareness of the implications that result from the idea of the constructivity of reality yet, he has at least understood the fundamental principles of such an attitude. John Fowles thinks this

[250] For those qualities see Watzlawik (1992), pp.74.

growing acceptance and Nicholas's fundamental decision in favour of living his own self, that results from this acceptance, most important, since it suggests that his development has taken the right direction: "I didn't mean to suggest that by the end he was authentic. But that last chapter in *The Magus* is certainly about achieving authenticity."[251]

Thus John Fowles represents in the example of his protagonist a development from a dependent being who is determined by his preconceived world picture, and the belief in an objective reality independent of the individual towards becoming a responsible and free man. By revealing the artificiality of the world he represents, Fowles destroys the readers' illusions of dealing with a closed world of its own. At the same time he makes them not only participate in the protagonist's process of disillusionment, but also makes them aware of the fact that while reading the novel they have laboured under the same kind of illusions as Nicholas has. Destroying this illusion, thus calling the readers back into their own reality, John Fowles establishes a relation between the readers' reality and the fictitious world of the novel. In this way he indicates that in their 'real' lives they might have fallen prey to similar illusions because they approach the world around them with fixed expectations, and a conventional, preconceived concept of reality. But just as it is only Nicholas himself who can decide which meaning to ascribe to his experiences, it is up to every single reader to establish a meaningful relation between the fictional world of the novel and his own life that might as well be nothing but fiction.

> But this is preposterous? A character is either 'real' or 'imaginary'? If you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it ... fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf - your book, your romanced autobiography.[252]

[251] J. Campbell (1976), p.466.
[252] John Fowles (1992): *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* London: Picador, p.87.

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