Realism in "The French Lieutenant's Woman"
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REALISM IN THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT’S WOMAN

WALTER ALLEN HAS PRONOUNCED that The French Lieutenant’s Woman is “first and foremost, an historical novel” and has dismissed its experimental qualities as “a boring red herring.” It is not clear how he arrives at this estimate. Fowles himself has written, “I don’t think of it as a historical novel,” and while the author may not necessarily be the most reliable guide to the work, such a comment should at least direct our attention to alternative areas of emphasis. In the same essay, Fowles adverts to the contradictions that seem to be involved with the demands of realism and credibility:

the genuine dialogue of 1867 (insofar as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old. It very often fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians—it is not stiff enough, not euphemistic enough, and so on; and here at once I have to start cheating and pick out the more formal and archaic (even for 1867) elements of spoken speech. It is this kind of ‘cheating,’ which is intrinsic to the novel, that takes the time. (284)

“Intrinsic to the novel”! If it were not already sufficiently obvious from the shape of the novel itself, this comment should alert us to one of its major concerns: intimately bound up with the procedures that characterize it generally as a historical novel, there is a practical exploration of the techniques and assumptions that go with the criterion of realism. The experimental aspects of the work are not always original, nor are certain of their inconsistencies always recognized; but nor, by any standard that makes sense, are they red herrings. Part of Fowles’s concern is with the transience of forms, the evolutionary principle—

changing cultural, social, and physical circumstances require the organism to adapt or perish. It is clear that he sees this principle as, so to speak, reflexive: it has implications not only for the phenomena being observed, but for the observational process itself. The way in which his novel is made attempts to conform to the requirements of what it actually claims to be true. Its experimental features are neither perverse nor self-indulgent, but rather are a direct expression in formal terms of that need for adaptation which is one of its central assertions. And since for Fowles it is the "cheating" to sustain the illusion of reality which is "intrinsic to the novel, that takes the time," any serious experimentation with form must involve some tampering with the received notions of realism.

The debate on "realism" is extensive and active. The question of what realism is, how it is to be used as a critical term, is by no means settled. Even so, there are certain things meant or understood by the term, and held in common by all parties to the debate. In order not to be drawn into one side or another of that discussion, I want to concentrate on the term at its lowest common denominator, for it is at this level, I believe, that Fowles's interest in the matter also lies. No one, I think,
would deny that, in whatever sense "realism" is spoken of in this kind of connection, it will always include a reference to that which is held to be the objective world, the world that goes on outside of the art work. One of the meanings it always carries with it involves the idea of accuracy to what we mean by reality. We speak of a novel as being "realistic" if it seems to reproduce the features of the world we live in, or at least the world man lives in or has lived in. "That's exactly what it is like," "It's so true to life," "You'd almost think you were there"—these are the casual comments we hear made in response to a play, or film, or novel that is held to be realistic. As a criterion, it manifests itself in popular entertainments through stereophonic sound tracks, wide screens, 3D effects, or gimmicks like Sensurround. All of these are geared to the demand for "realism," to the creation of greater immediacy and credibility, ultimately to reducing the gap between the experience of art and the experience of life, to making the medium, the art work, so transparent that it disappears. But obedience to the criterion has become mindless at a popular level. However acutely it is probed at what might be called an academic level, it needs only the most casual scanning of paperback shelves, films, television to see that the authority of "realism" has never been so naively and extensively taken for granted.

Lyme Regis, Broad Street, about 1855. The Lion Hotel is at the bottom on the left.
There are numerous reasons for using the word naïve here. Two of them at least involve false assumptions which relate to (or fail to relate to) the fact of authorial selectivity. One of these false assumptions is that there exists complete agreement as to what is "out there" waiting to be realistically portrayed. The other, and less widely discussed, is that given a provisional degree of consensus as to what is "out there" the artist simply has to "copy it down," as it were, with a minimum of distorting mediation in such a way as to create to the fullest possible degree the impression that it really is there. It assumes that all that is demanded of realism is that, given agreement as to what is real, it seeks only to reproduce or recreate it so fully and accurately that the witness to the art work becomes convinced he is a witness to the event it describes.

There are many fallacies, or, at the very least, unexamined difficulties, embedded in these assumptions, and I believe that much of Fowles's experimental energy is devoted to exposing them, particularly those contained in the second. Among other things, Fowles is showing that "realism," "truth to reality," unfiltered fidelity to the world we live in is, ultimately, not what the traditional novel has presented or even tried to present, even while implicitly endorsing the rumor that it has. The chief tactic by which he reveals this involves applying the common assumptions about what constitutes realistic devices as far as it is possible to apply them. What is then revealed is that they actually work against, or retreat from, the very aims they appear to set for themselves. Just as the best test of the proposition that the law serves justice lies in applying the law to the limit of its implications, so with the proposition that the techniques of novelistic realism achieve an absolute recreation of reality. Fowles reveals that if the devices of realism are pushed to their fullest extent they conclude only by emphasizing the fictional, "unreal" quality of what they describe. We do not normally recognize this anomaly in what we have come to think of as conventional realism, because the devices associated with it have become so refined along entrenched and conventional lines that the contract of illusion between author and reader remains unbroken. That which is artificial, even arbitrary, in the game of realism has so thoroughly impregnated the popular conception of the novel as to seem not artificial but natural, not arbitrary but cognate. That conception has achieved such a degree of authority that the full complexity of the relationship between reality and descriptions of it remains hidden at that level where the bulk of realistic work—books, films, television—is produced and consumed. In the face of this, Fowles's procedure involves showing what happens if what the realistic devices pretended were true, were really true. Realism seeks to
reproduce reality as convincingly as possible. What if it were pushed to the utmost and succeeded utterly in doing what it implicitly aspired to do? What would things look like if the drive to realism succeeded in collapsing the barrier between fiction and life? Popular conceptions of the ultimate aspiration of realism tend in this direction, and yet it must be clear that, without reassessing our most fundamental assumptions, we would not be able to cope with this—we only have to remember the Orson Welles’s broadcast of War of the Worlds to be reminded of this in the firmest possible way. The point is that a policy of realism, insofar as it involves a convincing recreation of reality, can only appear to be implemented and cannot, in conventional terms, be tolerated if it is as successful as standard formulations of it suggest it aspires to be. The French Lieutenant’s Woman, in its experimental aspect, includes precisely this matter in its considerations.

In many respects, of course, it seems to be a typical example of literary realism, but we are not far into the novel before disturbing touches appear—disturbing, that is, when set against the typical expectations we normally bring to such work. The footnotes, the reference to twentieth-century characters, the Hitchcock-like appearance of the author himself in the action, the choice of endings—all of these break the rules we had been led to expect would be adhered to. It seems that we cannot lose ourselves in the illusion without Fowles breaking it. And yet on many of these occasions what we have is no more than the zealous application of that spirit of realism which normally sustains the illusion. One of his techniques simply involves stressing verisimilitude to an unseemly extent. He writes of Mrs. Poulteney,

> she was an opium-addict—but before you think I am wildly sacrificing plausibility to sensation, let me quickly add that she did not know it. What we call opium she called laudanum. . . . it was, in short, a very near equivalent of our own age’s sedative pills.³

Notice the interjection to defend himself against the charge of sensationalizing at the expense of historical plausibility. It is an appeal to documentary accuracy and, as such, is well within the spirit of realism, which seeks to convince us of the truth of what we read. But the appeal itself breaks the surface. It disturbs the illusion by reminding us that this is a fiction, since it could go wrong, it could become implausible. In this reference to opium addiction, the fictive nature of what is before us is emphasized by the too desperate claim that the story could be true.

³ The French Lieutenant’s Woman (Panther, 1975), p. 82. All references are to this edition.
Many of the footnotes achieve the same effect. They tend to suggest that what we are reading is a history or a sociological treatise—again, it is as though to say, “This is a true record of what really happened.” But because we know it is a fiction, we are disturbed rather than reassured by the claim. What is happening here, as in so many of the instances to be considered, is that the criterion of documentary realism is being pushed so far that it is called into doubt. Fowles is disclosing part of the complexity of the category “historical novel” by actually confusing the kind of knowledge presented by the historian with the kind of knowledge presented by the novelist.

The work thus seems to tack between the fictive world of art and the “real” world of history. Of course, in a larger sense, the two do interpenetrate. But our practical reading habits tend to require that, at the back of it all, we keep them separate, even while implicitly judging realistic works according to how far that separation is broken down. It is this anomaly that Fowles is exploiting, not necessarily in order that the state of affairs be changed, but that at least they be recognized. One of the means by which he achieves this end is to push the criterion of documentary realism so far as to invite us actually to confuse the fictive with the real, to be unable to distinguish them. There are a great many forms of this device, not all of them necessarily original in respect of the tradition of the historical novel. Nor are they as uniformly conspicuous as, for example, the use of footnotes. More surreptitious, perhaps, is the following—Charles and Ernestina are walking along the Cobb at Lyme Regis:

She led him to the side of the rampart, where a line of flat stones inserted sideways into the wall served as rough steps down to a lower walk. “These are the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in Persuasion.” (12)

There is a violent and disturbing oscillation between two different orders of being here. Lyme Regis and the Cobb do exist, in such a way that I can live in one and walk on the other. The Cobb is there as I write, being eroded in the darkness on the other side of the world. But Louisa Musgrove never fell down its steps, not in the sense that I could. It is, on the other hand, true that Jane Austen said she did, yet it is not true, in the same sense, that Ernestina Freeman ever reported the writer as having done so. Fowles speaks casually as though all these things are true in the same way; he invites us to make certain kinds of confusion which would mark the total success of the putative aspirations of realism—principally, the confusion of the real with the fictitious. But as I search for my own response to this invitation, I find that I have spontaneously
declined. Its effect, before I can even do anything conscious about it, is to remind me that the two worlds are actually separate. Because of the vigor of its conventional claim to be real, Fowles’s landscape is all the more patently unreal.

A similar effect is produced by the references to historical persons whose fame is subsequent to the events in the novel, men like Marx (16) and Hitler (29). This is not quite the same as referring to, say, Queen Victoria, who would have been a plausible item in Charles’s consciousness. Karl Marx only gets into the picture by virtue of a twentieth-century historical perspective. Again, historical knowledge comes into tension with what we have become accustomed to thinking of loosely as artistic knowledge. On the face of it, the reference to someone like Marx is another device by which the impression of an historical “real” is conveyed. We know Marx existed, so anyone who shared his landscape must have existed. But coming upon it, I am not drawn unconsciously deeper into the illusion of reality. The effect is rather of surprise, a mild mental discomfort, a disturbance of those expectations that the mainstream of the realistic tradition has instilled in me. “This,” I feel, “is going too far.” In other words, the reference to Marx, which, on the face of it, should strengthen the link between the two worlds, in effect grotesquely emphasizes the distance between them. The disorienting effect of this kind of tactic is perhaps more acutely felt in the discussion of the serving girl, Mary:

Not even the sad Victorian clothes she had so often to wear could hide the trim, plump promise of her figure—indeed, “plump” is unkind. I brought up Ronsard’s name just now; and her figure required a word from his vocabulary, one for which we have no equivalent in English: rondelet—all that is seductive in plumpness without losing all that is nice in slimness. Mary’s great-great-granddaughter, who is twenty-two years old this month I write in, much resembles her ancestor; and her face is known over the entire world, for she is one of the more celebrated younger English film actresses. (68–69)

For the briefest instant, I catch myself wondering who it is; for a moment, a technique of realism achieves its ultimate success. But it cannot be sustained, and susceptibility is almost immediately overwhelmed by a combination of reason and the fixed patterns of belief about fiction. The result of this total but fleeting substantiation of the illusion is its more utter rout. The closer it comes to succeeding, the more derisory is the immediately subsequent reaction. Fowles here pushes the technique of realism so far, he is so insistent upon the “truth” of his scenario and so devious in the devices by which he seeks to establish it, that (deliberately, I believe) he achieves its undoing. The attempt to interchange the
invented community of which Mary is a part with the cosmopolitan world of the twentieth-century film industry is so outrageous that I am forced to remember how utterly separate they are.

This in turn forces a reassessment of those habitual, unsurprised responses to more conventional forms of representational writing. In responding in the usual way to the usual kind of realistic literature, one has not really been looking at and admiring the work according to the degree to which it implements a criterion of realism, even though there is a tendency to use that criterion as one of the foundations of evaluation. However naturalistic or "life-like" the details of the image, it nevertheless conventionally obeys that rule which insists that there be a frame around it, so that we know where that world ends and ours begins. In the realistic tradition, the image must be made so that we think it looks like real life, but not so much so that we confuse it with real life. So, no matter how far the realistic image seems to want to go in recreating the world, and no matter how far we frame our judgment of it accordingly, it in fact will not go as far as it could, nor, with our present expectations anyway, could we cope with it if it did. There must be a frame to limit the impression of the real, and we realize this when Fowles removes that frame and induces a mental discomfort in the reader. There has to be a complex act of prestidigitation: literary mimesis, realism, notwithstanding its traditional implicit promise to provide an immaculate mirror of reality, nevertheless has always secretly guarded its fictive status. The practical limits imposed upon a strategy of literary realism are exposed when Fowles exceeds them, even though he does so apparently in the interests of the complete fulfillment of that strategy. This in itself reveals that what is so generally taken to be a tradition of remorseless realism is in fact a highly mannered convention which has included among its elements a sort of fail-safe device: it holds out the threat (or promise) of its ultimate implications, but ensures that they are never enacted. That is, it includes a clause which prohibits us from making precisely that mistake which would testify to the achievement of total realism—the mistake of confusing the world recorded in fiction with the world we inhabit. Why does a more conventional or less self-conscious writer than Fowles stop short of these illusionist devices? He would probably think something like: "No, my readers would not accept that degree of apparent realism, of interchangeability with experienced daily life." A certain kind of plausibility would be violated, a plausibility which is actually at odds with the kind we usually mean when we talk of the realistic novel. It is that plausibility which takes as its foundation our agreement (along with
the writer's) that, when all is said and done, the whole thing is a pretense. That is, whatever may be implied in the doctrine of realism, the fact remains that in its application it has always withdrawn from its own implications; it has maintained carefully its fictive quality, within which its pretensions to copy "real life" are circumscribed. We are all relieved that the literary attempt to recreate the world absolutely is defeated by the intractability of the medium. Fowles draws our attention to this by giving us a taste of the discomfort we feel when it looks as though the victory might go the other way. He points up the anomaly in the realist tradition: that while aspiring to act out a policy of realism, its writers and readers have nonetheless tacitly agreed to the strategic attenuation of its devices. Its final claims upon us, including perhaps certain of its more overt moral imperatives, have to cope with the frame, the boundary which is established between the fictive and the real worlds.

II

This whole discussion raises the question of what exactly is the ontological status of those things created in a work of fiction. Does Charles Smithson exist or not? What sense does a question like that make? Fowles himself has things to say on the matter. His comments are by no means always convincing, though they are generally provocative, particularly if we glance first at the way he actually treats his characters in practical terms.
One aspect of this treatment introduces again those hidden restraints that traditional realism imposes upon its own apparent aspirations. We are accustomed to thinking of fictitious characters as possessing free will—without this they would lose a degree of psychological realism. But from time to time Fowles grants them so much free will that we can no longer reconcile the spectacle with the knowledge that they are not, properly speaking, self-determining. When he writes, "Let us imagine the impossible, that Mrs Poulteney drew up a list of fors and againsts on the subject of Sarah" (51), I want to ask in what sense is this impossible. Whether in a plausible way or not, surely Mrs. Poulteney can do whatever Fowles demands, short of attaining that degree of autonomy which his observation accords her. Similarly, "Meanwhile, Charles can get up to London on his own" (230). Does this mean that nothing else he has done has been done on his own? And it remains to be explained how a character who only exists while he is in our imagination can do anything while we are not imagining him. So too, "From it [his pocket] he drew a pocket-book and scribbled something: no doubt a reminder to speak to Mr Freeman" (286). What is this "no doubt" (meaning of course that it is merely a supposition)? If Fowles does not know, then the character cannot know. On each of these occasions he is treating his characters as though they had an independent existence. That, of course, is a standard device of realism. But the degree of autonomy he grants them is so great that we are forced to remember that they have none. When he writes, "But I no more intend to find out what was in her mind as she firegazed than I did on that other occasion when her eyes welled tears in the silent night of Marlborough house" (243), he suggests that his character can do something he does not know about, and this reminds me that the opposite is true, that she is a fiction. To write, "I have no doubt that when Charles’s and Sarah’s lips touched, very little amatory skill was shown on either side" (233), is to accord them an autonomy which changes his role from that of novelist (inventor) to that of historian (witness). He treats the fictive as real, but as so often, the way in which he does so merely reminds us of the traditional boundaries dividing the two. The same effect is achieved by conceding his characters a degree of privacy: "Whether they met that next morning, in spite of Charles’s express prohibition, I do not know" (117). This raises the whole question of what kind of knowledge it is that we have of fictional characters. When Fowles makes a comment like this it sounds perverse, and yet it implies no more than is conventionally implied in the tradition of realism. Even assuming for a moment that the characters do have the autonomy he often grants them, nonetheless he must know
what they do. If Fowles can know what they say in private, what they think unspoken, then he can certainly arrange to know what they do in public. It may be that this selective omniscience reveals some confusion in Fowles’s own mind, or it may be a device (after all, it might be said that Fowles can “not know” by consciously refusing to decide). What then is the effect of such an artificial device, since it cannot possibly be what it pretends to be (that is, to make a credible comment on the actions and whereabouts of the characters)? On the surface, of course, the effect is to enhance the impression of a true story being told, to suggest that the kind of knowledge Fowles is drawing upon is not the novelist’s knowledge of his fiction, but the historian’s knowledge of the objective world. The purpose of the device would seem again to be to confuse fiction with fact, art with life. But our set of prejudices about the novel surely prevents us from succumbing to this confusion, and the device only succeeds in doing the reverse—that is, reminding us, who are becoming so absorbed in the story, that it is an illusory world. A device which apparently should serve to remove the frame from around the picture actually reminds us that it is usually there, and that we expect it to be so.

We come again, then, to the question of what kind of existence can be attributed to fictional characters. Fowles raises the issue at a theoretical level, and his treatment of it is not always to be trusted. As in The Arists, he too often betrays an affection for formulations with what might be called a merely cosmetic appeal:

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons. . . . I could fill a book with reasons, and they would all be true, though not true of all. Only one same reason is shared by all of us: we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. When Charles left Sarah on her cliff edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy. . . .

Oh, but you say, come on—what I really mean is that the idea crossed my mind as I wrote that it might be more clever to have him stop and drink milk . . . and meet Sarah again. That is certainly one explanation of what happened; but I can only report—and I am the most reliable witness—that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself. It is not

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only that he has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it, and disre-
spect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real. (86)

Again, the appeal to a criterion of realism. It is certainly interesting,
but in the form he gives it to us, it begs a great many questions. For one
thing, it indicates that the standards involved in realism include a com-
mitment to a principle of nondeterminism. The novelist stands in rela-
tion to the world of his novel as the historian, or sociologist, or political
scientist, stands in relation to the real world: none of them can wholly
grasp future possibility. Fowles is trying to tell us that a character can
be in a novel on his own terms, doing as he pleases, becoming what he
likes. In the interests of realism, of copying what we believe to be the
case about the world, this would be useful if it were true. But a number
of things about it are worrying. There is an important distinction to be
made between the relationship of the historian to real events and of the
novelist to fictitious events: that is, that the real events are still there
without the historian, but the fictitious events cannot come into being
without the novelist. In other words, the novelist creates the events he
records, the historian does not.

There is something else rather facile buried in these reflections:

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. We are all in flight from the real reality. (87)
Fowles denies that a character is either real or imaginary. Again, he is calling into question the boundary between realistically conceived artistic landscapes and life. But there is an elementary sophistry in all this, a spurious maneuver that one expects to be discredited at an early undergraduate level, and certainly should not require extensive comment here. Whatever Fowles wants to say in a pseudo-philosophical way on the matter, the fact remains that there is a crucial sense in which I am more real than an imaginary character in a novel, or, more modestly, the way in which I am real is decisively different from the way in which Charles Smithson is real. If Fowles wants to deny that I am real, it simply means that I shall have to invent a new word to describe what the word "real" was describing before he told me I could not use it any more. The distinction expressed by the words "real" and "imaginary" does exist, and it is generally of crucial importance to be able to draw attention to it. If I am not real, then what is? If Charles Smithson is not an imaginary character, then what does "imaginary" mean? No amount of semantic trickery, of figurative sorcery, is going to change the fact that the world inhabited by Charles Smithson is not the same as the one I inhabit. We may interact, but we can never change places. We therefore exist in different ways, and there is nothing mystifying in defining that difference by saying that I exist in reality and Charles exists in imagination. So when Fowles says, "You do not think of your past as quite real," he has allowed the meaning of the word to change secretly from what it meant when used in connection with the characters in his novel. Thinking of

Photograph by Roger Mayne. The Cobb looking west towards the Undercliff.
my past as not real does not make it not real, and thinking of Charles as real does not make him real. What Fowles is talking about, of course, is the fact that we build illusions about ourselves—"We are all in flight from the real reality." There is nothing original or contentious about this; indeed, expressed in this unremarkable way, the only striking feature of the observation is its banality. But to say, for this reason, that the kind of illusions we have about ourselves is indistinguishable from the kind of illusion constituted by a novel is just untrue. And finally, we are entitled to ask how Fowles can imply that what is true for art is true for life and, at the same time, hold the view that "tragedy is all very well on the stage, but it can seem mere perversity in ordinary life" (108).

It is clear that any inquiry into the ontology of characters in a fictional landscape is going to have to impinge on the question of the status of the novelist himself. Fowles takes up the question, again at a theoretical level, in Chapter Thirteen, and the central thrust of his comment is directed at the notion of the novelist as illusionist, or as one who cheats (his own term, quoted above), the man seeking to convince us of the reality of the unreal.

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in... a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. (85)

I refrain from elaborating at length on the fact that if, as Fowles is quoted as saying above, we cannot distinguish between real and imaginary characters, then this observation is emptied of most of its emphasis. Rather, I prefer to note the emphasis on deception. The characters never really existed. The knowledge we have of them is a pretense endorsed by a certain literary tradition, the tradition of authorial omniscience. We may want to reply that, even so, the pretense is accepted by all parties, and the tradition works. Fowles confronts this objection when he goes on to say, "But I live in the age of Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word" (85). The conventions of the novel are not God-given and immutable. Things change, and in the age of Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* certain questions have been asked which challenge the authority of those conventions. Fowles indicates that we can no longer continue to think of the novel in the same old way.

He goes on to postulate various alternative versions of the novelist's activity. Yet there is something common to all of them:
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So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game. Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them. Or perhaps I am trying to pass off a concealed book of essays on you. (85)

In all of these there is an insistence on the element of pretense, disguise, concealment. We know, for example, that Fowles cannot be Smithson if Smithson is the nineteenth-century gentleman he is presented as. For one thing, Fowles has information about the twentieth century that Charles could not possibly have. Whatever it might be that Fowles is doing as a novelist, then, it seems that it must include the idea of pretending that things are other than they are. Where is such an activity acceptable? Certainly, as things are presently constituted, pretense is, at least nominally, frowned upon in what is regarded as the serious business of daily life. The only place where it is seemly is in a game—"Perhaps it is only a game." The word "game" has many senses, but in the condescending word "only," its trivial connotations are released: something not to be taken seriously. Fowles's logic is clearly leading in a particular direction here. Since the novel of realistic illusion is based upon skillful deception, he can only escape the odium normally attached to this kind of activity by withdrawing his claims to serious relevance and accepting the role of something like a harmless entertainer. The conclusion towards which he is moving is that the power and authority of the novelist are, or should be, severely limited. He cannot legitimately step outside the frame which surrounds his work and which enables us to distinguish it from life.

We may not want to agree with Fowles. Certainly, there is something very simplistic and mechanical in the model he assembles. Much is left out. But however we respond to his suggestions, the fact remains that the spirit of his exercise has much in it to admire. He is bringing into view the whole notion of art as an agreed illusion, the idea that it thrives upon some kind of conspiracy of pretense. And of course, in bringing such an idea into prominence he requires that we question what have become its accepted, often fossilized (the image is carefully chosen) conventions. Surely this can be no bad thing. Like a magician who explains how he performs his tricks, Fowles allows us to see the mechanisms, and therefore the limitations, of his own power. This, in fact, is the effect of many of the peculiarities of the novel. By extending the novelist's traditional mandate in respect of realism to its fullest, he allows us to realize just how little he really can get away with, just how tightly the conventions do chain him. At one point he considers following a character indoors, hardly a privilege automatically available to
someone who simply happened to be standing out in the garden:

But I am a novelist, not a man in a garden—I can follow her where I like? But possibility is not permissibility. Husbands could often murder their wives—and the reverse—and get away with it. But they don’t. (85–86)

Here again, a statement of what the novelist can not do. The omnipotence of the novelist is merely apparent, itself a fiction. If he exercises his power beyond the limits of what is conventionally expected of him, that power becomes ineffectual, for it is only by observing certain conventions that the contract between him and his readers remains honored.

There is much to object to in the novel, particularly in those sections of it which are given over to abstract commentary. It is not that it is abstract commentary per se which is exceptionable, but that much of it is glib. Notwithstanding this, the overall endeavor to renegotiate the terms of our understanding of realism is stimulating. The liberties Fowles takes with the conventional form of the novel are to be respected as a serious attempt to fashion a formal response to those anomalies in the tradition of realism which are too often ignored. It can be shown that his use of alternative endings, for example, is a formal summary of his view that “a planned world . . . is a dead world” (86), that chance and choice do remain decisive in a world too frequently thought of as transparently predetermined. I am not trying to claim that Fowles is the only writer to undertake at a formal level a reassessment of the assumptions behind realism. Sterne’s name must spring to mind here. More recently we find in works like Kurt Vonnegut’s Breakfast of Champions a further development of some of the formal peculiarities of The French Lieutenant’s Woman. In certain respects, Fowles is trying to do for the novel what men like Brecht have done for the drama or Godard for the cinema: to reexamine certain assumptions latent in the way in which the techniques of a given genre or medium have developed. He may not always be either consistent or convincing, but this is no reason to dismiss his experiments as though they were detachable from some other prior and unrelated intention. Through the metaphor of evolution the novel inquires into the variability of the relationship between an organism and its fluctuating environment. The experimental features are nothing less than the symptom of its own willingness to live out the terms of that inquiry.