

book reviews

Some of the themes which John Fowles developed in *The Magus* — the pursuit of the mysterious woman, the necessity of learning to choose, the impossibility of clear-cut solutions — are repeated and amplified in his new novel, a study of the Victorian age. On this count alone it is a good book; what makes it a wonderful one, and an important contribution to the development of the novel form, is Fowles' treatment of the genre itself.

There is a great deal in this book, more than one can hope to hint at in a review. Let me point out, though, that the prospective reader ought not

to be put off by the fear (propagated by some reviews) that only the scholar of Victoriana is going to get a charge out of the novel. The story itself is briskly told, replete with suspense and action and told with a peerless mastery of the language; in short, it gives everything that one would expect in a masterpiece of the Golden Age of novel-writing. Yet one must expect more from a novelist writing in 1969, and it's that aspect of Fowles' art that I want to dwell on here.

The French Lieutenant's Woman deals with an essentially Victorian problem within the framework of a Vic-

The French Lieutenant's Woman, by John Fowles (Little, Brown)

torian novel. Charles Smithson, a member of an aristocratic family but fortunate enough to have been exposed to the more advanced ideas of his day, is betrothed to Ernestina, a sprightly and intelligent (but shallow) member of the new rich. Charles meets and falls in love with Sarah, a mysterious woman who is said to have lost her purity in an affair with a French naval officer.

Sarah is like Lily/Julie in *The Magus*: she is the unknown quantity, a woman whose motives remain as much a mystery as her background. In this respect she is the ultimate mystery of wo-

man; and, to Charles, she represents the freedom from convention that we perhaps take for granted but which was almost unknown to the upper-class Englishman of the last century.

Charles is ultimately, of course, left with a choice: he must follow the strict edicts of his society and marry Ernestina (it must be remembered that betrothal was a much more serious contract in those days, and especially in his class), or he must cast her off and go to Sarah.

Now this is the crucial point I want to make about Fowles' treatment of the novel genre. Up to this point (aside from some fascinating literary tricks and theoretical digressions) he has been lulling us into the feeling that we are reading something by Hardy or George Eliot. But now Fowles refuses to go along with the convention: just as Charles must cast aside more than just Ernestina (for if she goes, so must Charles's whole Victorian heritage), Fowles must refute the typical Victorian denouement. This he does, and brilliantly.

Fowles hastily brings the plot to a conclusion halfway through the book: certainly it is the kind of conclusion which we would expect to find in a Victorian novel. But the novelist has us in his grip, and he is only reminding us of this: choose this as an ending if you wish, he seems to be saying, and close the book here. But of course we cannot; our conditioned response to the novel form forbids it, and

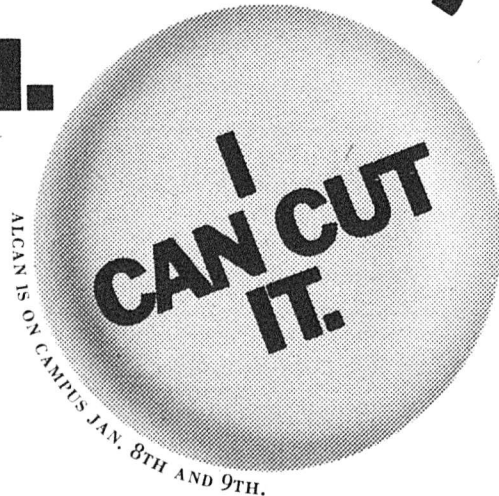
we must go on to find out "what really happened."

So once more we are led into the labyrinth, now growing ever darker and ever more serpentine. And at last Fowles gives us the final, shattering parody of the Victorian novel: he writes two endings (as Hardy and Dickens have done) and forces us to choose between them (as Hardy and Dickens would not do). He will not allow us to forget that this is fiction, that nothing "really happened." Furthermore, neither ending is a "satisfactory" one in the traditional way: there is no tidy denouement whether happy or tragic. As Charles leaps into the twentieth century, casting away the comfortable structure of morals and conventions which has hitherto saved him from existential angst, so we must face up to the reality of existence rather than being led along by a god-like narrator.

The importance of Fowles' treatment of the genre of the Victorian novel lies in this, that he accepts and retains its graciousness of language and concern with character, but rejects the simplistic approach to life implicit in the conventional denouement. This rejection clears a lot of ground: it enables the novelist to be modern without totally abandoning the many virtues of the novel as developed in the last century. We can expect, then, that if Fowles hasn't already established himself as one of the finest novelists of our time, he certainly will with his next book.

—Terry Donnelly

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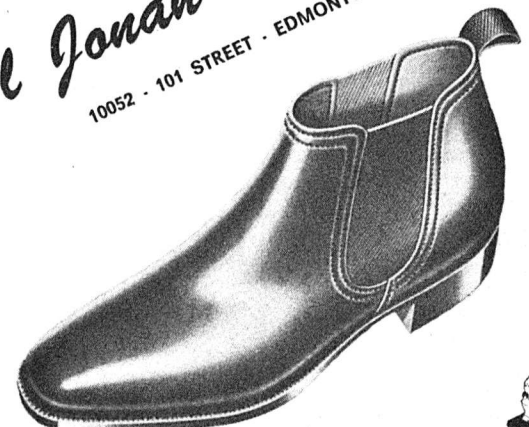
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