‘I make a new God’: Maurice Conchis and (traces of) G.I. Gurdjieff in John Fowles’s *The Magus* (1965)

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Abstract

The article speculatively compares the fictional Maurice Conchis at Bourani in 1953 in John Fowles’s *The Magus* (1965) with the historical G.I. Gurdjieff at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau-Avon in 1922-1924 based in a combination of source analysis, functional comparison and cultural contextualisation. I examine the evidence for Fowles’s interest in ‘esoteric’ material in his published diaries during the long period in which he wrote and re-wrote *The Magus*. I argue a case for using the original 1965 rather than the revised 1977 version of *The Magus* because these interests are clearer in the original text and closer to the literary and cultural context of its production in the long 1950s. This is the period in which the first publications by and about G.I. Gurdjieff became available in public libraries and were discussed by broadsheet literary editors and I argue that Fowles – a keen reader of Jung with interests in telepathy and the Tarot - at minimum knew ‘of’ Gurdjieff. I compare the presenting ‘supernaturalism’ of the original version of *The Magus* with Fowles’s later rationalist ‘revisionism’ and I also consider the novel’s relationship with the philosophy of *The Aristos* (1964). Through a comparison of the biographies and pedagogies of Conchis and Gurdjieff I argue that *The Magus* shows Fowles’s ambivalence about the scope of rationalism and his continuing attraction to enigma and mystery. I conclude that Fowles as author, his fictional creation Conchis, and the historical Gurdjieff as comparand, share the status of a modern magus but are legitimated by different sources of authority: ‘man’ and ‘god’.

Keywords: John Fowles, *The Magus, The Aristos*, Greece, Maurice Conchis, G.I. Gurdjieff, Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man

> The basic idea of a secret world, whose penetration involved ordeal and whose final reward was self-knowledge, obsessed me. In a way the book was a metaphor of my own personal experience.
>
> - John Fowles on *The Magus*[1]

Introduction

This article explores biographical and pedagogical resonances between the (fictional) Maurice Conchis in John Fowles’s 1965 novel, *The Magus*, and the (historical) Greek-Armenian teacher Georgii Gurdjieff (1877-1949). I speculate on Gurdjieffian echoes in Fowles’s representation of Conchis and in the methods Conchis uses to instruct the neophyte, Nicholas Urfe. This

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[1] Carol M. Barnum, ‘An Interview with John Fowles’s, *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1985), p. 195.

includes comparing the initiatic environment at the fictional 'theatre' at Bourani on the Greek island of Phraxos in 1953 with the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau-Avon in 1922-1924. I argue that, while there is no 'smoking gun', circumstantial evidence points to the likelihood that Fowles knew 'of' Gurdjieff during the long drafting process of *The Magus* and to the possibility that he drew on biographical and pedagogical elements of Gurdjieff, either deliberately or unconsciously, to shape the character of Conchis and his 'hazardous' pedagogy.

This article contributes to existing scholarship on fictional representations of Gurdjieff, for example as 'Dr Gambit' in Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*, as the mysterious 'Monsieur Hor' in C. Daly King's detective fiction, or even as 'himself' in *The Saint of Montparnasse*, a novel based on the life of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi.[2] The difference is that traces of Gurdjieff in Conchis remain speculative since I can find no reference to Gurdjieff in Fowles's published diaries, essays or biography.[3] Nevertheless I argue that exposure to Gurdjieff is entirely plausible during the long period in which Fowles obsessively wrote and re-wrote his text and showed a keen interest in existentialist thought and Jungian psychology. Hard evidence may yet be found in Fowles's unpublished diaries which were unavailable to me while writing this article at the University of Sydney.[4]

The exercise is worthwhile since at minimum it discloses fascinating similarities between Conchis and Gurdjieff and between the pedagogies of *The Magus* and the Gurdjieff Work. Whether these are due to hazard, to unconscious borrowing, or whether Fowles had read Gurdjieff (he was a wide and eclectic reader), putting literary text and new 'religion' into conversation in the cultural context of the long 1950s is "good to think" (*bonne á penser*).[5]

Comparing *The Magus* and The Work

I begin with a condensed comparison of basic 'plots' to set the scene. *The Magus* was published in 1965 by the English writer John Fowles (1926-2005). It takes the form of a *bildungsroman* about a young Englishman (Fowles's *alter ego*), Nicholas Urfe, who after studying desultorily at Oxford, begins an affair with a young Australian, Alison Kelly. Nicholas cynically extricates himself from this relationship by taking up a teaching post on the fictional Greek island of Phraxos. As he rationalises: "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." [6] On Phraxos he meets Maurice Conchis, an Anglo-Greek mystagogue living on a private estate at Bourani. Conchis inducts

[2] Carole M. Cusack, 'Portraying Charisma: The Representation of G. I. Gurdjieff in Fiction', *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2024). Other examples include Gurdjieff (pejoratively) as 'the Armenian' in D. H. Lawrence's short story, 'Mother and Daughter' (1929) and (appreciatively) as 'Max Falkoner' in Jacob Needleman's *Sorcerers: A Novel* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2015 [1986]). More recently Gurdjieff appears as himself in Zaza Burchuladze's *The Inflatable Angel* (Tbilisi: Bakur Sulakauri Publishing, 2018) and in Andrew Crumey's *Beethoven's Assassins* (Sawtrey, UK: Dedalus Books, 2023). See also 'Gurdensky' in the play *The Prophet* by Stuart Holroyd (1933-2025), written in the late 1950s but published for the first time in this issue.
[3] Eileen Warburton, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds* (London: Penguin, 2004).
[4] Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas: TXRC93-A76 John Fowles papers; Exeter University Library: MS 102 Papers of John Fowles, c. 1949-1990. The Exeter deposit is a copy except for Fowles's working drafts of his novels which are only held at HRC.
[5] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (London: The Merlin Press, 1991 [1962]).
[6] John Fowles, *The Magus* (London: Pan Macmillan 1973 [1968]), p. 13; I quote from this paperback edition.

Nicholas into a series of theatrical tableaux which ostensibly illustrate episodes in Conchis's life but are offered didactically to Nicholas to deepen his self-understanding. Nicholas begins a relationship with Julie, an English woman participating in Conchis's masques. He briefly meets his former flame Alison in Athens with a view to reconciliation but Phraxos proves more attractive. Soon after his return he learns that Alison has taken her life. This intensifies the emotional impact of the masque at Bourani which culminates with Nicholas physically restrained by Conchis and forced to confront his selfishness in an elaborate 'trial' sequence. At the end of the trial Nicholas is offered the chance to punish Julie for the deception he has endured at Bourani but he refuses, and in so doing he realises the nature of freedom. Conchis tells Nicholas he has passed the test and is now 'elect'. The domain is closed down and Nicholas returns to London. In limbo, he learns that Alison is alive and her suicide part of the masque. In the final chapter they meet but whether their relationship will be renewed is left open.

'The Work' is a term which describes the structure of Gurdjieff's pedagogy: a bricolage of Socratic dialogue, the practise of movements, contemplative reading, and exercises in breathwork and proprioceptive visualisation.[7] The aim of these practices is to 'remember oneself' and thus emerge from metaphorical sleep. The practise of self-remembering creates 'real I': an embodied presence able to act in the world rather than continuing to identify reactively to passing phenomena. Gurdjieff taught in groups so that instruction could be given orally and face-to-face and the inevitable tensions amongst group members be used as raw material for work. His physical movements were known as 'sacred dances' or 'sacred gymnastics' and were accompanied by music composed by Gurdjieff with Thomas de Hartmann (1884-1956).

Oral teaching within an authoritative lineage was (and remains) formative in the Work although the fullest account of Gurdjieff's teaching, *In Search of the Miraculous*, is based on notes made despite Gurdjieff's prohibition.[8] Since Gurdjieff's death, transmission has continued from teacher to pupil in different lineages although printed and digital sources have increasingly mediated. The history and development of the Work is complex, and a large literature has emerged, initially written by teachers and their pupils who are now into the fourth generation but also from an academic perspective, including a 'new wave' of Gurdjieff studies.[9] I take Gurdjieff at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau-Avon between 1922 and 1924 as my speculative comparand with Conchis, in 1953, in *The*

[7] For an argument on the Work as a bricolage, see Steven J. Sutcliffe, 'Gurdjieff as a Bricoleur: Understanding the "Work" as a Bricolage', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6.2 (2015), p. 117–137.
[8] P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950).
[9] For some examples of this 'new wave' see: Michael S. Pittman, *G. I. Gurdjieff: Armenian Roots, Global Branches* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008); 'The Gurdjieff Work' in Carole. M. Cusack and Alex Norman (eds), *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* (Leiden and Boston: Brill: 2012), pp. 237-348); Johanna J. M. Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/ de Hartmann Music and Its Esoteric Significance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015); Steven J. Sutcliffe, 'Hard Work: Locating Gurdjieff in the Study of Religion/s', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2014), pp. 262-284; David Seamon, '"Seeing the World with Fresh Eyes": Understanding Aesthetic Experience via Gurdjieff's Phenomenology of Human Being', *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 21, issue 1-2 (2017), pp. 150-175; and Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Magus. This was not the first iteration of Gurdjieff's Institute but it was the longest and most impactful in giving Gurdjieff an international platform based in an "intentional community."[10]

There is no argument about the singular existence of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. In contrast, commentators on Fowles's *The Magus* face a major interpretive question from the start: which of two versions to use, the 1965 original or the 1977 revision? Since my analysis turns on elided content, I turn to this question first.

The Magus: Original or Revised Version?

My argument is best made initially in reverse. The revision has a different flavour to the original on two counts. First, Nicholas is made even more self-centred and unlikeable a narrator, underscoring the epigraph from the Marquis de Sade: '*un debauché de profession est rarement un homme pitoyable*'. This presumably reinforces the underlying message that becoming 'elect' is easier said than done: 'everyman' (*hoi polloi*) is thrawn and cannot easily change. Second, the narrative has been secularised as confirmed by two American reviewers. Cory Wade thinks there was 'mystery enough' in the original and that the revised version benefits from elimination of "much of the artifice … including the suggestions of supernaturalism."[11] He commends the "more naturalistic pattern" which results including its "more intensely sexual" elements.'[12] Similarly Ronald Binns welcomes "Fowles's demystifying procedures" and appreciates the "more sceptical analysis" of events at Bourani.[13]

This reception is typical and serves to frame *The Magus* as a literary puzzle to be solved rather than an emotional mystery to be experienced. Yet sexing up logic and dialling down experience de-historicises the text and depreciates the cultural context in which it gestated. In one fell swoop *The Magus* is lifted from its dour post-war 1950s setting and deposited into the aftermath of the 'long 1960s.'[14] The redactions of the revised version obscure good evidence that Fowles remained attached to experience as an existential and aesthetic mystery. As he told Melvyn Bragg in 1977, the same year as the revised version:

> truths that are put across in the artifice of fiction are … different from philosophical propositions or scientific truths. Perhaps they are 'feeling' truths … I think people

[10] Carole M. Cusack, 'Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), pp. 157-176. For portraits of life at the Institute at Fontainebleau-Avon by those who were there, see: Fritz Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff, Gurdjieff Remembered, Balanced Man* (California: Bardic Press, 2005 [1964]); C. S. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The journal of a pupil. An account of some years with G. I. Gurdjieff and A .R. Orage in New York and at Fontainebleau-Avon* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); J. G. Bennett, *Witness: The Story of a Search* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), pp. 113-130; and Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff in the Public Eye: Newspaper Articles, Magazines and Books 1914-1949* (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2022).

[11] Cory Wade, '"Mystery Enough at Noon": John Fowles's Revision of "The Magus"', *The Southern Review*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1979), p. 716.

[12] Wade, '"Mystery enough at Noon",' pp. 716-717.

[13] Ronald Binns, 'A New Version of *The Magus*', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4, (1977), pp. 79; 84.

[14] Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States c. 1958-1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

> [readers] are amenable to such truths … I don't think they require of a truth that it is sort of arguably verifiable.[15]

Nevertheless, the redactions are real. The first 'demystifying procedure' (Binns) is to drop the dedication to the Canaanite/Phoenician goddess, Astarte.[16] Historically, secularization begins with the naturalisation of mythology but the elision of a two word dedication in the front matter is easily missed. A more noticeable deletion, however, is the epigraph from A. E. Waite's *The Key to the Tarot* (1910) in the original version which informs the reader that the Tarot Magus card contains "real symbolical meaning" due to its "mystic construction" from "the secret science of symbolism."[17] In Waite's description, as cited by Fowles, the Magus stands behind a table on which lie the four Tarot suits: cups, wands, swords, pentacles. These symbolise 'the elements of natural life' which lie 'like counters before the adept.'[18] These details identify the artist as Pamela Coleman Smith who illustrated the iconic Rider-Waite deck under Waite's direction.[19] T. S. Eliot referenced the same deck in *The Waste Land*[20] so, wittingly or not, Fowles was positioning his fiction within an occult Modernist hermeneutic.[21]

Waite's language of 'mystic construction', 'secret science' and 'adept' illustrates what Wade means by 'supernaturalism'. The message to the reader would seem to be obvious: prepare to be initiated. However Warburton argues that these and adjacent tropes to come - Conchis's declaration 'I am psychic', Nicholas's mystical experience under hypnosis and narcotics, the mythological figures at the 'trial' – are "sham magic trappings" designed "to reveal Conchis as a trickster and send Nicholas back to 'reality'."[22] During his 1969 tour of the

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[15] Fowles, in Melvyn Bragg, 'BBC Interview with John Fowles, 23 October (1977)' *Fowles Books*. At: https://www.fowlesbooks.com/bbc-interview-with-john-fowles-from-october-1977/. Charles Drazin, editor of Fowles's journals, sees a sense of mystery as being 'very core to Fowles's worldview and an underlying theme in all his writing – the irony of how a writer quests for truth never ever able finally to pin it down'; Drazin suggests that Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Daughter* (1969), which followed *The Magus* and famously offered the reader two possible endings, can be read as 'a satire on Victorian certainty' (pers. comm. 1 December 2025).

[16] Eileen Warburton says that 'Astarte' is Fowles's wife, Elizabeth, and that Fowles sometimes used the name of this 'mysterious goddess' for Elizabeth's 'wisest expression'. Warburton refers to earlier drafts (in the Harry Ransom Centre) where Fowles acknowledges his debt to "the sole begetter … of this story … whom our common friends will know haunts every scene and every page.", Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 273. This may be an oblique reference to the *genius loci* of Spetsai ('Phraxos' in *The Magus*) where Fowles first met Elizabeth and which also stands for his wider infatuation with Greece. See his description of the landscape of Spetsai and beyond, written in January 1952, in 'Behind the Magus', John Fowles, *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape 1998[1994]), p. 58-63.

[17] A. E. Waite, *The Key To The Tarot* (London: Rider, 1910) cited in Fowles, *The Magus*, n.p.

[18] Fowles, *The Magus*, n.p.: 'the adept' is Nicholas. Deleting this reference dramatically secularises the narrative.

[19] Coleman Smith's Magus, with a figure-of-eight above his head and his right arm raised in hieratic gesture, is illustrated in Ronald Decker and Michael Dummett, *A History of the Occult Tarot 1870-1970* (London: Duckworth 2002), pp. 130-141. Marvin Magalaner and Ellen McDaniel argue that the seventy-eight chapters in *The Magus* equal the number of cards in a Tarot deck and that Fowles 'draws a deliberate parallel between the quest of Nicholas … and the journey of the [Tarot] Fool,' Ellen McDaniel, '*The Magus*: *Fowles's Tarot Quest*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1980-1981), pp. 249, 257. Magalaner gives a *tour de force* 'Tarotian' reading of the novel in which Nicholas plays The Fool, Conchis is The Magus, Lily is The High Priestess and Mrs de Seitas is The Empress. See Marvin Magalaner 'The Fool's Journey: John Fowles's *The Magus*'. In *Old Lines, New Forces: Essays on the Contemporary British Novel, 1960-1970*, ed. Robert K. Morris (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), p. 82.

[20] Tom Gibbons, '*The Waste Land Tarot Identified*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1972).

[21] Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

[22] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 319.

United States, Fowles was said to be "dismayed at how many readers accepted the paraphernalia of superstition as the truth of the narrative" and 'disturbed' to learn that some readers saw the novel as "a work of magic or drug-induced inspiration."[23]

This is disingenuous or contrarian. Fowles surely knew that Waite was a Freemason, a Rosicrucian, and a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn alongside Aleister Crowley since the décor of the trial shows familiarity with magical ritual.[24] Furthermore the film of *The Magus* had just appeared for which Fowles wrote the screenplay and plays a Hitchcockian cameo as a taciturn Greek sailor. The film introduces a scene in which Nicholas asks Conchis 'What have you got in store for me now?' and Conchis replies 'Shall we leave it to chance?' He asks Nicholas to cut a Tarot deck three times. Nicholas draws the Hanged Man ('he stands for selfishness'), the High Priestess ('she stands for mystery and wisdom'), and the Magus ('the magician, he stands for [dramatic pause] many things').[25] The cinematography represents the trial through a soft-lens, 'psychedelic' sequence of masks swirling towards camera in which Conchis appears, dressed flamboyantly as a Tarot Magus.[26]

Fowles professed to dislike the final cut just as he claimed to dislike the reception of the novel. But did he protest too much? Peter Conradi points out that an irony of the book is the countercultural reception it shared with "Hesse, Tolkien and Castaneda"; in this way it "colludes with the kinds of vision it is wistful about correcting."[27] Similarly Binns regrets those "who solemnly wrote to [Fowles] enquiring whether he used acid or mescalin, how long he studied under Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and so on."[28] A 1977 *Guardian* article described *The Magus* as a 'cult': "correspondents turned to Fowles the guru to advise them on how to mend their marriages, whether or not they should journey to Greece, the secret of life."[29]

To contextualise this reception, in 1966 Fowles received a letter from Tima Preiss, a US school student, who describes the novel as "one of the most extraordinary reading experiences I've ever had." Nevertheless:

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[23] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 319.

[24] In the trial scene, Nicholas is dressed in a quasi-Masonic costume in a room containing "cabbalistic elements" with a "deep-red rose" on the wall; it "stank of ritual," Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 420. Numerous costumed figures arrive, the final one with "a real goat's head" and a "blood-red candle … between the horns," Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 425. The assembly reads like an occult roll-call: "the stag devil, the crocodile-devil, the vampire, the succubus, the bird-woman, the magician … the goat-devil, the jackal-devil, the pierrot-skeleton, the corn-doll, the Aztec, the witch." Nicholas is genuinely alarmed: "I found myself swallowing … I badly needed to shout something debunking … a 'Doctor Crowley, I presume'." Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 425.

[25] The interpretations are voiced by Conchis; see Guy Green (dir.), *The Magus* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1968), 22.05-26.16. Conchis holding the Hanged Man is reproduced as a still in Warburton, *John Fowles*, f.p. 302. This intensification of the symbology of the Tarot in the film seems odd in light of Fowles's repudiation of 'the paraphernalia of superstition'.

[26] See Green, *The Magus,* 1.44.15-1.46.28.

[27] Peter Conradi, *John Fowles* (London: Methuen 1982), p. 57.

[28] Binns, 'A New Version of the Magus', p. 79. It is interesting that Binns cites only these names. Fowles denied using drugs but admitted he was 'interested in reading about it' including 'those books by Carlos Castaneda,' see James Campbell, 'An Interview with John Fowles's, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976), p. 459.

[29] Richard Yallop, 'The Reluctant Guru', *The Guardian*, 9 June (1977), p. 8.

> I don't really understand the book and it keeps digging at me … I would deeply appreciate an explanation of the meaning of the book. I can't get at the meaning behind the meaning: the climax of reason, and the idea of "eleutheria"[30]

Fowles's reply is brusque: "[I]f it's baffling … perhaps the explanation is baffling." He relents:

> One gets one explanation – the Christian, the psychological, the scientific – but always it gets burnt off like summer mist … [T]he one valid reality or principle for us lies in eleutheria – freedom … To be free (which means rejecting all the gods and political creeds and the rest) leaves one no choice but to act according to reason: that is, humanely to all humans.[31]

The initiatic structure of *The Magus* is far removed from contemporary humanism.[32] Yet the original version, the film, and their reception show Fowles unwilling to disavow mystery.

As if he could not leave the bone alone, Fowles took up the trope anew in *The Enigma of Stonehenge* which appeared soon after the 'secularised' version of *The Magus*.[33] The archaic beauty of the Greek islands, so important to the atmosphere of the latter, is transplanted to "ancient Albion."[34] Fowles sets the tone of *Enigma* by describing an exchange he overheard at a lecture on the archaeology of Stonehenge. When asked to comment on the 'culture and religion' of those who built the monument, the speaker replies that "to speculate on such matters was not only totally unscientific, but far worse, it encouraged the lunatic fringe."[35] Fowles puts clear water between himself and "those who feel chthonic spirits and magnetic force fields … in every ancient landscape."[36] But he discerns a fear in the archaeologist's response "of giving an inch to non-science, as if it must be synonymous with nonsense."[37] Fowles asserts that it is "a potentially far more dangerous lunacy … to deny value to any other system or knowledge outside science."[38] He concludes that "choosing not to know, in an increasingly "known", structured, ordained, predictable world, becomes almost a freedom."[39] *Eleutheria*, the partisan's cry on Phraxos, seems to mean the freedom to reject some 'supernatural' explanations, as in the revised *Magus*, but to assert others, as in 'ancient Albion'. One might conclude that this is the freedom to have one's cake and eat it.

I use the original version of *The Magus* because it reveals Fowles's fascination with the esoteric dialectic of freedom: now natural, now supernatural; now you see it, now you don't.

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[30] The original is in the Harry Ransome Center but reproduced here: '1966 Fowles Letter to High School Student Sheds Light on The Magus', *Fowles Books*. At: https://www.fowlesbooks.com/1966-fowles-letter-to-high-school-student-sheds-light-on-the-magus/.
[31] In a later reflection posted on the same webpage, Preiss appreciates that Fowles typed his reply on her original letter, then returned it; this created a connection 'between young seeker and mage'.
[32] For example, Callum G. Brown, '"The Unholy Mrs Knight" and the BBC: Secular Humanism and the Threat to the "Christian Nation",' *The English Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 525 (2012).
[33] John Fowles and Barry Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).
[34] Kirke Kefalea, 'Greek Myths and Greek Landscapes in John Fowles's *The Magus*'. In *John Fowles and Nature: Fourteen Perspectives on Landscape*, ed. James R. Aubrey (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999).
[35] Fowles and Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, p. 10.
[36] Fowles and Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, p. 10.
[37] Fowles and Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, pp. 10-11.
[38] Fowles and Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, p. 11.
[39] Fowles and Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, p. 125.

Drafting *The Magus*: Process and Context

By all accounts Fowles was an eclectic reader, a Grecophile and Francophile with an interest in Carl Jung and a complex relationship to England.[40] Interests adjacent to Jung include 'fortune-telling by cards' and experimentation with 'telepathic power' of which, in December 1956, he received "several quite remarkable proofs."[41] Fowles tends towards a scientific explanation of phenomena but with qualification: "one can believe in the cards to a certain point, assign them fixed values' but 'the major part is psychoanalysis."[42] On the power of telepathy, Fowles concludes that "one has to be very passive … till a certain characteristic … surges up out of the unconscious." He adds: "I should like to do a lot more experiments."[43] A related practice is hypnotism which Fowles does not mention trying. Yet in an early passage in *The Magus*, Conchis hypnotises Nicholas with the help of a hallucinatory drug, to induce a 'mystical experience.'[44]

Fowles began drafting the manuscript of what was variously called 'The Godgame', 'The Joker' and finally 'The Magus' as early as 1952. (Note the variations on a theme in these titles). I place this writing period in post-war cultural context.[45] Gurdjieff died only three years before Fowles began work and two seminal books by or about Gurdjieff were already available from the prestigious publisher, Routledge and Kegan Paul: *In Search of the Miraculous*, a detailed account of Gurdjieff's 'system' by his one-time pupil P. D. Ouspensky, and Gurdjieff's epic fable, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*.[46] Accounts of Gurdjieff's teaching by Kenneth Walker (1882-1966), an early English proselytiser, became available shortly after: *Venture with Ideas* and *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching*, both issued by Fowles's future publisher, Jonathan Cape.[47] In a 1957 review article 'Teaching Mysticism to Intellectuals', the literary editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, H. D. Ziman (1902-1983), included Walker's *A Study* alongside a second

[40] Charles Drazin emphasises the breadth of Fowles's reading: "[E]ven though he writes … of having to cut down the philosophy in *The Magus*, he would certainly have read a lot of it in the course of his research for the book", Drazin, pers. comm., 4 November 2025. In his journal entry for 26 February 1954, Fowles writes: "I am reading a lot of psychology at the moment: Jung mainly. Vitally important knowledge," Charles Drazin (ed.), *John Fowles: The Journals, Volume 1* (London: Jonathan Cape 2003), p. 313. In his foreword to the revised *The Magus* he admits "the obvious influence of Jung," John Fowles, 'Foreword', *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Triad/Panther 1977), p. 6. In a later interview he also acknowledges the influence of "one of the Eranos yearbooks." See Dianne Vipond, 'An Unholy Inquisition (interview with John Fowles)', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1996), n.p. The reference is probably to the 1954 Eranos volume edited by Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) including papers by Jung and his follower Karl Kerényi; Campbell himself had recently set out his influential 'monomyth' theory in *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (USA: Pantheon Books, 1949). In 1977 Fowles said: "For many years I have felt in exile from English society, perhaps particularly English middle class society," Bragg, 'BBC Interview with John Fowles's.

[41] Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 385.

[42] Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 69.

[43] Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 386.

[44] Fowles, *The Magus*, pp. 209-213.

[45] The first reference to composition of *The Magus* is 8 January 1952. See Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 149. Fowles recalls that its "narrative and mood went through countless transformations," Fowles, 'Foreword', p. 5.

[46] Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1950; G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1999 [1950]).

[47] Kenneth Walker, *Venture with Ideas* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951); Kenneth Walker *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957).

volume by Ouspensky, and one by John G. Bennett (1897-1974), to illustrate a collective teaching that "will profoundly influence future thought about human nature."[48]

That books by or about Gurdjieff were available and could be impactful on readers is shown by the testimony of two contemporary writers. Whilst searching for "the wisdom of the Orient," as he put it, James Moore (1929-2017) "providentially encountered" *In Search of the Miraculous* and *Venture with Ideas* in a public library in Portsmouth in the south of England. Thereafter he joined a Gurdjieff group by contacting the author.[49] Around the same time, Colin Wilson (1931-2013) borrowed *In Search of the Miraculous* from Wimbledon public library which he considered "one of the most important books I had ever read."[50] Moore and Wilson underscore the significance of the availability of books as material objects for transmitting esoteric knowledge in a pre-digital age.

In November 1954 we find Fowles reading a pioneering biography of the New Zealand literary modernist, Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), whom Fowles describes as one of his wife's 'idols' and "a little one of mine" (Drazin 2003: 342). Mansfield's death in 1923 at Gurdjieff's Institute at Fontainebleau-Avon had become the stuff of tabloid opprobrium although she was dying when she arrived. The biography by Anthony Alpers includes detailed references to the Institute based on his contact with living sources including Alice Marks, secretary of A. R. Orage (1873-1934) the former editor of *The New Age* who had lived at the Institute, Olga de Hartmann (1885-1979) a long-term follower of Gurdjieff, and Adèle Kafian who was Mansfield's attendant.[51] Alpers's description of Mansfield's final days includes her impressions of the daily routine in the Institute.[52] It is unlikely that a writer like Fowles, who understood himself within a tradition of literary modernism, and who was at the time 'reading a lot of psychology', could miss these references.

Fowles could hardly fail to register the publication of *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson in 1956. Lauded by critics, including Kenneth Walker, Wilson's survey of alienated (male) writers would soon be developed into a 'new existentialism'. *The Outsider* even included a brief discussion of Gurdjieff whom Wilson described as a "strange man of genius" who offered a "complete, ideal *existenzphilosophie*."[53] Gurdjieff challenged the "completely deluded state of man" and taught that "man must live more; he must be more."[54] Warburton's biography of Fowles does not mention contact with Wilson, but Wilson confirms their acquaintance.[55]

Colin Wilson's enthusiasm for Gurdjieff made James Moore wonder if he, Wilson, was "altogether the outsider he claimed to be. Did Wilson's intellectual interest in Gurdjieff

[48] Cited in James Moore, *Gurdjieffian Confessions: A Self Remembered* (Hove: Gurdjieff Studies Ltd., 2005), p. 28. The two other books in Ziman's review are P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) and J.G. Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe Volume 1* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956).
[49] Moore, *Gurdjieffian Confessions*, pp. 11: 13-14.
[50] Colin Wilson, *Dreaming to Some Purpose* (London: Century, 2004), p. 52.
[51] Antony Alpers, *Katherine Mansfield* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), pp. viii-ix.
[52] Alpers, *Katherine Mansfield*, pp. 343-360.
[53] Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (London: Gollancz, 1956), p. 264.
[54] Wilson, *The Outsider*, pp. 264; 270.
[55] "John Fowles had once told me that the film of *The Magus* was the worst movie ever made. After seeing *Lifeforce* [the 1985 film of Wilson's novel *The Space Vampires*] I sent him a postcard telling him that I had gone one better." Wilson, *Dreaming to Some Purpose*, 332.

predicate[d] some deeper engagement?"[56] Moore was sympathetic to Wilson yet sceptical of his commitment to practical work despite his enthusiasm for Gurdjieff's ideas. After Kerouac's *On the Road* appeared in 1957, Moore identified a mutual disenchantment in post-war English culture between Beats and Gurdjieffians:

> [I]ndividuation was our shared goal, liberation our common aspiration, and high disdain of politics and war a common sub-text; the profound question of energy fascinated us all, and the bond which decidedly dared not speak its name was spiritual elitism.[57]

Each of these interests rewards comparison of *The Magus* with the Work but for reasons of space I focus on the first, individuation, because it carries Jungian overtones which we know are of interest to Fowles. In his discussion of the psychological background to Gurdjieff's *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am*,'[58] Vrasidas Karalis uses the concept of individuation as a heuristic to tease out the contrast between Jung's mythopoeic archetypes and Gurdjieff's practice-based method.[59] Noting a common concern with realising a real self behind the persona, Karalis argues that 'individuation for Jung is icon-making, but for Gurdjieff is icon-breaking' in that Jung aims for an apotheosis of 'Self' but Gurdjieff seeks to deconstruct the (false) Self to reach a 'real I'. It follows that Jung is an 'iconophile' while Gurdjieff is an 'iconoclast.'[60] However Conchis in *The Magus* is no iconophile, as we might expect from a Jungian enthusiast like Fowles, but a serial iconoclast for whom each tableau presented to Nicholas is a fabrication that is 'mercilessly destroyed'.[61]

Throughout the long 1950s Fowles oscillated between different 'atmospheres' by means of which to depict his *bildungsroman*. In a September 1964 journal entry, months before publication, he writes:

> The thing I have changed is the relation between Nicholas and the 'magic'; in the original mid-1950s draft I tried to carry on the 'psychic pretense' for too long. Now I am abandoning it very early on. The audience knows the magician is tricking them; but they still watch.[62]

This rationalisation is interesting and anticipates the mood of the 1977 revised version. But it goes against the grain even of the original version in which plenty of 'magic' is still at play: Tarot cards, near eastern deities, hypnotism, psychic powers, drug-induced mystical experience, esoteric ritual. One wonders what earlier 'magic' Fowles 'abandoned' for even in

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[56] Moore, *Gurdjieffian Confessions*, p. 26. Following Walker's positive review, he and Wilson developed a "warm friendship," see Wilson, *Dreaming to Some Purpose*, pp. 137-138.
[57] Moore, *Gurdjieffian Confessions*, p. 36.
[58] G. I. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'* (New York: E.P. Dutton 1981 [1975].
[59] Vrasidas Karalis, 'Gurdjieff and C. G. Jung: "*Life Is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'*" and the Question of Individuation', *Correspondences* vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), p. 275.
[60] Karalis, 'Gurdjieff and C. G. Jung', p. 275.
[61] I am paraphrasing the well-known 'iconoclastic' aim of *Beelzebub's Tales*: to "destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world," Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, n.p.
[62] Drazin, *John Fowles,* p. 612.

the final pages of the original it remains unclear whether the gods of the Regency façade of Cumberland Terrace, standing vigil over Nicholas and Alison's decisive meeting, are 'real' or not.[63] Nicholas decides "there are no watching eyes" and that "the theatre was empty." With relief he concludes "it was logical" and the 'perfect final touch to the godgame. They had absconded."[64] Yet immediately, as though unable to help himself (and Fowles), he adds: "I was so sure, and yet … after so much, how could I be perfectly sure?"[65]

Warburton tells us that Fowles had a very different ending in place until late on.[66] This was a final ordeal for Nicholas, set in Highgate Cemetery on 31 October (symbolically loaded as Christian All Hallows Eve/ Celtic Samhain New Year) after which Nicholas and Alison were reconciled. But Fowles's editor, Tom Maschler, urged him to rework this 'operatic' ending. As a result, Nicholas affirms his commitment to Alison but turns away, leaving her to respond.

We are not told what follows; the epilogue, in Latin, hints but is elusive. Readers are left uncertain as the letter from Tima Preiss suggests (and as the present writer remembers feeling on his first reading in the 1970s). In the 1977 revision Fowles writes "I accept I might have declared a preferred aftermath less ambiguously … and now have done so."[67] But Warburton notes that the revised version offers "a conclusion even more obscure" in that Nicholas offers only contingent commitment to Alison.[68] As a result three possible endings (pre-publication, original, revised) shift from resolution towards irresolution even as Fowles revises his text to expunge the 'magic.'

To help us understand why we need to consider the work Fowles was writing alongside *The Magus*. This is a set of philosophical aphorisms based on the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus. *The Aristos* (1964) was published the year before *The Magus* and expresses in gnomic form its key ideas. In the late 1950s Fowles was working on both texts simultaneously in an enterprise he nicknamed 'The Magaristos' and at one point even considered ascribing these aphorisms to Conchis to form an appendix to the novel.[69]

A lofty tone is established by the fourth aphorism in *The Aristos*: "This is not a dialogue, but only one side of a dialogue. I state; you, if you wish, refute."[70] Three ideas overlap with *The Magus* germane to the comparison of Conchis with Gurdjieff and therefore to the possibility that Fowles at least knew 'of' the Work. These terms are hazard, mystery, and 'aristos'. Fowles begins by describing the dialectic between "Law and Chaos, the two processes that dominate existence' which 'equally create, dictate to and destroy the individual."[71] Their dialectic knows 'no favourites' yet gives rise to a 'whole' in which "nothing is unjust."[72] Into this stark environment Fowles pitches "humanity on its raft … on the endless ocean" drifting

[63] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 567.
[64] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 570.
[65] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 570.
[66] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 272.
[67] Fowles, 'Afterword', p. 7.
[68] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 369.
[69] Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 401.
[70] John Fowles, *The Aristos* (London: Triad Grafton Books, 1980), p. 13. First published as *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (London: Jonathan Cape 1964). Conradi unkindly calls *The Aristos* a "sub-Nietzschean 'Thus Spake John Fowles's," Conradi, *John Fowles*, p. 25.
[71] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 14.
[72] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 15.

from "some catastrophic wreck in the past" towards "a promised land."[73] He sketches a typology of passengers on this raft: pessimist, egocentric, optimist, observer, altruist, stoic and child, before delivering the *coup de grace*: "there will be no promised land."[74]

Despite this grim outlook, "man" in his ordained role as "seeker of the agent", is compelled to look for "the causator, the god, the face behind the mysterious mask."[75] Numerous agents are postulated but each is exposed: "as man sees through one reason for living, another wells from the mysterious spring."[76] The condition which results is "an infinite situation of finite hazard" in which the "fundamental principle will always be hazard, but a hazard within bounds."[77] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hazard as a 'chance happening' with an 'unpredictable outcome' that could be an 'opportunity' but equally 'loss and harm'. Hazard offers its recipient limited agency with unpredictable outcome in a universe oscillating between law and chaos. This sober outlook maps onto *The Magus*: Nicholas, stuck between 'the wreck' (cynical self) and the 'promised land' (Self or real I) must 'seek the agent'. As each 'mask' is exposed another 'wells from the mysterious spring'.

This takes us to a further idea. Mystery is central to the human condition. What is 'the face behind the mask of being and not being'?[78] Yet mystery, also called 'unknowing', is an 'energy' for existence: "if we question deep enough there comes a point where answers, if answers could be given, would kill."[79] Fowles as aristos concludes: "I must exist in hazard but that the whole is not in hazard"; this yields 'a hazard within bounds' yet those bounds must remain mysterious and in some sense unknowable.[80]

The third idea is that mastery of life through engagement with the mystery of hazard is the aim of the 'aristos' defined as the 'ideal man' for "our situation at this time" (Fowles 1980: 201).[81] The term comes from the Greek ἄριστος meaning 'the best' or 'most excellent'. This quality crosses citizenship, class, religion, social group and political party. Fowles argues that the distinction between "the most excellent" (*aristos*) and "the Many" (*hoi polloi*) does not lie in "birth or wealth or power or cleverness" but on what he calls "intelligent and enacted goodness."[82]Against the response by some readers that its author was 'a crypto-fascist', Fowles

[73] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 15.
[74] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 16.
[75] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 16.
[76] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 16.
[77] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 17.
[78] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 26.
[79] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 27.
[80] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 28. Hazard is also a significant concept in J. G. Bennett's four volume *The Dramatic Universe*, the first volume of which was published in 1956 (and reviewed by Ziman, above). Bennett emphasises the role of 'uncertainty and hazard in the working of universal laws'.. As he puts it: 'conscious experience faced with hazard is a state of need, and need confronted with uncertainty as to its fulfilment is dramatic. Therefore we may speak of a **dramatic universe**, thereby drawing attention to the character which all existence acquires through the presence everywhere of relativity and uncertainty, combined with consciousness and with the possibility of freedom', Bennett, *Dramatic Universe Volume 1: Foundations of Natural Philosophy* (UK: Coombe Springs Press 1976), p. 20 (new edition, emphasis in text). In the second volume, published in 1961, Bennett formally defines hazard as 'uncertainty invested with dramatic quality, inasmuch as what ought to be may fail to be', Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe Volume Two: The Foundations of Moral Philosophy* (Coombe Springs Press 1976 [1961]), p. 343. The dynamism of Bennett's formulation is close to Fowles but feels more optimistic. Volumes three and four of *The Dramatic Universe* appeared in 1966 and Bennett gave six further talks in London and New York in 1967, published as *Hazard* (Coombe Springs Press, 1976). But these lie outside the period of composition of *The Magus*.
[81] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 201.
[82] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 201.

stresses in his revised version that "*the dividing line between the Few and the Many must run through each individual, not between individuals*."[83] In this way the *aristos* sees through what Gurdjieff called 'the terror of the situation':

> [The *aristos*] knows the Many are like an audience under the spell of a conjuror, seemingly unable to do anything but serve as material for the conjuror's tricks; and he knows the true destiny of man is to become a magician himself.[84]

'Aristoi' is the prefix of 'aristocrat': 'one of a ruling oligarchy' and 'a patrician order, a noble' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. There is a tension between Fowles's 'left-leaning and vehemently anti-Tory' position on the one hand, and the 'patrician' implications of becoming 'elect', even if Fowles democratises this position by claiming the line runs through each person. Yet during composition of *The Aristos* Fowles "toyed with suggesting that the voting age be raised to thirty and enfranchisement tests be imposed."[85] These are hardly 'left-leaning' values. But neither are Conchis's; he lives as a millionaire on Phraxos and may or may not be a German collaborator.

Conchis and Gurdjieff Compared

Thus far I have discussed the content of *The Magus* and its literary and cultural production in the 1950s in light of publications by or about Gurdjieff. I have suggested that Fowles at minimum knew 'of' Gurdjieff and at most may have known 'about' him. In this section I tease this out through a comparison of the 'larger than life' figures of Conchis and Gurdjieff.[86]

The first feature to note is their biographical and physical affinity. Both are male, short in stature and with a near-bald (Conchis) or shaved (Gurdjieff) head. Both are represented as of indeterminate age and described through 'Orientalist' tropes. Here is Nicholas's impression of Conchis:

> He was nearly completely bald, brown as old leather, short and spare, a man whose age was impossible to tell … The most striking thing about him was the intensity of the eyes: very dark brown, staring, with a simian intensity emphasised by the remarkably clear whites; eyes that seemed not quite human.[87]

And here is Ouspensky's impression of Gurdjieff:

> I saw a man of an oriental type, no longer young, with a black mustache and piercing eyes, who astonished me first of all because he seemed to be disguised and completely out of keeping with the place and its atmosphere … [T]his man with the face of an

[83] Fowles, *The Aristos*, pp. 8-9 (emphasis in original).
[84] Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 202.
[85] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 208.
[86] In terms of the influence of 'larger than life' tutelary Greek males, Fowles's published journal records his reading of Henry Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941) on the Greek writer, George Katsimbalis (1899-1978). Nikos Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* (1946) may also have played a role in Fowles's imaginary; it was filmed in 1964 with Anthony Quinn as Zorba in a role that translates to Conchis in the 1968 film of *The Magus*.
[87] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 69.

> Indian raja or an Arab sheik … seated here in this little café … produced the strange, unexpected, and almost alarming impression of a man poorly disguised … [Y]ou see he is not what he pretends to be and yet you have to speak and behave as though you did not see it.[88]

Both magi are of Greek heritage: Conchis, born in England to an English father and Greek mother,[89] Gurdjieff born in Alexandropol, Russia, now Gyumri, Armenia, to a Greek father and an Armenian (possibly Greek) mother. Conchis would be pronounced in Greek with hard 'ch' but he instructs Nicholas "to anglicise my name. I prefer the "ch" soft."[90] 'Conchis' thus becoming a homophone for 'conscious'. Gurdjieff is the Russian form of the Greek Georgiades and the Armenian Gourdjian; the result, as Moore puts it, is that Gurdjieff was "born in four different countries on three different dates and his name wasn't Gurdjieff."[91] In the aftermath of his ordeal at Bourani, Nicholas discovers a gravestone near Athens for a 'Maurice Conchis'. Who then was the man at Bourani? Likewise, who was Gurdjieff as numerous memoirs ask?[92]

Both are represented as exemplary charismatic sources. Conchis is the titular 'magus' and master of his domain: at the end of their first meeting he bids farewell to Nicholas with both arms raised "in an outlandish hieratic gesture … as if in some kind of primitive blessing."[93] Gurdjieff used the term 'mag' although this was not publicly available until recently.[94] Magicians by definition trade in spectacle and illusion. At Bourani, Conchis shows Nicholas 'real' artworks by Amedeo Modigliani and Pierre Bonnard that are later revealed to be fakes.[95] In *Meetings with Remarkable Men,* Gurdjieff paints sparrows and sells them as canaries to tourists.[96]

The core of *The Magus* lies in the dramatic tableaux orchestrated by Conchis for Nicholas as a living theatre. Silvio Gaggi describes the novel as "a virtuoso performance in narrative Pirandellianism."[97] Conchis tells Nicholas that, before the war, he conceived 'a new kind of drama' in which 'conventional relations between audience and actors were forgotten':

> He spread his arms. 'Here we are all actors. None of us are as we really are'. He raised his hand quickly. 'Yes, I know. You think you are not acting. Just pretending a little. But you … are as far from your true self as that Egyptian mask [Anubis] our American friend [Joe] wears is from his true face.[98]

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[88] Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 7.
[89] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 72.
[90] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 70.
[91] James Moore, *Gurdjieff and Mansfield* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 19.
[92] René Zuber, *Who are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?* (London: Arkana, 1990 [1977]).
[93] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 78.
[94] 'The mag (magus, adept, master) is cunning. The mag is the highest that man can approach to God, because only he can be impartial and fulfil obligation to God … Man with real cunning is man without quotation marks'. Gurdjieff, cited in Solita Solano and Kathryn Hulme, *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope: Notes of Meetings in Paris and New York 1935–1939 and 1948–1949* (London: Book Studio 2012), p. 59. For an interesting genealogy of the magus figure in Romantic literature, including H. P. Blavatsky and Rasputin as contemporary Russian examples, see E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).
[95] Fowles, *The Magus*, pp. 82-86.
[96] G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1985 [1963]), p. 137.
[97] Silvio Gaggi, 'Pirandellian and Brechtian Aspects of the Fiction of John Fowles's, *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1986), p. 324.
[98] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 345.

Compare Gurdjieff's views on theatre in which he asserts that "if I am acting, I have to direct at every moment … And I can direct only if there is someone present who is able to direct."[99] This 'someone present' is Gurdjieff's 'real I'. As Gurdjieff puts it: "in order to be a real actor, one must be a real man."[100]

Music plays a part in creating a ritual setting. Both Conchis and Gurdjieff play musical instruments which are used to enhance mood or to introduce a new scenario. On his first visit to Yiasemí on Spetsai ('Jasmine' on 'Phraxos'), Fowles heard "a harmonium being played" which he thought "quite the most incongruous sound imaginable in such a divine landscape."[101] Conchis plays harpsichord in the entr'actes of the masque and Gurdjieff co-composed music for movements in the Institute and later played folk melodies on harmonium.[102]

Befitting their status as magi, Conchis and Gurdjieff are attributed with extraordinary skills including astral travel and various forms of psychological and physical healing. Conchis tells Nicholas he has "lived a great deal in other centuries" not in imagination but "in reality"; he also claims to "travel to other worlds."[103] He may also be a psychiatrist treating Julie/Lily as a schizophrenic. He knows how to administer injections and practises hypnotism. In comparison Fritz Peters recalls that Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau was known as a "sort of 'faith-healer' … or 'miracle-worker'," and was "frequently consulted about day-today 'life' or 'mundane' problems."[104] Gurdjieff practised hypnotism and later, between 1936-1937, gave a course of injections or *piqûres* to the group known informally as the 'women of the rope.'[105]

In 1945, after the war, Peters visited Gurdjieff in Paris while facing a 'nervous collapse'. Gurdjieff refused Peters' request for medicine but gave him hot coffee - and 'watch[ed] me':

> I remembered being slumped over the table … when I began to feel a strange uprising of energy within myself – I stared at him [Gurdjieff], automatically straightened up, and it was as if a violent, electric blue light emanated from him and entered into me. As this happened, I could feel the tiredness drain out of me.[106]

When Nicholas first meets Conchis at Bourani there is reference to something similar: "[Conchis] sat in silence with his hands on his knees, apparently engaged in deep-breathing exercises."[107] Gurdjieff developed an arsenal of breathing and visualisation exercises in his later teaching although these were not public knowledge in the 1950s.[108] But given Fowles's

[99] Catharine Christof, 'Gurdjieff in the Theater: The Fourth Way of Jerzy Grotowski', *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 21 (2017), pp. 211-214.
[100] Christof, 'Gurdjieff in the Theater', p. 213.
[101] John Fowles, 'Behind the Magus', in *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape 1998[1994]), p. 64-65.
[102] See the description, with photograph of Gurdjieff's harmonium and fez, in Rina Hands, *The Diary of Madame Egout Pour Sweet: With Mr. Gurdjieff in Paris 1948-1949* (Oregon: Two Rivers Press 1991), pp. 22-24.
[103] Fowles, *The Magus*, pp. 94-95.
[104] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, p. 83.
[105] Carole M. Cusack, 'G. I. Gurdjieff on Health and Healing: Hypnotism, Sacred Dances, Diet, Physical Labour, and Drugs', in *Health Healing and Minority Religions*, eds. Sarah Harvey and Eileen Barker (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 176-179.
[106] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, p. 232.
[107] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 75.
[108] Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

knowledge of Jung and the Tarot he may have been aware at least of the role of breathing in practising 'harmonial' yoga.[109]

Physical settings are crucial. Bourani and the Institute are geographically and metaphorically liminal spaces. Set apart from everyday 'western' life, each provides an environment conducive to the ritual practice of self-examination. Both offer 'intentional community' in which participants must be deemed 'elect' to be granted admission. The community in question – Bourani, the Institute - provides a controlled environment in which instruction and practice take place with minimal distraction. Both environments are physically contained and recall Prospero's island in *The Tempest* or the château Les Sablonnières in Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Mealnes*.

Participation is ritually structured as an ordeal. Nicholas's builds over several visits through engagement with Conchis's narratives which become increasingly sensory and participative. As a boy at Gurdjieff's Institute, Peters recalls how he and his fellow children tormented Gurdjieff's loyal follower, Rachmilevitch: "a mournful, dour type, full of prophecies of disaster" who "complained, continually." Mimicry and practical jokes culminated in hiding Rachmilevitch's false teeth.[110] Peters later discovered that although Rachmilevitch was wealthy, Gurdjieff pays him to stay at the Institute to provide friction. As Gurdjieff explains "without trouble, conflict, life become dead. People live in status-quo, live only by habit, automatically, and without conscience."[111] Hence Rachmilevitch's ritual importance: "without [him], Prieuré is not the same; I know no person … who just by existence … produce friction in all people around him."[112] The value of controlled friction is to disturb mechanical reactions, to encourage disidentification with objects of awareness, and to facilitate self-remembering. Nicholas goes through a similar ordeal and achieves a taste of Gurdjieffian self-remembering when, despite his anger and self-pity, he refuses to punish Julie/Lily in the trial.[113]

This leads to my final comparison. At their first meeting Conchis asks Nicholas: "Are you elect? … Do you feel chosen by anything?" Nicholas demurs but Conchis insists "I think you might be."[114] Four hundred pages later, at the end of the trial, Conchis tells Nicholas: "you are now elect. You have no choice."[115] Nicholas's predecessors did not fare so well. Understanding the burden of election is a theme of *The Aristos*. Yet although Fowles insists that election runs through each person, in *The Magus* it seems to divide the sheep from the goats. Similarly at the Institute, Gurdjieff tells the young Peters:

> Nature make many acorns, but possibility to become tree exist for only few acorns. Same with man – many men born, but only few grow ... Rest become fertilizer, go back into earth and create possibility for more acorns … [M]y work, this Institute, not for fertilizer. For real man, only. But must also understand fertilizer necessary to Nature.[116]

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[109] Anya P. Foxen, *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[110] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, pp. 54-56.
[111] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, p. 60.
[112] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, p. 70.
[113] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 440.
[114] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 77.
[115] Fowles, *The Magus*, p. 452.
[116] Peters, *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, p. 40.

Conclusion: 'I make a new God'

In this article I have speculated on traces of the historical figure of Georgii Gurdjieff on the fictional figure of Maurice Conchis in John Fowles's 1965 novel *The Magus* through a combination of literary source analysis and cultural contextualistion. After explaining my rationale for using the original rather than the revised version as primary source, I explored the resonances in the teaching practised in the two 'domains' of (fictional) Bourani on Phraxos and the (historical) Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man near Paris. By unpacking the lengthy process of drafting the novel between 1952 and publication in 1965, I suggested that Fowles almost certainly knew 'of' Gurdjieff, given evidence of his interests in topics such as cartomancy, Tarot, telepathy and Jung. These rubbed shoulders with a variety of 'occult' or 'esoteric' concepts and practices broadly adjacent to the methods of the Gurdjieff work (and to other post-war 'gurus') as this was emerging in the public sphere in the long 1950s which anticipated the 'cultic milieu' of the late 1960s.[117] I showed how fellow male writers with similar interests in existentialism and psychology, such as the Gurdjieffian James Moore and the 'outsider' Colin Wilson, had 'come across' Gurdjieffian literature in public libraries, and that reviews of key publications about Gurdjieff were appearing in broadsheet newspapers. In sum there can be little doubt that Fowles was at minimum 'aware' of Gurdjieff. Whether he had read available sources, however, remains uncertain pending further archival research. Thus, my final section on 'elective affinities' between the fictional Conchis and the historical Gurdjieff remains speculative. However, even if no smoking gun can be found, the comparison tells us something interesting about the contemporary appetite for hidden knowledge and superior wisdom amongst certain audiences: in short, the desire for a magus.

In December 1956, Fowles wrote in his journal: "A good human being must fox the anthropologist."[118] This indicates a desire to outwit his readers. It applies equally to his creature Conchis, who makes theatrical scenario after scenario on Bourani as fast as Nicholas can decode them, before vanishing "into thin air."[119] The mythography of Gurdjieff is replete with similar testimonies: "he seemed to be disguised", wrote Ouspensky on their first meeting, "and completely out of keeping". The memoir by Margaret Anderson, founder in 1914 of the Modernist journal *The Little Review* and part of the 'rope' group in Paris in the late 1930s, is called *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*.[120] According to the Movements teacher, Wim van Dullemen: "When once asked 'who are you?' he [Gurdjieff] answered 'Who are you?'"[121]

Conchis and Gurdjieff sought to 'outfox' enquiries in that their respective scenarios raised questions but deferred answers. Similarly, despite his avowed rationalism and humanism, Fowles remained attached to mystery throughout his career. This includes late works like *The Enigma of Stonehenge*, discussed above, and his final novel, *A Maggot*

[117] Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization', in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vol. 5, pp. 119-136.
[118] Drazin, *John Fowles*, p. 385.
[119] "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air," Prospero in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, Scene 1.
[120] Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962)
[121] Wim van Dullemen, *Gurdjieff's Movements: The Pattern of All and Everything* (Germany: Private Publication, 2014).

(1985).[122] Rational enquiry remains an important component of *The Magus* but, as Warburton observes for Fowles's oeuvre: "the conversion to new knowledge was always accomplished through emotional, intuitive encounter, through *feu*."[123] Real knowledge can only be acquired 'existentially'. The reader is invited to grasp this through identifying with Nicholas's serial disillusionment following each scenario in his ordeal. *Feu* is also key to Gurdjieff's system through his emphasis on the quality of 'Being' over 'Knowledge.'[124] As Gurdjieff tells Ouspensky: "if you *understood* everything you have read in your life, you would already know what you are looking for … But *you do not understand* either what you read or what you write. You do not even understand what the word 'understand' means."[125]

Finally, there is the question of the source of the authority vested in the magus. In a 1976 interview Fowles said that "the original title was *The Godgame*, and, of course, it is about a man's stages of conception of what God is - you know, 'God' in quotes."[126] This contrasts with Gurdjieff's position in which the quotation marks belong to 'man.' As Kathryn Hulme (1900-1981) recalls:

> 'When you do a thing', he said once, 'do it with the whole self …To be able to do *one* thing at a time … is the property of man, not man in quotation marks'. In his objective eyes we were all 'man in quotation marks' with only a possibility of becoming otherwise (becoming 'part of God') *if* we would work unrelentingly on ourselves and open our eyes to our essential nothingness.[127]

For Conchis (and for Fowles) it is 'god' who is in quotation marks; for Gurdjieff, it is 'man'. Conchis's aim is to realise the 'triumphant smile' of the ancient stone head from Didyma. Gurdjieff's aim is to achieve theosis or divinization, not in a monastic order, but in secular life. As his pupil in Fontainebleau-Avon, the psychiatrist Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953), put it: "Behind 'real I' lies God."[128]

This emerging theological tension indicates how it can be "good to think" Conchis and Gurdjieff for a fuller understanding of the sources of literary modernism and the cultural production of new religiosity. Notwithstanding their theological differences, Conchis, Gurdjieff and indeed Fowles are in Karalis's terms less Jungian "iconophiles" than modern 'iconoclasts'.[129] Each ironises received opinion, worries at the mask of personality, and chafes at science. Each seeks 'Being' over 'Knowledge' in Gurdjieff's terms even as their epistemologies differ. They share a common function forcefully summarised by Gurdjieff shortly before his death in 1949:

> 'My aim to make a new world'. He spoke with passion such as I have never before heard him express – and then made a gesture of breaking something over his knee. 'I

[122] John Fowles, *A Maggot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).
[123] Warburton, *John Fowles*, p. 63
[124] Capital 'B' and 'K' as used in primary sources.
[125] Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 20; italics in original.
[126] Campbell, 'An Interview with John Fowles's, p. 458.
[127] Kathryn Hulme, *Undiscovered Country: A Spiritual Adventure* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1966). In 1915 Gurdjieff says "'Our starting point is that man does not know himself, that he *is not*' (he emphasised these words)", Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 14.
[128] Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, p. 74.
[129] Karalis, 'Gurdjieff and C. G. Jung'.

> break your Christ – I shit on your dirty world. I make a new world – I make a new God.'[130]

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[130] Hands, *The Diary of Madame Egout Pour Sweet*, p. 55.