

In which ways do narrative elements in John Fowles's *The Magus* communicate postmodern ideas?

Nicholas's narration

- Nicholas reconstitutes his life, rearranges his lived experiences to the reader
 - first chapter
 - Brooks's theories
 - he presents his own life, manipulated and recounted through *discourse*
 - attempt to take control of his past through a narrative structuration Brooks aligns with Freud's repetition compulsion
 - a reader would similarly search for totalising meaning through a text
 - partially establishes Nicholas as a biased narrative voice, but also demonstrates the ways in which his identity is constructed by interactions of discourses of power (Chapter 3, Butler)
 - he situates himself as the product of certain social institutions all the while rejecting them
 - "I was sent to a public school, I wasted two years doing my national service, I went to Oxford; and there I began to discover I was not the person I wanted to be." (p.15)
 - The idea is re-introduced during the trial scene in chapter 61) through the pseudo-psychological analysis of Nicholas as a by-product of these institutions and of the lived experiences he uses as self-justification for his identity / repeatedly seeks
 - ~~"he is behaviourally the victim of a repetition compulsion that he has failed to understand."~~ (p.510)
- Nicholas's control over the presentation of other characters in the novel, analogous to use of discourse to define and retain power over
 - Nicholas is the point through which the reader has 'access' to any of the novel's events or characters.
 - Postmodernism argues that any systematic use of language can have a power-enforcing function, and is critical of any entities control of presentation and reception [ex: curator-art complex] (Butler)
 - Particularly evident in the novel through Nicholas's narration of women
 - presented mostly through their relations and importances to him, much of which is dependant on sexuality
 - He defines women through comparisons to each other
 - tries to constantly oppose Lily-Julie and Alison : "madonna/whore complex" (Pollheide)
 - Ex : p. 601 : about Lily "It was a girl with as much morality as a worn-out whore from the Place Pigalle."
 - (also, less prominent, but defines the twins through their comparison/opposition)

- Symptom of a larger situation : who has control over the representation of different social groups, and, in a much larger frame, can language be trusted to represent reality (not tinted and filtered through power structures) [crisis of representation]
- Critique of rationalism
 - defining conditions under which something can be true
 - from the very first 'illusion' in chapter 21, Nicholas attempts to rationally deduce the circumstances of his experience, the underlying mechanisms, an objective truth
 - Does the same all through the other 'illusions', the whole duration of his time in Bourani and even afterwards
 - "I flexed muscles, rubbed my legs together, forced myself to stay sane, to deduce what reason I could get out of all this unreason." (trial scene, p. 507, chapter 61)
 - reader is privy to this because he is the narrator, 'inside his head'
 - His conclusions are always either elusive or proven wrong
 - Nicholas enacts an impossibility of interpretation outside of rationality, the latter of which is heavily critiqued in postmodernism, particularly in its imposition of conditions under which something can be true
 - Rationality = a metanarrative
 - Nicholas embodies so novel as a whole can critically position
- Cont. : Collector Mentality (Pollheide)
 - constantly trying to categorise into real/not-real
 - Nicholas searches for knowledge constantly (^ through rationalism), "collects" it
 - There is a created impression from his perspective of, without possessing the knowledge of the 'true' working of the situation, being powerless
 - "I wanted to know what [Lily] was doing on Phraxos, where she came from, the reality behind all the mystery." (p. 157)
 - Also a tool he uses to maintain power over women : as soon as he becomes aware that Lily/Rose/Alison know more than him of the situation, he begins to perceive them much more negatively
 - Trying to figure out who Lily (and Rose) 'are'
 - Trying to ascertain Alison's involvement
 - postmodernist critique of conceptions of knowledge, its equation with power
- Interpretations constantly proven wrong, proven to be constructs
 - No (universal) truth is accessible to or discovered by him through the course of the novel about the events of Bourani
 - Postmodernist idea that no universal meaning or truth can be known
 - bridging gap in concrete experience with presumptions : relativity : ground for understanding is established in lived experience
 - Above 2 points (no universal truth / relativity) correlate with postmodernist theories on literature, which would present a plurality of possible meanings

and would be partially 'written' by each reader into the 'text of their lives' (Barthes/Greene)

- ex: using 'intertexts' to his own benefit - parallels with *The Tempest* because the interpretation suits his own goals and conceptions (elaborated upon later)

Conchis's narration / fabricated events at Bourani - narrative cannot be directly accessed, is experienced by Nicholas

- "Novel" within a novel
 - although perhaps not explicitly a novel, the events strung together form a narrative presented to Nicholas and accessed by the reader through him
 - can easily serve as / mirror a novel
 - deliberate 'making' of a narratives - the Godgame
 - allows us to see narratives as not a representation of the existing world (that Nicholas so desperately seeks), but as replications and constructs of the reader (Greene) - crisis of representation
 - (...) in these postmodern times, neither artist nor philosopher is capable of representing what is objectively "out there" [Greene]
- *historiographic metafiction*
 - Conchis's 3 tales (de Deukans, Nygaard brothers, Wimmel)
 - Brooks : (again) reconstitution of the self/experience through narration
 - Demonstrated to be fabricated : Conchis reports his own history
 - Typically postmodernist genre
 - Mix / blur of history and fiction to question the principles of both
 - Highlights the motivations behind any form of representation
 - History, and its report (as accounts of it are the only point at which the former is accessible) are seen as unstable, contextual, and relational (Pollheide)
- Defamiliarization through the use of an unknown and separate location
 - In the novel : Conchis sets his 'narrative' on an isolated island, in country and landscape unfamiliar to Nicholas
 - "Yet in the end this unflawed natural world became intimidating. I seemed to have no place in it, I could not use it and I was not made for it. I was a townsman; and I was rootless." (p. 56)
 - strategy often used in postmodern literature
 - prevents a reader from feeling at home in a fictional world
 - creation of a world where one is unsure of the lifelikeness or 'reality' of anything, uncertainty is an intrinsic aspect of it
 - Annexed to the postmodernist notion of near constant critical questioning and deconstruction of any assumptions
 - (Butler, chapter 4) Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, on a 'text of bliss': *a text that imposes a state of loss; a text that discomforts (...); that unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological*

assumption, the consistency of his or her tastes, values, memories; and brings to a crisis his or her relation with language

- Redefining notions of empirical verifiability
 - Nicholas tries to use letters sent and received to verify information given to him through Conchis and his 'realm'
 - Ex : trying to use letters to "Lily"'s supposed bank and former employer (school) to check her existence/identity
 - however, it is later revealed that what Nicholas considered solid empirical proof was in fact constructed and manipulated by Conchis
 - another example : Conchis's psychological papers are used in order to lend, in Nicholas's eyes, a trustworthiness to his ideas and claims
 - those too are fabricated
 - Form over content
 - Why would an academic institution automatically make what Conchis says 'more true' (postmodern critiques use of *institutions* to validate)
 - What is by the main character considered to be true and external is found to be part of a (Conchis's) constructed narrative
 - truth itself is relative, cannot be represented by language
 - also : agendas behind methods of validation

Implicit and tertiary narration

- *(explain!)
 - not large / present enough to warrant its own section
 - Implied and not
- Case of intertextuality : *The Tempest*
 - Presence of this intertext depends on its presence/proposal through Conchis's narrative and through its reception by and 'relay' to the reader through Nicholas
 - comparison is first proposed by Conchis on page 83 ("Prospero will show you his domaine."), and throughout the book
 - Some comparisons are clear (control of Conchis over his domaine, role as a sort of 'magician'), others fabricated (↓)
 - But other intertexts are also repeated (*Three Hearts*), yet none quite as put into practice as *The Tempest* - why?
 - adopted and furthered by Nicholas because it suits his own image
 - p. 204: "I was rather hoping for Ferdinand.", Lily = Miranda
 - He accepts and pursues the comparison because he hopes to 'obtain' Lily as Miranda
 - motivations behind representation
 - (Pollheide) Bertens : *if they do not represent the world they must represent something else*
 - Nicholas does not relay to the reader an objective
 - He represents and influences (because the story of Bourani is a fluid one - see Mitford's account) the course of events in

- such a way that lends itself to his own goals (i.e. 'getting the girl')
 - Ex : describing Lily's attraction to him, interpreting the situation as one reflective of *The Tempest*
 - motivations behind interpretation
 - Postmodernist interactions between the reader and the text : reader plays a part its construction (Greene)
 - Nicholas interprets the 'intertexts' available to him within Conchis's narrative : no objective interpretation : his reception of the intertexts is greatly influenced by his motivations in 'reading'('experiencing') the 'text'
- Mitford's account (implies a fuller narrative of his own)
 - Pages 610-615
 - There is no universal truth, meaning, conclusion to events at Bourani, or even a concrete sequence
 - Conchis's narrative would well and truly embody the postmodern idea of interactions between reader (Mitford and Nicholas) and text (the characters and events of Bourani, organised by Conchis) - the 'text' is fluid and created by the reader, his desires, his expectation, his approaches, etc.
 - Jean-Paul Sartre: reading as a synthesis of perception and creation, requires both object and subject, the text imposes its structures and the reader who makes there be an object that is a literary text (Greene)
- Novel as a whole refuses to impose unity or closure
 - Circular textual and thematic structure (Salami)
 - Nicholas does not seem to have change in regards to his treatment of knowledge (above mentioned Collector Mentality becomes Detective Mentality)
 - Nicholas-Alison : in a sense back to where they started, i.e. meeting for the 'first' time
 - Mount Parnassus = structural centre of the novel
 - Circular location wise (London-Athens-Phraxos-Parnassus-Phraxos-Athens-London)
 - Ms. de Seitas' explanations, her own narrative : refuses to disclose any final, settled, definite 'meaning' or goal to the experience, at least not one that Nicholas is in a position to accept as true (and the reader is at the mercy of Nicholas's interpretation)
 - P. 631: "Nicholas, I never told you the other commandment my husband and I kept with each other."
 - The ending is indefinite: even an encounter that would, according to more traditional narrative formats, be the concluding 'tying of loose ends', leaves the outcome of Nicholas and Alison's reunion non-explicit and up to interpretation
 - There is no definite meaning, no universal truth, no totalising (metanarrative-like) narrative to encompass, explain, and associate all the separate events and stories told
 - In true postmodern fashion, dismisses much of what came before it:

blatant dismissal / deconstruction of Brooks's theories

- As Conchis might explain, there is only Hazard.