

**DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v4i2.456**

## **Decentred Centre in John Fowles's *The Magus*<sup>1</sup>**

**Aleks Matosoglu<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

John Fowles' *The Magus* (1966) has been the focus of criticism for many years. This study regards the character of Conchis as a decentred "centre" in the structure of the novel and as in the experience of the contemporary humanity. Conchis becomes in the eyes of Nicholas an all-knowing figure, an accumulation of Western thought since the Greek civilization. He produces signs to be read as he himself becomes a body of various signs that construct him as the metaphysical centre that Western thinkers have relied upon. His narration becomes superior to Nicholas' and he himself becomes only a narrative voice. The voice from the times of Plato has been considered as a direct expression of the thoughts in one's mind and thus superior to writing that is permeated with the undecidability of meaning in the absence of the speaker and the addressee. In the novel, words as an endless play of metaphors take the place of voice. There is no knowable reality outside the play words or metaphors which is an endless chain of signifiers that lead to other signifiers. Every time Nicholas turns to Conchis to find the centre outside the play of the language, he finds other signifiers. Thus, Conchis as a meaning-making centre is dethroned. He is not the sole operator of the masks that divert from their presumed original target when they are read. Nicholas is just another production of the literary tradition who reads the signs only to produce other signs. Conchis in the beginning of the novel renounces fiction for science but along the course of the novel, we see that words are never reliable whether in fiction or in science.

**Keywords:** Magus, John Fowles, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, phonocentrism, logocentrism, metaphysics of presence.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented in the 2nd English Studies Conference which was held between 8-10 May 2015 in Karabuk University.

<sup>2</sup> Istanbul University, [alexmateus123@hotmail.com](mailto:alexmateus123@hotmail.com)

## Introduction

*The Magus* (1966) began to receive serious critical attention in the 1970's, shortly after the first version was published. Many critics offer a structural reading of the novel. Roberta Rubenstein regards the mythological and mysterious as the basic motif as well as the underlying structure of the whole novel.(329) Fleishman regards *The Magus* as a modern version of the Orpheus myth, establishing a link between Nicholas's quest and the Odyssey (297). Ellen McDaniel explains the hero's quest for truth with the symbols of Tarot (242). Both the figure of the Magus and of the Foolare figures from the set of Tarot symbols. Huffaker sees Conchis's "godgame" as a conversion of Jung's analytic psychology (252). Finally, Susanna Onega reads the novels as a modern version of the hero's quest for self-individuation (109).

Thematically and structurally, *The Magus* complies with certain well-known genres. It is divided into three main sections in parallel with Joseph Campbell's threefold pattern of the mythological adventure. As he puts it, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men" (qtd. in Onega 70). The protagonist of the novel, Nicholas, is in the search of an authentic selfhood and a sense of direction in life, gets tangled up in a series of ordeals that challenges his basic assumption about himself and his life. The narrative mode is close to that of a *Bildungsroman* which traces the developmental phases of its hero. While we do not witness Nicholas as a child or youth but many critics still find a little change in his self for the better.

In the structural readings of the novel, this supposed metamorphosis in Nicholas is realized under the guidance of a 'Magus', who is a magician or a trickster. Nicholas's Magus is Maurice Conchis, who uses a combination of art and education to make Nicholas to face his own deficiencies. Conchis says to him: "Greece is like a mirror. It makes you suffer. Then you learn [...] To live with what you are" (Fowles 59). Conchis directs Nicholas to question his self-centredness through stories and masques that involve Nicholas, contradict one another, and resist definition. Conchis narrates stories supported and contrasted with theatrical performances along with mythical figures. Characters in his stories come alive and scene of Conchis's personal life are acted before Nicholas. This game even takes an extreme form as Nicholas at one instance is kidnapped, gagged and forced to watch the trial of his own self. Through these games, female figures that Nicholas preyed on in his early life now prey on

him. However, Conchis is not the sole authority over his performances. Nicholas is always alone to read the signs in the way that he likes.

### **The Mystery of Conchis**

Before entering the domain of Conchis, Nicholas from the very beginning reveals that his self is largely made out of fiction. In the first chapter, he defines himself as the orphan depicted as in Victorian *bildungsroman*'s. He says that he is "the only child of middle class parents [...] born in the grotesquely elongated shadow of that monstrous dwarf queen Victoria." (10) His father is authoritative and his mother is self-sacrificing for her family. He goes on to describe his early years in his life which he thinks that has wasted. With the tragic death of his parents, he feels that he has lost his ties with his background, finds himself out in the world. He thinks himself to be a high-class poet but soon he realizes that he is not the poet that he thinks to be. Writing down his early life like in a Victorian novel, he is turning his life into a fiction. Without a father figure, he is in need of creating a self on his own through writing. However, he sees that he has failed as a poet. He cannot create in the way that he desires.

When his application is accepted for a teaching post in Greece, he flies to Greece to start a new life of his own. At first, he seems to be impressed by the natural beauty of Greece and the island of Phraxos, where he is to teach, yet he quickly becomes bored of his post. He even thinks about resigning from his job, but considering it as "another failure", changes his mind; he escapes into his poetry, which is another exit door for Nicholas: "And there was my poetry, I had begun to write poems about the island, about Greece, that seemed to me philosophically profound and technically exciting. I dreamt more and more of literary success" (34). He is in need of creating a self through fiction. When he realizes that he is not a poet, his self crumbles:

The truth rushed down on me like a burying avalanche. *I was not a poet*. I felt no consolation in this knowledge, but only a red anger that evolution could allow such sensitivity and such inadequacy to coexist in the same mind. In one ego, my ego, screaming like a hare caught in a gin. Taking all poems I had ever written, page by slow page, I tore each into tiny fragments, till my fingers ached [...] Poetry had always seemed something I could turn to in need – an emergency exit, a lifebuoy, as well as a justification. Now I was in the sea, and the lifebuoy had sunk [...] (53).

This inability to create takes him to the brink of self-annihilation. He says: "I had created nothing. I belonged to nothingness, to the *néant* and it seemed to me that my own

death was the only thing left that I could create” (54). His attempt to suicide fails. At that very moment, he hears “the solitary voice of a girl” (59). The quality of the sound as it is “disembodied of place” and the mystery that it entails awakens something in Nicholas. Like Odysseus who hears the sirens and then lured to visit their island, the island of Phraxos promises a new beginning, a world of fiction in which he will be able to create himself.

Before being tangled up with the masques in the island, the identity and origin of Conchis entices Nicholas. Prompted by the open book left at the beach, he approaches to Conchis’s villa, crossing the barbed wire; he finds out that there must be someone living in it. At the school, he interrogates the teachers like a detective. Thus, Conchis becomes the central figure even before meeting him in person. The text of mystery is already woven out of the interrogations by Nicholas. Is Conchis a rich recluse, a German collaborationist, a great musician, an atheist, a queer or a just cynical man? It becomes quite difficult to get a certain truth. At this early stage, Nicholas himself waves a textual a mystery around Conchis. This points to the fact that Nicholas is not a simply a passive reader of signs but he is an active character in the meaning making process. This study regards the character of Conchis as an embodiment of a decentred “centre”. He produces signs to be read as he himself becomes a body of various signs that construct him as the metaphysical centre that Western thinkers have relied upon. The process of how the centre comes to be dethroned will be analyzed in this study. By reading various signs that contradict one another and defer meaning, Nicholas will be creating his self in fiction.

After he meets Conchis in person, the contrasting images of him still puzzle Nicholas. He describes Conchis as “his whole appearance was foreign. He had a bizarre family resemblance to Picasso: saurian as well as simian [...] the quintessential Mediterranean man” (71). In this description, Conchis embodies the evolution of living organisms and his being “the quintessential Mediterranean man” points to the Greek civilization gave birth to Europe. This gives a sense of Conchis’s being a metaphysical centre which is ever present and never changing. Moreover, Nicholas forces himself to believe that “there must be some mystery [...] second meanings hung in the air; ambiguities, unexpectednesses” (75). With a changing and inscrutable face, Conchis, in the eyes of Nicholas, easily becomes a magus, a wise man or a trickster who promises mysteries to be solved by Nicholas.

Nicholas’ entry into the domain of Conchis is marked by his being lured by the anthology of English verse with certain stanzas highlighted. The lines from “Little Gidding” frames the journey that Nicholas is about to make. The lines are:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time (60).

No matter what he experiences, he will only return to questioning his own self. These lines also point to the form of the questioning. It will be in the world of fiction. However, it is not that Nicholas will have to learn the difference between reality and fiction but he will be forced to posit his own identity into a galaxy of signs. After his meeting with Conchis, he writes a similar stanza:

From this skull-rock stage golden roots throw  
Ikons and incidents; the man in the mask  
Manipulates. I am the fool that falls  
Never learns to wait and watch,  
Icarus, eternally damned, the dupe of time (84).

He likens the island to a stage on which various performances take place to be read. "The man in the mask" is apparently Conchis who is seen as the creator of the masques and is placed at centre. Nicholas likens himself to Icarus, son of Daedalus who built the labyrinth for King of Minos to imprison Minotaur, a half man and a half bull monster. In this way, Nicholas creates himself a myth in which he becomes a fool, who will have to pass through ordeals to develop a better self. He convinces that he has entered a myth and thinks himself to be "Theseus in the maze; somewhere in the darkness Ariadne waited; and the Minotaur" (291). He is not a passive receiver in the myth but he has an active role; he is a reader of the characters and the performances and he writes his experiences as the novel is assumed to be a biography of the protagonist. Later on, he says, "I am Theseus in the maze; let it all come, even the black Minotaur, so long as it comes; so long as I may reach the center" (301). From all these performances and the mysterious characters, he makes up a myth of his own and tries to get to the end of it so that he will accomplish a certain deed. Ralph Beret considers this:

Nicholas [...] in the course of the novel must learn to act like both Daedalus and Minotaur. First he must try to understand and attempt to solve his own predicament, while later he is asked to view the whole experience as if he, himself, were the creator and manipulator of his environment. The objective of this novel is then not to reorient man so that he will be more able to cope with his feelings of alienation and impotence, but to construct an individual myth that will consequently enable an "elect" individual to impose a meaningful pattern on his existence (89).

This is a postmodern personal myth. There is no centre to be reached but there is a chance for a change for the better. Nicholas will undergo a change by not finding the centre, that is a revelation of truth but decentring the centre.

### **Conchis Dethroned**

This notion of centre in the Western tradition is criticized by Derrida in his paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences.” (1966) Derrida questions the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy which has always positioned itself on a static centre. The notion of structure has always presupposed a centre of meaning. Derrida terms this desire for a centre as “logocentrism” in his *Of Grammatology* (1966). Terry Eagleton explains that

[...] Western Philosophy [...] has also been in a broader sense, ‘logocentric’, committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word’, presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation for all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others, – ‘the transcendental signifier’ – and for the anchoring, unquestioning meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (113).

Derrida’s critique of structuralism bases itself on this idea of a centre. A structure assumes a centre which orders the structure and gives meanings to its components and limited interactions between them. Derrida reveals the ‘centre’ which Western metaphysics had relied on for thousands of years as a linguistic construct. For him, there is no centre that is ever-present and never-changing, outside the play of language. Given the instability of language, the meaning making process is always a play of signifiers and signifieds in which meaning is deferred.

Conchis, who has already established a central, authorial figure, points to the slippery nature of words. In the beginning, ironically, he asserts that the “novel is dead” and he believes that “Words are for truth. For facts. Not fiction” (Fowles 96). He offers Nicholas factual documents which are the pamphlet by Robert Foulkes and *De la communication intermondiale* by Conchis. However, the latter proves to be a fiction, like the paintings and sculptures at the villa which all turn out to be fakes. Furthermore, Conchis structures Nick’s experience at Bourani around the narratives of Neuve Chapelle, Givray-le-Duc, Seidevarre, and Phraxosin the 1940s none of which can be verified. Nicholas comes to think of Conchis as a sort of “novelist sans novel, creating with people, not words.” Conchis suggests the word “masques” in describing his activities and leaves a book titled *Le Masque Français au Dix-huitieme Siecle* in Nicholas’s bedroom with certain passages marked. Conchis refers to

masques as metaphors. Actually, words are like metaphors; they do not refer other things than themselves. This causes a process of endless deferment of meaning. One cannot come to definitive truth that is supposed to be behind all metaphors or words. Thus, the mystery continues on and on. Conchis asserts: "Mystery has energy. It pours energy into whoever seeks an answer to it. If you disclose the solution to the mystery, you are simply depriving the other seekers [...] of an important source of energy" (235). Mrs. Lily de Seitas acknowledges this fact when she tells that "[...] an answer is always a form of death" (626). Mystery is the endless deferment of meaning that the narratives and the masques provide. There is no certain meaning, a truth to be arrived in the end. When Nicholas tries to look beyond the metaphors or the masques, he finds other metaphors.

As the masques and the narratives do not refer to a certain reality outside language, the authorial power of Conchis diminishes and Nicholas gradually becomes the sole reader of all the signs. June Holmes reveals the diminishing powers of the authorial control and the texts' being reconstructed by the readers by telling Nicholas that Conchis wants his "cast members" to be "mysteries to him as well" (404). Whenever he turns to Conchis for possible meaning of the masques or questions the reality of the narratives, he is disappointed for Conchis himself and everything about him become signs that produce another signs in an infinite chain of signification. Nicholas, through the end of the novel realizes that "[...] the maze has no centre" (517). Thus, the centre is not Conchis who would reveal the truth in the end.

However, the figure of Conchis is not simply a body of contrasting signs that obscure or defer meaning. The island of Phraxos with the domain of Conchis represents the Greek civilization that formed the basis of Europe. He, himself is a man of culture with an artistic bent and the quality of wise man and all the things that are related to him are also closely related to the Western civilization from its origins to the present. The paintings, artefacts, sculptures, scientific books, biographies, autobiographies, his rejection of fiction point to the presence of a certain truth on which the Western tradition relied. Other than his character and environment, his narratives are great proofs of this. They take the place of the first person narrator. They are like the Greek *logos*. In Ancient philosophy, for the sophists the term was used to mean discourse, Aristotle used it to refer to "reasoned discourse" or "the argument" in the field of rhetoric.

### ***Logos and Conchis***

The second part of the novel is largely made up of these narrative monologues which are told as the truths lying at the centre of the formation of the Western Civilization. They are narratives that are at the heart of what makes historical and cultural Europe. They are not simply personal memories to be cherished but appeal to all humanity. Conchis' being talented

in music, his falling in love with a young girl, his being forced to go to war, leaving the girl behind and finally the atrocities he had to confront in the war and the choices he was forced to make are instances of the supposed truths of Europe. Nicholas even reduces Conchis into “a voice” that takes us to the Greek *logos*. This *logos* or the speech is closer to the truth. It is the presence of a certain truth. Derrida calls this “phonocentrism” and that “phonocentric” cultures regard speech as the uncorrupted as opposed to writing. Writing is considered to be open to deferment of meaning with the changing context and the absence of the speaker.

However, Conchis continuously makes it clear that all his narratives are carefully plotted, rehearsed and thus performances. Nicholas thinks Conchis to be a “dramatist” who tells an anecdote when the play requires. It is important to note that in a way Conchis creates this *logos* as in the traditional sense but at the same time he deconstructs the *logos* by making apparent that what he tells is fiction. His speech produces a supposed truth but at the very moment it is produced, it becomes involved in the process of deferment.

The binary between fiction and reality is upset when Nicholas enters what Julie calls “the Earth.” In the caverns, he finds a large array of stage props some of which he had seen in the masques and some he had not along with the lines of the scenes. Nicholas also finds a fairy tale called “The Prince and the Magician” which describes a prince who is in a quest for truth; he wonders whether islands, princesses and God exist. However, he cannot find the truth; all he finds are the conflicting stories of the two men; the king and a magician. In the end, the king says to the prince: “There is no truth beyond magic” (472) and to this the prince chooses to suicide but when death appears, he understands that the beauty of the islands and the princesses is what matters. At the very moment he gives in to the lies, he himself becomes a liar, who is a creator with words, a magician. This episode dethrones the authorial power of Conchis. The functionality of all masques, narratives and Conchis himself are revealed again. However, Nicholas once again realizes that there is no truth to be found. There is not a centre to be reached in the mazes of the game of masques.

### **Alison and Julie**

Apart from Conchis, women sexually and romantically entice Nicholas. They dethrone the authorial power of Conchis by making themselves the centre of attention. In the early chapters, Nick is prejudiced to Alison and humiliates her. Julie appears to be completely opposite to Alison. The Phraxos section of the novel is dominated by Julie, like the framing sections are dominated by Alison. The only time in the novel when Nicholas acknowledges his love for Alison is in the Parnassus section. Here she is depicted with a child-like



innocence within a background untouched nature which Nicholas fictionalizes as: “[...] intensely literary moment. I could place it exactly: *England's Helicon*. [...] Suddenly she was like such a poem and I felt a passionate wave of desire for her. [...] [She looked like] a child of sixteen, not a girl of twenty-four... it rushed on me, it was quite simple, I did love her” (269). His love for her seems to be in parallel with his ability to create her as a poem or as a poetic image. Alison is recreated and re-identified in the way that Nicholas desires. Thus, Alison finds a place for only for him in his own personal myth. She becomes a source of fictional imagery that satisfies Nicholas’s ego. According to Susana Onega, “Turning his life into fiction, rejecting the real in favour of the unreal [...] is d’Urfé’s major *sin*, generated by his short-sighted interpretation of reality” (71). Nicholas’s quest for identity is deeply related with finding literary role models and turning his own life into fiction.

As for Julie, who is the counter part of Alison in the island, she is regarded most of the time as a puppet of Conchis. For Nicholas, she is simply an actress required to play certain roles according to a plan. Julie becomes available in the domain of Conchis. As for Alison, Nicholas’s love and/or desire are only aroused when he can suppress the reality of her sexuality and fictionalize her to satisfy his ego. With both Julie and Alison, Nicholas’s interaction with both Julie and Alison, whether romantic or sexual, is mostly a fictional process, just as his interaction with Conchis. The images of Alison are as contradictory as those of Conchis or Julie in the mind of Nicholas even though Alison is out of the game in the Parnassus episode and in the earlier chapters. Thus, the Parnassus episode placed roughly in the middle of the masques, dethrones the story of mythic quest for self in the domain of Conchis. This mystery still goes on in Parnassus and it goes with Nicholas for the mystery is produced in his mind as much as it is experienced in the domain of Conchis.

In the Parnassus episode, Alison’s being metamorphosed into a fictional image is furthered through mythologizing her by comparing her to Eve. Regarding Alison as “a child of sixteen,” Nicholas believes that he is “seeing through all the ugly, the unpoetic accretions of modern life to the naked real self of her — a vision of her as naked in that way as she was in body; Eve glimpsed again through ten thousand generations” (269). Nicholas thinks that he loves Alison just because her contemporary looks are masked this time by himself in the very way that Julie attracts him with her period costumes and 1915 expressions that are all performances realized by Julie and Conchis. The dividing line between Alison and Julie is blurred. Alison can also become an archetype of female beauty just as Julie who plays Astarte, Ariadne, Artemis, Miranda, Estella, Desdemona, Eve and so on. When reality is revealed, Nicholas feels angry, stating that: “I suddenly knew her real name, behind the

masks. [...] I did not forgive, if anything I felt more rage” (572) just as he resents when the game of masques comes to an end: “Not that he had done what he did, but that he had stopped doing it” (567).

### **Conclusion**

In the search of a self, the protagonist gets tangled up within a maze of mythic stories in the mesmerizing Greek island of Phraxos. Nicholas’s deficiency is his being trapped by the illusionary projections of his ‘imaginary’ self. As a result, he has developed a cynical and irresponsible attitude towards life which is mostly seen in problematic relationship with women. Nicholas Urfe undergoes psychological and spiritual changes through the guidance of Maurice Conchis in a fictional world. Conchis becomes a father figure for Nicholas to create a self out of the reading of the masques and characters. In this way, he realizes his own weaknesses and understands that truth lies in self-knowledge. He leaves his immature self behind by creating a personal myth of his own.

### **References**

Fleishman, Avrom. “The Magus of the Wizard of the West.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 5 1976: 297-314

Online: <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/literary-criticism/6899395/magus-wizard-west>,

1 April 2015.

Huffaker, Robert. *John Fowles*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

McDaniel, Ellen: “The Magus: Fowles’s Tarot Quest,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 8, No: 2, John Fowles Special Number, 1980-1981, pp. 247-260, 2011

Online: [www.jstor.org/stable/3831231](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831231), 25 March 2011

Rubenstein, Roberta. "Myth, Mystery and Irony: John Fowles's *The Magus*," *Contemporary Literature*, 16, Summer, 1975, pp. 328-339, (Online)[www.jstor.org/stable/1207406](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207406),

5 April 2015.

Eagleton, Terry: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008

Fowles, John: *The Magus*, London: Vintage Books, 2004

Ralph Berets, "*The Magus*: A Study in the Creation of a Personal Myth," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 19, No: 2, April, 1973, pp. 89-90,

Online: [www.jstor.org/stable/440890](http://www.jstor.org/stable/440890), 12 April 2015

Susana Onega, "Form and Meaning in *The Magus*," *Miscelánea*, 1986, pp. 69-112,

Online: <http://www.miscelaneajournal.net/images/stories/articulos/vol7/Onega7.pdf>,

5 April 2015.