

Freeing Fossils

The Novel as Organism in John
Fowles's

The French Lieutenant's Woman

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The Cobb at Lyme Regis—a fourteenth-century stone harbour wall projecting into Lyme Bay—is a pivotal symbol joining various dichotomies (and trichotomies) that characterize John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. It is on the Cobb that the reader—like the protagonist, Charles Smithson—first sees the heroine Sarah Woodruff standing and staring out to sea, an image that resonates throughout the novel and even adorns the cover of its film adaptation. The novel’s first description of the Cobb portrays its physical structure as an embodiment of contradiction, “[p]rimitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo; and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass” (Fowles, 4). The names “Henry Moore” and “Michelangelo” interpret the Cobb aesthetically, as a piece of art. In contrast, in the description of the Cobb as “pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass,” the words “pure,” “salt,” and “mass” consider the physical components and dimensions of the Cobb through a traditionally scientific lens. As “a last bulwark—against all that wild eroding coast to the west” (4), the Cobb stands between the conventional town of Lyme and the wild Ware Commons. Similarly, as a “wall that flexes itself against the sea” (3), the Cobb links stable, familiar land with the unpredictable and unknown sea of Lyme Bay. The unification of land and sea is thus more than a physical bond—land, particularly the town of Lyme, bounds stability, convention, and order while the sea holds uncertainty, mystery, and freedom, especially as the site of both the arrival and departure of the enigmatic French Lieutenant, Sarah’s reputed lover.

Though the Cobb’s intermediary position exposes the coexistence of apparent oppositions, its symbolic role is primarily cohesive rather than divisive. The history of the fourteenth-century Cobb that seems to evoke differences between the Victorian and twentieth-century worlds, also more importantly links the two centuries because it exists—and, as the text suggests, looks almost identical—in both those worlds. The narrator emphasizes the Cobb’s ability to *connect* historical periods by reminding us that the Cobb witnessed the Duke of Monmouth’s 1685 rebellion and

remains much the same today as it did then. The Cobb also mediates between the two temporal worlds of the novel (Victorian Lyme and the twentieth-century narrator's Lyme) and the reader's current world. The fictional Victorian character Ernestina's comment as she walks down the Cobb that "[t]hese are the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in *Persuasion*" (8) highlights the Cobb's presence at the blurred intersection of the fictional and the real: steps exist in the reader's world, and Austen did "make" Louisa fall down them just as Fowles makes Ernestina observe them.¹ Though Ernestina's allusion to Austen momentarily exposes the distinction between the fictional and the real, it more importantly unites the two and encourages the reader to recognize the inseparability of the two spaces: despite any attempt to separate fiction and reality in Ernestina's allusion, the real Cobb remains a tourist attraction today in part because of its fictional status in both novels.

The Cobb is thus crucial to Fowles's novel not simply because it links apparently disparate elements of the novel, but because it becomes a metaphor for the interplay of those various thematic and formal constituents. The Cobb's ability to connect fossils and organisms, in particular, symbolizes its focus on interaction and exchange, rather than mere conflation. Neither dead nor alive itself, the Cobb brings fossils (the static, dead opposite of organisms) and organisms together: though the Cobb is covered in fossils, we first meet the three living, developing characters of the novel walking on the Cobb. Charles stoops to examine the fossil-covered surface of the Cobb, but it is also on the Cobb that he first observes and interacts with the very-much alive Sarah. Through such encounters and interplay, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ultimately suggests that discoveries are made and relationships formed through exchanges, not through distant observations. The novel—a novel as organism, as Fowles refers to it and as I want to call it—models a reading process that fosters the emergence of these interactions both within the text and between text and reader. The

¹ A. B. J. Johnson discusses this and other moments of disjunction between the "fictional" and the "real" in his article, "Realism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." I return to his argument in more detail later in this paper.

novel as organism reveals its composition as a set of interdependent, interacting parts. It manipulates the subjective relationship between the text and the reader, and exposes the complex overlaps between the human experience of time, narrative time, and the temporality of reading to demonstrate that a novel must be *approached as an organism*; in other words, that readers must actively interact with—not passively observe—the structural, linguistic, and temporal interplay within a text.

I. The Novel as Organism

Readers who ignore the undulations of the various relationships in the novel as organism often misread the two most apparent dichotomies in the novel—the opposition between the Victorian and twentieth-century eras and the opposition between the Victorian narrative and the modern narrator’s digressions—as meta-comments on the oppositional relationship between fiction and reality. But the “reality” of the novel, either its reality as a representation of Victorian England or the reality of any novel as a piece of fiction, is not Fowles’s primary subject: the novel as organism is—crucially—not about replicating (or undermining) reality. Instead, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* contrasts the Victorian and modern eras and distinguishes between the world of its characters, the world of its narrator, and the world of its readers to suggest the limitations of—and the importance of interactions between—any single interpretive context or framework. The juxtaposition of the different worlds (both historical and narrative) is not about the reality of either, but about exposing both the overlaps and voids between them to demonstrate the limitations of “discovering” when it consists of merely filtering information through a pre-conceived, always limited interpretive consciousness.

We see this interpretive interplay and emphasis on interaction played out most pointedly in the various scientific strategies of experience and explanation in the text. If we follow the narrative lines of the significant, individual scientific tropes (fossil-collecting and evolution) we find that the

science in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is thematically tied to the parts of the novel without explicit scientific content. Though most critics focus solely on the text's treatment of the theory of evolution, a limited focus on evolution (one that does not acknowledge the other scientific strands in the novel) typically reduces the text to a demonstration of scientific principles² or ignores the actual scientific content in the novel's handling of evolution.³ The concept of organism, in contrast, is a powerful metaphor that allows us to understand the structural and thematic exchanges exemplified in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as well as the interactions between the reader and the text essential to engaging with such a novel.

The text's understanding of the concept of organism is difficult to define because the concept of organism operates on many different levels. Even a specifically scientific understanding of the term is multivalent because the concept of organism changed dramatically between the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and the metaphor of the novel as organism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reflects all three understandings. Prior to the nineteenth century, the word "organism" did not refer specifically to a living creature: though derived from the relationship of a whole living creature to its component parts, "organism" originally meant any whole (alive or not)

² Many critics have suggested that Fowles's novel traces evolution theory from its human-centered interpretations of the nineteenth century to a twentieth-century understanding of evolution (reflecting the theories of Stephen J. Gould) that accounts for contingency and removes human biases. Tony E. Jackson, in his article "Charles and the Hopeful Monster: Postmodern Evolutionary Theory in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*," argues that the novel illustrates the principle of contingency that Gould deems essential to Darwinian evolution theory. He also claims that Sarah Woodruff is a "hopeful monster," or a new life form, that can survive (and reproduce herself in Charles) because of some affinity with the environment, perhaps because many elements of existentialism were already present (though unrecognized) in Victorian culture.

³ Evolution is an apt metaphor for many of the changes taking place in the nineteenth century because Darwin's realizations about the general *relations* between species—that all species on Earth developed from a single organism over millions of years—was not only a kind of Kuhnian paradigm shift that transformed biology, but also a more all-encompassing revolution that altered much of Western thought. The intense resistance to Darwinian evolution theory stemmed not from its biological implications, but from the social and religious upheavals that were corollary to the removal of man from the center of the universe (Beer, 1-18). In her article, "*The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the Evolution of Narrative," Katherine Tarbox argues that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an evolved narrative that exposes the limits of narrative, in the process teaching its readers to look beyond narrative to see what cannot be narrated ("evolved readers"). Though interesting (I return to the implications of her argument later in this paper), by sidelining the scientific content of the evolutionary themes in Fowles's novel, such an argument erases the connections between evolution and the other extensive scientific tropes of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

composed of interacting parts.⁴ In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, “organism” came to mean living creature, “an individual plant, animal, or single-celled life form.”⁵ The change in the term coincided with changes in biological science: prior to the late nineteenth century, biology consisted largely of a kind of categorizing and labeling process that attempted to grasp and solidify the multiplicity of life on Earth. Though scientists understood that animals were composed of interdependent parts (“organism” did, after all, derive from “organ”), living creatures were not recognized as uniquely interactive and changeable until Darwin’s realization of the general *relations* between species. The shift in the understanding of “organism” from a “whole with interdependent parts” to, more specifically, a “life form” parallels the growing recognition that living organisms are not only composed of interacting parts, but are also themselves interdependent pieces of a larger whole.

Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Alfred North Whitehead developed a “philosophy of organism” that returned to a broader understanding of “organism” while still accounting for the uniquely interactive properties of living creatures. Whitehead’s philosophy views the world as a composite of the interactions of its entities (called organisms) and examines the world as the interface of those interactions. “Organism” functions not merely as a scientific term that describes the cooperative processes that maintain a living thing, but also as a metaphor for the interactive processes that make up both individual living things and the community of life as a whole. According to Whitehead, “[s]cience is taking on a new aspect which is neither purely physical, nor purely biological. It is becoming the study of organisms” (Whitehead, 457).

Whitehead, too, notes the changes in the notion of the word “organism” over the course of the nineteenth century and claims that the seeds for understanding the universe as organism were

⁴ “organism, *n.*^{2a}” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989 (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 4 Apr. 2000 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>).

⁵ “organism, *n.*^{3a}” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989 (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 4 Apr. 2000 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>).

planted in the nineteenth century by the numerous advances in biology, chemistry, and physics taking place around 1867 (at the time of the Victorian narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). Whitehead argues that understanding evolution as a theory of the relations between different species is simply corollary to understanding the world as the relationships between organisms. He does not restrict organism to living creatures (he cites the predictable rules of protons and electrons cooperating as an example of interaction), but he recognizes the unique complications of living creatures and does not attempt to reduce interactions between organisms to rules of physics: Whitehead acknowledges that feeling and consciousness make comprehensive understanding of interactions impossible, writing that the development of nature is complicated by organisms that “can create their own environment” (Whitehead, 465). Perhaps because such consciousness is difficult to quantify or to study scientifically, Whitehead refers to it as “the neglected side...expressed by the word *creativity*.” (Whitehead, 465) and writes that “[t]he riddle of the universe is not so simple. There is the aspect of permanence in which a given type of attainment is endlessly repeated for its own sake.... Also there are its aspects of struggle and of friendly help” (Whitehead, 466). Though “struggle” and “friendly help” are difficult to quantify scientifically, Whitehead understands their significance: the interactions between organisms cannot be described by rules because any rule would suppress the subjectivity and emotion inherent to organisms.

The French Lieutenant's Woman's understanding of organism reflects both the breadth of Whitehead's notion of organism and the complications attendant on applying that definition to living (especially conscious) creatures. The novel as organism is about modeling the exchanges that govern organisms (both scientific and physical, conscious and social), that should govern explorations, and that might ultimately govern reading. Fowles's description of his novel as organism (both within the text of the novel and in an essay about the novel) distinguishes an organism from both a machine and a fossil to emphasize, much like Whitehead, two unique

properties of conscious, living organisms: they experience both emotion and memory. Within the text of the novel, the narrator distinguishes between organisms and machines when he writes that authors write to create worlds, and that “a world is an organism, not a machine” (Fowles, 96). A machine can appear to interact with its environment—many machines can respond to stimuli—but machines are always programmed and are ultimately predictable so that their interactions are never genuinely reciprocal. Genuine interaction depends on active, in-time exchanges and responses, and—no matter how purely rational and intellectual it pretends to be—authentic contact always includes intuitive, emotional reactions unique to living organisms. Fowles’s novel as organism does not criticize human sensibility in favor of robot-like objectivity; on the contrary, it asks us to acknowledge and value the subjective, emotional responses that (though often ignored or suppressed) play crucial roles in any relationship between organisms.

In his essay, “Notes on an Unfinished Novel,” Fowles distinguishes between an organism and a fossil to emphasize the importance of both the interactions of an organism’s composite parts and an organism’s (conscious) interactions with its environment: “I loathe the day a manuscript is sent to the publisher, because on that day the people one has loved die; they become what they are—petrified, fossil organisms for others to study and collect” (*Wormholes*, 25). The distinction between “petrified, fossil organisms” (a deliberate parallel with Charles’s scientific interests) and living organisms emphasizes the activity of and within a living, but not a dead, organism. (A dead organism can only interact chemically with its environment while the interactions of a living organism are much more extensive.) The distinction also highlights a conscious, living organism’s unique relationship to time. Fowles worries that his novel will become fossilized because his readers will treat it as dead, complete, no longer growing. Unlike fossils, organisms have a unique ability to recall the past and imagine the future, and they therefore exist in a multidimensional time that always includes past, present, and future simultaneously. Inanimate objects such as fossils preserve an

image of the past only because humans understand how to interpret them this way, not because the rocks themselves recollect years gone by. For a novel to remain alive, it must participate in a multifaceted “organism time” rather than remain firmly in the past as always already written. Fowles’s worry about post-completion calcification seems to repudiate his reader as part of an organismal interchange with the text. I want to suggest, however, that Fowles’s fossil anxiety assumes an inadequate reader and that the text itself teaches us how to read to prevent fossilization, to bring the novel to life as a novel as organism.

The conception of the novel as organism is not Fowles’s own invention. In his essay “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James similarly writes that “[a] novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts” (James, 582). James’s understanding of the novel as organism underscores the way apparently disparate elements of the novel work together, through processes of reciprocal exchange, to create a whole. The intersections—but not the conflation—of its many parts make a novel not merely a model of organism, but “a living thing” that simultaneously represents life and lives as an organism itself. As we see in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, James’s novel as organism incorporates the emotional and subjective to create “a personal, a direct impression of life” (James, 578). Both “personal” and “impression” highlight individual responses and feelings—rather than factual reality—as crucial to the “life” of a novel.⁶

Fowles’s representation of the feelings, interactions and exchanges that govern life, I suggest, constitutes a more authentic “impression” than any specific fact about Victorian England. The story of the Victorian love triangle of Charles Smithson, his betrothed Ernestina Freeman, and the

⁶ James’s concept of novel as organism reflects the notion of organic form, first articulated by Coleridge and A. W. Schlegel, in which a text “evolves, by an internal energy, into the organic unity that constitutes its achieved form, in which the parts are integral to and interdependent with the whole” (Abrams, 106). James, however, emphasizes not only the ways the pieces of the novel come together to form a whole, but also the irresolvable overlaps between those pieces that differentiate his understanding of the novel as organism from the theory of organic form.

seductively mysterious Sarah Woodruff is already complicated by the frequent interruptions of Fowles's meta-conscious narrator, and the juxtaposition of the Victorian era and the twentieth century that immediately differentiates Fowles's novel from traditional Victorian narratives. The Victorian plot appears to function as a period piece, a nineteenth-century novel that accurately reflects the conventions of 1867 and corrects modern assumptions about Victorian morality and sexuality in seemingly factual commentary. Fowles's narrator regularly highlights the disparities between the 1867 outlook and the narrator's own twentieth-century views with long digressions about Victorian England and jarring interruptions of the Victorian story with explicitly twentieth-century observations. But the distinctions made between the modern and Victorian eras are not simply attempts to portray accurately the reality of either period. In "Notes," Fowles acknowledges that he attempts not so much to represent 1867 faithfully, as to represent a twentieth-century notion of 1867. Fowles writes that he had "to start cheating and pick out the more formal and archaic (even for 1867) elements of spoken speech" because "the genuine dialog of 1867 (insofar as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old" (*Wormholes*, 15). Even when Fowles is not "cheating," he admits that many details of his work must be based on imagination rather than historical research. Referring to Charles's encounter with Sarah in Exeter, for example, Fowles claims that writing about two Victorians in bed is less a research project than a kind of backwards science fiction, since contemporary descriptions of Victorian sex scenes—nonfictional or fictional—are largely unavailable.

Just as the accuracy of the details about Fowles's Victorian world is unimportant, the details also serve a different purpose than merely supporting verisimilitude in the story.⁷ The narrator employs nineteenth-century speech and sex scenes to allow the reader to glimpse simultaneously

⁷ In "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes argues that details that effect verisimilitude become divorced from all meaning other than portraying reality in a text. The fact that the "realistic" details in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* do have thematic significance weakens their ability to create a sense of pure verisimilitude signifying nothing (but realism).

both the distance and the proximity (the bedroom scene created by a twentieth-century narrator for a twentieth-century audience) of 1867. Another example of such blending is the apparently trivial narrative interruption in which the narrator describes two young women (our heroine, Sarah Woodruff, with another servant to the wealthy, imposing, and conservative Mrs. Poultney) sleeping together in the same bed:

... a healthy young woman [Sarah] of twenty-six or seven, with a slender, rounded arm thrown out, over the bedclothes, for the night is still and the windows closed...thrown out, as I say, and resting over another body.

Not a man. A girl of nineteen or so, also asleep, her back to Sarah, yet very close to her, since the bed, though large, is not meant for two people. (Fowles, 157)

The narrator describes the scene, predicts his readers' suspicion of a lesbian relationship, and then corrects his readers' apparently anachronistic assumptions. We can see that historical accuracy is not the narrator's primary purpose because his initial, sexualized description of the female sleepers intentionally tricks the readers into imagining a lesbian relationship. The succinct and not immediately explained "Not a man," along with the description of the single bed and "very close" bodies, suggests a sexual relationship, and Fowles uses his readers' quick assumptions of lesbianism to illustrate the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century perspectives. But the comparison is more about contrasting viewpoints than about the customs of either century since the narrator represents the nineteenth-century here by the single (unmistakably biased) perspective of Mrs. Poultney: "I doubt if Mrs. Poultney had ever heard of the word 'lesbian;' and if she had, it would have commenced with a capital, and referred to an island in Greece. Besides, it was to her a fact as rock-fundamental as that the world was round or that the Bishop of Exeter was Dr. Phillpotts that women did not feel carnal pleasure" (157). Though many Victorians might have been equally ignorant of lesbianism and convinced that sexual pleasure is exclusively male, the narrator suggests this was not universal even in the Victorian era. Mrs. Poultney cannot fairly represent all Victorians (as she seems to do in this scene), and the narrator is well aware of this. (The narrator,

for example, makes it clear that Charles is worldly enough for “lesbian” to leap into *his* head when he meets Sarah again at the end of the novel.)

The fact that the passage reveals the presence of contrasting viewpoints is hardly revelatory. Indeed, most simple dialogues do that quite successfully. But the passage is unique because it allows the reader to see not only the differing views reflected in this single scene, but also the interpretive seepages and overlaps that exists between two temporal periods. Fowles corrects his readers’ mistaken assumption about the relationship between Sarah and her fellow servant a few lines later:

A thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867. Suppose Mrs. Poulteney stood suddenly in the door, lamp in hand, and came upon those two affectionate bodies lying so close, so together, there. You imagine perhaps that she would have swollen, an infuriated black swan, and burst into an outraged anathema; you see the two girls, dressed only in their piteous shifts, cast from the granite grates. (157)

The scene suddenly shifts into another familiar Victorian story; we imagine Mrs. Poulteney furiously throwing Sarah and her companion onto the street because we are primed to expect this by other accounts of similar incidents. This hypothetical passage, then, brings together the discourses of a prudish horror of lesbianism with that of the disgraced, mistreated Victorian female. The words “suppose” and “perhaps” mark the uneasy overlap between the discourses and expose the constant interplay of the various narrative paradigms both within a novel and in our own minds as readers.

This montage of perspectives, then, demonstrates not only the unimportance of historical accuracy, but also the naïveté of any attempt to secure the text’s relationship to objective reality. And yet, though historical accuracy is clearly not central to the novel, critics frequently try to establish the text’s relationship (or non-relationship) to objective reality using the novel’s two different narrative lines. A. J. B. Johnson, for example, in his article “Realism in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” argues that the novel emphasizes the irresolvable distinction between fiction

and reality.⁸ Similarly, though in contrast to Johnson, Frederik M. Holmes, in his article “The Novel, Illusion and Reality: The Paradox of Omniscience in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” argues that the novel demonstrates the erasure of any objective reality behind fiction.⁹ But Fowles neither attempts to erase the objective reality behind the novel nor to sever his novel from that reality. Most discussions of “reality” in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* center on the infamous Chapter 13 in which the narrator (acting as the author) claims that his characters must exist outside of his imagination and have wills of their own in order for his novel to be “real.” Though Fowles’s narrator appears to describe the “reality” of his novel, he in fact only suggests that such a “reality (or unreality)” is always enigmatic and ultimately insignificant:

But novelists write for countless different reasons. . . . Only one same reason is shared by all of us: *we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is.* Or was. . . . My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. Fiction is woven into all, as a Greek observed some two and a half thousand years ago. I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid. (97)

The novel has its own “reality” that (perhaps confusingly) reflects or differs from the objective reality of the reader’s world. Though the passage tempts us to identify the novel as “reality” or “unreality,” the interchangeability of the terms reveals the triviality of any such label. But the constantly fluctuating relationship between the world of the novel and the world of the reader suggests a crucial connection between fiction, life, and the life of a novel. The interlaced layers of

⁸ Johnson claims that when Fowles momentarily unites the fictional and the real—in moments such as Ernestina’s allusion to Louisa Musgrove on the Cobb, or the narrator’s comments about the great-great-granddaughter of one of Ernestina’s aunt’s maids—he illustrates the irresolvable distinction between fiction and reality. Johnson’s argument quickly exposes the problems of locating reality in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Johnson writes that Fowles’s claim that his characters exist outside of his imagination is clearly impossible and that therefore the narrator’s (glib) assertions are meant only to emphasize the distinction between fiction and reality. But in making this argument, Johnson assumes that Fowles’s narrator is real—that he is in fact Fowles himself—and Johnson forgets that characters *can* exist outside the imaginations of a fictional narrator. Recognizing the fictional status of the narrator reveals that the opposition between the Victorian and modern narratives is not a simple opposition between fiction and reality.

⁹ Holmes argues, more specifically, that Fowles blurs the line between fiction and reality, and that Charles’s recognition of the uncertainty of life at the end of the novel is analogous to the reader’s recognition that fiction is fiction without an objective reality behind it or an omniscient guide (even the author) planning it. But Fowles’s preface to the novel, in which he cites his lengthy historical research, clearly indicates the presence of some historical reality, though the relationship between the text and that reality is quite complex.

reality (narrative lines) of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* simulate the interplay of different realities that make up the reader's world, and because "[f]iction is woven into all," the novel itself becomes a part of the fabric of its reader's world.

The novel as organism is "*as real as...the world that is?*" because it creates a *feeling* of reality by highlighting the affective, emotional interactions between novel and reader and reminds us that reading is not merely an intellectual exercise distinct from the senses of a reader's daily life. The abrupt blendings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* characters with events in the reader's world create a momentary disjunction of the world of the text and the reader's world that exemplifies the irresolvable modulations between the two terms. According to Johnson, these disjunctions exaggerate the conventions of literary realism to expose the limitations of realism in fiction.¹⁰ However, as with the juxtaposition of the Victorian and modern eras, the friction between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives is about appreciating the nature of the overlap between the two, not about the reality of either. The moments when the text suddenly makes the reader aware of its fictional status are important because the interplay between the different worlds—exposed in the moments of overlap when the different worlds cannot be treated as separate elements of the novel—allows the reader to glimpse the relationship between the (fictional) text and his own interactions with the text.

One passage analyzed by Johnson reveals the momentary rupture in the illusion of reality within the novel. The narrator writes about a maid to Ernestina's aunt, that her "great-great-granddaughter, who is twenty-two years old this month I write in, much resembles her ancestor; and her face is known over the entire world, for she is one of the more celebrated younger English film

¹⁰ Neither Holmes's nor Johnson's approach to locating the relationship of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to reality accounts for the complex, modulating relationship between the world of the text and the world of the reader that reveals the overlaps and exchanges between—rather than the distinguishability of—the different worlds. By trying to choose between reality, fiction, and a combination of the two, critics like Johnson and Holmes miss the way the different fictional spheres participate in the novel's larger theme of exchange and sensibility.

actresses” (75). Johnson writes that “[f]or the briefest instant, I catch myself wondering who it is” (Johnson, 293), and this recognition is crucial, not for distinguishing between reality and fiction (a sophisticated twentieth-century reader already realizes that the fictional narrator cannot be equated with the author and thus be assumed to be real) but for forcing the reader to recognize his own intuitive response to the text. Fowles *intends* the reader to be caught off guard (as Johnson describes) as part of the reading process so that the reader becomes aware of his own instinctive reaction to the passage.

The section in which we see Sarah and the servant girl in bed together likewise suggests that the reader’s reactions are part of the reading process, and also that the text itself already contains and depends on those responses. The description of the sleepers manipulates the reader into imagining a lesbian relationship between the two girls so that Fowles’s narrator can then respond directly to what he knows the reader “must be” thinking. The drawn out sexual language of the depiction of the girls is so directive that readers can hardly fail to notice that they are being manipulated. The first sentence of each of the three paragraphs following the initial description of Sarah—“A thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867;” “Well, you would be quite wrong;” and “Incomprehensible” (157)—all speak directly to the reader and all assume that the reader has reacted to the previous paragraph. Fowles’s narrator thus confronts his readers with the fact that their responses to the text are entwined in, and indivisible from, the novel or any reading of that novel. Both novel and reader are organisms involved in this interactive reading process.

Roland Barthes similarly understands the novel as organism as a model of *reading*. In his own description of the novel as organism, Barthes further explores the way interacting pieces of a novel unite—but never fully coalesce into a single, organic whole—by suggesting that the whole comes about through the overlaps and exchanges of the continuously juxtaposed pieces of the text

as encountered through reading.¹¹ In his essay “From Work to Text,” Barthes uses the metaphor of text as organism to describe the multiplicity of a text that is “an *irreducible* (and not merely acceptable) plural” (Barthes, *From Work to Text*, 159). The word “*irreducible*” again differentiates Barthes’s theory from the notion of organic form: a novel as organism, while its individual parts cannot be isolated, can never be completely resolved into a single entity. Barthes’s claim that “*the Text is experienced only as an activity of production*” (Barthes, 157)—because the meanings of language and images in a text are constantly displaced and doubled through reading—exemplifies the way the thematic core of Fowles’s text emerges at the interfaces of its many interactions.

If the overlaps and exchanges between the disparate temporal spaces of the novel are crucial, Fowles’s model of the novel as organism provides a unique space for such exchanges between the text and the reader. The novel as organism reveals its composition as a set of interdependent, interacting parts and manipulates the relationship between the text and the reader to demonstrate that a novel must be *read as* an organism; in other words, that readers must actively interact with, not passively consume, a novel. Passive observation—studying and becoming familiar with a text without responding to the text as one reads—is an idealized impossibility. But readers (those readers that petrify, rather than revive, Fowles’s completed manuscript) can absorb a text *as though* they were reading passively, without recognizing that part of the reading process is responding to a text actively as it is read and re-read.

¹¹ Barthes’s theory of text as organism is particularly apt here because Fowles’s narrator mentions Barthes as he begins to describe what is unique about *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as a novel in the infamous Chapter 13: “But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word” (Fowles, 95). The reference immediately precedes the narrator’s use of the term “organism” to describe his novel (96).

II. Modeling Organisms within the Text

Fowles's characters and the encounters between the characters embody the process of (inter)active reading key to understanding the novel as organism. The characters serve as "model organisms"¹² that demonstrate the ways organisms interact, both superficially and authentically. The language Fowles's narrator employs to describe the relationship between Charles and his servant Sam—for example, his description of their "human bond"—reflects the distinction between organism and machine: "Their servants they tried to turn into machines, while Charles knew very well that his was also partly a companion.... He kept Sam, in short, because he was frequently amused by him; not because there were not better 'machines' to be found" (43). Though Sam's aspirations and the social changes occurring at the end of the nineteenth century ultimately disrupt his relationship with Charles, the fact that master and servant "knew each other rather better than the partners in many a supposedly more intimate menage" (39) reminds us that the characters are living, feeling creatures with unpredictable—but no less compassionate—interactions and reveals Charles's ability to connect genuinely with other characters.

The protagonists, Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff, function as the most important (and most difficult to characterize) model organisms in the text. As dynamic characters, both are themselves organisms, but they also metaphorize readers-as-organisms in their encounters with each other. Their meetings demonstrate different methods of reading, both ineffective and successful. Initially, and throughout much of the novel, both Charles and Sarah model ways in which organisms interact inauthentically and unproductively. Their early "interactions" are merely passive observations in which information about the other is gathered and filtered through a limited interpretive discourse, but in which no genuine exchange or response occurs. Charles models a kind

¹² A model organism, in biology, is an organism studied not merely for its own unique properties, but as a model for other organisms. The fruit fly, for example, is often studied as a model of evolutionary development (how organisms developed their unique abilities to grow from embryo to full-sized life form) that scientists use to understand development in other seemingly unrelated organisms, even humans.

of quasi-scientific attempt at discovery in which he tries to label and categorize Sarah according to a set of pre-formed rules. Sarah similarly uses a limited literary attempt at discovery in which she tries to fit her relationship with Charles into familiar fictional types, including many of the fictional modes simultaneously reflected in, commented on, and ultimately outgrown by Fowles's novel.

Charles's scientific dabblings frame his interactions with Sarah throughout the novel, and the narrator immediately suggests the inadequacy of Charles's nineteenth-century quasi-scientific approach to observation through the amateur nature of Charles's interest in fossils. Even before Charles inappropriately applies his model to the living Sarah, we can see that the model itself is essentially flawed because it attempts to impose order on its observations rather than open the way for discovery or fresh understandings. Throughout the novel, fossils serve as a metaphor for stasis: Mrs. Poulteney—certainly an example of an organism resistant to authentic interactions or development—is compared to a dead, not-quite-fossilized animal. The narrator writes that Mrs. Poulteney “bore some resemblance to a white Pekinese; to be exact, to a *stuffed* Pekinese” (31, emphasis added). Because fossils do not interact or change, Charles's interest in fossils suggests a willingness to observe from a distance rather than to interact with living creatures. Furthermore, the purpose of the study of fossils in the nineteenth century—particularly as it is portrayed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—was primarily classificatory: though the links between fossils might prove or illustrate Darwin's theory of evolution, the main goals of a scientist studying fossils were to find them, label them, and display them.

Charles's particular attraction to fossils epitomizes the general problems of classification and ordering that characterized the Victorian fascination with fossils. The particular fossil that Charles studies—“an echinoderm, or petrified sea urchin” (Fowles, 45), also called a sand dollar—lives in the sea (again, a symbol of the unpredictable and unordered), but as a fossil, the sea urchin conveys organization and stability: “[t]ests [another name for the fossilized sea urchin] vary in shape, though

they are always perfectly symmetrical” (46). Similarly, Fowles’s narrator tells us that Charles’s interest in the *Echinodermia* stems not from its value for scientific discovery, but simply from its rarity (though Charles would be unlikely to concede this):

Quite apart from their scientific value (a vertical series taken from Beachy Head in the early 1860s was one of the first practical confirmations of the theory of evolution) they are very beautiful little objects; and they have the added charm that they are always difficult to find. You may search for days and not come on one; and a morning in which you find two or three is indeed a morning to remember. Perhaps, as a man with time to fill, a born amateur, this is unconsciously what attracted Charles to them; he had scientific reasons, of course, and with fellow hobbyists he would say indignantly that the *Echinodermia* had been ‘shamefully neglected,’ a familiar justification for spending too much time in too small a field. But whatever his motives he had fixed his heart on tests. (46)

Charles’s desire to “find”—and his interest in fossils that are difficult to find—reflects his superficial interest in scientific discovery and a hermeneutic approach to his world. One can find only what one is looking for; true discovery, on the other hand, requires encountering something new (whether a fossil, a living creature, or an idea) and responding to it without the restrictions of an already static interpretive discourse. But the tests are valuable in part because they *already* illustrate Darwin’s theory of evolution, a theory that was widely known by 1867 and that we know Charles already subscribes to because he argues with Ernestina’s father about it. Charles’s fascination with fossils, then, suggests a propensity to reinforce established modes of thought rather than to develop new ones. Similarly, the beauty of the tests rests in their symmetry and indicates Charles’s craving for regularity even in his pursuit of “new” knowledge.

Discovery requires a willingness to be uncertain and to disrupt the established order that Charles, at least at this point in the novel, lacks. Indeed, fossils help Charles resist recognizing the uncertainty of the world: “[Charles] saw in the strata an immensely reassuring orderliness of existence” (49). Fowles’s narrator deprecatingly refers to Charles when he mocks “the Linnaean obsession with classifying and naming, with fossilizing the existent. We can see it now as a foredoomed attempt to stabilize and fix what is in reality a continuous flux” (49). The phrase

“continuous flux” emphasizes not just the new, but also the changes in the old and familiar, the constant exchange between, and alteration of, what appears stable. The kind of seepage described underscores changes not only in the natural world itself, but in our understanding of the natural world: despite a fossil’s seeming permanence, scientific interpretations of that fossil’s evolutionary history change frequently. Charles’s desire to find stability through classifying fossils corresponds to his unwillingness to accept unpredictability and uncertainty in any encounter. Again, Charles’s model itself—even before it is misapplied to living creatures such as Sarah—is inherently flawed by its attempt to impose order on, rather than to accept and perhaps participate in, the naturally dynamic and unruly world.

Although the narrator emphasizes that fossils are dead and static, they are still potentially dangerous, and indicate for the reader the peril of stagnation and petrification that turns reading into a descriptive cataloging of endless information, a process in which understanding erodes rather than evolves. The “blue lias” stone that hides the crucial specimens along Ware Cliff, for example, is slippery and risky, since it leads to long drops to the ocean:

An exceedingly gloomy gray in color, a petrified mud in texture, it is a good deal more forbidding than it is picturesque. It is also treacherous, since its strata are brittle and have a tendency to slide, with the consequence that this little stretch of twelve miles or so of blue lias coast has lost more land to the sea in the course of history than almost any other in England. (Fowles, 45).

Like the fossils it conceals, the land is rigid and “petrified.” The calcification that creates the land and the fossils in it yields “brittle” and weak ground. Nor is the hazard of the sliding ground merely hypothetical for fossil-hunting scientists: on his expedition, Charles “tried for the tenth time to span too wide a gap between boulders and slipped ignominiously on his back” (48). The narrator makes it clear that the “scientific” interpretive mode he displays and deprecates in Charles is only a kind of quasi-science, and that its limited scope is exactly its weakness. When Charles decides to return to Lyme, the narrator writes that “he once again hopscotched out of science” (50). Charles’s

separation of science from the rest of his life—along with his assumption that science is primarily categorizing and cataloging that has little to do with authentic discovery—allows him to misuse his interest in fossils as evidence of the order and predictability of the world (and his lovers) and limits the depth of his encounters.

Charles's quasi-science is simply unable to comprehend the inconsistencies of organisms. The narrator writes that the Victorians were “for positive all-explaining theories, carefully studied and studiously applied.... So Charles was inexplicable to himself” (248). Charles cannot even understand himself (let alone other characters) because he, like other living organisms, has complexities that his theories cannot encompass. Such limited scientific modes are especially damaging in his relationship with Sarah Woodruff both because she is clearly not a fossil and because she does not fit any single paradigm, even those designed for living creatures. In Charles's (and our) first encounter with Sarah, the narrator uses scientific language to describe Sarah and then notes the limitations of that discourse in any depiction of this woman. The narrator describes the scene on the Cobb—Charles and his betrothed, Ernestina, walking arm-in-arm toward Sarah, who stares out to sea at the end of the Cobb—in terms of what a telescopist both would, and would not, have seen:

The local spy—and there was one—might thus have deduced that these two were strangers, people of some taste, and not to be denied their enjoyment of the Cobb by a mere harsh wind. On the other hand he might, focusing his telescope more closely, have suspected that a mutual solitude interested them rather more than maritime architecture.... The eye in the telescope might have glimpsed a magenta skirt [Ernestina's] of an almost daring narrowness....

But where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure [Sarah] on that somber, curving mole. (4-5)

Though the scientific observer—the “eye in the telescope”—can describe Charles and Ernestina, he cannot discern anything about Sarah. As Charles repeatedly realizes, Sarah disobeys and resists standard modes of scientific categorization. The doctor of Lyme, Dr. Grogan, similarly attempts to characterize Sarah by finding her counterpart in a medical or psychological book, but fails because

she will not be reduced to a mere case study. Dr. Grogan labels Sarah, and he fails to foresee the outcome of her relationship with Charles (that Charles will inevitably be unable to forget her) because he does not (he cannot possibly—since he does not know about them) account for the exchanges between Charles and Sarah that haunt Charles throughout the novel. It is no accident that when Sarah comes to Ware Commons to find Charles and to tell him her story, she hands him two rare tests and that Charles initially equates his interest in fossils with his attraction to Sarah: “yet he felt the two tests in his pockets; some kind of hold she had on him” (140). Though Charles imagines that the scientific specimens Sarah has given him keep him listening to her story, in fact Charles’s attraction to Sarah began much earlier (in the very first scene on the Cobb) and goes far beyond a desire for petrified sea urchins. Sarah upsets Charles’s idea of mere fossil-collecting by expecting Charles to recognize her gift as an exchange, in which she trades her fossils for the privilege of participating in his story.

And yet, though Sarah often appears more enlightened than Charles, her own interpretive modes are also potentially limited and limiting.¹³ She is brilliant at understanding people, but the narrator notes that she is unsuccessful when she remains too strictly within a purely literary interpretation that does not account for experience:

Thus it had come about that she had read far more fiction, and far more poetry, those two sanctuaries of the lonely, than most of her kind. They served as a substitute for experience. Without realizing it she judged people as much by the standards of Walter Scott and Jane Austen as by any *empirically* arrived at; seeing those around her as fictional characters, and making poetic judgments on them. (53, emphasis added)

Sarah’s lack of empirical sensitivity suggests that she, like Charles, imposes her own interpretations on the world rather than responds to the world as she experiences it. The narrator manipulates the reader’s literary preconceptions to show that the reader approaches characters much as Sarah

¹³ Critics often interpret Sarah’s mysteriousness as evidence of an all-knowingness that equates her with the author. But because of elisions in the text, we cannot definitively determine Sarah’s motives. Though we cannot judge Sarah’s success in realizing her goals (since we will never know them), the narrator’s comments certainly suggest that Sarah’s interpretive discourses are limited.

approaches people. Mrs. Poulteney, for example, epitomizes limited literary models (for both Sarah and the reader) just as she represents a fossilized organism. Mrs. Poulteney's wealthy, haughty, aging, and would-be-commanding character recalls similar female figures such as Austen's Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and the reader quickly recognizes her as such. But, unlike Sarah, the narrator appreciates, and reveals to the reader, the limits of this stereotyping:

The second simple fact is that [Mrs. Poulteney] was an opium addict—but before you think I am wildly sacrificing plausibility to sensation, let me quickly add that she did not know it. What we call opium she called laudanum. A shrewd, if blasphemous, doctor of the time called it Our-Lordanum, since many a nineteenth-century lady...sipped it a good deal more frequently than the Communion wine. (92)

When Mrs. Poulteney suddenly seems not to fit the Lady-Catherine model, the narrator reveals the restrictive boundaries of her literary predecessors, though he then carefully corrects and re-shapes Mrs. Poulteney back into the literary stereotype he has just exposed. But Sarah's literary interpretations of the world are more confined. Despite the potential multidimensionality of a literary construction, Sarah's model does not see beyond the boundaries of the types into which she classes people, such as Ernestina's aunt, Mrs. Tranter. The narrator describes Sarah's surprise at a sudden kindness of Mrs. Tranter's: "For a second then, a rare look crossed Sarah's face. That computer in her heart had long before assessed Mrs. Tranter and stored the resultant tape. That reserve, that independence so perilously close to defiance which had become her mask in Mrs. Poulteney's presence, momentarily dropped" (103). The word "computer" suggests that Sarah's understanding of others is programmed rather than genuine, and Sarah's reaction here reveals an "organism moment," an authentic, emotional response to Mrs. Tranter's kindness that extends beyond her typical literary models.

Fowles does not pass judgment on literature any more than he does on science, even as he reveals the limitations of Sarah's and Charles's interpretive discourses. The narrator makes clear that Charles's science is only a limited quasi-science that characterizes one model of static science in the

nineteenth century; similarly, Sarah uses only narrow literary models. The narrator suggests rather that aspects of both disciplines can be used toward a kind of authentic interaction and discovery if opened into an exchange between these closed systems. Though the narrator jokes about Charles's fossil-hunting outfit, he reminds us not to laugh at all Victorian science:

[I]t was men not unlike Charles, and as overdressed and overequipped as he was that day, who laid the foundations of all our modern science. Their folly in that direction was no more than a symptom of their seriousness in a much more important one. They sensed that their current accounts of the world were inadequate; that they had allowed their windows on reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation; they knew, in short, that they had things to discover, and that the discovery was of the utmost importance to the future of man. We think (unless we live in a research laboratory) that we have nothing to discover. (47)

Victorians scientists' realization that "they had allowed their windows on reality to become smeared" suggests that they recognized the limits of some of their interpretive modes, though (as Charles's scientific pursuits show) not all of them. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* itself blends specific scientific paradigms with traditional literary genres, alternately employing and dismissing these individual approaches, to demonstrate the productive exchanges that can result from careful, more creative uses of standard interpretive modes. Here, the interplay reveals the overlaps and the restrictions of any single model. The narrator's description of authentic innovation reveals the *affective* sense of discovery—"they knew, in short, that they had things to discover"—that systematic labeling overlooks. The emotional and affective side of Charles's and Sarah's encounters works against the compartmentalization that characterizes both of their primary interpretive modes.

Because Charles approaches Sarah with inadequate interpretive discourses firmly in place, he fails to recognize the more authentic interactions between them that are carefully noted by the narrator, just as he does not realize that when he accepts Sarah's gift of fossils he creates an emotional bond with her as well. The narrator describes Charles's memory of his first encounter with Sarah not merely by describing his dispassionate observations of her, but by showing Charles's emotional reaction to seeing her: "Again and again, afterwards, Charles thought of that look as a

lance; and to think so is of course not merely to describe an object but the effect it has. He felt himself in that brief instant an unjust enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished” (Fowles, 10). Charles recognizes (but does not acknowledge this awareness in his interpretations of Sarah) an instinctual response to their meeting. His attempts to interpret Sarah may treat her as an isolated fossil, but “the effect” on Charles underscored by the narrator highlights the *exchange* between Charles and Sarah rather than simply the character of Sarah as an individual. The word “pierced” suggests that Charles and Sarah do not merely bounce off each other, but actually intermingle as they pass. Charles may fail to recognize that his attraction to Sarah cannot be explained simply by finding an appropriate label for her (whether the French Lieutenant’s Woman, Poor Tragedy, Grogan’s psychological maniac, or anything else); his fascination with her, nonetheless, stems from his response to and interactions with her.

When they meet on Ware Commons, the narrator again emphasizes Charles’s *reaction* to Sarah as much as he describes Sarah. The narrator says of Sarah that “[t]here was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay” not just to describe her, but to emphasize how this image of Sarah affects Charles: “it awakened a dim echo of [sic] Charles of a moment from his time in Paris” (70). Since Charles knows almost nothing about Sarah, his instinctual response is of primary importance: he continues to stare at Sarah, “tranced by this unexpected encounter, and overcome by an equally strange feeling—not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal, a certainty of the innocence of this creature” (71). When they meet later in the same walk, “once again that face had an extraordinary effect on him. It was as if after each sight of it, he could not believe its effect, and had to see it again. It seemed to both envelop and reject him” (86). Again, the word “effect” reinforces the lived and emotionally alive interactions between Charles and Sarah. Rather than describe the objective, physical aspects of Sarah that he remembers, Charles recalls the feelings that Sarah evoked. The words “envelop” and “reject”—unlike objective descriptors of a single, observed

person—involve two people exchanging a look—even merging—before parting ways. The text provides many objective descriptors of Sarah, but in the scenes with Charles these are always modified by their effect on him. The objective descriptors that do appear—for example, “a healthy young woman of twenty-six or seven, with a slender, rounded arm” (157)—come only when Charles and his thoughts about Sarah are absent from the scene.

Fowles’s narrator, however, suggests not only that Charles does not acknowledge the significance of these instinctive responses to Sarah, but also that he consciously resists interacting with Sarah as anything other than a passive observer. Superficially, Charles hesitates to become involved in Sarah’s affairs, except in a straightforward philanthropic way, because Victorian conventions forbid such relationships between engaged men and (especially single) women. His resistance, however, also goes deeper and reflects his attempts to retain stability in and impose order on his world as a whole. As Sarah begins to describe her past (whether her real past or a story she invented we will never know), the narrator explicitly notes that the relationship between Charles and Sarah is on the verge of becoming something more than mutual observation or literary analogy:

Moments like modulations come in human relationships: when what has been until then an objective situation, one perhaps described by the mind to itself in semi-literary terms, one it is sufficient merely to classify under some general heading (man with alcoholic problems, woman with unfortunate past, and so on) becomes subjective; becomes unique; becomes, by empathy, instantaneously shared rather than observed. Such a metamorphosis took place in Charles’s mind as he stared at the bowed head of the sinner before him. Like most of us when such moments come—who has not been embraced by a drunk?—he sought for a hasty though diplomatic restoration of the *status quo*.” (140-141)

The narrator uses “classify” and “semi-literary” to describe the initial “objective” and “observed” interactions, creating close parallels between Charles’s restrictive and order-imposing paleontology and Sarah’s limited literary models. In doing so, the narrator at the same time emphasizes the emotional and instinctive aspects of more authentic, intimate relationships: such interactions are “subjective” and “unique” so that they cannot be predicted by either scientific formulas or literary predecessors. Sentiment—such as the inexplicable pity Charles feels for Sarah from their first

meeting, despite Dr. Grogan's insistence that she is merely manipulative—produces closeness. And, crucially, the narrator reveals that the exchanges between organisms must be mutual, between *two organisms*, to generate the “instantaneously shared,” reciprocal moments that differentiate such a relationship from one-sided observation or classification.

The moment the narrator describes is not an absolute conversion in the relationship between Charles and Sarah, but this moment allows the reader a glimpse of the possibility of mutual exchange. Charles often feels a strong, natural empathy for Sarah—“he knew his instinct was to kneel beside her and comfort her” (247)—though he tries to oppose this instinct by pretending to be conventionally and appropriately charitable. Charles continues to resist this modulation by trying to return to the “*status quo*” of observation of an isolated creature even at a moment when Sarah takes him into her confidence and when his attraction to her is evident. Charles never fully understands Sarah because objective understanding of another organism is impossible, but he continues throughout much of the novel to want to “find” her, whether as one of his rare fossils or as a fellow organism is unclear. By the end, however, Charles does learn to account for his reaction to Sarah by looking inward *at his own feelings* and finally discovering there “an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build” (467). The narrator describes Charles's eventual discovery in explicitly scientific language with the word “atom,” but this final reference to a scientific framework is not a restrictive model into which the world must fit. Instead, this final scientific knowledge allows Charles to “build” outward, to truly discover through his own genuine experiences.

III. The Reader and the Text as Interacting Organisms

In the brief and breathless encounters between Charles and Sarah, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* begins to model for its readers a similar process of interaction and exchange between text

(the novel as organism) and reader. Just as Charles must learn to approach Sarah openly, so a reader must learn to respond actively and authentically to a text. Patricia Hagen, in her article “Revision Revisited: Reading (and) *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” equates the relationship between Charles and Sarah with the relationship between the reader and the text, arguing that Sarah is like an author because she writes stories about herself and that “the plot *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* traces is largely Charles’s internalization of Sarah’s story” (Hagen, 446). Hagen describes the way Charles misinterprets Sarah after each of his encounters with her, but (because Sarah does not fit any traditional Victorian role) he is also forced to reconceptualize his image of Sarah with every new piece of information he encounters. In this way, Hagen argues, Charles learns the importance of breaking down his conceptual schemas (the traditional Victorian roles into which he tries to fit Sarah) and revising his understanding based on what he “reads” in his encounters with her. But Hagen’s reading gives Sarah an infallibility not supported by the text. Rather than equate Charles exclusively with the reader or Sarah exclusively with the author to understand how their relationship models interactions between readers and texts, we might instead note how each character (both Charles and Sarah) reads the other—learns about and interprets the other.

But even a focus on characters as readers limits the text’s powerful conception of reading a novel as organism. The text itself acts on the reader, who participates in an ongoing process of narrative production simultaneously with reading as his or her responses are incorporated into the experience of the novel. The reading onto the reader of his or her immediate and instinctual responses and the integration of those into the text (as described earlier in the passage about Sarah and another servant girl sharing a bed) urges the reader to feel that personal interactions with the text are part of the reading process. Similarly, the moments of apparent revision in the text suggest that writing is a process that occurs simultaneously with reading. Hagen argues that these moments of revision—when Fowles’s narrator, for example, makes a statement and then refines or corrects

it—direct the reader to the process, rather than the product, of writing.¹⁴ Examples of these moments are scattered throughout the text in seemingly insignificant phrases, such as when the narrator tells us that “we make, I think, a grave—or rather a frivolous—mistake” (47). The hesitancy added by “I think” and the self-correction of the “or rather” make us feel that the narrator is constructing the story as we read it.¹⁵

Fowles’s own dislike of finalizing a manuscript suggests his worry that, despite any sense of ongoing revision in a text, a reader holding a novel assumes that it is already complete; that the production of a novel necessarily results in a chronological and material gap between writing and reading. This temporal separation seems to make the kinds of exchanges that occur between characters impossible between writer and reader, and to encourage readers to treat novels as “petrified, fossil organisms for others to study and collect” (*Notes*, 25). But the literal (unavoidable) delay between a writer’s putting words on paper and a reader’s responding to them is not the only temporal relationship that can exist between text and reader. The novel manipulates and reveals the relationship between linear time (a single endless sequence of instants) and narrative time to show that interactions between text and reader are in time and active even though writing and reading are not chronologically simultaneous. Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of “Narrative Time” explores the relationships between linear time (or the illusion of linear time), human experience of time, and narrative time that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* both manipulates and exposes as part of teaching its readers how to read a novel as organism. The apparent separation of writing and reading does not

¹⁴ Hagen researched the manuscripts of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and argues that these signs of revision are not entirely fictional, that these apparent moments of rewriting were actual revisions made to earlier drafts of the novel, though for our purposes the “reality” of these revisions is irrelevant.

¹⁵ Hagen argues that the textualized revisions create “the perfect reader, the participatory reader who will restore the ‘fluid polymorphic livingness’ of the writing process by imaginatively merging with the author” (Hagen, 443). But such an argument ignores the moments when the novel underscores the *differences* between the reader and author. The reader’s instinctual responses to the text—reactions that cannot belong to an author—are frequently incorporated into the text and are crucial to understanding the text as an *interactive* organism rather than simply a constantly re-written manuscript.

mean that text and reader cannot interact in time with each other because the temporal sequence in which writing and reading never meet is in fact itself illusory, a human construction.

Ricoeur argues that narrative time reveals a deeper human experience than chronological time in two important ways: first, in a kind of public, shared present time in which interactions take place; and second, in repetitions that illustrate the unity of present, past, and future in the human experience of time. Narratives naturally emphasize a public time that is both internal and external to the story. Characters in the narrative must be “in time” with each other to interact (internal public time), just as the readers of the narrative must be “in time” with the text to follow the chronology of the narrative (external public time). Ricoeur highlights the way shared time brings people together: “This public time, as we saw, is not the anonymous time of ordinary representation but the time of interaction. In this sense, narrative time is, from the outset, time of being-with-others” (Ricoeur, 184).

The French Lieutenant's Woman manipulates narrative time in ways that particularly highlight external public time, first to reveal that the relationship between a reader and a text is an “in time” relationship between organisms, and second, to replicate “organism time” (the time of conscious beings) within the novel. The narrator’s frequent comments addressed directly to the reader—“If you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*” or “if you think all this unlucky,” to note just two examples (97)—mark the external public time of the novel: though the narrative moves between centuries, we are clearly expected to be “in time” with the narrator as he tells the story. The novel further emphasizes this public-time relationship by incorporating both revision and the reader’s responses into the text to illustrate that reading is an “in time,” (inter)active process. The narrator jokingly toys with this public time, aware that an author controls the time of the novel and that, to read the novel, readers must follow along: when, for example, the narrator enters the novel a second time to re-play Charles’s final encounter with Sarah, the narrator does not merely start the scene over. Instead, he

takes out a watch and quite literally turns back time. The narrator's comments, dress, and actions all suggest that he is in a position of control, even command, as he explicitly manipulates narrative time. This domineering narrator recognizes that the public time of a novel requires a being together "in time" and that his readers must, too, turn their watches back.

Along with the public time that emphasizes interaction, Fowles's narrative time also reflects a conscious organism's unique experience of multidimensional time, time in which past, present, future, and even unrealized possibilities co-exist simultaneously. The constant juxtaposition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* highlights the co-existence of past, present, and future within a single moment of experience (reading). The fact that the narrator can hop between centuries (he appears as a character in 1867) further unifies the different historical times. Similarly, the narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* uses repetition to unite past, present, and future in memory time, the time in which conscious organisms exist. According to Ricoeur, this unity of time is already expressed in narrative form through repetition. Because the story already has an ending (often a familiar one), reading is always re-reading, and the unity of time that results from repetition is already present: "By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In this way, a plot establishes human action not only within time, as we said at the beginning of this section, but within memory" (Ricoeur, 176). Fowles's narrator highlights the way in which repetitions unite distinct temporal moments. The ending of the novel, in which Charles goes "out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" (467) recalls, for example, Charles's walk on the Cobb in the first chapter. The word "salt" in the final line particularly suggests the first description of the Cobb as "pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass" (4).

But the repetition in the narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is complicated by the double (even triple) endings of the novel: unlike most traditional narratives, the text does not have a

single ending that we can read in the beginning to make the text already a repetition. Rather than merely disrupting multidimensional time, the endings of the novel add another dimension to the narrative time: the dimension of possibility. Unrealized possibilities—what did not happen, but might have happened—are less easily characterized, though no less present in the lives of conscious organisms, than the past or the future. Gary Saul Morson, in his book *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*, describes a concept he calls “open time” to explore what happens when a narrative is not fixed in place by foreshadowing and backshadowing. Morson suggests that traditional narratives appear unnaturally fixed (“closed time”) because they do not represent the unrealized possibilities always present in human experiences of time. Foreshadowing and backshadowing (representing events as necessarily following from what came before them) particularly reinforce the sense of closed time by suggesting that the sequence of events that occurs was predetermined and necessary. Morson describes an alternative to the unrealistic constraints of these techniques, a method that he terms “sideshadowing,” the foreshadowing or suggestion of never-realized possibilities.

Fowles’s novel exaggerates the creation of sideshadows and open time within the text in order to call the reader’s attention to their centrality in any exchanges between organisms. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* not only hints at the existence of unrealized possibilities, but actually narrates them. The first ending—in which Charles returns to and marries Ernestina, Ernestina’s Aunt Tranter lives into her nineties, and Mrs. Poulteney promptly dies and goes to Hell—is only an imagined possibility, all in Charles’s head. But the novel even foreshadows this unrealized ending. When we first meet Mrs. Poulteney, the narrator carefully describes the monstrous fires always burning in her kitchen: “Never mind how much a summer’s day sweltered, never mind that every time there was a southwesterly gale the monster blew black clouds of choking fumes—the remorseless furnaces had to be fed” (18). The image of these Hellish fumes subtly foreshadows

(“sideshadows”) Mrs. Poulteney’s final abode, but Mrs. Poulteney’s ultimate residence in Hell only ever exists as a possibility (though one Charles eagerly anticipates) within the narrative. The novel also includes more subtle sideshadows. During the critical scene in which Charles first encounters Sarah on Ware Commons, the narrator notes multiple instances when Charles must choose a path. The moment just before he comes across the sleeping Sarah is especially significant:

The path climbed and curved slightly inward beside an ivy-grown stone wall and then—in the unkind manner of paths—forked without indication. He hesitated, then walked some fifty yards or so along the lower path, which lay sunk in a transverse gully, already deeply shadowed. But then he came to a solution to his problem—not knowing exactly how the land lay—for yet another path suddenly branched to his right, back towards the sea, up a steep small slope crowned with grass, and from which he could plainly orientate himself. (69)

Both the phrases “forked without indication” and the way Charles “hesitated” emphasize the uninformed choice Charles makes. Ironically, it is not a conscious choice, but Charles’s attempt to familiarize himself with the land leads to his discovery of Sarah, for he finds her sleeping at the top of the grass-crowned slope. We cannot know where the choices he did not make might have led, but the apparent randomness of Charles’s decisions—and the fact that he sees Sarah because he tries to make the “correct” one—reminds us that his meeting with Sarah (and all the consequences that make up the novel) did not have to happen, were not part of some pre-determined plan. The narrator’s explicit claim that he has not planned the events of the narrative and does not control them as though he were an omniscient god similarly reinforces the resonances of what *could have* happened instead of what did, creating within the narrative the sideshadows of unrealized possibility that characterize an organism’s constant (if not conscious) awareness of the multidimensionality of time.

Charles Scruggs, in his article “The Two Endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” describes the way the novel can be read differently in light of each of the three endings.¹⁶ Scruggs details clues

¹⁶ Scruggs argues specifically that the first (imaginary) ending is an eighteenth-century ending, the second a nineteenth-century ending, and final ending a post-modern ending.

throughout the novel that “foreshadow” each of the different endings; each conclusion retrospectively highlights different moments in the text. The open time created by the multiple conclusions of the novel illustrates the interpretive possibilities of the text. In a novel with a single ending, the retrospectively important details are set once the ending has been read; in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, however, we cannot re-read in the light of a single ending. Not only must we read in time and respond actively—but we can re-read this way as well. Each reading is an “encounter” with the text, like the encounters between Charles and Sarah, in which we respond to and re-evaluate our understanding of the novel. Any one such encounter is restricted because we cannot erase our interpretive modes. Indeed, all readers comprehend the world through culturally and socially created discourses; such subjective understandings are inherent to organisms and often critical to an organism’s reactions and interactions. Recognizing the limitations of those (unconscious) discourses does not allow us to eradicate them entirely, but instead to constantly re-read and re-interpret what we read.

Though the novel has a single ending—in the sense that it has a final page, a last word, and an ultimate punctuation mark—it does not provide the fantasy of closure of a single outcome concluding a narrative. The interpretive possibilities of the text invite the reader to re-read and re-respond, but they do not free the reader’s responses from the text itself. Because the novel as organism asks its readers to re-examine and re-interpret it, any analysis is only one possible response. Thus, reading a novel as organism inherently means *not* reading the novel as organism, opening the text up to other readings. This does not, however, ask the reader to *choose* an ending or an interpretation.¹⁷ Even if we prefer one of the endings, we cannot treat that ending as definitive, because any interpretation is always already marked by the other endings and their sideshadows.

¹⁷ Reading a novel as organism is also not the same as becoming what Katherine Tarbox calls an “evolved reader.” Tarbox argues that evolved readers learn to see beyond the text to what cannot be narrated. Reading a novel as organism in fact only privileges the reader’s response to the text itself, not to what has not been written.

The (final) ending highlights the unity of time as both the start of a new repetition (a new re-reading) and of an indistinct future:

[Charles] has already begun, though he would still bitterly deny it, though there are tears in his eyes to support his denial, to realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone or to be given up after one losing throw of the dice; but is to be, however, inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt estranging sea. (467)

Each re-reading is, finally, uncertain, and only when we, like Charles, accept this uncertainty will we genuinely bring the text to life by reading and interacting with it. The last line of the novel brings us back to the first page, and we are given the freedom not to go forward beyond the text, but to begin again. The final line of the novel—from Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite"—is already a re-reading that interprets the poem it quotes. But while the ending recalls the beginning and thus starts us off on a fresh return, the ending is also crucially unique. When Charles steps off secure, dry land onto "the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" of a fresh re-reading, he encounters no barrier blocking him. The absence of the Cobb in the closing scene extends the reading process modeled in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to other, less overtly organismal texts. This final outward gesture suggests that the concept of the novel as organism is widely applicable, but frees it to change and develop in other texts and through other readings, ultimately recognizing *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* own limitation as a single organism in a sea of literature.

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