Fowles's Enigma Variations

"Just thinking of what Barthes said"—ET, 259

When Sarah Woodruff returned to her Exeter hotel with the purchases Charles's gift of ten sovereigns had allowed her to make, she lost no time unwrapping them. These were the first things she had ever owned, and they deserved her contemplative gaze. The one the narrator describes in greatest detail, over which he lingers longest, is

a Toby jug, not . . . of Victorian manufacture, but a delicate little thing in pale mauve and primrose-yellow, the jolly man's features charmingly lacquered by a soft blue glaze (ceramic experts may recognize a Ralph Wood)... The Toby was cracked, and was to be recracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago... But unlike her, I fell for the Ralph Wood part of it. She fell for the smile. (FLW, 220)

The relic of an earlier time, this Toby ("a jug or mug... in the form of a stout old man wearing a long and full-skirted coat and a three-cornered hat"), like John Fowles's novel, carries with it something more than entertainment value. Like the smile that caught Sarah's eye, the expressive features of The French Lieutenant's Woman have made it a best seller, as was the jug. In the case of the latter, we are told, a discerning eye can see more than the charm of the surface, into a remoter past and a meaningful origin.

She did not have the least idea of the age of her little Toby. But she had a dim feeling that it had been much used, had passed through many
hands . . . and was now hers. *Was now hers*—she set it on the mantelpiece and, still in her coat, stared at it with a childlike absorption, as if not to lose any atom of this first faint taste of ownership. (*FLW*, 220)

This peculiar emphasis, for the ellipsis and italics are Fowles’s, on the importance of this vessel is all the more striking for the fact that, though it gives Sarah her first taste of ownership, it was not the first of her purchases to be opened—evidently the Staffordshire teapot, “with a pretty colored transfer of a cottage by a stream and a pair of lovers,” did not elicit such a proprietary sense.

The Toby jug will make one more appearance, just before Charles’s prospective marriage with Ernestina and a dull and respectable future are irretrievably lost by a fatal ninety seconds. It catches his eye in that Exeter room to which Sarah had fled from her self-engineered disgrace at Lyme Regis, and to which she was able to summon Charles, despite his decision never to see her again, by the three mere words “Endicott Family Hotel.”

He glanced round the small room. A newly made-up fire burned in the grate. There were some tired stems of narcissus in a Toby jug on the mantelpiece. (*FLW*, 271)

The Toby jug indeed bears a multiplicity of signs, varying with the eye of the beholder: an authentic artistic origin for the narrator, an entrancing smile and a first taste of ownership for Sarah, and now Narcissus for Charles, if literary and mythological allusions function in Fowles, the image of someone seeing himself.

Could the Toby jug be an image of Charles—his stand-in, his lieutenant? It might if Charles meant to Sarah what the Toby did, something that gave her the power and the pride of possession. Her possessive obsession is, in fact, a secret truth that Charles will not learn until the end, when he finds her again after years of search, living as Sarah Roughwood in a Pre-Raphaelite household:

> And perhaps he did at last begin to grasp her mystery. Some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny had begun; he was no more than a footsoldier, a pawn in a far vaster battle; and like all battles, it was not about love, but about possession and territory. (*FLW*, 355)

He will realize what makes her utterly different from himself, the fact that he had “an ability to give” but she “could give only to possess” (*FLW*, 364). Yet how could Charles Smithson in any way resemble the comic old toper on the jug? He doesn’t, of course, but an interesting perspective on Fowles’s novel can emerge if one is willing to read the scene of Sarah’s fascination with the Toby in the same way the narrator reads the jug, seeing in this object that has somehow fallen into his
hands something of greater age and value than Sarah can imagine. The narrator, who should by no means be confused with John Fowles, traced its origin back to Ralph Wood (1715–72, the potter who, together with his son of the same name, made the first Toby jug, soon to become extremely popular and frequently imitated). It is possible, however, to pursue further back in time, to a pre-Ralph Wood origin, not the jug itself but the scene that unites a Toby with a Sarah.

Toby is the familiar form of Tobias, the hero of the Book of Tobit, one of the most widely read texts of the Old Testament Apocrypha. His story is worth telling in some detail. Tobit, a Jew in exile in Nineveh, was a man of good works, in particular that of burying corpses that would otherwise remain above ground, often victims of execution by the Assyrian state. One evening he had left his house to dig a grave for such a corpse and, having become ceremonially defiled, had to sleep outside by a courtyard wall. Sparrows sitting on the wall dropped dung into his open eyes and made him blind. In despair, he prayed for divine assistance. Meanwhile, a woman in Ecbatana was praying to God over troubles of her own. She had been given in marriage seven times, and each husband had been killed by an evil demon before the marriage could be consummated. Tobit, now both old and blind, remembered a sum of money owed him in a distant city and, unable to go himself, decided to send his son Tobias. In view of his son’s youth and inexperience, a traveling companion is hired, who is in fact the angel Raphael in human disguise. On the first evening of the journey, Tobias goes down to the river Tigris to bathe and is startled by a fish that leaps out of the water, threatening to devour him. Raphael tells him to catch the fish, and then to cut it open and remove the heart, liver, and gall, and to keep them safe. After they eat the fish and continue along their way, Raphael begins to talk to Tobias about the woman in Ecbatana, a city along their route, informing him that she is a distant relative of his, that he therefore has a right to demand her hand in marriage, and that with the heart and liver of the fish he will be able to make a smoke that will frighten away the demon. And this takes place. The money, which will constitute Tobias’s inheritance, is retrieved as well; and the wife, the angel, and the son return to Nineveh, where Tobias cures his father’s blindness with the gall.

That blindness occurred in the most curious of ways: the father appears to have been sleeping as fish do, with his eyes open (“As my eyes were open, the sparrows’ droppings fell into my eyes and produced white films on them.” [Tobit 2:10])—and, lying there on the ground in such a state, he would also have looked like the kind of thing that
he seems to have had an obsession to conceal, an unburied corpse. The measure of that obsession, present in both father and son, can be taken from the first words Tobit speaks to Tobias in his advice before the journey, "My boy, when I die, bury me" (Tobit 4:3), and from Tobias's concern, should the demon kill him as he killed the others, that his parents would "have no other son to bury them" (Tobit 6:14) (as well as from the happy ending of the book, where, between the blessings of honored old age and inherited wealth, it is said of Tobias that "he gave his father-in-law and mother-in-law splendid funerals" [Tobit 14:13]). The fish, then, as it rose out of the water in a menacing way, might have been all the more upsetting to Tobias for its being a body that suddenly becomes unburied. It would have taken an angel's authority to convince him to grab it, preventing it from returning beneath the surface, and to cut it open to remove its hidden contents. And if not for Tobias, then at least for an attentive reader of the story, that fish is suggestive of not only a corpse but the father as well, whose eyes were open as he slept, like a corpse and like a fish.

What connection this story might have with The French Lieutenant's Woman, and in particular with the Toby jug that received Sarah's absorbing gaze, is suggested by the fact that the name of the woman Tobias wed was Sarah. Emboldened by this coincidence of names, together with the way in which the Toby jug can be seen as a figure for Charles, one could pursue the resemblance along several lines:

Charles's paternal grandfather, whose name he bears and to whom he was "nearer in temperament" than his father (FLW, 19), had an immense fascination, which Charles recently began to share, with archaeology, having "devoted a deal of his money and much more of his family's patience" to the excavation of neolithic graves (FLW, 16). This interest in disinterment, though the inverse of Tobit's obsession, does bespeak an intense concern with what is buried, and shapes the younger Charles's outlook enough for him to merit Dr. Grogan's rebuke, "When we know more of the living, that will be the time to pursue the dead" (FLW, 125).

It is when Charles had gone to the water's edge to hunt for a kind of buried water creature, the fossil of "the elusive echinoderm" (FLW, 264), that he was startled by the discovery of a corpse who came to life as Sarah Woodruff: "And there, below him, he saw a figure. For one terrible moment he thought he had stumbled on a corpse. But it was a woman asleep" (FLW, 61). A reader of Tobit alert to the importance of interment for both father and son and to the manner of Tobit's blindness would see more than a fish in what broke the
surface before Tobias's eyes. Charles, for a brief moment of terror, thought he saw a corpse. So, perhaps, did Tobias; and for both what ultimately came out of their fishing expedition was a woman.

Charles will once again go down to the water's edge, now no longer the Atlantic but an inland river, and there he will find tombs and a turning point in his life, just after the encounter with Sarah in the Exeter hotel in which he learns that she was still, despite her supposed affair with the French lieutenant, a virgin (like the seven-times-married Sarah of the Apocryphal tale, who, though known to have been with men, was still intact: "The wicked demon Asmodeus had killed them before they had been with her as is customary with wives" [Tobit 3:8]):

He took an abrupt downhill street toward the river Exe... At the bottom a small redstone church... Worn names and dates, last fossil remains of other lives, stared illegibly at him from the gravestones embedded in the floor. Perhaps the pacing up and down those stones... but something did finally bring calm and a kind of clarity... A dialogue began to form. (FLW, 280, 282)

The river Exe, along whose shore Charles here finds graves that stir him to meditation, recalls the name of another river in the novel, one where there briefly appears, through the narrator's simile, a fatherly fish. Dr. Grogan, in whom Charles found both a kindred spirit and an elder's corrective counsel, was thought in Lyme Regis to be "as excellent a catch in the river Marriage as the salmon he sat down to that night had been in the river Axe" (FLW, 120-21). What Charles heard from Grogan, who preferred "neo-ontology" to paleontology (FLW, 125), he hears in that church along the river Exe from his own inner voice. He had become more involved in death than in life, like those with "mesmerized eyes on one's dead fathers... It was as if his previous belief in the ghostly presence of the past had condemned him... to a life in the grave" (FLW, 286).

Or one could return to the Toby itself, trying once again to see it as Charles saw it, to take in all he absorbed as he glanced around the small room in the hotel where he had found Sarah. Just after the narcissus-bearing jug: "On the ceiling were blackened patches—fumes from the oil lamp; like so many spectral relics of countless drab past occupants of the room" (FLW, 271). It is in the nature of hotel rooms to have had previous occupants, but—as we will later see in Daniel Martin—it is in the nature of hotel rooms in Fowles to harbor the smoky traces of an Apocryphal ghost. Two pages later Charles and Sarah will appear to reenact the moment when Tobias
and Sarah got rid of the demon by putting into effect the angel's advice, burning the heart and liver of the fish to "make a smoke" that would fill the bridal chamber and send Asmodeus packing (Tobit 8:3). A blanket serves the purpose here, the one covering Sarah Woodruff's legs: in a moment of silence, "unendurable in its emotion, its truth bursting to be spoken," there was suddenly a small explosion in the fireplace. One or two hot coals fell onto the edge of that blanket, which began to smolder. Charles quickly grabbed it away from her legs and put out the sparks. "A smell of singed wool filled the room." Sarah's legs were now bare, he covered them again with the blanket; her hand touched his, and four seconds later they were engaged in passionate embrace (FLW, 272-73).

If Charles is in some measure following the footsteps of Tobias, he is not able to pursue that ancient journey to its successful conclusion; for despite the intervention of a Pre-Raphaelite guardianship that takes Sarah under its wing, as a prior, Raphaelite one had done for Tobias, he does not win the girl. That failure does not prevent, however, allusions to this Apocryphal tale from recurring in Fowles's subsequent fiction, most notably in Daniel Martin, whose protagonist succeeds where Charles fails; indeed, this most recent of Fowles's novels has just the kind of unambiguous and clearly happy conclusion that the earlier works, particularly The French Lieutenant's Woman and The Magus, avoided. Daniel Martin, as I hope to show, pursues a journey that seems even more closely to retrace Tobias's than did Charles's. Looking at Fowles's own itinerary from what is at present its midpoint, The French Lieutenant's Woman (the third of five works of fiction), it almost seems as if the curve of frequency of allusion to the Apocryphal text steadily rises from The Magus (1965, but in large measure written earlier) and The Collector (1963), through The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969), The Ebony Tower (1974), and Daniel Martin (1977). It almost seems this way precisely because it is only because of what happens in the third novel that it makes any sense to speak of allusions in the first two to Tobit. Things become fairly explicit in The French Lieutenant's Woman (we encounter a Toby, a Sarah, a [Pre-] Raphael—and a Ralph); but taken by themselves, the allusions in the first two novels would not have made one think of Tobias. Once, however, one sees the consistency with which, from the third novel on, elements of Tobit appear in Fowles's fiction, it is possible, though not necessarily compellingly so, to read these earlier appearances, which I will soon describe, as germs of what was later to become a continued development. As in any journey whose destination is not known in advance, there are at the beginning many possibilities; the ones that will later be seen to
have indicated the direction eventually taken were at first as indiscernible as the rest.

Nicholas Urfe, hero of *The Magus*, has hardly anything good to say about his father, whose death gave him “an almost immediate sense of relief, of freedom” (*M*, 19). But near the end of the novel, after Urfe has passed through his extraordinary learning experience at the hands of Maurice Conchis, a positive memory comes to him, a recollection of what may have been his father’s sole excellence, a delicate touch with a fishing reel:

> I remembered as a very small boy lying on the bough of a willow over a Hampshire stream; I was watching my father casting for a trout. It was his one delicacy, casting a dry fly, posing it on the water as soft as thistledown. I remembered that moment when the fish floated slowly up and hovered beneath the fly, a moment endlessly prolonged in a heart-stopping excitement; then the sudden swift kick of the tail and the lightning switch of my father’s strike; the ratcheting of the reel. (*M*, 622)

The son has somewhere learned the father’s angling skill, for Nicholas is fishing for information from his predecessor at the Phraxos school; and at the moment that he remembers his father catching trout, he succeeds in getting him to take the bait (“The fish took the fly,” he says of Mitford), and tell what he knows of Conchis, Julie, and Jane.

Frederick Clegg, the monstrous youth in *The Collector* who holds Miranda captive, was orphaned at two and raised by relatives. Uncle Dick “was as good as a father” to him (*C*, 10), and his happiest memories are of their journeys to the countryside, Clegg off collecting butterflies and Dick fishing.

Uncle Dick died when I was fifteen. That was 1950. We went up to Tring Reservoir to fish, as usual I went off with my net and stuff. When I got hungry and came back to where I left him, there were a knot of people. I thought he’d caught a whopper. But he’d had a stroke. They got him home, but he never said another word or properly recognized any of us again. (*C*, 9)

When the lottery suddenly made him rich, Clegg’s first thoughts were of the uncle who was a father to him (“besides Miranda of course”); he would have liked to “have given him the best rods and tackle and anything else he wanted. But it was not to be” (*C*, 10). And so he concentrated his attention and his newly acquired financial resources on Miranda, buying an isolated country house so that he could keep her prisoner where no one would find her, buried alive in an underground “crypt” (Miranda’s term: *C*, 118).

Both Urfe and Clegg remember their father, or the man who took the father’s place, doing what he did best, or most, or last—fishing. It is in this activity alone, transferred from a literal context to the fig-
Urfe could see, or would have wanted to see, any resemblance in himself to his father. The only thing that Urfe could pleasantly remember of his father, the only thing that he would like to think he inherited, is the same thing that completely surrounds Clegg's recollection of his fatherly uncle (minus the delicacy of the elder Urfe's skill), of whom it could almost be said that he died with his fishing boots on. Clegg's butterfly-hunting closely parallels his uncle's fishing, since they used to go out together to pursue each at the same time; Miranda Grey becomes the young lepidopterist's greatest catch, something akin to the kind of "whopper" that would have pleased Uncle Dick ("Easy does it," Clegg says to himself as he compares his captive to a caterpillar that takes months to develop, "as Uncle Dick used to say when he was into a big one" [C, 91])—something like a fish, but also something that Clegg is anxious to entomb.

There is a fishing scene in *The Ebony Tower* that might be able to hold our attention as well as Sarah's Toby jug did, for it seems a place where some indication of a deeper origin, the Apocryphal one, floats up to the surface of the text (like Urfe, fishing for information, we can sometimes savor that endlessly prolonged moment before we feel the tug on the line that Pirsig describes so well in his *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: "Watch it the way you watch a line when fishing and before long, as sure as you live, you'll get a little nibble, a little fact asking in a timid, humble way if you're interested in it.")

And like the Toby jug, it becomes in Fowles's hands a ceramic vessel:

The tugging fact here is that the "fish" (baptized thus by an ancient etymological confusion that obscured its original form, the French *écrevisse*) behaves like the Apocryphal fish, frightening the son by leaping out. "Daddy" here is Peter, a television producer interested in doing a documentary on Roland Barthes. Sally is his girl friend of the moment, though the direction the story takes will lead him to a woodland rendezvous with Catherine, with whom he shares two things (though little else: Catherine dislikes the "wretched little coffin-man" [*ET*, 258] and allows herself to be made love to only by averting her face), an interest in Barthes and the death of a spouse. Catherine is more haunted by the ghost of her husband, a writer (*ET*, 264) who committed suicide (*ET*, 252), than Peter could be by his "departed wife" (*ET*, 276)—"far from skeleton," the man for whom Catherine
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grieves beckons to her, “waiting, every moment now . . . smiling, alive, almost fleshed” (*ET*, 278).

Peter is a father in this story, at least nominally (“Oh well. My celebrated intermittent father act” [*ET*, 264]); but in the story that precedes this one in the *Ebony Tower* collection, another Peter is a son, whose father disappears, very possibly a carefully prepared suicide, drowned, his body rigged with weights so that it would not float up to the surface (“Drowned bodies need a lot of weight to stay down” [*ET*, 227]), buried in the waters of a pond named, appropriately, Tetbury. Despite the intuition of Peter’s girl friend, who becomes the investigating sergeant’s girl friend, that this is where the missing man lies, nobody with the means to do so can be persuaded to try to fish him out.

The reader of the five stories of which *The Ebony Tower* is composed faces a similarly unfinished task, that of drawing out the interconnected threads that Fowles has delicately woven—or, to change a metaphor, to reel in what he has, like Nicholas’s father, delicately cast, to see what lies buried beneath the surface of these tales that advertise themselves as *Variations*, an earlier, rejected title for which

the first professional readers, who do know my works, could see no justification . . . beyond a very private mirage in the writer’s mind. I have deferred to their judgment and, beyond this mention of it, kept the illusion to myself. (*ET*, 109)

What they are variations of is by no means apparent; at most we know that they are “variations both on certain themes in previous books of mine and in methods of narrative presentation” (*ET*, 109).

But we do know something more now about certain hidden themes in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the fact that there are names, characters, and turns of plot that seem to have their counterparts in another text, one that preexists Fowles’s work as the Toby jug preexisted Sarah’s use of it. And we also know that at certain moments, when talk turns to fathers, *The Magus* and *The Collector* join in the union of fathers and fishing, a conjunction whose third term is death. The story of Tobias and the fish has that tripartite unity because of its own turns of plot: the father blinded because he slept like a fish, with open eyes; the fish that left the water like a corpse that comes unburied; the complementarity of fishing and interment. The son who imitates his father by a kind of fishing in *The Magus*; the father in *The Collector* who became corpse-like while fishing (stricken, “he never said another word or properly recognized any of us again”); the grandson of a disturber of neolithic graves who found what he first thought was a corpse while searching for buried fish in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; the
fishing father in one story of *The Ebony Tower* whose namesake in another, somehow related, story has a father probably buried in water—these fishers, fathers, and corpses may all be variations on a certain noncanonical book; and the unity of *The Ebony Tower* that justified its original title may be discoverable by reading it in the light of what we have seen in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

But it may not be. There is an obstacle in our path, for the second of the five stories is beyond the author's control. It was written by someone else and only translated here. What is more, the first of the five is "a variation of a more straightforward kind" (*ET*, 109) on none other than that second, borrowed tale. And its foreign influence does not stop there, for the fifth story also shows signs of being under its power. What a "noncanonical" reading of the collection would have to do to succeed is to provide a theory to interpret not only more phenomena than its rival, the second story, but the very appearance of that story in Fowles's book.

The stories in the order of their appearance are:

1. "The Ebony Tower": Title piece of the collection, its setting is the woods of Brittany, where David Williams, art critic and sometime artist, has journeyed to interview Henry Breasley, a septuagenarian artist of some stature who holds quite different views from David on the nature and purpose of art. Their dinner-table conversation becomes a conflict of generations as Breasley gives an intemperate display of his disgust with modern nonrepresentational art. Though he has a wife awaiting him in Paris, Williams is tempted by Diana, "the Mouse," one of Breasley's two young assistants, during his brief stay, though in the end he is disappointed at his inability to sin boldly.

2. "Eliduc" is preceded by an authorial note that speaks of the variations of which the book is composed and introduces the *lai* of Marie de France, translated here, as a source for the preceding story—"of its mood, as also partly of its theme and setting" (*ET*, 109). Eliduc was a nobleman who was compelled to leave his native Brittany, having lost favor with his king. In his exile he became a knight errant, rendering heroic service to an English king in what is today Exeter (scene of Sarah's erotic hotel room encounter with Charles), against whom another sovereign had been waging war because his proposal of marriage to the Exeter king's daughter had been turned down. The princess falls in love with Eliduc, and he with her. But he has a wife at home, and now must go back, for he has learned that the Breton king has had a change of heart and is in need of his services. He fights his king's battles, makes peace, and then returns once more to England, where
he secretly meets princess Guilliadun and makes plans to bring her back to Brittany. A storm during the channel crossing, however, provokes the sailors to threaten to throw the princess overboard, for they know Eliduc is already married. But Guilliadun did not know, and the shock of learning it now causes her to fall into a coma so deep that Eliduc thinks she is dead. He resolves to have her buried in holy ground, and has a place in mind, a hermit's chapel in the Breton woods—the same Coetminais region that Henry Breasley would later inhabit—but when he arrives there, he finds that the hermit himself, with whom he “had often spoken” and of whom he had been “very fond” (*ET*, 129, 131), had died just the week before, his body buried in the very chapel where Eliduc had thought to bury the princess. Though his men want to go ahead and dig a grave for her, Eliduc hesitates, desiring first to obtain advice on how to consecrate the ground with some abbey or convent. He leaves her body by the altar. Meanwhile his wife sends out a spy who discovers the miraculous corpse, which shows no signs of decay. She feels sorry for them both, and as she sits by the body weeping, a weasel darts out of a wall toward the princess. A servant kills it; its mate emerges and sees that it has died, then goes out and returns with a red flower in its teeth, places it in the mouth of the dead weasel, which suddenly comes back to life. Eliduc’s wife then places the flower on the princess’s lips, and she also revives. The wife yields to her husband’s love for the girl, choosing to become a nun so that he can marry Guilliadun.

Being shared by two women is what strikes Henry Breasley, the elderly painter in the first story, as a resemblance between *Eliduc* and his own idyllic retirement in the Brittany woods, where he affords himself the luxury of two young women:

> “Damn’ good tale. Read it several times. What’s that old Swiss bamboozler’s name. Jung, yes? His sort of stuff. Archetypal and all that.” . . .

> “Those two gels now. Two gels in *Eliduc.*”

> He began to tell its story. (*ET*, 51)

Yet as that first story unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is David Williams who really seems to merit Eliduc’s role; for though he has a wife at home, he comes very close to playing “knight errant” to Diana’s “sleeping princess” (*ET*, 90–91). And *Eliduc’s* weasel also makes an unmistakable appearance in Williams’s life, but one too late to help the almost-erring husband obtain the woman he desired. His car crushes it as he leaves the Breasley estate; “a trickle of blood, like a red flower, had spilt from the gaping mouth” of the tiny corpse (*ET*, 99). Such a misplaced event effectively, if a little obviously (so obviously
one could hardly fail to notice it, as if it were a false clue), alludes to
the older story and at the same time shows how the variation can have
an outcome quite different from its theme's (as Charles's fate is a much
less happy one than Tobias's).

3. "Poor Koko," like "The Ebony Tower," features a conflict of
opinions between an older man and a younger, with the rather com-
plementary difference that whereas in the first story Henry Breasley
is the aggressor, sharpening his critique of modern trends in painting
into a personal attack on David Williams—

"Bumboy. You a bumboy, Wilson?"
This time the Mouse did not bother to correct him; or David, to answer.
"On your knees and trousers down. Solves all, doesn't it?" (ET, 42)

—in "Poor Koko" it is the younger man who both insults and injures
the older, who takes it as passively as did Williams. This third story is
the account of an elderly writer whose peace is disturbed by a young
burglar who does more than steal: he throws away the man's glasses,
rendering him nearly blind, lectures him on the inequities of capitalist
society, and burns the manuscript and notes of his work in progress, a
critical biography of Thomas Love Peacock.

The story's title is curious. Though one might have thought, the
narrator tells us, that Koko was an idiosyncratic spelling for the clown
Coco, it is in fact a Japanese word for "correct filial behavior, the proper
attitude of son to father" (ET, 176). The title, then, makes the conflict
between the old man and the burglar explicitly one between father and
son. But it may contain yet another clue—itself a pun ("poor clown,"
we are told, would in fact "do for a first level of meaning" [ET, 175]),
"Poor Coco/Koko" is very close to the name of the subject of the old
man's manuscript and notes, whose destruction by the intruder is a
source of great puzzlement. And that name is itself suggestive, evoking
both a bird and eyes, the iridescent *ocelli* of the peacock's tail that
justified its mythic identification with hundred-eyed Argus.

Something similar to what we saw in the appearance of Sarah's Toby
jug seems at work here. There, two levels of understanding were revealed
by the narrator: the first was what impelled Sarah to buy the Toby—
"she fell for the smile"; the second was what led the narrator to collect
the very same jug, his knowledge of its real value, the authenticity of
its origin—"unlike her, I fell for the Ralph Wood part of it." In some-
what the same way, the reader of "Poor Koko" is informed that, although
he may have fallen for the smile of the clown, there really is a more
meaningful origin to the title. But we have seen that the explanation
of the Toby jug's deeper sense is itself a false bottom, concealing yet
an older and more meaningful origin, one to which a meditation on the name Toby would lead. In fact, the “Ralph Wood part” could itself give way to another name, Roughwood, the surname into which Sarah eventually transformed her original Woodruff. The coincidence is rather similar to that of P...Coco/Koko and Peacock, and it is highly suggestive—as if Sarah’s ultimate (for Charles will never pry her loose from there) retreat at the end of the novel into a Pre-Raphaelite household under the name of Roughwood were, on some deeper level of the text, a return to her own origins; now a “Roughwood”—that is, on that level of a novel where the text, like a dreamer, made up as it is of words, associates things by their names, a “Ralph Wood”—she becomes a companion piece to the Toby, both now revealed as products of the same hand, whether one thinks of the potter or the Apocryphal author.

What then is the deeper meaning of “Poor Koko” whose existence the narrator’s linguistic explanation both signals and hides? The place to look is surely the name of the author to which the old man in the story is devoting his writing and research, all the more because it is the seemingly senseless destruction of these notes and manuscript pages that poses the great enigma of the story. Like Ralph Wood, Peacock has a historical reality of his own, and is a favorite of the author’s, facts that could camouflage his real importance here. What he does in “Poor Koko” is to occupy the old man’s attention so completely, in the opinion of the young thief, that he prevents him from seeing the reality of the present. Absorbed in the study of what he described to the burglar as “a long-dead novelist” (ET, 153), he was less interested in the present than the past, in the living than the dead—like Charles Smithson, who reproached himself for becoming like the fossils he used to collect, for having “mesmerized eyes on one’s dead fathers instead of on one’s unborn sons” (FLW, 285–86). “Man, your trouble is you don’t listen hard enough,” the thief tells him, shortly after he rejects the young man’s suggestion that he turn his writing skill to a subject closer at hand, the thief himself (ET, 161–62). Later, he admits to a deadened power of perception: “I believe my young demon was right in one thing. I was guilty of a deafness” (ET, 175).

This deafness is paralleled by another failure in perception, this one imposed on the writer by his demonic intruder, the blindness that resulted from the thief’s throwing his thick-lensed glasses out the window. A faith in the author’s precision in his choice of words, a value the old man defends against the careless speech of the young burglar (“I am convinced that the fatal clash between us was of one who trusts and reveres language and one who suspects and resents it” [ET, 175]), can lead us to see an even closer parallel between his situation and Henry
Breasley’s than that which resides in the fact that each is an older man arguing with a younger. Breasley was blind, too, for a while; over a dinner of quenelles of pike (a fish about which there was something strange, at least to the guard dog who tried to attack it when it was landed that afternoon [ET, 27]) and lamb, much drinking, and considerably heated argument with David Williams, there began to be “a glaze in Breasley’s eyes. He did not seem drunk . . . ; just that ocular symptom of possession by an old demon” (ET, 37). Strictly speaking, then, his blindness and the old scholar’s in “Poor Koko” were both caused by some kind of demon, a word the robbery victim twice used to describe his assailant (ET, 169, 175).

At first, the O.E.D. reminds us, a demon was “a supernatural being of a nature intermediate between that of gods and men; an inferior divinity, spirit, genius (including the souls or ghosts of deceased persons . . . )”; the connotation of inherent evil was a later, non-Greek addition. It is not clear that the original sense might not be at work in “Poor Koko.” For what if this were something more than a story about a burglary, and something more than the account of a gratuitous act of violence? What if the young visitor were something more than a hoodlum whose way of life and manner of speech merely confirmed the critic of Peacock in his old habits of thought? The old man is from the beginning amazed that the thief should take such an interest in his own personality: “Of all the fictional horrors connected with the situation that I had ever seen or read of, not one had included motivational analysis of the victim from its prime cause [i.e., from the perpetrator of the crime]” (ET, 148). What if the demonic intruder were some messenger from beyond the old man’s normal experience, come to teach him a lesson, to make him see a connection between his practice of blocking off life’s reality with the screen of his absorption in Peacock (as a character in Daniel Martin, likewise an old man, will say of how he spent so much of his own life in the study of an ancient culture: “I saw my papyri as screens I had put to hide what I did not wish to understand” [DM, 559]) and the semi-blindness through which he is made to witness the events of that night?

What makes it possible to speak of such things is that there is something that organizes the text of “Poor Koko” beyond the old man’s reminiscence. Fowles, obviously. One can see it more concretely, though, in the way the very wordplay in which the narrator (the old man) indulges in his discussion of the story’s title escapes his control. He only meant it to lead his reader to read “clown” where he should read “filial behavior.” But like the sorcerer’s apprentice, one soon discovers that the magic word, once pronounced, is not easily restrained. The old man
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sees himself as the keeper of a magic power, that of words, and he supposes that what the thief “must have resented most was the application of this precious and denied gift of word-magic to no more than another obscure word-magician,” Peacock (ET, 175). But the particular instance of “word-magic” that the narrator displays, “Poor Coco/Koko,” finds its own application to that other word-magician, apparently without his knowledge.

And even the uncultured youth seems able to manipulate the magical **cock** that floats between Coco and Koko, and from there to the name of the writer in whom his victim is so engrossed. Though he surely does so unknowingly, his parting shot is a gesture that prompts an extended semiotic analysis on the part of the elderly critic:

*His hand moved; I thought he was going to strike me. But all I was presented with, a foot from my face, as if to make sure that even someone as “blind” as I was could not mistake the gesture, was the yellow hand clenched into a fist—and incomprehensibly, with the thumb cocked high.*

The sign of mercy, when there was no mercy. (ET, 164–65)

He held his hand in “that inexplicable position” for at least five seconds. Later, thinking back on all that had happened, the old man began to see “an important clue in that curious last gesture” (ET, 172). It did not signify mercy; nor did it have for the young man any of the meanings he could observe in its use among the workmen demolishing a building across the street from his London apartment—“yes,” “I understand,” or “stop.” The aggression clearly present in it ruled these meanings out, and led him eventually to recognize it in a football player’s salute before a game, a promise of victory.

But he may have missed the point. In his position, of course, a mere character in a story that is itself part of a larger whole, a variation among others if we can believe the author’s promise, he could not be expected to see that this gesture that he thinks is a clue and tries so hard to explain is a kind of semiotic pun, whose translation into English, which he writes out four times, three in the space of less than a page, is yet another play on the word that links the story’s ambiguous title to the author with a fowl’s name, a **cocker** thumb.

And, speaking of names, of which there is a conspicuous absence among the real characters of this story, the only one given, even briefly, to the demonic visitor evokes a familiar ghost, or angel. **Raffles** (“I got up and started to dress,” the victim of the crime recounts, “and to review what I had deduced of the new-style Raffles downstairs” [ET, 155]), Hornung’s stylish criminal hero, has more than one good reason to be a clever anagram on Raphael, the angel whose intervention cured a father’s blindness. One is that anagrams do function in Fowles: Alison,
"an anagram made flesh" (*M*, 668), as "the better part of Nicholas" in *The Magus* (*M*, 271), and "S. Wolfe" for Fowles himself in *Daniel Martin* (*DM*, 17). Another is that Raphael, already present in the name of the household where Sarah finds refuge, the Pre-Raphaelites', has already found an anagram in the Christian name of the man who first created the Toby whose appearance and reappearance in that novel allow us to see the relevance of the Apocryphal tale.

4. Foul play is a possibility Inspector Jennings must consider in the case of the disappearance of John Marcus Fielding in "The Enigma," a detective story with no solution—or at least none officially sanctioned by the narrator. We are engaged in any event in a quite different work of detection, trying to discover whether the stories in *The Ebony Tower* are indeed variations, as their author says they are, and if so, on what original theme. The trouble with Fielding's disappearance, as Jennings puts it in a conversation with Isobel Dodgson, girl friend of the missing man's son, is that if it were fiction the author would have to be faulted for having forgotten "to plant any decent leads" (*ET*, 223). But there are a number of leads in what we have so far read that point to a possible solution to the enigma of the supposed variations, a solution that is not without relevance to Fielding's fate.

More than one reviewer of *The Ebony Tower* has claimed for it a unity arising from the authority of the author's "Personal Note," or at any rate from a misreading of what is said there concerning the place of *Eliduc* in the collection. The source of the difficulty is probably the following sentence:

> However, *The Ebony Tower* is also a variation of a more straightforward kind, and the source of its mood, as also partly of its theme and setting, is so remote and forgotten—though I believe seminal in the history of fiction—that I should like to resurrect a fragment of it. (*ET*, 109)

That fragment is *Eliduc*, but whether *The Ebony Tower* named here is the book or the story is not immediately clear. Rene Kuhn Bryant must have thought it meant the book when she wrote that "Fowles has contrived five variations on a single source, the Celtic romance... Whether others would recognize a common base and see a web of intricate relationships among these five stories, without the prompting proferred in 'a personal note' inserted in the middle [sic] of the book, is debatable." Likewise a reviewer in the *Economist* comments that "the other stories [other than the first] are equally satisfying explorations of the relations proposed in 'Eliduc,' if much less obviously so." So much less obvious are the ways in which such a story as "Poor Koko," to cite a particularly unlikely case, is a variation on *Eliduc* that very little has actually been said about this "web of intricate relation-
ships." Barry Olshen, in a book that surveys all of Fowles's works up to and including *Daniel Martin*, argues two points, however: one, that the "courtly love stress on 'keeping faith,' especially in sexual relations, which is central to 'Eliduc,' is an important specific theme running through . . . the stories of *The Ebony Tower*"; the other, that the stories contain variations on the motif of the ordeal so characteristic of the medieval romance. Like the medieval knight errant, each of Fowles's protagonists can be seen to undergo a kind of ordeal at a crucial point in his or her life. The experience upsets the character's equilibrium, thereby altering his self-image and the direction in which he hitherto thought his life had been heading.¹⁰

One can see that this may be true of David Williams, the young man in "The Ebony Tower" who is troubled by his encounter with Breasley's muse; much less so of the unnamed Peacock biographer in "Poor Koko," who though he admitted to a deafness will hardly change the direction of his life; John Marcus Fielding certainly, if one accepts Isobel's theory of his disappearance, a suicide brought on by a revulsion at the direction that his life had taken; only with difficulty in "The Cloud," for Peter is a mere sexual adventurer, and though Catherine is undergoing a crisis of grief over her husband's death, it is hard to see her in the role of a knight errant. When one separates out the knightly connotation that allows Olshen to describe as medieval the kind of stressful experience that the protagonists in many, or most, of the stories ever written undergo, there is little left that is specific to *The Ebony Tower*. His other argument, that courtly love and faith-keeping pervade the stories, is in no way applicable to "Poor Koko" (where there is no love), "The Enigma" (where keeping faith does not come into question), or "The Cloud" (where it doesn't matter).¹¹

But perhaps the greatest obstacle to seeing a "stress on 'keeping faith'" and a life-changing ordeal as central themes uniting the foreign body in the text with the other four stories is precisely that one does not place stress in *Eliduc* on the high value of keeping faith, nor does the knight in question undergo any ordeal at all. Things are too easy for Eliduc for there to be any chance that his life will change—a life characterized by repeated faith-breaking, to his wife, the princess, and her father. As Constance Hieatt points out, Eliduc is typical of the men in Marie de France's lays: selfish, opportunistic, and totally at odds with the chivalric ideal.¹²

So what then is the nature of the relation of *Eliduc* to the other stories? And of what kind of variations is *The Ebony Tower* composed that it could justify its author's original title, *Variations*? Ought one to seek a model in the musical variations that keep appearing in Fowles's
novels, Bach's Goldberg—a vivid memory for Miranda Grey of a moment when she felt the ultimate sadness at the heart of the universe (C, 176), the music Maurice Conchis played to reduce his German lieutenant to tears (M, 422), "the precise baroque complexity" that suggested to Daniel Martin, listening with Jane, "a deep intimation of other languages, meaning-systems, besides that of words" (DM, 600)? If so, one would find a collection of variations that do not once repeat the melody of their theme, but that are united by a common harmonic ground, first found in the original aria. And every third variation but the last is a kind of variation on itself, forming a progression of nine canons each based on a distance one step greater than the last. Such a structure allows each of the thirty Goldberg Variations to have a melody of its own and yet still be faithful to the theme, a freedom that the original title suggests: "Aria with Diverse Variations." And the subset of canons, linked to each other in ways that the other variations are not, as well as engaged in variations on themselves, increases the measure of that liberty as well as the complex precision of which Fowles's hero speaks. But it also suggests ways in which one could interpret the place of The Ebony Tower in the Fowles corpus since 1969: The French Lieutenant's Woman, as we have seen, and Daniel Martin, as I will argue, both allude to the story of Tobias in the manner of diverse variations on a common theme. Their story lines bear much less resemblance to each other than they do to that of Tobit. The Ebony Tower, too, plays upon that Apocryphal theme, but in a more complicated way. Like the Goldberg's canons, it has its own imitative impulses; the stories allude to each other in fragmentary ways—but not always with reference to Eliduc: we have already seen, for example, that "The Ebony Tower" and "Poor Koko" have parallel confrontations between a younger man and an older during which the older man undergoes a kind of blindness, a situation for which there is no equivalent in Eliduc. This old man's blindness becomes specifically a father's blindness in "Poor Koko," thanks to the title given the story and its explanation; The Ebony Tower thus has at its center an important element of the Tobias story. Whether it constitutes an allusion depends on what is going on around it, in the rest of the book—and in the rest of Fowles. The author's talk about variations both with The Ebony Tower and in its relation to other works of his gives us the freedom to think "laterally," as Isobel does to arrive at her solution of "The Enigma" (ET, 221). We might also bear in mind what another of Fowles's knowing women, Catherine in "The Cloud," says in explaining another mystery (Roland Barthes): "But the context is a kind of countermanding sign. It trumps" (ET, 261).
What is going on on the other side of “Poor Koko” is yet another argument between a father and a son, a political dispute whose active phase ended years before, when the left-leaning son gave up trying to convince his right-of-center father (ET, 200). Despite enormous differences of context and tone, it would have had some basic similarities to the dispute between the scholar and the thief in “Poor Koko,” for both arguments involved issues of property and social justice. The elderly writer is unmoved by his intruder’s appeals to vague Marxist ideals, yet he does come away from the experience with an awareness of some shortcoming on his part, a certain deafness; likewise, John Marcus Fielding, according to Isobel, though not necessarily undergoing a change of politics, did acquire some new knowledge:

All this dawns on him. . . . Slowly. . . . He’s like a fossil—while he’s still alive. . . . Even his own son despises him. . . . From being very privileged and very successful, he feels himself very absurd and very failed. (ET, 224, 226)

This realization, according to Isobel’s version of what might have happened (an exegesis that stands unchallenged in the story—the only response Inspector Jennings can make is to fall in love with her; it was a seductive solution), led Fielding to take his own life, drowning himself in the ancestral pond. The attraction of such a death is that, if properly done, it leaves no body. What Fielding wants is not just self-immolation but a scenario that “will get him immortality of a kind. . . . The one thing people never forget is the unsolved. . . . On condition that it stays that way. If he’s traced, found, then it all crumbles” (ET, 226). He’s untraceable because he’s buried at Tetbury, with water for a headstone.

This, too, like the paternal blindness in “Poor Koko,” does not remind us so much of Eliduc (where there is, nevertheless, a buried fatherly figure, but in earth, and in a marked grave) as it does of another story, the one in which something suddenly rises up out of the water in a manner that Fielding strove to prevent:

“He still has to sink himself. Drowned bodies need a lot of weight to stay down.”

“Something inflatable? An air mattress? Car tire? Then deflate it when he’s floated far enough out?”

“You’re beginning to give me nightmares.” (ET, 227)

A chain of circumstances linked the blinded father in Tobit to the corpses that he buried and to sleeping, open-eyed fish—and that peculiar father in turn to the fish that rose up to meet Tobias. Fielding, the water-buried father, here lies in a context that places him alongside
another "father" with Apocryphal qualities: a concern with the dead, and a blindness that, as the story progresses, becomes more and more a metaphor for the deadening of the senses that has resulted from his exclusive preoccupation with a long-dead Peacock—an author whose name, already implicated in a series of word associations, brings us back to the association of birds with eyes that lies at the origin of Tobit's blindness.

5. If "Poor Koko" and "The Enigma" seem to bear little relation to *Eliduc*, the second of the stories in the collection and a text that has sometimes appeared, because of its obvious difference in origin (being Fowles's translation of a medieval tale) and because of what is said in the "Personal Note" that precedes it, to be a likely candidate for the role of the theme on which the four other stories would be variations, "The Cloud" on the other hand, fifth and last tale in *The Ebony Tower*, does appear to repeat some of the characters and events of Marie de France's lay. Catherine, like the comatose princess in *Eliduc*, behaves as if she were dead. In the beginning of "The Cloud," she "lay stretched, as if biered," in the sun of Central France (not, by the way, the locale of *Eliduc*, which took place partly in Brittany); and toward the end of the story "Catherine lies, composing and decomposed, writing and written. . . . Young dark-haired corpse with a bitter mouth" (*ET*, 279). Part of her reason for feeling this way is the distinct impression that she is a character in someone else's novel (a feeling that Isobel attributed to Fielding in her scenario of his disappearance): "as if one had done it before one had, knowing it planned, proven, inevitable" (*ET*, 278).

Where had one done it—in *Eliduc*, or somewhere else? The scene that Catherine is about to reenact, with Peter, suggests the former, but not uniquely so. Peter is wandering in the wilderness, having left the picnicking party behind. After a half-hour in the brush and boulders that lie between the river and the cliff, he decides to return. The way back is not entirely clear. "It was like a natural maze, though the cliffs behind meant one knew roughly what direction to take" (*ET*, 279). Peter is in fact wandering in a landscape very similar to the Undercliff where Charles Smithson, in his search for echinoderm fossils, stumbled across the sleeping body of Sarah Woodruff, which he took at first to be a corpse—that, too, had been a rough terrain wedged between the cliff and the shore, a kind of marginal no-man's-land of more than usual wildness (*FLW*, 58).

He had misjudged the distance. . . . Then he nearly trod on a snake.

It was gone almost before he saw it. But some sort of pattern on its back? He was almost sure. It must have been an adder. It would certainly be an adder when he got back to tell them. (*ET*, 279)
The snake will prove useful; Peter's desire to find a way to profit from its appearance, perhaps to add a bit to make it more interesting, is already evident. He will soon get a more immediate opportunity. "Then suddenly his little five-minute ordeal was at an end. He came on a path that led downhill toward the river; it was faint and sinuous, but it had purpose" (*ET*, 279). It will lead him to Catherine, lying on her back in her underclothes and remembering a graveyard seduction ("As he took one once, in a churchyard; and wrote Having among graves. One did not like: the poem, not the having" [*ET*, 278]). The snake Peter glimpsed gives him an excuse to break in on her privacy: "Sorry. Thought I'd better warn you. I've just seen an adder" (*ET*, 280). What happens next, after an application of sun cream, justifies Fowles's publisher's blurbs about sensual storytelling. Though he doesn't entirely revive her (Catherine will remain behind when the group, Peter included, leaves; some readers have thought, without much justification, that she commits suicide at the end), Peter does gain entry by means of the snake, as Eliduc won his undisturbed enjoyment of Guiliadun through another small, darting animal, the weasel that bore the magic of her resurrection.

Not only here but in another instance as well does "The Cloud" allude to *Eliduc*—and sweep up "The Ebony Tower" in its net, strongly suggesting through what it has in common with that story that both are somehow under *Eliduc's* spell. It is the made-up tale that Catherine finally found herself telling Emma, Annabel's daughter, after having waited some time for the "ghost of even the simplest narrative" to appear (*ET*, 265). "Once upon a time there was a princess": this was almost as far as the fiction went; the rest is Catherine's own story, the story of that day—the picnic, her withdrawal from the family group, her hope of rescue. But one detail gives a special meaning, of which Catherine must remain unaware, to the twist with which she makes the story more vivid for her listener by revealing that it happened in "this very same place ... just where we're sitting" (*ET*, 268), for to say that the princess, shy and timid as she was, looked

"Like a mouse."
"Just like a mouse." (*ET*, 268)

is to bring us back to another story that happened in "this very same place," in the pages of the same book we're reading now, that of Diana in "The Ebony Tower," whose other and perhaps more-often-used name was "the Mouse" (*ET*, 18 ff.). Like Catherine, who described herself as "the odd woman out" (*ET*, 240), "Di's the odd one out" (*ET*, 67). Both (or all three, when one counts Catherine's fictive princess) inhabit the woods and await a prince's rescue.
It is not the fairy tale Catherine tells Emma that recalls Marie de France's lay, but rather its combination with Catherine's own situation later in "The Cloud." The reader can make the connection between Catherine's princess quality, gathered from the way she retells her own story when she spins a tale for Emma, and her corpse-like nature toward the end, when Peter discovers her after finding the snake. That the first story, the one that bears the title of the collection, is a "straightforward variation" on *Eliduc* is something for which we almost have the author's word, if we understand that statement in the "Personal Note" ("However, *The Ebony Tower* is also a variation of a more straightforward kind, and the source of its mood, as also partly of its theme and setting." [ET, 109]) in the only way that makes any sense, given the absence of medieval mood, theme, or setting in "Poor Koko" and "The Enigma": that it refers to the story, not the book.¹⁴

The influence of *Eliduc* is, then, only partial. And the recurrence of blinded or comatose or water-buried fathers in the first three of the four stories that Fowles wrote in the collection bears the trace of another, more ancient source. The stories are united, but not as much by *Eliduc* as by something else. Even "The Ebony Tower," the story the author puts forward as a variation on the medieval text, has elements of the Tobias story—the blinded father (that Breasley is to Williams as a father to a son becomes more and more apparent as one reads "Poor Koko" and "The Enigma," where much of their situation is repeated) and the suspicious fish (the pike that spooked the dog). And "The Cloud," last of the four Fowles stories in the book, has a "fish" that threatens to leap out at a father's son, in a scene the author freezes on a teacup, a ceramic to set beside the Ralph Wood one with which we began.

Like the fish that the Apocryphal youth disassembled, assigning under the angel's guidance some of its inner fragments to one purpose and some to another, realizing that his catch could serve both to rescue the maiden and cure his father's blindness, *The Ebony Tower* also lends itself to a certain dissection (read, consumed, victim of the hunger it excites in the reader, it can resemble the plump salmon that "lay in anatomized ruins" after Charles and Grogan were done with it [FLW, 122]), and a multiple use. Like another set of variations, Elgar's fourteen "Enigma" variations, Fowles's suite may appear to follow one theme only to point to another, a hidden, enigmatic one of which the apparent theme is really the counterpoint.¹⁵ Like Fowles, Elgar announced the presence of his theme, but declined to identify it. To find that the second of Fowles's five stories, the one he did not write, is really a counterpart pointing to another, in this case Apocryphal, theme.
Fowles's Enigma Variations

is not necessarily to discover that Marie de France was retelling the more ancient story. As Catherine pointed out, explaining Barthes, the context countermands (we will later see how this is true in Barthes, in a book Catherine hadn't read); the four stories with which Fowles envelops *Eliduc* have the power to trump, to transpose, to change the key of this story about a corpse revived in the presence of a buried father.

Williams's relationship to Breasley, the thief's to the elderly scholar, and Peter Fielding's to his father (as well as, in a larger context, Urfe's to Conchis and Charles's to Grogan) create a harmonic context that invites us to consider *Eliduc'*s relation to the monk in the Coetminais woods. The knight's fondness for the hermit and the fact that they often conferred, as if he came to seek advice, are explicitly mentioned (*ET*, 129, 131).\(^{16}\) It is striking that the two bodies, the hermit and the princess, the dead and the living, should occupy practically the same space, the chapel where a miracle is about to happen. Why it takes place there may well have something to do with that double presence—as if the tomb could not hold more than one corpse. *Eliduc* would in fact have buried the princess alive had the hermit not died, had his own grave not occupied the very ground intended for her.

It may also have something to do with the kind of strange conjunction of father and bride that the *Tobias* story brings about with its amphibious fish—itself ambiguous, representing, as in a dream, both the father left behind and the erotic awakening to come (more recent translations—the Jerusalem and *The New English Bible*—reveal that the fish's attentions were really directed toward that part of the boy's body which in other contexts often stands for the penis: “and a huge fish leapt out of the water and tried to swallow the boy's foot” [*Tobit* 6:2 in *The New English Bible*]),\(^{17}\) the fish also bears a double content in a literal sense. It finds its counterpart in the weasel: To save the girl, one had first to seize the creature (“Catch it! . . . Don't let it escape!” [*ET*, 131]; “Take hold of the fish!’ And the boy seized the fish and threw it up on the land” [*Tobit* 6:3]), then take possession of the magic that lay inside (the red flower in the weasel's mouth; the organs of the fish). Not by itself does the weasel form part of the counterpoint that Fowles's *Eliduc* (an attribution that has to do not with any departure in translation from the original but with the fact that he makes it part of another text, that of the stories in *The Ebony Tower*; it is now, for the moment, his), like Elgar's enigma theme, forms with his hidden but traceable theme, for its magic most likely has another origin, one not related, as far as one could tell without a great deal more spadework, to *Tobit*. Jean Rychner in his edition of Marie's *Lais* speaks of “an old tradition according to which certain animals who know of the resus-
citating herb allow themselves to be caught by someone who is then able to bring a corpse back to life.” Fowles’s Ebony Tower stories, however, repeat and vary Eliduc’s weasel in such a way as to transform it into something like a fish: the weasel appeared as a weasel in “The Ebony Tower,” when David Williams ran over it with his car, though not before first appearing in the guise it will later assume in “The Cloud,” that of a snake:

Something orange-brown . . . oddly sinuous, almost like a snake, but too small for a snake, ran across the road. . . . It was a weasel. (ET, 99)

It appears as a snake when it crosses Peter’s path in “The Cloud”; the impression that he could read some sort of pattern on its back leads him to say it was an adder. But another pattern, more readily verifiable, emerges with this sighting of the serpent, for it is the second time a snake has caught Peter and the reader’s attention. Earlier that day:

“Daddy! Daddy! There’s a snake!” . . .
“Tom, keep back!” shouts Peter.
. . . They see the snake swimming sinuously along the stone bank, its head making a ripple. . . . The snake disappears among some yellow iris in the shallow water at the foot of the terrace wall. With Peter everything is always about to disappear. (ET, 237)

The snake that Peter found before he saw Catherine was also glimpsed at the point of vanishing (“It was gone almost before he saw it”); the earlier snake prefigures the adder’s appearance, differing from it in one important regard: like Tobias’s river monster, it is first seen in the water, becoming dangerous only should it leave the river and approach the boy on the shore. The trail of a persistent adjective (and adverb) links this sinuously swimming snake not only to the path, “faint and sinuous,” that suddenly appeared to Peter after his serpentine encounter, winding its way down to Catherine and the river, but also to the ”oddly sinuous” weasel in “The Ebony Tower” that so clearly finds its origin in the weasel that led to the princess’s rescue.

Peter’s son Tom’s discovery of the snake in the water is paralleled by his father’s pursuit, later that day, of other fauna in the same river. In a passage quoted earlier, Tom is led to see “what Daddy is looking for.” This time it is the son who is frightened: ”The little boy stares, then flinches back when one of the crayfish tries to jump out” (ET, 246). His fear recalls the alarm that may have prompted Breasley’s dog to attack the fish as it came out of the water, reeled in on the fisherman’s line; that incident from the first story in the collection, which finds its
altered reflection in the last, remains a troubling detail in the background of “The Ebony Tower,” even if only because the reason it happened is never explained. The fisherman in question, Breasley’s peasant gardener, had murdered his father years before (ET, 62). Had the dog not been with him that afternoon, it would have been attacking David instead of the fish, so that both the man and his fishing partner represent a disquieting potential for violence: “Breasley bent and wagged a finger over the dog’s head, he was to save his teeth for thieves; David was glad he had chanced to arrive when the animal was off the premises” (ET, 27)—a fleeting thought that reinforces the parallel already evident between Williams and Breasley and the criminal intruder and the Peacock scholar, for David, though there by invitation, had had to enter the artist’s estate like a thief, climbing over the gate (ET, 4). Somehow the fish had taken his place.

If Peter’s gaze is drawn by snakes that swim out of sight (and by opportunities as if they were swimming snakes: “Peter, always eager to set things going, to bring things together . . . before the main chance disappeared, like a snake into a clump of yellow iris” [ET, 243]), Catherine’s is drawn by fishermen, or at least by one in particular whose seriousness of purpose contrasts with Peter and the other picnickers’ sense of play. Just after the teacup “transfer scene” in which Sally shows Tom the crayfish his father is looking for, and the creature threatens to leap out,

[a] figure appears, from the trees, from the way they came: a fisherman, a peasant come fishing, in rubber boots and faded blues. . . . They stop looking for crayfish a second. . . . Perhaps simply because he is a serious fisherman, he has a function in the day. The frivolous ones turn back to their pursuit. Only Catherine watches the blue back till it finally disappears. . . . And leaves the water, as if he draws her after him. (ET, 246–47)

She leaves the group, wandering in search of her own secret place in the woods; later, her tranquility will be broken by Peter, who will stumble across her supine body and sunglass-shaded eyes, having already stumbled across the snake.

What catches their eye, fisherman and fast-moving river wildlife, also catches ours, leads us on, either toward some main chance “to bring things together” or to some Undercliff, some forgotten margin of rough, wooded land between the cliff where farmland and meadow end and the water’s edge, to a place where we are made to feel we have been before—for Catherine, because she feels as one who “lies, as in a novel by an author one no longer admires . . . as if one had done it before
one had” (ET, 278); for us, because we know one has, as Sarah Woodruff, who was similarly discovered, lying on her back in the grass, so well concealed one might not have seen her at all:

She lay on her back. . . . Her body was almost hidden in the long early summer grass; so nearly hidden he might have missed her. (ET, 280)

She had chosen the strangest position, a broad, sloping edge of grass some five feet beneath the level of the plateau, and which hid her from the view of any but one who came, as Charles had, to the very edge. (FLW, 61)

A certain perspective is required, and a willingness to go to the edge, to look beyond the boundary that limits a story to its own plot, in order to see that space, which for Fowles has a particular sense of place, where one comes across a character one recognizes in the way a ceramic expert tells a Ralph Wood, seeing in her a deeper past, a meaningful origin. Behind Catherine there is Sarah, and behind her another.

What could be found in The Ebony Tower in fragmentary form—separated, like the various parts of Tobias’s fish, from an original unity—appears in Daniel Martin of a piece with the plot, seeming to guide it with the kind of “supernatural pattern” with which the title character from the beginning feels threatened (DM, 46). The fish that found its avatar in the weasel, and in the snake in water and the snake on land, surfaces again in the boyhood memory that suddenly comes to Daniel on the occasion of his discovery of a corpse in a river. What happens in the rest of the novel, in particular at its end, flows from the circumstances of that discovery, behind which lies the memory that itself almost seems a remembrance of what has gone before (in The Ebony Tower, in The French Lieutenant’s Woman), with a sureness that hints that in this novel we are closer than we were before to the track of the Apocryphal journey.

The discovery itself functions as a memory in the story of the novel, one that will help the hero achieve a union with the woman who was with him that day, for it will remind him, decades later, that their coming together—the eventual marriage toward which this long novel tends—would in fact be a reunion. Daniel and Jane were already united by their discovery of the corpse, and more than that by the event that followed it and that it seemed to cause. That he and Jane should have been together at all that day was unusual. They were each part of another couple: Jane was Anthony’s fiancée; Daniel’s future wife was her sister Nell. All were college friends at Oxford. In a punt on the Cherwell River, the two were headed for a quiet spot among the reeds near the bank when their boat was halted by some soft obstruction. Daniel was in the back, with the pole; it was Jane who first looked over
the side. She suddenly turned back, horror-struck. Daniel steps forward, and sees

[j]ust beneath the surface of the water, pushed down by the punt's nose, a naked human buttock, grayish-white. There is an opening in the reeds where the back and head must lie. The bottom of the legs are in the water, invisible beneath the punt. (DM, 23)

When he pushes the boat away, he can see "the hideous, obscure shape bob slowly to the surface" (DM, 23). They call for help; someone takes charge of recovering the body. It was a woman. Later, on the bank, their faces turned away from the horror in the water (flesh that looked like what it contained: "the gray buttocks like uncooked tripe" [DM, 54]), Daniel speaks to Jane of a hidden memory from childhood:

"When I was a kid, helping with the harvest during the war, a rabbit got caught in the mower blades of the reaper." But he doesn't go on.
She stares out over the river. "I know what you mean. Like things in dreams."
"It's all I can remember about that day now. The whole summer." (DM, 26)

The reader of the novel will also remember that scene, which took place in the opening chapter. The rabbits' presence in the field of corn was signaled by "a stirring of ears, a ripple of shaken stems, like a troutwave in a stream"—this in a field marked by the name Fishacre (DM, 7). What makes Daniel Martin remember that incident now is that it was, like the discovery of the waterlogged corpse, an unexpected, perhaps illuminating, confrontation with death.

The last swathe. Then a scream of pain, like a tiny child's, from the hidden blades. . . . A rabbit drags away, its hind legs sliced off. The boy who stooked runs and lifts it: the red stumps. (DM, 8)

The boy is Daniel, and the moment the narration changes from third to first person, the moment the boy becomes the man and the writer who tells his own story, is also the moment he repeats the gesture by which Tobias passed from youth to manhood, when he seized the fish and cut out its heart, liver, and gall.

He sits with his back to a beech-trunk, staring down through foliage at the field. Without past or future, purged of tenses; collecting this day, pregnant with being. . . . Inscrutable innocent, already in exile. . . .

I feel in his pocket and bring out a clasp-knife; plunge the blade in the red earth to clean it of the filth from the two rabbits' liver, intestines, stench. He stands and turns and begins to carve his initials on the beech-tree. . . . Adieu, my boyhood and my dream. (DM, 10)

The difference is that, though like Tobias he has begun a journey away from home, Daniel's exile will allow him to win the bride but not to
return to his father, and that for him it is the knife itself that he will have to learn to use, the instrument with which he begins a writing career grounded in the distance that has already begun to separate him from his past.

His first literary success, a play, *The Empty Church*, would be an attempt to cast off a dead father's influence, "to exorcise my father's ghost from my life" (DM, 140), a paternal presence associated with ever-open, ever-vigilant eyes: "His father had once unwittingly terrified him by insisting that Christ's eyes followed . . . wherever you went, whatever you did, they watched" (DM, 673). A clergyman, like the great-grandfather who stared down from the portrait on the dining room wall (DM, 80), Daniel's father buried not only the dead of his parish but also "any nakedness of feeling" (DM, 79). His father died in 1948 (DM, 87), Daniel's first year at Oxford; his ghost, not easily exorcised, seems to reappear in the person of a friend he meets that same year (DM, 69), through the kind of coincidence of dates that appears to recur in Fowles—the sentencing of Emile de la Roncière, the other "French lieutenant," took place "the very same day that Charles had come into the world" (FLW, 188); Conchis saw Henrik, the mad and blinded Norwegian ("And what eyes! . . . insane eyes. . . . I could also see the characteristic opacity of cataract" [M, 310-11]) whom his interest in birdwatching had led him to discover, meet his pillar of fire at the same hour and day that de Deukans's chateau (the man from whom Conchis had acquired a fascination for "ornithosemantics" [M, 183] and from whom he would inherit a fortune and a way of life) was consumed by flames (M, 316). The friend in whom Daniel saw his father was Anthony:

He was a kind of father-substitute, though we were almost exactly the same age. The idea would have outraged me at the time, and killed the friendship, as I believed I had consciously "killed" the spirit of my father and his antiquated world. (DM, 71)

It is with the announcement of Anthony's own imminent death, more than two decades later, that the novel begins. Living in California, with "too many dead fish on his conscience" to write the novel that would redeem his talent from the waste of Hollywood script-writing (DM, 15) and in the company and embrace of the starlet Jenny McNeil (in whose name Daniel already possessed, proleptically, both "Janey" [DM, 59, e.g.] and "Nell"), Martin is called to the phone. Anthony, dying of cancer in an English hospital, has asked Jane and Nell to plead with Daniel to come speak with him before he dies. Daniel feels "strangely frightened," as if "threatened with supernatural pattern." His thoughts run to "traps, returns out of freedom, the digging up of corpses" (DM,
46). For him the return from the American West Coast is a retracing of his path of exile; he has been in transit nearly all his life, "homeless, permanently mid-Atlantic" (DM, 33), ever since that moment in the Fishacre field in Devon where, "inscrutable innocent, already in exile," he had eviscerated the rabbit and carved his signature with the knife. What Anthony will ask of him is that he open up a long-buried past, that he care for his widow by helping to "disinter the person Jane might have been from beneath the person she now is" (DM, 188), that he return to that afternoon on the river that ended with Jane and Daniel in bed—

We got under the bed-clothes, and I possessed her, and I don't think it lasted very long. I remember those minutes far more for their profound and delicious wickedness, their betrayal, their impossibility-actuality, their inextricable association with the woman in the reeds. (DM, 94)

Anthony had long known about what happened that day; far from bearing a grudge, the dying man would be grateful if Daniel, long since divorced from Nell, would rekindle a friendship with Jane. As if Daniel's assent were all he needed to die in peace, Anthony accelerates the process of his death by rolling his wheelchair to the window once he was again alone in the room and pushing himself out over the edge to the street below.

That death slowly draws Daniel and Jane together, leading him to a contentment that his years of unserious affairs with younger women had never allowed him to find, giving her the opportunity to unite both love and passion, giving both the chance to begin again, to take the path they both should perhaps have taken, together, years ago. Their marriage of middle-aged love is projected beyond the last page of the novel, giving Daniel Martin the kind of conclusiveness that Fowles's novels had until now avoided.

Along the way to that happy ending, signs emerge that point to the common Apocryphal background that unites this journey with the less fortunate ones of Fowles's earlier heroes. Chief among them may be Anthony himself—or rather, his ghost:

"I suppose it's that third person who's always with us. Between us."
"Anthony?"
"Our familiar compound ghost."
"Which also joins us?"
"As crossbeams join girders. Making sure they never touch."
"But I am touched, Dan." (DM, 604)

This ghostly companion to Jane and Daniel's journey, accompanying them here on a voyage up yet another river, the Nile, an Anthony whose gratitude seems to last beyond the grave, guiding this distantly related
pair to a reunion that was predestined from the beginning, has, like the
Toby that presided over Charles and Sarah’s brief union, more than one
origin. Anthony himself was first perceived as the ghost of Daniel’s
father; he is a compound ghost in that sense, but also in a way that
allows Fowles to trace his genealogy to the poem that Nicholas Urfe
found, as if by chance, on the beach in The Magus, and which served
as the passage through which he entered Conchis’s domain. The narrator
makes it clear, four pages later in Daniel Martin, that the compound
ghost is in some sense Eliot’s (DM, 608); one could have first encoun-
tered it in “Little Gidding,” where the poet

... caught the sudden look of some dead master
  Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
  Both one and many; in the brown baked features
  The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
  Both intimate and unidentifiable.20

What Urfe found, later in the same place, are lines that, brought to
mind again by this allusion in Fowles’s last novel to date, serve to remind
one that what has been taking place since his first novel is a journey,
a repeated voyage whose end may be to know its beginning, an origin
that can be traced back to another, earlier journey:

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.21

That earlier journey had an angel for a guide, which according to one
student of the story was in fact a ghost: G. H. Gerould in his study of
The Grateful Dead, a folk tale of which Tobit is the earliest example
and whose basic plot is the story of how a young man is aided in his
quest for a wife by the grateful ghost of a man whom he has charitably
buried, argues that Raphael “is certainly a substitute for the ghost” of
the corpse whose interment led to the father’s blindness and the son’s
departure. Though no longer young, Daniel Martin is indeed assisted
by the ghost of the man whose death he made easier, aided in his effort
to marry Jane, whose distant kinship to him recalls the family tie that
gave Tobias the right to demand Sarah’s hand (Tobit 6:11).

Other details, smaller in scope than the events and relations that
make it possible to see Tobias in Daniel, Sarah in Jane, the angel in
Anthony, and the fish in the rabbit in Fishacre and the woman in the
reeds, continue to point both the couple’s way and our own along this
ancient path: in their journey up the Nile, they meet an elderly Egy-
pologist (whose resemblance to the burglarized scholar in “Poor Koko”
Fowles's Enigma Variations

has already been mentioned) who explains to them the meaning of the place through which they are passing, of "the river between," a moment somehow outside time where past and future are linked, or disappear \((DM, 559)\). In speaking of his own life, he admits to a blindness, an inability to see what was really happening in the world that was caused by his absorption in a long-dead past, preserved in the tombs around them. What is striking in this fatherly figure is the small fact of his son's vocation:

Jane asked him what his son still in Germany did.
"He is a doctor. Like his mother and grandfather."
"You must be proud of him."
"Yes, he is a surgeon now. Of the eyes. I am told very good." \((DM, 554)\)

And when Daniel and Jane continue their exploration of the ancient Middle East with an excursion into Syria, to the ruins of Palmyra, an eastward journey that if prolonged would have taken them to Nineveh, to the banks of the Tigris, and along the path Tobias had himself followed, they are finally brought together in the way they were once before, in the same bed, by the intervention of another small detail that first appeared in Tobit: once he had entered Sarah's room, Tobias "made a smoke" with the heart and liver of the fish and thereby scared off the evil demon that would have stood in the way of his sleeping with his bride, as it had for the unlucky seven who preceded him \((Tobit 8:3)\). Although Daniel and Jane have been traveling together for some time, and despite long conversations and a shared memory, he has been unable to persuade her to share his bed. When they returned that night in Palmyra to their separate hotel rooms and she opened her door, the smell of the paraffin stove was overpowering. "He drew a breath, then squatted beside the ancient stove and turned a tap on a fuel-pipe. It was wet with leaked paraffin. Another clogged wheel: the flame shone white a moment, then began to phut and smoke" \((DM, 638)\). In trying to adjust the flame, he has only made it worse, adding smoke to the stench of the paraffin. What his earlier proposition could not accomplish ("Jane, why don't we behave like two normal human beings and make it one room tonight?" \([DM, 634]\)), the smoke does:

"Any warmth. In a wasteland."
She stayed, as if already frozen; but then the gloved fingers clenched against his.
"I'll come in a minute." \((DM, 638)\)

That she should finally sleep with him only because of the smoke that he inadvertently caused to fill her room, and that the old man who
accompanied them on their Nile journey should have a son who practiced Tobias's craft, make it nearly seem that only by evoking in even the smallest details of his narrative the older story can Fowles bring his novel and his hero to a harmonic resolution. That harmony arises not only from the reconciliation with himself that the marriage implies, the resolution of the tension between Daniel Martin and his life style of the past two decades, but, in a larger context, from the fact that though they pursued their journeys in different places and at different times Charles Smithson and Daniel Martin, together with certain main and supporting characters in *The Ebony Tower*, were acting in harmony both with each other and the original, the theme of which they give every appearance of being variations. It is appropriate that it should be while listening to a performance of the Goldberg Variations that Daniel would find the resolve to ask Jane to marry him: "It was less that the music particularly moved him, he had never really enjoyed Bach," but rather that he became aware as he heard it played that night, listening with Jane on the terrace, of "an identity, a syncretism, a same key" (and, somehow, of "that shadow of the other shared voyage") (*DM*, 600): he was responding to the near-hypnotic effect of Bach's thirty variations, of their strange ability to be variations on a theme whose melody they never repeat, stretching to the limit the idea of sameness in diversity. What they had in common, with each other and with the theme, was their harmonic progression, "a same key"—though the one variation that moved him most, appearing to Daniel to be "symbolic of things he had buried" (*DM*, 601), a very slow one toward the end that seemed "to hesitate . . . on the brink of silence," evidently the twenty-fifth (Miranda Grey had also felt its power: *C*, 176), was even more distant from the theme, disguising its origins still further by changing the key from G major to minor (as do only two others), though still preserving the harmonic progression, that sequence of chords that might be thought of as itself a melody, more basic than the changeable upper line, the ground upon which the thirty figures dance. It was therefore at the moment that the source was most buried that Daniel was most aware of what he had kept underground. The reader of Fowles's last three works of fiction might well undergo a similar experience, feeling despite the diversity of story line a unity that makes one suspect one has never really left the place where one began, that the river of his prose is, like "the river between," a place where the past is still now and an ancient and Apocryphal fish still present.
Fowles's Enigma Variations

1. John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*. Fowles's other novels are indicated by the following acronyms: C = *The Collector*; M = *The Magus, A Revised Version*; FLW = *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; DM = *Daniel Martin*.


4. A. Wikgren, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4:658–62), notes its "wide appeal"; recognized as canonical by the Council of Trent in 1546, it was regularly printed in English Bibles until 1629. G. H. Gerould, in his study of the related folk tale *The Grateful Dead* (pp. 46–47), says of Tobit that it "has been, perhaps, the best-loved story in the Apocrypha." J. C. Dancy, in *The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha* (p. 14), points out that the names of father and son are the same, Tobit being "a rarer contracted form of Tobias."

5. A name that is given to only one other woman in the Bible, Abraham's wife (Interpreter's Dictionary, 4:219–20).


7. Barry Olshen, in his *John Fowles*, (p. 99), reports that he is "one of Fowles's favorite nineteenth-century writers."


11. Olshen actually includes all of Fowles's novels with the stories in his invocation of knightly ordeals and faith-keeping, and there is some measure in which what he says may be true in this broader sense.

12. "Eliduc Revisited."


14. Indeed, Fowles more or less abandons responsibility for whatever echoes of *Eliduc* may lurk in the stories, even in the first, in an interview with John F. Baker: "The realization that the 'Ebony Tower' stories were variations on a theme only came to Fowles after they were written, he says—and he is amused by the detective work some critics have put in trying to find the links between them. 'It wasn't until I'd finished the title story that I was struck by the echoes of the old French tale of Eliduc, and I wrote that in, and the incident of killing the weasel on the road, afterward.' "

15. Eric Blom, " 'Enigma' Variations." Though Elgar said the hidden theme was one with which everyone would be familiar, it remains unknown.


19. It also looked like a mouse, an animal that has its own recurrence in the book, for different reasons.


