

THE UNYIELDING TEXT AND THE SURROGATE READER IN JOHN FOWLES' THE MAGUS

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Abstract: The Magus is a novel that perplexes its readers – perhaps due to the freedom Fowles allows his readers. In the foreword, Fowles mentions that the book is like a Rorschach test: what it means is exactly what the perceiver sees in it. Fowles believes in the freedom of the reader: “One of the greatest arts of the novel is omission – leaving it to the reader’s imagination to do the work.” (Vipond 437) The text draws the reader into an active role using a plot full of mysterious events that raises his interest. The narrator is aware of all the events that occurred at Bourani, but he retells them in the same sequence in which they happened, disclosing a little of the mystery each time. Furthermore, Fowles has left the ending open to interpretation so that the reader might read his own insights in it. As with the rest of John Fowles’s fiction, the reader has an important role in The Magus. The text is incomplete and the only one who can perform its completion is the reader outside the text. Within the text though, there is another reader, a surrogate – the protagonist and narrator of the godgame – Nicholas Urfe. The reading metaphor (from within and without the text) is underscored by Nicholas’s attempt to live life as if he were a fictional character (Fowles 17). The whole text can be viewed as an elaborate charade through which Conchis ensnares Nicholas Urfe, and a ludic farce by which Fowles lures the reader into his story.

Keywords: reading practices, freedom of the reader, surrogate reader, reader outside the text, power of the reader.

The Magus is a novel that perplexes its readers – some simply love it and others do not. Perhaps this is due to the freedom Fowles allows his readers – it is the reader’s duty and function to respond to the ideas that Fowles has laid bare if the novel is to work. In the foreword, Fowles mentioned that the book is like a Rorschach test: what it meant was exactly what the perceiver saw in it. The story is thoroughly absorbing. Fowles perfectly captured the psyche of an aimless twentyish male – no discernible roots, no goals, looking for the next adventure to be lived and mystery to be solved. Conchis’s ‘godgame’ was ultimately a lesson in freedom, in being responsible for one’s own path as at some point one must cease becoming and start being. Fowles has left the ending open to interpretation so the reader might read his own insights into it.

The Magus is a story of mystery and deception told from the point of view of Nicholas Urfe, a British young man who has attended Oxford and taught for a year at a public school. Nicholas Urfe is a typical Englishman with a college education, a selfish and conceited man who cannot see beyond his nose but thinks he is very smart. Naturally he is not satisfied with life, teaching does not please him, so he decides to take a position as an English teacher at the Lord Byron School in Greece, on the island of Phraxos. In the last few weeks before his departure he meets Alison, an Australian girl, about to begin training as an airline stewardess. During his first six months on Phraxos, Nicholas finds the school claustrophobic but the island beautiful. He realizes that he cannot write good poetry and that drives him to try to commit suicide – but he is unsuccessful even in that. The mysteries commence as Nicholas explores the part of the island where Conchis’s estate, Bourani, is located. Nicholas decides to

look him up and finds, inexplicably, that he is expected. Invited back for the next weekend, Nicholas is astonished by Conchis's collection of art and by his claim to be psychic. In the next few weekends, Conchis tells Nicholas about various episodes in his life, which are significant to Nicholas's education as one of the elect. Strange things happen, things that Nicholas and the reader cannot explain.

At Bourani Nicholas meets a young woman, Lily, who is part of Conchis's game and plan to educate him. Later on he also meets her twin sister, Rose. He gradually falls in love with Lily, who professes to be mystified by what Conchis is up to. The latter, attempting to confound his prey, invents various masks for himself, for Lily and for various other characters. Nicholas cannot be sure of anything that is enacted on the estate – or Prospero's domain as he calls it. Nicholas' education serves him well in intertextually interpreting Conchis and his games in light of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Alison reappears in his life, when he meets her in Athens for one weekend, but he decides to break the relationship off by telling her about Lily. A few weeks later he is informed that Alison had committed suicide. The mysteries deepen and Nicholas feels more confused as the days go by – of one thing he is sure though: that he desires Lily/Julie. Their affair is consummated one night, but Nicholas is seized by three men and drugged. Some days later, Nicholas wakes up, is dressed in ritual garb, and is taken to a chamber decorated with symbols, where he is seated on a throne facing twelve figures in bizarre costumes. As they unmask, they are introduced as psychiatrists, including the former Lily as Dr. Vanessa Maxwell, who reads a clinical diagnosis of Nicholas's psychological problems. She is then stripped to the waist and tied to a flogging frame, as Nicholas is handed a whip and invited to judge her – and the others – by choosing to flog her or not. He declines. Then Nicholas is tied to the frame, to watch Lily and Joe make tender love in front of him. Afterward, he is again made unconscious. The trial he is judged in and the sexual intercourse between Lily and Joe are supposed to purify and cleanse Nicholas, in order for him to start a new life.

Nicholas finds a typescript of a story about how a prince learns to become a magician by accepting that life is full of illusion, still he goes on looking for explanations. He realizes that he was like a rat in the maze, like a guinea pig in some experiment the purpose of which remained unknown till the end – he cannot decode the message in the godgame, cannot understand its purpose and its relevance to his own life – perhaps because of the characteristic lack of imagination of his class. He discovers that Alison is still alive, her supposed suicide being evidently part of the charade. After spending months searching for clues and meeting Lily and Rose's mother, Nicholas begins to appreciate what has happened, and even declines to discuss it with others. Finally, Alison appears when he least expects her, and they have a confrontation in Regent's Park, which ends in uncertainty. Nicholas is angry that the game is over, that he failed their expectations but continues to live 'on the stage' by feeling himself under the ever-watching eye of the director when the game is long finished. When in Regent Park he at first imagines that they are being watched, but then realizes it is not so.

The Magus was the first novel Fowles wrote (not the first he published) and he rewrote it until its first publication and then a decade later he published another revised version. The protagonist is trapped in a meaningless maze-like world, and he must learn to choose and appreciate life and love. Fowles' writing is clearly informed by existentialism, leading to Nicholas' conclusion that life is meaningless, since he cannot grasp its meaning. The Greek island setting is important as the 'other world' in which Nicholas's journey of initiation takes place. One of the central themes of this novel is the 'unmasking' in order to get at the essential core of a person. Conchis' godgame is set up to dramatize the masks each person wears. In this godgame, the would-be Prospero plays the magus, or magician, who brings forth the actors and actresses, only to unmask them as they take on new roles. Nicholas is intrigued by the mystery he suspects awaits him within Conchis's realm, and he becomes one

of the players in the godgame. At the heart of the godgame is his own unmasking, in other words maturation – the stripping of the Self of all its masks, which takes place in the trial scene, and from which he emerges reborn into a higher state of consciousness, a new awareness of who he is and of what it means to be one of ‘the elect’. At first the masques seem a kind of joke to Nicholas, but as they grow more elaborate and intense, his perception of what is real and what is not dims and vanishes. He becomes a performer in them, realizing that they are not about Conchis's life, but about his own: he becomes a conspirator in his own destruction or psychic rebirth – he does not know which. Although the end of the novel provides a reunion with Alison, who must choose Nicholas as he has come to choose her, the story, like most of Fowles's fiction, does not have a straightforward ending. Nicholas has learned to choose, and thus learned how to be free, but the lack of certainty which characterizes modern life creates hazards that prove hazardous to freedom, and while knowledge should be the aim of modern man's quest, it does not necessarily ensure his stability or happiness. By the end of the ‘godgame’, it was impossible to tell what was real and what was not. This unreality spilled over into Nicholas's life back in London. One of the messages of the book might be that there is no objective reality, that a manufactured situation is no less valid or invalid than a ‘real’ one, and that one has to live with one's accepted reality as best one can.

The Surrogate Reader and the Reader outside the Text

As with the rest of John Fowles's fiction, the reader has an important role in *The Magus* and is expected to participate in the creation of meaning and its communication. The text is incomplete and the only one who can perform its completion is the reader outside the text. Within the text though, there is another reader, a surrogate – the protagonist and narrator of the godgame – Nicholas Urfe. The reading metaphor (from within and without the text) is underscored by Nicholas's college attempt to live life as if he were a fictional character (Fowles 1997: 17). The whole text can be viewed as an elaborate charade through which Conchis ensnares Nicholas Urfe, and a ludic farce by which Fowles lures the reader into his story. Fowles believes in the freedom of the reader: “One of the greatest arts of the novel is omission – leaving it to the reader's imagination to do the work.” (Vipond 437) This idea recurs in his novels as the text draws the reader into an active role using a plot full of mysterious events and raises his interest in the godgame. The narrator is aware of all the events that occurred at Bourani, but he retells them in the same sequence in which they happened, disclosing a little of the mystery each time. This anticipation keeps the reader engaged in the action.

Nicholas is the reader within the text – he needs to read, examine, interpret and understand the text of life, in other words the events in which he is involved – unless he wants to lose his firm hold of reality. He is not very successful in interpreting the text of life, so when he, as first person narrator, relates the events at Bourani the readers outside the text feel as puzzled as he did when he was part of this strange experiment. Mark Currie discusses the existence of a “dramatized interpreter whose role in the narrative is to make sense of unintelligible events or to grapple with a mystery” (Currie 1995:4) – this function suits Nicholas Urfe perfectly, but he is not a very successful interpreter as the mystery is not solved by the end of the novel, and the reader must take his own turn in trying to explain the unintelligible and intriguing events of the text. *The Magus* is portrayed as “a metafictional novel (...) where metafictionality is generated in the relationship between Conchis, the surrogate author, and Nicholas, the surrogate reader. (...) Nicholas and the reader are yoked together by a fictional point of view in quest of an interpretation. (...) Nicholas formulates possible interpretations of the fiction constructed around him by Conchis, and in so doing, interpellates the external reader, who is in possession of no extra information, into analogous interpretative acts.” (Currie 1995:16-17)

As a metafictional novel, *The Magus* dramatizes the boundary between art and life by breaking the illusions created through the intervention of the author. This text has authors and readers within the text, but also on its outside, and in it the role of the reader is salient. The relevance of the fact that Fowles uses metafiction as a mode of writing and intertextuality in order to construct his text is actually the reader's function, as he is set in-between – the reader must be able to recognize the quotations and the references of the text in order to fully understand it. His work is more difficult as the text requires an ideal reader who is supposed to be able to decipher its codes. (Allen 93)

John Fowles's assertion that the meaning of *The Magus* (and of his other books) is actually the reaction of the reader and that there is no given and correct reaction, borders on reader-response criticism. Fowles is a postmodern writer who has internalized the critical theories and approaches of the age, therefore he advocates together with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault that the author-God is dead. Now begins the age of innovation and progress in the field of narrative – the reign of the reader commences. At the same time, by showing what influenced him in writing the text (from a biographical as well as a literary point of view) he conditions the reader's response – what the reader understands to be true of a certain Fowlesian text cannot be a neutral meaning. Metafiction is a mode of writing in which the process of fictional construction is directly rendered by means of self-reflexive techniques such as the use of self-conscious narrators, evident intertextual play, *mise en abîme* and increased reader involvement. Nicholas Urfe can be seen as a self-conscious narrator because he is aware of everything that has happened on the Greek island of Phraxos, yet he chooses to reveal those circumstances little by little. *The Tempest* imagery and metaphor of the novel – a magician, similar to Prospero, who controls everything that happens on an island; a young couple, Ferdinand (Nicholas) and Miranda (Lily/Julie); various helpers and the mysterious events that come to be in this enchanted domain – point to intertextuality and require an educated reader who is able to notice those relations between the two texts. The importance of this imagery of *The Tempest* lies in “its exploration of the relations between art and magic, (...) [its] emphasis (...) [on] the figure of Prospero (...) and [on] the enchantments and deceits of art.” (Connor 186-187) At one point, when Lily has been kidnapped and Nicholas locked up, the latter characterizes Conchis with the following words: “this was Prospero turned insane, maniacally determined never to release his Miranda.” (M 458)

The principle of *mise en abîme* is that of a miniaturised form within the work, which reflects, either the novel as a whole, or at least a major theme. The term was coined by Gide who borrowed it from the heraldic custom of crest design, where a crest could contain one or several miniature versions of itself within its boundaries. “*Mise en abîme*” could be described as the Russian doll principle in art as the technique refers to a particular type of frame story in which the main narrative may be used to summarize or encapsulate some aspect or theme of the frame. The *mise en abîme* technique refers to the narration of stories within stories and there are plenty such tales told by Conchis in order to educate young Nicholas into reaching his own potential – the loaded dice episode is linked to taking chances in life, the Seidevarre episode to the place of mystery in life, and the eleutheria episode to the freedom of choice. The readers of this text are involved in all its stages – they become its co-authors by performing it through their own knowledge and thoughts. The *mise en abîme* participates in artistic reflexivity in the sense that it draws attention to the constructedness of art, and also in the sense that the *fragment en abîme* acts as a kind of mirror image of the larger work or metafiction.

Alison Lee in *Realism and Power* discusses the tendency of historiographic metafiction (a term coined by Linda Hutcheon) to play with realist conventions and at the same time to subvert and undermine them: “While they use Realist conventions, they simultaneously seek to subvert them. Yet they do so from within precisely those conventions

which they are clearly trying to undermine.” (Lee, 36) The story seems at first quite realistic, but once the godgame begins with all its illusion-breaking and its mysteries, all those conventions are challenged. The reader is placed in a difficult position – he has to admit that what he is reading is art, but at the same time he has to become a co-creator of the text through his mental reconstruction of the text: “explicit demands are made upon him (...) for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience.” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 5.) Each reading is unique and each reader has some distinctive life experience that transforms the novel through his/her perspective. The text needs rewriting through reading: the knowledge of the reader alters the text – each fresh reading by a new reader or each re-reading by the same reader is a new representation and performance of the written text and it adds new meaning to it. The text appears as the confession of a reliable narrator, but the reader recognizes the artifice in it – after all s/he is working with literature/fiction.

A vital aspect of the novel is the role of the reader. Considering Foucault's ideas on confession, the reader is given the privilege of authority as in his words confession is “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, (...) the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.” (Foucault 1978: 61-62)

The Magus is, in Foucault's terms, a ‘confession’ which comprises Nicholas's narrative and Conchis's accounts to show the subject's development. The authority position in the novel is occupied by the reader who witnesses Nicholas's confession and who afterwards has to respond to it.

Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle discuss the idea of the subject from a Foucauldian perspective in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*: “there are two meanings to the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to one's own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge.” (Foucault qtd. in Bennet and Royle 123) Nicholas is subjected to Conchis's power through the control and manipulation exerted by the latter, and to his own identity through the self-knowledge he achieves through the godgame. His Self is always subject to forces within and outside itself therefore achieving its transformation – in the same way the novel is subjected to external or readerly and internal or writerly forces. The text reveals Nicholas's rational interpretation of the baffling and mystifying situations in which he finds himself, and Conchis's role as a kind of author-God. The quest for a new self in which Nicholas enters consolidates Conchis's surrogate-authorial role and distorts the boundary between reality and art within the fiction – through intertextuality. Nicholas's reading and elucidation of the godgame is internal to the text and, as these circumstances were lived and experienced by him, he cannot distance himself from his feelings and impression. However, the real reader can, remaining free to construct the text from his own point of view and personal experiences.

Fowles and Conchis, as surrogate author, are responsible for the creation of roles in the novel intended for the characters' performances at Bourani. Roles are also created for the reader who is not only that, but also co-author and critic and therefore s/he must evaluate the transformation of the characters (as in a bildungsroman) through their role-playing in the true-to-life performances staged by Conchis. He creates a text that only he can control and manipulate, therefore he is the author of this text called ‘the godgame’ and he tries to convince the reader, Nicholas, of its reality: “the novelist weave[s] into [the] fiction details of circumstance and context that insist on its narrative veracity.” (Norris 87) Postmodern texts are interrogative because they ask the reader to complete their meaning, to interpret them, to construct them – these texts are questions which require answers (Belsey 91) and cannot become complete until they are read – each reading is a new performance of the text, and it attaches new meaning to the text. In *The Magus* a series of frames are established only to be

broken later. This presents both the reader and Nicholas with a sequence of illusions of authentic life which destabilize reality. This novel can be regarded as metatheatre by the reader because of the multitude of roles and the layering of frames – the chapters themselves and the prologue written by Fowles can be considered frames, apart from the frames created by Conchis to confuse Nicholas – and it is difficult to find any constant in this confusing text. Fowles persuades the reader to consider Nicholas as the only constant. Nicholas Urfe is also in the dark and no more knowledgeable than the reader him/herself when it comes to what the experiment signifies – he is just as confused and as astounded as the reader. While being the only constant, he is a rather confused and confusing one.

The metaphor of reading is emphasised at various points in the novel in order to remind the readers of their central function. Conchis hypothesizes about the genre of the novel when stating that it is dead: “The novel is dead. As dead as alchemy. (...) Words are for truth. For facts. Not fiction.” (Fowles 1997: 96). Later on, Nicholas perceives Conchis as the author-God that he truly is, but his creation is not made up of words: “Now I saw Conchis as a sort of psychiatric novelist sans novel, creating with people, not words.” (Fowles 1997: 242) Conchis as novelist creates a work of art, but that work is made up of the experiences he imposes on his characters-victims. In another instance, Nicholas recognizes in Conchis “some fatal extra dimension in his objectivity, which was (...) that of a novelist before a character, [not of the] most changed man before his own real past self.” (Fowles 1997: 133) Conchis seems to be the author par excellence, but he also assumes the role of the magician.

In real life people say that they can read a person – in other words they read the signs, the gestures, the behaviour – and then they interpret them. Nicholas does the same thing with Conchis in:

“trying to comprehend the sadistic old man’s duplicities: to read his palimpsest. His ‘theatre without an audience’ made no sense, it couldn’t be the explanation. The one thing all actors and actresses craved was an audience. Perhaps what he was doing did spring in part from some theory of the theatre, but he has said it himself: The masque is only a metaphor.” (Fowles 1997: 458)

Conchis’s metatheatre can be considered a palimpsest as he casts various roles on everyone around him, then rewrites the parts played by those same persons, the entire thing resulting in a confusing layering of roles. Nicholas is an unsuccessful interpreter of the text Conchis represents and of the mysteries at Bourani. Moreover, he is a resistant reader – his intuition reveals to him facts that should help him see through the charade, but he is unable to do so. Even after attaining the knowledge – the purpose for which the entire godgame was devised – Nicholas is still a resistant reader as he refuses to internalize what he is being taught. A palimpsest is a manuscript on which an earlier text has been effaced and the vellum or parchment reused for another. For poststructuralist literary critics, the palimpsest provides a model for the function of writing as it foregrounds the fact that all writing takes place in the presence of other writings. Intertextuality is relevant in this case as the poststructuralist idea of the palimpsest stresses the fact that a writer cannot create something original as he has been influenced by all the books he has read. Palimpsests subvert the concept of the author as the unique source of his work, and thus defer the meaning of a work down an endless chain of signification.

At one point in the narrative, towards its end, Nicholas calls himself the anti-hero and advises the writer to leave him at a crossroads with no direction to follow in his future – and that is exactly what happens. As a grand finale the author and the magician decide to exit the stage, without any explanations in order to make the reader remember them forever as people never forget the unsolved; therefore, the novel ends in a mystery:

“The smallest hope, a bare continuing to exist, is enough for the antihero’s future; leave him (...) at a crossroads, in a dilemma (...); let him survive, but give him no direction, no reward; because we too are waiting (...) for this girl, this truth, this crystal of humanity, this reality lost through imagination, to

return (...) But the maze has no center. An ending is no more than a point in sequence, a snip of the cutting shears. (...) another mystery.” (Fowles 1997: 645)

The final disappearance of the author-God Conchis can be interpreted as the rebellious character’s affirmation of his freedom; that is, as an attempt to disobey the literary rules. The reader can draw an analogy between the plot created by the writer in fiction and the ‘plot’ of God’s creation. As Fowles puts it in one of his character’s words: “you’re in the hands of someone very skilled at rearranging reality.” (1997: 219) The reader is not certain if those words refer only to Nicholas, or they apply to him/her as well. Thus, a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone else’s order or within a maze surfaces. Nicholas is trapped inside Conchis’s narrative, while the reader is snared inside the web of words created by Fowles. Perhaps the readers form part of a story which is being written by someone above us – in that case even our reality would be fictitious.

The idea of the labyrinth or maze has been a fascinating one for the human mind for centuries now – at first the maze was regarded as a symbol of the path of ignorance, leading away from God, then it became the path of the pilgrim strewn with difficulties, and only in the last three hundred years it acquired the symbolism it is now known by: the concern with finding one’s way to a goal. Nowadays, it represents a spiritual journey, the winding path of the soul through human life, and it forms an initiatory barrier to the life after the achievement of self-knowledge. Nicholas starts his spiritual journey with the commencement of the godgame – the maze he has to go through separates his life before the godgame from the potential life after it, a life in which he would be one of the elect and a new magus. Another metaphor used by Fowles is that of life as stage, as performance – from the very start Nicholas identifies in Conchis something theatrical: “underlying everything that he did I had come to detect an air of stage-management, of the planned and rehearsed.” (Fowles 1997: 109) His intuition tells him that Conchis is experienced in narrating his stories in order to draw people in. At the end of the godgame – it is not really the end as the trial has not taken place yet – Conchis tells Nicholas that “The comedy is over.” (Fowles 1997: 405)

Each of Fowles’s novels draws this same sketch of the relationships between life and art. Life learns to emulate art as each scene in Conchis’s masque corresponds to an imitation of it through Nicholas’s actions later in the novel. All the masques come to life, and are shaped into Nicholas’s own experience, who eventually realizes that Conchis is staging more than a private revel. The meta-theatre artistically represents the largest play in which we are all actors on the vast stage of the world. At one point Nicholas has one of his insights into what is going on, he feels that he is going to be one of the actors on the stage at Bourani: “I had an idea that sooner or later I was going to be asked to perform as well” (Fowles 1997: 184), what he does not realize is that he is already performing his own part. He does not have to become one of the masks or to play one of the roles Conchis may impose on him – he has to play himself and be authentic in doing so. Yet he is unable to be dependable and truthful, it seems that he cannot stop lying. The theatre at Bourani is really life, after all, there are no limits to this theatre, no identifiable spectators and the participants devise their own drama – all the conventions of theatre are discarded. According to Conchis this is a new kind of drama:

“One in which conventional separation between actors and audience was abolished. In which the conventional scenic geography, the notions of proscenium, stage, auditorium, were completely discarded. In which continuity of performance, either in time or space, was ignored. And in which the action, the narrative was fluid, with one point of departure and a fixed point of conclusion. Between those points the participants invent their own drama. (...) We are all actors here, my friend.” (Fowles 1997: 404)

A theatre in which everyone is an actor can only be life, as in traditional theatre there is always a distinction made between spectators and actors – otherwise it would not be theatre as this art form requires an audience without which it cannot survive.

Defamiliarizing the conventions used in making previous art is one of the techniques Fowles uses in order to make the reader more conscious of the artistic processes involved, and hence to refresh his/her perception of the world. The decentring characteristic of deconstruction results in the realization that there are not merely one, or even two readings of a text, but many. Barthes discusses intertextuality in his essay *The Death of the Author* in the following terms:

“a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as hitherto said, the author” (150)

This goes along the lines of the king has died, long live the king, but here we are discussing in terms of author and reader – the postmodern text has relinquished the importance of its writer, and thus begins the reign of the reader and interpreter of its codes.

The layering of roles in *The Magus* includes the reader as author through the reworking of the text, Conchis as author, manipulator, director and creator of the frames in the alternate world at Bourani and of the sequence of performances and Nicholas as author and manipulator of the readers outside the text through his becoming the narrator of the succession of mysterious events (all, of course, without an explanation). When reading a novel the reader tends to bestow authority on the narrator’s voice, but in the case of this text, authority is asserted and then denied and all the reader’s expectations are created and then destroyed because the same frames imposed on Nicholas by Conchis and the same open ending of the experiment are forced upon the readers by Nicholas. The author plays a cat and mouse game with the readers, and with the characters – similarly, Conchis toys with Nicholas in his so called godgame and the greatest godgame of all is the novel itself – Fowles controls that fictional world and is the greatest puppeteer of them all.

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