

THE LANGUAGE OF METATEXTUAL FICTION. THE NARRATIVE
DISCOURSE OF JASPER FFORDE

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This paper deals with issues related to the consideration of the language of fiction and the employment of meta-narrative patterns. By addressing the novels of Jasper Fforde, I mean to expound the complexity of devices used in order to recreate an atmosphere of fiction and a linguistic use of eccentric metaliterary references and intertextuality. The representation of a text-world is a most conspicuous act of literary innuendo, and this is a salient feature on the novels used as samples. The presence of complex rhetorical and stylistic devices makes these novels a unique example for the study of the linguistics of fiction in contemporary English.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single character in possession of a good fiction must be in want of a good text. And, if the text goes beyond itself, much the better: “the more metafiction, the more metatextual, the better”. A text travels in the discourse of time and the discourse of place, in history and geography. The text haunts the minds of readers, extricates the hearts of scholars and creates a universe of discourse of deep semantic impact. This is specially the case of fiction, which is that alternative view of reality carried out by means of a particular use of language. Fiction is not an attempt to foil truth or gainsay reality but a projection of a universe of discourse mounted on an imaginative display. These words may serve as introduction to my humble offer to my friend Maria Luisa Dañobeitia who I expect will enjoy this commentary on a couple of books by a most hilarious author.

The books by Jasper Fforde make up a case in point. I am going to focus upon two of them and, finally, upon a special episode. The main character in these narratives of fiction is Thursday Next, a literary detective “without equal, fear, or boy friend” who lives in an alternative London in an alternative 1985.

The first novel to consider is *The Eyre Affair*. The Nazis have just left Britain after a forty-year-old occupation, and the British have continued the Crimean War till 1975, when the Russians are expelled from the Peninsula. Besides,

Wales is no longer part of the United Kingdom: it is a Republic of its own since 1965, when the Anglo-Welsh border was closed (2001:9;301, historic note). That's just to start. Thursday Next travels with a dodo, her pet (Chapter 10: the Milton conference, 108; her name is Picwick in *Lost in a Good Book*). Nobody has seen a dodo alive, though. I remember seeing a stuffed dodo in the Natural Science Museum at Oxford. So my cognitive map, the reader's cognitive map, includes dodos and pets and, consequently I admit, I tolerate that fiction.

As to the protagonist's name, Thursday Next, it possesses literary overtones: cf. G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, by the way one of my mother's favourite readings. Is it a case of intertextuality? This is alternative nominalism in a feminist sway... Another major character, the villain, also bears an ominous name: Acheron Hades, kidnapper and blackmailer: is it possible to compress more mythology of fatal destination in a name? Naturally, a friend of this character bears the name Styx. The principle of poetics *nomen/omen* is fully operative. Classical echoes of ancient texts remind of the discourse of classical mythology. One of her colleagues in the Swidon operative is Victor Analogy... Her uncle's name is Mycroft (cf. the brother of Sherlock Holmes). The SpecOps (SPECIAL OPERATIONS NETWORK), the ChronoGuard, all these names deploy a weak or strong array of referential relevance to our shared knowledge, and all this stresses the metatextual dimension.

This fiction is a complete universe of discourse, a world of its own. Everything is properly placed: the SPECIAL OPERATIONS NETWORK has been designed to fight art crime; the CHRONO GUARD is another agency in charge of time.¹ The piece of fiction is made up of intertextualities of fiction. Each chapter starts with a quotation of a book written by one of the characters, or related to the narrative discourse. Chapter 6 starts with an excerpt from Thursday Next, *Crimean Reminiscences*, and chapter 17, entitled "Miss Havisham", starts with a quotation from *The Mill on the Floss*.

Detective Next's duties comprise, among other things, to cope with literary characters or people who support rare theses:

My name's Edmund Capillary. Have you ever stopped to wonder whether it was really William Shakespeare who penned all those wonderful plays? [...] "Bloody Baconians!" (*The Eyre Affair*:39)

This is a serious argument and it is specially relevant to the main issue found in *Lost in a Good Book*:

1. It is remarkable the use of terms created in the narration which indicate the metatextual dimension. Boojum: Term used to describe the total annihilation of a word/line/character/subplot/book/series. Bowdlerisers: A group of fanatics who attempt to excise obscenity and profanity from all texts (*Lost in a Good Book*:263). Bloophole: Term used to describe a narrative hole by the author that renders his/her work seemingly impossible. Textmarker: An emergency device that outwardly resembles a flare pistol (*op. cit.*:277). PageRunner: Name given to any character who is out of his or her book. Texters: Slang term given to a relatively harmless PageRunner (*ibid.*:327).

The Baconians were quite mad but for the most part harmless. Their purpose in life was to prove that Francis Bacon and not Will Shakespeare had penned the greatest plays in the English language. Bacon, they believed, had not been given the recognition that he rightfully deserved and they campaigned tirelessly to redress this supposed injustice. (39)²

Or to find out the missing *Martin Chuzzlewit* manuscript:

The book would end within a chapter. Can you imagine the other characters sitting around, waiting for a lead character who never appears? It would be like trying to stage *Hamlet* without the prince! (210)

Later, we read the following headline in the newspaper: *Chuzzlewit death: SpecOps blamed* (237).

The visit to the house of the Brontës is a major event: chapter 6 “Jane Eyre. A short excursion into the Novel”. Here we read of “[t]he character of Jane Eyre, a tough and resilient heroine”. There is the theft of another manuscript: *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography*, by Curre Bell, 1847, and all this takes place within the framework of a powerful enemy: the Goliath corporation (Chapter 7). Then, the action goes back to the 19th century. Two Japanese tourists are trying to visit Jane Eyre, and Thursday Next is watching over, protecting her from Hades. She talks to Rochester while Jane is away. The narration is inserted within the fictional discourse of *Jane Eyre* (330).

Another feature of this fictional construction is the presence of weird names: “the Church of Our Blessed Lady of the Lobsters” (351). Finally, there is a wedding and it marks the end: “Mrs Jane Rochester asked Mrs Nakajima to bring me here to assist”. The back pages of the novel contain fiction ads: DODO EMPORIUM/TOAST.

What happens in this novel from the point of view of metafiction? Well, in my opinion, there is a game of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls: the story takes place in a period that belongs to fiction, to an alternative reality: Thursday Next passes from her late 20th century England to the early 19th century England of *Jane Eyre*. Could we speak of a *mise en abyme*? There is a representation/fiction

2. As to this, see especially the classic by Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence, *Bacon is Shakespeare* (1910). The opinions of this “Baconian” are straight: “I believe that everybody in Stratford must have known that William “Shakespeare” could not write so much as his own name, for I assert that we possess nothing which can by any reasonable possibility be deemed to be his signature” (30). He goes on to explain a graphological evidence proving that it was a solicitor who wrote Shakespeare’s name (37). As to his literary capacity Durning-Lawrence writes: “Shakespeare the Stratford householder could not have known so many as one thousand words” (67). For the author it is Bacon who reveals much of himself in *Hamlet* or in the Sonnets. He goes on to prove the cryptic inscription of Bacon’s name in a series of letters and figures and Bacon’s name can be read on page 136 on line 33 of the 1623 folio edition. The author also explains that there is a plate which contains a picture of Bacon giving his writing to a Spearman dressed in actor’s boots (125). Spear-man = Shake-spear. He goes on repeating the refrain BACON IS SHAKESPEARE. He stresses that the documents prove that “one Shakespeare” could not have been the poet and dramatist (174). The book ends up with testimonies of Lord Palmerston, Lord Houghton, Coleridge, John Bright, R. W. Emerson, Mark Twain and many others. The book contains a final appendix with the *Promus* by Bacon.

which is projected into another representation/fiction and then it is presented as such (Rimmon-Kennan 1983:93). So, the narrative levels intertwine themselves; this entails the critical approach implied in the jargon: extradiegetic/diegetic/hypodiegetic. This discourse provokes a narrative thread of strange complexity becoming its own *raison d'être*.

The second novel, *Lost in a Good Book* (2002), offers, in my humble opinion, a more intricate and interesting plot, especially if considered under the viewpoint of metafiction and metatextuality. The main point in the plot is the play *Cardenio* which apparently was written by Shakespeare but there is scarce information about it since there is no text available. In fact William Shakespeare wrote a play based upon the famous episode of *Don Quixote* and, according to Park Honan in his biography on William Shakespeare, the play was performed at court in the winter of 1612 to 1613 and on the 8th of June 1613. Humphrey Moseley registered it in the Stationer's Register in 1653 "*The History of Cardenio* by Mr Fletcher and Shakespeare". In 1728 Lewis Theobald published *Double Falshood*, also based upon the romantic fable of Cervantes, and textual analysis reveals that this 18th century play contains "ghosts of Shakespeare's lost words" (imagination, suspicions, possession) of the disappeared original play by Fletcher and Shakespeare.³ In the book by Miguel de Cervantes we find chapter XXIII, first part, "Donde se prosigue la aventura en Sierra Morena", and a story is told about the disgraceful love of Cardenio and Lucinda, the intrusion of the Duke and his son, Ferdinand, and all the miseries and tribulations suffered by Cardenio: "el astroso Caballero de la Sierra" (the ragged Knight of the Mountain), "el Roto de la Mala Figura" (the torn down of the bad countenance) or "el Caballero del Bosque" (the Knight of the Forest), since all these phrases are used to refer to the character (Martínez-Dueñas Espejo 2005:34).

In the novel by Fforde, Thursday Next goes to the house of a Mrs Hathaway₃₄ ("Call me Anne", 30)⁴ at her request, since she says she has a copy of *Cardenio*. This is really surprisingly funny and maintains the tone of parody and satire which enhances the metafiction. The detectives say that the copy is a forgery:

3. See Honan (1998:375-376). On 9 September 1653 the London publisher Humphrey Moseley entered in the Stationers' Register a batch of plays including "*The History of Cardenio* by Mr Fletcher and Shakespeare". Cardenio is a character in Part One of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, published in English translation in 1612. There are references to the play "Cardenio" in the payment of the Privy Council on 20 May 1623 to the King's Men and on 9 July 1613 Hemmings, leader of the King's Men, received some money for the play "Cardenio". Theobald claimed to own several manuscripts of an original play by Shakespeare some of his contemporaries thought the style was Fletcher's, not Shakespeare's. It is quite possible that *Double Falshood* is based (however distantly) on a play of Shakespeare's time; if so, the play is likely to have been the one performed by Fletcher and Shakespeare. *Double Falshood* is a tragicomedy and the characters' names differ from those in *Don Quixote*, and the story is varied.

4. This short sentence, as simple as may sound, inevitably reminds me of Melville *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael", the first phrase in Chapter I. However, it may also be a remake of the usual polite order: "Call me Tony!", uttered by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, when a journalist addressed him as Sir/Prime Minister. Sir Anthony Hopkins replied exactly the same when asked by a Spanish journalist: "Call me Tony!" It is an extreme case of intertextuality, though I write this tongue-in-cheek.

“I’m afraid so. The rhyme, metre and grammar don’t really match any of Shakespeare’s known works”. Although Anne Hathaway rejects the opinion, the detectives continue their argument till Next replies:

It’s not just the text. You see, Shakespeare never wrote on lined paper with a ballpoint, and even if he did, I doubt he would have had Cardenio seeking Lucinda in a Range Rover. (31)

Naturally, Anne Hathaway replies that it is a “literary anachronism” (31).

The remark is quite hilarious and makes up the yeast of the novel as an iconic echo: literary anachronism and its rhetorical force, as Luzzi (2009:69-84) has recently explained.

The idea, on the whole, is rather original: to dig up a non-existent play, the idea that that play ever existed and was actually written and performed but no longer available, and make it the centre of a bibliographical search and a detective investigation. The Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* is not really a copy or imitation but a creative fiction, and this is a good sample of that literary fiction, or rather, metafiction, metamimesis(?).⁵ There is a continuity of this furthering a representative action, something peculiar to the human condition. This is also enmeshed in a dimension of historicity fully assumed: in this particular case from Cervantes (1605) to Shakespeare (1612) and the early 21st century Ffordeian epitomes.

All told, the narration is quite hilarious:

The play, forgery or not, was *excellent*. After the opening soliloquy we soon went into a flashback where the unragged Cardenio and Lucinda write a series of passionate love letters in an Elizabethan version on Rock Hudson/Doris day split screen, Lucinda on one side reacting to Cardenio writing them on the other and vice versa. (37)

Finally, going on with the novel and the metafiction by Fforde, Thursday Next goes to the manor of Lord Volescamp to visit his library and see the manuscript of *Cardenio* just found. The expert bibliophile who works for the aristocrat says that he has seen many fake manuscripts of *Cardenio* but that was not. That is the original one, the authentic, the genuine text. Upon reading the soliloquy of Cardenio he perceived a halo of *Romeo and Juliet* Spanish style, with laughter and happy end. There is even a line of great expression: “Knowst thou, O love, the pangs which I sustain” (36). The manuscript undergoes a series of tests to prove its authenticity: metrical parsing, syntactic study, lexical analysis; this shows that the text found is 70% corresponding to Shakespeare’s authorship. However, the discovery of the manuscript engenders certain social alarm since it is a good that may become part of a family patrimony.

5. At the beginning of *Peri Poietikes* (Poetics), Aristotle declares that all literary forms are imitations (Gk. *Mimesis* Lat. *imitatio*.) Antoine Compagnon in his opening lecture at the Collège de France said that *mimesis* is translated nowadays as “representation” or “fiction” rather than “imitation” (2008:35).

Consequently, the members of the Liberal Party (the Whigs), who by the way are almost non-existent in current British politics, propose that there should be no property rights on the play and its performance, so that it can be performed without paying royalties or copyright:

Then there' Yorrick Kane, a Whig politician who hopes to use the free distribution of the play to sway the Shakespeare vote in his favour at tomorrow's election. (328)

But complete happiness does not exist, as you all know, and since the political situation is so fragile in that England (conflicts on the border with the Republic of Wales, the Crimea War just finished, and the recent Nazi occupation) it is necessary to get rid of the manuscript of *Cardenio*, whose existence, continuity, editions and publication might have given extreme power to the lobby of the Shakespearians, breaking so the political equilibrium. There is also reference to the Baconians.

Without *Cardenio*, the powerful Shakesperean lobby had returned their allegiance to the current administration, who had promised to postpone, with the help of the ChronoGuard, the eighteenth-century demolition of Shakespeare's old Stratford home. (341-342)

That is why, despite the discovery of the manuscript, we are no longer able to read the play. The original text by Miguel de Cervantes was a source of inspiration for Fletcher and Shakespeare and this went on to Lewis Theobald. Unfortunately, the English link disappeared, and Jasper Fforde rekindles it creating a hope for metafiction and a metatextual frustration, since we are not able to read the manuscript. The mystery remains. And, what about the manuscript?

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