Wishing to Be Fictional

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In Jasper Fforde’s crime-novel parody *The Fourth Bear: A Nursery Investigation* (2006), a detective named Jack Spratt investigates crimes involving characters from nursery rhymes, such as the Gingerbread Man. The novel’s parallel universe of Reading, England, features two kinds of characters. Some characters are, for the novel’s purposes, “real people,” who have the same beliefs about their ontological status as the novel’s readers do about theirs and are fictional only from the reader’s extradiegetical perspective. These characters live side-by-side with “Persons of Dubious Reality” (PDRs), whose existence derives from other texts and who know that they are intradiegetically, as well as extradiegetically, fictional. As it turns out, Spratt himself is a PDR—Jack Spratt of the nursery rhyme, who, having added an extra “T” to his name, is passing as real. A crisis occurs when he must confess his status to his wife, Madeleine, who is, apparently, real. Her anger at his deception is compounded by the fear that if someone as apparently ordinary (by local standards) as Jack is a PDR, she might be one also. Spratt’s attempt to dispel this fear is not, as the reader recognizes, entirely persuasive: “In the nursery world, surnames always make good rhymes. Horner/corner, Spratt/fat, Hubbard/cupboard. Your maiden name of ‘Usher’ doesn’t rhyme with much except ‘gusher’ and . . . ‘flusher’” (185). Spratt seems to overlook his own knowledge that PDRs don’t come exclusively from nursery lore (his own close PDR acquaintance includes his daughter’s fiancé, Prometheus, and his son’s pet, Caliban), and his reading apparently has not extended to the stories of Poe, in whose “Fall of the House of Usher” Madeleine is to be found.1

With its crossing and re-crossing of conventional boundaries between the representationally real and the representationally fictional, Fforde’s postmodern romp mocks readers’ attachment to these distinctions and our conviction that we (unlike Madeleine) can be certain which side we are on. As Erica Hateley observes, Fforde “deploy[s] a realist narration that is inflected through the fantastic,” producing “a world related to, but separate from, our own” (1024). One of the features that separates Fforde’s world from ours is its interpenetration by other textual worlds. In this context, the distinction between imaginary friends and real ones is not always obvious or significant. If, however, ignoring not only Fforde’s
teasing but also the more straightfaced admonitions of our own critical practice, we treat Madeleine Usher’s psyche as that of the “real person” that she so ostentatiously, though unconsciously, is not, we might wonder whether her recoil from the thought of being a PDR reveals its hidden contrary—an attraction to the status of fictitiousness.

That is the possibility that I want to pursue here—that the desire of readers of novels in the broad tradition of fictional realism is less to imagine fictional characters as real than to mimic their state of fictional reality ourselves; not to invite them into our world, but to invite ourselves into theirs. Fforde’s self-conscious commentary on this desire may seem to be part of his metafictional practice. I want to suggest, however, that an ambivalent awareness of the reader’s desire to enter the fictional world is part of the history of realist fiction, visible not only in a postmodern author such as Fforde but also in a Modernist one such as E. M. Forster and, perhaps most surprisingly, in a Victorian novelist such as Charlotte Brontë.

Why might a real reader envy the state of a fictional character? Why would performing the mimesis of consciousness seem preferable to inhabiting the consciousness so painstakingly mimed? One answer is suggested by a passage near the end of E. M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* (1924), which, like many Modernist novels, is partly about the perceived insufficiency of an inherited (Victorian and Edwardian) vocabulary of fictional representation. After the death of her friend and chaperone, Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested remarks to her newer friend, Fielding, “I used to feel death selected people, it is a notion one gets from novels, because some of the characters are usually left talking at the end. Now ‘death spares no-one’ begins to be real” (264). In this character’s mournful observation about her personal situation we can also read both the irony of Forster (that is, a twentieth-century author) about the conventions of realist fiction, and the reluctance of Adela (who is represented as a twentieth-century novel-reader) to abandon its assurances. Forster’s irony is directed at the impossible claim of fictional realism, over the course of the nineteenth century increasingly freed from or at odds with a template of providential design, to approach the aleatory condition of “real life.” Death does not, in Forster’s secular conception, select people—but the novelist does, and that is precisely what makes fictional reality appealing to a novel-reader such as Adela. Adela’s remark expresses a readerly desire for the consolations at least of novelistic, if not of providential, selection.

In *A Passage to India*, then, Forster represents an attachment to providential plot-design, in which people are “selected,” as that which experi-
ence will teach a reader to forego. But if he presents anti-providential plots as both developmentally and historically inevitable, he also presents them as inherently disappointing to the reader. In the wake of the exchange between Adela Quested and Fielding,

A friendliness, as of dwarfs shaking hands, was in the air [. . . . But] they were dissatisfied. When they agreed ‘I want to go on living a bit’ or, ‘I don’t believe in God,’ the words were followed by a curious backwash as though the universe had displaced itself to fill up a tiny void [. . . .] (264)

Adela and Fielding are diminished along with the reduction of a sacred universe to a secular one. As Lisa Zunshine observes, the amount of “prompting [that readers] need to begin to attribute a mind of her own to a fictional character” is in fact “very little [. . .] since any indication that we are dealing with a self-propelled entity (e.g., [in Mrs. Dalloway] ‘Peter Walsh has come back’) leads us to assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings, and desires, at least some of which we could intuit, interpret, and, frequently, misinterpret” (277). Our eagerness to make this assumption, I am suggesting, comes from a desire not only to imagine literary characters as “self-propelled” (like us) but also to imagine ourselves as propelled (like them) by an authorial design that would confer significance on the reality that, after all, we already possess, by making us part of a narrative that maintains the texture of the real but expresses intention and meaning rather than contingency and inconclusiveness. We wish, that is, to be only dubiously real.

It is a testament to Forster’s success in avoiding such reassuring effects that there is no evidence that readers of A Passage to India have particularly wished either to become or to befriend the plain, initially prim, scandalously mistaken Adela Quested. Though she escapes death, Adela’s narrative “peter[s] out,” and she returns to England to “settle down to some career” with “sufficient money left to start [herself], and heaps of friends of [her] own type” (262). Adela’s anticlimactic departure from the novel contrasts markedly with the triumph of an earlier, equally plain, prim, and scandalously mistaken fictional heroine—Jane Eyre, who, not looking back on but standing at the beginning of the Victorian novel’s relationship to realism, avoids both a threatened passage to India and a fate as inconclusive as Adela’s.

The frequency with which Jane Eyre has been and continues to be reproduced and rewritten suggests the depth of imaginary friendship it
has inspired—the intensity of readers’ desires to enter Jane’s world. One recent revisitation is Fforde’s first novel, *The Eyre Affair* (2002). *The Eyre Affair*, another postmodern parody, presents both an alternative European history (in 1985, the Crimean war is still being fought) and an alternative literary history. In this alternative literary history, *Jane Eyre* and its author, along with many other classics of English literature, are highly valued cultural commodities, but the ending of *Jane Eyre* is not the one to which we are accustomed. In the ending of *Jane Eyre* with which Fforde’s characters are familiar, Jane “agrees to go with [St. John Rivers] to India as his assistant. It is in India, with Jane building a new life that the book ends” (271). As Fforde’s protagonist, “Literary Detective” Thursday Next, concedes, “It is a crap ending. Why, when all was going so well, does the ending just cop out on the reader? Even the *Jane Eyre* purists agree that it would have been far better for [Jane and Rochester] to have tied the knot” (272).

This “original” ending that Fforde posits for *Jane Eyre* has striking similarities to the conclusion of Adela Quested’s narrative, though with the geographical trajectories reversed. Adela’s mistaken accusation of assault against Dr. Aziz results in the dissolution of her engagement and her departure from India; she attributes it to “an hallucination . . . the sort of thing—though in an awful form—that makes some women think they’ve had an offer of marriage when none was made” [240]. The belief that she has had “an offer of marriage when none was [validly] made” is, in fact, what befalls Jane, causing her in both Brontë’s and Fforde’s versions of the story to break with Rochester and leave Thornfield, and attempt, like Adela, to “settle down to some career.” Adela Quested and the *Jane Eyre* of Fforde’s “original” ending represent the real as mundane and inconclusive. By comparison, in the actual ending of Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre* travels—famously—from frequent initial misrecognition and isolation (as orphan, schoolgirl, and lonely governess) to social and emotional recognition as Rochester’s wife and as a member of a rediscovered family of origin. This ending is re-supplied in Fforde’s novel when Jane is kidnapped from the pages of Brontë’s manuscript. Thursday Next is sent into *Jane Eyre*, via an invention called the “Prose Portal,” to rescue her, and the events of this rescue lead to a “revision” of the ending, producing the one with which we are familiar. In bringing about this revision, Thursday Next redirects the novel away from the “cop out” of the initial ending posited by Fforde toward the most traditional indicator of fictional closure—the happy marriage. Thursday’s revision is a popular triumph—“In a recent survey,” she is told, “ninety-nine out of a hundred readers who expressed a preference said they were delighted
with the new ending” (316)—and Thursday is celebrated by a group called “Brontë for the People.”

The “new” ending is popular partly because it fulfills the providential narrative logic of the rest of Jane Eyre, which has led readers to believe that Jane’s virtue will be rewarded by the recognition that she clearly most values—Rochester’s. Fforde’s account of the genesis of this ending, which is brought about by the actions of a particularly activist reader—Thursday Next—also makes literal the idea of friendship between readers and characters, which, in Fforde’s representation, is both possible and benign. At the end of The Eyre Affair, Rochester returns the favor by intervening in Thursday’s narrative to bring about her own marriage, to a character named Landon Parke-Laine. This conclusion suggests, at least from Thursday’s point of view as a reader of Jane Eyre, that “real” life can be brought to mimic the providential logic of fiction. For the reader of The Eyre Affair, however—for whom Thursday is as fictional a character as Jane—the marriage serves, conversely, as a gentle reminder of the fictionality, however pleasurable, of such conclusions.

If, in Jane Eyre, Brontë offers readers the promise of a providentially plotted world in which some favored characters are not only “left standing” but also stand in triumph, in her last novel, Villette (1853), she emphatically withdraws this hand of friendship. In Jane Eyre, origins can be recovered and family rediscovered; in Villette, Lucy’s Snowe’s origins are unrecoverable, and surrogate families (such as the Brettons) provide limited succor. In Jane Eyre, kind friends (for example, Helen Burns, Miss Temple, and the Riverses) aid Jane at crucial moments; in Villette, friendship (such as John Bretton’s) is insufficient, love (such as M. Paul’s) doomed, and thoughtlessness and cruelty (such as that of Ginevra Fanshawe and Madame Beck) prevail. In Jane Eyre, despite gothic flashes of secrecy and disguise, characters are consistent and chronology straightforward. In Villette, characters (such as John Bretton) are literally unrecognizable from scene to scene, or their behavior (such as that of Madame Beck) transforms itself incredibly; past events may be completely inaccessible (such as the implied ruin of Lucy’s family) or oddly recurrent in the present (as when Lucy in Labassencour wakes to find herself amid furniture familiar from the Brettons’ home in England). And finally, in Jane Eyre, the autodiegetic narrative seems to grant the reader direct access to, and make plain, Jane’s feelings and experiences; in Villette, the first-person address is often a source of confusion, since Lucy seems to forget, withhold, or doubt many of the aspects of her narrative.

Lucy’s isolation within the novel, and the unusually high degree of suspicion or hostility toward the reader that her narrative displays, have
been frequently noted in scholarly readings. But it is hard to overstate how thoroughly the novel is imbued with Brontë's insistence on dislocation and misrecognition not only in the novel’s most dramatic scenes but also in less apparently significant ones, such as an interaction that occurs early in the novel, at the beginning of Chapter V, between Lucy and one Mrs. Barrett. Readers are abruptly informed, was once Lucy’s nurse and is now housekeeper at a “grand mansion,” where Lucy goes to seek her advice about employment. She has however little advice to give:

The housekeeper was slowly propounding some difficulties, while she prepared orange-rind for marmalade, when a child ran past the window and came bounding into the room. It was a pretty child, and as it danced, laughing, up to me—for we were not strangers (nor, indeed, was its mother—a young married daughter of the house—a stranger)—I took it on my knee. Different as were our social positions now, this child’s mother and I had been schoolfellows, when I was a girl of ten and she a young lady of sixteen; and I remembered her—good-looking, but dull—in a lower class than mine.

I was admiring the boy’s handsome dark eyes, when the mother, young Mrs. Leigh, entered. What a beautiful and kind-looking woman was the good-natured and comely, but unintellectual girl become! Wifehood and maternity had changed her thus, as I have since seen them change others even less promising than she. Me she had forgotten. I was changed too; though not, I fear, for the better. I made no attempt to recall myself to her memory: why should I? She came for her son to accompany her in a walk, and behind her followed a nurse carrying an infant. I only mention the incident because, in addressing the nurse, Mrs. Leigh spoke French (very bad French, by the way, and with an incorrigibly bad accent, again forcibly reminding me of our school-days); and I found the woman was a foreigner [. . . .] When the whole party were withdrawn, Mrs. Barrett remarked that her young lady had brought that foreign nurse home with her two years ago, on her return from a Continental excursion; that she was treated almost as well as a governess, and had nothing to do but walk out with the baby and chatter French with Master Charles;
“and,” added Mrs. Barrett, “she says there are many Englishwomen in foreign families as well-placed as she.”

I stored up this piece of information[. . . .] (53-54)

In what seems an arbitrary, if not downright hostile, distribution of narrative emphasis, readers learn the contents of Mrs. Barrett’s marmalade but not what difficulties she “slowly propounds,” just as we learn that Lucy once had a nurse, a friend, and a different social standing, but no more about the family to whom that nurse must have been attached, the cause of the change in standing, or the failure of Lucy’s former friends to come to her aid. Orange rind aside, the narrative here favors abstraction even as it seems to offer a wealth of gratuitous detail. Lucy’s repeated use of the word “it” to describe the child before remarking on “the boy’s” eyes gives the impression that Brontë began the passage without having considered what gender to bestow upon this narratively extraneous character. Speech is characterized—Mrs. Barrett speaks slowly, Mrs. Leigh inelegantly—but not directly represented. The only piece of dialogue that appears in quotation marks—the French nurse’s remarks—belie them by being doubly reported speech. The passage implies a connection between the nurse’s reported remark and Lucy’s own decision, in the next chapter, to leave England, but it is striking that she makes this decision not as a result of aid or advice offered by any character in this scene, but rather as the result of a series of chances whose contingency is emphasized: Lucy “only mentions the incident” of Mrs. Leigh’s entrance because it reveals, accidentally, that the nurse is a “foreigner,” prompting Mrs. Barrett to remark on the situation of similarly-placed Englishwomen, but not, apparently, directly to recommend such a course.

It is precisely this scene’s combined superfluity and insufficiency of detail, its grudging and recursive revelation of plot elements, and the ignorance of others that its characters cultivate and display, that make it exemplary of Lucy Snowe’s rebarbative narrative and predictive of its multiple disconnections, both between characters and between reader and protagonist. The tortured syntax of Lucy’s description of her relationship to Mrs. Leigh and her child reinforces her habit of making elliptical references to her origins that, rather than illuminate them, serve only to heighten the readers’ frustration. And the actual arrival of “young Mrs. Leigh,” who fails to recognize, in Lucy, the old schoolfellow who recognizes her, adumbrates the novel’s many scenes of mis-, non-, or belated recognition. Lucy’s penchant for recognizing while not being recognized recurs in her identification of the louche pursuers of her first night in Labassecour with the two bullying professors for whom she
later writes an essay on “Human Justice” as well as in her recognition of the “Dr. John” of Villette as both the “true young English gentleman” (78) of that same night, and, as she subsequently realizes, the “Graham Bretton” of her youth. But Lucy can fail to recognize as well as to be recognized, not identifying Paulina Home when first re-encountered in Villette; Ginevra Fanshawe’s suitor, Alfred de Hamal, in disguise as a nun; even herself in an unfamiliar dress. In this dislocating context, the reader may feel that, even if she were provided with a “prose portal,” characters would be unrecognizable from moment to moment and the protagonist might not welcome her friendship.

Lucy’s problem is not simply, like Jane’s, that recognition is difficult though desirable; nor is Brontë reiterating a theme, traceable to eighteenth-century didactic fiction, of the invisibility of interior worth to the careless eye. Brontë’s radical proposition here is that Lucy’s ability to maintain a sense of self depends paradoxically upon avoiding recognition by others—including the novel’s readers—since her gender and social status make it available only on others’ terms and never on her own. When the snobbish Ginevra Fanshawe repeatedly asks “Who are you, Miss Snowe?” she is not interested in understanding, but in classifying, her puzzlingly opaque companion: “You used to call yourself a nursery-governess [. . .] and now Madame Beck treats you with more courtesy than she treats the Parisienne, St. Pierre; and that proud chit, my cousin [i.e. Paulina de Bassompierre], makes you her bosom friend!” (383). Ginevra shares this insistent desire to confine Lucy to some pre-existing type with the novel’s other characters. Dr. John, viewing her as Ginevra’s duenna and his own sisterly confidante, overlooks her capacity for passion and “wanted always to give me a role not mine” (395); similarly, “Madame Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical; Mr. Home, a model teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet” (375). In The Fourth Bear, before he has confessed to being a PDR, Jack Spratt tells his wife, who wants to understand the “ceaseless violence” between Punch and Judy (who have moved in next door), that “PDRs just can’t help themselves” in their repetitive behavior, which is “a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder or self-fulfilling prophecy” (78). The other characters in Villette cast Lucy as a kind of PDR, her identity reducible to a series of repeated gestures or clichés; they have the power to deny her reality. In this novel, then, the question of who is “real” becomes a question less about textual representation than about social power.

These two kinds of reality are almost brought together—as they are at the end of Jane Eyre—in M. Paul Emmanuel’s growing attachment to Lucy, concern for her welfare, and final proposal of marriage. But his
periphrastically but clearly indicated downing at sea makes this resolution short-lived and returns the narrative to a state that is at best open-ended, at worst tragic. More important, the implied drowning emphasizes the ephemerality not only of Lucy’s entrance into a conventional, and conventionally conclusive, marriage plot but also of any pleasure the reader may have taken in contemplating it. After conjuring “a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores” to indicate the shipwreck, Brontë offers the reader a consolatory image deliberately condescending in its ostentatious fictiveness: “Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and happy succeeding life” (617). What reader would willingly imagine herself among such a sentimental, unimaginative “them”?

If readers do wish to imagine an ending in which “joy [is] born again fresh out of great terror,” we must confront the fact that in doing so we, too, reduce Lucy to a cliché—the heroine of a romance. Further, like the novel’s other characters, we do so to make not Lucy but ourselves feel better, by imaginatively inhabiting a world in which romantic endings are possible. If, however, we wish to honor the originality that makes Lucy real to herself, then we must acknowledge that we have followed her not to a providential conclusion, as in the case of *Jane Eyre*, but to a future certainly inconclusive and probably bleak. In presenting readers with this choice, between a consolatory but inattentive reading and a more darkly wised-up one, Brontë anticipates the generally more chastened mode of realist fictional representation often seen as beginning some decades later, with the work of George Eliot. As Vargish suggests, for Brontë’s contemporaries this shift produced “a cacophony of admiration and anxiety” (70). Twentieth- and twenty-first century readers, however, reading Brontë backwards through the continuing tradition of fictional realism, may find it easier to take satisfaction in the very frustrations of Brontë’s narrative. If, like Adela Quested, we have come to see providential plotting as not operative in life, and therefore as a sign of unreality in fiction, then the very contingencies and disappointments of Lucy’s fate may serve to make her seem more like us—more real; paradoxically, that very reality effect may make her more compelling as a fiction. Despite its distresses and disappointments, we may still, as readers, wish to enter Lucy’s fictional world, in the hope of sharing not in the providential arrival of answers but rather in her vigorous and passionate questioning of both fictional and social convention. As *Villette* suggests, such self-reflexive examination of the relation of characters to readers
and of the represented to the real is not the new purview of postmodern
texts but is part of the history of English realist fiction.11

Notes

1 Madeleine is Jack's second wife; his first, who "could eat no lean," died as a
result of her diet (75)—presumably of a heart attack. It may be a significant dis-
tinction or merely a difference between English and American orthography that
Fforde's Madeleine spells her name differently from Poe's Madeline (see Poe 144
ff.).

2 As a writer of parodies of genre-fiction, which itself distills many of the con-
ventions of traditional realism, Fforde both comments on and relies upon those
conventions. For a brief discussion of the relationship between genre fiction and
nineteenth-century realism, see Holland 216-218.

3 On the "providential aesthetic" of the nineteenth-century novel, see Vargish;
see also Gallagher, Industrial Reformation, ch. 2.

4 My claim here is, I think, in only apparent contrast with Catherine Gallagher's
recent argument that realist fiction, such as George Eliot's, "gives us something
we might never otherwise experience: the desire to be real" ("Immanent Victo-
rian," 66). By "to be real," Gallagher here means both to be a particular exception
to a general type and to be, and feel oneself to be, fully embodied. Discussing the
representation of Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, she concludes that "through
Dorotheas, and perhaps in no other way, we can experience a longing for that
which simultaneously seems already given as the basis of our being: our incar-
nate selves" (73). Our arguments seem to me parallel, despite their significant
differences, in that both suggest that readers experience an intensification of their
relationship to, and desire for, reality through participation in fictional worlds.

5 For an overview of revisions and adaptations of Jane Eyre through the twentieth
century, see Stoneman.

6 For discussions of the providential aesthetic of Jane Eyre see Vargish 58-67. Sil-
ver reads Jane Eyre as an instance of the fairy-tale, which follows, though it ren-
ders secular, much of the logic of the providential narrative.

7 See Hateley for a critique of the end of The Eyre Affair as "gesturing toward
feminist discourse while ultimately promulgating and reinforcing conservative
romantic endings in the service of patriarchal culture" (1034). The publication of
a series of sequels to The Eyre Affair, in which the romantic closure of the mar-
rriage of Thursday and Landon is frequently suspended, to my mind challenges
Hateley's conclusion.

8 See Vargish ch. 2 for a more thoroughly developed contrast between Jane Eyre
and Villette as in their relation to the "providential aesthetic."
9 See, e.g., Hughes, who reads *Villette* as “a great novel of affective estrangement” (711) and Gilbert and Gubar, who call Lucy “from first to last a woman without” (400). See Silver in Abel *et al.*, and Preston for engagements with assumptions about the novel’s “unreliability.”

10 Vargish, ch. 4, discusses Eliot’s adaptation of the “providential aesthetic” as a secular “pool of literary conventions and techniques accessible to calculated artistic manipulation” (163). See Christ for a discussion of providential death in Eliot’s fiction.

11 See Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story*, Ch. 4 for a discussion of relations of sympathy and identification between readers and characters in the eighteenth-century novel; see Flint, particularly chs. 2 and 9, for discussions of debates over Victorian and Edwardian women’s relations to fictional characters.

**Works Cited**


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