Bookworm’s & Post-Mod-erni’sm In T’he Ey-re Affai’r

Although Jasper Fforde’s *The Eyre Affair* is saturated with postmodern experimentation and an affinity for sampling and responding to the various manifestations of this aesthetic, one scene that is especially exemplary in its encyclopedic treatment of postmodern tendencies is the metafictional bookworm scene at the end of chapter 31. In the short amount of space in which they feature, they involve many of literary postmodernism’s most salient features, including self-reflexivity, irreverence, word-play, an overload of meaning, and the nature of the relationship between characters, narrator, author, and reader. The scene is helpful for understanding the aesthetic of the book as a whole in that it playfully pays tribute, intentionally or not, to some of the hallmark concerns of postmodernism in the same vein in which the book as a whole reflects upon literary culture in general. And while the scene may not be intended as a serious contemplation of postmodernism, it can nonetheless be read in this way and thus deepens the level of meaning available for diligent readers.

Perhaps the most noteworthy and obvious postmodern characteristic of this section of the novel, in which Mycroft’s bookworms begin to produce punctuation and capitalization that becomes incorporated directly into the text, is its metafictionality. At the most straightforward level, the text is accessing a postmodern aesthetic by responding to the influence of diegetical stimuli: The bookworms create symbols and these symbols materialize in the very words of the characters themselves, thus drawing attention to the fact that the characters of *The Eyre Affair* are
inextricably linked to the paper on which they are written, and cannot escape the influences of author, narrator, reader, and even other characters in the novel (the bookworms). This becomes metafictional in that the narrative is drawing attention to itself as a text that is not a virginal transmission of one narrative truth, but ultimately a fabrication that can acknowledge itself as a text in a self-reflexive way.

However, what is particularly self-reflexive about this scene is the way in which it continues the theme of authorial usurpation. Within *The Eyre Affair*, Charlotte Bronte loses her importance as the generating force of *Jane Eyre* once the construction of the Prose Portal creates new opportunities for influencing the outcome of the novel’s plot in ways that Bronte had not intended. Thus, merely by entering *Jane Eyre* and interacting with its characters, Thursday and others are able to actually redirect the events committed to paper by Bronte and thus change their outcomes. In this manner, Fforde grants Thursday a sort of cooperative authorship of *Jane Eyre* alongside Charlotte Bronte, thus depriving Bronte of some of her control over her own text.

Similarly, Fforde relinquishes his authorial and totalitarian grasp upon the determinacy of the narrative’s events in *The Eyre Affair* and allows for his characters to individualize his plot in their own ways. One major example of this is Rochester’s suggestion to Thursday to “choose happiness” (348), which allows him to author Thursday’s happy ending in the same way that Thursday has authored his happy ending by rectifying his relationship with Jane and expunging Bertha from the narrative in chapter 33. In the same way, the bookworms in chapter 31 exert their influence over the text by manipulating it directly. Because this scene is an extension of Fforde’s larger fascination with the power relationships between author, narrator, characters, and reader directly investigated in other areas of the book as a whole, this section becomes
metafictional and self-reflexive in that it explicitly draws attention to its own participation in the
discussion of textual authorship.

The bookworm scene also exhibits a preoccupation with the proliferation of meaning in a
postmodern age, even going so far as to hint at the futility of language. The first products that
the overactive bookworms manufacture are ampersands and apostrophes. These enter the text at
random. They potentially increase the meaning of the prose because of their functions in normal
everyday English. Because ampersands denote addition and apostrophes denote either
possession or contraction, each of these symbols ascribes significance to both individual words
and larger grammatical units such as phrases and sentences. For instance, the apostrophes in the
line, “[i]n he’re the Pla’sma Rifle work’s perf&ectly” can be interpreted as not only extra
punctuational symbols incorporated at random into the text, but also as placeholders that suggest
missing letters in the words that they inhabit (312). This expands the meanings of the words,
whether their new meanings are attainable to readers or not. After all, whether or not the reader
is aware of a new meaning, the mere suggestion of missing letters confirms that there is
additional meaning to these words beyond our ability to understand, just as meaning in a
postmodern age is often elusive and sometimes even undiscoverable. The apostrophization of
random letters also changes the pronunciation of words, further frustrating meaning and
comprehensibility to reflect this sense of futility.

The use of ampersands is especially interesting because they materialize in the text in a
variety of ways. In the same line previously mentioned, an ampersand splits the word
“perfectly,” making it instead “perf&ectly,” thus splitting the word from one part into two and
obscuring its meaning (312). Soon afterward, ampersands are used in substitution of the letters
“a-n-d” in “H&held,” “Dem&ed,” and “L&” (313). This reflects a contemporary affinity for
abbreviation which allows us to eliminate work from everyday textual communication in order to save time in a postmodern age defined by speed and distraction. Furthermore, the ampersand is also used simply for its original purpose, as in the line, “& a 50% Cut On Everything That Comes Out Of It” (313). Here, the noteworthy aspect of the use of an ampersand is not only that it conserves space and energy in lieu of “and,” but that it is a symbol, and symbols are becoming as common as words in a time when information and meaning are increasingly codified and impenetrable, as evidenced by the continuing boom of information and science.

When the bookworms begin to effect incessant capitalization, the result is another postmodern obsession—commercialism. The quality of each sentence in which all of the individual words are capitalized is alternately titular or commercial in nature. For instance, “& a 50% Cut On Every’thing That’ Comes Out Of It!” sounds like it could be ripped from a Penny Saver advertisement though it is actually a command directed at Thursday by Acheron (313). The capitalization of all the words in this sentence adds extracontextual advertisical meaning to it despite the fact that it is not advertisical in intent. However, even when capitalization does not suggest anything explicitly commercial, it still provides an annunciative or titular quality to each sentence as though the sentence were a headline of some sort. This quality lends itself to commercialism in that any comparison that can be made to a newspaper headline demonstrates a general connection to sensationalist marketing techniques, which in turn reflect capitalism and commercialism. An example that particularly seems as though it could be pulled from a newspaper front page is “The Czar Will Permanently Cede The Peninsula To England” because it is political and completely capitalized as a news story would be (313). But even when capitalization isn’t being read as sensational in this section, it ascribes an increased importance to each word that can also read as enthusiasm. Examples to substantiate this claim that
capitalization creates a titular quality for sentences include, “Any’thing That The Hu’man Imag’ination Can Think Up, We Can Reproduce” (312), and “With It We Can Ma’ke Anything We Want” (313). Of course, a commercialistic interpretation of grammatical capitalization is frustrated a bit by the superfluous apostrophes present in these sentences, but these can just suggest the dishonesty of consumerism in that the apostrophes are bookmarking additional letters in the word and thus additional meaning that is not transparent to the consumer/reader. And even if the sentences aren’t being read as sensational or commercial in any way, their capitalization also ascribes an increased importance to each word which can be interpreted as reflecting an increased volume found in the discordant and jarring tone of the postmodern era, which is defined by overstimulation.

The final form of manipulation of text is hyphenation. The entry of hyphens into the text has the effect of dividing complete words into multiple parts which each then become capitalized to form their own individual words in a sort of lexical meiosis. For example, “Im-Pervious” (314) and “In-Struc-tion” (313) both include more capital letters than they would have if they were not divided for the bookworms to capitalize. Additionally, separate words are also linked to form arbitrary connections between words in a manner vaguely reminiscent of David Foster Wallace, such as in the sentence “Give-Them-To-Me,” among other examples (314). The purpose of all of this is undoubtedly to speculate upon the nature of language and the ways that manipulation of punctuation can affect that nature. However, it is unclear whether this manipulation of punctuation and capitalization serves to complicate language, generate new language, enrich it, destroy it, or to function as some combination of these. But this confusion is appropriate, given that a postmodern investigation of any subject will tend to lead to complicated and unanswerable questions rather than neatly articulable conclusions.
Yet, with all of these categorical explanations of the use of punctuation and capitalization for a postmodern aesthetic, there are a few examples that fit into categories all of their own. The first is the “It’_“s” located near the bottom of 312 (underscore added for demonstrative purposes). This is essentially just the word “it’s” with an additional space and quotation mark between the t and the s. Because extra spacing is not one of the manipulations effected by the bookworms, it is likely that this anomaly is a dead-end, the meaning of which is intended to remain opaque, despite analysis. This is a favorite trick of postmodernism and is related to the idea of the futility of knowledge. Here, the use of extra space—space literally being defined as nothingness—is probably meant to be a mischievous admission by Fforde of the anomaly’s own meaninglessness. Thus, though this may seem like something important to analyze, its very meaning is in its lack of meaning. Furthermore, once the bookworms introduce hyphenation into the text, Fforde uses em dashes (—) at least three times, though these are not the same as hyphens, but are their own form of punctuation (314). It is as though he is irreverently disobeying his own rules of order and introducing new punctuation without offering any explanation as to why he does this. It is again a mischievous and playful rouse to confuse readers—another tradition in postmodern literature. This playfulness is even reflected in his use of an em dash in the line “You Dare To Dou-ble—Cross Me?” (314). Because em dashes are two hyphens in length, there seems to be some communication between the word “Dou-ble” in this quote and the length of the em dash, which is a doubled hyphen. Fforde’s irreverence also reinforces the context of the entire scene itself, which occurs as a result of the bookworms “happily farting out” punctuation (312). The use of such a crude word as “farting,” and the use of “belching” within the next two pages signals Fforde’s low-brow, non-elitist, postmodern sensibility.
Additional anomalies in punctuation and stylization establish the text as its own reality separated from that of either the characters or the readers and draws attention to the unspecified influences of both the narrator and the author. Before the bookworms effect any textual manipulation, the phenomenon is foreshadowed in the lines, “rest & recuperation,” and “the air was heav’y with th’em&” (312). Throughout the rest of the episode, excess punctuation and capitalization only manifest themselves in dialogue, and not in the narration. However, this paragraph is unique in that either Fforde or Thursday incorporates superfluous punctuation into the narration, but it is impossible to know whether this should be attributed to Fforde or Thursday. In addition, this premature manipulation of text seems to herald the upcoming proliferation of apostrophes and ampersands, and thus it seems that the narration is predicting what will happen in the dialogue, or that it is even predestining such textual manipulation to occur.

Similarly, because it is unclear who is transmitting dialogue to the reader—Fforde or Thursday?—it is also interesting to note that despite the textual manipulations caused by the bookworms, Acheron Hades is able to italicize at will when he says, “Give Me The Gun,” and “You Dare to Dou-ble—Cross-Me?” even though such stylization is not provided for by the bookworms’ output, which consists only of hyphenation, capitalization, and excessive use of apostrophes and ampersands (314). Thus, someone is not following the rules of the text in transmitting Hades’ words to the reader, which means that either Thursday or Fforde is taking stylistic liberties beyond what the bookworms provide for. And of course, though Thursday is the narrator, it is possible that Fforde may be interfering with her narration; however this is impossible to determine for sure. The main point is that someone is tampering with the text besides the bookworms, but it is impossible to know because there are multiple entities authoring
the text, including individual characters themselves, the narrator, the author, and the bookworms. It is a postmodern frustration of ultimate authority in which there are multiple scribes facilitating the narrative. In a way, this almost becomes a Cubist aesthetic, as multiple perspectives are combined to make one whole in which the final perspective is composite and highly subjective.

Because it is assumed that the characters are speaking into a fictional, other-worldly ether in which they cannot see their own speech as it becomes infected with unnecessary punctuation, the reader can assume that they may be perceiving the bookworms' activities different than we are perceiving them while reading. This draws attention to the reader as an external force that is privy to the novel’s existence as a text, whereas the characters may only be indirectly aware of the fact that they are themselves characters in a book. Because we can perceive their existence in a text by seeing that text manipulated by bookworms, Fforde seems eager to highlight the separate components that go into making a novel: The author, the characters, the narrator, and the reader. All four are necessary for the process of reading, but the deconstruction of such simple and foundational elements as these four, which calls attention to their existence by breaking the fourth wall, has a decidedly postmodern flavor about it.

The deconstruction of forces acting upon the novel also casts the reader as a sort of voyeur once they are made aware of their own presence and agency in their relationship to the novel. By seeing the textual manipulation of this bookworm scene, the reader becomes aware of their own powers of surveillance, and this creates a subtle feeling of paranoia in the unbalanced relationship between the reader and the characters whose words are transcribed to the page with excess punctuation and capitalization as though they are sometimes unaware of their own presence in a story. The characters have no control over their own destinies apart from what the author, or in this case, the bookworms, decide for them. This creates a somewhat uneasy
dynamic relished in the postmodern aesthetic, since discomfort is one of the biggest truths of the present world.

Of course, the postmodern aesthetic is very complex and broad in scope, and this in turn complicates the discussion of postmodernism in *The Eyre Affair*. To analyze its many manifestations within the novel would be a large undertaking; however, the bookworm scene discussed here is a good entry point into the subject, from which many connections may be drawn. However, the multitude of comments that can be culled from this section alone is demonstrative of just how deeply present the postmodern aesthetic is within the novel, and can be useful for understanding the novel at a deeper critical level.