"Proving a thing even while you contradict it": Fictions, Beliefs, and Legitimation in The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.

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"Proving a thing even while you contradict it":
FICTIONS, BELIEFS, AND LEGITIMATION IN
THE MEMOIRS OF BARRY LYNDON, ESQ.

ROBERT P. FLETCHER

William Makepeace Thackeray, the sentimental-ironist amongst the
Victorian novelists, is a writer profoundly ambivalent about fiction. Of course,
his suspicions about particular fictions are well-known—his attacks on the
Newgate Novel are the foremost instance of this skepticism. As a critic for
Fraser's in the 1830s and 1840s, he set out to demarcate clearly the line
between storybooks and experience, or what he might have termed the
artificial and the natural. It is not gratuitous that he objected to Edward
Bulwer-Lytton as a hypocrite and as a bad writer, for—according to
Thackeray—the criminal effects of a criminal romance proceed from the
writer's self-conscious but unmarked imposition of a fiction on his readers.
Sometimes, he found, Bulwer even imposed on himself.1 It is this stance
towards fiction—exposer of the sham, champion of the real—that has been
assigned to Thackeray by literary history.

But such a categorization does justice neither to Thackeray's love for
novels nor to his comprehensive notion of fiction—that is, his sense of its
pervasiveness. His appreciation of the cognitive importance of fictions led
him to inquire into their formal markings, on the one hand, and their uses and
abuses, on the other, by indulging his penchant for parody. His major novels
have often been discussed as investigations of the shifting relations among
author, readers, and story—and as attempts to forge a moral bond between
novelist and audience—but some of his minor texts offer strategic qualifica-
tions of any "sense of an audience" too readily presumed.2 In Thackeray's
early novel, The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., the pleasures, hazards, and
ubiquity of fiction are presented through a lively but thoroughly untrustworthy
storyteller. By creating a speaker who tells a tale by not telling it, Thackeray
explores the boundaries among fiction and belief, knowledge and power; in
effect, the novel undermines as naive the common sense distinction between
truth and fiction, exposes the dangers of wholehearted belief in any language game, and offers fiction itself as the pedagogical tool par excellence for teaching the intricacies of interpretation.

Thackeray’s thoughts on fiction develop in response to a philosophical position represented most immediately for him by Thomas Carlyle. In “Biography,” Carlyle invokes an ancient dichotomy between history and fiction, with history identified as the true, the real, and the route of access to the spiritual, and fiction condemned as harmful deceit: “Fiction, while the feign of it knows that he is feigning, partakes, more than we suspect, of the nature of lying; and has ever an, in some degree, unsatisfactory character.” Conversely, the claim that historical narratives, such as biographies, are believable supports Carlyle’s sense of wonder:

Let any one bethink him how impressive the smallest historical fact may become, as contrasted with the grandest fictitious event; what an incalculable force lies for us in this consideration: The Thing which I here hold imaged in my mind did actually occur; was, in very truth, an element in the system of the All, whereof I too form a part; had therefore, and has, through all time, an authentic being; is not a dream, but a reality. (P. 54)

With his trust that the historical narrative is more reliable than a fiction, Carlyle can endorse without hesitation a relation between belief and power on a cosmic level: “Belief is, indeed, the beginning and first condition of all spiritual Force whatsoever: only in so far as Imagination, were it but momentarily, is believed, can there be any use or meaning in it, any enjoyment of it? [sic]” (p. 50). Those who believed in mythological creatures, provided they believed sincerely (an important redundancy, which we shall find Thackeray questioning indirectly, through a fiction), were inspired by “spiritual Force,” despite the counterfactual nature of mythological creatures. Myths are belatedly fictional, but, when first in circulation, genuinely prophetic. Sincerity—what Carlyle terms “a loving Heart”—together with an attention to historical reality guarantee knowledge, turning “the whole man” into “a living mirror, wherein the wonders of this ever-wonderful Universe are, in their true light . . . represented, and reflected back on us” (p. 57). Throughout his career as novelist, Thackeray seems to be writing against this background of confidence in the factual (i.e. “real”) story, looking at this problem of fictionality and belief from different angles but always with the responsible philosopher’s objections in mind. Thackeray’s responses, in the form of fictions that force readers to test both the speaker’s coherence as well as their own grounds for judgment, undermine the link in Western philosophy between representation and knowledge, the link reforged by Carlyle’s metaphor for humanity, the “living mirror” that reflects the world. In every Thackerayan fiction, and in
every fiction in general (according to Thackeray), that mirror is warped, cracked, and beyond repair.

The problem of fictionality has as its crux the question of whether or not, at any point, an audience believes in the fiction to which it has been exposed. While a certain line of criticism, descending from the Coleridge of the Shakespearean lectures, would have it that the audience suspends its disbelief when attending to a fiction in its desire to see through the performance to reality, an equally important faction has held that the audience always has clearly in mind the fictionality of novel or drama. Thackeray’s bent was skeptical, away from belief in fictions and away from the Carlylean trust in belief, towards a sort of “ironic reception” theory. At the very least, he began his career with a notion that belief is not essential to the appreciation of fictions, though he himself often succumbed to the “charm” afforded by Dickens and others. As his career progressed, however, and his skepticism was confirmed, his insistence on the groundlessness of belief gave way to an understanding of the consequent prevalence of fictions.

*Barry Lyndon* asks us to consider in detail the consequences of that engagement with fiction, from the perspective of both the fictionalizer and his audience. It presents an engaging story which, through its narrator’s inconsistency, keeps the reader off-balance regarding what is false and true, and in fact thematizes this pragmatic problem of distinguishing and establishing the legitimate in a world of pretenders. In so doing, it makes a case that the play of fiction is quite serious, for not only does fiction help explain the dangers of belief, as Thackeray saw them, it also exposes the processes whereby those beliefs can be validated as knowledge.

*Barry Lyndon* is a fairly complex narrator; he brags with the hyperbole of a teller of tall-tales, but he also purposefully keeps silent, naively admits his miscalculations, moralizes on man’s inhumanity, argues for realism in novels, sentimentalizes over his home and mother, and even frankly admits to dishonesty or unscrupulousness, justifying himself through necessity. It becomes the book’s challenge to the reader to sort as many of these narrative “speech acts” as he or she can by checking them against the “facts” of the narrative. The fictionalization of this speaker’s “experience” becomes apparent, then, through the accumulation of his discrepancies, inconsistencies, inadvertent revelations, and moments of obtuseness, to name just a few of the mechanisms. In this novel, Thackeray makes a case that fictionalization is both a cognitive and cultural phenomenon which literary texts can enact and exemplify.

The novel works through the combination of two elements that have been cited by critics throughout the history of its reception: the immorality readily apparent in the narrator’s discourse and the nonetheless seductive pull of its seeming candor. James Fitzjames Stephen and Anthony Trollope both identify
what makes *Barry Lyndon* unusual as a fiction and yet exemplary of the way fictions work. Stephen explains the mechanism of the text—which depends for its effect on what a narratologist might call the coincidence of focalizer and point of view—as well as his own ambivalent reaction to its creation, *Barry Lyndon*:

To be able, with perfect decency and propriety, to take up his abode in the very heart of a most unmitigated blackguard and scoundrel, and to show how, as a matter of course, and without any kind of denial or concealment, he *bonâ fide* considers himself one of the best and greatest of men, is surely one of the hardest tasks which could be imposed on an author; yet Mr. Thackeray has undertaken and executed it with perfect success . . . The conception of *Barry Lyndon*’s character involves, however, some grains of good . . . He is almost heartbroken at his [son’s] death, and, in his lowest degradation, wears a lock of his hair round his neck. There is something not only touching, but deeply true, in such a representation.¹⁰

Trollope is more direct:

*Barry Lyndon* is as great a scoundrel as the mind of man ever conceived . . . And yet his story is so written that it is almost impossible not to entertain something of a friendly feeling for him . . . the reader is so carried away by his frankness and energy as almost to rejoice when he succeeds, and to grieve with him when he is brought to the ground.¹¹

Both reviewers are very clear that we, as readers, are not supposed to trust Barry, and yet both also feel engaged with the cooperative principle in narrative to such a degree that they respond emotionally to something “deeply true” in Barry’s representation of his life. Trollope and Stephen are instructive in their responses because they express the inconsistency of interpretation Thackeray meant to elicit and thematize: neither believes the character *Barry Lyndon* attributes to himself, yet both believe in the character and in some of what he says. The charm registered by both critics in response to Barry’s “frankness” provides another example of Thackeray’s insights into the relation between fiction and belief, insights which challenge Carlylean faith.¹²

In this novel, Thackeray has exemplified and dramatized the cooperative principle in narrative and how that pragmatic need to “listen” empowers fiction.¹³ The merging of “who is seeing” and “who is speaking” in this fiction provides it with the same narrative mode as that of autobiography, and—like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels hoping to blur the line between history and fiction—*Barry Lyndon* is labeled as a non-fictional life narrative, a memoir.¹⁴ This claim to narrate a life and the consequent trust of the reader in the narrator’s competence is, however, immediately compromised when, to begin his narrative, Barry makes an assertion wildly misogynistic and hyperbolic: “Since the days of Adam, there has been hardly a
mischief done in this world but a woman has been at the bottom of it.”15 The reader is given two uncomplementary tasks as he or she begins the novel: to listen seriously to the events described and explained by the narrator—in Smith’s words, “to infer the motives and circumstances that occasioned his utterance”—and to double check those explanations against the descriptions, as well as any other descriptions available to him or her.16 This first-person narrative will stretch the cooperative principle and thus highlight the game-someness of fiction. But the complexity of Barry’s voice and his willingness to present other voices in his text will also highlight the “inferential walks” that are part of the game, for the point of Barry Lyndon is not only the fictionality of the narrative but also the processes by which narrative necessarily fictionalizes to some degree.17 Barry’s story posits, of course, a series of events, linked by cause and effect or by fortune and luck, that add up to a life. But Thackeray’s novel, through the inconsistency of its narrator, demands that the reader separate event from description of the event, as well as from narrative of the event, explanation for the event, and justification of the explanation.18 At every step of this process, the potential for fictionalization enters; indeed, the inferential nature of the process guarantees that even the most veracious witness to an event creates a fiction, in the sense of a hypothesis (or a series of them). Our desire to listen to Barry and our almost immediate distrust of him combine to force us to try to recognize every level of the text, every voice in it, and the possibility of alternative hypotheses—inferences or stories—at each of the levels.19 In effect, the reader of Barry Lyndon must become a writer, creating another fiction or two “truer” than the original, perhaps, only in their coherence.20

Barry’s retrospective of his early experiences begins immediately to construct his inconsistency as both character and speaker. With his profligate father dead and his widowed mother dedicated to rewriting the character of her husband, Redmond Barry, as Barry Lyndon is called when he begins life, grows up in the household of his uncle and cousins as the poor but proud relation of a family of shabby gentry. Simultaneously contemptuous of idle claims to nobility and full of the glories of the “Barrys of Barryogue,” the young Barry and the adult narrator puncture the pretensions of this society (including his cousins) but fail to reflect on their own myths of identity. The reader is thus caught in a position he or she will occupy frequently, crediting the outsider’s view of the society provided by Barry and yet supplementing Barry’s understanding of himself and his part in the world. Barry’s irony, both in the story and its retrospective frame, is fairly limited to his view of others and the world at large and is rarely self-reflexive.

This character/narrator, then, puts us in the awkward position of listening to his story but second-guessing it relentlessly. He offers as a formative experience his romance with his cousin Nora, subsequent rejection in favor of
an English captain with money, and successful revenge through a duel. By exploiting the techniques of first-person narrative, however, Thackeray turns the “experience” into an examination of the distance between event and explanation. Barry’s reader must, at the least, take his word for it that something happened involving him and his cousin, certain events that he has structured as his first affair of the heart. But, his characteristic braggadocio and retrospective misogyny predispose the reader to fill out certain nascent narratives suggested by his own:

I was a more accomplished man than either of my cousins; and I think Nature had been also, more bountiful to me in the matter of person. Some of the Castle Brady girls (as you shall hear presently) adored me. At fairs and races many of the prettiest lasses present said they would like to have me for their bachelor, and yet somehow, it must be confessed, I was not popular. (P. 16)

Adored and yet not popular, proud of his “deeds of prowess” and yet eager to dismiss the subject of his losing efforts in boyhood fights with the claim that “fisticuff-facts are dull subjects to talk of, and to discuss before high-bred gentlemen and ladies” (p. 17), Barry presents two narratives in one, the buried version left to the reader to infer against that provided by his storyteller. So it is, too, with his infatuation for Nora. He sets up the story with a backward glance at her appearance, a glance which—like the generalizations on the foolishness of first love that precede the episode—tempers the adult Barry’s necessary admission that “in my first affair I was wofully unsuccessful” (p. 19):

When I come to think about her now, I know she never could have been handsome; for her figure was rather of the fattest, and her mouth of the widest; she was freckled over like a partridge’s egg, and her hair was the colour of a certain vegetable which we eat with boiled beef, to use the mildest term. (P. 22)

Wrapped up in the mixed signals about his popularity, Barry’s story of Nora rewrites itself as he proceeds. He undercuts his own love story, telling us that Nora was a flirt—far from adoring her cousin, she really only uses him “to rehearse her accomplishment upon” (p. 22)—but failing to recognize his own foolishness as a boy, which remains to him, instead, the great but undeveloped passion of a future hero:

“For after all, Redmond,” she would say, “you are but fifteen, and you hav’n’t a guinea in the world;” at which I would swear that I would become the greatest hero ever known out of Ireland, and vow that before I was twenty I would have money enough to purchase an estate six times as big as Castle Brady. All which vain promises, of course, I did not
Barry is quite ready to see his life as a coherent whole, tied together by causation when he thinks his actions reflect well on him, by luck when he thinks things could have gone better. In his version of this episode, Nora jilts him for Captain Quin, an Englishman, whom young Redmond Barry then insults (by flinging a glass of wine in his face) and challenges to a duel. The older Barry can sometimes laugh at his younger self’s hot-headedness—so long as he glosses it as the “spirit” belonging to a gentleman—as when he bursts out in advance of his engagement with Quin:

“I’ll have his blood, or he shall have mine; and this riband shall be found dyed in it . . . Yes! and if I kill him, I’l pin it on his breast, and then she may go take back her token.” This I said because I was very much excited at the time, and because I had not read my novels and romantic plays for nothing. (P. 40)

But when he describes the results of the duel, he presents his feelings as they were at the time, leaving any ironic hindsight out and thus validating his boyhood sense of grandeur: “I did not feel any horror or fear, young as I was, in seeing my enemy prostrate before me; for I knew that I had met and conquered him honourably in the field, as became a man of my name and blood” (p. 47). What Barry doesn’t tell us here is that Quin has survived the duel because it has been fixed; as we find out two chapters later (p. 65), Barry’s older male cousins and another officer, Captain Fagan, have loaded his pistol with a plug of tow, a sort of blank, rendering it harmless. Of course, Barry Lyndon knows this as he narrates, but young Redmond Barry’s heroism would be compromised if the story of the duel were rewritten at this point, so he carefully elides this development, to keep his fiction of development intact.

If the reader has been careful, however, he or she has come upon rudimentary narratives which have been “narcotized” in the narrator’s discourse—narratives which may nevertheless counter Barry’s blown-up romance if they are revived in the reader’s imagination.21 To trace Nora’s story is to find a flirtatious girl who spots her cousin’s boorishness very early (p. 23), discourages him good-humoredly from taking his suit for her seriously (pp. 25-6), and is matched (for her family’s advantage) with an equally boorish English captain (p. 33).22 When Barry bursts upon the pair and threatens to attack Quin and the latter reaches for his sword, Nora finds herself between two melodramatic boys:
“Captain Quin, for Heaven’s sake spare the child—he is but an infant!”
“And ought to be whipped for his impudence,” said the captain; “but never fear, Miss Brady, I shall not touch him; your favourite is safe from me . . . When ladies make presents to gentlemen, it is time for other gentlemen to retire.”
“Good heavens, Quin!” cried the girl, “he is but a boy.”
“I’m a man,” roared I, “and will prove it.”
“And don’t signify any more than my parrot or lap-dog. Mayn’t I give a bit of riband to my own cousin?” (P. 32)

Nora’s voice asserts, within Barry Lyndon’s memoir, what a minor character young Redmond Barry was. The arranged marriage is threatened, however, by his obstreperousness, and when Quin and Nora’s brothers are about to fall to over Quin’s attempted withdrawl, Fagan, the wily brother officer, encourages Redmond to attack again, in order to defuse the situation. The engagement is thus preserved and, after Redmond is sent home, even cemented. As Barry tells us, when he finds out eventually about the clandestine marriage he grabs center-stage again by tossing the wine in Quin’s face and proposing the meeting between them:

“Mr. Quin,” said I, in the most dignified tone I could assume, “may also have satisfaction any time he pleases, by calling on Redmond Barry, Esquire, of Barryville.” At which speech my uncle burst out a-laughing (as he did at everything); and in this laugh, Captain Fagan, much to my mortification, joined. (P. 38)

Barry, in retrospect, still cannot find anything ridiculous in his boyhood bravado and thus cannot understand the laughter. What is in Barry’s story the highly serious end to a fatal attraction is in the alternative story (and the novel as a whole) a comedy; when Barry arrives at the site appointed for the duel, he finds that “the party were laughing together at some joke of one or the other, and I must say I thought this laughter very unbecoming in my cousins, who were met, perhaps, to see the death of one of their kindred” (p. 45). Once again, Barry’s fiction overtly narcotizes the farcical element of the events (this laughter is, of course, an early clue that the duel is a fake), but his representation nonetheless contains the makings of another story.

The vagaries of narrative and its resulting fictiveness form the ultimate subject of this episode in all its variations. Barry narcotizes the voices that would interpret the events differently—even the voice of a wiser self that is supposed to result from experience. On the other hand, he blows up the importance of some events—most notably, Nora’s flirtations—in line with his own sense of himself as ill-used gentleman. The resulting story is, of course, only half the story, a half that has been made significant for Barry by fitting his experience into a formula we might entitle the rhetoric of the jilted
romantic hero. The narcotized elements of this narrative, however, provide the building blocks of alternative interpretations for the events Barry tries to restrict to his own story. These fragments call attention to themselves, as we have seen, precisely because they don’t fit Barry’s schema for himself; it turns out that they repay, instead, the reader’s “inferential walks,” or forecasts of the future course of the story, which they highlight. They allow him or her to construct “ghost chapters” (Eco, pp. 214-15), such as the conspiracy to fix the duel, and these phantom fictions cumulatively empower the reader to place Barry back on the periphery of the action, against his will. Barry’s desire to center events around himself, to tell his story rather than others’ stories, repeats the gesture of autobiography or the historical text by framing (and thus fictionalizing) events around a subject.

Our faith in Barry’s competence as a narrator of his own experience is virtually shattered, then, very early on in the book; yet, we find ourselves continuing to listen to this voice, as well as the voices that come through his—clairvoyantly, one might say. The focalization of the narrative and the cooperative principle that is entailed by it demand that the reader attend to Barry’s characterizations, unless he or she detects a discrepancy, stops reading the novel, or decides to play his or her own game with the text, a la Barry himself. Much in Barry’s story of his early romance remains believable, for lack of falsification. His portrayal of Quin as a coward, for instance, finds corroboration in the words of Fagan, the Brady brothers, and even Nora herself. Thackeray thus continually challenges the reader’s inferential skills, demonstrating that belief in narrative is no simple matter of choice. Believe we may (or may not), but agree upon, at the least, we must.

Barry’s narration of his military experiences reflects his inconsistency as a storyteller and, hence also, the reader’s inconsistent trust in him. After leaving his village because of his “deadly” encounter with Quin, Barry tries to make a start in the “genteel world” by posing as a wealthy young gentleman, only to be fleeced by two similarly-minded con artists. To make his way he decides he must “accept his Majesty’s shilling” (p. 62) and enter the army, where he bemoans the situation his luck has placed him in:

Pah! the reminiscences of the horrid black-hole of a place in which we soldiers were confined, of the wretched creatures with whom I was now forced to keep company, of the ploughmen, poachers, pickpockets, who had taken refuge from poverty, or the law, as, in truth, I had done myself, is enough to make me ashamed even now, and it calls the blush into my old cheeks to think I was ever forced to keep such company. (P. 62)

Barry’s irrepressible pride sustains him, however, and he sees action in the Seven Years’ War as a corporal. Thackeray thus places his young rogue in circumstances that permit him to give a footman’s view of the war, with his
usual “frankness.” Barry’s confusion over the various shifting alliances—“It would require a greater philosopher and historian than I am to explain the causes of the famous Seven Years’ War in which Europe was engaged” (p. 67)—reduces the complicated, political explanations for the war to the sort of personal power struggle he is familiar with: “Now, somehow, we were on Frederick’s side.” His scenario thereby also debunks “the Protestant hero,” as we used to call the godless old Frederick of Prussia,” as a fiction of historians and de glorifies the war as well.

We listen attentively to Barry at this point, I would argue, for several reasons. First, his admission of his low station, however undeserved he thinks it, again narcotizes, for the time being, our sense of his bragging, which has up till this point strained our credulity. Second, given our disposition to take inferential walks when interpreting a narrative, regardless of its type, this outsider’s view of political history enlists the reader’s desire to revise the conventional, general narrative of the war by filling in the motivations of the various characters involved: Frederick, Maria of Austria, George II of England, and others. Finally, we simply have no other voice than Barry’s here; his focalization temporarily overlaps with the teleology of the novel, providing through the corrective of his underling’s perspective another example of the prevalence of fictions—this time, those to be found in history books.

Here then is evidence of the persuasiveness of the storyteller’s testimony, especially when he offers it as alternative to received opinion. Barry makes a point of deromanticizing (and thus increasing the believability of) his own military experience through comparison:

Were these memoirs not characterized by truth, and did I deign to utter a single word for which my own personal experience did not give me the fullest authority. I might easily make myself the hero of some strange and popular adventures, and, after the fashion of novel-writers, introduce my readers to the great characters of this remarkable time. These persons (I mean the romance-writers), if they take a drummer or a dustman for a hero, somehow manage to bring him in contact with the greatest lords and most notorious personages of the empire, and I warrant me there’s not one of them but, in describing the battle of Minden would manage to bring Prince Ferdinand, and my Lord George Sackville, and my Lord Granby into presence. (Pp. 69-70)

Barry is, of course, quite capable of turning romance-writer when he has a mind to, as we saw him do in his tale of first love and as he will throughout his memoir. But, in this instance, Thackeray uses his inconsistent narrator as a leveller whose brutality rides roughshod over the glosses of battle-field honor found in the military novels:

I saw, I promise you, some very good company on the French part, for their regiments of Lorraine and Royal Cravate were charging us all day; and in that sort of mêlée high and low are pretty equally received. I hate
bragging, but I cannot help saying that I made a very close acquaintance with the colonel of the Cravates, for I drove my bayonet into his body, and finished off a poor little ensign, so young, slender, and small, that a blow from my pig-tail would have dispatched him, I think, in place of the butt of my musket, with which I clubbed him down. I killed, besides, four more officers and men, and in the poor ensign’s pocket found a purse of fourteen louis-d’or, and a silver box of sugar-plums, of which the former present was very agreeable to me. If people would tell their stories of battles in this simple way, I think the cause of truth would not suffer by it. All I know of this famous fight of Minden (except from books) is told here above. (P. 70)

Critics have found these comments out of character, but the coherence of character is a fiction that this novel is, in fact, out to challenge.24 Barry is indeed an incoherent character, for he is rarely self-aware, and the checks people impose on themselves which stabilize the self and inhibit what they say are largely (though not entirely) absent from his voice. Recalling his discovery of the dead Fagan on the battlefield, stripped of his valuables, Barry moralizes upon the rapacity of those who would rob a body while retreating and the hypocrisy of the politicians who lead them:

Such knaves and ruffians do men in war become! It is well for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they lead—men nursed in poverty, entirely ignorant, made to take a pride in deeds of blood—men who can have no amusement but in drunkenness, debauch, and plunder. It is with these shocking instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world. (P. 71)

Not only does Barry fail to apply the moral to himself, as illustration of the murder and rape that Frederick’s “philosophy, and his liberality” produce, he casually adds one more story, in which he prominently figures:

I can recollect a certain day, about three weeks after the battle of Minden, and a farm-house in which some of us entered; and how the old woman and her daughters served us, trembling to wine; and how we got drunk over the wine, and the house was in a flame, presently: and woe betide the wretched fellow afterwards who came home to look for his house and his children! (P. 71)

The spontaneous combustion Barry’s grammar provides—“the house was in a flame, presently”—elides (or attempts to, at least) the responsibility he begins to lay upon himself and his fellows. Like so much of his narrative, Barry’s example implicates his own actions, not only those he intends to criticize.25 The hypocrisies made possible through the fictionality of explanations extend, he inadvertently shows us, to both high and low, general and corporal, narrator and character.
These early episodes of boyhood infatuation and the military life set the tone for the novel as a whole and also establish the reader’s task: to understand the narrative and its narrator, to join in his game, without being fooled—without, that is, missing the fact that he violates the rules more than occasionally. Barry’s commitment to his own story makes this interpretive play a struggle at times; indeed, this fiction about fiction-making aims to characterize the writing and reading of fiction as a form of agonistics, where writer and reader play for the advantage over or persuasion of the other. Barry’s belief is a function simultaneously of his self-creation through storytelling and the self-deception which that “fictionalizing” reflects and reinforces. Barry’s changing names and guises may signal to the reader that the voice of Barry Lyndon breaks down, once he or she unravels the unity imposed by the reminiscing narrator, into a number of voices or perspectives, some reliable in their reporting, some not. Through them all, however—from the boy who believes his cousin adores him, to the old, broken-down prisoner who believes luck and not his actions has determined his fate—runs that strain of frankness Trollope identified, a sincere faith Barry has in himself, which he is convinced the reader will share.

That the novel leads us to question that faith and rewrite Barry’s story reflects Thackeray’s own doubts about the value of belief in fictions. From the novelist’s perspective, we are in trouble if, as Carlyle insists, belief is to be the criterion with which to judge the worth of a text. Carlyle claims that we believe only in the serious or the responsible, not the ironic, flippant, or the make-believe, but our interpretative situation allows for the irresponsible to pass for the responsible, fictions for facts. There is no clear semantic difference between these categories of discourse, only a pragmatic one which the fiction writer or the rogue can exploit. Barry Lyndon plays upon the fragmentary moments of assent that occur in the game of make-believe in order to reframe the issue of the fiction’s and reader’s responsibility. In opposition to Carlyle’s sermons of conviction and serious representation, Thackeray presents a playful education in interpretation through a fiction which rewards disbelief in what its narrator pretends to represent. Responsibility is, for Thackeray, a matter of reading, not of discourse analysis.

But disbelief in a fiction (or even a series of them) is not the same as disbelief in fiction. Where Carlyle argues that we must abandon the fictional for the real, Thackeray reveals that criticism is generated, and perspective on self and culture gained, only through appeal to other stories, or to the textual indications of their narcotized presence. Too firm a belief in the reality beyond the story, without the frequent checks other stories supply, can land one in the predicament of Barry Lyndon, creating ad hoc fictions without realizing it. In forcing his reader to deal with Barry Lyndon, Thackeray sought to train him or her to recognize the intertextuality of experience and to handle competently
the shifting language games of human society. Like Carlyle, Thackeray worried about irresponsible discourse, but—feeling that historical and fictional discourse refer to their objects in the same way—he tried in this novel to show that fictions are detected and understood through other fictions. In fact, this practice in formulating alternative hypotheses and other readings—thus changing the rules of the game—is the most beneficial thing fiction can provide. And it is what *Barry Lyndon* refigures through the strategies and tactics of its narrator and his opponents.

The act of reading a novel seems to carry with it few dire consequences for the reader—beyond wasting time—but Thackeray wishes to indicate in his novel that fictions do indeed have serious repercussions for human experience. The smart reader (or informed reader or ideal reader or any other such entity) may have kept his or her distance from Barry’s narrative by picking up on all the signals of its frequent unreliability. Perhaps he or she has found the narrator a bit obtuse and, being especially perspicacious, has distrusted any judgment, assertion, or even description offered. However, through the power of the story, its representation of events that are perhaps only possible, Thackeray ensures that the dangers of belief in fiction get dramatized. The reader may think that Barry’s stories will get him nowhere, but the narrative insists that our hero does find his audience eventually. Uncontradicted by other voices in the novel, Barry’s rise to power through his machinations and eventual marriage to Lady Honoria Lyndon drive home to the reader the possibility of success for even the most obvious of storytellers as well as the gullibility of the world at large for fictions. Lady Lyndon—who, like the reader willing to play along for the fun of the tale, “listens” to Barry for too long—stands-in, as it were, for that reader. The reader may vicariously “experience” this rogue through the text, but, in the text, Lady Lyndon pays the price for her game.

After employing masquerades to escape from service in two different armies, and after taking up a gambler’s life with his long-lost uncle—a life in which his bluffs are backed up by his sword—Barry decides to pursue the widow of an English lord who had shown in his last days a fascination (akin to Trollope’s) for the Irishman’s effrontery. Barry picks Lady Lyndon because she also indulges in elaborate stories, though without the sort of calculation involved which Barry is guilty of here. Thackeray makes her a woman too saturated with fashionable novels, too ready to engage in fictions of romance, for her own good. While her elderly first husband lived, she carried on innocent intrigues through letters with Barry and other gallants, and Barry later takes advantage of her desire for such frivolity and play by showing his letters from her to her cousin, Lord George Poynings, thus guaranteeing the latter’s retreat:
“My wife,” said the little lord, “shall write no sonnets or billets-doux, and I’m heartily glad to think I have obtained, in good time, a knowledge of the heartless vixen with whom I thought myself for a moment in love.”

The wounded young nobleman was either, as I have said, very young and green in matters of the world—for to suppose that a man would give up forty thousand a year because, forsooth, the lady connected with it had written a few sentimental letters to a young fellow, is too absurd; or, as I am inclined to believe, he was glad of an excuse to quit the field altogether, being by no means anxious to meet the victorious sword of Redmond Barry a second time. (P. 214)

Barry can understand Lady Lyndon’s harmless make-believe but cannot fathom Poyning’s objections to it; he is, of course, more worldly than the young nobleman and—like so many of Thackeray’s ambitious upstarts—has a quite thorough appreciation for the social weight of fictions and less of an overriding fiction of honesty of his own to abide by. When Lady Lyndon rejects his advances, having herself finished with the game, Barry poses as the Byronic lover and shows her that quitting the masquerade is not always a voluntary matter:

“These have passed, madam,” said I,—“Calista’s letters to Eugenio. They may have been very innocent, but will the world believe it? You may have only intended to play with the heart of the poor artless Irish gentleman who adored and confided in you. But who will believe the stories of your innocence against the irrefragable testimony of your own handwriting? Who will believe that you could write these letters in the mere wantonness of coquetry, and not under the influence of affection?”

“Villain!” cried my Lady Lyndon, “could you dare to construe out of those idle letters of mine any other meaning than that which they really bear?”

“I will construe anything out of them,” said I, “such is the passion which animates me towards you.” (P. 216-17)

The danger of textual games is that they are subject to interpretation, to a change in the way they are used. Barry has switched the mode of play from Pastoral to Gothic, and he continues to play the villain: “Terror, be sure of that,” he tells us, “is not a bad ingredient of love” (p. 218). Lady Lyndon finds herself cooperating, writing of Barry in the style of a Gothic heroine: “‘The horrid look of his black serpent-like eyes fascinates and frightens me; it seems to follow me everywhere, and even when I close my eyes, the dreadful gaze penetrates the lids, and is still upon me.’ When a woman begins to talk of a man in this way,” Barry boasts, “he is an ass who does not win her” (p. 220). She becomes Barry’s audience without realizing it, “listening,” along with the reader, and “believing” the fiction.

With the skills of a strategist for a modern political campaign, Barry spreads a “story of her ladyship’s passionate attachment for me” (p. 228), thereby transposing what was a private game into the social world:
Every one thought I was well with the widowed countess, though no one could show that I said so. But there is a way of proving a thing even while you contradict it, and I used to laugh and joke so à propos that all men began to wish me joy of my great fortune, and look up to me as the affianced husband of the greatest heiress in the kingdom. The papers took up the matter. (P. 228)

Barry’s mastery at manipulating gossip demonstrates how readily belief is socially validated as knowledge. As rumors are legitimized, so categories and narratives are reified through tacit social agreement. \(^{31}\) Barry’s triumphant arrangement of his marriage to Lady Lyndon implies that the basis of culture is not so much an immediately available real world as it is a combination of fictions and power. Barry demonstrates enough competence or know-how (or “savoir-faire,” according to Lyotard [p. 21]) with the social world to “earn” success and hence the legitimacy he has claimed all along.

The consequences of Barry’s grand stake are paid by Lady Lyndon, after she succumbs and marries her Byronic lover. The remainder of his story tells of the struggles of his wife to escape his abuse, while he imagines it to exemplify the turn of “Fate” against him. Lady Lyndon quickly finds out what her husband is really like, and, in describing their honeymoon, Barry lets the reader know as well, through euphemistic glosses: “Lady Lyndon was a haughty woman, and I hate pride, and I promise you that in both instances [of her objecting to his actions] I overcame this vice in her” (p. 235). He soon begins to confine her, isolating her from family and friends and hoping thus to find a way of securing her fortune for their child, while disinheriting her first son from her previous marriage. With the help of that son and her cousin Lord Poynings, Lady Lyndon escapes eventually from Barry’s clutches, and he ends, years later, in prison, with only his faithful mother to watch over him. But the misery that the bully inflicts on the foolish woman serves as a warning to the reader who thinks fictions are inconsequential. Lady Lyndon’s predicament serves as a sort of mise en abyme for the reader’s engagement with the text, her vicarious play with Barry mirroring the naïve reader’s vicarious experience through Barry’s story—in both cases the amateur being duped by the professional player. \(^{32}\) We are thus implicated in the consequences that Barry’s fictions about himself (and other such fictions operating in the society around us) have for others without having to suffer them ourselves. We learn to recognize the game without having the penalties for playing enforced.

Even more importantly, Barry himself also stands in for his reader, for Barry is his own best audience. As The Book of Snobs makes clear, Thackeray understood the self to be a social dyad, and so we should expect to find his fictionalizer as much a product of the fictions around him as he is a producer and promulgator of them. Indeed, from the novel’s first page until its hero’s last words—his description of a final “miserable existence, quite unworthy of the famous and fashionable Barry Lyndon” (p. 307)—Barry remains con-
vinced of the stories of his family’s nobility and distinction first instilled in him by his self-righteous mother (pp. 6-7). From that vantage point, he is quite good at puncturing the pretenses of genteel society—whether they be those of his cousins, the Bradys, or his wife’s relations, Lord and Lady Tiptoff (p. 254).

Yet Barry’s belief in his fictitious heritage is part of his greatest weakness, his adoption of the values and habits of that fictional creature, the “man of quality” (p. 233).31 Once he attains his position “as an ornament of English society” (p. 234), he immediately starts to spend money wildly, cutting down the forests on the Lyndon estate, hiring a French decorator—who “in his rage for improvement . . . dared anything” (p. 239)—to transform, among other things, his bedroom, “after the exact fashion of the Queen’s closet at Versailles” (p. 238). He goes through his wife’s fortune in no time (the swindler being swindled in turn when he tries to invest or gamble), and has to borrow money to support his extravagancies. In all things, Barry follows “the practice of the world” (p. 143), and so his fortunate rise becomes an unlucky fall. Through much of the novel, he can spot the impostor in others, but he fools himself into believing his own fictions of his “natural station” (p. 127) in society. His indiscretions with the money and land turn the people against him and help to forge the alliance among his stepson, Lord Poyning, and his own secretary, the son of Quin and Nora; yet, once on top, Barry feels himself invincible, and the strategic daring with which he grabbed his place dissipates into careless tyranny. The fictions that won him his marriage and name deprive him of it as well, once he acts up to the part.34

Convinced of his own stories and convicted by them, Barry Lyndon illustrates, for Thackeray, the pervasiveness of fictions: their social ubiquity and even psychological necessity. Barry must, in effect, keep up the swagger, or he would self-destruct, so important to him is it that he be the successful character he imagines himself. When he drops the mask for a second, we are shown the confusion that would result if his fictions of himself were discredited:

The fact is, between my respected reader and myself, that I was one of the handsomest and most dashing young men of England in those days, and my wife was violently in love with me; and though I say it who shouldn’t, as the phrase goes, my wife was not the only woman of rank in London who had a favourable opinion of the humble Irish adventurer. What a riddle these women are, I have often thought! I have seen the most elegant creatures at St. James’s grow wild for love of the coarsest and most vulgar of men; the cleverest women passionately admire the most illiterate of our sex, and so on. There is no end to the contrariety in the foolish creatures; and though I don’t mean to hint that I am vulgar or illiterate, as the persons mentioned above (I would cut the throat of any man who dared to whisper a word against my birth or my breeding), yet I have shown that Lady Lyndon had plenty of reason to dislike me
if she chose; but, like the rest of her silly sex, she was governed by
infatuation, not reason. (Pp. 256-57)

A narrative moment of insecurity such as this one, along with other naive
revelations, might just sway the reader to appreciate that “frankness” noted by
the novel’s first critics. Again, James Fitzjames Stephen’s previously cited
response to Barry contains something of the emotion and self-deception of
Barry’s narrative. If Barry contradicts himself, revealing his sense of himself
as a “humble Irish adventurer” while insisting that he is not “vulgar,” Stephen
creates “a most unmitigated blackguard and scoundrel!” who has “some grains
of good” in him. Stephen finds Barry’s reaction to the death of his son
“touching” and “deeply true,” and this is the reaction Barry himself solicits.
If we investigate young Bryan Lyndon’s death, though, we find a father who
irresponsibly encourages his son in the act of disobedience that results in his
death from a fall off his new pony:

“Promise me, Bryan,” screamed his mother, “that you will not ride the
horse except in company of your father.” But I only said, “Pooh, madam,
you are an ass!” being angry at her silly timidity, which was always
showing itself in a thousand disagreeable ways now; and, turning round
to Bryan, said, “I promise your lordship a good flogging if you mount
him without my leave.”

I suppose the poor child did not care about paying this penalty for
the pleasure he was to have, or possibly thought a fond father would
remit the punishment altogether. (P. 282)

Barry never understands his culpability here, so insulated is he by his good
sense of himself. And Stephen is fooled as well, for he “listens” to Barry’s
affecting description of the scene and misses the irony of Barry’s stupid
indulgence of the boy and its justification on the grounds of emotion. There
is indeed something “deeply true” about the scene, as well as about Stephen’s
conscripted response, for both narrator and critic are so involved in the fiction
as to blind themselves to their own responses.35 The fictions through which the
self is constructed and validated can be so powerful as to make criticism
impossible. And yet, to abandon those stories and become “objective” is
equally impossible. What we are left with is the necessity of self-deception,
for either self-creation or the creation of an “objective” world (textual or
experiential). Barry Lyndon’s inconsistent fictional life (within the fiction of
his life called Barry Lyndon) dramatizes the potential unreliability of the
fictions we ourselves live by.

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NOTES


6 William Charlton, "Feeling for the Fictitious,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24:3 (1984): 206-16, reminds us that such a recognition of the necessity of fictionality extends back in criticism at least to Samuel Johnson’s *Prefaces*, if not to Sidney’s *Apology*. The recent, theoretical interest in the overt, textual signalling of fictionality can be found in three books with different orientations to the subject, though they all make a case for the respectability of the phenomenon: Peter J. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988); Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990); and Warhol, *Gendered Interventions*. The reversal of Coleridge that I acknowledge here derives (indirectly) from Riffaterre, who finds that “signs of fictionality” are always “suspending belief, by radically displacing verisimilitude” (p. 33). Warhol gives a fair representation of how overt signs of fictionality have been embarrassing to critics interested in realism.

Perhaps no one has traced this development in Thackeray’s career more thoroughly and with greater understanding of its importance to his art than Jack P. Rawlins, *Thackeray’s Novels: A Fiction that is True* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974). Rawlins doesn’t discuss *Barry Lyndon*, but many of the arguments made here about that novel accord with his treatment of other works such as *Vanity Fair*.

Compare the analysis by Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Peter Owen, 1985), of Barry’s complex voice: “There is no virtue in Barry Lyndon, but he is endowed with some capacity for what we may call ‘good’ feeling. He is brilliantly shown as a master of almost all the forms of false feeling, but is allowed genuineness when he feels nostalgia, filial affection, paternal love, and hostility to war” (p. 79).


In *A Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), Wayne C. Booth points to Trollope’s reaction to *Barry Lyndon* as an example of “how strongly a prolonged intimate view of a character works against our capacity for judgment” (p. 322). In his brief commentary on the novel, Booth fits “Barry Lyndon’s rhetorical vitality” (p. 323) into a context of fictions that confuse narrative “distance” through irony.

See also Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978):

A natural utterance constitutes, for the listener, not only an invitation and provocation, but ultimately an *obligation*, to respond to the speaker. When we “listen” to someone, as distinguished from merely noticing or overhearing what he says—in other words, when we identify ourselves as his audience—we implicitly agree to make ourselves available to that speaker as the instrument of his interests. We agree not only to hear but to heed his promises, excuses, questions, and commands and also, of course, his assertions. Most simply, but most significantly, we agree to understand what he means, that is, to infer the motives and circumstances that occasioned his utterance.

(Pp. 101-02)

I would further extend Smith’s notion of listening to the interpretation of texts, regardless of form.


Compare this dual skill of listening and double checking to Rawlins’ description of the education in reading provided by *Vanity Fair*: “One must learn to read back and forth between Thackeray’s ‘realist’ moral vision and his authorial commentary. Simply to discard the latter is to distort his work competely [sic]; to contain the two in one reading is difficult indeed” (*Thackeray’s Novels*, p. 161).


Cp. Rawlins on Thackeray’s interest in reader-response:

Thackeray’s sense that the novel’s truest object of attention is ourselves has more important consequences than his frequent whimsical instructions to the reader, that he take the book’s lesson to heart—“Remember how happy such benefactions made you . . . , and go off on the very first fine day and tip your nephew at school!” . . . ; it also means that the responses by the reader to the text—his criteria for judgment—are always topics for discussion. (*Thackeray’s Novels*, p. 177)

Sanders, in his “Introduction” to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Barry Lyndon*, provides a cogent analysis of the novel’s concerns with fictionality and the reader’s role:

If Thackeray’s stories always keep us alert to the fact of their fictionality, his historical stories forcibly remind us that history is the greatest lie of all . . . [Barry Lyndon] conspicuously suggests the degree to which a reader ought to distrust any teller of any tale, and especially a teller who purports both to tell the truth and to justify him- or herself . . . . Thackeray’s story makes us look directly at the shifting levels of meaning in the narrative itself. (P. xiii)

I borrow from Eco (pp. 224-28) the term “narcotization” for a sort of linguistic shorthand that occurs in narrative and is often taken for granted as we read. It consists of the “storing” or momentary erasure of semantic (or narrative) information or alternative interpretive hypotheses that are available for a particular sign. In essence, we take a certain number of a narrator’s explanations for granted, without searching our “semantic encyclopedias” for all the possible meanings of a term used or inferences to be drawn from an assertion. Narcotization as a textual manifestation is something akin to a “will to ignorance” or an intentional (though unremarked) “dumbing down” on the part of the interpreter (whether that be “writer” or “reader”).

Micael M. Clarke’s feminist reading of the novel (“Thackeray’s *Barry Lyndon*: An Irony Against Misogynists,” *TSLL* 29 [1987]: pp. 261-77) argues convincingly for an alternative interpretation of almost every woman described by Barry, including Nora, and points out the pattern of male violence against women in the novel as something Thackeray wished to expose to Victorian society.


scape-grace and something of an alter ego” for Thackeray. Colby, nonetheless, finds that these shifts between unreliable rogue and authorial persona attempt “a precarious balance which [Thackeray] maintains with surprisingly few lapses” (p. 128).

25 Barbara Hardy reads this episode and Barry’s report of it much as I do. She sees it as an example both of how Barry’s “character is destabilized by role-playing and dishonesty, and [of how] his contradictions and inconsistencies are used by Thackeray to express emotions discretely and discontinuously” (Forms of Feeling, p. 80).


The self-deceiver becomes fictional, an actor in a play which he is constantly writing. And he believes in all the traits of this character, and in all of the events in this character’s life, all of which he creates as author, in the same way that he believes in the traits of all fictional characters, and in the events in any work of fiction. That is, he makes-believe. (P. 74)

27 Some of the narrator’s names and disguises: Redmond Barry, Mr. Redmond of Redmondstown (p. 54), Captain Barry (p. 66), Lieutenant Fakenham (when he steals his officer’s papers to escape from the English army, p. 78), a Hungarian servant (p. 112), his own uncle the Chevalier de Balibari (when dressed like him to effect an escape from Prussian service, p. 122), Redmond de Balibari (once he joins his uncle in a life of professional gambling, p. 128), Eugenio (in his love games with Lady Lyndon, p. 213), and finally Barry Lyndon (once he marries the widow of Sir Charles Lyndon, p. 233). Colby, “Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero,” also notes the “various mutations” of Barry’s name and his “several disguises” (p. 111).


Part of the difficulty is that a fictional text is only fictional as a whole, each sentence separately has exactly the same form as a “true” sentence, which is what makes the problem of irony, or the poet’s “lies” according to Plato, or (to take a more specific instance), the problem of “voice” in free indirect discourse . . . so difficult to analyse.


In short (and, mutatis mutandis, the same is true of any human semiotic instrument), there is no algorithm which, on the basis of textual factors, enables one to differentiate, in a narrative corpus, fiction from truth, error, or lying. The forms of narrative, its possibilities, are neither governed by its relationship to the real, nor do they indicate it. (P. 547)

29 Richard Rorty, “Is There a Problem About Fictional Discourse?,” Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 132, suggests that those who are concerned about the logical status of fictional discourse (such as Searle and, I would add, Carlyle) are, in reality, worried that, if fictive and non-fictive utterances are shown to refer to the world in the same way, we will have no way of telling responsible from irresponsible language use.
30 See also Clarke, “An Irony Against Misogynists,” pp. 266-72.

31 For an analysis of the crisis of narrative, knowledge, and legitimation, which is supposedly paradigmatic for the late twentieth century, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984). References will appear in the text.


33 See Colby (pp. 112-13) who correctly cites this weakness as a specific type of snobbery: “Thackeray had a word for it: ‘Two penny magnificence, indeed, exists all over Ireland and may be considered as the great characteristic of the Snobbishness of that country’” (p. 113). Also see Altinel, who observes that the novel’s “entire action is controlled by the name Lyndon” (*Thackeray and the Problem of Realism*, p. 93).

34 Altinel, too, points out that “Barry turns into a victim of his own myth” (*Thackeray and the Problem of Realism*, p. 93).

35 As a contrast, see Hardy’s incisive reading of this scene (*Forms of Feeling*, pp. 82-83).