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A WAY OF READING THE WRITTEN SELF OF ANOTHER

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Abstract: *The paper follows the way in which self-consciousness acquires a narrative form in David Lodge's novels. A postmodern dialogue with the literary tradition is emphasized in his novels *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, *Small World* and *Therapy* in which the issue of self-knowledge is acutely raised. The paper also highlights the fact that in metafiction the self-reflexive element is the dominant one. This is illustrated by mirror structures (doublings, analogies, frames, *mise en abîme*) and by thought, consciousness, reflection accompanying action. The idea is pointed out that in Lodge's novels the metafictional discourse constantly breaks the frame of reality by referring to the author's reality. Especially in his latest novel – *Author, Author* – Lodge makes explicit references to the process of creative writing.*

Metanarrative is a self-reflexive narrative which calls attention to its own status as narrative through reference to its own terms of production. Gerald Prince emphasizes the idea that metanarrative signs are inherent features of narrative in general, and not merely characteristics of metafictional novels. He understands metanarrative signs as glosses on parts of a text and its underlying codes: as a metanarrative commentary which builds into the text instructions on how to read:

Above all metanarrative signs are glosses on various parts of a text and on the codes underlying them. To some extent at least, they point out the set of norms and constraints according to which the text deploys itself and makes sense; they present a model for its decipherment; they put forward a program for its decoding. In other words, they partially show how a given text could be understood, how it should be understood, how it wants to be understood.[...] Metanarrative signs provide us with some specific connotations; they make some symbolic dimensions explicit; they define the hermeneutic status of some situations. On the one hand, then, metanarrative signs help us understand a narrative in a certain way; on the other hand, they force us (try to force us) to understand it in this way and not another. They thus constitute the answer of a text to the question: *How should we interpret you?* (Prince, 1982: 127).

However, the metanarrative signs do not only tell us how to read, they also specify the distance between a text's self-commentary and the reading process of a given reader. In *Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*, David Lodge takes up the same position:

No book ... has any meaning on its own, in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels we should not know how to read it, and if it wasn't different from all other novels we shouldn't want to read it. Any adequate reading of a text, therefore, involves identifying and classifying it in relation to other texts, according to content, genre, mode, period, and so on (Lodge, 1977: 4).

Thus, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that narcissistic or metafictional narrative is as mimetic as any other narrative genre, including classic realism:

The decentralizing of the traditional realistic interest of fiction, away from the story told to the story telling, to the functioning of language and of larger diegetic structures, is important to the *nouveau roman*. Language becomes material with which to work, the object of certain transforming operations which give it meaning. There is a self-conscious recognition of the multiple contextual

significances yielded by textual selection and organization. As such, this *new new novel* can remain within the novel genre, since these are the very operations or processes that form the link between reading and writing – that is, between life and art, reality and fiction – that seems to be a minimal requirement for a mimetic genre (Hutcheon, 1984: 35).

In this paper, I do not refer to the analysis of metanarrative strategies used by David Lodge in his novels, nor to the features which ensured the metafictional character of his novels. I deal more with the way in which self-consciousness acquires a narrative form. Along the same line, Marc Currie presents an interesting viewpoint:

...for self-consciousness to take a narrative form, it had to forsake self-consciousness of the moment of narration. This places self-consciousness in the same logical position as lying in the sense that when one is self-consciously self-conscious, the veracity of self-narration is questioned and any therapeutic value may be lost: when one becomes aware that one is performing or transforming oneself in the act of narration, it is at the expense of the constative force of narrative as the recuperation of past events. When I tell my own story, I must deny that I am inventing myself in the process in order to believe that I am discovering myself (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* 131).

Marc Currie's arguments which emphasize the relationship between a particular narrative and its reading coincide with David Lodge's opinions expressed in the study *The Novel Now* (1990). Lodge is concerned with the way in which recent critical attacks on ideas of the author and reality have been reflected in fiction itself, in metafictional anti-realism and the incorporation of a surrogate author into the novel as ways of addressing these issues in the theory of fiction:

The reception of new writing has in fact probably never been more obsessively author-centred than it is today, not only in reviewing, but in supplementary forms of exposure through the media – interviews and profiles in the press and on TV, prizes, public readings and book launches and so on. All this attention is focused on the author as a unique creative self, the mysterious, glamorous origin of the text; and the questions one is asked on these occasions invariably emphasize the mimetic connection between fiction and reality, which de Man denies, exists: what is your book about? Is it autobiographical? Is such and such a character based on a real person? Do academics/Catholics really behave like that? And so on. Let it not be supposed that such questions come only from naïve or uneducated readers. Some of the most committed post-structuralists among my acquaintances are also the most determined to read my novels as *romans à clef*. (*After Bakhtin* 16).

Defining postmodern novels, Lodge specifies that what they have in common is, to a greater or lesser extent, 'a retreat from the modernist effort to represent subjective consciousness as faithfully as possible. They reverse the modernist privileging of depth over surface. There is a return in their novels to objective reporting of the external world, and a focus on what people say and do rather than what they think and feel' (*Consciousness and the Novel* 64). Under these conditions, what is important is the distinction between *framed* and *unframed*. Patricia Waugh analyses the relation between metafiction and frame-breaking, pointing out that contemporary metafiction 'foregrounds *framing* as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels' (1984: 28). But what is the frame that separates reality from fiction? According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (563) frame is 'a structure for admitting or enclosing something', 'a construction, plan, system underlying support of anything', 'form, constitution, or structure in general; system, order'. Patricia Waugh highlights the fact that the concept of frame includes Chinese-box structures 'which contest the reality of each individual box through a nesting of narrators in metafictional novels framing devices range' (30). She also states that obvious framing devices range from stories within stories, characters reading about their fictional lives and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations. This leads to the idea that 'such infinities of texts within texts draw out the paradoxical relationship of *framed* and *unframed* and, in effect, of *form* and *content*' (31). The conclusion is that 'there is ultimately no distinction between *framed* and *unframed*. There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only *content* perhaps, but it will

never be discovered in a *natural* unframed state' (31). Waugh also indicates the essential 'deconstructive method of metafiction':

One method of showing the function of literary conventions, of revealing their provisional nature, is to show what happens when they malfunction. Parody and inversion are two strategies which operate in this way as frame-breaks. The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction (*Metafiction – The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* 31).

Lodge's self-consciousness as a writer is still fairly restrained and unobtrusive. Daniel Amman asserts that in his novels the fictional frame 'is never really questioned or seriously broken' (42). Regarding the novel *Changing Places*, he affirms that:

Apart from the very beginning (...) where Lodge makes reference to the *privileged narrative altitude* from which we view the story, the problematic relationship of language or narrative conventions vis-à-vis reality is not explored through a self-referential voice. Except for the subdued Fieldingesque irony in the authorial voice, Lodge does not undermine the ontological status of his characters. On the other hand, there are implicit comments on the story and the writing of fiction (*The Art-and-Reality Novel* 42).

I agree with this observation because throughout the whole novel there is an ironic distance which is highlighted through the passing from one way of presentation to another. This passing puts the novel into postmodern dialogue with the literary tradition. I refer to Chapter 3 which is epistolary in form unlike the first two chapters. It is made up entirely of letters written by the four principal characters. Chapter 4 shifts again because it contains a collection of newspaper items, new releases, student manifestos, flysheets, and printed handouts. The end of the novel disrupts the text yet again, for it takes the form of a film script. Thus, it has been found that in this novel self-consciousness is basically rooted in technique. 'Instead of explicit metanarrative comments, Lodge favours implicit frame-breaking' (Amman 43).

In *Small World* fictional intertexts and the metaphorical overplot of the Grail quest give the impression that 'reality itself has come to be as problematic as the means by which it is communicated' (Amman 45). Discussing the ideas that initiated the writing of *Small World*, Lodge states that he wanted the novel to 'deal in a carnival spirit with the various competing theories of literary criticism which were animating and dividing the profession of letters and with the complex relations between academic scholarship, creative writing, publishing and the media which are such a striking feature of contemporary culture' (Lodge, 1986: 72). Ihab Hassan's commentaries about *Quest as a Literary Mode* are very interesting in this case:

Quest is adventure, adventure travel, travel autobiography: is this not a continuum of selves, or perhaps personae, at various degrees of risk?

Autobiography is, of course, the singular voice of literature. That voice has become of late both rasping and rife. All manner of autobiographies vie for our attention in factual or fictional, 'factional' or 'fictual', guise. Why this greed for self-witness? Perhaps because we live in a self-regarding age; perhaps because through autobiography we deny the obsolescence of the self in mass society; perhaps because we lack consensus in our values, and so must ground our deepest articulations on the self, on death itself, the invisible ground of every autobiography.

But perhaps, too, we choose autobiography because it expresses all the ambiguities of our postmodern culture. In the current climate of our ironic self-awareness, autobiography has indeed lost much of its innocence. It has become the vehicle of our epistemic evasions, our social and psychic vexations. (*Selves at Risk* 29).

In one of his recent novels, *Therapy* (1995), the autobiographical intrusions but also these frame-breakings designed to express forms of self-consciousness are much more obvious.

David Lodge himself confesses that in *Therapy* he has introduced the obsession of the main character, Tubby Passmore, for Kierkegaard to approach a different frame of reference. In *Consciousness and the Novel* he explains:

But merely having Tubby read Kierkegaard, and draw out the parallels between himself and the philosopher, did not seem to expand the horizons of the novel sufficiently. I felt the need for other points of view and other voices. I consequently decided to present Tubby's manic behaviour after his wife leaves him through the eyes of several other characters, who narrate their stories in the form of dramatic monologues, addressing interlocutors whose responses are implied, not quoted. Tubby's friend Amy describes to her psychoanalyst his belated attempt to turn their platonic relationship into a carnal one, with farcically catastrophic results. Then a female Hollywood film producer, Louise, tells a friend in a telephone conversation how Tubby, whom she met four years previously and tried unsuccessfully to seduce, suddenly reappeared in Los Angeles to invite her out to dinner. [...] When Louise explains that she has a partner and is pregnant, Tubby is devastated, and quotes Kierkegaard to her: 'The most dreadful thing that can happen to a man is to become ridiculous in his own eyes in a matter of essential importance' (*Kierkegaard for Special Purposes* 278 – 279).

The intertextual insertion of Kierkegaard in this novel implies not only another perspective and another parallel story but especially a feature which is found again in his other novels such as *Small World* or *Nice Work*. In *Therapy*, Lodge confesses, what is important is the fact that the novel is written in the form of Tubby's journal, and that Kierkegaard was one of the great journal writers of literary history (*Consciousness and the Novel* 274). This parallel is at the same time an opportunity for self-consciousness because:

Tubby's fumbling attempts to understand Kierkegaard reflect my own reading experience, and the things which interest and excite him in Kierkegaard's writings are those which interested and excited me: the early works rather than the later ones, the secular works rather than the religious ones, the pseudonymous books rather than the ones Kierkegaard published under his own name. In particular I was impressed by Kierkegaard's insights into the subjectivity of happiness and unhappiness, into the perverse habits of unhappy hoping and unhappy remembering by which we rob ourselves of contentment and fail to enjoy each moment of life for what it is (*Consciousness and the Novel* 276).

What is significant is the fact that with the twists in the novel's narrative method, the issue of self-knowledge is acutely raised:

As Tubby says, contemplating Kierkegaard's relationship with Regine: 'What a fool. But what an endearing, entirely human fool'. Kierkegaard does not lecture us from some pulpit of assumed impartiality, objectivity, and omniscience. He speaks to us out of the flux and the fray of human existence. He grounded the perennial problems of philosophy in man's self-consciousness, which reason alone can never satisfy (*Consciousness and the Novel* 277).

Reading David Lodge's novels, an aspect should be noticed as follows: the metafictional discourse constantly breaks the frame of reality by referring to the author's reality. In his latest novel, *Author, Author*, regarding Henry James's life and activity, Lodge makes explicit references to the process of creative writing. Moreover, at the end of the novel he introduces text in italics which alternate with the essential text as a metafictional self-consciousness. The commentary abandons the realist narrative to point out directly the author's word and a contemporary point of view on Henry James:

...while for me, as I conjure up this deathbed scene, looking at it as through the curved transparency of a crystal ball, perhaps the most poignant fact about Henry James's life is that, having suffered professional humiliation and rejection in mid-career, culminating in the debacle of Guy Domville, and having then triumphantly recovered his creativity and confidence, and gone on to write his late masterpieces, those foundation stones of the modern psychological novel, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, he had to suffer the experience of catastrophic failure all over again, little more than a

decade after the first ordeal. The three major novels, written at Lamb house and published in quick succession between 1902 and 1904, in an astonishing, prolonged surge of creative power, were received for the most part with respectful bafflement or blank indifference (*Author, Author* 373).

Along the same line, the same contemporary point of view is found some pages further:

It's tempting therefore to indulge in a fantasy of somehow time-travelling back to that afternoon of late February 1916, creeping into the master bedroom of Flat 21, Carlyle Mansions, casting a spell on the little group of weary watchers at the bedside, pulling up a chair oneself, and saying a few reassuring words to Henry James, before he departs this world, about his literary future. How pleasing to tell him that after a few decades of relative obscurity he would become an established classic, essential reading for anyone interested in modern English and American literature and the aesthetics of the novel, that all his major works and most of his minor ones would be constantly in print, scrupulously edited, annotated, and studied in schools, colleges and universities around the world, the subject of innumerable postgraduate theses and scholarly articles and books [...] . And what fun to tell him that millions of people all over the world would encounter his stories in theatrical and cinematic and television adaptations, that *The Turn of the Screw* would be made into an opera by one of the greatest of modern British composers, that although his plays would, alas, remain unperformed, the novels and stories would provide coveted roles for some of the greatest actors and actresses in the world; and that film and TV tie-in editions of these books would sell in large quantities (*Author, Author* 375).

In her famous work *Narratology: An Introduction*, Susana Onega shows that narrative is a complex phenomenon whose analysis allows infinite perspectives. In her view, metanarrative can be defined as a way of writing, 'as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction. Metafiction as writing would constitute a specific sub-genre in which the reflexive element is the dominant one [...] The term 'reflexive' calls our attention both to mirror structures (doublings, analogies, frames, *mise en abîme*) and to thought, consciousness, reflection, awareness accompanying action. Indeed, metafiction is reflexive fiction in the sense not only that mirror images are found in it, but also that these mirrorings and reflexive structures are used as a meditation on the nature of fiction' (Onega, 1996: 31).

All these means which metafiction implies are found in David Lodge's novels. The best conclusion to the demonstration which I did is expressed in David Lodge's words. In a conversation with Craig Raine, he states:

I'm a metafictional novelist, I suppose, because I was a teacher of fiction and therefore a very self-conscious novelist. I think this is generally true of the present literary period. We're all very conscious of what we're doing. So if you want to write a realistic novel, you have to signal to the audience that you're operating a convention. But, basically, it's because I was involved in teaching and analysing fiction formally for so long. That's why my work is riddled with this sort of allusion and joke (*Consciousness and the Novel* 296).

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