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HOW FAR CAN YOU GO WHEN UNDERMINING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE? DAVID LODGE'S PARODIC NOVEL AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Keywords: *religious discourse, Catholicism, power and authority, resistance, doctrinal changes, parodic novel*

Abstract: *The article aims to illustrate how the novel constructs a picture of reality, or rather the realities of power and authority held by the Catholic Church, counterbalanced by the resistance of individuals, the religious discourse being presented on two levels: the institutional dogma and its actual impact on the community members. Using a plethora of characters, David Lodge chronicled the doctrinal changes and the moral uncertainty within Catholicism in England, covering two decades starting with the 1950s. It is also shown that the (hi)stories in the novel unfold in a comic tone, which lightens the serious matter of discussion. In order to achieve this, the paper includes an attempt to 'define' postmodernity and postmodernism from the perspectives of some influential thinkers or theoreticians, namely Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon. Next, parody and its means of realization - metafiction mainly - are briefly explained, then illustrated in the novel under scrutiny.*

Edward W. Said supported the view that "texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (Said 4). Consequently, David Lodge's novel How Far Can You Go?, *which constitutes the focus of this paper, cannot be an exception to the rule. And since we are looking at this novel from the perspective of the topic "Genres and Historicity: Text, Context, Context", it follows logically that we should try to locate the production of the novel and its contribution to international literature in time and even space. Winner of the Whitbread Award for Novel of the year,* How Far Can You Go? *was first published in the United States under the title* Souls and Bodies, *in 1980. Using a surfeit of characters, David Lodge chronicled the doctrinal changes and the moral uncertainty within Catholicism in England, covering more than two decades starting with the early 1950s and going up to the late 1970s.*

The present paper aims to illustrate how the novel constructs a picture of reality, or rather the realities of power and authority held by the Catholic Church, counterbalanced by the resistance of individuals, the religious discourse being presented on two levels: the institutional dogma and its actual impact on the community members. I will also prove that the (hi)stories in the novel unfold in a comic tone, which lightens up the serious matter of discussion.

The novel is constructed on an entanglement of mini-plots, as the story develops on an alternation of incidents and experiences cut out of the lives of ten characters brought up in a Catholic environment. The very beginning of the novel is a picture of the protagonists of the novel, taken on a dark February St Valentine's Day, at a dialogue mass ("a recent innovation designed to increase lay participation in the liturgy") inside the church of Our Lady and St Jude: "Let's just take a roll call. From left to right along the altar rail, then: Polly, Dennis, Angela, Adrian, Ruth, Miles, Violet. Michael kneeling in his pew. Edward and father Brierley on the altar" (Lodge, *How Far* 14).

The year the story starts is 1952, when most of our characters are still students, preparing for their Final Examinations, which the author uses as a sort of trigger for the manifest fear of the punishment that may befall upon them under the form of low grades in case they do not attend the Tuesday mass performed as well as the Monday study group conducted by father Austin Brierley: "they believe it [the Catholic dogma], or at least they are not sure it is safe not to believe it; and this deeply engrained eschatological consciousness (eschatological, another useful word, meaning pertaining to the four last things – death, judgment, heaven and hell) is probably the chief common factor behind their collective presence here at the mass". (Lodge, *How Far* 9). The atmosphere of religious guilt and subsequent punishment inevitably shapes every single aspect of the characters' progress. Confession and induction of fear related to after-life punishment are both ways by which the Catholic Church acquires its controlling power over the individuals.

The writer takes advantage of this gathering not only to describe the characters and their perspective on life and death, and on religious doctrine, but also the effect the latter has on their existence. On the individual level, we follow most of our characters getting through with their Finals, some of them getting married and losing their virginities, as the very title of chapter two reveals. The book acquires the appearance of a guidebook providing information on the issue of decent sex-life addressed to young Catholic couples. To lighten the serious matter of discussion, David Lodge tells the stories of their frustration in a comic tone. Everything seems to revolve around sex, and on how to avoid the risk of pregnancy using the only means allowed by the Church: the so called "Safe Method" or "Rhythm Method".

> In the early nineteen sixties, however, their main hope was that the official Church would change its mind on birth control; that they would wake up one morning and read in the papers that the Pope had said it was all right for them to use contraceptives after all. What a rush there would have been to the chemists' and barbers' shops, and the Family Planning Clinics! In hindsight it is clear that this was a fairly preposterous expectation, for such a reversal of tradition would have dealt a blow to the credibility of papal authority so shattering that no Pope, not even Pope John, could reasonably have been expected to perpetrate it. (Lodge, *How Far* 80)

But, as the book advances into the third chapter, we are shown "how things began to change". Years later, when they try to understand why they had unconditionally accepted the church running their sexual lives, they find the explanation in "the fear of Hell", a fear which disappears in the next chapter, suggestively entitled "How They Lost Their Fear of Hell".

Thus, historical facts are interpolated among the "small narratives" of the characters, which seems to reflect Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives". Breaking down these grand narratives is an issue specific to our "postmodern condition". Postmodernism attempts to place discourses into larger social contexts, questioning the existing conventions and thus casting uncertainty upon the recounts of history told through the perspective of grand narratives. The historical interpolations belong to all fields of activity – education, politics, culture, military system – but what interests us the most are the changes that take place within the Catholic Church.

> The mass was revised and translated into the vernacular. The priest now faced the congregation across a plain table-style altar, which made the origins of the Mass in the Last Supper more comprehensible, and allowed for the laity to see for the first time what the celebrant actually did. All the masses were now dialogue masses, the whole congregation joining in the responses. The Eucharist was fast reduced to a negligible one hour, before which any kind of food and drink might be consumed, and the laity were urged to receive communion at every mass –a practice previously deemed appropriate only to people of great holiness and entailing frequent confession. Typical devotions of Counter-Reformation Catholicism such as Benediction and the Stations of the Cross dwindled in popularity. Rosaries gathered dust at the back of drawers. The liturgy of Holy Week, previously of a length and tedium only to be borne by the most devout, was streamlined, reconstructed, vernacularized, and offensive references to the "perfidious Jews" were removed from the prayers on Good Friday. (Lodge, *How Far* 81)

One of the characters, Miles, the aesthete and the intellectual, who has come to confess his homosexuality, voices the changes undergone by the church where they used to meet when they were young students, enslaved by the precepts of the Catholic doctrinal system:

> The candles had gone, and most of the statues, and the old paintings of the Stations of the Cross, which were admittedly fairly hideous but so heavily varnished that you could scarcely see them, had been replaced with ghastly modern bas-relief in some kind of aluminium more appropriate to saucepans than to sacred art, and the altar rails had been removed and at the top of the steps there was a plain wood altar, quiet nice in its way but utterly incompatible with the old high altar behind it – all marble and gold inlay, turreted and crenellated in the gothic style…and quite honestly the mass itself seemed to me to be the same sort of muddle, bits of the old liturgy and bits of the new flung together, and nobody quite knowing what to do and what to expect. (Lodge, *How Far* 83-84)

This uncertainty is typical of postmodernity, and postmodernism respectively. I shall briefly attempt to "define" postmodernity and postmodernism, as these are helpful in providing the explanation for the direct interference of David Lodge in the text, addressing his reader in a Shakespearian tone as "gentle reader, have patience", and even plunging among his characters: "I teach literature at a redbrick university and write novels in my spare time, slowly, and hustled by history" (Lodge, *How Far* 243).

In attempting to answer the question "What is postmodernism?" Linda Hutcheon argues that "few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word postmodernism" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1). Nevertheless, due to the complexity and intricacy of the phenomenon, it is utterly difficult to comprise it in any definition. While Zygmunt Bauman claims in his book *Intimations of Postmodernity* that "[p]ostmodernity means many different things to many different people" (Bauman vi), Brian McHale points out in *Postmodernist Fiction* that every critic "constructs" postmodernism in his or her own way from different perspectives, none more right or wrong than the others:

> Thus, there is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational régime; Ihab Hassan's post-modernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Kermode's construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence. (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 4)

Linda Hutcheon is very careful in distinguishing between postmodernity and postmodernism. By the former she understands "the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 23), that is the period or "condition" in which we now live. The latter stands for cultural expressions in various fields, including "architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance,

music" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1). However, she does not deny the fact that postmodernity and postmodernism are "inextricably related" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 26).

An important aspect of postmodernist theory depends on the persistence of a sceptical attitude, to which the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard had an essential contribution. In his *Postmodern Condition*, he argued that we live in an era which witnesses the crisis and decline of formerly legitimizing "master narratives". These "grand narratives" traditionally serve to give cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority. The two metanarratives attacked by Lyotard are those of the progressive emancipation of humanity (from Christian redemption to Marxist utopia) and that of the triumph of science. Lyotard considers that such doctrines have "lost their credibility" since the Second World War:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. (Lyotard xxiv)

Another important theoretician of postmodernism is Ihab Hassan, who defines it as the opposite of modernism, making the well-known parallel list with the characteristics of both. He remains committed all the same to the view of modernism as "centred" and of postmodernism as characterized by what he terms "indeterminacy" and "immanence". "Indeterminacy" is "a complex referent" delineated by diverse concepts, such as "ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation". (Hassan 92) "The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimization—let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence."(Hassan 92) These are said to denote a deep and widespread loss of logical and ontological certainty, while the second term, "immanence", is described by Hassan as "the capacity of mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, immediately, its own environment." (Hassan 93)

Bauman suggests that perhaps, more than anything else, postmodernity is "a state of mind", "a state of those minds who have the habit (or is it a compulsion) to reflect upon themselves, to search their own contents and report what they found". "This is a state of mind marked above all by its all—deriding, all—eroding, all—dissolving *destructiveness.*" (Bauman vi-vii). We cannot overlook here Derrida's strategy of deconstruction, with its central argument depending on relativism. For the deconstructor, the relationship of language to reality is not given, or even reliable, since all language systems are inherently unreliable cultural constructs. If we see our conceptual systems in

this way, we can also see that the world, its social systems, human identity even are constructed by us in language. We live, not inside reality, but inside our representations of it. If we were to quote the notorious Derridean phrase "il n'y a pas de hors-texte", we could add that there is only more text that we use to try to describe or analyze the things to which texts purport to refer, which leads us to the question of intertextuality, or metafiction.

Self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, as well as questioning of such Enlightenment values as progress, science and empire or such nineteenth-century values as bourgeois domesticity, capitalism, utilitarianism and industry are some of the strategies that postmodernism borrows from modernism. According to Linda Hutcheon, if there is one thing that distinguishes postmodernism from modernism, it is their relation to mass culture. Whereas modernism "defined itself through the exclusion of mass culture" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 28), postmodernism does not draw the line between elitist and popular culture. Along with the breakdown between the high and low cultural forms of expression, one of the main features that distinguishes postmodernism from modernism is the fact that it "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1). And one way of achieving this is by means of parody, explained by the author as follows: "Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders. For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 93).

The Canadian critic disagrees with the assumption that parody denies the past by proclaiming the absolute domination of the present. Instead, she considers it to have a double nature of installing and criticizing the past. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she states explicitly that "[t]o parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this, once again, is the postmodern paradox" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 126). This duplicity is repeated in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, in which she writes that "postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from the past today" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 94). Moreover, she identifies in parody an attack on humanism since it questions the belief in originality. The critic draws attention to the paradoxical character of postmodern parody:

> Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with significant change – the dominant white, male middle-class, heterosexual, European culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot. Postmodern signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it. (Hutcheon, *Politics* 130)

The terms "use" and "abuse" illustrate the paradoxical nature of parody as well as the complex relationship it establishes between the past and the present. This view on parody resembles Foucault's discourse analysis. Both emphasize the futility of a quest for origins due to the endless process of discourses generating new discourses as well as to the continual reversal of roles. The denial of any original hypotext is exceptionally illustrated by Lodge's *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, novel parodying, among others, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is, in its turn, a metafictional parody of Homer's *Odyssey*. The fact that any discourse is born out of other discourses is called in literary theory "intertextuality". David Lodge has proposed an account of postmodernist writing as essentially "parasitic" on earlier modes, postmodernism being essentially rule-breaking art. (Lodge, *Working with Structuralism*). In *Constructing Postmodernism,* Brian McHale draws on the differences theorized by Alan Wilde in *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination* (1981):

> Where the characteristic "disjunctive irony" of modernism sought to master the world's messy contingency from a position above and outside it, postmodernist suspensive irony takes for granted "the ironist's immanence in the world he describes" (Wilde *Horizons of Assent* 166) and, far from aspiring to master order, simply accepts it. (McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 21)

Coming back to our book, besides the carnivalesque succession of hilarious incidents the fictitious characters have to face, *How Far Can You Go?* provides unexpected metafictional insertions. Thus, within a long authorial dissertation on religion, he asks the reader "Patience, the story will resume shortly." He also inserts intertextual fragments, mentioning St Paul, Augustine and Plato, but also the groundbreaking book *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* David Lodge openly admits his own limitations as an omniscient writer:

> The omniscience of novelists has its limits, and we shall not attempt to trace here the process of cogitation, debate, intrigue, fear, anxious prayer and unconscious motivation that finally produced that document. It is as difficult to enter the mind of the Pope as it must be for a Pope to enter the mind of, say, a young mother of three, in a double bed, who feels her husband's caressing touch and is divided between the desire to turn to him and the fear of an unwanted pregnancy." (Lodge, *How Far* 114)

The author is playing with us just as he is playing with his characters: "Tessa, in short, was classically ripe for having an affair, and in another milieu, or novel, might well have had one" (Lodge, "How Far" 154). The process of writing is utterly exposed before the inquisitive eyes of the reader. When introducing the characters at the beginning of the book, Lodge seems to be on the same wavelength with the postmodern indeterminacy: "Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no, Violet, improbable a name as that is for

Catholic girls of Irish extraction, customarily named after saints and figures of Celtic legend, for I like the connotations of Violet – shrinking, penitential, melancholy" (Lodge, *How Far* 15). This is obviously generated by the fact that the tone of the book is generally comic, yet with some darker overtones: one couple, Dennis and Angela, has a Downs syndrome child and loses another through an accident, while another character, Violet, is mentally unstable and has breakdowns.

Reaching the mid 1970s, our protagonists, having lost the fear of Hell, and against this background of dynamic changes in the Church and society at large, especially with regard to sexual morality, join the avant-garde society called Catholics for an Open Church (COC in short). In the last but one chapter, entitled "How They Dealt with Love and Death", it is explicit they begin a new stage in their lives, leading again to uncertainty, as the end of the novel is open, typical of David Lodge: "What will happen now? All bets are void, the future is uncertain, but it will be interesting to watch. Reader, farewell!" (Lodge, *How Far* 244).

Bearing in mind the fact that David Lodge is not only a creative writer but also a literary critic, quoting David Lodge's confession in terms of the creative process seems a natural and meaningful step to be taken in order to cast light upon his choices:

> [h]ow you end a story crucially affects the impression it leaves on the reader about the implied author's attitude to life. I am fascinated by this question of endings, and have written about it in several critical essays. As modern literary novelists go, I think I am more drawn than most to the old-fashioned 'happy ending', and have sometimes been criticised for it, though you don't seem to agree. I tend to leave my characters in an open-ended situation, but a hopeful one, with the major problems they have confronted in the story resolved. This resolution of the issues raised by the narrative is a constant preoccupation while writing the novel for me. I always have a provisional idea of how the story is going to end, but usually this is modified as the composition of the work proceeds. This is because there are so many 'codes' involved in writing a novel – the codes of narrative coherence, psychological plausibility, thematic significance, formal elegance, etc. etc. and the ending must satisfy on all these levels. Also, you discover so much of what you want to say in the process of writing. (Vianu 225)

In literature, as in real life, the attitude we have towards any attempt to control human beings, either as individuals or as large groups, is after all dependent on the interpreter's perspective. There is a wide range of possible responses: denial, indifference, dismay, revolt, irony, etc. Using quick illustrative slides from the lives of his many characters, Lodge creates a bitterly funny satire of the two decades covered by the novel. The stories in the book make up the picture of a historical reality, revolving around the protagonists' sex life and evolution shaped by the Catholic doctrine and its attempts to be more or less adapted to the passage of time and times.

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