(EX)CHANGE, IDENTITY, REALITY AND META/FICTION. DAVID LODGE'S 'TALE'

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Abstract

David Lodge's *Changing Places* remains canonical among contemporary (postmodern) novels, thirty years after its publication. It has managed to become the epitome of what the writer and critic understands by 'a good novel', namely a type of narrative that exerts so much power that the reader feels entrapped in the story, being challenged to read it 'more than once'. The present study tries to analyse *some* of the elements that make such a perfect construction possible, focusing, at fictional, metafictional, theoretical and critical level, on a 'tale' about an academic exchange of a British and an American professor, which may be a mere pretext for Lodge to explore the art of fiction while humorously approaching the issue of intercultural communication in a world that obsessively desires to *change*.

Keywords: change, reality, meta/fiction, identity, 'life and art'

In the *Afterword* of the book *Schimb de Dame* (the Romanian title of David Lodge's book, *Changing Places,* translated as "changing dames"), professor Virgil Stanciu calls the writer "a capitalist of the imagination", inspired by Lodge's own words about what a writer is, in *Nice Work*, the third book of the campus trilogy: *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988). Professor Stanciu explains that, without making any concessions to the taste of the public, just like Malcolm Bradbury, Martin Amis and Julian Barnes, David Lodge is successful with every novel he publishes, probably due to his expertise in narratology and the poetics of the postmodern novel, to his rich academic experience, as a professor at Birmingham University, and to his "omnipresence in the London literary gossips", more or less in connection to the literary awards that he won or that he juried (Stanciu 2003: 269). Antithesis seems to have grounded Lodge's works, underlines Virgil Stanciu, i.e. the contrast between two different and opposed characters, life-styles, countries, nations, university systems, cultures, identified in the never-ending, yet comical dichotomies "masculine-feminine, conservative-anarchic, religious-freethinker" (271). The irony resides especially in what not only his characters come to realise, but also in the fact that this contrast is Lodge's own dilemma: how should novels be written since there are two obvious opposing tendencies regarding this issue? One the one hand, capitalism, just like the English novel (whose foundation coincide) depend on the existence of *one, autonomous, essential individual* always in search for happiness while competing with his fellows and who is the source of composition (of the character in the novel and of the novel itself). On the other hand, with postmodernism, and the crisis of capitalism, this *essential individual* disappears, he is 'deconstructed' (thanks to deconstructivism and poststructuralism, Barthes and Derrida). There is no "autonomous self on which capitalism and the classic novel are based, there is no soul, no essential,

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finite, unique essence to construct the identity of the person" but only a "series of positions of diverse subjects in the infinite network of discourses of power, religion, family, sex, science, poetry" and, evidently and consequently, there is no author to "create from nothing a work of the imagination" because the text is an intertext…(Stanciu 2003: 271). Eventually, emphasizes professor Stanciu, Lodge's characters are *the image and likeness* of the writer himself, or rather of the public university professor who looks for signs that would allow him to "verbalize reality" (271-272). Virgil Stanciu points to the basic characteristic of Lodge's writing, and of contemporary writing, in general: Lodge is not at the crossroads of *empirical narration* (realist narration) *and fictional narration (fabulation, verbal artefact, metafiction)*, but rather *in* what he names *"crossover fiction"*, i.e. he inserts fabulation and metafiction within the traditional, conventional realistic writing, which is "aesthetic pluralism", and one evident feature of this type of narration is that it is "*reader-friendly"* because the contemporary writer is interested in *communication* (273). Furthermore, the entire story, as parody, pastiche or imitation, must come to the reader with *humour*, deriving from the desire to show and shock, while incisively and conciliatorily displaying, just like in a comedy of manners, characters as intellectuals, who are confronted with social, cultural, political practices of larger entities/ institutions meant to de- and re-construct their evasive identity (274-276), some 'alter-egos' of Lodge's critical ideas, to be found in his books and studies of literary theory and criticism. This is also the case of *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, the story of a British and an American professor who make an academic exchange (and an exchange of places, dames, wives, universities, political views, countries, cultures, identities, lives…), a novel based on, in Virgil Stanciu's terms: "the comical (but not always funny) effects of 'culture shock'" (276). This book constructs a type of "imaginary that assimilates the real", endowing 'reality' with something of the irreal, concludes professor Stanciu, this becoming possible due to a generous "panoply of rhetorical, compositional and stylistic devices" in a type of discourse that mocks at the "postmodernist obsession for *heteroglossia*" (276-277).

In "David Lodge Thinks ... The British novelist of ideas takes on the literary implications of 'consciousness studies'" published in the November 1, 2002 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Scott McLemee characterises Lodge's writing/'consciousness studies' in a text that mixes interview with literary criticism and journalistic comments, as if in a 'fictionalized' portrayal of the 'real' man, writer, professor, critic David Lodge. It is here that he inserts some of Lodge's beliefs about the relationship between 'author/ reader', 'fiction/ reality', eventually 'life/ fiction/ writing'. A "curious game" is the interaction between the Author/ Writer and the Reader because, as Lodge explained: "The fiction writer produces a *version of experience*, and wants the reader to enter into the *illusion*, and the reader thinks that there must be a *reality* behind that, if only they could get to it. So the writer finds ways to *mask or disguise the empirical sources*" and when "the work is finished, the novelist doesn't necessarily know himself, or herself, what is real and what isn't" (Lodge in McLemee).

'Why writing?' would be the question, since the result of it is a 'curious game' of

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reality and fabulation, coming from the desire to intersect the 'empirical' with the 'fictional'? And professor Virgil Stanciu's answer to this question, when concluding his essay on Lodge, "A Capitalist of the Imagination", is the following: Lodge writes by "subordinating the arsenal of the modernist and postmodernist devices to conventional techniques in order to *genuinely communicate* with as many readers as possible" (Stanciu 278). That is why Lodge's books address both experts able to read such novels from a formal point of view but also any reader from everywhere, who simply enjoys the story by being unawarely manipulated to discover, with pleasure, something coherent and ordinary in the possibly foreign and unknown world that the novel constructs. Nevertheless, his writing is not explicit, superficial, ordinary or popular discourse (because the writer 'masks/ disguises the empirical sources', as stated above), and in the interview taken by Raymond H. Thomson in 15 May 1989, David Lodge explains his intention as a novelist:

> I write to communicate, but like most literary writers I don't display all my goods on the counter. The books are written in a layered style so that they have coherence and comprehensibility on the surface. I don't want to write books that repel layreaders who don't know much about the literary sources, and so there is in the novel itself a certain amount of indirect explication of the analogy between modern professors and knights of romance.
>
> Then there's another level of fairly esoteric literary allusion which I don't expect more than a small percentage of readers to perceive. Although I wouldn't conceal in that way elements that are vital to the structure of the whole, I like to feel that a book shouldn't give up all its meanings at the first reading. There should be nuggets hidden there. Readers who stumble on them will then get special pleasure at having recognized them, just because they're not obvious. I hope the novel invites readers into a world which may not be familiar, but yet is comprehensible enough to give pleasure. They may have the sense that it's holding something back from them, and I don't think this is a bad thing. Only those with a literary education would see all the allusions and parallels that I've put into the book (Lodge in Raymond H. Thomson).

Moreover, David Lodge describes his technique, *how* he *writes* so that he communicates: "a novel should have a thematic and narrative unity that can be described". It must have some so-called autobiographical elements ("a particular phase or aspect of my own life") but that, nevertheless, are not simply personal elements but rather "what I have experienced or observed has some representative (i.e., more than merely private) significance that could be brought out by means of a fictional story"; a "structural idea" is needed to "generate the story", and in his case, it is a *binary structure* which betrays his preference for structuralism and Bakhtin, with the carnivalesque of the polyphonic discourses that are appealing and that endow the narrative with so much power that they make the reader feel entrapped in the story and challenge him to read it "more than once" (Lodge, 'Author Statement'). His *crossover fiction* (empiricism plus fabulation) does not deny the necessity of the presence of some *essential, unique individual, a specific identity, a "soul"* (which used to be the subject of realistic writing) betraying his construction as an "old-fashioned literary humanist", a neo-conservative, admits Scott McLemee: "But I find it interesting that in all kinds of contexts people still resort to the

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word 'soul,' and that it would be almost impossible to banish it from discourse. The idea of a unique, immaterial *human identity* may be something we create. Maybe it's a fiction, but it's a fiction without which we cannot do. The question, I suppose, is whether it's immortal or not" (Lodge in McLemee).

Morris Zapp - Lodge's American version of the typical arrogant academic, a distinguished professor of the State University of Euphoria, author of five books, who has reached the peak of his career, a specialist in Jane Austen, and who is evidently opposed to Philip Swallow, the British unsecure and undistinguished academic of Rummidge, who would do anything to please and stand out – has very strong convictions about "the root of all critical error" which is "a naive confusion of literature with life". Here is what Zapp/ Lodge formulates in *Changing Places*:

> *[…] it was surprising how many people thought that Jane Austen's novels were about finding Mr Right. The failure to keep the categories of life and literature distinct led to all kind of heresy and nonsense: to 'liking' and 'not liking' books for instance, preferring some authors to others and suchlike whimsicalities which, he had constantly to remind his students, were of no conceivable interest to anyone except themselves (sometime he shocked them by declaring that, speaking personally on this low, subjective level, he found Jane Austen a pain in the ass)* (Lodge 1985: 47-48).

Literature is *not* life, states Zapp, and this because *Life* is transparent, an open system, it consists of things, it is what it appears/ what it is to be about, it is *reality/ realistic*. In contrast to it, *Literature* is opaque, it is a closed system of words, it is what it does appear to be/ what it is not about, i.e. *realistic illusion* (Lodge 1985: 48). Because of this logical binary opposition, Zapp explains:

> *[…] if you applied an open-ended system (life) to a closed one (literature) the possible permutations were endless and the definitive commentary became an impossibility. Everything he knew about England warned him that the heresy flourished there with peculiar virulence, no doubt encouraged by the many concrete reminders of the actual historic existence of great authors that littered country – baptismal registers, houses with plaques, second-best beds, reconstructed studies, engraved tombstones and suchlike trash. Well, one thing he was not going to do while he was in England was to visit Jane Austen's grave* (Lodge 1985: 48).

These beliefs about life and literature or *life and art* echo Lodge's own theories providing here a rephrasing of his definition of *crossover fiction* as defined in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971). These statements meta-fictionalise the discourse of *Changing Places*. Realism is not enough for capturing reality and that is why it must coexist with metafiction. If life is not art and it cannot be explained by means of art criticism or literary criticism, there is still a paradox in this relationship and critic Bárbara Arizti Martín explains the theorem in "David Lodge's Changing Places. The Paradoxes of a Liberal Metafictionist":

> In *Changing Places* David Lodge evolves in the direction of the «problematic novel», a category he characterizes in -The Novelist at the Crossroads- as a «novel-about-itself», a «game-novel» that leaves the reader not with any simple message but with «a paradox about the relationship of art to life-. *Changing Places* -published in 1975- is not content with capturing reality through just one literary tradition and emerges as an attempt to make realism and metafiction coexist. Lodge, combining accessibility and experiment -in the manner of most British metafictionists- has achieved a kind of compromise between

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> experimentalism and realism. [...] the novel constitutes a further stage in Lodge's battle for realism. In my view, David Lodge resorts to metafictional strategies in order to undertake a renewal of the realistic mode, a task which requires from time to time the challenge of alternative conventions. [...] [the novel is] an attempt at containing, controlling and cancelling the potentially subversive, experimental energies of postmodernism (Arizti Martín 2000: 293).

Why and how does *Changing Places/ Lodge's fiction* construct itself as a 'polyphony of discourses' while renewing realistic narration by embodying postmodern elements? The key argument for such a construction seems to be, in Robert A. Morace's understanding, *doubling, or dialogism, or duplex, or 'twofold'*. It is all in the *voices* of the narrator and the characters that change gradually while places and identities are literally exchanged, in a realistic manner, but also in a postmodern way as they sometimes become pastiches of other voices, either previously present in the text or belonging to other literary texts/ authors/ characters…(Morace 158). At the metafictional level, there is some narrative purpose of this intermingling of voices of *one* simple character, like Philip Swallow, for example, as in Swalllow's mental letter to his wife, which intertextualises the story line by mixing direct speech and interior monologue, consciousness with literary history and criticism (see pages 177- 196 in Lodge, *Changing Places*, 1985) – all with evident narratological and formal intentions, in order "to allow the husband to explain himself -- or rather his adulterous self -- to his wife; to permit Lodge to flash back to events related to Swallow's adultery that have not yet been narrated; to enable Lodge to parody the flashback technique and the epistolary novels in which it is used; and finally but perhaps most interestingly to permit Lodge to double Swallow's mental voice (itself the double of his speaking voice)", explains critic Morace (159). Here is an example of such splendid crisscrossing of the empirical/ realistic with the fictional in a sample of polyphony of voices of one single *soul/ identity* (Philip Swallow) that actually are the image and likeness of the entire novel in its *form* [as Robert A. Morace phrased it, these voices and forms do not repeat or echo but rather renew "the voice and form of fiction in an age of fabulism, exhaustion and film" (Morace 161)]:

> *Philip snapped up a tiny vacant table at the open window of Pierre's cafe*, ordered himself an ice-cream and Irish coffee, and sat back to observe the passing parade: the young bearded Jesuses and their barefoot Magdalenes in cotton maxis, Negroes with Afro haircuts […] junkies and potheads stoned out of their minds groping their way along the kerb […] ghetto kids and huckleberry runaways […] priests and policemen, bill-posters and garbage collectors, a young man distributing, without conviction, leaflets about courses in Scientology, hippies in scarred and tattered leather jackets toting guitars, and girls, girls of every shape and size and description […]*
>
> *Philip felt himself finally converted to expatriation; and he saw himself, too, as part of a great historical process - a reversal of that cultural Gulf Stream which had in the past swept so many Americans to Europe in search of Experience. Now it was not Europe but the West Coast of America that was the furthest rim of experiment in* life and art*, to which one made one's pilgrimage in search of liberation and enlightenment; and so it was to American literature that the European now looked for a mirror-image of his quest. He thought of James's The Ambassadors and Strether's injunction to Little Bilham, in the Paris garden, to 'Live . . . live all you can; it's a mistake not to,' feeling himself to partake of both characters, the speaker who had discovered this insight too late, and the young man who might still profit by it. He thought of Henry*

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> *Miller sitting over a beer in some scruffy Parisian cafe […] He understood American Literature for the first time in his life that afternoon, sitting in Pierre's on Cable Avenue as the river of Plotinus life flowed past, understood its prodigality and indecorum, its yea-saying heterogeneity, understood Walt Whitman who laid end to end words never seen in each other's company before outside of a dictionary, and Herman Melville who split the atom of the traditional novel in the effort to make whaling a universal metaphor […] understood all that, though he couldn't have explained it to his students, some thoughts do often lie too deep for seminars, and understood, too, at last, what it was that he wanted to tell Hilary.*
>
> Because I've changed, Hilary, changed more than I should hem thought possible. Vve not only, as you know, been lodging with Disirie ZaPP s^nce *** "^Snt of the landslip, I've also been sleeping with her quite regularly since the day of my arrest, and to be honest I can't seem to work up any guilt or regret about it (Lodge 1985: 193-195).

The six chapters of the novel construct a conventional realistic plot but their form make the design of what is known as postmodern narrative (metagenres and metaforms): from the linear structure of the first two chapters in realistic style, to letters/ epistolary form, to cut-ups of newspapers, manifestos, printed material, back to realistic narration but mixed with introspection or rather mental letters, and eventually to a film script in the end of the novel. In other words, we do have here a mixture of *reality* with *realistic illusion* enabled by what Lodge names in his novel: "One of these differences we can take in at a glance from *our privileged narrative altitude* (higher than that of any jet)" (1985: 8). This is coherence that comes through disruption, or, in Robert A. Morace's words: "aesthetic integrity" deriving from "the artful fragmentation of its parts", a "narrative paradox, holding together by breaking apart" in a novel that has some "arbitrary ontological status" and has a "problematic but still existent relationship with reality" (165).

Where does *film* intersect with fiction and life, in Lodge's theory? Why a novel that ends with: "Philip shrugs. The camera stops, freezing him in mid-gesture?", the last sentence of the text? Is it a mere compromise between the traditional campus novel and the postmodern film-script-like novel/ the new epistolary novel…? The novel itself betrays its author's preference for *renewing* the discourse by incorporating other voices/ genres/ forms/ languages in *one unit*. At the same time, metafictionally speaking again, Lodge's Philip Swallow, initially a humble unsecure English character, comes to realise at the end of the story, when he is more American than British, that:

> *PHILIP: […] there is a generation gap, and I think it revolves around this public/private thing. Our generation – we subscribe to the old liberal doctrine of the inviolate self. It's the great tradition of realistic fiction, it's what novels are all about. The private life in the foreground, history a distant rumble of gunfire, somewhere offstage. In Jane Austen not even a rumble. Well, the novel is dying, and us with it. No wonder I could get anything out of my novel-writing class at Euphoric State. It's an unnatural medium for their experience. Those kids* (gestures at screen) *are living a film, not a novel […]*
>
> *MORRIS: (To PHILIP) The paradigms of fiction are essentially the same whatever the medium. Words or images, it makes no difference at the structural level* (Lodge 1985: 250-251).

The ending is not as pessimistic as it might sound, and this because of the discourse strategy of the novelist who constructs a type of ending that would 'make both ends meet'. All the characters in this last scene, as well as all the stage directions and the

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explanatory, describing sentences are the voices of the creator/ writer/ narrator/ Lodge who designs the ending of the realist-postmodernist novel while turning it into film-script/ film. This not because this might have been his intention but because this seems to be the course of events, of circumstances, of the cultural context, where 'reality' (young people protesting and marching) is on TV/ on the screen, while Philip, Morris, Hilary and Désirée chat and watch TV and all these are superposed by the proper film (in the reader's 'eyes') of *all these* films: metafilm or metamedia, where film and media replace (actually rather construct/ fashion/ artificialize) reality! Nothing can surpass prose fiction but unfortunately this new type of 'life/ reality' which comes *on the screen* through film/ media can surpass life, despite the fact that the result is nothing but fake reality/ *realistic illusion*, precisely as the ending of this novel in not a proper ending, and the reader is explicitly told the reason:

> *PHILIP: That's it. Well, that's something the novelist can't help giving away, isn't it, that his book is shortly coming to an end? It may not be a happy ending, nowadays, but he can't disguise the tell-tale compression of the pages.*
> *HILARY and DÉSIRÉE begin to listen to what PHILIP is saying, and he becomes the focal point of attention.*
> *I mean, mentally you brace yourself for the ending of a novel. As you're reading, you're aware of the fact that there's only a passage or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent, than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just…end (Lodge 1985: 251).*

Consequently, what the reader receives with this ending is prose=film=fiction that remains *open*, and as Morris Zapp demonstrates, this, being an 'open system', is Life, for, opposed to this, Literature is a closed system. According to this logic, *Changing Places* is not Literature, it is Life! And yet, the formal devices that construct it belong to literature. It is the *word* that fashions such 'life', and the particularities of such writing, which results in *realistic illusion*, design the paradoxical and, therefore, fascinating discourse of David Lodge's polyphonies.

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