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TRANSFORMING THE REALIST NARRATIVE MODE IN *THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS FALLING DOWN*: DAVID LODGE'S LITERATURE OF EXHAUSTION

Abstract

David Lodge was one of the many novelists in the 1960's who felt that the novel form was at a crossroads. Due to the immense pressure on the aesthetic and epistemological premises of literary realism, many novelists considered two routes branching off in opposite directions: one led towards the neodocumentary, fiction as history, or the other way round; the other led towards metafiction. Despite being drawn to metafiction, Lodge retained a modest faith in realism: he was not prepared to accept the assumption that history and reality were so appalling and the human situation so disastrous that realism could no longer be a fitting response to reality. Having produced two realistic novels in the early 1960's, Lodge responded to the widespread feeling that realism and the novel form were in a crisis, reflected memorably in John Barth's influential essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", by tackling metafiction on his own terms, moving freely between the realistic and the metafictional mode. What he produced was a narrative about a thoroughly realistic subject, namely, young Catholic parents struggling with the perils of contraception while trying to adhere to the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. The plot, encompassing a single day in the life of its protagonists, unfolds through a series of delightfully witty parodies of the literary styles of a number of major writers, among them James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka. The paper will analyse how Lodge's narrative strategy in his first overtly experimental

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novel, relying mostly on pastiche, proved that the creative possibilities of literature, despite widespread misgivings, were far from exhausted.

Key words: David Lodge, realism, metafiction, pastiche, the novel at a crossroads, literature of exhaustion.

The 1960's were a period of great social turmoil and far-reaching changes of the ideological paradigm of the West, which gave rise to high expectations of sweeping social changes, the result of which would be a better, more just world. In the sphere of literature, this decade was marked by a widespread feeling that contemporary literature was undergoing a crisis that might easily mean its end as a creative activity. Typical of this feeling were dire prophecies of the death of the novel form, the death of the author, that literature as such, especially its realist mode, was a spent force in creative terms. Thus the American author Ronald Sukenick in his characteristically titled book *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969) maintains that the contemporary writer is forced to practically start from scratch, for reality does not exist, God as the omniscient narrator has died, so that "...now no one knows the plot" (Bradbury 2001: 375). His view was echoed by the British experimental writer B. S. Johnson, who was of the opinion that the 19th-century narrative novel was "exhausted", and that a new random literature was required to accurately reflect the disorderly nature of reality and the modern chaos (Bradbury 2001: 371). And when it comes to exhaustion, the single most influential essay written along those lines was most likely John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), wherein he also claimed that literary realism was "used up" (Bradbury 2001: 370). The figure of the author did not escape this general process of deterioration in the realm of literature unscathed either: in his equally influential essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes argued that it was impossible for a writer to locate him/herself in the text as the "real" author, the reason being that the writer was written by language itself (Bradbury 2001: 373).

David Lodge was certainly aware of the urgency of these issues, both in his capacity as a literary practitioner (he published four novels during the 1960's) and as a literary scholar (in 1960 he became a lecturer at the University of Birmingham, where he eventually became Professor of English Literature, leaving this post in 1987 to become a full-time writer). In his essay "The

Novelist at the Crossroads” (1971), Lodge acknowledged that, although most novels published in England at the time belonged to the category of realistic novels, the pressure of scepticism on the aesthetic and epistemological premises of literary realism was so intense that many novelists were considering two routes branching out from the crossroads: one led to the non-fiction novel, and the other to what the American scholar Robert Scholes called “fabulation” in his influential study *The Fabulators* (1967).

Scholes coined this term to describe the fast-growing class of 20th century fiction that violates the conventions of realistic fiction in a variety of ways by means of radical experiments with subject matter, form, style or temporal sequence, blurring traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, tragic or comic. In rejecting realism, authors whom Scholes refers to as “fabulators” “posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions” (Waugh 1984: 19). As such, fabulation is a variant of metafiction, self-referential or autorepresentational fiction that provides within itself a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception (Hutcheon 1984: xii).

While Lodge admitted to being drawn to metafiction, he refused to give up on realism, retaining, as his fellow writer and colleague at the University of Birmingham Malcolm Bradbury put it, a “modest” faith in it. Lodge, quite simply, as Bradbury observes, refused to “accept the assumption that history and reality were so appalling, the human state so disastrous that realism could no longer be a response” (Bradbury 2001: 376). Lodge admitted as much in an essay written two decades after he originally examined the position of the novelist at the crossroads entitled “The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?” (1992). Restating his “modest affirmation of faith in the future of the traditional realistic novel”, with which he concluded the original essay, Lodge went on to conclude that the original generalisation he posited back then, namely, that “We seem to be living through a period of unprecedented cultural pluralism which allows, in all the arts, an astonishing variety of styles to flourish simultaneously” still held good. Equally importantly, he added that he was “struck by how sturdily traditional realism ha[d] survived the obsequies pronounced over it by Scholes, and by a number of other writers and critics in the Sixties and Seventies, and how clearly it remain[ed] a serious option for the literary novelist today” (in the 1990’s, that is, but this essentially holds true in the 21st century as well) (Lodge 1997: 6).

In the three decades spanning his literary career from its beginnings in the early 1960's to the publication of the latter of the two essays referred to above, Lodge produced a total of eight novels, moving freely between the realistic and the metafictional mode, occasionally combining the two. In doing so, he produced an impressive body of work that both affirmed the vitality of realism and explored interesting metafictional possibilities. In the context of the present conference, "Tradition and Transformation", it would be of interest to examine how Lodge, in his first metafictional experiment, transformed the traditional realist narrative mode to great effect, producing a metafictional narrative about a perfectly realistic life situation, often with hilariously comic results.

For Lodge, the crossroads he spoke of in his essays came in 1965. Having published two novels of "scrupulous realism" (Lodge 1983: 169), *The Picturegoers* and *Ginger, You're Barmy*, in 1960 and 1962 respectively, Lodge felt it was time to try something new. As he explains in the afterword to the 1981 edition of his third novel, having been commissioned to write a satirical revue for the Birmingham Rep in 1963, together with Malcolm Bradbury, working in the comic mode opened up new horizons for him. Lodge discovered in himself a zest for satirical and parodic writing, which liberated him from the restrictive decorums of the realistic novel. The result was *London Bridge Is Falling Down* (1965), his first novel "that could be described as in any way experimental" (Lodge 1983: 169).

However "modest" his faith in realism may have been, Lodge was not prepared to accept claims such as the one made by Robert Scholes that film had made literary realism redundant. He was aware, on the other hand, that British writers, by and large, tended to be excessively committed to realism and resistant to non-realistic literary modes (Morace 1989: 15). As he would expound in his essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads", instead of opting for one of the two forking paths at the crossroads (the fabulation/metafiction advocated by Scholes or a variant of the "empirical narrative" such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* /1965/, based on a non-fictional premise), the novelist could adopt a third course of action, building his/her hesitation into the novel itself (Lodge 1971: 22). The result would be what Lodge termed "the problematic novel", a work in which the writer could remain loyal to both reality and to fiction, giving up on the nostalgic illusion of being able to reconcile them. Following in the footsteps of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), the author of a problematic novel makes "the difficulty of his task... his subject" and "invites the reader

to participate in the aesthetic and philosophical problems that the writing of fiction presents” (Lodge 1971: 23-24). The problematic novel provides, as the critic Robert Morace points out, a way of continuing the development of the novel form instead of breaking with it altogether or maintaining the realist tradition as a literary anachronism (Morace 1989: 15).

Writing *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, Lodge produced, as Morace aptly observes, his own variant of the literature of exhaustion: an English-style parodic collage “in the guise of a seamless comic realistic novel” (Morace 1989: 132). At this point we need to remind ourselves that John Barth’s 1967 essay was originally widely misunderstood as yet another one spelling out “the death of the novel”. Clarifying matters retrospectively in his 1980 essay entitled “The Literature of Replenishment”, Barth suggested that his earlier essay was actually about “the effective ‘exhaustion’ not language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism”, and that, rather than advocating the apocalyptic view of the fate of the novel form, he had only meant to say that a particular stage in its history was passing and to point possible directions for further development from there (Barth 1984: 206). Bearing in mind the publication dates, it turns out that Lodge spontaneously and intuitively prefigured Barth’s suggested way out of the impasse, replenishing the traditional realist narrative by resorting to parody and pastiche.

Lodge was, in his own words, well aware of the risks of extensive use of parody and pastiche, the main danger being the possibility of “puzzling and alienating the reader who wouldn’t recognise the allusions” (Lodge 1983: 170). Indeed, when the novel was originally published, very few reviewers recognised the full extent of the parodies involved, many made no reference to them whatsoever, and some even complained that the novel was “somewhat derivative without perceiving that this effect might be deliberate and systematic” (Lodge 1983: 171).

While later readers run the risk of going to the opposite extreme and focusing solely on the novel’s parodic aspect, Robert Morace is certainly correct in pointing out that in Lodge’s first overtly experimental novel “realism and parody, life and literature, feed on and reflect each other, creating a comical but nonetheless disturbing confusion of realms” (Morace 1989: 132-133). Although the novel is filled to bursting point with very funny situations and observations, it is at the same time a perfectly realistic story about a single day in the life of Adam Appleby, a postgraduate student painfully aware of the fact that he will, in all likelihood, be unable to finish

his PhD thesis on the long sentence in three modern English novels before his scholarship expires. To make matters even more complicated, there is an ominous possibility that, having given birth to three children already, his wife Barbara might be pregnant again, her period being worryingly late. Their problem in that respect was shared by many young Catholics who adhered to their church's doctrine on birth control, which forbade the use of contraceptives. Adam's rueful realisation that "Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round." (Lodge 1983: 56) sums up their situation with wonderful wit, and has since deservedly found its way into a number of dictionaries of modern quotations.

Much of Adam's day is spent in and around the British Museum, in whose Reading Room he toils away at his thesis. Various mishaps and crises that befall him are narrated in the literary styles of ten different writers, some of them well-known literary figures (among them Graham Greene, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway or Henry James), some rather obscure ones (such as Baron Corvo, whose opus Lodge studied in some detail while working on *his* MA thesis on the Catholic novel from the Oxford Movement to the present day, also in the British Museum's Reading Room; Corvo's style provides a delightful excursion into fantasy when Adam imagines himself as the Pope issuing an encyclical in which he grants the faithful freedom of choice in the matter of contraception /Bergonzi 1995: 7/).

Due to the restricted format of this presentation, we shall limit ourselves to analysing briefly the greatest literary debt owed by *The British Museum Is Falling Down*. As Lodge readily admits himself, it is to James Joyce's *Ulysses* that he owes much of his inspiration when it comes to the overall narrative technique. Even a brief overview reveals numerous similarities between Lodge's slim volume of what appears to be a conventional realistic novel and what Robert Morace describes as "Joyce's mammoth literary museum of densely textured modernist prose" (Morace 1989: 135), some of them not necessarily obvious on a first reading, such as the parallels between Adam Appleby and Leopold Bloom pointed out by the critic Dennis Jackson: like Bloom, Adam "becomes increasingly disoriented as his day progresses, and his perceptions of life around him become increasingly phantasmagoric". Also like Bloom, Adam "keeps his mind constantly fixed... on his home and his wife; he suffers because of his religion; and he has fantasies of grandeur (which, like Bloom's, are always followed by some sort of comic diminution)" (Morace 1989: 136).

It was while pondering the problem of how to present Adam's marital problems, even if only briefly, from another perspective, that of his wife Barbara, that Lodge "belatedly" realised how Joyce, limiting the duration of the action of *Ulysses* to a single day, varying the narrative style from one episode to another and, most importantly of all, having Molly Bloom become the subjective consciousness of the final chapter and give "her own wry, down-to-earth, feminine perspective" of her marriage, provided an ideal basic model for the narrative structure of *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (Lodge 1983: 171). With characteristic modesty, Lodge refers to this flash of inspiration as "writer's luck" (Lodge 1983: 171), but it is owing to his creative ingenuity that his variation on Joyce's classic has lost none of its freshness half a century after it was originally published. Where Joyce relied on Homer, Lodge resorted to sometimes "wickedly funny" (Morace 1989: 137) parodies of a number of writers, additionally varying his text with passages written in the style of newspaper reports, advertising jingles, encyclopaedia entries, plot summaries and letters to the editor. And while Molly Bloom ends her monologue with a life-affirming "yes", Barbara Appleby ends hers with a postmodern "perhaps". This is entirely fitting in view of the fact that, even though it turns out at the very end that Barbara is not pregnant after all, the Applebys' other existential problems remain, providing a firm realistic basis to a novel characterised by wild parodic flights of fancy. Faced with the threat of exhaustion of the realistic narrative mode, Lodge found a way of moving ahead by moving back, of demystifying the literary past by parodying it (Morace 1989: 137), thus effectively replenishing its expressive potential.

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