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The Academic Double Agent : Criticism and Fiction in David Lodge's Early Novels

Abstract: Given David Lodge's double identity as both a novelist and a university professor and writer of academic criticism, it comes as no surprise that one of the most frequently discussed aspects of his work consists precisely in his position on the threshold between theory and fiction. This paper aims to discuss Lodge's increasing awareness of the crisis faced by contemporary criticism and the evolution of his own writing on the background of constant changes, as well as the way in which these concerns emerge from both his critical and fictional writing. Rather than pay closer attention to the novels belonging to the academic trilogy, universally regarded as his most representative texts in terms of the fusion of criticism and fiction, this paper will focus on the relationship between the theoretical ideas elaborated in his works of criticism and the often tentative allusions to the study of literature present in his early writings, highlighting the extent to which they anticipate the complex and often spectacular interaction between criticism and fiction that characterises his later novels.

Key words: academic criticism, critifiction, fiction, identity, metafiction, reality

It would be difficult to engage in any analysis of David Lodge's novels without referring at some point to his decision to position himself "on the threshold between theory and fiction, between academia and the outside world" (Hopkin 54) and as such it comes as no surprise that his double identity, "split between writing fiction and literary scholarship" (YHJ 11) and adding further complexity to the "doubleness of the writer *qua* writer" (Atwood 28), is one of the most frequently discussed details of his work. It could be argued that the tendency to perceive this dual orientation in terms of conflict stems from the awareness that the combination of novelist and critic is considerably less familiar in literary history than that of poet and critic, although in both cases success relies on the close relationship between creative and critical faculties in the process of composition, involving "not only inspiration but the capacity to test and assess what has been written, to revise and if necessary to delete." (Bergonzi 48) Indeed, the smaller number of critics among novelists can be explained as a natural consequence of the fact that their art requires considerable resources of time and effort and is in any case compensated for by the illustrious examples of Henry James,

Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster. Moreover, however great the temptation to read Lodge's evolution in terms of a constant creative and intellectual tension between apparently incompatible activities, his own confessions reveal that the two complement each other and that the only problems were caused by the need to reconcile the "social roles or personae of professor and novelist" (CN 100), often leading to an almost schizophrenic existence on the social-psychological level.

The desire to keep a balance between his academic career as a university teacher and scholar and being a fiction writer best emerges from the decision to publish a novel and a work of literary criticism in alternation throughout the almost three decades of combining the two activities. Notwithstanding the care taken to keep his two worlds in equilibrium, the necessity of constantly crossing the frontier between them was enough to make Lodge feel "like a double agent, always vulnerable to the accusation of treachery" (PW 36) and worried about being exposed. However, the paradoxes and contradictions of this position only became acute when the Birmingham campus was used as a location for the filming of *Nice Work* and 'Rummidge' somehow ceased being a verbal construct, confined and consumed within the covers of a book (PW 36).

Another important component of the decision to retire from university teaching and to attempt a new kind of literary criticism consisted of the growing difficulty of making meaningful connections between "an academic criticism increasingly dominated by questions of Theory and the practice of creative writing" (PW 4), a problem that did not seem to characterise the period when Lodge began the twin career of novelist and academic critic:

The relationship between fiction and criticism was comparatively unproblematical. Criticism was conceived of as a second-order discourse dependent on the first-order discourse of fiction. Novelists wrote novels and critics criticized them. This latter activity was usually described as a combination of description, interpretation and evaluation of texts, with different schools striking a different balance between the terms of this formula. The function of theory was to provide a more and more comprehensive and refined methodology for carrying out this work. (AB 11)

The transition from the traditional, humanist model of the relationship between fiction and criticism to a new approach to literature marked by the impact of structuralism and post-structuralism coincided with a promising abolishment of the conceptual boundary between creative and critical discourse, yet also resulted in the loss of a "common language of critical discourse which used to be shared between academic critics, practising writers, literary journalists and the educated common reader" (AB 14), the latter being no longer able to make any sense at all of contemporary literary criticism. Although quite willing to admit that his involvement in two different worlds made the discontinuity between the most sophisticated discourse about literature and the production and reception of new literary works seem more oppressive than it would have appeared to representatives of either of the two spaces, Lodge did not consider the situation of contemporary theory a healthy or particularly beneficial one for any of the protagonists involved in its production and reception.

His own transition to a more accessible kind of criticism can be best understood in connection with the belief that contemporary fiction, irrespective of its allegiance to realism, non-realism, fabulation, metafiction or non-fiction, is likely to be "reader-friendly" (PW 16)

as a result of a greater desire on the part of the writer to communicate. Indeed, unlike some of his contemporaries, Lodge did not believe that the abolition of the Author, the rejection of literature as communication and indeed of communication itself on the grounds that it is nothing more than an illusion or fallacy (*PW* 16) inevitably followed from the most persuasive and illuminating arguments of post-structuralist theory (*LF* 300) and perceived his disagreement as a consequence of the practice of writing fiction rather than of theoretical conviction. As far as Lodge is concerned, the strenuous and complicated project of writing a novel can only be approached by “mentally projecting its effects upon an imagined other” (*LF* 300), by acknowledging some form of interaction between the implied reader of the text and its implied writer.

Apart from these specific points of difference there was also the issue of the incompatibility between an excessive emphasis on theory and a sort of criticism that would appeal and be understood by anyone outside the academic system. It might seem an exaggeration to associate Lodge with the voicing of one of the major prejudices directed in the course of time against professors of English (and of literature in general), which is that while there is nothing particularly difficult about what they profess, their attempts to make it appear complicated spoil the innocent pleasure of ordinary people who know what they like and enjoy reading (*WS* 3), yet he has repeatedly emphasised, often to comical effects, the awe triggered by specialised texts:

As an academic critic and university teacher specializing in modern literature and literary theory, I spend much of my time these days reading books and articles that I can barely understand and that cause my wife (a graduate with a good honours degree in English language and literature) to utter loud cries of pain and nausea if her eyes happen to fall on them. (*WO* 112)

Indeed, instead of attempting to bring an authentic contribution to human knowledge, a vast amount of the academic criticism and theory published in learned journals and by university presses seems to represent little more than “the demonstration of a professional mastery by translating known facts into more and more arcane metalanguages” (*AB* 8). As regards Lodge’s own academic writings, the difficulties sometimes faced by readers familiar with the study of literature make it quite easy to understand why those outside the academic world are often unable to grasp even the least complicated of such texts and why a book like *Working With Structuralism*, that he attempted to make as “lucid and readily intelligible” as possible, was received with “bafflement and sometimes derision” (*WO* 114) by the general public. Consequently, while Lodge continued writing occasional literary criticism and collecting it into books even following his decision to leave academic life and his quite noticeable shift from theory to performance (Childs 16), his retirement was marked by a criticism addressed to a general educated readership, or to “students of all kinds and ages” (*LF* xi) rather than to the specialised audience that is most likely to be interested in and capable of grasping the complexity of his earlier writings.

It could be argued that the general audience that Lodge’s later non-fiction writings are targeted at did not have to wait that long in order to become familiar with his critical ideas, many of which are to be encountered in his novels. One of Lodge’s most frequently quoted

contributions to the study of contemporary fiction consists in his metaphor of the novelist at the crossroads, faced with the difficult choice between “the way of traditional realism, now alleged to be a very boring route, and possibly a dead end” (*PW* 6) and the ways of fabulation and non-fictional narrative. The outcome was that numerous writers found it impossible to select either way and built their hesitations into their fiction, making the reader participate in the aesthetic and philosophical problems the writing of fiction presents by embodying them directly in the narrative (*NC* 24) and producing a type of fiction that Lodge labels the problematic novel. Relatively few other critics made use of this particular term, as the name of metafiction coined some time later achieved considerably wider currency and was also accompanied by more elaborate if quite similar definitions and explanations, usually emphasising the tendency of such fiction to “concern itself with itself, with literature, with the crisis of literature, with the crisis of language” (Federman 5) and its pervading self-reflectivity:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 2)

One of the most interesting mechanisms to be noted at the level of such texts is the possibility of the writer turning into a theorist by simply talking about a narrative within that narrative and thus putting it in quotation marks and stepping beyond its boundaries (Martin 181) Perhaps the best known example of such a device in Lodge’s fiction is to be encountered in *Changing Places* and consists of the running critical commentary on its own processes that adds a new level of self-reflexiveness to the novel. The constant references to “the narrator of this duplex chronicle”, the one entity who notices the crossing of the protagonists’ paths “at the still point of the turning world” (*CP* 5), or to his “privileged narrative altitude (higher than that of any jet)” (*CP* 6) put the novel into postmodern dialogue with the literary tradition (Morace 163) and emphasise the contract entered into by the various participants involved in the process of writing and reading a text.

A more elaborate version of this dialogue occurs in the final paragraphs of *How Far Can You Go?* and entails the insertion of the extradiegetic narrator, the “fictive and entirely nameless authorial narrator that has always been one of the novel’s characters”, into the diegetic universe that sometimes bridges the gap between past and present, narrative time and historical time, the time of the narration and the time of the narrating:

I teach English literature at a redbrick university and write novels in my spare time, slowly, and hustled by history. While I was writing this last chapter, Pope Paul VI died and Pope John Paul I was elected. (...) What will happen now? All bets are void, the future is uncertain, but it will be interesting to watch. Reader, farewell! (*HF* 244)

An even more spectacular such intrusion to be encountered in the same novel consists of an overt reference to the treatment of the theme of Catholic family planning in an earlier

novel, followed by its summary, comments on the audience's response that might constitute the basis of an interesting discussion of the problematic interaction between fact and fiction, as well as an excerpt from a letter sent by a Czech reader, the writer's reaction to it and his own assessment of the novel. As far as Lodge's novels are concerned, metafiction is a particularly useful way of continuing to exploit the resources of realism even while exposing their conventionality and an interesting paradox characterising such writing is that "the more nakedly the author appears to reveal himself in such texts," the more obvious it becomes that "the *author* as a voice is only a function of his own fiction, a rhetorical construct" (AB 43), an object of interpretation rather than a privileged authority.

A crucial concept that can be brought into this discussion alongside metafiction is the more recent one of critifiction, referring to the category of narrative that contains its own theory as well as its own criticism, and it could be argued that this is the best term that can be used to describe some of Lodge's most appreciated novels. His own observations on the care taken to ensure that the number of fictional and critical works published in the course of his double career was relatively similar might induce in some readers the mistaken tendency to regard them as clearly delimited areas of his work, ignoring the fact that while he disseminated new theories in his critical works Lodge was also writing imaginatively about them by means of a new form of discourse that is critical as well as fictional. Indeed, one of the truly fascinating aspects of Lodge's writing is the way in which he manages to treat major contemporary themes and issues with a mixture of comic irony and concerned seriousness (Burton 237), to write innovative novels that breach the boundary between apparently separate fields and make literary theories and critical practices a centre of their attention (Stevenson 122), spreading "structuralist and poststructuralist ideas about fiction more widely than anyone else in the process" (Currie 51).

The impressive number of copies of *Changing Places*, *Small World* and *Nice Work* sold by the end of the twentieth century did not only disprove allegations that David Lodge's brilliant academic satires were known almost exclusively among those they ridiculed (Whissen 39) but also ensured that rather complicated theoretical concepts and the general pattern of their development became at least loosely familiar to a broadly reading public and showed that contrary to stereotypical perceptions of the gaps between creator and critic the two functions were sometimes closer than ever before (Stevenson 122). Moreover, given the fact that most of Lodge's protagonists are not only university teachers or students but also literary critics and often writers, the abundance of open references to literary theory in his fiction never appears artificial and as such even readers with a completely different background can be gradually lured into a world of increasingly complex concepts and demonstrations and acquire new information without being deflected from the story. It could be of course argued that numerous subtleties are inevitably lost on some members of the audience, yet Lodge's tendency to write "layered fiction" (Haffenden 160) that has attracted rather unflattering labels such as "a lightish novelist albeit a serious scholar and critic" (Walden 48) or a "desperado of simplicity" (Vianu 154) also ensures that those who cannot understand all levels of implication and reference can always make sense of the narrative and derive satisfaction on the surface level.

It is equally important to note that although the vast majority of such elements are confined to the novels constituting the academic trilogy and to a certain extent to some of the

later novels, there is virtually no text to be found in Lodge's entire fiction that does not contain at least passing comments on literary theory and criticism and all of them are appropriate to the context in which they appear. Since most of his early protagonists are young people involved in the study of literature, there are occasional references to the most significant theoretical texts encountered in the course of their studies, such as Jonathan Browne's attempts to explain his interest in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and literary criticism in general (GB 185), and often amateurish attempts at literary analysis.

Given the protagonist's age, it might seem quite obvious that some of the clumsiest examples of critical reading are to be encountered in *Out of the Shelter*, yet even the discourse of a schoolboy is more sophisticated than that of Lawrence Passmore, the protagonist of a later novel, whose interrupted education places him at about the same level in terms of literary analysis:

Dramatic monologues, I think they're called, because they're addressed to somebody whose lines are just implied. I remember that much from Fifth-form English. We had to learn one by Browning, off by heart. "My Last Duchess" The Duke is a crazy jealous husband who, it turns out, has murdered his wife. (Th 210)

Thus, Timothy's failure to comment on a possible connection between Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* (OS 52) and the lyrics of a song that keeps recurring throughout the novel, *There'll Be Bluebirds Over the White Cliffs of Dover*, as well as the rather simplistic comparison he draws between the inhabitants of the unfamiliar European landscape and the characters in *The Wizard of Oz* (OS 98) merely confirm his limited exposure to literature beyond his set examination texts yet suggest an incipient interest in the field and mirror the more comprehensive discourse of Lodge's other protagonists. As regards *The Picturegoers*, while Patricia Mallory's first encounter with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is characterised by a typically adolescent identification with its "sadness and revolt and rebellion and need to be free" (P 32), Mark engages in sophisticated analyses of the works of Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence, and ponders on unexpected topics such as the "attachment to the cloacal in writers and intellectuals" (P 94) that he elaborates on with pertinent examples from various texts.

The British Museum is Falling Down, succinctly but very accurately described by its author as "a comic and self-consciously literary novel containing a good deal of parody" (AF 167), is one of the first representative examples of fictional texts characterised by considerable discussion of literary questions, enabling the author "to gain a surprising distance on his own literary identity." (LF 278) It could be argued that unlike Lodge the central figure of this particular novel is neither a writer nor a real critic, merely a postgraduate student of English literature working in the British Museum Reading Room, yet he is a potential novelist as well, although this particular career choice is only hinted at, and also envisages producing "a thesis that would rock the scholarly world and start a revolution in literary criticism" (BM 18), a scarcely realistic ambition given his unsuccessful attempts to write his PhD dissertation.

Moreover, taking into account his preoccupations, not only are his actions and way of thinking caught up in general literary matters and particular texts, but, what is even more

important, he is constantly tormented by the same anxiety of influence Lodge constantly refers to in his theoretical texts and also uses as an important theme in his fiction, and as such his often far-fetched ideas are considerably more interesting than the rather banal discussions on literary topics to be encountered in a novel such as *How Far Can You Go?* The fact that the original subject of Adam's thesis on "The Structure of Long Sentences in Three Modern English Novels" was "Language and Ideology in Modern Fiction" enables the reader to perceive it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of *The Language of Fiction* (Morace 137) and constitutes a further argument in favour of the idea that the novel is indeed used as a vehicle for its author's personal anxieties, assuming such confirmations were necessary after Lodge's open discussion of the issue: "No doubt the use of parody in this book was also, for me, a way of coping with what the American critic Harold Bloom has called 'Anxiety of Influence.'" (BM 168)

One of the most paradoxical aspects of Adam's attempts at literary criticism is the salient incongruity between his inability to even choose the novels to be analysed in his paper or decide "how long a long sentence was" (BM 48) and his occasional insights into considerably more interesting aspects of literature, such as his highly original observation concerning the complex relationship between life and art, incidentally one of the most quoted lines in David Lodge's entire fiction: "Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round." (BM 56) Yet, Adam's most convincing approach to this issue emerges in the course of a sherry party and concerns the dangerous rate at which "novelists are using up experience" (BM 119). Accidentally triggered by a fellow academic's remark, his theory focuses on the evolution of narrative literature from the times when it "dealt only with the extraordinary or the allegorical – with kings and queens, giants and dragons, sublime virtue and diabolic evil" (BM 119) which could never be confused with life, to the emergence of the novel as the dominant literary form and the implicit possibility of picking up a book at random and reading about a protagonist involved in the same activities as oneself. His conclusion takes John Barth's intimations of the exhaustion of literary possibilities one step further, suggesting an even more disquieting exhaustion of the subject matter of life itself and thus providing the ideal background for Lodge's own intertextual solution to this crisis.

There is no denying the fact that the novels constituting the academic trilogy and to a certain extent some of David Lodge's more recent novels are considerably richer in references to contemporary critical ideas, yet the numerous such elements to be encountered in his earlier works clearly demonstrate that there is virtually no text to be found in his entire fiction that does not contain at least passing comments on literary theory and criticism. These often tentative interactions between theory and fiction moreover anticipate the reader's encounters with the two contrasting types of literary criticism embodied by Morris Zapp and Philip Swallow in *Changing Places*, with the problems of a discipline practically pulled in different directions by an impressive array of representatives of the most prestigious schools of criticism in *Small World*, and with the difficulties raised by the increasingly arcane language of literary theory in *Nice Work*, and can be thus regarded as valuable practice before the considerable greater challenges raised by later novels.

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