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Academic Metafiction:

A Postmodern Reading of David Lodge's *Small World*

“Not many people are capable of adjusting their perceptive apparatus to the pane and the transparency that is the work of art. Instead they look right through it and revel in the human reality with which the work deals.”

(Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*)

This paper rests on two basic convictions. The first is that the exhaustion of the academic novel, as a literary form, is largely due to the realist critical approach¹ that it has mainly received. The suggestion behind the statement, nevertheless, is that there is a lot more to academic novels than their representation of and correspondence to higher education. Based on the observation that a significant body of campus novels exhibit strong metafictional characteristics, the second thesis points out that the application of postmodernist literary theory to reading academic fiction is a fresh direction which not only has the potential to raise the genre to a more prominent literary status, but also offers innovative possibilities for analyzing academic novels. The present literary investigation aims at demonstrating this departure from the traditional realist reading of academic novels by applying the critical framework and terminology of postmodernist literary criticism to David Lodge's *Small World: An Academic Romance*².

The works of J. O. Lyons, 1969³, Mortimer Proctor, 1977⁴, Ian Carter⁵, David Bevan⁶ and Janice Rossen⁷ in the early 90s, and the latest by Elaine Showalter, 2005⁸, are considered to be the core of the body of literary criticism that deals with campus novels today. These works, though being completely different in their particular approaches to the campus genre, display a striking uniformity from the point of view that they all treat academic novels as social documents. The underlying concept behind this critical thinking is that campus novels portray the ‘real’ academe as it is perceived and experienced by those who participate in them, and primarily concern such themes as the history of higher education, the lives of university teachers and students, academic competition, the difficulties of women in higher education, the relationship between the

¹ Exclusive focus on a work's referentiality and correspondence to the 'real' world.

² David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (London: Penguin, 1985)

³ J. O. Lyons, *The College Novel in America* (London: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968)

⁴ Mortimer Proctor, *The English University Novel* (New York: Arno Press, 1977)

⁵ Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post War Years* (London: Routledge, 1990)

⁶ David Bevan, ed., *University Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990)

⁷ Janice Rossen, *The University in Modern Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993)

⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: An Academic Novel and its Discontents* (Oxford: OUP, 2005)

academic and non-academic communities, the difficulties of participating in higher education, university expansion, cuts and the general recession of higher education, etc. Critics, having identified these thematic specializations, reacted accordingly, and the general practice that became established in campus novel criticism focuses on a campus novel's descriptive power and authenticity of real academic issues, concentrating on such questions as: "What segment of higher education is portrayed in the novel?", "Is the representation authentic?", "What is the technique of the representation?", "What values are associated to themes dealt with in the novel?", "Are these values accepted, questioned or subverted?", etc. The questions basically aim at investigating what campus novels show us, teach us about higher education. Thus, – also corresponding to the nomenclature 'realist fiction' – let us name this critical attitude: realist criticism. Whenever the term 'realist criticism' is mentioned in this paper, it stands for the basic suppositions and critical attitude described above.

The dominance of this critical approach has been absolute. Today there is not one serious investigation of the campus novel that would study its subject matter outside the scope of the realist approach. Critics celebrated the campus novel as a unique literary channel capable of communicating the concerns and criticism of higher education. But the literary appreciation arising from this exclusively social concern proved to be short-lived. The main reasons behind the breakdown have been identified as follows: the world of higher education is a relatively limited domain and, consequently, academic novels offer the same venues, the same participants and the same events. Also, the flow of campus novels after the 1950s quickly absorbed all the significant changes of higher education and exhausted the topical scope of the genre, reducing it to mere permutations of themes already dealt with in previous novels. This repetitiveness, together with the two-dimensionality of the stock characters academic novels feature, gradually earned the genre a mediocre literary esteem.

The sense in which Lodge's novel counts as a postmodern literary piece is that it is heavily charged with metafictional qualities. Although the metafictional nature of the novel manifests itself in various different types of language use, its basic mechanism originates from a common linguistic notion. Part of *Small World* is what the linguist L. Hjelmslev termed as metalanguage, *i.e.*, a language that, instead of a non-linguistic entity, refers to another language. Using structuralist dichotomies, a metalanguage is a language that functions as a signifier to *another language*, and this other language thus becomes its signified.⁹ The subtitle of the novel, *An Academic Romance*, already attends to this metalinguistic function by focusing on the literary conventions that the upcoming text exhibits. I wish to point out that the academic 'novelness' of

⁹ See Fredric Jameson's *The Prisonhouse of Language* (Princeton, 1972), p. 159.

Small World does not reside in its interest in the romance as a narrative form. As Lodge said, "...to me it was just a device. It's not as if I have a thematic interest in that particular body of material. [...] One likes each novel to look like a new solution to the problems of narrative"¹⁰.

Lodge's last statement, nevertheless, carries weighty implications. He talks about the 'problems' of narrative and offers a solution by endorsing the romance as a form of narrative configuration. The problem of the narrative is, of course, ultimately the problem of language, the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world by using words. Accepting that our experience and knowledge are mediated through language, "literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself"¹¹. Metafiction does this construction in an idiosyncratic way through formal self-exploration and a heightened self-consciousness.¹² Whenever a text heavily draws on borrowed literary conventions, one is justified in suspecting to find some metafictional act at work. In an interview with Raymond Thompson, Lodge reveals how romance became the central organizing principle in his work:

I remember writing in my notebook something like, what the novel needs is some kind of principle of unity--perhaps some myth which would function like the Odysseus myth in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. [...] Then it struck me that here was a story which could provide the mythic skeleton or underpinning necessary to give shape to my modern comedy of academic manners [...] It gradually grew on me that there was an analogy between my story and the Arthurian story, particularly the Grail quest in which a group of knights wander around the world, having adventures, pursuing ladies, love, and glory, jousting with each other, meeting rather coincidentally or unexpectedly, facing constant challenges and crises, and so on. This all corresponded to the modern world with its Round Table of professors [...] Once I realized that the Grail legend could provide the structural principle for my story, then I really felt my novel could work.¹³

The novel reiterates the statement that is made in the subtitle in an array of highly different modes. Lodge systematically prepares his reader. The motto taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* already encourages the reader to meditate about the nature of the romance as a literary form: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a novel"¹⁴.

¹⁰ Raymond H. Thompson, "Talesin's Successors: Interviews with Authors of Modern Arthurian Literature" May 15, 1989 [accessed April 11 2006] <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/intrvws/lodge.htm>>

¹¹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

¹² A metanarrative is aware of the difficulty of representing the 'outside reality' and resolves the dilemma by representing the *discourses* of the world outside its own fiction.

¹³ Thompson

¹⁴ Lodge, p. iii.

Hawthorne's words lead us to metafictional dimensions, as well as philosophical depths. By alluding to what Coleridge termed as "the willing suspension of disbelief"¹⁵, the motto uses the romance–novel comparison to heighten the reader's awareness of the never absolute borderline between fiction and reality. The issue is undoubtedly familiar. What is fiction? What is reality? What is the connection between the two? Can reality be represented in fiction? If so, how? These are some of the questions that postmodern fiction attempts to explore and the words borrowed from Hawthorne, in a sense, promise that *Small World* will indeed provide "a new solution to the problems of narrative".

Small World can be grasped not only as one romance plot, but a collection of romances. Although the quest of Persse McGarrigle frames the narrative, a multitude of other love threads and quests are detectable in the novel. In fact, the characters are involved in so many love affairs and pursue so many goals that it is these threads that finally compose the narrative texture, with rather feebly constructed references to a single dominating plotline serving as the backbone to the events. Persse McGarrigle pursues his idealized lover; Philip Swallow, a teacher of literature at the University of Rummage and an old acquaintance for those familiar with one of David Lodge's previous novels, *Changing Places*, is in search of pleasure and women; Ronald Frobisher, a failed writer, is looking for a style that would return the talent he has lost; Cheryl Summerbee, a check-in clerk at Heathrow Airport and an ardent reader of romantic fiction, is waiting for the knight who would make her romantic dreams come true; Joy Simpson, captive of her desires, seeks joy (note the unmistakably telling name), and a great deal of other people start out as protagonists of single, independent episodes. But as the reader proceeds, these secondary plotlines slowly but surely meet and fuse, and the final narrative develops into a collection of interrelated romances, a multiple romance.

The novel, especially the individual romance threads, heavily draws on the tradition of romance literature by borrowing parts of texts or textual qualities from the Arthurian legends, *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto, *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, "The Eve of St. Agnes" by John Keats, Tennyson and his vision of Victorian Medievalism and Eliot's "The Waste Land" with its imagery saturated by the legend of the Fisher King. There is no mistaking about the close correlation between Lodge's use of literary allusions and the novel's structure. The textual imports, often quoted or acted out by the characters who people *Small World*, exert a shaping force on the narrative: the idea of interweaving action instead of just a linear series of adventure stories originates from Philip Sidney (*c.f.* *Arcadia*); the Arthurian legends, the classical

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Chapter XIV', *Biographia Literaria*, (1817) <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/biographia.html>> [accessed 10 April 2007]

Alexandrian and the Renaissance epic romance patterns further enhance the quest and love elements of the novel.¹⁶

Though *Small World* may prompt its readers to contemplate the relationship between these imported romance texts and the adventures of the academics – who seek love, promotion and joy in the midst of conferences –, a more profound metafictional quality dwells in the novel's own explication of its own nature as a romance. Lodge saw lots of possibilities in the intertextual broadening of his theme by theoretical discourse. The novel often theorizes its appropriated literary conventions and discusses narratological issues related to the romance genre. One of these issues concerns the various endings of romance-induced minor narrative patterns in the novel. *Small World* can be conceived as a collection of interlaced romance subplots. The structure of the various subplots, however, is far from being identical: some of them result in failure, some of them result in success and some of the quests remain unfinished, as if it had been on purpose to display the complete spectrum of romance endings. Philip Swallow realizes that he is not really a romantic hero after all; families reunite; some people forgive each other, others resolve to hate even more; Persse McGarrigle, as he does at the beginning of the novel, finds another heart to win and embarks on another quest. Lodge nicely theorizes McGarrigle's open-ended romance thread by imbedding it into Morris Zapp's discussion of literary post-structuralism: "the idea of a romance as narrative striptease [is] the endless leading on of the reader, a repeated postponement of an ultimate revelation which never comes – or, when it does, terminates the pleasure of the text"¹⁷. Persse McGarrigle falls in love with Angelica Pabst, a bright literature scholar, and decides to marry her. The only problem is that he can never find her. Persse travels from Rummage to New York through innumerable conferences only to find that Angelica has just left the place he has arrived at. The pattern unmistakably correlates some of the arguments Derrida used to undermine the structuralist principles of language. The argument is as follows: Saussure claimed that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. Meaning is acquired in a process of exclusion within the system of signs, *i.e.*, everything is what it is not. Therefore, since the value of a sign is totally given by the system, every unit is in the grip of the total. Derrida used a simple example to point out the logical shortcomings of structuralism. What if I want to find out everything about one particular item? If that one item can only be found by the exclusion of every other item, I will have to go through an endless process of turning from one excluded item to the other. The result is that there will always be a constant shift between the signified and the signifier. This kind of deferment or displacement is what Persse's quest is based on. The

¹⁶ Lodge himself provided a detailed account of the various sources and patterns he had applied in an interview with Raymond Thomson. See: Thomson

¹⁷ Lodge, p. 29.

conceptual analogy is nicely played down with Persse never being able to find Angelica, with his quest never having an ultimate settlement.

Angelica Pabst, at an unofficial conference panel entitled *Ad Hoc Forum on Romance*, proposes another variation on Zapp's ideas:

If epic is a phallic genre, which can hardly be denied, and tragic the genre of castration (we are none of us, I suppose, deceived by the self-blinding of Oedipus as to the true nature of the wound he is impelled to inflict upon himself, or likely to overlook the symbolic equivalence between eyeballs and testicles) then surely there is no doubt that romance is a supremely invaginated mode of narrative. [...] Epic and tragedy move inexorably to what we call, and by no accident, a 'climax' – and it is, in terms of the sexual metaphor, an essentially *male* climax – a single, explosive discharge of accumulated tension. Romance, in contrast, is not structured this way. It has not one climax, but many, the pleasure of this text comes and comes and comes again. No sooner is one crisis on the fortunes of the hero averted than a new one presents itself; [...] no sooner has one adventure been concluded that another begins. The narrative questions open and close, open and close, like the contractions of the vaginal muscles in intercourse, and this process is in principle endless. The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished – they end only with the author's exhaustion, as a woman's capacity for orgasm is limited only by her sexual stamina. Romance is a multiple orgasm.¹⁸

Angelica's lecture is not merely a feminist-deconstructionist-psychoanalytical¹⁹ analysis of the romance form. Apparently, action in *Small World* develops very much according to the theoretical observations she outlines. The final statement of Angelica's paper, referring to Persse McGarrigle's open-ended romance, can even be seen as a self-congratulatory gesture on Lodge's behalf.

The self-referentiality of *Small World* resides precisely in the fact that the already outlined multiple romance structure is blended with a great deal of romance-related theory. The imbedded theoretical discourses (*i.e.* the explications of the various critical schools) exert their shaping force in a somewhat reversed process: the romance pattern of the novel originates from a set of narrative conventions that have been observed and put down by other critics. With this process in mind, the making of *Small World* is more like reconstruction than construction. The conscious recycling of the romance literature that Lodge does, of course, inevitably results in a narrative configuration that points to its own architecture, its own internal arrangement, as if the novel was in search of itself, as if the narrative attempted to define its own existence, its main qualities. By the very act of appropriating and meditating about the romance, the novel gains a determining

¹⁸ Lodge, pp. 322-323.

¹⁹ *C.f.* Muries Dimen, "The Engagement Between Psychoanalysis And Feminism", *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 33, No. 4 (1997)) [accessed 05 June 2006] <<http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=cps.033.0527a>> pp. 527-548.

metafictional quality. Instead of an omniscient narrator, the metanarrative episodes of the novel, like a transposed soliloquy, find their ways through the characters. Perhaps at this point Lodge was rather negligent, as some of the self-identifying outbursts of the narrative originate from people who normally would have no idea whatsoever about the critical observations they actually utter. Be it carelessness, or the novel taking over the voice of a character for a sentence or two – as if it was also endowed with the consciousness and authority to do so – *Small World* goes so far as defining itself.

“A real romance is a pre-novelistic kind of narrative. It’s full of adventure and coincidence and surprise and marvels, and has lots of characters who are lost or enchanted or wandering about looking for each other, or for the Grail, or something like that”²⁰, says Cheryl Summerbee. Though it is highly improbable that Cheryl, a check-in clerk at Heathrow, would be able to come up with an utterance like that, the sentence may as well stand for *Small World* itself (yet another note of authorial self-appraisal is perceivably lurking in Cheryl’s – Lodge’s – summary).²¹ Lodge stretches the notion even further. The novel’s metafictional awareness is not limited to a preoccupation with its own ‘romanceness’. Lodge also saw the possibility of addressing a more global literary agenda by projecting his interest in self-referentiality into the generic evolution of the campus novel. In the following conversation Hillary Swallow and Morris Zapp (also known characters from *Changing Places*) contemplate the changing tendencies in the profession with regard to literature:

“That’s how it is in the academic world these days [*i.e.* travelling to conferences all around the world],” said Morris Zapp. “I was telling a young guy at the conference just this morning. The day of the single, static campus is over.”

“And the single, static campus novel with it, I suppose?” [Hillary Swallow]

“Exactly! Even two campuses wouldn’t be enough. Scholars these days are like the errant knights of old, wandering the ways of the world in search of adventure and glory.”²²

The metafictional paradox in the quote is striking. This is the only case when the narrative, instead of its romanceness, makes references to its own campus-novelness. Hillary Swallow with no literary education is clearly not in the position to make such critical statements concerning the campus genre. Hillary Swallow and Morris Zapp apparently *know* about the larger context in which the novel they feature was conceived. Their acute knowledge concerning the existence and

²⁰ Lodge, p.258.

²¹ The idea of self-referentiality is certainly the complete opposite of authorial unobtrusiveness, for which Lidia Vianu celebrated the novel in the first place. Lidia Vianu, *British Desperados at the Turn of the Millenium*, (Bucharest: LiterNet Publishing House, 2005) [accessed 16 April 2006] <<http://editura.liternet.ro/click.php?id=153&ver=pdf>>, pp. 196-197.

²² Lodge, p. 63.

potential trends of the academic novel lends the meta-discourse a quality of obvious inconsistency. Whether Lodge was right in his prediction concerning the future of the campus novel, – now, more than twenty years after the publication of his novel – is clear: the academic novel did not follow the ways of the global campus and *Small World* has remained an idealized small world, experimental in many ways.

According to the romance expert Gillan Beer, romance “frees us from our inhibitions and preoccupations by drawing us entirely into its own world – a world which is otherwise unattainable”²³. As had been pointed out, the metafictional quality of the text exerts a force that is completely opposite in direction to the gravitational pull of the romance. Metafiction makes one conscious of the act of reading, while romance strives to conceal this activity by completely engaging the reader. It may be argued that *Small World*, in effect, is the tug-of-war of these engaging and distancing techniques. There are forces on both sides. The issue ultimately boils down to the initial romance-novel opposition Hawthorne so well characterised in his Preface. It is important to remember that the campus genre, primarily, is still a product of the realist approach to literature. *Small World*, after all, is a campus novel because, firstly, it pictures a transitory change in the academic community in a rapidly globalizing world; secondly, because it takes a profound interest in the present state and future of literary criticism. Lodge also admitted that the basic idea of the novel roots in his first-hand experience as a commencing conference attendant. The extreme unlikelihood of the novel’s action aims precisely at compensating for those components that would anchor *Small World* to the realist tradition in literature. The novel, as John Gross characterizes it, “bristles with outrageous coincidences. As Perse’s quest proceeds, it turns into a farrago of foundlings, identical twins, long-lost mothers, million-to-one chance meetings – in a word, it turns into an unashamed romance.”²⁴. Whether the forces that would engage and distance the reader are balanced is probably a matter of individual perception. The fact is that they are at work, and the reader is compelled to keep stepping inside and outside the charmed circle of the novel.

The novel’s central postmodern quality resides in its formal experimentation and self-referentiality. Though *Small World* refrains from probing the depths of other fundamental postmodern concerns, its uniqueness in contemporary literature proves that the novel very much fits into the experimental impetus of postmodernist fiction. It is a reassuring outcome that postmodernist literary theory celebrates *Small World*, though arriving at its conclusion in a

²³ Gillan Beer, *The Romance* (New York: Methuen 1986), p. 3.

²⁴ John Gross, “Books of the Times”, *The New York Times* (March 8, 1985) [accessed June 05 2006]

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE6DA1139F93BA35750C0A963948260&sec=&pagewanted=1>>

completely different fashion, for the same reasons as the realist critical approach: for its resourcefulness and variety.