

## DAVID LODGE'S *CHANGING PLACES* THE PARADOXES OF A LIBERAL METAFICTIONIST

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### ABSTRACT

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 experimentalism and realism.

I propose to start the present study with a brief description of the connections of *Changing Places* and metafiction, which is not intended to be exhaustive since the topic has already been tackled by several critics. Then, I will focus on proving how 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. I will also analyse *Changing Places* as an attempt at containing, controlling and cancelling the potentially subversive, experimental energies of postmodernism.

*Changing Places* —David Lodge's fifth novel, completed in the summer of 1973, and published by Secker and Warburg in February 1975— shows Lodge at his best as a writer of comic academic fiction and also reveals his skill in combining readability with an awareness of the comings and goings of the world of literary criticism in a highly entertaining fashion. But, above all, in *Changing Places* we are aware of Lodge's hesitation about whether or not to continue «serenely along the road of fictional realism» (Lodge, 1886a:22). David Lodge—who unlike many of his contemporaries has retained his faith in traditional realism as a vehicle for his fiction, and has repeatedly endorsed it in his critical writings— deploys in *Changing Places* a carnivalesque variety of styles and metafictional practices that, he states, loosen up the traditional realistic technique, but do not in any way abolish it (in Díaz Bild, 1990:265). The formal side of the metafictional creation is conspicuous in *Changing Places* — considered as Lodge's most experimental novel. However, it is not so much the technical brilliance of the metafictionist as the vision of experience his practice endorses that proves particularly interesting. The metafictional devices employed in *Changing Places* connect this novel with postmodernism, the cultural manifestation of a wider sociopolitical and philosophical current known as postmodernity. Judging by these techniques and by the movement to which they relate, we could conclude that David Lodge is, at least in *Changing Places*, a postmodern author. A closer analysis seems nevertheless to challenge this initial speculation and makes one wonder about the ideological discourse that lies behind the potential postmodernity of Lodge's novel. After briefly sketching the metafictional techniques employed in *Changing Places*<sup>1</sup>, the present study will concentrate on analysing the novel as a further stage in Lodge's battle for realism and as an attempt at neutralising the subversive potentiality of postmodernism.

More than flaunting its similarity with external reality *Changing Places* exhibits its complex patterning by means of a series of metafictional strategies. A narratological analysis of *Changing Places* exposes the striking symmetry and predictability which generate the novel, achieved by the juxtaposition of two parallel story-lines —one led by Philip Swallow and the other by Morris Zapp. Pattern and structure acquire a meaning in themselves, calling attention to the artificiality of any novelistic design: structures are not directly encountered objects, but contrived constructions. The thematization of the narrative function also encourages the reader to stand back from the novel. The omniscient external narrator, in control of the novel's elaborate

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend to be exhaustive since the topic has already been dealt with by several critics: Paddy Bostock (1989), Fernando Galván (1988), Pilar Hidalgo (1984), Robert Morace (1989), Merrit Moseley (1991) and Wenche Ommundsen (1986) among others.

structure, incorporates conventions from inside and outside the mainstream literary tradition, high and low art forms, putting side by side experimental devices and practices that go back to the very origins of the novelistic genre, thus foregrounding what Mikhail Bakhtin valued in fiction, its dialogism and polyphony. The analysis of the narrative instance's perceptibility in the different chapters lays bare the multifarious story-telling techniques employed in the novel: the workings of a highly —for the novel's standards— perceptible commenting narrator («Flying»), a rather impersonal chronicler («Settling» and «Changing»), an epistolary technique («Corresponding»), a collage of newspaper cuttings and all sorts of printed material («Reading»), and finally, a film-script («Ending»). The external narrator never disappears completely. Even the most unobtrusive of these modes present some hints that point at its presence in the text. The examination of the narrative instance displays a concern for the narrative act in itself and reveals an ordering intelligence behind the text.

David Lodge seems determined to foreground the composition of *Changing Places*, making the reader aware of its condition as a set of discursive strategies. No attempt is made to cover up the fabrication. The conventions, which are part of the shape and the subject of the novel, are often parodically commented on and thus brought to the fore in a self-conscious way. The academic setting —the novel is populated by teachers of English Literature engaged in academic pursuits and keen on venting their critical views— justifies and helps naturalize some of the reflexive commentary. The commentary comes mainly from two sources: the characters themselves, and the book *Let's Write a Novel*, Philip Swallow's favourite manual for initiating would-be novelists in the mysteries of creative writing, which he had bought second-hand for six pence. «It had been published in 1927, as part of a Series that included *Let's Weave a Rug*, *Let's Go Fishing* and *Let's Have Fun with Photography*» (p. 85). Quotations from this obviously parodic internal metatext —in Gérard Genette terminology (1982)— keep cropping up all through the novel, all of them offering the most conventional advice on fiction writing, which Lodge's own practice in *Changing Places* is keen on contradicting. The inclusion of self-directed literary criticism not only reminds the reader that s/he is reading a novel, but also challenges the assumptions upon which the novel is based and questions the validity of novelistic conventions. This parodic undermining affects both the traditional and the experimental devices deployed by *Changing Places*<sup>2</sup>. By the time we reach

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<sup>2</sup> In «*Corresponding*», a letter by Hilary commenting on *Let's Write a Novel* destroys any attempt to pass the missives off as factual: «What a funny little book it is. There is a whole chapter on how to write an epistolary novel, but surely nobody's done that since the eighteenth century?» (p. 130).

«Ending», the last chapter, *Let's Write a Novel* has already laid bare postmodernist open endings. There are three possible ways of ending a novel—this compendium of conventional novelistic wisdom states: the best is, of course, the happy ending, the second best is the unhappy ending, and the worst—and one you should never attempt unless you have Genius—is the non-ending (p. 88). *Changing Places* ends in a «short-circuit»— a common metafictional strategy— while at the same time poking fun at postmodernist fiction by parodying the ambivalent endings which many recent writers have given to their stories. The story «tantalizingly stops just short of that point in the fabula where we should, with our readerly desire for certainty, wish it to» (Lodge, 1986b:28). Also in «Ending» —written in the form of a film-script— David Lodge makes fun of the theories of Robert Scholes and other critics who think that film has rendered literary realism redundant. In ending his story unexpectedly, leaving the reader wondering about the future of the characters, Lodge can claim that *Changing Places* is nearer to reality in that it imitates life's arbitrary flowing. In presenting the last chapter in the form of a film-script, he is invoking the visual medium in order to reinforce verbal communication and defend the viability of realism as an appropriate vehicle for contemporary reality (Jackson, 1983: 478). David Lodge, by means of this realistic and yet infinitely contrived ending, can have it both ways in *Changing Places*, encouraging two readings simultaneously. In the words of Paddy Bostock «Lodge can claim to be adding an extra layer of realism to what is already his preferred form» (1989:68).

In what remains I will focus on proving how the novel constitutes a further stage in Lodge's battle for realism. In my view, David Lodge resorts to postmodernist strategies in order to undertake a renewal of the realistic mode, a task which requires from time to time the challenge of alternative conventions. Metafiction in *Changing Places* is not, however, only «a useful way of continuing to exploit the resources of realism while acknowledging their conventionality» (Lodge, 1990:43) but also an attempt at containing, controlling and cancelling the subversive, experimental energies of postmodernism. The ironic distance with which the experimental techniques are employed in the novel signals repetition but also critical separation, which, according to Linda Hutcheon, characterizes the workings of modern parody (1986:6). In the same way as postmodernism parodies the stale conventions of realism but depends on them for their subversion, *Changing Places* depends on postmodernist strategies to show its bias for realism. Being «antirealist, irrealist, in some way, metafictional» was —Lodge acknowledges (in Díaz Bild, 1990:266-67)— the only way to be taken seriously as a novelist in the 1970s. Metafiction and the parody of metafiction was then the best way of conveying the message that

realism was not totally finished—as some apocalyptic critics believed—but was still capable of convincingly apprehending the contemporary world.

The analysis of the world-view embodied in the novel confirms the critical distance with which experimentalism is employed in *Changing Places*. Its values are those of liberal humanism, the prevailing ideology of the classical English novel. This proves that metafictional practices do not necessarily go together with a questioning of the status quo, that the undermining of literary conventions is not invariably used to foster critique and subversion. *Changing Places*' particular contribution to the fabrication of reality is not precisely an incitement to change the establishment, but an invitation to withdraw from the path of political action.

The use of stereotypes and the foregrounding of certain binary oppositions manifest a simplification of reality in *Changing Places*. The axis British/American, which underlies characterization, spatial considerations and cultural aspects, is related to the use of stereotypes in the novel. Not even Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp escape simplification. Their characterization continues the technique of comparison and contrast employed in the presentation of events. This «duplex chronicle», composed of two parallel storylines, is also led by two complementary and stereotyped characters. Lennard J. Davis, who in *Resisting Novels* deals with the ideological charge implicit in every novel, distinguishes between «character» and «personality»: «personality is what living beings have», «“character”, on the other hand, is what people in novels have» (Davis, 1987:111). Character, he argues, is a necessary simplification of personality (DAVIES, 1987:111). The stylization of personality required to produce a character is double in *Changing Places*, since its characters are twice removed from personality: once for being fictional and twice for being social and literary types. This can carry different messages. On the one hand, our faith in the uniqueness of the self is undermined through typification, which does not seem to encourage a confusion between personality and character, one of the main ideological assumptions in novels. On the other hand, moral character and physical features must be simplified to be effective. In fact, all propaganda or popularization involves the reduction of the complex to the simple (EAGLETON, 1991:149). Stereotypes—which exaggerate and universalize—are comforting to the reader in the sense that they falsely present the world as something one can easily «grasp» and thus master. In identifying the stereotypes the reader feels reassured as he is led to believe that the world—and more particularly our contemporary society—is not as complex and chaotic as it may seem. They emphasize continuity with tradition and a sense of cultural universality, which runs counter to the postmodern ideology of plurality and the recognition of difference.

This putting of the complex into the simple is especially significant in *Changing Places* in relation to the female characters. Hilary Swallow and Désirée Zapp are also depicted as complementary characters. This complementarity shows, first of all, in their physical traits: Hilary has «big melon-shaped breasts» (p. 238), and Désirée is flat-chested (p. 168). The former—as her maiden name Broome further suggests in a crude metonymical association—conforms to the compliant housewife-mother type. The latter fits the type of the aggressive independent woman. For the rest, both share most of the traits assigned to their husbands, and may, thereby, be considered as «trait-connoting metonymies» (Rimmon-Kenan, 1990:66). There is something the two wives have in common: their interest in the Women's Liberation Movement, which, to stress the symmetry of the novel, they discover at approximately the same time. 1969—the year the action of the novel takes place—was a year of emancipation for women, but not, unfortunately, for Désirée Zapp and Hilary Swallow. Although the novel is aware of the Women's Liberation Movement, and the protagonists' wives often turn to it seeking a remedy for their marital problems, the subversive power of the Movement is constantly being undermined by the fixed roles played by female characters in *Changing Places*. The novel reproduces the strategies of our patriarchal society, which fixes women in their social roles, sees them as determined by the body, and depicts them in terms of their feminine attributes. All this finally comes down to the endorsement of the very traditional stereotypes of the maternal and compliant little-angel-in-the-house and the dangerous but predictable *femme fatale*. To accept such fixed representations unquestioningly is to condone social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women and not others (Hutcheon, 1989:22). The fact that the two male protagonists find in their counterpart's wife just the kind of woman they are in need of, presents Hilary and Désirée as projections of male erotic fantasies and male desires. This is further stressed by the constant focalization of the action through Philip and Morris, which encourages a tendency to voyeurism, foregrounded when they go to see some striptease and when Morris runs «an expert eye over Miss January's boobs» in *Playboy*, but also recurrent in less overt circumstances and affecting most if not all female characters. As Laura Mulvey (1992:162) puts it in a cinematographic context, «the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly»:

Melanie, he couldn't help observing, looked remarkably fetching this evening in a white peasant-style dress that reached to her bare feet, her long brown hair loose about her shoulders, her eyes bright and dilated (p. 94).

Pulling the nightdress over her head, Désirée walked into the adjoining bathroom. Philip followed her appreciatively, and sat on the toilet cover while she showered (p.176).

[...] one girl who particularly caught Philip's attention as she waited at the kerb to cross the street, dressed in a crotch-high mini with long bare white legs and high up one thigh a perfect, mouth-shaped bruise (p. 194).

There was a rose-tinted mirror behind Hilary's head in which [Morris] was able to make small, unobtrusive adjustments to his face when he wasn't occupied in looking down Hilary's neckline (p. 203).

Amanda appeared at the door, arrayed in her school uniform [...] The students of Rummidge High School for girls wore their skirts very, very short indeed, so that they resembled mythical biform creatures like mermaids or centaurs, all prim austerity above the waist, all bare forked animal below. The bus stops in the neighbourhood were a nympholept's paradise at this time of the morning. Amanda blushed under Morris' scrutiny (p.207).

The only chapter in the novel that allows us to contemplate the action through the eyes of the two female protagonists is «Corresponding». This chapter undermines the conventionality of the epistolary technique, but perpetuates its patriarchal labelling of women as belonging to the private sphere. In «Ending», which leaves women no place from which to speak and nothing to say, Hilary and Désirée must finally submit to the male discourse, embodied in *Changing Places* in the discourse of literary criticism<sup>3</sup>.

The construction of *Changing Places* around noticeable binary oppositions also reveals a simplification of reality. As in every text the sheer number of oppositions produced all through the novel is ultimately inexhaustible. *Changing Places*, however, appears as a systematic and conscious attempt to harness, to fix these boundless oppositions through a binary logic. It shows both Lodge's skill as a structuralist literary critic and also pokes fun at structuralism, whose basic premise is that meaning is not in things but in the relations we establish between them. From the opening pages this «tale of difference between British redbrick and American state university mores» (Carter, 1990:16) is blatantly controlled by structural balance (Morace, 1989:156; Hidalgo, 1984:5; MEWS, 1989:716) favoured by its two parallel story-lines and the contrastive perspective employed in the characterization of the complementary protagonists. Binary axes are a useful instrument of

<sup>3</sup> «It's no use, Hilary. Don't you recognize the sound of men talking?» (p. 250), says Désirée while Philip and Morris discuss literary matters instead of tackling their marital dilemma.

exposition and analysis and also a powerful means of control. By and large, all authorities exercise control through binary division or branding. According to theories of deconstruction these antitheses create ideological problems because their own structure privileges one term —usually the first— over the other, and because they hide the system of preconceptions which governs a society. Lodge's fascination with duality in *Changing Places* shows the same fear of the irrational and the same need for neatly compartmentalizing vying concepts and realities in order to avoid conflict that run through his critical work. Binary oppositions contribute —by means of «assimilation» and «domestication»— to the belief that reality is something intelligible, since they are a comfortable and reassuring way of capturing the code of a complex world. The opposition between Britain and America —which gathers several pairs of opposites throughout «this duplex chronicle»— is perhaps the most noticeable and all-embracing in *Changing Places*, and also, in my opinion, the least problematic. The effect of this exaggerated foregrounding is that it manages to draw our attention away from more problematic axes which the novel conceals, like the opposition man/woman, and the even less conspicuous —in the novel— opposing of black to white<sup>4</sup>, both of which hide a violent hierarchy. Another opposition worth tackling in relation to the novel's ideology is that between the private and the public.

*Changing Places* may be interpreted not only as a safety-valve for the realistic mode, but also as a safety-valve for the truths of the establishment at large. That the prevailing ideology of the novel is conservative is shown not only in its tendency to simplify reality and avoid conflict, but also in the ideology of its two protagonists. Morris Zapp's contribution to the preservation of the established order lines him up with the neoconservative ideology: his successful mediation in the student protest at Rummidge University encourages a message of easy and effective collaborationism with the system. Philip Swallow's process

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<sup>4</sup> A list of the white characters that populate *Changing Places* would, no doubt, amount to quite a few lines; the relation of its black characters, on the contrary, comes down to «a coloured, or rather black woman emptying ashtrays» (p. 82) that Swallow bumps into when he leaves the Hogans' cocktail party; a Black Pantheress Charles Boon escorts to the same party; a black student he meets at Melanie's —«in loose black judo garb— he was also black himself and wore sunglasses with black frames, just in case there was any doubt about where he stood on the racial issue» (p. 95)— and finally «two powerfully built Negroes» (p. 188) who share the felon's cell with Philip for a few hours. There is also a certain Wily Smith, a student at Euphoria University who wants to write an autobiographical novel about «this black kid growing up in the ghetto» (p. 67) and whose complexion is «about the shade of Philip's own a week after his summer holiday, when his tan would begin to fade and turn yellow» (p. 67). The opposition is further destabilized later in the novel when we read about him in the *Esseph Chronicle*: «[a young man] was dragged off to the police station bleeding profusely, and was later identified as Wily Smith, 21, a *black*, student at Euphoric State (p. 160; my emphasis).



of change involves a dangerous but ephemeral countercultural stage in which he identifies with the struggle of the young generation against the over-repression of society. Philip's quest, however, ends in privacy, an area where personal sovereignty is made possible, and which installs people in a comfortable existence deprived of any public concerns: «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 (p. 250).» Swallow's evolution from the counterculture to postmodernity advances the massive abandonment of «the public square» which followed the militant activism of the 1960s. *Changing Places* gives priority to integration in society over a dangerous questioning of the status quo. It demonstrates a general lack of interest in social change and privileges the private over the public, identifying emancipation almost exclusively with sexual liberation and thus conforming to Herbert Marcuse's theory of the repressive desublimation of genital Eros, which has been used to divert attention from its political —more menacing— component (Marcuse, 1985:10).

Caught between the countercultural activities depicted in *Changing Places* and the clearly neoconservative attitude of Morris Zapp, Philip Swallow embodies an attempt at blurring and mitigating the ideological debate reflected in the novel. With Philip's evolution towards postmodernity David Lodge seems to be turning a blind eye to ideological questions. However, in Swallow's withdrawal to the private sphere Lodge is once again showing his conservative bias. The criterion is not so much an explicit manifestation of conservatism/radicalism, but an attitude towards social change. Swallow's postmodern attitude is a veiled form of conservatism. He declines participating in history, and in so doing remains caught in the old liberal humanism «which operates precisely on the suppression of history (replacing this with eternal, immanent 'truths of human nature') and the elimination of politics» (Docherty, 1991:182).

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