Once more on Own-Tail-Chasing Literature

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Résumé *: Les tentatives de classification du postmodernisme ne cessent pas de s'enrichir par une toute nouvelle, à savoir celle qui divise ce courant en postmodernisme ironique et postmodernisme imaginatif ou anthropocentrique. Aucun de ces deux types n'existe à l'état pur, la distinction se fait en fonction de la dominante du texte. Les frontières entre les deux deviennent d'autant plus floues qu'ils superposent des univers possibles : le « réel », le fictionnel, le fictionnel fictionnalisé et la métafiction elle-même. Cependant, le critère de véridicité est nécessaire et révélateur dans ce sens.*

Mots-clés*: postmodernisme, mimesis, diegesis, métafiction, fictif, fictionnalisé*

That metafiction is fiction about fiction is nothing new under the sun. Nevertheless, before going into the analysis proper of the way in which the metafictional text articulates, mention should be made of the at least two types of postmodernism differentiated by the organization of the narrative material and their vision: a playful, self-ironical and parodic postmodernism, the features of which are narrative discontinuity, open, even ostentatious, display of the narrative strategies and compositional procedures, parody of the literary conventions and the challenging of the reader (as in Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut or Barthelme), and a second postmodernism, imaginative or anthropocentric, centering on a human being striving to recover the symbolic imagination and visions (as in Fowles, Murdoch or Styron).

Heterogeneity being one of the characteristics of postmodernism, most often than not the two types contaminate each other, so that none of the writers mentioned for either of the types is unfamiliar with the devices used by the ones in the other category. The distinction is necessary only if we consider the dominant of the text, the author's preference for one set of devices or another.

Metafictional novels overtly reveal their fictionality and reflect on their own status and narrative procedures. Within this self-reflective category, Linda Hutcheon distinguishes between overt, diegetic metafiction (that takes as main theme its status, rules and the very process of narration) and covert, linguistic metafiction (that suggests through language games, parody and intertextual references, the inability of language to function as a means of communication or, even more important than this, its ability to create other worlds, alternative to and more meaningful than the 'real' one). [1]

This second category of novels, of a bewildering type and unlike the traditional realistic one, breaks the illusion that what it tells about is an objective reality, truthfully reflected in language; instead, its purpose is to raise questions and pose problems, to tease the readers out of their easy acceptance of the traditional and pre-established modes of thinking, to invite them to take part in the literary game. In what the area that explores the relationship between fiction and reality is concerned, however vigorous the post-structuralist insistence to see fiction, as well as literature in general, as a free game of signifieds with no signifiers, the metafictional novel makes an open invitation at finding answers for a set of unexpected and startling questions: is there a reality ontologically separate and different from our linguistic consciousness? And if there is, can we know it without altering it by our knowledge? And if we can, can we 'render' it in language? And if we can, does this rendering correspond to give a truthful view of that ontologically different reality that we have assumed to exist? Or are we fooling ourselves in believing that there is such a reality, when in reality we are locked up in the prison-house of language, in the reading gaol? (Kums in Bignami & Patey 1996: 151)

The borders become additionally obscured due to the juxtaposition of a number of possible worlds: the 'real', the fictitious, the fictionalized fictitious and metafiction itself. The

central and most relevant issue, intimately and necessarily linked to this set of questions, remains that of truth.

Regarding the distinction between factual and fictional discourse, Peter Lamarque offers the following solution for the existence or inexistence of reference and truth: we either admit that the objects in fiction match the existence of objects in the real world, or consider that the only objects that exist are those of the real world, thus denying any existence to the ones in fiction. Therefore, the very ground for the distinction between fictional and factual discourse disappears: "Fiction is whatever is man-made (conceptually or linguistically). Truth is man-made (conceptually or linguistically). Therefore, truth is just a species of fiction" (Lamarque in Nash, 1994: 137).

In an interview, Fowles claims that all novelists are liars because fiction is the business of telling untrue things about people who do not even exist (Fowles in Ciugureanu & Vlad, 1998: 73). 'Lies' (stories born sometimes from the desire to embellish a monotonous thus boring reality) give birth to a new world, different from the existing one in the same way Bagdhad (before the war that brought a sad fame upon it) meant the city of 'one thousand and one nights' or, as Barth puts it in *Chimera* (1972), some fictions were so much more valuable than fact that in rare instances their beauty made them real.

Bringing to focus the gap between art and life that conventional realism tries to conceal, metafictional discourse appears in the work of English novelists in the form of asides (from prefaces and mottos to direct, authorially intrusive passages) in novels primarily focused on traditional means of conveying the message, portraying character and describing action; such passages are considered manipulative as they use the conventions of realism and, in the same time, acknowledge their artificiality even as they employ them; they disarm criticism by anticipating it; they flatter the reader considering him their intellectual equal, a reader sophisticated enough to be familiar with the conventional fictional representation, the intricacies of weaving a text, and aware of the fact that the work of fiction is a verbal construction rather than a 'slice of life'. Professor David Lodge said that "metafictional writers have a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their text and thus 'fictionalize' it" (Lodge, 1992: 208). The borders become even more fluid and obscured due to the juxtaposition of a number of possible worlds: the real, the fictitious, the fictionalised fictitious and metafiction itself; these categories seem to fall on Baudrillard's four phases of the image.

From the logical point of view, fictional discourse is defined in terms of *zero denotation* [2]: the linguistic constituents that, in factual discourse, have a denotative function (proper names, deictics, demonstratives…) lack any denotation proper. The fictional statement has a meaning without having a referent. If we are to think how much, for example, we care if Ulysses existed or not, we realize that, beyond the issue of the presence or absence of the denotation of fiction in real world, a special attention deserves the cognitive richness that fiction offers. A statement that lacks denotation because it is read literally can become true (can denote) if read metaphorically. Don Quixote never existed but his name applies metaphorically to a certain category of people. Therefore, the intrinsically literary characteristics as well as the expressive qualities of writing are part of the referential structure of both the symbolic system and the denotative one: if a piece of writing does not denote because it is fictional, it does not necessarily lose its referential dimension.

With metafiction, what is non-denoted, but real-ised, is fiction itself: The process of reaching that slippery referent is made difficult by the elitist and self-parodic game of mirrors presupposed by the metafictional text, a particular manifestation of intertext, allusive of other, similar texts, and illustrative of literary text-forwarding. "Considering itself and its artificiality, the metatext may also be looked upon as intratext, whose depth is not simply structural […] but message-ridden also…" (Praisler, 2005: 71).

This way, the discussion about the construction of the text becomes the content proper. On the other hand, the same as we move in everyday life from a kind of world to another, fiction allows us free access to different and successive worlds, parallel to the ones the human being is aware of historically and socially; consequently, the structure of fiction should be understood as resembling to the one of a ladder on which, more or less real and more or less fictional worlds define human reality by interaction and inter-reflection: "Strangely enough, […] when using the term 'world' one is using a space term […] But narrative fiction calls our attention to time and a sequence in time […] Literature is generally to be classed as a time-art (in distinction from painting and sculpture, space-arts)" (Wellek & Warren, 1993: 147).

As a result, the world of a novel is a structure or a complex organism made up of a wide range of constitutive elements, combined to create the illusion of reality; this illusion depends on the effect it has on the reader to be assimilated as the reality of a work of fiction; it is the task of narratology to analyze these elements and establish the manner in which they contribute to the presentation of the events.

The wave of metafictional novels in the '60s and '70s may have lost its force in the '80s, but it did not disappear as its critics heralded; they used to see in this kind of writing just a futile attempt of the novel at postponing its own death. Those who attacked metafiction accused it of 'self-flattering narcissism' (a term that Hutcheon transforms in her essay, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 1980, in grounds for pride), of élitism (novelists talking to themselves and to one another about how great and how utterly important their writing practices are), of narrowness, circularity and repetitivity (resembling dogs chasing their own tail as if it were the most important thing in the world). From this perspective, metafictional novels are those in which the epic respiration gives way to the self-anihilating experiment. Beyond all these accusations lies the assumption that the novel should tell about people and reality, taking over the tradition of social realism, in a clear message.

Thus, metafiction becomes, to use Barth's words in a somehow distorted interpretation, a 'literature of exhaustion', the last stage before its death. The reaction of rejection towards this type of literature is also triggered by its labeling, without any further distinctions, as 'postmodernist', even 'deconstructivist'. Consequently, the latter's critics transferred their accusations upon metafiction: the lack of a final, stable meaning of the text [3], its refusal of any forms of closure, the ignoring of literary tradition and the cannon; as in the case of deconstructivism, the critics of metafiction consider it to 'sin' by taking pleasure in ambiguity and contradiction, by incorporating heterogenous material (fantasy, fairytale, documents, fiction, journalism) [4], and this way, erasing the boundaries between the genres, by incorporating its own criticism and reading instructions, by toying with the printing conventions etc. In short, the novel, in the opinion of the dissenting voices, tends to become an unrecognizable category, downgrading to a kind of jumbled and jangled text. Taking out the exaggerations, one cannot ignore such reactions simply because they exist even if from conservative positions, resistant to change.

It is true that, although metafiction and deconstructivism are not the same – the latter being a critical attitude, a practice of approaching any linguistic expression, literature included – they have in common a certain permanent self-search and self-questioning, and the refusal to accept existing forms and hierarchies as such and for ever.

Among the critics who embarked upon offering counter-arguments we find Patricia Waugh (*Metafiction*, 1984), Linda Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*, 1980), Steven Kellman (*The Self-Begetting Novel*, 1980). They showed that self-questioning in fiction is not a symptom of exhaustion but a necessary and very important stage in the development of the analysis, and that the value of metafictional literature resides exactly in this self-scrutiny, sometimes playful, some other times painful.

It would be absurd to suppose that metafiction sets as its goal to demonstrate its own futility and irrelevance; the 'message' it carries is, nevertheless, different from that of the traditional realist novel; unlike this one, metafictive writings do not want to preserve the illusion that they reflect reality objectively and truthfully. However deep this undermined the fictional conventions and however confusing the avoidance of the final meaning were, in the metafictional novel there is always an implicit intention (but also explicit many times), to challenge the reader into giving up their final formulations and accepting that posing questions with no easy, even impossible, answers is beneficial.

For the question about the possibility to (re)present the world into the literary fiction, the metafictional novel has a negative answer: what can be represented is the discourse of that (Waugh, 1984: 3). If the novel uses language, either to represent a world or even create it, then it becomes very clear that the fundamental theme of metafiction is the linguistic paradox describing novelists permanently confronted with the inability of language to express the richness of their visions, which makes them fight a constant battle with the limits 'prison of language' in order to achieve proper expressiveness. Despite this turmoil and by the very means of this language, poor as it is, writers create the most coherent and spectacular fictional worlds and completely expose their transparency as worlds of words, not worlds haunted by the stubborn and rejecting resistance of reality: "What is to be acknowledged is that there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests that there can never be an escape from the prison-house of language and either delights or dispairs in this (Waugh, id.: 53).

This seems to be Lodge's 'novelist at a crossroads', the British one choosing, in the critic's view, most of the times, the road of the realist novel, the road of the compromise between the fictional and the empirical modes of writing, although admitting that the pressure of skepticism on the esthetic and epistemological premises of traditional realism is so intense that many novelists feel confronted with a choice, the one mentioned above, between the non-fictional novel and the 'fabulation', as Robert Scholes names it, giving as examples Günter Grass, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon etc. What professor Lodge recommends, himself having one leg in the boat of criticism and the other in that of literary creation, is that writers take at least the time of hesitation, or, as many already did, built that hesitation within the writing itself, within that 'écriture' to which he attaches the following label: "[t]he novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader (who wishes, naïvely, only to be told what to believe) through a fairground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life" (Lodge, 1971: 105).

Unlike their peers, the American novelists repeatedly approach the issue of the words as a unique system for the translation of reality into fiction in their novels, primarily in the self-reflective ones. The process of trespassing ontological barriers is summarized by Bellerophon in Barth's *Chimera*: "Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words: Bellerophonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and recombinations, the man they forever represent" (Barth in Toma, 2004: 80).

This growing fascination with words is part of the similar growing introversion of the postmodernist novel, being yet another mark of the fact that this one is aware of it being an 'invented reality', opposed to the 'real reality'. This attitude towards language, its use to attract attention upon itself, not external reality, expresses, as we could expect, the refusal of literature to immortalize the symbols of reality, the loss of confidence in its stable values and the transformation of this loss into a supreme faith. Todd Andrews, the barthian character in *The Floating Opera* (1956), offers the only possible solution:

> So, reader, should you ever find yourself writing about the world, take care not to nibble at the many tempting symbols she sets squarely in your path, or you'll be baited into saying things you don't mean and offending the people you want most to entertain. Develop, if you can, the technique of the pall-bearer and myself: smile, but walk on and say nothing, as though you hadn't noticed (Barth in Toma, 2004: 85).

The focus on fictionality becomes essential in the attempt to playfully order the (seemingly) random, the accidental, and attach some significance to it or ironically ignore it; even if sometimes, and only for a while, the illusion of reference to the real world is maintained, the reader is permanently 'brutalised' with passages that violate the code of realism. Lodge mentions in this respect Joseph Heller's novel *Good as Gold* (1979), where one of the numbered chapters begins like this:

> Once again Gold found himself preparing to lunch with someone [...] and the thought arose that he was spending an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking. [...] Certainly he would soon meet a schoolteacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalising promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep (Heller in Lodge, 1992: 42).

The above-mentioned trespassing is achieved in two ways: on the one hand, admitting that Gold is a character in a book, not someone in the real world; on the other, underlining the fact that he has no autonomy whatsoever, being simply and completely at the disposal of a creator who is not sure what to do with him. Such 'gestures' are described as the 'breaking of the frame' or 'revealing the device' or 'metafiction'. By itself, the procedure is not new at all and similar examples of exposure of the fictionality of fiction can be easily found in Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Thackeray or Trollope. But not in the modernist ones because such a foregrounding of the author's existence, the very source of *diegesis*, is contrary to the modernist principle of impersonality and the *mimesis* of consciousness. Quite paradoxically, metafictional devices might appear as a way to continue the exploration and exploitation of the sources of realism, simultaneously to the admittance of their conventionality. The more the authors reveal themselves in such texts, the more they become a voice, function of their own fiction, a rhetorical construct; not privileged authority but object to interpretation.

A possible conclusion is that postmodernist literature re-affirms *diegesis*; not harmoniously interweaved with *mimesis* as in the classic realist text, not subordinate as in the modernist one, but foregrounded, in contrast, by *mimesis*: The stream of consciousness has turned into a stream of narration, which would be one way of summarizing the difference between the greatest modernist novelist, Joyce, and the greatest postmodernist, Beckett. When the Unnamable says to himself "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on", he means, on one level at least, that he must go on narrating (Lodge, 1992: 44).

Also in reference to the British writers and their relationship with postmodernism, especially some of its attributes such as the questioning of mettanarrative, the decentring of cultural authority, and the ironic disruption of the self-contained fictional world, Dominic Head (2002) agrees that their novels also convey a conviction about the moral and emotional function of narrative fiction, and its ability to make readers re-engage with the world they know. In this way, the writers offer a re-working of the realist contract, involving the reader's willing acceptance that the text provides a bridge to reality. Much the same as Lodge, Head considers that British authors are not postmodernist in the meaning of 'experimentalist' only, but their writings should be viewed as the expression of a mode of writing capable of generating an emotional response, beyond the distractions of self-conscious tricksiness; this understanding of postmodernism, as a hybrid form of expression that renegociates tradition, is the one that could make a case for 'British Postmodernism', and that could account for the

work of practitioners such as Margaret Drabble, Martin Amis, Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis or Angela Carter. About metafictional writing, the self-conscious fiction that underlines its own fictionality, Head says:

> This degree of playfullness is self-deprecating in the sense that it has the effect of devaluing the role and function of 'literature'. No longer capable of high seriousness, the literary object colludes in its own debunking, participating in the cultural logic that blurs the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. The consequence of this is a culture of pastiche, with no vantage point from which value can be assigned with authority. [...] It is this kind of ludic postmodernism that has failed to gain a purchase in British literary culture (Head, 2002: 229).

A further consequence, in Head's oppinion, is a 'waning of affect', the production of self-conscious culture in which powerful emotion can no longer be communicated without mediation, qualification, or reservation. This kind of ludic postmodernism seems to have failed to gain a purchase in British literary culture, unlike in the American one.

Notes

[1] In postmodernist fiction, Lodge distinguishes the following categories: transfiction, surfiction, metafiction, new jurnalism, non-fictional novel, faction, fabulation, le nouveau roman, le nouveau nouveau roman, irrealism, magic realism etc. In his opinion, British postmodernism ignores modernist experiments that Joyce, Woolf and Co. thought had despatched for good (Lodge, 1990: 25).
[2] Roland Barthes expresses in *Writing Degree Zero* (1967) the hope that language can be used in an utopic way and that there are cultural codes that can be trespassed. At the beginning of the '70s, he began to see language, the same as Derrida, as a space the metaphoric character of which remains unknown. In *Empire of Signs* (1970), Barthes gives up any claim to describe or analyze reality, mixing cultural forms of an extreme diversity, from haikus to different machines, pieces of a sort of anti-utopic landscape in which everything is surface and nothing is form, and writing becomes a goal in itself. In his last text, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), concepts do not count for their validity or invalidity, but for their efficiency as a writing tactic.
[3] The two alternative endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are an excellent illustration of the 'forking paths technique' that McHale (1987: 106-10) considers to be postmodernist par excellence.
[4] Arguing in favour of the metafictional novel and referring to its connections and affinities with other genres, Guido Kums says: "It is also evident that these novels, all to a greater or lesser extent, display this magpie tendency to collect other genres of writing: they all contain letters, diaries, documents with political, philosophical or sociological discourse, and they all parody various styles and fashions of writing (Kums in Bignami, 1996: 153).

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