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1. Frames that separate metafiction from fiction

In a conversation with Craig Raine, David Lodge has stated: 'I'm a metafictional novelist, I suppose, because I was a teacher of fiction and therefore a very self-conscious novelist. I think this is generally true of the present literary period. We're all very conscious of what we're doing'. He speaks on, defining the way in which he has written a great deal of his novels, especially those known as campus novels. 'If you want to write a realistic novel', he says, 'you have to signal to the audience that you're operating a convention. But, basically, it's because I was involved in teaching and analysing fiction formally for so long. That's why my work is riddled with this sort of allusion and joke'. (*Consciousness and the Novel*, 296)

The recurrence of this self-consciousness can be detected in many of his novels and we can mention *Thinks...*, *Therapy*, or *Changing Places*.

Deaf Sentence continues this characteristic feature, exploring the drift of meaning to which the hard of hearing is subject. At the end of the book, Lodge himself specifies that: 'the narrator deafness and his Dad have their sources in my own experience'. The same as Lodge, the protagonist of his novel is Desmond Bates, retired professor of linguistics in a northern town. Literary criticism has emphasized this aspect. D. J. Taylor has stated in an article from *The Guardian*: 'Lodge himself is a

former academic who suffers from deafness' and 'his father, like Harry Bates, was a freelance musician'. At the same time it was mentioned that 'the authorial presence is much more saturated than these instant identifications might suggest'. As, for example, Desmond Bates' literary interests, which express themselves 'in a fondness for Larkin (a constant influence on the novel's view of the ageing process) and an absorption in the TLS, are those of his creator. Old friends are name-checked, and even the mention of Goya's *Dog Engulfed by Sand* is a back-handed compliment to Bradbury, the jacket of whose *The History Man* it adorned in 1975'.

Coming back to the testimonies of the author, we find out that the possible source of his troubles can be a gradual deterioration of the hearing ability which is almost inevitable, 'but for some of us the experience is much earlier or more drastical than others'. This can be due to a number of causes, sometimes in combination, such as 'genetic inheritance, viral illness, head injury, side effects of certain drugs and hair cell trauma'. Also, 'unprotected exposure to excessive noise early in life – such as artillery fire or nightclubbing – will accelerate the natural loss of hair cells and may lead to serious deafness later'.

In the quoted paper, Lodge mentions the difficulties he experiences in real life, difficulties which his main character faces in the novel: 'Outside the home, deafness makes communication even more hazardous. Modern hearing aids can damp down background noise to a degree, but if speech in the foreground is to be audible, users must put up with an amplification of the background noise. In situations where there is a lot of this – a busy restaurant or crowded party – I find it difficult and sometimes impossible to hear what people are saying even face to face from a few feet away'.

Under these conditions, following the same line of thought of the self-consciousness, the novel indicates several possibilities and solutions. Here are some of them:

When you can't hear what people are saying you have two options: you can either keep quiet and nod and murmur and smile, pretending that you are hearing what your interlocutor is saying, throwing in the odd word of agreement, but always in danger of getting the wrong end of the stick, with potentially embarrassing consequences; or alternatively, you can seize the initiative, ignore the normal rules of conversational turn-taking, and talk non-stop on a subject of your own choosing without letting the other person get a word in edgeways, so that the problem of hearing and understanding what they are saying doesn't arise (196).

In the novel, Lodge is so closely identified with his protagonist that the book often devolves to a personal meditation on the means of artistic expression which he uses:

I decided to write an account of my conversation, or rather non-conversation, with the woman at the ARC private view, which in retrospect seemed rather amusing, though stressful at the time. First I did it in the usual journal style, then I rewrote it in the third person, present tense, the kind of exercise I used to give students in my stylistics seminar. First person into the third person, past tense into present tense, or vice versa. What difference does it make to the effect? Is one method more appropriate to the original experience than another, or does any method interpret rather than represent experience? Discuss (10).

Defining postmodern novels, Lodge specifies that what they have in common is, to a greater or lesser extent, 'a retreat

from the modernist effort to represent subjective consciousness as faithfully as possible. They reverse the modernist privileging of depth over surface. There is a return in their novels to objective reporting of the external world, and a focus on what people say and do rather than what they think and feel' (*Consciousness and the Novel*, 64). Consistent to this principle, he continues his meditations on deafness, extending the sources of reference towards further and further cultural areas. As in the demonstration on the fact that 'deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic':

Take Oedipus, for instance: suppose, instead of putting out his eyes, he had punctured his eardrums. It would have been more logical actually, since it was through his ears that he learned the dreadful truth about his past, but it wouldn't have the same cathartic effect. It might arouse pity, perhaps, but not terror. Or Milton's *Samson*: 'O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, / Irrecoverably dark, without all hope of day.' What a heart-breaking cry of despair! 'O deaf, deaf, deaf ...' doesn't have the same pathos somehow. How would it go on? 'O deaf, deaf, deaf, amid the noise of noon, / Irrecoverably deaf, without all hope of sound.' No.

Of course, you could argue that blindness is a greater affliction than deafness. If I had to choose between them, I'd go for deafness, I admit. But they don't differ only in degrees of sensory deprivation. Culturally, symbolically, they're antithetical. Tragic versus comic. Poetic versus prosaic. Sublime versus ridiculous (14).

We find here what Susana Onega describes in her famous work *Narratology: An Introduction*. In this book she shows that narrative is a complex phenomenon whose analysis allows infinite perspectives. In her view, metanarrative can be defined as a way of writing, 'as a way of consciously manipulating fictional

structures, of playing games with fiction' (1996: 31). Metafiction as writing would constitute a specific sub-genre in which the reflexive element is the dominant one. The term *reflexive* calls our attention both to mirror structures (doublings, analogies, frames, *mise en abîme*) and to thought, consciousness, reflection, awareness accompanying action. Indeed, 'metafiction is reflexive fiction in the sense not only that mirror images are found in it, but also that these mirrorings and reflexive structures are used as a meditation on the nature of fiction' (Onega, 1996: 31). Here is an example in which metanarrative is ingeniously associated with both specialization of the main character in linguistics and a famous example from literature:

Consonants are voiced at a higher frequency than vowels. I could hear vowels perfectly well – still can. But it's consonants that we mainly depend on to distinguish one word from another. "Did you say pig or fig?" said the Cat. "I said pig," replied Alice. Maybe the Cheshire Cat was a bit deaf: it wasn't sure whether Alice had used a bi-labial plosive or a labio-dental fricative the first time she pronounced the word, and being a well-brought-up Victorian middle-class little girl she would have spoken very clearly (20).

Desmond Bates' own deafness is sometimes comic, sometimes inconvenient, but most of the time embarrassing. For him deafness is a kind of death – a symptom of mortality, a constant reminder of his ageing body and diminishing hopes. As in other Lodge's novels, such as in *Therapy* or *Thinks...* the raising for discussion of issues regarding faith and religion completes the depiction of Desmond's late-midlife crisis and his efforts to come to terms with age and mortality and the passage of time:

I envy religious people their belief and at the same time I resent it. Surveys have shown that they have a much better chance of being happy than those whose belief systems are totally secular – and you can understand why. Everyone's life contains some sadness, suffering and disappointment, and they are much easier to accept if you believe there's another life to come in which the imperfections and injustices of this one will be made good; it also makes the business of dying itself a much less depressing prospect. That's why I envy religious believers. There are of course no firm foundations for their belief, but you're not allowed to point this out without seeming to attack their right to be happy. That's why I resent religious belief, even among my nearest and dearest – indeed especially among my nearest and dearest, since with them the impossibility of discussing religion dispassionately is most apparent (80).

For this kind of expression of the self-consciousness, what is important is the distinction between *framed* and *unframed*. Patricia Waugh analyses the relation between metafiction and frame-breaking, pointing out that contemporary metafiction 'foregrounds *framing* as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels' (1984: 28). But what is the frame that separates reality from fiction? According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (563) frame is 'a structure for admitting or enclosing something', 'a construction, plan, system underlying support of anything', 'form, constitution, or structure in general; system, order'. Patricia Waugh highlights the fact that the concept of frame includes Chinese-box structures 'which contest the reality of each individual box through a nesting of narrators in metafictional novels framing devices range' (30). She also states that obvious framing devices range from stories within stories, characters reading about their fictio-

nal lives and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations. This leads to the idea that 'such infinities of texts within texts draw out the paradoxical relationship of *framed* and *unframed* and, in effect, of *form* and *content*' (31). The conclusion is that 'there is ultimately no distinction between *framed* and *unframed*. There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only *content* perhaps, but it will never be discovered in a *natural* unframed state' (31). Waugh also indicates the essential 'deconstructive method of metafiction':

One method of showing the function of literary conventions, of revealing their provisional nature, is to show what happens when they malfunction. Parody and inversion are two strategies which operate in this way as frame-breaks. The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction. (*Metafiction – The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* 31)

In his novel David Lodge shows a concern to highlight the fact that the kind of metafiction he uses is committed to the idea of constructed meanings rather than to the one of representable essences. Currie's general opinions about postmodernism are topical in explaining Lodge's prose. In Currie's words:

Whereas postmodern fiction can generally be regarded as conscious metafiction, postmodern readings can also identify metafiction as an aspect of the unconscious level of the text, against the grain of realist intention, and therefore beyond any temporal boundaries which might apply to the term 'postmodernism'. In other words, postmodernist fiction and criticism

both aim to articulate the unconscious, and in particular the unconscious self-referentiality of non-metafictional fiction. (17)

In David Lodge's novel the metafictional discourse constantly breaks the frame of reality by referring to the author's reality. In *Deaf Sentence* Lodge makes explicit references to the process of creative writing as a metafictional self-consciousness. The commentary abandons the realist narrative to point out directly the author's word and a contemporary point of view on art history when he draws a comparison between the effects of deafness on Goya and Beethoven:

What comfort can I draw from these case histories? Not much. Both men happened to be geniuses and found some kind of compensation for their affliction in their art. I'm neither a genius nor an artist. I suppose a linguist who can't hear what people are saying is more like a deaf musician than a deaf painter, so I can identify more readily with Beethoven than with Goya. But I can't claim that only my work on discourse analysis has held me back from despair these last twenty years, or that I feel it impossible to leave the world until I have given it my last thoughts on, say, topic – drift and skip – connecting in casual conversation, which I could still do using transcripts of recorded speech. In fact I *have* given the world my last thoughts on those and similar subjects, some time ago. So what will I have to live for, when social and sexual intercourse are effectively at an end too? Let us not enquire further into that question (88).

The intertextual insertion of *Heiligenstadt Testament* in this novel implies not only another perspective and another parallel story, but also a feature which is found in his other novels such as *Small World* or *Nice Work*. In *Deaf Sentence*,

Lodge confesses, what is important is the fact that the novel is written in the form of a journal. This parallel is at the same time an opportunity for self-conscious mirroring, as in the following example:

Perhaps it's true that nobody ever committed suicide on account of deafness. Beethoven came pretty close, but, as Alex said, he didn't. You could say that the Heiligenstadt Testament was *instead* of a suicide note, designed to be found after he died by natural causes, but having just the same motives as a suicide note: to reveal the depth of his despair to his family and friends, to explain why he seemed outwardly such a grouchy unsociable bastard, and make them feel bad for not realizing how wretched he had been. Maybe that's why I started writing this journal; maybe that's what it is, a testament. The Rectory Road Testament (161).

The autobiographical intrusions but also these frame-breakings designed to express forms of self-consciousness are much more obvious. David Lodge himself confesses in *Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism* that: 'No book ... has any meaning on its own, in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books'. If a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels 'we should not know how to read it, and if it wasn't different from all other novels we shouldn't *want* to read it. Any adequate reading of a text, therefore, involves identifying and classifying it in relation to other texts, according to content, genre, mode, period, and so on' (Lodge, 1977: 4).

Along the same line, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that narcissistic or metafictional narrative is as mimetic as any other narrative genre, including classic realism:

The decentralizing of the traditional realistic interest of fiction, away from the story told to the story telling, to the functioning of language and of larger diegetic structures, is important to the *nouveau roman*. Language becomes material with which to work, the object of certain transforming operations which give it meaning. There is a self-conscious recognition of the multiple contextual significances yielded by textual selection and organization. As such, this *new new novel* can remain within the novel genre, since these are the very operations or processes that form the link between reading and writing – that is, between life and art, reality and fiction – that seems to be a minimal requirement for a mimetic genre. (Hutcheon, 1984: 35)

At the end of the novel, resuming an idea expressed at first – *Deafness is comic, blindness is tragic* – David Lodge remembers some of the moments filled with dramatism. This recall is like a self-conscious recognition of the multiple contextual significances used in the novel:

The events of the last couple of months keep provoking echoes and cross-references like that: the votive candle flickering in the dark on the rubble of the Auschwitz crematorium and the night-light I put on Maisie's bedside table when she fell asleep for ever; hospital pyjamas and striped prison uniforms; the sight of Dad's wasted naked body on the hospital mattress when I helped to wash him, and grainy photographs of naked corpses heaped in the death camps. It's been something of an education, the experience of these last few weeks. 'Deafness is comic, blindness is tragic,' I wrote earlier in this journal, and I have played variations on the phonetic near-equivalence of 'deaf' and 'death', but now it seems more meaningful to say that deafness is comic and death is tragic, because final, inevitable, and inscrutable. As Wittgenstein said, 'Death is not an

event of life.' You cannot experience it, you can only behold it happening to others, with various degrees of pity and fear, knowing that one day it will happen to you (305).

We observe the way in which self-consciousness acquires a narrative form. In this respect, Mark Currie develops an interesting viewpoint, stating that 'for self-consciousness to take a narrative form, it had to forsake self-consciousness of the moment of narration'. In his opinion:

... this places self-consciousness in the same logical position as lying in the sense that when one is self-consciously self-conscious, the veracity of self-narration is questioned and any therapeutic value may be lost: when one becomes aware that one is performing or transforming oneself in the act of narration, it is at the expense of the constative force of narrative as the recuperation of past events. When I tell my own story, I must deny that I am inventing myself in the process in order to believe that I am discovering myself. (*Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 131)

Mark Currie's arguments, which emphasize the relationship between a particular narrative and its reading, coincide with David Lodge's opinions expressed in the study *The Novel Now* (1990). Lodge is concerned with the way in which recent critical attacks on ideas of the author and reality have been reflected in fiction itself, in metafictional anti-realism and the incorporation of a surrogate author into the novel as ways of addressing these issues in the theory of fiction:

The reception of new writing has in fact probably never been more obsessively author-centred than it is today, not only in reviewing, but in supplementary forms of exposure through the