A HERMENEUTICAL READING OF A POSTMODERN BRITISH NOVEL. TIME AND NARRATIVE IN DAVID LODGE'S "THINKS..."

ALEX CIOROGAR[1]

ABSTRACT. *A Hermeneutical Reading of a Postmodern British Novel. Time and Narrative in David Lodge's "Thinks...".* The present paper investigates two aspects of a postmodern British novel. From a narratological perspective, we will examine the ways in which time - as a theme, on the one hand, and as a fictional issue, on the other - is constructed in David Lodge's "Thinks…". Leaving behind post-structuralist instruments of analysis (deconstructive reading practices), the article will argue in favor of a more nuanced approach by showing the advantages of utilizing hermeneutical and phenomenological instruments in exploring postmodernist techniques of emplotment.

Keywords: hermeneutics, time, narratology, postmodernism, reading, phenomenology.

REZUMAT. *O lectură hermeneutică a unui roman britanic postmodern. Timp și narațiune în romanul "Thinks..."* semnat de David Lodge. Lucrarea de față investighează două aspecte ale unui roman britanic postmodern. Adoptând o perspectivă naratologică, vom examina modurile în care timpul - atât ca temă, dar romanul și ca problematică literară - e construit în romnul "Thinks..." semnat de David Lodge. Lăsând la o parte instrumentele post-structuraliste (și, în special, lectura deconstrucționistă), articolul demonstrează avantajele utilizării unor instrumente hermeneutice și/sau fenomenologice în vederea explorării tehnicilor de compoziție postmoderniste.

Cuvinte cheie: hermeneutică, timp, naratologie, postmodernism, lectură, fenomenologie.

Introduction

The present paper investigates - as the abstract clearly shows - two aspects of a postmodern British novel. We will examine, from a narratological perspective,

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[1] Ph.D. candidate at the „Babeş-Bolyai" University (Faculty of Letters, Comp. Lit.) of Cluj-Napoca (Romania), e-mail: alex.ciorogar@gmail.com.

the ways in which time - as a theme, on the one hand, and as a fictional issue, on the other - is constructed in David Lodge's book. Outweighing post-structuralist instruments of analysis (namely deconstructive reading strategies), the article will argue in favor of a more nuanced approach by highlighting a series of advantages understood as the result of utilizing hermeneutical and phenomenological concepts in exploring postmodernist techniques of emplotment. In the first part of the paper, we will draw an outline of David Lodge's account concerning the topic of novelistic consciousness. After identifying the main features as to why this volume could be regarded as a postmodern novel, the last part will, of course, consist of a series of close readings. Before offering some final conclusions, we will also look at how time and narrative work together in order to represent/reproduce the so-called effect of consciousness.

Consciousness and the Novel

Without any sort of hesitation, David Lodge clearly indicates that the renderings of the mind (or, more simply, consciousness) could easily be included in a long list of stylistic devices and narrative methods which communicate meaning. In fact, he equates the totality of semantic strategies with a poetics of fiction[2]. Viewed as a virtual machine, consciousness is an information processor. However, the interface between this virtual machine and our real flesh-and-blood bodies (and the morality adjacent to that flesh) erects consciousness, in his view, into something that will be forever impossible to simulate in a computer program[3]. Although he may prove to be forever careful not to slip into simple Cartesian dualism, the author can't be easily enlisted on the side of the skeptics either. However, Lodge records that V. S. Ramachandran, a famous neuropsychologist, argued that the barrier between mind and matter is only apparent and arises as a result of language usage[4]. Unsurprisingly, he seems to agree by further invoking two other definitions of consciousness (the first belonging to Daniel C. Dennett, best known as a philosopher of mind, whilst the second is attributed to the linguist Steven Pinker): "consciousness is a kind of illusion or epiphenomenon" and "the mind is a machine, an on-board computer of a robot made of tissue"[5]. Without getting into any details about the subtle differences between mind, brain, and consciousness, we will, however, show, in Dennett's words, that consciousness is a "fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition"[6]. If telling stories deals with the illusion of

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[2] David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel. Collected Essays*, Penguin Group, London, 2002, p. x.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-6.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

consciousness, we can easily conclude that the act of narration, or narrating (a) consciousness, becomes an actual process of self-fashioning.

If, for a large period of time, psychology (mainly behaviorism) viewed consciousness as a "black box", contemporary science (like quantum physics) demonstrated that an event is inseparable from its observation. By simple analogy, this means that consciousness cannot be observed outside the thing observing it, and, at the same time, not be influenced by it. Clearly enough, the problem is, in the case of consciousness, that the consciousness being observed is, in its turn, observed by a more or less similar consciousness. It is fascinating to observe that literature (or, to be more precise, prose fiction) has always dealt with describing a like-minded situation: a setting in which one consciousness (*e.g.* an author, a narrator, or a character) reflects on another (*i.e.* the author, a narrator, or a character) through language. Surely, we can additionally (and truthfully) observe that this phenomenon develops some sort of third-degree dimension when including the actual reader in the circuit. Indeed, Lodge also maintains that fiction is "a record of human consciousness", while lyrical poetry could be regarded as an effort to describe qualia through metaphor. We are only interested in the novel which, in David Lodge's view, could be understood as a fictional model of life or as an effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through time and space[7]. In a sense, novels give us a convincing taste of what Theory of Mind (the fact that other people have different interpretations of the world) is actually all about. The narrative nature of human consciousness allows us to represent and possess the continuum of experience in a way we are never able to grasp in reality[8]. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle gave way for the development of quantum physics which argues (by simplification) that light can be seen, at the same time, both as a wave and as a particle. Again, by simple analogy, we can infer that the ways in which Lodge decided to present the problem of consciousness are, in a sense, similar to the findings of contemporary science. Be that as it may, it is easily observed that his understanding of the poetics of fiction (as the totality of semantic strategies) and of the novel (as a virtual model for understanding life as change within a time-space continuum) rapidly transforms into an anthropology of fiction (or literature for that matter), even though he does not emphasize this fact. This is an important aspect because, as we will see, it can easily be coupled with Paul Ricoeur's descriptions of time and narrative.

In order to show the means by which the novel is capable of unifying first-person discourses with third-person discourses, Lodge offers readers clear examples of what the direct, indirect, and the free indirect speech/es

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[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

look like[9]. From Descartes' works onwards, the evolution of literature has come to define the essence of human beings through consciousness containing such elements as memories, the free association of ideas, or emotions[10]. Nonetheless, the critic warns us that there are several limitations involved in a narrative's representation of consciousness. The linearity of language doesn't always allow a clear representation of consciousness because it is simply not linear[11]. This is why, speaking, as it were, inter-medially, Lodge declares: "I don't think visual and electronic media will make reading and the book obsolete. But the interaction between them will increase"[12]. Consequently, we always run the risk of trying to describe the conscious self by representing "something that is constantly changing"[13].

"His literary creation represents the literary tendency of the post-war British neo-realism and his literary criticism reflects the successive impact of New Criticism, Structuralism and Bakhtin's theory of fiction on British critical circles"[14]. Within this context, "Thinks…" (published in 2001) is a novel about the relationship between two people: an atheistic cognitive scientist and a novelist lapsed but not entirely skeptical Catholic[15]. There's no secret to it: "I like seeing both sides of a problem and then make up characters to represent them: for example, consciousness as it is scientifically studied and consciousness as a literary form of representation'[16]. For instance, Helen (the novelist) is torn apart between the desire for privacy and the desire for intimacy, while Ralph (the cognitive scientist) is an honest, independent and egotistical man. Phillip Tew has argued that David Lodge reflected on the nature of fiction by comparing narratives to the nature of cognition itself using irony as his main tool[17]. Undoubtedly, he actually confessed that "my novels are full of irony … there is also a softer, more emotionally tender (and some of my critics would say, sentimental) aspect to my work. I don't see any contradiction in this […]. In my later works particularly the ironic posture of the implied author towards the story is qualified by a more sympathetic ('tender', if you like) attitude towards the characters"[18]. What's more, the author explains that "If you understand your negative experiences as being ironical, it means you have

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[12] http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/david_lodge.htm - Accessed: 06.01.2017
[13] Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
[14] http://journal.acs-cam.org.uk/data/archive/2010/201002-article13.pdf - Accessed: 05.01.2017.
[15] Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
[16] http://lifestyle.ele.ro/Vedete/David-Lodge-interviu_--a3563.html - Accessed: 05.01.2017.
[17] Phillip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, Continuum Publishing Group, Norfolk, 2004, p. 11.
[18] http://www.e-scoala.ro/lidiavianu/novelists_david_lodge.html - Accessed: 05.01.2017.

already distanced yourself from them, in a certain degree, and that you are ready to see them as subjects that can become fictional elements"[19]. According to Lodge, Ralph establishes the constraints for the truthful representation of consciousness as a first-person account: "lyric is first-person discourse, and I have used first person narration a lot in my last three novels (including the forthcoming *Thinks...*)   perhaps in order to deal with the 'tender' emotions associated with love and death"[20]. Helen, on the other hand, is a "metafictional novelist...and therefore a very self-conscious novelist"[21]. Lodge wanted Ralph to experience a real shock in order to challenge his self-confidence and his rather arrogant materialist ideology by representing his self-acknowledgement as a media don trapped in his own philandering mold. Applying a biographical reading, we can understand the reasons behind why Lodge did this: "death has become a primary subject ... in my work, simply because the fact that one is getting older. When you are young, you really don't think you are going to die. As you grow old, you realize that you are"[22]. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Lodge believes, much as McEwan does too, in the power of ending a story[23], because it "crucially affects the impression it leaves on the reader about the implied author's attitude to life. I am fascinated by this question of endings and have written about it in several critical essays. As modern literary novelists go, I think I am more drawn than most to the old-fashioned 'happy ending', and have sometimes been criticized for it [...] I tend to leave my characters in an open-ended situation, but a hopeful one, with the major problems they have confronted in the story resolved'[24].

The pluralism invoked above betrays Lodge's involvement with postmodernism. If Ralph represents the scientific community, Helen is a representative of the novelistic world. Without adopting any "grand narrative", the novelist plunges directly into what one may call an anti-modern aesthetic. Mocking William James' definition of the stream of consciousness ("a bird flying through the air and the perching for a moment then taking wing again"[25]), this ironic comment with regard to modernists' experiments represents a clear stultification of their writerly efforts. Using a recording device, Ralph transcribes his thoughts while, in the meantime, making comments on what a

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[19] http://lifestyle.ele.ro/Vedete/David-Lodge-interviu_--a3563.html - Accessed: 05.01.2017.
[20] http://www.e-scoala.ro/lidiavianu/novelists_david_lodge.html - Accessed: 05.01.2017.
[21] Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 296.
[22] http://journal.acs-cam.org.uk/data/archive/2010/201002-article13.pdf - Accessed: 05.01.2017.
[23] Ricoeur writes: "an inconclusive ending suits a work that raises by design a problem the author considers to be unsolvable", Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. II, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1985, p. 22.
[24] http://referaty.atlas.sk/cudzie-jazyky/anglictina/19620/?print=1 - Accessed: 04.01.2017.
[25] David Lodge, *Thinks...*, Secker and Warburg, London, 2001, p. 1.

painstaking and boring process this is. These remarks all point to a postmodern way of subverting literary conventions. It is also obvious that Ralph's recordings are symptomatic of a characteristically postmodern series of internal ruptures and fragmentations[26]. As Nietzsche placed aesthetic experience above science and rationality, so does Helen in her diary[27]. According to most theoreticians, postmodernism revealed several new ways of structuring narratives. To be sure, Lodge's novel is a wonderful example of unfamiliar ways of structuring narratives. His use of the recorder as a device for capturing the wanderings of the mind, for example, or Helen's electronic diary, or even the direct transcription of e-mails are all beautiful examples of unusual means of concocting brand-new types of narratives. And what do all these narrative strategies represent, if not the acute problem of communication which is highly distinctive of postmodernity? Lodge wants us to realize that, even if Ralph's consciousness is mechanically recorded, the only way in which he, or anybody else for that matter, can understand it is by (re)reading it. That is to say, by way of hermeneutics. We are thus easily led to conclude that, even if one disapproves of Helen's account of consciousness, one always comes to the realization that a genuine, objective account of consciousness is not necessarily impossible, but more or less identical to what novelists have always done in a subjective, fictionalized manner. Likewise, Ralph's transcriptions, Helen's diary, the students' essays, and the e-mails are all great examples of simulations (in Baudrillard's terms) and the ways in which they compose the "hyper-reality" of the novel. In this respect, one can identify at least four levels of interferential consciousness: a scientific one (Ralph's recordings), a technical one (Helen's diary), a fictional one (the students' essays) and a virtual one (the e-mails). A combination of such various narrative strategies could easily be validated if one takes into account the functioning (and the role) of what Rüsen described (in Clifford Geertz's footsteps) as the process of a "thick description"[28]. Without him being conscious of the fact, Ralph's efforts are clearly and ironically indicative of Derrida's deconstructive actions: showing the instability of language systems, they are, at the same time, the absolute embodiment of postmodern pastiche. Bridging the gap between high and low forms of art through the use of irony, postmodernism has no use in distinguishing between scientific and artistic discourses. Nonetheless, as we have already declared, we will not be giving into a deconstructionist reading of the text.

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[26] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, p. 12.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[28] Jörn Rüsen, "Historical studies between Modernity and Postmodernity" in Sorin Antohi (ed.), *Modernism și antimodernism: noi perspective interdisciplinare* (*Modernism and Antimodernism: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives)*, Cuvântul, Bucharest, 2008, p. 97.

Time to Think

The Augustinian theory of time could be read, as we have already shown[29], as a psychological solution to the paradoxes of time. Since we've already described Ricoeur's theory at some length, we will refrain from unfolding the same arguments again. We will, instead, swiftly review some of the most pertaining issues (this article represents a second - and last - part of a larger effort in suggesting that a structuralist, phenomenological, and hermeneutical reading of postmodern texts should readily be applied before giving into to post-structuralist or deconstructions interpretations). Consequently, one has to acknowledge that memories and expectations represent different modes of viewing the present. The question, of course, is how can one relate the Augustinian theory of time to David Lodge's novel? First of all, we read Ralph's consciousness, as it were, in the moment of its' recording (which is also its genesis) in the same way we read Helen's consciousness as she is writing her diary. Their perceptions of the present moment are, however, transcribed in the past tense. Sometimes, Ralph speaks in the present tense, allowing us to see the world through his eyes, while Helen's diary entries are basically retrospective (the e-mails could undeniably be interpreted as the fragments of a modern, technologically altered epistolary novel). It goes to show that Lodge's desire not to intervene as a mediator in order to produce a more realistic effect of what has really happened (it is well known that the use of such documents offers the impression of immediacy): the novel's action consists, as we have already mentioned, in portraying the relationship between a recently bereaved novelist (Helen Reed) and a cognitive scientist, Ralph Messenger. The process of emplotment consists not only in the exploration of the tensions between two different types of consciousness but also in the use of a third-person narrative (an omniscient narrator), thus revealing its artificiality to the reader. According to Ricoeur, a narrative will always deploy two types of temporal configurations: a chronological dimension which reveals the episodic dimension of a narrative (linear representation of time) and the configurational dimension in which the plot transforms a series of disparate events into a full-blown story[30]. The conceptual network functioning on the paradigmatic axis and its complementary synchronic order (syntagmatic axis) are easily observed by any reader. The latter (the syntagmatic order of the discourse) is very important because it implies an irreducible diachronic

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[29] See Alex Ciorogar, "Time and Narrative: Reading Ian McEwan's Atonement", in *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal Of Multidisciplinary Research in the Humanities*, vol. xxi, no-2, 2016, pp. 147-149.

[30] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1984, p. 66.

character, while, at the same time, allowing us to grasp the paradigmatic order of action.

The novel is composed of a number of 34 chapters. The action of the novel begins on Monday, the 17th of February, even if it opens up with Ralph's recording dated Sunday, the 23rd of February. The action ends on the 4th of June. We are then dealing with several events which took place in a five-month interval. Ralph's recordings are usually very brief and ambiguous. For example, his first recording lasts only 50 minutes, as it begins at 10.13 a.m., quickly ending at 11.03 (a.m.). In contrast, Helen's first entry expands from the 17th to the 23rd of February when Ralph sees Helen for the first time as she was walking across the campus. Ralph's recordings are full of narrative "gaps" which the reader must fill in after reading Helen's journal. Although Helen basically resumes what has happened, her account is that which typically carries the story forwards (one tends to say that her chapters represent a series of discontinuous "monumental scenes"). Uniting different but subjective accounts of consciousness, the omniscient narrator also accounts for the reasons behind their endeavors: Ralph records his thoughts as he is scientifically interested in researching the phenomenon of consciousness, while Helen views it as a good way of exercising her novelistic skills. Ricoeur has argued that narratives possess the property of being split into utterances and statements and that the act of configuration determines different temporal levels. Swiftly analyzing Ralph's recordings, we quickly realize that his utterances are simple tools used for representing consciousness (and not for narrating events). According to the French theorist, the fictional past is a narrative tense described by an attitude of relaxation or detachment. On the contrary, what we seem to observe in Lodge's novel is a gradual development of temporal anxiety. Although language is linear, the only way in which one can actualize consciousness is through language. While recording his thoughts, Ralph also remembers various events and expresses future desires. The duration of different chapters varies according to the number of their lines and pages. Succession is seen in the development of each chapter. Some of them move the story forwards, while others could be described as rather static. Coexistence is applicable where their thoughts are recorded on the same day, but also in the parts in which the omniscient narrator brings them together. In the first case, simultaneity refers to the day in which they write or record their thoughts, and, in the second case, simultaneity consists in their physical presence in one and the same space. Finally, the feeling of contemporaneity is shaped by the relationship between the private time of the individuals (Ralph and Helen) and the public time of history (the third-person omniscient narrator).

Mark Currie argued that the postmodern experience of time is understandable as the relationship between the phenomenological experience of time and the way it is presented to collective consciousness[31]. This means that the postmodern experience of time is a relationship between the internal time-consciousness of different characters in the novel (Ralph and Helen) and the overall experience of the time. The postmodern experience of time is thus shaped by the way in which society is altered by scientific, cultural, and political changes. Currie emphasizes the fact that the present is seen as the object of a future memory. This is exactly what Ralph is doing when recording his thoughts, because, by doing this, he projects the present as the future data for his objective analysis of consciousness. As we have anticipated, time is both a theme of narratives and an essential part of the temporal logic of storytelling[32]. However, the experience of time in consciousness is identical to narrating itself. Consequently, we can confidently argue that temporality, in Lodge's novel, is the storytelling itself because the narrative is the expression of Ralphs' thoughts and consciousness. Currie emphasizes the impossibility of separating the mind from the world. As a result, temporality (brought about by the narrating of consciousness) also represents the configuring power of the story itself[33]: "literature may provide, for example, a case study in internal time-consciousness ...it can capture something which escapes systematic knowledge"[34]. When discussing the novel in terms of modes of representation, we can recall Linda Hutcheon's distinctions between the four types of narcissism: overt, covert, diegetic, and linguistic[35]. It is obvious that "Thinks..." is a linguistically self-aware text, conscious of its limits and powers - a covert form of narcissism in which the reflexive processes are structuralized or internalized.

Anthropomorphic time is narrative time (it displays the temporal aspects of every human experience)[36]. Moreover, the organization of events is always inseparable of the representation of events[37]. In other words, *mimesis* is not the imitation of life (nature or reality), but a modality of representation (*i.e.* different literary genres)[38]. The process of imitating different types representations (or narratives) is, according to Ricoeur, a dialectical undertaking: the first step consists in recognizing that action is always

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[31] Mark Currie, *About Time. Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time,* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 80.
[32] *Ibid.,* p. 28.
[33] *Ibid.,* p. 76.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[35] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, University Printing House, Cambridge, 1992, p. 204.
[36] Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

grounded in the understanding of a pre-narrative world of action (we are interested only in its temporal aspects of life or experience); the second step is, of course, that of configuring actions through narratives, while the final step rests in the hands of the reader who must mediate between time and narrative or between fiction and reality[39]. This last process is important because it signifies the intermingling of writing and history[40]. Also called refiguration, the last phase allows us to grasp the real-life effects of fiction: "the key to the problem of refiguration lies in the way history and fiction, taken together, after the reply of a poetics of narrative to the aporias of time brought about phenomenology"[41]. Fiction merges with the reader through interpretation[42]. Mark Currie, on the other hand, believes that a reverse temporality is always employed in any type of narrative[43]. If all narrative is retrospective, Currie argues that anticipation is a mode of existence which enables us to engage the present as nothing more than a memory to come[44]. Consequently, *prolepsis* (the anticipation of retrospection) is not only our fundamental characteristic of real-time experience but an essential dimension of any type of representation (the organization of events)[45]. This second-dialectic between text and reader projects a temporal picture[46]. The relationship between time and narrative is an indirect relationship between life and representation[47].

Conclusions

Instating a third degree or, if you will, a reader-oriented type of meta-consciousness, "Thinks..." shows - at the end of a hermeneutical reading - how the ways in which the conformations of the fictional state of affairs (or, simply put, the story) contribute in developing not only a time pattern but also in elaborating a design of/for consciousness. The soon-to-be quality of mindfulness (the awareness associated with conscious experience) and the rearwards migration of narratives, validates our hypothesis that applying phenomenological instruments of analysis to postmodern texts is more useful than deconstructing entire passages of texts while fully ignoring the real-life

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[39] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
[41] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1988, p. 101.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 165.
[43] Mark Currie, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.
[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[46] *Ibid*, p. 16.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

aspects of both fiction and literary studies. The formation and legitimation of different types of discourses (scientific or fictional) are deeply enmeshed with issues such as the constitution and evaluation of temporality.

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