

The Campus Novel: Self-Conscious and Metatextual Fiction: a postmodern response to realism and modernism

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This [the Campus Novel] is by now a form of fiction so well established that addicts of the campus novel, like addicts of detective stories and spy thrillers, relish its familiar and recurrent features almost as much as they enjoy whatever new twist or texture the novelist is able to impart. What are the sources of the campus novel's attraction, for both readers and writers? One reason, perhaps, is that the university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scaleⁱ. DAVID LODGE

Please give all the help you can, for certain things of your writings cause here a confusion. Perhaps you do not know it yet, but this type 'the campus novel' does not really exist in Germany, I think because all our professors are very great scholars who write only very serious books, and have no need of such strange publications. For us 'Campus Novel' is a very peculiar praxis, found only in Britain and small bits of the United States. Explain me please. I know your professors are not so well paid — I have met some once and seen their very worn clothes — and must find other ways to survive. Yet this does not explain the representations of universities in these novels, which seem always wicked and dishonest. Does perhaps your government pay you to write these books to stop students attending your universities now with economic crisis you have no more places for them? I have also been told that many of these novels are in the tradition of humoristic satire, but I do not think it is so. I do not understand how it is possible to make humor about a university. [...] If your books are funny, please tell me where, [...] Only one more question now! My professor hints me that you and David Lodge are the same Person. Perhaps you are also T. Hardy, M. Beerbohm, T. Sharpe and H. Jacobson. If so please tell me in your letter, and give me a full bibliography of your writings, under all your namesⁱⁱ. MALCOLM BRADBURY

The quotations above, from two different works by Malcolm Bradbury (1932-2000) and David Lodge (b.1935 -) — two of the most outstanding contemporary English novelists [campus novelists] and academics —, introduce the basic traces and foundations of the narrative genre or sub genre, now called the 'campus novel'.

In the first text Lodge discusses how popular this type of fiction has become, and tries to trace the origins of such popularity — for both writers and readers — in that the academic environment might be very appropriate to portrait society as a whole, as a microcosmic world.

The second text is an excerpt from one of the imaginary letters Bradbury includes in his book *Unsent Letters: Irreverent Notes from a Literary Life*. This collection of 'unsent' letters is a series of supposed messages the author has received, followed by the writer's also supposed answers. Here, some of the questions and statements from this supposed German student serve as an introductory point for the theme of 'campus novel', to be discussed in the present paper.

Much of what is mentioned in them are real issues, closely related to the new sub genre: a) this genre developed primarily in Britain and in some parts of the United States; b) the academic world, lecturers, tutors, professors, courses, students, physical and psychological spaces and so forth, are the background or the thematic core for the plot of such novels; c) the narratives make use of the comic strand and of the tradition of the humoristic satire; d) the campus novel is a self-conscious and metatextual mode of fiction; e) being self-conscious and metatextual, it tends for parody or even clear and pure imitation of styles and themes.

The satirical English *campus* novel, as we know it today, was first written and published, in the early fifties, in the 20th century. Nevertheless, education as subject has been satirized and treated as a comic theme over many centuries. As early as 423 b. C, the Greek playwright, Aristophanes, in *The Clouds*, already made fun of and punned at Socrates' academic methods and at his rhetoric.

In the XIV century, Geoffrey Chaucer (1345-1400) introduces in the frame narrative of *Canterbury Tales* a monk from Oxford University, a modest scholar, somewhat sanctified, who tells his seventeen tales/tragedies with a somewhat modeling intention. This character, one of the enthusiastic narrators of the famous tales, establishes a dialogue with the literature from his own time, telling a story adapted from the Italian poets, Petrarca, his contemporary, Bocaccio and Dante.

In 1981, Umberto Eco, pays homage to, but, at the same time, ironically and sarcastically criticizes the academic surroundings, besides revering Chaucer and the British novel in some of its characteristic sub genres. In his famous novel, *The Name of the Rose*, knowledge is a synonym for domination. Death and deceit

happen in its name. Furthermore, among many other aspects, the plot establishes a parodist dialog with the British detective novel and brings, as its main character, a friar, called William of Baskerville, a prototype figure of Sherlock Holmes.

Nevertheless, knowledge and scholars have not always received literary respect and honor. From the XV century on, the European literature, in general, and the British narrative, in particular, offer plenty examples of negative descriptions of intellectuals, of academic knowledge and attitudes and of high-brow culture. In this context, university professors, and men of letters became the target for an endless conflagration, and received some of the most bitter and fierce criticism ever. Such criticism came indiscriminately from within distinct literary productions, whether poetry, drama or prose.

Important to notice, though, that, even when some stories were produced with the clear objective of making fun of intellectuals, there were others to praise the success of academic institutions. These works were mainly written during the historical and artistic period now known as Enlightenment; when a special emphasis was given to letters, science and reason. The possibility of personal empowerment from learning and from the production of knowledge had a strong influence in the imagination of many people, what caused, on the one hand, people wanting to resist while, on the other, people being praised.

It is also necessary to remember the great number of literary works, in the XVII and XIX centuries — during the Romantic and Realist aesthetic periods — that bring education and culture, in different forms, functions and expression, to the centre of the plot: boarding schools, orphanage, children's home, tutorials, private teachers, nannies, among many others. An important point to be made about these kinds of literary works, though, is the discussion of a great range of possibilities of character expressions and the different views about teaching methods and theories they bring about.

It follows that the novels that have education and educators as their theme have constituted a fictional separate category, in which is possible to find hundreds of examples.

As far as education is concerned, in the XX century, we come again to be uncertain, and even to have doubts about the social use of academic and university systems — represented by the institutions they depict — and, besides that, about the beliefs underling the subjects related to liberal humanities.

Terry Eagleton, analyzing the content and environment of David Lodge's works, states that the success in Great-Britain of the novels that discuss themes related to education and that deal with issues related to educational institutions, especially the universities, is a consequence of the cultural and historical development of the British society. From the renowned and intense debate and dispute between the political theorist, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) with the Jacobites, the so-called British *intelligentia* has been viewed as a group of sinister, vagabond, and non-conformist figures; treacherous clerks, whose academic heartless celebrations represented a great threat for the daily unreflective beliefs.

On the other hand, as far as representation of people, Eagleton points out that they are certainly pathetically ineffectual characters — funny people that follow their ridicule abstraction in a remote distance from daily realities and disturbances. Furthermore, it is also against them that Napoleon Bonaparte rebelled when he repudiated the Enlightenment ideologies, as he considered them to be both subversive and unnecessary.

Considering these points the critic states that the attitude towards scholars and academics has been ambivalent and unexpected over the last years. The *campus novel* seems to be a means to express the solution to the problem of both this ambivalence and of the realistic mimetic representation:

The intellectual combines the fascination of the offbeat with the comic relief of the harmless eccentric, and is thus fit meat for a kind of fiction which equivocates between a satiric criticism of everyday middle-class life and an unshaken commitment to its fundamental values. Something of the same ambiguity can be traced in the relation of the university and to society as a whole. [...] The 'campus' novel thus provides one kind of solution to a problem which has never ceased to dog the modern English novel, and which is nothing less than how ordinary social experience is to offer a fertile soil for fictional creationⁱⁱⁱ.

Eagleton discusses the evidences for the seeming paradox that even though most of the contemporary narrative is written in England, they are in fact located in

non-English places. This fact exposes a certain revelation as if the local themes were found improper for the social experience “of an industrially declining, cultural parochial, post-imperial nation.”^{iv} As a consequence, the academic or *campus* novel “could offer here a characteristically English compromise, anchored as it is in the idiosyncrasies of middle-class life, yet sufficiently askew, unconventional and (given the global reach of academia) internationalist, to call that familiar existence into satiric question.”^v

The *campus novel* can be seen as an extension of the narrative theme that has, throughout history, taken as its main motif the life and characters of the academic world. But, among these many narrative expressions, the academic novel is a peculiar one, as it clearly assumes the metafictional characteristics of the post-II World War European and American fictions.

The university novel uses the academic context for making satire, placing in the center of its stage the primacy of irony, of frontal attack and of analysis. In this fictional arena, the characters are given a second role. It seems that the university has always been a privileged environment for satire, humor and wit, for that, besides representing closed and isolated communities, which can serve as a narrative space, call for themselves representative elements from society as a whole.

The most productive and innovative historical period we find this typology of narrative coincide with Post-Modernism. Following the tradition of the post-modern aesthetics, the *campus* novel is one of the fictional subgenres to establish its foundations primarily in self-reflection, self-consciousness and meta-reference in England. This happens mostly from the expressions of some of the authors who make use of some of the British intellectual agents, of the new architecture of the university buildings and of the university life of the time they were written.

The situations proposed by the academic novels are experienced by characters that belong, mirror and carnivalize a certain environment, a daily routine and a historical reality; in other words, they represent a unique social microcosm. But, what is now called *campus* novel, is different from the novels about learning and education, seen through amplifying lenses that have looked back with

melancholy and have exploited youth and young students, previously written. These *campus novels* focus on the examination of the social group that wanders around and in this surrounding, and also the world of knowledge and its relationships with the historical universe.

It is known and socially accepted that the Universities' main role is to pass on important ideas and values to societies they are part of. On the other hand, when performing this specific role, they may also pass on some 'deviated' values that might subvert this same society — such as some radical ideas, hedonistic values, for example.

Moreover, in the contemporary world, academy was given new responsibilities and roles. Rules have been created to assess its professors' and students' successful teaching and learning. As a consequence, some distinct rules might become either arbitrarily comic or scaring. In such a context, academic success becomes strictly related to each one's skill to taking complete control of the rules or in the ability of knowing how to take advantages of them.

The professors who belong to these institutions generally form closed teams, whose members may either be cooperative or competitive. Such groups tend to split into very hostile factions, especially when they have to vote for the head of a Department or of a Course, to select new professors, deliberate about promotions and about a workmate's stability.

They generally group themselves into different or similar theoretical fields and have no ending discussions about pedagogical methods, political tendencies, sexual behavior, among other very polemic issues. Nevertheless, the university and department members are generally lenient with themselves and tend to isolate — to say the least — strangers who do not share their same privileges.

The academic theme belongs to and is developed in an important historical period, which coincides with the expansion and the universalization of higher education in Europe and in North-America.

According to Malcolm Bradbury, the British *campus* novel has strong historical roots: it is the product of the democratization of higher education. The forerunner examples, mainly written in the 20s, of such a fiction are peopled with

reminiscences about a happy past and are full of echoes of nostalgia for the good and distant old days. The focus seems to be the place and the situations where the characters have spent one of the important moments of transition in their lives, and of the building up and the establishment of their personalities.

So, it does not seem difficult to trace the beginnings of the development of such new sub genre. Trying to do this, one might come to the early past of the romantic and sentimental novels about *Oxbridge*, in the XIX century compared “with *Wilhelm Meister* and the *Bildungsroman*. These are tales about young men’s education in pastoral surroundings, part of an Oxbridge myth that grows much more ironic in the twentieth-century novels of Forster, Waugh and Aldous Huxley.^{vi}”

Most of the times, these first stories about the university show a tendency to my(s)tify reality. They are not representative of a determined historical period. For this reason such narratives come near utopist idealization, telling stories of its character’s development and moral, social and religious education.

After the II WW, a new phenomenon occurs, within the limits of the *campus* novel: **the professors**, themselves, start writing about the university, setting their plots in *campi* that “really” exist or in some form of fictitious reality — or, besides that, in both. This is achieved, though, in a clear and purposeful metatextual and polyphonic way, as the following opening notes from Bradbury and Lodge in some of their most famous works show:

1. Author’s Note

Although some of the locations and public events portrayed in this novel bear a certain resemblance to actual locations and events, the characters, considered either as individuals or as members of institutions are entirely imaginary. Rummidge and Euphoria are places on the map of a comic world which resembles the one we are standing on without corresponding exactly to it, and which is peopled by figments of the imagination.^{vii}

2. Author’s Note

Like *Changing Places*, to which it is a kind of sequel, *Small World* resembles what is sometimes called the real world, without corresponding exactly to it, and is peopled by figments of the imagination (the name of one of the minor characters has been changed in later editions to avoid misunderstanding on this score). Rummidge is not Birmingham, though it owes something to popular prejudices about that city. There really is an underground chapel at Heathrow and a James Joyce Pub in Zurich, but no universities in Limerick or Darlington; not, as far as I know, was there ever a British Council representative resident in Genoa. The MLA Convention of 1979 did not take place in New York,

though I have drawn on the programme for the 1978 one, which did. And so on.^{viii}

3. Author's Note

Perhaps I should explain, for the benefit of readers who have not been here before, that Rummidge is an imaginary city, with imaginary universities and imaginary factories, inhabited by imaginary people, which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world.

I am deeply grateful to several executives in industry, and to one in particular, who showed me around their factories and offices, and patiently answered my often naïve questions, while this novel was in preparation. D. L.^{ix}

4. Author's Note

This fiction is for Beamish, whom, while en route for some conference or other, I last saw at Frankfurt airport, enquiring from desk to desk about his luggage, unhappily not loaded onto the same plane as he. It is a total invention with delusory approximations to historical reality, just as is history itself. Not only does the University of Watermouth, which appears here, bear no relation to the real University of Watermouth (which does not exist) or to any other university; the year 1972, which also appears, bears no relation to the real 1972, which was a fiction anyway; and so on. As for the characters, so-called, no one but the other characters in this book knows them, and they not well; they are pure inventions, as is the plot in which they more than participate. Nor did I fly to a conference the other day; and if I did, there was no one on the plane named Beamish, who certainly did not lose his luggage. The rest, of course, is true.^x

From being polyphonic, sarcastic and metatextual, from simple explanations of the construct of their novels, the authors start explaining their clear interference and change in reality; the post-modern deconstructionism they had been able to perform. How and why they have done — godlike — the changes to organize and produce their pieces of fiction, as if they were telling the reader to rely on their job because they know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing so. The Preface to Bradbury's last novel, *To the Hermitage*, might illustrate this fact:

5. This is (I suppose) a story. It draws a great deal on history; but as history is the lies the present tells in order to make sense of the past I have improved it where necessary. I have altered the places where facts, data, info, seem dull or inaccurate. I have quietly corrected errors in the calendar, adjusted flaws in world geography, now and then budged the border of a country, or changed the constitution of a nation. A wee postmodern Haussman, I have elegantly replanned some of the world's greatest cities, moving buildings to better sites, redesigning architecture, opening fresh views and fine urban prospects, redirecting the traffic. I've put statues in more splendid locations, usefully reorganized art galleries, cleaned, transferred or rehung famous paintings, staged entire new plays and operas. I have revised or edited some of our great books and

republished them. I have altered monuments, defaced icons, changed the street signs, and occupied the railway station. In all this I have behaved just as history does itself, when it plots the world's advancing story in the great Book of Destiny above.

I have also taken the chance to introduce people who never met in life, but certainly should have. I have changed their lives and careers, allowed them fresh qualities, novel opportunities, new loves. To my chief character — Denis Diderot, the most pleasing of all the philosophers, though alas now generally remembered only as a Parisian district or a Metro stop — I have been particularly kind. [...] I have reshaped his life, adjusted his fame; I have granted him (as he would have liked) some pleasant extra months of existence, extended some of his ideas, developed some of his plots and mystifications. In fact I have amended and reorganized his entire website in the big Book of Destiny above.

I have been just as bold with our so-called contemporary reality. There really is a Boris Yeltsin. And there really is a Diderot Project: a splendid set of international conferences (organized by Professors Bo Gorazon and Magnus Florin of the Royal University of Stockholm) which over the years has encouraged some of our most splendid dons, writers, philosophers, scientists, actors and crafts persons to extend Diderot's educational and intellectual heritage, and for that purpose brought them comfortably together in some of the great cities of the world. I too have taken part in these congresses.[...]

As all you practiced readers of stories know, this means there can be no possible resemblance between the real pilgrims, our real hosts in Petersburg, or the real Diderot Project itself and the imaginary people and plans you find depicted here. This is, as I mentioned, a story. But I dedicate it to those real people (Bo Gorazon, Jon Cook, Stephen Toulmin, etc.), many of whom are my friends. I hope they remain so. [...] M.B.^{xi}

Since the beginnings of the 50s, the much closed *campi* become a paradigm for the political and social order. The *campus novels* written after that are very much concerned with social and intellectual changes, and present as their main characters, people who, coming from the working class, had been able to grow socially as a consequence of the possibility of having access to a higher education diploma. Malcolm Bradbury calls the fiction about the academy, *campus* novel. According to the critic this is the type of narrative that, from the 50s on, has given voice to cultural changes happening in university life, as well as reflects the and about innovations and developments taking place within the genre itself.

So, the *Campus* novel, as is being described now, treats the university as a physical and psychological space apart from ordinary life, "a small world in which ambition and desire generate comedy rather than tragedy. There is invariably an element of artifice and literary self-consciousness in the genre, of which Shakespeare's courtly campus play, *Love's Labour's Lost*, was a distant precursor."^{xii}

David Lodge's novels prove that it is possible to transform some very simple, "no exotic or heroic experience", besides suburban families from middle class environments, or universities whose professors and students are deprived of any special *glamour* into the matter, the theme and the plot of great stories.

One should notice, also, that this sub-genre "must be credited, too, with extraordinary willingness for change. There has been an alternation, in the more mature novels, between comic fiction and works with a more serious tone: between novels which are playful, self-consciously fictive, and those which hew to the demands of gritty realism.^{xiii}

As far as the referential content aspect is concerned, in the Afterword of one of his early novels, *Ginger, You're Barmy*, Lodge explains that

The novel, in other words, begins as a short answer to the question that will eventually be asked of it, as of every novel: what is it *about*?^{xiv}

Both, David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury answer this question using their own academic experience. university life, campus life, relationship between students, teachers and between class activities and research is one of their strongest themes and part of the plot itself. These authors' literary production seems always to discuss some aspects of it. Furthermore, their novels are a paradigm for the academic sub genre as those academic novelists always introduce in the plot of their works some aspects related to approaches and ideas about literary criticism, or some metafiction to and polyphony with what it is being narrated.

It is important to stress that when both write about the academy they are not making pure denunciation about university life. Their representation is a comical one, satirical and humoristic, and so is the structure of all their work. Moseley stresses that it is impossible to forget, when reading Lodge and Bradbury, the presence of the literary critics in their fiction, as the authors constantly interfere in the story, calling the reader's attention to what is being narrated and to the way they are, little by little, assembling, distributing and organizing the events and the characters within the story

It is also clear the critical self-conscience of both novelists about each composition process they construct as novel writers and, more important, about

their own function and voice as real and implicit authors who are, at the same time, interfering in the process. While Lodge and Bradbury, when reading other people's novels, ask themselves how a special aspect, character or effect have been composed and done, they eagerly try to make clear to the readers how their own novels have been constructed and organized.

What is certain, though, is that David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, the real authors, actually interfere in the text of their narratives. They tend to relate the actions in the plot to real situations, found in a parallel or opposed way, in some of their personal or individual experiences and in some of their literary "parents", or, more, in the English or American literary canon itself, that they have inherited. Furthermore, there are always polyphonic dialogues between different texts in the novels; texts that communicate one with the other, talk with the authors and also talk with the art of writing novels. This polyphony is a very important issue in these authors' writings, as it seems they try, through it, to solve their own theoretical-critical questions about the references that form the literary works.

When Lodge and Bradbury use these dialogues in their fictions, one might even believe that this is the way they have found for escaping from the narrative "crossroads" one finds a contemporary writer who is still fond of literary realism. However, dialogue does not happen only among the characters, but among different styles, speeches, between a specific character and his/her speech and thought, between the character(s) and the author, between the novel and the novels and the readers and between the text and the intertext. It clear that the objective that Lodge and Bradbury have in composing this intertextual polyphony is to break up with the novel realist pattern.

As Lodge himself states in *The Art of Fiction* "(...) intertextuality is not, or not necessarily, a merely decorative addition to a text, but sometimes a crucial factor in its conception and composition."^{xv} But for both writers, this 'crucial factor in conception and composition' is self-conscious. It seems that all the movement they take in the novel is structured to picture, in the clearest way possible, the role of the author in the composition of the formal elements as they are found. Instead of hiding they devices, as traditional realist novelists would have done, they openly

reveal them; they celebrate, through the exposition of their own narrative strategies, how much the novel is far away from only mimetizing reality or thinking and reflecting about ordinary life.

There is no more doubt that the *campus* novel, as a whole, already establishes a particular sub genre in prose narrative, from which history both, Bradbury and Lodge, are a significant part, being responsible not only for its development, but for its popularity, as well. Many times these writers are taken one for the other, not only in relation to the books they write, but also personally. When Bradbury was alive, they used to make fun of such situations and help to make it all more confusing when one included the other in his own work, as seen in Bradbury's quotation in the opening epigraph.

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