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“C’est la vie, c’est la narration”: The Reader in  
Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Textermination* and  
David Lodge’s *Small World*

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**Abstract**

This article considers two metafictional academic novels from the reader’s point of view. It argues that this critical vantage point is suggested (if not imposed) by the fictional texts themselves. The theoretical texts informing this reading pertain either to reader response or to theories of metafiction, in an attempt to uncover conceptual commonalities between the two. Apart from a thematic focus on academic conferences as pilgrimages and the advocacy of reading as an ethically valuable activity, the two novels also share a propensity for intertextuality, a blurring of the boundaries between fictional and critical discourse, as well as a questioning of the borderline between fiction and reality. The reading of fiction is paralleled to the reading of (one’s own) life and self-reflexivity emerges as crucial to both types of literacy.

**Keywords:** academic fiction, metafiction, self-reflexivity, reader response theory, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh

In the 1983 Preface to her seminal study *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Linda Hutcheon deplores the fact that “critics and theorists today have seemed much more willing to read and assimilate the latest theory, hot off the press, than to trust to the insights revealed by the self-reflexivity of the equally recent fiction” (xii). In an attempt to heed Hutcheon’s implied advice and engage with the “lessons” that metafiction as a “most didactic form” (xi) teaches, I argue that the two academic novels chosen for discussion guide their readers towards

considering their own role in 'making' texts. The novels' metafictional character is essential in pointing out the centrality of the reader to the reading process. My reading of these texts will simultaneously regard and disregard Linda Hutcheon's suggestion above, by focusing not only on the two metafictional texts themselves, but also on criticism and theory, reader response criticism in particular.

This is how *Textermination* (1991) begins: "so that Emma found, on being escorted and followed into the second carriage by Mr Elton, that the door was to be lawfully shut on them, and that they were to have a tête-à-tête drive" (1). Although the "1" preceding this paragraph is reassuringly interpretable as the number of the chapter – a familiar structure in a novel – the start *in medias res*, and with an un-capitalized 's', is at once an unsettling and enthralling experience for the reader. The first paragraph proves – auspiciously – to be an excerpt from Jane Austen, a canonical writer, and that recognition reassures the reader, as she identifies the "Emma" in the text to be Emma Woodhouse of Austen's eponymous novel. However, Brooke-Rose's choice of paragraph puts the reader on her guard once again: this must be one of the most uncomfortable paragraphs in Austen's entire novel, when the reader's expectations are considered; by his marked attentions, Mr Elton has raised the suspicion that it is not Harriet he is courting but Emma herself. Until this point in Austen's novel, only the reader had suspected as much, but now Emma herself becomes privy to this unsavory possibility. While the reader braces herself for the unpleasantness of the scene to follow, she is again thwarted in her expectations: the second paragraph of *Textermination*, instead of dealing with Mr Elton's "actually making violent love to her" (Austen 103), sedately goes on like this: "She sat still in her corner, her hands crossed over her reticule" (Brooke-Rose 1). Should the word "reticule" (never employed in Austen's novels, although it must have been in circulation for half a century or so by the time *Emma* was written), as well as the word "landauer" – not to be confused with Mrs Elton's pet-word "barouche-landau" (Austen 214) – not raise the reader's suspicion, Goethe's presence, asserted two sentences later, most certainly does. Goethe's use of German and the mention of Ossian and Klopstock misleadingly bring to the reader's mind Johann Wolfgang

Goethe's 1774 *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), whereas the text refers to Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* (1939). The error is caused by a lapse of attention in the reader, by the common and all-too-eager conflation of Werther with Goethe himself: although much has been made of the autobiographical character of Goethe's *Sorrows*, its hero is still Werther, whereas the (mostly absent) protagonist of Mann's novel is indeed Goethe. The mention of the "Gasthaus Zum Elefanten" is another clue pointing towards Mann's novel.

Reading the first page of Brooke-Rose's novel, then, entails a repeated (and riveting) frustration of one's expectations as a reader, a phenomenon Wolfgang Iser welcomes as inducing "innovative reading" (56), because the reader is required to make a decision as to how to bridge the gap between the expectation and its modification, in this case to decide between the presence in the (same?) carriage of Emma Woodhouse, Lotte Kestner, or both. The next paragraph both answers and complicates the reader's predicament:

Das ist sehr artig, Exzellenz Goethe, erwiderte sie, and as she speaks, Emma realises that she has boarded the wrong carriage. Despite her relief at not having to face, for the billionth time or so, the scene with Mr Elton, more disagreeable than she yet knows, she wonders how she comes to be speaking in German, and whether she can keep this up without becoming quite other. Which is worse, she now asks herself, involuntarily leaping forward in time: to misread a man's suit to her as addressed to someone else and suffer the vexation of her error but at least to be in power still and able to repair; or to be thus misread by someone else unknown to her and quite beyond her control? (Brooke-Rose 1-2)

As readers, we tend to hastily translate this paragraph as Emma's having intertextually boarded the 'wrong' book, a totalizing interpretation that would solve our problems, at least for now. Emma would still be a character in a well-known novel, as would Lotte, and the reader is reassured. This interpretation is redolent of Iser's contention that "the reader will strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern" (58). However, there are numerous elements in the paragraph above that impede this re-establishment of consistency. Emma – i.e. Jane Austen's character – seems to be aware of the reception history of the novel she is a character in. If, as Iser drawing on Roman Ingarden

claims, “the text only takes on life when it is realized” (Iser 50), we can equate Emma’s billion or so lives with the billion or so readings of Jane Austen’s novel throughout history so Emma is no longer just a character in a book, but a self-aware cultural construct produced by centuries of reading. However, this interpretation too is overthrown by the next phrase, “more disagreeable than she yet knows,” which again ‘reduces’ her to the status of an unwitting character in a novel, only to ‘elevate’ her again to prescience when she involuntarily leaps forward in time (or is it the reader who leaps forward in reading Jane Austen’s novel?). Emma’s thinking of being “in power still and able to repair” elicits a condescending smile from the reader, aware as she is of the illusory nature of Emma’s ‘power’ and ‘control’. It is but a brief smile, however, as the potential of a misreading – both active and passive – by the very reader of *Textermination* insistently suggests itself even while it seemingly refers to Emma’s misreading of Mr Elton’s intentions and to Brooke-Rose’s misreading/writing of *Emma* respectively. Emma’s dual identity as both Emma Woodhouse and Lotte Kestner further complicates the reader’s attempt to fabricate coherence and consistency. The free indirect speech which articulates Emma/Lotte’s thoughts reads as a reminder to the reader of her responsibility in reading. One of the many questions raised by *Textermination* as its reading progresses is what (if anything) would actually count as a “misreading.”

Like *Textermination*, *Small World* (1984) is an academic novel with a thematic interest in academic conferences. Lodge’s novel stages a series of academic conferences taking place all over the world (Rummidge, Amsterdam, Zürich, Heidelberg, Seoul, Jerusalem, New York, etc.), in which a large cast of characters – most of them academic critics – take part. *Textermination* revolves around one conference, held in San Francisco, to which literary characters from (mainly Western) literature and from different literary epochs are invited by present-day academics. Travel is central – thematically – to both novels, as it is to the reader’s experience in reading these (and all other) texts. The reader’s journey not only entails the common notion that reading a book takes one to new fictional worlds, causing one’s consciousness to travel to unknown territory, but also the fact that the process of reading itself is a journey

unfolding in time. The reader travels from the book's first page to its last, forgetting much in the process, but nevertheless traveling from a state of 'unknowing' or ignorance to some kind of knowledge or even an epiphany of sorts.

Intriguingly, both novels associate academic conferences with religious pilgrimages. In the Prologue to *Small World* pilgrimages and conferences are likened in their participants' "indulg[ing] themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement" (i). The "annual Convention of Prayer for Being" (8) in Brooke-Rose's text is calculated to avoid the event announced in the title, i.e. the end of literature. Characters who are doubly fictional – i.e. fictional even within the fictional world of *Textermination* – are praying for their continued existence to their god, the capitalized Reader. Characters in books no longer read are "dead," their names are inscribed in a long Index which is read during the "Service of the Dead" (28). This is another nod to reader response criticism and its claims that the text only becomes alive when it is *konkretisiert* by a reader. Emma Woodhouse "revives, begins to feel the blood circulate in her veins again" (15) when a passage from Jane Austen's novel is read aloud by one of the academics delivering a conference paper on *Emma*. In the next sentence, written like the rest of the paragraph in the free indirect style typical of Austen's prose, the doubly fictional Emma calls her own ontological status into question: "If she has blood, if she has veins" (15).

The conference in Brooke-Rose's novel is organized to ensure the survival of literature (what would be called the 'primary text'), whereas Lodge's novel suggests that conferences are organized "to uphold the institution of academic literary studies ... by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse" (28), i.e. to also ensure the survival of the 'secondary' discourse of literary criticism. These are the words of Morris Zapp, a post-structuralist according to his own tentative admission and a character modeled on reader response theorist Stanley Fish according to Lodge himself. During the first conference in the novel, Zapp delivers a lecture entitled "Textuality as Striptease" (20), a lecture that focuses on the activity of reading and interpretation. Zapp declares himself to have "once believed

in the possibility of interpretation" (24), of establishing the 'meaning' of texts, whereas at present he views the activity of reading as "an endless, tantalising leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation, it is solitary, masturbatory" (26). The aim of reading should therefore be not to strive to possess the text, but to "take pleasure in its teasing" (27). Had Lodge not provided us with the clue as to Zapp's 'real' counterpart, we might still be able to recognize him: "Coming to the point fulfils the need that most literature deliberately frustrates (if we open ourselves to it), the need to simplify and close. Coming to the point should be resisted ..." (Fish, *Is There* 52). Zapp's lecture, placed as it is at the beginning of the novel, rings slightly prescriptive to Lodge's reader, i.e. indicative of an interpretation 'sanctioned' by Lodge himself for his own novel, or in other words, it may (mis)lead the reader into committing the 'intentional fallacy'. The beginning of this novel, as opposed to *Textermination's* relative formlessness, evinces an excess of form: the actual beginning of chapter one is delayed over ten pages, containing, in addition to a few interspersed blank pages, a dedication, an "Author's Note," three epigraphs – one of which contains Nathaniel Hawthorne's thoughts on the Romance versus the Novel – and the already mentioned Prologue. This protracted start gently eases the reader into the narrative, which re-traces a connection to the Prologue and its mention of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* by quoting *The Waste Land's* first line: "'April is the cruellest month,' Persse McGarrigle quoted silently to himself, gazing through grimy windowpanes at the unseasonable snow crusting the lawns and flowerbeds of the Rummidge campus" (1). Within one sentence, the protagonist (as we will find out) as well as the time and place of the action have been introduced. The quoted line is helpfully identified as penned by T.S. Eliot in the very next sentence. The demands Lodge places on his readers for dwelling in (intertextual) uncertainty seem – at this point – to be much more modest than Brooke-Rose's.

In both novels the reader's perception is rendered more complicated by the inclusion in their subject matter of literary theory and criticism. As is the case with Morris Zapp's lecture, the reader may interpret these bits of literary criticism as prescriptive, without even being aware of doing so. The unreflective 'adoption' of one critical suggestion or another is,

however, impeded by the novels themselves. *Textermination* ironically dramatizes some of the objections raised throughout the history of criticism against reader response criticism: Emma Woodhouse is made to irreverently question the identity of the Reader and thereby her own identity as well, as she wonders why, after having been “totally sure of her personality, flaws and all” for two centuries, she now feels confused, as if “the Reader her Creator had somehow absconded, like God, behind a Cloud of Unknowing” (14). The capital letters in “Cloud of Unknowing” alert the reader to its being another literary allusion, this time to a fourteenth-century Christian work (or possibly also *Rashh-i-'Amá*, a work of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith – a work neither Emma Woodhouse nor Jane Austen could have been aware of, since it was written in 1852). Emma then subjects her faith in this god to scrutiny, asking herself why the Reader is always referred to as a man, especially in her own case, as she (correctly) assumes she is read mainly by women. Indeed, when one reads Jauss, Iser or Fish, the same thought arises – they all use masculine pronouns throughout – a fact that *Textermination* cannot help but point out when it reproduces Iserian ideas: “...but the text is all ... It has the ambiguities on which survival depends. It's in illogics that the interpreter takes his pleasure ... Hisher, I'm sorry. She [the reader] is condemned to textuality, that is, to making the apparently incoherent coherent, reducing the aggressivity of the text” (Brooke-Rose 36).<sup>1</sup> The (male) character speaking here has revised his pronouns to account for readers of both genders. The “ambiguities” and “illogics” mentioned bring to mind Iser's “elements of indeterminacy” or textual “gaps” (58), without which the reader would not be able to use her imagination, while the “aggressivity” of the text is reminiscent of what Fish calls Milton's “programme of reader harassment” (*Not so much* 196).

Another central aspect of reader response is “the generalisation of all these readers into the Super Reader, who seems both there and not there, dead and alive” (Brooke-Rose 15). This is another nod not only to Stanley Fish's “informed reader” and Rifaterre's “super-reader” (Fish, *Is There* 63), but also to Fish's *interpretive communities* and to an entire tradition of conceptualizations of the reader in (reader response) criticism. Emma's irreverent thoughts on the Reader as her Creator further allude to

criticism: "God of course is the Father, who created the world. But the Reader as Creator of our world, her world?" (15). In *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish argues that the text itself does not exist, that "it is the reader who 'makes' literature" (11).<sup>2</sup> As will be seen in the following, various other schools of thought are given consideration: the allusion above to Barthes's "The Death of the Author" is taken up again later in the novel, from the perspective of the author: "Be that as it may, I am the author, take it how you will, and I am still alive and well, if not in Texas, at least here, and for a little while yet" (Brooke-Rose 107).

Even without making these connections to criticism, the reader of *Textermination* would inevitably join Emma in her doubt and would end up self-reflexively questioning her own competence as a reader and subjecting herself and her reading (not only of *Textermination*) to doubt. This fostering of doubt dramatizes the way we as readers construct our own sense of self out of fictions, out of the narratives we tell ourselves about who we are and the way we question each of these narratives at some point in our lives. The experience of reading is parallel and analogous to our experience of living, as reader response theorists are keen on observing (Iser 64, Fish, *Is There?* 202). *Textermination* too equates the two experiences: "That's the way we read books or the world..." (148). Thus, the novel's drive towards questioning all kinds of categories, literary and otherwise, is (or should be) paralleled by the readers' own questioning of her world. The reader is constantly educated, as the characters pray to her: "Distinguish my cause from the nation that reads not ... deliver me from the unjust and the ignorant man" (28). The reading of fiction is invariably promoted as an ethically valuable activity and the reader is obliquely reproached for having "absconded," having closed "his reading eye," or for "look[ing] elsewhere<sup>3</sup> for these pleasures" (26). The novel in its entirety reads like a plea for reading, as various characters voice their opinions on the topic: "I ... believe that the fate of the world depends, has always depended, on our ability to tell and to listen to stories. To listen, to believe, to suspend our customs of thought and let ourselves be charmed by otherness" (126).

In an oversimplifying move, *Small World* can be said to be less urgent and more oblique in its tone when advocating reading. It is, at any



rate, less metafictional and more interested in actually constructing narrative and in entertaining the general reader (that is, if one assumes that realistic storytelling is more 'entertaining' to the general reader than intertextual and metacritical games). In one of its metafictional asides, delivered casually by Ronald Frobisher, who is one of the two novelists in the fictional world of Lodge's novel, the text states this overtly: "...but with fiction it's the narrative bits that give the writing its individuality. Descriptions of people, places, weather, stuff like that" (182). This is an accurate description of how Lodge's own novel unfolds its fictional world for the reader: the main characters are fleshed out, the lesser ones are merely sketched, or rather caricatured, which is probably why they endure in the reader's memory more vividly than do Brooke-Rose's; the houses these characters live in and the places they travel to are at times constructed in minute detail: Fulvia Morgana's "magnificent eighteenth-century house" (127) and Akira Sakazaki's tiny "living unit," a "luxurious padded cell" (103) spring to mind. So does the character vignette that introduces Fulvia, which reads like an ironic challenge to clichés about men not being able to notice fashion in women: all of 337 carefully selected words are dedicated to Fulvia's physiognomy, the book she is reading, her "slender gold-plated propelling pencil" (89) and – most of all – to her attire. The paragraph's cinematic technique, with its ironically feminine representation of color, shape and texture, is calculated to produce vivid images in the reader's mind, reminding her of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, as well as of T.S. Eliot's re-writing of that description in *The Waste Land*: "The hand itself, long and white and slender, looks almost weighed down with three antique rings in which are set ruby, sapphire and emerald stones. At the wrist there is a chunky gold bracelet and the hint of a cream silk shirt-cuff nestling inside the sleeve of a brown velvet jacket" (Lodge 89). Much attention is lavished on Fulvia's luxurious life-style, and with good reason, for she will be subjected to explicit judgment by the other characters and the narrator: Morris Zapp wonders how Fulvia manages "to reconcile living like a millionaire with being a Marxist" (128), while Sy Goodblatt nods solemnly at her as "she holds forth about the necessity of revolution with her mouth full of *Sachertorte*" (238).

It may well have been this treatment of the Marxist academic that attracted Terry Eagleton's embittered review entitled "The Silences of David Lodge," published in the *New Left Review*. Eagleton accuses Lodge of being a liberal bourgeois ideologue who, as a Roman Catholic, should have brought more rigorous critical thought and social and ethical concern – not to mention more spiritual passion – to his writing instead of merely dramatizing the "running conflict between doctrine and experience, now translated as the fraught encounter between literary theory and liberal humanism" (97). He goes on to claim that Lodge ensures that, in the conflict between theory and experience, "the former enters the arena seriously weakened," allegedly because, as Lodge's "derivative and unadventurous" theoretical writing shows, he is uneasy with Marxism and psychoanalysis, confining himself to formalist analyses (97). However, if one considers the novel itself, all of the main schools of literary theory are represented, in more or less detail, and with more or less 'sympathy' from the author and/or reader: post-structuralism (Morris Zapp), liberal humanism (Rudyard Parkinson), Marxism (Fulvia Morgana), Freudian theory (Sybil Maiden), reader response theory (Siegfried von Turpitz), anti-theoretical views (Philip Swallow), Computational Linguistics (Robin Dempsey), structuralist narratology (Michel Tardieu), deconstruction (Angelica Pabst), Arnoldian criticism (Rodney Wainwright), etc. While Eagleton does seem to appreciate Lodge's "allowing each to put the other into ironic question," he deplores the novelist's "implied posture of Arnoldian disinterestedness," as he claims that this strategy "places the text firmly on one side of the duality it is supposed to mediate" (97-98). While this may have been applicable to, though not true<sup>4</sup> of *Changing Places*, where a duality could be identified, it seems more precarious in relation to a work as multi-faceted as *Small World*. Moreover, the characters and – by implication – theoretical positions the reader finds least attractive are Philip Swallow and his anti-theoretical mediocrity, his moral laxity and cowardice, Rudyard Parkinson with his malevolence and his (il)liberal misuse of privilege, and Rodney Wainwright, with his stagnation in the Arnoldian paradigm, his procrastination habits and his all too sudden conversion to the Christian faith.

If Lodge's fiction is too little culturally (and politically) 'engaged' to suit some tastes, Brooke-Rose's novel is militant in promoting reading as a valuable but endangered cultural activity. If Lodge is Georg Lukács, Brooke-Rose is Bertolt Brecht, less interested in "enjoyment" and "escape" and more concerned with "struggle" and "advance" or progress (Brecht 69). *Textermination* was published in the aftermath of the Fatwa issued after Salman Rushdie's publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Consequently, Brooke-Rose's novel repeatedly alludes to it and to the politicized status of art and of fiction in particular. During the Convention of Prayer for Being, Mass commences with the words "In the name of the Reader, and of the Interpreter, and of His Imagination. Amen" (27). A ritual intensely reminiscent of Catholic mass is carried out in a psalm-like discourse: "I will go in to the altar of God. To the Reader who giveth joy to my youth" (27). Prior to Mass, the fictional Pope Hadrian VII had complained:

...for we are not read, and when read, we are read badly, we are not lived as we used to be, we are not identified with and fantasised, we are rapidly forgotten. Those of us who have the good fortune to be read by teachers, scholars and students are not read as we used to be read, but analysed as schemata, structures, functions within structures, logical and mathematical formulae, aporia, psychic movements, social significances and so forth. (26)

This nostalgic view of reading is just one of the many views which the novel brings into play and it is not necessarily endorsed by the novelistic text. Mass is interrupted by twelve (possibly doubly fictional) armed and turbaned Muslims who protest against the Christian religions getting to celebrate Mass first, although the order had been drawn by lot. Gibreel Farishta, the protagonist of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, makes several appearances in the novel and Rita Humboldt, a "Complit" academic and the organizer of the conference, suspects that he is the real cause of the terrorists' insurgence. Speculating on the fictional status of the terrorists, Rita rejoices: "...fiction's our business. Do you read me? It's a goddamn miracle that fiction still has the power to offend, and maybe change things, as it used to" (35). Rita's question "Do you *read* me?" (my emphasis) turns out to be a verbal tic, as she utters it repeatedly

whenever she asks another character whether she has been understood, but it also reads like a challenge posed to the reader of *Textermination*, to check whether she is paying attention: "...how do you read where we're at?" (37).

The novel is strewn with references to theories of reading: Fish's "interpretive communities" (Brooke-Rose 26), the "gaps" (14) in Iserian phenomenology, Jauss's "horizons of expectations" (90), etc. When TV characters as embodiments of a newer and less threatened cultural force are storming the conference, the difference between the reception of written fiction and TV and drama is spelled out: the distinction is between "a character who gradually appears out of the reading process, the letters on the page, not made flesh but creating phantoms in the very varied minds of each solitary reader ... [and] the actor, a real person, with immense talent, [who] is there to do the realisation work for us" (120). Iserian phenomenology and reader response theory at large clearly inform the entire novel.

The "frustration of expectations" (Iser 55) at the heart of Iser's (and also Fish's and Rifaterre's) conception of what literary texts do is relentlessly exercised in *Textermination*. This is also the point at which reader response and theories of metafiction converge: both stress the alternating 'use and abuse', the making and breaking, of literary conventions, which have the effect of alternatively promoting the reader's identification with and distancing from fictional characters and events. Thus, in *Textermination*, Rita Humboldt complains that her "horizons of expectation have been stretched to breaking-point" (90), as indeed will be the reader's two pages later. Kelly McFaddeon, a graduate student in Comparative Literature who thinks she is "abysmally ignorant" (41) because she does not recognize every character attending the conference and is not well-read in theory, is the character most readers probably identify with – much like Persse McGarrigle, Lodge's theory-innocent young academic. Half-way into *Textermination*, Kelly disappears, right after she reads her name in the Index of dead characters: "Yes: McFaddeon, Kelly. From *Textermination*, by Mira Enketei" (92). Mira Enketei is also a character in *Textermination*, an academic as well as a novelist who claims that nobody reads her (67). Thirteen pages after

Kelly's disappearance, Mira too will find her name in the Index and the reader is once more thrown into frame-break, paradox and entirely new narratological ground. As the reader of *Textermination* realizes, it should not be possible for either Kelly or Mira to die, since that reader is currently reading Broke-Rose's novel. However, one cannot help but suspect that, apart from wanting to place the reader before a (typically metafictional) paradox or textual gap, the disappearance of these two characters in particular is motivated by another rationale. Kelly is a slightly self-pitying but refreshingly honest student: "What am I doing here? I'm hopeless ... I'm ignorant and naïve and over-literal ... And so on" (92). The "[a]nd so on" could be read as the narrator's impatience with Kelly, yet Kelly turns out to be the most courageous of the participants in Mass, as she is the only one brave enough to negotiate with the twelve armed men. It is only too easy for the reader to identify with Kelly, consciously or unconsciously, yet the former is abruptly denied this indulgence half-way through the novel. One suspects that, with Mira's sudden disappearance, Broke-Rose denies herself the very same indulgence, i.e. identifying with the author-character in her own novel. Mira's fictional life is even shorter than Kelly's, only stretching over one quarter of the novel. Mira is a self-conscious combination of three 'personae': author, character, and reader. She admits that she feels strange to be both character and reader and portrays readers (herself included) in a cautionary manner: "Readers are interpreters, and interpreters extrapolate. We're all spies from Extrapol" (65). However, most of Mira's discourse relates to her tasks as an author, and her constant punning is a mark of her creativity. She explains how she goes about constructing characters as "constellations of semes" (63) and wonders about their awareness of themselves, of their fictional future and of their critical receptions.

From Chapter 11 on, the narrative discourse shifts from the third person to the first: "If she can't go on, I suppose I'll have to. I am not Mira of course, though many readers think I am ... so far I haven't said I. As eye-narrator I've kept pretty quiet, effaced as they say..." (106). This new I/eye-narrator is very kind to the novel's reader in that she provides the latter with a condensed history of twentieth-century criticism, raising awareness of her empowerment as well as responsibility as a reader and

critic: "The author was out. All authority rested in the text. And later all authority rested in the Reader, Implied, Ideal or whatever. ... But behind this lip-service to fads, what the author intends, what the text says, what the reader infers, is in every case what one critic interprets. He too is Reader, he too is God" (107). The reader/ interpreter/ critic is again challenged, this time by being forced to reassess all major turns in literary theory and criticism and to check whether they agree that these turns are indeed – as the text claims – minor. The reader suspects that this new I-narrator – who only is an I-narrator for less than three pages and then becomes 'effaced' again – though claiming not to be Mira, is Mira still, because the latter had been included in a list of I-narrators provided before her disappearance (94). However, Mira herself had stated that she had not said "I" as a narrator, but only as a character and the reader finds that this is indeed so: "...but part of *her* mind asks, am *I* abolished? Another part tells *her* that on the contrary *she* is inventing all this, and has no idea how to go on. Someone should enter now" (103, my emphasis). The last chapter, which briefly revives the I-narrator, hints towards this I-narrator's being indeed Mira: an "ex-husband" (176) is mentioned and the only one ever making a show in *Textermination* is Mira's.

The systematic manner in which the reader's expectations are frustrated by *Textermination* requires of her to constantly reframe the fictional world she constructs, to reorganize her reading experience and re-examine her assumptions in order to enlarge that frame, to adjust it so it can accommodate ever more meanings. This process is, however, self-reflexive, for the reader becomes aware of these acts she is performing. In Mieke Bal's words,

[t]he act of framing ... produces an event. This verb form, as important as the noun that indicates its product, is primarily an activity. Hence, it is performed by an agent who is responsible, accountable for his or her acts. Furthermore, in a regress that might, in principle at least, be infinite, the agent of framing is framed in turn. In this way, the attempt to account for one's own acts of framing is doubled. First, one makes explicit what one brings to bear on the object of analysis: why, on what grounds, and to what effect. Then one attempts to account for one's own position as an object of framing, for the 'laws' to which one submits. (135-6)

Making one's own assumptions explicit is crucial to reading/ interpreting any work of art, as it is for one's reading of life itself. "Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels" (Waugh 28), or, in the words of Jaques Textel, the narratologist in Lodge's novel: "C'est la vie, c'est la narration" (200). *Textermination* plays with such assumptions or preconceptions at every turn. Rita Humboldt, the strong, efficient academic who proudly asserts that she never watches television, or as she calls it "the idiotbox" (62) and looks down on Lieutenant Colombo for being "illiterate" (44) is revealed to have an increasingly pernicious effect on everyone around her. She alienates most of the fictional characters she encounters with her "peculiar academish" (119), i.e. her academic jargon, her systematizing impulses and her unreflexive narrow-mindedness. It would, however, be equally narrow-minded of the reader to extrapolate Rita to all academics, as Rita's own attitude makes clear.

The stress laid by *Textermination* on the importance of a self-reflective framing of experience translates formally into a narrative frame: the novel starts and ends with the same paragraph from Jane Austen's *Emma*, thereby drawing attention to frames and also suggesting the endlessness of reading. The characters who, much like 'escapist' readers, have escaped their fictions, are returning to their novels after the disastrous, near-apocalyptic ending of the conference.

Patricia Waugh asserts that "[t]he 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" (31). As will have been discernible by now, both novels under scrutiny here are metafictional, in different ways and to different extents. While *Textermination* revels in paradox, frame-break and self-reflexivity, *Small World* more rarely reminds the reader she is actually reading a novel. When Morris Zapp claims that "[t]he day of the single, static campus is over," Hillary Swallow replies "And the single, static campus novel with it, I suppose?," to which Zapp retorts "Exactly! Even two campuses wouldn't be enough" (63), thus alluding first to *Small World*, then to its predecessor, *Changing Places*. *Small World* is, however, much more concerned with its status as a romance than as a campus novel. Perhaps in

order to pre-empt criticism, and surely also in order to provide the reader with a possible frame for interpretation, the text informs the reader that "real romance is a pre-novelistic kind of narrative. It's full of adventure and coincidence and surprises and marvels, and has lots of characters who are lost or enchanted or wandering about looking for each other, or for the Grail..." (258). Anticipating its more or less open ending – with Persse starting a new search, this time for Cheryl Summerbee – romance, the text insists, conforms not to the male textual model, according to which texts only have one climax, but to the female, so that "the pleasure of this text comes and comes and comes again. ... The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished... romance is a multiple orgasm" (322-3). These metafictional remarks reconcile the reader to the necessity of submitting to an intensified suspension of disbelief, so that the many conferences and resulting accidental meetings between characters become more acceptable even within a reading along realist lines. The endless teasing of the text advocated at the beginning of the novel by Morris Zapp is in the end revised by him, after his brush with death: "I've rather lost faith in deconstruction ... the deferral of meaning isn't infinite as far as the individual is concerned ... death is the one concept you can't deconstruct. Work back from there and you end up with the old idea of an autonomous self. I can die, therefore I am" (328).

It remains for each reader to decide whether Zapp's revision is to be extrapolated to her own reading of *Small World*, of literature and art at large, or even of life itself. By making conscious decisions about how to bridge textual gaps, the reader implicitly acknowledges "the inexhaustibility of the text" (Iser 55). In Iser's view, this is particularly characteristic of modern texts, whose object is "not to complicate the 'spectrum' of connections, so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links" and to refer "us back directly to our own preconceptions" (55). Iser's words in turn refer us (forward in time) to theories of metafiction elaborated mostly during the 1980s by theorists like Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh, Robert Scholes, Larry MacCaffery, and Mark Curry. Linda Hutcheon in particular insists on the reader's place in metafiction, on the fact that the reader comes to question her life values and might thus be freed from her "own set patterns of thought and



imagination" (139). Iser's insistence on the reader's continual search for consistency and order is not, as might be expected, at odds with metafiction's disruptive impulse, for Iser includes disruption in the category of patterns which the reader looks for in a text: "...even in texts that appear to resist the formation of illusion, thus drawing our attention to the cause of this resistance, we still need the abiding illusion that the resistance itself is the consistent pattern underlying the text" (59). Thus, *Textermination* is a challenge brazenly posed to its reader to resist any totalizing interpretation and revise her own assumptions about fiction as well as the world.

*Small World* too refuses to resolve the dispute between the different schools of criticism. Persse McGarrigle, the "conference virgin" (18) who had asked, at the beginning of the novel, whether structuralism was a good or a bad thing (14), thereby stimulating the theory-literate reader's hubris, is, in the end, the one character who musters enough critical distance to ask the question that none of the highly specialized theorists seem to be able to answer: "What follows if everybody agrees with you?" (319). Arthur Kingfisher is the only one who appreciates the question and who offers a tentative answer: "...what matters in critical practice is not truth, but difference" (319), an answer implied in the question, an answer which does not bring resolution but asks the reader to find her own or to dwell in uncertainty. Arthur Kingfisher, unlike the other critics in the novel, does not profess to belong to a particular school of thought, but is a near-mythical persona, a Fisher King healed of his intellectual and physical impotence by the knight's question. Myth is central to both *Small World*, which is structured on the Arthurian Legends in particular and romance in general, and to *Textermination*, modeled on the Armageddon, with Beckettian overtones.

Christine Brooke-Rose and David Lodge are<sup>5</sup> both novelists and university teachers,<sup>6</sup> critics and theorists of literature. The conflicts and compromises inherent in such a combination of (pre)occupations carry over into the fiction as well as the theory of these writers. This relationship (even consistency, to a certain extent) between theory and fiction may well hold true for the entire subgenre of the academic novel, as well as for metafiction. While Brooke-Rose is almost unknown as a

novelist (judging at least from Romanian university syllabi as well as the lack of translations of her novels), she is a respected theorist – known particularly for *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (1971), *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (1981) and *Stories, Theories, and Things* (1991) – a fact confirmed even by Lodge's novel, which mentions her, alongside Julia Kristeva, as a potential candidate for the UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism (121). David Lodge, on the other hand, has a wide readership as a novelist (not only in Romania), but is less known for his contribution to literary theory and criticism in books like *Language of Fiction* (1966) and *Working with Structuralism* (1981). The two writers complement each other and this dual identity (both professional/ academic reader and writer, both theorist and practitioner of fiction) applies to many of the novelists who have written academic or campus novels. Brooke-Rose and Lodge have certainly availed themselves of the opportunity to "throw an aura of doubt or humour or particular perception upon theory" (*Stories* ix). For Lodge, the "comparative rarity of ... cross-fertilization [between fiction and criticism] in today's literary culture" is a worrying symptom ("The Novel Now" 146) and *Small World* is an illustration of this cross-fertilization, as is *Textermination*.

In conclusion, a web of conceptual relationships is discernible: the link between fiction and theory realized in metafiction, the frequent coupling of academic fiction and metafiction, the interconnection of theories of metafiction and reader response theory. As slippery and delicate as this web apparently is, the overarching theme of self-reflexivity yokes these concepts together. The dialogically interacting discourses all advocate the intrinsic value of self-reflexivity as conducive to self-knowledge: the reader's, the critic's, the academic's, the author's, and the text's.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In acknowledgement of both genders of novel-readers, and for simplicity, I use feminine pronouns in this essay to refer to all readers.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Fish and Christine Brooke-Rose took part in the same seminar at the University of Vincennes in 1970 (Fish, *Is There* 21).

<sup>3</sup> This is an allusion to television: in the novel, TV characters invade the conference and a discussion between the representatives of the written text and those of the filmic text ensues. Although the premise from which *Textermination* starts is that literature is a more endangered art form than film, this is qualified throughout the discussion between the two sides of the dispute. However, the novel's text relentlessly attempts to make the reader feel guilty, mostly for being too lazy to read, but not too busy to watch soaps.

<sup>4</sup> According to Eagleton, Lodge places "in caricatured antithesis the ideological poles of his world (theory and humanism, Zapp and Swallow, California and Birmingham, modernism and realism, technocrat and common man)" (97), only to end up favoring the second term in each pair, a fact demonstrated by his own novels' remaining within a "sedate, commercially acceptable realism" (97); by subjecting itself to ironic questioning, the position favored by Lodge (i.e. in Eagleton's view that of the ineffectual academic liberal) evinces its own superiority.

My own reading of *Changing Places* never left me with the impression that Lodge favored Swallow over Zapp or realism over modernism; if any one of the two, Zapp has always seemed the more likeable character. His 'voice' within all three novels in the trilogy is certainly the more interesting, instructive one. Lodge's writing in the realist tradition pertains ultimately to the artist's propensities and Eagleton seems too prescriptive here to be taken seriously (see Gąsiorek, who argues that the linkage between liberal humanism and realism is "contingent and arbitrary" [4]). Eagleton's policy is inadequate, all the more so since Lodge's realism is not unquestioned and unreflective, but abounds in self-reflexive moments and experimental narrative devices, as Eagleton himself acknowledges.

<sup>5</sup> The present tense here is used in full awareness of the fact that Brooke-Rose has passed away recently.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose taught for twenty years at the University of Paris, Vincennes. David Lodge was a lecturer and then Professor at the University of Birmingham for 27 years.

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