

*THE WHITE HOTEL: APPEARANCE AND REALITY IN THE
METAFICTIVE PROCESS OF WRITING*

SANDRA MARRERO MORALES
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

After breaking with the Realistic Canon of the Traditional novel, there appears a change both in mentality and style which gives rise to the Modernist Movement. This movement, which implies a reaction against the bourgeois culture and, therefore, a confrontation between past and present, offers us a new conception of the world. Thus, that world which had to do with reality is not valuable anymore. Instead, there appears a metaphoric world full of impressions, dreams and memories, the world of subconscious, psychologic adventures and inner isolation. This “myriad of impressions” told by a narrator, whether omniscient or not, is closely related to the so called “Stream of Consciousness”, a term coined by the psychoanalyst William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). As he points out, the Stream of Consciousness characterises the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind. It implies, therefore, a break of the chronological development of events and a consequent fragmentation of language.

Nevertheless, the modernist subjective adventure seems not to clarify the shadows of reality. In this sense, there emerges a new current, Postmodernism, as a reaction against the previous movement. As Ramon Selden states (1989, 71-72),

The term Postmodernism is variously used to describe a widespread current in Art and Literature and also an entire world-view. Some see it as simply the continuation and development of Modernist ideas, while others have seen in Postmodern Art a radical break with Classical Modernism.

Postmodernism is, furthermore, closely related to Poststructuralist ideas which, undoubtedly, imply a new conception of culture and a reflection upon the issues which preoccupy Postmodern Art. In Postmodernism, the writer does not limit himself to the text. He is also interested in those functions surrounding it, in the process of writing which is, moreover, recreated by the reader or co-creator of fiction who is the one to describe other universes, whether possible or impossible, of fiction.

That being said, we can argue that the fundamental nucleus of Postmodernism is Metafiction, which is

a term given to fictional writing which selfconsciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality [...] Such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 1990, 2).

Thus, Metafiction attempts to apprehend reality, which is the result of our linguistic capacity, through language, through different literary conventions which are used in order to ponder over the process of writing. These literary conventions characterising the metafictional process of writing can be observed in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, a novel that recreates many literary genres in the form of a collage showing the psychological chaos of the human being.

D. M. Thomas shows us a novel with different levels of invention both subjective, dominated by the subconscious, and objective, related to the principle of reality. These levels of invention are to be shown through an extraordinary range of registers and styles where appearance and reality are mixed up.

The prologue of *The White Hotel* invites us to read the letters of several characters (Sandor Ferenczi, Sachs and Sigmund Freud, the famous psychoanalyst). The introduction of the figure of Freud, a historical being

who investigates the allegations of ill-treatment of war neurotics, seems to imply the fact that the clinical case he is going to analyse happened in real life. Nevertheless, although the figure of the doctor is real, the reader can question the veracity of the case. In this sense, the epistolary prologue could be regarded as an invitation to introduce the dichotomy between appearance and reality. The reader, therefore, cannot be sure of the truthfulness of the case. He can only argue that literary fiction simply demonstrates the existence of multiple realities whether objective or subjective. As Patricia Waugh points out (1990, 90).

All metafictional novels have engaged with this question of the “truth” status of literary fiction, and of necessity therefore with the question of the “truth” status of what is taken to be “reality”.

Apart from these considerations, we must take into account the fact that the prologue, which introduces the case of one of Freud’s patients, Lisa Erdman, suffering from a severe sexual hysteria, is merely a pretext used by the author to open our mind to the different possibilities of interpretation of the story, to the fantasy and reality of the main character, to the narrative powers which seem to be quite unusual in British Fiction.

The first chapter of the novel, “Don Giovanni”, is revealed through poetry with pornographic connotations. The poem, which was written by Lisa Erdman, an opera singer, “between the staves of a score of Don Giovanni” (Thomas 1981, 14), shows us the erotic fantasies of a being dominated by hysteria. Full of sensual metaphors such as “the white hotel”, “the red leaves”, and “the falling stars”, it depicts the images which come out of the mind of the patient who questions her sexual capacity in a period of history where female behaviour is limited to submission. It is about a dream which torments Lisa’s mind all along her life. It is, furthermore, the reflection of her subconscious, her innermost, her sexual fantasies. Everything she tells springs from her imagination, from the dark side of her mind. In this sense, we can state that the writer is quite innovative since he resorts to a dream in order to apprehend the psychic reality of Lisa and invites us to enter her mind by saying “(do) not fear or turn away from what, unknown or neglected by men, walks in the night through the labyrinth of the heart” (1981, 15). The world of

subconscious, so many times “neglected” by men, appears to be an inspiring source for D. M. Thomas. However, the subjective world of dreams, which is revealed through poetry, is a pretext to reflect upon the process of writing. Thomas advocates for a colloquial tone full of metaphorical devices which can be easily interpreted through the light of Psychoanalysis.

In “The Gastein Journal” the author paraphrases the poem through an implicit narrator. The language is quite descriptive and it is also full of metaphorical devices. Lisa Erdman, who reads a book in Tamil, a language spoken in India, meets a man who seems to be the son of Freud. In a short period of time many things happen (a flood, a fire, deaths, etc.) and none of them can be explained with conviction. All the residents of the White Hotel come to their own conclusions. Nevertheless, we cannot rely upon any of them since they have their own perception of the world. Thus, it can be observed that the worlds of appearance and reality are again mixed up in a description which attempts to convey an objective vision of the story, although it fails.

The third chapter of the novel, “Frau Anna G”, introduces us a new narrator, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who is going to tell us the clinical case of the opera singer and determine the “exact” diagnosis of her illness. Freud, although basing his theories and conclusions on Psychoanalysis, is quite subjective since he offers us his own vision of reality, his own perception of the inner world of Lisa Erdman. According to the doctor, the young woman suffers from anorexia nervosa, an illness coming from the horrible childhood she had to face up to. All the things which happen in Lisa’s life have their origin in the past. Through the analysis of the psychoanalyst, D. M. Thomas interprets the previous chapter. Thus, the journal represents “an attempt to return to the time when erotism reigned supreme and the bond between mother and child was unbroken” (1981, 106). Furthermore, the metaphorical devices appearing in the previous chapter are going to be interpreted. The flood and the hotel fire are related to her mother’s death, the white hotel stands for her mother’s womb, a place without sin, or even for her whole life. Nevertheless, all these interpretations are subjective visions of Sigmund Freud’s mind and this is the reason why we, as readers, cannot rely upon them. On the

other hand, the doctor's mind is full of doubts. It happens many times that he has no evidence, no proof to claim that he is dealing with a real fact or, on the contrary, with a fantasy. In this sense, everything can be regarded as true and false at the same time.

The real aspect of the story is enhanced by the introduction of real characters such as Sophie, Freud's second daughter, references to William Shakespeare's plays and quotations by Freud. Therefore, D. M. Thomas goes on keeping the balance between the world of appearance and that of reality by introducing elements taken from real life and subjective ones which have to do with Freud's opinion about the diagnosis of Lisa Erdman's illness. This dichotomy between appearance and reality helps the author to parody the style of the psychoanalyst. Thomas makes reference to the conclusions Freud comes to. However, in the following chapter, the writer offers us Freud's conclusions as possible versions. In this sense, the doctor's diagnosis of Lisa Erdman's illness is not the only one since there are other versions which can be, like that of Freud, possible. D. M. Thomas parodies the conventions of Psychoanalysis as Cervantes parodied the conventions of Romance in *Don Quixote* or Jane Austen the Gothic Novel in *Northanger Abbey*. When speaking about parody, Pierre Macherey suggests that "all literary writing imitates the real use of language in an endless tease and questioning and is therefore parody" (Bradbury 1987, 53). In *The White Hotel*, Parody distorts rather than imitates the style of the psychoanalyst and helps to foreground the subjectivity of reality creating an alternative world which attempts to convey the illusion of verisimilitude.

"The Health Resort" and "The Sleeping Carriage" reinterpret the previous chapter by offering us the real story of Lisa Erdman. Thus, the information obtained by Freud from his patient is not completely true since Lisa had invented many aspects which, later on, were recognised to be false. Therefore, we can consider as a relevant fact that the same reality was given different versions. On the other hand, the writer introduces an omniscient narrator who is going to tell us the whole story from an objective point of view: the German experience, the incident with Alexei, the cause of the asthma, the situation of the Jews and the final tragedy of Lisa Erdman's life are going to reveal that Lisa's fears did not come

from the past but were announcements of the tragic future she would have to face up to. Thus, her death, which was announced in her hysteria, was not seen by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who saw in her neurotic symptoms the reflection of her childhood.

At the end of the novel and, as an invitation to state the dichotomy between appearance and reality, there emerges the fabulous description of a shadowed world. Lisa Erdman seems to have risen from the dead of the Babi Yar massacre so as to look for her lost relatives. This nebulous world appears to be an alternative world constructed through a descriptive language. It is completely fantastic since it does not correspond to the norms of the everyday world but to the rules of life after death. Thus, in the use of the fantastic, D.M. Thomas is regarded as an innovator since the fantastic element, which seems to be the exclusive property of many texts being fantastic in their structure, appears now in a postmodernist novel, a novel which is not fantastic at all.

That being said, we can summarise that D. M. Thomas foregrounds the subjectivity of reality by creating alternative worlds through different techniques (mixture of prose and poetry, realism and fantasy, etc.). In this sense, Thomas shows us a novel in which appearance and reality are mixed up so as to convey different versions of Lisa Erdman's life, or better, of the psychic chaos in which she is immersed. Therefore, the novel invites us to state the dichotomy between appearance and reality: each chapter reinterprets the previous one from different points of view and offers new versions of the same story. Moreover, they try to convey the illusion of verisimilitude through the introduction of real historical events and characters into the fictional world of the novel. They also make reference to worlds which have nothing to do with reality, worlds which are beyond history, open our mind to scepticism and let us, therefore, enter the realm of fantasy and uncertainty. Thus, *The White Hotel* could be regarded both as a modernist text, taking into account the subjectivity of perception of the different characters and, of course, of readers who propose different versions of the same reality, and as a postmodernist text, stating the famous dichotomy between appearance and reality as a mere pretext to ponder over the process of writing. Actually, *The White Hotel* is a work of imagination which challenges, with

the genuine innovation of apprehending reality through language, those norms and rules which governed the fictional world of previous years.

WORKS CITED

- BRADBURY, M. *No Not Bloomsbury*. London: André Deutsch, 1987.
- MCHALE, B. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- SELDEN, R. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Billing and Sons LTD, 1989.
- THOMAS, D. M. *The White Hotel*. London: Penguin Books, 1981.
- WAUGH, P. *Metafiction*. London: Methuen, 1990.