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Academia at a critical point: David Lodge's *Small World*

Akademia w punkcie krytycznym – Mały światek Davida Lodge'a

Streszczenie:

Artykuł omawia *Mały światek*, jedną z najbardziej znanych powieści uniwersyteckich współczesnego pisarza brytyjskiego Davida Lodge'a. Omawiany tekst wyróżnia tematyka ściśle akademicka, jako że niemal wszyscy bohaterowie powieści to przedstawiciele kadry uniwersyteckiej, wykładowcy literatury. Lodge angażuje czytelnika w intertekstualną grę, której znaczenia są dostępne w zasadzie tylko dla ekspertów, czyli samych wykładowców, np. większości czytelników może umknąć fakt, że powieść jest satyryczną repliką romansu arturiańskiego. Wspomniany w tytule „punkt krytyczny" odwołuje się do krytyki literackiej, częstego tematu debat w powieści, oznacza też krytykę samej instytucji akademii i kulminację gatunku powieści uniwersyteckiej, jakim wydaje się być *Mały światek*.

Słowa kluczowe:

Powieść uniwersytecka, intertekstualność, romans, krytyka literacka

Summary:

The article discusses *Small World*, one of the most popular campus novels by the contemporary author David Lodge. What distinguishes *Small World* is the theme of academia: nearly all major characters are lecturers in literature. Lodge involves the reader in an intertextual game whose meanings are available only to experts, i.e. lecturers themselves, since most readers may overlook the fact that the novel is a satirical remake of Arthurian romance. The "critical point" mentioned in the title of the article alludes to critical debates in the novel, to a critique of the academic institution as such and indicates *Small World* as the climax of the genre.

Key words:

Campus novel, intertextuality, romance, criticism

> The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed – the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and form new and interesting relationships with them; exchange gossip and confidences (for your well-worn stories are fresh to them, and vice versa); eat, drink and make merry in their company every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind.
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> David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance*

In 1957 Mortimer Proctor, describing pre-twentieth-century realities of an undergraduate's life, suggested the plot formula of what he then called the "English university novel":

> The freshman, armed with parental advice from either a father who is a country vicar or a widowed mother who plans to live in penury to educate her son, arrives at the university aboard a coach driven by a cigar-smoking, horn-tootling undergraduate (though later, of course, he comes by train from London). The formalities of matriculation performed, he meets his uncongenial tutor to determine a course of study; this, however, is at once neglected in favor of more diverting pastimes when he learns that college life is a highly social affair. Vigorous wine parties, a bonfire in the quad, tricks played upon unpopular students, midnight excursions to screw shut the doors of offending tutors, days in the field with hounds and horses and on the river in punt and shell, all take up too much time to permit him much study.… From time to time the scholar takes a much-needed vacation, usually in the company of a friend who is conveniently furnished with a beautiful sister; this girl, blushing and paling interminably and utterly unable to imagine what the young man can be thinking of, soon is obliged to listen to the tender words that will make them the most blessed of mortals.… The days of examination come at last, when pale and trembling he faces his inquisition; but seldom has the struggle been in vain, for he is quite likely to merge with a first class. Then, with glory resting heavily upon him, he is ready to enjoy the climax of the college year, when the university is invaded by flocks of fair faces during a week of boat races, college balls, and the ceremonies of awarding degrees; during this eventful time the scholar, plying his guests with lobster and champagne, wrings from willing lips the promise of future bliss. Not infrequently two friends have a sister each, in which event the end of university days takes on an overwhelmingly matrimonial tone.[1]

The formula centred on the adventures of a young rowdy, encapsulating also a romantic closure and Oxbridge as the backdrop. Proctor gives the example of

[1] Mortimer R. Proctor, *The English University Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 1-2.

Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861) and Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* (1911) as representative specimens.[2] Inevitably the genre shifted its attention from the undegraduate to the don. After World War II, a number of writers such as C.P. Snow, Angus Wilson and Kingsley Amis were stationed at universities, sharing their time between teaching and fictionalizing their teaching experiences. Especially important, very nearly a landmark, was Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), in which an insider's perspective increased the authenticity of the account and added colours to the subject. Both factors, the academic subject and the academic author, paved the way for a "niche" variety of fiction, interesting to the knowledgeable, perhaps university staff, perhaps a graduate or possibly someone delighting in topical satire and social comedy, but without expertise.

This situation changed perceptibly in 1975 when Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge came up with what now, with the benefit of hindsight, appears to be a double bill: *The History Man* and *Changing Places*. Both authors for a long time pursued university careers, Bradbury as Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, and Lodge as Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Birmingham. Both also toured and lectured worldwide, although it seems that in this capacity they counted more as popularisers than trailblazers in the critical wilderness. Given the similarity of their professions, it is small wonder that their identities were sometimes hopelessly confused among the general public. In *Rates of Exchange* (1983) Bradbury offers an amusing tribute to that when he shows the English professor on a visit to an imaginary country in Central Europe pestered with questions about writers in Britain: 'I have read your great poet of debunkery, Philip Larking,' says a stout lady to Petworth's right, 'I like to visit him and talk to him for three days and make a thesis.' 'Do you know also a campus writer Brodge?' asks a lady to his left, 'Who writes *Changing Westward*? I think he is very funny…'[3]

David Lodge has combined the career of a writer with that of a literary critic. In this latter occupation, which he has lately more or less given up, he wavered in his critical allegiances, endorsing at various stages the moralist criticism of F. R. Leavis, the New Criticism, the linguistics of Roman Jakobson, structuralism, Bakhtin's dialogics and cognitivism. Lodge's book publications, which usually assemble his dispersed essays, reflect these successive fascinations in their titles: *Language of Fic-*

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[2] Ibid, pp. 105-113, 131-133.

[3] Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange* (London: Arena, 1984 [1983]), pp. 268-9. After Bradbury died in 2000, Lodge was asked to write an entry on his friend and colleague for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

tion (1966), *Working with Structuralism* (1981), *After Bakhtin* (1990), *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002). The impression one gets upon acquaintance with the essays is that their author is grappling with his own insecurity in the matter of the applicability of the various theoretical positions to practical analysis, that in fact he is strenuously trying to naturalize the divergent and discordant methodological approaches both for himself and for his readers, especially non-professional readers. In the Preface to *Working with Structuralism* Lodge wrote:

> Literary criticism is at present in a state of crisis which is partly a consequence of its own success. One might compare its situation to that of physics after Einstein and Heisenberg: the discipline has made huge intellectual advances, but in the process has become incomprehensible to the layman – and indeed to many professionals educated in an older, more humane tradition. This incomprehensibility is not simply a matter of jargon – though that is a real stumbling block; more fundamentally, the new criticism, like the new physics, often runs counter to empirical observation and common sense. It therefore tends to alienate and exclude the common reader.… To open a book or article by, for instance, Derrida or one of his disciples is to feel that the mystification or intimidation of the reader is the ultimate aim of the enterprise.[4]

One wonders if *Small World* (1984), undoubtedly a masterpiece among Lodge's novels, could not be read as a comic-parodic response to the crisis in the institution, a tongue-in-cheek attempt to establish "connections and continuity between these different discourses" he himself had been practising, i.e. criticism and fiction writing.[5] And since academia is most to blame for the baffling of the ordinary reader its members are targeted as butts of the satire. *Small World* was preceded by *Changing Places* (1975) and followed by *Nice Work* in 1988, all three novels not only sharing the thematic preoccupation with academic life but also relying heavily on intertextual references. The sheer amount of experience Lodge possessed as an elucidator of meanings sublimated itself into humorous tales of university teachers who specialize in literary criticism.

The critical theme is less obviously present in the first volume of the trilogy, which is lighter in tone than the other two. *Changing Places*, with the allusive Dickensian subtitle, *A Tale of Two Campuses*, is structured as a comic narrative of an exchange scheme between Philip Swallow, an unprepossessing lecturer from a British red-brick university called Rummidge (Birmingham in disguise), and Morris Zapp (Stanley Fish in disguise?), a swaggering American professor from the University of Euphoria, which is meant to take off Berkeley in California. Not only jobs are

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[4] David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991 [1981]), Preface, pp. vii, ix.

[5] Ibid., p. v.

swapped in the course, but also students, attitudes and even wives, all this set against the background of student unrest of 1969 (the year when Lodge was invited as a Visiting Professor to the University of California). *Changing Places* already anticipates *Small World* in its convoluted style. Lodge weaves his yarn out of a multiplicity of narrative techniques, points of view, and even non-fictional discourses. Straightforward authorial narration is interlaced with letters, press cuttings and a filmscript. As one critic put it, "we realise that the title *Changing Places* refers as much to the changing standpoint from which the reader views the main characters as it does to their exchange of jobs."[6] This shifting perspective can be taken in and appreciated by a recipient well-versed in literary theory rather than by one who enjoys erotic adventures of two unleashed middle-aged males.

An orientation towards the expert reader is even stronger in the sequel. Certain characters from *Changing Places* reappear, notably Swallow and Zapp. The narrative, however, concentrates mainly on the adventures of Persse McGarrigle, a junior lecturer from a provincial university in Ireland, an outsider among old cronies who tries to prove his worth as a scholar and a lover. The canvas for the plot is much larger, because it covers the entire globe. Most significantly though criticism is not an embellishment of social satire as is the case in *Changing Places* but the guiding principle. Without the knowledge of literary conventions, more, without thorough familiarity with contemporary literary theory, from Saussure to Barthes, the reader is likely to miss most of the clues and settle for crude farce.

Theory is present already in the opening scene, although at first it is fed rather cautiously to the reader, in the form of casual dialogues between participants of a conference at Rummidge, the first of many in the book. As the hero enters the scene, his passage from innocence to experience begins. It takes the form of scholarly instruction. Persse is only dimly aware of the existence of such a thing as structuralism, which for some like the linguist Robin Dempsey amounts to a sacred pursuit but for others like Swallow means simply dangerous Continental nonsense.[7] So at first Saussure's linguistics is duly explained to the novice.

> "Structuralism?" said Dempsey, coming up with a sherry for Angelica just in time to hear Persse's plea, and all too eager to show off his expertise. "It all goes back to Saussure's linguistics. The arbitrariness of the signifier. Language as a system of differences with no positive terms."

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[6] James Acheson, "The *Small World*s of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge," in James Acheson (ed.), *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), p. 87.

[7] The time of the action is set in 1979, missing by a year the outbreak of the Colin MacCabe affair, which probably more than anything else marked off the liberal-humanist tradition in British academic criticism.

"Give me an example," said Persse. "I can't follow an argument without an example." "Well, take the words *dog* and *cat*. There's no absolute reason why the combined phonemes *d-o-g* should signify a quadruped that goes 'woof woof' rather one that goes 'miaou'. It's a purely arbitrary relationship, and there's no reason why English speakers shouldn't decide that from tomorrow, *d-o-g* would signify 'cat' and *c-a-t*, 'dog'."

"Wouldn't it confuse the animals?" said Persse.

"The animals would adjust in time, like everyone else," said Dempsey. "We know this because the same animal is signified by different acoustic images in different natural languages. For instance, 'dog' is *chien* in French, *Hund* in German, *cane* in Italian, and so on. 'Cat' is *chat*, *Katze*, *gatto*, according to what part of the Common Market you happen to be in. And if we are to believe language rather than our ears, English dogs go '*woof woof*', French dogs go '*wouah wouah*', German dogs go '*wau wau*' and Italian ones '*baau baau*'."[8]

The gist of the argument and the examples may have been borrowed straight from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. It is to be doubted whether the intrinsic needs of the plot would justify the inclusion of such specialist talk which must be obscure to the average reader. The briefing on Saussure introduces the crucial motif of the sign and its unstable character. In *Small World* debate on signification takes place both on the level of the plot and in theoretical discourses embedded in the narrative. For Lodge endlessly teases the reader about his/her conventional expectations as to plot and character. Angelica, the girl who is present during the briefing scene will later defy her role as the hero's heroine, not so much by slipping from his grasp (which she does all the time), but by providing in her place a twin sister, a poor replacement since the sister is a dedicated slut. Additionally, both girls carry birthmarks in the form of inverted commas, a trick serving not only to mask the identity of the heroine, but also to bring out the illusiveness and contingency of all knowledge. Angelica herself lectures about the deferral of meaning in literature, thus invoking Derrida, and on the connection between narrative and sexuality, an echo of Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (SW, 322-3). Early in the story, at the Rummidge conference, Morris Zapp delivers a keynote address on the futility of all interpretation. On the way from *Changing Places* Lodge has reconceptualized the character of the American academic. In the first novel Zapp, a specialist in Jane Austen (he has called his children Elizabeth and Darcy!), exudes positive energy and a totalizng ambition with reference to his scholarly occupation and wants to write the definitive book on Jane Austen, "to examine [her] novels from every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenologi-

[8] David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (London: Penguin Books, 1985 [1984]), p. 22, in further parts of the essay abbreviated to SW.

cal, archetypal, you name it …"[9] In Rummidge Zapp recalls self-deprecatingly his project of ten years before and even repeats, almost word for word, the sentiments about there being nothing further to say for other critics when he has done his job. This time, however, he rejects the possibility of interpretation, any intepretation, in fact, let alone exaustive. And he brings up the now well-worn arguments about the eternal sliding of the signifier that once characterized the intellectual effusions of Jacques Derrida and his followers. "Every decoding is another encoding", says Zapp, and ends on the Foucaldian note that the point of all interpretive activity is merely "to uphold the institution of academic literary studies. We maintain our position in society by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse – lawyers, politicians, journalists" (SW, 25, 28). That this presentation does not simply document a poststructuralist stance, typical of the 1970s/80s, is testified by the crude and scurrilous imagery that Zapp uses to support his argument.

> The classical tradition of striptease … offers a valid metaphor for the activity of reading. The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another. When we have seen the girl's underwear we want to see her body, when we have seen her breasts we want to see her buttocks, and when we have seen her buttocks we want to see her pubis, and when we see her pubis, the dance ends – but is our curiosity and desire satisfied? Of course not. The vagina remains hidden within the girl's body, shaded by her pubic hair, and even if she were to spread her legs before us [at this point several ladies in the audience noisily departed] it would still not satisfy the curiosity and desire set in motion by the stripping. Staring into that orifice we find that we have somehow overshot the goal of our quest, gone beyond pleasure in contemplated beauty; gazing into the womb we are returned to the mystery of our own origins. Just so in reading. The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain – it is only ourselves that we find there, not the work itself. Freud said that obsessive reading (and I suppose that most of us in this room must be regarded as compulsive readers) – that obsessive reading is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother's genitals [here a young man in the audience fainted and was carried out] but the point of the remark, which may not have been entirely appreciated by Freud himself, lies precisely in the concept of displacement. To read is to surrender oneself to an endless displacement of curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing." (SW, 26-27)

This is, of course, a scathing parody of poststructuralist discourse, and more broadly, of postmodernist gibberish, erected upon Derridean notions, which asks

[9] David Lodge, *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (London: Penguin Books, 1978 [1975]), p. 44, henceforward abbreviated in the text to CP.

readers to enjoy, by way of erotic play the futility of all hermeneutic effort. It is telling how often the academics in *Small World* engage in philandering alongside their career interests. Kenneth Womack even argues, rather persuasively, that sex in Lodge serves as a semblance of serious intellectual pursuit, thus implying that romance in the novel stands to displace scholarship.[10]

The inconclusive panel on the function of criticism during the MLA convention especially corroborates Lodge's view of the essential inefficacy and barrenness of contemporary critical discourse. As Persse arrives in New York for the mega-conference, he witnesses an array of theoretical positions presented by the experts. Philip Swallow appears as the guardian of the traditional Leavisite approach, still cherished in some quarters in Britain, when he says that criticism should assist literature, which is the repository of timeless values. Michel Tardieu, as a classic structuralist, speaks of examining deep structures and binary oppositions. Siegfried von Turpitz represents reader-oriented criticism. Fulvia Morgana advocates Marxism. Morris Zapp reiterates his deconstructive views. The apparent purpose of the forum, chaired by the doyen of literary studies, Arthur Kingfisher, is to decide which of these discourses gets the upper hand at the present stage of literary studies. But this noble purpose is overridden when the young hero, a non-theorist, decides to query the speakers.

> "I would like to ask each of the speakers," said Persse, "What follows if everybody agrees with you?" He turned and went back to his seat.
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> Arthur Kingfisher looked up and down the table to invite a reply. The panel members however avoided his eye. They glanced instead at each other, with grimaces and gesticulations expressive of bafflement and suspicion. "What follows is the Revolution," Fulvia Morgana was heard to mutter; Philip Swallow, "Is it some sort of trick question?" and von Turpitz, "It is a fool's question." A buzz of excited conversation rose from the audience, which Arthur Kingfisher silenced with an amplified tap of his pencil. He leaned forward in his seat and fixed Persse with a beady eye. "The members of the forum don't seem to understand your question, sir. Could you re-phrase it?"
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> Persse got to his feet again and padded back to the microphone in a huge, expectant silence. "What I mean is," he said, "What do you do if everybody agrees with you?"
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> "Ah." Arthur Kingfisher flashed a sudden smile that was like sunshine breaking through cloud. His long, olive-complexioned face, worn by study down to the fine bone, peered over the edge of the table at Persse with a keen regard. "That is a very good question. A very in-ter-est-ing question. I do not remember that question being asked before." He nodded to himself. "You imply, of course, that what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and then there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game. Am I right?" (SW, 319)

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[10] "The Professoriat in Love: David Lodge's Academic Trilogy and the Ethics of Romance" in: *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 77-97.

The answer to Persse's question supplied by the chairman (strictly in structuralist terms) ironically points to the potential self-annihilation of critical work. What matters is not the prevalence of truth but difference. Critics should continue to contend with each other or else the discipline will founder. In other words, the whole rationale for the perpetuation of academic study of literature is never to arrive anywhere. A truly Eliotian conclusion, but one which Lodge delivers with comic grace.

Another reason why *Small World* is so strictly academically-minded is its intertextual overkill, which is no less than astounding and merits comparison only with the stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Characters throw quotations and allusions at each other, the knowledge of Keats, Tennyson, Spenser and Eliot, is compulsory and compulsive; moreover, scenes from literary works are acted out by the protagonists, as in the case of *The Eve of St. Agnes* or *The Waste Land*. Above all, the novel is very closely and intricately structured on romance, in particular Arthurian romance. The earliest indication of this generic convention appears in the subtitle, which only from hindsight loses its deceptive reference to popular fiction, because the narrative, after all, fails to develop into a love story about dons or undergraduates. The usual paraphernalia of romance are all present here and magnified: mistaken identities, coincidences, mad pursuits, vicissitudes of courtship, sudden reversals of fortune, scenes of recognition, etc. The knights-errant of old are replaced by university scholar-teachers, while conference venues become the sites of chivalric quests. In fact two such can be easily distinguished: one, on which minor characters like Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp go, comes in the form of an attractive sinecure – a UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism, with the salary of $100,000 a year; it corresponds to the famous Siege Perilous at the Round Table, which can be occupied only by the finder of the Holy Grail. The other quest, rather more important for the plot composition, is the young hero's search for the elusive heroine. The meaningful name of the hero, Persse, sets him firmly within the confines of medieval romance as the innocent Perceval, although there are other connotations, for example with the mythical Perseus or the American semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce. This latter possibility, especially is rich in implications. Is Persse McGarrigle a semiotician a rebours, involved in a quest for the ultimate signified in which he is bound to fail? Ironically, it is one of the characters in the story, Angelica herself, the object of the pursuit, who provides the answer. Breaking out of the authorial narrative she looks down on it from the vantage point of a romance specialist and gives clues to what will be happening to her and her hero: in a conversation with Morris Zapp that follows his paper at the outset of the novel she points to Ariosto, Spenser, Keats and Coleridge as authors who realize "the idea of romance as narrative striptease, the endless leading on of the reader, a repeated post-

ponement of an ultimate revelation which never comes – or, when it does, terminates the pleasure of the text." (SW, 29)

Roland Barthes' equation of the pleasure of the text with sexual bliss[11] seems to work as a central metaphor in *Small World*. When Angelica elaborates her theory of romance during the MLA convention in New York, she relies heavily, so heavily as to make a pastiche of it, on the language of Barthes. Her conception of romance and other narrative genres exploits the double entendre of the word "climax." Accordingly, epic and tragedy are characterized by a "male" climax, "a single, explosive discharge of accumulated tension" (SW, 322). With romance, "a supremely invaginated mode of narrative," the case is different. Climactically, romance is of the female sex:

> Romance, in contrast, is not structured in this way. It has not one climax but many, the pleasure of the text comes and comes and comes again. No sooner is one crisis in the fortunes of the hero averted than a new one presents itself; no sooner has one mystery been solved than another is raised; no sooner has one adventure been concluded than another begins. The narrative questions open and close, open and close, like the contractions of the vaginal muscles in intercourse, and this process is in principle endless. The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished – they end only with the author's exhaustion, as a woman's capacity for orgasm is limited only by her physical stamina. Romance is a multiple orgasm. (SW, 322-3)

The sexual/generic polarity is reflected in the main characters' fortunes: the odyssey of McGarrigle through conferences around the world in search of Angelica is epic in its scale and a tragedy in terms of personal involvement. It is also romance-like, because of the constant deferment of closure, since the heroine refuses to yield. Obviously, Lodge more than anything else wants to send up poststructuralist discourse; but he also boldly plays on the theme of the rise of the novel. However, when a member of the audience asks if the birth of the novel occurred "when the epic, as it were, fucked the romance," we realize that it is not just a gibe at the disciples of Ian Watt and Michael McKeon, but an intimation of what is going to happen in the story. For in the land of Lodge, critical remarks carry the mark "EXECUTE!" upon them, and in due course the characters will enact them. So Persse does finally catch his girl/Grail at the MLA convention. Apparently.

> He parted her thighs like the leaves of a book, and stared into the crack, the crevice, the deep romantic chasm that was the ultimate goal of his quest.…
>
> As soon as he was invaginated, he came, tumultuously. With Angelica's assistance and encouragement, however, he came twice more in the hours that followed, less precipitately, and in two quite

[11] Cf. *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).

different attitudes; and when he could come no more, when he was only a dry, straining erection, with no seed to expel, Angelica impaled herself upon him and came again and again and again, until she toppled off, exhausted.…

"You'll have to marry me now, Angelica," he said.

"I'm not Angelica, I'm Lily," murmured the girl beside him. (SW, 325)

The vessel proves to be the other twin, or the other twin's. The climax has occurred but a false climax it is, one which precludes finality and so the hero must set out on a new quest, its object displaced from Angelica Pabst to the less glamorous Cheryl Summerbee. Narrative pleasure is terminated and at the end of the novel Persse stands in the position of the reader who has been constantly led on in his search but has not been satisfied. Thus, on the compositional level, Lodge articulates the plot as a deconstructionist metaphor, even though he does not proceed so far as to deconstruct any of his characters. Morris Zapp, the chief poststructuralist in the novel, remains comically disempowered from his principle of "every decoding is another encoding" when he is forced to plead his own case and when his message is "misread" by the one important decoder, his wife, who refuses to pay the ransom to his kidnappers. Nor does Lodge openly take sides with any other representatives of critical schools who make their appearance intermittently in the course of the story.

It seems that by the time Lodge wrote the last part of the trilogy, he had partly lost interest in theory and intertextual play as promising subjects for fiction and came to regard them as perhaps too elitist. Lodge's *Nice Work* of 1988 continues the theme of university life but blends it with the topic of factory life. She is a female lecturer in English, teaching about Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*, he is managing director of an ailing engineering firm. The confrontation between a young, feminist radical and an aging conservative businessman is the source of all the typical Lodgean mirth. As one critic put it, it is a case of "town meets gown".[12] In purely social terms survival in both university and industry is one unifying concept, but another is the meaning of the concept of work: for Vic Wilcox work is work and reading is something you do after work; for his shadow, Robyn Penrose, reading is a form of production since especially gifted readers like academics produce meaning. In *Nice Work* university is a place exposed to confrontation with the semblance of real life, the modern industrial plant, and in this confrontation the university does not fare better than the other side. *Nice Work* is not just a rewrite of the mid-nineteenth-century industrial novel but it certainly is a departure from the strictly academic subject.

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[12] Robert S. Burton, "Standoff at the Crossroads: When Town Meets Gown in David Lodge's *Nice Work*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 35: 4 (1994), 237-43.

Of the three novels, *Changing Places* and *Nice Work* seem to appeal to a wider audience than just purely academic as both feature a lot of social input: in the first one the scene is an end-of-the sixties student revolt in America, and in the latter it is the late Thatcher era in industry as well as academy. This wider appeal is confirmed in the greater public recognition: *Small World* was "only" nominated for the Booker Prize, while the other two received a number of awards, with *Nice Work* also being nearly "bookerized". The reason for this relative lack of appreciation in the case of *Small World* can be explained by the parallel fortunes of Lodge's earlier novel, *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), which was designed and executed as a combination of a straightforward narrative of a young postgraduate student of English who is writing a thesis in the British Library and worrying about his wife's irregular periods, and an extensive parody of the modern novel or, to be precise, ten modern novelists. The lampoon is at first very subtly woven into the life of Adam Appleby, the central character, until it becomes loud and obvious at the close, when Appleby's wife acts out the famous monologue of Molly Bloom from *Ulysses*. A decade and a half after the publication of *The British Museum* Lodge felt it necessary to provide a commentary and a key to his cryptograph, with a detailed list of the ten novelists taken off. He also recounted how the publisher's editor rejected his suggestion for some explanatory blurbs on the dust jacket to lead the reader through textual difficulties. The absence of such hints had serious consequences, as Lodge noted:

> Very few readers recognized the full extent of the parodies, and a surprising number made no reference to them at all. Some complained that it was a somewhat derivative novel without perceiving that this effect might be deliberate and systematic. When an American edition was published later, the blurb carefully drew attention to the parodies, and they were duly noticed and generally approved.[13]

Lodge concluded at the time that the reader had every right to have some instruction to the text. Ironically, even though he took care to explain in *Small World* some of the most obvious allusions and stylizations through his "spokescharacters" like Angelica, Zapp or Sybil Maiden, the sheer density of the intertextual material brought into the book caused a partial flop. As a result, it has enjoyed a readership that is significantly more limited than might be expected of a hilarious, tightly organized story of contemporary middle-aged middle classes.

It seems that a certain variety of fiction known as the academic novel, university novel or university fiction, campus novel or campus fiction, having had a

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[13] David Lodge, *The British Museum is Falling Down*, "An Afterword" (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983 [1965]), p. 171.

long pre-history, very nearly going back to Chaucer's time,[14] climaxes in Lodge's text and requires, on top of an academic author and an academic subject, also an academic reader to be properly interpreted. Brian A. Connery has an apt comment on this: "Ultimately, Lodge's entire creation is centripetal as academic readers read a novel about characters who are academics who think that they are characters and who consequently act according to the very conventions parodied by the novel itself, conventions used by competent readers to decode the parody."[15] And competent they will have to be. For who among the common readers will recognize Arthur Kingfisher as the Fisher King, the keeper of the Grail in the Percival versions of the Arthurian legend?[16] Who will know that the forum on "The Function of Criticism" at the MLA convention reflects the ritual of asking questions about the Grail which are meant to restore fertility to the land? And finally, perhaps most importantly, who will acknowledge the equivalence between the barren land ruled by the Fisher King and the barrenness of contemporary critical discourse, which Lodge seems to be offering as the central notion in *Small World*?[17]

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[14] On the origins of university fiction, see, among others, Proctor, op. cit.; Richard Sheppard, "From Narragonia to Elysium: Some Preliminary Reflections on the Fictional Image of the Academic," in David Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 11-48.

[15] "Inside Jokes: Familiarity and Contempt in Academic Satire," in David Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 131.

[16] Taught by the example of *British Museum*, which was direly misread or "under-read", Lodge offered to explain certain intricacies in *Small World*. Thus the episode when Morris Zapp meets Fulvia Morgana contains more than meets the eye: "The passage … is designed to contribute both to the romance theme and the comic effect. Morris Zapp is re-enacting the situation of the errant knight lured into an enchanted castle and trapped in the toils of a seductive sorceress. The name Fulvia Morgana echoes that of Morgan Le Fay in Arthurian legend. In her mirrored bedroom Fulvia snaps handcuffs on to Morris Zapp's wrists and removes his underpants, rendering him powerless to escape. Travesty turns into farce as the terrified Zapp hears Fulvia's husband, Ernesto, let in himself into the house and climbing the stairs. In a reversal of the outraged-husband stereotype, Ernesto greets Morris Zapp genially and prepares to join him and Fulvia between the crimson sheets of the circular bed. Reversal is indeed the keynote of the whole episode. There is a reversal of normal seduction roles in Fulvia's hot pursuit of the reluctant Morris. There is a reversal of "normal" sado-masochistic roles in that Fulvia, while inviting Morris to hurt her, actually hurts him. Thus in the very process of trying to re-enact *Difficult Days*, to force reality to fit the fiction, she is in fact reversing the fiction, just as Morris claims Désirée reversed the facts." See his "The Novel as Communication," in *The Practice of Writing. Essays, Lectures, Reviews and A Diary* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), p. 194.

[17] Frederick M. Holmes suggests that the image of sterility in fact extends in Lodge to entire modern culture, "The Reader as Discoverer in David Lodge's *Small World*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 32: 1 (1990), 53, 54 and passim.

Lodge himself had this to say about his projected readership:

I write to communicate, but like most literary writers I don't display all my goods on the counter. The books are written in a layered style so that they have coherence and comprehensibility on the surface. I don't want to write books that repel lay readers who don't know much about the literary sources, and so there is in the novel itself a certain amount of indirect explication of the analogy between modern professors and knights of romance.

Then there's another level of fairly esoteric literary allusion which I don't expect more than a small percentage of readers to perceive. Although I wouldn't conceal in that way elements that are vital to the structure of the whole, I like to feel that a book shouldn't give up all its meanings at the first reading. There should be nuggets hidden there. Readers who stumble on them will then get special pleasure at having recognized them, just because they're not obvious. I hope the novel invites readers into a world which may not be familiar, but yet is comprehensible enough to give pleasure. They may have the sense that it's holding something back from them, and I don't think this is a bad thing. Only those with a literary education would see all the allusions and parallels that I've put into the book.[18]

Small World is likely to remain the ultimate university novel because it focuses satirically on a closed or even cloistered community given to mental occupations whose arcaneness, emblematized in conferencing, an activity so characteristic that it calls for this special derivative of the verb "confer," shuts out the general public.

[18] Interview with David Lodge by Raymond H. Thompson, www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intrvws/lodge.htm .