

Incentives for academic excellence: sex, money and self-advertising in David Lodge's *Changing Places* and *Small World*

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Abstract

The paper will focus on two novels of David Lodge's trilogy, namely Changing Places. A Tale of Two Campuses and Small World. An Academic Romance. During the 1970's the university life was profusely sponsored by the state. Consequently, academics travelled extensively and improved their professional expertise by leading tumultuous lives. Thus, the latest theories were intertwined with empirical experiments in hedonistic enterprises. The academic rivalries used to be appeased by parallel satisfactions. The legends of the Holy Grail, the Arthurian Cycle, and the Green Knight constituted ferments of a hermeneutics of fertility imbued with post-structuralist relativization. Interculturality received political implications and, in this way, professors had to assume a social standing. This involvement secured their status of authentic intellectuals, beyond the ivory tower. The research resorts to diverse studies on the campus novel. The main scholars to be quoted are Chris Baldick, Catherine Belsey, Eva Lambertsson Björk, and Elaine Showalter.

Keywords: *academy, competition, hedonism, hermeneutics, rivalry.*

“Human beings are troubled with the opinions [*dogmata*] they have of things, and not by the things themselves [*pragmata*]”
Epictetus as cited by Laurence Sterne

Introduction

The world of academe is perceived as a competitive, full of rivalry milieu. The professors find themselves in the midst of a whirlpool of ideological and conceptual trends. The effort of the academics to stay tuned and to catch every new intellectual issue transforms universities into the fiercest professional environment. David Lodge humorously analyses the effects of this excessive professionalization on the academics' personalities and personal lives. His

approach in *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) and *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984) is different from the tenses one adopted by Malcolm Bradbury in *The History Man* (1975).

The aim of such an intellectual impetus is not personal development, but a life-long effort to get better integrated into the social system. The subtitle of the first novel, *A Tale of Two Campuses* is an intertextual link to Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. The opening statement of the Victorian novel testifies, unwillingly of course, to the loose moral, intellectual and humanitarian principles. What at Dickens announced the Nietzschean epistemological perspectivism, in postmodernism is a sign of debilitation or, at least, of complete disorientation:

It was the best of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the Spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...¹

The need of vitality, of continuous displacement and confrontation indicates that these professors are not what Martin Heidegger called *Being-toward-Death*, with respect to *Dasein*. In the same time, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) points out that: "The transitions from one shape to another involve a form of logical suicide or «dialectical negation» whereby a shape of consciousness discovers incoherence between what it thinks it can know and what it does know."² Hegel sustains that it is compulsory to grasp the whole of life in order that one could attain freedom or self-consciousness.³ The faculty members do not seem preoccupied with the limits. Actually, their philosophy – rather primitive – is to break any limitation and live life to the full. If we admit to Dragan Glavasic's statement that "in any normal society philosophy should have the pivotal place as the most important, most profound and most remarkable cognitive activity,"⁴ it consequently results that the world of academe represented in David Lodge's novel is not a "normal society". Careerism and hedonism are not philosophical attitudes. Willingly or not, the faculty put between brackets principles and norms and in this way they resort to a twisted phenomenology. The only theoretical approaches accepted are the literary and hermeneutic ones.

¹ Ch. Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 1.

² L. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 280.

³ Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Phenomenology*, 280.

⁴ Dragan Glavasic, *Ascertaining the Intellectual Horizon* (Odin & Thor, Belgrade, 2008), 16.

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If Kierkegaard considers that faith needs a “leap of decision”, able to bracket every prior reasoning,⁵ the characters in Lodge’s novels isolate every value or tradition that could reduce their chances of self-indulgence. They do not want to search for their subjectivity. This happens only in the case of those who do not overestimate their profession. Apart from the existentialist approach, they do not picture their “everydayness negatively.”⁶

The seductive profession. Acting capacities

In such a slippery environment, people cling to whatever offers them at least short-term certainties. During the ‘70s and until the ‘90s professorship is a profession of the stage. Students expected to be seduced on all plans by their tutors. Even the timid Philip Swallow – although with a budding charisma while he reaches full maturity – gets involved in putting “spells” on his students. One of his “victims” reproduces such an episode in her test paper:

Question 5. By what means did Milton try to justify the ways of God to man in *Paradise Lost*? – My tutor Professor Swallow seduced me in his office last February, if I don’t pass this exam I will tell everybody. John Milton was the greatest English poet after Shakespeare. He knew many languages and nearly wrote *Paradise Lost* in Latin in which case nobody would be able to read it today. He locked the door and made me lie on the floor so nobody could see us through the window. I banged my head on the wastepaper bin. He also considered writing his epic poem about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, which is a pity he didn’t as it would have made a more exciting story.⁷

I had to reproduce the quotation in full as its implications, besides its humour, are revealing. Milton’s puritanism is abruptly abolished by the academe. The intellectual guides are not spiritual masters too. Lodge exploits the myth of King Arthur and his knights; for instance, Morris Zapp declares: “Scholars these days are like the errant knights of old, wandering the ways of the world in search of adventure and glory”.⁸ “Adventure” obviously stands for “affairs”. But more than an errant knight the postmodern professor assumes the role of an actor. There is an issue of imagology here: the academic actors and actresses resort to a plethora of means in order to seduce their young auditorium: they try to keep fit, to be fashionable and updated even in terms of pop culture, to be trendy when it comes to theoretical developments, and to stay in contact with the world-wide

⁵ Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Phenomenology*, 278.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 281.

⁷ D. Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy: Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 288.

⁸ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 291.

academic milieu and with the political one too. For example, Morris Zapp jogs even if he dislikes physical training, buys sophisticated clothes and invests in a new sports car able to transmit his sexual openness. The same Zapp fascinates Swallow's 11-year-old daughter with his knowledge of pop-music and cartoons, while he greedily absorbs the latest literary theories with the declared purpose of becoming the highest paid English-professor in the world. Even the provincial Philip Swallow once arrived in the USA gets involved in the political turmoil. All in all, professors need to stay in good shape in order to resist on the academic stage. That is why the private lives of the best professionals are different from the common bourgeois families. A discussion between the former erotic rivals in *Changing Places*, but on friendly terms in *Small World*, between the anti-theoretical British Swallow and the over-theoretical American Zapp synthesizes the attitude of some academics. Swallow: "Perhaps that's what we're all looking for – desire undiluted by habit." Zapp invokes the "Defamiliarization" (*Ostranenie*) of the Russian Formalists and quotes Viktor Shklovsky: "Habit devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war... Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life."⁹

Stimulants for vitality and hypocritical reactions

The question is whether these super-professionals are super-beings boiling with vitality or they suffer a devitalizing process the more they climb the social ladder. "The sensation of life" is assured, surprisingly, by approximately the same necessities at persons who seem different. This unsuspected similarity explains the involuntary swapping of wives between two characters with opposite profiles. Harold Bloom remarked that the swarming opportunities and collective enthusiasms of the '60s and '70s were just traps set by the establishment. The authentic avant-gardist movements were over: "The Nineteen Sixties benefit from a general nostalgia compounded by political correctness and the sad truth that erstwhile Counter-culture has become Establishment-culture, visible upon every page of The New York Times."¹⁰

This competitive, not to say aggressive behaviour characteristic to men generates strange responses from women: Hilary, Swallow's wife, when informed about her husband's infidelity, instead of divorcing him installs central heating in the house. The cheated wife reacts like a responsible mother, but her husband's

⁹ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 306.

¹⁰ H. Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Interpretations: Ken Kesey's One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: InfoBase Publishing, 2007), 2.

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problems are weird. While he is cheating on her he is fearful of Zapp's allure of a perverse Humbert Humbert in front of his daughter Amanda, possibly a future Lolita.¹¹ When Zapp proves an unexpected humanitarian side by asking Hilary to shelter his American ex-student, the pregnant Mary Makepeace, Swallow reproaches her from the States the acceptance of "an unmarried mother on the premises."¹² Once his hypocrisy is revealed, he tries to make amends by inviting Hilary to the USA. She rejects his proposal using Mary Makepeace's psychoanalytical-feminist interpretation: "men always try to end a dispute with a woman by raping her, either literally or symbolically."¹³ The humorous intertextuality masks an uttermost confusion in regards to the capital choices made in life. Thus Zapp is a catastrophic father. He had walked out on his daughter from his first marriage "leaving her a five-dollar bill to buy candy," a decision considered by his second wife, Désirée, "the most sordid transaction in the history of conscience-money." The twins resulted from his second marriage take to cultivating marijuana or what their mother calls "avant-gardening."¹⁴ The competitive life grants no time for family or for spirituality. The interesting fact is that these competitors are not forced to climb up at a quick step the professional ladder. The tempo is set by everyone depending on their ambition. At the beginning of *Changing Places*, in the year 1969, we meet two professors, Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp. The former is only a lecturer and published a few essays and reviews: "He lacked will and ambition, the professional killer instinct which Zapp abundantly possessed." Zapp is a full professor and published "five fiendishly clever books (four of them on Jane Austen)."¹⁵

The poststructuralist kitsch

Under such circumstances, "self-realization and self-fulfilment have become central aspirations of self-polity [...] in which every desire is a potential right, it is forbidden to forbid."¹⁶ Hedonism and maximal professional development are more than interconnected: they fuel each other. One cannot resist the tough rhythm of competition without renewing their pleasures. In the same time, competition is a pleasurable activity in itself. Only those academics that evolve between these two

¹¹ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 112.

¹² *Ibidem*, 120.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 130.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 126.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 12.

¹⁶ P. Goulimari (ed.), *Postmodernism: What a Moment?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 65.

poles are able to establish complex communicational routes. The other ones, the monomaniacs get isolated and bury themselves in all sorts of minutiae. This is the reason why Euphoria State University, with its gorgeous surroundings (rivers, lakes, forested mountains and a splendid bay), favours the gathering of highly-competitive academics. If the American euphoric paradise suggests the Californian geography, the British Rummidge reflects the dire cityscape of Birmingham, encompassed by factories, smog and motorways. Academic life here gets asphyxiated by routine and pettiness. The broken parallelism between the two institutions is described by the quality of the symbolic simulacra they both find pride in. Rummidge and Euphoria have on their campuses a replica of the inclined Tower of Pisa, but restored to verticality in both cases. The American replica is built of white stone and “twice the original size”, while the British one is made of red brick and “to scale.”¹⁷ The architectural artifices are telling about the pomposity and loftiness in one case, and of deplorable scarcity in the other one. When the two universities pay no attention to the original materials of construction and, worse, they change the peculiar and authenticating mark of a renowned monument they both fall into hubris, through excess or through insignificant approach. In postmodernity hubris is imbued with kitsch. Bad taste should not be the attribute of superior education. But, again, what are the purposes of such an elite education? Zapp dreams of writing a *nec plus ultra* book on Jane Austen. This aspiration has structuralist implications: civilization is a hierarchical structure and some interpretations are central while others fall at periphery. Structuralism is implicitly colonialist. Ten years later, Zapp makes a pirouette and gives up Jane Austen studies taking to poststructuralism. Not that he disliked his initial preoccupations, on the contrary, but he needed to stay fashionable if he wanted to remain a communicational relay in the academic world. On the other hand, Zapp’s humour makes him more suitable to the relativistic poststructuralism than to the rigid structuralism. That is why his conference paper “Textuality as striptease” excludes the possibility of establishing a final meaning. The true intellectual existence implies an eternal quest:

The classical tradition of striptease, however, which goes back to Salome’s dance of the seven veils and beyond, and which survives in a debased form in the dives of your Soho, 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.¹⁸

¹⁷ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 253.

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Aiming at a crystal-clear understanding of texts and, in the end, of the world would be similar to living in a possessive and reductionist couple. Zapp invokes psychoanalytical hermeneutics: “Freud said that obsessive reading [...] is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother’s genitals.” The text reacts as an untameable bachelor to this superficial and target-oriented reading: “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.”¹⁹

The academic weaponry

The transparency of the meaning encourages, paradoxically, the earthliness of the researchers. The multiple ways of interpretation seem to excuse the necessity to ground in material attachments. Matter can be spiritualized in Zarathustra’s view: “Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue! Let your bestowing love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth.”²⁰

Excess is the rule of thumb in this academic enclave. A postmodernist mythology of hubris is frantically frequented by those who aspire to the highest ranks of academics. Swallow, in his turn, if he is not a fertile and creative scholar, compensates this drawback with excessive scrupulosity in examining his undergraduates. When Zapp arrives at Rummidge University and browse through Swallow’s observations on his students, he is amazed at the level of knowledge regarding students’ public and private lives.²¹

In the same line, in *Small World*, the young Angelica Pabst shows an erudition that baffles even the all-knowing ever-trendy Morris Zapp. She masters mediaeval culture as well the latest theories in literary criticism.²² If Zapp is an academic who approaches the university as if it were a corporation and “aims for financial and sexual success, loves power and is not despised or punished for being crass, sexist, competitive, hedonistic and horny,”²³ Angelica, as her name suggests, is fond of knowledge not only as power, but as intellectual nutrient in itself. She does not belong to that category of “successful female intellectuals [who] are

¹⁹ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 254.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian DelCaro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 57.

²¹ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 14.

²² *Ibidem*, 257.

²³ E. Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 78.

necessarily either frigid or sexually deviant in one way or another.”²⁴ She follows the same track pursued by the older professors: flies to conferences all over the world, writes articles and books, does a lot of documentation. But we can suppose, on account of her passion, that The Robbins Report of the Committee on Higher Education from 1963, upon which the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher based their politics of cutting financial resources for the universities would not affect her dramatically.

The variegated perks

The main difference between Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp is the approach to pleasure. Zapp ‘professionalizes’ pleasure whenever he resorts to it, which is not a rare choice. Even the private facets of pleasure are part of a competitive endeavour, as Désirée confesses: “with Morris it had to be a four-star fuck every time. If I didn’t groan and roll my eyes and foam at the mouth at climax he would accuse me of going frigid on him.”²⁵ This is one reason – getting tired with such performances in marriage – for Désirée’s transformation into a writer of feminist best-sellers. Philip Swallow indulges in milder pleasures, even if, with the occasion of landing on the American territory, he diversifies the range of hedonistic involvements. He reads out of pure interest and does not have a PhD. The English academic milieu tolerates such a relaxed professional life. In exchange, Morris Zapp is disconcerted by the cosy atmosphere in the British university: “No talk of «lows» or «highs» here: all was moderate, qualified, temperate.”²⁶ A non-competitive environment seems stifling for him, as he needs external stimuli. Sex is another mark of domination and that is why he interprets Jane Austen’s later novels in terms of Eros and Agape. When one male character of Jane Austen offers a woman a pencil without lead this is interpreted as a semiotic suggestion of impotence.²⁷ Such a “hermeneutic of suspicion”²⁸ is indicative of the fissures in self-assurance and in inner resources. In order to boost his energy, Morris Zapp proposes “group marriage”, as a unique opportunity to “pool their [the two swapping couples] resources”.²⁹

²⁴ E. Lambertsson Björk, *Campus Clowns and the Canon. David Lodge Fiction* (Stockholm: University of Umeå, Almqvist&Wiksell Int., 1993), 120.

²⁵ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 173.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 186.

²⁸ P. Ricoeur (ed.), *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and introduced by John B. Thompson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 334.

²⁹ Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy*, 213.

Conclusion

In *Small World: An Academic Romance*, professors are presented as modern knights-errant, flying from one conference to another. The archetypal model for the globalized academic world is the Arthurian romance. But exactly as it happened at Camelot, the knights – be they old or new – need challenges in order to preserve their high-spirits. Intellectual and spiritual contemplation does not constitute a sufficiently-powerful incentive. Derek Pearsall highlighted the Arthurian passivity, if not exhaustion:

In the English tradition from which he was transplanted, King Arthur himself had a very limited romantic interest: he has no interesting love-affairs either before or after his early marriage. It seems impossible to imagine any being invented for him. So in Arthurian romance he is relegated to the role of, at best, a great king who stays at home while his knights go off on romantic adventures and report back to him, or, at worst, an ineffectual cuckold. Nothing is said of his campaigns against the Saxons and the Romans. Arthurian romance has Arthur's court as its background or point of reference, but it is not about Arthur.³⁰

But we should consider King Arthur wisdom and self-possession as an explanation for his sedentary attitude. On the contrary, faculty members in the postmodern era continuously seek stimulants to keep them in the academic race. The imperative of external stimuli indicates that they are not super-humans, but only super-clerks, dependent on the resources allocated by the government to the universities. Sooner than later, in Margaret Thatcher's epoch the politicians spotted the weak point and aimed at it: universities were forced to become corporatist in the educational approach. As if anticipating the calamitous reforms, they act frantically, in way specific to immortal beings. Rainer Maria Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge was preoccupied with the individuality of his own death: "The desire to have a death of one's own is becoming more and more rare. In a short time it will be as rare as a life of one's own."³¹ Lodge's professors stay away from philosophical dilemmas; they show no interest in eschatological considerations. The only thing they need is a transitory liberty, in the hope that the Mephistophelean pact will not be enacted afterwards.

³⁰ D. Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 20.

³¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (trans. Stephen Mitchell, New York: Vintage, 1990), 9.

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