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Academic Criction:

Literary Theory and Scholarship in David Lodge's *Small World*

> "In an era before there were handbooks, self-help guides, or advice columns for graduate students and junior faculty in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *the Times Higher Education Supplement*, novels taught me how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail."
>
> (Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers*)

The introductory words of Elaine Showalter succinctly encapsulate that the appeal of academic fiction resides in its edifying potential concerning higher education. Although the thematic range of campus novels is fairly extensive, not every aspect of academe is equally well represented. One of the least frequently portrayed domains within the establishment of higher education is literary scholarship. This paper looks at a novel whose uniqueness rests in its singularly deep treatment of literary theory and literary scholarship. The investigation focuses on what the reader can learn about the world of literary criticism, how the theme is rendered and what value judgements are attached to this representation.

The reason why David Lodge is special among the writers of academic fiction is that he is the only one who has extensively dealt with literary criticism. Although most of Lodge's novels take place at universities, feature university teachers and deal with issues related to academe, *Small World*[1] is the novel that immerses the deepest into the concerns of literary scholarship and literary critics.[2] *Small World* readily lends itself to the approach of realist criticism.[3] The novel may aptly be described as a richly endowed treasure-house of literature. Literary criticism from Marxism, structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response theory to liberal humanism; literary works from Horace, Ludovico Ariosto, Spenser, Keats, Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, Hawthorne, Yeats, T. S. Eliot to James Joyce; theory of prosody and narratology and a great deal of whatever lay at hand became part of the novel. The strikingly high density of world literature and theoretical knowledge may be intimidating enough to prompt the uninitiated reader to put the book down. Lodge was certainly aware of the danger of writing about literature and literary theory without providing lucid explications, and recognized that only the intelligible rendering of

[1] David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Novel* (London: Penguin, 1985)
[2] It should be noted that *Changing Places* (1975) and *Nice Work* (1988) also deal with literary criticism on a lesser degree.
[3] For a detailed discussion of the realist criticism of the novel see my "Academic Metafiction: A Postmodern Reading of David Lodge's *Small World*" at http://seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

his chosen academic content would ensure the general readability of his novel. Lodge himself commented on the issue in an interview with Raymond H. Thompson:

> 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.[4]

The fictional realm of *Small World* is peopled with literature professors, who, each armed (and armoured) by one of the contending leading literary theories of the '80s, set about combating one another in quest for an ultimate literature chair, the acquisition of which would prove the superiority of the literary theory they adhere to. The various schools of literary theory and the competitive air of the '80s literary scholarship are all elements of Lodge's (critic and teacher of literature) first-hand experience. *Small World* at this point fulfils its generic promise to instruct and inform us about a specific piece of reality within the domain of higher education. It is through the major characters that the reader can learn about Marxism, the basics of structuralism, reader-response theory, liberal humanism, deconstruction or the basic principles of formalism. The protagonists of the novel take every opportunity, be it a conference or just a literary conversation, to go into lengthy discussions of their theoretical convictions. This is, for example, how one can read extensively about the fall of structuralism and the emergence of deconstruction at the opening conference in Rummidge. The more literally disposed most certainly enjoy and benefit from the lucid explications of the various theoretical schools as the purposeful guidance that Lodge offers, with special considerations for lay readers, at points goes back to absolute basic-level discussions. Persse McGarrigle's genuine question concerning literary theory is here to demonstrate the point:

> Angelica looked annoyed. "Oh, what a nuisance that I missed it [i.e. a conference paper]. I'm very interested in structuralism."
> "What is it, exactly?"
> Angelica laughed.
> "No, I'm serious," said Persse. "What is structuralism? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?"
> Angelica looked puzzled, and wary of having her leg pulled.[5]

[4] Raymond H. Thompson, "Taliesin's Successors: Interviews with Authors of Modern Arthurian Literature" [accessed April 11 2006] 15 May 1989 <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/intrvws/lodge.htm>
[5] Lodge, p. 14.

Introducing his subject matter by applying the conventions of the romance tradition, Lodge imports medieval sources to establish a network of symbolism in the narrative. The sovereign of the land of literary theory is Arthur Kingfisher "…doyen of the international community of literary theorists, Emeritus Professor of Columbia and Zürich Universities […], now retired but still active in the world of scholarship. A man whose life is a concise history of modern criticism…"[6]. The connections that the symbolic use of names establishes are easily detectable. Kingfisher is an allusion to the Fisher King, or Wounded King who figures in the Arthurian legends as the latest in a line charged with keeping the Holy Grail. The name Arthur is also a reference to King Arthur, the legendary knight, leader of the Knights of the Round Table. The allusion is nicely played down when Kingfisher presides over the final literary battle of his knights errant.

The discussions of literary theories also fit into a grander design which concerns no less a theme than the future of literary criticism itself. Lodge effectively stretches the Arthurian analogy even further. Although Arthur Kingfisher – the "king among literary theorists" and the person who "personifies the whole profession of academic literary studies"[7] – is always accompanied by the beautiful Song-mi Lee (his attractive future wife), and is surrounded by more books and honorary degrees than he can remember, he is desperate at no longer being able to achieve an erection or an original thought. Similarly to the medieval sources, where the physical disability of the Fisher King is paralleled by the ruined state of his country, the physical and intellectual impotence of Arthur Kingfisher symbolically coincides with the sterility of the scholarly land he presides over. For those who are well-versed in modernism, the imagery is undoubtedly also an Eliotian one. "The profession is in a very un'ealthy condition"[8], comments Fulvia Morgana (also a markedly Arthurian name), Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Padua, while outlining the theoretical stalemate in the field of literary criticism in the early 80s. *Small World* portrays the literary scene of the 80s as the theoretical battlefield of outdated critical convictions with few creative ideas of how to go on. The element of realism that unfolds in this romance symbolism concerns a question that has occupied scholars ever since the theoretical landscape of literature became densely populated, and a novel that deals with literary theory on such a large scale as *Small World* cannot ignore a problem area so pressing as the 'future of literary criticism'.

The fictional representation of the theoretical path-finding of the 1980s highlights two fundamental problem areas. The first concerns the question whether literary criticism should embrace deconstruction or not. Arthur Kingfisher is unable to answer this question, as reported

[6] Lodge, p. 93.
[7] Lodge, p. 119.
[8] Lodge, p. 119.

by Fulvia Morgana while having a conversation with Morris Zapp *en route* for the next conference venue:

> Everybody was waiting to see what line he would take on deconstruction. Would 'e be for it or against it? Would 'e follow the premises of 'is own early structuralist work to its logical conclusion, or would 'e recoil into defence of traditional humanist scholarship? […] 'E said, on the one hand this, on the other hand that. 'E talked all around the subject. 'E waffled and wandered. 'E repeated things 'e said twenty, thirty years ago, and said better. It was embarrassing, I am telling you. In spite of all, they gave 'im a standing ovation.[9]

It is Rodney Wainwright, a teacher of literary theory at the University of North Queensland ("Theories of Literature form Coleridge to Barthes"), who is given the unfortunate task of trying to tackle the second problem. What emerges is yet another choice, this time not between structuralism and deconstruction, but between deconstruction and traditional humanist scholarship. Rodney Wainwright's struggle to write a paper for a conference on 'The Future of Criticism' held in Jerusalem truthfully reflects the complexity of the problem: "*The question is, therefore, how can literary criticism maintain its Arnoldian function of identifying the best which has been thought and said, when literary discourse itself has been decentred by deconstructing the traditional concept of the author, of authority?*"[10]. The debate over electing a superior, an ultimate literary theory is effectively reduced to the discussion of two contending schools of thought throughout the greater part of the novel. By foregrounding two of his characters, Morris Zapp and Philip Swallow, Lodge, in fact, highlights two literary schools: deconstruction and a rather anti-theoretical branch of liberal humanism.[11] Wainwright's reference to Matthew Arnold, and with Jacques Derrida's thoughts looming in the background, the opening question of the quotation recapitulates the so-called Swallow–Zapp controversy. The reason behind Lodge's choice is clear when we consider the theoretical path-finding in the 80s in literary criticism. With the downfall of structuralism and the emergence of deconstruction Continental theorizing gave extra dimensions to the complexity of critical thought and language. In the narrative 'Swallow-Zapp counterpoint' professor Swallow stands for a withdrawal from the kind of literary criticism that would mean precious little for the ordinary reading public, and bitterly comments on the influence of "that fundamental scepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty about anything, which I associate with the mischievous influence of Continental theorizing"[12]. As Swallow puts it in his lecture:

[9] Lodge, pp. 118-119.
[10] Lodge, pp. 84-85.
[11] The example that *Small World* sets by the fusion of friendship and professional disagreement between the two professors (whom the reader may now from *Changing Places*) is a noble gesture on Lodge's behalf.
[12] Lodge, p. 27.

> The function of criticism was to assist in the function of literature itself, which Dr Johnson had famously defined as enabling us better to enjoy life, or better endure it. The great writers were men and women of exceptional wisdom, insight, and understanding. Their novels, plays and poems were inexhaustible reservoirs of values, ideas, images, which, when properly understood and appreciated, allowed us to live more fully, more finely, more intensely […] It was the job of the critic to unlock the drawers, blow away the dust, bring out the treasures into the light of day.[13]

The title of Swallow's book, *Hazlitt and the Amateur Reader*, is also a succinct encapsulation of the disapproval of the inbreeding and alienation that excessive theorizing endangers literary criticism. Lodge even goes out of his way to demonstrate the point by citing William Hazlitt's own condemnation of the notion:

> A critic does nothing nowadays who does not torture the most obvious expression into a thousand meanings…His object indeed is not to do justice to his author, whom he treats with very little ceremony, but to do himself homage, and to show his acquaintance with all the topics and resources of criticism[14]

The reader cannot help suspecting that Lodge's own position may be close to what Philip Swallow professes. The suspicion is based upon the reader's familiarity with Philip Swallow. For those readers who are already familiar with the hero of *Changing Places*[15] (and also a major character in *Nice Work*[16]), the likeable English professor could be successfully employed to present a more affective argument, a more forceful appeal to support the theoretical vantage point of traditional humanist scholarship. Whether this is the case or not is impossible to prove. The fact, nevertheless, that Philip Swallow never really slips out of the mainstream of the narrative proves the importance of the values attached to liberal humanism. Lodge efficiently sustains the tension between pro- and anti-deconstructionists right from the beginning of the novel, highlighting how much Continental theorizing can undermine, and at the same time jeopardize the existence of the establishment of literary scholarship. Philip Swallow's reaction to the conclusion of Morris Zapp's pro-deconstructionist conference paper at the opening conference of the novel in Rummage speaks for itself:

> "Then what in God's name *is* the point of it [*i.e.* discussing literature] all?" cried Philip Swallow, throwing his hands into the air.

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[13] Lodge, p. 317.
[14] Lodge, p. 161.See also, William Hazlitt, "On Criticism" [accessed 27 March 2007] <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Essays/Hazlitt/TableTalk/Criticism. htm#fn1>
[15] David Lodge, *Changing Places* (London: Penguin Books, 1975)
[16] David Lodge, *Nice Work* (London: Penguin Books, 1988)

> "The point [says Morris Zapp], of course, is 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."[17]

Wainwright's sexual daydreaming while working on his speech successfully demonstrates the professor's inability to cope with the question. The following excerpt, apparently the full text of the conference paper, gives an appetizing insight into the sense of humour with which Lodge approaches his subject matter:

> […]"*One possible solution*," he writes, and then pauses, gnawing the end of his ballpen.
> *One possible solution would be to run to the beach, seize Sandra Dix* [his student] *by the hand, drag her behind a sand dune, pull down her bikini pants and*
> "Cuppa tea, Rod? I'm just going to make one for Meg and me."
> Bev's [his wife's] red perspiring face peers in at the open window. Rodney stops writing and guiltily covers his pad. After she has gone, he rips out the page, tears it up into small pieces, and tosses it into the wastepaper basket, where it joins several other torn and screwed-up pieces of paper. He starts again on a clean sheet.
> *The question is, therefore, how can literary criticism…*[18]

Rodney Wainwright, of course, remains unable to finish his paper, thus, also successfully maintains the problem of choosing between deconstruction and liberal humanism throughout the novel. Even when he finally makes it to the conference in Jerusalem and is standing in front of his audience, apparently just pausing, because having read the last line of his unfinished paper he runs out of words, he is rescued by Philip Swallow, who collapses with high fever. The event, naturally, is yet another postponement of the answer concerning the future of literary criticism.

Small World, nevertheless, offers a narrative solution to the question Rodney Wainwright is incapable of answering. Ingeniously translated into the novel's network of romance symbolism, the novel envisages a goal worthy of all the knights errant of the literary world to fight for: the UNESCO chair of literary criticism, a purely conceptual chair with a salary of a hundred thousand dollars a year, a research assistant team at your disposal, generous travel grants allowing you to fly about the world and no particular work to be done! Even Rudyard Parkinson, a venerable Oxford don, Regius Professor of Belles-Lettres at All Saints' College contemplates the academic trophy: "…even if UNESCO was an institution routinely sneered at in Oxford Common Rooms. Nobody was going to sneer at one hundred thousand dollars a year, tax-free, to be picked up without the trouble of moving one's books…"[19] But beyond the financial advantages of the post, possessing the UNESCO chair, the ultimate literary Grail, also represents

[17] Lodge, p.28.
[18] Lodge, p. 85.
[19] Lodge, pp. 163-164.

the selection and the consequent dominance of *one* of the contending theoretical schools in the field of literary criticism. The equation of the chair with the Holy Grail is, of course, an antithetical juxtaposition. The chair manifests a power position that can be obtained, but the Grail is elusive. The suggestion that can be read out of the symbolism is not too promising: the competition for the ultimate literary chair will not solve the problems affecting the profession.

That such an implausible UNESCO chair would offer a plausible remedy to the all too serious problems of literary criticism is a solution that Lodge, even on a fictional level, rules out. The leading literary professors of the fictional academic world are unable to convince Arthur Kingfisher, chairperson of the session, about the superiority of their theoretical convictions. Lodge, however, contemplates *one* particular resolution that would potentially be able to settle the theoretical battle royal. It is by asking the right question that Persse McGarrigle, re-enacting the legend of the Holy Grail, manages to break Arthur Kingfisher's intellectual (and sexual) sterility:

> "What do you *do* if everybody agrees with you?" [asks Persee McGarrigle from the nominees, who are all unable to answer intelligibly]
> "That is a very good question [says Arthur Kingfisher]. 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."[20]

Instead of one ultimate literary theory, Lodge's own vision is a kind of critical eclecticism in which all the contending critical currents of the '80s can operate in harmony. The suggestion behind Kingfisher's words is that academic competition should not be based on the fierce exclusion of competing branches of literary theory, but should always strive to maintain a balanced tug-of-war in which the opposing theoretical forces would constructively move forward the cause of literary criticism. The solution that is offered to the problems of literary criticism is cunning. Throughout the novel Lodge systematically reduces the novel's main problem area to the choices between either structuralism-deconstruction or deconstruction-liberal humanism. The meagre participation of other critical schools effectively creates the impression that they have never really been intended for serious consideration as potential candidates for the chair. The idea of one of the contending theoreticians wins the literary Grail effectively channels the reader, who is unable to contemplate a solution devoid of competition.

[20] Lodge, p. 319.

As Peter Barry wrote: "The 1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade was the 'moment' of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial"[21]. *Small World* offers an informative fictional rendering of this period in the history of literary scholarship, rich in logical theoretical explications and their literary applications. Lodge employs literary analogies to describe the world of literary scholarship he was an active participant of and introduces, embedded into a medieval romance pattern, a literary community in which professors of literature zoom from one conference to the other all over the world seven days a week looking for intellectual challenge and sexual adventure. The feat that Lodge accomplishes is remarkable: out of the cardboard characters that stand for easily identifiable stereotypical images, out of the unfeasibility of the romance-driven action, a real world emerges. Lodge fuses the antithetical impulses of realism and the romance with great ingenuity, and the resulting fictional world seems both authentic and acceptably imaginary at the appropriate scenes. The novel, far from being a neutral representation of 1980s' theoretical climate, is strongly opinionated. Lodge presents a condemning image of the academe and questions the traditional 'the winner takes all' form of academic competition. The message of *Small World* is infused with a great deal of corrective purpose. Not only does the novel function as a pseudo- 'introduction to literary criticism' course book[22], it even passes judgement, levels criticism at its own subject matter. It is in this sense that *Small World* can be grasped as a fictional criticism of literary criticism, hence the coinage: *campus criction*.

[21] Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 1.

[22] Judging from its high content of romance literature, *Small World* might as well be used as primary material on a romance survey course.