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Cultural and Institutional Memory as (a) Means of Progress (Part II)

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Abstract

The world of academia is perceived as a competitive milieu full of rivalry. University teaching staff in Britain find themselves in the midst of a whirlpool of ideological and conceptual trends. The effort of academics to stay tuned and to keep up with every new intellectual issue transforms universities into a fierce professional environment. David Lodge humorously analyzes 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 tenser one adopted by Malcolm Bradbury in *The History Man* (1975).

Keywords: academia, rivalry, David Lodge, Britain, development

Introduction

The aim of such 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 morals and intellectual principles of the times. What Dickens announced as Nietzschean epistemological perspectivism, has become a sign of debilitation or, at least, complete disorientation in postmodernism:

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... (Dickens 1).

1. A Seductive Profession for Acting Skills

In such a slippery environment, people cling to whatever offers them at least short-term certainties. During the '70s and until the '90s, university teaching was a profession of the stage. Students expected to be seduced on all planes by their tutors. Even the timid Philip Swallow – only possessing budding charisma until 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 (Lodge 288).

I had to reproduce the quotation in full as its implications, besides its humor, are revealing. Milton's puritanism is abruptly abolished by the academe. Neither are the intellectual guides spiritual masters. 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" (Lodge 291). "Adventure" obviously stands for "affairs". But more

than an errant knight, the postmodern academic 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 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, becomes caught up in the political turmoil. Above all, university lecturers need to stay in good shape in order to stand up to the demands of 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" (Lodge 306).

2. Stimulants for Vitality and Hypocrisy

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 guaranteed at different persons by the same stimuli. 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*" (Bloom 2).

This competitive, not to say aggressive behavior 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 problems are weird. While he is cheating on her, he is fearful of Zapp's allure as a perverse Humbert Humbert in front of his daughter Amanda, possibly a future Lolita (Lodge 112). When Zapp reveals an unexpected humanitarian side by asking Hilary to shelter his American ex-student, the pregnant Mary Makepeace, Swallow reproaches her from his location in the States for accepting "an unmarried mother on the premises" (Lodge 120). 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" (Lodge 130). The humorous intertextuality masks the utmost confusion in regards to crucial choices made in his 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" (Lodge 126), a decision considered by his second wife, Désirée, "the most sordid transaction in the history of conscience-money" (Lodge 126). The twins resulted from his second marriage take to cultivating marijuana, or what their mother calls "avant-gardening" (Lodge 126). 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 academics, Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp. The former is only a lecturer who has published a few essays and reviews: "He lacked will and ambition, the professional killer

instinct which Zapp abundantly possessed" (Lodge 12). Zapp is a full professor and published "five fiendishly clever books (four of them on Jane Austen)" (Lodge 12).

3. 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" (Goulimari 65). 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. At the same time, competition is a pleasurable activity in itself. Only those academics that evolve between these two poles are able to establish complex communicational routes. The other ones, the monomaniacs, become isolated and bury themselves in all sorts of minutiae. This is the reason why the Euphoria State University, with its gorgeous surroundings (rivers, lakes, forested mountains and a splendid bay), favors the gathering of highly-competitive academics. If the American euphoric paradise suggests Californian geography, the British Rummidge University 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" (Lodge 10). The architectural artifices are telling about the pomposity and loftiness on the one hand, and of pitiful scarcity on the other. When the two universities pay no attention to the original materials of construction and, even worse, change the peculiar and authenticating mark of a renowned monument, they both fall into hubris, through excess or through an 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 *the ultimate* book on Jane Austen. This aspiration has structuralist implications: civilization is a hierarchical structure and some interpretations are central while others fall at the 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 active in the communicative relay of the academic world. On the other hand, Zapp's humor makes him more suitable to relativistic poststructuralism than to rigid structuralism. That is why his conference paper, *Textuality as Striptease*, excludes the possibility of establishing a final meaning. 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 (Lodge 253).

Aiming at a crystal-clear understanding of texts and, in the end, of the world, would be similar to living as a possessive and reductionist couple does. Zapp invokes psychoanalytical hermeneutics: "Freud said that obsessive reading [...] is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother's genitals" (Lodge 254). 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" (Lodge 254).

4. Academic Weaponry

The transparency of meaning encourages, paradoxically, the earthliness of the researchers. Multiple interpretational approaches seem to excuse the necessity of indulging in material attachments. Matter can be spiritualized following Zarathustra's perspective: "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" (Nietzsche 57).

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 academia. 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 browses through Swallow's observations on his students, he is amazed at the level of knowledge regarding students' public and private lives (Lodge 14).

In the same manner, 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 (Lodge 257). 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" (Showalter 78), 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 necessarily either frigid or sexually deviant in one way or another" (Björk 120). She follows the same track pursued by the older academics: flies to conferences all over the world, writes articles and books and carries out extensive research 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.

5. 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. Maybe the pun of the proper name ("to zap") aims exactly at this superficial, but edgy speediness. Even the private facets of pleasure are part of a competitive endeavor, 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" (Lodge 144). 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 chance of landing on the American territory, he diversifies the range of hedonistic involvements. He reads out of pure interest and does not have a Ph. D. The English academic milieu tolerates such a relaxed professional life. In exchange, Morris Zapp is disconcerted by the cosy atmosphere of the British university: "No talk of 'lows' or 'highs' here: all was moderate, qualified, temperate" (Lodge 173). 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 psychoanalytic suggestion of impotence (Lodge 186). Such a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Ricoeur 34) 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" (Lodge 213).

In *Small World: An Academic Romance*, the academic is presented as a modern knight-errant, flying from one conference to another. The archetypal model for the globalized academic world is the Arthurian romance. But exactly as it happened in 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 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 (Pearsall 20).

Conclusion

We should consider King Arthur's 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 their educational approach.

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