

LAUDATIO

In honour of **David John LODGE CBE**, Emeritus
Professor, Birmingham University, Great Britain,
on the occasion of the award of *Doctor Honoris Causa* title of
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

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Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi is honoured today to pay homage to one of the most appreciated and beloved British authors of our time, a wonderful example of the double hypostasis typical of postmodern writers: fiction writer and literary critic, the professor, the intellectual David John Lodge. Known to Romanian readers first and foremost through his University novel trilogy written in the seventies and eighties, comprising *Changing Places*, *Small World* and *Nice Work*, David Lodge continues to take his readers by surprise with the variety of styles and themes with which he likes to experiment, even if, as the author himself confesses, he has a fondness for binary structures which, owing to his early-career passion for structuralism, shape his narratives. However, his novels (fourteen so far) are far from being mere applications of pre-established formulae, the narrative construction always allowing the literary theorist to come forth, with his keen interest in the ways in which narrative discourses interweave in polyphonies in the novel, using the writer to give shape to his vision of the art of fiction.

For some of his readers, David Lodge is also one of the greatest English Catholic authors, his education at home and his interest in writers like Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh being major influences in the shaping of the writer preoccupied with the moral dilemmas, spiritual searches and existential dramas of his characters. Born on 28 January 1935, in a lower middle-class family of south-east London, David Lodge's childhood was not peaceful or safe. In 1940, during the intense Nazi air raids on the British capital, the family had to leave the outskirts of London to take refuge in Surrey and later in Cornwall, until the end of the war. When he was ten he was enrolled in the St. Joseph's Academy grammar school in Blackheath, London, and he might not have continued his education had it not been for his headmaster, who persuaded his parents to allow the young man to go to university. Much influenced by his readings, particularly of Evelyn Waugh's novels, which had deeply impressed young David Lodge with their descriptions of the aristocratic atmosphere at Oxbridge – full of pomp and airs –, he chose to study English at University College London, where he was to meet his future wife, Mary, whom he married after completing his masters' degree, in 1959. The following year he became a PhD student and also obtained a teaching position at Birmingham University, from which he retired in 1987 to devote himself entirely to writing. That same year his first novel, *The Picturegoers*, was published,

a text in which we find themes he will use in many of his writings: social and religious identity, Catholicism and agnosticism, and the impact the profound changes in postwar society had on young, educated people.

As one of the beneficiaries of a certain inevitable breaking of the very rigid social class system, David Lodge felt the need to turn to his own life experience to distill it in the feelings, emotions and destinies of his characters. The author has never denied the connection between the universe of his characters and his own life. In a country that is increasingly moving away from the church and even faith, observing the Catholic doctrine under the pressure of a modern lifestyle, libertine and individualist, emerges as a problem that the writer himself hopes to solve through writing, as we see in novels like *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), *Out of the Shelter* (1975), or *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), in which the main theme is the decline of faith. In a pure Lodgian style, the existential crisis experienced by a young doctoral student, married and with three kids, reflects not only the author's own hesitations (who was in a similar situation at the time), but a pretext for a metafictional construction, a demonstration of stylistic craftsmanship and intertextual play, the author referring, through plot and pastiche, to all the authors Lodge, like his protagonist, was attentively studying at the time: Henry James, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Here, as in many of the subsequent novels, the finest humour and (self)irony serve as disguises for very serious considerations of the connection between man and divinity and the relationship with others, being also strategies for the partial dissimulation of literary experiments that the author of no less than ten books on literary theory and criticism, among which *The Language of Fiction* (1966), *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), *Working with Structuralism* (1981), or, more recently, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002), always feels the need to offer to the public in the shape of his novels.

Undoubtedly, the most successful of all his works, an exceptional construction with high chances to remain among the greatest achievements in twentieth-century world fiction is the University novel trilogy: *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984) and *Nice Work*(1988). The novels – written over a period of approximately fifteen years – fit the specifically British aesthetic typology of *campus novel* (later, in American literature as well), which traces back its origins to E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* and has modern ramifications in the works of various English authors of the sixties, seventies and eighties – the time when postmodernism separated from modernism.

The author elaborates a gigantic novel (the entire trilogy presents events occurring over a period of twenty years and on five continents, having several parallel narrative levels that ultimately become conjunct, intersected or concentric, with

dozens of characters and reflectors), following a pre-established technical and thematic “recipe”, beyond which we can glimpse the literary theorist, well anchored in the artistic world in which he lives. Like a mediaeval alchemist, he mixes all the traditional and modern narrative “ingredients” – in appropriate dosage – to obtain the necessary success with the (industrial) public, to satisfy the taste of the elite, to be original, to remain within the familiar sphere (the academic one) and to also incorporate, discreetly, his ideology – his “poetic art”, in classical terms – somewhere in the symbolic infrastructure of the text.

Lodge’s celebrity comes from the dynamism of his plots (with symmetries and organic articulations, not only tolerable, but absolutely captivating), and his intellectual performance relies on fine humour (with absolutely charming situational and psychological subtleties) and on the play of ideas and parabolic themes. If we consider this allegorical substratum, the writer undoubtedly belongs to postmodernity. The universe that he describes seems increasingly “smaller”, globalized, technologized and information-driven, leading to behaviour uniformity, individual alienation and the loss of intellectual autonomy.

The Lodgian character (the academic) experiences a Heideggerian “psychological prison”, being unable to escape a certain pattern. The academics of the trilogy are frequently

indifferent, skeptical, and mostly unsatisfied by their teaching activities, filled with stereotypes and repetitiveness, desiring (and searching for) adventure. They nevertheless discover, at the same time, their inherent inability to change their personalities and adopt other typologies, and each time, after some kind of excess, they return, humbled, to their usual identity formula (the only one that is accessible and natural). As a matter of fact, we always see these heroes on a *quest*, a rather utopian “quest” as it loses itself in its own circularity, symbolically bridging the beginning and the end.

Probably a birds'-eye view characterisation of *Therapy* (1995) would be as a “crisis story”, the personal crisis of a writer entering the stage of arid old age, but also a more general crisis of the metamorphosed writer, converted, if not completely marginalised, within a postindustrial universe. The seriousness of the novel is not in the tone but in the plot, in the unexpected course of events – equally surprising for both the reader and the protagonist. The cultural critic will certainly identify the moral and psychological drama of a consumerist society as a whole, or perhaps the tribulations of a certain psychological model, against the background of postindustrial changes.

This “model” reflects, in a general sense, the profile of the authentic writer (the writer *in aeternum*, that transpersonal entity, unconditionally sensitive to the collective tragedies

which he acknowledges, through a shaman-like transfer, as individual traumas), who has become – because of his own weakness, out of necessity – a puppet in a consumerist society. Corrupted by the financial reward and immediate notoriety, he accepts depersonalisation, using his talent and artistic intelligence, in an alienating, mediocre way, for the entertainment of over-technologized masses, who have no appetite for great literature, only for sitcoms, soap operas and shows with no spiritual depth.

The obsession of the *quest*, in conjunction with existential spleen, can also be found in *Deaf Sentence* (2008). The motif of making the mechanism of story “limited”, as it were, is connected with the psychological profile of the protagonist – the linguist David Bates – undoubtedly an *alter ego* of the author himself to a certain extent. Bates has several major biographical “issues”, which have gradually led to his intellectual alienation. He is almost completely deaf, though still relatively young, which has forced him to retire early. His second wife (the first one, Maisie, having died of cancer) is the extremely dynamic Winifred (Fred, for short) – herself married for the second time – and the many children from former marriages are now grown up, with their own lives. Somehow by chance the professor of linguistics meets the American Alex Loom, who begs Des to become her doctoral advisor, or at least help her out with scholarly advice. The almost extraordinary

insistence of the young girl (whose topic is intriguing – the stylistic analysis of suicide notes!) catches Bates in a psychological and sensorial trap from which he cannot escape. What we see here is both the obsession and the paradoxical voluptuousness of failure (perceived in its “formative”, “initiatory” aspect). Desmond Bates proves to be a very complex character, in spite of his unilateral narrative debut. The hero’s “deafness” functions metaphorically as a self-induced “autism”, an estrangement from the world whose values have become confusing for the protagonist. The novel – with all its humour, at times absolutely mad – is actually a sad one, mapping out the efforts we all make to postpone our fate.

Different in thematic content and style from the previous novel, *Author, Author* (2004) is an artistic analysis of two decades from Henry James’s life, in which the novelist explores the intimate, obscure, subliminal mechanisms of the author, in an X-ray of the creative act as well as of literary authorship. It is a sharp X-ray of the anguish, uncertainty, instability of the author’s artistic destiny. It is at this somewhat “generalizing” level that the reader deciphers the “high” code of the novel *Author, Author*, in its metatextual quality, in its ability to use James as a model for an entire *class* of characters (covering its various yet complementary forms from the deepest strata of tradition to the core of postmodernism), the *class* of literary authors.

The novel focuses on a period of creative crisis (two whole decades!) in Henry James's biography, a crisis that is increased by his dramatic failure with the play *Guy Domville*, performed in London in January 1885. In *Domville*, in his radical option, James embodies his absolute ideal of "high contemplation", unspoiled by the petty dreams of the common people. His cipher is not so much unintelligible as unacceptable for the hedonistic audience in pre-modern London theatre. When the author comes onstage for ovations, he is met with unrestrained booing. *What then is an author?* The implicit answer in David Lodge's novel, if we can consider it an answer, is as indecipherable as the notion itself. The author is, first and foremost, a cultural enigma and a historical one as well.

The novelist's latest work, *A Man of Parts* (2011), is also an investigation of literary authorship. This time Lodge chooses as semi(fictional) hero another great personality of post-Victorian and, in a certain sense, pre-modern English literature. He is H. G. Wells, the creator (together with Jules Verne) of European science fiction. The title chosen by David Lodge for his gigantic story (over 500 pages long), a biography relying on detailed information from Wells's autobiographies, memoirs, journals and letters, has a symbolic dimension that cannot be ignored. The hidden connotation is linked with the multiple personality (slightly schizoid, even) of the great

novelist. The text investigates precisely this dark, or semi-obscure space in Wells's biography, the novelist having obviously put much work into gathering the "historical material" and then fictionalising it intensely.

Novelist, literary critic, fiction theory scholar, essayist and, last but not least, playwright and screenwriter, David Lodge has received many prizes and several dignities in a career spanning over more than fifty years. Since 1976 he has been a member of the Royal Society of Literature, his name being next to some of the greatest personalities of British literature like S.T. Coleridge, W. B. Yeats and Th. Hardy, or Tom Stoppard, Doris Lessing and V.S. Naipaul, his contemporaries. For *Changing Places*, the novelist received the Hawthornden Prize and the Yorkshire Post Book Award, both in 1975, his fame as a writer being consolidated by the prizes he received for the following novels: Whitbread Book of the Year for *How Far Can You Go?*, in 1980, and Sunday Express Book of the Year for *Nice Work*, in 1989. The latter was shortlisted in 1989 (five years after *Small World*) for one of the most prestigious prizes for literature written in English, Booker Prize for Fiction. In 1995, his adaptation of Dickens's novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* won the Writers' Guild Award in the Best Adapted Screenplay category. Last but not least, his prize list includes being shortlisted in 2009 for *Deaf Sentence* and receiving the Best Book award for *Therapy* at the Commonwealth Writers'

Prize (Eurasia Region), in 1996. Other awards include the Silver Nymph (the International Television Festival, Monte Carlo, 1990), and for Best Drama Serial (Royal Television Society Award, 1989), both for his adaptation of *Nice Work*. Also, his play *Secret Thoughts*, a dramatisation of his novel *Thinks* (2001), received the Best New Play award at Manchester Theatre Festival in 2011. In 1997 he was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture and the following year he was appointed Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE), an honour bestowed by the British Monarch upon major personalities in various fields.

In Romania, David Lodge's novels have been very well received by the critics and enthusiastically welcomed by the public. Polirom Publishing House has commissioned and published no less than twelve of his novels (some with third editions), starting with the University trilogy and continuing with texts from his entire career, all wonderfully translated. The translations, accompanied by excellent critical introductions and editorial notes, were penned by first-rate English literature specialists like Professors Virgil Stanciu and George Volceanov, or writers-translators such as Radu Paraschivescu and Radu Pavel Gheo, themselves authors of books in which humour and irony are used to disguise a rather sombre vision of the realities of the contemporary world.

In recognition of the high aesthetic and ethical value of the work of the distinguished writer and literary critic David John Lodge CBE, Emeritus Professor, today, 3 October 2014, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi confers him the *Dignity Doctor Honoris Causa*.

The Laudatio Committee

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Iasi, 3 October 2014