

# ‘SCHOLARS THESE DAYS ARE LIKE THE ERRANT KNIGHTS OF OLD’: ARTHURIAN ALLUSIONS IN DAVID LODGE’S SMALL WORLD

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**Abstract.** David Lodge’s novel *Small World* (1984) builds on a wide range of literary allusions, most notably on allusions to medieval and modern versions of the Grail quest and Arthurian literature. Using the methodology of historically informed literary criticism, the present paper showcases Lodge’s employment of key medieval topoi, especially of the Grail quest, in portraying the academic community of *Small World*.

**Key words:** Arthurian literature, Grail quest, David Lodge, chivalry, academic community

David Lodge’s *Small World* (1984), like many of his other novels, presents the reader with a wealth of literary allusions. In the 1989 interview with Raymond Thompson, when questioned about his use of allusion, Lodge states: ‘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’ (Thompson, 1999). In *Small World*, the most notable allusions are to the Grail quest, with particular references to T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) and Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920).

The present paper examines Lodge’s employment of medieval topoi, especially of the quest, in depicting the academic community of *Small World*. The discussion begins with issues of genre and community as a preliminary to exploring Lodge’s representation of the Grail quest in *Small World*. It is argued that Lodge’s Grail quest has multiple meanings: Lodge describes the quests pursued by individual characters, but he also presents the common goal of the entire academic community, that of finding a productive way to study literature and avoid the impasse of literary theory divorced from the enjoyment of literature itself. On a more general level, the Grail quest in *Small World* is associated with seeking the intensity of experience, a pursuit in which literature, and art itself, can help both academics and the general audience.

The discussion focuses on several episodes which are important in the characters’ individual ‘quests’, notably Philip Swallow’s ‘story within a story’

and Persse McGarrigle's question at the MLA conference. Discussion of particular episodes showcases the similarities and differences between the medieval Grail quest as it appears, for instance, in the so-called Vulgate cycle of romances, also known as the *Lancelot-Grail cycle* (*Queste del Saint Graal*) and in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* ('Tale of the Sankgreal'), and the contemporary quests of the *Small World* characters. In fact, Lodge includes a variety of literary allusions in the novel, referring to medieval romances – Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Roman de Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, among others – as well as post-medieval romances and literature that make use of Arthurian motifs, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In an interview with R. Thompson, Lodge explains that *The Waste Land* and Jessie Weston's study *From Ritual to Romance*, used by Eliot for his poem, were his primary sources for the Grail quest motif in *Small World*. According to Lodge, he 'concentrated upon the Grail legend seen through the lens of Jessie Weston and T. S. Eliot' (Thompson, 1999). However, he acknowledges being familiar with medieval romances, such as *King Horn*, and with scholarly studies of romance, including Patricia Parker's *Inescapable Romance* (1979) and Northrop Frye's works, when writing *Small World* (Thompson, 1999). Lodge uses the Grail quest as a structural motif to convey his view of the global academic community in the 1980s, which, as Lodge remarks, represents society in microcosm: 'The university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scale' (Lodge, 1986: 169). Indeed, his novel describes a quest for meaning; this quest is set in the context of literary studies, where the very idea of meaning is under threat from new literary theories, post-structuralism and deconstruction.

*Small World*, subtitled 'An Academic Romance', belongs to a hybrid genre: it is both a romance and a campus novel. Lodge explains that he decided to add the subtitle in order to prepare the reader for the (occasionally) unrealistic development of its plot (Vianu, 2006: 226). Accordingly, he states that *Small World* is 'a novel that consciously imitates the interlacing plots of chivalric romances, so there is an intertextual justification, too, for the multiplicity of coincidences in the story' (Lodge, 1992a: 152). Likewise, Rubin, reviewing the romance, notes Lodge's employment of 'traditional techniques and devices, familiar to readers of Ariosto, Boiardo, Tasso, and Spenser' (Rubin, 1985: 23). In fact, Lodge makes use of techniques that date back to medieval romance, including Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Malory's French source, the Vulgate cycle of romances.

Meanwhile, *Small World* is not only a romance but also a campus novel, usually classified, alongside *Changing Places* (1975) and *Nice Work* (1989), as part of Lodge's 'campus trilogy'. The reasons for grouping the three novels together include the continuity of setting (Rummidge, a fictional place, inspired by the city of Birmingham, where Lodge used to teach) and characters (most notably Morris Zapp and Philip Swallow). However, none of these novels is set

on a single campus. *Changing Places* is subtitled 'Tale of Two Campuses', and the action takes place simultaneously not only on two different campuses, but on two continents, at Rummidge in Britain and at Euphoria in the United States. In turn, *Nice Work* is built on the conflict between the factory and the university, between two cultures, industry and academe, with its main characters Vic Wilcox and Dr Robyn Penrose representing the respective milieus.

*Small World* can be called a campus novel in the sense that it is set in the world-wide space of a 'global campus'. Lodge draws attention to the global nature of contemporary academic life in the conversation between Morris Zapp and Hilary Swallow, Zapp highlighting that

'The day of the single, static campus is over.'  
 'And the single, static campus novel with it, I suppose?'  
 'Exactly! Even two campuses wouldn't be enough.' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 63)

Zapp also remarks 'The world is a global campus' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 64). Earlier in the novel, Zapp explains to Persse McGarrigle, who is a 'conference virgin' (ibid.: 18), that 'As long as you have access to a telephone, a Xerox machine, and a conference grant fund, you're OK, you're plugged into the only university that really matters – the global campus' (ibid.: 44).

In fact, somewhat qualifying Zapp's claim that the old-fashioned campus novel is no longer possible to write, *Small World* contains many features that relate it to classic representatives of the genre, as B. Bergonzi notes in commenting on Lodge's contribution to the campus novel tradition (Bergonzi, 1995: 14). Early in the text, Zapp quotes from one of the first campus narratives, F. M. Cornford's 1908 pamphlet on university politics, *Microcosmographia Academica* (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 42). Elsewhere, Lodge describes *Lucky Jim* as 'the first British campus novel', as different from the Varsity novel about the life of Oxford dons, to which genre Cornford's *Microcosmographia* belongs. Thus, in his 'Introduction' to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Lodge cites the main themes of 'most campus novels, British and American' as being 'academic politics in the broader sense, intellectual competition and intrigue, taboo sexual relations between staff and students, and the social and educational dynamics of the seminar and tutorial' (Lodge, 1992b: viii). Moreover, Lodge notes that the narrative interest of the campus novel derives either from the struggle for power or from amorous intrigue: 'Inside, as outside, the academy, the principal determinants of action are sex and the will to power, and a typology of campus fiction might be based on a consideration of the relative dominance of these two drives in the story' (Lodge, 1986: 170). In *Small World*, the two topics are present, so that individual characters are engaged in the pursuit of power, women or both: Persse's quest is for a girl, Angelica, and, later, Cheryl, while most of the other academics' quest is for the prestigious UNESCO chair of literary criticism. When Zapp quotes Cornford's *Microcosmographia*, he chooses a passage about 'young [men] in a hurry' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 44), a class of men who seem to be the academic

counterparts of the medieval 'young', that is, unmarried knights. Zapp postulates that 'In modern academic society they [young men in a hurry] take away your research grants. And your women, too, of course' (ibid.: 42). Lodge's explanation for the popularity of literary theory in American academic society is enlightening in respect of Zapp's mode of thinking:

There is surely a hidden link between the professionalism of the American academic world and the eagerness with which it has devoured, domesticated and developed European theory. The very difficulty and esotericism of theory make it all the more effective for purposes of professional identification, apprenticeship and assessment. It sorts out the men from the boys or, to put it another way, speeds the tribal process by which boys become young men and push out the old men. (Lodge, 1990: 181)

As Lodge notes in his review of Imre Saluzinsky's book of interviews *Criticism in Society* (1987) 'The world of American academic criticism is a small, insulated one, but it mirrors the macro-society in being highly competitive. In both worlds it is possible to succeed spectacularly, because it is also possible to fail' (Lodge, 1990: 176). In another essay, Lodge argues that the campus novel represents society in miniature, so that the situations described in *Small World*, the struggles for power and success, apply not only to the 1980s academic community, but to the entire western society of the 1980s (Lodge, 1986: 169).

The world Lodge describes is dominated by the struggle for power in professional and erotic spheres. This struggle for power is one of the reasons for associating the *Small World* academic community with medieval chivalry, especially with King Arthur's Round Table. Lodge explains that he uses the motif of errant knights as a unifying metaphor for the novel and that he first conceived of the idea after watching the film *Excalibur* (Thompson, 1999; Lodge, 1986: 72–73). In fact, the film offers a stereotypic image of medieval violence, which does not correspond exactly to the tone of medieval romances, even to Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the violence of which has been studied in some detail by medievalists, notably A. Lynch, who comments that the romance 'consists mainly of descriptions of martial combat' (Lynch, 1997: 28). Moreover, Lynch highlights that the 'violence of war and other forms of fighting is a frequent feature of *Le Morte Darthur*' (Lynch, 2000: 24). In this respect, as in many others, Lodge's Grail owes more to Eliot's *The Waste Land* than to the film. Indeed, Lodge mentions that he reread Jessie Weston and decided to incorporate information on her and Eliot in the novel (Thompson, 1999). Only the comic medieval banquet episode, with 'lasses' in low-cut garments and obscene songs performed by a jester, reflects the popular stereotype of medieval England, stretched to the extreme:

It was no great sacrifice to be on the margins of this particular feast. The mead tasted like tepid sugar-water, the medieval fare consisted of fried chicken and jacket potatoes eaten without the convenience

of knives and forks, and the wenches were the usual Martineau Hall waitresses who had been bribed or bullied into wearing long dresses with plunging necklines. (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 53)

The academic community is compared to Arthurian knighthood on two levels: comically, the academics in this scene become part of Arthur's retinue when they attend this down-market pastiche of a banquet and, on a more serious note, when they become engaged in their various quests.

The quest that most academics, except Persse, enter is for the UNESCO chair of literary criticism. This quest, remote as it may seem from the spiritual quest of the French *Queste* and Malory's 'Sankgreal', brings to mind these medieval texts, because the quest of Lodge's academics is instigated by discontent and by desire to gain fame in this world. Accordingly, as the UNESCO representative, Jacques Textel, observes, 'top academics are the least contented people in the world. They always think the grass is greener in the next field' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 163). His remark echoes the dream seen by one of the more worldly knights in the *Queste*, Sir Hector, in which bulls depart to seek richer pastures; the dream is interpreted by a hermit, who explains that the bulls represent Arthur's knights, dissatisfied with the glory available at the court and aspiring, vainly, to witness the Grail mysteries (Pauphilet, 1923: 149, 155–157). The quest of medieval worldly knights in the *Queste* and the 'Sankgreal' is doomed to failure because they are bent on increasing their social glory rather than on seeking salvation and the revelation of divine mysteries.

Likewise, the efforts of such high-profile academics as Morris Zapp, Rudyard Parkinson, Fulvia Morgana, Siegfried von Turpitz, Michel Tardieu and Philip Swallow come to nothing because they want professional, worldly fame for themselves, rather than being concerned with the quest for truth. Presumably, the 'truth' of literary texts can never be established once and for all – not because, as Zapp intimates, 'it would have eventually put [them] all out of business' or because 'every decoding is another encoding' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 25), but because, if all the meanings of all literary texts *could* be explained, literature, as well as literary criticism, would be 'dead'. When Persse asks his apparently naïve question at the MLA conference, about what would happen if scholars agreed on a single theory of literary criticism, he strikes at the heart of the problem: no single theory can explain all possible implications of all literary texts. For Zapp, deconstruction is the theory most likely to bring about the débâcle of literary studies: 'It's kind of exciting – the last intellectual thrill left. Like sawing through the branch you're sitting on' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 118). However, Zapp becomes disillusioned with deconstruction after experiencing the threat of being 'deconstructed' by kidnappers. The question of literary theory is not resolved in a satisfactory way by the end of *Small World* – it manifestly cannot be – and in this respect the novel resembles the medieval Grail quest romances, where the Grail is taken from this world after the quest is accomplished, so that the reader remains ignorant of the mysteries the Grail contains.

In difference from medieval Grail quest romances, there is more than one Grail in Lodge's *Small World*. Different quests conducted by the characters in *Small World* indicate the complex nature of Lodge's body of academic 'chivalry' because the Grail each character pursues depends on his or her ambitions. Lodge himself stated in an interview that he uses the Arthurian framework as a metaphor for academic activity because of the similarity between contemporary academics venturing tirelessly to conferences, the modern equivalent of pilgrimages and quests, and medieval knights errant (Thompson, 1999). As a spiritual search, the Grail quest is of course similar to a pilgrimage, and, indeed, *Small World* begins with an allusion to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

The parallel between academics and Arthurian knights is introduced overtly in the first part of the book by Morris Zapp in a conversation with Hilary Swallow: 'Scholars these days are like the errant knights of old, wandering the ways of the world in search of adventure and glory' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 63). In addition to Zapp's early reference to contemporary academics as errant knights, *Small World* includes comments which bring the Grail quest to the fore explicitly. In two conversations with Miss Maiden, Persse mentions his quest for Angelica, and these conversations establish a link between contemporary 'knights' and their various Grails – professional, personal and spiritual. Of all the *Small World* academics, Persse is the only one for whom the private Grail, his beloved Angelica, is more important than his professional career. Although Persse's attachment to the enigmatic and elusive Angelica is rash and immature, he makes a significant point when remarking in a conversation with Miss Maiden that the Grail is different for everyone: 'For Eliot it was religious faith, but for another it might be fame, or the love of a good woman' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 12). As is further shown at the end of the paper, Persse's ability to seek the private Grail of affection enables the attainment of the public Grail and restores the Waste Land of literary theory to fertility. Indeed, F. Holmes maintains that to the two different quests within the fictional framework of *Small World*, the quest for the UNESCO chair of literary criticism and Persse's quest for Angelica, there can be added a third quest, the quest of the reader trying to discover the novel's unifying principle (Holmes, 1990: 47–57).

Remarkably, the romantically-minded Persse is not the only character in *Small World* to make the connection between the pursuit of the Grail and the character's own experiences and aspirations. Philip Swallow, recollecting of the plane crash in which he could have died several years ago, makes several medieval allusions and comments, indirectly, on what the Grail quest means both for him and for the academic community in general. This episode sheds light on what exactly the Grail quest is for Lodge's academic 'knights' and how some characters in *Small World* identify their adventures with the adventures common in chivalric romance, thus contributing to the self-reflexive nature of Lodge's novel.

For Swallow, proximity to death increases the intensity of experience, though he appreciates it only when the actual danger to his life is removed: 'Intensity of

experience is what we're looking for, I think. [...] I found it in America in '69 [...] the mixture of pleasure and danger and freedom – and the sun' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 66). Swallow has experienced this intensity in the previous novel of the trilogy, *Changing Places*, in which he spends a term at the University of Euphoric State, coming to enjoy the American way of life, the atmosphere of upheaval at the university and the company of Zapp's wife, Desirée. Following the mock medieval banquet at the beginning of *Small World*, Swallow returns home dejected at the failure of his conference, and Zapp wonders if Swallow is 'always like this after a medieval banquet' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 66). It is possible that the evocation of King Arthur's Round Table and the contrast between genuine medieval romance and its clownish re-enactment by 'Ye Merrie Olde Round Table' team contributes to Swallow's depression. This contrast may remind him that his own life, the life of an obscure professor at a redbrick university, is closer to the farce of the cheapened inauthentic medieval banquet rather than to the glory of medieval romance, whereas earlier he *had* experienced adventures. These adventures, though not exactly heroic, were occasions which seemed briefly to approach the intensity of experience associated with chivalry, such as successive encounters with death on battle-field and with love in castles.

Thus, Swallow tells Zapp a story of what happened to him years ago, when he was only beginning to travel as a visiting lecturer on British Council tours. Flying back home, he and his neighbour notice that one of the plane's engines is on fire. The plane returns to the airport it left at Genoa and makes an emergency landing. Swallow telephones the British Council representative Simpson who takes Swallow to his house for the night. Swallow dines with Simpson and his wife, Joy, and, after Simpson leaves on a work trip, Swallow makes fervent love to Joy. The next morning he departs without having an opportunity to speak privately to Joy. Later, Swallow learns that the Simpsons died in a plane crash. The story is narrated in a rather literary manner, commented on by Zapp, and Swallow acknowledges that once he wrote it down for his 'own satisfaction' (*ibid.*: 72). Thus, the reader is aware that Swallow's story within the story lacks immediacy, because Swallow must have put much consideration into selecting and wording the relevant details, for instance, when he speaks of 'taking an irrevocable leap into moral space, pulling on the zip-tab at her throat like a parachute ripcord, and falling with her to the floor' (*ibid.*). In other words, the story renders not simply Swallow's experience but his understanding of this adventure and the way he wants to see himself within it. Indeed, the narrative is saturated with a flavour of medieval romance in its structure and in separate details. Like the romance knights errant, who enjoys the favours of a lady or damsel after a violent battle, Swallow feels an urge to make love to 'any woman' after his narrow escape (*ibid.*): 'It was as if, having passed through the shadow of death, I had suddenly recovered an appetite for life I thought I had lost for ever' (*ibid.*: 71). Later he explains that by making love to Joy, '[he] felt [he] was defying death, fucking [his] way out of the grave' (*ibid.*: 74). The episode can be explained, alternatively, in a more modern way, so that Swallow would appear not like a knight but like the hero

of an adventure story, an academic James Bond, who survives mortal danger and seduces his attractive hostess.

Early in his narrative, Swallow sees himself as a bold, self-possessed man, making a point of his English 'sangfroid' as opposed to the emotional response of the Italian passengers (ibid.: 70). However, the impression of Swallow as a brave knight is undermined, when he confesses to feeling a double unfairness in the episode of the emergency landing: it is unfair that he should die, and it is unfair that he is one of the last passengers to leave the plane (ibid.: 69, 70). When he comes to Simpson's flat, Swallow notices that his sensations have been exacerbated by the proximity of death. He feasts on Parma ham, cake and tea, as medieval knights feasted in a castle, prior to making love to his beautiful 'chatelaine': 'The food pierced me with its exquisite flavours, the tea was fragrant as ambrosia, and the woman sitting opposite to me seemed unbearably beautiful, all the more because she was totally unconscious of her attractions for me' (ibid.: 71). Indeed, Swallow's description of Joy echoes both medieval romance and its interpretation from James Frazer and Jessie Weston onwards as a fertility myth. Swallow explicitly associates Joy's long gown with a medieval dress (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 72) and Joy herself with a feminine deity, a life-giving principle: 'I was moaning and raving into her ear [...] how I felt reconnected to the earth and the life force and all kinds of romantic nonsense' (ibid.: 73). Joy's name is of course symbolic, as, according to Swallow, she teaches him to enjoy life once more.

When Swallow meets Joy again, he tries to recreate the experience, despite Zapp's warning that habit would eventually destroy the excitement he felt. Swallow now has, less romantically, to choose between, on the one hand, breaking the rules of propriety by abandoning his wife and, on the other, succumbing to the ordinariness of his family routine, which would drag on to his eventual death. Before meeting Joy again, he muses on the sadness of finishing his life in retirement and impotence:

Was it, perhaps, time to call a halt to his travels, abandon the quest for intensity of experience he had bumbled on about to Morris Zapp, [...] settle for routine and domesticity, for safe sex with Hilary and the familiar round of the Rummidge academic year, [...] until it was time to retire, retire from both sex and work? Followed in due course by retirement from life. (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 212)

Like Arthur Kingfisher, whose belief in the connection between sexual and intellectual powers is discussed later on in the article, Swallow associates sex and career. Eventually, he acknowledges that he is not equal to the challenge of acting as a dashing knight and tireless lover, so he leaves Joy and returns to Hilary.

Commenting on Swallow's experience, Zapp suggests that the action of breaking away from habit is accountable for Swallow's 'intensity of experience'. Zapp quotes the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky on the detrimental effects of routine: '*Habit devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear*



of war... Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life' (ibid.: 77). In fact, Zapp misquotes Shklovsky, because the first word of the quotation is 'habitualization' rather than 'habit': Lodge uses the same quotation to comment on the use of defamiliarization for describing execution in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Lodge, 1977: 13). Habitualization drives Swallow and, possibly, other academics like Zapp, to their round-the-world errantry of conference-hopping and foreign lectures. Conference-going is supposedly an escape from the more dreary routine of teaching and administration, as conferences are associated with pleasure. However, conferences become a habit in themselves for Swallow, and, as he sets out for Turkey, he longs for the warmth of Hilary's embrace.

Ironically, Lodge's scholars of literature, a subject which, like all art, should 'help us recover the sensation of life' (ibid.: 13), are unaffected by the subject of their study. Swallow himself notes that the application of contemporary theory, structuralism and deconstruction in particular, destroys the enjoyment of great literary works and, hence, annihilates their value, an argument with which Lodge appears to sympathise. Literary theory as such may result in imaginative death when elaboration of theory hides from the critic and the reader art and life themselves, as structuralism and deconstruction or, indeed, any theory, might do when taken to an extreme. Accordingly, Lodge cites one of the most radical exponents of structuralism, Roland Barthes, for whom the critic's task 'lies not in the ability to *discover* the work under consideration but, on the contrary, to cover it as completely as possible with one's own language' (Barthes, 1964; cited by Lodge, 1977: 62). Lodge's implication in *Small World* seems to be that recent developments in criticism lead to non-existence, to death in life and that this failure to live authentically leads to stagnation and spiritual death.

At the most general level, *Small World* is about the redemption of humanity through art, in this case through literature and its critical reception and appreciation. This redemption is achieved through the offices of a particular family. Thus, *Small World* is comparable to the late medieval family romances, such as *King Horn*, which, among other themes, engage the issue of redemption. Thus, Lodge cites *King Horn* among the romances with which he was familiar at the time of writing *Small World* (Thompson, 1999). Likewise, in the medieval French *Queste del Saint Graal* and Thomas Malory's *remaniement* of the romance, 'The Tale of the Sankgreal', Galahad heals the ailing king who dies afterwards. In *Small World*, Persse's question at the MLA conference restores life and fertility simultaneously to Kingfisher and the entire critical and creative literary community gathered in New York, some of whose members (Arthur Kingfisher, Desirée Zapp and Raymond Frobisher) have been blocked creatively and made imaginatively sterile. Kingfisher's creative and physical impotence is a motif that could have been suggested to Lodge by the film *Excalibur*. However, the motif has roots in medieval Arthurian romance such as Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* and the anonymous French *Perlesvaus*. In the latter, it is King Arthur who suffers from a condition known as *acedia* or 'volonté délayante', sloth, which paralyses the life of Logres (Koroleva, 2008).

In an interview, Lodge explains that Arthur Kingfisher represents the Fisher King (Thompson, 1999; Bergonzi, 1995: 21). His full name suggests that Kingfisher blends the characters of the Fisher King *and* King Arthur, both of whom suffer from an illness that impedes their creativity and their community's productive functioning. Indeed, Zapp reminds Fulvia Morgana that Kingfisher is the man who personifies in some way the academic community, to which Fulvia replies, with justice, that the discipline must be 'in a very un'healthy condition' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 119). As will be argued later in this article, Lodge fully shares Fulvia's view about the problems which literary criticism experienced at the time.

Lodge applies the metaphor of the Waste Land being restored to fertility by the Grail knight (Jessie Weston's theory) to Persse's question at the MLA conference, which 'saves' the universe of academic research from being taken over by a single critical theory, be it structuralism, deconstruction or Marxism. According to Lodge, the novel is about overcoming sterility, either intellectual or creative, an idea inspired by Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Weston's study rather than medieval Grail quest romances (Thompson, 1999). The impasse at which literary theory has arrived is metaphorically rendered as the desolation of Logres in Arthurian romance at the time of the Grail quest, but it is treated humorously in relation to several characters. Notably, the Australian scholar Rodney Wainwright becomes creatively blocked, unable to answer his own question '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?' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 84). The question, with which he struggles throughout the novel, remains unanswered, possibly because Lodge saw no succinct answer to it at the time.

In order to understand the myth of redemption presented by Lodge in *Small World*, it is instructive to consider his writings on the history of literature and criticism before and after the novel's publication. In 1977, Lodge published *The Modes of Modern Writing*, where, in the 'Preface', he confessed to be 'sufficiently conditioned by the Arnoldian tradition in English studies to feel that any critical method should be able to explain why literature is valued (in other words, what is special about it) as well as how it works' (Lodge: 1977, xii). This way Lodge embraces both the more innovative strands of criticism, studying the mechanics by which a text works, and more traditional criticism which leads to the establishment of literary canon. *The Modes of Modern Writing* begins, appropriately, with a chapter seeking to define literature, entitled 'What is Literature?', at the end of which Lodge concludes that any text can 'become literature by responding to a literary reading'. Lodge maintains that only literary texts, with 'the kind of internal foregrounding which makes all [their] components aesthetically relevant' can and should be subject to critical study (Lodge, 1977: 8). Later in the book, in the section 'Problems and Executions', Lodge describes the controversy of competing literary schools, which draw into its orbit authors and critics. Hence, Lodge suggests the need to find 'a single way

of talking about novels, a critical methodology, a poetics or aesthetics of fiction, which can embrace descriptively all the varieties of this kind of writing', which may not be the same as using a single theory to explain all literary texts (ibid.: 52). In *Small World*, the same conflict is presented in fictional terms and, at the end of the novel, an answer to this controversy is promised, but never made explicit, as an answer to Persse's naïve question.

In his collection of critical essays *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (1990), published after *The Modes of Modern Writing*, Lodge appears to have found a theory which would enable the critic to consider the text as a heterogeneous construct. In the 'Introduction', Lodge explains that Bakhtin's theory is more adequate for the analysis of fiction, showing that 'there is no such thing as *the* style, *the* language of a novel, because a novel is a medley of many styles, many languages – or, if you like, voices' (Lodge, 1990: 6). The plurality of voices highlighted by Bakhtin's theory ensures the flexibility of critical approach, implying that there would be no single, rigid methodology with which everyone should agree – a problem raised by Persse's question 'What follows if everybody agrees with you?' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 319).

In Logres, war makes the land barren; similarly, in *Small World*, various critical theories are in conflict, and the result of this conflict is a shift of interest from the writing of literature, the object of literary study, to the sterility of literary theory barely comprehensible not only to the lay reader but to the majority of academics themselves. In his critical works, Lodge frequently comments on the trouble of literary theory becoming an elite intellectual game. In his essay 'The Novel Now: Theories and Practices', written three years after *Small World*, Lodge deplores the breakdown of communication between literary scholars and the 'practising writers, literary journalists and the educated common reader' (Lodge, 1990: 11–24). The words could have been uttered by Philip Swallow, who in a conversation with his publisher, Felix Skinner, comments bitterly on the non-academic media's sagging interest in 'lit. crit.':

'I'm afraid the Sundays and weeklies don't pay as much attention to lit. crit. as they used to.'

'That's because so much of it is unreadable,' said Philip Swallow.

'I can't understand it, so how can you expect ordinary people to?'

I mean, that's what my book is *saying*. That's why I *wrote* it.' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 51)

In his critical writing, Lodge acknowledges his own difficulty, similar to Swallow's, in comprehending some of contemporary literary theory: for instance, he admits to finding Roland Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* 'almost incomprehensible' (Lodge, 1977: x). Elsewhere, Lodge reports Frank Kermode's confession of 'having read Derrida's *Grammatologie* with total bafflement only to discover some time later that his copy had many crucial pages missing' (Lodge, 1990: 183).

For Lodge, the exclusive, elitist discourse of literary studies, which is barely understandable to academics themselves, is erroneous and sterile because it

excludes the 'common educated reader' (Lodge, 1990: 24) whom the writer, in theory, is supposed to address and whom literary criticism should help to understand the writer's work. In the article *Structural Defects for The Observer* (1980), Lodge wryly comments that

The exponents of post-structuralism do not even try to be lucid or intelligible. There seem to be two motives for this. The respectable reason is that these writers believe there is no single, simple 'meaning' to be grasped anywhere, at any time, and the experience of reading their books is designed to teach that uncomfortable lesson. The less respectable reason is that their command of a prestigious but impenetrable jargon constitutes power – the power to intimidate their professional peers. (Lodge, [1980] 1986: 114)

Lodge's attack on the elitism of literary studies reverses the traditional message of medieval Grail quest romances, where the Grail is available only to a restricted, hereditary group. Lodge's novel also differs from the medieval Grail quest romances, such as the *Queste* and the *Morte Darthur*, in their interpretation of what achieving the Grail actually means; in medieval romances, the attainment of the Grail leads to an enhanced understanding of divine mysteries, quite beyond the reach of ordinary people. In *Small World*, the idea of the Grail as a mystical union with God is never seriously invoked, and the word is used symbolically to signify one's aspirations. However, at a more general level, the Grail constitutes a redemptive force, which includes creativity and intensity of experience that can be achieved, among other things, through literature. This intensity of experience, which Swallow unsuccessfully seeks, constitutes one's ability to view things freshly, to appreciate the present moment and to live authentically.

It has been mentioned earlier in the article that, for Swallow, intensity of experience is often associated with sexual novelty, as in his sojourn at Euphoria with Desirée or his night in Genoa with Joy. As a result, it may appear that the revival of the Waste Land in *Small World* is connected primarily with sexuality. The sexual preferences and activities of the characters are candidly described, and Arthur Kingfisher himself conceives of intellectual productivity as being directly proportionate to sexual prowess. Nonetheless, the morality of *Small World* is more conventionally Christian and closer to the morality of medieval romance than the flamboyant, carnivalesque picture of sexual promiscuity it initially presents, demonstrating a striking contrast between unabashed reference to sexuality by academics and their innate shyness.

There is a contradiction between the ideology of sexual liberation professed in the academic world and its practice. The only character with integral moral convictions, discourse and practice is Persse, and he is genuinely shocked by the boldness of academic discourse. Persse's naïvety in matters of both literary theory and sexual practice enable him to act as a quester, because innocence is crucial in the Grail quest. Gross notes that Persse's naïvety and lack of experience

in matters of love and sex derives from his prototype, the Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes (Gross: 1985). Indeed, the redemption of the Waste Land achieved by Persse's question in the novel is connected primarily not with sexual, but with emotional and imaginative fertility. By asking the innocent question 'What follows if everyone agrees with you?' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 319), Persse challenges the sterile authority of various academic theories. He humanizes literary study, making it inclusive, open to those scholars who do not adhere to a particular theory and to non-academics, rather than exclusive and elitist.

The asking of the question restores creative capacity to the increasingly sterile academic community, and the change is signalled by a miraculous spell of warm weather in the middle of the bleak American winter, which Kingfisher calls 'halcyon days' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 321): 'The icy wind that had been blowing straight from the Arctic down the skyscraper canyons, numbing the faces and freezing the fingers of pedestrians and street vendors, suddenly dropped, and turned round into the gentlest warm southern breeze' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 320). A number of people at the MLA conference who had been rendered creatively sterile regain their powers to write. Accordingly, Desirée realizes that the book she is writing is not as bad as she feared, so she regains confidence in her creative capacity. Likewise, Frobisher discovers he can begin a novel, which he had been unable to do for years. Both associate their inspiration with the 'extraordinary spell of fine weather' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 330): for instance, Frobisher tells Persse how he 'was sitting in Washington Square [...] and basking in this extraordinary sunshine, when suddenly the first sentence of a novel came into [his] head' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 330). Most importantly, Arthur Kingfisher, the leading authority in literary study, who had been unable to conceive a new, original idea, realizes he can work again and decides to take the UNESCO chair himself.

It seems that Persse's ability to experience and express innocent, somewhat naïve but genuine affection restores vitality to the academic community. The subsequent sexual activities at the MLA conference are distinguished by their emotional dimension: for instance, Arthur Kingfisher not only regains his sexual prowess, but also becomes engaged to his assistant. The conference ends on a note of reconnection, openness and inclusiveness, while the quester himself, Persse, is about to continue with another quest, this time for the airport employee Cheryl Summerbee. As has already been mentioned, Lodge's novel is open-ended, in accordance with Angelica's theory about the romance being 'in principle endless' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 322): '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' (Lodge, [1984] 1995: 322–323). According to this theory, a true quest can never achieve its goal, because achievement of the quest's object would remove the pleasure and vitality of life or, in Angelica's words, 'the satisfaction of [the reader's] need [to 'know'] brings pleasure to an end, just as in psychosexual life the possession of the Other kills Desire'

(Lodge, [1984] 1995: 322). Thus, medieval Grail quest romances, if they are finished, usually end with the quester and the Grail being taken to heaven: at the end of the *Queste* and the 'Sankgreal', the Grail is seized by angelic hands, Galahad and, eventually, also Perceval die, while Bors returns to King Arthur's court with news about the adventures. Such an ending would have hardly satisfied Lodge's modern readers and, in *Small World*, there is a very modern sense that the value of the quest is in the spiritual search itself.

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