

Lucia Opreanu

## The British Museum is Falling Down: the Roots of David Lodge's Academic Echo-Land

*One of the most frequently discussed aspects of David Lodge's fiction consists in the intertextual complexity of his novels and the ways in which echoes of countless texts are interwoven in the structure of new and original works. The present paper aims to analyse the various types of such echoes present in one of his first novels, *The British Museum is Falling Down*, identifying the ways in which it anticipates the increasingly elaborated intertextuality of later works and focusing on Adam Appleby's anxieties of influence and troubled interactions with various literary texts in order to emphasise David Lodge's eventual ability to eschew such worries and successfully use the works of the past for his own creative purposes.*

Key words: *allusion, anxiety, influence, intertextuality, originality, parody*

Although intertextuality is a relatively recent critical term, it refers to an inescapable phenomenon (WO 58) that has been in existence since the appearance of the first literary texts and whose evolution involves constant revaluations of the true nature and meaning of originality and the associated notion of influence. As far as the former concept is concerned, the modern age has been marked by quite contradictory approaches, emphasising either the inevitable exhaustion of literary possibilities and the subsequent unlikelihood of any artist imagining something that has not already been written in one form or another, or the awareness that the existence of a vast corpus of past texts does not preclude the creation of valuable new works. Far from being daunted by the success of their precursors, some of the most appreciated contemporary writers take advantage of the resources of literary history, resorting to parody, pastiche, appropriation, quotation, allusion and various other devices and combining elements from the archives of the past in their own highly original works.

David Lodge is perhaps one of the most representative such writers, as his novels do not only make use of all the intertextual possibilities available but also treat the numerous uncertainties faced by contemporary artists. His decision to position himself "on the threshold between theory and fiction, between academia and the outside world" (Hopkin 54) and his subsequent double identity as both academic and novelist, "split between writing fiction and literary scholarship" (YHJ 11), clearly emerge from his tendency to include in his novels echoes from the texts analysed in his works of criticism, to use his literary texts as vehicles for theoretical ideas and to create protagonists who share the same preoccupations and uncertainties. The fact that the majority of his characters are either professors and students of literature or are involved in some form of artistic production provides multiple opportunities for references and allusions to an impressive variety of texts and results in extremely complex novels, whose greatest merit has however been seen to consist precisely in their appeal to a wide audience. Indeed, while less literary minded readers can simply

enjoy the surface comedy, absurd situations and unlikely coincidences, others can derive an even greater enjoyment from their ability to identify the multiple sources and the ways in which the works of illustrious precursors as well as Lodge's own earlier writings are constantly used in the elaboration of new texts. All of these features are particularly noticeable in the case of a novel which anticipates many of the familiar themes and literary strategies of the more critically acclaimed academic trilogy and later works.

*The British Museum is Falling Down*, succinctly but very accurately described by its author as "a comic and self-consciously literary novel containing a good deal of parody" (AF 167), is a representative example of a category of fictional texts that Lodge discusses in detail in a critical work published about the same time. These texts are characterised above all by the fact that "the central figure is himself a writer, often with autobiographical reference, that there is a lot of parody, many literary jokes, and much discussion of literary questions, and that in this way the author is able to gain a surprising distance on his own literary identity." (LF 278) It could be argued that the central figure of this particular novel is not really a writer, merely a postgraduate student of English literature working in the British Museum Reading Room and hopelessly trying to write his PhD dissertation, yet he is also a potential novelist, although this particular career choice is only hinted at. And, given his preoccupations, not only are his actions and way of thinking caught up in general literary matters and particular texts, but, what is even more important, he is constantly tormented by the "immense anxieties of indebtedness" (Bloom 5) Lodge constantly refers to in his theoretical texts and also uses as important themes in his fiction.

The fact that the original subject of Adam's thesis on "The Structure of Long Sentences in Three Modern English Novels" was "Language and Ideology in Modern Fiction" enables the reader to perceive it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of *The Language of Fiction* (Morace 137) and constitutes a further argument in favour of the idea that the novel is indeed used as a vehicle for its author's personal anxieties, assuming such confirmations were necessary after Lodge's own open discussion of the issue: "No doubt the use of parody in this book was also, for me, a way of coping with what the American critic Harold Bloom has called 'Anxiety of Influence'" (BM 168) Moreover, irrespective of his own status in the literary world, Adam Appleby's life keeps taking on "the stylistic and thematic colouring of the fictional texts he is studying" (BM 167) and he finds himself responding to the successive events and traumas he is confronted with in the characteristic manner of a twentieth-century novelist (Bergonzi 7).

There is no denying the fact that the most obvious anxieties experienced by the protagonist are those related to his rapidly growing family and the Catholic ban on the birth control methods that would make his life considerably easier, yet these coincide with equally disturbing intimations of the impossibility of original creation. Like most of the doctoral candidates surrounding him, Adam alternates between the hope of eventually producing "a thesis that would rock the scholarly world and start a revolution in literary criticism" (BM 18) and the realization that most topics have already been dealt with; in this context, Adam's reply to Mr Alibai's tentative hints concerning research possibilities acquires a much more universal meaning and suggests the potential exhaustion of all possibilities: "I have a feeling it's been done." (BM 123) His own literary or critical attempts are constantly thwarted by similar apprehensions, a typical example being the moment when his young daughter Clare anticipates the line he was going to enter for the Brownlong competition:

"I always choose a Brownlong chair." What about the next line?"

'Because it's made for wear and tear,' suggested Clare.

'That's what I was going to say,' said Adam, resentfully. (BM 17)

Although apparently little more than a highly amusing yet trivial item on the perpetually growing list of Adam's misfortunes, the episode can be regarded as a reference to the increasing unlikelihood of Adam being ever able to produce a truly original piece of writing as well as to the grim possibility of two writers striking upon the same idea.

Far from being confined to his work, the anxiety of influence eventually comes to make the protagonist question the very possibility of leading an original existence. Indeed, Oscar Wilde's famous words ("life imitates art") used as one of the novel's epigraphs anticipate Adam's uncomfortable reflections on "the way his humble life fell into moulds prepared by literature." (BM 56) His initial analysis of this phenomenon treats it as the effect of spending too much time engrossed in the study of literature and ending up being inevitably influenced by the various texts he has come in contact with: "was it, he wondered, picking his nose, the result of closely studying the sentence structure of the English novelists? One had resigned oneself to having no private language any more, but one had clung wistfully to the illusion of a personal property of events." (BM 32)

His friend's observation that Adam suffers from a "special form of scholarly neurosis" as a result of which he is "no longer able to distinguish between life and literature" (BM 56) indicates a similar approach to this problem. This particular diagnosis is triggered by one of the innumerable instances in which Adam expresses his thoughts using the words of famous writers rather than his own, in this particular case uttering the rather shocking yet perfectly adequate line "*Mr Marx, he dead!*" (BM 56) when dealing with a group of Chinese visitors eager to see the desk Karl Marx worked at when researching *Das Kapital*. This tendency to deliberately short-circuit the "gap between the text and the world, between art and life" (MMW 239), characteristically associated with texts that attempt to "administer a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary" (MMW 239-240), might be interpreted as an indication of Adam's allegiance to postmodernism. Nevertheless, the protagonist's own reaction to Camel's words denies any such approach by means of a highly original observation on the complex relationship between life and art, incidentally one of the most quoted lines in David Lodge's entire fiction: "Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round." (BM 56)

Yet, Adam's most convincing approach to this issue emerges in the course of a sherry party and concerns the dangerous rate at which "novelists are using up experience." (BM 119) Accidentally triggered by a fellow academic's remark, his theory focuses on the evolution of narrative literature from the times when it "dealt only with the extraordinary or the allegorical – with kings and queens, giants and dragons, sublime virtue and diabolic evil" (BM 119) which could never be confused with life, to the emergence of the novel as the dominant literary form and the implicit possibility of picking up a book at random and reading about a protagonist involved in the same activities as oneself. His conclusion takes John Barth's intimations of the exhaustion of literary possibilities one step further, suggesting an even more disquieting exhaustion of the subject matter of life itself:

But that's just the point: there've been such a fantastic number of novels written in the last couple of centuries that they've just about exhausted the possibilities of life. So all of us, you see, are really enacting events that have already been written about in some novel or other. Of course, most people don't realize this – they fondly imagine that their little lives are unique... Just as well, too, because when you *do* tumble to it, the effect is very disturbing.' (BM 119)

Considering that Adam Appleby's uneasiness reflects Lodge's own reaction to the weight of the literary past, *The British Museum* can be regarded as "his literature of exhaustion, his way of moving ahead by moving back, of demystifying the literary past by parodying it." (Morace 137) The protagonist's life seems indeed to consist of little more than a compilation of incidents derived from a great variety of sources, ranging from his claim to have "met Mrs Dalloway grown into an old woman" (*BM* 42) to his surreptitious descent via a fire escape after a rather atypical romantic assignation, fully "conscious of re-enacting one of the oldest roles in literature." (*BM* 145) It is quite interesting to note that although Adam's dominant attitude towards the literary influences that seem to deprive his life of any element of original choice is one of frustration, there are moments when he is comforted by the knowledge of being able to count on a literary precedent and finds the task of coming up with personal solutions quite daunting: "Now, when he most needed to assume a ready made role, the knack seemed to have deserted him. He was alone with himself again, the old Adam, a bare forked animal with his own peculiar moral problem." (*BM* 130) It thus becomes increasingly clear that the anxiety almost inevitably experienced when confronted with the vast corpus of texts already written coexists with an equally powerful awareness that the literature of the past has a vital part to play in any new act of creation.

Apart from the multitude of literary allusions, the novel also comprises quite lengthy passages of parody or pastiche of individual authors including Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence, Fr. Rolfe (Baron Corvo), C. P. Snow and Virginia Woolf, as well as of literary schools and subgenres. The latter consist of an accomplished caricature of the Chesterbelloc style of essay writing in the manuscripts of the obscure Egbert Merrymarsh, as well as of a parody of the sherry-party scene almost invariably present in campus novels. Initially intended as a distillation of the post-Amis variety of such fiction, it bears at the same time a striking similarity to Malcolm Bradbury's comedy in *Eating People is Wrong* and is made particularly memorable by the decision to record rather than merely note the brief and entirely unrelated fragments from the conversations of various unidentified speakers:

On all sides a babble of academic conversation dinned in his ears.

'My subject is the long poem in the nineteenth century...'

'Once you start looking for Freudian symbols...'

'This book on Browning...'

'Poe was quite right. It is a contradiction in terms...' *(BM 124)*

This highly convincing transcript reflects on the micro-level the general structure of the entire novel, "a concatenation of voices transformed into a seemingly sequential and apparently seamless narrative" that "Lodge is able to carnivalize so adroitly because he cannibalizes so well." (Morace 135) His comically parodic novel is moreover the first text which evidences Lodge the novelist's indebtedness to Lodge the critic, the writing of the numerous parodic passages having been clearly facilitated by the close analysis of language in his recently completed critical study, *Language of Fiction*.

Intertextuality is to be found at every level of the text starting with its very title based on a well-known nursery rhyme and replacing a famous landmark with an even more significant symbol of London, significantly described at some point in the novel as "a place where

eventually you met everyone you know.” (BM 96) Lodge is by no means the only writer to have attached such a significance to this particular institution, as the same library features prominently in other representative contemporary novels, being in turn perceived as “that nest of knowledge, those inexhaustible ovaries of learning,” (BM 44) “the true spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed” (Ackroyd 269) in Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, and the “inner circle of learning”, the high dome holding “insufficient oxygen for all the diligent readers” (Byatt 26) in A.S. Byatt’s *Possession. A Romance*. As the repository of a considerable part of the literary heritage of the past, the Reading Room provides the protagonists of these novels with the texts that may lead to the creation of their own works and their preference for this particular place emphasizes the importance of tradition and the fact that few artists can achieve greatness without the help of their precursors. The Reading Room thus emerges as the meeting point of various texts and discourses and as such as a symbol of intertextuality itself.

The materials devoured and adapted by the novel are of course more varied than the texts likely to be found inside this particular library and range from literary styles and works to newspaper reports, advertising jingles, encyclopedia entries, unpublished manuscripts, plot summaries, letters to the editor, and slapstick comedy. One of the most interesting aspects of the genesis of this particular novel concerns precisely the writer’s initial choice of a title consisting of a line from a song by George and Ira Gershwin, “The British Museum had lost its charm,” which had to be changed after permission to use the words was refused. However trivial this detail might seem, it is a significant reminder of the role played by intertextuality in the creation of virtually all texts; it would be indeed quite difficult to try to decide what the literary canon would look like if the same laws of copyright applied to all texts. Moreover, the Gershwins’ song did not suggest only the novel’s working title but also the “fog which is such an important part of the atmosphere of the story and the machinery of the plot” (BM 172) and, what is even more important, the idea of limiting the action to one day. Any reader in any way familiar with modernism would automatically read a novel confined to the events of a single day in relationship to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, and Lodge indeed acknowledges this debt: “The parodies in *The British Museum is Falling Down* were inspired by the example of *Ulysses*, as was its one-day action, and the last chapter is a rather cheeky *hommage* to Molly Bloom’s monologue.” (AF 102) It is nevertheless interesting to note how echoes from a wide variety of texts combine in a sometimes unpredictable way in the genesis of all new writings, which makes it difficult to decide with any degree of certainty upon the true sources of any given idea.

The indebtedness of Lodge’s “slim, seemingly conventional realistic novel” to “Joyce’s mammoth literary museum of densely textured modernist prose” (Morace 135) is by no means surprising given David Lodge’s perception of it as “probably the most celebrated and influential example of intertextuality in modern literature,” (PW 101) and as such it seems only natural that it should be referred to in so many of his critical works as well as in an Afterword to a later edition of the novel. The “stylization, parody, *skaz* and hidden polemic” (AB 85) to be found in rich profusion in the later episodes of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a veritable thesaurus of the Bakhtinian discourse types frequently discussed and adopted by Lodge himself, further reinforce the suitability of such a model. It could be moreover argued that Joyce is the one influence that no reader reasonably acquainted with British literature would fail to identify on a closer reading even in the absence of such hints, given the similar duration of the action, the decision to vary the style from one episode to the other, not to

mention the final, “most obvious, most appropriate and most ambitious parody of all.” (*BM* 170) One of the greatest ironies in Adam’s story is that he himself seems strangely unaware of the importance of this particular text as he struggles to decide “how long a long sentence was” (*BM* 48) and find suitable examples in Lawrence’s novels instead of simply choosing the one book bound to provide the necessary material for his dissertation. This irony is emphasised by the fact that the person to spot “the longest sentence in English fiction” (*BM* 160) is not a postgraduate student of English literature who lives surrounded by books but his domestically inclined wife, quite suitably made to re-enact the most famous stream of consciousness in English literature.

The general sense of carnivalistic play is further enhanced by the epigraphs which precede the novel’s ten chapters, each headed by a quotation from some printed source about the British Museum Reading Room, “both imitating and mocking the procedures of literary scholarship” (*AF* 167) and including fragments from the writings of Graham Greene, Ruskin, Thackeray, Carlyle, W.B. Yeats, Baron Corvo, as well as from obscure texts by Arundell Esdaile (former secretary to the British Museum) and even anonymous sources such as *A Guide to the Use of the Reading Room* (1924), the Act of 1753 defining Users of the British Museum and the British Museum Catalogue. Far from merely selecting fragments that bear a certain relevance to the topic, Lodge also succeeds in placing figures and even objects of authority “in a decidedly humorous light by excerpting their words in such a way as to deprive them of their serious context (and content)” (*Morace* 138) and thus undermining the authority of his sources while paradoxically validating and even paying homage to them. Critics have also noted the contrary set of allegiances highlighted by Lodge’s reworkings of modernist writings (*Stevenson* 426), as admiration for the great modernist writers coexists with a tendency to follow the literary tendencies dominating the middle decades of the century.

The novel is indeed characterised by a complex combination of realism and parody, life and literature, feeding on and reflecting each other and creating a comical but nonetheless disturbing confusion of realms (*Morace* 133) for protagonist and reader alike. Later audiences are likely to disregard the indebtedness to the neo-realist anti-modernist writing of the 1950s, just as most early reviewers failed to notice the parodic collage under the guise of comic realism: “Very few reviewers recognized the full extent of the parodies, and a surprising number made no reference to them at all. Some complained that it was a somewhat derivative novel without perceiving that this effect might be deliberate and systematic.” (*BM* 171) Although these rather disappointing reactions might seem a good argument in favour of the decision to draw attention to the parodies in the blurb, the advisability of constantly providing the reader with clues is a more debatable matter.

Lodge’s tendency to reveal the sources of his intertextual undertakings in interviews, critical writings or the very texts of the novels finds its main justification in his belief that “the reader is entitled to a hint about what to look for in the book.” (*BM* 171) In the case of this particular book, the Afterword contains the almost complete list of the authors parodied in the novel, yet they are presented in alphabetical order rather than in the order of their appearance in the text, which leaves it to the reader to identify the relevant fragments and the writer whose style inspired them. The parodies themselves were the result of careful consideration and influenced by Lodge’s awareness of the risks entailed by the extensive use of such a device, especially that of confusing and alienating those readers who wouldn’t recognize the allusions. They were comparatively discreet, especially in the first chapters,

making “the narrative and its frequent shifts of style fully intelligible and satisfying” (*BM* 170) even to the general public, while offering the more literary reader the additional satisfaction of spotting the parodies, recognizing the allusions and getting involved in the intertextual complexity of the novel, and even preparing oneself for the considerably greater challenge of the subsequent novels.

Ovidius University, Constanța

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