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"My" David Lodge: Recollections Punctuated by Coincidences

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of David Lodge's death, in this invited short memoir Roberta Mullini, former professor of English literature at the University of Urbino, traces the history of her personal literary relationship with David Lodge through reading, teaching and writing about his novels. An appendix with comments about Lodge by some former students of hers concludes the article.



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On the occasion of David Lodge’s death, in this invited short memoir Roberta Mullini, former professor of English literature at the University of Urbino, traces the history of her personal literary relationship with David Lodge through reading, teaching and writing about his novels. An appendix with comments about Lodge by some former students of hers concludes the article.

KEYWORDS: David Lodge; narratology; novels.

1. Back to the last century

David Lodge passed away on 1 January 2025, and in the following days, the major international newspapers devoted obituaries to him, recollecting his academic and literary career and the main events in his life. What follows, though, is not meant to be an obituary, but only an explanation for my own academic ‘passion’ for his novels.

The obituary in *The New York Times* on 5 January 2025 was subtitled “His 15 well-plotted novels teemed with romance and strange coincidence” (Cotter 2025), and I would say that many coincidences have also marked my relationship with Lodge’s narrative and with him as a person, since 1975. That year, a colleague of mine (I was teaching at the University of Bologna then) arrived flourishing a book: it was David Lodge’s *Changing Places*, in its first hardcover edition. He accompanied his gestures with laughter and comments about the quality of the novel, the engaging narrative, and the intriguing setting. As many readers now know, especially after Lodge’s novels have been translated all over the world, the events of *Changes Places* take place on two (fictional) university campuses, Rumridge in the UK and Plotinus in the USA. The parallels between those events on the one hand, and the situations in Italian universities on the other were not immediate, but there were some, particularly concerning the caricature and satire of academic life, of its subtle but sometimes perfidious jealousies, of its struggle for power. I read the novel then, even if I was not fully immersed in university life yet, and therefore I did not understand all the references underpinning the satire (they became clearer on my second reading...).

For me that was the first time I heard David Lodge’s name and encountered his work. Five years later, in 1980, I attended one of the first conferences of AIA (the Italian Association of Anglicists), where Lodge was one of the panelists at a round table about contemporary narrative theory. To say the least, he surprised me, because my a-bit-prejudiced idea of British critics as rather reluctant to accept European continental narratology was dispelled by his competence and, I’d say, benevolent understanding of literary criticism prospering this side of the Channel. Lodge was then still professor of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, but, as I got to know, he had also written some early novels beyond volumes of literary criticism, which were later reprinted when, thanks to

his campus novels, he gained fame. Another five years passed, and I happened to be a participant in the 1985 British Council (BC) Summer Seminar in Cambridge, where Lodge and other contemporary writers took part to present and discuss their own recent works (there were also Malcolm Bradbury, Arnold Wesker and Margaret Drabble among others). The venue was at Trinity College, the entrance to which was (and still is) just opposite Heffers Booksellers, whose shop windows were full of the latest volumes published by the authors the BC had invited. Among these, there was the just-released Penguin pocket edition of *Small World*, the sequel, so to speak, of *Changing Places*, because of the presence in the plot of the two main protagonists of the previous novel. All participants rushed to buy Lodge's fresh product and asked him to sign their personal copies (of course, I still have mine, happily preserved over time and the repeated readings). I was very shy and did not exchange a word with him, but started reading and enjoying the book.

After Cambridge, I began reading Lodge's novels extensively, from those he was publishing (at intervals of more or less four years) to those he had written before gaining fame after *Changing Places* and *Small World*. On the whole my attention was attracted in particular by *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965, reissued in 1981) and by *How Far Can You Go* (1980), because, on the one hand, of the religious themes they explored and their parallels with the situation of Catholics all over the world concerning sexuality and contraception, together with the expectations during and after the Second Vatican Council in the Sixties, and, on the other, for the structure and the general layout of the stories. All this, including the most serious subjects, was spiced up with Lodge's ability in the comic mode.

2. Teaching David Lodge's novels

I have always commuted from home to the universities where I happened to be teaching at a particular time, and I remember laughing inwardly – and sometimes quite overtly – when reading funny details and situations from one of Lodge's novels while on a train, so that sometimes I had to explain why to my fellow travellers. In the long run, the pleasure of reading Lodge's narrative increased so much, along with my admiration for his narrative and discursive traits, that I

decided to transfer it to my students as well. Starting in the mid-nineties, I included *The British Museum is Falling Down* among the set books my students were required to study for the exam of English Literature. And, a couple of times, I devoted to some of his novels the special course I was asked to teach, of course, updating the list of set books according to the author's production. For example, in the academic year 1995-96 (University of Chieti-Pescara), the readings were *The British Museum is Falling Down*, *Changing Places*, *Small World*, *Nice Work* (1988), and *Paradise News* (1992), while in 2001-02 (University of Urbino) the more recent *Therapy* (1995) replaced *Paradise News* in the list. The main bulk of them remained, in any case, the campus novels for their being all written "in the comic mode" and for their enthralling structure.¹

Besides writing novels, though, David Lodge was also (or rather started as) a literary critic and for many years, even after his retirement from the University of Birmingham in 1988, he published lucid analyses of various authors' works, and discussions of (plus forewords and/or afterwords to) his own production. For example, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) among chapters devoted to how consciousness is represented in Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster, Henry James and other novelists, also includes a final chapter titled "A Conversation about *Thinks...*", i.e. his own latest novel at the time, dealing with the competition between literature and Artificial Intelligence in reproducing human thinking processes. This interest in the development of science and technology, quite evident in *Thinks...* which in a way anticipates the discussion connected to the moral and regulatory issues of A.I., is not limited to this work. It was already present as early as *Small World*, where a character, Robin Dempsey, working at the University of Rummidge Computer Centre, is obsessed with the possibility of 'talking' with a machine by means of a software program called "ELIZA" to get useful answers to his personal depression.² Needless to say, Robin does not solve his psychological problems, nor can Eliza help him: after his query to the machine on what to do, the computer's answer is "SHOOT YOURSELF" (all

¹ *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work* were also published together in a single volume, under slightly different titles: *A David Lodge Trilogy* (1993) and *The Campus Trilogy* (2011).

² ELIZA, the "mother" of all chatbots as it has been called, was developed at MIT in the mid-1960s by Joseph Weizenbaum.

capitals in the text; Lodge 1985, 309), simply because the head of the department has tampered with the program in order to prank his colleague. Dempsey does not kill himself, but the computer’s answer in the novel seems to anticipate certain very dangerous self-harm and suicidal feelings triggered by some social media nowadays. As has become clearer and clearer, machines must be fed with data, either correct or falsified, always designed by humans, hence the ethical problems of using A.I. still today. Lodge recalls ELIZA in *Thinks...*, defining it “a well-known program”, part of “an interactive virtual reality” scheme, “that acts like a psychiatric counsellor” (Lodge 2001, 278): read now, he sounds like a precursor of future happenings.

In the last chapter of *Consciousness and the Novel*, Lodge declares: “I’m a metafictional novelist, I suppose, because I was a teacher of fiction and therefore a very self-conscious novelist.” (Lodge 2002, 296). This aspect of Lodge’s writing was what interested me greatly as a university teacher and a literary critic myself, so I decided to use his *The Art of Fiction* (1992) as a guide for my students in the field of narratology because of its (relatively) easy way into narrative and its devices. This book is not an academic volume per se, but a collection of Lodge’s (revised and expanded) weekly contributions to *The Independent on Sunday* in the early 1990s about prose fiction, devised for a more general public than university students. Nevertheless, I believed that a book explaining literary theory in a ‘human’ way, without any esoteric jargon, would be quite helpful to my students, who were not supposed to become literary critics but needed to grasp the difference, let’s say, at least between interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

3. Writing about David Lodge

Lodge’s deep awareness of the forms of writing (and communicating) and his interest in narratology went beyond his volumes of literary criticism tout-court, but also flowed into his novels, shaping them in a riveting hybridization of discursive forms, i.e., a fascinating mixture of various and sundry types of narrative devices (journals, dialogues, phone calls, quotations, correspondence, email exchanges, narrator’s intrusions etc.), visible in most of his novels, in particular, in my opinion, in *Therapy* (1995) and in *Thinks...* (2001).

After my first course on Lodge's novels (1995-96), I decided that I wanted to write something about this author, but it was not until 2001 that my *Il demone della forma. Intorno ai romanzi di David Lodge* was published. As the title suggests, in that booklet I focused on the formal and structural aspects of his fiction, while also showing a decisive interest in the paratexts of his writings. The title, also to homage Lodge's love for quotations, parody, and pastiche, is the translation into Italian of a phrase from his second novel, *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962), when – in the "Prologue" – the narrator realises that his previous jottings and notes about his military service could improve into a better narrative, when "the demon Form began to whisper in my ear about certain alterations and revisions" (1984, 10 [1962]).

Before the end of 2000, my research about Lodge's novels had reached a conclusion, but I needed to know something that only the author could explain to me. Therefore, despite my reluctance to intrude into other people's lives, I decided to write to him: it was 11 November 2000 (I still have a copy of the formal letter I sent by 'snail' mail – email was not so in use in those days, at least in Italy). To my great and delighted surprise, ten days later, he wrote back (to my email address, this time), offering generous answers to my queries. He also added that "You may be interested to know that I have a new novel, entitled 'THINKS...' coming out in March 2001".³

For a strange and very pleasant coincidence, at the beginning of March 2001 Lodge's book and mine were published, almost simultaneously. As I had promised, I sent him a copy of my book and shortly afterwards I received a brand-new copy of the first edition of *Thinks...* At that point, my surprise was even greater, since the dust jacket of the novel and the cover of my book shared a striking graphic feature that we had no prior knowledge of: they both showed an empty thought bubble. The designers of the two covers (Brett Ryder – an artist now working for *The Economist* and *The Lancet* – on Lodge's side, and Alessandro Zanarini – my son – on mine) were and are totally unknown to each other. I particularly enjoyed the coincidental nature of the relationship between Lodge and me. But the 'great coincidence' was still ahead.

³ This is exactly how Lodge's message looked like (personal correspondence). From my small archive of personal exchanges come all Lodge's unpublished quotes.

4. In the 2000s

At the beginning of February 2002, I was at the British Library for my personal research. I found a seat in the Humanities Reading Room at an empty desk near one visibly occupied by somebody who was not there at the moment. After placing my bag and baggage on the table, I got up heading towards the paper catalogues (they still existed!), when I was struck by a person whose features I trembled at recognising: from my personal recollections dating back nearly twenty years, and especially from the photograph of David Lodge on a flap of the dust jacket of *Thinks...*, there he was! David Lodge was just a few feet away from me, with his thick eyebrows and a bob haircut. After quickly pondering whether to approach him or not, I restrained the shyness that would have pushed me silent back to my seat. Then I headed towards him and introduced myself, reminding him of our email and book exchange. He was extremely kind and offered to meet at one of the BL cafés for a cup of tea about an hour afterwards.⁴ I was more than thrilled. But coincidences had not finished yet.

After looking up what I needed in the catalogues, I went back to my seat, the table near mine still empty. After a while, a person arrived and sat down: it was David Lodge! So, even if we had not met in the library consultation area, on that day I would have seen him anyway, the two of us sitting almost elbow to elbow. A great coincidence indeed.

Our letter exchange did not last long, but in December of the same year, I wrote to him again because a student of mine asked me for his email address. She was, in her words, "fascinated" by Lodge's writing, which she found "formidable" and "terrific". He agreed on my passing his address to her, but I do not know how things developed. What I know is that my students enjoyed Lodge's novels and appreciated his narrative.⁵

⁴ Later, while chatting over our tea at the King's Library Café, Lodge lamented that he was afflicted by hearing loss and by the problems deriving from his hearing device. When I read *Deaf Sentence* (2008), I recognised some autobiographical traits in the misadventures of Desmond Bates, the deaf protagonist of the novel.

⁵ In the Appendix at the end of this article the reader can find some comments by former students of mine about their 'Lodgian' university course. I am very grateful to them.

The last time I emailed him was after reading the first volume of his autobiography (*Quite a Good Time to Be Born*, 2015). It was already the end of 2017. Lodge answered just a couple of hours after I contacted him, informing me that the second volume (*Writer's Luck*, 2018) was about to be published, and inviting me to read it: "I think you will find it interesting – indeed, if you don't, nobody will" is what he wrote to me (6 November 2017). This made me feel – quite immodestly, I confess – like a sort of "model reader" of his works.

He started his answer with "By a curious coincidence, I came across *Il demone della forma* in my study just the other day, after many years during which it was undisturbed.". And just before finishing his letter, he added: "I suppose it's another coincidence that you should write to me about that first memoir [2015] when I am awaiting the first bound copy of my second one [2018]".

Yes, Professor Lodge: as you wrote to me once (15 February 2002), "it was a pleasant and novelistically contrived meeting we had" at the British Library many years ago. In the end, a lot has happened "by coincidence". My luck is that these coincidences have been many.

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⁶ Readers interested in an almost complete bibliography of David Lodge's works can find it at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lodge_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lodge_(author)). Besides novels and literary criticism, it also includes Lodge's plays, scripts for television adaptations, and novelistic biographies.

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Appendix

Students' comments from the universities of Chieti-Pescara and Urbino

Reading David Lodge at University instead of a classic was unexpectedly eye-opening. At first, I was surprised by the teacher's choice, it felt almost too light-hearted for an academic setting. But as I got deeper into his satire, I realized how amazingly he juggled with Catholic faith paradoxes and the mimicry of the style of famous writers like Joyce and Kafka as in *The British Museum is Falling Down*. Lodge doesn't just entertain; he also holds up a mirror to academic life, exposing its contradictions, egos, and rituals with wit and precision. It made me reflect more critically on the university experience itself, something a traditional classic

might not have done so directly. In a way, reading Lodge was both a study of literature and the culture that surrounds it.

Luca Luciani (actor, dubber and voice trainer), academic year 1995-96

As a student, I loved *Small World* because when I went to study in Sheffield and Exeter, it made me feel like Persse McGarrigle. I had the opportunity to meet some academics and attend literature conferences around Europe, becoming acquainted with world-renowned professors. Just like in the novel, every meeting between people from different countries was not a coincidence because I used literature as a way of life: coincidences seemed to be part of a more compelling plot in which to find meaning, or at least a hidden pattern. Looking back at those academic experiences thirty years later, I have to confess I am grateful to David Lodge since his novels helped me laugh at my clumsy attempt to play my part in this great wooden O. This commentary is about to end because “without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just... end.” (*Changing Places*, last page).

Vincenzo Macchiarola (English teacher and tourist guide), academic year 1995-96

Irony and desecration are the first words that come to mind if I think back to the university course I took on David Lodge. But, to be true, I have to admit that when, in my twenties, I found myself pushed to read his novels, I didn't appreciate them very much. Even though I always loved English humour and smiled at some situations and witty jokes Lodge wrote, I was very happy to quickly finish the exam and go on with those I considered more interesting studies. Now, thinking back after many years and after some university career, I realized how much his books were actually a very lucid criticism of the embalmed and corrupted university reality that doesn't differ very much even between distant countries like Italy and England. What else to say? Age and experience made me deeply reevaluate Lodge's irony and desecration.

Giada Trebeschi (novelist and actress), academic year 1995-96

I was fascinated by Professor Mullini's course on Lodge, in which his campus novels were analysed as a mix of excellent narrative, thought-provoking sociological portraits, and highly amusing stories related to his essays on literature. I remember it was love at first reading! The margins of my copies of Lodge's

novels are full of asterisks, exclamation marks, and stylised laughing mouths, which are my *manicules* for interesting, startling, and funny lines, respectively. I was made to laugh out loud and was simultaneously deeply touched by his smart snapshots of campus life, academic career, and the adventures of Philip Swallow, Adam Appleby, and Robyn Penrose. Some moments, images, and words have stuck in my memory since I read them as a twenty-something student and have resonated differently with me throughout the various stages of my life. After reading Lodge's novels, some places could never be the same again for me, most of all global academic conference venues, the green quadrangle of a campus, and, of course, the British Library!

Maria Elisa Montironi (associate professor of English Literature), academic year 2001-02