Heterotopic Clashes in David Lodge's *The British Museum Is Falling Down* and Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and The Limehouse Golem*

Eduard VLAD
"Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract

David Lodge's The British Museum is Falling Down and Peter Ackroyd's Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem represent a famous British institution as more than a setting, inviting redefinitions of the museum as an institutional cultural site, as a heterotopia of time acquiring sometimes unexpected cultural and ideological uses. The paper examines the ways in which the fictional rendition of the British Museum signals important cultural changes in Lodge's narrative set in the 1960s, while in Ackroyd's novel it sets the same institution in a Victorian setting, achieving effects created by the apparently unexpected combination of Gothic elements and poststructuralist perspectives on subjectivity.

Key Words: *heterotopia; fabulation; metafiction; Gothic; poststructuralism; subjectivity*.

Museums have been, since their rise in parallel with the ascent of the nation-state in the western world, heterotopic sites of authority, classifying, disciplining and imposing order, while promoting a sense of continuity in the creation of national identity, being one of the pillars of what Benedict Anderson calls 'imagined communities'. Focusing on an apparently far from European issue (the museal representation of Pacific Island cultures), Miriam Kahn draws attention to the equally far from detached cultural practices that museums engage in. While they are "organized institutions, educational or aesthetic in purpose, that collect, preserve, interpret, and display objects on a regular basis […] it is in the details of what they do with those objects that the importance lies"(324). She is aware that their taxonomic practices indicate that they are, to use Foucault's concept, 'power-knowledge' institutions, imposing order on, rather than describing their objects of investigation. Such an awareness has prompted the current investigation of the power exerted by the fictional representation (rather than the institution itself, which would be a much more general project) of the British Museum in Ackroyd's Gothic text set in the Victorian age and in one of Lodge's early comic novels. To borrow Kahn's phrasing, the present study aims at examining the "dissonances" dramatized by means of the British Museum as prevailing heterotopia[1] in two novels, one by David Lodge, the other by Peter Ackroyd.

Both in David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* and in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, the famous British institution is more than a setting, inviting redefinitions of the museum as an institutional cultural site, encouraging a re-reading of these

[1] More specifically, heterotopia of time, with the specific meaning ascribed to the phrase by Michel Foucault in "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" http://foucault.info/doc/documents/heterotopia/foucault-heterotopia-en-html.

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literary texts within the frameworks of what has lately emerged as "the museal turn". Both novels invite the reader to engage with issues of imbalances of power and new developments at two very important moments in British and world history (post-war, post-imperial Britain in Lodge, late Victorian Britain in Ackroyd, which prompt a move beyond the museum toward a broader cultural scope. Since the danger of overtheorising when the scope of the textual investigation of two apparently widely different fictional worlds and visions is too broad, the current undertaking will content itself with using Ackroyd's representation of the British Museum as a starting point creating a significant difference, a necessary background against which Lodge's own depiction of the same heterotopic space will be focused upon.

Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, the editors of *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (London: Routledge, 1994), draw attention to the increasing importance of museums in scholarly writing associated with the above-mentioned "museum culture":

> In asking how museums accord objects particular significances, in examining the politics of museum exhibitions and display strategies, and in comparing policies and attitudes toward museum publics over time, we are attempting an inquiry into modes of cultural construction from an innovative and increasingly important vantage point (ix).

From a contemporary rather than a more comprehensive historical perspective, one might argue that policies and attitudes toward museums, as well as the politics of museum exhibition, the power networks in which the museum as an important cultural institution is involved, have more to do with sociological investigations and less with the critical examination of a limited number of literary texts, the work of special individuals with special visions and attitudes. However, if the examination of a couple of literary texts may lead to significant links to developments observed elsewhere (sociology, cultural studies), then the undertaking is worth considering. What follows aims at describing two different sets of attitudes to, and values associated with, the British Museum as a physical location, a powerful presence, an institution at two distinct moments set almost one century apart, and the manner in which all this says something that can be assessed in relation to important cultural processes taking place in Britain at two distinct historical moments.

Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* uses The British Museum, like Lodges's novel, both as a significant setting (although this is initially concealed, and for good narrative purpose) and as an ominous, awe-inspiring, authoritative presence towering above the characters. Unlike in Lodge's narrative, where Bernie the rich American is considering for a while buying the British Museum, dismantling it and taking it to the U.S., thus completing the Americanisation of the Old World, in Ackroyd's Victorian narrative of the same institution, the characters' lives and careers are largely determined by the influence of the omnipotent place where 'the readers' reading' is done (i.e. within the walls of the Museum's reading room). The British Museum will be 'writing' such secondary characters as Karl Marx (who will then feature prominently in the grand narrative of Marxism, researched and prepared in London) and the one who will turn out to be the serial killer whom the Victorian journalists will call "The Limehouse Golem." In other words, the British Museum shapes both the most influential revolutionary thinker of all ages and the rival of Jack the Ripper in the Victorian age, the latter being the protagonist of Ackroyd's novel.

The novel, innovatively dealing with Gothic conventions of labyrinthine narration, horror, terror, anxiety and fear "conspires" against the readers' expectations from the very

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beginning. This conspiracy on which the "plot" of the novel is based is the result of the combination of temporarily misleading, unreliable narrative voices being used in the process of narration proper. This "plot as conspiracy" in technical, narrative terms is completed by the conjoined impact of the British Museum on the characters' minds (especially on the one that it will "inspire" to perpetrate the gruesome murders) and on the readers. The rhetoric of the novel also accommodates one of the best-known comedians of the Victorian age, Dan Leno, a master of transvestism in pantomimes and music hall acts. The connection between characters impersonating roles belonging to the other sex and the British Museum will gradually emerge in this postmodernist Gothic crime fiction.

Thus, the beginning is reminiscent of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, with an apparently detached, 3rd person narrative voice that recounts a scene which makes the reader side with the victim from the outset. One sees a vulnerable female character being handled by a whole army of malevolent, insensitive males representing cruel punishment in a patriarchal society. This is Elizabeth, led to the place of execution for the killing of her husband, John Cree. The matter-of-fact style that the narrator uses in this dramatic opening section of the novel clashes with the pathos of the young woman's situation. Can the reader not side with the victim and express uncritical sympathy? Ackroyd's Victorian character Elizabeth Cree appears to be another avatar of Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield:

> The Burial Office was read, and it was noticed that she participated in this with great fervour. The condemned are supposed to remain quite silent at this solemn time but she lifted her head and, staring through the little roof of glass at the foggy air beyond, begged loudly for the safety of her own soul. The customary incantation came to an end, and the hangman stood behind her as she climbed the wooden block; he was about to place the coarsely woven cloth over her, but she brushed it away with the motion of her head. Her hand had already been bound behind her back with leathern thongs, but there was no difficulty in interpreting the gesture. While she stared down at the official witnesses, the rope was placed around her neck (the executioner, knowing her precise size and weight, had measured the hemp exactly). She spoke only once before he pulled the lever and the wooden trapdoor opened beneath her. She said, "Here we are again!" Her eyes were still upon them as she fell. Her name was Elizabeth Cree. She was thirty-one years old.[2]

There is one small detail which, on the second reading of the novel, when the initial sympathy the reader has for the victim has cooled off, will become significant: the young woman's last words. Why "Here we are again"? Apparently, the rest of the novel is a horror story telling what had happened in the year preceding the innocent heroine's terrible end. Part of the story is told in the first person with Elizabeth herself as the narrator, part of it are extracts from "the diary of John Cree of New Cross Villas, South London, now preserved in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, with the call-mark Add.Ms. 1624/566". The diary shows its author as a mentally deranged serial killer, minutely describing details of his obsessive thoughts, as well as his gruesome deeds. All this is presented with the power of documentary fact, based upon the place where this text is stored:

[2] Peter Ackroyd. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem.* London: Minerva, 1994: 8. Subsequent parenthesised page number references will indicate this edition of the novel.

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> (the diary of John Cree of New Cross Villas, South London, now preserved in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, with the call-mark Add. Ms.1624/ 566**)** September 6, 1880: It was a fine bright morning, and I could feel a murder coming on. ...I was eager to begin.. a novelty ... to suck out the breath of a dying child...[p.25] I knew well enough that, a little way down towards the river, stood the house which had witnessed the *immortal* Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1812. On a spot as sacred to the memory as Tyburn or Golgotha, an entire family had been mysteriously and silently despatched into eternity by an artist whose exploits will be preserved for ever in the pages of Thomas De Quincey ... a glorious crime [p.29:] Her eyes had opened, and I had to take them out with my knife for fear that my image had been seared upon them. May I quote Thomas De Quincey? His essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" I first learned of the Ratcliffe Highway deaths, and ever since that time his work has been a source of perpetual delight and astonishment to me (25, 29).

The accumulation of "facts", however gruesome, and the "solidity of specification", typical of realism, suggest a horror story supported by reliable, realist conventions and a reliable narrator. Little does the reader suspect that the document is a fake done by Elizabeth herself to conceal the fact that she is the sadist killer. We only realise this at the end of the novel, *Dan Leno* thus turning into a novel of detection that prompts us to reconstruct the past of the Crees, with which we have to interweave the past of other people (including Karl Marx) in order to find the real pattern of the murders and the motivation of their "author".

Therefore, documentary truth as "history"(John Cree's diary from the British Museum) has just turned into pure fiction. On the other hand, the theatrical performance that is meant to contain a simulation of Elizabeth's execution turns into "the real thing". By accident, the actress impersonating the executed murderess actually gets hanged on the stage, although the audience is unaware of that. Dan Leno, trying to hide the accident, rises through the trapdoor through which the actress fell to her death, addressing the audience with his best-known comic catchphrase, "here we are *again*!". It is now that the sinister significance of Elizabeth's mysterious last words ("Here we are again") uttered at the beginning of the novel (but towards the end of the story) is revealed. It also means that the author of the manuscript that describes his/her gruesome murders has, in addition to reading Thomas De Quincey's often misinterpreted tongue-in-cheek "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts"[3], is also familiar with Dan Leno's transvestite art, having assimilated his catchphrase.

The reality of the present moment is thus seen as the actualization of a well-prepared and cyclical script. And what is the role of the British Museum: a mere repository of all these scripts or perhaps an ominous presence that prompts and incites people like Elizabeth Cree, whom we find to have been an assiduous reader on the premises? This question will become important in the second, the critical reading of the novel.

What initially appears as a possible parody of realist, Victorian fiction turns into a harder, postmodern nut to crack. It is more than the narrator that is to distrust, apparently, and everything

[3] This is how De Quincey satirically "sells" his essay to the Editor of Blackwood's Magazine:
SIR,—We have all heard of a Society for the Promotion of Vice, of the Hell-Fire Club, &c. At Brighton, I think it was, that a Society was formed for the Suppression of Virtue. That society was itself suppressed—but I am sorry to say that another exists in London, of a character still more atrocious. In tendency, it may be denominated a Society for the Encouragement of Murder; but, according to their own delicate [Greek: euphaemismos], it is styled—The Society of Connoisseurs in Murder <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10708/pg10708-images.html>

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appears to witness, again, a strange interconnectedness. Peter Keating notes this, and draws attention to the mysterious function that contrasting narratives are likely to perform. He draws attention to another case of "ontological uncertainty", the deed of a tricky author. Wondering about the function of these narratives, the critic conjectures and warns:

> Perhaps they are just further examples of fact and fiction being playfully intertwined, though they operate more like a confused and confusing double standard. Be careful here! Don't bother there! *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* is certainly a novel to be enjoyed, but it is not to be trusted (21).

Keating is arguably wrong here: the novel's initial narrative tricks, having by now become common in postmodernist fiction, only work during the first, uninformed reading. On the second reading, the connection between Elizabeth Cree and Dan Leno, the master of transvestism, is made from the moment one hears the young woman's last words, actually Dan Leno's best-known words. This catchphrase does not anticipate the character's pledge to becoming a revenant in a subsequent ghost-haunted narrative, being merely an illustration of Elizabeth's defiant sang-froid and black humor. In addition to being a cold-blooded, calculated serial killer, she does not appear to be devoid of a sense of humor, however sinister. In contrast, Elizabeth Cree is either unable, or deliberately distorts, Thomas De Quincey's oblique rhetoric in his notorious essay. Very much like Jonathan Swift in "A Modest Proposal", he does not mean what he straightforwardly says in the essay's title, but she does. Who is to blame, the scarcely educated woman or the British Museum, who brings the text to her notice? Is the British Museum, like the mysterious churches built by a malevolent, satanist architect from the Age of Enlightenment in Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, a sinister force of the past, exerting its terrible authority on victims in the present? If so, the immediate victim is Elizabeth, who is thus compelled to become … "an artist". To follow the same line of argument for other famous people shown as characters in the novel, is Karl Marx the "victim" of the philosophy books that he reads and creatively interprets under the dome of the same British Museum, turning them in his revolutionary theory that affected, mainly negatively, a large part of the world? At least in Ackroyd's novel this seems to be the answer. In poststructuralist terms, it appears that people (here characters) as subjects are subjected to language, culture, ideology, and the British Museum is shown as being the prevailing institution achieving that in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. The heterotopia of time that the museum represents as a rule is thus represented in Ackroyd's novel as a Victorian equivalent of the ominous dark presence of the ruined castle or monastery in the early British Gothic novels of the late 18th and early 19th century.

Like in the Gothic crime story with a postmodern twist in Ackroyd's novel dealt with above, there is some fear and loathing in David Lodge's otherwise very entertaining 1965 comic novel. There is a lot of "anxiety of influence" (although compounded with a distinctly comic mode) in David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down*, although Harold Bloom started writing the first draft of his well-known theory of poetry two years later, in 1967. Should we read the American's volume as a misprision of the British novelist's comic book? Should we read Lodge's novel as a misprision of the lyrics of George and Ira Gershwin's musical piece *The British Museum Had Lost Its Charm*? Is there any other significant meaning that this comic narrative suggests in connection with "the power of the British Museum"?

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In the 1980 *Afterword,* Lodge recounts significant aspects of the genesis of his work in the early 1960s, foreshadowing other important theories, such as that expounded by Roland Barthes in his essay on the death of the author (as Author). Lodge's working title had been *The British Museum Had Lost Its Charm,* which did not change until the novel was completed. Then something went wrong, as Lodge reminisces:

> The proofs of the novel had been sent to me in San Francisco, corrected and returned to London, and the book was about to go into the final stages of production, when it occurred to Tim O'Keeffe to ask me if I had obtained permission to use the words of the Gershwin song in my title. I had not (172).

Although the author pleaded with the Gershwin Publishing Corporation in New York, his request was categorically turned down. Lodge then had to come up with other tentative titles, although none of them conveyed an idea he had had in mind: *Wombsday* and a host of other equally unfortunate proposals, out of which the omnipotent agent chose what we readers have now, *The British Museum Is Falling Down.*

Lodge remembers his work in the British Museum with nostalgia, although what he evokes about the arduous process of naming his third novel draws attention to the power of institutions, structures, traditions, rules (including copyright laws and literary agencies) over the author's (and the book's protagonist's) own individual agency as more or less free will.

Some of the questions which invite answers concern the way the British Museum had lost its charm, in what figurative way is it falling down, how does the power of the famous British institution affect the characters? Is there one particular aspect of the British Museum that acquires particular salience in the novel or is its presence inviting several aspects and meanings?

One of the novel's epigraphs, a quote from Dr Johnson, humorously, ironically and self-ironically indicates that the novel deals with Catholic issues ("I would be a Papist is I could. I have fear enough, but an obstinate rationality prevents me"), namely with thorny dilemmas linked to the "pre-Pill" age, to complicated contraception and family planning in the early 1960s in Catholic circles. Lodge did have a Catholic upbringing, and he takes some of the pressing Catholic issues as seriously as a comic author can. For Adam Appleby, however, these issues are more important than a sense of humour, so, it is understandable that, for him, The British Museum had lost its charm at that time: there are signs that his fourth child is on its way, he lives in digs in a small flat, he isn't making much progress with his PhD work, and the chances of getting a decent job are slim. It thus turns out that, from the very beginning, the epigraph is bound to link the Catholic issues the novel addresses with the British Museum, under whose roof and influence the protagonist finds himself during his one-day "Bloomsbury odyssey". The question remains to investigate the kind of power relationships obtaining between the fictional representation of two power-wielding institutions, the Catholic Church and what The British Museum may stand for in this narrative context.

The lyrics of Gershwin's song creates an artistic context for the piece's title: an I is all alone in foggy London, close to the British Museum, until a miracle happens and "you" will appear, the stuff romance is made of. In Lodge's text, the miraculous person only initially appears to be a very young woman who tries to seduce him. The character who, very ironically, saves Adam Appleby's day is the American who, initially, back in the States, had planned to buy the British Museum, to dismantle it, to have it carried over the ocean to Colorado.

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The other epigraph, Oscar Wilde's famous aestheticist statement, "Life imitates art", shows another direction of a novel that seems to announce the polyphonic, carnivalesque mixture of voices, registers and outlooks of later fiction, everything under the half oppressive, half benevolent shadow of the British Museum. Going even further, beyond what Wilde might have meant (in this time and age, one has become painfully aware that meaning does not lie in the author's communicative intentions, if any, but in the prevailing power institutions of a culture), art is more than a disinterested pursuit of perfection. If art is linked to power and life imitates it, then power games prevail in both, cultural critics would say today.

Adam Appleby, the protagonist, a Catholic young (family) man desperately trying to write his Ph.D. thesis, shares Wilde's above-mentioned belief. He has so deeply immersed himself in the books whose style he is attempting to critically deal with that the effect of art on his life is overwhelmingly confusing. He has become a "subjected subject", and the pressure exerted upon him go beyond specific academic requirements. First, it has to do with completing a rite of passage that might make him eligible for a decent job, since he is supposed to be the breadwinner of a permanently increasing Catholic family. Art, in the fictional context created by the novel, is also the canon of literature, especially the modernists, and the space which it haunts, together with other powerful ghosts, such as that of Karl Marx, whose seat in the Reading Room is currently taken by Adam Appleby. This imitation, as it has already been said, has a lot to do with powerful influences and the anxiety which they instill in characters like Adam Appleby, even if, at first, we are given, in a comic mode, a different, more benign interpretation of the British Museum and of its role: "The British Museum was returning to its winter role – refuge for scholars, post-graduates and other bums and layabouts in search of a warm seat" (34). Once again, one should not forget that the ghosts of Matthew Arnold's sweetness and light are accompanied by Marx's militant, political presence in this special heterotopic space, the latter's presence, as previously shown, appearing in Peter Ackroyd's novel as well in situations involving power and influence under the roof of the British Museum.

Gradually, the museum turns out to be more than the shelter for loafers that the narrator initially refers to. In the shadow of Bloomsbury as an emblem of Modernism (or, at least of Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group) and of the Reading Room of the British Museum as the authoritative cultural presence of the power exerted by the literary canon, Adam gets the impression that episodes of his life are re-enactments of literary excerpts from important authors, and those particular episodes or scenes from his life are rendered in a style which parodically follows significant works he is planning to deal with in his thesis. In this polyphonic, dialogic, postmodern mixture, where parody and pastiche feature prominently, the overall design reminds of Joyce's *Ulysses*, while other details (topography, minor characters and incidents) also link the novel to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. In addition to a host of oppressive modernist writers including Joyce and Woolf, there is also a young Virginia (not Woolf) literally harassing him on his visit to the owner of the Merrymarsh manuscript.

The museum's grand narratives of progress, culture and civilisation under the aegis of acknowledged authority is given a comic twist by the interplay of elite and popular culture as represented in the early parody of the episode from Mrs Dalloway in which the traffic in central London is blocked for the safe passage of a member of the royal family. Britain is still an empire ruled by Buckingham Palace, but in Lodge's novel it is The Beatles who substitute royalty in the parodying scene, while the conservative Catholic priest to whom Adam Appleby is giving a ride

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on his decrepit scooter close to Mrs. Woolf's Bloomsbury is one of the group's most ardent fans, considering the excitement with which he responds to the cause of the traffic disruption.

The book shows a day in the life of the protagonist, with various moments, episodes written in different styles that bring to mind famous writers like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Henry James, Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence. It ends with a long, one-sentence, interior monologue, where Molly Bloom's highly repetitive "yes" is replaced by Barbara's (Adam's wife) less exciting "perhaps" (so very much more "British", isn't it?). Such intertextual, parodic games are not disinterested exercises meant to create a merely humorous effect, showing, in addition to the entertainment provided by the comic mode, significant cultural changes and processes.

Adam, a practicing Catholic, is worried. His anxiety is mainly caused by the impact of the conservatism of the leaders of the Catholic Church at the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) on his increasing family size, as well as by the oppressive and overwhelming presence of the literary tradition reigning at his current workplace, The British Museum (which does not appear to be literally falling down). However, since Lodge has decided to become a comic author, there is one more source of anxiety to support the approach, in addition to his wife's possible pregnancy and the oppressiveness of the literary canon, associated with the place where he does his documentation work: he must have pulled a muscle in his leg, which creates a comic, bathetic effect under the other equally dramatic circumstances.

The beginning of the novel parodically and humorously displays some of the characteristic features of the stream-of-consciousness technique, with the protagonist as focalizer, whose impressions are mediated by a 3rd person narrator. The narrator speaks, but the focalizer feels, thinks, and sees in disjointed, rambling, long sentences, where repetition betrays obsession and concern; for the sake of brevity, this is just part of one of the opening sentences:

> …Adam was simultaneously reminded that he was twenty-five years of age, and would soon be twenty-six, that he was a postgraduate student preparing a thesis which he was unlikely to complete in this the third and final year of scholarship, that the latter was hugely overdrawn, that he was married with three very young children, that one of them had manifested an alarming rash the previous evening, that his name was ridiculous, that his leg hurt, that his decrepit scooter had failed to start the previous morning and would no doubt fail to start this morning, […] that his leg hurt, […] that he had forgotten to reserve any books at the British Museum for this morning's reading, that his leg hurt, that his wife's period was three days overdue, and that his leg hurt.[4]

This fragment of a (much longer) sentence voices Adam Appleby's worries, concerns and frustrations that will animate the character's peregrinations throughout the day, the whole verbal lot a mixture of what is supposed to be "reality"(Adam's day) and the texts he is "victimized by". Here is the protagonist, early in the morning, speeding on his faulty scooter to the library of the British Museum, haunted, in addition to the sentence structure of various novelists, by the presence of Virginia Woolf's fiction:

> From near-by Westminster, Mrs Dalloway's clock boomed out the half hour. It partook, he thought, shifting his weight in the saddle, of metempsichosis, the way his humble life fell

[4] David Lodge. *The British Museum is Falling Down.* London: Penguin, 1965: 7-8. Subsequent parenthesized page number references to the book will point to this particular edition.

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> into moulds prepared by literature. Or was it, he wondered, picking his nose, the result of closely studying the sentence structure of the English novelists? (32)

A few seconds later, Adam has another vision, in a similarly comic manner, of Mrs Dalloway and Woolf's Bloomsbury:

> Adam, drawing level with her as the traffic surged slowly forward, murmured "Clarissa!" and the old lady looked at him sharply. Suddenly frightened, Adam accelerated and drove off recklessly in the direction of Bloomsbury. Bloomsbury. *Bloomsbury!* (33)

Focalizer as main character, narrator and author are all prone to parody, and their combined effort, supported by Lodge's great comic vein, leads to what Bakhtin had called carnivalization in his approach to Rabelais's work. Robert Morace, in his study of Bradbury's and Lodge's dialogic novels, considers that "Lodge is able to carnivalize so adroitly because he cannibalizes so well"(135). He supports this statement by showing how the author can prey on, integrate (devour, cannibalize) a wide range of texts of all types:

> The novel devours and adapts not only literary authors, styles, and works at a bewildering rate, but literary and subliterary forms as well, including newspaper reports, advertising jingles, encyclopedia entries, unpublished manuscripts, plot summaries, letters to the editor, and slapstick comedy (Ibid.).

Apart from the grimly realistic dimensions of his life, having to do with the uncertain fate of his rapidly expanding family, Adam's identity, in the shadow of the Reading Room of the British Museum, is largely fictional and metafictional, defined in terms of the reading he does, the texts he engages with, his literary ambitions (in addition to his thesis, he also wants to write a novel). Morace, while reviewing the novel's perception in terms of either its comic or its parodic dimension, advocates its complex, dialogic structure, associated with what he calls a "disturbing confusion of realms":

> While early reviewers tended to overlook the novel's parodic side, later readers run the risk of making the opposite mistake and of thus failing to realize that in Lodge's third novel, realism and parody, life and literature, feed on and reflect each other, creating a comical but nonetheless disturbing confusion of realms (132-133).

Is there a confused or a confusing author hiding in this labyrinthine text winding between the conventions of realism and the playfulness of metafiction? Lodge is playing with stylistics and literary theory within the canonical and intertextual framework provided by the library of the British Museum, turning this combination into a highly readable narrative with great comic potential.

Robert Morace goes so far as to compare the book's verbal playfulness to John Barth's, to which can be added the apparent earnestness of the debate of vital Catholic issues:

> *The British Museum* can be described, therefore, as a Barth-like virtuoso peformance that serves to establish Lodge's credibility as a writer and, equally important, at a time when the debate "about authority and conscience" provoked by the birth control issue was just getting under way, his credibility as an individual Catholic able to make his own moral (as well as aesthetic) decisions (139).

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One might take issue with Morace about Lodge's performance in this novel. Is the author establishing his credibility as a writer and as an individual Catholic or is he just playing, and, in so doing, undermining his above mentioned positions? On the other hand, David Lodge is obviously less verbally playful and less postmodern than John Barth himself, and, unlike Roland Barthes, he is living proof that the author is still alive, fully aware that his position is being weakened, but having the resources to challenge and play with this situation.

From the vantage point of his 1996 *The Practice of Writing*, Lodge looks back on a significant moment in the development of his critical approach to literature, which will provide a sound basis for a discussion of some characteristic features of his own fiction. It was a few years after the publication of *The British Museum Is Falling Down* that he wrote the essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads"(1971), prompted by Robert Scholes's critical book, *The Fabulators* (1967), in which the American critic considers that writers should leave realism to other media, such as film, and instead develop the purely fictive potential of narrative. To the term "fabulation", Scholes will add "metafiction" in the 1979, updated version of the 1967 book, to address innovative, self-reflexive fiction of the 1960s and 1970s.

At the time, Lodge felt that the contemporary novelists were "at the crossroads", with traditional realism, then already considered by many to be a boring route, right before them, and fabulation, metafiction and non-fictional narrative on the sides. Twenty years later, the British novelist-critic is struck by how successfully traditional realism has survived the obsequies pronounced over it by Scholes, how clearly it remains a serious option for the literary writer (Lodge 1996: 6). However, Lodge's fiction, ever since the 1960s, has shown a marked engagement with artifice and innovation, the critic and the creative writer working together in a world of contrasts, dialogism and polyphony.

It is obvious from the above that Lodge himself views himself not as a fabulator or metafictionist, but as a novelist "at the crossroads", exploring and exploiting a variety of styles and tendencies, including the self-reflexive devices of what he himself accepts as one important mode, metafiction. However, it is also important to see how he anticipates or foreshadows important developments which mark significant cultural shifts both in Britain and in the world as a whole, a smaller and smaller world becoming increasingly globalised (or Americanised).

In a way, The British Museum as a prominent cultural heterotopia of time, as an emblem of traditional cultural authority, *is* falling down, even if Bernie the American realizes that the building which houses it is much too big for him to dismantle and move to Colorado. Adam Appleby has a tempting job offer from the American, and might trade his temporary workplace in 'the less deceived' British Museum in the early 1960s for a trans-Atlantic assignment. The British Museum as a symbol of authority, as a pillar of "Britishness", as well as its association in this novel with the Modernist canon, is shown, if not as falling, at least as facing new challenges in the 1960s and ever after, one might add.

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