



# "As Far As You Can Go": Carnality and the Catholic Conscience in David Lodge's Fiction

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“As Far As You Can Go”: Carnality and the Catholic Conscience  
in David Lodge’s Fiction

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the evolution of David Lodge's philosophy and depiction of sexuality and Catholicism in four of his novels spanning four decades: *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), *Small World* (1984), and *Thinks . . .* (2001). How does Lodge's experience growing up Catholic affect his attitude toward sexuality, and how do his views on sexuality influence his attitude toward the Church? Most critics have focused on the Catholic aspects of Lodge's fiction, or on his campus novels, but none have extensively connected how Lodge portrays both carnality and Catholicism in his work. A close reading of the novels is illuminated by Lodge's personal essays and interviews, as well as key aspects of Church doctrine and history such as the 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, and recent polls of Catholic believers. This close reading shows a notable movement in Lodge's fiction from conservative acceptance of the Church's teachings, through full-blown rebellion against them, carnivalization of the Church's authority in the tradition of Rabelais and Bakhtin, and finally, development toward acceptance of a post-Christian, agnostic understanding of the world. Lodge is less authoritarian and more forgiving of human frailty than the Church, and recognizes, specifically, how its controversial stance on birth control calls into question its authority in more important issues. Sexual impulses are what drive the intellectual and spiritual seekers in Lodge's novels; understanding these impulses helps both the author and his creations find a synthesis between physical desire and the longings of what many call "the spirit."

For my parents, Robert and Virginia O'Malley

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

David Lodge may be best known for his campus novels: academic comedies of manners that hinge on the struggles of English professor types as they deal with boring sex lives, professional isolation and/or humiliation, and unfathomable intellectual fashions.<sup>1</sup> While critics have noted the importance of Lodge's Catholicism and his double life as both an academician and a creative writer, they have failed to do justice to the pervasive element of sex and sexuality across Lodge's *oeuvre*. My intent is to illuminate this main focus of Lodge's work and establish how his views of sex not only inform his views on religion, but also, in the course of his novels, bring him to a new view of religion. Lodge has called himself "an agnostic Catholic,"<sup>2</sup> revealing that practical theology is far more important to Lodge than doctrine or dogma; the depiction of sex in his novels is a reflection of that view.

In this thesis, I will select four novels of David Lodge that best show the progression of his thought about sex and its place in the lives of his characters, especially his Catholic ones. By choosing works from various periods of his writing life, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), *Small World* (1984), and *Thinks . . .* (2001), I will demonstrate the development of Lodge's philosophy of carnal relations, and how it reveals an evolution in his theology, one that

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<sup>1</sup> Lodge himself taught literature at University of Birmingham from 1960–1987.

<sup>2</sup> John Cullen, sermon, St George's Church, Hanover Square, London, 19 June 2005, 22 April 2006 <<http://www.stgeorghanoversquare.org/Sermon190605.htm>>.

moves him away from the Roman church of his upbringing and toward a more accepting, humanistic, less fire-and-brimstone, sin-oriented philosophy.

The chief questions I will investigate are: How does the Catholic religion influence the sexual practices of Lodge's characters? Does this influence change over time? How do we account for these changes? At what points do the characters begin to rebel against the Church? What does this progression indicate about Lodge's view of carnality and its place in the life of human beings in general and Catholics in particular? Moreover, how do we really account for the significant role sex plays in the novels, beyond the obvious fact that sex plays a significant role in human life?

I hypothesize that, despite the increasingly secular spirit dominating his novels and the diminution of religious practice and fading deference to religion, Lodge, a cradle-Catholic, cannot free himself completely of the notion that religion is a good thing, even though he rarely portrays Catholicism as such. In other words, he becomes only a nominal Catholic. Although considered conservative by some readers, his books are actually classically liberal in the sense that they seek progress through self-knowledge; and while in some ways they show that we can only progress so far, the novels do not consider striving to be a useless effort. The old certainties, still dominant though beginning to be questioned in *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, are mostly overthrown in *How Far Can You Go? By Small World*, while it may be troubling to one's soul to have premarital sex or commit adultery, the fear of hell (first lost in *How Far Can You Go?*) and the specter of sin are marginalized to the point of becoming a caricature. The Church itself is absorbed into a Rabelaisian carnival. On the whole, Catholicism in Lodge's novels does more to engender misery than it does to alleviate it,

especially where the sacrament of matrimony is concerned. For example, Adam and Barbara Appleby live in mortal fear that following the Church-approved “rhythm method” of birth control will result in a fourth child by their mid-twenties, and the strain on their relationship shows. Dennis and Angela from *How Far Can You Go?* court each other for five sexless years before entering into a disappointing marriage that is eventually thrown into turmoil by his affair with his secretary; their friend Michael becomes a connoisseur of pornography, and wonders at one point if the force of religious brainwashing was what drove him to marry his wife, Miriam, in the first place.

The Church and its priests are usually depicted as bitter censors, worried more about their terrestrial dominion than any celestial paradise after death. They use the fear of hell rather than the happy promise of heaven to model behavior, as when Father Finbar Flannegan tells Adam, “The true purpose of marriage is to procreate children and bring them up in the fear and love of God.” Note that fear takes precedence over love. Elsewhere, priestly logic is exposed when one cleric says “Talk about purity . . . begets impurity.”<sup>3</sup> By the time Persse McGarrigle, the young Irish romantic hero, of sorts, in *Small World*, walks into an adult movie theater, thus involving himself in what the priests would call “an occasion of sin,” Lodge is going almost exclusively for the laugh: Persse ejaculates in his pants, rushes out “as if from the pit of hell,” and immediately seeks absolution through confession in a Catholic Church across the street.<sup>4</sup> Behind the raucous humor of this scene is the fact that masturbation is a sin in the priest’s church: as Persse has no outlet for his natural sexual urges (even in private, since God is

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<sup>3</sup> David Lodge, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (London: Penguin Books, 1965) 36–37, 120. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as BM.

<sup>4</sup> David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Penguin Books, 1984) 49. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as SW.

omniscient), he pathetically cannot control them in a public venue. Persse has already shown by this point, however, that he is modern enough not to be so strict with his Catholicism that he would never consider premarital sex, telling Angelica, “if you promised to marry me eventually, I might stretch a point” (SW 40).

Helen Reed in *Thinks . . .* is far more liberated in her views. Although she admits to being “totally muddled and inconsistent about religion,” she waxes philosophical about the “unnecessary agonies” of her Catholic education: “in retrospect I feel only nostalgic affection for the nuns who taught me even though most of them were more or less deranged by superstition and sexual repression, which they did their best to instill in me.”<sup>5</sup> Helen does not regret that she set aside the practice of Catholicism after losing her virginity while a student at Oxford: “I could not with sincerity confess as a sin something that I had found so liberating, or promise not to do it again. Intellectual rejection of the rest of Catholic doctrine quickly followed” (TH 29). Tracing through the novels in this way will show how and why what is almost unthinkable to Barbara Appleby in relation to sex and religion is practically automatic to Helen Reed.

Lodge is a strong admirer of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of the carnivalesque can be helpful in partially explaining Lodge’s celebration of sexual liberation in his novels. Bakhtin’s Stalinist Soviet Union, Rabelais’ late medieval France, and the post-WWII Jansenist Catholicism that Lodge grew up near are all repressive societies that need to be disrupted by the spirit of carnival. As Michael Holquist points out, “Both Rabelais and Bakhtin knew that they were living in an unusual period, a time when virtually everything taken for granted in less troubled ages lost its certainty, was plunged

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<sup>5</sup> David Lodge, *Thinks . . .* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 28–29. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as TH.

into contest and flux.”<sup>6</sup> David Lodge stands in a similarly revolutionary period in the life of the Catholic Church: in his childhood, strictures that had been in place for hundreds of years still held sway, and seemed as if they would for centuries onward, but World War II and the modern industrial/technological society, and, most specifically, the invention of the birth control pill, shook the Church to its foundations. Lodge deals with this shift thoughtfully and creatively: his Catholic characters increasingly embrace a moral life apart from Catholicism; sex is shown in a predominantly positive light, even from the perspective of persons engaged in adultery (which is usually depicted as a grasp at happiness through pleasure); and his novels demonstrate a pluralistic, life-affirming way of living in the world.

Despite the fact that Lodge has been publishing for forty-five years, scholarship focused on his novels is not extensive, offering rich opportunity to explore new territory. Book-length studies of his work are rare, and articles in scholarly journals are likewise limited. Critics have mostly focused on his campus novels, particularly the loose “trilogy” of *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work*. Some have discussed the Catholic aspects of his fiction, and those will be relevant here. Merritt Moseley and Bernard Bergonzi have produced slim, readable introductions to Lodge’s novels, each containing a cursory chapter on “Catholic Questions,” as Bergonzi puts it.<sup>7</sup> Moseley focuses his attention on *How Far Can You Go?*, acknowledging its depth and appreciating (as Terry Eagleton does not—see below) that the birth control issue sparked “a serious examination” of “the relationship between authority and conscience, between

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<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984) xv.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *David Lodge* (Plymouth, UK: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1995) 29.

the religious and lay vocations, between the flesh and the spirit.”<sup>8</sup> While Lodge’s Catholic school education was strict, he did not become an either/or thinker, setting up his characters to be judged by the harsh standards of a religion that engendered the spiritual game of “snakes and ladders,”<sup>9</sup> where every good turn one does moves him a bit closer to heaven while every sin drops one all the way toward an afterlife in hell. Moseley rightly places Lodge in the “Matthew Arnold vein of liberalism—the refusal to believe in the ‘one thing needful,’ a determination to see all sides of issues—that is admirably catholic in understanding and sympathy.”<sup>10</sup> Moseley seems to understand how the meaning of the word “catholic,” with a lower case “c,” is actually more universal than the church that co-opts that word with a big “C,” but his purpose is descriptive rather than analytical, and that’s as far as he goes. Bergonzi points to the same novel as evocative of “a [Catholic] subculture on the point of meltdown.”<sup>11</sup> He notes that Lodge referred to himself as an “agnostic Catholic” as early as 1992, and hesitantly advances the idea, almost in passing, that Lodge’s religious views show some affinity “with recent radical Protestant theology”—with the difference that Lodge prefers the traditional Catholic theological notion stressing divine transcendence to the Protestant focus on its immanence.<sup>12</sup> While he does not focus much on the sexuality in Lodge’s novels as it

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<sup>8</sup> Merritt Moseley, *David Lodge: How Far Can You Go?* (San Bernardino: The Borgo Press, 1991) 78.

<sup>9</sup> David Lodge, *Souls and Bodies* (London: Penguin, 1980). The title of this book was changed for the United States’ printing. I will refer to the British title of the book, *How Far Can You Go?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), and hereafter cite it parenthetically in the text as HF.

<sup>10</sup> Moseley 13.

<sup>11</sup> Bergonzi 38.

<sup>12</sup> Bergonzi 43.

directly relates to Catholicism to the extent that I will, Bergonzi does point out that married Catholics after *Humanae Vitae* simply chose to ignore Church doctrine, saying that the papal encyclical “provoked a crisis not only about sexuality but about authority in the Church that is still unresolved.”<sup>13</sup> He concludes that “it makes sense to regard Lodge as a kind of religious writer,”<sup>14</sup> with which I agree, but only in the sense that he finds religion as it exists insufficient, and frequently harmful.

Terry Eagleton, in contrast, judges Lodge to be untheological, for sex cannot matter so much to religion or be all it is based on; but Eagleton is too dismissive. In *How Far Can You Go?*, Lodge shows that it is sex and particularly the Catholic Church’s prohibition against birth control that gets many of his characters thinking about their relationships to God in the first place. This does not mean, as Eagleton somewhat superciliously claims, that Lodge “commits the banal Catholic error of mistaking sexuality for morality.”<sup>15</sup> Eagleton fails to appreciate the stress that the Catholic clergy places on sexual sins—most Catholics, and especially the characters in Lodge’s novels, can be forgiven for the honest confusion that Eagleton terms a banal error. In other words, Eagleton unfairly ascribes the putative errors of Lodge’s characters to the novelist himself.

Peter Widdowson argues that Lodge’s novels carry “ideological implications of considerable reactionary force,”<sup>16</sup> which is an overdramatic way of saying no more than

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<sup>13</sup> Bergonzi 34.

<sup>14</sup> Bergonzi 47.

<sup>15</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The Silences of David Lodge,” *New Left Review* 172 (November/December 1988): 93–102.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Widdowson, “The Anti-History Men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge,” *Critical Quarterly* 26.4 (Autumn 1984): 6.

that Lodge wouldn't mount the battlements to overthrow the English political or economic system from which he benefited. At the same time, Widdowson chides Lodge for validating "the specious liberal freedom of having it both ways."<sup>17</sup> Widdowson stresses the way in which *Changing Places*, *How Far Can You Go?*, and *Small World* all make marriage the end-all; but it is not, over the course of the novels I am discussing, the Catholic sort of marriage that Widdowson implies without making any distinction of the difference between Catholic marriage and any other sort. His view of the sex in Lodge's novels is amusing in itself, parenthetically glossing over it, as he does, as "a kind of nose-against-the-window," "voyeuristic" obsession.<sup>18</sup>

Wenche Ommundsen's criticism is much more relevant to my thesis, affirming that "the Catholic teaching on the subject of sex and contraception comes to crystallise the rising conflict between an authoritarian Church and a liberal and increasingly secular society" in Lodge's fiction.<sup>19</sup> While not denying Widdowson's claim that a "strong conservative impulse" can be found in the texts "at the most obvious level of their argument," Ommundsen, concerned more with literary theory than I am (and, unfortunately, writing before the publication of *Thinks . . .*), makes the following sensible statement: "Conservative and radical impulses coexist [in Lodge's fiction], albeit in constant conflict, undermining each other, but without either being fully annihilated."<sup>20</sup> He goes further, saying that readings like Widdowson's (of *How Far Can You Go?*, for

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<sup>17</sup> Widdowson 27.

<sup>18</sup> Widdowson 26.

<sup>19</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, "Sin, Sex, and Semiology: Metafictional Bliss and Anxiety in the Novels of David Lodge," *AUMLA—Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 73 (1990): 123.

<sup>20</sup> Ommundsen 126.

example) “can only be produced by a consistent effort to ignore, or dismiss as insignificant, incidental, or merely ‘comic’ the constant tendency in the text to contradict the voice of anxiety, the conservative impulse.”<sup>21</sup> Most keenly, Ommundsen notes a point that is important to my view of Lodge as a progressive liberal: even though *How Far Can You Go?*, *Small World*, and later *Thinks . . .* end in engagements or renewed marriage commitments, marriage is never to be taken as a “metaphor for stability” in Lodge. Rather, it “is more likely to be precisely the site of the strife, the unstable contract where irreconcilable opposites confront each other until death—or divorce—they part.”<sup>22</sup>

Whether Catholic or not, there are few happy marriages in the four novels I am analyzing, and my intention is to show that the Catholic Church’s negative view of sex is a significant reason why. The only married couples in the four novels under my study who have seemingly happy sex lives are those of the Italian (and therefore more passionate than the English) swingers Fulvia and Ernesto Morgana, and the Turkish (and therefore exotic) Akbil and Oya Borak, who make love every night. As far as Lodge’s countryfolk go, it is a long journey from Adam Appleby’s mortal agony with the rhythm method in the 1960s to Helen Reed’s overcoming of her ethical qualms against adultery, attributed to her Catholic upbringing, in the 1990s. By following the struggle of sex with religion over those decades, I hope to show that Lodge’s progressive impulse makes him welcome these changes, while still observing that a loosening of the religious and societal

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<sup>21</sup> Ommundsen 131.

<sup>22</sup> Ommundsen 139.

bonds doesn't solve everyone's problems as they pursue happiness, fulfillment, or even what Philip Swallow calls "the intensity of experience" (SW 66).

The question "How far can you go without losing something vital?" is central to Lodge's work, as the eponymous novel will be central to my study. Bruce K. Martin notes that many of Lodge's critics have focused on that question and underscores the author's non-reactionary belief that, while progress is good, there are still "trade-offs" to be made in its modern pursuits. Martin points out that Lodge does not agree with Eagleton's philosophy that "we must see the world as structured only politically,"<sup>23</sup> but also ascribes to the idea, sanctioned by Lodge in his 1980 introduction to *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, that its ending is conservative, as it concludes "without fundamentally disturbing the system which provoked" its conflicts and misunderstandings. Martin adds that all of Adam Appleby's "frustrated complaining" about the Church is "swept aside in favor of a resolution upholding [his] marriage, and by implication, the religious institution sanctioning it."<sup>24</sup> Even before we move on to the later novels, this conservative resolution does not change the fact that the Applebys' concerns are valid and pressing; rather, it is the Applebys' absurd situation that prepares us for the eventual revolution against the Church that culminates in its relegation to the sidelines. Sex and religion are the two main topics Lodge uses to explore how far one can go, and my thesis will detail how sex overthrows religion without completely eliminating the interpersonal and societal difficulties that can arise from sex and

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<sup>23</sup> Bruce K. Martin, *David Lodge: Twayne's English Authors Series No. 553* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999) 103.

<sup>24</sup> Martin 114.

sexuality. My research has not located any criticism comprising the four works I have chosen to examine, or one that traces the discourses of intimacy<sup>25</sup> throughout Lodge's novels as far as *Thinks* . . . .

Gerald Parsons is surely correct when he points out the insufficiency of arguing that sexual morality and the Catholic Church's prohibition against birth control are "the" theme of *How Far Can You Go?* There is a "broader historical process" involved, "which, the seeming predominance of the sexual issue notwithstanding, constitutes the deepest theme of the novel."<sup>26</sup> This is why Lodge is so important, and why he may frustrate those who demand that he pick a side, choose an orthodoxy—it's the orthodoxy against which Lodge and his characters chafe. Lodge doesn't just ask "How far can you go in throwing off the bonds of religion?," which he does explicitly; his whole body of work is constantly asking "How far can you go in submitting to such external bonds until you have thrown away any chance for happiness on earth?" Lodge is obviously an appreciator of the golden mean. He admires moderation and good sense; he recognizes that the Dionysian impulses help individuals most when tempered by the Apollonian. *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, while it ends with the Applebys spared the trauma of another baby for which they could barely provide, does not end in "an affirmation of the Church's authority," as Eva Lambertsson Björk claims<sup>27</sup>—the entire book is an *indictment* of the way Catholics suffer at the hands of a celibate clergy who make the

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<sup>25</sup> Bárbara Aritzi, *Textuality as Striptease: The Discourses of Intimacy in David Lodge's Changing Places and Nice Work* (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Parsons, "Paradigm or Period Piece?: David Lodge's *How Far Can You Go?* in Perspective," *Literature and Theology* 6.2 (June 1992): 174.

<sup>27</sup> Eva Lambertsson Björk, *Campus Clowns and the Canon: David Lodge's Campus Fiction* (Umea, Sweden: University of Umea Press, 1993) 79.

rules and ostensibly hold the keys to the gates of heaven. Resignation is not the same thing as affirmation.

Two-thirds of Bárbara Aritzi's 2002 postmodern theory-oriented book, *Textuality as Striptease: The Discourses of Intimacy in David Lodge's Changing Places and Small World*, is given over to Lodge, and one-third toward a chapter on "Theorising Intimacy." Her ambitious project takes upon itself the goal of showing how Lodge both reflects and creates the culture in which his novels are written, and she has valuable things to say about sex, marriage, and religion, notably: "While a sediment of Christian morality still exists in most Western societies, the process of secularisation resulted in an enriching diversification of moral discourses."<sup>28</sup> I am convinced that Lodge approves of this diversification and disagrees with Aritzi that *Small World* "privileges the comforts of domesticity over the thrills of the outside world."<sup>29</sup> Her answer to how far Lodge wants to go is "as far as the institution, be it religious, academic, or literary, is not seriously threatened,"<sup>30</sup> and, on the academic and literary, I agree with her; but the religious, for Lodge, at least as far as the Catholic Church goes, must be overthrown—not by the armies of Stalin or the rule of law, but by each individual liberal humanist seeking a better life.

In this thesis, I will employ close readings of Lodge's novels to investigate the consciousness of his characters and how their experiences, filtered through a narrative voice, reflect many of the author's own views. I will also use biographical and historical

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<sup>28</sup> Aritzi 62.

<sup>29</sup> Aritzi 211.

<sup>30</sup> Aritzi 44.

materials, tracing Lodge's intellectual and philosophical journey via the development of his evolving views of sex and religion across four novels and four decades. From the standpoint of literary theory, I agree with E. D. Hirsch that the writer's stated intentions are valuable and generally worthy of respect when interpreting a work of literature, but they are not gospel.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

## Chapter II

### Religious Sexual Repression in *The British Museum Is Falling Down*

David Lodge's third novel, and first comic one, opens with twenty-five-year-old Adam Appleby assaulted by reasons not to get out of bed in the morning. He is running out of money while falling behind on his Ph.D. dissertation, has three small children, an unreliable motor scooter, a (psychosomatic) pain in his leg, and a wife whose menstrual period is three days late. The latter is by far the most pressing problem, and will follow him throughout the foggy London November day on which *The British Museum Is Falling Down* is set. A practicing Catholic in the early 1960s, Adam constantly wonders what it would be like to live the life of "an ordinary, non-Catholic parent, free to decide, actually to decide, in calm confidence—whether or not to have a child." Meanwhile, he envisions his own marriage "as a small, over-populated, low-lying island ringed by a crumbling dyke which he and his wife struggled hopelessly to repair as they kept anxious watch on the surging sea of fertility that surrounded them" (BM 12). A young and educated member of a prosperous post-World War II society would hope to have a more positive outlook on life than one marked by a persistent fear of drowning, but Adam's Catholic upbringing prevents any kind of tranquil optimism.

Indeed, Adam Appleby's situation is the perfect beginning for this examination of the development of sex and its relation to the Catholic religion in four novels of David Lodge spanning nearly four decades. He lives his days in fear rather than hope or peace or joy. After the birth of their third child in approximately three years, Adam and his

Wife, Barbara, “simply abstained from intercourse for six months of mounting neurosis” (BM 13), but “found it hard” that they had maintained their virginities for the three years of their courtship only to be forced to return to a celibate life out of fear of having more children than they could reasonably afford to support. As non-Catholics, the Applebys abide by the Church’s prohibition of all artificial forms of contraception: no condoms, no progesterone pill, and no anxiety-free way to share what they might call “the physical act of love.”

Lodge himself grew up Catholic, though he did so under less direct cultural and religious pressure than many, as he notes in the essay, “Memories of a Catholic Childhood”:

I am the only child of what used to be called in Catholic circles a “mixed marriage”. My mother was Catholic, and my father a “non-Catholic”—as one said in those same circles implying that there was no positive form of faith outside the One True Church.<sup>32</sup>

Lodge was never an altar boy, religion was not a topic often discussed at home, and the neighborhood was not populated by many Catholics with whom to make friends. He therefore felt “something of an outsider within the Church.” He wanted to belong, but “shyness, absence of familial pressure and inadequate grasp of the relevant codes” held him back (WO 29). Lodge learned many of the codes (at least the one demanding obedience at the end of a leather strap) when attending a grammar school run by an order of brothers, though he deems the quality of religious instruction there “very poor” (WO 30). He began to read Paulist apologetics in sixth form and developed an intellectual sense of the Church, and was later drawn to the novels of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and others, who showed him an authentic belief that was “equally opposed to the

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<sup>32</sup> David Lodge, *Write On: Occasional Essays 1965–1985* (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as WO.

materialism of the secular world and the superficial pieties of parochial Catholicism” (WO 31). Lodge became fascinated by “[t]he idea of the sinner as a representative Christian,” and the idea “that being a Catholic need not entail a life of dull, petty-bourgeois respectability” (WO 31).

Poor Adam Appleby, however, is trapped in that respectability-obsessed petty-bourgeois world, with seemingly little hope to raise himself up even to the middle of his perhaps ill-chosen academic profession. Adam may be a sinner, as the Church teaches all are, but he is easily one more sinned against than sinning. *The British Museum Is Falling Down* captures the world of Lodge’s late adolescence and early married years, and Adam’s comic struggle, the author admits in the essay, “My Joyce,” is a way for Lodge to relieve “a certain amount of impatience and frustration provoked by the Catholic teaching on birth control” (WO 66). He also notes, in his 1980 introduction to the reissue of *British Museum*, that he and his wife and their married Catholic friends discovered “that the only method of family planning sanctioned by the Church, known as Rhythm or the Safe Method, was in practice neither rhythmical nor safe, and therefore a cause of considerable stress” (BM xii).

Following the Rhythm Method fails the Applebys, who started their married lives “with vague notions about the Safe Period and a hopeful trust in Providence that Adam now found difficult to credit: a woman who monitors her menstrual cycle closely, by means of taking her temperature each morning, can supposedly know when she is ovulating and thereby avoid intercourse when she is most likely to conceive. The method’s effectiveness is demonstrated by three births in three years in the Appleby household—all to be able to keep “in accordance with the Natural Law” (BM 14). Lodge

underscores the practical absurdity of the Rhythm Method by depicting a nervous Barbara in bed and on her belly with both oral and rectal thermometers protruding from her, just to ensure the most accurate reading.

As Lodge explains in his introduction, in an effort to show why any intelligent and educated persons like Adam and his wife would put up with such stress, Catholics of his generation made sort of an existential deal:

. . . in return for the reassurance and stability afforded by the Catholic metaphysical system, one accepted the moral imperatives that went with it, even if they were in practice sometimes inhumanly difficult and demanding. It was precisely the strength of the system that it was total, comprehensive and uncompromising, and it seemed to those brought up in the system that to question one part of it was to question all of it, and that to pick and choose among its moral imperatives, flouting those which were inconveniently difficult, was simply hypocritical. (BM xiii)

Adam is foreordained not to consider leaving the Church: he is too caught up by the metaphysical promise to discard the inhumanly demanding temporal practices, the sexual ones being the most extreme. He recognizes these practices as fundamentally unreasonable; even before leaving his apartment in the morning of the single day upon which the novel takes place, he imagines writing an entry on Roman Catholicism for a post-apocalyptic Martian encyclopedia, describing the religion as having been “characterised by a complex system of sexual taboos and rituals.” The entry continues for thirteen lines about the paraphernalia associated with the unlikely use of the Rhythm Method as a means of limiting offspring, before adding as an afterthought that “[o]ther doctrines of the Roman Catholics included a belief in a Divine Redeemer and in a life after death” (BM 16). It is this misplacing of priorities that troubles both David Lodge and his creation, Adam Appleby. In 1965, when *British Museum* is published, neither author nor his truly agonizing protagonist are ready to renounce the Church in spirit or in

practice, but Adam's objections lay the groundwork for crucial departures that happen in Lodge's later novels.

Adam's situation is not made lighter by the nosy Protestant landlady, who considers Barbara to be the "innocent victim" of his "ungovernable sexual appetite," considers him excessively "naughty" for siring three children, "whom he could patently not afford to support" so quickly. The narrator points out that Mrs. Green regards Adam as one might an accomplished stud bull, something he finds difficult to countenance, since "he calculated that there could be few married men in Metropolitan London who enjoyed their martial rights as seldom as himself" (BM 28). Mrs. Green goes so far as to suggest various contraceptive approaches to Barbara, and is undeterred when told that their religion prevents them from taking her advice, even suggesting, not in so many words, that her tenants employ *coitus interruptus*: "'You'll just have to pull away, dear, at the critical moment'" (BM 29).

We soon discover the Applebys' religion in the person of Father Finbar Flannegan, who accosts Adam for a ride on the latter's motor scooter and then replies angrily to Adam's insistent suggestions that the Second Vatican Council, "on which he and Barbara and most of their Catholic friends pinned their hopes for a humane and liberal life in the Church" (BM 34), should modernize the Church's teaching about birth control: "'The true purpose of marriage is to procreate children and bring them up in the fear and love of God!'" (BM 36) (At least interfering Mrs. Green was trying to make their lives easier.) Father Flannegan's edict appears in my introduction above, but bears repeating, as it crystallizes the mindset of those who administer Adam's religion. Fear comes first, love comes second, despite Jesus Christ's famous boiling down of the law of

the god of the Jews to two commandments: “Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, with thy whole strength, and with thy whole mind,” and “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”<sup>33</sup> This point is not merely rhetorical, and as Lodge writes elsewhere, “[w]ords cannot but *mean*, and meanings are always potentially subversive and threatening to orthodoxy” (WO 37). Lodge intentionally puts fear before love in Father Flannegan’s mouth because fear is what most effectively binds people to orthodoxy. Fear of hell can reasonably be said to play the primary role in making Father Flannegan the youngest of eighteen children, a staggering eleven of whom died in infancy. Fear of the strap is what kept Lodge, his schoolmates, and millions of other Catholic school pupils of the mid-twentieth century from misbehaving or forgetting to study.

Fear of a fourth child to feed is what causes Adam hallucinations, distracts him to the point that he falls down more than once, makes him hum aloud, and brings him to the brink of a nervous breakdown, during which he wonders if such an extreme physical and mental collapse would result in a “special dispensation” from the Pope to use contraceptives. He is sufficiently composed to abjure having a breakdown when he thinks it might take his death to have the Vatican Council revise their Natural Law—it would do him no good if he were dead (BM 54). Lodge plays on the dichotomy between natural and unnatural here: Adam reacts to one of his repeated calls home to Barbara to unsuccessfully ascertain that she’s not pregnant after all by thinking, “This is denaturing me” (BM 58). Wanting to have sexual relations with one’s wife is natural, as is *not* wanting to have more children than one can materially support. Adam’s predicament,

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<sup>33</sup> “Lesson Twenty-Ninth: On the Commandments of God,” [Catholic.net](http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Catechism/3/129.html), 1 May 2006  
<<http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Catechism/3/129.html>>

made clear by Lodge, is that the Church considers the reasonable solution to his problem to be *unnatural*, and therefore punishable by eternal hellfire.

While Adam has no desire to be a martyr, he also does not want to stop being a Catholic. He thinks little of the attempts of his non-believing colleagues, Camel and Pond, as they say, “to convince him intellectually that Catholicism is false” and “free him from the shackles of a superstitious creed” (BM 65, 66). Their suggestion that the Applebys leave the Church until Barbara reaches menopause and then repent is put down by the telling example of the bus that could hit Adam at any moment: “Catholics are brought up to expect sudden extinction around every corner and to keep their souls polished at all times” (BM 65).<sup>34</sup> Their other arguments are even less persuasive, but they bring Adam to the admission that the Church’s stance against birth control will likely increase the “lapsation rate” (BM 67) among his fellow Catholics. Adam’s view can be summed up in his reply—resonant with frustrated and unfulfilled desire—to Camel’s teasing that he will become a museum library eccentric who can no longer tell the difference between life and literature: “Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way around” (BM 63).

It is significant, however, that Adam belongs to a Catholic discussion group that presses for the progressive reforms of the Church that would lessen the misery of his daily life. Lodge uses the Dollinger Society to bring more comedy to the novel and a sense of hopeless optimism to the plight of young married Catholics. Letters from the society, named after “the celebrated German theologian of the nineteenth century who

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<sup>34</sup> Compare with the game of “Snakes and Ladders” of *HF* in Chapter 3 below. Catholics in Adam’s world are taught to feel that God is watching their every move, keeping score with a view to sending them to heaven or hell, and just one slip could leave them exposed to eternal damnation should they die with unconfessed sins.

had been excommunicated in 1871 for refusing to accept the doctrine [newly fabricated in 1870] of Papal Infallibility” (BM 67), are never printed in the Catholic press, but having sent them makes the members feel better, even though no one in the group really wants to risk his or her own excommunication. Adam (very much one of them, which adds to the humor) reflects that this timidity results from “the liberal conscience [having] a more thrilling existence within the Church than outside it” (BM 67). He has written letters arguing for liberalization of the Church’s laws against birth control to the Catholic press under his own name (BM 29), but we do not know whether they actually appear in print. While making him stand out as a liberal, these letters would probably not mark him as a heretic, since Vatican II was in fact considering the issue at the time, under the Pontifical Commission on the Family, Population, and Birth Control (BM xiv).

When Adam arrives at the meeting of the Dollinger Society, he does so having drunk more beer with Camel and Pond than he expected, which may contribute to his impatience with the society’s latest long yet vague letter tentatively in favor of birth control, which “somehow missed the real rub of the problem as it was felt by the individual: the ache of unsatisfied desire, or the pall of anxiety that the Safe Method draped over the marriage bed” (BM 69). Adam demands more specificity in their petition, and when the question is turned back at him he uneasily gathers his thoughts before making one of Lodge’s most essential points: “we Catholics expend most of our moral energy on keeping or breaking the Church’s teaching on birth control [and it should be noted that no indication is given that Adam and Barbara do anything but keep it], when there are a lot of much more important moral issues in life” (BM 70). Lodge has Adam go on to explain that the trouble with artificial contraception is that it is

“necessarily a premeditated sin,” based on the requirement of buying the products at a chemist’s shop in the first place. Adam’s solution is burdened by an almost medieval scholastic impulse (confirmed as such a page later): he wonders if contraception could be downgraded to a venial sin, therefore not one that gets the transgressor sent straight to hell when the bus runs over him.

The group falls silent until Lodge introduces the first of a handful of liberal priests in his novels, Father Wildfire, whose name seems to describe an event in the soul of the Church that both conservative and liberal Catholics fear, but which the liberals would secretly like to see. Father Wildfire does not even wear a collar, and is portrayed as a frequent tippler, thereby undercutting his unorthodox (at the time) argument that “[a]ll sins are mortal sins. Or, to put it another way, all sins are venial sins. What matters is love. The more love, the less sin” (BM 72). Lodge then sends Father Wildfire overboard, doctrinally, when he has him report preaching to a recent men’s retreat: “better sleep with a prostitute with some kind of love than with your wife out of habit.” Such an outrageous claim from Father Wildfire works for Lodge in at least two ways: first, it neutralizes Wildfire as a legitimate spokesman for the Church, and in so doing marginalizes anyone who might draw inspiration from that line of thinking. This undermining of the liberal-progressive is in keeping with Lodge’s description of the novel as “essentially conservative in its final import” (BM xiv). Second, it disconcerts Adam when he realizes that the question “Is it better to make love to your wife using a contraceptive, or not make love to her at all?” would be too “trivial and suburban” (BM 72) for him to ask Father Wildfire. The Catholic suffering-must-be-borne mentality strikes Adam, and he remembers how his mother always used to say, in a way representative of Catholic

conditioning wherein guilt is used instead of fear, “There’s always someone worse off than yourself.” The proof that this sort of conditioning works is that thinking of it makes Adam feel better. It does not solve his problem of potentially having more children than he can feed, but it does refocus him on trying to get a job to feed them.

When Adam’s mentor, Briggs, who has been working on an unfinished book of his own for 20 years, tells Adam—who is far from completing his dissertation or having anything that he might excerpt for a scholarly article—that the only way to get a job is to “Publish or perish!” (BM 76), the ensuing despondency (as well as a bout of hunger—the stress of worrying about Barbara’s possible pregnancy has caused Adam to neglect himself in many ways) drives Adam to comic flights of fancy: he imagines himself chosen as the first Pope with children of his own in centuries. Lodge mediates the fantasy by having it reported by a character in it—a member of the Papal Court who tells the story in his diary. Regardless of how the story is related, it underscores Adam’s desire to *change* the Church, not to *leave* it.

Again, as Lodge writes in his introduction, “The possibility of making a conscientious decision to ignore [Church] teaching is not raised” (BM xiv). The daydream has one aspect of nightmare, in that Adam is freed to become Pope not only by a fantastical decision of Vatican II to admit married men to the priesthood, but also because his wife has died giving birth to their fourth child. As a result, the newly invested Adam puts out an encyclical decreeing “the practice of birth control by any method [is] left to the discretion and conscience of the Faithful” (BM 81). That step would be enough to upset the reactionaries in Adam’s papal court, such as Scarlettofeverini, but Adam drives him to cry “Paganism!” by calling for the worldwide

creation of local parish clinics “to instruct married Catholics in all available techniques.” The diary-keeping attaché concludes by noting that the entire Anglican Church returned to Rome and that the churches cannot hold all of the lapsed Catholics who want to come back, “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” (BM 82).

On awakening from his reverie, Adam, more and more distraught, tells Camel that he does not see the point of his life anymore. Thinking about sex has consumed him. He has sex less than he would like, and when he does have it he spends much of the rest of his time anxious about whether Barbara will get pregnant. Meanwhile, his non-Catholic friends can go about their lives breezily; and then Adam finally says what Lodge has been implying in the entire book: “it just doesn’t seem fair” (BM 82). The injustice of his situation, which he knows is perpetrated upon him by unmarried men with princely robes and titles who claim to speak for God, which is borne with some complaint by oppressed Adam, will be a main topic of *How Far Can You Go?*, where several of Lodge’s characters (who are roughly Adam’s contemporaries) choose not to bear it any longer. Adam is certainly one to understand that life is not fair no matter who you are, but he is not one to rebel, though the direness of his circumstances in a three-room apartment with five inhabitants are vividly characterized by a narrator with access to Adam’s thoughts:

One of the rooms had originally been a living room, but this had long ago become Adam and Barbara’s bedroom, while the children occupied the other. This seemed the logical and inevitable design of a good Catholic home: no room for *living* in, only rooms for breeding, sleeping, eating and excreting. As it was, he was compelled to study in his bedroom, his desk squeezed up beside the double bed, constant reminder of birth, copulation and death. (BM 88)

Adam knows his situation is almost past bearing as it is, and the worry that it will assuredly get worse with the addition to the apartment of a sixth occupant drives him very close to rationalizing a premeditated mortal sin.

Because Lodge is writing a comedy, Adam's pain (and the pain of those reading the story who can personally empathize with him) is softened by humor and favorable coincidences that are sure to prevent Adam from having anything truly horrible happen to him. Though it has often been noted that laughter keeps us from crying, or diffuses our anger to make us less likely to revolt (as some critics note about the ancient carnival, or point out the Roman emperors' custom of keeping the people satisfied with bread and circuses) eventually, as we shall see in *How Far Can You Go?*, some things are funny only to a point—Lodge's humor develops as society and his characters do. Adam Appleby, meanwhile, will be freed of his job-related worry, he thinks, if he can obtain an unpublished manuscript by mediocre Catholic writer, Egbert Merrymarsh, the niece of whom has returned Adam's request to meet with her and review his papers, some of which, writes Mrs. Amy Rottingdean to Adam, might "be of the greatest interest to a serious-minded young man like yourself" (BM 90). Before he can get to her house, he unintentionally reports a false fire at the British Museum to the authorities, and, if that were not enough to torture him (even though the prospect of Merrymarsh's manuscript has lightened his mood somewhat), in hiding in the stacks he notices a book with a picture of "the Jansenist Christ, arms raised above the bowed head in a grim reminder of the exclusiveness of mercy" (BM 100). As long as he is a Catholic, Lodge implies again, there is no escape from these ubiquitous reminders.

When Adam appears in the gloomy hallway of Mrs. Rottingdean's house, the walls are covered with "morbid icons" representing "St. Sebastian transfixed with arrows like a pincushion, and St. Lawrence broiling patiently on a grid-iron" that he shrinks from "as from something cruel and sinister" (BM 113). Lodge is poking fun here at the superstitiousness of Catholics of a certain stripe; Adam also encounters a human finger bone in a case and various other "reliquaries statuettes and vials of Lourdes water . . . ranged on shelves, dim dusty devotional" (BM 115). Before he knows what happened to him, he is locked in a room with Mrs. Rottingdean's teenage daughter, Virginia, who is determined to seduce him, whatever his objections. She does not mind that he's married, even voices a predilection for "experienced" men, and when Adam tries the doorknob she asks him, "'Does your wife have frequent orgasms?'" (BM 123). Her frankness and forwardness disturb Adam to blushing and evoke an exasperated admission that he and Barbara do not have sex very often. When Virginia is shocked by this, and asks if he has stopped loving his wife, Adam replies, "We happen to be Catholics, that's all." With Virginia's reply, "You mean you believe all that nonsense about birth control?" Lodge is once again putting the most pointed objection to Adam's Catholic practice in the mouth of someone who can easily be disregarded—in this case a sexually aggressive seventeen-year-old pretending to be nineteen. It is important, however, to the progression of attitudes that will take place during the course of Lodge's novels that Adam's answer to this girl, whose breast he must shortly touch if he is to obtain the key to the door, is, "I'm not sure I believe it, but I practise it" (BM 123). The breast he touches without wanting to do so, only after "setting his countenance grimly," and "with a gesture as brusque and

clinical as he could manage” reaching under her sweater and discovering neither key nor brassiere (BM 124).

Important to Adam’s immediate and long-term professional and financial situations is the decision whether he will succumb to Virginia’s sexual advances, and, indeed, prostitute himself to obtain a different manuscript from the mundane one Virginia’s mother showed him, a manuscript that shockingly reveals Egbert Merrymarsh was not Mrs. Rottingdean’s uncle, but her lover. Lodge gives Adam time to contemplate this decision, by having Virginia tell him (while actually licking her lips!) to come back later that evening. Flustered, Adam makes an excuse to Mrs. Rottingdean that will permit his return, and as Adam rides his motor scooter to his department’s annual sherry party, Lodge juxtaposes Adam’s memory of Merrymarsh’s prayers (“You who made us pure as children/ Keep us pure in adulthood” (BM 126)) with the character’s “precise tactile memory of Virginia’s bare breast” (BM 128) and the notion that it’s not such an unpleasant thing to have a lovely young woman throw herself at him so wantonly (BM 127). Naturally, Adam’s thoughts drift toward his first chaste experiences with dating, and then his long courtship with Barbara, that “tortured, intense affair of endless debate and limited [physical] action,” resulting in much “nerve-wracking,” and the following:

When they finally married they were clumsy, inexperienced lovers, and by the time they got the hang of it and began to enjoy themselves Barbara was six months pregnant. Ever since, pregnancy, actual or fearfully anticipated, had been a familiar attendant on their lovemaking. Adam had long since resigned himself to this fate. The experience of unbridled sexuality, the casual unpremeditated copulation unembarrassed by emotional ties or practical consequences . . . this was not for him. (BM 127)

Casual, emotionless copulation is never what Adam wants; he simply wants to have intimate relations with the woman he loves without bankrupting his family by increasing

its number past his means to support it. Upon finding himself in a situation where seemingly the best way to support the family he loves is to engage in a bit of unbridled sexuality, however, he puts himself in the ironic situation of attempting to buy condoms, not to prepare for sex with his wife, with whom he begrudgingly follows the Church's proscriptions, but to arm himself for sex with the girl Virginia—thereby clearing the way for possibly committing two sins: adultery *and* using artificial contraception. He does not make the decision to buy the condoms until imbibing more than his share of sherry and all but begging senior faculty at the party to help secure him a full-time job. The fact that he is stumbling-drunk again undercuts the progressive impulse of his resolution to obtain the scandalous manuscript of Merrymarsh, with which “he would deal a swinging blow at the literary establishment, at academe, at Catholicism, at fate” (BM 141). He is a classic case of the desperate sinner thinking, *If I'm going to hell, I might as well enjoy it*, intending to “leap to fame or perdition in a blaze of notoriety.” If it took sex with an attractive young girl, then so be it: “He had had enough of continence.”

Since Adam had also had an incontinent amount of alcohol, Camel and Pond pick him up off the ground, stick his head under water, and feed him coffee and a sandwich before he continues on his adventures, having lost “that happy mood of careless confidence” that first made him resolve to return to the Rottingdeans' house: “He was alone with himself again, the old Adam, a bare forked animal with his own peculiar moral problem” (BM 142). His immediate problem is how to obtain condoms for his liaison with Virginia. Visiting a medical supply shop does not raise his excitement; it

makes him uncomfortable and unsettled.<sup>35</sup> The potentially encouraging book in the window, *Sexual Happiness Without Fear*, whose title describes exactly what Adam wants, is displayed between *The History of Flagellation* and *Varieties of Venereal Disease*, and thereby undermined. Also “detumescent” (BM 143) are the various medical devices for sale, evocative of suffering, old age, and decline, which cause him to linger indecisively on the sidewalk. He thinks to himself, “There can be no doubt . . . that the conditioning of a Catholic upbringing entered into the very marrow of a man” (BM 143). While another man might think nothing of picking up a package of condoms and sleeping with a woman not his wife, Adam is nearly paralyzed by “embarrassment, guilt and superstitious fear” (BM 144).

What motivates him to go forward is the thought that he has no other chance to take something positive from an otherwise ruinous day, and the only way to prevent further ruination is not to impregnate Virginia. All he really wants from her is the chance at that literary discovery—this ray of hope for his career and family rapidly being supplanted in his thoughts by the idea that “if jumping into bed was the only way of getting his hands on the manuscript . . . well, he was only human” (BM 145). Adam knows he will be committing a “grave sin,” but after all the anxiety and calamity that he has experienced during the course of his long day he does not care; in fact, “he looked forward to the experience of being a Sinner in full-blooded style with a certain grim satisfaction. The advantage of the present circumstances was that they permitted him to feel the victim of an almost irresistible temptation which was not of his seeking” (BM 145). Though Lodge doesn’t point it out here, Adam, like any Catholic, knows that if he

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<sup>35</sup> It also offers Lodge the chance to make a joke of the store’s brightly lit sign, which would tout “Surgical Goods” if the s and an o weren’t missing, rendering the display as “URGICAL GO DS,” and making Adam wish he were truly “possessed by the spirit of Dionysian abandon” (BM 143).

makes a full confession to a priest, even a grave, premeditated sin (or two) will be forgiven. He would still have to live with the knowledge of betraying his innocent wife and children, but the dilemma here is one that Lodge, in general, wants people to understand can be forced on Catholics by the totalitarian nature of their “one true religion”: commit adultery and save his family; or obey the commandments and in all likelihood drive four (and possibly five) other persons into destitution.

To add to the comedy and remind the reader further of the totalitarian Church, Adam is intercepted again by Father Flannegan as he tries to enter the medical supply shop—the fog saves Adam complete embarrassment at being caught out in such a place, and he quickly buys some facial tissues to deflect any further scrutiny by the oblivious priest, who is busy, meanwhile, re-engaging Adam on the evils of birth control. He gently tells Adam that the Church does not forbid contraceptives “just to make life harder for young couples,” before raising his voice so the shopkeeper can hear him say, “CONTRACEPTION IS NOTHING LESS THAN THE MURDER OF GOD-GIVEN LIFE AND THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE AND SELL THE FILTHY THINGS ARE AS GUILTY AS THOSE WHO SUPPLY OPIUM TO DRUG ADDICTS” (BM 148). Two moments of perfect dramatic irony follow when Father Flannegan presses on in a stage whisper, asking Adam if he knows “that the manufacture of contraceptives is an industry so vast that no one can even make a guess at the profits? That the whole dirty trade is so covered up in secrecy that these profiteers don’t even pay taxes?” and later snaps, “Some people in this world don’t like to hear unpleasant truths” (BM 149). Lodge almost certainly wants to draw attention to both the Church’s tax-exempt status and the tendency of its practitioners to ignore the difficult questions that Church law engenders—but he

hews to the conservative nature of his comedy by showing the priest as rude and insensitive; surely, by extension, most Catholic priests are not this rabid, the narrator implies.

Equipped only with a packet of tissues, therefore, Adam still rides to the Rottingdeans, where within minutes he finds himself having made his career-building discovery in the pages of Merrymarsh's manuscript, but also must account for a completely uncovered Virginia right next to him. She foils his first few objections by denying her virginity, lighting the fire for warmth, proving her age by showing him her First Communion picture, and answering with a simple negative when he asks if the picture causes her any shame (BM 155). She puts his hand on her naked breast and says "Take me," and then tells him not to worry about his not having taken "precautions;" Adam grows hopeful for a moment and even allows himself to close his eyes and stroke her back. He quickly jumps up when she says she does not mind risking it, something he minds very much, to the point where he makes her take her temperature. "Not very romantic," she mumbles with the thermometer in her mouth. "'Sex isn't,' he snapped back" (BM 156). As he tries to leave, she loses her patience and chases him around the room, catches him, and begins to pull off his trousers. It's a crucial and serious moment for Adam, even though it comes in the middle of a rather slapstick scene: "He struggled to retain [his trousers], but, on a sudden inspiration, desisted." He has given in; he will sin, which in his theology only goes to show that men are weak and unworthy and therefore need to be saved by a god from the sky. In reality, it means that he's taking a risk to try to make his family's life better, even if he is thinking more about Virginia's

naked body at the moment than becoming a great literary scholar and living in some brand new six-room semi-detached house with his wife and three or four children.

Lodge appreciates the complexity of his situation, but, hewing to his comic mission, he liberates Adam from the consequences of giving in to temptation: Virginia leaps back in shock when she sees that Adam is wearing Barbara's lace-trimmed panties. The reason he is wearing them was that his home-life is so distracting that he forgot to keep a clean pair out when Barbara did the wash, and so all of his were still damp when he wakes up. Clearly Virginia agrees that "a transvestite is a poor man who likes wearing ladies' clothes because he's silly in the head" (BM 25), as Adam's daughter Clare reports that her mother told her that morning. Adam seizes on the opportunity to extricate himself from the situation by encouraging Virginia to believe it, but Lodge allows him one last criticism of the Church in doing so: "Religion has played havoc with my married life' he explained. 'If sex can't find its normal outlets . . .' He shrugged, and snapped the elastic on Barbara's pants" (BM 157). Adam and Virginia would not have been able to consummate their transaction anyway, as her mother and the butchers in her employ start noisily up the stairs with meat-axes. Before he climbs out the window, "conscious of re-enacting one of the oldest roles in literature" (BM 158), Virginia allows Adam to keep the papers showing that Catholic writer Merrymarsh was a great hypocrite, revealing in the process that she really was a virgin after all.

Before Adam can enjoy his getaway, his scooter catches fire and burns the manuscript, but Lodge sends a *deus ex machina* in the form of a wealthy American who hires Adam to scout for books for a library in Colorado at a ten percent commission. Adam can go home happily to his wife, not caring whether she's pregnant or not, indeed,

so happy that his money troubles are solved that he intends to make love to her. The pain in his leg finally disappears, and Adam catches himself even absurdly hoping that Barbara's period had not started (BM 166).

The novel's epilogue begins with Adam asleep, having made love to Barbara and still thinking Barbara is pregnant; she is awake, having just discovered conclusively that she is not. The "desperate unhappy look" (BM 86) of the newly pregnant woman that she claimed to have had earlier in the day is gone. It is in the epilogue that Lodge finally chooses to show Barbara's thoughts, and he does so by taking what he calls "a colossal liberty" (WO 67) by patterning them on the model of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Lodge admits to the profound influence Joyce had on his early writing (surpassed only by Graham Greene), and explains the parallels and differences in their individual Catholic upbringings:

To Joyce, in his Irish context at the turn of the century, the Catholic Church was a force antipathetic and inimical to the literary imagination: distrustful of independent thought, suspicious of novelty, indifferent to beauty and fearful of sexuality. This was also true of the Catholicism I experienced in school and parish—but that Church had no power to impose its canons on the production and consumption of art, since its authority covered only a minority, and a socially and educationally depressed minority, within British society as a whole . . . . In short, I did not feel it was necessary to stop practising the Catholic faith in order to assert the spiritual independence of the artist as a young man. (WO 60)

As this thesis argues, Lodge eventually stops practicing the Catholic faith in order to assert the spiritual independence of the individual, artist or not. While Joyce's novel and Molly's thoughts end with the affirmative "yes,"<sup>36</sup> Barbara Appleby's situation is less sure, and, by the conventions of Lodge's comedy, only her immediate problem is solved (the next act of intercourse with Adam could bring more days of anxiety very similar to

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<sup>36</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, First Vintage International Edition (New York: Random House, 1990) 783.

those of that day, and many days before), therefore her last word is “perhaps,” as in “perhaps the church will change and a good thing too there’ll be much less misery too” (BM 175).

Barbara thinks of her poor friend, Mary Flynn, who is pregnant for the fifth time and will have five children under six, and thinks “I’d go mad, literally stark staring mad” (BM 169). She spends many lines criticizing the hopelessness of life in a Church that prohibits birth control, thinking, “the Vatican’s always about a hundred years out of date” (BM 170), “no wonder they call it Vatican Roulette” (BM 172), “Safe method that’s a laugh” (BM 173), and “if you ask me nobody gives a damn for the natural law (BM 174); she does, however, also acknowledge (as Adam did in the Dollinger Society meeting) that nobody really wants to fumble around with condoms and spermicidal jelly before having sex. She thinks of a letter to a Catholic paper she saw where an older Catholic mother of nine writes, “I have no patience with the moans of young couples today who put a car and washing machine ahead of the responsibilities of parenthood we have been poor but happy all our lives” (BM 173). Barbara grants that she cannot blame this woman for being jealous that younger Catholics might escape the difficulties that she suffered if the Church suddenly decided to allow contraception, but adds, “the trouble is this myth of the large family what’s so marvelous about a large family I’d like to know there was only one child in the Holy Family six in ours and we were at each other throats most of the time.” Lodge appreciates that there are two major responses to life’s suffering: some who have suffered pain will grow more understanding and sympathetic to others; others will grow bitter and less sympathetic to the struggle of others. Barbara is one of the former; she acknowledges that everyone suffers, and perhaps it is sex that

causes all the trouble, “perhaps it’s original sin,” adding “either it’s comedy or tragedy nobody’s immune,” and “not that that entitles the church to sit back and say put up with it” (BM 174).

These last two highlighted phrases of Barbara Appleby sum up nicely Lodge’s empathetic feeling toward those who try to be good Catholics according to all the myriad laws the Church decrees. Lodge does not like to throw bombs or slash and burn, even where others (like Joyce) might. In 1965, he believed the Church would change, or at least hoped it would. With 1968’s *Humanae Vitae*, however, Pope Paul VI went against the advice of a majority of the Pontifical Commission and dashed the hopes of millions of Catholic couples by reaffirming the ban on all forms of artificial contraception. The fallout of this decision is the subject of Lodge’s *How Far Can You Go?*, where young couples similar to the Applebys will make quite different decisions about sex, sin, and religion than do Adam and Barbara.

### Chapter III

#### Rebellion and Attempts at Changing the Church From Within: *How Far Can You Go?*

While *The British Museum Is Falling Down* is focused on the life of a single married Catholic and his wife over the course of one day, *How Far Can You Go?* follows ten Catholic characters over the sweep of more than twenty-five years. It begins when nine of them are students at University College, London and gather together at an early morning St. Valentine's Day mass in 1952, celebrated by the tenth. Also, while the "conservative" comedy of *British Museum* does not "fundamentally disturb" the Catholic system, Lodge has written: "[t]hat more fundamental disturbance is the subject of *How Far Can You Go?*" (BM xiv). We therefore know from the beginning that this novel is going to be about testing boundaries, about breaking chains and seeking new, more fulfilling ways of living. Lodge crystallizes the novel's purpose three-fourths of the way in:

Our friends had started life with too many beliefs—the penalty of a Catholic upbringing. They were weighed down with beliefs, useless answers to non-questions. To work their way back to the fundamental ones—what can we know? why is there anything at all? why not nothing? what may we hope? why are we here? what is it all about—they had to dismantle all that apparatus of superfluous belief and discard it piece by piece. But in matters of belief (as of literary convention) it is a nice question how far you can go in this process without throwing out something vital." (HF 143)

How Lodge dramatizes and elucidates this final question, how he shows what can be lost (and what can be gained) by changing one's basic beliefs, is the subject of this chapter.

Lodge is not so specific about the year in which *British Museum* takes place, but it can be estimated at 1963 or 1964—in this case Adam Appleby would be fourteen or fifteen in 1952, and essentially the age of the younger siblings of the university-age congregants of *How Far?* Both novels begin on days of gloominess: Adam must navigate through enormously thick fog, while all those arriving at the church of Our Lady and St. Jude must brave a dark and coal-smoky morning made worse by a cold drizzle. The narrator in *How Far?* is more directly familiar with the reader, setting the stage by pointing out the “considerable cost in personal discomfort” it takes the students to make their way to “this unexciting ritual” (HF 3). What the narrator wants us to know, and therefore asks us directly before beginning to spin an answer, is “Why? . . . Why have they come here, and what do they expect to get out of it?”

The answer to the first part of the question is simple for Dennis, who is “not a particularly devout” Catholic: he is at mass because the object of his affection is, too, and he does not want her eyes to light on any other boy. Angela is there “because she is a good Catholic girl,” who “has been conditioned to do what is good without questioning” (HF 3). Michael, in contrast, is there to help himself avoid impure thoughts, which are all he seems to think these days—an “impure thought, he has been told by a boy who had been told by a priest in confession, is any thought that gives you an erection” (HF 6). Michael, who frequently masturbates, considers himself abnormal and led astray by the Devil. Before the narrator introduces the other characters, almost as a favor to the reader, he sets out the philosophical framework in which they live:

Before we go any further it would probably be a good idea to explain the metaphysic or world-picture these young people had acquired from their Catholic upbringing and education. Up there was Heaven; down there was Hell. The name of the game was Salvation, the object, to get to Heaven

and avoid Hell. It was like Snakes and Ladders: sin sent you plummeting down towards the Pit; the sacraments, good deeds, acts of self-mortification, enabled you to climb back towards the light. Everything you did or thought was subject to spiritual accounting . . . . On the whole, a safe rule of thumb was that anything you positively disliked doing was probably Good, and anything you liked doing enormously was probably Bad, or potentially bad—‘an occasion of sin.’ (BM 6-7)

The narrator goes on to explain more of the Church’s “most ingenious game,” including the difference between venial and mortal sins, as well as the practice of seeking penance, revealing in the process a religion that would seem to drive many human beings who believe in it to paralysis at times, wondering whether the next possibly sinful act would damn them to eternal torment in Hell, or merely an extended punishment in Purgatory.

The reason why the narrator calls the game “ingenious” (BM 7) is that it keeps individuals constantly focused on the state of their souls from childhood, and therefore more easily controlled by those in authority—parents, teachers, and priests. Behave, do what you are told, contribute generously to the collection box and you will go to heaven. Misbehave, disobey, fail to support the clergy in their good works (not to mention vestments and stone cathedrals) and you will go to the other place. The primary motivator, as first seen in *British Museum*, is *fear*. The narrator of *How Far?* asks whether the young people really believe that all the intricate practices of the Church, including the seeking of indulgences (a sort of get-out-of-Hell-free card), will help them toward eternal paradise. The answer is bound up in fear: “yes, they believe it, or at least they are not sure it is safe not to believe it” (HF 9).

Michael sees no hope for his soul while he continues to avoid the mortifying confession of his masturbatory habits, and so stays in his pew when the others go up to receive the Eucharist. As a result he eventually has to pretend that he has “Doubts” about

other Church doctrines, just to distract from the sin that put him in the state he thinks he is in. Lodge's narrator here is much more aggressively critical of the Church than the narrator of *British Museum*, and quicker to point out the absurdity of the mechanisms by which the Church and its faith are administered and cultivated. "Michael's Doubts" actually impress the others, who "try to encourage his failing powers of belief" (HF 10). The dilemma of the thoughtful and intelligent young Catholic is thus revealed, in that Michael "believes the whole bag of tricks more simply and comprehensively perhaps than anyone present at the mass, and is more honest in examining his conscience than many (HF 10). Meanwhile, Michael is not the only regular auto-eroticist in the church: "Polly, for instance, frequently comforts herself with a moistened forefinger before dropping off to sleep, but wouldn't dream of mentioning this in Confession or letting it prevent her from taking the Sacrament" (HF 10). She thinks it does not count because she's half asleep when she does it, and, at any rate, as the narrator points out, none of them even know the word "masturbation." Angela, for that matter, a product of a convent school, barely even looks at her body in the mirror (HF 11).

As for the rest: Ruth, a child of "frivolous and vaguely agnostic parents," who has "resigned herself" to being plain and unattractive, wants to become a nun (HF 12). Edward, who is helping the priest on the altar, is a medical student with a "rubbery clown's faced locked into an expression of exaggerated piety" (HF 14). Adrian is introduced merely as "bespectacled (=limited vision), in belted gabardine raincoat (=instinctual repression, authoritarian determination)" (HF 14). Miles is a convert and an ex-public schoolboy, the latter of which makes him the only one of his peers at the mass who has heard of "the refinements and variations of the act of love—fellatio, cunnilingus,

buggery, and the many different postures in which copulation may be contrived” (HF 12). Miles is also marked early as a possible homosexual—“his graceful, wandlike figure [bespeaking] a certain effeminacy”—a reality he will use Catholicism to help him deny for years to come. Violet (the third habitual masturbator) is a troubled soul, Irish by birth, who may have been molested at age twelve. Father Austin Brierly is the only one of the ten who, like Miles, is familiar with the ways and means of human sexual possibility, though for him and all the others, it is strictly theoretical; and he only came by the information because “it is necessary that a priest should know of every sin that he might have to absolve”<sup>37</sup> (HF 12). All of these young people are virgins, and all have been conditioned by their religion to repress any and all sexual urges: “They are therefore sexually innocent to a degree that they will scarcely be able to credit when looking back on their youth in years to come” (HF 12).

While they are young, though, they will ignore the two elderly ladies that also join in the mass; they feel the immortality of youth and think about life rather than death: “The afterlife figures in their thoughts rather like retirement: something to insure against, but not to brood on at the very outset of your career” (HF 16). The narrator describes religion as both insurance policy (“the Catholic Church offering the very best, the most comprehensive cover”) and way to get ahead, since God controls both the afterlife and the known world: “Not a sparrow falls without His willing it” (HF 17). By highlighting the possible benefits of intercessory prayer (“fine weather for the School Sports Day, the recovery of a lost brooch, promotion for Daddy, success [in examinations],” the narrator recalls an image of a Catholic god as a constant accountant, or referee in the game of

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<sup>37</sup> Contrast this with the line from a priest in BM: “talk about purity begets impurity.”

Snakes and Ladders. It is this constant accounting that drives Adam Appleby to his various neuroses in *British Museum*, just as it will cause pain and anguish for most of the characters in *How Far Can You Go?*, even as they pair up or branch out into the following couples: Dennis & Angela, Michael & Miriam, Edward & Tessa, Adrian & Dorothy, Violet & Robin, and Polly & Jeremy—the homosexual Miles, and the priest, Austin Brierly, eventually change their relationship to the Church and also find partners. The nun, Ruth, remains a “bride of Christ.”

The narrator’s critical, amused eye holds back none of the rational person’s criticisms of Church mysteries, reporting Dennis’s ruminations on the central teaching that the Eucharistic wafer becomes the flesh of Jesus Christ: “At what point, Dennis cannot help wondering, does the miracle of transubstantiation reverse itself, since it cannot be that Christ submits himself to the indignities of the human digestion and excretion” (HF 19). The narrator does, however, give the students credit for not being completely mercenary in attending these supererogatory masses, by pointing out that “they have all grasped the idea that Christianity is about transcendence of self in love of God and one’s neighbour, and they struggle to put this belief into practice according to their lights” (HF 17). Most of them perform some sort of community service, ritual self-mortification, or other pietistic works, and try not to think too much about the “truth[s] beyond reason” (HF 19) of their faith. Why they would need to pray to Christ or any of the hierarchy of saints, Adrian wonders (as later will Miriam), for intercession or to give glory to God, when they can easily pray directly to God, is an awkward question, but “Adrian is conditioned not to ask such awkward questions” (HF 20). As a result, through the boredom of repetition, and the difficulty of pondering the imponderable, “within

thirty seconds of kneeling down and bowing their heads, most of them are thinking . . . of breakfast, or study, or the weather, or sex or just the ache in their knees” (HF 20).

Even Father Brierly finds it “very hard to generate an appropriate sense of awe towards something done so often,” and is reported as missing “Polly’s dark curls and rosy cheeks” until she arrives late and he has to “suppress a smile” others might see (HF 13).

Father Brierly suppresses very little when he interrupts the students’ St. Valentine’s party later that evening, channeling the energy of his sexual attraction toward Polly into chastising her in public for performing a risqué sketch in which she, out of no genuine indecency, “points a stockinged leg, daringly exposed to the very suspender button, at the ceiling and wiggles her toes” (HF 27). Young Father Brierly, though aware of his own hypocrisy, “proceeds to do his duty”:

Catholic students should set an example to other young people by their purity of mind and body. The Catechism, he reminds them, explicitly forbade attendance at immodest shows and dances as an offence against the sixth commandment. All the more deplorable was it, therefore, actually to perform such degrading entertainments. He was surprised, he was shocked, he was disappointed. (HF 28)

Polly, who, the narrator points out earlier, really just wants to be cuddled (HF 25), is reduced to tears while the others stare quietly at the floor, only recovering her equanimity after she surprises herself by angrily vowing to quit Brierly’s study group and cease attending his masses.

Dennis has earlier in the evening “recklessly” proposed marriage to Angela, who feels that the blood rushing to her heart, cheeks, and loins (the narrator almost self-consciously eschews euphemism here and specifies “vagina”) at that moment “must indeed be love” (HF 24), and is disappointed that she does not find Polly’s sketch as “erotically exciting” as Dennis does. He pays the price for arguing the point when he

tries to introduce his tongue into their goodnight kiss (HF 28-29). While he tells Angela he does not mind her insistence that they wait at least three years (it ends up being more than five) to enter into the sacrament of holy matrimony, he was, two decades later, “to describe their courtship as the most drawn-out foreplay session in the annals of human sexuality” (HF 31)—a claim that Adam Appleby might have made until meeting Dennis. Dennis’s alcohol-induced admission comes early in the second chapter of the novel, which Lodge entitles, “How they lost their virginites,” and in which the narrator describes in graphic detail how not all these seemingly faithful Catholic young men and women act as their religion dictates.

Poor Violet cannot bring herself to study for their final examinations in 1954, and decides that she is “under some kind of spell or curse, that God [is] punishing her for her sins” (HF 32). This conviction drives her to go to Confession all over London, and when she finds that priests are not “particularly shocked” by her confessions, she makes increasingly worse sins up, like “she had sold herself as a child to an American soldier for chewing gum, [and that] she had masturbated with a statuette of the Sacred Heart” (HF 33). When a priest finally warns her not to tell lies in Confession, she only grows more depressed and unable to study: “She would have tried to kill herself if that hadn’t been a surer way than any of going to Hell.” She finally has a nervous breakdown and drops out for a year; but things are a different kind of torture for her when she returns refreshed and studies with a highly respected classics professor, the very silver-bearded image to her of “God the Father speaking out of the clouds” (HF 42). She is honored that he keeps her two hours instead of one, though during the second hour he always dims the lights, serves her sherry and expounds upon extra-curricular “pagan fertility rites, phallus

worship, Dionysian orgies and sacred prostitutes.” She is horrified to discover one day that he has been masturbating behind his desk the whole time, and, when she catches him, he begs her to “[h]ave pity on an old man” whose wife has left and who has been impotent for years. She does pity him, and even finds with herself “a strong impulse to sacrifice herself, to become a sacred prostitute, to heal his broken sex. It would be a sin, technically; but also, she thought, a corporal work of mercy” (HF 43).

Before she can act on her impulse, the professor transfers her to another tutor, and promises to deny everything if she makes a complaint, adding the cruel words, “my conscience is clear. No genuinely innocent girl would have sat there all these weeks listening to what I told you without a flicker of protest” (HF 43). The cad of a professor plays perfectly upon Violet’s weaknesses as a convent-educated Catholic girl—he “revived and confirmed her old feelings of guilt”—and here the narrator confirms that she was indeed molested as a child, not once but twice (HF 43). She blames herself, since, after all, “she had derived a certain thrill from the Professor’s stories of pagan filthiness,” and determines to drop out for good, only to be dissuaded from doing so by a much younger non-believing tutor, Robin, who eventually courts her himself under a veil of secrecy.

Whereas a love relationship and traditional marriage might be good for Violet to help her conquer some of the troubles inflicted upon her, just when she thinks he is about to propose, she finds out what Robin wants is “to see how we suit each other physically first” (HF 43). While many Europeans and Americans (both secular and religious) might consider this a good idea in 1980, and most do in 2006, this would come as a great shock to a Catholic girl in 1955, and she is quick to invoke her religion. Robin, though,

“play[s] cannily on [her] Catholic belief,” asking her, “Wouldn’t it . . . be madness for two people to contract an indissoluble marriage without knowing whether they were sexually compatible?” When Violet pleads “But if they loved each other, wouldn’t it be bound to come right in the end?” he speaks the ominous and clinical-sounding but undeniable words: “Unfortunately there are case histories which prove otherwise” (HF 45-46).

The trouble with their early relationship is that Robin does not quite know “how seriously to take Violet’s religious scruples,” and is given an “extra frisson of excitement” by having to overcome them. The narrator provides, in dry, textbook detail, how he does overcome them, how Violet directs him where to touch her clitoris to stimulate her properly, and how this is the only way she achieves orgasm in the four times over their first weekend away that they do have intercourse (HF 47). Afterward, she is “crestfallen” when he demurs on the issue of whether they are compatible, and promises that a second weekend is not in the offing, parroting that she has to be so harsh “because I’m going to Confession at the very first Church we come to and I must have a firm purpose of amendment or it won’t be any good” (HF 47). When she gets pregnant, he makes the mistake of assuming that she will get an abortion, which she considers to be murder. Despite his objections and reservations he marries her (“and in a Catholic church”). It gets worse for them both when Violet has a miscarriage in her fourth month and falls “subsequently into a deep depression” (HF 48).

Violet’s story is not the norm for the group, as the majority, spurred on (or off) by their Catholic religion at least try to wait until they are married to find out if they are truly sexually compatible, whatever the risks to their relationships. Adrian seems to be the

most representative of these. In 1956, he “had a job and was suddenly very impatient to have sexual intercourse after so many years of continence in the interests of holiness and self-advancement” (HF 51), and marries religious education teacher, Dorothy, to whom he has to explain—as patiently as possible—the mechanics of intercourse when she grows hysterical on their wedding night because, as she tells him, “Sex was never mentioned at home, Adie” (HF 52). The act is a “disappointment,” and causes Adrian “a dark wedding night of the soul,” wherein the reader sees exactly how a certain kind of upstanding Catholic soothes himself to sleep at night:

. . . other people, less dutiful, indeed positively mischievous—fornicators, adulterers, unbelievers—prospered and enjoyed themselves. Of course all would get their just deserts in the next world, but he couldn’t help feeling some resentment about the lack of justice in this one. (HF 53)

Lodge shows here that it is not just the good that one does that makes someone like Adrian, whose Catholic *bona fides* are thus far unimpeachable, find solace in his religion; it is the knowledge that all those who sin worse than he does and who are not Catholic by birth or conscience will suffer, and possibly for eternity. That Adrian genuinely feels better about his own failures because his deity will someday make sure the tables will be turned on the non-failures seems mean and small, and it is one of Lodge’s more subtle but distinct criticisms of the way the Church frames the thinking of its adherents.

Edward and Michael both take up with women who convert to Catholicism in order to marry them. While Michael’s Miriam is a more difficult convert, considering Confession to be “humiliating, a violation, a hideous ordeal” (HF 59), Tessa is a nurse who finds “a lot of the doctrine inherently implausible,” but since “it all fitted together, and if Edward believed it, [thinks] who [is] she to quibble?” (HF 55) While a virgin, Tessa had done some heavy petting in the past and is not upset when she and Edward are

accidentally placed in a married couple's room during what they think is a pre-cana weekend during their engagement. She misses the physical contact she had in the past and takes advantage of an out-of-his-depth Edward. Lodge's graphic depictions of sex, restrained in *British Museum*, are given full flow here, though the religious implications (and constant accounting) of such acts cannot be separated from them:

Feeling the pressure of an imminent and unstoppable orgasm, [Edward] was filled with shame and panic at the thought of spilling his seed all over Tessa and the bedclothes. In his perturbation it seem to him that their sin would be less, certainly his own humiliation would be less if they performed the act properly. Desperately he rolled on top of Tessa, and with a fluke thrust at the right place and angle, entered her in a single movement . . . [and in no time] pumped rivers of semen into her willing womb. (HF 57)

Though he had no intention of thus sinning before his wedding day, Edward could not resist further opportunities to have sex with Tessa while they are engaged. Because they follow the Church's prohibition against birth control, she gets pregnant and they have to move up the date of the ceremony—though Tessa “did not for one moment contemplate giving up her white wedding and nuptial mass” (HF 57).

Adrian would certainly consider such a white wedding to be rank hypocrisy, as would Michael, who found “a sensible priest” who assured him masturbation was “a venial sin” and had since “resumed the full practice of his religion” (HF 40), though Michael would understand it better after his café chat with Polly a year before. She has gone to Italy and been “deflowered . . . quite quickly and skillfully” by a married count to whose children she was nanny (HF 38). After seeing the count continue to go to church as normal, she was shocked at Italian hypocrisy but soon decides that “[t]he trouble with English Catholics . . . [is] that they took everything so seriously. They tried to keep all the rules really and truly, not just outwardly,” which sets them up for failure, since, “it

was against human nature, especially where sex was concerned” (HF 39). While Michael agrees with her about the English, he is stunned to be sitting in a café with “sin incarnate,” who would really be in trouble if hit by a bus (the same one that Adam Appleby fears!), since “[s]he knew the rules and the penalties for not keeping them, whatever she might say about the instinctive passion of Italians” (HF 41). But what Michael says to Polly is different. In responding to her remark that it is no wonder English Catholics are so repressed, Michael explains why: “In penal days, Irish priests used to be trained in France, by the Jansenists, so that over-scrupulous, puritanical kind of Catholicism got into their bloodstream—and ours too, because, let’s face it, English Catholicism is largely Irish Catholicism” (HF 40).

When Polly presses Michael about why he wants to get married so young, asking “Don’t you want to have some fun first?,” he immediately demonstrates his subjection to the Jansenist Catholicism that he had just been blithely lamenting: “How can you, if you’re a Catholic, Polly? I mean, you either are or you aren’t. I am. I often wish I wasn’t—life would be more fun, agreed. But I am and there it is.” Michael is at least intellectually honest enough to appreciate that the Church is not what he or Polly or the Italian count decides it is, but what the Pope and bishops decide, and what the clergy tell them. This will not be enough for him as he ages, however. In fact, in 1975, he tells the story of seeing an unmarried Oxford undergraduate couple, in 1968, try to get a hotel room together and not be “in the least embarrassed or disconcerted by the refusal,” which contrasts sharply with how mortified he was in 1958 having to ask the hotel desk on his wedding night to switch Miriam and him to a room with a double bed (HF 62).

Their wedding night, too, was nearly a disaster, as “there seemed to be no way that Michael could get his penis to go in and stay in” (HF 63). Here Lodge’s narrator reminds us once again (while adding a few new details) of the extreme ignorance and naïveté that leads young adult married Catholics to such frustration and desperation:

Had Miriam grasped Michael’s penis and guided it to its target, there would have been no problem, but it never occurred to her to do so or to him to suggest it. None of our young brides even touched their husbands’ genitals until weeks, months, sometimes years after marriage. All accepted the first nuptial embrace lying on their backs with their arms locked round their spouses necks like drowning swimmers being rescued; while these spouses, supporting themselves on tensed arms, tried to steer their way blind into a channel the contours of which they had never previously explored by touch or sight. No wonder most of them found the act both difficult and disappointing. (HF 63)

Fortunately for Michael, his dark wedding night, “suffused with a Greeneian gloom, ‘the loyalty we all feel to unhappiness, the sense that this is all where we really belong’” is lightened enormously by the inspiration to try applying Vaseline to Miriam’s “nether lips,” something he plans to recommend to all his married friends for their wedding nights.

The last of the first wave of nuptials is Dennis and Angela’s, and though Angela delays for a long time, not wanting to give up her freedom, fearing her mother’s “lifetime of drudgery and father’s “lifetime of worry,” and even trying “to provoke him into breaking their engagement” to no avail (HF 64-65). Father Brierly performs the ceremony and Angela’s brother, Tom, on his way to becoming a priest, assists with one of the readings: “Brethren: let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church” (HF 67). Ruth, whose mother cried aloud through her investiture as a nun while her father had refused to come (HF 35), cannot join the celebration because she is now under the strict control of

the sisterhood as Sister Mary Joseph of the Precious Blood and the “Rule of the Order forbade attendance at weddings” (HF 68).

Polly, who works for the BBC and has not had any marriage proposals at least in part because she “had the reputation of being a bit of a tart” (HF 69), feels mildly envious of her peers who are already married and having babies, and lightly considers that returning to the Church might help her start over. Two glasses of wine are enough to pull her out of her maudlin mood and start her flirting even with Father Brierly, calling herself “The Salome of Cath. Soc” (HF 69). The other remaining single member of the group, Miles, is about to become a Cambridge don, a path he pursued after a Jesuit helped him decide against a clerical vocation when he was considering it in 1952 as a way to sublimate his homosexual inclinations: “after a great deal of throat clearing and tortuously allusive argument he gathered that only guaranteed heterosexuals were eligible for the priesthood” (HF 26). His repressed homosexuality combined with the fervor of the convert—not to mention old-fashioned academic pedantry—makes Miles a particularly supercilious Catholic, which Michael recognizes when the subject of the Church’s teaching on birth control comes up and Miles says, “Oh yes, well, I do sympathize, but on the other hand there is something fine about the Church’s refusal to compromise on that issue, don’t you think? Unlike the Anglicans, poor dears” (HF 70). This inspires Michael to think, “It’s all very well for you,” but he does not argue, since Miles’s position is that of the Church, and Michael is bound to agree with it.

Agree or disagree, like the Applebys, the four couples who marry in the fifties practice the Rhythm Method, with the result that within a decade they have “fourteen children between them, in spite of strenuous efforts not to” (HF 73). So opens Chapter

Three, or “How things began to change.” Lodge reveals himself to be the narrator by commenting on his writing of and the responses to *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (beloved by clergy who found in it “that the sex life they had renounced for a higher good wasn’t really very marvelous after all” and useful in cheering up terminally ill parishioners). In so doing Lodge, in his own authorial voice, reveals that he and the Applebys have seen the light, too:

Healthy agnostics and atheists among my acquaintance, however, found the novel rather sad. All that self-denial and sacrifice of libido depressed them. I think it would depress me, too, now, if I didn’t know that my principal characters would have made a sensible decision long ago to avail themselves of contraceptives. (HF 74)

But fear of pregnancy and the failure to control the number and timing of their offspring traumatizes couple after couple in *How Far?* until, finally, they drop the Rhythm Method.

Particularly traumatized, one evening, is Edward, now a doctor in family practice, whose scientific experience of the Rhythm Method diminishes his faith in it, and whose head is actually pounded one night into his own hall floor by a wildly distressed father screaming “*Safe! Safe! Safe!*” The man’s sixth child was just born “with some kind of physical malformation which [he] could not even bring himself to describe” (HF 78).

Edward has seen other birth defects in women he has advised about the Safe Period, and noticed in medical literature the hypothesis that more birth defects arise when the egg is fertilized late in the monthly cycle, which “was obviously more likely to occur with couples who were deliberately restricting their intercourse to the post-ovulatory period.”

In fact, when Tessa gets pregnant for the fourth time (and second unintentionally), he fears the worst and quits his position on the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council.

One of the worst of Edward's fears comes true when Dennis and Angela have a Downs' Syndrome baby, something that happened in real life to David Lodge and his wife, Mary, in 1966, a year after the publication of *British Museum*. In a 1984 interview with John Haffenden, Lodge brings up the "causal connection" between the "so-called 'rhythm method'" and such "congenital problem[s],"<sup>38</sup> but what he wants to do in the novel is explore how people use religion to help them deal with tragedy; therefore, he inflicts another tragedy on Dennis and Angela—the death of their four-year-old daughter, struck down by a truck in the street outside their home. Lodge's stated intention here is to break new ground for himself as an author: "Whereas my previous novels had been either serious and rather drab or comic and exuberant, *How Far Can You Go?* would somehow be both" Writing fiction, he says, allowed him to go beyond his own experience. By 1980, he had long since come to terms with having a mentally handicapped child, but, by the novelistic killing off of young Anne, he is able to look at what happens when a person, in this case Dennis, decides to give up.

Lodge the narrator (and the parent who has been through the experience already) explains that prior to the birth of Dennis's daughter, Nicole, with Downs', Dennis's upbringing caused him to think that his god was "rewarding him for working hard and obeying the rules of the Catholic Church" (HF 146), and that his "simple confidence" was "rudely upset" by having an abnormal child. Dennis wonders: "Why me?" which, Lodge notes, "is probably everyone's first thought on misfortune, but those with a religious world-view are especially prone" (HF 146). Just when he had developed some equanimity over Nicole, Anne is killed, and he loses the idea of "a personal god with an interest in his . . . personal fortune" (HF 148). And although he and Angela continue to

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<sup>38</sup> John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985) 153–154.

have sex, Dennis eventually reaches the point where he reflects how “unthinkable” it would have been to him as a young man “that he would one day be free to possess Angela and would be wondering whether to bother” (HF 200).

Dennis is not the only one whose interest in sex with his partner has waned; in fact, “[i]t was much the same for most of the other couples” (HF 151). They would not have expected this dulling of desire when they vented their anger at the 1968 reaffirmation of the Church’s prohibition on artificial contraception in Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* by deciding to disobey it; led by Adrian, they even found Catholics for an Open Church (with the amusing acronym COC) “to fight HV and help priests who [including Father Austin Brierly] are in trouble over it” (HF 121). At a COC meeting in 1969, they reflect on why they put up with such family planning torture for so long, attributing it to “conditioning” (Adrian), “guilt” (Dorothy), or even “innocence” (Edward), before finally agreeing with Michael: “It was fear, the fear of Hell” (HF 79). What COC really attempts is to work to advance liberal ideas within the Church—they are a more modern and vocal version of Adam Appleby’s Dollinger Society. Many COC members do not think that they should stop being Catholics just because they disagree with the Pope and bishops on points they do not feel should matter to God. Miriam goes even further, telling the group: “Where you went wrong was in supposing that the Church belonged to the Pope or the priests instead of to the People of God” (HF 80).

“How they lost the fear of Hell” is the title of the fourth chapter of *How Far Can You Go?* The date Lodge the narrator pinpoints for when it is lost is the release of *Humanae Vitae*, the angry uproar against which “astonished and dismayed” the Pope, who, in not making the encyclical *ex cathedra*, i.e. “infallible [according to the doctrine

first promulgated in 1870] . . . left open the theoretical possibility, however narrowly defined, of conscientious dissent from its conclusions, and of some future reconsideration of the issue” (HF 114–115). Lodge points out the absurdity that:

. . . the first important test of unity of the Catholic Church after Vatican II . . . was a great debate about—not, say, the nature of Christ and the meaning of his teaching in the light of modern knowledge—but about the precise conditions under which a man was permitted to introduce his penis and ejaculate his semen into the vagina of his lawfully wedded wife, a question on which Jesus Christ himself had left no recorded opinion. (HF 115)

In the few pages following the above statement, Lodge traces the practical theological implications of the above, pointing out that once the Church agreed sex could be “a Good Thing in Itself,” it grew increasingly “difficult to set limits, other than the general humanistic rule that nobody should be hurt, on how it should be enjoyed” (HF 116). It is this general humanistic rule, coinciding with Christ’s invocation to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” that Lodge’s novels demonstrate he strongly believes, though he is noted for saying “I don’t take up strongly defined positions. I am by nature a kind of compromiser, I suppose, looking to reconcile apparently opposed positions.”<sup>39</sup>

The positions Lodge seeks to reconcile in *How Far Can You Go?* are the liberal and the conservative, the hedonist and the ascetic, and he uses the essential topic of family planning to do so:

The crisis in the Church over birth control was not, therefore, the absurd diversion from more important matters that it first appeared to many observers, for it compelled thoughtful Catholics to re-examine and redefine their views on fundamental issues [including homosexuality and women priests]: the relationship between authority and conscience, between the religious and lay vocations, between flesh and spirit. (HF 120)

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<sup>39</sup> Haffenden 157.

It is after the fear of Hell disappears that most of the characters can finally deal with their sexual relationships as adults—indeed, the deck is cleared for them to enjoy the “sexual happiness without fear” that Adam Appleby (and they, in their younger days) could only dream about with wistfulness and consternation. Despite this glorious new freedom of conscience, most of them are surprised, like Dennis, to discover that the sexual spark they once shared with their partner is fading: They are almost turning forty, and begin to wonder, “had they [started] too late?” (HF 151).

Michael, an English teacher who takes a job at a more liberal Catholic school when the one where he had been working disapproved of his membership in COC, “was the least willing of all our male characters to admit that sex might just become a comfortable habit.” What he wants is “every act to burn with a lyric intensity” (HF 152). He becomes an “addict of sex instruction films” and introduces Miriam to them in the hope that she will want to try a few new things. She does for a while, but when he wants her to try more than she is willing, it is “not long before they had to settle between them the old question of how far you could go” (HF 152–153). Eventually, they have a huge fight (about Miriam’s right to work, not about sex) that leaves Michael reflecting worriedly on his marriage:

Miriam was a puritan, an ascetic, self-denial was no hardship for her, it was the only way she could be happy, whereas more and more he felt himself to be an epicurean. But it was not clear to him whether they had both changed since they had married, or, brainwashed by the cult of matrimony in their youth, had tacitly conspired to conceal and ignore their real identities. There were times when Miriam seemed like an utter stranger, and their married life like a dream from which he was just beginning to waken. But to what? (HF 201)

“To what” does not include divorce or infidelity for Michael, and though he has a temporary, libido-destroying bout with mortality that turns out to be just colitis,

ultimately he bounces back and pressures Miriam one last time when they visit the long-since-lapsed-from-the-Church Polly and her voracious husband, Jeremy, for an evening that turns out like neither expects.

Polly's Jeremy is a television producer who falls in love with Polly before divorcing his first wife. He brings home sex manuals and magazines with descriptions of activities that he and Polly try out "conscientiously," since she is a fervent believer "in every woman's right to frequent orgasms" (HF 100). Although Polly is happy to have Jeremy lick jam or chocolate syrup from her nipples, she is not interested, later on, in accepting an invitation they receive to a swingers' party. When he explains sincerely that things are great between them, but that he wants more variety in partners and does not want to do it behind her back, he adds that it's "nothing personal," just "the nature of the beast." She replies, "Beast is the word," and feels "a cold dread at her heart. Was it possible that the flame of sex could be kept burning only by the breaking of more taboos?" (HF 157) Lodge here is showing the widening diversity of opinions about sex. He is not demonizing Jeremy, and neither is Polly. She is mature and experienced enough to know that she has broken all the taboos that she needs or wants to break. When she asks Jeremy where it all ends, he says it ends with old age, impotence and death, but that he does not "intend to give in until [he] absolutely [has] to" (HF 157).

When Michael and Miriam visit, Jeremy intends to seduce them for as long as he possibly can, suggesting they watch the movie *Deep Throat*, which Polly criticizes as "crudely disgusting," and Miriam tells Michael in private that she will absolutely not watch, among other reasons, because it's "sinful" (HF 214). She also chides him for his use of the word 'fuck' (HF 216). While many positive changes in the Church and its

people happen with breathtaking speed in the 1960s, Lodge seems to say, not everyone is ready to discard everything they were taught, nor is it necessarily right or good that they should. As the four of them prepare to move into the sauna, the invitation to which Miriam accepts guardedly (and only if they wear towels), Jeremy is open about wanting to make a hedonist of Miriam. When Michael tells him good luck, Polly reminds him how shocked he was during their chat about her sexual escapades in Italy; “The world has changed,” he responds, “and I’ve been trying to catch up. But Miriam won’t let me” (HF 216). Miriam does let him romp naked in the snow with Jeremy and Polly after their sauna (and after he begs her “just this once” to let him enjoy “*la dolce vita*” (HF 217)); she even struggles against herself as to whether to join them, but Michael’s excitement, combined with too much wine and the shock of switching between such hot and cold environments (a metaphor for the Church, it is certainly possible) causes him to faint, and renders him far less adventurous in the future.

What also calms Michael’s profligate impulses, besides the fact that he enjoys his family life, is seeing the damage done when Dennis leaves Angela after his secretary falls in love with him and he and Angela have a fight in which he tells her she never showed any “gratitude” for the way he’d “worshipped [her] with his body,” and she tells him that she “hadn’t got anything out of [their] sex life for years”(HF 222). When Angela tells these things to Miriam, Miriam thinks, “how strange it was, and slightly shameful, that the news should make her feel fonder of Michael” (HF 223). Lodge uses the opportunity of Dennis’s affair to expose the centuries-old exceptionalism felt by most Catholics (and, he would not deny, most followers of other religions which claim, in their own way, to be the “one, true” religion):

‘We are not immune,’ Miriam declared solemnly, and when Michael asked her what she was on about, merely repeated, ‘We are not immune.’ By ‘we’ she meant their circle, their peer group of enlightened, educated Christians; and by ‘not immune’ she meant that there was no magic protection, in their values and beliefs, against failure in personal relationships. (HF 224)

Michael meets with Dennis, and looks on him with “a kind of admiration mingled with self-doubt,” for it was *he* who should have been having the affair, Michael thinks. *He* “ought to have been defying bourgeois morality, and yet he knew that he never would, he never would have the courage, or the wickedness, or indeed the provocation” (HF 225) since Miriam so recently became a much happier person to be around after beginning training courses to become a social worker. She is able to go farther in society than women in the past, and this feeling of independence no doubt improves their (monogamous) sex life.

Still, after a few beers, Michael has to wonder if he really has gone as far as he can: “He had been content with his bargain until he saw Dennis in the corner of the pub holding Lynn’s hand, a man who had torn up his contract and tossed the pieces in the face of the world.” Lodge seems to imply that both that the general sustenance of marriage is more important to Michael than his lifetime orgasm tally, but that Michael will continue to feel unsettled from time to time, but that it will only trouble him at rare, philosophical moments triggered by alcohol. Dennis, meanwhile, has gone far enough; he finds himself “profoundly miserable” within two weeks. The pleasure of the sex does not outweigh the disapproval of society and the guilt at having deserted his wife and children. Father Brierly mediates their reconciliation, and both Dennis and Angela are soon “hugely relieved” to be back together” (HF 226).

The men, it is important to note, are not the only ones who want more from their sex lives, though their yearnings get the most attention: Tessa and Edward are limited by his bad back, and she sublimates her desires by joining a health club (after living for a while “in a constant fever of vague sexual longing to which she dared not give definition” (HF 153)). Getting in shape, however, “only fuelled the fires of her libido” which could not be quenched by her tired and chronically in pain husband: “Tessa, in short, was classically ripe for having an affair,” writes Lodge the narrator, “and in another milieu, or novel, might well have had one” (HF 154). Instead she pursues other activities, even going on a retreat with a writers’ group that is highlighted by her dousing a naked young man with hot coffee when he presumes to wait for her in her room, and by a man trying to seduce her, a night after he implies that he’s homosexual, by telling her “I have a feeling you could cure me” (HF 182).

Tessa pays a visit to Violet’s house while she is away, where Robin (from whom Violet had been separated but has since reunited with) tells her that Violet is in a mental hospital. Violet’s reasons are plenty, including suffering through several miscarriages (“which she regarded as a Divine judgement on them for previously using contraceptives” (HF 101)) and the torture of telling an older male psychiatrist about her experience with the Professor only to have the psychiatrist make a pass at her and then say, “If you make a complaint, I shall deny everything, of course” (HF 139). Lodge also has Miles see a psychiatrist for falling into a depression over being a homosexual. The doctor gives him the classic two-faced argument: “Speaking as a doctor, my advice would be: find yourself a partner. Speaking as a Catholic, I can only say: carry your cross” (HF 138). Eventually, Miles gives up, comes out of the closet, has a happy

relationship with an ex-monk and, since the Catholic Church turns too liberal for him, returns to Anglicanism. Violet's religion changes, too. Desperately, she turns to the Jehovah's Witnesses, and when the world doesn't end on their schedule, to Sufism. But the day Tessa meets Robin, he explains Violet's problem in Lodge's terms: "Personally, I blame her religious upbringing." When Tessa tells him she's a convert, he says, "Ah, well, that's different. It's the conditioning in childhood that does the damage" (HF 185).

By choosing to follow the lives of so many different characters, Lodge can, and does, effectively portray a wide range of all the possible responses English children of the 1940s and 1950s had toward the changes in the Church. Some, like Michael and Adrian, are liberated by the changes, though they stay in the Church. For Violet, much abused by the world and still "terrified of going to hell," as Robin explains, "the change has come too late" (HF 186). For Tessa, who the next day discovers Robin chin deep in the thighs of the university student who babysits his and Violet's daughter, the whole world has gone sex-mad. She returns to Edward after a week in which "her body's hunger for sexual adventure" is "quite appeased," leaving her "happy to be returning to her chaste and blameless married life" (HF 188).

The novel's denouement presents the Catholics for an Open Church Paschal Festival, filmed for the BBC by Jeremy, but merely lets sound bites out in answer to the ubiquitous question: "how far can you go . . . without losing something vital?" (HF 143) It is no surprise that Jeremy, like Robin and like the count who deflowered Polly, is also having sex with his *au pair*. Nor is it a surprise when Polly divorces him, not because she is square, but because she is not an Italian countess who feels she has to quietly put up with her boundaries being breached. It is a little surprising that Miriam should say: "I

can imagine circumstances in which I would consider having an abortion” (HF 229), but it is merely poetic and comic that Father Austin Brierly should reconcile Dennis with Angela, after their three-week separation, only to marry and have a child with Dennis’s former mistress.

Brierly is, in fact, one of two priests to leave the ministry in order to marry; the other is Angela’s brother, Tom, whose curt explanation to his sister that he did not have time to fall in love with a woman, “in those days [he] was locked up in a seminary” (HF 166), alludes to the way that many young boys were marked for the priesthood from an early age, sent to the seminary by their parents because it was a good thing to have a priest in the family. What the teenage boy wanted to do with his life was not a question often asked, or if it was, the pressure to make his mother and other relatives proud (not to mention the pressure of wondering whether God would feel spurned, too) had to have been crushing. Tom has no intention to leave the Church, just the priesthood, and tells Angela, when she refers to the vows he took: “I don’t regard them as binding. I was too young and naïve to know what I was doing,” and, “if I could continue to be a priest and a married man, I would” (HF 167). When Angela insinuates that he just wants to have sex, he reacts with anger: “I’m marrying for love, for total commitment to another human being. Have you any idea of the intolerable loneliness of a priest’s life?” She replies that intolerable things can happen in married life, too—here Lodge again shows he appreciates that life can be difficult and challenging for everyone, but that the liberal climate in which miserable priests can be empowered to free themselves and take a step toward happiness is undoubtedly a good thing.

Nothing is ever an *unqualified* good with Lodge, however, but the freedom from fear and the freedom to make informed moral decisions are the bases of his philosophy. To make honest moral choices, one must be free. Lodge also seems to agree with Brierly, who says, “Christ came to start a revolution, but instead became the object of a cult” (HF 231). By choosing to take the liberty of inserting himself in the text as the actual narrator, Lodge does not destroy his narrative or betray the concept of the novel—he expands the latter and enriches both. Similarly, COC does not eradicate the faith of its members by attempting publicly to get the Church to discard stupid, mean, and oppressive practices that they have privately abjured anyway.

We are a long way from the Adam Appleby’s lonely seat in the British Museum, but most of the characters in *How Far Can You Go?* take the question of their religion seriously, as Lodge the liberal Catholic in 1980 certainly does. Lodge also clearly believes that sex in itself is a good thing, but that it has been twisted so much by the Church that most of the fifties’ generation has such a hard time with sex that their religion actually *causes* more suffering than it alleviates; until, at least, they change the rules for themselves. Sex obsesses them so much that Miriam can honestly say to Michael (who, in turn, justifiably blames the Irish Jansenist tradition): “The trouble with you is that all you think about is sex . . . . You can’t imagine people feeling guilty about anything else, can you?” (HF 60) Once they get to have more sex, Lodge shows, they can start to think more about their lives in general. Because of this change, though, it seems that Lodge comes to the same concluding rhetorical question as Polly: if the religion becomes ecumenical and its believers stop claiming that everyone else is going to Hell and only they are saved, then “why be a Catholic at all, rather than something

else, or just nothing?" (HF 235) In the short leap to Lodge's *Small World*, the author, having purged the anger and wry irony from his system (and his soul), will move farther and farther away from that God-fearing religion of his childhood and young manhood.

## Chapter IV

### Catholicism Carnivalized in *Small World*

It is possible to classify the bulk of David Lodge's fiction into two categories: Catholic novels and campus novels. Sex is an important theme in both, but organized religion generally takes a back pew in Lodge's academic fiction. *Small World* is a campus novel, but the campus is the global conference circuit for literary scholars. Only one Catholic character plays an important part in the story; Lodge's use of innocent young poet and scholar Persse McGarrigle, whose surname means "Son of Super-valour" (SW 9), only shows how far both he and society have gone since the early nineteen fifties. Published in 1984 and set in 1979, the book was intended, in part, "to deal in a carnival spirit with the various competing theories of literary criticism which were animating and dividing the profession of letters" (WO 72). Unlike *British Museum*, the traditional conservative comedy, or *How Far Can You Go?*, which "is not a comic novel, exactly, but [which Lodge claims he] tried to make . . . smile as much as possible" (HF 74), *Small World* is a raucous and carnivalesque romp.

Growing philosophically more expansive even as he revels in more explicit depictions of carnality, Lodge seems to be enjoying himself in the process of writing this novel much more than in the two earlier ones under consideration. He is no longer motivated by anger at injustice as he once was, and, while his themes are equally serious, he handles them with a light touch and a broad grin. Life seems better to be lived under the ideals of carnival than the aegis of Catholicism:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its own laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.<sup>40</sup>

It is as if Lodge experienced a liberating catharsis in writing *How Far Can You Go?*, which, in this sense, can be considered a statement of his loss of faith in the specifically Roman Catholic mode of living. But life still holds mysteries that cannot be deconstructed, and Bakhtin's theories are appealing to Lodge because they hold that just because "every decoding is another encoding," as advanced by Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, and Lodge's Morris Zapp, we need not deny "the possibility of communicating meaning in discourse."<sup>41</sup>

Catholic Persse will circle the planet in a romantic quest for love, not on a religious journey for salvation, or a quest for the Holy Grail, that Lodge intentionally parodies; meanwhile, nearly a score of other characters will navigate the literary conference seas: having sex, making enemies, trying (not always successfully) to avoid embarrassing themselves, and, above all, attempting to advance their careers. None will be mere spectators, and all are one way or another on a quest for happiness that Lodge no longer ties down to preparing for Heaven and avoiding Hell. The medieval quest for the Grail provides the structural framework of *Small World*, and the thematic framework is made clear repeatedly by the retired Cambridge don, Miss Sybil Maiden, who early on advances Jesse Weston's argument that the story of the peregrinations of Arthur's knights "was only superficially a Christian legend, and that its true meaning was to be sought in

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<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin 7.

<sup>41</sup> David Lodge, *After Bakhtin* (London: Routledge, 1990) 90. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as AB.

pagan fertility ritual” (SW 12). Persse acknowledges that each person has his or her own version of the Grail that they seek: “For [T. S.] Eliot it was religious faith, but for another it might be fame, or the love of a good woman.” Miss Maiden will not be deterred, and neither will Lodge: “It all comes down to sex in the end . . . . The life force endlessly renewing itself” (SW 12, 36).

Lodge uses the Grail framework because it gives him a “wonderfully gripping narrative” to help him pattern his plot, and allow him to draw parallels between a longstanding tradition of “sexual and spiritual sterility” (pointed out by Eliot in *The Waste Land*) “with the various kinds of frustration and failure that afflict writers and critics in contemporary culture, and with the tension between ambition and desire in the lives of literary intellectuals which the institution of the conference tends to dramatize” (WO 73). *Small World*, he discovered, he could make “not so much an academic novel, as an academic romance” that would draw on “a traditional rather than a contemporary notion of romance as a genre” (WO 73). In doing so, he melds together a tradition of romance, which is “inherently a myth of satisfied desire,”<sup>42</sup> with the modern realistic novel, whose message is “the unattainability of one’s desire.”<sup>43</sup> In the end, Lodge’s minor characters will achieve some satisfaction, but his major ones (Philip Swallow and Persse) will not—true to Lodge’s self-description as one who is most comfortable when “balanc[ing] things against each other.” He likes to employ “binary structures,” not in the Catholic either/or sense, but in a more liberal both/and model.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Haffenden 161.

<sup>43</sup> Haffenden 162.

<sup>44</sup> Haffenden 152.

Persse is fresh out of graduate school with an M.A. in 1979, so he cannot be much older than twenty-two, which would place him with the eldest of the children of the characters from *How Far?* He is from the west of Ireland, however, and the evidence of his innocence and the Jansenist tradition is fierce when he blushes at the definition of a colloquialism for sexual intercourse, “dip his wick” (SW 8). With a somewhat stereotypical Irish temper, he challenges the vulgar Robin Dempsey for referring to the beautiful Angelica Pabst’s breasts as “knockers.” When asked what he would call them, the Romantic poet in him refers to them as the “twin domes of her body’s temple” (SW 8–9). If Adam Appleby or Michael from *How Far?* had thought in such metaphors at Persse’s age, they certainly would not have said so in public. Persse is just as much a virgin and a naïf as they are in their youths, however; when the much more worldly Morris Zapp learns that condoms are prohibited from sale in Ireland and suggests that Persse will be taking advantage of his trip to England to buy some, he replies firmly, “I believe in premarital chastity for both sexes” (SW 34).

It soon turns out that Persse’s religion is not as compelling to him as is his private Grail, in the person of Angelica, with whom he falls in love at first sight. Just hours after meeting her at the novel’s first conference, Persse asks Angelica to marry him. When she says “of course not!” but tries to laugh off his ridiculous request and humor him by asking his reasons, he says it is because he loves her and also does not believe in sex before marriage, thereby admitting that what he really wants to do is have sex with her. When she suggests that she may not believe in premarital chastity, he begs her not to tell him if she has had other lovers. When she hears he is a virgin, she says she understands that “nowadays people usually sleep together before they get married” (SW 40). Persse’s

sexual scruples are immediately revealed as far weaker than Dennis's or Angela's; his proposal also coming just hours after protesting his chastity to Zapp, he replies to Angelica as if she were the one making a proposition: "It's against my principles . . . . But if you promised to marry me eventually, I might stretch a point" (SW 40). It is not really any wonder that she sets up a practical joke on him later in the conference and then eludes him for most of the rest of the book, which is given over to sex, unlikely coincidences, poking fun at competing literary theories, Persse chasing her, and an underlying meditation on the meaning of life in a postmodern world.

There is nothing particularly noble about Persse, or his Catholicism, in the early part of the story, which is partially because his character serves the framing function and partially because Lodge's romance has no true protagonist. He is a caricature, and his form of Catholicism is merely a small part of the carnival that subsumes it in *Small World*. It is not meant to be charming that he proposes to Angelica within hours of meeting her, nor in this world where "a lot of the knights are women" (SW 63) does she find it gallant of him to bristle and growl jealously, "What the blazes do all these old men want with you?," when others pay attention to her (SW 41). In fact, by trying to monopolize Angelica, he obstructs her in her task of finding someone who might give her a job someday. She can only giggle when he starts quoting the Keats poem, "The Eve of St. Agnes," and begs her, "Be my Madeline, and let me be your Porphyro!" "What," she replies, "and miss the rest of the conference?" (SW 40) When he says he can wait a night, it gives her the chance to think up the joke she will play on Persse and her other unwelcome suitor, Robin Dempsey. Thus, Angelica the temptress: "You could hide in my room and watch me go to bed. Then I might dream of you as my future husband."

When he asks, “Suppose you didn’t?” she merely teases, “That’s a risk you’d have to take” (SW 40).

Persse scrambles to find a copy of “The Eve of St. Agnes,” to find out “whether or not sexual intercourse was taking place [t]here” (SW 46); when he decides that it is, and that Angelica has implicitly offered it to him, he finds himself in a dilemma similar to the one Adam Appleby faces before his second visit to Virginia and the house of the Rottingdeans. He must undertake the “distasteful and unromantic” task of procuring condoms (SW 46). Unlike Adam, however, Persse is not already married. Adam could perhaps be forgiven adultery, mortal sin that it is, in a desperate attempt to ensure the health and safety of his family, but Persse’s *object* is the one offering herself to him. Persse will stretch the point more willingly than Adam, but like Adam, Persse does not enter a shop directly, but wavers outside before growing frustrated with his “pusillanimity” (SW 47). The joke on Adam, which is that the priest, Father Finbar Flannegan, joins him in the store and prevents him from attaining his object, is compounded in *Small World* when Persse, dismayed originally by the shop being tended by a teenage girl, mumbles a request in his Irish accent for Durex, a brand of condoms, and is instead given Farex, a brand of baby food. Back in the street, he decides that “the frustration of his design” was “providential, an expression of divine displeasure at his sinful intentions” (SW 48).

When he sees a Catholic church advertising “Confessions at any time,” he chooses the flesh over the spirit, since “he could not *in good faith* promise to break his appointment with Angelica” (italics mine), and begins to fantasize about what it will be like to watch her undress, to see her naked. Then he grows nervous, fearful of failure

when naked with her. So innocent is young Persse, and implicitly, so extremely ignorant are the Irish Catholics of County Mayo kept, that “his knowledge of sexual intercourse [is] entirely literary and rather vague as to the mechanics” (SW 48). Conveniently, and Lodge smiles through his narrator’s voice here, Persse happens across an adult cinema, which appears “[a]s if the devil had planted it there,” and offers “THE EXPLICIT AND UNCENSORED DEPICTION OF SEXUAL ACTS.” Lodge does not stop there; the sign on the cinema continues “REDUCED RATES FOR OLD AGE PENSIONERS,” which is surely lost on Persse as he rushes in, “before his conscience [has] time to react.”

Once Persse is admitted to the dark theater, loud with sounds of “moaning and groaning as of souls in torment” (SW 48), Lodge takes a new step in explicit depictions of sex as virgin Persse obtains the mechanical education he had scarcely imagined:

It took Persse some moments to realize that what he was looking at was a hugely magnified penis going in and out of a hugely magnified vagina. The blood rushed to his face, and to another part of his anatomy . . . it became apparent that the owner of the vagina had another penis in her mouth, and the owner of the first penis had his tongue in another vagina, whose owner in turn had a finger in someone’s anus, whose penis was in *her* vagina; and all were in frantic motion, like the pistons of some infernal machine. Keats it was not. It was a far cry from the violet blending its odour with the rose . . . . The moans and groans rose to a crescendo, the pistons jerked faster and faster, and Persse registered with shame that he had polluted himself. (SW 49)

Perhaps Persse might have sat for a while and collected his thoughts; maybe he would have gone to the bathroom to clean himself up; but when he thinks he sees Angelica on the screen he runs out of the theater “as if from the pit of hell.” The stakes for Persse, however, are so much lower than they were for Adam Appleby, or any of the characters from *How Far?* when they were contemplating or having illicit sex, which makes

Persse's situation more amusing, and more of a caricature of a good young Catholic, even as it displays him as a more modern figure.

Persse does not stop running until he gets to the church across the street, and another priest named Finbar appears in a Lodge novel, this time Father Finbar O'Malley, to hear his confession and offer him absolution, which is only the more comical since the evidence of Persse's sin is undoubtedly still showing through the front of his trousers. Father O'Malley is a less bellicose figure than Adam's Father Flannegan. Rather than prescribe a heavy penance he merely sighs and tells Persse, "This is a terrible sinful city for a young Irish lad like yourself to be cast adrift in," and offers to help send him back to their native Ireland, as he administers the "Our Lady of Knock Fund for Reverse Emigration" (SW 49–50). Lodge's historically echoing implication here is that only by removing God-fearing Catholics from occasions of sin can they truly find peace and be saved. By now, however, Lodge betrays no doubt that even Catholic human beings will act according to their lights, regardless of whether the Church wants to call them sinners.

A sinner is what Persse thinks he is, and Lodge reminds us of the temporary psychological benefit of Confession by allowing Persse a bath and a nap back at the University of Rummidge (where the conference is being held), after which Persse "awoke feeling serene and purified" (SW 50). As part of his penance, of course, he would have had to vow not to pursue the occasion of his recent sin again. No sooner does he compliment Angelica's "heart-stoppingly beautiful" wine-colored dress than she resumes her toying with him by poetic allusion, telling him: "I can't guarantee it will actually rustle to my knees." Persse's "firm purpose of amendment," a phrase that gives Violet and others so much trouble in *How Far?*, is "shattered" on the spot: "He knew that

nothing [not even the fear or love of God, presumably] could prevent him from keeping watch in Angelica's room that evening" (SW 52). Utterly indifferent to Persse's potential sacrifice of his soul (though it is hard to tell whether Persse believes that he'll go straight to hell if hit by the proverbial bus), Angelica has set him up to watch Robin Dempsey disrobe, and has set Dempsey up to be watched by Persse. She has left the conference, for which she was not registered in the first place, and disappeared into the night, leaving Persse bereft and still a virgin.

Few other virgins populate the text of *Small World*, and Persee's story is not as important to Lodge, philosophically, as that of conference host and English department chair at the University of Rummidge, Philip Swallow. Philip is something of a *Doppelgänger* for the author, in that they are both English professors in an English Midlands university (Rummidge corresponds with Lodge's Birmingham), and both have visited America and traveled to many literary conferences. The American visit is the subject of Lodge's 1975 novel, *Changing Places*, where Philip and the American Morris Zapp participate in an exchange program in 1969, taking each other's jobs for an academic year. During that year, Philip commits his first adultery, unbeknownst to him, with the university-age daughter of Morris, and later, very much known to him, has a long affair with Morris's wife, Désirée; Morris, whom Désirée is divorcing for his many infidelities, has his own affair with Philip's wife, Hilary. *Changing Places* ends unresolved: all four principals meet in a New York hotel, and the reader does not know whether the couples will stay intact, divorce and marry the other's spouse, or just plain divorce.

Lodge brings the Swallows and the Zapps back in *Small World*, a decade older and now in their late forties. Morris and the Swallows are reunited when Morris agrees to speak at Philip's conference. The famously philandering Morris has long been divorced by Désirée, who has struck it rich by writing a novel, *Difficult Days*, based on her marriage to him. Over a friendly, non-erotically charged private dinner with Hilary at the Swallows' (while Philip is occupied with hosting duties), Morris derisively describes the subject of the novel as "[m]arriage as one long period pain" (SW 59). He says that he "kind of liked" the way the husband in the book is portrayed as such a "monster" and that an unbelievable number of women propositioned him after reading the book. He theorizes that it was because "they wanted to experience a real male chauvinist pig before the species became extinct" (SW 59). Surprisingly, Morris does not indulge them, as sex no longer gives him the thrill it once did:

I gave up screwing around a long time ago. I came to the conclusion that sex is a sublimation of the work instinct . . . . The nineteenth century had its priorities right. What we really lust for is power, which we achieve by work. When I look around at my colleagues these days, what do I see? They're all screwing their students, or each other, like crazy, marriages are breaking up faster than you can count, and yet nobody seems to be happy. Obviously they would rather be working, but they're ashamed to admit it. (SW 59)

Whether Morris's observations are accurate is debatable, especially since he did not have the power to keep Désirée married to him, as he had wanted. But he echoes Lodge's important point from *How Far Can You Go?* that "screwing around" itself does not lead to happiness, whatever your religion (Morris is Jewish by birth; the Swallows are nominally Anglican<sup>45</sup>).

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<sup>45</sup> Lodge is one-eighth Jewish, which he considers "one possible source of [his] delight in comedy and the absurd" (Haffenden 165).

Instead of actually having sex again and again with different women, as he has relished doing in the past, Morris travels from country to country giving, ironically, the same lecture over and over to different audiences at each conference he attends. “Textuality as Striptease” is its title, and it is a manifesto of a critic who no longer believes “in the possibility of interpretation” (SW 24). He takes a post-structural tack in arguing, “it isn’t possible because of the nature of language itself, in which meaning is being constantly transferred from one signifier to another and [just like Désirée or any other woman, Lodge seems to want us to recognize] can never be absolutely possessed” (SW 25). Morris’s lack of belief in interpretation can be seen as a facet of Lodge’s waning faith in the Catholic Church’s ability to explain the universe, and is also a way for Lodge to examine where meaning (in literature, in life) can really be found if the grand certainties and assumptions of one’s youth are rationally dismantled.

Lodge clearly enjoys showing where Morris’s excitement now lies, which is in titillating and discomfiting his conservative audiences by defining reading as:

“an endless, tantalising leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation [as when a story ends or a mystery is solved], it is solitary, masturbatory . . . . The reader plays with himself as the text plays upon him, pays upon his curiosity, desire, as a striptease dancer plays upon her audience’s curiosity and desire. (SW 26)

Morris goes on to argue that every successive garment a stripper discards, like the text, only “teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed.” The viewer, or reader, wants more: “no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another.” Our curiosity would still not be satisfied when the stripper is naked, or the text is finished, because there is always more to want: “The vagina remains hidden within the girl’s body and even if she were to spread her legs

before us [which today's strippers, in fact, commonly do] it would still not satisfy the curiosity and desire set in motion by stripping" (SW 26–27). Since we can never possess the text, he concludes, "instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing" (SW 27). It is not a leap of faith to point out here that Lodge is drawing a comparison also with theology: instead of striving to possess God, or the meaning of life, we should take heart in the hope, or in the joys and pleasures of the day to day, however grand or small.

Many disagree with the clever thesis of "Textuality as Striptease," Philip among them, who, speaking for one side of Lodge's mind, validly criticizes Morris's stance in holding "a fundamental skepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty about anything, which [Philip] associate[s] with the mischievous influence of Continental theorising" (SW 27). Philip, here, is not far off from Father O'Malley's lament about what happens to honest Catholics when they are subject to sinful or godless environments. Morris and the other side of Lodge's binary-focused brain, however, are saying that the world was not necessarily a better or happier place before the old certainties were dispelled, (Lodge's *British Museum* and *How Far?* offering vivid examples of how life was *not* better), and the intelligent human must evolve to adapt to changed circumstances. As for "what in God's name is the point of it all?," which Philip asks while Morris is still at the podium, Morris can only answer "to uphold the institution of literary studies" (SW 28). In other words, to keep their jobs "just like any other group of workers," so that they can live, love, and prosper as best they can in society.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Morris's response is also evocative of the line in The Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day, our daily bread."

Philip, meanwhile, who never cheated on Hilary before his time at the State University of Euphoria in America, is the victim of the heavy burden of “unsatisfied desire,” and has been indulging what Hilary calls “a weakness for pretty students” (SW 59), who, Morris explains, are drawn to his power as department chair. She shows Morris the evidence of one such indiscretion. Hilary is unhappy because, ten years earlier, when Philip wanted to separate, she gave up the power she had in their relationship by begging him to come home and return to normal: “I was weak. If I’d said, to hell with you, do what you like, I daresay he would have come crawling back with his tail between his legs inside a year. But because I *asked* him to come back, with no conditions, he, well, has me over a barrel” (SW 61–62). The day-to-day is no thrill ride for Hilary, who finds herself going through menopause and gaining weight just when her formerly weak-chinned husband is growing into his good looks and sporting a distinguished beard. “It doesn’t seem quite fair” she laments (SW 62), though she acknowledges that she made her bed ten years earlier, and “must lie in it cold and lumpy as it often seems” (SW 61).

Although she is unhappy, Hilary is somewhat resigned to what she sees as her fate as the consequences of her earlier choices. She has even given up on the possibility of finding another lover at her age and weight (to Morris’s relief, when she tells him she has no intention of bringing him upstairs “for a trip down memory lane”) (SW 61). Philip, however, has been traveling frequently to avoid the coldness and lumpiness of their marriage bed, confessing to Morris: “it’s the only thing that keeps me going these days . . . Changes of scene, changes of faces” (SW 66). When he adds that bringing Hilary along would defeat the purpose of his trips, Morris has the chance to ask *him* what the

point is. Philip's reply is vital to an understanding of where Lodge's philosophy has moved since it has left behind the game of Snakes and Ladders, and also recalls Polly's husband Jeremy from *How Far?*: "What are we all looking for? Happiness? One knows that doesn't last. Distraction, perhaps—distraction from the ugly facts: that there is death, there is disease, there is impotence and senility ahead." Philip wants more than just his daily bread; he saw a more exciting life in warm and sunny Euphoria, and he lived it in his head for a long time after he returned to Rummidge. *His* personal Grail is "Intensity . . . . Intensity of experience is what we're looking for, I think. We know we won't find it at home any more, but there's always the hope that we will find it abroad" (SW 66).

Over whiskey and cigars, Philip tells Morris of his great post-Euphoria encounter with intensity, and in so doing further reveals the existential dilemma through which Lodge seems to be working. On the same night he survived an emergency aircraft landing in Italy, he had a passionate night in the arms of the wife of the man who put him up for the night, and describes it in words so fervent that it can safely be seen as something of a religious experience:

. . . we made love. There was nothing particularly subtle or prolonged about it, but I've never had an orgasm like it, before or since. I felt I was defying death, fucking my way out of the grave. She had to put her hand over my mouth, to stop me from shouting her name aloud: Joy, Joy, Joy. (SW 74)

Philip spent just one ecstatic night with Joy Simpson, and the story ends sadly when he says he found out she had died with her husband and son a year later in, ironically, a plane crash; but that one night, "convinced [Philip] that life was still worth living, that [he] should make the most of what [he] had left" (SW 74).

While Philip chafes at the restraints put on him by marriage, Morris, strangely, tried to marry again after his divorce, but none of the younger women he lived with at various times would marry him, so he “gradually lost interest in the idea” and makes do by working, reading, writing, and occasionally visiting a massage parlor where “a very nice class of girl” takes care of his sexual urges: “When I was a teenager I spent many exhausting hours trying to persuade girls like that to jerk me off in the back seat of my old man’s Chevy. Now it’s as easy as going to the supermarket. It saves a lot of time and nervous energy” (SW 77). When the more romantic Philip protests that there’s no relationship there, Morris, who’s personal Grail is to attain as much power as he can, replies, “Relationships kill sex, haven’t you learned that yet? The longer a relationship goes on, the less sexual excitement there is.”

Philip *has* learned that, but he, of a more traditional mindset, has a harder time accepting it than the postmodern Morris: “Habit ruins everything in the end, doesn’t it?” Philip says, altering slightly his vision of a Grail: “Perhaps *that’s* what we’re all looking for—desire undiluted by habit.” Morris explains the Russian Formalist view on the subject: “Defamiliarization. It was what they thought literature was all about. ‘*Habit devours objects, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war . . . Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life.*’ Viktor Shklovsky” (SW 77). Is Lodge saying that, if not by going away from his wife and home and having romantic and passionate sex with other women, but by writing about a character much like himself who does so, that he is “recovering the sensation of life?” Perhaps, but that’s beside the point. Even though Philip says, “[b]ooks used to satisfy me . . . . But as I get older I find they aren’t enough,” Lodge’s books show enough evidence that he appreciates that people find their intensity

in different ways. The human connection, the “life force endlessly renewing itself” provided by sex, appears to be the best way to find such intensity, even if the day will come when we are too old to enjoy it.

Part I of the novel ends with the chat between Philip and Morris, and Part II introduces the multitude of characters who will be coming together at various European literary conferences, culminating with the MLA convention on an unseasonably warm December day in New York City, where most of the loose ends are romantically, if sometimes supra-plausibly, tied up. The narrator is most concerned with establishing each character’s theoretical angle on literature, the state of their sex lives, and drawing comic parallels between the two. There is an Australian who is trying to write a paper reconciling the “Arnoldian function of identifying the best which has been known and thought and said” (SW 84) with the specter of deconstructionism—all the while fantasizing about a young student (the same one who, while in England, has earlier had sex with Philip and blackmailed him for a grade). There is a wealthy Italian Marxist who tires to seduce Morris into a threesome with her husband; her name, Fulvia Morgana, is evocative of the Arthurian sorceress, Morgan le Fay. There is Arthur Kingfisher—his name and situation an explicit reference to the sterile monarch in the Grail legend—the aged American “doyen of literary theorists,” whose young Korean amanuensis massages his limp penis and soothes “his despair at no longer being able to achieve an erection or an original thought” (SW 93–94), just to name a few. There are also a homosexual French narratologist whose boy-toy is cheating on him with a woman; a mysteriously black-gloved German reader-response theorist; a celibate South African transplant in England; and an American who tries and fails to get his wife to have sex with him on an

airplane so he can be a member of the “Mile High club” (SW 90), to name a few. These characters and others are basically sideshow tents in Lodge’s sex-and-theory carnival; ostensibly each represents one possible way to truth, or pleasure, one claim to the best explanation for literature and life. The important narratives, however, remain Philip’s and Perse’s.

After Morris leaves, Philip and Hilary “copulat[e]” without passion, without speaking, and without looking in each other’s face. It is a sad, animalistic release: he is fantasizing about his night with Joy; she is nostalgically remembering the time she had sex with Morris (SW 95). They both seem, like King Arthur’s questing knights, to be taking draughts from cups of disappointment when they wish they could taste the real happiness of the Grail. A few nights later, when Philip is to leave for Turkey in the morning, Hilary spurns his advances for their customary “valedictory embrace;” he seethes, ponders his hopes of finding “a compensatory amorous adventure in Turkey,” and falls asleep fantasizing about Angelica (SW 166). When he gets to Ankara and sees no prospects of adventure, he remembers the surprising “spasm of desire,” he felt for Hilary when her coat fell open just before he left: “Sex with Hilary wasn’t the greatest erotic sensation in the world, but at least it was something. A temporary release from tension. A little pleasant oblivion” (SW 211). He wonders what he is doing in Turkey after all, if it is “time to call a halt to his travels, abandon the quest for intensity of experience . . . settle for routine and domesticity . . . until it was time to retire, retire from both sex and work? Followed in due course by retirement from life” (SW 212). No sooner has he wondered he really has decided to give up passion for secure habit than he sees Joy Simpson alive.

Joy and her son were not on the plane that crashed and killed her husband, and within minutes Philip tells her he loves her (SW 216). Within hours he is waiting for her to meet him at his train to Istanbul, the depression he had been suffering was gone: “He was again a man at the centre of his own story—and what a story!” (SW 217) He had told her he loved her and he was hoping she loved him too:

He was not, after all, finished, washed up, ready for retirement. He was still capable of a great romance. Intensity had returned to experience. Where it would lead him he did not know, or care. He had a vague premonition of difficulties and pain ahead, to do with Hilary, the children, his career, but pushed them aside. All his mental energy was concentrated on willing Joy to reappear. (SW 217)

She does reappear, and they talk about their earlier night together and make love multiple times on the train. She recalls a happy, but passionless, marriage with her late husband, saying that she “used to read about people making love in novels,” but never felt “so ecstatic, so carried away” like they seemed, and so she gave up on hoping for such intense feeling, until Philip arrived, and she could finally say: “for the first time in my life I knew what it was like to be desired, passionately” (SW 219–20). She takes him to her apartment in Istanbul, where they cannot sleep together because of her kids (one of whom is revealed to be Philip’s daughter) and because, as Lodge the modern realistic novelist has her smilingly tell him: “You can’t have everything you want” (SW 222).

Whereas earlier in the novel Philip is portrayed as a bumbling older man with a hopeless crush on Angelica, Lodge has evolved “from treating him as a farcical victim to making him capable of grand romantic passion.”<sup>47</sup> It seems that Philip has truly found his Grail, and the reader can be forgiven for rooting for him. Nevertheless, Lodge

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<sup>47</sup> Haffenden 165.

decided “that Philip Swallow’s romantic idyll had to collapse, because his wife Hilary could not be casually ditched—not within the comic romantic tradition. It’s an interesting case where genre and psychological reality in a way conflict.”<sup>48</sup> Lodge prepares Philip for his romantic defeat by having Hilary greet him at the airport, fresh from daydreaming about cunnilingus with Joy, to tell him that his latest book, which had gone unreviewed because his publishers never sent it out to the press,<sup>49</sup> drew a rave from the *TLS*. This good news, which might have buoyed him further in immediately telling Hilary of his plan to leave her for Joy, is eclipsed when he learns Hilary’s plan to pull herself up out of the depression she had earlier revealed to Morris: she intends to become a marriage counselor. When Philip registers his unenthusiastic surprise, Lodge twists the knife of dramatic irony by having her say: “I feel I do know something about the subject. I mean, we’ve had our ups and downs, but we’re still together after all these years, aren’t we?” (SW 227).

Instead of telling Hilary right away about Joy, he finds an excuse to fly to Greece, where he tells Joy it would have been “too cruel” to ask for a divorce just when his wife had announced her plans to become a marriage counselor. Instead, he intends to wait until Hilary is well along in her training, thinking “when she feels she’s got a purpose in life, she’ll be quite happy to agree to a divorce,” thereby freeing him to marry Joy (SW 242). He writes Morris, who is hosting a conference in Jerusalem, to ask if he can bring Joy along, explaining, that he is “madly in love,” and that Morris must “know that [his] marriage has been a lost cause for quite some time.” Morris, meanwhile, “will not admit

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<sup>48</sup> Haffenden 166.

<sup>49</sup> This error was comically corrected after boxes of the review copies were knocked over by the force of Philip’s publisher’s orgasm into his secretary (SW 160–161).

to himself that there may be a trace of envy in [his] harsh assessment of Philip's situation"—he thinks Philip is acting like a fool (SW 248–249), and pretends righteous indignation at being pressured to help deceive Hilary: “For a man who claims to believe in the morally improving effects of reading great literature, Philip . . . takes his marriage vows pretty lightly” (SW 249).

If Philip really took his marriage lightly, he may never have returned from Euphoria, even though it is marriage in which he locates his disappointment unto death. Joy gives him one more chance at joy, but he is not up to it. In another one of Lodge's improbable coincidences licensed by the romance genre, Philip and Joy bump into Philip's son, whom Philip had forgotten was working on a nearby kibbutz. Joy is stunned by Philip's embarrassment and pretense that nothing is going on, and when he “seems to go into shock after[ward],” and comes down with a fever, she is “silent and unsympathetic” (SW 303–304). In his interview with Haffenden, Lodge explains: “Philip is rather punished when his erotic adventure is punctured, because he has been untruthful and hasn't got the gumption to admit it,” and “The dissolution of that romantic relationship is a down-beat part of the novel.”<sup>50</sup> *The* down-beat part of the novel, when one considers Morris Zapp's explanation of how Philip asked Joy to call Hilary to come rescue him: “Philip decided he was getting to the age when he needed a mother more than a mistress” (SW 316).

Philip's own pathetic reason is found on the novel's penultimate page: “Basically I failed in the role of romantic hero. I thought I wasn't too old for it, but I was. My nerve failed me at a crucial moment” (SW 336). The fact that he “wasn't equal to the woman

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<sup>50</sup> Haffenden 166.

in the case” shows less the folly of a man attempting to live a life of passionate intensity than it does the necessity of Lodge’s stated comic romantic purpose, which Lodge admits conflicts with psychological reality. It is not that it is implausible that Philip should accept defeat and go back to his wife/mother figure (much of the pleasure of *Small World* lies in admiring its barely plausible romantic contrivances), and nor should his return to Hilary be seen as Lodge cheerleading for traditional marriage, as some critics maintain, since by choosing to write a comic romance, he is compelled to be faithful to the genre by tying up many loose knots with wedding bonds. Philip’s return to Hilary, moreover, is not the face-saving and peace-of-mind-restoring move of Dennis going back to Angela in *How Far?* because he appreciates the valuable and enduring bonds of his own marriage. Dennis, though an adulterer, can be seen as noble because he takes only three weeks to decide that what he really wants is to love his wife and to take care of his family; Philip is pathetic because he goes back to his wife so that she can take care of him.

One of the few notable characters not ending up married or engaged at the end of *Small World* is the one who most wants to be, the one who sees sex leading to marriage as his own Grail: Persse McGarrigle. He is not put off by the trick Angelica plays on him and Dempsey, but finds his way to Heathrow Airport’s St. George’s Chapel to say a prayer “in some consecrated place before entrusting himself to the air” (SW 123). Helping him find his way to the chapel is British Airways check-in attendant, Cheryl Summerbee, whom Persse does not realize is just the kind of “girl of old-fashioned moral principle, who intended to go to the altar a virgin” (SW 115) that he should be pursuing. Instead, he asks his deity, via noticeboard petition: “*Dear God, let me find Angelica*” (SW 125), and no doubt thinks that his prayer has been partially answered when he

returns to Limerick to discover that he has won a £1000 prize for his poetry. He decides to spend it on flying wherever he thinks Angelica might be, but before he can cash the check, after picking it up at a reception in London, he sees her picture outside the door of a strip club called *Club Exotica* in Soho, “naked, swathed in chains, with her arms behind her back.” He does not know that the Lily Papps pictured in the photo is the twin sister of the object of his infatuation, the peripatetic A. L. Pabst, and he discovers that she has left the club weeks before, but he is determined “to rescue her from the sordid life to which poverty has condemned her” (SW 189); after all, Persse thinks, stripping for money is “not an irredeemable degradation” (SW 190).

What is irredeemable, as far as he is concerned, is the idea that Angelica would be a prostitute. He gets this idea in his head while in Amsterdam, looking for Angelica’s adoptive father. A day after a chat with Morris Zapp, who tells him that “[i]nformation is the religion of the modern world” and a chance encounter with Miss Sybil Maiden, who reminds him that [o]ne should never dismiss what one does not understand”(SW 196), the romantic young Catholic sees Lily in a window of the Red Light District. Saying “’Tis pity she’s a whore” (SW 202), Persse finds out later that Lily was only babysitting for the actual prostitute, which makes him chide himself that he ever believed Angelica could be a whore:

His shame at having entertained such an idea, however plausible the circumstantial evidence, made him readier to accept the fact that she performed in nude reviews. He couldn’t approve of it, he hoped to persuade her to give it up, but it didn’t fundamentally affect his feelings for her. (SW 204)

Any Catholic in Lodge’s previous novels would have stopped at the first evidence of his beloved dancing naked onstage, but Lodge has caricatured his only prominent Catholic

character, and for all his naïveté, and function as a throwback to earlier days, Persse is less parochial than the Applebys or the *How Far?* coterie. His equanimity is shattered, however, when his eye is drawn by the carnivalesque signs outside a live sex show, promising “THE REAL FUCKY FUCKY,” and picturing “Angelica [really Lily], naked, kneeling . . . being mounted from behind by a hairy young man, also naked, and grinning” (SW 204). In shock, Persse drinks himself to sleep that night, “like any other disillusioned lover,” before flying back to Heathrow with “his life laid waste, his occupation gone” (SW 205).

Persse finds his petition that God let him find Angelica outside the airport chapel and replaces it with: “*Dear God, let me forget Angelica. Lead her from the life that degrades her*” (SW 205). Lodge has a bit of fun with superstitious Catholics by making the plane on Persse’s way back to Ireland require an emergency landing. The flight attendants’ request for a priest to lead everyone in an Act of Contrition is met with silence: “Wouldn’t you know it, just when you need a priest, there isn’t one. Not even a nun” (SW 207). The chief stewardess, Moira, asked to lead the prayer herself, reveals that she has forgotten it, having not been to confession since she started taking birth control pills, and presses her subordinate, Brigid, into service; but Brigid has forgotten the Act of Contrition too, and in her panic says the grace before meals: “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful” (SW 207). Persse laughs himself out of his depression while they land safely, and decides on the spot to hole himself up in a cottage in Connemara and write poetry for the summer.

He does not forget Angelica, and returns at the end of the summer to the Heathrow chapel to find his most recent petition annotated: Angelica has written

“*Appearances can be misleading*” (SW 256) and included a citation from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, a copy of which she has left with Cheryl Summerbee. When Cheryl gives him the book, he reads the passage describing two maidens, one shy, the other displaying aloft “*her two lily paps*,” he realizes that Angelica is the virtuous one of two twins, and kisses Cheryl to thank her, blind to Cheryl’s feeling for him, expressed with a single tear on her cheek. His pursuit of Angelica will take him to Switzerland, where he checks into her hotel room after just missing her, and pays the concierge not to clean the room. There, he swallows “the dregs of water at the bottom of a glass tumbler [a sort of pedestrian Grail substitute used by Angelica] as reverently as if it were communion wine,” and sleeping “naked between sheets that were still creased and wrinkled from contact with Angelica’s lovely limbs” (SW 268). His journey will take him to Los Angeles, Honolulu, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Aden, and Jerusalem, finally finding Angelica giving a lecture at the MLA conference in New York.

While Lodge has departed in many ways from the Church as a source of meaning, he is in *Small World* concerned more directly with literary theory as a source of meaning, which is troubling since some famous literary theorists argue that there is no objective meaning, not even any objective facts. Whereas in the earlier novels Lodge wanted to dismantle many of the Church’s claims to authority, he definitely wants to do the same to specious theorists who similarly take the wonder and mystery out of literature and life, even as they have lots of sex, most of them. But since he is an academic critic in his own right, Lodge is firmly of the belief that he cannot “satirize in a destructive way” an institution to which he belongs:

I think I can stand back from the academic profession enough to see its absurd and ridiculous aspects, but I don’t think it’s really wicked or

mischievous. That's probably why the overall impression of *Small World* is genial: fun-poking rather than denunciation."<sup>51</sup>

This effect of this description of Lodge's intentions matches him perfectly with Bakhtin's notion of festive carnival laughter:

The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.<sup>52</sup>

Before he allows Persse to visit Angelica's lecture, Lodge—whose choice of subject matter and way of discussing it proves him to be a humble man of the people—has him ask a question that stumps the various eminent critics at the main MLA panel (Marxist, deconstructionist, reader-response, post-structuralist, and Philip Swallow as old-style humanist-moralist).

They are all jockeying for what has become their own personal Grail, a UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism, that is "purely conceptual" in that it comes with a high salary, limited responsibilities, and can be occupied wherever the successful candidate wished to reside" (SW 120); but they cannot answer Persse when he asks, "What follows if everybody agrees with [any one of] you?" (SW 319) The asking of this question "roused Arthur Kingfisher from his long lethargy," making him take the chair himself, allowing him to once again achieve an erection, and impelling him, now that he can "get it up" to ask Song-Mi Lee to marry him, since Persse has made him see "that what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference . . . . To win is to lose the game" (SW

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<sup>51</sup> Haffenden 161.

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin 12.

319). Literature is truly no substitute for life, however many academics blur the line between the two from time to time.

Persse wins and loses his own game when he hears Angelica's lecture, with which Lodge has particular prurient fun. Angelica refers to Derrida's term "invagination" and Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* (being "all foreplay") to prepare her explanation of the differences among genres:

Epic and tragedy move inexorably to what we call, and by no accident, a 'climax'—and it is, in terms of the sexual metaphor, an essentially *male* climax—a single, explosive discharge of accumulated tension.

Romance, in contrast, has not one climax but many, the pleasure of the text comes and comes again. No sooner is one crisis in the fortunes of the hero averted that a new one presents itself . . . . The narrative questions open and close, like the contractions of the vaginal muscles in intercourse, and this process is in principle endless. The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished—they end only with the author's exhaustion, as a woman's capacity for orgasm is limited only by her physical stamina. Romance is a multiple orgasm. (SW 322–323)

Persse, definitely of the epic-phallic camp, considers Angelica's lecture to be one long "stream of filth," and listens to it with cheeks burning and the surprise that no one else in the audience should be as disturbed as he. But nothing (except another disappearance by Angelica before the end of the lecture) can keep him from kissing her intensely when he finds her an hour later, proclaiming his love and lust. Only it is Lily that he kisses, though the reader cannot be sure at that point.

He thinks it is Angelica whose thighs he parts, "like the leaves of a book" (SW 325), and reminding us of a line from Morris's opening lecture about "[s]taring into that orifice we find that we have somehow overshot the goal of our quest" (SW 27), Lodge has Persse stare "in the crack, the crevice, the deep romantic chasm that was the ultimate goal of his quest" (SW 325). His first orgasm comes "as soon as he [is] invaginated . . .

tumultuously,” but “Angelica” is not done with him, encouraging him twice more over the next hours, “and in two quite different attitudes,” before she “impaled herself upon him [“when he was only a dry, straining erection, with no seed to expel” or thought of sin on his mind, apparently] and came again and again and again” (SW 325). He insists that she will have to marry him now, only to find out that Angelica is in fact Lily, and that he was “in love with a dream” (SW 326), as Lily tells him, before revealing that Angelica is engaged to another.

Dazed and confused, Persse wanders to Morris’s hotel room and asks to take a shower, for he has no room of his own. Through Morris, who has survived the harrowing ordeal of being kidnapped, Lodge reveals his own growing agnosticism: Morris has discarded his faith in deconstruction, because “the deferral of meaning isn’t infinite as far as the individual is concerned,” and “death is the one concept you can’t deconstruct” (SW 328); neither of these ideas would find favor with any of the Father Finbar’s scattered across Lodge novels. Morris has taken up with Thelma Ringbaum, whose Mile High Club-fixated husband is “stuck in Illinois because he’s been barred for life by the airlines for soliciting sex in flight from a hostess” (SW 329). Not that anything anyone else could be doing at this point could disturb this Persse newly relieved of both his virginity and his romantic illusions about Angelica, but Morris speaks to the Persse he thinks he knows (and, in truth, used to know) when he says: “in case your Irish Catholic conscience is shocked by the set-up here, I should tell you that Thelma and I are thinking of getting married” (SW 329). Persse is not shocked, but his Irish Catholic conscience, in another conflict between psychological reality and genre, is restored by implication when he

realizes that Cheryl Summerbee loves him. Cheryl becomes “endowed, to his mind’s eye, with an aura of infinite desirability” (SW 332).

While Philip Swallow goes back to Hilary with his head hung low, Persse finds out Cheryl has lost her job and chosen to travel. Perhaps he will find her, chastely marry her, and have a bunch of Catholic children; but it is doubtful that that marriage could be exactly like the Applebys or any of the Catholic characters from *How Far Can You Go?* Perhaps he finds another on the journey, having multiple (literal or literary) orgasms along the way. In Persse, Lodge shows that Catholics are mostly like everyone else; maybe they have a few strange, inhibiting quirks, but generally they are assimilated into the world of the carnival, a liberal and welcoming place, rather than the religion marked by Jansenist notions of the exclusiveness of God’s mercy. Lodge, meanwhile, simultaneously buoyed and unfettered by the writing of this powerful carnival of sexual self-expression and search for meaning in a world without Hell, or perhaps even God, moves, often salaciously, into the future. Catholicism has effectively been laughed out of existence; the subject of Lodge’s *Thinks . . .* will be what remains.

## Chapter V

### *Discordia Concors: Moving Toward a Synthesis in Thinks . . .*

*Thinks . . .*, Lodge's eleventh novel, and first of the twenty-first century, returns us to a single campus—the imaginary University of Gloucester in the Cotswolds, since Lodge has decided on a more bucolic setting than that offered by the industrial city of Rummidge in his earlier campus novels. In it, he returns to his established binary custom of following two primary characters who offer contrasting world views and provide fertile territory for his dialogic explorations. Ralph Messenger is “Professor and Director of the prestigious Holt Belling Centre for Cognitive Science,” and Helen Reed is “one of England's finest contemporary novelists.”<sup>53</sup> He is a powerful campus figure, frequently asked to speak about science on television; he is also a well known philanderer. She is recently widowed and takes a leave-replacement teaching position in creative writing to help her get through her bereavement. Ralph is an avowed atheist whose ambition is to leave a lasting contribution to science before he dies, and Helen is what Adam Appleby would have called—quaintly, from the perspective of 1997, when the novel is set—a “lapsed Catholic.” The story of Ralph and Helen's affair is different from earlier Lodge depictions of marital infidelity in that it airs out in detail the ethical implications of such affairs in a post-Catholic world, showing Lodge still to believe in the possibility of meaning, even if it no longer comes from the religion of his youth.

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<sup>53</sup> David Lodge, *Thinks . . .* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 24, 250. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as TH.

Ralph is successful and, unlike the also famous and sometimes megalomaniacal Morris Zapp, he is not obsessed with more and more power, since he believes he is doing ground-breaking work for humanity. He would scoff in agreement at Morris's ultimate rationalization that theory exists to keep literature professors in tweeds and travel stipends. His work, however, is to explain the structure of consciousness. Unlike Philip Swallow, he has always been personally charismatic. Though Ralph and Philip both have extramarital affairs, Ralph is confident in a "tacit agreement" that his American wife, Carrie, "wouldn't kick up a fuss as long as she never knew about it" (TH 3). Ralph is still attracted to Carrie, at least more than Philip is to Hilary. For Philip, the lack of attraction to and response from Hilary is a source of existential despair, but Ralph simply shrugs at the fact that Carrie no longer indulges his fantasies; he has nary an ethical qualm about taking whatever he can get wherever he can get it, as long as it does not "embarrass [Carrie] on her own territory" (TH 25). It matters that Ralph's economic situation is considerably more comfortable than Philip's, too, though it is Carrie's inheritance that sets them up in style and keeps her from the same type of depression that afflicts Hilary. Until the loss of Joy extinguishes his hopefulness, Philip is looking for human contact and intense feeling; Ralph likes a bit of danger and to satisfy his lust when it arises.

Lodge alternately employs transcriptions of the voice recordings of Ralph with the diaries of Helen, interspersing a third-person narrator from time to time, and includes e-mails, as well. The tape of Ralph's thought experiment takes little time to get to the contemporary man's lament about the waning of two great pleasures after the advent of mad cow disease and AIDS—"prime beef and wild pussy" are now "possible causes of a

horrible death” (TH 3). Ralph would disdain clergymen or anyone else who claim that either widespread infection represents the wrath of a supernatural force. But he does not stop to think of that on the rainy Sunday morning, since talking into a tape recorder reminds him of the time he taped a one-night stand (now dead from breast cancer), who was particularly vocal during her orgasms: “I’d like to listen to it again and masturbate in memory of Isabel Hotchkiss” (TH 5). Ralph is refreshingly unencumbered by the taboos so common to Catholics and literary scholars often found in Lodge novels.

Helen has not had an orgasm in the year since her husband, Martin, died, nor has she been able to write new fiction due to her mourning. Her son and daughter are in university, and her early journal entries show her as still sad, still lonely, and looking to feel connected while sitting in her small visiting faculty apartment. After watching the movie, *Ghost*, which features a widow who communicates with her dead husband through a female medium, Helen does masturbate (for the first time in over twenty years) in memory of the dead, “imagining that Martin’s ghost hand had inhabited mine and that he was making love to me” (TH 21). The faint whiff of necrophilia, both in Ralph’s offhand comment about Isabel Hotchkiss, and Helen’s deeply felt remembrance of her husband, represents a new departure for Lodge, in how far he will go into human sexual fantasies. While, typically, he does not judge Ralph and Helen, his earlier Catholic characters would have considered their masturbatory daydreams unspeakable. Helen, meanwhile, wakes up in the middle of the night, “depressed, as usual, but not ashamed. In a curious way it was a cathartic experience” (TH 21).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Neither Ralph nor Helen wants to have sex with the dead, of course, but that Lodge can write about this forty years after women’s undergarments were still referred to as “unmentionables” shows a certain social and linguistic progression from the days of the *How Far?* communicants.

It wouldn't occur to Ralph to be ashamed of masturbating, but then he did not grow up Catholic. Helen did, and considers herself confused and unsure about religion, but is pleased that she survived "Catholic education even though [she] suffered unnecessary agonies of guilt, frustration and boredom on account of it in childhood and adolescence" (TH 28). She forgives and pities the nuns, "deranged by superstition and sexual repression," who tried to make her similarly neurotic, and she locates her leaving the Church at the precise moment when she lost her virginity as a second-year undergraduate:

I could not with sincerity confess as a sin something I had found so liberating, or promise [with Violet or Persse's "firm purpose of amendment"] not to do it again. Intellectual rejection of the rest of Catholic doctrine quickly followed, whether as a consequence or a rationalization of this moral decision would be hard to say. (TH 29)

Helen is in her early-to-mid forties, and so just the right age to have been the child of parents like Edward and Tessa, whose daughter Becky sleeps with her boyfriend at university and has stopped going to mass—the latter is known to both her parents, and is so troubling to Edward that only Tessa knows about the former (HF 241).

Helen does not regret her Catholic education, her marriage in a church, or having her children baptized; she writes that the latter two were "ostensibly to please Mummy and Daddy, but secretly because I should have felt myself uneasy otherwise" (TH 29), which loudly echoes Adam Appleby's line from *The British Museum Is Falling Down* that "a Catholic upbringing entered into the very marrow of a man" (BM 143). It clearly does no less to a woman. The difference in eras is that most of the fire and brimstone has been removed from the religion, and so Helen also does not regret educating her children

in a Catholic primary school, since it was better than the state school. She and her husband agreed, she notes in her journal:

. . . there would be no harm in exposing our children to the more benign myths of Catholicism, like Christmas and guardian angels and people going to heaven when they died, as long as we were at hand to check the tendency to morbidity or fanaticism, and that they would grow out of any belief they acquired in due course, as indeed they did . . . . At their secular secondary schools they soon became as indifferent to religion as most of their peers, but I like to think that they acquired from their early education an above-average ethical sense, not to mention a priceless key to the literature and art of the last two thousand years. (TH 29)

The lessons from *How Far Can You Go?* are long since learned. The rules of the Church have not changed in 1997 or 2001: sex outside marriage and contraception within it are still sins, but most members ignore those teachings and would welcome the ordination of women as priests.<sup>55</sup> Helen is one of these, and, by implication, she has Lodge to sympathize with her positions.

She records her thoughts about the Church because she had gone to mass (on an impulse while passing by the University's non-denominational chapel) the morning of the above journal entry. She reveals that, for a few weeks after Martin died, she went to Sunday mass for the first time in years, "desperate for some kind of consolation and reassurance" (TH 30). It is not just consolation she desires, since her marrow is still infected: "perhaps I feared superstitiously that the Catholic God had punished me for my apostasy, and that I'd better get back on good terms with him before He did something else terrible to me or my children." Lodge has long deplored such psychological torture of children, but, finally, here, he puts it in the perspective of a mature adult who has

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<sup>55</sup> Philip F. Lawler, "A Principle Rejected," *Catholic World News*, 7 January 2002, 10 June 2006 <[www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=21033](http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=21033)>. This article laments that 73 percent of American Catholics disagree with Church teaching on contraception, 54 percent disagree on abortion, and 57 percent disagree on the ordination of women.

survived, and only in extreme weakness and sorrow succumbs to her vestigial superstitious fear, which she recognizes as “more and more ignoble as time passed” (TH 30).

In their first private conversation, Helen finds reason to wonder at Ralph’s noble qualities, though she has already seen him surreptitiously kissing the English department chair’s wife at a dinner party, leading her to note about Ralph and Carrie’s tacit arrangement: “either there isn’t one, or it’s being breached” (TH 27). His lack of nobility does not come out to her when he says, “Oh, good,” after learning she was brought up Catholic but does not believe any more, or when he explains that “it’s impossible to have a rational conversation about anything important with religious people” (TH 33). It is when he refuses “to be conventionally sympathetic when she played the bereavement card” at lunch (TH 59). Ralph had merely challenged her for saying that she hopes there is a truth behind religion, “[b]ecause otherwise life is so pointless” (TH 33). It surprises Helen to sit down with an atheist who finds life “full of interest and deeply satisfying,” and, when she starts to say she turned to religion briefly after her husband’s death, he bluntly gives her a different perspective on death. Instead of politely saying “I’m sorry,” Ralph makes Helen bristle by the plain suggestion that Martin’s quick and relatively painless death was “tough” for Helen, “but a good way to go for [Martin]” (TH 34), which he genuinely believes, calling the “self . . . spirit . . . soul . . . ?” of Helen’s protestations “just ways of talking about certain kinds of brain activity” which cease with death (TH 35).

Ralph records later, *vis à vis* Helen’s Catholicism, that “[she] doesn’t believe anymore but can’t bring herself to dismiss the whole boiling, still hankers after the idea

of personal immortality, like so many otherwise intelligent people” (TH 58). It seems that two sides of Lodge’s personality are struggling with each other in Ralph and Helen, but, as in Lodge’s earlier “duplex” chronicles, neither is allowed ascendancy, thus confirming Lodge’s self-description of being an “agnostic Catholic.” Ralph uses his scientific skills to find explanations, Helen her novelist’s talent to seek out meaning beyond the merely empirical. Although she quotes Keats’s definition of “negative capability” to Ralph, “*When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and fiction*” (TH 37), it does not seem to give her much solace either—her depression is such that neither mysteries nor facts bring her happiness. When Ralph is not busy seeking explanations in pursuit of his making a permanent mark on cognitive science, he is seeking out new sexual encounters. He quickly notices that Helen “gives off an aura of vowed chastity, like a nun,” and “badly needs a good seeing to,” and rightly perceives that she has not had sex since the death of her husband (TH 60). This deficiency he will soon try (and succeed) to relieve.

The sex in *Thinks . . .* is less fraught with anxiety (in Helen’s case, at least once she’s had it) than anywhere else in the novels under consideration. When compared with the disappointing descriptions of long “dark wedding night[s] of the soul” (HF 52) and the tumultuous “theft” of Persse McGarrigle’s virginity (SW 324–326), Ralph’s recollection of his “first fuck” (TH 73) is a consummation devoutly to be welcomed. Lodge must relish taking the opportunity finally to describe in detail a teenage boy’s original foray into sexual intercourse, through the speech of a middle-aged man looking back in nostalgia. Ralph’s first experience came when he was seventeen, and staying with a middle-aged farmer named Tom and his young wife, Martha, in the country; he

remembers it as “the classic situation.” How lucky he was, he recalls: “to lose my virginity to an experienced, warm-blooded fully grown woman . . . who laughed and told me not to worry when I came prematurely as inevitably I did” (TH 76–77).

As wonderful as it was for Ralph to be taught how to give a woman pleasure, which is something Tom, a sheep-breeder, did not know [*“it’s just tugging to him, a quick in and out,”* Martha once said (TH 80)], sexuality is never completely divorced from morality in Lodge novels, even as morality is increasingly divorced from orthodox religious practices. Ralph worried about Tom catching them, but “it wasn’t just fear it was guilt, too, because I liked Tom . . . but once we were in her bedroom and she started taking off her clothes there was no going back” (TH 77–78). He credits Martha with teaching him how to give pleasure to a woman: “I’m eternally grateful to her, as were many women subsequently who didn’t know who they had to thank for the good times I gave them” (TH 80). Morally, Ralph justifies being a party to adultery (as a priest might say) because Martha wanted him so much and because she explained how her husband, though a good man, gave her no pleasure at all.

He disagrees strongly with Carrie, who once told him that Martha sexually abused him, and that it didn’t matter that he was “eager [and] willing”:

*‘She was a sexually frustrated adult who used your adolescent dick as a dildo . . .’* I said on the contrary she was a warm-blooded, big-hearted woman who taught me things about sex it took my contemporaries years to learn . . . Every boy should have a Martha, I said, she taught me to be a good lover . . . *‘you mean she made you into a sex addict,’* Carrie said. (TH 79)

Ralph cannot accept this definition, recording, with his scientific bent, that:

. . . men are biologically programmed to want as much sex as they can get with as many women as they can get . . . only culture constrains our urge to copulate promiscuously . . . sometimes suppresses it completely of

course, as with priests and monks, poor deluded sods, or almost completely, as in the case of Tom. (TH 79)

Ralph is aware of his culture, and aware of its limits; he just happens to be in a powerful position. He considers marriage a cultural product, not any sort of sacrament, and, in that way, he is similar to the Italian count who deflowers Polly in *How Far?*, only less hypocritical, as he has no religion that tells him, if he commits adultery, that he cannot then take communion at mass. He knows that Carrie would prefer he did not cheat, but he also remembers that she was married when she fell in love with him, and their tacit agreement is confirmed by Helen's talks with Carrie. He loves his children and is a good father, and does not want his family to come to harm or hurt. And if it does not hurt Carrie that he has flings on business trips (at least not enough for her to "kick up a fuss"), then he will keep having them, with the thinking that what keeps him happy will keep him an attentive husband and father—he certainly has more on his mind than sex, what with his prosperous scientific career, but he wants to lead a balanced, vigorous life. If Martha taught him more than he thinks, it is the reality of cliché: *if he can't get it at home, he'll find it someplace else.*

When he tries to find it with Helen, she proves to be a bit more of a challenge than his usual seductions. Typical of many seducers, he talks animatedly about what he knows best in order to impress the object of his interest; after Carrie invites Helen to visit them at their home, Ralph impresses Helen, in conversation in the Messenger family hot tub, with his knowledge of evolutionary history.<sup>56</sup> His disquisition can stand in perfectly for where the understanding of Lodge himself seems to have evolved:

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<sup>56</sup> The invitation is issued both because Carrie likes Helen and does not want her to feel lonely, and, as English department chair Jasper Richmond suggests, because Helen is an attractive colleague of

*Homo sapiens* was the first and only being in evolutionary history to discover he was mortal. So how does he respond? He makes up stories to explain how he got into this fix, and how he might get out of it. He invents religion, he develops burial customs, he makes up stories about the afterlife, and the immortality of the soul. As time goes on, these stories get more and more elaborate. But in the recent phase of culture, moments ago in terms of evolutionary history, science suddenly takes off, and starts to tell a different story about how we got here, a much more powerful explanatory story that knocks the religious one for six. Not many intelligent people believe the religious story any more, but they still cling to some of its consoling concepts. Like the soul, life after death, and so on. (TH 101)

When Helen suggests that Ralph is something of a scientific “Inquisitor,” annoyed by such persistent belief and determined to root it out, he says, “I just think we shouldn’t confuse what we would like to be the case with what *is* the case” (TH 102). A moment later, as they are getting out of the hot tub and returning to the house, from which Carrie just summoned them, his first kiss on Helen’s lips meets no resistance.

Although she has “absolutely no intention” (TH 105) of having an affair with Ralph, “THAT KISS,” as Helen records in her journal, made her feel “like a harp that’s been plucked,” and just writing about it makes her “moistly aroused” at the thought of how “very attractive” he is, “whatever [she tells herself she] think[s] about his opinions and morals” (TH 103). As Oscar Wilde wrote, and Lodge is sure to know, “Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike.”<sup>57</sup> Ralph is not immoral or amoral (and he is quite likable to Helen), he simply does not dress up his morality with all the trappings of religious puffery, as he might say. Tit for tat, cooperate or defect is his considered position on “the sum of human morality”: “You cooperate with

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Ralph’s, and it is Carrie’s custom to make friends of these with the thinking that it will dissuade such on-campus, on-her-territory liaisons (TH 131).

<sup>57</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 209.

the other [person] unless and until they cooperate with you, and then next time you defect. Only, as long as the other [person] knows that's what you'll do, you won't need to. That's what holds society together" (TH 51).

One way Ralph's recorded thought experiment differs from Helen's (or anyone's) written journals is that it leaves much less room for self-censorship, which, anyway, is not his motive in saying everything that comes into his head. He is not, in general, an admirer of social taboos, even as he understands their function. Just because there is a taboo against having sex with one's seventeen-year-old step-daughter does not prevent him from speaking the words, "I'd like to fuck Emily . . . I'm not going to, of course, it would be unthinkable—no, that's exactly what it is, thinkable" (TH 117). As Lodge has shown in his novels, he is well aware that "there's no sexual act however perverse or bizarre that can't be thought, that hasn't been thought by somebody." His step-daughter is a physically fully-formed female; Ralph is a male. If he were not married to her mother, he would not feel any taboo (Britain's age of consent is 16). As it is, he would "never do it . . . It's one of those thoughts that we keep locked up . . . no use trying to shred it or burn it, or deny it's existence, you can only hide it, from your own sight as well as other people's" (TH 118). There is no "taboo" with Helen, merely simple adultery, which is morally acceptable to Ralph, as long as no one tries to use it against him or Carrie has to know.

Helen knows about Ralph's morals, and about his philandering, before she accepts his kiss, and has earlier recorded her knowledge in her journal. The kiss does not distract her, however, from analyzing the metaphysical discussion that preceded it; she wonders how right he is, and fears "[t]here's something horribly plausible about Ralph's

arguments” (TH 107). She goes so far as to apply Ralph’s reasoning to the Biblical story of Original Sin, realizing that it “could easily be a myth about the advent of self-consciousness in evolutionary history” (TH 107), before reassuring her own will-to-believe by recalling, “as somebody said, the idea of a universe existing without a Creator seems just as far-fetched as the idea that a God created it” (TH 108). This sounds like Lodge, too, who increasingly has pulled away from the idea of a God that notices every sparrow that falls, and comes to discover that the only honest intellectual stance on the question of the existence of God is an agnostic one.

While Lodge’s temperament is such that he has plenty of understanding for why people would find the Catholic religion appealing, he never lets go of the conviction, based on the facts, that “the Catholic Church has a lot to answer for.” These words, spoken by Polly in *How Far Can You Go?* (HF 98), reappear in a similar but more contemporary context in *Thinks . . .*, when spoken by a woman who considers the Church’s opposition to contraceptive programs in the Third World to be “criminally irresponsible” (TH 136). Anachronistically observant Catholic Colin Riverdale frustrates the speaker by saying “it’s no use distributing condoms to African women if African men won’t use them.” Riverdale has already been revealed as the supercilious sort of modern Catholic, who fancies himself better than the rest because he and his wife can follow all the rules that so many have found too difficult. Lodge has fun with him by revealing that his wife is secretly on the pill. This personal story of deceit would have been tragic in the context of Lodge’s 1950s and 1960s; in 1997 is silly and funny and pathetic. What is tragic now is how AIDS, which is killing millions of Africans and others around the

world, can be prevented by condoms, and the Church still cleaves to its teaching of abstinence. Lodge wants to make sure that both points are noted.

It is the Church that Helen uses to defend herself from Ralph's advances. She has already written that she is attracted to him, but does not want "to be a party to adultery" (TH 144). This moral objection does not stop her from inviting him over to help her hook up her e-mail account, nor does it discourage him as much as if she were simply not attracted to him—and she cannot be dishonest and say she isn't attracted. When he says that he might be falling in love with her and suggests they "make slow, very enjoyable love" that nobody else would know about (TH 173), she protests that they "can't just do what we want without regard to other people" (TH 174). He explains to her that Carrie "won't mind as long as we're discreet," and that their marriage has survived because Carrie is smart enough to know that "most men are not one hundred per cent faithful" and she "doesn't check up" on him (TH 174). He persists that there are plenty of things people do not tell each other, and asks: "Why make a fetish of this one?" Helen replies that it is just the way she is: "It's probably my Catholic upbringing." Even though she no longer believes in Hell, and even though she would very much like to accept his invitation to go upstairs and "very pleasantly fuck" (TH 174), admitting in her journal later: "Oh dear, just writing those words makes me wet" (TH 178), Helen refuses.

Helen, after all, would not have wanted Carrie to have sex with her husband, so she will follow the golden rule and not have sex with Carrie's . . . at least until she finds out that Carrie herself is having an affair of her own. Before she knows that, however, Lodge has her struggle with moral questions he has been exploring for some time. If God does not exist, is it true that *everything is permitted*, like one of Dostoyevsky's

Karamazovs says? Then “why be good?” she wonders, even though she knows the materialist answer of “[e]nlightened self-interest”:

Civilization is based on repression, as Freud observed. But not in sex, not any more, the godless say. There is no need to pretend that sex for pleasure should be confined to monogamous marriage. True? Not if contemporary fiction is to be believed. There seems to be just as much anger, jealousy, bitterness generated by sexual infidelity as there ever was. (TH 179)

Lodge, of course, knows that contemporary fiction needs drama, and that relations between men and women are always going to be of interest to novelists, just as they always have been. The majority of sexual relationships in the four Lodge novels under consideration are adulterous; but, as he has Helen say, “[t]here’s not a great deal of narrative mileage in the stable monogamous marriage” (TH 211). He would also agree that the impulse toward adultery (as in Philip Swallow and Ralph Messenger) is an impulse for freedom beyond bourgeois economic constraints that do not make sense any more in the modern, enlightened world that has mostly (after centuries of bloodshed and pain, much of it directly attributable to the Church) thrown off the shackles of medieval religious superstition.

Since there’s no “mathematical certainty” in human relations that could guarantee Carrie would never find out, “and therefore never be hurt” by an affair between Helen and Ralph, Helen will demur. Modern, enlightened novelist that she is, she still guides some of her actions by such superstition:

. . . it’s not only her feelings that weigh in the balance. In a curious way I feel it would dishonor Martin’s memory, or the memory of our marriage, if my first sexual experience after his death were to be an adulterous one. If that’s irrational, even superstitious, so be it. (TH 179)

Helen makes an informed, moral choice to refuse her own pleasure so as to avoid causing another undue pain, and she has every reason to be comfortable with this choice when she makes it. Over the next couple of days, she declines Ralph's suggestion that they swap journals, on the grounds that "[w]e all have bad, ignoble, shameful thoughts, it is human nature, what used to be called Original Sin" (TH 189). Keeping such thoughts private is "essential," both to an individual's "self-respect," and to "civilization" as a whole (TH 189). Unfortunately for Helen, her notion of civilization is about to be stood on its head when she finds out that her late husband, Martin, of pure and beloved memory, was a serial adulterer.

Before she knows about Martin for sure (in a *Small World*-like coincidence, one of Helen's creative writing students, Sandra Pickering, has written a story where the male character makes love exactly like Martin),<sup>58</sup> Helen spends the Easter weekend with her parents, offering her time to simmer yet hope there is some way Martin can still be innocent, and offering Lodge another opportunity to contrast the *How Far?* generation of Catholics with that of their children. She was actually born when her mother was forty ("a 'mistake,' she presumes, with the Rhythm Method), which makes her parents even older than those of the *How Far?* crowd, and, therefore, part of the "docile and obedient generation of Catholics who accepted the Church's teaching on [contraception] unquestioningly" and did not discuss sex with their children (TH 197). The only moment of the weekend Helen is not completely preoccupied with Martin and Sandra is when she is carried briefly away "by the power and eloquence of the scriptures" (TH 199). She can

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<sup>58</sup> Lodge, always conscious of the names he gives to his characters, uses "Sandra" earlier: Sandra Dix is the student who seduces older professors Philip Swallow and Rodney Wainwright in *Small World*. Note, also, that Martin has his succession of research assistants, similar to the manner in which Polly's husband Jeremy has his series of production assistants in *How Far Can You Go?*

affirm her rejection of Satan and all his works, but cannot affirm, or even mouth, a positive response to the question, “*Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?*” Based on the novels, and his statements about being an “agnostic Catholic,” it is likely that Lodge does not believe either, but the ritual retains a certain appeal for him, as it does for Helen.

Lodge constructs matters so that Helen will eventually be driven to Ralph. He has Sandra tell Helen the whole truth about Martin, forcing Helen to face that she “had been completely deceived” (TH 201). It does not make her feel the least bit better that his cheating began during a six-month depression she had gone through seven or eight years before, though it seems that Lodge is trying to mitigate his betrayal by implying that he was a man who felt he had lost his wife while she was alive, and though he loved her and would stick by her [he told Sandra that “she mustn’t imagine that he ever would” leave his family for her (TH 200)], he had his own needs and urges that he needed to fulfill in order to continue to be Helen’s loving husband in other ways. “Can I blame him?” she asks herself. “Yes, of course I blame him . . . he deceived me, he cheated on me, he made a fool of me. If he were still alive I would divorce him” (TH 203). But his death has already done that, so she feels that she cannot relieve her anger.

Lodge helps Helen relieve some of her anger by having Carrie take her to a spa, where they relax in brine baths in which Helen decides that she “will never weep for Martin again” (TH 205). To her own surprise, she takes Carrie into her confidence. Carrie points out, in relation to Sandra, that “at least [Martin] didn’t love *her*,” explaining that whenever “the men have power and the women have youth and beauty, there’s a

trade-off.” She tells Helen, in exchange, that she made a point of sleeping only with faculty when she was a beautiful undergraduate at Berkeley, admitting, “I was a real bitch (TH 206).” When Carrie went to Harvard to do graduate work, she expounds: “Naturally I set about seducing my dissertation adviser. Ironically enough, he turned out to be an old-fashioned honourable guy who insisted on marrying me” (TH 207). Carrie philosophically laments the loss of her figure, and, though Helen tells her, “you’re . . . magnificent. You’re Junoesque” (TH 207), Ralph, who nevertheless still loves his wife’s “awesome” breasts, has confirmed earlier that “making love to Carrie these days is like fucking a Bouncy Castle” (TH 153). In the same recording, Ralph reveals that the reason he sought out Carrie on the Bouncy Castle night was his getting aroused by listening to the Isabel Hotchkiss tape, and that, when Carrie refuses his requests to talk dirty, he starts fantasizing, not about Isabel, but about Helen.

Helen’s day of relaxation and revelation with Carrie, who told her to get out there and live again, helps her decide that Martin, the “impostor,” is now “finally ‘gone’” (TH 222), along with her urge that he suffer in Purgatory. Within a few days, she discovers that Carrie is having an affair with Nicholas Beck, a man generally assumed around Gloucester to be a celibate homosexual, and finds it “irresistibly comic” that such a man should be cuckolding Ralph. She reflects on what she has learned since coming to the University: “What a world of secret infidelities . . . . How many more deceptions shall I uncover? Is everybody I know cheating? Am I the only one with scruples and principles, as outmoded and inconvenient as Victorian crinolines? Am I missing something?” (TH 236) After another conversation with Carrie, who tells her that she only trusts Ralph to be faithful at the University, not anywhere else, and explains how she decided that she

might as well have a little fun, too, Helen herself, scruples and all, resolves to have some fun of her own.

Her chance comes quickly when Carrie has to visit her hospitalized father in California, but Helen does not write another entry in her journal for a month, since she was afraid to “awaken scruples of conscience and inhibit [her] pleasure” in bed with Ralph (TH 258). When she does write, she even does so in the third person, to further avoid “the straight unflinching gaze of the first person,” and reveals how removed she is from the traditional, rule-bound morals of her Catholic upbringing:

For that was what she had become, a woman of pleasure, a scarlet woman, a woman of easy virtue . . . She was only doing what everybody else was doing, evidently: fulfilling her desires, making hay while the sun shone, squeezing every drop of joy from her ageing body before it was too late, because ‘*This is the only life you will have,*’ etc., etc. And whatever happened she would never regret it, it had been so exciting. (TH 258)

Lodge has finally portrayed an affair, in depth, where it seems that both parties can enjoy themselves and both can feel justified in secret passion. Carrie is away for three weeks, and her return makes Helen realize that Carrie is still Ralph’s wife, and that her affair with Beck “made no difference” (TH 266). Helen has thoroughly enjoyed “the lineaments of gratified desire” (TH 265) on her face from what Ralph explains as “the only way to resist ageing. Feed the flame of sex. Keep it burning at all costs” (TH 255). She remembers Carrie telling her she does not want to divorce Ralph, despite her knowledge of his promiscuity. Ralph’s profile is high enough to have evidence of several of his affairs make the newspaper gossip columns, and thoughtful or vengeful people have sent Carrie clippings to be sure she knows: “There was a reference to him in Private Eye once as a ‘Media Dong’” (TH 25). Helen remembers Carrie saying, “We make a

good team. He's a good father. The kids would be devastated if we split up" (TH 244), and she wonders what her place will be when Carrie returns.

Marginalized, is the answer, but not because of Carrie's return. As he has done to Michael in *How Far?*, Lodge gives the middle-aged Ralph a serious health scare just when sex is most on his mind. A lump on his liver makes Ralph impotent and keeps him from being in touch. He is too busy being depressed that he may never have sex again (TH 293) and is letting Carrie take care of him. When he and Helen finally do have a private conversation, he asks her to help him commit suicide if he has a terminal cancer. She refuses, citing her "love" for him and a vestigial Catholic abhorrence of euthanasia, but, when writing in her journal later, she decides to do whatever he asks. Her distress at the prospect of Messenger's death and her possible part in it, should he want to go quickly and painlessly instead of slowly and miserably, triggers more religious anxiety. She laments that she now finds superstitious petitionary prayer pointless, but misses it. And she cannot avoid feeling like so many other of Lodge's earlier Catholics bombarded by the Jansenist God as children: "I can't entirely suppress a feeling of guilt, a feeling that we have brought calamity down upon ourselves . . . [b]y giving in to lust . . . let's face it, I feel as if we have sinned, and deserve to be punished" (TH 299). Lodge seems to be saying that there will always be Catholics who know better (Helen acknowledges that the lump on Ralph's liver was probably there before they met), but just cannot get completely over their superstition. An atheist like Ralph might say that they cannot get over their arrogance in thinking that a supernatural being who rules the universe has a personal interest in the minutiae of their behavior, and even their thoughts. Lodge does

not judge, though; he understands the lifelong power of the fear and doubt impressed on children by the Church.

What Lodge does not completely excuse is dishonesty. That he and his wife have a tacit agreement that he can cheat away from home may be a nice thing for Ralph to tell himself, and it may be real; but, as Ralph himself acknowledges, that was not enough for him. Resolving that his sickness has made him want to stay married to Carrie (“[t]he old cliché that these things bring a couple closer together turns out to be true”), Ralph says: “Looking back, I’ve been very stupid . . . I broke my unspoken contract with Carrie, no affairs on her home ground’ (TH 294). He is nervous that she might find out, and he is looking forward to Helen’s going back to London at the end of term. Helen struggles merely to determine what she honestly can and should do, and she even falls into the pathetic (and possibly the stupid) by saying, “I’m in the worst possible plight, to still believe in sin but no longer in the possibility of absolution” (TH 299). But, then, she is a woman in love with a married man, and so sensibly does not “see much prospect of happiness in it” (TH 305).

The worst betrayal of the book, and, arguably, of all four books, comes when Ralph, who has found out that the lump on his liver is benign, and has had sex with Carrie to celebrate and “affirm life over death” (TH 329), visits Helen’s apartment and reads her journal without permission. His intention in visiting her was selfish: he wants to have sex with her one last time so she will not remember their “last time in bed, when I was impotent,” he says (TH 330). Helen is not home when he arrives and he convinces himself that “[i]t wasn’t just personal curiosity . . . it was scientific curiosity, too” (TH 335). What he wants to know is why Helen finally decided to have sex with him; what

he finds out instead is that Carrie is having an affair with Nicholas Beck. Ralph is something of a hypocrite when he gets angry at finding out that Carrie has taken a lover, something he was too arrogant to imagine, but soon realizes was “tit for tat.” He cannot keep himself from rashly confronting Helen, who has not caught him in the act, with why she did not tell him about Carrie’s affair. Helen’s love for Ralph dies on the spot when she realizes his transgression, and they return to their lives, both more chastened, with Helen weeping one last time and forgiving her husband (TH 340).

Lodge’s philosophical conclusion to *Thinks* . . . comes twenty-one pages before its ending, when Helen gives the concluding speech at Ralph’s cognitive science conference. She asserts: “the Christian idea of the soul is continuous with the humanist idea of the self,” which can both be considered as pointing toward “conscience” (TH 319). She laments:

This idea of the self is under attack today, not only in much scientific discussion of consciousness, but in the humanities too. We are told that it is a fiction, a construction, an illusion, a myth. That each of us in ‘just a pack of neurons,’ or just a junction for converging discourses, or just a parallel computer running without an operator. As a human being and a writer, I find that view of consciousness abhorrent—and intuitively unconvincing. (TH 319).

She is Persse McGarrigle standing up at the MLA conference; she is Polly the advice columnist saying that the Catholic Church has a lot to answer for; she is David Lodge pointing out that anyone with a claim to the exclusivity of truth is operating under a delusion that is harmful both to themselves and to others. She is also Lodge’s latest champion of “hold[ing] on to the traditional idea of the autonomous individual self” (TH 319). This self is someone who enjoys life and sex, someone who treats others well because it is the right thing to do, not just the way one would want to be treated oneself. The autonomous self knows that mortality is unavoidable but is not paralyzed or

corrupted because of that knowledge. It embraces consciousness and all the responsibilities that come with it, even as it is aware of its own human frailty. This self, always increasingly important to Lodge, is both humble and magnificent.

## Chapter VI

### Conclusion

David Lodge's career as a novelist has both recorded and reflected the sexual and spiritual experience of many Catholics of his generation, though he always claims, as far as his portrayals of promiscuity in the sexual revolution go, that he writes as "a war correspondent, not a combatant."<sup>59</sup> His wife of forty-seven years, after all, is his first reader, and she has never registered a deep enough objection for him to change anything substantial in his depictions. It would seem that Mary Lodge trusts her husband (and has it repaid) more than Hilary Swallow or Carrie Messenger can trust theirs. If David Lodge, who writes so vividly about the many permutations, anxieties, and even consolations of adultery, was ever unfaithful, it is nobody's business but his and his wife's, and is ultimately not relevant to the verisimilitude of his novels. For, as he has written in a discussion of biographies of Graham Greene: "Revelations about a writer's life should not affect our independently-formed critical assessment of his work. They may, however, confirm or explain reservations about it."<sup>60</sup>

Insofar as his novels demonstrate a philosophy of extra-marital sex, Lodge puts it well in a 2004 interview in the *Daily Telegraph*: "'Of course one occasionally longs for liberation,' he smiles wryly. 'But I believe monogamy is more likely to generate

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<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Wroe, "Seriously Funny," *The Guardian*, 24 February 2001, 13 June 2006 <[http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday\\_review/story/0,3605,441998,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,441998,00.html)>.

<sup>60</sup> David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing* (London: Penguin Books, 1996) 78.

happiness than a lot of temporary relationships.”<sup>61</sup> In the long run, this is probably true, but Lodge, who married at age 24, has clearly been more fortunate in his youthful choice of partners than were several of his characters in *How Far Can You Go?* and *Small World*. In *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, Adam and Barbara’s relationship is not the problem—it is their suffering under the Church’s totalitarianism. The affectionate pair-bonding, two-persons-in-loving-union aspect of a monogamous relationship would seem to be more important to Lodge than the sacrament of holy matrimony, or even the contract of civil marriage. Similarly, he has moves away from strict notions of what it means to be someone drawn to belief in the transcendent:

I think if you read my novels in sequence you will see a gradual waning of orthodox religious belief in the ‘implied author’. I don’t propose to comment here on the ‘real author’s’ religious position. *The British Museum is Falling Down* satirised Catholic doctrine, especially as regards sex, from within orthodoxy. *How Far Can You Go?* (called *Souls and Bodies* in the US) takes a more detached, more ironic view of the decline in orthodox belief and practice and questions its survival. *Paradise News* [(1991) and, certainly, *Thinks . . .* as well] is written from an implied post-Christian perspective – which is not the same as non-Christian or anti-Christian. Simple belief in the transcendental is almost impossible, but the fundamental problems that religion addresses remain.<sup>62</sup>

Lodge grew up in a circumscribed philosophical world. He grew up playing the game of “snakes and ladders,” and as a writer moved from criticizing that game, to rejecting it outright, and living his life for many years with it well behind him, even though he says, as late as 2001 in the *Guardian* profile: “While I can’t say I believe literally in the articles

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<sup>61</sup> Julia Llewellyn, “Bad Reviews Spoil My Lunch,” *The Daily Telegraph* 23 August 2004, 12 May 2006 <[www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/08/23/bolodge22.xml&sSheet=/arts/2004/08/24/ixartright.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/08/23/bolodge22.xml&sSheet=/arts/2004/08/24/ixartright.html)>.

<sup>62</sup>Lidia Vianu, “Art Must Entertain, or Give Delight: Interview with David Lodge,” *Desperado Literature*, 2001, 12 May 2006 <[http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/david\\_lodge.htm](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/david_lodge.htm)>.

of Catholic faith, I see some value in continuing to belong to the church. It still addresses fundamental questions that remain even if you kick religion into touch.”<sup>63</sup>

Extremely important to Lodge, as an academic critic, increasingly agnostic Catholic, and novel writer, is the influence of the writings on Mikhail Bakhtin, who helped him to see the value of embracing life as carnival, which absorbs religion without intending to eradicate it. What Bakhtin writes about Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* can also be applied to David Lodge’s not-so-small world:

All the episodes . . . are presented in the popular-festive carnival spirit. Therefore, all the episodes are ambivalent: the destruction and uncrowning are related to birth and renewal. The death of the old is linked with regeneration; all the images are connected with the contradictory oneness of the dying and reborn world.<sup>64</sup>

Bakhtin called such a world “immense, infinitely rich.”<sup>65</sup> So, too, is the world of David Lodge, even though it is usually seen from the perspective of Catholics or academicians. Lodge would consider sex in one’s youth to be a celebration of life; but when he and his characters were young, they lived in too much fear of creating life that could not be then fed or housed. Once the religious superstitions and major economic worries are conquered (even if they are never completely eliminated), an individual can be free to create the best possible life for himself (or herself), preferably, in Lodge, with a partner who will be supportive and not constraining. Sex in later years is still a celebration of life, even as it occasionally reminds one of the approach of death. We cannot stop the one, but we can hope to keep having the other as long as possible.

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<sup>63</sup> See note 59 above.

<sup>64</sup> Bakhtin 217.

<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin 218.

One of the first things burgeoning humanists or literary scholars learn when they study the classics of Greece and Rome is the Platonic notion of *sophrosyne*, often translated as “moderation,” to describe the important notion of nothing in excess. This idea was further advanced by Aristotle’s idea of the “golden mean,” the happy and safe middle ground between excess and defect. Lodge, temperamentally inclined toward reconciling opposites and exploring questions in his fiction rather than answering them,<sup>66</sup> has spent his career seeking such a mean. Though his writing by *Thinks . . .* has become post-Christian, the pre-Christian deities of Apollo and Dionysus, one the god of wisdom and moderation, the other of wine, theater, and ecstasy, can be imagined looking over each of Lodge’s shoulders as he writes.

Despite not being one to advance hard-and-fast answers to questions, a characteristic certainly understandable in one who has rejected the irrational and harmful certitudes of the Catholic hierarchy, Lodge does come to something of a resolution by the end of *Thinks . . .*. He demonstrates peace with his agnosticism, celebrates life, and acknowledges that while growing older can take its toll on the body (Lodge himself has been losing his hearing for years), it need not demoralize the spirit. David Lodge’s novels entertain, inform, and edify because they have been written by an author with an excellent sense of humor, a deep and sharp intellect, and—however it may be defined—an expansive soul.

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<sup>66</sup> Haffenden 152.

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