

The Two Cultures and Other Dualisms in David Lodge's *Thinks...*

Bożena Kucała
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Abstract: This article discusses several types of dualism in David Lodge's campus novel *Thinks...* (2001). Underlain by a conflict between "the two cultures", the plot and the narrative mode serve to illustrate different approaches to human consciousness, which are grounded in the humanities and the sciences, respectively. The novel brings together a novelist arguing for the uniqueness and opacity of the self and a cognitive scientist who denies the autonomy of the self and rejects the dualism of body and mind. This opposition is dramatised in the debates between the chief antagonists and in the development of their relationship, which constitutes the basis of the plot. It is argued that Lodge's novel points to areas of convergence between the two approaches but ultimately demonstrates their disjunction while arbitrarily making a case for the humanities.

Keywords: academic fiction, David Lodge, dualism, the two cultures

In his introduction to a comparative analysis of the fiction of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge*, Robert A. Morace foregrounds dialogism as the defining quality of their work, which he detects at several levels at once:

Their novels are truly "double voiced," or, to use a word from Lodge's *Changing Places*, "duplex," which in telegraphic jargon refers to the sending of two messages simultaneously in different directions along the same line. [...] There is a fiction of structural, thematic, semantic, and intertextual doublings, echoes, and mirror reflections: a fiction which simultaneously undermines and endorses; a fiction at once academic and accessible, referential and self-reflexive, British and American, Anglo-liberal and postrealist;

a fiction tentative about its commitments yet increasingly committed to its own tentativeness. (1989, 29)

The notion of novelistic dialogism derives, of course, from the legacy of Bakhtin, identified by Lodge in his collection of critical essays *After Bakhtin* (1990) as a crucial influence on modern literary theory and practice. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin stressed the Russian writer's role in the creation of a novel underlain by genuine polyphony: "What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (1999, 6). He further contends that in Dostoevsky's works we are dealing with "an ultimate dialogicality, that is, a dialogicality of the ultimate whole" (18). Dialogic elements, he observes, exist also between elements of structure and are "juxtaposed contrapuntally" (40). Lodge explains that he finds Bakhtin's emphasis on the dialogic nature of language and his approach to discourse in the novel "useful and inspiring" both as a critic and a practising novelist (1990, 89). In an interview with Bernard Bergonzi Lodge commented on how his personal attitudes carried over into his fiction:

I think I am by temperament tentative, sceptical, ironic, and so that reflects itself in the structure and texture of what I write. I am well aware that I tend to play off different ideological or moral attitudes against each other, and I can see that one could say it is evasive [...] I do sheer away from strong resolutions of the narrative line in my novels which would affirm one position rather than another. I tend to balance things against each other; my novels tend towards binary structures – with, for example, opposite characters – and they very much leave the reader to make up his own mind. (Bergonzi 1995, 60-61)

The aim of this article is to analyse David Lodge's *Thinks...* (2001) as a novel constituted by dualism. I shall use the term "dualism" rather than "dialogism" since this is the term used in the novel itself, and also in the philosophical sense (e.g. references to Descartes). Furthermore, "dualism" appears to emphasise splits, divisions and contrasts rather than dialogic interaction – which is more

apposite in the discussion of this book. To modify Bakhtin's formulation, *Thinks...* is not so much about the plurality of consciousnesses but (amongst other things) about the contrast between two different approaches to consciousness.¹²

However, at the start of the discussion it must be pointed out that, as both a creative writer and a literary critic, in this, as in his other academic novels,¹³ Lodge is self-conscious about his craft and the overall design of his narratives. As Michiko Kakutani observes, he "has often composed his comic fictions around a lofty literary or philosophical concept" (2001).¹⁴ Written in a realistic mode tinged with metafictional elements, *Thinks...* overtly identifies its main preoccupations. The architecture of the campus on which the action is set serves as a metonymy for the novel's numerous dualisms. The (fictitious) University of Gloucester, established in the 1960s, is located in the countryside, on a campus whose unfinished construction reflects the inner divisions within the academic world. The project had started on opposite ends of the site, with the intention of eventually filling up the entire space by merging the Arts and the Sciences buildings, but the university eventually ran out of money, which effectively left a permanent gap between the two sets of buildings. Consequently, as one staff member explains to the newcomer Helen Reed, the university is "an architectural allegory of the Two Cultures" (Lodge 2001, 11). The analogy is so self-evident that, as Helen notes, his tone betrays an exhausted self-consciousness about the joke: "It wasn't the first time [...] that he'd made this observation to visitors. In fact almost everything he says has a faintly used feel to it, like paper that lost its crispness by being handled too frequently. Perhaps that's inevitable if you're a teacher, even a university teacher, having to repeat the same things over and over again" (11).¹⁵ The novel itself, which Kakutani aptly describes as "rather mechanical" (2001), is based on an old concept.

12 The research that Lodge did during the writing of this novel also gave rise to his collection of critical essays, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002).

13 Chris Walsh points out that even though the majority of Lodge's novels are not concerned primarily with academia, his fiction is nevertheless regarded as "being *mostly* about academic life" so that it tends to be cited as an example of this genre (2007, 268).

14 With its overall satirical approach to academia, *Thinks...* confirms Bruce Robbins's assertion about the periodisation of the academic novel: in the first half of the twentieth century the genre was dominated by the pastoral mode (e.g. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* [1945]) whereas in the postwar decades satire prevailed (e.g. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* [1954], David Lodge's *Changing Places* [1975] and *Small World* [1984], Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* [1975]) (Robbins 2006: 251).

15 Writing in the 1980s, Lodge asserted that the campus novel had already become so well established as a genre that readers "relish its familiar and recurrent features almost as much as they enjoy whatever new twist or texture the novelist is able to impart" (1986, 169).

The reference is to the well-established opposition between “the two cultures” as defined by C.P. Snow in a Rede lecture titled “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution”, delivered in 1959.¹⁶ Having established his credentials as a scientist by training and a writer by vocation (2012, 1), Snow complains about a split between “literary intellectuals” and “physical scientists”, allegedly separated by a gulf of mutual incomprehension (4). Denouncing the old-fashioned, humanities-centred British model of education, he argues that in view of the scientific revolution as well as global social and political developments, the goals of education should be redefined so as to recognise the growing importance and relevance of science. In the conclusion of his essay, Snow argues that “[c]losing the gap between our cultures is a necessity in the most abstract intellectual sense, as well as in the most practical” (50). Stefan Collini remarks that by delivering this lecture and reiterating the notion of an opposition between the sciences and the humanities, Snow “launched a phrase, perhaps even a concept, on an unstoppably successful international career” (Collini 2012, vii).¹⁷

In Lodge's novel, the opposition between the two cultures is dramatised in the plot primarily as encounters between their chief representatives, the English novelist and temporary creative writing teacher Helen Reed on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the American scientist Ralph Messenger.¹⁸ Their divergent attitudes concern the concept of consciousness, and, related to it, the idea of the existence or non-existence of an individual self. The architecture of the science centre also serves as a visual analogy of the different approaches. As with the overall design of the campus, the symbolism of the architecture is explicated by the characters themselves. The walls of the science centre are made of mirrored glass, which is supposed to represent the workings of the mind: one can look from within one's consciousness but

16 The first section of Lodge's essay on “Consciousness and the Novel”, entitled “Consciousness and the Two Cultures”, is a deliberate allusion to Snow's concept (Lodge 2002, 16).

17 In “The Two Cultures: A Second Look”, published four years after the original lecture, Snow expressed his astonishment at the widespread response to his arguments, suggesting that “a nerve had been touched” (Snow 2012, 54).

18 To some degree, the novel draws on English-American cultural differences – a theme which Lodge fully explores, with comic effect, in *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984). In his overview of Lodge's academic fiction, Chris Walsh describes *Thinks...* as “unambiguously and self-evidently a serious novel” (2007, 279), which is part of the thesis he advances, namely that Lodge should be appreciated as serious rather than merely a comic novelist. However, the comic and satirical dimension in the novel is undeniable and should not be downplayed.

outsiders cannot look inside. This corresponds to Helen's view. However, the architect's conceit contains its own dualism: after dark, with the lights on, the interior of the building is exposed to view, illustrating the idea to which Ralph subscribes, namely that the explanatory power of scientific research may illuminate what goes on inside the mind.

In a playful metafictional gesture, the narrative mode of the novel imitates this architectural conceit: the alternating first person-narratives by Helen and Ralph give the reader access to their thoughts while every third chapter offers an external perspective by employing a conventional third-person narrator.

In his collection of essays *Consciousness and the Novel*, which immediately followed the publication of *Thinks...*, Lodge explains that the idea for this novel emerged from his discovery in the mid-1990s of the renewed concern with the notion of consciousness. In its current revival, the debate took the form of a conflict between recent scientific concepts and assumptions about human nature that stemmed from "religious, humanist, and literary traditions" (2002, x-xi). From their opposed positions, rooted in the humanities and the sciences, respectively, both Helen and Ralph attempt the same: to study human consciousness. Their methods, however, radically differ. Helen believes that consciousness is uniquely subjective and essentially impenetrable to others; nevertheless, she claims that one may try to imaginatively enter another person's mind. Novelists, as she points out, have tried to do so for two hundred years. Her prime example is the master of the modern psychological novel Henry James,¹⁹ whose opaque descriptions of human thoughts and emotions she quotes on a number of occasions. Ironically, Ralph, who does not conceal his contempt and ignorance of literature, records his thoughts in a style which resembles stream of consciousness prose, or the most advanced form of a literary transcription of what goes on in the human mind. From his perspective, his recordings of himself speaking aloud are part of a scientific experiment. Unbeknown to Ralph, his doubts about the validity of this method are in fact shared by writers: "by articulating [your thoughts] ... however informally ... by articulating them in speech you're already at one remove from the phenomenon of consciousness itself" (57-58).

19 Henry James is the protagonist of Lodge's novel *Author, Author* (2004). In his book on Lodge, J. Russell Perkin argues that the writer is "fascinated with the idea of passing between different worlds and identities [...], for example industry and the university in *Nice Work*, the humanities and science in *Thinks...*, or his recurrent use of the Jamesian international theme to explore the cultural differences between England and the United States" (2014, 51).

Despite having similar objectives, Helen and Ralph jealously lay claim to exclusive access to the phenomenon of consciousness. The writer asserts that "consciousness was the province of the arts, especially literature, and most especially the novel", and calls novels "thought experiments" (61). Taking the concept of consciousness for granted, she considers its representation rather than definition as the main challenge while denying science the right to appropriate "the intangible invisible essential self" (62). Without overtly embracing the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, and admitting that bodily experiences may affect one's mind, Helen nevertheless believes in the autonomy of the mind, which she roughly identifies with unique selfhood. Her example is the case of a Frenchman who, despite being completely paralysed, managed to express his thoughts and feelings by moving his eyelid. The case appears to suggest that consciousness, or the soul, or the spirit, is locked up in the body but independent of it. In other words, Helen's stance obliquely corresponds to the philosophy of substance dualism. Ralph, by contrast, is convinced that body and mind are ontologically the same substance. His arguments, however, are derived from science rather than philosophy. Consciousness, in his view, emerged in the process of evolution as a function of the brain and therefore may be studied as a purely physical phenomenon; hence the ultimate objective of cognitive science is the replication and understanding of the process by the construction of an artificial mind. In philosophical terms, his views represent so-called "physicalism", encapsulated in the thesis that "everything is physical", or "everything supervenes on the physical". Items of a psychological, moral or social nature are believed to be ultimately "either physical or supervene on the physical" (Stoljar 2015).

These conflicting approaches are carried over into the characters' attitudes to religion. Debates on religious issues originate in Helen's grieving for her late husband. His recent and sudden death confronted her yet again with the question of the existence of the soul and its possible survival after the death of the body. Like David Lodge himself, and indeed a number of his characters, Helen is a lapsed Catholic who no longer practises but who has preserved a residue of her religious upbringing. By contrast, Ralph conceives of survival only in a material sense: "The atoms of my body are indestructible" (35), and remains unperturbed by the prospect of individual annihilation. In his view, religion, together with art, literature and the capacity for self-reflection emerged as a response to man's awareness of his mortality.

He broadly dismisses the validity of all the answers provided by culture through according the last word to science: “in the most recent phase of culture [...] 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” (101). Helen finds such ideas both horrifying and reductive, which Ralph again easily dismisses as groundless, culturally-induced sentiments: “You’re a machine that’s been programmed by culture not to recognize that it’s a machine” (102).

Ralph’s views echo Gilbert Ryle’s notion of the fallacy of the Ghost in the Machine, expounded in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949). According to this theory, the phenomenon of mind is produced by the human body, which includes the brain. The body is a machine, with no ghost, soul or spirit to be found inside. Invoking Ryle’s influential book in *Consciousness and the Novel*, Lodge comments on the consequences of adopting this view: “To distinguish between flesh and spirit, body and soul, the material and the immaterial, the earthly and the transcendent, is to commit the fallacy of dualism, which runs deep through the history of Western culture, but is now dead and buried. Or it ought to be” (2002, 5). However, according to Lodge, this dualism “stubbornly persists”, both in everyday speech and in the language of literature (2002, 5).²⁰

In his own novel, the dualism of Helen’s and Ralph’s approaches is enacted in the numerous debates between them, in the course of which familiar arguments are deployed. Reviewing *Thinks...*, Kakutani comments critically on the predictability of the line of reasoning: “the reader can feel the author trying to shoehorn into their talks all sorts of research about cognitive science and familiar humanist arguments about the perils of scientific hubris” (2001). As their professional acquaintance evolves into an erotic relationship,²¹ they learn more about each other’s views and the limitations of their own attitudes, without, however, any significant modification, let alone abandonment, of their respective approaches. Ironically, their philosophies of consciousness

20 Sally Dalton-Brown observes that a recurrent theme in academic fiction is an academic’s dilemma “whether to opt for the life of the mind or the life of desires, whether sexual, status-oriented, or commercial lust” (2008, 592). However, in Lodge’s novel, despite the prominence of the body-mind dualism, the conflict between the two manifests itself differently.

21 Discussing Lodge’s academic novel *Small World*, Dieter Fuchs detects the tradition of Menippean Satire in the clash between the carnal and the intellectual (2014, 55). To some extent, such elements may also be found in *Thinks...*

run counter to their private lives. Whereas Ralph, who dismisses the concept of body-mind dualism, can easily separate the life of his body (the short-term relationship with Helen is merely one of his countless extramarital affairs) from his intellectual life, Helen partly loses control over her emotions and lets her mind be affected by her physicality, to the point where she briefly imagines herself to be in love with Ralph.

The novel stages a number of parallels between the antagonists and the rival approaches for which they stand. Both are preoccupied with the problem of consciousness and both keep a record of their thoughts. Both champion the case of their respective field while secretly experiencing doubts about its legitimacy. While creative writing as well as cognitive science appear to be all the rage in the academic world at the turn of the twenty-first century, and therefore the University of Gloucester expects financial benefits from each, the novelist and the scientist are less confident about the long-term success of their disciplines. Helen admits that very few writers make sufficient impact to be read after they are dead. The course she teaches leads to the production of about a dozen new narratives, since each of her students harbours an ambition to be a writer. Without sharing her thoughts with anyone, Helen is made to wonder about "the prolific production of fiction in our culture" (83): "Is it over-production? Are we in danger of accumulating a fiction-mountain - an immense quantity of surplus novels, like the butter mountains and milk lakes of the EEC?" (83). Ralph, for his part, is uncertain about the originality and significance of his own research; also, the unsuccessful experiments staged by his team demonstrate that cognitive science is a very long way from understanding how consciousness functions. The plot of *Thinks...* also attests that in their private lives neither the writer nor the scientist has adequate insight into other people's minds. Helen belatedly learns about her husband's infidelities, which not only changes her perception of him and of their marriage, but also undermines her self-confidence about having a writer's ability to imaginatively enter other people's inner worlds. Ralph arrives at a similar realisation of his own blindness when he learns new facts about his wife and about one of his colleagues. The current complications in his private life affect his confidence as a scientist; in the words of Adam Mars-Jones, "Ralph finally forfeits any authority he might have as an interpreter of life's mysteries" (2001).

The overall drive of Lodge's novel is to intimate the possibility of a reconciliation between the opposing stances, only to eventually dismiss it. In the

academic context, the two cultures are spuriously brought together in a guest lecture given by Robyn Penrose, a character from Lodge's earlier novel, *Nice Work* (1988). By now, Robyn has become a formidably successful professor, who dazzles her audiences with fashionable concepts and maverick combinations of ideas. Robyn's lecture, as summarised by Helen, revolves around the term "subject", which, although used by the lecturer in very diverse contexts, as an individual self, the subject of a sentence, the subject of a political state, the subject of English Literature in the curriculum, invariably comes under attack and is laid open to deconstruction in all these senses. Awed by Robyn's brilliant performance, Helen nevertheless deplores the "dry and barren message" that the lecturer conveys: "Where was the pleasure of reading in all this? Where was personal discovery, self-development?" (225). Robyn's lecture concludes with an analogy drawn between the humanities and the sciences. She suggests that computer software, which enables one to operate in different programs simultaneously, offers a metaphor for the decentred self. At this point, Helen is immediately struck by a correlation between the lecturer's ideas and Ralph's denial of the existence of any fixed identity. A representative of a traditional, liberal-humanist approach, Helen is alarmed at the fact that there should be "so much agreement on this point between the most advanced thinking in the sciences and the humanities" (226).

However, surprisingly for Helen, Ralph remains unimpressed by the lecture and refuses to endorse the convergence intimated by Robyn Penrose. In his view, poststructuralists pick up certain scientific concepts and incorporate them into their theories without proper understanding while falsely asserting that contemporary science has also deconstructed its foundations and claims to adequate knowledge. Hence, paradoxically, the only thing which the writer and the scientist agree upon is their scepticism about attempts to blend the two cultures.

As Lodge explains in his summation of Bakhtin, "In Bakhtin's perspective it is not possible to say 'the last word' about anything in the human sphere" (1990, 94). The denouement of *Thinks...* serves to illustrate yet again and reiterate the idea of dualism. The plot ends with Helen and Ralph's brief affair coming to an end, with neither party harbouring many regrets. They each go their separate way, rejoicing in their moderate success in their chosen field. Helen writes another novel whereas Ralph publishes another book on cognitive science. It does not mean, however, that no one has the last word in the dispute. The end of Helen's contract at the University of Gloucester

coincides with a major scientific conference on consciousness, which she attends without understanding any of the papers. However, she has been asked by Ralph to deliver the final paper, called by the organisers "The Last Word", and it is reasonable to assume that David Lodge himself made the arbitrary decision to let the novelist have the final say.²² At the core of Helen's speech is a defence of the individual self and the impenetrability of human consciousness. Even though science appears to rule out the separation of body and mind, convincingly demonstrating that the latter is merely a function of the former, Helen, in defiance of scientific arguments, chooses to uphold the idea of the autonomy of the mind, or spirit, or soul, whatever one may call the substance that constitutes our autonomous being. Her position remains unsubstantiated and easy to challenge, being based on intuition and affect alone:

We are told that [the self] is a fiction, a construction, an illusion, a myth. That each of us is "just a pack of neurons", or just a junction for converging discourses, or just a parallel processing computer running by itself without an operator. As a human being and as a writer, I find that view of consciousness abhorrent – and intuitively unconvincing. I want to hold on to the traditional idea of the autonomous individual self. (319)

Helen's declarative speech, illustrated with literary examples, is well received but fails to convince any of the scientist participants. In his review of *Thinks...*, Mars-Jones reads Lodge's message as the claim that "knowledge of how the universe works is less valuable than the knack of living without any certainty about what goes on in other people's heads" (2001). Ultimately, the dualism of perspectives remains firmly in place but Lodge's novel makes a tentative though unverifiable case for literature as a more adequate way of addressing the dilemmas of existence and conveying "the dense specificity of personal experience" (Lodge 2002, 10).²³

22 Rong Ou points out that Helen expresses Lodge's own views. Her arguments correspond to the assertions Lodge made in his Richard Ellman Lectures in Modern Literature at Emory University in 2001 (Ou 2009, 153).

23 In *Consciousness and the Novel* Lodge suggests that the existence and the value of literature may be legitimised by two kinds of connections between literature and science: "One kind of connection emphasises the *differences* between literary and scientific discourse about consciousness. The other emphasises points of agreement" (2002, 10).

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