

ON REALISTIC FICTION AND BAKHTIN: A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID LODGE

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— *Nice Work* is your latest novel. Where would you place it in the framework of your writing technique?

— If you look at the novels in chronological order you will be aware that they have changed quite a bit. In a way they fall into two sets. There is also the fact that *Out of the Shelter* was actually conceived as the third novel. If you put that in position three, then *Picturegoers*, *Ginger*, *Yor're Barmy* and *Out of the Shelter* are all very much in a traditional realistic mode, whereas *The British Museum*, and *Changing Places*, *How Far Can You Go?* and *Small World* are more sort of carnivalesque novels. I don't know if you know Bakhtin's work.

— Yes.

— I came across it fairly late, I suppose, in the nineteen eighties. It seemed to answer to my own sense of what I was doing as a novelist very much. You mentioned the different voices and accents and varieties of English in my work and that's very Bakhtinian. I would say that the comic and carnivalesque element that came into my work with *The British Museum is Falling Down* sort of loosened up the traditional realistic technique, but not in any way abolished it. And I suppose in *Nice Work* in some ways the realistic mode comes back into the dominant position. The crucial passage is where Robyn complains to her friend Penny that she feels she is being dragged into a realistic novel, which was in a way what I felt myself as I wrote the book, actually. The only way to be truthful to Vic's world is to be realistic and it seemed to me at the outset that the way to be truthful to Robyn's world was to be post-modernist. So she is introduced in a different way, with the author saying that she doesn't believe in characters, etc. I did think at one point I would have more of that sort of metafictional commentary. But as the novel went on I felt, as Robyn did really, that I was being drawn into a more realistic kind of fiction and that to disrupt it with experimental post-modernist games would actually be counterproductive, that I would lose a lot of what was becoming rather interesting, which was the conflict between the two characters and the way they were mutually exploring each other's worlds. Robyn does in a way come to

acknowledge the force of empiricism and pragmatism and old-fashion morality, things she theoretically disapproves of. And also I suppose I saw her character as in some ways based on a contradiction between her theory and her practice. Vic is drawn away from a purely commercial, materialistic view of the world, but he is not drawn to anything like postmodernism because that would be totally implausible.

I mean there is a sense in which the novel to me now seems slightly limited by its realistic method. I find that it isn't so quite much fun to read as *Small World*, I mean when I read it to an audience. But it seemed at the time that that was the logical way to develop the ideas since it is a novel which is addressing itself to serious realistic issues and it is in some ways trying to re-enact Victorian novels of society and social reconciliation and all that.

— **Yes, *Nice Work* follows the pattern of a nineteenth-century novel.**

— Yes, that is what saves it from being a purely realistic novel. There is this intertextual game going on all the time with these Victorian novels. And again Robyn actually teaches these novels and regards herself as very distant from them and takes a rather patronizing attitude to them critically, but in fact finds herself being drawn into the same patterns. I suppose the joke is on Robyn in a way, but Vic suffers more.

I'm satisfied with the novel but there is a sense in which you discover as you write a book that there is only so far you can go in developing its possibilities and in laying on layers of meaning, and in that novel I felt I would lose more than I would gain by really disrupting the decorum of the realistic novel. Whether that is just because of the nature of that book or because of my own response to new experience, I do not know. I think in comparison with *Small World* it very much reflects a more sober and somber mood in Britain, and in the universities particularly, in the nineteen eighties.

— **Is there much anger in *Nice Work* against the Government's educational policy?**

— I wouldn't describe it as anger myself. I think it reflects the demoralization of the universities. It was written about 1986 when the recession was fairly acute in Britain and particularly in the Midlands, but since then things have improved a bit. It was a response to things like unemployment as well as educational policies. But on the other hand I do not think that the Thatcher measures have been a total disaster actually. In some ways they were a necessary medicine for England. I think the universities were partly responsible for their own fate and they certainly did need reform, but the way it was done was very clumsy and counter-productive for reasons I try to explain.

Nice Work is a more serious novel than *Small World*, which is a more farcical and fantastic novel, and a kind of holiday, in a way an escape really. It doesn't deal very much with Britain actually, it deals with the "global campus".

I think that realism is more fashionable and more viable now than it was ten, fifteen years ago. There was a feeling in the nineteen seventies that realism was totally finished and if you wanted to be taken seriously as a novelist you had to be

antirealist or irrealist in some way, metafictional or whatever. There are people who still believe that, but I think that in some ways the whole postmodernist experimental movement has lost a certain amount of impetus, particularly in America where it started really. There are a lot of literary novelists now writing books in which the realistic convention is not seriously questioned or undermined. I think that is partly the result of writers no longer being able to ignore social change and political change. In a curious sort of way the Thatcher years, although the Thatcher government's values are antipathetic to most writers and artists, have actually confronted artists and writers with the economic base of culture and they also have confronted the universities with the question "Who pays?". There is no such thing as a free seminar. *Nice Work* does reflect that consciousness, whereas in *Small World* everybody is having a ball, etc.

— **You had an early retirement. Were there any pressing reasons for this?**

— No, I chose to. I jumped at the chance really. What it means is that instead of just resigning my job, I took advantage of a scheme whereby I drew a pension as soon as I retired. I have what every writer dreams of, which is a small regular income. I was beginning to think about going freelance anyway but that would have meant that I wouldn't draw any pension till I was 65. I have, ironically, benefited from the effects of the Thatcher policies on universities, which required them to reduce their staff. Because British university teachers had watertight contracts and they couldn't be made redundant, universities had to persuade people to leave voluntarily, but the only people who are voluntarily going to leave are people like me who can supplement their pension in another way. That is the irony of the situation. The university did not want me to leave, but they had to meet some quota and I was willing to go. I could not believe my luck really, because I was just starting to feel rather bored with university teaching after doing it for about 27 years and I was also just beginning to find new avenues in writing opening up. It just happened at the perfect moment as far as I was concerned. I started a second life.

— **But you criticize early retirement to a certain extent in the novel, don't you?**

— I criticize the policies which brought this about because they have not been in the interest of universities. On the whole the people who have left are not the people who the universities could most easily do without. The people who left are fairly able people who have either gone to America or become freelances like me. The Government thought that their policy was going to work as in a business: the top management would get rid of the dead wood; and that has not happened. Much of the dead wood is still there. That's the criticism I was making. I think universities had got rather lazy and inefficient and they needed a shake-up, but it could have been done so much better.

— **Do you question the value, the usefulness of university education in the novel?**

— I suppose *Nice Work* was an attempt to redress the balance set by *Small World* and shows Robyn actually doing a kind of educational job even though it was not always what she thought she was doing. Every profession and every

institution is vulnerable to satire and that is another part of Bakhtin's theory, that the function of literature is to question and mock institutional mystiques and orthodoxies. I suppose that has been my stance towards universities, that is, to satirize and question the profession that I myself belonged to and took it quite seriously. When everybody took universities for granted there seemed an obvious social function in making fun of them. When universities came under pressure, the stance that I adopted in *Changing Places* and *Small World* did not seem quite appropriate, so I wrote a novel which is a rather more realistic and positive account of what universities do. I don't think that education is something that needs defence. It is a self-evident good. The professional mystique that is erected on top of that, however sometimes needs to be satirized. Just as there is obviously a need for social work and social workers, but the professional jargon of social workers and their professional mystique about themselves are always open to question and criticism; and the same could be said of medicine and law and every other profession.

I think people are sometimes slightly scandalized because being a university teacher myself I satirize universities but if I were not a university teacher the question would not arise. I suppose I am relieved that I am retired and I am not any longer subject to that criticism.

— **In *Modes of Modern Writing* you seemed to find the way to defend the realistic novel by using the difference between metaphor and metonymy. Have you found a better definition for the realistic novel in Bakhtin?**

— No, not specifically the realistic novel, but rather the notion of fictional discourse that Bakhtin puts forward, which is that prose fiction is a polyphonic discourse. I think you can apply it to the defence of the realistic novel. One sort of modernist attack on and criticism of the realistic novel is that it is stylistically very limited to a single tone of voice and experimental fiction is supposed to open up a variety of styles. That is broadly speaking true, but the realistic novel itself is actually constituted of a multiplicity of voices. The classic nineteenth-century novel, Dickens, George Eliot or Thackeray, as Bakhtin demonstrates, is actually not a single monological discourse, imposing the author's vision of life on the characters. It's a kind of ventriloquism. You take any chunk of a realistic novel and you will find not just a single narrative voice but the evocation of popular wisdom, learning and other literature, not to mention the distinctive idioms of the characters, either as they speak or the verbal styles they think in. I think this is also brought out by Roland Barthes in his criticism and his analysis of Balzac.

That approach shows there is not a radical discontinuity between the realistic novel, and the modernist novel as a lot of proponents of experimentalism like to pretend; that somebody like Joyce is only bringing out further a potentiality that is already there, in the novel tradition, of a multiplicity of styles and voices. Comedy, I do think, does liberate the writer to exploit that more and Joyce is a comic writer.

— **In *The Novelist at the Crossroads* you say that “if the case for realism has any ideological content it is that of liberalism”. And in your essay “Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Bakhtin” we read that according to Bakhtin “the dominance of the**

novel in the modern era is therefore explained and justified by its capacity to match the rich variety of human speech and to respect the ideological freedom that variety embodies". Is there any connection between your statement and Bakhtin's?

— Yes, there is a connection there, certainly. Bakhtin puts it in a much deeper perspective. It goes back long before the development of the concept of liberalism, he takes it right back to classical literature and shows there was always a kind of subversive, satirical, parodying, travesty kind of literature. It was a kind of counterpoint to the official culture's literature. The whole carnival tradition carries that mocking, parodying, travesty function which is vital if official culture is not to become tyrannical and totalitarian. Bakhtin sees that that is the destiny of the novel, so the novel has a kind of democratic function in his theory and its association with liberalism follows on logically from that. So I think that there is a continuity between those two comments.

— In "Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Bakhtin" you state that Bakhtin draws a seminal distinction between the adventure novel and the social-psychological novel of everyday life and that what Dostoevsky did, according to the same writer, was to put the adventure plot "at the service of the idea". Would you say that this could be applied to any of your novels?

— It seems a rather large claim to be making, but in a small way I suppose *Small World* is doing that, though I wrote it before I came to know very much about Bakhtin. Bakhtin has extraordinarily interesting things to say about romance and the adventure novel and the way they handle space and time. He is thinking mostly about ancient prose romances, Alexandrian romances, etc. There are kinds of jumps in time and space in those stories which are never explained and they do not really need explaining and also people falling in love with each other instantly, and that doesn't need explaining. The whole point is that, having fallen in love, they are separated and then it is all to do with how they get together again. I read this after I'd written *Small World*, but it completely fitted in with that. People do suddenly move from one part of the world to another in that novel, because of air travel and international conferences.

Another thing that Bakhtin says is: but it does not matter where the characters are, whether they are in Athens or Rome, it is all the same in romance. In a way this is the world of *Small World*, always in a big-luxury hotel in a resort somewhere, it is always the same. There is a sort of analogy there. Whereas the realistic novel moves slowly through real time and space and gives a sense of the real time passing and characters fall in love slowly and develop psychologically. I thought you could say of D. H. Lawrence, as of Dostoevsky, that he deals with contemporary life and with social and psychological material, but the way the characters act is more like the adventure story: they make sudden leaps from one position to another, they move from one crisis to another, of a spiritual or psychological kind, in a context where the circumstances are not so densely portrayed as in the realistic social and psychological novel.

That is true of *Women in Love*. It is supposed to be taking place in modern

England, but you are never quite sure when it is, before the Great War or after. Whereas in the novel of social and psychological realism you have to know that sort of thing. In my work I always put in references to real events and the reader can locate the action in relation to them. In that respect I am a realist writer.

I think that what you said would only apply to *Small World*. Possibly *How Far Can You Go?* in a way too. There is that same rather abrupt, arbitrary movement of the characters. It is a novel of accelerated tempo, which is what I was getting at, together with covering a lot of change happening to a lot of people in a very short textual space. It's like watching a newsreel going very fast and that means that the specificity of background is diminished in order to have this quick onward movement. And that is something like what Bakhtin calls the novel of adventure tempo, but only in a rather analogical sense.

— **It is a bit surprising that there is no trace of Catholicism in *Nice Work*. Why is it so?**

— I did at one point think of making Vic a Catholic, actually, at a very early stage of planning the book. I think there are two reasons why I did not. One is that the friend who was my main entrée to the world of industry, whom I followed around in his work, is a Catholic, and I was very anxious that there would be no excuse for anybody to identify him with Vic. And since it is rather unusual to have senior executives in engineering industry who are Catholics, it would encourage an identification I did not want. The second one was that I felt that if Vic was a Catholic the adultery story which develops would be too heavy, really. It would be overweighted with all kinds of theologically motivated guilt which would go against the style of the book, which although serious has an element of comedy about it. It would just be overloading the book, it would have a distorting effect. The book is about values, but to bring religious ones into it, especially ones highly charged with Catholicism, I felt would be wrong for the book as it developed.

As I said, originally it was going to be about a man who is a successful businessman and has a kind of mid-life crisis and begins to have doubts about his life, and is alienated from his family. His children would have lapsed from religious practice (that would be one of the sources of tension). I had in mind that part of his crisis would be a relationship with a woman who came from some kind of artistic, intellectual area. When I was doing the research for the book I followed this friend around; my cover story was that I was shadowing him and we invented this story that I was following him around as part of an industry year scheme. And I realized it was a wonderful plot mechanism for bringing the two worlds together and that is how I thought of a woman university lecturer who was compelled by circumstances to shadow some person whose life she would normally have no contact with.

This is what you find when you write: there comes a point where you commit yourself to a certain line of development and that means discarding other things which you had been entertaining because they are simply not compatible with the route you finally decide to go down. In a way the whole process of writing is continually like that, you keep coming to a crossroads where you either go this way

or that way and you know that both of them entail excluding something. You have to decide which is the best way to go. That is how religion got dropped out of *Nice Work*. I am interested in the loss of belief now and I think that would be the way I would approach Catholicism in future, not the burden of the Faith which is what the other novels are about.

— **How would you describe the endings of your novels, starting with *The Picturegoers*?**

— What you would notice when you read *The Picturegoers* is that it has a certain resemblance to some of the later books in that it has a lot of characters. There are two main characters; one of them is a young student at university who is an agnostic and he is lodging with a Catholic family with a large number of children in an area in south-east London. The eldest daughter of the house has just given up the attempt to become a nun. She has come back to live with the family. She falls in love with him and he gets converted to Catholicism as a result of that. And so the ending is that they go in opposite directions: she has become more secular and he has become more religious. But the novel follows the fortunes of a large number of characters, other members of the family and also other people who are sometimes connected only by the fact that they go to the same cinema every Saturday night. The temporal structure of the novel is three week-ends when all the characters go to the cinema on Saturday night and some of them go to church the next morning. There is the cinema manager and an usherette and a priest, etc.

In several of my novels there are two things. One is that nearly all the novels have a binary structure, like the contrast between the hero and the heroine in the first one, Vic and Robyn, Zapp and Swallow. I like to work with characters who embody two sides of some kind of opposition. The other thing is that in some novels I feel I want a large number of characters, more or less equal in importance rather than to focus on a single one or two. In *Small World* it was a very conscious decision that at some point I needed to introduce a whole set of new characters who would be in different parts of the world, with different nationalities only connected by the fact that they were part of the academic net-work. In a sense the same is true of *The Picturegoers*, that is the structure and principle of it, with all these chance encounters, with people passing each other without even knowing who the other person is; only the novel pulls them together. I have always been interested in that as a structural device. There again you get a lot of varieties of English discourse: educated characters, uneducated characters, childish characters. But *The Picturegoers* is a rather immature book. I was only about twenty, twenty-one when I wrote it. The ending is not exactly closed. Some of the stories are closed. I do not know really. The hero, Mark, who is alienated from his parents decides to go back and try and rebuild the bridges with his past, but I do not know if it would be considered closed or open really. It's a long time since I read it.

Endings are an anxiety to me and also a fascination. I often build my own hesitation about how to end the book into the book itself, it is the best way I can cope with the problem. I have done it in novels like *Changing Places*, *How Far Can*

You Go?. Small World in a sense sends up the closed ending, but Persse is left in an open ending.

In *Nice Work* there is a kind of intertextual relationship with the Victorian novel in that Robyn talks about how the Victorian novelists relied on certain devices to end their stories: marriage, the fortunate will, emigration and death. These are the four ways in which Victorian novelists tried to get their characters out of the ideological fix that they got them into. In fact all four endings are canvassed as possible endings for the fortunes of Robyn and Vic in the ending section of the novel. She gets a proposal of marriage from Charles, gets a legacy and she has the opportunity to emigrate to America. Death, it was not appropriate having it in the novel, so there is just a fleeting reference when she is driving to University and she feels that all her good luck may be wiped out by a car crash. When I was working on the novel I thought that probably I would end it with her emigrating, in as much as that was the most likely decision she would make. But I really did not want to do that, partly because I thought all readers would be expecting that and you always like to surprise the reader if you can do so. Secondly, it would have left Vic out on a limb somehow, and in some ways it would be false to Robyn's idealism. She is an idealistic, altruistic character, not ultimately self-seeking. It was a question of how could I plausibly bring about a reversal by which she might have the opportunity to stay and I found it in the combination of the legacy and the little joke about "virement". In a sense it is a sort of outrageous happy ending, she gets the legacy and he is able to fund his own business. It is a much more closed ending than you can normally get away with in a modern novel and I suppose I thought I was going to get away with it because of its slightly tongue-in-cheek quality and its allusion to the nineteenth-century novel, the joke that Robyn is constantly being drawn into a plot which is of a kind she regards as obsolete. And on the whole readers have taken it in that spirit, they have not felt this is a cheat or a 'cop out'. They felt, as it were, that the author is well aware of the game he is playing. I think because it is a novel of reconciliation of contrary values, that there is some aesthetic justification for this rather contrived happy ending. I have written the screen-play of *Nice Work* and it will be very interesting to see what effect the final scenes have. I think it will be slightly more emotional.

— **What about the endings of *Out of the Shelter* and *Ginger, You're Barmy*?**

— Both of them have epilogues, which betrays a certain anxiety on my part about how to end the story. Perhaps an excessive anxiety to make points clear that perhaps were not clear in the main narrative. They are afterthoughts in a way.

Ginger, You're Barmy's epilogue is particularly clumsy. The epilogue to *Out of the Shelter* is more effective, I think. The main story ends rather abruptly. I think one fault of *Out of the Shelter* is that there is too much intrigue and mystery all resolved in the end. The epilogue was an attempt to be able to look back on the events of the novel with a more mature perspective than the main character could have at the time they happened. The novel was much more sympathetically read the second time it was published. Within its limits it is quite a complex novel with the combination of the Bildungsroman and the Jamesian "international" novel of

conflicting ethical and cultural codes. I am not sure whether if I were writing it today I would keep so rigorously to the perspective of the young teenage boy. I would look for some way of avoiding being trapped within that innocent, limited perspective for so much of the story.

— **How close is Rummidge to Birmingham in your novels?**

— It gets more like Birmingham as the three novels progress. In *Changing Places* it is a kind of caricature and there are some things which I borrowed from other places. There is a new building which has got tiles on the outside, always falling down; that was borrowed from Warwick University. Rummidge as described in *Nice Work* corresponds very closely to Birmingham actually. Birmingham has a rather ugly modern core, it rebuilt its centre in a very ugly way, but it is modern. And then it has on the south-west a very attractive suburban area where the University is and where I live and where Vic and Robyn would live, partly modern, partly Victorian with lots of green spaces and trees and parks and so on. To the north-west and beyond the frontiers of the city is an industrial area. Birmingham merges into what is called the Black Country, there is no space between them. That is what I am describing in the factory sequences, that north-west section.

— **Are universities really making an effort to have some contact with the industrial world, as it is hinted in *Nice Work*?**

— There is quite a bit of co-operation between the Science and Engineering Departments and industry for obvious reasons. I was concerned with the Humanities and certainly in the past there has been very little interest or contact between Humanities and local industry or commerce. I think there is a bit more now because the whole climate is in favour of such co-operation. Even Arts Departments are being encouraged to try and get funding from local business for their work or to make money in some way like that. But historically there has been very little contact and I would say that the ideology of English as a University subject has been deliberately and programmatically hostile to commerce and industry. When you read English literature from the Romantics onwards, what you are reading is one long tirade against industrialism, against science, against machinery and commerce. This in some ways is a sort of self-indulgence by literary intellectuals, not recognizing that their institutions are supported by the wealth generated by those they criticize. This is one of the themes of the book.

— **In *The British Museum is Falling Down* Briggs says to Adam: “Publish! Publish or perish!”, whereas in *Changing Places* we find a completely different situation: Philip Swallow has been teaching for some years but has not published anything. There seems to be a contradiction there. In any case, what is the attitude towards research and publishing in British universities now?**

— Historically it has not been absolutely essential to publish in order to get or hold an academic job in England. I think there is a slight contradiction there between the two novels. In that chapter of *The British Museum is Falling Down* I was parodying C. P. Snow. I suppose I was in some ways reflecting the antagonism you get in Snow between some more old-fashioned conservative dons and some

more progressive professional ones. The reason why Briggs says it is because it motivates the hero, Adam, to think that he can get a job and improve his fortune if he gets hold of the manuscript by Merrymarsh. Throughout the post-war period there has been a slow development of an American or Continental style of academic careerism which has slowly become dominant over a more old-fashioned amateurish, some would say, civilized tradition of the Oxbridge don, who publishes one article in 25 years but he is a good teacher and basically sees his function as educating, civilizing young gentlemen. Philip Swallow is a kind of caricature of that tradition, whereas Morris Zapp is a caricature of a highly professional American academic. I exaggerated Philip Swallow's non-productivity in *Changing Places* to heighten the contrast. When in *Small World* I wanted to put Philip Swallow into circulation in the global campus I had to suddenly give him a book, make him a bit more of a competitor than he had been before. Now, in England, we are getting to a quasi-American type of career structure and methods of assessment and people are required to publish regularly in order to demonstrate their credentials as University teachers, which of course can produce a lot of garbage if they publish just to qualify for their job.

— **Can you explain the “character” of ELIZA?**

— That is a real computer programme. ELIZA was originally designed to see how far you could programme a computer to hold a conversation with a human person. The theory was that if you took certain institutionally restricted speech situations (like doctor-patient), you could in fact programme a computer so it could respond quite meaningfully to almost any cue that was given to it. One of them was the psycho-analyst-patient situation. It was done purely as a linguistic experiment, but people became fascinated by it and there are a lot of stories about people getting completely involved with this programme and in fact using it for therapeutic purposes. I was much taken with that. I sat in on a computational stylistics course in Birmingham and all that stuff about the novelist having his work put into a computer came out of that experience.

— **What about the figure of *Scarlettofeverini* in *The British Museum is Falling Down*?**

— There is an esoteric source for that chapter. It's also a very broad verbal joke. There is an illness in English called scarlet fever. But the source of that chapter is this rather eccentric English novelist, who had two names; his real name was Frederick Rolfe, but he called himself Baron Corvo though he was not a baron. He was a strange, homosexual, paranoiac, but rather clever character who flourished around the turn of the century. He tried to become a Catholic priest and he kept getting thrown out of the Seminary for obvious reasons. And he wrote these novels in which he would get his own back on the people who had persecuted him. He wrote one rather good novel called *Hadrian VII*, which is about a humble English priest who by chance is elected Pope. He happens to be chaplain to the English cardinal at the Conclave. He becomes a charismatic Pope. Corvo wrote another book called *Don Renato* which is written in the first person and is the diary of a Renaissance monk. I put those two books together in the chapter, so that you get

an account written in that rather odd diary style, about a man who is made Pope unexpectedly.

— ***Changing Places* and *How Far Can You Go?* have both very cinematic endings. How much has the cinema influenced your work?**

— Most modern writers have grown up with the cinema and television and are influenced by the language of those media. I think that *Changing Places* is a very cinematic novel. It is based on the principle of the cut from one country to another. The reason I chose a scenario or screen-play layout in the closing chapters of these books was that it was a way of avoiding taking sides or betraying authorial preference for one position or another, or privileging one character or another. In *Changing Places* I did not want to take sides in the matrimonial debate, I did not want to write from just one point of view or even two, but from four. Also, it is a rather joky treatment of a potentially very painful situation, a double adultery, the question whether they are going to divorce each other or marry each other. So, by using a sort of dramatic form, just the dialogue, the reader stays outside the characters, there is a kind of distance, so they all have an equal status. Also, as I was changing the style of each chapter I wanted the last one to be the most striking deviation from straight narrative.

In *How Far Can You Go?*, again, I wanted to present the plurality of approaches to Catholicism that existed at the end of the action compared to the Mass at the beginning. And I did not want to take sides, only to lay it all out. This is the present religious scene: totally eclectic, totally pluralistic. The technique of the jump cut from one scene to another is a part of the language of film which has entered into the mainstream of the novel.

— **The way you present some of the characters in *Small World* gives the sense of a camera closing in on them very slowly: first the shoes, then the legs, etc.**

— Like most realistic novelists I am interested in the way people's clothing and possessions are an index of their characters. You may remember that passage in *Modes of Modern Writing* where I quote Christopher Isherwood, who I think is a novelist absolutely saturated with the cinema. He says that if you are a certain kind of novelist, then when you describe people you project them onto a kind of screen inside your head, you describe the way they smoke cigarettes, etc. He says "I'm a camera". I think he means "I'm a movie camera". So I do not think what I do is peculiar to me. A lot of novelists who work in a roughly realistic tradition in the twentieth century are using techniques of close-up and so on which derive from the cinema. But I am interested in films. *Small World* turned out to be a rather difficult novel to film really, because of its intertextual levels. I would say that *Small World* is, in terms of my typology, structurally a metaphorical novel, and the metaphor, as I said in *Modes of Modern Writing*, is very difficult to portray in film.

Nice Work is a much more metonymic book. In fact it lent itself very easily to adaptation. Any references to the Victorian novel almost entirely disappeared. But the way the story develops in space and time is very easy to render in the film.

— **Was *Small World* a success as a film?**

— Not entirely. It had great moments. If you see it you will enjoy parts of it.

People who liked the book on the whole were disappointed with it. The more the quality of the work is invested in the narrative voice, then the less easily it will transfer to the screen. But *Nice Work* is a very scenic novel which consists mostly of scenes in which characters are interacting and talking to each other and arguing with each other. Then there is a visual background with factories, furnaces, universities, that can be represented very easily photographically.

— **Do you not think that *Out of the Shelter* would make a good film?**

— I did do a screen-play of it some years ago for Channel 4 Television, but they never made it. Somebody else, a German producer, is now just expressing interest in the idea. I do not know if I want to invest my time in rewriting the screen-play. It has got quite a lot going for it. I am quite drawn to the idea. You cannot really do the childhood of the hero, there is not room for it. You have to start the story with him going to Germany and just using, for example, flashbacks or pre-credit sequences to establish what his childhood of the hero was like. The German producer grew up in Heidelberg just after the time I was there, so he knows that scene very well.

This text is a partial transcript of a longer conversation that took place in London in July 1989.