

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Small World

David Lodge

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by David Lodge

Dedication

Title Page

Author's Note

Prologue

Part I

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Part II

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Part III

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Part IV

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Part V

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Copyright

About the Book

Philip Swallow, Morris Zapp, Persse McGarrigle and the lovely Angelica are the jet-propelled academics who are on the move, in the air and on the make in David Lodge's satirical *Small World*. It is a world of glamorous travel and high excitement, where stuffy lecture rooms are swapped for lush corners of the globe, and romance is in the air . . .

About the Author

David Lodge's novels include *Changing Places*, *Small World*, *Nice Work*, *Thinks . . .*, *Author, Author*, *Deaf Sentence* and, most recently, *A Man of Parts*. He has also written stage plays and screenplays, and several books of literary criticism, including *The Art of Fiction*, *Consciousness and the Novel* and *The Year of Henry James*.

ALSO BY DAVID LODGE

Fiction

The Picturegoers
Ginger, You're Barmy
The British Museum is Falling Down
Out of the Shelter
Changing Places
How Far Can You Go?
Nice Work
Paradise News
Therapy
Home Truths
Thinks . . .
Author, Author
Deaf Sentence
A Man of Parts

Criticism

Language of Fiction
The Novelist at the Crossroads
The Modes of Modern Writing
Working with Structuralism
After Bakhtin

Essays

Write On
The Art of Fiction
The Practice of Writing
Consciousness and the Novel
The Year of Henry James

Drama

The Writing Game
Home Truths

*To Mary
With all my love*

Small World

David Lodge

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Author's Note

LIKE *Changing Places*, to which it is a kind of sequel, *Small World* resembles what is sometimes called the real world, without corresponding exactly to it, and is peopled by figments of the imagination. Rummidge is not Birmingham, though it owes something to popular prejudices about that city. There really is an underground chapel at Heathrow and a James Joyce Pub in Zurich, but no universities in Limerick or Darlington; nor, as far as I know, was there ever a British Council representative resident in Genoa. The MLA Convention of 1979 did not take place in New York, though I have drawn on the programme for the 1978 one, which did. And so on.

Special thanks for information received (not to mention many other favours) are due to Donald and Margot Fanger and Susumu Takagi. Most of the books from which I have derived hints, ideas and inspiration for this one are mentioned in the text, but I should acknowledge a debt to two which are not: *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* by Patricia A. Parker (Princeton University Press, 1979) and *Airport International* by Brian Moynahan (Pan Books, 1978).

Caelum, non animus mutant, qui trans mare currunt.

HORACE

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Hush! Caution! Echoland!

JAMES JOYCE

Prologue

WHEN April with its sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root, and bathed every vein of earth with that liquid by whose power the flowers are engendered; when the zephyr, too, with its dulcet breath, has breathed life into the tender new shoots in every copse and on every heath, and the young sun has run half his course in the sign of the Ram, and the little birds that sleep all night with their eyes open give song (so Nature prompts them in their hearts), then, as the poet Geoffrey Chaucer observed many years ago, folk long to go on pilgrimages. Only, these days, professional people call them conferences.

The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed – the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and form new and interesting relationships with them; exchange gossip and confidences (for your well-worn stories are fresh to them, and vice versa); eat, drink and make merry in their company every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind. Today's conferees have an additional advantage over the pilgrims of old in that their expenses are usually paid, or at least subsidised, by the institution to which they belong, be it a

government department, a commercial firm, or, most commonly perhaps, a university.

There are conferences on almost everything these days, including the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. If, like his hero Troilus at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he looks down from the eighth sphere of heaven on

*This litle spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is*

and observes all the frantic traffic around the globe that he and other great writers have set in motion – the jet trails that criss-cross the oceans, marking the passage of scholars from one continent to another, their paths converging and intersecting and passing, as they hasten to hotel, country house or ancient seat of learning, there to confer and carouse, so that English and other academic subjects may be kept up – what does Geoffrey Chaucer think?

Probably, like the spirit of Troilus, that chivalrous knight and disillusioned lover, he laughs heartily at the spectacle, and considers himself well out of it. For not all conferences are happy, hedonistic occasions; not all conference venues are luxurious and picturesque; not all Aprils, for that matter, are marked by sweet showers and dulcet breezes.

Part I

One

"APRIL is the cruellest month," Persse McGarrigle quoted silently to himself, gazing through grimy windowpanes at the unseasonable snow crusting the lawns and flowerbeds of the Rummidge campus. He had recently completed a Master's dissertation on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, but the opening words of *The Waste Land* might, with equal probability, have been passing through the heads of any one of the fifty-odd men and women, of varying ages, who sat or slumped in the raked rows of seats in the same lecture-room. For they were all well acquainted with that poem, being University Teachers of English Language and Literature, gathered together here, in the English Midlands, for their annual conference, and few of them were enjoying themselves.

Dismay had been already plainly written on many faces when they assembled the previous evening for the traditional sherry reception. The conferees had, by that time, acquainted themselves with the accommodation provided in one of the University's halls of residence, a building hastily erected in 1969, at the height of the boom in higher education, and now, only ten years later, looking much the worse for wear. They had glumly unpacked their suitcases in study-bedrooms whose cracked and pitted walls retained, in a pattern of rectangular fade marks, the traces of posters hurriedly removed (sometimes with portions of plaster adhering to them) by their youthful owners at the commencement of the Easter vacation. They had appraised the stained and broken furniture, explored the dusty interiors of cupboards in vain for coat-hangers, and tested

the narrow beds, whose springs sagged dejectedly in the middle, deprived of all resilience by the battering of a decade's horseplay and copulation. Each room had a washbasin, though not every washbasin had a plug, or every plug a chain. Some taps could not be turned on, and some could not be turned off. For more elaborate ablutions, or to answer a call of nature, it was necessary to venture out into the draughty and labyrinthine corridors in search of one of the communal washrooms, where baths, showers and toilets were to be found – but little privacy, and unreliable supplies of hot water.

To veterans of conferences held in British provincial universities, these were familiar discomforts and, up to a point, stoically accepted; as was the rather inferior sherry served at the reception (a little-known brand that seemed to protest too much its Spanish origins by the lurid depiction of a bullfight *and* a flamenco dancer on the label); as was the dinner which awaited them afterwards – tomato soup, roast beef and two vegetables, jam tart with custard – from every item of which all trace of flavour had been conscientiously removed by prolonged cooking at high temperatures. More than customary aggravation was generated by the discovery that the conference would be sleeping in one building, eating in another, and meeting for lectures and discussions on the main campus, thus ensuring for all concerned a great deal of tiresome walking to and fro on paths and pavements made dangerous and unpleasant by the snow. But the real source of depression, as the conferees gathered for the sherry, and squinted at the little white cardboard lapel badges on which each person's name, and university, were neatly printed, was the paucity and, it must be said, the generally undistinguished quality of their numbers. Within a very short time they had established that none of the stars of the profession was in residence – no one, indeed, whom it would be worth travelling ten miles to meet, let alone the hundreds that many had covered. But

they were stuck with each other for three days: three meals a day, three bar sessions a day, a coach outing and a theatre visit – long hours of compulsory sociability; not to mention the seven papers that would be delivered, followed by questions and discussion. Long before it was all over they would have sickened of each other's company, exhausted all topics of conversation, used up all congenial seating arrangements at table, and succumbed to the familiar conference syndrome of bad breath, coated tongue and persistent headache, that came from smoking, drinking and talking five times as much as normal. The foreknowledge of the boredom and distemper to which they had condemned themselves lay like a cold, oppressive weight on their bowels (which would also be out of order before long) even as they sought to disguise it with bright chatter and hearty bonhomie, shaking hands and clapping backs, gulping down their sherry like medicine. Here and there people could be seen furtively totting up the names on the conference list. Fifty-seven, including the non-resident home team, was a very disappointing turn-out.

So Persse McGarrigle was assured, at the sherry party, by a melancholy-looking elderly man sipping a glass of orange juice into which his spectacles threatened to slide at any moment. The name on his lapel badge was "Dr Rupert Sutcliffe", and the colour of the badge was yellow, indicating that he was a member of the host Department.

"Is that right?" Persse said. "I didn't know what to expect. It's the very first conference I've ever been to."

"UTE conferences vary a lot. It all depends on where it's held. At Oxford or Cambridge you would expect at least a hundred and fifty. I told Swallow nobody would come to Rummidge, but he wouldn't listen."

"Swallow?"

"Our Head of Department." Dr Sutcliffe seemed to have some difficulty in forcing these words between his teeth. "He claimed it would put Rummidge on the map if we

offered to host the conference. Delusions of grandeur, I'm afraid."

"Was it Professor Swallow who was giving out the little badges?"

"No, that's Bob Busby, he's just as bad. Worse, if anything. Been beside himself with excitement for weeks, organizing outings and so forth. I should think we'll lose a pretty penny on this affair," Dr Sutcliffe concluded, with evident satisfaction, looking over his glasses at the half-filled room.

"Hallo, Rupert, old man! A bit thin on the ground, aren't we?"

A man of about forty, dressed in a bright blue suit, hit Sutcliffe vigorously between the shoulder blades as he pronounced these words, causing the latter's spectacles to fly off the end of his nose. Persse caught them neatly and returned them to their owner.

"Oh, it's you, Dempsey," said Sutcliffe, turning to face his assailant.

"Only fifty-seven on the list, and a lot of *them* haven't turned up, by the look of it," said the newcomer, whose lapel badge identified him as Professor Robin Dempsey, from one of the new universities in the north of England. He was a broad-shouldered, thickset man, with a heavy jaw that jutted aggressively, but his eyes, small and set too close together, seemed to belong to some other person, more anxious and vulnerable, trapped inside the masterful physique. Rupert Sutcliffe did not seem overjoyed to see Professor Dempsey, or disposed to share with him his own pessimism about the conference.

"I dare say a lot of people have been held up by the snow," he said coldly. "Shocking weather for April. Excuse me, I see Busby waving urgently. I expect the potato crisps have run out, or some such crisis." He shuffled off.

"God!" said Dempsey, looking round the room. "What a shower! Why did I come?" The question sounded rhetorical,

but Dempsey proceeded to answer it at some length, and without apparently pausing for breath. "I'll tell you why, I came because I have family here, it seemed a good excuse to see them. My children, actually. I'm divorced, you see. I used to work here, in this Department, believe it or not. Christ, what a retarded lot they were, still are by the look of it. The same old faces. Nobody ever seems to move. Old Sutcliffe, for instance, been here forty years, man and boy. Naturally I got out as soon as I could. No place for an ambitious man. The last straw was when they gave a senior lectureship to Philip Swallow instead of me, though I had three books out by then, and he'd published practically nothing. Now - you wouldn't credit it - they've gone and given him the Chair here, and he's still published practically nothing. There's supposed to be a book about Hazlitt - *Hazlitt*, I ask you - it was announced last year, but I've never seen a single review of it. Can't be much good. Well, anyway, as soon as they gave Swallow the senior lectureship, I said to Janet, right, that's it, we're off, put the house up for sale, we're going to Darlington - they'd been wooing me for some time. A Readership straight away, and a free hand to develop my special interests - linguistics and stylistics - they always hated that sort of thing here, blocked me at every turn, talked to students behind my back, persuaded them to drop my courses, I was glad to shake the dust of Rummidge off my feet, I can tell you. That was ten years ago, Darlington was small in those days, still is, I suppose, but it was a challenge, and the students are quite good, you'd be surprised. Anyway, I was happy enough, but unfortunately Janet didn't like it, took against the place as soon as she saw it. Well, the campus is a bit bleak in winter, outside the town, you know, on the edge of the moors, and mostly prefabricated huts in those days, it's better now, we've got rid of the sheep and our Metallurgy building won a prize recently, but at the time, well, anyway, we couldn't sell the house here, there was a freeze on mortgages, so

Janet decided to stay on in Rummidge for a while, we thought it would be better for the kids anyway, Desmond was in his last year at junior school, so I commuted, came home every weekend, well, nearly every weekend, it was a bit hard on Janet, hard on me, too, of course, and then I met this girl, a postgraduate student of mine, well, you can appreciate that I was pretty lonely up there, it was inevitable when you come to think of it, I said to Janet, it was inevitable – she found out about the girl, you see . . .”

He broke off, frowning into his sherry glass. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this,” he said, shooting a slightly resentful look at Persse, who had been puzzled on the same score for several minutes. “I don’t even know who you are.” He bent forward to read Persse’s lapel badge. “University College, Limerick, eh?” he said, with a leer. “*There was a young lecturer from Limerick* . . . I suppose everyone says that to you.”

“Nearly everyone,” Persse admitted. “But, you know, they very seldom get further than the first line. There aren’t many rhymes to ‘Limerick’.”

“What about ‘*dip his wick*’?” said Dempsey, after a moment’s reflection. “That should have possibilities.”

“What does it mean?”

Dempsey looked surprised. “Well, it means, you know, having it off. Screwing.”

Persse blushed. “The metre’s all wrong,” he said. “‘Limerick’ is a dactyl.”

“Oh? What’s ‘dip his wick’, then?”

“I’d say it was a catalectic trochee.”

“Would you, indeed? Interested in prosody, are you?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“I bet you write poetry yourself, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, I do.”

“I thought so. You have that look about you. There’s no money in it, you know.”

"So I've discovered," said Persse. "Did you marry the girl, then?"

"What?"

"The postgraduate student. Did you marry her?"

"Oh. No. No, she went her way. Like they all do, eventually." Dempsey swilled the dregs of his sherry at the bottom of his glass.

"And your wife won't have you back?"

"Can't, can she? She's got another bloke now."

"I'm very sorry," said Persse.

"Oh, I don't let it get me down," said Dempsey unconvincingly. "I don't regret the move. It's a good place, Darlington. They've just bought a new computer especially for me."

"And you're a professor, now," said Persse respectfully.

"Yes, I'm a professor now," Dempsey agreed. His face darkened as he added, "So is Swallow, of course."

"Which one *is* Professor Swallow?" Persse enquired, looking round the room.

"He's here somewhere." Dempsey rather unwillingly scanned the sherry drinkers in search of Philip Swallow.

At that moment the knots of chatting conferees seemed to loosen and part, as if by some magical impulsion, opening up an avenue between Persse and the doorway. There, hesitating on the threshold, was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life. She was tall and graceful, with a full, womanly figure, and a dark, creamy complexion. Black hair fell in shining waves to her shoulders, and black was the colour of her simple woollen dress, scooped out low across her bosom. She took a few paces forward into the room and accepted a glass of sherry from the tray offered to her by a passing waitress. She did not drink at once, but held the glass up to her face as if it were a flower. Her right hand held the stem of the glass between index finger and thumb. Her left, passed horizontally across her waist, supported her right elbow. Over the rim of the glass she

looked with eyes dark as peat pools straight into Persse's own, and seemed to smile faintly in greeting. She raised the glass to her lips, which were red and moist, the underlip slightly swollen in appearance, as though it had been stung. She drank, and he saw the muscles in her throat move and slide under the skin as she swallowed. "Heavenly God!" Persse breathed, quoting again, this time from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Then, to his extreme annoyance, a tall, slim, distinguished-looking man of middle age, with a rather dashing silver-grey beard, and a good deal of wavy hair of the same hue around the back and sides of his head, but not much on top, darted forward to greet the girl, blocking Persse's view of her.

"There's Swallow," said Dempsey.

"What?" said Persse, coming slowly out of his trance.

"Swallow is the man chatting up that rather dishy girl who just came in, the one in the black dress, or should I say half out of it? Swallow seems to be getting an eyeful, doesn't he?"

Persse flushed and stiffened with a chivalrous urge to protect the girl from insult. Professor Swallow, leaning forward to scrutinize her lapel badge, did indeed seem to be peering rudely down her décolletage.

"Fine pair of knockers there, wouldn't you say?" Dempsey remarked.

Persse turned on him fiercely. "Knockers? *Knockers*? Why in the name of God call them that?"

Dempsey backed away slightly. "Steady on. What would you call them, then?"

"I would call them . . . I would call them . . . twin domes of her body's temple," said Persse.

"Christ, you really are a poet, aren't you? Look, excuse me, I think I'll grab another sherry while there's still time." And Dempsey shouldered his way to the nearest waitress, leaving Persse alone.

But not alone! Miraculously, the girl had materialized at his elbow.

"Hallo, what's your name?" she said, peering at his lapel. "I can't read these little badges without my glasses." Her voice was strong but melodious, slightly American in accent, but with a trace of something else he could not identify.

"Persse McGarrigle – from Limerick," he eagerly replied.

"Perce? Is that short for Percival?"

"It could be," said Persse, "if you like."

The girl laughed, revealing teeth that were perfectly even and perfectly white. "What do you mean, if I like?"

"It's a variant of 'Pearce'." He spelled it out for her.

"Oh, like in *Finnegans Wake*! The Ballad of Persse O'Reilley."

"Exactly so. Persse, Pearce, Pierce – I wouldn't be surprised if they were not all related to Percival. Percival, *per se*, as Joyce might have said," he added, and was rewarded with another dazzling smile.

"What about McGarrigle?"

"It's an old Irish name that means 'Son of Super-valour'."

"That must take a lot of living up to."

"I do my best," said Persse. "And your own name . . . ?" He inclined his head towards the magnificent bosom, appreciating, now, why Professor Swallow had appeared to be almost nuzzling it in his attempt to read the badge pinned there, for the name was not boldly printed, like everyone else's, but written in a minute italic script. "*A. L. Pabst*," it austerely stated. There was no indication of which university she belonged to.

"Angelica," she volunteered.

"Angelica!" Persse exhaled rather than pronounced the syllables. "That's a beautiful name!"

"Pabst is a bit of a let-down, though, isn't it? Not in the same class as 'Son of Super-valour'."

"Would it be a German name?"

"I suppose it was originally, though Daddy is Dutch."

"You don't look German or Dutch."

"No?" she smiled. "What do I look then?"

"You look Irish. You remind me of the women in the southwest of Ireland whose ancestors intermarried with the sailors of the Spanish Armada that was shipwrecked on the coast of Munster in the great storm of 1588. They have just your kind of looks."

"What a romantic idea! It could be true, too. I have no idea where I came from originally."

"How's that?"

"I'm an adopted child."

"What does the 'L' stand for?"

"A rather silly name. I'd rather not tell you."

"Then why draw attention to it?"

"If you use initials in the academic world, people think you're a man and take you more seriously."

"No one could mistake you for a man, Angelica," Persse said sincerely.

"I mean in correspondence. Or publications."

"Have you published much?"

"No, not a lot. Well, nothing, yet, actually. I'm still working on my PhD. Did you say you teach at Limerick? Is it a big Department?"

"Not very big," said Persse. "As a matter of fact, there's only the three of us. It's basically an agricultural college. We've only recently started offering a general arts degree. Do you mean to say that you don't know who your real parents were?"

"No idea at all. I was a foundling."

"And where were you found, if that isn't an impertinent question?"

"It *is* a little intimate, considering we've only just met," said Angelica. "But never mind. I was found in the toilet of a KLM Stratocruiser flying from New York to Amsterdam. I was six weeks old. Nobody knows how I got there."

"Did Mr Pabst find you?"

“No, Daddy was an executive of KLM at the time. He and Mummy adopted me, as they had no children of their own. Have you really only three members of staff in your Department?”

“Yes. There’s Professor McCreedy – he’s Old English. And Dr Quinlan – Middle English. I’m Modern English.”

“What? All of it? From Shakespeare to . . . ?”

“T. S. Eliot. I did my MA thesis on Shakespeare’s influence on T. S. Eliot.”

“You must be worked to death.”

“Well, we don’t have a great number of students, to tell you the truth. Not many people know we exist. Professor McCreedy believes in keeping a low profile . . . And yourself, Angelica, where do you teach?”

“I haven’t got a proper job at the moment.” Angelica frowned, and began to look about her a trifle distractedly, as if in search of employment, so that Persse missed the crucial word in her next sentence. “I did some part-time teaching at . . .” she said. “But now I’m trying to finish my doctoral dissertation.”

“What is it on?” Persse asked.

Angelica turned her peat-dark eyes upon him. “Romance,” she said.

At that moment a gong sounded to announce dinner, and there was a general surge towards the exit in the course of which Persse got separated from Angelica. To his chagrin, he found himself obliged to sit between two medievalists, one from Oxford and one from Aberystwyth, who, leaning back at dangerous angles on their chairs, conducted an animated discussion about Chaucerian metrics behind his back, while he bent forward over his roast shoe-leather and cast longing looks up to the other end of the table, where Philip Swallow and Robin Dempsey were vying to entertain Angelica Pabst.

“If you are looking for the gravy, young man, it’s right under your nose.”

This observation came from an elderly lady sitting opposite Persse. Though her tone was sharp, her face was friendly, and she allowed herself a smile of complicity when Persse expressed his opinion that the beef was beyond the help of gravy. She wore a black silk dress of antique design and her white hair was neatly retained in a snood decorated with tiny beads of jet. Her name badge identified her as Miss Sybil Maiden, of Girton College, Cambridge. "Retired many years ago," she explained. "But I still attend these conferences whenever I can. It helps to keep me young."

Persse enquired about her scholarly interests.

"I suppose you would call me a folklorist," she said. "I was a pupil of Jessie Weston's. What is your own line of research?"

"I did my Master's thesis on Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot."

"Then you are no doubt familiar with Miss Weston's book, *From Ritual to Romance*, on which Mr Eliot drew for much of the imagery and allusion in *The Waste Land*?"

"Indeed I am," said Persse.

"She argued," Miss Maiden continued, not at all deterred by this answer, "that the quest for the Holy Grail, associated with the Arthurian knights, was only superficially a Christian legend, and that its true meaning was to be sought in pagan fertility ritual. If Mr Eliot had taken her discoveries to heart, we might have been spared the maudlin religiosity of his later poetry."

"Well," said Persse placatingly, "I suppose everyone is looking for his own Grail. For Eliot it was religious faith, but for another it might be fame, or the love of a good woman."

"Would you mind passing the gravy?" said the Oxford medievalist. Persse obliged.

"It all comes down to sex, in the end," Miss Maiden declared firmly. "The life force endlessly renewing itself." She fixed the gravy boat in the Oxford medievalist's hand with a beady eye. "The Grail cup, for instance, is a female symbol of great antiquity and universal occurrence." (The

Oxford medievalist seemed to have second thoughts about helping himself to gravy.) “And the Grail spear, supposed to be the one that pierced the side of Christ, is obviously phallic. *The Waste Land* is really all about Eliot’s fears of impotence and sterility.”

“I’ve heard that theory before,” said Persse, “but I feel it’s too simple.”

“I quite agree,” said the Oxford medievalist. “This business of phallic symbolism is a lot of rot.” He stabbed the air with his knife to emphasize the point.

Preoccupied with this discussion, Persse failed to observe when Angelica left the dining-room. He looked for her in the bar, but she was not to be found there, or anywhere else that evening. Persse went to bed early, and tossed restlessly on his narrow, lumpy mattress, listening to the plumbing whining in the walls, footfalls in the corridor outside his room, and the sounds of doors slamming and engines starting in the car park beneath his window. Once he thought he heard the voice of Angelica calling “Goodnight,” but by the time he got to the window there was nothing to be seen except the fading embers of a departing car’s rear lights. Before he got back into bed he switched on the lamp above his sink, and stared critically at his reflection in the mirror. He saw a white, round, freckled face, snub nose, pale blue eyes, and a mop of red curly hair. “I wouldn’t say you were handsome, exactly,” he murmured. “But I’ve seen uglier mugs.”

Angelica was not present at the first formal session of the conference the next morning, which was one reason why Persse muttered “April is the cruellest month” under his breath as he sat in the lecture-room. Other reasons included the continuing cold, damp weather, which had not been anticipated by the Rummidge heating engineers, the inedibility of the bacon and tomatoes served at breakfast that morning, and the tedium of the paper to which he was

listening. It was being given by the Oxford medievalist and was on the subject of Chaucerian metrics. He had heard the substance of it already, last night at dinner, and it did not improve on reacquaintance.

Persse yawned and shifted his weight from one buttock to another in his seat at the back of the lecture-room. He could not see the faces of many of his colleagues, but as far as could be judged from their postures, most of them were as disengaged from the discourse as himself. Some were leaning back as far as their seats allowed, staring vacantly at the ceiling, others were slumped forwards onto the desks that separated each row, resting their chins on folded arms, and others again were sprawled sideways over two or three seats, with their legs crossed and arms dangling limply to the floor. In the third row a man was surreptitiously doing *The Times* crossword, and at least three people appeared to be asleep. Someone, a student presumably, had carved into the surface of the desk at which Persse sat, cutting deep into the wood with the force of a man driven to the limits of endurance, the word “BORING”. Another had scratched the message, “*Swallow is a wanker.*” Persse saw no reason to dissent from either of these judgments.

Suddenly, though, there were signs of animation in the audience. The speaker was commencing his peroration, and had made reference to something called “structuralism”.

“Of course, to our friends across the Channel,” he said, with a slight curl of his lip, “everything I have been saying will seem vanity and illusion. To the structuralists, metre, like language itself, is merely a system of differences. The idea that there might be anything inherently expressive or mimetic in patterns of stress would be anathema . . .”

Some, probably the majority, of the audience, smiled and nodded and nudged each other. Others frowned, bit their lips and began making rapid notes. The question session, chaired by the Aberystwyth medievalist, was lively.

There followed a break for coffee, which was served in a small common-room not far away. Persse was delighted to find Angelica already ensconced here, fetchingly dressed in a roll-neck jumper, tweed skirt and high leather boots. Her cheeks had a healthy glow. She had been for a walk. "I slept through breakfast," she explained, "and I was too late for the lecture."

"You didn't miss much," said Persse. "Both were indigestible. What happened to you last night? I looked all over for you."

"Oh, Professor Swallow asked some people back to his house for a drink."

"You're a friend of his, then, are you?"

"No. Well, not really. I've never met him before, if that's what you mean. But he *is* very friendly."

"Hmmpf," said Persse.

"What was the paper about, this morning?" Angelica asked.

"It was supposed to be about Chaucer's metre, but the discussion was mostly about structuralism."

Angelica looked annoyed. "Oh, what a nuisance that I missed it. I'm very interested in structuralism."

"What is it, exactly?"

Angelica laughed.

"No, I'm serious," said Persse. "What is structuralism? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?"

Angelica looked puzzled, and wary of having her leg pulled. "But you must know something about it, Persse. You must have *heard of* it, even in . . . Where did you do your graduate work?"

"University College Dublin. But I wasn't there much of the time. I had TB, you see. They were very decent about it, let me work on my dissertation in the sanatorium. I had a visit from my supervisor occasionally, but mostly I worked on my own. Then before that, I did my BA at Galway. We never heard anything about structuralism there. Then after I got

my Master's degree, I went home to work on the farm for two years. My people are farmers, in county Mayo."

"Did you mean to be a farmer yourself?"

"No, it was to get my strength back, after the TB. The doctors said an open-air life was the thing."

"And did you – get your strength back?"

"Oh yes, I'm sound as a bell, now." He struck himself vigorously on the chest. "Then I got the job at Limerick."

"You were lucky. Jobs are hard to find these days."

"I *was* lucky," Persse agreed. "Indeed I was. I found out afterwards that I was called to the interview by mistake. They really meant to interview another fellow called McGarrigle – some high-flying prize scholar from Trinity. But the letter was addressed to me – someone slipped up in the Registry – and they were too embarrassed to retract the invitation."

"Well, you made the most of the lucky break," said Angelica. "They could have appointed one of the other candidates."

"Well, that was another piece of luck," said Persse. "There *were* no other candidates – not called for interview anyway. They were quite sure they wanted to appoint this McGarrigle fellow, and they were after saving train fares. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I've never been in what you might call the swim, intellectually speaking. That's why I've come to this conference. To improve myself. To find out what's going on in the great world of ideas. Who's in, who's out, and all that. So tell me about structuralism."

Angelica took a deep breath, then expelled it abruptly. "It's hard to know where to start," she said. A bell sounded to summon them back to the lecture room. "Saved by the bell!" she laughed.

"Later, then," Persse urged.

"I'll see what I can do," said Angelica.

As the conferees shuffled back towards the lecture-room for the second paper of the morning, they cast wistful

glances over their shoulders at the figure of the Oxford medievalist shaking hands with Philip Swallow. He had his overcoat on and his briefcase in his hand. "That's the trouble with these conferences," Persse heard someone say, "the chief speakers tend to bugger off as soon as they've done their party piece. Makes you feel like a besieged army when the general flies out in a helicopter."

"Are you coming, Persse?" Angelica enquired.

Persse looked at his programme. "'Animal Imagery in Dryden's Heroic Tragedies'," he read aloud.

"It could be interesting," Angelica said earnestly.

"I think I'll sit this one out," said Persse. "I think I'll write a poem instead."

"Oh, do you write poetry? What kind?"

"Short poems," said Persse. "Very short poems."

"Like *haikus*?"

"Shorter than that, sometimes."

"Goodness! What are you going to write about?"

"You can read it when it's finished."

"All right. I'll look forward to that. I'd better go." A vaguely smiling Philip Swallow hovered nearby, like a sheepdog rounding up strays.

"I'll see you in the bar before lunch, then," said Persse. He made a show of hurrying to the Gents, intending to loiter there until the lecture on Dryden had begun. To his consternation, however, Philip Swallow, accompanied by Bob Busby, followed him. Persse locked himself in a closet and sat down on the toilet seat. The two men seemed to be talking about a missing speaker as they stood at the urinal. "When did he phone?" Philip Swallow was saying, and Busby replied, "About two hours ago. He said he would do his best to get here by this afternoon. I told him to spare no expense." "Did you?" said Swallow. "I'm not sure that was entirely wise, Bob."

Persse heard the spurt of tapwater at the sinks, the rattle of the towel dispenser, and the banging of the door as the