

Consciousness and the Novel

David Lodge

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David Lodge has become intrigued by the recent scientific interest into consciousness and has as a consequence read up on the literature. He does, however, seem to suffer from a major misunderstanding, namely that the novelist has a special insight into consciousness and hence that the study of the Novel may at least complement the frustrated efforts of Science. Such a misunderstanding must be considered quite naive. As to consciousness, we are all experts, at least as regards to our own. The probably impossible quest of science to afford some kind of real understanding of consciousness in terms of neurons and brain architecture, is something quite different from having a first hand acquaintance with your own qualia. We do not need Science to tell us that we have conscious minds. The real issue Lodge should have addressed is to what extent imagined fictional characters have an 'independant consciousness' only partially under the conscious control of the author. On the face of it such a statement is absurd, clearly fictional characters can possess no inner life, and are but shadowy representations of a writer. Still, why do writers over and over again report that the characters they create seem to live lives of their own? Many fictional characters are as vivid to their readers as their own acquaintances, and definitely as the characters that make up our more or less common brood of so called celebrities. It was reported that the death of a Dickens heroine caused intense public grief. Something similar was at stake at the public manifestation of grief at the death of Princess Diane. As far as the public was concerned, both were in effect fictional characters, and the grief a vicarious path for the outlet of the sentimental indulging in the emotions of loss without the concomitant pain of real deprivation. Logically we can only be assured of our own consciousness, and those of others remain one of sympathetic inference. This is the true meaning of solipsism, not that you are everything, but that there are no other beings, to whom you are just possibly a phantom.

The collection of essays presented in the volume, does only intermittently touch upon the issue of consciousness, and if so only obliquely. Most of the chapters are rather straightforward literay criticism presented in non-technical terms and intended for the larger untutored audience. Such an approach puts ultimate demands on the writer to come up with striking insights and not only to present trite observations.

As a writer of fiction himself, one expects Lodge to divulge some trade-secrets, but he refuses to do so. Either because, as he claims, he possess no priviligued insights into the workings of his mind when creating fiction, or because of a reluctance, like all magicians, to spill the beans. I suspect, tantalizing hints to the contrary, that the former is actually the case. Still one or two tidbits of confessions slip through, to which I will return.

Thus the book consists mainly on discussing a few well-known writers, the excuse either being a review of a biograhly, or a foreword or some other lecture. About Dickens, whom he puts next to Shakespeare, his fascination seems to revolve mainly about his status as a celebrity. With Dickens the author emerged from a prefered anonymity to the very

pinnacle of celebration, and it is doubtful whether Dickens status as a popular icon has ever been repeated. Nevertheless it has set a precedent, and nowadays, even minor writers can expect a sort of stardom with the appropriate financial compensations attached.

Henry James is quite another figure. He wrote intentionally for the high-brows, a rather fastidious prose, dispensing with exciting plots focusing on the inner lives of characters; still he resented his lack of popular success. In recent years he has ironically had a come-back through movie versions of his books. This is truly ironic, because after all the essence of his work is exactly that kind of thing that the medium of the film cannot even try seriously to convey. On the other hand, the irony resides in the very fact that just because so little remains after the unfilmable core has been thrown out, it is manageable for the standard full-length movie. As there are so few characters, all of them can appear; and there are also bound to be a few stretches of witty conversations, providing some memorable lines. Unlike Hardy and D.H.Lawrence, there is little visual description in a novel by James, but that is of course no impediment. What the film-medium can really indulge in, is visualizations to complement the prose. Mass-education and mass-production of say Penguin Classics has put James on the map of the public, and there will be enough people to cherish having their favourite novels retrospectively illustrated, and those who have not read, can have 'culture' suitably 'pre-digested'.

The generation of writers that Lodge singles out are those he terms the post-modernists. Those writers that came on the scene after James, Joyce and Woolf. No more experiments in form and realism, no more attempts to render the inner lives, the streams of consciousness, and the mundane trivialities of living. Back to basics. Simple prose, all surface. The less the better. Hemingway comes to mind of course, but more congenial to Lodge is Evelyn Waugh, the mock-comic catholic writer, hiding his serious attempts, just like Lodge himself, under a veil of high-comedy, maybe as an alibi against high-pretentious failure. The piece on Waugh trails off without any kind of conclusion or even closure. Later on there is Kingsley Amis and son, the son more successful than the father, a near-celebrity. The relations between father and son, both novelists, invariably fascinates Lodge. The father comes out as a rather boorish guy, whose main redeeming feature as a human, as well as literary figure, may have been his epistolary friendship with Philip Larkin, achieving the kind of no-holds-barred intimacy denied him in the heterosexual flesh. Roth fascinates (and awes?) him with his energy and productivity, but his retelling of the story of that authors latest novel seems a bit pointless. Maybe the most original feature of the authorial portraits is that of E.M.Forester and the greatness of his 'Howards End' in spite of all its apparent flaws. The explanation given being that it centers on a still unresolved conflict, that between higher culture and its financial under-pinnings.

The concluding piece, more like an appendix, is rather awful. An interview with Lodge on the subject of his latest novel - 'Thinks.' The interviewer has read the novel very carefully phrasing his questions in a very professional way, which obviously strikes Lodge as distasteful. Unwittingly the interviewer reveals the pitfalls of subjecting works of fiction to a too close a scrutiny. One repetition he has discovered, and which to Lodges dismay appears to have been over-looked and hence unintentional (and as he points out, all unintended repetitions are mistakes), and (maliciously ?) prods the interviewee about its significance.

One confession as a writer Lodge makes. As a writer it is easy to fake erudition, as a reader naturally thinks that what is presented is just the tip of the proverbial, when in fact it is just the tip, there is nothing submerged below the surface (because the density of the knowledge is too fluffy to force any kind of submersion?). One is naturally reminded of Huxley, who revealed that as a journalist, one can easily present the illusion of wide reading, just by consulting some sources in the library for an hour.

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