

## The practice of writing

*D.Lodge*

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Writing shop. How is a novel, or more generally any piece of fiction written? The question arouses curiosity. How is the imagination kindled and tapped? Memoirs of writers are legio. This is to be expected. Thus the surface of a writers life is well documented. But how is it done? The memoirs, the critical comments, the essays, they do not reveal. Why? Perhaps because there is nothing to reveal beyond inspiration, obsession, preserverance and discipline.

Can writing be taught like painting? Creative writing-courses, by many considered a contradiction in terms are rather popular, filled with naive hopefuls and conducted by jaded second-rate writers. What is being taught really? David Lodge admits nothing but the subjection to criticism of what you have written, as well as a language with which to describe and criticise. The creative impulse has to come from within. There are no tricks, no subject-matters, no methods that invariably works.

Fabulation is something all people are endowed with, unlike say painting in which instruction has to be supplied. Almost any piece of conversation entails some rudimentary formulation, any day-dreaming some primitive making up. Thus in principle everyone can do it, dreams testifying at least to the unconscious potential. People who read a lot have an obvious edge. They have been provided models of emulations, as well as inspiring provocations to try their hands at creating themselves directly what they have learned to thoroughly enjoy second-hand. But it is not easy to write something that grips, which does not interest merely the author and his close of kin. The professional may be less sentimental than the amatuere. More phrone to discard what does not work, less attached to his own smell.

The present book is a collection. The first part consisting of literary essays, the second containing rather elabourate documentations of Lodges own attempt to cross over as a writer of plays and adopting work (his own as well that of Dickens) to the TV. Those were heady experiences for a novelist and academic used to solitary pursuits. To stage a play involves so many others, and necessitates reworking and compromise. To write and adapt for the screen even more so. The writer losing complete control, but as in the case of the not supreme master (including Lodge of course), this usually means a better product in the end, a realization to teach some humility. Of the two parts of the book, the latter is clearly the most original and interesting as when it comes to probing under the skin of a writer, as well as being for long stretches the most tedious in execution.

As to the former we have reviews of works, biographies and assessments of authors intended for magazines and meetings. Greene, Waugh and James Joyce having been seminal in their influence on Lodge himself, the fact of sharing the Catholic faith not being an insignificant component. Greene is clearly the most decisive, involving a few personal meetings as well. Greene appears to have been something of a human monster, but life and art should be kept separated, although the allure of biography hinges on the deliberate failure

to do so. Joyce is a demi-urge, in many ways beyond reach; Greene just within. Both being writers' writers although the latter also enjoyed commercial recognition. Greene is often acclaimed as the supreme stylist, although one of effacement rather than ostentatiousness, and thus only consciously appreciated by those in the know. A rather mundane sentence in the works of Greene is given as an example of a masterpiece. It gives you the impression that you are missing something. But there are also writers' writers' writers, Henry Green being a supreme example. Limited recognition among the general reading public, but a true master of the craft.

D.H. Lawrence and Nabokov are anomalies. Lawrence as the only working-class writer of note in English literature. And Nabokov an import, a linguistic cross-over, the kind of animal that is not supposed to exist. A novel consists of *nuclei*, key passages that carries the story forward, and *catalysers*, passages of description and digression, done for the beauty of it. Most readers tend to concentrate on the former, skimming through the latter. In Nabokov the proportion of catalysers to nuclei is very high. His writing is a kind of game, often ending in death, actual or pondered. His own father was assassinated by mistake. Obviously a traumatic experience, yet one surmises not deep enough to explain. The novelist is a hoarder, Lodge explains, wanting to collect facts, and to document life, just to stem the inevitable extinction. It is ultimate extinction not just physical death that engages Nabokov, giving to his works their particular poignancy.

Lawrence, a delicate mother-bound intelligent child. To such chastity is a fate, out of which he may late break out of. Lawrence, in spite of his special reputation was no exception. Yet he was strong-willed, which explains his elopement with Frieda, one of the great literary love-affairs. He treated women abominably, but what writer did not?

Kingsley Amis a young angry man of the 50's, making it with 'Lucky Jim'. And Anthony Burgess coming to writing late in life (as opposed to sexual experience in which he was singularly precocious) but making up for it. The collection of writers (including Lodge himself) discussed is haphazard but not unpredictable. The essays are of a disparate and somewhat uneven quality (some of them simply dreadful), as to be expected, obviously collected to cash in on his marketability.

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