

## A Novel by David Lodge

a postscript to *Untied Kingdom* (where some novels of the age are discussed)

David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988, paperback edition quoted 1989) is one of the few contemporary novels I don't intend to send to the charity shop. It was recommended—by a friend whose opinions I listen to—as a modern condition-of-England novel, and does present a meeting of at least two parts of England, the arts faculty of the university, and manufacturing industry. *Nice Work* is sharp and well-imagined. But one major shortcoming prevents me from putting it into a group with *Sybil*, *Alton Locke*, or *North and South*, let alone *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*. The condition-of-England novels of the 1840s give a spread of English society in characters who can all one way or another be taken as serious representatives of different parts and tendencies. I think David Lodge does a bit of this with Victor Wilcox, the not quite philistine and not quite religious manager of a not quite successful Midlands foundry. I don't know anything about running factories, but Lodge does for me get inside a man who is really serious in his way and who can be taken, more so than the earlier Wilcox of *Howards End*, as representative of a class. (In fact I wish I could believe they are as good as Victor.) The same cannot be said of his representative of academe, Robyn Penrose, the bright young English lecturer, up to the minute with her thinking but in danger of losing her job because of staffing cuts—and Lodge doesn't know. He does of course know, inside out, the terminology of the young Deconstructionists of the 1980s, and he accurately makes Robyn the academic feminist of the day. What he doesn't see is what a mindless person she is, that her clever sort of stupidity warps judgement and blights life. It makes her, for instance, incapable of understanding love and therefore incapable of loving fully, as is shown in her rather hideous affair with Charles, the complementary academic who goes off to be a merchant banker. Wilcox's love for Robyn may be grotesque but does exist. At one decisive moment Robyn is stupid and Vic intelligent.

Earlier, Robyn has (quite improperly) intervened in the running of the factory to try to safeguard the job of a worker of immigrant origin, Danny Ram.

"Vic," she said, shaking her head sadly, "How many times do I have to tell you: I don't believe in that individualistic sort of love."

"So you say," he said.

She bridled a little at that. "Are you suggesting that I don't mean it?"

"I thought it was impossible to mean what we say or say what we mean," he said. "I thought there was always a slippage between the I that speaks and the I that is spoken of."

"Oh, ho!" said Robyn, planting her hands on her hips. "We *are* learning fast, aren't we?"

"The point is," he said. "If you don't believe in love, why do you take such care over your students? Why do you care about Danny Ram?"

Robyn blushed. "That's quite different."

"No, it's not. You care about them because they're individuals."

Game set and match to Victor, and I conjecture that Lodge can write Victor because he is or was a Roman Catholic. Wilcox not only has a better understanding of love, he exposes Robyn Penrose's intellectual incoherence. The passage continues,

"I care about them because I care about knowledge and freedom."

"Words. Knowledge and freedom are just words."

"That's all there is in the last analysis. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*."

"What?"

"There's nothing outside the text."

"I don't accept that," he said, lifting his chin and locking his gaze on hers. "It would mean we have no free will."

"Not necessarily," said Robyn. "Once you realize there is nothing outside the text, you can begin to write it yourself."<sup>1</sup>

If there is nothing outside the text, knowledge and freedom as are as arbitrary as love, and there can be no such thing as "the last analysis".

But in the novel Robyn Penrose is taken for the best “teacher” in the department, complimented by Vic Wilcox himself on being “really good at it” and “a natural teacher”,<sup>1</sup> and she has the happy ending of being allowed to stay there, God help her.

Never trust the artist, trust the tale: if the tale shows the mindless shallowness of one bit of England, whether it is against the will of the novelist doesn’t matter? It would say something about his judgement of his own work though. But how do we know he shares the general opinion of Robyn as thinker? In this case there is evidence of a kind that is irrefutable unless one is to accuse David Lodge of deliberately misleading his public or publishing a work of fiction as an academic monograph, for he himself cites Robyn Penrose as an authority in *The Art of Fiction*<sup>2</sup> as part of a very unconvincing argument that in that wonderful moment of *Women in Love* with Gerald Crich on the mare at the crossing “the train ‘symbolises’ the mining industry, which is a product of culture in the anthropological sense, and that the horse, a creature of Nature, symbolises the countryside.” Robyn comes in as authority for the view that “Metonymy substitutes cause for effect or vice versa (the locomotive stands for Industry because it is an effect of the Industrial Revolution) and synecdoche substitutes part for whole or vice versa (the horse stands for Nature because it is part of Nature).”<sup>3</sup> Vic Wilcox would have been too mannerly to say “Bollocks!” But no, the steam engine and coal-trucks, the horse, the man, don’t stand for anything. They don’t symbolise, they (actually in a condition-of-England kind of way) exemplify. Reading the account of the horse’s terror and submission one does not think Nature is being terrorised into submission by Capitalism: it’s this horse and Gerald Crich. This fact is known to the common reader but not to the literary theorist.

Perhaps if Lodge had been a clearer-minded critic he would have written a better novel. As it is, *Nice Work* demands criticism. This is not faint praise.

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1 p. 355

2 1992; quoted *Critical Anthology* AQA GCSE Advanced Level for use in 2010, 2011, 2012, pp. 15–16, citing *Nice Work*, pp. 222–3

3 Wilcox chooses Robyn’s doctrine of metaphor and metonymy in support of his admiration of her teaching; *Nice Work*, p. 355.