

Consciousness Constrained

Paul De Palma

Here is Huckleberry Finn at the opening of Mark Twain's great novel: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There were things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth." I haven't even gotten my reading light adjusted, and already I am stuck in the conundrum that is present on every page of David Lodge's generous novel. Who is talking here? More importantly, whom should I believe? Huck? "Mr. Mark Twain" disguised as Huck? However I slice it, there's a problem. If the author, posing as the narrator, commenting on the author's honesty, is telling the truth, then the narrator himself is a liar; in which case, our Mr. Mark Twain might well customarily be honest. It's an old story: Epimenides, a Cretan, declares that all Cretans are liars. Whichever meaning I assign his words, I am forced to admit that Huck's report on his inner state might be more nuanced than a boy's adventure story would normally warrant. I am also on to what Lodge's scientist antihero, Ralph Messenger, calls the central problem of consciousness: "How to give an objective, third-person account of a subjective, first-person phenomenon" (and its implication: the experience of consciousness is private), to which Helen Reed, novelist and the champion of prescientific knowledge, immediately replies: "Oh, but novelists have been doing that for the last two hundred years." The battle has begun. In the words of

the old Union song, "Which side are you on?"¹

To paraphrase Huck, you don't know about David Lodge without you have read *Small World*, a wonderful and zany romp through the academic conference circuit. There we met Morris Zapp, a thinly disguised Stanley Fish, professor of English at Euphoria State, an even more thinly disguised Berkeley. I read these lines as a new and quite untenured professor:

Morris was shown into his well-appointed suite on the second floor, and stepped out on to his balcony to inhale the air, scented with the perfume of various spring blossoms, and to enjoy

■ *Thinks*, David Lodge, New York, Penguin, 2002, 352 pp., \$14.00, ISBN 0142000868.

the prospect. Down on the terrace, the other resident scholars were gathering for the pre-lunch aperitif. He had glimpsed the table laid for lunch in the dining-room on his way up: starched white napery, crystal glass, menu cards. He surveyed the scene with complacency. He felt sure he was going to enjoy his stay here. Not the least of its attractions was that it was entirely free. All you had to do, to come and stay in this idyllic retreat, pampered by servants and lavishly provided with food and drink, given every facility for reflection and recreation, was to apply. Of course you had to be distinguished by, for instance, having applied suc-

cessfully for other, similar handouts, grants, fellowships and so on, in the past. That was the beauty of academic life, as Morris saw it. To them that had had, more would be given (Lodge 1986, p. 172).

A few pages later, Professor Zapp reflects on a letter to a colleague: "Morris read through the letter. Was it a shade too fulsome? No, that was another law of academic life: it is impossible to be excessive in the flattery of one's peers." I was sold.

Thinks... is David Lodge's latest visit to the wilds of academe, although this time not to the English Department—that's an easy trip for a novelist—but to a fictional University of Gloucester, anchored, like a dying shopping mall, by the Humanities Tower at one end and the Holt-Belling Center for Cognitive Science at the other, with not much beyond hope and a decimated English education budget in between. Here we meet Ralph Messenger, cognitive scientist, television personality (he's a regular on the British version of the Discovery Channel), and womanizer extraordinaire. Messenger, as his wife calls him, is the rare fictional scientist that is neither heroic nor mad. No Dr. Frankenstein he, Ralph's ambitions seem not to reach beyond bedding visiting professors and the accolade of underlings. Here is Messenger, to his tape-recorded journal, on the Nobel Prize: "I wonder what it's like, really like to win a Nobel...the qualia of Nobleness...it must be like, what's the word for becoming a god...apotheosis, yes...suddenly you become invulnerable, immortal.... You simply bask in its glory, its glamour surrounds you like a halo wherever you go...you fall asleep every night smiling in the knowledge that you are a Nobel prizewinner and you wake happy, not knowing why immediately, then remembering...every day of your life that is your first conscious thought....I won the Nobel." This soliloquy is several long strides beyond tortured genius, the role usually offered to scientists in film and fiction. In fact, the self-serving, sometimes even self-mocking, narciss-

sism—I mean this is in the technical, psychoanalytic sense—that fairly leaps from every Messenger scene makes *Thinks...* more than just another hymn to the human spirit like, say, the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, or yet another meditation on scientific hubris in the long tradition of Dr. Faustus.

The narrative structure of the novel is itself an experiment on ways to give an objective account of subjectivity (Lancaster 2002). Helen Reed is the matter to Ralph's anti. Novelist, widow, guilt-racked ex-Catholic, she is our entrée—because she is Lodge's—into the world of science. Reed accepts a semester appointment to the University of Gloucester to recover from the recent death of her husband. We know Helen mostly through her journal, which is (what else?) an exploration of consciousness: "It's as if I am two people at once—the Helen Reed other people see, who is settling into her new job at Gloucester U, calm, efficient, conscientious; and another mad, deluded disembodied Helen Reed, living a parallel life somewhere else, inside the head of the first one." Ralph we know through his own journal, a tape-recorded account of "the thoughts that are passing through my head at this moment in time." Of course, Ralph tells us about Helen, Helen about Ralph, and through occasional visits from an omniscient narrator we learn about both of them.

Helen contends that writers of fiction and poetry long ago solved the problem of giving a third-person account of a first-person state. As supporting evidence, she quotes a lovely passage from Henry James to Ralph early in their friendship. Later, in her closing remarks to the Conference on Consciousness, a spot that Ralph arranges, Helen analyzes one of the most glorious poems in English, Andrew Marvell's (1993) seventeenth-century meditation on a garden:

The Mind, that Ocean where
each kind
Does straight its own
resemblance find;
Yet it creates,
transcending these,

Far other Worlds, and other Seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green Thought in a
green Shade.

Ralph argues, with an almost caricatured certainty, that science is the only source of real knowledge and that the most significant secret still uncovered is an account of consciousness.

The irony here is that Ralph's own inner life, to read his tape-recorded entries of trysts, ambitions, and more trysts, is as bereft of an inner life as his account of science is bereft of its wonder, its richness, and its limits. Helen, however, a visitor from the Humanities Tower, is endowed with all the misgivings, self-doubts, and false starts, the deceptions and self-deceptions that drive only humans, among all the species with whom we share this blue planet, to find our representations in literature, art, and religion.

Still, Ralph is a charmer, or at least the women in *Thinks...* appear to find him so. A major theme in the novel—back to Huck Finn and Mr. Mark Twain—is just how Ralph, Helen, Ralph's wife, a Czech graduate student, Helen's husband, an aspiring young novelist, a dinner guest at Ralph's well-appointed home, and the chair of the English Department are able to deceive one another. The answer, of course, is that despite Ralph's efforts to "crack the problem of consciousness," our inner lives are our own. Like Helen, we can be two people at once. This is our glory, and the source of our deepest sadness.

To underscore this odd and recently acquired ability, we meet the autistic son of a woman who is the object of Ralph's attentions early in the novel. The boy finds Ralph and his mother carrying on in a supermarket parking lot like a couple of teenagers. Ralph, desperate that his wife not learn that he went out for more than a gallon of milk, begs his companion to talk to her son. She replies that the boy cannot deceive. Quite unlike Helen, his disability makes it impossible for him to be two people at once. Too bad the same thing cannot be said for Ralph's rival, Professor Douglas. He hangs himself in the men's

room of the Holt-Belling Centre after child pornography is discovered on his computer. Respected scientist by day, contemporary Lewis Carroll by night: Both made possible by consciousness.

Throughout these goings on, faux writers meditate on what it's like to be a bat ("Bloody hell, as far as I am concerned," says bat expositor "S*Im*n R*shd**"). Ralph and Professor Douglas lecture on the Chinese box, the prisoner's dilemma, functionalism, and the mind-body problem. Helen takes a swipe at graceless scientific writing ("if 'written' is the word, rather than 'bolted together'") and muses on the addiction to overhead presentations at scientific conferences. The autistic boy even makes a cameo mid-novel to demonstrate, like Oliver Sacks' *Priming Twins*, the extraordinary computational abilities that have been known to accompany autism. It's all here, every argument and counterargument that has buzzed about AI for the past four decades, right down to John McCarthy on the inner lives of thermostats. You might not like all of it. I am the first to admit that it's not pleasant to have the sciences of mind represented by a sexist, womanizing buffoon. Still, as Robert Burns, yet another observer from the British Isles, has wisely told us:²

O wad some Power the giftie gie
us
To see oursels as ithers see us!

In addition, as in all David Lodge novels, there is no parody without affection. He loves Ralph, despite his many and obvious failings, and Ralph, chastened by some happenings late in the novel, becomes more loveable.

However, it is Helen—actually Helen described by the narrator—who gets the last word: "In the first year of the new millennium Helen published a novel which one reviewer described as 'so old fashioned in form as to be almost experimental'. It was written in the third-person, past tense, with an omniscient and sometimes intrusive narrator. It was set in a not-so-new greenfields university, and entitled *Crying is a Puzzler*." You people in AI, says Lodge, now disguised as

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the narrator, might have made some progress with cognition narrowly defined, but affective states, that's another kettle of fish. "Crying is a puzzler," as Darwin (1987) said long ago.

Notes

1. Written by Florence Reece in 1931 for the Harlan County, Kentucky, miner's strike.
2. R. Burns, "To a Louse." www.Robert-Burns.org.

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