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A Review of "Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays" by David Lodge

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T H E S T U D Y O F I
Consciousness And The Novel: Connected Essays

by David Lodge, Harvard University Press, 2002

Reviewed by Adam Hill

You are reading this sentence. Wherever you are at this very moment, you are reading this and you are now fully aware that you are reading this. At the same time other things are also going on in your mind, other forms of mental activity- fragments, figments, phenomena of such whirling multiplicity that there is no way for you possibly articulate it. Your consciousness is both obvious to you and oddly elusive, a mutable mosaic of the haunting and the fleeting, the trenchant and the trivial. And as you know, or think you know, it is not in any sense linear or even truly attributive.

The study of human consciousness, for more than a decade now, has been one of the most fertile fields of scientific inquiry and debate, involving neuroscientists, biologists, philosophers, physicists and many working in artificial intelligence and computer science. This has resulted in a slew of fascinating and even controversial books by the likes of Daniel Dennett, Francis Crick, Steven Pinker, Antonio Damasio, and Martha Nussbaum. A quick search on Amazon.com yields about 40 recent nonfiction titles that seem to take up the subject. But of course, if one wanted a fuller, longer-standing, and more dramatic accounting of this subject, one might conduct a search for fiction titles, realizing that novels have always endeavored to provide us insight into human consciousness. Affording us access into the furthest reaches of the mind and representing in language the mazy pathways of human thought and emotion are the novel's greatest strengths and pleasures. It might take you perhaps 24 hours to read *Ulysses*, but in that time you will come to know the inner life of Leopold Bloom in a manner you could never know yourself or anyone in your life. So it is no accident that several of the nonfiction books exploring and explaining consciousness reference great novelists like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

In his new book, *Consciousness And The Novel*, the English novelist and critic David Lodge discusses some of the aforementioned works from the different sciences and seeks to connect these investigations with some of the novels by English and American writers he admires. He has some interesting points to make about what it is we take from the experience of reading, and how “the dense specificity of personal experience” that novels offer has a correlation with the empirical study of human consciousness. From *Tristram Shandy* to *Ulysses* to *The Unnamable* to *Beloved*, novels have, in varying imaginative ways, shown us the utter uniqueness of individual consciousness, which is what makes it so difficult to explain or theorize about. And unlike experiments in the sciences, novels do not ask you to agree or disagree with what is presented; they only attempt to absorb you in it.

Another fascinating area that this reviewer wished Lodge had spent more time on is how the experiments and advances in narrative point of view (the verbal vehicle of consciousness) are also advances in human understanding. A Joyce or a Woolf does not just change the novel; they also change how we think of ourselves. Lodge could have, too, focused more fully on how these new narrative forms come as the result of, or are sometimes the cause of, advances in other disciplines such as psychology, and even other art forms such as music and painting. In fact, there are a lot of sub-topics stimulated by Lodge that are given too little attention. Ultimately, his book is a mixed bag because only the title essay (which is 91 pages in length) truly takes up his thesis. And even there he but scatters quotes from the scientific and philosophic studies rather than truly linking them with the breakthroughs of the novel form. The rest of the book is composed mostly of appreciations of writers such as Dickens and Evelyn Waugh, as well as extended reviews of novels by John Updike and Philip Roth, and while all of this is interesting and even illuminating, the book fails to live up to its stated ambition. It’s a very good idea for a full-length book, and a good idea for a talented novelist who is also a talented critic to undertake. Perhaps this book will initiate other writers to pick up on its thesis. I could easily imagine a writer/ critic like Francine Prose or Jane Smiley or even John Updike doing so. Let’s hope one of them will. ☺

Adam Hill is a Lecturer in English who teaches literature and creative writing. His work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, The American Poetry Review, and SPIN magazine.