# Desperately Seeking Robyn Penrose: David Lodge and the pre-1992 Campus Novel

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I was very sad to hear the news of the death of novelist and literary scholar David Lodge (1935-2025). I first read his novel *Nice Work* (1988) in 1989, just after I had graduated. I loved it then and have read it several times since, followed soon afterwards by the other two novels in his campus trilogy (*Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) and *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984)) then *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), and as they came out *Paradise News* (1991), *Therapy* (1995), *Home Truths* (1999) and *Thinks …* (2001). The campus novels served in part as part of my guide to the workings of academic politics and culture, and inspired me to read more of the literature discussed therein, in particular the medieval romance after *Small World*. His three-volume memoir/autobiography – *Quite a Good Time to be Born: A Memoir, 1935-75* (2015); *Writer's Luck: A Memoir: 1976-1991* (2018); and *Varying Degrees of Success: A Memoir* (1992-2020) (2020) – were also a very engaging read, though I also think it will take an independent biographer (as with Adam Sisman on John le Carré) to establish for sure the veracity of Lodge's own claims that all the extra-mural sexual activities depicted in his novels had no biographical basis.

I also read a range of his literary essays and monographs, my favourite of which is *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), which employs Roman Jakobson's classic opposition between metaphor and metonymy as a means of structuring literary history. Lodge continued to write criticism after voluntarily leaving academia in 1987, aged 52, having taught continuously at the University of Birmingham from 1967, the year he finished his PhD, and being made Professor of English Literature in 1976, at the age of 41. He himself said that he was aiming his post-academia criticism at a wider general audience, but I would say all of his critical work demonstrates an admirable clarity and elegance of style (clearly related to the fact he was also an accomplished novelist), almost never engaging in jargon for the sake of mystification or academic capital. There was certainly plenty of engagement with a range of sophisticated theories – structuralism, post-structuralism, Russian formalism and the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and later neuroscience and theories of consciousness and communication – though almost never the Frankfurt School or other Germanic schools of literary and cultural theory. Lodge was a true lover of and insightful writer in particular into James Joyce, who he thought one of the greatest writers of all, and also admired Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett, but had no time for those, including William Burroughs and B.S. Johnson, who employed chance-based techniques in literature. He made use of a range of 'experimental' techniques in his own novels, notably shifts in style or genre (a little in the manner of Italo Calvino) in each chapter of *The British Museum* and *Changing Places*, and in others occasionally breaking the literary equivalent of the fourth wall to foreground the actual act of

writing. But these devices were more occasional or decorative than part of a more fundamental aesthetic, and for the most part his work belongs essentially in a twentieth-century British realist tradition.

**Lodge and *Nice Work***

It happens that just last week, before departing on holiday (I have been writing this blog post from various resorts in Nevada and California) I was re-watching the 1989 BBC dramatisation (by Lodge himself) of *Nice Work*, still my favourite of his novels and the third part of the campus trilogy. This can be viewed **here**, **here**, **here** and **here** (if anyone at all reading this has some video of the 1988 Granada TV adaptation of *Small World*, about which Lodge was sceptical, but which I have never seen and would love to, please do let me know). Warren Clarke plays the gruff, sharp but vulnerable engineer and manager, of J. Pringle & Sons, Vic Wilcox, aged 46, married with three children (this part played a major role in propelling Clarke's own career forward, having previously mostly had supporting bit parts, but later taking leading roles, most memorably in *Dalziel and Pascoe* (1996-2007)), while Haydn Gwynne plays that of young and precariously-employed feminist English literature lecturer Robyn Penrose, aged 32-33 (before Gwynne became even more familiar playing Alex Pates in the first two series of *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1990-1991) and then from 1999 Joanne Graham in *Peak Practice*). The novel introduced both Vic and Robyn for the first time, while characters in *Changing Places* and *Small World* Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp have only bit parts. The novel and series involve a scheme whereby (in line with **Industry Year 1986**) an academic is required to 'shadow' someone working in industry, in light of a decree by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Rummidge (where Robyn is a junior lecturer on a temporary contract), indicating 'a widespread feeling in the country that universities are 'ivory tower' institutions, whose staff are ignorant of the realities of the modern commercial world.' This brings Penrose and Wilcox, both reluctant and dubious about the value of the scheme, into regular contact, highlighting the clashes of their very different worlds and associated values, also an ill-judged sexual encounter during a trip to Germany. Later Vic elects to undertake the scheme in reverse, and shadows Robyn at her work.

Meanwhile, Robyn, whose job has come about since Swallow, previously Head of the English Department at Rummidge (which Lodge himself described in 2011 as 'a comic caricature of Birmingham', where the university scenes in the series were filmed, though its description of an institution never 'of more than middling size and reputation', also being overtaken by 'new' universities, in *Changing Places*, is at odds with the high prestige of Birmingham and its English Department), has been elected Dean of the Arts Faculty for three years. She is covering his undergraduate teaching, but dealing with her fears of being out of work when her contract expires, as it seems impossible that it will be made permanent in light of cuts to higher education during the era. At the same, she is mentally negotiating her on-and-off relationship with Charles, who she has known since student days at the University of Sussex (having chosen there rather than applying to Oxbridge, because the 'new' university offered a lot of the more radical new developments in literary studies). Both went to Cambridge as postgraduates, at a time when semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and more were in the air, and Robyn threw herself 200% into these (Charles was rather more circumspect). Her specific subject areas are

Victorian literature and feminist literary criticism, while Charles works on romantic poetics of the sublime. He finished his PhD in time, and was able to find a permanent position at the University of Suffolk (portrayed as a new 'plateglass' institution – no such institution existed at the time of writing, though a later initiative from the Universities of East Anglia and Essex, working together with some local colleges in Suffolk, the largest county then without a university, led to the establishment of such a place in 2007). Robyn wanted to stay at Cambridge, and remained there doing some undergraduate supervision, also helped by an allowance from her father, himself an academic holding a personal Chair in an unnamed university on the south coast of England. Then there was a major controversy at Cambridge in 1981, which Lodge describes without giving names, but refers to the denial of tenure to then 32-year old English lecturer Colin McCabe (also involved in film studies and the journal *Screen*), who had studied at the *École normale superieure* in Paris, attending classes of Barthes, Althusser, Derrida and others, who was viewed as a Young Turk of structuralism in opposition to more traditionally-inclined professors at the university. McCabe moved to the University of Strathclyde (a much more technologically-focused institution) and later held senior positions at a range of institutions in the UK and US. In the novel, Robyn was very outspoken during this controversy, which made the national press, but this led to her feeling a 'marked woman' after the traditionalists were victorious. With no jobs going, institutions in the process of persuading existing staff to take early retirement and freezing vacancies, Robyn was unemployed for around a year before getting the job at Rummidge.

As for Vic, born in Rummidge, he attended 'Rummidge College of Advanced Technology', and worked his way up from an apprenticeship through various engineering then middle management jobs, becoming a managing director at age 40. His adherence to Thatcherism is qualified, inclined to believe that allowing the pound to rise on the back of North Sea oil made British companies highly vulnerable to foreign competition, as a result of which he has seen one-thirds of engineering companies in the West Midlands close down. Nonetheless, he believes Thatcher was right to tackle overmanning and restrictive practices, even if she may have gone too far. He worries however for the fate of his own firm, and also about the possibility that industrial action might make it unprofitable, so that the larger enterprise of which it is part may sell it off (a fear which proves well-founded by the end). His own marriage seems loveless and sexless, and Vic clearly yearns for something more in his life.

The *Nice Work* adaptation has endured well, I believe. Inevitably some of the detail of the book, and the particular type of narrative perspective, had to be lost or changed for TV, and the direction by Christopher Menaul is not very visually imaginative or stimulating (though one memorable scene features the most smoke-filled room I have ever seen depicted). But it is tightly scripted and has both excellent dialogue and compelling performances from the two exceptional leads. The questions which occupy me now, though, after over two decades over working in academia myself, are: what of the view of academia portrayed by Lodge still seems true and relevant today, and what has changed?

**Lodge's Campus Novels and the Changing Situation of UK Higher Education**

Though Lodge will probably forever be associated with the campus novel (and to my mind his novels of this type are considerably more accomplished than those of his close friend Malcolm Bradbury), only four of his fourteen novels really count as such: the three of the campus trilogy and *Thinks …* The world of the literary student features in *The British Museum* (painfully familiar for those who us who have spent many days, weeks, months, in libraries as part of our research) and *How Far Can You Go?* and that of a retired academic in *Deaf Sentence* (2008), but the world of campus life (or, in *Small World*, conference life) do not play a central part in any of these. Of the campus trilogy, the last, *Nice Work*, is set in 1986, and includes references to **the Westland affair**, **the American bombing of Libya**, and **Industry Year 1986**. In 1986 (the year I went to university, though in the autumn, so the academic year after the events of the book), students paid no fees to go to university and still received means-tested grants for subsistence, while **around 14-15% of young people participated in higher education**. 1986 was also the first year of the **Research Assessment Exercise** (RAE, later the Research Excellence Framework (REF)) which is alluded to only very briefly in the novel. The events depicted predate the ending of academic tenure in the UK in 1988, and even more significantly the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, allowing a range of polytechnics and other colleges to attain university status, the founding of the Russell Group in 1994, the introduction of student maintenance loans, and later fees.

By the time of *Thinks …*, fees were still just £1000 per year, which figure would increase to £3000 in 2003, then £9000 in 2012, while participation rates had more than doubled, to over 30%. All of this affected the relationship between student and institution/academics, and arguably was designed to do so, at least at the time of the trebling of fees in 2012 at the hands of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government. Other changes which postdate any of Lodge's novels include further expansion of student numbers and the removal of caps on these in 2015, many developments in the RAE/REF, new provisions to encourage the growth of private 'alternative education providers' in the later 2010s, the implementation of Brexit in 2020, meaning European Union students now had to pay larger fees like all others from abroad, and the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020-2021, which forced many academics to learn rapidly about online and hybrid learning. All of this has contributed to a significantly changed higher educational landscape, and makes me yearn for a latter-day Lodge to write an equivalent type of novel set today.

A few aspects of *Thinks …* do reflect some changes. The novel is set in the University of Gloucester, a fictional institution. The real-life University of Gloucestershire, a post-1992 institution, was established out of the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education in 2001, the date of publication of the novel. The fictional institution is clearly a 'new' university from the 1960s: 'Jasper Richmond, the Head of English and Dean of Humanities, explained to me that the original plan, conceived in the utopian sixties, envisaged a huge campus like an American state university, accommodating thirty thousand students.' Other **'new' universities** created in the 1960s include those in East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York, of which the latter two are now members of the Russell Group.
The central character of Helen Reed in *Thinks…* is a recently bereaved 'writer-in-residence', reflecting the increased presence of active artistic practitioners in universities (though Helen is only there for one semester), a process which increased further after reforms to **submission guidelines to RAE 2001**, enabling creative

practice outputs to be submitted with no requirement for any verbal commentary beyond an optional 300-word statement (for some thoughts on the problems of practitioners coming to usurp scholars, see **this article by Eva Moreda Rodriguez and myself**).

**Vic Wilcox and the Colleges of Advanced Technology**

In the 2011 introduction to the campus trilogy, Lodge describes Vic as 'polytechnic-educated'. But this is not strictly accurate in terms of how his education is described. As mentioned earlier, he attended 'Rummidge College of Advanced Technology'. This is a clear allusion to Birmingham College of Advanced Technology, the first institution of its type, created in 1956, becoming Aston University in 1966. Lodge appears to have imagined that the Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) were essentially the same as polytechnics. But this was not the case. The CATs were 10 institutions in England and Wales (Birmingham, Salford, Bradford, Northampton CAT (London), Chelsea, Battersea, Welsh, Loughborough, Bristol, Brunel) that were created from 1956 onwards, as a result of a range of reports beginning with the Percy Report of 1945. They were a response to a perceived lack of qualified individuals to serve as senior and/or advanced figures in science and technology to work for government and the highest ranks of industry, and would be a relatively elite layer of such training on top of existing technical colleges (which often educated mostly part-time students, many not to graduate level). Whilst most of the CATs had grown out of existing technical colleges and polytechnics, by this stage they became different types of institutions. Industrialists had said that many universities produced graduates with knowledge which was too academic, theoretical and remote from industrial needs, and the CATs could offer an alternative.

There were problems. The CATs were not able to offer full degrees but instead a Dip. Tech. qualification. Furthermore, their awards were controlled by a National Council for Technological Awards. The Robbins Report of 1962-63 recommended that they become full universities with independent degree-awarding powers, which they all did in the late 1960s (Chelsea CAT was ultimately incorporated into King's College, London, and the Welsh CAT into Cardiff University). The mantle of technical education was then transferred to the polytechnics, the number of which expanded very significantly from 1965.

Rummidge/Birmingham CAT served Vic well, though in reality, with a diploma from there, he should have been able to enter industry at a considerably more senior level than a mere apprentice. But the contrast between Vic and Robyn's type of tertiary education should not be viewed necessarily as one of intellectual level or even rigour, but rather of simple *type*. The ending of the CATs experiments was a mixed blessing, and some return to this model could have positive implications for the state of higher education today, as I shall return to in the final section of this essay.

**In Search of Robyn Penrose**

Robyn Penrose would disdain the idea of seeking some essence of her self, as made clear by Lodge when introducing the character:

*According to Robyn (or, more precisely, according to the writers who have influenced her thinking on these matters), there is no such thing as the 'self ' on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded – that is to say, a finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity; there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses – the discourses of power, sex, family, science, religion, poetry, etc. And by the same token, there is no such thing as an author, that is to say, one who originates a work of fiction ab nihilo. Every text is a product of intertextuality, a tissue of allusions to and citations of other texts; and, in the famous words of Jacques Derrida (famous to people like Robyn, anyway), 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte', there is nothing outside the text. There are no origins, there is only production, and we produce our 'selves' in language. Not 'you are what you eat' but 'you are what you speak' or, rather 'you are what speaks you', is the axiomatic basis of Robyn's philosophy, which she would call, if required to give it a name, 'semiotic materialism'. It might seem a bit bleak, a bit inhuman ('antihumanist, yes; inhuman, no,' she would interject), somewhat deterministic ('not at all; the truly determined subject is he who is not aware of the discursive formations that determine him. Or her,' she would add scrupulously, being among other things a feminist), but in practice this doesn't seem to affect her behaviour very noticeably – she seems to have ordinary human feelings, ambitions, desires, to suffer anxieties, frustrations, fears, like anyone else in this imperfect world, and to have a natural inclination to try and make it a better place. I shall therefore take the liberty of treating her as a character…*

This passage caught the attention of philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett, who reproduced part of it in his *Consciousness Explained* (1991) as an alternative way of framing the sorts of ideas he was exploring from other angles, **saying that** Lodge 'articulates the discomfort, the anxiety, that I have been feeling for years. There's a queasiness that people feel as they see the march of science into the brain and the mind, a fear that we'll be swallowed up and turned into robots.' For his part, this led Lodge into a new interest in consciousness studies and neuroscience which culminated in *Thinks…* and his collection of essays *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002).

Nonetheless, Robyn does seem to turn back to more familiar notions of selfhood when she thinks about her shadowing role as 'the shadow of the self who on the other six days a week was busy with women's studies and the Victorian novel and poststructuralist literary theory – less substantial, more elusive, but just as real'. Nonetheless she remains dismissive of the concept of 'love', which she calls 'a bourgeois fallacy', and during their sexual encounter says to Vic that:

*The discourse of romantic love pretends that your finger and my clitoris are extensions of two unique individual selves who need each other and only each other and cannot be happy without each other for ever and ever.*

But one who is less enamoured of Robyn's ideas on selfhood is the bereaved Helen Reed in *Thinks …*, who encounters Robyn, now Professor and Head of Communications and Cultural Studies at a fictional 'Walsall University', giving a guest lecture at the School of English at the University of Gloucester:

*The 'Subject' in Robyn Penrose's lecture title turned out to be a kind of multiple pun, meaning the subject as experiencing individual, the subject of a sentence, the subject*

*of a political state, and the subject of English Literature in the university curriculum. As far as I could follow it the general argument was that the Subject in all these senses is a Bad Thing, that there is some kind of equivalence between the privileging of the ego in classical psychoanalysis, the fetishization of formal correctness in traditional grammar, the exploitation and oppression of subject races by colonialism, and the idea of a literary canon: they are all repressive and tyrannical and phallocentric and have to be deconstructed . . . It was quite a dazzling discourse in its way, juggling all these conceptual balls in the air, especially when delivered by a tall, handsome, youngish woman in a smart black velvet trouser suit, her flaming red hair swept up at the back with a silver comb, and long silver earrings swinging and glinting as she swept the audience with her confident gaze. But it depressed me that the awed-looking young people in the audience were being given such a dry and barren message. Where was the pleasure of reading in all this? Where was personal discovery, self-development? But the argument didn't allow for the self, the very idea of the self is a miss-reading or 'mister-reading' (or myster-reading?) of subjectivity, apparently. The individual is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed continuously by the stream of semiosis into which she is thrown by the acquisition of language (I think I got that right, I was taking notes). The metaphor of the stream reminded me of the poor Austrian woman flung into the canal by the louts who had just raped her, and I thought it wouldn't be much consolation to her to know that this was in some obscure and indirect way the fault of compulsory Shakespeare in English Literature syllabuses …*

Helen proceeds to discern the connections between what Robyn is saying and the ideas on cognition from Head of Computer Science Ralph Messenger at the university, with whom she becomes drawn into an affair.

There are many ways in which I think the fictional Robyn does have a self, but not an especially individual one. Other in academia will have encountered a range of people holding various of her views and convictions, not many of which are that individual or distinctive. Nor is the following description from Helen about how Robyn sees her 'mission statement to upgrade their [Walsall University's] quality assessment in research and teaching' (the RAE is also mentioned in the context of Gloucester) likely to be unfamiliar to many who will have seen comparable progressions in academia (also unwittingly observing some of what she has learned from Vic):

*She deployed this management jargon with the same smooth competence as she had displayed in literary theory. I got the impression that she cracks the whip over a recalcitrant and resentful staff of mostly older men, spurring them on to achieve higher and higher productivity, like an old-fashioned factory boss. But she seemed more interested in discussing infant ailments and gender stereotyping in nursery schools with Annabelle Riverdale, who was sitting opposite her at dinner. There are curious contradictions between her literary theory and her professional practice and between both and her personal life. But she probably regards consistency of character as an exploded concept.*

(Perhaps she simply wants to have her cake and eat it?)

There are also ways in which Robyn's character embodies values which would have been common for an academic like her in the mid-1980s, but which would be out of

step with later ideologies. In *Nice Work*, she makes unequivocally clear her thoughts on polytechnics, when Vic suggests it might be better to save money if more students went to their local college, and that a whole polytechnic could be built for the price of some of the student accommodation at Rummidge:

*'Oh, but polytechnics are such ghastly places,' said Robyn. 'I was interviewed for a job at one once. It seemed more like an overgrown comprehensive school than a university.'*
*[Vic] 'Cheap, though.'*
*[Robyn] 'Cheap and nasty.'*

But 15 or so years after *Nice Work*, at the end of which she was able to stay on at the University of Rummidge (due to a process of reallocation of resources known as 'virement'), Robyn has moved to Walsall. Today there is a Walsall Campus at the University of Wolverhampton, which gained university status in 1992 (having been Wolverhampton Polytechnic from 1988 and for a long time before that Wolverhampton and Staffordshire College of Technology), one of the first wave of polytechnics to do so. Walsall University is said to have been created out of an old polytechnic, so is what those inside academia would now call a 'post-92 university'. Furthermore, Penrose 'was appointed there just a couple of years ago' with the 'mission statement' mentioned above. This is a common pattern by which mid-career academics from longer-established institutions, with decent research records, are lured with major professorships to lend prestige to post-92 institutions often with little prior research.

So Robyn is now working for the type of institution that she used to detest, but her job there is to try and make it less like what it would have been at the time of *Nice Work*. This was an important part of the legacy of the 1992 Act, but has proved more and more problematic as time has gone on. In 1994, the Russell Group of research-intensive universities was formed, creating a new hierarchy to replace the old one of universities and polytechnics, and in a way which became more, rather than less elitist, as the Russell Group only encompassed a sub-section of the old universities (currently 24 institutions), leaving others, which I generally call 'mid-ranking', in a type of no-man's-land between the RG and the post-92s. More traditional, long-established disciplines, such as English Literature, History or the scholarly study of Music, have struggled to survive in the post-92s, generally operating with lower tariffs, and so attracting a different type of students, many of whom are much less inclined towards critical thinking and rigorous approaches. Other factors, including the removal of caps on numbers in 2015 (essentially deregulating the number of students different institutions and departments can admit), and also a move in secondary education towards 'teach to the test', which encourages rote learning rather than critical engagement, have exacerbated this divide.

Cultural Studies is strongly associated with the **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham**, founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, especially when the directorship was taken up by Stuart Hall in 1969, and then through the 1980s after Hall had left for the Open University. By the early 1990s, Hall and others, including **Anthony Easthope**, were suggesting that this might supersede literary studies. Today there are only a very small number of 'pure' cultural studies degrees, but a range combining it with media, communications, or sometimes

reframed as ‘Cultural and Creative Industries’. Interestingly, a greater percentage of Russell Group institutions offer these types of degrees than elsewhere in the sector. These institutions are less bound by vocational demands than others, and these are not necessarily vocational subjects.

There is almost nothing otherwise in Lodge’s campus novels alluding to the development of cultural studies. despite it having a centre in his own university. The closest, albeit oblique, might be Morris Zapp’s statement ‘*But every decoding is another encoding*‘ in a lecture recounted in *Small World*, in order to explain why his project to write about Jane Austen’s novels from every possible critical angle is ultimately fruitless. The terms encoding/decoding became fundamentally important in cultural studies after their use by Hall, first in an essay on television in 1973, then fleshed out much more in 1980 (thus a year after the events of *Small Work* are set). For this reason, the connection with cultural studies here is weak.

As for **Communications Studies**, this field, linked to study of journalism and media, can be said to have been established in the UK with the founding by James Halloran of the **Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester in 1966**. **A Centre for Television Research was established by Jay G. Blumer at the University of Leeds in 1966**, and the **Glasgow Media Group by Greg Philo in 1974**, while a **BA in Media Studies, the first of its type. began at the Polytechnic of Central London in 1975**. Today there are numerous undergraduate courses whose titles combine ‘Communications’ with Journalism, Media, Advertising, etc., but only a small few (at UCL, Edinburgh Napier and Hertfordshire) in which it is the sole subject. A similar situation applies at postgraduate level.

Robyn Penrose’s work certainly skirts the boundaries of cultural studies as it existed in the 1980s. This is mostly through her work on semiotics, relating as much to the work of Colin McCabe and Stephen Heath as the Birmingham School. There is a notorious passage in the novel in which she interprets an advert for Silk Cut cigarettes using Freudian terminology, whilst we learn that both she and Charles read the sections on fashion and furniture in the Sunday newspapers, ‘for nothing semiotic is alien to the modern academic critic’. Later Charles believes that his career shift from academia to finance involves ‘simply exchanging one semiotic system for another, the literary for the numerical, a game with high philosophical stakes for a game with high monetary stakes’.

But there is little to suggest that Robyn has any stake in the dethroning of high culture, as was certainly a major concern for the Birmingham School and others, culminating in **denunciatory work on high culture by John Fiske and Andrew Ross at the end of the 1980s**. On the contrary, she stands as a strong defender of ‘difficult’ literature (albeit with some scepticism towards existing canon formations, which appears to have become a more central concern of hers by the time of *Thinks* ...) in contrast to Vic and those around him. In his 2011 introduction to the trilogy, Lodge himself notes that his own experience shadowing a local industry ‘brough home to me a truth that academics and literary intellectuals tend to ignore: that high culture depends ultimately on the wealth created by trade’, and Robyn is certainly no exception to this, at least earlier on in the novel. She is distinctly unimpressed by hearing that Vic’s rival Norman Cole reads Coleen McCullough’s *The Thornbirds* or Frederic Forsyth’s *The Fourth Protocol* (her disdain might today be interpreted as

hegemony, an expression of class and other privilege, and so on), and feels she has achieved something when Vic has started reading literature of the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Tennyson and others.

But the contrast with Vic is starkest with respect to music. Lodge tells us:

*Vic's taste in music is narrow but keen. He favours female vocalists, slow tempos, lush arrangements of tuneful melodies in the jazz-soul idiom. Carly Simon, Dusty Springfield, Roberta Flack, Dionne Warwick, Diana Ross, Randy Crawford and, more recently, Sade and Jennifer Rush. The subtle inflexions of these voices, honeyed or slightly hoarse, moaning and whispering of women's love, its joys and disappointments, soothe his nerves and relax his limbs.*

That five out of the eight names above are black women is not insignificant. Robyn, on the other hand, prefers to listen to Mozart and other classical music on BBC Radio 3, and speaks with some implied disdain when she asks Vic 'But you prefer Randy Crawford?', who she describes as 'bland' and 'sentimental'. She also seems pleased when, towards the end of the novel, Vic indicates that he now prefers Tennyson to the lyrics of Jennifer Rush. Rush is the one of the above singers who features most prominently in the novel, perhaps a strategy on Lodge's part to avoid foregrounding a possible racial issue, but certainly he appears to like Crawford just as much. More widely, while Robyn certainly shows concern for the plight of black and Asian workers at Pringle's, there is little indication of any engagement with black or Asian (or African-American) culture or any interest in doing so on her part.

Robyn is undoubtedly vested heavily in post-*structuralism*, but not necessarily in post-*modernism*. Whilst the latter term appears several terms in reference to conference papers in *Small World*, there are only two references to it in *Nice Work*. One is to 'the modernist and postmodernist deconstruction of the classic novel in the twentieth century' (linked to the 'terminal crisis of capitalism'), which says little distinct about this concept, the other as something possibly related to 'late capitalism' (a term which grew amongst Marxist and socialist thinkers from the 1920s onwards). To some extent the low usage of this term has to do with the time of her fictional portrayal and its understanding by Lodge himself. He had used it in *The Modes of Modern Writing* to indicate a body of literary work which:

*continues the modernist critique of traditional mimetic art, and shares the modernist commitment to innovation, but pursues these aims by methods of its own. It tries to go beyond modernism, or around it, or underneath it, and is often as critical of modernism as it is of antimodernism.*

Writers categorised as such by Lodge include Beckett, John Fowles, Muriel Spark, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, John Barth, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, and Jorge Luis Borges. This categorisation (which tends towards a periodisation of modernism as pre-1945, and postmodernism as post-1945) was certainly in keeping with the concept as it was understood in various writings in English at that time, including essays of Leslie Fiedler and then in books such as Christopher Butler's *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde* (1980) and as late as Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (1999). But it is a

much milder definition than that which came in the wake of Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir/The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979, English translation 1984) and some of the essays in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (1983), which were amongst the writings which developed a more radical opposition between modernism and postmodernism, and opened the doors to certain forms of relativism in the process. Postmodernism came into its own in literary and cultural studies in the later 1980s and early 1990s, and in some of its manifestations combined the ideas of the 'death of the author' and 'pleasure of the text' associated with 1970s writings of Roland Barthes with drastic epistemological scepticism out of the work of Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

For all Robyn's rejection of ideas of the autonomous self, and authorship, this type of work, not to mention the use of highly experimental forms of presentation, is unlike that of hers presented in *Nice Work*. She does not eschew rational argumentation, continues to use conventional sentences and grammar, and does not appear to show much interest in free 'play' (even if some of her Derridean inclinations might have led in such a direction). Also, she does not engage with 'camp' culture (there is one brief allusion to Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, but just within a list of novels she is revising before teaching), while her view of sex is resolutely vanilla (notwithstanding her like for non-penetrative action and non-missionary positions). As such, it is hard to imagine her endorsing Barthes' view of a text as 'that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*', let alone the at least part-celebratory cultivation of the simulacrum and hyperreality in Baudrillard, or the 1990s idea of a certain gay 'performative' culture acting in mocking contempt of the types of metanarratives provided by Marxism and the like.

I mention the 'camp' performative element, because it is for this reason I find it hard to imagine Robyn embracing a wholly performative view of gender and denial of the biological (she can deny the self, but that is not the same is denying biology). Her essentially second-wave feminism remains hyperaware of male violence and predation (as witnessed by her fury at Vic's marketing director Brian Everthorpe's proposal for a calendar for Pringle's featuring semi-naked women, or the presence of similar images around the premises, and for that matter her association of the central locking system in Vic's car with the requirements of a rapist), and whilst she might have paid some lip service to the performative concepts put forward in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), full acceptance of the idea that trans women are the same as biological ones (in *Nice Work* Robyn says that humans are 'language and biology'), and thus acceptance of such trans women into women's changing rooms, refuges, prisons and more, would certainly be a step too far.

For this reason I think Robyn would eventually have fallen foul of a new generation of academics emerging in the 2000s and 2010s, might have been labelled a TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and despised for that reason, also been portrayed as an antiquated defender of elitist high culture (Vic's tastes in music would have been more in line with those of this generation than Robyn's), with classic literature remorselessly attacked by those drawn to the **#DisruptTexts movement** (endorsed by no less than Penguin Books). She might have struggled with the growth of Critical Race Theory and the gradual elimination of most white writers from the curriculum (including the white women writers she favours). Literary study

as she knows it, and in which her expertise lies, would likely have largely disappeared from Walsall University, in order to accommodate students who have no interest in reading books from beginning to end, or even whole chapters (rather than bullet-point lists of what they 'need to know'). Her analyses of cigarette adverts and the like would have had some currency in her new department, but would hardly have been enough to sustain her own interest. The reality of academia voided of high culture and most of the vestiges of the humanities would come home to her, though perhaps not the fact that she would be looking at the views of the younger generations rather as older academics had once looked at hers. So I imagine her either taking early retirement (perhaps encouraged to do so) – bearing in mind she would have reached the age of 65 by 2018-19 anyhow – or possibly moving almost exclusively into management.

**Robyn as Teacher**

Student Marion Russell tells Robyn 'You're the best teacher in the Department, everybody says so.' Come the time of mandatory student evaluations, Robyn would surely do well. But I am less convinced by the quality of her teaching, notwithstanding its popularity. Lodge provides the text of part of one of her lectures on the Industrial Novel. Some of this is basically factual and contextual, linking the rise of this genre of novel to the huge social and economic changes effected by the Industrial Revolution (described in a very ideologically loaded manner). But her readings of the novels – Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*, Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Dickens' *Hard Times* are more of a condensed version of her research than any type of communication of plural perspectives to students. She provides no critical questions for students to consider. This is preaching rather than teaching.

In many ways this approach to lecturing is an exploitation of Robyn's hierarchical position relative to the students, even more so then than it would be today, as the students of her time paid no fees and received grants, while institutions did not need to fight so much to attract them. She, as a research-experienced academic with a monograph to her name, presents her fully-formed arguments to the students, but not those of others except where they concur with her own. In theory, students are open to disagree with and challenge her, but few at this stage would have anything like the same confidence and intellectual fluency to meet her on her own terms.

Having seen more than a few academics who lecture in a similar manner, some of which have been popular, I would suggest that the appeal of such teaching comes about precisely *because* it avoids presenting serious critical questions to the students, answers to which are by no means necessarily obvious. It becomes possible essentially to parrot or at least paraphrase Robyn's own views in an essay, oblivious to alternatives, and without providing critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of those views (something I have found is much more common in my adopted discipline of sociology than in many of the arts and humanities). Not only the most able students but also the weaker ones are taught *what* to think, rather than *how* to think.

At one point Lodge comments:

*What Robyn likes to do is to deconstruct the texts, to probe the gaps and absences in them, to uncover what they are not saying, to expose their ideological bad faith, to cut a cross-section through the twisted strands of their semiotic codes and literary conventions. What the students want her to do is to give them some basic facts that will enable them to read the novels as simple straightforward reflections of 'reality', and to write simple, straightforward, exam-passing essays about them.*

What results from such teaching *can* be taken as 'basic facts' by students. Even as approaches/methods to interpreting other texts, they can be followed in an almost automated manner, free from any sense of responsibility for methodological choices. This is what I believe is a common outcome of 'activist' teaching, but even of the application of the **Humboldtian model of higher education** to an expanded student cohort, whereby academics are employed primarily on the basis of their research, teaching is centred around that research, and students can then go on to do research themselves.

But there will never be anything like enough jobs in academia for the number of graduates they produce, unless only a tiny number go to university. The majority will go on to work in other fields. When I was a student, it was common to think that simply having a degree, almost regardless of the subject, was enough to demonstrate the intellectual achievement to be able to enter all sorts of fields of high-level employment. But now that far more go to university, it is at the very least highly debatable that a degree is anything like the type of guarantee it once was (one reason why the specific institution one attended may matter more and more, for those doing degrees with no obvious direct career outcome, a situation which benefits the Russell Group).

It does not seem to have even occurred to Robyn that her job might be something other than disseminating her own research, Humboldtian-style. But the problems with this are seen by Charles, who in his letter to Robyn announcing his decision to leave academia to become a merchant banker, says:

*Poststructuralist theory is a very intriguing philosophical game for very clever players. But the irony of teaching it to young people who have read almost nothing except their GCE set texts and Adrian Mole, who know almost nothing about the Bible or classical mythology, who cannot recognize an ill-formed sentence, or recite poetry with any sense of rhythm – the irony of teaching them about the arbitrariness of the signifier in week three of their first year becomes in the end too painful to bear …*

(It is worth noting that this represents a shift in Charles's view from earlier in the book, when in response to Robyn's worry that 99.9% of the population 'don't give a monkey's' about 'whether Derrida's critique of metaphysics lets idealism in by the back door, or whether Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is phallogocentric, or whether Foucault's theory of the episteme is reconcilable with dialectical materialism', says to her 'You can't explain poststructuralism to someone who hasn't even discovered traditional humanism' and 'the idea of a centre is precisely what poststructuralism calls into question. Grant people like Wilcox, or Swallow for that matter, the idea of a centre, and they will lay claim to it, justifying everything they do by reference to it. Show that it's an illusion, a fallacy, and their position collapses. We live in a de-centred universe.')

**Robyn, Charles, the 1980s and the 2020s in UK Higher Education**

Charles serves as a foil to Robyn arguably to a greater extent than Vic, because Charles's outlook may be more threatening to her. He shares many of her values, but without the same level of fervour and absolutism, and with a more jaded or measured (depending from which angle one views it) perspective on higher education. Early in *Nice Work* we read:

*He had seen the writing on the wall: after the oil crisis of 1973 there wasn't going to be enough money to keep all the universities enthusiastically created or expanded in the booming sixties in the style to which they had become accustomed. Not many people perceived this quite so soon.*

This may have informed his sensible decision to take a job at a mid-ranking university when it was going, before the advent of cuts, while Robyn's ideals and wish to be at Cambridge makes her the victim of events.

Robyn clearly has no knowledge or experience of contemporary industry, despite being an expert in the industrial novel (she gets out of this issue by saying her expertise is 'not in a realist sort of way'). She dismisses the Victorian novelists' 'attempts to reconcile the conflicting class interests of their time', but as Lodge points out, as a result of the Shadow Scheme, her experiences mirror some of their heroines, while both she and Vic come to understand some more about the relationship between their two worlds. Some of Robyn's doubts relate to the traditionalist assumptions which sustain her earlier positions (and which postmodernists and others would abhor):

*There must, she reflected, be millions of literate, intelligent people like Victor Wilcox walking about England who had never read Jane Eyre or Wuthering Heights, though it was difficult to imagine such a state of cultural deprivation. What difference did it make, never to have shivered with Jane Eyre at Lowood school, or throbbed in the arms of Heathcliff with Cathy? Then it occurred to Robyn that this was a suspiciously humanist train of thought and that the very word classic was an instrument of bourgeois hegemony.*

Furthermore, having previously given little thought to the financial sustainability of higher education, unlike Charles, she returns to the question put to her repeatedly by Vic: who pays for it all? Vic leads from this to suggesting that arts degrees might be a waste of money because they do not provide graduates with the skills required for the contemporary economy. Robyn recognises the arguments she is forced to rely upon, such as 'the importance of maintaining cultural tradition, and improving students' communicative skills', are ones in which she no longer really believes.

We learn that Robyn was quite religious when younger, and this sort of fervour appears to have been sublimated into her highly idealistic view of universities:

*Universities are the cathedrals of the modern age. They shouldn't have to justify their existence by utilitarian criteria. The trouble is, ordinary people don't understand what they're about, and the universities don't really bother to explain themselves to*

*the community. We have an Open Day once a year. Every day ought to be an open day. The campus is like a graveyard at weekends, and in the vacations. It ought to be swarming with local people doing part-time courses – using the library, using the laboratories, going to lectures, going to concerts, using the Sports Centre – everything.*

There is much to be said for this vision, but it would require considerably more hours of work from staff, who would need to be paid for it. To offer it for free would only be possible with considerably increased government funding.

At various points during his memoir *Writer's Luck*, Lodge refers to the various rounds of cuts to higher education which occurred during the 1980s as part of wider trimming of public expenditure by the Thatcher government:

*'Sadomonetarism', as it was sometimes called by its critics, meant high interest rates, designed to make British industry more competitive by eliminating inefficient businesses, and drastic cuts in public spending. The effect of the first measure was a steep rise in unemployment at all levels from the shop floor to management (in the West Midlands it reached 17 per cent) and one effect of the second was a substantial reduction in the funding of British universities, leading to the freezing of new appointments at many, including Birmingham. Our students were graduating without any confidence that they would find a job, and the prospects for the brightest ones to pursue an academic career were especially bleak. These developments shaped my thoughts about a new novel. It would be about work – what their work meant to people in different walks of life and how it defined their identity.*

As tutorials and seminars got bigger, and other resources were cut, this led Lodge to elect to take early retirement. Such retirement could then only be voluntary; after the ending of tenure in 1988 it became possible for institutions to implement compulsory redundancies, as is happening regularly at present.

Some of Lodge's wider thoughts appear to be laid out in Charles's letter to Robyn on leaving academia:

*You and I, Robyn, grew up in a period when the state was smart: state schools, state universities, state-subsidized arts, state welfare, state medicine – these were things progressive, energetic people believed in. It isn't like that any more. The Left pays lip-service to those things, but without convincing anybody, including themselves. The people who work in state institutions are depressed, demoralized, fatalistic. Witness the extraordinary meekness with which the academic establishment has accepted the cuts (has there been a single high-level resignation, as distinct from early retirements?). It's no use blaming Thatcher, as if she was some kind of witch who has enchanted the nation. She is riding the Zeitgeist.*

*Contrary to the stereotype of the ex-public-school stockbroker, it doesn't matter what your social background is in the City these days, as long as you're good at your job. Money is a great leveller, upwards. As to our universities, I've come to the conclusion that they are élitist where they should be egalitarian and egalitarian where they should be élitist. We admit only a tiny proportion of the age group as students and give them a very labour-intensive education (élitist), but we pretend that*

*all universities and all university teachers are equal and must therefore have the same funding and a common payscale, with automatic tenure (egalitarian). This worked all right as long as the country was prepared to go on pumping more and more money into the system, but as soon as the money supply was reduced, universities could only balance their books by persuading people to retire early, often the very people they can least afford to lose. For those who remain the prospects are bleak: bigger classes, heavier work loads, scant chances of promotion or of moving to a new job.*

After 1992 and with the expansion of higher education after 1997, more jobs became available, including in some of the arts and humanities, as a range of former polytechnics sought to prove themselves on a par with established universities. But subsequent developments including increased fees (accompanied by cuts in government money), the removal of caps on numbers, a decreasing role for various arts and humanities subjects in secondary education, then the freezing of fees from 2017 to 2024, leading the majority of institutions to be incurring significant financial losses in real time, have made this sort of vision now look somewhat antiquated. At the time of writing, programmes and departments are being closed, and staff being made redundant (much easier than in the mid-1980s, when there was still tenure) all over the sector. The sense of crisis encountered back then is at least as vivid today, and the initial optimism which accompanied tertiary expansion seems more and more distant by the day.

The question of the range of options for students, an issue in the 1980s as it is today, is also raised in a staff meeting towards the end of the novel. Philip Swallow, Lodge's alter-ego in *Changing Places* and *Small World*, notes to Robyn's dismay the impossibility of bringing about meaningful curricular changes, since no-one will support anything which will marginalise their own area, and thus possibly make them redundant. Therefore the curricula are overflowing with elective options for students, a highly inefficient situation in terms of resources and marking, as well as academics being spread too thinly. Again, these issues reflect the problems of the Humboldtian model. Academics who are prepared to teach 'outside the box' of their own expertise will make their own positions more secure, and the priority should be which teaching serves the needs of the students best, rather than simply what the academics want to teach. One colleague, Rupert Sutcliffe, suggests that it may have been better when there was a single syllabus with a survey course 'from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf'. In light of Charles's comments cited earlier about the absurdity of teaching some highly advanced approaches to students with hardly any foundations, I do believe this makes sense, and it reminds me of refreshing words from one sociology colleague who spoke disparagingly of a 'Netflix' or 'Lidl' approach to university education.

The issues raised in *Nice Work*, and their amplified form today, may not be insoluble. The current costs of teaching might be able to be reduced through less wasteful courses with fewer over-specialised modules, more pooling of skills and methods teaching between different departments and disciplines, as well continued development of the skills for online and hybrid delivery learned during lockdown. The balance between teaching and research may need some recalibrating, while the move towards a 'publish or perish' culture (fuelled by the RAE/REF) such as had existed for a long time in the US, as Lodge notes in the 2011 introduction to the trilogy, has indeed resulted in a situation in which, as **he said in a 2015 interview**, 'Much academic publication is done merely to maintain the author's position in the

profession, and not out of a desire to communicate something'. A move away from the 'boarding school' model of universities, so that more students stay at home and commute, would considerably alleviate accumulated debt for money, though for this to be practical requires **some consistency of provision across different regions.**

None of this would likely appeal to the Robyn Penroses of this world, but the highly entitled (and hugely elitist) view of education she espouses reflects a time when a tiny number went to university, extrapolated across an expanding sector with at most only partial success. But also, not all of what I suggest above would be appropriate for universities which are indeed first and foremost research institutions. The number of these which can be sustained may not be so high, and alternative models of education than those simply pursuing knowledge for its own sake should be taken seriously, rather than trying to pretend some equivalence across the sector such as was implied by the 1992 Act. The model provided by the CATs, ideal for the likes of Vic, should be revisited, with the limitations of those institutions addressed, and the expansion of their remit beyond science and technology. There are many reasons why other disciplines, including some traditional subjects, can be valuable both to students who go onto other types of work, and their employers, either in terms of direct or transferrable skills. But academics need to make the case plausibly for this to prospective and current students, parents, teachers, and the wider public.

Vic Wilcox was fond of saying there was no such thing as a free lunch. There is no such thing as a free degree either. The costs to students could be reduced with either greatly increased government expenditure (which would in turn almost certainly require increases in taxes, or sweeping cuts elsewhere) or a new culture of major endowments such as exists in the US. The former option is unlikely to be on the political agenda in the UK for a long time, while the latter could only ever be a long-term project. In the meantime, academics need to play their part in preserving a sector and jobs. In the pre-1992 landscape, the initial petulant attitudes of Robyn Penrose (certainly possessed of a self, and capable of choices) provided no solutions, though this may have changed by the time she moved to Walsall University. Such attitudes are still prevalent today, and this is one of the reasons Lodge's novels remain so engaging for many involved with academia, over and beyond their wider comic and narrative appeal to a much wider constituency.

But a last word from Lodge, from **an interview in 2004**, which I have often quoted and pondered when trying to navigate university politics:

*The high ideals of the university as an institution – the pursuit of knowledge and truth … are set against the actual behaviour and motivations of the people who work in them, who are only human and subject to the same ignoble desires and selfish ambitions as anybody else. The contrast is perhaps more ironic, more marked, than it would be in any other professional milieu.*