

What Condition of England? Re-Imagining the ‘Two Nations’ in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*

Marlena Tronicke

(University of Münster, Germany)

Abstract:

Although the demise of the national novel has been announced repeatedly, the condition-of-England novel continues to thrive. While the traditional Victorian form with its focus on the ‘factory question’ was very specific in what it defined as the state of the nation, in the twentieth-century English novel this became more difficult to identify, at least in such pithy terms. David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988) relocates this debate to educational discourses in the 1980s, identifying the opposition of town vs. gown as a substitute for Disraeli’s ‘two nations’. Additionally, Lodge takes this debate to a meta-level: as I will argue, he illustrates how it is precisely this concern with a sense of dividedness that answers the state-of-the-nation question on a larger scale, with higher education providing a pertinent context. Thus, I suggest that the ‘two nations’ have not only turned into a topos of (neo)Victorianism but also into a metanarrative of Englishness more generally.

Keywords: condition-of-England novel, Englishness, higher education, David Lodge, metafiction, metanarrative, neo-Victorianism, *Nice Work*, Thatcherism, ‘two nations’.

In his recent introduction to contemporary fiction, Robert Eaglestone claims that “[t]he novel used to be seen as a place where a national tradition revealed and reinforced a community, a ‘we’. However, modern novels have become increasingly global”, so that increasingly “[t]he idea of a national tradition of, say, the English [...] novel has been bypassed by globalization” (Eaglestone 2013: 4). And indeed, with his England-as-theme-park in *England, England* (1998), Julian Barnes playfully exposes the absurdity and artificiality of constructions such as national identity and national history. Nonetheless, the contemporary English novel seems to be preoccupied with the concept of Englishness; to name but a few examples from the the first years of the twentieth century, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2002), Linda Grant’s *The Clothes on Their Backs* (2008), Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012) and Martin Amis’s boldly titled *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012) all address

Neo-Victorian Studies

10:1 (2017)

pp. 110-132



the state of the English nation, albeit in rather diverse ways. In doing so, these novels form part of the inherited tradition of a distinctly Victorian art form: the condition-of-England novel.¹ Originally, this body of literature saw its hey-day in the mid-Victorian age, addressing topical problems of society such as urbanization, child labour and the ‘factory question’ both during and after the Industrial Revolution. Thus, with its goal of guiding the readers’ attention to deplorable conditions that needed urgent reform and remodelling, the genre’s purpose has always been an educational one.² As soon as the problems it addressed seemed resolved, or at least reduced, the production of such novels decreased towards the end of the Victorian era, and hence the genre became “a victim of its own success” (Simmons 2002: 350). As James Richard Simmons Jr. puts it, “who could write a novel with a Chartist uprising or a starving factory child at its centre when such things, for all practical purposes, no longer existed?” (Simmons 2002: 350). Nevertheless, the fact that this genre still flourishes attests to its continuing relevance for a present-day readership, even though it has become difficult to pinpoint what exactly has replaced the targets of Dickensian social criticism. As Florian Kläger has pointed out,

[i]t is surely significant that the focus of writers’, and critics’, attention should have shifted from considerations of a formal nature to a question of the subject – whereas the original challenge was *how* to represent the condition of England, the problem now seems to be, *what* to present as ‘the’ condition of England. (Kläger 2012: 65)

The above-mentioned texts address such diverse topics as multiculturalism, racism, perceived cultural decline, and the growing divide between the classes. So, has it become altogether impossible to define a common denominator when it comes to constructions of Englishness in the contemporary novel?

In order to address this question, I draw on a novel that is not exactly contemporary anymore, namely David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), which relocates the state-of-the-nation question within discourses of education in Margaret Thatcher’s England. Firstly, I show how Lodge reimagines Benjamin Disraeli’s ‘two nations’ from *Sybil; Or, The Two Nations* (1845) as the divide between town and gown, thus implying cultural continuity

between the 1980s and the Victorian age. In a second step, I argue that *Nice Work* identifies the ‘two nations’ topos as a key characteristic of the state-of-the-nation question on a larger scale. The novel focuses on educational discourses as a prevalent concern of the 1980s (as they are for the present day), but *Nice Work*’s status as a *meta-condition-of-England* novel illustrates that this perception of society as divided can be applied to other contexts as well. Thus, I read the ‘two nations’ as a metanarrative of debates not only on education but on Englishness more generally, be it in the Victorian age, during Thatcherism, or in the twenty-first century.

1. The (Neo-)Victorian Novel, Thatcherism, and Education

While comparisons between nineteenth-century Britain and Thatcherism are well-established, not least by Mrs Thatcher’s own invocations of “Victorian values” (Briggs 1988: 10), such parallels are perhaps less immediately visible as far as the topic of education is concerned. In their seminal introduction to neo-Victorian Studies, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn explain that in order to be considered neo-Victorian, a text “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). Further, Llewellyn stresses that a neo-Victorian text “aims to re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to the here and now. The contemporaneous historicism present in the text thus becomes the key to its neo-Victorian classification” (Llewellyn 2008: 171). Lodge locates this “contemporaneous historicism” between the Victorian age and Thatcher’s Britain in the ‘two nations’ topos, specifically with regard to educational discourses. From the outset, education has been a key theme of the traditional condition-of-England novel, as for instance in Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), in which Mr Gradgrind’s educational philosophy of strict utilitarianism is contrasted with the world view of Sissy Jupe, who rejects his abstract reasoning for the imaginative values of the circus.³

Against this background, Lodge sets his novel in the fictional town of Rummidge in the Midlands in 1986, highlighting the manifold repercussions Thatcherism had for both the academic and industrial sector. The plot follows a so-called shadow scheme that brings together representatives of industry and academia – two sectors which, it is suggested, could not be further apart:

There is a widespread feeling in the country that universities are ‘ivory tower’ institutions, whose staff are ignorant of the realities of the modern commercial world. Whatever the justice of this prejudice, it is important in the present economic climate that we should do our utmost to dispel it. (Lodge 1988: 85)

As Professor Philip Swallow, the lecturer-protagonist Robyn Penrose’s boss, is informed by the VC’s memorandum, this strategy forms part of a wider planned action: the Industry Year, announced by the Conservative government in 1986. The scheme echoes the educational policy of the Thatcher government, which radically tightened its hold on school and university curricula. These developments culminated in the Education Reform Act of 1988. Generally speaking, Thatcher felt that their independence from market forces had led universities into a state of laziness, if not complacency. Thus, she subjected them to market rules, considering the educational sector, as journalist Peter Wilby puts it, akin to “an ailing, near-bankrupt industry”; the role of government ministers “was to challenge, even denigrate, the views of ‘insiders’, to demand value for money, to impose performance management, to root out endemic ‘failure’ and to insist on what they saw as customer satisfaction” (Wilby 2013: n.pag.). In the words of the novel itself, “the Conservative Government of Mrs Thatcher, elected in 1979 with a mandate to cut public spending, has set about decimating the national system of higher education” (Lodge 1988: 50). As regards the impact on the industrial sector, Vic Wilcox’s factory, Pringle’s, serves as a microcosm of the state of the nation at the time: there is an increase in productivity, but simultaneously the trade union’s power becomes drastically reduced and a large part of the work force is made redundant.⁴ Still, Vic considers these measures necessary, as he makes clear in conversation with Robyn:

[...] ‘But of course you support Thatcher, don’t you?’
‘I respect her,’ said Vic. ‘I respect anybody with guts.’
‘Even though she devastated industry round here?’
‘She got rid of overmanning, restrictive practices. She overdid it, but it had to be done.’ (Lodge 1988: 242)

His steadfast loyalty remains until eventually the factory closes down due to competitive pressure and Vic, too, loses his job. Ironically, the decline of Pringle's enables him to consider seriously the dream of starting his own business. Like Robyn's long-term prospects at the university, though, this endeavour is characterised as "risky, going it alone" and left unresolved (Lodge 1988: 373).

Today, education is no less topical a concern than it was in the nineteenth century or the 1980s, and the higher education landscape is a direct result of Thatcher's educational policy. While her government undoubtedly revolutionised the British system of higher education, the merits of these changes, like her political legacy overall, remains contested, to say the least. In the recent debate about the current state of British universities, Terence Kealey, at the time Vice-Chancellor of the private University of Buckingham, praised the changes she brought to the system, concluding that "[b]efore Mrs Thatcher, universities were very similar to public utilities – run for the benefit of staff with government money. Now they are stellar" (Kealey 2013: n.pag.). Following this controversial assessment, the education reporter Jack Grove offered a more balanced picture in the *Times Higher Education*. Amongst others, he cites Roger Brown, Professor of Higher Education Policy at Liverpool Hope University, who named Thatcherism "the beginning of a long decline" of British universities (Grove 2013: n.pag.).

On the one hand, Lodge's position on this dystopian scenario seems conspicuous, and we can certainly detect his voice behind Robyn's: "If you try to make universities like commercial institutions, you destroy everything that makes them valuable" (Lodge 1988: 345). Consequently, critics such as Rosemarie Bodenheimer have deemed the novel "a somewhat wistful farewell to the idea of the university radically threatened by the Thatcher government" (Bodenheimer 2008: 171). But while Lodge critiques Thatcher's transformation of the university system, any form of resistance to the process is comically undercut. The one-day strike of the Association of University Teachers is portrayed as ineffectual and, in Cora Kaplan's words, "merely symbolic, and the wildcat walkout at Vic's factory, Pringle's, suicidal" (Kaplan 2007: 101).⁵ Here, as elsewhere, Lodge's stance appears cynical, yet at the same time brutally honest.

2. Generic Signposting

In order to make the historical contingencies visible, Lodge juxtaposes Thatcher's England with that of Queen Victoria by means of excessive generic signposting, primarily via direct quotations from traditional, that is, Victorian, condition-of-England novels. This textual network is astonishingly complex, highlighted from the earliest possible moment at the paratextual level: even before the general epigraph, a dedication, followed by an author's note, teasingly alludes to the Victorians' obsession with inscriptions and prefaces.⁶ The author's note indicates that the following text is completely "imaginary", just to destroy this illusion a few lines later by – "for the purposes of fiction" – locating the so called "imaginary city" of Rummidge in the area of Birmingham (Lodge 1988: n.pag.). Equally, "D.L.'s" self-referential statement about being grateful to industrial managers for assisting him with the research while writing the novel betrays a "taint of realism" (Lodge 1988: 95). What follows is a general epigraph combining the original epigraph to George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) with a quotation from *Sybil; Or, The Two Nations*, the latter of which famously defined the two nations as "the rich and the poor" (Disraeli 2017: 59). Lodge pointedly cuts the quotation short:

‘Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's habits, thought and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners...’

‘You speak of –’ said Egremont hesitatingly.
(Lodge 1988: n.p.)

By cutting the quotation right before Egremont's interlocutor defines the 'two nations', Lodge continues this ambiguity, and so the reader expects *Nice Work* to fill in the gap and define what exactly the term references. Whether Lodge's novel provides a convincing enough answer is another question, but we can infer the town vs. gown divide because the novel initially establishes Vic and Robyn as antagonists. Nevertheless, just like Egremont, we should hesitate to complete the sentence, because this neat analogy may prove a mismatch in Thatcher's new Britain. Lodge's industry

and academy do not, like Disraeli's rich and poor, form a dichotomy. They do not exclude each other, but rather, in the course of the novel (as well as in Thatcher's *Realpolitik*) become intimately entangled with one another.⁷ Their opposition is an ideological one, opposed in terms of how to define the role of education, work, knowledge, or success, to name only a few of the novel's most immediate foci. Thatcher's educational policy sought to bring these sectors closer together by subjecting them to a market ideology based on competitiveness. In a system that potentially produces losers and losses, people might work harder to win, she assumed. But as the novel implies, this is a misunderstanding, because neither industry nor academia can exist if they are purely market-driven and run without a social conscience. The assumption that such a system could bring the two sectors closer together equally turns out to be naïve; the only (partial) reconciliation allowed by Lodge is that between Robyn and Vic as individuals.

Analogous to this general epigraph as a motto for the novel as a whole, each individual part is preceded by further epigraphs from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854/1855) and Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). Like *Sybil*, all these texts may be categorised as condition-of-England novels (see Simmons 2002: 344-351), and thus Lodge sets the generic background against which to consider *Nice Work*. The actual beginning of the novel is again postponed by a further epigraph, this time taken from *Shirley*. Paradoxically, this quotation promises "[s]omething real, cool and solid" to follow (Lodge 1988: n.pag.). By this point, even before the first chapter begins, readers already find themselves trapped within a metafictional network that simultaneously establishes and subverts a framework of illusion. In addition to these explicit textual references, the protagonists' names hint at the Victorian tradition: Robyn Penrose's family name is a metafictional comment on her nature as a product of the author's pen, while Victor's Wilcox's first name places him within the Victorian context, as his surname recalls E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910). Lodge comments on this correspondence:

About halfway through writing the novel I realized that I had selected for Vic [...] the surname of the chief male character in *Howards End*, Henry Wilcox – another man of business who becomes enamoured of an intellectual woman. (Lodge 1992: 38)

In other respects, however, this analogy is flawed. Vic, the managing director of a slowly declining, medium-sized enterprise, who is moreover of working-class origin, is an ill-fitting equivalent to Forster's wealthy London banker.

The generic signposting continues on the level of narrative perspective. When introducing Vic, the narrator does not intrude but, by referencing the exact date and place of the action, establishes a framework of realism and verisimilitude. In this opening part of the novel, the narrative situation is predominantly authorial, using Vic as a focaliser. Interestingly, as soon as introducing Robyn, the narrator intrudes and comments on the action:

And there, for the time being, let us leave Vic Wilcox, while we travel back an hour or two in time, a few miles in space, to meet a very different character. A character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself believe in the concept of character. (Lodge 1988: 39)

In other words, once the expert on the Victorian novel appears, the narrative situation switches from a typically Victorian to a self-reflexive, and hence more typically neo-Victorian voice.

Apart from these individual metafictional markers, another element of the plot employs all the techniques mentioned above on a larger scale: Robyn's lecture on the condition-of-England novel, which Lodge uses to provide the reader with some required background knowledge. Robyn briefly summarises and contextualises each of the novels quoted in the epigraphs and so, in case the reader has not yet seen the generic connection between all these texts, she steps in to make it explicit. The lecture discusses two of these hypotexts, namely *Hard Times* and *North and South*, in more detail, and so one does not even have to have read the novels to recognise the intertextual links. Whereas the plot of *Nice Work* closely follows that of *North and South*, there are significant parallels between *Nice Work* and *Hard Times* concerning their moral statement(s), specifically with regard to the latter's preoccupation with competing ideologies of education. The summaries Robyn provides can, at least with hindsight, be taken as foreshadowing the plot of *Nice Work*: keeping in mind the implications made by the condition-of-England frame, one already roughly knows what

kind of plot developments to expect. Amongst other things, the reader learns that in *North and South*,

Margaret is at first repelled by Thornton's harsh business ethic, but when a strike of workers turns violent, she acts impulsively to save his life, thus revealing her unconscious attraction to him, as well as her instinctive class allegiance. (Lodge 1988: 79)

It does not come as a surprise that Robyn and Vic's relationship develops in a similar direction or that Robyn increasingly adopts Vic's attitude and terminology akin to the way that Margaret begins to use factory slang in her speech.⁸

While retaining the overall plotline of *North and South*, Lodge also changes several significant details. Yet apart from the fact that his novel features a female protagonist with a career of her own, none of these alterations creates the illusion that the situation has changed; they merely update the text to its new, 1980s context. One example is the marginalisation of non-white immigrants, who seem to be substitutes for the immigrant Irish of Gaskell's novel.⁹ Thus, Robert Winston and Timothy Marshall hold that "[t]he point here is not that the plots of the novels are precisely identical but rather that the ideological markers in each text are strikingly similar, that the values attributed to geography and class are crucially parallel" (Winston and Marshall 2002: 8). But again, especially with reference to class, these crucial parallels drawn by Lodge do not quite fit. While in *North and South* the opposition is between Mr Thornton as an entrepreneur and the working class, in *Nice Work* the 'real' working class is merely implied, a faceless and furthermore ethnically 'Other' mass, which only becomes visible when Robyn visits the 'underbelly' of the factory; no wonder she feels that "the whole set-up is racist" (Lodge 1988: 134). This Othering, too, is in close dialogue with Gaskell's text and its several racist slurs against Thornton's Irish workforces. After John Boucher's suicide, Richard Hale sneers that Boucher and his family seem to lack the "granite in all these northern people" (Gaskell 1995: 301). Margaret replies, "I should guess from their tones they had Irish blood in them" (Gaskell 1995: 302), thereby blaming their struggle on their non-English ethnicity. As Mary Jean Corbett concludes, in Boucher's

rage and torpor, as in the lowness and apathy of the rest of his family, we can read the somewhat muted signs of a discourse that racializes Irish “blood” as posing a threat to contaminate the English working classes through proximity and amalgamation. (Corbett 2004: 94)

Thus, ultimately, Gaskell’s attitude towards the Irish not only looks ahead to the latent racism in the 1980s as practiced within Vic’s factory but also resonates with British racist discourses, both in the twenty-first century and the novel’s 1880’s context. Regarding the latter, another immediate parallel to the racializing of Irish workers in *North and South* is curiously absent from the novel. With the Good Friday Agreement still many years away, the 1980s were a particularly atrocious time in the Irish Troubles, and many of the bombings taking place that decade were the worst in the conflict’s history. In 1988, this would have been one of the most pressing and topical aspects of the state-of-the-nation question, but one that Lodge chooses not to explore.¹⁰

During Robyn’s lecture, the narrator cross-cuts between scenes of the protagonists at work, Robyn in her lecture hall and Vic in his office, thus further reinforcing their apparent opposition. In this way, they are not only contrasted as individuals but also as representatives of the ‘two nations’ suggested by Lodge. By switching between Robyn and the Wilcox family as middle-class representatives of different educational backgrounds, the novel implies that their lives have little in common, that they occupy separate spheres. At the same time, Lodge employs the sharp cuts between Vic’s words and Robyn’s explanations of *Hard Times* to link Vic ideologically to Mr Gradgrind. Vic’s speech about profit-making is juxtaposed with Robyn’s statement that “Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times* embodies the spirit of industrial capitalism as Dickens saw it” (Lodge 1988: 76). The lecture provides the opportunity to see Robyn within her usual working environment and to reveal her ideological position. It prepares the ground for her reaction when entering a real-life factory later on in the novel, since Robyn is an expert on the Victorian industrial novel. This field of expertise, together with fact that due to the depressed academic job market her employment contract is at stake, makes her (in the eyes of her colleagues) the ideal candidate for a shadow scheme. After all, she is the author of a monograph entitled “*The Industrious Muse: Narrativity and Contradiction*

in the Industrial Novel” (Lodge 1988: 52). Of course, being an expert on the literary genre of the industrial novel as an aesthetic medium proves scant preparation for experiencing industry in ‘real life’, a fact the novel makes clear. Ironically, what here appears a far-fetched and unworldly endeavour to bring closer two spheres that ostensibly have nothing in common is today’s common practice. For most larger corporations, not only inside the UK, university graduates from all subject areas have become a major pool to recruit their managerial staff from.

While both the reader and Robyn herself anticipate the discrepancy between theory and practice, her profound theoretical knowledge clashes with reality when she visits the factory. In fact, Robyn does quite the opposite of counteracting the stereotype of the ivory tower. Rather, her naivety turns this into a scene that she herself feels to be “so bizarre, so totally unlike her usual environment, that there was a kind of exhilaration to be found in it, in its very discomfort and danger, such as explorers must feel, she supposed, in a remote and barbarous country” (Lodge 1988: 130). When trying to explain her reaction to Vic, she initially wants to defend herself but immediately realises how grotesque the situation appears: “‘I told you I didn’t know anything about...’ She was going to say “industry”, but it occurred to her that this admission would come oddly from an expert on the Industrial Novel” (Lodge 1988: 122, original ellipses). Even though she feels out of place and hence should be aware of her incompetence in terms of factory management, she makes naïve attempts to incorporate the factory into her own cloistered world and advises Vic to “[m]odel industry on universities. Make factories collegiate institutions” (Lodge 1988: 345) – the very opposite of Thatcher’s attempts at the time to turn universities into knowledge ‘factories’. Bodenheimer rightly points out that, although it may run counter to Robyn’s self-conception as a twentieth-century feminist, “[a]ll her vaunted theoretical distance cannot prevent her from acting out the roles and attitudes of heroines in the industrial novels she teaches” (Bodenheimer 2008: 171). This strategy of trying to construct and evaluate the alien world in terms of the familiar (not to mention the hopeful reversal of the trend to make universities more like businesses) is a sign of changing power structures: whereas Robyn is in control in her classroom, she feels utterly helpless in the factory.

Robyn's attempts to adapt the factory to her own experiences also surface in the language she uses to describe her new temporary work environment:

What *had* she expected? Nothing, certainly, so like the satanic mills of the early Industrial Revolution. Robyn's mental image of a modern factory had derived mainly from TV commercials and documentaries [...]. The whole place seemed designed to produce, not goods for the outside world, but misery for the inmates. What Wilcox called the machine shop had seemed like a prison, and the foundry had seemed like hell. (Lodge 1988: 121)

She recycles the familiar nineteenth-century trope of the factory as hell or prison in order to express her shock about the working conditions. Compared with her own, privileged position, she understands such physical labour as a meaner form of work. The initial question is rhetorical, but the narrative voice switches to free indirect discourse, allowing for slippages between narrative levels. Who is speaking – the narrator, Robyn, or even Lodge himself? This is one of the many instances where this happens in the novel, in this case ridiculing Robyn for confirming the stereotype of the ivory tower. Thus, Kaplan concludes:

[i]t is Robyn's ideological stance born of ignorance, rather than Vic's unconcerned acceptance of labour market realities, which is behind the times, Lodge implies. Gaskell's economic liberalism is still operative, but not her middle-class female sympathy for the poor, which is as ineffective now as it was in the 1850s. (Kaplan 2007: 102)

In fact, Robyn's "middle-class [...] sympathy for the poor" is not only ineffectual but worsens the situation: her well-meaning interference in Danny Ram's case leads to a walk-out, eventually threatening all the workers' employment.

Nowhere do Robyn's and Vic's ideologically contrasting positions become more evident than when it comes to the definition of work: whereas Robyn finds that her job is "nice work. It's meaningful. It's rewarding. I

don't mean in money terms", Vic, in true Thatcherite fashion, retorts that "it's nice work if you can get it" (Lodge 1988: 126, 346). Vic says this as an immediate reply to Robyn's comment and while looking out of the window in the university's Senior Common Room, which suggests that he speaks about her job. However, given that Vic does not distinguish between different kinds and purposes of jobs, as Robyn does, he could just as well refer to himself, especially since he says this at a point in the novel when he can no longer get work. Furthermore, as suggested by the direct quotation from the Gershwin classic 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' (the chorus of which begins with "Holdin' hands at midnight"),¹¹ work here becomes a substitute for romantic love or sex, a topic on which the novel offers a somewhat dubious perspective.

Lodge often reaffirms rather than subverts Victorian sexual stereotypes, and hence Stefan Horlacher is certainly right in arguing that the numerous (phallic) jokes exhibit "a kind of humour that subtly and implicitly draws [its] readers into an often voyeuristic complicity with the male narrator" (Horlacher 2007: 465). *Prima facie*, power structures between Robyn and Vic are inverted to some degree. For instance, in Lodge's novel, it is the man who hopelessly falls in love with the woman, while Robyn treats her fling with Vic as a casual affair. But what could otherwise be considered a neo-Victorian reimagining of gender politics or empowerment of the woman's sexual identity is in turn subverted by the detached way in which Robyn reacts to all things sexual. To Vic's declaration of love she replies, "When I was younger [...] I allowed myself to be constructed by the discourse of romantic love for a while" (Lodge 1988: 293), and their love-making is disrupted by similar comments.¹² Robyn's self-fulfilment, it seems, lies not in her private life. As an alternative to romantic love, work appears to be what Kaplan describes as a "libidinised enjoyment for the old and the new middle classes, whether it is running a factory or teaching the politics and semiotics of the Victorian novel" (Kaplan 2007:100). Herein Lodge not only echoes the work ethics of *North and South* (Kaplan 2007:100) but also extends and embellishes Mrs Thatcher's famous propagation of what she considered "Victorian values": working "jolly hard" and thereby gaining both self-respect and self-improvement (Briggs 1988: 10), so that work no longer is a means to an end.

The list of such references to the Victorian parent genre, be they overt or subtle, could be extended, and they all serve a similar purpose: generic signposting and framing. In his introduction to genre, John Frow reminds us that generic structures are a basic tool for understanding the world, both enabling and restricting meaning. As he phrases it,

genre theory is, or should be, about the ways in which different structures of meaning and truth are produced in and by the various kinds of writing, talking, painting, filming, and acting by which the universe of discourse is structured. That is why genre matters: it is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings. (Frow 2010: 19)

By overtly labelling *Nice Work* a condition-of-England novel Lodge does exactly that; he produces meaning, pointing out the cultural continuities between 1980s England and the Victorian age. Robyn does not behave very differently from Margaret Hale, and Vic is a twentieth-century comic version of Mr Gradgrind. Lodge does not stop here, however. Since he reworks Disraeli's 'two nations' as a divide between academia and industry, the question arises as to what the novel's metatextuality adds to both the state-of-the-nation and the state-of-higher-education questions. In addition to the context of genre, Frow's comment also applies to education, which, again, ties in with the novel's larger topic. Institutions of higher education, in the liberal arts especially, equally play a vital role in the process of meaning-making. They, too, provide a framework that structures, (de)constructs, and mediates epistemological questions.

3. Metanarratives and Englishness

Many neo-Victorian texts feature a certain amount of metatextuality, yet *Nice Work* takes it further than most. In its broadest definition, 'metafiction'

is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the

fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 1993: 2)

In this sense, *Nice Work* not only acknowledges and calls into question its own constructedness as a novel, its indebtedness to a parent genre or its status as a medium of social critique. It also, more importantly, addresses the constructedness of reality itself, revealing that our perception of the world is formed by narratives, including the Victorian and later narratives we encounter on university Arts and Humanities courses.

The Disraelian topos of the ‘two nations’ is one particularly powerful topos or narrative, not only as far as the context of education is concerned. In Patrick Parrinder’s view, however, it was overemphasised from the outset, and he investigates why it has become such a powerful notion with lasting appeal nonetheless. As a possible answer, he proposes that “[i]n part this was due to the urgency of its historical context, in part to the repetition of a familiar fictional pattern” (Parrinder 2006: 168). By centring his novel on the topic of higher education, Lodge employs and extends this repetition of pattern. The ‘two nations’ still exist, but Lodge substitutes the rich vs. poor dichotomy with another pairing: the factory chimney vs. the ivory tower, or town vs. gown. Instead of reconciliation, the gulf between the two spheres has widened even more, so that they have – and again this is a close parody of Disraeli – finally turned into “two zones, whose values, priorities, language and manners were so utterly disparate” (Lodge 1988: 216). The inhabitants of each of these zones are “oblivious of how they fitted into the total picture” (Lodge 1988: 269), and the same is true for both Robyn and Vic, at least until they meet each other.

By way of conclusion to her lecture, Robyn demonstrates that “all the Victorian novelist could offer as a solution to the problems of industrial capitalism were: a legacy, a marriage, emigration or death” (Lodge 1988: 83). *Nice Work* features all of these possible endings except for death. Yet while offering many different solutions on the personal level, Lodge’s novel does not provide any remedies for the social problems it addresses, a concession that is in line with the Victorian genre: “Unable to contemplate a political solution to the social problems they described in their fiction, the industrial novelists could only offer narrative solutions to the personal dilemmas of their characters” (Lodge 1988: 82). So what kind of moral do

we take from *Nice Work*? Robyn anticipates some form of hasty conclusion and oversimplified interpretation with a reference to *Hard Times*, a warning that stands in for Lodge's novel as well: "The message of the novel is clear: the alienation of work under industrial capitalism can be overcome by an infusion of loving kindness and imaginative play [...]. Of course, such a reading is totally inadequate" (Lodge 1988: 77). At the end of the novel, Robyn's student Marion Russell interrupts a conversation between Robyn and Vic, wearing a T-shirt that carries the message "ONLY CONNECT" (Lodge 1988: 381). This further intertextual reference to *Howards End* offers a mock-Edwardian solution to the problem; the shadowing scheme and the ludicrous attempt to school Victor in the reading of Victorian condition-of-England novels make this unmistakable. Thus, in the same way as his Victorian predecessors, Lodge does not offer any final solution to society's problems and neither does he intend to. Robert S. Burton calls this "a testament to Lodge's honesty" (Burton 1994: 241), arguing that

[a]lthough *Nice Work* brings town and gown together just as it brings the genres of the campus and the industrial novel together, it does so without flinching from the grim realization that the differences that divide town and gown remain strong and deep, inevitably scarred onto the sensibility of any British writer who dares to approach this subject matter as the basis for a twentieth-century novel. (Burton 1994: 242)

Put even more strongly, Lodge's novel envisions a dark dystopia, painting what Kaplan poignantly describes as "a political image of modern Britain as more hopelessly divided than the bleakest visions of nineteenth-century industrial fiction" (Kaplan 2007: 105) – which does not bode well for the future of British higher education or industry.

In spite of this defeatist notion, Lodge takes his explorations further in the final sequence of the novel. Christian Gutleben highlights the framing function that this last page takes in combination with the novel's overall epigraph. Regarding both lexis and syntax, these passages are remarkably similar, and Lodge thereby "expresses the idea of cyclical repetition" (Gutleben 2001: 75).¹³ This idea of repetition is crucial, because Lodge's

novel does not merely revisit a Victorian genre. Kläger, too, has accentuated as much:

If, in content and form, contemporary condition-of-England novels give in to the nostalgic urge to look backwards (to traditional notions of Englishness, of the genre, and of the function of literature as a means of effecting change), they do not do so in the service of re-defining Englishness. Instead, they attest to the impossibility of doing that, but at the same time thrive on the ‘visceral power’ that arises from looking back. This attitude, paradoxically, at the same time mocks and reinforces the importance of tradition for both signifier (novel) and signified (England). (Kläger 2012: 75)

Lodge’s novel does exhibit a considerable degree of nostalgia or indeed self-indulgence, and on the surface seeks to re-define the focus of the state-of-the-nation question. But in order to unfold the visceral power that Kläger describes, *Nice Work* does not settle for a simple substitution of town vs. gown for rich vs. poor.

Going back to the novel’s opening quotation from *Sybil*, it becomes evident how Disraeli’s words fit the ‘two nations’ represented in the novel, however flawed or inaccurate an analogy this may be. The question arises as to whether they would fit another context just as well, with reference to issues of gender, race, sexuality, or any other divide in society. Disraeli’s words are born out of their specific historical moment. At the same time, however, Lodge’s use of the concept suggests that they are ahistorical and acontextual; with a little bit of artistic freedom, they can, at least broadly, be applied to any aspect of the state-of-the-nation question. Thus, the decisive criterion is not the context to which they are applied but the fact that it seems to have become impossible to apply them to one specific context *only*. In other words, the defining characteristic of a collective identity, of Englishness, is not a division into rich and poor or industry and academe, but the very perception of English society as divided into separate spheres, whatever these may be. Kaplan, too, concludes that “the novel implies that social antagonism, rather than an historically specific problem of the late twentieth century, will, like the poor, always be with us”, adding that “[i]n this respect Lodge shifts his novel, consciously or unconsciously, nearer to

Thatcherism if not to the right of it” (Kaplan 2007: 102). What is more, this does not necessarily presuppose a division into dichotomies. Instead, intersecting factors such as class, race, gender, and sexuality provide a myriad of ‘nations’ for society to be divided into. This is as true for Disraeli’s Victorian novel as it is for Lodge’s neo-Victorian appropriation.

Adaptations of individual texts or even entire genres typically come with a lot of ‘baggage.’ As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum observe, such materials arrive “with predetermined horizons of expectation and with their values and ideas about the world already legitimized. In other words, they are always already shaped by some kind of metanarrative”, which they, *sensu* Jean-François Lyotard, define as “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (Stephens and McCallum 1998: 6). Certainly, the condition-of-England question is one of these materials with predetermined horizons. To be English has always implied being multi-fractured into several parts and, by extension, a discussion of the state-of-the-nation question can only ever be a discussion of a divide rather than unison. *Nice Work* attests to a certain fondness for metanarratives when it comes to defining Englishness. The ‘two nations’ have developed into an ever-present grand narrative, a concept in constant flux and metamorphosis that reproduces itself in ever new (and old) forms. Lodge’s novel adds to this cultural reproduction in the same way that he adds to and revitalises the condition-of-England genre.

With regard to the novel’s ideological stance and political agenda, Heilmann and Llewellyn rightly conclude that *Nice Work* portrays Thatcherism as a renaissance of Victorian values in the late twentieth century (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 237), which becomes evident through the ways in which the novel revisits Victorian debates on education. Thus, it is a product of its time of composition. Yet surely, this renaissance of Victorian values goes much further. In the face of recent developments in British educational politics under David Cameron’s and more lately Theresa May’s Conservative governments, themselves more or less immediate consequences of Thatcherism, Lodge’s novel has lost none of its topicality. It is through various layers of metafiction or, more specifically, generic self-reflexivity, that Lodge situates himself within the (Victorian) condition-of-England genre. However, drawing on Lyotard’s concept of the metanarrative, it seems that the ‘two nations’ are neither distinctly Victorian nor neo-Victorian: they are English. Considering the current popularity of

novels written within the condition-of-England tradition, it is true that an ultimate conceptualisation of “the Victorians as representatives of something stable, secure, and comparable to us moved into a new context around the year 2000” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 237). That Lodge provided a meta-comment on this as early as the 1980s carves out this perceived cultural continuity and stability even more strongly.

Notes

1. The phrase was first used by Thomas Carlyle in his opening chapter of *Chartism* (1840), which is entitled ‘Condition-of-England Question’ (Carlyle 1840: 1). Texts subsumed under this term have been variously labelled ‘Industrial Novels’, ‘Social- or Social Problem Novels’, and ‘Utilitarian Novels’, but I am following James Richard Simmons Jr., who considers the term ‘condition-of-England novel’ “most inclusive” (Simmons 2002: 336). Jonathan Bate applies the term even more broadly: “But the 19th-century novel more broadly is a Condition of England genre. The big house, sustained by the sugar plantations in the West Indies, in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) is England. The world in which Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) is branded a fallen woman and his *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is excluded from university is England. The parsonage in which Mrs Humphrey Wards’ *Robert Elsmere* (1888) loses his faith, in one of the bestsellers of the age, is England” (Bate 2010: 132).
2. It is important to note that the genre was not solely concerned with economic questions, as its major focus on the effects of the Industrial Revolution may suggest. Instead, Lodge explains, the condition-of-England novel was “part of the continuous cultural debate about the place of human values in a society given over to materialism, a debate which had been sustained from the industrial revolution to the present day” (Lodge 1966: 217).
3. On the question of education in *Hard Times*, see Anne Hiebert Alton 1992. She primarily discusses the novel with regard to its satiric depiction of Utilitarianism.
4. For a more detailed overview of how Thatcherism affected both sectors, see Evans 1997, especially pp. 45-83.
5. As Kaplan points out, Lodge herein follows the Victorian novelist’s tradition of portraying workers’ movements as largely ineffectual, if not counterproductive. Two prominent examples are the failed strike at

Thornton's factory in *North and South* as well as the Chartist petitions in *Mary Barton* (Kaplan 2007: 101).

6. On the significance of epigraphs, especially in *North and South*, see Jackson 2005.
7. Although Egremont here explicitly distinguishes between 'the rich and the poor', Bodenheimer emphasises that the nature of 'the two nations' has always been a curiously contested issue (Bodenheimer 1988: 177f.).
8. In *North and South*, Mrs Hale, in a lengthy conversation with her daughter, expresses her disapproval of Margaret's newly adopted "factory slang" (Gaskell 1995: 233-235).
9. This, together with the Danny Ram episode, is one of the few passages in which the novel touches on class, if only in passing: "The Asians and some of the West Indians are willing to do it. The locals aren't any more. I've no complaints. They work hard, especially the Asians. It's like poetry, Tom Rigby says, when they're working well. Mind you, they have to be handled carefully. They stick together. If one walks out, they all walk out" (Lodge 1988: 134). In *North and South*, the contempt for "them Irishers" is fuelled by the fact that the English mill workers fear their jobs are at stake: "They were consequently surprised and indignant at the poor Irish, who had allowed themselves to be imported and brought over to take their places" (Gaskell 1995: 225).
10. Since the purpose of education is one of the novel's larger concerns, the absence of any reference to this political conflict is particularly conspicuous. While concentrating his educational impulse on one specific topic (i.e. the drawbacks of a market-driven educational system), Lodge ignores, if not reproduces, one major dilemma educational institutions have to face: they always chose their 'teaching material' selectively, thereby silencing specific discourses and potentially perpetuating ethnic inequalities. Lodge's decision not to comment on the Troubles is a prime example of this.
11. The music for 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' was composed by George Gershwin, lyrics were supplied by Ira Gershwin. Originally performed by Fred Astaire in the movie *A Damsel in Distress* (1937), it was later covered by a number of famous artists including Billie Holiday (*Quintessential Billie Holiday: Vol. V*, 1937), Bing Crosby (*Bing Sings Whilst Bregman Swings*, 1956), Frank Sinatra (*A Swingin' Affair!*, 1957), and Ella Fitzgerald (*Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Songbook*, 1959).
12. In passages such as these, Horlacher sees a strategy of belittling Robyn as an "outdated Lawrentian image of the sexless female brain" (Horlacher 2007:

470), which, in his opinion, makes it impossible for the reader to identify with her as a character.

13. Gutleben furthermore points out how the entire novel can be considered “anti-progressive” (Gutleben 2001: 75f.).

Bibliography

- Alton, Anne Hiebert. 1992. ‘Education in Victorian Fact and Fiction: Kay-Shuttleworth and Dickens’s *Hard Times*’, *Dickens Quarterly* 9:2, 67-80.
- Bate, Jonathan. 2010. *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. 2008. ‘The *Nice Work* of Victorian Novels in Thatcher’s Britain’, in Gay, Penny, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters (eds.), *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 171-181.
- . 1988. *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Briggs, Asa. 1988. ‘Victorian Values’, in Sigsworth, Eric M. (ed.), *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 10-26.
- Burton, Robert S. 1994. ‘Standoff at the Crossroads: When Town Meets Gown in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35:4, 237-243.
- Carlyle, Thomas. 1840. *Chartism*. London: James Fraser.
- Corbett, Mary Jean. 2004. *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Disraeli, Benjamin. 2017. *Sybil: Or, The Two Nations* [1845]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eaglestone, Robert. 2013. *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, Eric J. 1997. *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Frow, John. 2010. *Genre*. New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. 1995. *North and South* [1855]. London: Penguin.
- Grove, Jack. 2013. ‘Thatcher Had ‘Immense Impact’ on Higher Education’, *Times Higher Education*, 8 April, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/thatcher-had-immense-impact-on-higher-education/2003059.article> (accessed 28 July 2015).

-
- Gutleben, Christian. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Horlacher, Stefan. 2007. “‘Slightly Quixotic’: Comic Strategies, Sexual Role Stereotyping and the Functionalization of Femininity in David Lodge’s Trilogy of Campus Novels under Special Consideration of *Nice Work* (1988)”, *Anglia - Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 125:3, 465-483.
- Jackson, Jeffrey E. 2005. ‘Elizabeth Gaskell and the Dangerous Edge of Things: Epigraphs in *North and South* and Victorian Publishing Practices’, *Pacific Coast Philology* 40:2, 56-72.
- Kaplan, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana – Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kealey, Terence. 2013. ‘How Margaret Thatcher Transformed Our Universities’, *The Telegraph*, 08 April, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/9979999/How-Margaret-Thatcher-transformed-our-universities.html> (accessed 28 July 2015).
- Kläger, Florian. 2012. ‘Reading Iconic Spaces. The Public House in the Contemporary Condition-of-England Novel’, in Tönnies, Merle and Heike Buschmann (eds.), *Spatial Representations of British Identities*. Heidelberg: University Press Winter, 63-81.
- Llewellyn, Mark. 2008. ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’ *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn), 164-185.
- Lodge, David. 1966. *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1988. *Nice Work*. London: Penguin.
- . 1992. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin.
- Liotard, Jean-François. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Parrinder, Patrick. 2006. *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simmons, James Richard Jr. 2002. ‘Industrial and Condition of England Novels’, in Brantlinger, Patrick and William B. Thesing (eds.), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*. Malden: Blackwell, 336-352.

- Stephens, John, and Roby McCallum. 1998. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Waugh, Patricia. 1993. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Winston, Robert P., and Timothy Marshall. 2002. 'The Shadows of History: The "Condition of England" in *Nice Work*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44:1, 3-21.