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SCHOLAR – FICTIONIST – MEMOIRIST:
DAVID LODGE'S DOCUMENTARY (SELF-)BIOGRAPHY IN *QUITE A
GOOD TIME TO BE BORN: 1935–1975*

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade or so, David Lodge has become not only a reader but also an avid practitioner of “fact-based writing” – be it the biographical novel (*The Master* of 2004 and *A Man of Parts* 2011), the autobiographical novel (*Deaf Sentence* of 2008), the biographical essay (*Lives in Writing* of 2014) and – finally – a proper autobiography (*Quite a Good Time to Be Born* of 2015). The aim of this paper is to analyse Lodge's recent turn to life narratives and, in particular, his autobiographical story of 2015; and, consequently, to address the following questions: Does Lodge's memoir offer “an experiment in autobiography” (to quote H.G. Wells, one of Lodge's favourites), or remain a conventional life story immune to the tenets of contemporary life writing? Is it the work of a (self-)historian, or a novelist? Does it belong to the “regime of truth,” or is it the product of memory? Finally, is it, indeed, a memoir (as its subtitle claims), or a specimen of self-biography? The paper will show special interest in the work's generic characteristics and will offer an attempt to locate *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* on the map of contemporary life writing practices.

Key words: David Lodge, memoir, auto/biography, documentary biography

“We live in the age of mass
loquacity. We are all writing it or
at any rate talking it: the memoir,
the apologia, the c.v., the *cri de
Coeur*.”
(Amis 2001: 6)

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1. A life in writing

In the prologue to his 2014 collection of essays tellingly titled *Lives in Writing*, David Lodge writes about his recent fascination with the realm of non-fiction² in the following fashion: “[A]s I get older I find myself becoming more and more interested in, and attracted to, fact-based writing. This is I believe a common tendency in readers as they age, but it also seems to be a trend in contemporary literary culture generally” (Lodge 2015b: ix). Though Lodge never explicates his use and understanding of the highly problematic category of “fact”,³ he, nevertheless, lists a number of genres that he unequivocally classifies as “fact-based writing” *par excellence*, namely “biography, the biographical novel, biographical criticism, autobiography, diary, memoir, confession,” as well as “various combinations of these modes” (Lodge 2015b: ix). In short, specimens which allow “the lives of real people [being] represented in the written word” (Lodge 2015b: ix).

However, to anyone who is familiar with the rich oeuvre of David Lodge, both a novelist and a literary critic, his turn to life narratives⁴ – since, in fact, all the specimens of “fact-based writing” that he enumerates are instances of life narrative – is, by no means, a novelty and cannot be seen as a recent development only.⁵ On the contrary, interest in life (be it one’s own or the lives of others), as well as intersection of *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* appears to go to the very heart of Lodge’s writing. *The Picturegoers*, Lodge’s debut novel of 1960, is the first to contain a number of ostensibly auto/biographical elements: not only an accurate portrayal of the writer himself (in the guise of fictional Mark Underwood), or Mary (Lodge’s real wife portrayed in the novel as Clare) and her deeply religious Catholic family, but also such minor episodes as a pilgrimage of Catholic students to the Marian shrine of Walsingham in Norfolk (which

² Thus echoing Diana Athill who in her memoir *Somewhere Towards the End* confesses that she has “gone off novels,” and explains that “rare delicacies” capable of satiating her dwindling appetite for literature are to be found primarily in the field of non-fiction (Athill 2009: 134).

³ “A fact,” Hayden White states, “is an event under description,” where “description can be understood as consisting of a perspicuous listing of attributes of the event ... an event cannot enter into a history until it has been established as fact” (White 2008: 13).

⁴ In line with Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s reading of the term, I see life narrative as a “general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (Smith and Watson 2010: 4). Life narrative is thus an umbrella term (or a master category) for all modes and instances of life presentation, including life writing (strictly textual recordings of *bios*).

⁵ Cf. Morace 1989, 141–142; Bergonzi 1995, 9; Martin 1999, 2–3, 92–94, 155, 161; Perkin 2014; on his part, Lodge has never attempted to conceal the fact that many of his works of fiction are profoundly “autobiographical in origins” (qtd. in Morace 1989: 142).

Lodge, just like his protagonist, did take in the Holly Week of 1955).⁶ *How Far Can You Go* of 1980 offers a largely true account of Lodge's schooldays in St. Joseph's Catholic school, while *Therapy* of 1995 recreates his time in the parish youth club⁷ (where the future novelist, similarly to his fictional alter ego Tubby Passmore, learned to dance and thus "got to know girls, to touch them, and to feel reasonably at ease with them" (Lodge 2015a: 102). In *Ginger, You're Barmy* of 1962 Lodge conjures up and imaginatively re-lives the period of his military service, and in one of his best-known novels, *Changing Places* of 1975, he summons up his experience of teaching at Berkeley (and also famously portrays Stanley Fish as one Morris Zapp). In the short stories "My First Job" and "Why the Climate's Sultry," Lodge veraciously recalls his own first job as a bookseller on Waterloo station and vacation in Ibiza where he travelled in 1957 having been discharged from a conscript's service, respectively. Desmond Bates, the major character of *Deaf Sentence* of 2008, is, analogously to his creator, an ageing academic who suffers from deafness and whose father was a freelance musician.⁸ Finally, in *Out of the Shelter* of 1970, acknowledged by Lodge as "probably the most autobiographical of [his] novels" (Lodge 2015a: 110),⁹ the writer provides his readers with a thinly disguised story of his own childhood and adolescence: experiencing the Blitz, moving to the country to escape air raids, his father William Lodge being conscripted and posted to the Air Force group, or paying a visit to Heidelberg where his maternal aunt Eileen did live after the end of World War II. This amalgamation of (personal) fact and fiction identifiable in most of Lodge's novels remains – one should duly note – consistent with Lodge's theoretical musings on the nature of postmodern fiction, whose practitioner the writer considers himself to be. It appears, perhaps,

⁶ In *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* Lodge admits that the episode of Mark Underwood taking part in the Student Cross is based on a real-life experience of the writer. What is more, Lodge asserts that an excerpt of his novel covering this episode (which he duly quotes) offers a "more accurate account" (sic!) of the event than any attempt to summon it up from [his] memory (Lodge 2015a: 198–199).

⁷ The novel's third part is also written in the form of memoir in which Tubby reminisces about his first girlfriend and offers an account of their relationship.

⁸ For more autobiographical traces, see Taylor 2008.

⁹ Lodge confesses to having drawn on his memories when writing *Out of the shelter* and insists on its autobiographical origin despite the fact that "for narrative and thematic reasons" the facts have been "chang[ed], combin[ed] and embellish[ed]." When quoting excerpts from the novel he also admits that it is impossible for him to determine which of the details were "take from life" and which inspired by "classical fictional treatment of the subject" and, consequently, imagined. Nevertheless, the passage, Lodge claims, is "certainly true to the sense of abandonment I felt, as a five-year-old used to my mother's devoted and no doubt over-indulgent care, when suddenly thrust into the austere collective life of a boarding school" (Lodge 2015a: 28, 31).

enough to mention that among a number of techniques¹⁰ which he identifies as essential to the phenomenon in question is the so-called “short-circuit”,¹¹ by which he means “combing in one work violently contrasting modes – the obviously fictive and the apparently factual; introducing the author and the question of authorship into the text; and exposing conventions in the act of using them” (Lodge 1977: 240).

Despite Lodge’s apparent (and briefly summarised above) deep-rooted interest in the dynamics between the fictive and the factual, one should observe that over the last two decades or so the writer has intensified his exploration of the ways the lives of people are represented in the written word. In the period, he has produced a number of biographical essays on the likes of Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, and Anthony Trollope, among others. First published in the *Guardian Review*, *New York Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, or *Critical Quarterly*, they were revised, extended and re-printed in 2014 in a single volume entitled *Lives in Writing*. Most importantly, however, David Lodge has become a leading practitioner and theoretician of a new sub-genre of the biographical novel that came to prominence at the turn of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, namely the biographical-novel-about-a-writer.¹² Lodge did not only write two specimens of the genre, i.e. *Author, Author* of 2004 and *A Man of Parts* of 2011, fictionalised life stories of Henry James and Herbert George Wells, respectively, but greatly contributed to its scholarly exploration by means of his essay “The Year of Henry James; or, Timing Is All: the Story of a Novel.” Interestingly, Lodge’s discussion of the formal characteristics of the biographical novel did not limit itself to an impersonal theoretical analysis of a literary phenomenon, but, instead, welcomed a considerable amount of confessional criticism¹³ (focusing in particular on being overshadowed by Colm Tóibín and his critically-acclaimed novel *The Master*) – thus conceding the correctness of Oscar Wilde’s famous dictum that “criticism is the only civilised form of autobiography” (Wilde 2008: 26).

Consequently, when in the autumn of 2014 it was announced that one day after the celebrations of the novelist’s eightieth birthday (i.e. on 29 January

¹⁰ I.e. contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, and excess.

¹¹ “[The] process of interpretation assumes a gap between the text and the world, between art and life, which postmodernist writing characteristically tries to short-circuit in order to administer a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary” (Lodge 1977: 239–240).

¹² Lodge has defined it as a novel that, with the help of novelistic techniques, takes a real writer and the writer’s real story as the subject matter for imaginative exploration (Lodge 2007: 21).

¹³ Also known as “personal criticism,” “sequestered criticism,” or “autocritography”.

2015) Lodge's first memoir would be published, the news came as no surprise to his readers and critics alike. Given the trajectory of Lodge's literary career, his ostensible (and latterly accelerated) interest in life writing genres, as well as the all-pervasive "memoir boom" (cf. Anderson 2011, 113–124),¹⁴ the publication of Lodge's autobiography appeared to be inevitable. However, precisely due to his long-standing preoccupation with the interplay of fact and fiction, not to mention Lodge's interest in the figure of H.G. Wells, the author of the highly unorthodox *Experiment in Autobiography*, one was entitled to expect that Lodge's life story would escape conventionality and break – to use Jacques Derrida's apt phrasing – the paradigmatic "law[s] of genre" (Derrida 1980, 204). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse *Quite a Good Time to Be Born: A Memoir 1935-1975*, and, resultantly, to address the following questions: Does Lodge's memoir offer its own "experiment in autobiography," or remain a conventional life story immune to the tenets of contemporary life writing? Is it the work of a (self-)historian, or a novelist? Finally, is it, indeed, a memoir (as its subtitle claims), or a specimen of self-biography?

2. Memoir on the map of life writing regimes

Since the subtitle (also known among the scholars of paratexts as a secondary title or genre indication (Genette 1997: 56–57) of Lodge's volume unambiguously and boldly asserts the piece's generic affiliation, it appears necessary to first identify some of the features of memoir – traditionally considered to be an autobiographical narrative offering a collection of its subject's memories – and, subsequently, discuss the position of Lodge's autobiographical narrative *vis-à-vis* the genre's parameters.

Although contemporary literary criticism remains at odds as to the formal characteristics of memoir (cf. Larson 2007, Yagoda 2010, Marasco 2011, Vice 2014), while an attempt to establish (and explicate the choice of) memoir's generic *marqueurs* far exceeds the scope of the present paper,¹⁵ I should like to turn to a few theoretical frameworks which might prove to be particularly helpful when trying to put *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* on the map of life writing modes.

¹⁴ Not to mention Lodge's preoccupation with the position he and his oeuvre occupy (and will occupy) in the history of English literature. This characteristic of Lodge is clearly visible in his essays – its most explicit evocation being *The Year of Henry James* which testifies to the writer's obsession with figures (copies sold), reviews and bestsellers lists (e.g. Lodge 2007: 100–101).

¹⁵ A thorough discussion of contemporary memoirs and an attempt to establish the genre's formal parameters are to be offered in my study *Through the Looking Glass. Writers' Memoirs at the Turn of the Centuries (1990–2015)* to be published in 2016.

The first interpretation this paper would like to privilege is Julie Rak's brilliant reading of the genealogy of memoir tellingly titled "Are Memoirs Autobiography?" – an essay which does not only prioritise the genre's essential hybridity but also argues in favour of recognising the memoir's distinctiveness. When elaborating on what she believes to be a transgendered nature of this type of life writing, Rak notes that memoir typically blends the private and the public; its subject may be one's self or others; it is equally written "by the most powerful public men" and "the least known, most private women"; it describes "writing as process and writing as product" (Rak 2004: 316–317). Rak insists that memoir differs considerably from long-standing life writing genres (such as autobiography) in, among others, its ostensible resistance to their laws (hence it cannot be seen as their sub-genre), as well as the overt appraisal of democracy/plurality (of subject), meta-textuality, and, above all, the polyphony of voices (it is never a story of a single self, but always of selves and others). In Rak's model, memoir, is thus seen as an "un-biography" (Miller 1996: 2), an anti-life (*bios*)-writing (*graphie*) which opposes the vision of life as singular, coherent and comprehensible. This aspect was, in fact, noted before by Gore Vidal who the introductory note to his 1995 memoir entitled *Palimpsest* stated: "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked" (Vidal 1995: 5).

A more recent theoretical underpinning of memoir's characteristics has been offered by G. Thomas Couser. Clearly indebted to Rak's conception, Couser's pronouncements on memoir formulated in his 2012 study postulate what follows: memoir belongs to the realm of non-fiction since it depicts the lives of real people, but since it is based on the working of memory it is inevitably selective and potentially fictive; it can be both self- and other-life writing; it is a "term of art, the prestige term" which has recently spurned its centuries-long attribution of inferiority¹⁶; it is "relational," i.e. concerned with intimate relationships, and focused on a discrete part of life (Couser 2012: 15, 18, 19, 20, 23). The last aspect – a major addition to Rak's deliberations – deserves a more detailed exploration here. Again, unlike the traditional autobiography or biography, which are believed to "recompose and interpret life in its totality" (Gusdorf 1980: 38), memoir – I should like to argue – does not wish to offer a God's-eye view of someone's existence; it not a "projet fondamental" as Lejeune recently declared about autobiography (Lejeune 2010: 13), but a "souvenir"¹⁷ which is deliberately episodic, limited and segmental, further characterised by some considerable distrust towards such notions as unity, comprehensiveness,

¹⁶ "No one writes autobiography any more. At least, no one reads it" (Couser 2012: 18).

¹⁷ To re-appropriate a term considered derogatory and inferior by the French pope of autobiography (Lejeune 2010: 16–17).

understanding and, ultimately, truth.¹⁸ Having summarily elucidated the selected “conditions and limits” of memoir, this paper would like to offer now a close analysis of Lodge’s autobiographical volume in order to address its (purported and “actual”) generic identity.

3. Biography of self

One of the most striking features of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is the sheer totality of Lodge’s life writing project – as this paper shall argue, the first of many violations of the memoir’s poetics that the writer perpetrates. The concluding statement of the foreword to Lodge’s massive; almost five hundred-page-long autobiographical work perfectly grasps its ambition of completeness and thoroughness: “it covers, what is, at the time of writing, the first half of my life, up to the age of forty. I hope to write another book about the second half, in added extra time” (Lodge 2015: 3). *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is, in consonance with its bulk, an absolute and all-inclusive piece of life writing. It opens with a chapter which could easily (having first changed the first-person into the third-person narrative voice) be found in a biography of the novelist. With the help of extensive documentation (e.g. birth certificates, tape recordings of his conversations with his father, photographs) and the help of a genealogist (who was to verify if there was any chance of his family being Jewish), Lodge offers an exhaustive account of his nearest and dearest. Conforming to the patriarchal model of life writing, he first discusses in detail his father’s family and, subsequently, his mother’s family tree (always starting with the male ancestors) in order to establish his *patrimony* [my emphasis]. The first chapter unambiguously announces to its readers that *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is not to be the work of a memoirist, i.e. the one who remembers, but of a (self-)historian, i.e. the one who, to use Hayden White’s terminology, “factualises events”: dates, places, describes, classifies and, ultimately, names them (White 2008: 14). Lodge attempts to solve the “riddle” whether he was, indeed, born in a nursing home (as having been told); makes a number of claims on the basis of various records and archives (e.g. “[T]o judge from their parents’ wedding photograph ...”; “according to the marriage certificate”, Lodge 2015a: 14, 16); desires to formulate a number of objective (i.e. verifiable) statements (e.g. “Marriage forced on to couple by pregnancy, and the absence of any further children [unusual in that class at that time] suggest that the union was somewhat lacking in mutual love”, Lodge 2015a: 9); aims at precision and deliberately separates speculation (“I suspect,” “I think”, Lodge 2015a: 14) from “knowledge.” Most

¹⁸ I am referring here to the “markers” of autobiography as stipulated by Georges Gusdorf (1980: 34, 35, 37).

explicitly, he complains about the impossibility to recover facts and to find answers to many questions that “arise from an exercise like this one” (Lodge 2015a: 5).

The sense that Lodge’s life story radically belongs to the “regime of truth” pervades the whole narrative which, following the chronological order of events (both major and minor) in a fully religious manner, offers a meticulous account of the forty years of the novelist’s life: his childhood and adolescence, school and university days, marriage and family life, career as a teacher and novelist, ending with the publication of *Changing Places* in 1975. Throughout the book one is unable to shake off the impression of being confronted with an extensive form of curriculum vitae compiled by a diligent biographer. Lodge is at pains to establish an accurate chronology of his activities (e.g. various movements from and to London during World War II) and he admits to having consulted all available papers and documents relating to a particular period of his life prior to writing individual sections of the book (Lodge 2015a: 86). If possible, he revisits individual places or venues so as to describe them accurately. He is obsessed with dates and figures. For example, important individuals are given the dates of their birth and death or their “regnal years” in brackets (e.g. Pope Pius X). Elsewhere when writing about the priests that ran St. Joseph’s Academy – his own school, he provides his readers not only with the history of the school (and details about the building), but also of the order (an almost encyclopaedic entry on the De La Salle brothers). All his novels written in the period are provided with extensive synopses. Moreover, Lodge does not fail to inform one how much his wedding and his first car cost, how many copies his individual books sold, or the current position of Brown University (which he visited in the mid-1960s when he was awarded the Harkness Fellowship) in the world ranking list. Needless to say, the main body of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is fleshed out with a full index of personal names, a number of footnotes (listing sources or providing more details), as well as (highly unusual for any autobiographical text) an insert with twenty-eight photographs illustrating events and people (most notably Lodge himself) described in individual chapters – all duly signed and credited.

Not surprisingly, in light of the remarks formulated above, Lodge’s narrative happily welcomes a truly exorbitant number of quotes – thus further solidifying the view of the volume being subordinated to the domain of documentary evidence and not the spirit (and mode) of reminiscing. Be it an account of his relationships (with father, Mary), friendships (Malcolm Bradbury or Frank Kermode) or even inspirations (Graham Greene), instead of writing about them personally and intimately, Lodge prefers to quote extensively from a variety of sources which he himself defines as “written traces” (Lodge 2015a: 162). Consequently, the story of Mary Lodge giving birth to the couple’s firstborn is nar-

rated by means of a letter her husband wrote to their friends to announce the arrival of their daughter Julia. While an account of his friendship with Frank Kermode is offered in the form of an abridged extract from Lodge's biographical essay "Frank Remembered – by a Kermodian," namely a different life writing genre which is governed by a different set of characteristics.¹⁹ However, Lodge's quotable sources are not limited to those typically classified as instances of factography. On the contrary, a significant number of quotes in *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* are taken directly from Lodge's novels since, as the writer himself admits, oftentimes he cannot "distinguish confidently between the details that were taken from life ..., and those that [he] imagined [him]self" (Lodge 2015a: 31). As a result, readers of Lodge's life story become exposed to a notion popularised by biographical positivism which is still in fashion among biographers (though it needs to be stated that many remain wary of it) – namely that books do not only derive from life but that one's life, its "truths" and incidents, can be illuminated by means of studying one's works.²⁰ However, to seek the "explanation" of the work "in the man or woman who produced it" and to "unite person[s] and their works" (Barthes 2003: 126) is not the role of a writer, but precisely that of a biographer. Nevertheless, Lodge is determined to inform his readers about almost every single convolution of (his) life and (his) literature; for example, he explains that "a detailed account [of his military service] can be gathered from [his] novel *Ginger, You're Barmy*": "Jonathan's service in the Army follows the pattern of mine closely, and almost every detail of setting and daily life in the novel, many small illustrative incidents, and numerous lines of dialogue, were recalled from memory" (Lodge 2015a: 211). This elucidation is, of course, followed by a lengthy quote from the opening section of the novel. But apart from assuming the role of a (self-) biographer, Lodge also becomes a critic of his own works, explaining patterns and motifs, analysing style and language, identifying intertexts and influences present in his novels; like in the following elaboration on the importance of James Joyce to his writing:

Joyce's direct influence on my own writing is not observable until my third novel, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), with its parodies of various modern writers and *hommage* to Molly Bloom's monologue in the last chapter. The style of the first section of *Out of the Shelter* (1970) owed a good deal to the corresponding section of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in acknowledgement of which, when I issued a revised edition of that novel in 1986, I used an introductory dash at the beginning of direct speech, which Joyce preferred to what he

¹⁹ A largely scholarly piece which should be analytical, critical, impersonal, etc.

²⁰ When writing about interrelationships of life and literature, Boris Tomaševskij states the following: "It is sometimes difficult to decide whether literature recreates phenomena from life or whether the opposite is in fact the case: that the phenomena of life are the result of the penetration of literary clichés into reality (Tomaševskij 2003: 85).

scornfully called “perverted commas”. And in *Small World* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988), ... I took a tip from Joyce and used precursor texts as structural scaffolding for stories of modern life: the Grail legend and chivalric romance in the former, and Victorian industrial novels in the latter.

(Lodge 2015a: 197–198)

Borrowing from the lexicon of philosophy, one could describe Lodge’s narrative as being indebted to a specific form of materialism – visible not only in the interest that the writer takes in *materia* (meaning wood),²¹ namely the physicalism of objects and people (e.g. detailed descriptions of furniture, architectural ornaments, etc., Lodge 2015a: 20, 21), but, above all, in his preference for what is fixed, stable, verifiable and actual. In his attempt at “objectification of the person,” to use Jean-Paul Sartre’s phrasing, Lodge produces a text in which material life generally dominates social, political, and intellectual life; not to mention *la vie d’un coeur*²² (Sartre 1968: 142, 97).

Sartre, the father of the “progressive-regressive” biographical method, also claimed that in order to discover one’s particularity and profundity, one requires not only encyclopaedic or factual information but, above all, a mental effort involving imagination, intellect and sensibility. And, one would be more than tempted to add, artistry, since, as Georges Gusdorf writes, “[A]n autobiography cannot be a pure and simple record of existence, an account book or a logbook: on such and such a day at such and such an hour, I went to such and such a place A record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be no more than a caricature of real life; in such a case, rigorous precision would add up to the same thing as the subtlest deception” (Gusdorf 1980: 42). The question of form remains, in fact, another problematic aspect of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born*. In the past, Lodge was deservedly praised for stylistic and verbal inventiveness (e.g. the already mentioned pastiche passages in *The British Museum is Falling Down*). Regrettably, none of it is to be encountered in Lodge’s autobiographical narrative. The orthodoxy of Lodge’s style and vocabulary (no dialogues; chapter/life episode division; formal conservatism reflected by the frequent use of old-fashioned words) has led Stefan Collini to describe *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* “spontaneous and artless recall”, deprived of “the effect of selection and arrangement”. Lamenting over the fact that Lodge’s narrative fails to meet the standards and quality of his earlier writing, the *London Review of Books* critic and Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge ends his review of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* with an instance of verbal and stylistic playfulness which he finds missing in the volume:

²¹ The adjective “material” (or the noun “matter”) is traditionally understood in philosophy as something constant, characterized by mass and weight, occupying space.

²² Gusdorf calls it a “state of the soul” (Gusdorf 1980: 37).

Reading this [a lengthy quote from *The British Museum Is Falling Down* included in *Quite a Good Time to Be Born*] again I said alright it was a nice idea but repeating it seems a bit like showing off or just not being able to think of anything so inspired these days not that I mind much and anyway its alright to do this because he is so cherished now and no one wants to say anything bad about him and thats alright because he is a good thing and over the years he has made me laugh and can still make me smile a bit and anyway its only an autobiography and its alright to go on a bit about yourself there in fact it wouldn't work if you didn't really but even so I wanted to say to him that its not really very good but I didnt quite have the heart and perhaps Im only disappointed because I used to enjoy him a lot when I was younger and when he was younger too and perhaps its never quite as good when youre older only alright and so thats what I said about his book I said it was alright though it isnt really but thats alright.

(Collini 2015: 15)

Explicit frustration of the critic evident in the above-quoted excerpt is, in fact, perfectly understandable. Even a nonprofessional reader of this autobiographical account is able to identify such obvious structural deficiencies as the lack of any climax, or finishing the narrative *in medias res*²³ – an aspect which cannot be explained by the fact that the book is planned as the first of the two volumes. Doris Lessing also published her life story in two parts but it did not interfere with the carefully planned organisation and internal complexity of individual books (e.g. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* memorably ends with the writer being thirty years old, sitting on the veranda in Cape Town and waiting for a ship which would take her to England – a symbolic scene of the writer “waiting for [her] future, [her] real life to begin”, see Lessing 1995: 418).

But the totality of Lodge's life writing project, its documentary character and lack of artistic finesse are not the only reasons why I find the classification of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* as an instance of memoir particularly problematic. The relevant hallmarks of the genre (as Rak and Couser convincingly argue) also include the specimens' relational or polyphonic nature (never the story of a single self), as well as them equally embracing private (intimate) and public (official) modes of life. In these respects, Lodge's narrative uniformly violates the tenets of memoir. First of all, Lodge is the only “persona,” to use the Jungian category synonymous with “a private conception a man has of himself,” particularly appreciated by H.G. Wells (Wells 1934, 9), that can be described as the *subject* [my emphasis] of the narrative, its sole character.²⁴ For a fact, the

²³ The last sentence of the volume reads: “But that is a subject, among others, for another book” (Lodge 2015a: 478).

²⁴ One of the most explicit manifestations of Lodge's obsession with one's own self (and another proof of the volume's documentary nature) is a profuse use of citations from (mostly positive) reviews of his books.

pages of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* are populated by a vast array of people, but Lodge, this unlikely memoirist, refuses to invest into their stories or share (qualitatively) his book with them. Possibly, with the single exception of his father, people are either reduced to facts (e.g. his colleague Terrence Spencer, see Lodge 2015a: 319), or the roles they perform in a Lodge-centred world. One learns surprisingly little about Mary Lodge (one may only guess about their marital problems and her dissatisfaction with being reduced to the role of a mother despite outstanding academic results), his mother (“lacking a satisfying career of her own, and having a limited interest in the things that preoccupied Dad and me, like music, literature and sport, she was marginalised and became a kind of servant to both of us: shopping, housekeeping and serving up meals, often individually at hours which suited our separate timetables”, Lodge 2015a: 24), or his children. A vivid illustration of Lodge’s (and, *a posteriori*, narrative’s) solipsism is the way *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* addresses the story of Christopher, Lodge’s son who has Down syndrome. Having paid some considerable attention to his “gloom” and “shock” related to the birth of a disabled child, he sums up Christopher’s adult life in just a few sentences, vaguely concluding at last that “[h]is life was not to be without problems and anxieties, for him and for us, but it has been mostly a happy and (given his limitations) a fulfilled one” (Lodge 2015a: 419). When reading Lodge’s story one is, many a time, enticed to pronounce a judgement made by Martin Amis in relation to Philip Roth’s Zuckerman novels: “writing about writers, writing about writing: his compulsive self-circlings, I felt, were stifling his energy and his comedy. Something was missing: other people” (Amis 2001: 176).

However, despite such an ostensible pronouncement of self-interest, the narrative reveals very little about Lodge’s private self (his “personality” to quote Wells once again). Lodge is, of course, very much aware of the autobiography’s liaison with confessionalism and he peppers his life story with a few (mostly embarrassing) disclosures such as admitting that the dates with his first girlfriend Peggy left him with “an erection like a small crowbar in [his] trouser pocket” (Lodge 2015a: 121). Nevertheless, intrusions of false familiarity and confidentiality are not enough to create a sense of intimacy between the author/character and the readers (who, using GUSDORF’s idiom, can be defined as the book’s mere “witnesses”). *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is governed by a belief that its subject is, indeed, worthy of a special interest and that he writes, at eighty, “in order to celebrate [his] deeds ... , providing a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity that otherwise is in danger of forgetting [him] or of failing to esteem [him] properly” (GUSDORF 1980, 36). By focusing on his activities, his career as a novelist and academic – in short, his exteriority, not “the history of his soul” (GUSDORF 2015a: 37) – Lodge defines himself primarily as a public man. The final couple of pages of *Author, Author*, Lodge’s biographical

novel about Henry James, show the Master in his coffin: “Henry James is laid out in his coffin, covered with a black pall, and there is a white cloth over his face which Minnie folds back to reveal his immaculately shaven face. He looks very fine, like a work of art in ivory wax, perfectly peaceful, but disassociated with everything that was his personality” (Lodge 2004: 379). It is the very same disassociation from Lodge’s own personality that one may identify as characteristic of self-presentation in *Quite a Good Time to Be Born*.

Taking into account the totality and thoroughness of Lodge’s life writing project; its ostensible rejection of memories (always selective and potentially fictive) in favour of hard evidence, fact and research/documentation; its disavowal of intimacy and focus on Lodge’s public life; and, finally, its self-absorption and banishment of others from the story’s thematic core – one is determined to conclude that *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* cannot, by any means, be defined as a classic of memoir.²⁵ However, one may find it equally difficult to classify this volume as an autobiography since the volume clearly fails to meet the criteria of the genre authoritatively stipulated by Georges Gusdorf:

[autobiography] is unquestionably a document about a life and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. It is therefore of little consequence that the *Mémoires d’autre-tombe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his *Voyage en Amérique*; the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of travelers’ moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal.

(Gusdorf 1980: 43)

²⁵ At best, it can be seen as an instance of *mémoires* – the way this life writing genre (deliberately plural!) is defined by the French and, to some extent, continental (but not English or American) criticism – namely a piece of non-fiction in which the subject is merely a witness (*témoin*), an instrument by means of which a larger history of social groups, times and mores becomes unveiled (Lejeune 2010: 13). *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* does, indeed, pay some considerable attention to a number of important social and historical events (World War II, the 1944 Education Act, the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the Cuban missile crisis, the Second Vatican Council, and the Vietnam War) and shows Lodge’s implication in some of them (e.g. how the Catholic Church’s refusal to acknowledge contraception failed to meet his expectations). In the introduction to the volume, Lodge emphasizes that in the period 1935–1975 he lived through “an extremely interesting period in English social history” and witnessed “momentous [also technological] changes” (Lodge 2015a: 1–2).

In light of the above-formulated claims, one is more than justified to state that *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* by David Lodge is, so far as possible, a biography of the self, i.e. a narrative which uses traditional (and essentially positivist) techniques of biographical research (which Hermione Lee describes as “clinical investigation,” or simply “autopsy”, see Lee 2009: 2) and applies them to the act of writing about its writer’s own self. Nevertheless, it is not – to turn to the legacy of Russian Formalism – a “literary biography,” namely the kind that offers a “biographical legend” and is *not* [my emphasis] “the author’s curriculum vitae or the investigator’s account of his life”; but a “documentary biography,” which, as Boris Tomaševskij aptly observes, “belong[s] to the domain of cultural history, on a par with the biographies of generals and inventors,” and which with regard to literature and its history, “may be considered only an external (even if necessary) reference material of an auxiliary nature” (Tomaševskij 2003: 89). *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is neither a major contribution to Lodge’s oeuvre, nor an original addendum to the field of life writing, but, I am bound to conclude, a “reference material of an auxiliary nature” only.

4. Late style?

All things considered, two questions need to be ultimately posed with reference to Lodge’s *Quite a Good Time to Be Born*: namely why the volume has been paratextually marked as a memoir (by a knowledgeable critic and literary theorist familiar with terminological conundrums), as well as why the celebrated novelist has decided to write his life story in the form of documentary (self-) biography?

To explain this truly unfortunate (and misleading) choice of subtitle seems to be a relatively easy task.²⁶ Many a time in his life story does Lodge admit to having problems with the titles of his publications and the difficult process of their negotiation with the editors and publishers of his works. Thus, it may be justifiable to assume that the decision to name this volume a memoir has been particularly advocated by Lodge’s publishing house and has been governed by the market demands, as the genre in question currently remains one of the most popular literary forms.²⁷ By calling this book a memoir, Harvill Secker could potentially attract not only Lodge’s loyal readers, but a wider and more diverse audience.

²⁶ Though, due to an impossibility to verify the following claims, they are of a speculative nature mostly.

²⁷ One does speak of a “memoir boom” and “the age of memoir” and not “autobiography/biography boom”: “This is an age – if not *the age* – of memoir” (Couser 2012: 3).

However, an answer to the second question (concerning the form/content of *Quite a Good Time to Be Born*) appears to be considerably less straightforward. When, early on in the narrative, David Lodge identifies his first major source of influence, he unambiguously points to his English teacher, one Malachy Carroll, who became the writer's mentor and encouraged his interest in critical and creative writing. Interestingly, Carroll, apart from being a teacher, also pursued a career of a man of letters and, in his time, published several highly conventional works of non-fiction – not only histories of religious orders but also biographies of various saints and the blessed.²⁸ In other words: hagiographies. Is Carroll responsible for shaping Lodge's approach towards life writing genres?²⁹ Is *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* a testament to his legacy? In Lodge's writing, one is, indeed, tempted to recognise the impact of the highly traditional (pre-theory) attitude towards the tenets and forms of (auto) biographism; however, taking into account Lodge's entire oeuvre, it appears that *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* is, first and above all, a manifestation of what Theodor W. Adorno and Edward Said called the "late style" (Said 2007: 6), and what J.M. Coetzee described as a decline into "detachment," "aridity" and "didacticism": "[the writers] grow cooler or colder. The texture of their prose becomes thinner, their treatment of character more schematic" (Coetzee 2007: 193).

However, the validity of the latter claim and potential applicability of the category to Lodge's own "late style" (not to mention a thorough discussion of this phenomenon) are only to be verified when the second volume of his "memoir" will be ultimately published.

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²⁸ E.g. *The Charred Wood: The Story of Blessed Julie Billiart, Foundress of the Congregation of Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur* (1950) or *Man of Fire: Father Emmanuel d'Alzon & the Oblates of the Assumption* (1955).

²⁹ Also visible in his biographical novels which have elsewhere been classified as "fictionalized biographies" (cf. Kusek 2013: 45–54).

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