Student of Two Masters:
David Lodge and the Dual Tradition of the Novel

Ákos Farkas, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The article examines David Lodge's indebtedness to James Joyce and Graham Greene, self-elected precursors whose Catholic sensibilities appear to be the only connecting link between them. Although Lodge has now abandoned the religious thematics relating his early The Picturegoers *and* The British Museum is Falling Down *to Joyce and Greene, the duality of aesthetic principles emblematized by those "two masters" remains an abiding interest informing his postmillennial novels* Author, Author *and* A Man of Parts. *However, the rival poetics of "modernism" and "realism" are here represented by Henry James and H. G. Wells, with the emphasis shifting towards the latter.*

Keywords: David Lodge, postmillennial, bio-fiction, novel, modernism, realism

> "But Greene's awfully sordid, don't you think?" says Polly.
> "But Waugh's so snobbish."
> "Anyway, it said in the *Observer* that they're the two best English novelists going, so that's one in the eye for the Prods."

The eye of the beholder: Lodge's elective affinities

The exchange quoted above comes from a dialogue taking place between two young persons, Michael and Polly, during a lull in a dance party in David Lodge's mid-career novel *How Far Can You Go?* Although Michael would sooner contemplate Polly's frontal endowment than the relative merits of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, he is ready to settle for talking books to impress his pretty interlocutor with his advanced literary tastes. The two of them have rather different preferences when it comes to individual writers, though: Graham Greene's preoccupation with the drama of damnation and redemption acted out in the writer's sad tropics in the middle of nowhere or the seedy outskirts of grey English cities is too depressing for Polly; Michael, for his part, has no time for the ritual capers of the aristocratic saints and sinners populating Evelyn Waugh's baronial mansions.

Apart from their possibly gender-related differences in tastes, Polly and Michael both agree, tacitly or otherwise, that in the cultural contests of the early sixties, it is their co-religionists, the English Catholic novelists, who carry the day. The young ones' shared aesthetic judgement seems to be reinforced, for once, by the "official verdict" published in the world's oldest Sunday paper, *The Observer*: yes, Waugh and Greene, both converts to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church are the two best English novelists going. And that, as Polly gloatingly observes, must be bad news for England's Protestant majority: "one in the eye for the Prods" (Lodge 1981: 25). Despite the flippancy of the young woman's remark, with all that is behind it, the quip offers itself as a suitable starting point for an examination of how David Lodge's fiction can be located between the poles of more-or-less conventional

types of the novel as represented by Graham Greene or even H. G. Wells here, and what is commonly regarded as formal experimentation associated with James Joyce or Henry James there. In simpler terms: between modernism on the one hand and realism on the other.

Arriving at the crossroads: Lodge's Joyce is Greene

Returning to my motto above, it would be a grave error to conclude from it that the implied author of *How Far Can You Go?* shares the thoughtless bigotry suggested by Polly's anti-Protestant jibe. Such an assumption would be given the lie, among other things, by the central significance of the Lutheran Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy in Lodge's later novel *Therapy*. Indeed, any form of religious dogmatism or exclusionism is wholly irreconcilable with the liberal position occupied by Lodge within the church, as correctly noted by J. Russel Perkin (2014: 7), which even led the novelist to describe himself at one point as an "agnostic Catholic" (qtd. in Bergonzi 1995: 43). Accepting others, or the religious Other, does not, however, mean disavowing his own for David Lodge. The writer of half a dozen or so novels regularly appearing in surveys of Catholic fiction, Lodge has never gone on record to reject the label "Catholic novelist" – unlike Graham Greene, and very much unlike his other self-chosen precursor, James Joyce.[1] Tellingly, the spiritual growth of Mark Underwood, the hero of Lodge's first novel *The Picturegoers*, runs a course diametrically opposed to the developmental trajectory followed by Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Mark, an intellectual doubter and an uninhibited womanizer at the outset, eventually relinquishes his literary and amorous aspirations to embrace the vocation of the Catholic priest. Mark's spiritual growth clearly reverses the direction taken by the mental progress of the *Portrait*'s protagonist. Rejecting his spiritual advisor's invitation to enter the priesthood, Stephen Dedalus chooses the apparently broader path of becoming an artist "transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (Joyce 2004: 196).

Both *The Picturegoers* and the *Portrait* could be regarded as conversion narratives, except that the former is of the genuine sort, patterned on the St Augustine of the *Confessions*, whose conversion implied the acceptance of the Pauline injunction to "walk honestly […], not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities" (Romans 13:13, the Douay-Rheims Bible). How impure the ambition of the *Portrait*'s Stephen to become a liberated artist may or may not be is open to debate, but his opting for the life of the artist rather than the saint or the martyr suggests what he would have thought of St Paul's warnings against living the life of the dissolute sensualist. In any case, Stephen defiantly refuses at novel's end to serve that in which he no longer believes "whether it call itself [his] home, [his] fatherland or [his] church" (Joyce 2004: 219). Lodge's Mark, for his part, finds, rather than loses, his religious faith, and decides to serve, at the cost of renouncing the pleasures of the flesh and even those of the intellect, that which he has eventually come to believe in.

In spite of such thematic reversals, the list of Joycean allusions in the novels of David Lodge could be added to almost indefinitely. A near-comprehensive account of such analogies has in fact been compiled by J. Russell Perkin who, in a substantial chapter of his study *David Lodge and the Tradition of the Modern Novel* titled "Lodge Rejoyces,"[2] offers a survey of Lodge's salient Joycean negotiations (2014: 62–90). These include a diversity of discourse-types used in *The Picturegoers* from the narrative pattern of the Homeric

homecoming or *nostos* or the female interior monologue in *The British Museum Is Falling Down* to the sudden shifts of perspective and style in Lodge's last truly Catholic novel *Therapy* – all borrowed, in modified form, from *Ulysses*.

In spite of their frequency, his Joycean echoes are still less conspicuous in Lodge's novels than his various playful allusions as well as earnest tributes to his strongest precursor invoked in my prefatory quote – Graham Greene. Lodge's sometimes transparently autobiographical engagements with his most significant Catholic preceptor are as numerous in his scholarly publications – ranging from his MA thesis on Greene to a chapter each in his late essay-collections *The Year of Henry James* and *Lives in Writing* – as they are ubiquitous in his fictions, again, from *The Picturegoers* to at least *Therapy*. From major thematic parallels such as self-abnegation, literal and metaphorical border-crossings, as well as instances of miraculous healing, to paragraph-long exercises in virtuoso pastiche and tongue-in-cheek parody, Greene is invoked at virtually every narrative turn that Lodge's novels take. Here it is a character called Grahame, with the mute "e" transferred from Greene's surname to his Christian name, there a forbidding library partition appearing in the shape of "a green baize door" (see Perkin 2014: 12), the latter being a recurrent motif of sinister liminality in Greene's autobiographical writing, that reminds the attentive reader of the master's ghostly presence.

As for Lodge's other major source of serious intertextual play, there is little in the way of family likeness connecting James Joyce to Graham Greene. The specific Christian denomination shared, at least temporarily, by the two great precursors may be one of the few meeting points. But just as England and America are said to be two countries divided by a common language, so are Joyce and Greene separated by their common religion – Roman Catholicism. An Irish-born cradle Catholic, Joyce left his faith as a young man prompted by his artistic-intellectual convictions, while Greene, the son of a liberal Anglican Englishman, converted to Catholicism mainly for biographical reasons at about the same age that the Irish giant of modernism left it. Further complicating the matter is the fact that his friend Cranly's assessment of Stephen Dedalus's spiritual position in the *Portrait* can be applied to Joyce himself: even in apostasy, his mind remained "supersaturated with the religion" in which he said he disbelieved (Joyce 2004: 213). Conversely, Greene insisted that he was not a Catholic novelist per se but a novelist who happened to be a Catholic. Even though such assertions should be treated with some reservations, it can be safely said that Joyce's apostasy was as half-hearted as Greene's belief was, to say the least, unorthodox. But then the real difference between the two of them does not lie in the true character of their respective ecclesiastic affiliations. What really sets Lodge's two paragons apart from each other as writers is not so much a matter of religious creed as it is of artistic credo.

Greene's frequently voiced reservations about Joyce's achievement are instructive here. Although he admired *Dubliners* and regarded "The Dead" as "the finest story in the language" (qtd. in Hoskins 1999: 184), and cited a resounding line from the famous sermon on hell in the *Portrait* to suggest the terrors of his own schooldays at St John's in Berkhamsted (Greene 1979: 14), Greene found *Ulysses* one of the most overrated classics – in fact "a big bore" (qtd. in R. Greene 2007: 288). In that respect the writer of cheap westerns in the film-novella *The Third Man* can be regarded as an ironic self-portrait of sorts. Unlike Rollo Martins, Greene was of course neither ignorant of the existence of James Joyce nor was he clueless about the meaning of the term stream of consciousness. And yet the satire of the farcical writer-meets-readership scene in which Martins admits to never having heard the name of Joyce cuts both ways. The bourgeois snobbery of the Viennese literary circle in

which Martins is bombarded with questions about current novelistic fads is as much the object of ridicule here as the pulp-western writer's philistine anti-intellectualism. That is not the only reason for suspecting a degree of deliberate identification on the part of defiantly anti-modernist Greene and his Joyce-ignoring hero. Aside from being a heavy drinker who nevertheless has a sensitive conscience, Martins is, after all, in the process of writing a story to be called *The Third Man*, the title of the "entertainment" authored by his own creator, Graham Greene. In short, the attitude to James Joyce of semi-autobiographical character and implied author alike can be said to be ambiguous at best and dismissive at worst.

We can only guess what Joyce, who tended to keep whatever opinions he had about his literary competitors to himself, and in any case did not live to see Greene's rise to fame, would have thought of the younger novelist's anti-modern modernism. It is known for a fact, however, that defending the thick opacity of his *Finnegans Wake* Joyce explained, in a letter to his magnanimous but worried sponsor Harriet Weaver Shaw, that much of human existence could not be "rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot" (Ellmann ed. 2003: 318). Although "wideawake" is not a quality one would readily attribute to Greene's dark thrillers and existential spy-stories, his grammar, if not necessarily "cutanddry," is mostly fairly regular and always sufficiently intelligible. More importantly, the action-packed plots of Greene's metaphysical thrillers do have a tendency to run away with his fugitive characters and breathless readers alike. Having the non-events of an ordinary weekday in a provincial city fill a book "the size of a telephone directory," as Greene described his copy of *Ulysses* (Greene 1974: 97), would have been unthinkable for the writer of not only the "entertainments" *Stambul Train* and *A Gun for Sale*, but even of such undisputed classics as *Brighton Rock* or *The Power and the Glory*. Greene is not on record to have said anything as harsh as Evelyn Waugh did when speaking of "the failure of modern novelists" and accusing James Joyce and his followers of "presumption and exorbitance" (qtd. in Gorra 1990: 182). He would, however, have agreed with his own, later, commentator who argues "that Greene's popular thrillers were in part a reaction to the high modernism of writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf, whose esoteric experiments with language were disengaged from immediate social concerns and inaccessible to a large segment of the reading public" (Diemert 1996: i).

Poles apart as Joyce and Greene may have been, David Lodge has found the narrow strip of overlap between the two of them to build his own dialectical theories and dialogical novels upon. This he accomplished by discovering the Joycean about Greene and the Greene-like about Joyce, which qualities he cleverly blended together in his fiction. A characteristically Lodgean way of doing so is where he borrows the matter from one and goes on to treat it in the manner of the other. Behind, for example, his self-description revealing an early tendency to transpose, in his own words, "some characteristically Greenian themes […] into a less luridly lit, more suburban milieu" is a paradoxical move of borrowing from the less expected of these two sources (Lodge 1996: 71) – James Joyce. Bernard Bergonzi, who finds the descriptions of lower-middle class interiors in *The Picturegoers* "disturbingly accurate" (Perkin 2014: 42), is right in identifying the closest parallels of Lodge's micro-realism in the scrupulous meanness of the early Joyce. *The Picturegoers* may ultimately be a straightforward narrative of conversion through self-renunciation in the style of Greene's *The End of the Affair*, the naturalistic descriptions metonymically suggesting the humble lifestyle of the average lower-middle-class Catholic family could come right out of Joyce's earlier works – the stories in *Dubliners* or parts of the *Portrait*. The enumeration of such cheap religious bric-a-brac at a point in *The Picturegoers* as "the plastic holy water stoup askew on

the wall, the withered holy Palm, stuck behind a picture of the Sacred Heart […] and the statue of St Patrick enthroned upon the dresser" in the description of a Catholic "dwelling-place" provide us with a material clue to the tenants' social standing as well as their religious affiliation (Lodge 1993: 44) – much the same way as a faded photograph of a long-departed priest in a dusty room or a cup of watery tea drained to the dregs do in Joyce's earlier writings.

If such a metonymical move is something that one would expect to be taken over from Lodge's paradigmatically anti-modern Greene, rather than the arch-modernist Joyce, the reverse can be witnessed where it is Greene, not Joyce, who Lodge turns to for certain decidedly *modernist* – or, in his own terminology, metaphorical – practices. In most of these instances Lodge follows Greene, who is himself indebted to T. S. Eliot, in that he yokes together abstract and concrete phenomena in similes like the one describing, in *The Picturegoers*, a seminary dropout as the "fellow [who] carried his failure before him like a monstrance" (qtd. in Perkin 2014: 41). Lodge's vaguely Eliotian image is reminiscent of how the "whisky priest" in Greene's *The Power and the Glory* "drank the brandy down like damnation" (qtd. in Perkin 2014: 40-41).[3] Using an as yet pre-modern, or naturalist, Joyce to complement a sometimes deceptively modern-looking Greene, does not, however, prevent Lodge the critic from locating Greene in a somewhat uneven but largely continuous tradition of the English realist novel.

While recognizing the unavoidable influence of the great modernists on Greene and his compeers in the 1930s, Lodge believes the latter to have "challenged the modernist version of reality […] reverting to norms of non-literary descriptions not very different from those observed by Bennett and Wells" (Lodge 1977: 46). Beginning with the great Victorians and the lesser Edwardians the realist, or metonymical, line of descent then returns, after the High Modernist moment, with the "Silver Age" writers represented by Isherwood, Orwell, Waugh, and Greene himself, to resurface, after a brief modernist revival in the forties, with the anti-moderns or new-realists, the Angries and the Movement generation of the post-war period represented by C. P. Snow, William Cooper, and Kingsley Amis among others.

Biography all out or the art that makes life: between Wells and James

The structuralist schema of Lodge's theoretical work *The Modes of Modern Writing* is constructed around a binary opposition where traditional realism and experimental formalism – Lodge's metonymic and metaphoric poles – vie for pre-eminence in the history of the Anglo-American novel. The confrontation of these competing aesthetics takes centre stage in two of Lodge's late, postmillennial, novels: *Author, Author* (2004) and *A Man of Parts* (2011). In his successive ventures into the increasingly popular genre of the biographical novel, Lodge gives fictionalised treatment to the richly documented turns in the creative lives of two more of his self-chosen precursors – Henry James and H. G. Wells respectively. What makes *Author, Author* and *A Man of Parts* particularly interesting in the context of the rivalling traditions of the English novel briefly surveyed in Lodgean terms above is that the writer-protagonists of these bio-fictions of Lodge embody poetics perhaps even more starkly opposed to each other than those embraced by James Joyce and Graham Greene.

Representing and commenting on Henry James's extended and ultimately disastrous drive "to achieve fame and fortune as a playwright" followed by the life-altering consequences of the failed campaign to conquer the popular theatres of London (Lodge 2008:

21), *Author, Author* constitutes a new departure in Lodge's long and distinguished career as a novelist. In terms of temporal setting, subject matter and tone, *Author, Author* was Lodge's "first 'period' novel, and [his] first about a real person; its predominant mood was elegiac, its comedy muted, and its hero was celibate from start to finish" (Lodge 2008: 64). With its time-span extending from the Edwardian *belle époque* to the end of the interwar period, its historical protagonist characterized by feeble and ambiguous sexual appetites and dying without the consolations of a loving family or a truly appreciative audience, *Author, Author* is indeed very much unlike Lodge's earlier novels. From *The Picturegoers* to at least *Thinks…*, Lodge's narratives had all been set in the present or recent past of their writing, featured intensely libidinous imaginary characters, and tended to make the reader laugh out loud at every other turn – very much unlike the bio-novel featuring Henry James.

Despite these conspicuous differences, there is almost as much continuity yet as there is disruption between *Author, Author* and Lodge's previous fictions. The motif of international peregrination is certainly there: Lodge's Henry James travels widely in Britain and continental Europe, while, along the way, giving expression to some very strong opinions on the perceived vulgarity of the modern world, especially as retrospectively seen in his native America, a country serving as a major point of reference in Lodge's campus novels *Changing Places* and *Small World*. Also present are here, as elsewhere in the Lodge canon, the themes of art, religion and science with their varying degrees of relevance to the great issues of human existence. "'Consciousness is my religion, human consciousness. Refining it, intensifying it – and preserving it'," says Lodge's Henry James at one point (2004: 90). If observing, rendering and nourishing the intricacies of human consciousness are at the heart of the Jamesian-Lodgean writer's *art*, observing and interpreting mental processes are no less important for the *science* of the psychologist. It is not without precedent in Lodge's fiction of psychological exploration that Henry's brother William James makes repeated appearance – as he does in *Author, Author*. Consciousness is also the domain of today's cognitive scientist and even of the literary scholar open to interdisciplinary approaches as variously represented by Prof. Ralph Messenger and Dr Helen Reed – one coming from the humanities, while the other from the sciences –, whose conflicting worldviews do not prevent them from falling for each other's romantic charms in *Thinks…*, Lodge's science-*faction* novel written immediately before *Author, Author*. The later Lodge as a critic can himself be seen as a representative of the scientifically-minded humanist for whom the functioning of the human mind is a major preoccupation, as witnessed by his collection of essays *Consciousness and the Novel*. What connects these divergent interests addressed in *Author, Author* to each other is the writer's concern with the observable and knowable world as its peculiarities are registered by the perceiving mind. In a word, there is a version of thematic, as well as formal, realism – psychological realism as it may be – present in *Author, Author*.

It is, however, with *A Man of Parts*, Lodge's second, and to date last, contribution to the genre of bio-fiction that science and, with it, science fiction, takes centre stage. Science fiction is a mode of writing removed just as far from Henry James's aesthetically refined novels as H. G. Wells's space and time travellers can be from the drawing rooms and formal gardens of James's crafted plots. And yet, H. G. Wells already plays a walk-on part in the frame story as well as the core narrative of *Author, Author*, mainly, but not exclusively, as a foil to the figure of the central character, Henry James. Appearing to the latter as "the very embodiment of the new scientific age" (Lodge 2004: 345), the younger writer makes a favourable first impression on a middle-aged Henry James with his originality, courage and self-belief. Later on, however, Wells's cruel caricature of James's style and person in the

younger writer's satirical pamphlet *Boon* makes the old and ailing master ill-disposed to respond gracefully to Wells's congratulatory telegram received on the occasion of the now bedridden James having been awarded the Order of Merit.

As it turns out from both of Lodge's bio-novels, there is more to the *Boon* incident than meets the eye, even if it is euphemistically referred to as a *jeu d'esprit* at a point in *Author, Author* (32). Wells's caricature of the elder novelist and his circumambient style in the image of "a magnificent but painful hippopotamus" could perhaps still be overlooked. The younger novelist's unsparing description of the late Henry James's art as "a church lit but without a congregation [where] on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, [is] a dead kitten, an eggshell, a bit of string" cuts to the quick (Wells 2008: 92). Should the meaning of the cruel witticism elude the reader, Wells's position is made crystal clear in an exchange between the younger novelist and an admirer of his in *A Man of Parts* itself. When Wells admits to Amber Reeves that "there are things in [James's] *The Wings of the Dove* that […] he couldn't do", the young woman responds by querying whether what James can, but other writers can't, do is worth doing at all (Lodge 2011: 218). Needless to say, Wells gladly accepts the compliment made at the expense of James.

What is worth doing, according to Lodge's H. G. Wells, is exploring and faithfully representing what really matters – reality. "Who would read a novel if we were permitted to write biography – all out?" is the rhetorical question Wells asks in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (qtd. in Maunsell 2018: 135). Opposed to that, the post-Joycean experimenter with sophisticated metafiction, parodic intertextuality and radical indeterminacy as we know Lodge from *The British Library Is Falling Down*, from his virtuoso campus trilogy, or from the postmodern Catholic novel *Therapy* would have wished his reader to prefer what Wells would abandon: the novel of unambiguous fictionality. The writer of Lodge's last two works to date would, however, likely opt for biography "all out." Not only does everything remain verifiably close to historical fact in both *Author, Author* and *A Man of Parts*, where philological reliability is documented by long bibliographies appended to both works, but – as the acclaimed Wells-scholar Patrick Parrinder astutely observes – *A Man of Parts* is "sprawling and […] diffuse, rather like one of Wells's own novels" (2011: n. p.) – and, as one might add, rather like Wells's model and creative ideal: life in the raw.

Where to Lodge?

It would be a mistake to identify, without due reservations, the later David Lodge with the emerging "artistic movement" envisaged by David Shields in his seminal "manifesto." However, such components identified by the American writer-academic as "a deliberate unartiness: 'raw' material'" and, most importantly, "a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction" (Shields 2010: 5) are qualities emphatically present in David Lodge's later, semi-fictional, work. To (re-)classify Lodge as a representative of what goes by the name of the metamodernism would be as inappropriate as earlier attempts to squeeze him into slots labelled as "postmodern" or "neo-realist". The Lodge-phenomenon is too large and too elusive to fit into any ready-made categories. And yet, in the light of his last two postmillennial (non-)novels he appears to be only too willing to satisfy the reader's "reality hunger" discussed at length in David Shields's "manifesto" of the same title.

Whether the writer of *Author, Author* and *A Man of Parts* will have the time or inclination to return from the Wellsian to the Jamesian pole is as yet to be seen. Perhaps the aging Lodge will one day come to accept James's dictum that "It is art that makes life" (qtd. in Batchelor 1985: 118). For now, it seems that it is truth, or its semblance truthiness, rather than art, "that makes life" for Lodge and his like-minded, younger contemporaries. We will have to wait and see if there is yet another swing of the pendulum, now back to what Henry James knew no substitute for – art. One thing seems to be certain, though: whether it is James Joyce or Graham Greene, Henry James or H. G. Wells who may play a walk-on part in any later novels to be written by David Lodge, the stage will be managed and the script written by the author, the very much alive author, of *Author, Author, A Man of Parts* and all the other novels touched upon in this brief survey.

Notes

1. In the last volume of his comprehensive biography of Greene, Norman Sherry concludes that by 1989 the writer's "faith seemed almost nil" (Sherry 2004: 682). The stages of Joyce's separation from the Catholic Church, such as his rejection of the priesthood, his refusal to "make his Easter duty" for his dying mother's sake, the surreptitious baptism by relatives of his son Giorgio against the express paternal wish, etc., are only too well known to be rehearsed here. Not even "Catholic agnostic" Greene would have gone quite so far (qtd. in Sherry 2004: 682), let alone Lodge, whose self-avowed agnostic Catholicism (note the deliberate and meaningful reversal of noun and modifier) was an expression of intellectual uncertainty rather than a gesture of spiritual or emotional renunciation.
2. Perkin's chapter-heading echoes *ReJoyce*, the punning title of Anthony Burgess's 1965 introduction to James Joyce.
3. The analogy should not be overstated here, as the comparison of an abstract concept ("failure") to a concrete one ("monstrance") seems to be less original – or modern – than reversing the conventional functions of tenor and vehicle by comparing a tangible – or, as is the case here, potable – phenomenon of material reality ("brandy") to an abstraction ("damnation"). Here the precursor – Greene – seems to have gone further than the descendant – i.e., Lodge.

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Ákos Farkas
E-mail: farkas.akos@btk.elte.hu

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