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Voix / *Voices*

“From Then to Now and Next”

An interview with David Lodge

by François GALLIX, Vanessa GUIGNERY, Sophie GABEREL-PAYEN

I. An introduction

David Lodge's latest book, *Author, Author*, published in 2004, appears as a complete change of direction in his literary production. Even though the indication “novel” appears on the cover of the book, the generic status of *Author, Author* is uncertain, hesitating between the historical novel and the biography. The book reads like a fascinating novel displaying narrative tricks, a polyphony of voices, a play on focalisation and strategies of suspense, but it is also a selective biography of Henry James containing a few invented episodes which Lodge enumerates and comments upon in the acknowledgements. In the frame story, which opens and closes the book, Lodge chooses to focus on the last few weeks before James's death in 1916, while the main story deals with his middle years, the 1880s and 1890s, when James decided to write for the theatre but suffered failures such as that of *Guy Domville* (1895), an episode which is wonderfully but also excruciatingly related in Lodge's book. *Author, Author* also focuses on James's friendship with George Du Maurier, *Punch* illustrator and the author of a popular best-seller, *Trilby*, both as a novel (1893) and as a play (1895), which is now forgotten but was very successful at a time when James's career was waning. Finally, *Author, Author* draws attention to the ambiguous relationship between James and Constance Fennimore Woolson, a popular writer at the time who was suffering from an unrequited love for Henry James.

The choice of such a subject for David Lodge does not come as a complete surprise as Henry James already figured in Lodge's previous novel, *Thinks...* (2001), in which Helen Reed, a novelist, had started writing a thesis on the issue of point of view and consciousness in Henry James and very often quoted from his books. One of her students in her course of creative writing even produced a pastiche of Henry James's style, and

Helen made a pilgrimage to Ledbury church where James himself had been years before. In 2002 David Lodge published *Consciousness and the Novel*, a book of literary criticism which contained a chapter devoted to Henry James's art. Despite this continuity in terms of literary figure, the form of the book is completely different from anything Lodge has published before.

David Lodge's career as a novelist started with realistic novels, *The Picturegoers* (1960), *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962), *Out of the Shelter* (1970), before moving on to what may be termed catholic novels: *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), which examined the effects of the Catholic Church's teaching about birth control on the lives of married Catholics; *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), which won the Whitbread Prize; and *Paradise News* (1991). David Lodge, who was a Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Birmingham where he had worked since 1960, then became a very successful novelist with the publication of the Rummidge trilogy—*Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988)—campus novels full of satire, comedy and parody, the latter two having been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Published a few years later, *Therapy* (1995) moves away from academic romps and addresses the modern issue of depression. One of the epigraphs of the novel, taken from Graham Greene, may also be its conclusion: "Writing is a form of therapy."¹

In spite of the multiple facets of David Lodge's fiction over the last forty years, from *The Picturegoers* to *Thinks...*, with the unavoidable succession of reductive labels used by his fellow critics (realist, catholic, self-reflexive, author of campus novels or of condition of England narratives), there is a leading thread that runs through most of his works: his never-ending interest in the English novel of the nineteenth century. Even if *Author, Author* marks a new turning-point in his literary career, it can also be considered as a confirmation of what George Letissier called "victorianophagy"²—a kind of textual cannibalism. One remembers, for instance, his very carefully constructed pastiches in *The British Museum is Falling Down*, or the thought-provoking epigraphs from George Eliot, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens in *Nice Work*.

This does not mean that Lodge's position on realism never varied. Thus in his introduction to *Emma*,³ he praised the perfection of Jane

1. David Lodge, *Therapy* (London: Penguin, 1995), 1.

2. George Letissier, in Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben, eds., *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi: 2004), 126.

3. David Lodge, introduction to *Emma* by Jane Austen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Austen who, in her novels, succeeded in giving the illusion of what real life was. In one of his declarations ten years later, however, he underlined the artificiality of the novelists who claimed that, by trying to erase the signs of narration, they could offer their readers "a transparent window" onto the world.⁴ From then on, his total faith in realism somewhat lessened, but he never completely lost his admiration for the way Victorian novelists knew how to organise and interpret socio-historical experience. As a novelist, a critic and, for a long time, an academic, Lodge has always been particularly conscious of all literary devices and of their degree of artificiality, whether they be realistic, modernist or postmodernist, the main point being to create an efficient artistic illusion.⁵

With his fictional biography of Henry James, mostly based on research and facts, but with the freedom allowed by the novelistic genre,⁶ it seems that David Lodge has found a new way of paying homage to the nineteenth-century novel without being an unconditional advocate. By entering James's literary universe, with the discourse of a third person narrator, David Lodge gives a realistic panorama of the historical and social context of the time while illustrating and analysing James's narrative techniques: his use of limited points of view, his rejection of omniscience, thus—like Joseph Conrad—heralding a new way of writing novels.

David Lodge is, however, not only a novelist. He has also written two stage plays, *The Writing Game* (1990) and *Home Truths* (1998), and has for a long time been interested in the reasons why a novelist should wish to experiment with other forms, an issue he addresses in *Author, Author*, in which he empathetically describes Henry James's joys and disillusionments as the latter is trying to make his way as a playwright. A novelist and a playwright, David Lodge is also a screenplay writer for television. After *Small World* was adapted for Granada TV in 1988, Lodge himself adapted *Nice Work* for the BBC in 1989, then *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Dickens in 1994 for BBC2, and his play *The Writing Game* in 1996 for Channel 4. Lodge's use of different media underlines an essential feature of his work: art is defined as a means of communication with (new) readers and audiences, entailing for the writer "the thrilling discovery that your words had more potential expressivity than you were aware of yourself."⁷ Lodge's interest in "the possibility of simultaneous communication on several different

4. In James Vinson, ed., "David Lodge Comments," *Contemporary Novelists* (Third edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 401-02.

5. See Jean-Michel Ganteau, *Le choix de l'éloquence* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2001).

6. See "Acknowledgements, etc.," in *Author, Author* (London: Secker and Warburg), 385-89.

7. David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1996), 217.

channels”⁸ is also revealed through the multifaceted dimension of his novel writing—mixing genres, parodic games, intertextual references, and various media. Intermediality—the relations of literature to visual arts, theatre, and more specifically film—impregnates Lodge’s work and can be traced back to most of his short stories and novels, the very first one being entitled *The Picturegoers*. After *Changing Places* in which the last lines are written in the form of a film script, *How Far Can You Go?* which ends with the transcription of a television programme on the New Catholics, and *Therapy* which centres on Laurence Passmore, a screenplay writer for television, it is therefore not surprising that *Author, Author* should partly focus on the period when James decided to write for the theatre.

Having worked for a long time as both an academic and a writer, Lodge has also written many books of literary criticism. *Language of Fiction* (1966), *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971), *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), *Working with Structuralism* (1981), *Write On* (1986) were first oriented towards an essentially academic audience. The analysis of the dialogical theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (the language of prose fiction is not a language, a novel doesn’t have a style but is a medley of styles) helped Lodge define his own practice of writing as he explained in *After Bakhtin* (1990). This book and the subsequent ones addressed themselves to a larger audience with whom Lodge nevertheless still wanted to share a critical knowledge punctuated with personal experiences, feeling—as the preface of *The Art of Fiction* (1992) shows—that he “still had things to say on the art of fiction and the history of the novel that might be of interest to a more general reading public.” He added: “this is a book for people who prefer to take their Lit. Crit. in small doses.”⁹ Lodge’s interest in the interweaving of media is reflected in these latest critical books as well. In *The Practice of Writing* (1996), Lodge dealt with the TV adaptations of *Nice Work* and *The Writing Game* as well as the interrelations between novel and film writing in an essay entitled “Mixed-Media: Three Ways of Telling a Story,” while among the various “connected essays” composing Lodge’s latest book of literary criticism, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002), one was entitled “Henry James and the Movies.”

The interview that follows addresses the multiple aspects of David Lodge’s work as a novelist, a critic, an academic, a playwright and a screenplay writer, focusing both on his past and present literary production, and giving a few hints as to what may happen next.

8. *Ibid.*

9. David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), ix-xi.

II. The interview

François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery are respectively Professor and Senior Lecturer in English literature at the University of Paris IV-La Sorbonne. Both are specialists of the contemporary novel in English, and direct the research centre «Écritures du roman contemporain de langue anglaise» (ERCLA) at the Sorbonne. Sophie Gaberel-Payen has just completed a thesis entitled "From page to screen: David Lodge, novelist and adapter."
The interview was conducted in Paris on January 13, 2005.



After "*The Novelist at the Crossroads*" (1969) and "*The Novelist today, still at the Crossroads?*" (1990), where would you situate the novelist at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

I think the metaphor of the crossroads, which suggests a variety of formal directions which a novelist could take, still applies. I do not think that the situation has changed very much since 1990. If you look at contemporary British fiction, you see just the same variety of modes and you see individual novelists moving from one kind of novel to another rather than just producing the same sort of book again and again. My latest book, *Author, Author*, is a completely new departure for me, but also an example of a general trend towards hybrid novels which mix fiction with biography. It is a sub-genre which has developed markedly since 1990. So it is another possible road for the novelist, and perhaps five ways rather than four would apply to the novelist's situation today. I suppose also that as I am now getting on in years and inevitably coming towards the end of my career, it is not such a consideration anymore, to think of which ways the novel is going to go, or which way I should try and take it. That is more of a younger writer's question. To me the question is: "Can I write another novel of any kind?" I am much more concerned with my own thoughts about possible subjects than with situating myself on some literary map. I think that is for other people to do.

Would you say that the reader has changed since you started to write? Is there a post-postmodernist reader and if so what are his (her) characteristics?

If there are readers of a totally new kind, I do not think they are reading me. They are probably reading things on the internet, or using interactive television. There is a very radical new kind of writing which involves the collaboration of the reader, who can decide which way a story should develop. That is a type of experimental narrative which I cannot imagine being involved in. It seems to me I write basically traditional literary fiction. There are a few postmodernist tricks in it, but I belong to a

tradition which you can trace back through the history of the English novel. If there is a new kind of writing which actually demands a completely different kind of attention, then I do not know much about it, to be honest.

One is constantly told that people are reading less and that they watch television or listen to music instead, or do all those things at once. But I still think that if you are going to read a narrative text, it is a cumulative process which requires certain mental operations: to remember the things you are told, get the relationships of the characters in place, know when and where the action is happening, and gradually reconstruct the whole world of the novel in your head. I do not think my novels require any different kind of reading from Jane Austen's in that respect. I am very pleased that I have young readers, of course. People who were born after I started writing fiction are reading my books and apparently still find them interesting. That persuades me there is more continuity than discontinuity in the institution of literature, and in the activity of reading fiction. I think that theoretical pronouncements that the author is dead and that the reader produces the meaning of the work, are only extreme ways of expressing something which is true, but not the whole truth. In fact, very few ordinary readers really believe that they are making up the whole meaning of a story. They read a novel because they are interested in what a particular writer has to say about the world and want to discover it and compare it with their own reactions.

You have been a professor of literature at Birmingham University, you have published many books of criticism and literary theory and some of your books are clearly marked by the influence of some writers. If you look back over your production, could you tell us from which writers you really acknowledge an influence and have the influences evolved over the years?

Influence—it is a very big subject. For the writer, influences are unavoidable and in a way essential. The way most writers get started is by absorbing influences from some writers rather than others. On the other hand if you are going to achieve anything original, then you want somehow to free yourself from those influences or do something quite different with them. So it is always an ambiguous concept for the writer. Probably, the older you get, the more mature you are, the less open you are to influence or the more suspicious you are of influence. You do not want to pick up some habit from some other contemporary novelist. But influence is something you are probably more aware of when looking back at your work than you are at the time of writing it. There is also a sense in which quite minor literature can actually be very influential because you absorbed it in a crucial time in your development. In my own case, I came to realise that a book I loved as a child, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome K. Jerome, had actually had quite strong effects on my sense of humour, on my sense of comedy, on my way of writing comedy. I was not aware of that until a Bulgarian post-graduate pointed it out to me.

The two literary novelists I read with real enthusiasm in adolescence and youth were Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. I was brought up as a Catholic and had a Catholic education. The fact that the two most famous British novelists of the late 1940s, early 1950s, were both Catholic was a very interesting and encouraging fact for me, when I was starting out, hoping to become a writer. They are very different writers though they were good friends and came from exactly the same social class. When I was an adolescent, Graham Greene influenced me very strongly. Greene's gloomy romanticism appeals to a teenager's sensibility, I think. In my early novels, in particular *The Picturegoers* and *Ginger, You're Barmy*, I can trace direct influence from Greene, though he dealt with much more exotic subject matter—Catholics in extreme situations, in places like Mexico or Congo—whereas I dealt with a parochial suburban Catholicism. But I got from Greene the structural contrast between the world of religious values and the world of material values which runs through many of my novels. As to Waugh, his experience and subject matter were equally remote from mine, but he was a great model for writing comedy—for instance, in the way he prepares a comic set-piece, building up to a climax without letting the reader know what is going to happen. And he understood that a joke depends so much on timing—on the arrangement of the words in the sentence and the moment you choose to release the joke. He taught me a lot in that respect.

When I was an undergraduate I read James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) for the first time and that had an enormous effect on me. It was a wonderful discovery, and of all the novels I have read, probably, that is the one that influenced me most. When asked this question, many novelists give the same answer. Joyce is such a wonderful exemplar of so many fictional techniques. For me also the Catholic dimension of his work—the Irish Catholic culture he describes, not only in *Ulysses* but in the earlier books, *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)—was one I could recognise even fifty years after he was writing about it. Joyce's device of basing a modern story on the model of a great mythical precursor—the story of *The Odyssey*—fascinated me, and it is one which I subsequently used myself, in *Small World* for instance and *Nice Work* to some extent. So I think those are the three novelists who most influenced me.

At about the same time—in my youth—Dylan Thomas was a very fashionable writer in England. I remember being delighted by his radio play, *Under Milkwood* (1954). I think the polyphony of that work, the many interwoven voices of ordinary common people, and the rather ribald humour, had an effect on my first novel, *The Picturegoers*. All those different characters going to the same cinema and the same church were also perhaps a little bit inspired by the Wandering Rocks episode in *Ulysses* which has people wandering around Dublin at the same hour of the day, their paths intersecting without their being aware of it. These are things

which I recognised retrospectively in my work. Much later the multiple endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles fascinated me and I borrowed that idea in a way and used it in a different form in *Changing Places*. The metafictional elements in my books owe something to Fowles, to Muriel Spark's use of the omniscient narrator, and to Kurt Vonnegut's "frame-breaking" in *Slaughterhouse Five*. These are techniques, the further possibilities of which you sense, and you think: "Ah! That's a good idea. I wonder if I can do something with it that is original." But there is a debt one has to acknowledge.

In Author, Author, you describe James's reflections about the "lesson" drawn from writing for the theatre, i.e. applying to prose narrative the method he used to write plays: "presenting experience scenically—'showing' rather than 'telling' the story" while "being able to reveal the secret workings of consciousness" (283). How far does it apply to your own "practice of writing"?

I think that this distinction that James made between showing and telling—I am not sure whether James himself used those words, actually, or whether it was Percy Lubbock interpreting James's prefaces, but it is certainly enshrined in James's practice—is fundamental to the novel, so it is not anything peculiar to my work. If you read early eighteenth-century novels—the novels, say, of Defoe—they are rather heavy going, they seem difficult to read to us now because they are just "telling." One thing after another is reported in the past tense, often for page after page without any dialogue in direct speech; and there are no chapter divisions to separate the moments of particular importance and establish a narrative rhythm. As the novel developed as a form it became more sophisticated in the selection and dramatisation of events—in "showing" them, as in a play. But there is a crucial difference between novel and play. In a novelistic "scene" there are people talking to each other, reacting to each other, but also having silent, private thoughts about each other, interpreting or misinterpreting what is said and done. Through the development of "free indirect style" novelists were able to "show" that aspect of experience too. The writer must then decide whether to represent what everybody is thinking in such situations or just a few, or whether to adopt a single person's point of view. James made novelists more conscious of the implications of this aspect of fiction, and was a virtuoso in telling the story from a single, limited and fallible point of view. In fact, most novels are a combination of telling and showing. If you have a novel that is all scenic showing, all dialogue and actions, with no representation of what anyone is thinking, it is unusual—it can be very effective but it is deviant. If you have a novel that is all telling and has no dialogue, no scenes, that is also very deviant. So most novels are a balance of the two, but the balance can alter.

In a novel like *How Far Can You Go?* "telling" is very important because I was trying to give a picture of Catholic life and culture over twenty-five years and in the lives of about fifteen characters in quite a short novel. So the voice of the narrator "telling" the story is the most dominant voice in the book and the reader will be struck by the rapid, summary way in which he describes so many characters and all the things that happen to them. Whereas *Nice Work* in comparison is a very scenic novel. The story develops in a series of encounters between the main characters, with extended dialogues and arguments between them, because it is a dialectical novel about two different cultures, professions, views of the world colliding and being affected by each other.

There are no rules in fiction, and once rules are set up they are always broken. Each novel, to my mind, requires a specific formal solution to the problem that it presents to the writer: what is the best way to explore this theme? The relative emphasis you give to "showing" or "telling" is crucial. *Author, Author* was criticised by some English reviewers as having too much "telling" in it, being too much like a biography. I was aware of the danger of that and I kept it to the minimum. But it is typical of the kind of divergent reaction you get that one reviewer said I had completely ignored James's advice to "Dramatise! Dramatise!" while another commended me for following it! In the first half of the book, describing the development of the James-Du Maurier relationship, there is more "telling" because there were a lot of facts which I needed to put the reader in possession of. There are scenes in this part of the book but there are some quite long passages of narrative summary of what James was doing, over extended periods of time. And then, having created—I hoped—a background of knowledge about these characters, I felt free to "show" the material more in the second half of the book—through dramatic scenes and through the representation of James's consciousness. So, each novel requires a different solution to that particular question.

Henry James observed the similarity between Du Maurier's drawings and the English novel of manners, i.e. interpreting pictorially many situations and character types, as would do the novelist's eye.¹⁰ Intermediality—the relations of literature to other media such as the theatre, visuals arts, music and especially film—seems to me to be a salient feature of your work. Would you comment on this?

I am aware that references to other media do run through my work, particularly references to the cinema and to film, going right back to my very first novel, called *The Picturegoers*, which in English idiom means people who go to "the pictures," as we used to call movies in my childhood

10. Richard Kelly, "The Novelist's Eye," *The Art of George Du Maurier* (Hants, England: Scholar Press, 1996).

and youth. There was a movie magazine in those days called *The Picturegoer*. I suppose it is because I grew up in a culture where the cinema was the main form of mass entertainment. It was then replaced by television which is basically the same as a narrative medium, inasmuch as its grammar is roughly the same as film. But I guess that movies are somehow more potent as points of reference within a novel than television. Television is a kind of wall-paper. It is there all the time, in the home, it has no mythical dimension to it; whereas the films that we see in the dedicated, dark space of the cinema, particularly when we are young, can be imprinted on our consciousness for life. Certain films are points of reference in one's emotional development, and so I find it useful to describe characters actually watching films or remembering films, which are not necessarily great works of art. For instance, in *Thinks...*, you may remember that the heroine's grief for her husband who has died suddenly a year before, is revived when she watches a rather silly but affecting film called *Ghost*. Since I can assume that most of my readers will also have seen that film, I think that they will understand how that film could revive in somebody a mood of loneliness and loss, a very powerful, almost overwhelming feeling. In *Paradise News*, there is a film that Bernard watches in the aeroplane going to Hawaii which he feels trivialises death, whereas he is actually going to confront a real dying person. So, yes, I have used films quite consciously as metaphors for states of mind.

Talking about theatre now, there has always been a dramatic element in fiction. As I said before, Henry James used to say to himself: "Dramatise! Dramatise!" as he prepared to develop the raw material of a narrative into a novel or story. But I think film and the novel are more compatible as art forms than theatre and the novel. I think the latter pair are very different in the way they are experienced and in the way they organize that experience; whereas film moves from scene to scene very flexibly and quickly, and it can go out into the open, into space or wherever, like a novel. Both novels and films have a fluidity and flexibility in the handling of time and space which is hard to achieve in the theatre.

I am not practically or theoretically competent in music. I cannot read music and I cannot play an instrument although my father was a musician. I have quite a good ear and I respond to music, but music is one thing that the novel finds very hard to deal with for obvious reasons. How do you represent the effect of music in words? It is very hard to do. E.M. Forster had a very good go at it in *Howards End* (1910) and Joyce in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, but there are not many such examples. What I have used are the lyrics of pop songs, in the same way that one refers to films. One of the pleasures of adapting *Nice Work* for television was that I was able to use the music as well as the words of the songs that are used to evoke Vic's fantasy life. I think this is one great advantage of film as a medium, that it has these extra channels of expression—the music as well

as the image, as well as the words—whereas the novelist has to do it all with words.

According to Henry James to which Author, Author is devoted, a novel should be art and not entertainment. This dichotomy is made clear in your book by the contrast between the popular success of Trilby by George Du Maurier and the relatively low sales of James's own books. As for you, you certainly showed with your campus novels how a novel could be both entertaining and highbrow. So how would you situate your own novels? Art or entertainment, or both?

Obviously, I have tried to do both. Being a professor and an academic, I always saw the novel as an art form. I was always trying to write novels which satisfied me as works of art, but I found that I had a vein of comedy which seemed to appeal to readers and that was something that was worth following. When I published *Out of the Shelter* in 1970, which is a rather serious novel, it did not do very well and I was worried about the future of my career as a novelist. So I deliberately chose to write a comic novel next in *Changing Places*. It did have the effect of finding a new audience and a new publisher for my work, and in a way my career took off at that point. I think the novel should entertain but I do not think that necessarily means vulgarisation. Even *King Lear*, in a sense, entertains. There is an element of pure play, pure pleasure in the consumption of even the highest art. So the two are not necessarily incompatible. The danger is that if you find you entertain your readers by a particular kind of technique, you are tempted to go on using that and not develop your work. I sometimes feel I have been characterised as a comic writer because I achieved some success with *Changing Places* and *Small World*. I got categorised as a comic, campus novelist and people, in a way, continue to see me like that though in fact several of the later books are rather different: they deal with quite serious matters and they do not necessarily deal with university life. The publishing industry, journalism and the book trade all tend to categorize novelists in that way. I think it is quite difficult to satisfy both the criteria of art and also the criteria of the market place in writing novels, and it is a source of some anxiety to me, in a way, to maintain the balance. But it is for others to say whether I have succeeded or not.

Your latest book, Author, Author, focuses on some episodes of Henry James's life. Why did you choose the form of the novel as is explicitly written on the cover of the book and not that of the biography?

There have been many excellent biographies of Henry James and I cannot imagine that I could write one that would improve on the knowledge we have of him. But a biographer is like a historian. A biographer can only report what can be proved from evidence to be the case. A biographer

cannot speculate about what the subject was thinking or feeling at any particular moment, and the biographer cannot know the whole of any conversation that was held with somebody who lived 100 years ago, before the age of tape recorders. So this kind of novel is a hybrid of fiction and biography. It is now an established sub-genre, certainly in England and America. Your contract with the reader is that the basic story is true but you are using the license of a novelist to try and imagine what your subject was thinking or feeling—normally something that we know only about ourselves—and to present conversations in direct speech in a way that the biographer cannot do.

There seems to be a need for both writers and readers to write or read fact-based novels: historical novels, biographies, docudramas, true crimes. Why is there such a thirst for reality? Could this lead to a decrease in pure fiction and to less space for imagination?

It is true that there is at the moment a trend in narrative writing towards biographical, historical, documentary writing—one being the biographical novel of the kind that *Author, Author* represents, but also autobiographies and memoirs, what is sometimes called “life writing.” There have been a lot of quite successful literary books in the last ten years which are confessional, autobiographical. Not autobiographies in the traditional sense of covering a writer’s entire life but sometimes about their parents, or about the death of spouses or partners... I think it may be because reality itself now has become so extraordinary that it is difficult for fiction to rival it. It may be that the saturation of our lives with documentary media like television, journalism and radio—we are constantly bombarded with facts about the world—has made us attracted to writing which guarantees its authenticity by its references to the real world. Whether this is a passing trend and fashion or whether this is part of a more significant shift, I do not know. And we will not know for a long time. You cannot predict what is going to develop in the arts, they will always falsify your predictions. Personally I find, as I get older, that I am more and more interested in literature with a documentary basis and find it harder and harder to make the effort to read fiction unless it is really good. This may be pure ageing of the brain! It does actually require considerable efforts to read a novel. You have to recreate the world from the clues that the writer gives you and build up this elaborate little model of a world which contains husbands, wives, children, aunts, uncles, register all the names, remember who they are, and so on. If you are reading something which is referring to people you are already familiar with—big historical figures or great writers—you will have a more immediate access to the world of the novel. It is somehow less of an effort to read a novel about Henry James, than to follow the story of a completely fictional novelist called Joseph Soap.

But there may be a difference between British and French cultures in this respect. Biography is very much more popular in England than it is in France. We are obsessed with biographies. It is one of the most common forms of high quality publishing and reading. There are lots of people who openly say that they cannot be bothered reading novels but they read biographies all the time. It is a pity but I think it may also have something to do with the lack of a coherent body of shared values in the reading community. If you think of the great nineteenth-century novelists, they could assume their readers shared basically the same beliefs, the same values, the same ideals of what the good life was, what evil was. In a much more relativistic age, a multicultural society with different ethical systems competing or coexisting, it is very difficult to create a fictional world in which you have the kind of moral authority which the classic novelists used to have. But if you say: "this is how it was, this is what happened," it does not raise the same expectations. Instead of trying to persuade readers to share your view of life, you just say: "this is a human record: make of it what you will."

Perhaps the age of the readers may have something to do with it. Children like pure fiction, still now.

Yes. And in England anyway, there has been a great surge of popularity for children's writing which crosses over to the adult market. Think of the Harry Potter series, though I do not myself consider it as serious literature. I applaud its success in getting children to read but I do not think it will turn out to be a classic work like the Alice books. A more interesting example is a writer like Philip Pullman whom I cannot say I have read but he is obviously highly regarded by both literary critics and by children. That is a rather epic, poetic, fantastic sort of fiction. So, there are obviously readers who have an opposite hunger to the one we were speaking of: they want fantasy, they want myth. And they cannot find it in ordinary adult fiction because we novelists rather distrust myth now. So they find it in sub-genres like children's writing or science-fiction, horror stories, things like that. The gothic still flourishes in corners of the literary world, which brings me back to the first question: the crossroads is still there and there are even more roads going from it. But there is a new trend, or emphasis, on confessional, first-person, documentary writing, occupying some of the ground which used to be occupied by purely fictional novels.

It seems that you have moved away from the purely fictional novel with Author, Author. Would you see a continuity in your literary production over the years or is Author, Author a complete change of direction?

Author, Author is certainly a complete change of direction in terms of form. The rules of it—the rules of that kind of novel, and the rules I created

for myself—are very different from that of any of the fictional novels that I wrote before. Some of the discipline of the biographer or the historian underlies that book. I decided to research it carefully. When I started thinking about *Author, Author*, I assumed that I would probably invent a lot of characters. But once I started doing research, I thought: “The real people, the real life characters are very interesting. There is enough real life material here. If I keep to the facts and I keep to real historical people, the novel will have a kind of hold on the reader, will guarantee its own authenticity in that way. And I do not have to worry about making the story plausible, because it is a true one.” So then I could concentrate on trying to do justice to that story and to fill it out and to get into the inside of the characters’ thoughts and feelings. But that was a very different problem from writing a purely fictional novel where everything is open to choice by the novelist.

The novelist is like God. You can make anything happen and the problem is to make it all happen in a consistent and plausible and satisfying way. When you are writing a fictional novel, you come to points when you have to decide whether the story will go this way or that way, and you have to imagine the consequences of both directions in order to decide. So all that decision-making is taken from you if you are portraying a real life. The problem is rather how to carve out of all the data that you gather a story which has the shapeliness and cohesion of a fictional narrative—which seems to lead the reader along a kind of seamless path through a dense, complex life. What it did show to me was that when you create a character in a novel, imagine relationships for this person and situate them in a sociological and historical context, you leave out huge amounts of what in real life would belong to that person. You can, for instance, write a whole novel about a man without saying anything at all about his parents. It is quite common! The novelist just ignores such relationships because they are irrelevant to the story he wants to tell, and to mention them would mean dealing with them and portraying them. That to me is the great difference between the two kinds of writing. In the case of the fictional novel, you just create what is relevant, what you and your readers need to know. In the case of the biographical novel, you have to find what is really dramatically interesting in what you do know, and see how to discard the rest without making it seem arbitrary.

So in terms of fictional form, *Author, Author* was a completely new departure, but in terms of theme, I think it has continuity with the previous works, particularly with *Thinks...* Henry James is often mentioned in that novel as an example of the novelist who advanced the representation of consciousness in fiction and is used by the novelist character, Helen, as the prime example of how literature can rival or even exceed science in giving an account of human consciousness. There was a continuity there. I was already thinking of writing *Author, Author* when I was writing *Thinks...* so

there is that connection. And I have dealt with authors and their problems and obsessions and hang-ups and occupational neuroses before in *Therapy*, and in *Small World*, and so there is that continuity too. Formal change of direction and thematic continuity.

In the acknowledgements to Author, Author, you explain to the reader which events and details were invented. Why did you find it necessary to do so? After all, your book is called a novel so you should not have to justify the invented bits.

This actually was the result of a comment of a friend who is a biographer. She has written several biographies, including one of Edmund Gosse who was Henry James's friend. This was at a quite late stage. I had finished writing the novel. I was just describing it to her and she said: "I hope you will indicate where you have invented things." I think the reason was that for the ordinary reader, it perhaps does not matter to know exactly what I have added to the known facts. But for somebody who is really interested in Henry James, it does matter. So I thought if I put it in an appendix at the end, people need not read it if they are not interested but those who are interested might like to know. I suppose also I wanted to make clear how little I had invented by confessing what I *had* invented, because I invented nothing that was absolutely crucial to the action. All the main events which cause other events are true. But I added a few little details, sometimes because with, say, Henry James's servants, I could not find any descriptions of what some of them looked like. So I had to invent a few things about them for instance. And I put in little jokes, like Henry James being knocked off his bike by young Agatha Christie who was only five years old at the time. It is true that Agatha Christie was in the same place as Henry James that year but I invented that encounter. But it is not essential. It is a little extra. That was really the reason for the note. I suppose also because I am a teacher by profession—or was—I like to explain. Some critics think I explain too much, but I want the person at the back of the class to understand!

In Author, Author, the reader is transported into the nineteenth century in its most minute details: we meet Maupassant, Wilde, Shaw, we know which clothes Edith Wharton was wearing and we see the posters of the first best-seller: Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines. How can you explain the contemporary writers' and readers' growing interest in the nineteenth century?

I would suggest that the reason the nineteenth century fascinates us—particularly the later nineteenth century—is that in a way, we are children of the industrial revolution and we can connect with people who lived then in a way we cannot identify with people who lived in pre-industrial eras. The

existence of industrial power and technology—steam, railways, electricity, telephones, all these things which came into being in the nineteenth century—and also the philosophical developments like Darwin’s theory of evolution and Freud’s theory of the unconscious which developed in the nineteenth century, mean that the world picture of the Victorians still forms part of our consciousness. Henry James himself thought that the historical novel was an impossibility: you could not reproduce the consciousness of people in the past because their horizons were so different. He was thinking of the attempt to write about the Elizabethan age or the Middle Ages and I understand what he meant. But I feel that we know enough about the nineteenth century; we know from their own novels what their life was like. So we can actually imaginatively recreate it with a certain amount of confidence. They are different from us in many ways, but they are sufficiently similar, so that we can relate to their emotional and moral problems as we read the nineteenth century novel. I think we get more out of the nineteenth century novel than out of the eighteenth century novel because we feel that much closer. That is my theory, anyway.

In Author, Author, why did you decide to concentrate on Henry James’s flop with Guy Domville and on George Du Maurier’s triumph with Trilby?

The reason I chose to foreground the relationship between Henry James and George Du Maurier was that this was really the starting-point of the novel—what Henry James used to call “the germ” of the novel, when the seed of an idea is planted in the novelist’s mind. I was familiar with the story of the disaster of the first night of *Guy Domville*, when Henry James was booed on the stage. It had always seemed to me an extraordinarily dramatic story but it is just an episode and I did not think of writing a novel about James until a television company asked me if I would be interested in adapting Du Maurier’s *Trilby* for television. I had never read it but had heard of it, so I said: “yes.” So I read the novel and I thought I could not possibly dramatise this for a modern audience, but I read in the introduction that George Du Maurier, who was a very good friend of James, had offered him the idea of the story of *Trilby* and Henry James had said: “No, I couldn’t do it, there’s too much about music in it,” and James added: “Why don’t you write it?” And a few years later, Du Maurier did write it and, as I discovered, *Trilby* was thought to be the biggest best-seller of the nineteenth century in England and America. The irony is that Henry James who always wanted to have a big popular success as a novelist, a commercial success, and never achieved it, had to see his friend, whom he thought of as a visual artist, becoming a best-selling novelist, and this happened in the same year as the disaster of *Guy Domville*. To add to the irony, *Trilby* then became a very successful stage play, in an adaptation,

and I just imagined the feelings of James, his friendship, his affection for George Du Maurier, struggling with his professional rivalry, his feeling about this mediocre book having a tremendous success, while at that time he was unsuccessful as a novelist and a failure as a playwright. He was not selling many books and he had just been defeated in a five-year campaign to conquer the London stage.

So, that was the starting-point of the novel. I would not have thought of writing it otherwise. It seems to me that, if you wrote about Henry James on his own—he was a very unusual and strange man, not a normal man in many ways—it would be rather difficult to interest a large audience. They would not be interested in the figure of Henry James just as a novelist. But if you put him in a relationship with another artist—a rather more normal family man, extrovert—and a relationship that turns into a rivalry, there was the possibility of sustaining a novel. Of course in some ways I exaggerate the importance of Du Maurier in James's life by leaving out lots of the other things. That is where the novel differs from biography. I carved out a novel shape from the immense amount of data that we have about Henry James's life. To me, that relationship was the backbone of the novel.

Two women were very important in James's life: his cousin, Minnie Temple, and the writer Constance Fenimore Woolson. Strange but close links existed between James and "Fenimore"—two single, exiled artists. How far do you think these links influenced James's work?

Henry James's sexuality is a rather complex, mysterious question. We do not really know the answers to the questions about that part of his life. A biographer would have to say we do not know whether he had a sexual relationship with anybody, though most biographers think he did not. The novelist of course must make up his mind. You cannot have a central character who does not know whether he has had sex or not. These two women in his life were certainly very important: the young cousin Minnie Temple who died tragically in her youth and who was a kind of model for many of James's heroines, and the writer Constance Fenimore Woolson who was a little older than James. There is reason to think she came from America to Europe determined to meet him—she had a letter of introduction—and she may even have hoped that he would fall in love with her. They got on very well in a companionable way but as far as James was concerned that was how he wanted it to stay. He did not really have a strong sexual drive, he did not desire women. He liked their company, he appreciated female beauty very much, but he did not want a sexual relationship with "Fenimore," as he called her, and he did not want to marry her. As far as we know, she never explicitly made any declaration of love to him, but if you read the biographies about them and the three letters that have survived from Fenimore to Henry James, their relationship was

often very intimate. James burnt all his letters in two great holocausts towards the end of his life, but he made a pact with Fenimore long before that, that they would burn each other's letters, which suggests he did not want anybody to know exactly what their relationship was.

They communicated in a curious way through their fiction, because you can see that some stories of Fenimore Woolson are really about herself and James—and at least one ends with a couple getting married. You can see it in some of James's stories, and particularly in a story called *The Beast in the Jungle*. That was written long after Fenimore died. Almost certainly she committed suicide. She was a depressive character. James felt guilty, as one does feel when a friend commits suicide, and he feared that maybe she committed suicide because he was not able to respond to her feelings. Also he had kept putting off his visit to Venice where she was at the time. I think that may have been a contributing factor. But it was only one. Nevertheless he did feel guilty and had perhaps some reason to feel guilty. He sort of expiated this in the story of *The Beast in the Jungle*, which I believe, was inspired by some things he read in Fenimore's notebook after her death. It is about a man who all his life thought something wonderful or dramatic was going to happen to him and who kept talking to this woman friend about what it might turn out to be: "Is it going to be like a beast in the jungle, pouncing? When is it going to happen to me? When will I know what this fate is that I am expecting...?" Then she dies and he realises that it was her love for him that he missed, that he did not see, that he never perceived, the reason why he never had a great experience in his life, and I think that was James, in a way, making a sort of confession. So there is certainly interplay between the works of these two writers. Their relationship is a sad story, but there was no possible happy ending to it because if James had married her that would have been disastrous too.

This story of Henry James is a fascinating and entertaining fictional representation of the nineteenth-century writer's consciousness often using a third-person discourse while the frame story is much more polyphonic, experimental (the authorial voice in italics, the other characters' opinions on Guy Domville literally in square brackets...) Could you tell us more about this structure?

At an early stage I decided that the main story of the novel would be Henry James's story. It would be Henry James's view of what was happening, I would use him as "the centre of consciousness," to use his own term. I did not think of letting him be the narrator because that would have meant imitating his own voice, which would be too difficult. But I wanted to get inside his head and describe the experience of his career and his personal life as he perceived them. However, there are two exceptions to this. One is when I come to the first night of *Guy Domville*, a very

dramatic event. James was not present most of the time so I had to find a way, in that chapter, of presenting different points of view on the event, of different people in the audience and on the stage, and I rationalised this by imagining that Henry James later heard or read all these evidences in one way or another, all these reports of what happened that night. This chapter is a kind of compilation of all the different points of view that he is supposed to have learned about later on. But of course it is just a device to cover up a deviation from the basic narrative mode of the main story.

The main story begins with James's developing friendship with George Du Maurier and ends with James finally buying a house in Rye which is his refuge from London and where he settles down to write his most important work. From an early stage I thought of putting a frame around this story, namely, the story of Henry James's last illness and death between October 1915 and February 1916. There was a lot of drama in these events that seemed to me to be worth exploring. There was particular poignancy in the fact that James's man-servant, Burgess Noakes—whom he had hired as a boy at the age of twelve or thirteen and trained to become his valet—went off to fight in France, one of the first volunteers in August 1914, was wounded in action, was deafened, sent back to England and given medical leave so he could nurse Henry James in his last illness. That gave me a link with the First World War, background of innumerable deaths on the battlefields of Europe while this one individual death was happening in a flat in Chelsea, with relatives and servants grouped around the dying man. They all had their own agendas, their own conflicts. It seemed to me that there was a good story there to be told which would hold up the main story like two bookends, and it was also an opportunity to vary the style of the novel because I do like to use more than one style in my novels. So that frame story is written in the present tense, I keep changing points of view and eventually I speak and intervene myself as an author in the final passage. I could not do that in the main story without breaking the illusion of historical truth but in the frame story I felt I could.

Do you think D. H. Lawrence's phrase "Never trust the teller, trust the tale" is still meaningful today and how far do you agree? How do you consider the author outside his text, not only in his postfaces, articles, but also in the presentation of his books, in his declarations and interviews like this one?

It is a difficult question and one that literary critics have debated a lot. As with most such questions, both possible answers are true up to a point. "Never trust the teller, trust the tale" is an ambiguous statement because it could mean: "Do not trust the narrator of the tale" or it could mean: "Do not trust the author who tells you what it means afterwards." Being a teacher and an academic, I am very conscious of what I am trying to do in my

novels. In a way I write them so that I could criticise them as I have criticised the work of other novelists. I think I know exactly what I am doing, and this is by no means universally true of writers. Being a teacher, when I am asked what I mean I will tell people what I mean in great detail. So, in practice, I assert or use my authority as an author and my familiarity with literary criticism to interpret my own work. On the other hand, I am also quite well aware that people will read things into my books which I had no intention of putting there. Sometimes these are quite legitimate meanings to find in my work but sometimes I think they are not. There are wrong readings, it is possible to read a novel wrongly and the writer can sometimes correct this misapprehension, but there are also readings the writer never dreamed of but has to admit could be valid. So I think you can trust the teller if the teller is the actual author for certain kinds of information. Somebody recently asked me a question about whether I was alluding to some other writer in a book of mine and I said I did not because I have never read this writer, so it was not possible. But I remember Antonia Byatt, reviewing *Small World*, said it was a very neat touch on my part to call Philip Swallow's wife "Hilary" and his mistress "Joy" because the Latin root of Hilary, "hilaritas," means "joy." And they are, in a way, twin figures: the mistress is a sort of younger incarnation of the wife. I know I had no such intention of making that pun. I called Hilary Hilary because it is an androgynous name which can be given to a man, and she is the dominant figure in that marriage. I called Joy Joy because she brings Philip a sense of romantic ecstasy. But this is a perfectly legitimate reading by Antonia because language itself is playing a game that runs through the whole novel, which is full of reflections and pairings and doublings of that kind. So, it is a question of deciding what information to trust, not whom to trust.

