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*To my parents*

**Hans and Marianne Gappmaier**

*with love*



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*Our lives with all their miracles and wonders are merely a discontinuous string of incidents – until we create the narrative that gives them meaning.*

*(Arlene Goldbard)*





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## Introduction

Over the last three decades, autobiography has become the most popular literary genre of our contemporary culture (cf. Miller, 1). In a way, this is not surprising, for autobiography captures a range of contemporary concerns, such as the status of the subject, issues of gender, and – perhaps most importantly – the individual’s relationship with his or her past (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 1).

*Who am I? What distinguishes me from other people?* These are the kinds of questions addressed in autobiography, and everybody can relate to them, because – as one autobiographer observes – ‘[t]here is nothing more important than one’s identity’ (Keenan, 141). Our ever-present desire to investigate our sense of self and to communicate it to other people is part of what makes us human. Most of us will probably never get round to putting down our lives on paper, but this does not mean that we are not familiar with the autobiographical process. In fact, we all engage in the art of self-storytelling on a daily basis. Through interacting with other human beings, telling them how we feel and what we have done recently, we do exactly the same as autobiographers do, albeit on a non-literary level: we embark on a journey of self-discovery, reflect on and reshape our identities.

Remembering and sharing stories is a universal human need. Even though ‘[w]e know perfectly well that life certainly isn’t a story, at least not in any simple [...] sense, and we also know that a person isn’t a book’ (Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 99), we use stories to make sense of the flux of experiences that our lives present us with. Reading other people’s stories gives us the opportunity to accompany them on their journey to their inner beings and identify with their feelings and experiences. Despite the high chance that our lives may be very different from the autobiographers’, we read ourselves into their stories. Perhaps it is ‘precisely [this] process of [] identification that sends readers to the biography section (which is where you find autobiography) in such large numbers’ (Miller, 3). As Martin Amis observes in his autobiography, *Experience*, which will be discussed in this thesis, ‘[e]xperience is the only thing we share equally, and everyone senses this.’ (Amis, Martin, *Experience*, 6)

In the preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde famously declares that ‘[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.’ (Wilde, 6) This statement is interesting, for it affirms the very notion that audiences

tend to recognise themselves in autobiographers' experiences and their narrative search for the self. Since autobiography deals with true events and real people, however, Wilde's dictum has to be adapted in this context: In an attempt to account for the genre's referential claims, autobiography can thus be said to be a special form of art which mirrors *both* the spectator (or the reader) *and* life. Apart from his allusion to the spectator's emphatic identification process with a work of art, it is intriguing that Wilde uses the metaphor of the mirror. In fact, the autobiographical process has been compared to the act of looking into a mirror ever since literary theory started to acknowledge autobiography as a genre of its own right. Georges Gusdorf, for example, who is recognised as one of the first theorists of autobiography, draws on the mirror metaphor as early as 1956, noting that 'autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image' (Gusdorf, 33).

Writing an autobiography is indeed like looking into a mirror, in which the autobiographers see – or seek to detect – who they have been, who they are now and who they may become. However, this process of reflecting one's identity through self-storytelling is by no means a simple endeavour, which is why the phenomenon of autobiography has kept scholars busy for over half a century. Not only do works of autobiography offer many avenues for exploration (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 1), but it is also not clear how exactly 'the self and its experiences may [] be represented in a text.' (Eakin, *How*, 99) As it is the mission of this thesis to explore 'this linked notion of self and story' that 'is lurking whenever autobiographical practices are engaged' (Eakin, *How*, 99), questions of genre, identity and narrative will be tackled both theoretically and practically. The presented theoretical concepts, which are taken from autobiography studies as well as narrative theory, are subsequently applied in an analysis of three contemporary texts of autobiography, namely Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* (1999), Martin Amis's *Experience: A Memoir* (2000) and Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream: A Memoir* (2002).

Contrary to what may be expected from the enumeration of the primary authors' names in the thesis title, it is *not* the purpose of this paper to conduct a comparative analysis of the primary texts, but rather to employ the concepts compiled in the theory part and put them to the test. Thus, each primary text featured in the analysis part will be examined *individually* from the double perspective of autobiography studies and narrative theory. Despite the fact that no comparative

approach is followed here, it makes sense to perceive the chosen primary texts and their authors as a group. As the identical surname of Kingsley and Martin Amis indicates, this pair of writers is related: Kingsley is Martin's father, and both of them are established novelists. The third author, Elizabeth Jane Howard, who is also a successful novelist, has no blood relation with either Amis père<sup>1</sup> or fils, but she is Kingsley's ex-wife and Martin's former stepmother. Consequently, the three primary authors are a family of British novelists who have experimented with the form of autobiography. Due to these autobiographers' intimate acquaintance with one another, their texts tell partly overlapping stories, and can thus be seen as co-texts or mutual commentaries. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce these autobiographies to their thematic interrelatedness, as each memoir follows a different agenda that deserves to be analysed separately.

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<sup>1</sup> While Kingsley Amis (b. 1922) died in 1995, Martin Amis (b. 1949) and Elizabeth Jane Howard (b. 1923) are still practising novelists.

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# Theory

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## 1. Theorising autobiography as a genre

Most fundamentally, autobiography refers to ‘the writing of one’s own history, the story of one’s life written by oneself’ (Winslow, 3). While the word autobiography did not enter the English language until the late eighteenth century, the genre itself has a much longer history; indeed autobiography has been practiced from ancient times onward. (cf. Gunzenhauser, ‘Autobiography’, 75)

The term autobiography was first used in 1797 in a review attributed to William Taylor of D’Israeli’s *Miscellanies* in the *British Monthly Review*. Taylor had suggested ‘autobiography’ as a substitute for the hybrid word ‘self-biography’ which had been employed by D’Israeli. Despite this first recorded usage by William Taylor, however, it is the poet Robert Southey who is commonly thought to have coined the term in 1809 when he described the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieuira. (cf. Anderson, 7 and Winslow, 3) Felicity Nussbaum maintains that the word autobiography had become generally established and was frequently used by the 1830s, but definitions of what it might denote were by no means stable (cf. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, 4-5).

The theoretical debate about autobiography was initiated in the second half of the twentieth century with Georges Gusdorf’s seminal essay ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’ (1956). Since then, an impressive body of work has accrued on the subject of autobiography, but it is in the last three decades – under the influence of structuralism and poststructuralism – that autobiography studies has particularly flourished (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 1).

### 1.1. Genre as a working hypothesis

Despite the fact that autobiography has been heavily theorised across various disciplines such as literary studies, philosophy, history, anthropology and brain



science, scholars have not managed to arrive at a unified generic definition of autobiography. This does not mean, however, that theory has failed altogether. On the contrary, autobiography's tendency to eschew definition does have a reason which is well-documented in the theoretical body: the evasiveness of autobiography as a genre can be explained by the fact that it is situated on the crossroad between history and fiction, or – in generic terms – biography and the novel. Thus, I would hold with Paul John Eakin when he affirms that

[d]efinitions of autobiography have never proved to be definitive, but they are instructive, reflecting characteristic assumptions about what may well be the slipperiest of literary genres' (Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 1f.).

Eakin proceeds to ask whether 'indeed autobiography can be said to be a genre in the first place' (Eakin, *How*, 2). It goes without saying that this question is immensely difficult to settle. Since the 1970s a lively debate has been going on about this issue, as theorists have tried to shed light on the liminal space autobiography occupies, and the next few sections will be devoted to giving an overview of this theoretical development. Preliminarily, however, it is important to say a few words about the working hypothesis and the concept of genre which underlie this thesis:

Even though some theorists have claimed that autobiography does not lend itself well to a generic approach at all,<sup>2</sup> I maintain that the concept of genre is useful as a frame of reference from which to examine the subject of autobiography and the various issues related to it. Borrowing Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir's approach in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (2003), I work from the premise that there are generic differences between autobiography and other forms of writing (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 3). Gudmundsdóttir draws on Ann Jefferson to argue that it is crucial

to presuppose that there are generic distinctions [...] since [...] generic differences need to be respected as an effect of reading, even if they cannot be defined as intrinsic qualities of the texts in question. (Jefferson, 109 as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 3)

But what is *genre*? Broadly speaking, genre refers to 'a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style or purpose' (OED2). According to Linda Anderson, it denotes 'a specific type of artistic or cultural composition, identified by codes which the audience recognize' (Anderson, 136). Anderson claims that the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul de Man's view summarised in Linda Anderson's *Autobiography*: 'According to de Man, autobiography 'always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in the company of the major genres – the novel, poetry and drama – never quite attaining aesthetic dignity nor even providing an empirically useful way of understanding texts since each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm'' (de Man as cited in Anderson, 12).

question is not only ‘what kind of genre is autobiography’, but more importantly ‘how does the ‘law of genre’, to take the title of Jacques Derrida’s famous essay, work to legitimize certain autobiographical writings and not others?’ (Anderson, 9). As far as Derrida is concerned, it lies in the nature of genre to be conceptualised in terms of ‘norms and interdictions’ (Derrida ‘Law’, 203, as cited in Anderson, 9). These rules, however, are not implemented in an absolutist manner; they are to be understood as frontiers that are meant to be crossed, for ‘the law of genre can only operate by opening itself to transgression.’ (Anderson 9f.) By means of creating parallels, genre can make use of the reader’s recognition of a pattern shared by different works. It draws on what is already known, thereby organising and regulating the meanings of a text for the reader. (cf. Anderson, 10) In the last analysis, genre is thus an effect of reading, and ‘could [...] be seen as a way of creating a dynastic relation between texts, encoding tradition in formal features which operate like ‘family characteristics’’ (Anderson, 10, citing Fowler, 32).

## **1.2. Structuralism**

### 1.2.1. Before structuralism: Georges Gusdorf’s ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’

The value of George Gusdorf’s ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’ (1956) is undeniable. As early as in the 1950s, it opens up a space for autobiography to be discussed theoretically. It does not, however, discuss the subject of autobiography in generic terms, even though Gusdorf once uses the term ‘literary genre’ (Gusdorf, 39).

The generic approach is taken up in the 1970s by the structuralists<sup>3</sup>, notably Philippe Lejeune, who, following Saussure’s theory of language, ‘prioritize the mode of representation over the thing represented’ (Prosser, 248). According to Prosser, the structuralist project of

distinguishing autobiography involved attending to the rules and forms of writing, analysing the relations between textual structures, and drawing up resultant typologies; structuralism considers relations between structures, locating meaning in the system or langue (Prosser, 248).

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. ‘The earliest attempts at generic definition of autobiography are in ideal structuralist’ (Prosser, 248).

Gusdorf's attempt to delineate the *conditions* and *limits* of autobiography points towards the arrival of structuralism, which was recognised by James Olney when he included the essay in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. (cf. Prosser, 248) Despite this theoretical undertow, however, Gusdorf's essay is not structuralist in the pure sense of the word, as it 'delimits autobiography less through its intratextual properties than through its historical and cultural conditions.' (Prosser, 248) Essentially, Gusdorf restricts 'autobiography properly speaking' (Gusdorf, 37) temporally and geographically. 'First of all', he maintains, 'it is necessary to point out that the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere.' (Gusdorf, 28f.) He distinctly characterises it as 'a late phenomenon in Western culture' (Gusdorf, 29), therefore excluding autobiographical writings from the antique traditions, such as Epicureanism or Stoicism, from his definition (cf. Gusdorf, 34). Furthermore, he identifies the ability of self-reflection as a consequence of the secularisation of the Christian tradition of self-examination – i.e. the emergence of individualism. In the Christian belief system, Gusdorf explains,

[e]ach man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts – whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life. The rule requiring confession of sins gives to self-examination a character at once systematic and necessary. (Gusdorf, 33)

In autobiography, which represents the secularised version of such a confession, the writer 'assumes the task of bringing out the most hidden aspects of individual being. The new age practices the virtue of individuality' (Gusdorf, 34).

### 1.2.2. Philippe Lejeune's 'The Autobiographical Pact'

Structuralist theory as applied to autobiography has given precedence to the *graphie* (writing) and rendered it determinant of the *autos* (self) and the *bios* (life). In structuralist theories of language (such as Saussure's), writing is seen to precede and construct reality, not simply reflect it. Thus, language and writing are prioritised over historical context. (cf. Prosser, 248) According to Prosser, it is Philippe Lejeune's 'The Autobiographical Pact' which initiates the 'structuralist project on autobiography, particularly since [it] [...] draw[s] on linguistic theories to refine that task of autobiographical definition.' (Prosser, 248) Lejeune calls upon the linguist Emile Benveniste's theories on *utterance* and *enunciation* when he affirms that 'the personal pronouns (I/you) have real reference only within discourse, in the very act

of enunciation.’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 8). According to Benveniste, ‘there is no such concept as ‘I.’ The ‘I’ refers, each time, to the person who is speaking and whom we identify *by the very fact* that he is speaking.’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 8f., emphasis original) Thus, Lejeune’s essay constitutes the archetypal structuralist statement on autobiography:

Not only does Lejeune suspend history and context [...] to define autobiography exclusively through text, but his mode of argument and conveyance is itself highly structured, his essay punctuated with mathematical formulae and schematic diagrams (Prosser, 248).

In ‘The Autobiographical Pact’ (1973), Lejeune seeks to map the boundaries of autobiography against both biography and the novel, thereby establishing it as a discrete genre while also anchoring it in a world beyond the text (cf. Eakin, *Stories*, 2). Lejeune draws precisely on the aforementioned reader’s recognition of autobiographies as separate from other categories of texts that Anderson, citing Derrida and Fowler, recognises as the characteristic function of the ‘law of genre’ (cf. Anderson, 9f.), thus creating ‘a reader-based poetics of autobiography’ (Eakin, ‘Foreword’, ix). At the outset of ‘The Autobiographical Pact’, Lejeune asks himself whether it is indeed ‘possible to define autobiography’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 3), and proceeds to do exactly that, in remarkably clear-cut fashion:

*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.* (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 3, emphasis original)

As Eakin notes, Lejeune emphasises that his definition was specifically aimed at distinguishing *autobiography proper* from a number of adjacent types of autobiographical writing in related genres, such as the autobiographical novel, the diary, the autobiographical poem, and memoirs. (cf. Eakin, ‘Foreword’, viii) Thus, Lejeune’s definition in ‘Pact’ is followed by a decidedly formalist demarcation of autobiography against other genres.

Interestingly, ‘The Autobiographical Pact’ (1973) was not Lejeune’s first attempt to solve ‘the thorny problem of establishing a boundary between factual and fictional modes of discourse’ (Eakin, ‘Foreword’, ix). He had already introduced the notion of *le pacte autobiographique* two years earlier in *L’Autobiographie en France* (1971). Essentially, the autobiographical pact is

a contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life. (Eakin, ‘Foreword’, ix)

Reviewing his first endeavour to delineate the pact, however, Lejeune concedes that the contract between writer and reader was not enough to determine a text definitively as autobiography. His feeling that the autobiographical pact – as it was standing then – was insufficient derived from his deep belief that

autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities, and given his lively awareness that the novel has often imitated the posture of self-referential intention in all sorts of pseudo, mock, or otherwise fictive autobiographies. (Eakin, 'Foreword', ix)

Thus returning to the seemingly insoluble problem of drawing a generic line between autobiography and fiction in 'The Autobiographical Pact', Lejeune proclaimed a decisive alteration of the stance he had taken in *L'Autobiographie en France*: his discovery of the author's *proper name* as 'the deep subject of autobiography' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 20). Through the ploy of including the title page – formerly overlooked – as a constituent and integral part of the text, Lejeune was now able to pin down a *textual criterion* by which to differentiate between autobiography and fiction, namely the identity ('identicalness' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 14)) of the proper name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist. (cf. Eakin, Foreword, ix) 'In order for there to be autobiography', Lejeune maintains, 'the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical.' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 5) The autobiographical pact thus signifies 'the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 14)

According to Lejeune, it is only by way of reference to the *proper name* that a valid distinction between autobiography and fiction can be achieved, because it is 'the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-text, referring to a real person.' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 11) The existence of this person is 'certified by vital statistics and verifiable[...] [H]is existence is beyond question.' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 11)

Lejeune tries to account for his previous blindness to the implicit yet apparent connection between autobiography and the real world through the proper name, conceding that it had a good reason: in *L'Autobiographie en France* he was looking for answers in the wrong place, because if 'we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page', then 'there is *no difference*' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 13, emphasis original) between autobiography and the novel; they both make use of the same structural patterns and narrative techniques. 'All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative', Lejeune asserts, 'can be imitated by the novel, and often have been imitated.' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 13) Thus, 'on the level of

‘structures, modes, and narrative voices’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 29) autobiography and the novel are indistinguishable. But since every reader nevertheless experiences autobiography as a distinct genre, Lejeune proposes a solution by introducing the proper name as the ‘essential element of the contract’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 29). By doing so, he establishes autobiography as a ‘referential genre’ (Lejeune, ‘Pact’, 25).

### **1.3. Poststructuralism**

#### 1.3.1. Philippe Lejeune’s ‘The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)’

Conceiving of writing as fluid and intransitive, poststructuralism shows a rising scepticism about autobiography’s status as a distinct genre and even questions its very possibility; thus, poststructuralist theories deconstruct the neat structures of autobiography. (cf. Prosser, 249) The growing uncertainty of poststructuralism with regard to the status of autobiography is best exemplified by Lejeune’s return to the autobiographical pact in ‘The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)’ (1982), in which he performs a dazzling reversal of the former essay’s structuralist approach. (cf. Prosser, 249)

By criticising the ‘essentially linguistic and formal point of view’ (Lejeune, ‘Bis’, 130), Lejeune overthrows the very structuralism of the former essay. Thus, he exposes the ‘undeniable normative aspect of ‘Le Pacte’’ and its ‘cut-and-dried presentation’ (Lejeune, ‘Bis’, 121) to a searching critique. Moreover, he finds fault with the desire manifest in ‘Pact’ to systematise autobiography, questioning whether such a goal can indeed be achieved. He unmasks his definition as ‘dogmatic’ and as having ‘a rather uncertain theoretical status’ (Lejeune, ‘Bis’, 120). In ‘Bis’, Lejeune laments his previous failure of taking into account ‘what happens when the seemingly ideal structures of the text encounter the unstable contexts of its reception.’ (Prosser, 249) Acknowledging that texts are necessarily embedded in the context of their reception and can never exist outside it, Lejeune concedes that autobiography cannot be definitively isolated – notably from fiction –, for readers can and do read texts differently. (cf. Prosser, 249)

### 1.3.2. Paul de Man's 'Autobiography as De-facement'

In poststructuralist theory, autobiography has been remodelled as a project of '*poesis*' by being rendered 'constructive and self-referential, and thus never fully distinct from fiction.' (Prosser, 249) According to Prosser, it is this blurring of distinctions between autobiography and fiction which represents poststructuralism's key contribution to autobiography studies (cf. Prosser, 249). Paul de Man encapsulates the poststructuralist position on autobiography in his famous essay 'Autobiography as De-facement' (1979) when he notes that 'the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but [...] finally undecidable.' (de Man, as cited in Prosser, 249) He uses the metaphor of autobiography as *prosopoeia* – as face- or figure-making – to unveil the fictiveness of autobiography's reference: autobiography is not a reflection but a created product; it is not revelatory, but a form of persona or mask – "the illusion of a reference", 'a correlation of the structure of the figure', 'something akin to fiction'.' (de Man as cited in Prosser, 249)

As Paul John Eakin observes, Paul de Man's consequence of observing this interrelatedness between autobiographical and fictional modes is to question the legitimacy of the generic approach: according to de Man, the concept of genre is ultimately futile when applied to autobiography. Complaining of the 'distressing sterility of generic discussions of autobiography' (Eakin, 'Foreword', vii), he argues that 'empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition' (de Man, as cited in Eakin, 'Foreword', vii).

### 1.3.3. Michael Sprinker's 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography'

Similarly to de Man, Michael Sprinker also considers structuralism's attempt to define autobiography as a distinct genre a hopeless task. In 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography' (1981), he illustrates his conviction that 'autobiography [is] fundamentally unstable and hence unclassifiable, a shifting borderless locale' (Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 2, citing Sprinker, 342). Threatening the very existence of the genre, 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography' (1980), constitutes poststructuralism's most extreme encounter with autobiography. Sprinker goes one step further than de Man, annulling the distinction between autobiography and fiction altogether.

In order to drive home his view that in autobiography, 'concepts of subject, self and author collapse into the act of producing a text' (Sprinker, 342, as cited in

Eakin, *How*, 2) Sprinker draws on Nietzsche's biting analysis of the subject in *The Will to Power*:

'The subject' is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the 'similarity' of these states [...]. The fundamental false observation is that I believe it is *I* who do something, suffer something, 'have' a quality.' (Nietzsche as quoted in Sprinker, 333f., emphasis original)

Following Nietzsche's argument, autobiography as defined by Lejeune could not pass for a 'literature of fact' (Eakin, *How*, 3) despite its reference to the proper name. However historically manifest the proper name of the author-narrator-protagonist may be, the 'I' referring to that name 'remains no less than a creature of fiction' (Eakin, *How*, 3). In concluding his analysis of Sprinker's essay, Eakin maintains that '[w]ithout an 'I' to perform actions, to possess feelings and qualities, the possibility of 'having' a story of one's 'own existence' to tell simply evaporates.' (Eakin, *How*, 3) After unmasking the fictitiousness of the subject, Sprinker pulls the plug on life writing by announcing the end of autobiography (cf. Eakin, *How*, 3).

#### **1.4. Emerging from poststructuralist cynicism**

Structuralist and poststructuralist theories have dominated our understanding of autobiography in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet at the beginning of the new millennium, we seem to be leaving behind 'poststructuralist cynicism' (Prosser, 249); poststructuralism's denial of autobiography's ability to provide a means for representing the self is ultimately unsatisfactory. The fact that autobiography has not ceased to exist, as proclaimed by Sprinker, and continues to flourish 'as a form irreducible to fiction' (Prosser, 249) points to the shortcomings of poststructuralism in relation to the experience of writing and reading autobiography. According to Prosser, all autobiographies, no matter how heavily cross-fertilised they are by fiction, are assigned a separate space in our experience of reading them and remain distinct from works of fiction by the same authors. (cf. Prosser, 249)

##### 1.4.1. Philippe Lejeune's 'Bis' revisited

Despite theory's demonstration of 'a Lacanian fragmentation and imaginarity of selfhood and a Derridean conception of writing as self-referential' (Prosser, 249),



autobiography continues to prosper in both theory and practice. Lejeune's 'The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)' is archetypally poststructuralist as it topples the very structures of the original definition. However, Lejeune observes that '[i]n spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.' (Lejeune, 'Bis', 131f.) Thus, 'Bis' does not accept poststructuralism's attempt to declare autobiography's death. (cf. Prosser, 249) Lejeune recognises the paradox of the reality of individual experience on the one hand, and the fiction of this same experience on the other hand, as it is caught up in and can only be accessed via textual representation. The relevant passage will be quoted at length, for it illustrates so very precisely what Eakin has called 'the conceptual impasse that confronts theorists in the age of postmodernism' (Eakin, *How*, 3):

It's better to get on with the confessions: yes, I have been fooled. I believe that we can promise to tell the truth; I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it; I believe that my proper name guarantees my autonomy and my singularity [...]; I believe that when I say 'I,' it is I who am speaking: I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn't believe in it? But of course it also happens that I believe in the contrary, or at least claim to believe it. (Lejeune, 'Bis', 131)

#### 1.4.2. Paul John Eakin and Tonya Blowers

According to Prosser, the most recent theoretical encounters with autobiography have been concerned with the nature of the very reality that poststructuralism marginalised. Prosser metaphorically extends Freud's concept of fetishism in order to shed light on the experience of reading autobiography after the disillusionment of poststructuralist theory (cf. Prosser, 249):

Like Freud's fetishistic little boy who denies what he knows to be true in order to go on living, after theory we accept the impossibility of autobiography and go on reading and writing (and writing about) autobiography as if we still believed it had something of the real to offer us that fiction does not. (Prosser, 249)

Two of Eakin's works, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992), and *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) exemplify 'the return of poststructuralism's repressed referent' (Prosser, 249) that Prosser assigns to recent theories of autobiography.

In *Touching the World*, Eakin asks the pivotal question of why autobiography has not vanished into fiction even though poststructuralism had written a premature obituary of autobiography. He maintains that it is 'autobiography's referential

aesthetic' (Eakin, *Touching*, as cited in Prosser, 249) that keeps it separate in the mind of the reader. Thus, autobiography has an unquestionable ability to refer to the real; as an 'aesthetic', however, it is intricately tied to representation. (cf. Prosser, 249) In his analysis of *Touching the World*, Prosser observes that Eakin intends to 'reopen the file on reference in autobiography', while not seeking to return to a 'naïve prestructuralist reference' (Prosser, 249).

Tonya Blowers takes a similar stance in her essay 'The Textual Contract: Distinguishing Autobiography from the Novel' (2000), which reconsiders and remodels Lejeune's pact between the author and the reader. She postulates that there is a model of autobiography which succeeds in taking on board 'autobiography's claims to 'truth' [...] whilst also highlighting the transformative process inherent in recollecting and representing such truth' (Blowers, 113). Blowers claims that we read autobiographies as a *textual contract*, acknowledging on the one hand the proper name of the author-narrator-protagonist, knowing that it signifies a distinct mode of reading – autobiography, not fiction. On the other hand, we can also see the proper name as mere adornment which refers to 'no person, no thing, no history, other than that which it creates for the complicit reader in the text.' (Blowers, 115) Consequently, the reader has a sense of the real world outside the text while being aware at the same time of the constructed nature of that reality within the text. (cf. Blowers, 115) Thus, Blowers pointedly concludes that 'the textual contract provides a means of having our cake (there is a historical reality) and eating it (a text is pure representation).' (Blowers, 115)

In his introduction to *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Eakin tries to tackle the question of *why* it is that autobiography has proved to be so impervious to the manifold deconstructions of the subject suggested by Nietzsche, Lacan, and others. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 3) If we accept the testimony of most autobiographies, he maintains, people do base the conceptions of their lives on Nietzsche's 'fundamental false observation [...] that I believe it is *I* who do something' (Eakin, *How*, 3, emphasis original), thus acknowledging that this belief is deeply ingrained in human experience. Eakin calls on the philosopher John Searle to account for autobiography's remarkable resilience. Searle creates a conceptual arch between the self as an experiential reality on the one hand and the Nietzschean subject as a fiction on the other hand by refuting Daniel C. Dennet's denial of the existence of consciousness:

Couldn't we disprove the existence of these data [inner qualities and mental states, *annot.*] by proving that they are only illusions? No, you can't disprove the existence of conscious experiences by proving that they are only an appearance distinguishing the underlying reality, because *where consciousness is concerned, the existence of the appearance is the reality*. (Dennet, 58, as cited by Eakin, *How*, 2f., emphasis original)

In his body of work, Eakin has devoted a great amount of attention to studying the reality of consciousness and selfhood. Two thirds of *How Our Lives Become Stories*, deal with the question of what it means to be a self; yet I do not wish to deepen my examination of selfhood at this point, as it will be the purpose of the next chapter to explore the role of the self in writing and reading autobiography. Instead, I want to conclude my discussion of autobiography as a *genre* by trying to come up with a working definition of autobiography which is specifically aimed at the three autobiographies I have chosen for my analysis in the second part of this thesis.

## **1.5. Arriving at a working definition**

### 1.5.1. Lejeune's definition in 'The Autobiographical Pact'

In trying to provide a working definition that should serve as a generic point of reference for my analysis, I am once more drawing on Lejeune's classic structuralist concept of autobiography:

DEFINITION: *Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*. (Lejeune, 'Pact', 3, emphasis original)

With Lejeune's definition in mind and by borrowing Gudmundsdóttir's approach, I read autobiography as a referential genre, without denying the complexities involved in that referentiality (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 3), which is inclusive of fictional modes of writing. It is important to take into consideration, however, that Lejeune himself has subjected the seemingly normative function of his definition to continuous re-evaluation. He is perfectly aware that an entire genre cannot be reduced to a definition which is no longer than a dictionary entry. As Eakin points out, Lejeune views his work as a theorist of genre in the context of genre criticism at large, whose purpose it is not to construct absolute, intemporal generic categories but to describe how the law of genre and historical developments co-determine each other and how genres operate and evolve over time. (cf. Eakin, 'Foreword', xv)

Notwithstanding the fact that Lejeune's definition of autobiography as a pact between reader and writer is unavoidably a simplification and ignores fascinating areas of intersection between autobiography and fiction, it is useful in that it provides a straightforward technical means of defining the genre. (cf. Blowers, 105) After overthrowing the very structures of his own definition in 'The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)', Lejeune confesses that he nevertheless has 'no regrets' (Lejeune, 'Bis', 121) for having dressed autobiography in such a tight generic corset in 'The Autobiographical Pact': 'After all', he argues,

if we rely on this definition, it is because it corresponds to a need. Far from reproaching my readers for having followed my lead, which would be ungrateful, I will take their approval as a sign of relevance. (Lejeune, 'Bis', 121)

By coming up with a suitable definition that is applicable to the three primary texts I have chosen, I am in effect acting on Lejeune's advice. Indeed, Lejeune postulates that '[a]nyone who goes on about autobiography (or about any literary genre whatever) is obliged to confront the problem of definition [...] by choosing what to talk about.' (Lejeune, 'Bis', 121)

#### 1.5.2. Contracting the scope: *British author-autobiography*

In one sense, my definition is narrower than Lejeune's, as I focus on the specific case of *British author-autobiography*. Thus, I limit myself geographically as well as generically; all three texts come from Great Britain, and they have all been written by established authors. Even if I have not come across the term author-autobiography in my research, I prefer it to the hazy word 'literary autobiography' (Gunzenhauser, 'Literary Autobiography', 562). According to the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, literary autobiography 'often refers to autobiography written by a self-defined or publicly recognized writer' (Gunzenhauser, 'Literary Autobiography', 562), which is the usage I apply. But the term also seeks to establish a distinction between autobiographies that are of literary value and ones that are not (cf. Gunzenhauser, 'Literary Autobiography', 562), which is a meaning that has no relevance for my concern.

#### 1.5.3. Expanding the scope: *memoir* and the *relational life*

On the other side of the spectrum, my definition is also wider than Lejeune's, as only one of my primary texts – Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream* (2002) – qualifies as

an autobiography in the Lejeunian sense. One of the other two works, Martin Amis's *Experience* (2000), does not fully comply with the identity of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. Amis does not exclusively focus on *his individual life*, as the definition demands, but is also concerned with the lives of his father Kingsley Amis and his cousin Lucy Partington. Lejeune admits in 'Bis' that through formulating the identity-criterion as a *sine qua non*, he was occupying an extreme position: 'I tended to fix on an 'all or nothing' position, when in reality many intermediary positions are possible' (Lejeune, 'Bis', 125). By calling on Gudmundsdóttir, I justify my decision to read *Experience* as an autobiography, for in her study on the borderlines between autobiography and fiction in postmodern life writing Gudmundsdóttir also includes a number of texts in which the author writes on the life of his or her parent(s). This kind of text, she claims, constitutes a large part of recent life writing, especially in Britain, where it is widely published and discussed as part of autobiographical writing. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 2)

The third and last text of my trio of primary literature is Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* (1991). As remains to be seen, it is debatable whether *Memoirs* can truly be said to be an autobiography, as Kingsley<sup>4</sup> not only abandons the traditional approach of delivering a continuous *narrative*, instead presenting many mini-narratives, but he also barely tells *the story of the personality* or focuses on *his individual life*, because the mini-narratives that make up the individual chapters – at least on the surface level – primarily deal with other people. Nevertheless, as Linda Anderson reminds us, 'the law of genre can only operate by opening itself to transgression.' (Anderson 9f.) Based on the fact that, essentially, *genre* is an effect of reading, I include *Memoirs* in my corpus of texts and maintain - similarly to Gudmundsdóttir (cf. 8) – that transgression is probably a good term to be employed; *Memoirs* may not qualify as autobiography proper, but its autobiographical qualities as experienced by the reader are unquestionable.

There is a final generic issue that demands clarification: All three works I discuss in this thesis feature the word 'memoir' in their titles. Kingsley Amis's book is simply called *Memoirs*, while Martin Amis and Elizabeth Jane Howard's works are both labelled *A Memoir* in their respective subtitles. How, then, can I justify

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<sup>4</sup> I herewith establish the habit of calling the authors of my primary texts – Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis and Elizabeth Jane Howard – by either their full or only their first names. The use of their Christian names is not meant as a gesture of disrespect, but should avoid confusion, since Kingsley and Martin share the same surname.

reading texts that openly bear the generic marker of the *memoir* as part of my definition of *autobiography*?

Some scholars, such as Helen M. Buss, are anxious to maintain memoir as a genre independent from autobiography and lament the memoir form's recent tendency of being subsumed within autobiography (cf. Buss, 595f.), even though the two terms tend to be used interchangeably by writers, theorists and editors alike. Buss highlights 'two principal features' that separate the memoir from autobiography: 'its incremental, episodic structure and its preoccupation with the physicality of a materially located place in history and culture' (Buss, 595). According to Buss, the memoir tends to concentrate on the times in which the subject-author has lived and the 'significant others of the memorist's world' (Buss, 595), while traditional autobiography focuses on the individual life (cf. Buss, 595).

Interestingly, Buss defines the memoir as a 'form that often presents itself as being about a significant other and about history, but is always also about the self of the writer' (Buss, 596). Recent theoretical works on autobiography have made exactly the same point from the reverse position: insofar as autobiography is about the self, it is also always necessarily about others and about the historical context embedding the individual's life. As far as the 'significant other' (Buss, 596) is concerned, the memoir parallels the specific kind of autobiography that Gudmundsdóttir includes in her study: autobiography as dealing with the life of the author's parent(s). In the same vein, Eakin calls this variation of the genre 'a *relational life*' (Eakin, *How*, 69, emphasis added), defining it as featuring

the decisive impact on the autobiographer of either (1) an entire social environment (a particular kind of family, a community and its social institutions – schools, churches, and so forth) or (2) key other individuals, usually family members, especially parents. (Eakin, *How*, 69)

Moreover, Eakin informs us in *How Our Lives Become Stories* that his conception of autobiography has considerably changed over the years:

I find myself approaching life writing in the 1990s in a way that is quite different from my approach when I first began work on it in the 1970s [...]. [Memoirs], which I once found peripheral to my concerns [...] now seem to me central to the genre.' (Eakin, *How*, 61)

Observing that present-day autobiographers often refuse being confined to the 'clear formal conventions' (Gunzenhasuer, 'Autobiography', 75) of autobiography proper, Eakin feels 'increasingly uncomfortable about the mismatch between contemporary

life writing on the one hand and received categories of [...] genre on the other' (Eakin, *How*, 57).

The recent hybridisation of autobiographical texts, which incorporate autobiographical, fictional, historical and biographical elements alike, has also partly affected the primary texts that feature in my analysis. As a consequence, I will follow Eakin and Gudmundsdóttir in their *inclusive approaches* to autobiography, including autobiography proper *as well as* memoirs in my definition. In order to both preserve genre as a useful concept and respond to the fact that both autobiography theory and practice have opened up to surrounding discourses, I conceive of autobiography not as a single, hermetic category, but as a 'cluster of genres and subgenres' (Gudmundsdóttir, 1).

## 2. Concepts of the self in autobiography

As has been outlined above, the generic borders of autobiography have been opened up considerably over the last two decades. Naturally, this process has not occurred in a theoretical vacuum. Scholars have not only relaxed their comfort zones as far as genre is concerned; they have also reshaped their ideas about what role *the self* plays in autobiography. It does not come as a great surprise that these changes have taken place simultaneously, for the issues of genre and selfhood in autobiography are thoroughly intertwined. Notably, Paul John Eakin has defined autobiography as ‘the story of the self’ (Eakin, *How*, ixf.), which illustrates just how central conceptions of the self are to the genre. Autobiographers may not always directly address selfhood as a theme, but questions of identity<sup>5</sup> certainly ‘run[] through life and its various accounts’ (Brockmeier, ‘Identity’, 455), for identity is indeed ‘one of the functions and motives of writing a life’ (Brockmeier, ‘Identity’, 455).

Human self-experience is an endlessly complex matter (cf. Eakin, *How*, x), which is why autobiography studies has not managed to come up with a unified picture of what the *autobiographical self* might look like. As Olshen explains, ‘[m]uch of the difficulty in understanding the self is that, if it is granted meaning at all, its meaning will of necessity be entirely experiential, entirely subjective’ (Olshen, 799). This general intricacy is reflected in the hazy terminology that overshadows the entire discourse of selfhood. According to Brockmeier, the ‘concepts of ‘I’ and identity, the self and the ego, tend to be used without clear-cut definitions and distinctions’ (‘Identity’, 455). This lack of conceptual accuracy might be unsatisfactory, but it echoes ‘an essential quality of human identity itself: namely, its open, fleeting, and elusive nature’ (Brockmeier, ‘Identity’, 455).

Traditionally, the theoretical debate about the self in autobiography is rooted in positions formulated in philosophy, literary theory and the social sciences. More recently, new insights from cognitive science and neurology have also fed into the discussion. It is not a direct consequence of this multidisciplinary input, however, that the nature of the self has been examined from various standpoints in autobiography studies; rather, the fact that the discourse is so multi-faceted, mirrors the very nature of selfhood. Due to its complexity, identity offers many doors from which to enter its examination. In order to both assure clarity and preserve a feel for

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<sup>5</sup> Also see Introduction.



the multifariousness inherent in selfhood, I will try to break down the discussion into three dimensions in the sections that follow: (1) the self as autonomous vs. the self as relational, (2) the self as accessible, constant, and unitary vs. the self as evasive, changing, and multiple, and (3) the self as a representational fiction vs. the self as narratively constructed. Through this approach, I hope to give sufficient attention to each aspect and shed light on how ideas have changed in the course of the debate. Moreover, the term *dimension* is meant to reflect the notion that these features are part and parcel of the same phenomenon and do not exist in isolation.

## **2.1. Dimension 1: the self as autonomous vs. the self as relational**

### 2.1.1. Georges Gusdorf: the autonomous self

Throughout a large part of its history, autobiography theory has fostered a model that conceives of the self as an autonomous entity. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 47) In this emphatically individualistic approach, which is based on Georges Gusdorf's groundbreaking essay from the 1950s, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', the self is perceived as 'separate and unique' (Friedman, 34). According to Gusdorf, autobiography is a product of the Enlightenment<sup>6</sup> and can only be found in the Western hemisphere. Friedman observes that

[f]or Gusdorf, the consciousness of self upon which autobiography is premised is the sense of 'isolated being,' a belief in the self as a discrete, finite 'unit' of society. Man must be an island unto himself. Then, and only then, is autobiography possible.' (Friedman, 36)

Paradoxically, Gusdorf claims that it is *within* 'social space' (Gusdorf, 32) that the human child develops a sense of his or her individuality: approximately at the age of six months, 'the infant [...] distinguishes that which is without from his own within, he sees himself another among others' (Gusdorf, 32). Yet here, the community within which a person becomes *a self* only serves as a social 'mirror' (Gusdorf, 33) against which a person can recognise his individuality and does not shape or influence the self in any other way. Gusdorf also presents the flipside of his argument of individualism as a prerequisite for autobiography: in his train of thought, true individual identity – and by implication autobiography – cannot emerge if 'the

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<sup>6</sup> As Eakin observes, the same argument was still pursued in the 1970s by Lejeune and Weintraub who also 'traced the rise of modern autobiography to Rousseau and Enlightenment individualism' (Eakin, *How*, 47).

individual does not oppose himself to others' and 'does not feel himself to exist outside others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence' (Gusdorf, 29).

### 2.1.2. Susan Stanford Friedman: a feminist critique of Gusdorf's approach

It was not until the 1980s that – in the wake of feminism – the universalising claims of Gusdorf's model of selfhood were repudiated. According to Eakin, Mary Mason 'was the first of a long line of feminist critics to [...] question its place in the history of the genre' (Eakin, *How*, 47). In her essay, 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers' (1980), Mason conceded that the individualistic concept of the self as endorsed by *malestream* scholars might be applicable to the lives of Augustine and Rousseau, but it does not suitably describe how *women* autobiographers experience what it means to be a self (cf. Eakin, *How*, 47). In order to correct this 'gender bias' (Eakin, *How* 47), Mason came up with an alternative model of the female self, i.e. 'identity through relation to the chosen other' (Mason, 210, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 47). Subsequently, feminist scholars such as Domna Stanton, Bella Brodzki, Celeste Schenck, and Susan Stanford Friedman picked up on Mason's concept of 'relational identity as the distinguishing mark of women's lives' (Eakin, *How*, 47f.). They asked, as Domna Stanton's essay title suggests, 'Is the [female] subject different?', answering the question in the affirmative. In the feminist deconstruction of the 'Gusdorf model' (Eakin, *How*, 47), the female subject and her life story are indeed perceived to be endemically distinct from male selfhood and male autobiography (cf. Eakin, *How*, 48).

Most famously, Friedman's<sup>7</sup> article 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' (1988) subjects the Gusdorf model to a feminist critique and notes that the individualistic concept underlying Gusdorf's autobiographical self raises significant 'theoretical problems for critics who recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women'<sup>8</sup> (Friedman, 34). According to Friedman,

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<sup>7</sup> My discussion of the feminist reassessment of the autonomous model of selfhood focuses on Susan Stanford Friedman's essay, since her reversal of Gusdorf's male individualism is particularly illuminating.

<sup>8</sup> It shall be noted here that Friedman also extends her concept of women's relational identity to 'minorities and many non-Western peoples' (Friedman, 34), but she does not elaborate on this aspect.

[t]he very sense of *identification, interdependence, and community* that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman's identity. (Friedman, 38, emphasis original)

Friedman puts forth two arguments to suggest that the individualistic model of the self is fundamentally inapplicable to women: first, the prominence that is given to individualism ignores the 'importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women' (Friedman, 34); and second, it neglects 'the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity' (Friedman, 34f.). Since women's individuation process is different, women tend to develop 'collective and relational identities' (Friedman, 35) rather than autonomous ones. Friedman therefore concludes that due to their upbringing, 'women's sense of self exists within a context of a deep awareness of others' (Friedman, 34). She capsizes Gusdorf's argument, thereby establishing a model that does account for female subjectivity:

To echo and reverse Gusdorf once more, this autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to others, does not feel herself to exist outside others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. (Friedman, 56)

### 2.1.3. Paul John Eakin: the relational self

In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Eakin notes that the feminist turn in autobiography theory created overdue space for the serious and sustained study of women's autobiographies, which had formerly been excluded from the canon. This, he argues, is the 'single most important achievement of autobiography studies' (Eakin, *How*, 48) in the 1980s. The one lamentable if unavoidable consequence of feminists' reversal of Gusdorf's individualistic model of selfhood and their creation of a female alternative, however, was 'an unfortunate polarization by gender of the categories we use to define self and self-experience' (Eakin, *How*, 48). Thus, a set of male-female binaries was established according to which men had individualistic and autonomous conceptions of self, and – for an unspecified reason – produced their life stories in narrative fashion, while women's sense of identity was said to be collective and relational, resulting – equally unaccountably – in 'non-linear, discontinuous, nonteleological forms' (Eakin, *How*, 48).

Among other critics such as Sidonie Smith and Nancy K. Miller, Eakin was unhappy with 'the sterile binary logic of categories aligned strictly by gender' (Eakin, *How*, 50), which has resulted in the present rejection of such black and white thinking. In *How*, he informs us that he keeps encountering both evidence of

relationality in men's autobiographies as well as women's autobiographies that are strikingly individualistic and narrative in character (cf. Eakin, *How*, 50). As a consequence of these observations, he combines the two extreme positions by proposing that 'regardless of gender, *'all identity is relational'* (Eakin, *How*, 43, emphasis original).

The self is defined by and lives in relation to others (cf. *How*, 43). Indeed, an individual cannot survive on his or her own, as Eakin convincingly demonstrates with the story of Christopher McCandless, a young American who sought a life of complete isolation in Alaska and consequently died of starvation – 'a radically autonomous identity gone wrong' (Eakin, *How*, 45). As a result of reading about McCandless's tragic death Eakin 'began to think about autobiography in a new way' (Eakin, *How*, 46). He draws on Paul Smith to maintain that 'none of us lives without reference to an imaginative singularity which we call our 'self'' (Smith, 6, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 46) and that we can indeed not exist without this sense of self. (cf. *How*, 46). The longevity of 'the myth of autonomy' (Eakin, *How*, 61) is no great astonishment, for 'autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I write my story; I say who I am; I create my self*' (Eakin, *How*, 43, emphasizes original). Nevertheless, it is paramount that autobiography studies fully addresses the relationality of all human identity (cf. Eakin, *How*, 57). As long as we conceive of the individual as 'a closed system' (Benjamin, 49, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 52) we are caught up in our own reductive categories and the discrepancy between the model and the lives we encounter cannot be bridged. Thus, Eakin emphasises that the definition of the genre and its history needs to be stretched in order to reflect adequately 'the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed' (Eakin, *How*, 43f.), as the Gusdorf model only allows for one type of autobiography, excluding everything else from the discourse; it is a limiting interpretative instrument that needs to be adapted. As Susanna Egan maintains, 'we need as theorists to [...] recognize what autobiographers are writing and respond to that' ('Encounters', 598, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 55). On the positive side, Eakin has observed a 'growing acceptance of a relational model of identity' (Eakin, *How*, 74f.) in both theorists as well as autobiographers in recent years, which is 'conditioning us to accept an increasingly large component of 'we'-experience in the 'I'-narratives we associate with autobiography' (Eakin, *How*, 75).

## **2.2. Dimension 2: the self as accessible, constant, and unitary vs. the self as evasive, changing, and multiple**

### 2.2.1. The self as accessible vs. the self as evasive

Standard theories of autobiography have been based on the assumption that the autobiographical self is unitary and does not change over time. Furthermore, the subject is said to have unique access to his or her own consciousness. Because of this privileged position, the account of one's life, if written by oneself, is more authoritative and reliable than anyone else's could ever be. (cf. Olshen, 799) Even early scholars such as Gusdorf, however, realised that such a clear-cut concept of the self was necessarily a simplification. It is true; Gusdorf did believe that the individual holds a unique key to his self. He claimed that 'no one can know better than I what I have thought, what I have wished. I alone have the privilege of discovering myself from the other side of the mirror' (Gusdorf, 35). But he was also aware that the writer's vision of his self is necessarily limited. Autobiography cannot be a mimetic mirror image of the writer's self, because

[a]ny autobiography is a moment in the life that it recounts; it struggles to draw the meaning from that life, but it is itself a meaning in the life. One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole but it adds something to this whole of which it constitutes a moment. (Gusdorf, 43)

### 2.2.2. The self as constant vs. the self as changing

Theorists have wondered how autobiography can faithfully replicate 'the unity of a 'life' across time' (Olshen, 800). How can a person both change continually and remain the same? (cf. Olshen, 799) Philippe Lejeune, who has also been puzzled by this paradox, formulates the problem as follows: 'is it really the same person, the baby who is born in such and such a clinic, in an era of which I have no memory whatsoever – and *me*?' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 9, emphasis original) We do indeed think of ourselves as having a continuous self. According to Brockmeier, this aspect of identity is a protective barrier we build 'against a background of instability. In the flux of time, identity is something firm that develops, or manifests itself against the backdrop of change and temporality' (Brockmeier, 'Identity', 455). As Eakin notes, it is 'through the use of the first person, autobiography's most distinctive – if problematic – generic marker' that most autobiographers 'proclaim the continuous identity of selves early and late' (Eakin, *How*, 98). Consequently, the impression is

fostered that ‘the ‘I’ speaking in the present – the utterer – is somehow continuous with the ‘I’ acting in the past – the subject of the utterance’ (Eakin, *How*, 98).

Eakin calls upon John Updike to examine why exactly we cherish the notion of a continuous identity and thus create this double reference in autobiography to the past and the present, which he unmasks as ‘a fiction, the primary fiction of all self-narration’ (Eakin, *How*, 93). According to Updike, the need to write down our life stories is a way of coming to terms with the otherwise “‘unbearable’ knowledge ‘that we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves’” (Eakin, *How*, 93, citing Updike, 226). Our sense of continuous identity might be ‘an existential fact, necessary for our psychological survival amid the flux of experience’ (Eakin, *How*, 94), but it is also an illusion, a trick played on us by memory: in the last analysis we cannot hold on to this fantasy, for ‘the body changes, consciousness changes, memories change, and identity changes too, whether we like it or not’ (Eakin, *How*, 93f.).

As I have pointed out by citing Gusdorf, autobiography is part of the life it seeks to map out, for ‘human identity formation’ is a ‘lifelong process of making selves that we engage in daily and that informs all autobiographical writing’ (Eakin, *How*, 1). Gusdorf already identified the constructed nature of identity; he informs us that the writer’s self is *reflected* while simultaneously being *constructed* in the autobiographical process: ‘Autobiography is [...] never the finished image or the fixing forever of an individual life: the human being is always a making, a doing’ (Gusdorf, 47). According to Eakin, it is memory which allows us to uphold the illusion of a continuous identity. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 93) Memory ‘reforge[s] the link between selves past and present’ (Eakin, *How*, 94), thus binding different periods of our personal history together. Yet the Neural Darwinist<sup>9</sup> Israel Rosenfield, whom Eakin quotes, claims that memory, contrary to general belief, does not enigmatically stock past events on the shelves of the mind. On the contrary, Rosenfield is convinced that ‘memories are perceptions newly occurring in the present rather than fixed and stored in the past and somehow mysteriously recalled to consciousness.’ (Eakin, *How*, 18f.) He maintains that memories – like all other brain events – are constructed: remembering is a kind of perception, ‘*and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled*’ (Rosenfield, 89, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 19, emphasis

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<sup>9</sup> According to Neural Darwinism ‘the brain’s neural organization is constantly modified – both phylogenetically and ontogenetically – to adapt to the ever-changing demands of experience.’ (Eakin, *How*, 13)

added by Eakin). The conclusion that Eakin draws from Rosenfield's insights is that we intuitively resort to identity-sustaining structures in order to deal with the overwhelming impact of the continually changing nature of self-experience. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 20)

### 2.2.3. The self as unitary vs. the self as multiple

In autobiography, the use of the first person promotes the illusion that our selves remain the same as we age. This, however, is not the only fantasy it cultivates; it makes 'our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organized than it possibly could be' (Eakin, *How*, ix). We tend to forget that the pronoun 'I' ultimately refers to a subject which is 'neither singular nor first, and we do well to demystify its claims' (Eakin, *How*, 43). Indeed, as Brockmeier has us know, the self is not at all a uniform entity. Rather, identity comprises a whole set of different selves – or voices of the self –, which do not only come into play one after another but operate simultaneously (cf. Brockmeier, 'Identity', 455). Similarly, Eakin asserts that '[s]elf and self-experience [...] are not given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing and *plural*' (Eakin, *How*, xi, emphasis added). In the introduction to this chapter, I have said that Eakin has characterised autobiography as 'the story of the self' (Eakin, *How*, xi). In fact, he has come to revoke this definition as an oversimplification, since his research in cognitive science has taught him just how very complex human self-experience is. Thus, he maintains that instead of speaking of *the self*, '[w]e do better [...] to speak of 'registers of self-experience', for there are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them.' (Eakin, *How*, xi)

There has been a general tendency in autobiography studies to oversimplify concepts of the self. One of the reasons for this theoretical shortcoming, Eakin argues, is the long tradition in Western philosophy to think of the *subject* as distinct from the *body*. Most prominently, seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes defined the subject as 'the disembodied linchpin of conscious experience' (Eakin, *How*, 1). Inspired by new theories from cognitive science which perceive human identity as grounded in the body,<sup>10</sup> Eakin repudiates the traditional mind-body split, taking on an 'anti-Cartesian posture' (Eakin, *How*, 1). By adopting psychologist Ulric Neisser's model of the self for the study of autobiography, he seeks to reopen

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Neural Darwinism also works with a biologically informed model of the self, rooting self-experience in the body. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 20)

the debate so as to arrive at a more open-minded, pluralistic and dynamic conception of selfhood in the autobiographical discourse. In his essay ‘Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge’ (1988), Neisser distinguishes between the following selves:

- (1) the *ecological self*: the self perceived in a physical environment
  - (2) the *interpersonal self*: the self as engaged in immediate social interaction
  - (3) the *extended self*: the self of memory and anticipation
  - (4) the *private self*: the self of conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else
  - (5) the *conceptual self*: the extremely diverse forms of self-information – social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person
- (cf. Eakin, *How*, 22f., citing Neisser 36-50)

The ecological and interpersonal selves precede the other three selves in the child’s development. Neisser maintains that the ‘ecological self is present from the first (Neisser, 40, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 23), and that the interpersonal self is usually ‘in place by the time the infant is 2 months old’ (Neisser, 42, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 23). By then, the child is immersed in ‘a very rich form of intersubjectivity’ (Neisser, 42, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 23). What makes the existence of the ecological and the personal selves as separate registers so important is that – unlike Neisser’s other three selves – they are established *before* language acquisition and thus remain completely ‘unmediated by reflexive consciousness of any kind’ (Eakin, *How*, 23) for they are grounded in the infant’s immediate, direct perception of persons and objects of the physical environment (cf. Eakin, *How*, 23). By contrast, the extended, the private and the conceptual selves cannot be obtained before the child has mastered language. Consequently, they are influenced by the conceptual models available in the child’s environment and culturally encoded (cf. Eakin, *How*, 25).

The main advantage of Neisser’s model is – according to Eakin – that by dividing the self into five different categories, it avoids getting caught in the same trap of simplification as the Cartesians (cf. Eakin, *How*, 22). Furthermore, bodies and selves are viewed as intertwined and inseparable (cf. Eakin, *How*, 29), and none of the five registers of self occupy a privileged position. Eakin favours Neisser’s model as – more than any other concept – it emphasises the previously neglected early modes of experience that are essential for the individual’s development of a sense of



self. Overall, it provides ample evidence that the time is ripe for abandoning restrictive concepts of the self, paving the way for a much more open, experientialist approach to the fascinating mystery of the self. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 25)

### **2.3. The self as a representational fiction vs. the self as narratively constructed**

#### 2.3.1. The self as representational fiction

In postmodernist theories of life writing, human subjectivity emerges exclusively as a problem of textuality. By conceiving of identity merely as a construction of language (despite the fact that this constructivist process is influenced by historical and social forces) postmodernism has reduced the self to a mere product of representation – a textual signifier that is part of nothing more substantial than the volatile process of signification. (cf. Olshen, 799) Much of this semiotic conception of the self ‘retraces structuralist and poststructuralist ground reaching back to Saussurian linguistics’ (Eakin, *How*, 21). The governing assumption of this tradition is epitomised by Emile Benveniste’s well-known phrase, “‘ego’ is he who says ‘ego’” (Benveniste, 224, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 21). Because the self is said to be entirely constituted by language, the meaning of a life is not given or found, but *made* – it is inscribed *by language*. Following this line of reasoning, postmodernist theory seeks to demystify the privileged status of the self in the Western philosophical tradition. It proceeds to decentre human subjectivity by highlighting that ‘personal identity is constituted by structures that exceed and encompass individual consciousness’ (Olshen, 799).

Such radical doubts about the capacities of selfhood have serious implications for the generic status of autobiography. For that reason, the postmodernist debate has chiefly focussed on generic issues.<sup>11</sup> It questions quite fundamentally if autobiography has anything to tell us that fiction does not, for if the self is only a representational figure-head, then the ‘I’ in autobiography cannot be distinguished from the subject of first-person narrative fiction. In the wake of poststructuralism, the autobiographical self indeed turns out to be ‘indistinguishable from fiction, and referentiality becomes no more than an illusion.’ (Olshen, 800)

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<sup>11</sup> Also see 1.3.

Eakin asserted in *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) – which is one of his earlier works – that any ‘knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language’ (Eakin, *Fictions*, 278). From a developmental perspective, he argued, a sense of self does not emerge in the child before the acquisition of language. Thus, ‘self and language [...] are mutually implicated in a single, interdependent system of symbolic behavior’ (Eakin, *Fictions*, 192). As has been pointed out in the last section of this chapter, however, his position has changed vitally since 1985, for Neisser’s fivefold modelling of the self suggests that human identity cannot entirely be relegated to language. Primarily, our sense of self is rooted in the body, for both Neisser’s ecological and interpersonal selves are in place a long time before the infant learns to speak.

What role then, it is fair to ask, does language play in the lifelong process of identity formation? Poststructuralist theory has undeniably produced important insights for autobiography, and its merits must not be diminished. Nevertheless, it has left most readers, writers, and even theorists of autobiography with a bitter aftertaste, as Olshen tellingly remarks:

[E]ven if we no longer can accept with Rousseau the ‘truth of nature’ or the belief in the textual replication of physical reality, this seems insufficient cause to swing to [the] opposite extreme, reducing all uses and modes of language to the same fiction. (Olshen, 800)

Poststructuralism has taught us that the autobiographical self is but the product of discourse, and yet we still like to think that this does not tell the whole story. Consequently, we now try to ‘walk a middle path between Rousseau and Jacques Derrida’ (Olshen, 800): without wanting to relinquish too much of our hard-earned poststructural insight, we cling to autobiography’s referentiality (cf. Olshen, 800). Accordingly, most readers and writers of autobiography would still hold with Gusdorf’s aforementioned credo of privileged self-knowledge: ‘no one can know better than I what I have thought, what I have wished. I alone have the privilege of discovering myself from the other side of the mirror’ (Gusdorf, 35).

### 2.3.2. The self as narratively constructed

Due to the fundamental discontentment with poststructuralism’s language-centred view of the self, scholars have recently tried to find new ways of looking at human subjectivity. Olshen for instance, wants to rescue the self from being caught up in postmodern fictionalisation by differentiating between *existence* and *textuality*.

‘[H]aving a life’, he claims, is by nature entirely different from ‘writing (or speaking) a life’ (Olshen, 800), thus concluding that ‘the autobiographer’s self’ must not be confused with the ‘autobiographical self’ (Olshen, 800). The autobiographer’s self belongs to ‘the living person, the experiencing subject’, while the autobiographical self is ‘bound in text, a textual signifier, [...] [a] *persona*’ (Olshen, 800, emphasis original). By contrast, Eakin approaches the problem from an entirely different point of view. He rejects the very distinction that Olshen draws between the autobiographer’s self and the autobiographical self. Even though he concedes that ‘[we] know perfectly well that life certainly isn’t a story, [...] and we also know that a person isn’t a book’ (Eakin, *How*, 99), he is convinced that such ‘familiar but misleading distinctions between experience and expression, content and form [...] need to be set aside’ (Eakin, *How*, 99) if we want to break new ground in theorising subjectivity. Thus, he observes that the notions of self and story are inherently linked in the autobiographical process, for there would be no point in writing our lives if we did not believe that human self-experience can somehow be represented in textual form. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 99)

Drawing on the philosopher Anthony Paul Kerby and on the narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner, Eakin introduces a ‘*narrative* model of the subject’ (Eakin, *How*, 21, emphasis added). The question of whether it is ‘in fact, anything more than literary convention that prompts most autobiographers to write their lives as narratives’ (Eakin, *How*, 99) serves as a starting point for this narrative turn in Eakin’s search for the self. Answering in the affirmative, he cites Kerby to identify ‘self-narration [as] the defining act of the human subject, an act which is not only ‘descriptive of the self’ but ‘*fundamental to the emergence of that subject*’ (Eakin, *How*, 99, citing Kerby, 4, emphasis original). In this concept, which Eakin calls ‘*narrative identity*’ (Eakin, *How*, 99, emphasis original), the self is, first and foremost, rooted in the *body*. Thus, the dominance of language that lingers from poststructuralist notions of selfhood is put into perspective, for the body features as

‘both the site of narration and the site of ascription for subjectivity’: ‘In a face-to-face dialogue it is the other’s ‘body’ that speaks to me [...]. This physical body, the site of narration, thereby becomes endowed with the status of selfhood’ (Eakin, *How*, 21, citing Kerby, 71).

In Eakin’s approach, narrative is absolutely central to the autobiographical enterprise. It is not simply a particular mode of writing, but a form of cognitive and phenomenological self-experience; as a consequence, it does not only describe, but

rather constitutes part of the ongoing process of human identity-formation. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 100) According to Sacks, '[n]arrative and identity are performed simultaneously [...] in a single act of self-narration' (Eakin, *How*, 101). Inspired by the insight that our lives are immersed in narrative practices, Sacks forms a radical equation: 'narrative *is* us, our identities' (Sacks, 110, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 101, emphasis original). Eakin, however, elaborates on this idea and notes that narrative cannot be 'coextensive with all selfhood' (Eakin, *How*, 101), if one takes into consideration the multiple registers of the self that Neisser includes in his model of identity. It is important to recall that the ecological and the interpersonal selves function solely through direct perception, are unmediated by reflexive consciousness, and are consequently unavailable for self-representation. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 102) Therefore, narrative is better thought of as 'a constituent part of self – of the self [...] that is expressed in self-narrations' (Eakin, *How*, 101).

From a developmental perspective, narrative practices play a determining role in the emergence of the first of Neisser's three reflexive selves, i.e. the extended self, the self in time. Eakin claims that the extended self, which normally develops at the age of three and is responsible for memory and anticipation,

constitutes the foundation of the self represented in autobiography, providing a proto-narrative, temporal armature, that supports and sustains our operative sense of who we are. (Eakin, *How*, 102)

According to this argument, it is the faculty of memory which holds our sense of self intact. Eakin cites the cognitive psychologist Daniel L. Schacter to deepen his discussion on memory. Schacter differentiates between three major memory systems: '*semantic memory*', which comprises factual and conceptual knowledge, '*procedural memory*', with which we learn skills and form habits, and '*episodic memory*, which allows us explicitly to recall personal incidents that uniquely define our lives' (Schacter, *Searching*, 17, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 107f., emphases original). Within the realm of episodic memory, there is a particular strand called '*autobiographical memory*' (Nelson, Katherine, *Language*, 162, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 108, emphasis original), which is responsible for chronologically sequencing significant events from one's own life (cf. Nelson, Katherine, *Language*, 162, as referred to in Eakin, *How*, 108). Autobiographical memory emerges simultaneously with the acquisition of language, which is why we normally have no recollections at all before the age of three or four. Prior to that, memories are only useful with regard to future behaviour, for we have not yet learned to share our memories with others. It is only when we

start talking about what we have experienced that memories become valued for themselves and can be called autobiographical. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 108f.)

Memory – as has been noted before – does not preserve the past. On the contrary, it is a kind of perception that is constructed anew in every moment of recall. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 107) The construction of memory, however, is not limited to the mental processes: memory is embedded in a social and cultural context, which is particularly relevant when it comes to autobiographical memory. Katherine Nelson emphasises that ‘the autobiographical memory system is a product of social and cultural construction’ (Eakin, *How*, 109), for exchanging memories with others is a fundamental social activity that we learn in early childhood. In this activity, we find out what sort of memories are shareable as we create ‘a personal history that has its own value independent of the general memory function of prediction and preparation for future events’ (Nelson, Katherine, ‘Ontogeny’, 266f., as cited in Eakin, *How*, 109). The social constructivist approach to memory has also been supported by other scholars. Kenneth J. Gergen, for example, argues that by reporting on our memories we engage in an approved form of telling, while Robyn Fivush stresses the relational context in which the extended self develops. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 110f.) According to Fivush, the chief function of autobiographical memory is that of ‘organizing our knowledge about ourselves, a self-defining function’; furthermore, she maintains that ‘it is the sense of self that is crucial for autobiographical memory’ (Fivush, ‘Functions’, 227, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 111).

Drawing on Catherine E. Snow and Dennie Palmer Wolf’s analyses of ‘memory talk’ (Eakin, *How*, 112), which refers to the conversations a child has with his or her caregiver(s) about past experiences, Eakin observes that it is this praxis of memory talk which supports the emergence of the child’s sense of extended selfhood, ‘for awareness of time is central to both’ (Eakin, *How*, 112). Thus, the development of autobiographical memory in early childhood lays the foundations and ‘prepares for the writing of autobiography – when it occurs – in adult life: [...] both belong to a single, continuous, lifelong trajectory of self-narration’ (Eakin, *How*, 113). By talking about and remembering the past, children ultimately learn to ‘narrativize their experience’ (Nelson, Katherine, *Language*, 170, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 115). As Eakin observes, it is particularly interesting with regard to autobiography that memory talk allows children to gradually master the double point of view that is fundamental to all retrospect: “the person who identifies with the

younger, distant person (the object of memory) and the person who engages in recollection (the subject who currently has the memory)’’ (Wolf, 192, as cited in Eakin, *How*, 116). By calling on Wolf, he memorably concludes that ‘[t]he child who has learned through ‘memory talk’ ‘to speak as subject and object, author and critic, character and narrator’ is a budding autobiographer.’ (Eakin, *How*, 116, citing Wolf, 208).

Although Eakin notes that the subject is essentially ‘an effect of language, of the interpersonal<sup>12</sup> discourse with parent or caregiver that fosters the emergence of the extended self’ (Eakin, *How*, 139), his concept of selfhood moves away from the purely language-centred perspective that poststructuralist theory has embraced. Not only does he recognise the body as the temple of the self, he also merges the categories of existence and representation, which have had a long tradition of separation in Western philosophy. In Eakin’s groundbreaking model of selfhood, narrative and identity are so thoroughly intertwined ‘that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other’ (Eakin, *How*, 100). Both early self-narrations as well as the writing of autobiography in maturity are narrative practices, and both belong to the lifelong process of identity formation. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 101) Thus, life writing is not necessarily restricted to the page, for ‘we are always writing our lives in the act of living them’ (Eakin, *How*, 123). Narrative – it is important to recall – is not only a textual device, but first and foremost an identity-constructing practice that we perform on a daily basis.

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<sup>12</sup> The narrative and the relational dimensions are in fact intertwined in Eakin’s approach, as narration is by nature a relational act, and narrative competence is transmitted intersubjectively. (cf. Eakin, *How*, 116)

### 3. The role of narrative in autobiography

In the previous chapter, narrative was discussed with regard to its role in the lifelong process of identity-formation. Narrative, however, does not only help us shape and maintain our sense of self,<sup>13</sup> it also looms large in other elements of human experience. Therefore, this chapter relies on theories from narratology and autobiography studies both in order to examine the concept of narrative on a broader scale and to consider autobiography as a specific type of storytelling that makes use of various narrative techniques.

#### 3.1. The ubiquity of narrative

In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan maintains that our lives are immersed in narrative practices:

Newspaper reports, history books, novels, films, comic strips, pantomime, dance, gossip, psychoanalytic sessions are only some of the narratives which permeate our lives (Rimmon-Kenan, 1).

Autobiography, we may add here, is another. Michael Hanne makes a similar observation when he states that any examination of the connection between narrative and life writing must start with ‘an acknowledgement of the ubiquity and centrality of narrative to the personal and social existence of all humans’ (Hanne, 634). In his view, narrative is one of the most important mechanisms with which we organise and make sense of the flux of experience. Narrative is inextricably linked with self-knowledge, as Hanne demonstrates by citing various scholars (cf. Hanne, 633f.): the philosopher Louis Mink denotes narrative as ‘a primary cognitive instrument’; the cultural critic Frederic Jameson refers to narrative as ‘the all-informing process [...], the central function or *instance* of all human mind’ (Hanne, 634); and the historian Hayden White, who observes that the word *narrate* originates from the same Sanskrit

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<sup>13</sup> Eakin’s model of narrative identity (see chapter 2), which he discusses in *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), has been tailored specifically for autobiography studies. There is a parallel concept in narratology, which is to be found in Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (3 vols., 1984-8). Eakin does not quote Ricoeur in this respect, but the two ideas seem to be closely related, as Michael Sheringham explains: ‘L’identité narrative’ does not reduplicate and externalize a process inherent in consciousness: prior to the act of narrative is only the need and demand for narrative understanding [...]. Narrative identity is not the product of organic unfolding based on passive intuitive understanding, but a dynamic modelling process driven by active, constructive processes at work in our engagement with the vestiges and enigmas of temporal experience.’ (Sheringham, 26, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 74).

root *gna* as the Greek and Latin words for *to know*, claims that there may perhaps even be no knowing that does not involve narrating. It is the literary theorist Peter Brooks, however, who – according to Hanne – demonstrates most vividly the primary role that narrative plays in our daily existence:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the interaction of several stories not yet completed. (Brooks, as cited by Hanne, 634)

As a consequence, autobiography should be perceived as a specialised form of the much wider human practice by which we use narrative continually to ‘invent and reinvent ourselves and the world around us’ (Hanne, 634).

### 3.2. Narrative and temporality

Now that the ubiquity of narrative has been established, it is fair to ask *why* narrative plays such a dominant role in human experience. One answer to this admittedly complex question may be found in the fact that human existence and narrative share a fundamental feature: both are *temporal* in nature.<sup>14</sup> Rimmon-Kenan defines narrative as representing ‘*a succession of events*’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2, emphasis original). Narration, she maintains,

suggests (1) a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee and (2) the *verbal*<sup>15</sup> nature of the medium used to transmit the message (Rimmon-Kenan, 2).

The key terms of these definitions – *succession*, *event*, *communication process* – all point towards this temporal dimension. The sociolinguist William Labov’s concept of narrative as ‘any sequence of clauses which contains at least one temporal juncture’ (as cited in Hanne, 633), addresses the issue of temporality more directly, reminding us of ‘our dependence on narrative for describing lived *time*’ (Hanne, 634, emphasis added).

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<sup>14</sup> This insight is shared by both scholars of autobiography (e.g. Blowers) as well as narratologists (e.g. Ricoeur, Rimmon-Kenan).

<sup>15</sup> There are narratives such as dance or pantomime which do not use language. However, this thesis is concerned with autobiography, a verbal form of narrative, which is why the specific characteristics of non-verbal narratives will not be dealt with here.



As Rimmon-Kenan has us know, time is one of the most crucial categories of human existence (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 43). Some of our notions of time, such as day and night or the recurrence of the four seasons, spring from natural processes and thus belong to the concept of ‘universal time’ (Blowers, 107). Our civilisation, however, has established the model of ‘historical time, which mediates between universal time and our experience of lived time’ (Blowers, 107). Contrary to the circularity of universal time, historical time is uni-directional and irreversible, thus enabling us to measure the passing of time (e.g. with calendars and clocks) and to talk about it. (cf. Blowers, 108 and Rimmon-Kenan, 44). In this sense, time is a sort of one-way street, in which both the object and the subject of experience are in a perpetual flux. (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 44) Interestingly, both Blowers – who is a theorist of autobiography – and Rimmon-Kenan – a narratologist – draw similar conclusions from observing the difference between universal and historical time (even though Rimmon-Kenan does not use the words ‘universal’ and ‘historical’). In the context of showing that narrative, with its dependence on temporality, is a feature common to fictional as well as historical discourses, Blowers makes the following claim:

[t]he invention of historical time allows us [...] to place ourselves in a continuum and compare our lives with those who went before us, even to an extent immortalize ourselves by looking back to our ‘forefathers’ in one direction and towards our children [...] in another. The narrative structure (or ways of refiguring time) that we have invented for putting ourselves on this historical continuum are the same structures that we use to refigure time in fictional narratives. (Blowers, 108)

Following an entirely different endeavour, namely explaining the difference between story-time and text-time, Rimmon-Kenan holds that ‘time is not only a recurrent theme in a great deal of narrative[s], it is also a *constituent factor* of both story and text’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 44, emphasis added).

It may be important to clarify Rimmon-Kenan’s usage of the terms ‘story’ and ‘text’. She differentiates between three different aspects of narrative: the events, their verbal representation, and the act of telling or writing, which she labels ‘story’, ‘text’ and ‘narration’ respectively<sup>16</sup> (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 3). ‘Story’ refers to ‘the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 3). The ‘text’, on the other hand, is what we read or hear; it is ‘a spoken or written

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<sup>16</sup> This classification is based on Genette’s distinction between ‘histoire’, ‘récit’ and ‘narration’. (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 3)

discourse which undertakes their telling' (Rimmon-Kenan, 3). Because the text is communicated, 'it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or the process of production is the third aspect – 'narration'' (Rimmon-Kenan, 4). All three of these elements of narrative unfold along the temporal axis: time is constitutive of both the means of representation through language (narration, text) and the object represented (the events of the story). (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 12)

On first glance, Rimmon-Kenan's concepts of 'story', 'text' and 'narration' mirror the very distinction between existence and representation or content and form that has been rebutted by Eakin (see chapter two) as a hindering device in the study of autobiography (cf. Eakin, *How*, 99). However, scrutinising 'story', 'text' and 'narration' in isolation has no harming qualities in itself; on the contrary, it provides a powerful tool for the analysis of narrative texts and has a long-standing tradition in narratology. Moreover, Rimmon-Kenan is eager to note that such a threefold concept is only a *theoretical model* which can and should not endeavour a complete separation of the individual elements of narrative, for they are part and parcel of the same phenomenon. The relevant passage shall be quoted at length, as it will help to resolve this seeming opposition between narratological and autobiographical perspectives regarding the nature of narrative:

[T]he text is the only [aspect] directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story (its object) and of the narration (the process of its production)[...] [H]owever, the narrative text is itself defined by these two other aspects: unless it told a story it would not be a narrative, and without being narrated or written it would not be a text. Indeed, story and narration may be seen as two metonymies of the text, the first evoking it through its narrative content, the second through its production. (Rimmon-Kenan, 4)

Given the fact that narrative theory clearly acknowledges the interdependence between content (story) and form (text, narration), it seems likely that Eakin does not criticise the model itself but rather the way it has been applied in autobiography studies. In the context of autobiography, the content of a narrative is supposed to be 'true', which may perhaps account for the problematically strict division between existence and textuality as found in traditional theories of autobiography. As the narratologist Paul Ricoeur points out, however, human action can only be narrated 'because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. [...] [I]t is always already symbolically mediated.' (Ricoeur, vol. 1, 57, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 83) Eakin borrows the very notion of textual and experiential interdependence from narrative theory when he observes that "the picture" is an intrinsic part of "the thing

itself” and cannot be separated out of it’ (Eakin, ‘Narrative and Chronology’, 35, as cited by Gudmundsdóttir, 84).

Returning to the topic of temporality and recalling Rimmon-Kenan’s and Blower’s statements on the connection between time and narrative, we may observe that scholars from both autobiography theory and narrative theory recognise the temporal structure of narrative and human experience despite their different outlooks. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur formulates this reciprocity between human time and narrated time as follows:

time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. (Ricoeur, vol. 1, 3, as cited by Gudmundsdóttir, 67)

### **3.3. The past, memory and fictionality in the autobiographical process**

#### 3.3.1. The inaccessibility of the past

As a specific form of narrative locating ‘the self in time and temporality’ (Brockmeier, ‘Time’, 876), autobiography always involves at least two different yet interlocked temporal levels, i.e. the past (past experiences as accessed via memory) and the present (the writing, and experiences at the moment of writing which in turn influence the mnemonic process). (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 62 and Brockmeier, ‘Time’, 877) As has been indicated in chapter one, autobiography stands at the generic interface between fiction and history, both of which are narratives that seek to represent time comprehensibly (cf. Blowers, 106). According to Blowers, any successful narrative

must represent time in a plausible and recognizable way. It is impossible to escape the strictures of time whether writing science fiction or biography, since without time there is no narrative and, subsequently, no meaning. Even when we are not writing chronologically, we still maintain a sense of time, which is inherent to the narrative or story or plot. (Blowers, 106)

Rather than merely remembering and representing the past, the autobiographer thus *refigures* time (cf. Blowers, 106). This refiguration, however, is no trivial undertaking. For a start, the past is not unproblematically and transparently available (cf. Blowers, 109). The novelist Julian Barnes vividly demonstrates this evasiveness of the past in his fictional biography *Flaubert’s Parrot*, in which the main character

and amateur Flaubert expert, Geoffrey Braithwaite, contemplates the past philosophically:

How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so? When I was a medical student some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet. (Barnes, 5)

The same problem has also been widely discussed in the theory of autobiography, albeit in a more academic manner: As early as 1955, Gusdorf is aware of the fundamental inaccessibility of the past. In *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, he observes that ‘the past is the past, it cannot return to dwell in the present’ (Gusdorf, 40). Moreover, he observes that autobiography cannot be a ‘simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in spirit of a world forever gone’ (Gusdorf, 38). What sets him apart from modern scholars, however, is his optimistic attitude despite his recognition of the ‘limits’ of autobiography. He is convinced that ‘a sufficiently moral alertness and a basic good faith will make it possible to re-establish the factual truth’ (Gusdorf, 40). According to Gusdorf, who equates the task of the autobiographer to that of a historian (cf. Gusdorf, 39), the difficulties one may encounter in retrieving the past can be managed ‘through the exercise of critical objectivity and impartiality’ (Gusdorf, 40).

Unlike Gusdorf, contemporary theorists neither have the illusion that ‘objectivity and impartiality’ can be achieved, nor do they think an objective approach desirable in autobiography. In order to visualise the elusiveness of the past, Ricoeur introduces the metaphor of the trace:

On the one hand, the trace is visible here and now, a vestige, a mark. On the other hand, there is a trace (or track) because ‘earlier’ a human being or an animal passed this way. (Ricoeur, vol. 3, 119, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 66)

The trace itself is thus present, but it reminds us of something that is absent, something that belongs to the past. The trace, however, can never tell us exactly what it is a trace *of*, nor, for that matter, can it bring back the *thing itself*. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 67) In a similar vein, Stanley, asserts that

‘[t]he past’ is not a time and place that ‘exist’ [...] – it does not go on its own sweet way whether I visit it or not. Its time is over and done with and it exists, now, only in and through representational means. Its ‘then’ no longer has existence except through ‘now’ and those moments of apprehension concerned with it. (Stanley, 6)

If Stanley observes that the past only exists through representational means, she does not, however, clarify *how* we arrive at this representation. The missing link and thus the key to the past – or rather to its trace – seems to lie in the faculty of *memory*.

### 3.3.2. Memory and fictionality

In *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gudmundsdóttir closely examines the role of memory in autobiography. The act of self-writing, she maintains, involves ‘a dialogue with [...] the voice of memory, since [...] autobiography is inherently the genre of memory’ (Gudmundsdóttir, 11). The problem with human memory is, however, that it is highly subjective and fallible. We cannot remember everything that ever happened, not even to ourselves. (cf. Blowers, 109) Blowers interprets this imperfect vision we have of our past experiences as ‘a prodigious philosophical problem: the individual is more than he can know’, since ‘the mind is too narrow to contain itself entirely’ (Blowers, 109). Moreover, the process of documenting what we remember is no more accurate or transparent. (cf. Blowers, 109) Andreas Huyssen – whom Blowers cites – articulates this paradox underlying the mnemonic process when he points out that we perceive the past as *real*, yet it is in fact already always mediated through textual *representation* (cf. Blowers, 109): ‘The past is not simply there in memory, but *it must be articulated to become memory*.’ (Huyssen, 2-3, as cited in Blowers, 109, emphasis added) For autobiography, this means that representation is not limited to writing; it is also a constitutive element of remembering. Huyssen applies this argument to explain that the underlying structures of historical texts are in fact very similar to those of fictional texts. As Blowers informs us, he seeks to undermine the notion that historical discourse is ‘non-imaginative’ by highlighting that ‘remembering is itself a creative activity’ because ‘we [...] have to imagine ourselves into the past’ (Blowers, 109).

In a similar vein, Gusdorf observes that ‘autobiography cannot be a pure record of existence, an account book or a logbook’ (Gusdorf, 42). On the one hand, this necessary incompleteness of autobiography is due to the aforementioned fact that we cannot remember everything that ever happened to us. On the other hand, our memories are so many and varied that we cannot display all of them in an autobiography. We have to *select* from and *structure* our memories (cf. Cockshut, ‘Autobiography and Biography’, 79) in order to arrive at a ‘comprehensive sketch’

(Gusdorf, 35) of the lives we have lived. Thus, *structuration* and *selection* are powerful creative tools which the autobiographer uses in *narrating* his own history. Significantly, Gudmundsdóttir terms this process of choosing some memories and discarding others<sup>17</sup> ‘self-invention’ (Gudmundsdóttir, 9), because the narrative structure an autobiographer gives his/her text is an important part of the meaning-making process which autobiography involves. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 9) In reorganising a selection of memories into a specific form,

the autobiographer consciously forgets (if that is possible) other interpretations of the same event[s], other memories that might contradict the one[s] he or she is writing about. (Gudmundsdóttir, 36)

From this observation Gudmundsdóttir draws the conclusion that fiction is an inherent part of the forging of autobiographical narratives. Fictional elements are at work when we supplement memory gaps as well as when we rearrange and regroup events (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 4 and 59). According to Gudmundsdóttir, ‘real’ stories do not exist. Quoting the historian Hayden White to underscore this argument, she informs us that ‘[s]tories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a ‘true’ *story*, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions.’ (White, 27, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 59) She does not, however, interpret the influence of fiction on autobiography as a disadvantage. On the contrary, in her view fiction is coextensive with the performative dimension of memory and memory-writing and is thus necessary in a good sense. Fiction is perceived as the process of

making and not just making up [...]. It affirms the increasingly highlighted ‘act-value’ of autobiographical writing at the expense of its traditionally supposed ‘truth-value’ (Gratton, 253, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 4).

According to Gudmundsdóttir, fictional processes are intrinsic to the autobiographical process itself, because writing an autobiography is *one specialised form* of remembering. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 54)

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<sup>17</sup> From a narratological perspective, the taking on of some memories and casting off of others necessarily leads to information gaps, which Rimmon-Kenan considers a necessary part of narrative, because no story can be told in its entirety (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 127) This does of course not only hold true for narrative fiction but can equally be applied to autobiography.

### 3.4. Analysing autobiography as a type of narrative

#### 3.4.1. Justifying the narrative approach

Interestingly, Guðmundsdóttir's revelation of the fictionality of autobiography on the basis of memory mirrors Lejeune's starting point for demarcating autobiography as an independent genre.<sup>18</sup> Despite the risk of sounding repetitive, it seems essential in the present context to restate Lejeune's 'insistence that autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities' (Eakin, 'Foreword', ix). In *L'autobiographie en France* (1971), Lejeune asserts that 'autobiography is above all a *narrative*, which follows in time the story of an individual' (Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France*, 33, emphasis original). By recognising the importance of the proper name on the title cover in *The Autobiographical Pact* (1973), and the specific consequences of its reference to a world beyond the text, Lejeune was able to distinguish autobiography from the novel. This differentiation of the specific generic characteristics of autobiography has of course been invaluable and indispensable for autobiography studies; however, it does not discard Lejeune's earlier observation that 'on the level of analysis within the text' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 13), meaning 'on the level of structures, modes, and narrative voices' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 29), 'there is *no difference*' (Lejeune, 'Pact', 13, emphasis original) between autobiography and the novel. Therefore, the analysis of the three chosen primary texts in the second part of this thesis will be conducted on the basis of narrative theory. This does not mean, of course, that the analysis will cancel out the insights from autobiography studies that have been presented above or resort to an outdated poststructuralist equation of autobiography and fiction. On the contrary, the idea is to operate on two fronts: conducting a narrative analysis while also incorporating context-relevant aspects of autobiography theory.<sup>19</sup> This procedure seems justifiable for the following reasons:

- a) narrative is pivotal to autobiography;
- b) there is no narrative poetics designed specifically for autobiography;

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<sup>18</sup> See 1.2.2. for the discussion of Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact.

<sup>19</sup> The focus of the analysis – there has to be a focus for the sake of clarity and readability – will lie in the examination of narrative structure, but the awareness that we are dealing with autobiography – not fiction – will nevertheless be continually present and have an influence on the outcome.

- c) there are manifest parallels between fictional and autobiographical narratives; and
- d) it is an interesting and challenging experiment to find out how exactly the theory of narrative fiction can be applied to autobiography and whether or where such an approach has its limitations.

### 3.4.2. Narrative theory: the toolkit

The analysis will draw on three books of narrative theory: Franz Karl Stanzel's *Theory of Narrative* (1979, English version 1984), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), and Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978). Stanzel presents a self-contained, all-encompassing model of narrative fiction, the typological circle, which comprises three different narrative situations (authorial, first-person and figural) and the techniques with which they operate (cf. Stanzel, xvi and 237). Rimmon-Kenan and Cohn, on the other hand, do not come up with independent systems of categorisation. While Rimmon-Kenan brings together sections of narrative theory from different schools (structuralism, formalism, new criticism, the Tel-Aviv school of poetics and the phenomenology of reading) (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 4-5), Cohn has a tighter focus, exploring the narrative rendering of mental processes. The following sections will not be an overview of the theoretical models Stanzel, Rimmon-Kenan and Cohn elaborate; they will very briefly introduce those narrative concepts that tie in with autobiography theory, thus forging a link between the two methodological axes of the analysis.

Rimmon-Kenan's<sup>20</sup> definition of narration as a communication process and her theoretical tripartition of narrative into *story*, *text* and *narration* has already been touched upon in section 3.1. Within each of the three elements, she explains in detail the processes that are at work. Some of these, such as the concepts of time, characterisation, narrative levels and speech representation, will be weaved into the analysis in one way or another.

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<sup>20</sup> Rimmon-Kenan makes an interesting remark in her introduction which may serve as an addendum to the justification of my narrative approach in 3.4.1.: Like Stanzel's and Cohn's books her approach is directed towards narrative *fiction* (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 3). She concedes, however, that while 'non-fictional verbal narratives, like [...] autobiography' (Rimmon-Kenan, 3) have specific characteristics, 'some of the procedures used in the analysis of fiction may be applied to texts conventionally defined as 'non-fiction'.' (Rimmon-Kenan, 3)



In Stanzel's typological circle, the first-person narrative situation<sup>21</sup> is most relevant in the context of autobiography. Stanzel distinguishes between the peripheral and the quasi-autobiographical first-person narrator; the former is a minor character who functions as the biographer of the protagonist or as an eyewitness of the main events (cf. Stanzel, 205f.); the latter, on the other hand, is a narrator-protagonist from whose point of view the events of the story unfold. (Stanzel, 209f.) Apart from that, there are two features that stand out in Stanzel's discussion of the first-person narrative situation: the notion of 'narrative distance' (Stanzel, 96) and the motivation of the act of narration (cf. Stanzel, 93).

#### 3.4.2.1. Narrative distance: the two selves

In the quasi-autobiographical first-person narrative situation, there is an intrinsic tension between 'the self as hero and the self as narrator' (Stanzel, 212), or between the experiencing and the narrating selves<sup>22</sup> of the 'I'-figure of the narrative (cf. Stanzel, 213). The narrative distance that separates the two selves of the narratorial 'I' depends on the amount of time, learning and experience that has taken place between the events of the story and its narration. (cf. Stanzel, 213) According to Stanzel, the measure of this disparity is therefore 'also one of the most important points of departure in the interpretation' (Stanzel, 213) of a quasi-autobiographical narrative. If a narrator completely identifies with his/her younger self, he/she will employ different narrative strategies from a narrating self who feels utterly estranged from his/her earlier self (cf. Stanzel, 213).

These different retrospective techniques of rendering consciousness in the first person are the focus of Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds*. To one side there is the knowing and enlightened narrator who creates a wide gap between his narrating and his experiencing self (cf. Cohn, 143) by means of 'dissonant self-narration' (Cohn, 145). To the other side, an 'unobtrusive narrator [...] identifies with his earlier incarnation, renouncing all manner of cognitive privilege' (Cohn, 155). This type of narrator, whose basic technique is called 'consonant self-narration' (Cohn, 153), does not put his present, narrating self in the forefront of concern by adding

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<sup>21</sup> There are, in fact, autobiographies written in the third person, but neither of my primary texts fall into this category.

<sup>22</sup> For the discussion of the self in autobiography and how it can be perceived as changing over time or staying the same see section 2.2.2. Gusdorf already writes about the distance between selves past and present, although he, of course, does not do so in narrative terms: 'the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past.' (Gusdorf, 38)

reflections, judgements or opinions to his past experience (cf. Cohn, 155). Between those two extremes, many shades and variations are possible, and a narrator may also slide up and down the scale, increasing or contracting the distance between the narrating and the experiencing selves as the narration progresses.

#### 3.4.2.2. Motivation and ‘embodiment’

Stanzel maintains that most first-person narrators choose *not* to identify completely with the experiencing self. He links the cause of this resistance to the so-called ‘embodiment’ (Stanzel, 99) of the experiencing self. The narrator strives to distance himself/herself from his/her past mistakes or confusions by means of displaying his intellectual faculties of cerebration, remembrance and imagination. (cf. Stanzel, 99)

Contrary to the authorial third-person narrator, a first-person narrator ‘belongs to the represented reality, the [...] world in which the characters live’ (Stanzel, 90). He/she is physically and existentially present or ‘‘embodied’ in the world of the characters’ (Stanzel, 90). In the quasi-autobiographical first-person narrative situation, as Stanzel informs us, this embodiment is characteristic of both the experiencing and the narrating selves (cf. Stanzel, 91). As a consequence, the embodied narrator’s motivation to tell his story is not – as with the authorial narrator – aesthetic but ‘existential’ (Stanzel, 93). This narrative drive originates from the joys and frustrations, the feelings and needs the narrator himself experienced. Depending on whether he/she feels close or distant to his/her earlier self, the narration can either have a fateful, inevitable and compulsive quality or it can be used on the part of the mature self to satisfy the need to organise and give meaning to the chaos of the past. No matter how big or small the narrative distance, the narrative urge is always existentially determined, for the narrator’s experience and the narrative process are inseparable. (cf. Stanzel, 93) According to Stanzel,

the reader is constantly invited to keep in mind this existential unity of the experiencing self and the narrating self. Thus the consummation of the life of a first-person narrator is only attained with the completion of the narrative act. (Stanzel, 93)

Stanzel’s delineation of fictional first-person narrators’ narrative motivation perfectly matches the two main reasons that autobiography theorists connect with the fact that memoirs are constantly being written and read: First, narrative provides us with a means of establishing causality and continuity and allocating meaning to events (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 59); it has the function of ordering the chaos of our

lives. Self-narration, as Gudmundsdóttir informs us, 'is a basic human practice and narrative is there to provide beginnings, middles and ends' (Gudmundsdóttir, 59). The second motivational factor that autobiography theory stresses is 'the wish to avoid oblivion.' (Cockshut, 'Autobiography and Biography', 78) Even though this concern with the fear of death is also present in narrative fiction, it seems to be specifically highlighted in autobiography, for 'death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.' (Benjamin, Walter, as cited in Hanne, 635). We thus narrate our lives in order to come to terms with the fact that we will age and pass away;

[e]ach of us tends to think of himself worthy of a special interest. I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete. In narrating my life, I give witness of myself even from beyond my death and so can preserve this precious capital that ought not disappear. (Gusdorf, 29)

When we set out to analyse individual works of autobiography, a narrator's motivation for telling his/her story has to be considered anew for each text we approach, as 'the question why one writes is notoriously difficult' (Gudmundsdóttir, 24). However, both narrative's capacity of giving form to what is unformed and the inescapability of death are valuable theoretical tools which may serve as a starting point for this mission.

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# Analysis

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## 4. Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* (1991)

### 4.1. Macrostructure: narrative approach and structural design

The title cover of Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* shows a photograph of the author.<sup>23</sup> With a beginning smile on his face, Sir Kingsley sits in a comfortable armchair, resting his legs on a desk. It seems as if he has done all his work and the time has come for him to relax and confidently look back on his life. A photograph can be interpreted in many different ways, but it is interesting here that the presence of the author's portrait on the book jacket totally contradicts the approach that underlies this autobiography. As Kingsley reveals in the preface, he has tried to 'focus on others rather than [him]self' and to 'keep [him]self away from centre stage' (*Memoirs*, xv). Thus, the first impression of the title photograph is (intentionally?) misleading: the author may be on display *on* his autobiography,<sup>24</sup> but once one has opened the book, one starts to have doubts whether there is as much of Kingsley Amis *in* his *Memoirs* as the front cover promises.

Indeed, *Memoirs* is not a conventional work of autobiography. One does not even have to start reading the book in order to suspect that it may not conform to the criteria that are generally expected of the genre. A glance at the table of contents suffices to get a first idea of its unusual structural design: with a few exceptions, the list of chapters is entirely comprised of names, which either belong to famous people (such as Philip Larkin or Margaret Thatcher) or places (such as Oxford or Cambridge). It can thus be inferred that *Memoirs* is no continuous, linear narrative in which the events of the author's life unfold chronologically; instead, it is a thematically structured conglomerate of mini-narratives which appear in seemingly random order. If one studies the table of contents more closely, further information about the structure can be extracted from it: the main body of the book contains

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix II.

<sup>24</sup> For the working definition of the autobiographical genre which underlies this thesis see chapter 1.5. Also note that Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* is labelled as 'autobiography' on the back cover of the book.

forty-two chapters<sup>25</sup> which are framed by a preface at the beginning and a section at the end called 'Instead of an Epilogue'. Apart from the text, the author has included several photographs throughout the book, most of which show Kingsley Amis and/or people he has known. Before the preface, there is a 'List of illustrations' which catalogues all the images.

In the preface, the author openly explains the approach that underlies his *Memoirs*. Thus, he warns his readers that 'this book consists not of a connected narrative but of a series of *essays* or *sketches*' (*Memoirs*, xv, emphasis added) and can be classified as 'allo- rather than autobiography' (*Memoirs*, xvi). From such direct descriptions, we may infer that the narrator of *Memoirs* is a 'teller-character' (Stanzel, 144) who – at least at this point – uses 'overt mediacy of narration' (Stanzel, 141). A teller-character – as opposed to a reflector-character – is a narrator who 'perform[s] before the eyes of the reader and portray[s] his own narrative act' (Stanzel, 17). According to Stanzel, the presence of a teller-character always draws the reader's attention more strongly to the act of narrative communication, as he explicitly mentions why he selects or eliminates parts of the story or why he omits or abridges the description of a character, a setting, or an event. Thus,

[a] teller-character narrates, records, informs, writes letters, includes documents, cites reliable informants, refers to his own narration, addresses the reader, comments on that which has been narrated, and so on.' (Stanzel, 144)

When Kingsley Amis categorises the chapters of *Memoirs* as essays and sketches, he does so in his role as a teller-character. Most of the essays, he informs us, are portraits of 'individuals [he has] known more or less well' (*Memoirs*, xv). Apart from three exceptions, all the essays follow this pattern of concentrating on a single person and the author's relationship with his subject; only the very first chapter, 'Family', the tenth chapter, 'Shrinks', and the eighteenth chapter, 'Terry-Thomas and Others', are special cases insofar as they deal with several people at once. From the forty-two chapters that make up the main body of the book, thirty can be allocated to the essays. The remaining twelve chapters belong to the second category, i.e. the sketches. The majority of the sketches describe 'self-contained episodes' of the author's life, 'like [his] time in the army or [his] trip to Prague in 1966' (*Memoirs*, xv). Only two sketches do not conform to this pattern: the fifth chapter, 'Jazz', and the fifteenth chapter, 'Booze', are exceptions, as they deal with topics that have

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<sup>25</sup> It must be stated here that Kingsley Amis does not number the chapters. In an analysis, however, it is useful to be aware of the order in which the chapters are arranged, which is why chapter numbers will be referred to from time to time here.

played a role throughout the author's life and cannot be assigned to a certain time period. All the chapters, we are told, largely depend 'on a good memory of anecdotes and anecdotal detail' (*Memoirs*, xvi).

Kingsley Amis gives several reasons as to why he has avoided to write directly about himself in his own autobiography. First, he maintains that

[m]ost writers lead dull lives whether or not those lives may be fun to lead, and are likely to be boring to read about in any detail. Writing directly about my own would anyway not appeal to me (*Memoirs*, xv).

Yet after stating these pragmatic causes, he reveals more deeply-rooted motives which prevent him from disclosing too much about his private life:

To publish an account of my own intimate, domestic, sexual experiences would hurt a number of people who have emotional claims on me, probably as much by my writing of good times as of bad, and I have no desire to cause pain, or further pain, to them or myself. (*Memoirs*, xv)

This quotation deals with the author's narrative motivation ('the motivation of the narrator to narrate' (Stanzel, 93)), even though it does so *indirectly*, i.e. by accounting for what the reader will *not* find in *Memoirs* rather than explaining why he has included certain materials. By admitting that there are many private, emotional experiences he could have told if he had been following the usual generic rules of autobiography, Kingsley inevitably causes curiosity in his readers. From the beginning of the book, the readers know that the author will be very secretive about his self. The heightened awareness of possible gaps is thus likely to influence the reading experience. In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Rimmon-Kenan maintains that gaps are absolutely central to the narrative process (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 127), so central indeed, that she suggests the following simile: 'How to make a bagel? First you take a hole... And how to make a narrative text? In exactly the same way.' (Rimmon-Kenan, 127) The reason that Rimmon-Kenan gives for the significance of gaps in any narrative is that

the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation. No matter how detailed the presentation is, further questions can always be asked. (Rimmon-Kenan, 127)

Kingsley asserts in the preface that it is 'not out of self-effacement but for other reasons' (*Memoirs*, xv) that he wants to stay in the background; nevertheless, the word 'self-effacement' sticks, and, as a reader, one inevitably wonders what these gaps, these absences are that the author refers to. According to Iser,

it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions,

the opportunity is given to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself. (Iser, 285, as cited in Rimmon-Kenan, 127)

By warning his readers that they may not get what they are looking for and thus drawing attention to the gaps of the story, the author causes tension and suspense from the very first page of the book; but he also creates doubts regarding his reliability. How can a narrator be trusted who prevents his readers from getting to know the core of the story?

As a reader, one feels that there must be a difference between a narrator who promises to tell his story to his best ability and a narrator who undermines the narrative process. Narrative theory, however, makes no such distinction between a willing and a subversive narrator. According to Stanzel's *A Theory of Narrative*, any first-person narrator – and Kingsley qualifies as such – is unreliable *by definition* due to his embodiment in the characters' world (cf. Stanzel, 90). Stanzel asserts that

[t]he unreliability of the first-person narrator is not [...] based on his personal qualities[...], e.g. character, sincerity, love of truth, and so on, but on the ontological basis of the position of the first-person narrator in the world of the narrative. The presence of such a narrator in the world of fictional characters and his endowment with an individuality which is also physically determined leads to a limitation of his horizon of perception and knowledge. For this reason he can have only a subjective and hence only conditionally valid view of the narrated events. (Stanzel, 89)

Despite the fact that Stanzel's argument is based on narrative fiction, the concept of the embodied narrator is also applicable to autobiography. In fact, the narrator's embodiment is even heightened in autobiography, as it is not only the narrator who is part of the characters' world, but also the author. Thus, the narrator-protagonist of first-person fiction becomes an author-narrator-protagonist in the referential context of autobiography. The reader is always aware of this referentiality, because all the characters of an autobiography also have an existence outside the book, namely in real life. One place where these ties between writing and the real world become visible in *Memoirs* is the dedication page. Kingsley Amis has dedicated his autobiography to a number of his family members: *Hilly* (Hilary Ann Kilmarnock, nee Bardwell, his first wife) is at the top of the list. Furthermore, the book is devoted to his three children, *Philip*, *Martin*, and *Sally*, as well as his first wife's new husband and their son, *Ali* and *Jaime* (Alistair Boyd, 7<sup>th</sup> Baron Kilmarnock and James Boyd). It is not hard to establish a connection between the family members Kingsley lists in the dedication and the 'people who have emotional claims on me'

(*Memoirs*, xv), whom he mentions in the preface and in consideration of whom he covers details of his private life with a cloak of silence.

Due to the narrator's embodiment inherent in an I-narrative, the motivation to narrate is *existential* for every first-person narrator<sup>26</sup> (cf. Stanzel, 93). 'It is directly connected with his practical experiences, with the joys and sorrows he has experienced, with his moods and needs.' (Stanzel, 93) This is the case because the narrative process and the narrator's experience are inseparable, – they form an entity. (cf. Stanzel, 93) No matter how big or small the narrative distance between the experiencing and the narrating selves may be, 'the reader is constantly invited to keep in mind this existential unity' (Stanzel, 93) of the two selves. Stanzel even goes as far as to suggest that 'the consummation of the life of a first-person narrator is only attained with the completion of the narrative act.' (Stanzel, 93) For this reason, it is important to bear in mind that '[e]verything that is narrated in the first-person form is somehow existentially relevant for the first-person narrator' (Stanzel, 98). In this respect, *Memoirs* is a special case: it is not only the narrated events that are relevant, but also the narrative gaps the author creates. By mentioning an absence while at the same time refusing to fill it with the missing information, Kingsley Amis assigns existential relevance to what he does *not* write, thereby inviting us to read between the lines. In the third chapter, 'Oxford', in which the author reports how he met his first wife, Hilly, the largest narrative gap of the book is torn open:

In May 1946 I met Hilary (always Hilly) Bardwell, a student at the Ruskin School of Art, and here we come to one of those difficult bits. I said in my preface that I intended to leave out as much as possible of potentially hurtful topics, and here is the biggest of such omissions. In the relevant parts of what follows I mean without apology to be severely reticent and factual, after just one mention of the word love. (*Memoirs*, 47)

It is indeed the only time in this autobiography that the word love is mentioned. Once one has absorbed the meaning of this paragraph, one cannot help but notice that the cavity that is announced in the preface runs through the whole book. The crack starts on the dedication page, hits rock bottom in the above-quoted passage and still leaves nothing but a hole after one has read the last page; in 'Instead of an Epilogue', Kingsley has included a poem addressed 'To H.' (*Memoirs*, 337), of which the third and last stanza is the most outspoken in its expression of regret:

In '46 when I was twenty-four  
I met someone harmless, someone defenceless,

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<sup>26</sup> In the authorial narrative situation, by contrast, the narrative motivation is 'literary-aesthetic' (Stanzel, 98) and not existential, as the authorial narrator is not part of the characters' world.



But till then whole, unadapted within;  
Awkward, gentle, healthy, straight-backed,  
Who spoke to say something, laughed when amused;  
If things went wrong, feared she might be at fault,  
Whose eye I could have met forever then,  
Oh yes, and who was also beautiful.  
Well, that was much as women were meant to be,  
I thought, and set about looking further.  
How can we tell, with nothing to compare?  
(*Memoirs*, 338)

If Kingsley Amis had not ‘spent a great deal of his life in the public eye’ (Anon., ‘Obituary: Sir Kingsley Amis’), his perforated, achronological and highly selective narrative approach would not have been possible. But because he was and still is a literary celebrity, at least in Great Britain, he was in a position to assume that his readers already know a lot about him when he set out to write *Memoirs*. Only owing to this precondition can the author limit the account of the most important stages of his life to as little as two paragraphs in the preface (cf. *Memoirs*, xvi). It takes other autobiographers a whole book to narrate the main events of their lives; Kingsley, however, reduces them to a CV-like enumeration of dates and facts, which he introduces with the telling sentence:

*It will save space further on if I say here that I was born in 1922 in South London and brought up in Norbury, S.W.16, the only child of William Robert and Rosa Annie Amis.’* (*Memoirs*, xvi, emphasis added)

Due to the fact that a great deal of his private life was – and still is – grist for the mill of British newspapers, it is almost common knowledge that Kingsley Amis was born in 1922 and that he went to Oxford. Not only were all of his books reviewed by the press, but his marriage breakup with Hilary Ann Bardwell in 1965 and the subsequent marriage with Elizabeth Jane Howard, as well as their divorce in 1980, were covered in all major newspapers. Most readers probably start reading *Memoirs* hoping to find out more about these events that they have read about in the newspapers, and most importantly, get to know the author’s own perspective, his personal, private side of the story. As a result of the unconventional announcements in the preface, however, all such illusions are destroyed before the book has even properly started. Interestingly, Kingsley maintains that it is not necessary to reveal his private persona, as he has ‘already written an account of [him]self in twenty or more volumes, most of them called novels’ (*Memoirs*, xv), as he points out in the preface:

Novels they fully are, too, and those who know both them and me will also know that they are firmly unautobiographical, but at the same time every word of them inevitably says something about the kind of person I am. ‘In vino veritas – I don’t know,’ Anthony Powell once said to me, ‘but in scribendo veritas – a certainty.’ (*Memoirs*, xvf.)

In this quotation, the author establishes a philosophical truth-value which he applies to his fiction as well as his autobiography. By extension, he suggests that the true core of a text does not necessarily lie in *what* is written but in *how* it is written.

Instead of chronicling the author’s life, *Memoirs* may primarily be about other people. Nevertheless, the author feels that ‘even as they are, there is probably quite enough about me in these pages, more than I intended or realise.’ (*Memoirs*, xv) The ultimate judgement about this is of course up to the reader, and – as we will see in a later section of this chapter – most reviewers have a different opinion on this point. In any case, no matter how little of himself the author has intended to pack into his *Memoirs*, it is still he as the author-narrator-protagonist who functions as the narrative lynchpin and holds together everything which is narrated. According to recent findings in autobiography theory, it is indeed no rarity in modern autobiography that narrators try to find alternatives to the traditional model of simply telling the story of their lives from early childhood to old age. Rebutting critics of the memoir who have derogated the genre for being self-indulgent, Miller thus emphasises that ‘the memoir is not about ‘terminal moi-ism’ (as it’s been called) but, rather, a rendezvous with others’ (Miller, 2). No person, as has been established in chapter two, lives in a social vacuum, for the human self is relational rather than autonomous. From this standpoint, it could be argued that *Memoirs* is a highly innovative autobiography, since it leaves the traditional focus on the author’s self behind. Despite its unconventional structure, however, it is debatable, how modern *Memoirs* really is, given its denial of emotion. Before this question can be settled – if it can be answered at all – several essays and sketches have to be looked at in detail.

#### **4.2. From macrostructure to microstructure**

Due to the fact that the individual chapters in *Memoirs* are independent narrative units, they will be analysed separately here on an exemplary basis. The narrative techniques that Kingsley Amis uses will thus be examined in a number of both essays and sketches by way of close reading.

#### 4.2.1. The essays

##### 4.2.1.1. 'Family'

Unsurprisingly, Kingsley does not begin his *Memoirs* conventionally, say, by relating his very first memory as a child. Instead, he chooses to introduce his most important relatives – one by one – in a series of portraits, thus painting an overall picture of the family at large and his situation as a child. He starts with his grandparents on his father's side, 'Pater or Dadda' (*Memoirs*, 1) and 'Mater' (*Memoirs*, 4), and his uncle Leslie who thought he was homosexual and only discovered his heterosexuality after his mother – 'Mater' – had died. Subsequently, the maternal grandparents, 'Grandad' (*Memoirs*, 5) and 'Gran' (*Memoirs*, 5), and his aunt Dora (his mother's sister) are portrayed. Kingsley calls Dora his 'knockout relative' (*Memoirs*, 6), as she suffered from an anxiety disorder with obsessions. The list is completed by his father and mother.

All of these portraits follow a narrative pattern which includes two types of characterisation: 'direct definition'<sup>27</sup> (Rimmon-Kenan, 60) and 'indirect presentation'<sup>28</sup> (Rimmon-Kenan, 61). The author's paternal grandfather, for example, is depicted as a 'small fat red-faced fellow with starting moist eyes and a straggly moustache' (*Memoirs*, 1). Apart from this physical description, 'Dadda' is referred to as 'a great teller of jokes' (*Memoirs*, 1) and as 'a jokey, excitable, silly little man' (*Memoirs*, 2). Having established his paternal grandfather's humorous side, the author narrates two anecdotes which exemplify and specify this quality. The emphasis of this analysis lies in the narrative techniques of the first anecdote (according to the appearance in *Memoirs*), which is why the content of the second anecdote shall briefly be recapitulated beforehand: The second anecdote relates an incident in which 'Dadda', who was a glass merchant by profession and sold 'unbreakable' glass, bounces one of his glass plates across the carpet and unwittingly causes it to burst in the fire place. Having liked the effect of his stunt a lot, he performs it all over again in front of one of his clients. (cf. *Memoirs*, 2f.), which induces Kingsley to make a rather sardonic comment about his grandfather's eccentric behaviour: 'I like to think that this demonstration did its tiny bit to bring on the decline of J.J. Amis & Co. at the hands of Woolworth's.' (*Memoirs*, 3) This

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<sup>27</sup> Direct definition is 'the naming of a character's qualities [...] if it proceeds from the most authoritative voice in the text.' (Rimmon-Kenan, 60)

<sup>28</sup> 'A presentation is indirect when rather than mentioning a trait, it displays and exemplifies it in various ways.' (Rimmon-Kenan, 61)

humorous account serves as an example of the author's 'good memory for anecdotes and anecdotal detail' (*Memoirs*, xvi). In the first anecdote, Kingsley Amis also illustrates 'Dadda's' qualities as a buffoon:

He enjoyed eating out, with I suspect plenty to drink, and I used to admire him, if nothing else, for sticking his napkin in the neck of his shirt, then thought a vulgarity. At these feasts he was a great teller of jokes, typically without any preamble, to trap you into thinking you were hearing about some real event. One of these horrified me so much that I have never forgotten it. A Scotsman (I was still so young I had not heard about Scotsmen being supposed to be mean) took his wife out to dinner. Both ordered steak. The wife started eating hers at top speed, but the man left his untouched. 'Something wrong with the steak, sir?' – 'No, no, I'm waiting for my wife's teeth.' Except in greeting I cannot remember my grandfather addressing a word to me personally. (*Memoirs*, 1)

This passage starts off with a general statement about the grandfather's liking of dinner parties or restaurant visits and the aforementioned direct definition ('a great teller of jokes'), which merges into the actual anecdote and the re-telling of the joke. As the past simple tense of the general statement ('He enjoyed eating out') is combined with the habitual past ('I used to admire him'), it becomes clear that such jokey behaviour on the grandfather's side was not a one-time experience but occurred frequently. The use of the adverb 'typically' also helps to foster this impression. Furthermore, it is obvious that the narrating self is the dominant voice here, since the author has included several narratorial comments: 'with I suspect plenty to drink', 'if for nothing else', 'then thought a vulgarity', 'I was still so young I had not heard about Scotsmen being supposed to be mean'. These comments, which either occur between commas (or – at the end of a sentence – between a comma and a full stop) or in brackets, draw attention to the narrating self. The use of the present tense in one of the comments ('with I suspect plenty to drink') and in the last sentence also indicates the supremacy of the narrating self over the experiencing self. Another important aspect is that the author thematises the process of remembering ('I have never forgotten it' and 'I cannot remember my grandfather addressing...'). The fact that Joseph James Amis never gave any attention to Kingsley does not only say something about the kind of person 'Dadda' was, but it also characterises the relationship between the author and his grandfather: thus, it appears only logical that Kingsley Amis did not like him, as the following quotation shows: 'I find it hard to remember him smiling. I have only realised since preparing to write this how much I disliked and was repelled by him.' (*Memoirs*, 1) It seems a legitimate interpretation if one deduces from this that Kingsley's dislike of his grandfather was renewed and

aggravated by the narrative process, which confirms Stanzel's aforementioned claim that – due to the embodiment – the life of a first-person narrator is not consummated until it is brought to the page.

Similarly, Kingsley Amis's other three grandparents are portrayed with the use of the same techniques. His paternal grandmother, for example, is described as a 'large dreadful hairy-faced creature who lived to be nearly ninety and whom I loathed and feared in a way I had never felt towards Dadda.' (*Memoirs*, 4) The only grandparent that the author really cared for was his mother's father, because he had a literary bent and collected books, of which a few volumes were left to Kingsley when he died. (cf. *Memoirs*, 5)

An interlude about religion and sex education in the Amis family serves as a narrative bridge between the portraits of the grandparents and the parents. Religion played a very minor role in Amis's childhood, for his parents 'considered themselves religious apostates, which meant among other things that they gave me no religious instruction' (*Memoirs*, 10). Nevertheless, the chapel must have cast some shadow over Kingsley's parents, as his father still believed in 'masturbation-mania' (*Memoirs*, 11) and was quite uptight in this respect, as the following passage illustrates:

But – because it has to come in somewhere, and this paragraph may need a bit of livening up – he neither directly nor indirectly offered me any enlightenment at any age about sex, with the exception of a short course of harangues about what happened, in some detail, to boys who played with themselves. Every ejaculation (though my father put it differently, I am sure) thinned the blood and the victim eventually fell into helpless insanity.

Before you start grinning, reader, if that's what you feel like doing, let me tell you that a chum told me how at his school each class as it approached puberty was taken on a little tour of the supposed masturbation-mania ward of the local mental hospital. I have had no opportunity of checking this story: the date would have been about 1945. (*Memoirs*, 10f.)

Similarly to the passages that have been analysed above, this quotation is interspersed with narratorial comments (between dashes, in brackets and between commas), and the dominant voice is the narrating self. When Kingsley notes that 'this paragraph may need a bit of livening up' and directly addresses the reader ('Before you start grinning, reader'), he is discernible as a teller-character, since the act of narration is emphasised and lifted to a conscious level. The section about 'sex instruction in the home' (*Memoirs*, 12), which is over two pages long, is interesting not only from a narratological point of view but also from the perspective of autobiography studies. By relating both his experiences as a child and as an adult and

father, he establishes generational ties: First, the reader learns that Kingsley was neither offered ‘any version at all of what he might have called the facts of life’ (*Memoirs*, 12) nor ‘given the all-clear’ (*Memoirs*, 12), which would have amounted to a permit for ‘refer[ring] to physical sex or even to let it be seen that I knew about it.’ (*Memoirs*, 12)

Two paragraphs down, the author suddenly finds himself in the position of the father, trying to improve his parenting style compared to his own mother and father. The relevant passage shall be quoted at length:

As I have already implied, sex instruction in the home is often – usually? I don’t know – not instruction but a formal permit. But it must be given. I shall never forget the scene when it came to my turn. I swear it began with me hearing my wife saying somewhere out of shot, ‘Your father wants to speak to you in his study’ – a room big enough, say, to accommodate a full-grown rhinoceros, though without giving him much room to turn round.

Philip and Martin came in, their expressions quite blank, innocent in every possible way that the most expensive film-director could have put there. They were, I suppose, seven and six years old. The short monologue I gave them slipped out of my head afterwards at the first opportunity, though I know I did conscientiously get in a certain amount of what might be called hard anatomy and concrete nouns, although again I must have used the word ‘thing’ a good deal and talked about Dad planting a seed. Well, what would you? I have never loved and admired them more than for the unruffled calm and seriousness with which they heard me out. I knew they knew, they knew I knew they knew and so on to the end but never mind. They left in a silence that they courteously prolonged until they were out of all hearing. It was a couple of years before Philip confided to me that he had muttered, ‘Hold on to your hat – he’s going to tell us the big one’ as the two made their way to my ‘study’. But we did it. In no sphere is it truer that it is necessary to say what it is unnecessary to say. (*Memoirs*, 12f.)

Apart from the techniques which have already been analysed above, Kingsley Amis makes use of two other narrative methods here: the first is related to speech representation, while the second is a stylistic attribute of his writing.

Ad 1) In the above-quoted paragraphs, two incidents of ‘direct discourse’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 110) can be found; Kingsley directly quotes both his wife and his son Philip. Several aspects play a role here. On the one hand, these direct quotations are a method of characterisation – i.e. indirect presentation through speech (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 61); on the other hand, they can be said to be a foreign body in the referential genre of autobiography, since direct discourse ‘creates the illusion of ‘pure’ mimesis’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 110) and actually represents a dramatic element. Furthermore, the question is legitimate in autobiography how the author can have an exact memory of what the characters said several years in the past. In the quoted

passages, the direct quotations are very brief, so this aspect may not be so important here; however, Kingsley Amis frequently includes long stretches of dialogue in other chapters; in such cases, the question of where the author draws these dialogues from does become relevant. In the preface, he assures us that in his anecdotes he has tried to stay as close to the truth as possible, yet he also refers to the unavoidability of the fictional element with respect to dialogue:

It is easy and tempting to improve on reality in recounting them [the anecdotes, *annot.*], which I have fairly conscientiously eschewed in what follows, and in remembering them too, which I can only hope I have mostly avoided. I have purposely invented or changed nothing of substance. Of course, in the interests of speed and of limiting dullness, I have invented dialogue, but nothing that is material or is not the sort of thing that would have been said at the relevant moment. (*Memoirs*, xvi)

Ad 2) The second narrative feature is not so much a technique as a matter of style. The first two sentences of the long quotation ('As I have already implied, sex instruction in the home is often – usually? I don't know – not instruction but a formal permit. But it must be given.') are written in the present simple tense and belong to the world of the narrating self. Stylistically, they could easily have been taken from a political or some other sort of essay, rather than serving as the introduction to an anecdote in an autobiography. Statements in the present simple tense that reflect the author's opinion are dispersed all over the book and are characteristic of Kingsley Amis's essayistic style.<sup>29</sup> Of course, comments and opinions of this sort (in the present tense) occur in every autobiography, regardless of the fact that the focus is on the past; but Kingsley seems to make especially frequent use of the present tense as a vehicle for voicing his opinions, hence the clear predominance of the narrating self and the considerable narrative distance between the two selves of the narrator. From the viewpoint that every past experience can only be accessed through the eyes of the narrating self, it does not come as a surprise that the "chronicler" (the narrating self) plays at least an equally important role as the "doer" (the experiencing self). Every narrator has a choice as to how visible he wants to make the narrative voice of the narrating self, who, in *Memoirs*, functions as the lens of the whole narration.

Despite the strong position of the narrating self, the past is not pushed to the edges of the picture. On the contrary, Kingsley Amis's selection of anecdotes represents, at least for the younger reader, a series of history lessons, albeit private

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<sup>29</sup> Nomen est omen: the majority of the chapters in *Memoirs* belongs to 'the essays'. Note that the name for this category stems from the narrator himself (see 4.1. in this thesis or the preface, page xv, in *Memoirs*.)

rather than public history. As the above-quoted passages indicate, we learn how Amis's father, for example, handled (or did not handle) the intricate task of sex instruction, but his behaviour is suggestive of the general situation of J.J. Amis's generation. The narrator informs us that it was 'not uncommon' (*Memoirs*, 11) for schools up until at least 1945 to escort their pupils to the psychiatric ward of a hospital, making them believe they were seeing 'the supposed masturbation-mania ward' (*Memoirs*, 11).

After the excursus into the realms of sexual education, the author continues with his portraits of family members. Generally speaking, the sections devoted to his parents are a lot longer and more intimate than the ones about his grandparents. Kingsley Amis and his father had a loving relationship, but their tastes and opinions were very different, which led to a lot of arguments during the author's adolescence. These quarrels mainly evolved around music and politics. While Kingsley liked 'Brahms's Second Symphony' (*Memoirs*, 16) and was a jazz enthusiast and 'a bloody little fool of a leftie' (*Memoirs*, 17), his father was fond of Gilbert and Sullivan and 'an ex-Liberal [...] who went Tory after the Great War' (*Memoirs*, 17). During the author's adolescence, these conflicts were sharpened by the fact that Kingsley – being an only child – was 'short not so much of allies, of potential supporters, as of means of dilution and diversion, simply another body to share the parental attention.' (*Memoirs*, 15) Nevertheless, Kingsley describes the 'era of the quarrels' (*Memoirs*, 18) as 'not surprisingly, the time of greatest intimacy' (*Memoirs*, 18). In adulthood, and especially when J.J. Amis was an ageing widower, Kingsley removed himself more and more from his father, whose world of the 'City office' (*Memoirs*, 14), was totally alien to the successful writer:

Boredom, I am sorry to say, came to be my chief reaction to my father's company, though I did not want to feel like this and grew better at hiding it – I hope [...]. It is depressing to think how persistently dull and egotistical we can be to those we most value, and how restless and peevish we get when they do it back to us. (*Memoirs*, 18)

Kingsley's relationship to his mother, by contrast, was not overshadowed by any conflicts, even though he portrays her as overprotective and she habitually made him eat more food than he wanted, which he absolutely detested: 'But my mother was too obviously concerned for my welfare, too gentle, to arouse my resentment, only my fervent wish to get the meal over somehow.' (*Memoirs*, 20)

Despite the announcement of the preface, the reader gets to know quite a lot about Kingsley Amis in the first chapter of *Memoirs*. As has been pointed out in 4.1.,



however, 'Family' occupies an exceptional position within the essays. Not only does it subsume a series of characters, it is also by far the longest essay. As far as both the characters' physique and personal traits are concerned, the reader is allowed to get a very vivid impression of Kingsley's colourful gallery of family members.

#### 4.2.1.2. 'Philip Larkin'

The essay about Philip Larkin, the famous British poet, is a tribute to the author's 'best friend' (*Memoirs*, 64). A version of this mini-memoir was already published in 1982 in a volume called *Larkin at Sixty* (cf. *Memoirs*, 51), as Kingsley Amis informs us with narratorial directness in the introductory paragraph. In *Memoirs*, however, the portrait of Larkin appears in adapted and appended form, for the author wanted to include 'some reflections that it would not have been proper, in one sense or another, to publish in Philip Larkin's lifetime or in the immediate aftermath of his death' (*Memoirs*, 51). Throughout this chapter, Kingsley uses the same means of characterisation that are in evidence in 'Family', i.e. direct definition and indirect presentation.<sup>30</sup> The main focus of this section, however, lies in a number of other narrative techniques which have not been examined at length yet. One of these devices, which can be specified as a structural pattern, is oppositionality.

At least in those essays whose subjects the author has known fairly well, Kingsley Amis has consciously tried to present different sides of his characters. By juxtaposing contradictory traits, he creates round and complex rather than flat characters.<sup>31</sup> In the essay about Philip Larkin, this device of oppositionality is identifiable, as different elements in the subject's nature are contrasted with each other. The fact that the oppositionality operates on various levels creates a complexity that undermines any attempt on the reader's part to draw a one-dimensional comparison between two poles of Larkin's character.

At the beginning of the essay, Philip Larkin's comical side is described in an account of how the author saw Larkin when they first got to know each other as students at Oxford University:

Soon after arriving at St. John's College, Oxford in April 1941 I met somebody who, a trifle comically I thought at the time, was called Philip Larkin. I was

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<sup>30</sup> As these techniques of characterisation have already been analysed in some detail in the last section, they will only be indicated where relevant but will not be discussed extensively here.

<sup>31</sup> In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Rimmon-Kenan differentiates between flat and round (or complex) characters on the one hand, and developing and static characters on the other hand. (cf. the chapter 'Story: Characters' (29-42), and especially the section 'Character-classification' (40-42)).

most impressed with his self-confidence when he told me not very long afterwards that he had once come across, in some writers' manual, a list of names not to be given to serious characters, and found 'Larkin' on it. His clothes too seemed to me not very serious: tweed jacket, wine-coloured trousers, check shirt, bow tie – not commonplaces then. I had already gathered that this sort of thing was no sign of any particular artistic bent; [...] But in my suburban way I considered it was flashy of him to go on like that, though I would have had to admit that the effect was neat, the shoes clean, the tie carefully chosen and knotted. He always dressed well and smartly, also appropriately, whether in undergraduate informals or the senior librarian's 'good' suits.

[...] Before I grew too fond of him to see him in any such light, Philip struck me as a little ridiculous in his appearance, anyway outlandish, unlikely, on one's hasty summing-up, to be attractive to girls. (*Memoirs*, 51)

In this passage, the subject is viewed from the perspective of the narrating self, which clearly distances itself from the experiencing self by using temporal referents such as 'I thought *at the time*' or '*Before* I grew too fond of him' as well as the conditional in 'I *would* have had to admit'. Furthermore, phrases such as 'in my suburban way' or 'on one's hasty summing-up' are value-judgements by the narrating self about the experiencing self which indicate that the narrator does not fully support the views of his younger version. From these 'distancing techniques' (Cohn, 148) it can be deduced that this passage is an example of what Dorrit Cohn calls 'dissonant self-narration' (Cohn, 145), in which a lucid narrator turn[s] back on a past self steeped in ignorance, confusion, and delusion' (Cohn, 145). According to Cohn, it is characteristic of dissonant self-narration that the 'narrative process [...] is emphatically conscious, deliberate, intellectual' (Cohn, 146), which has been observed in 'Family' as well as in the introductory paragraph of 'Philip Larkin'. A further hallmark of this retrospective technique lies in frequent 'reminders of the memory process' (Cohn, 151), which have also been touched upon with reference to the first chapter of *Memoirs*.

After establishing Larkin's comical side, the author contrasts it with two other traits. On the one hand, his eccentric physical appearance and dress style are seen to conflict with his normal, student-like behaviour as an Oxford undergraduate: 'Otherwise, Philip was to outward view an almost aggressively normal undergraduate of the non-highbrow, non-sherry-sipping sort, hard-swearing, hard-belching, etc.' (*Memoirs*, 52). The introductory adverb, 'Otherwise' emphasises the oppositionality; on the other hand, - and on a different level – the young Larkin's bizarre exterior as well as his 'normal' student-like behaviour is contrasted with the older Philip Larkin's tendency towards melancholy and solitude:

The solitary creature of later years, unable to get through the day without spending a good part of it by himself, let alone the author of (say) 'First Sight', was invisible to me then; most likely I was not looking hard enough.' (*Memoirs*, 52)

There are a number of further oppositionalities which are described both directly and indirectly in this essay, but not all of them can be analysed in detail here. Unsurprisingly, these contrasts do not only characterise the subject; they also tell us something about the author as well as the author-subject relationship. Thus, it is significant how Kingsley Amis deals with his friendship to Philip Larkin and which aspects he has selected to include in the memoir. It has been noted before that the author has tried to present multiple sides of his characters, with the result that even his close friends are partly shown in a rather unfavourable light. In one of his many anecdotes, he thus shares the story of how Larkin – by then a fully grown man and no Oxford undergraduate – 'intentionally pissed himself' (*Memoirs*, 59) during a public meeting because 'a tremendous desire to urinate' (*Memoirs*, 59) had come upon him. Enormously funny though it may be, Kingsley is well aware that his including this tale about drunken incontinence is to some extent unethical, especially because Larkin had told it to him in strict confidentiality.

He went on to extract from me some sort of promise not to go round repeating it [this story, *annot.*], which I interpreted as a ban on any sort of publication. But now I consider myself released from that undertaking' (*Memoirs*, 59).

As this quotation illustrates, Kingsley Amis cannot resist the novelist's impulse to make his characters as interesting as possible. In another chapter (his essay about John Betjeman), he touches upon this 'difficulty that has come up more than once in these memoirs' (*Memoirs*, 262). Ignoring the fact that some information may be immoral in an autobiography, he allows his

attention and emphasis [...] to go to those people, and those characteristics of theirs, that are suitable to an anecdotal or at least a narrative approach, as in a novel. Those who are merely good chaps, or fairly good chaps, with whom I have enjoyed some drinking and yarning, perhaps self-restrained chaps or even secretive by nature, or just less given to colourful behaviour, get fewer pages from me. (*Memoirs*, 262)

Despite all indiscretions, the portrait of Philip Larkin is ultimately loving and amiable. Towards the end of the chapter, the author makes sure that the last impression the reader gets presents Larkin in a positive and favourable light:

What I have written above about Philip's 'closeness' [about money, *annot.*] and inclination to solitude or solitariness, emphasised from early middle age onwards by progressive deafness, is not exaggerated, but I must close the second half of this memoir as I closed the first, by emphasising his tendencies

in the opposite direction. As I wrote in a notice after his death, 'he was too warm, too humorous, too genuinely sociable – as well as having been a little awkwardly so – to settle into withdrawal' (*Memoirs*, 64).

Another area which is interesting with regard to both the oppositionality of Larkin's personality as well as Kingsley Amis's relationship to his subject is literature. Thus, the author detects traces of conflicting character traits in Larkin's writing. Although Philip Larkin became famous for his poetry, he had actually intended to be a novelist at the start of his career. He wrote parts of his first novel, *Jill* (1946), when he was still a student at Oxford (cf. *Memoirs*, 55). By way of comparing the novel's protagonist to its author, Kingsley Amis draws a parallel between literature and life:

There was another, deeper division between the experiences of the hero, John Kemp, in wartime Oxford, instantly attributable to the Philip I knew, visible Philip, and on the other side Kemp's fantasy life, dreamy, romantic, sensitive, the work of someone I had never known before, invisible Philip. I found them hard, if not impossible to reconcile – well, so had the author. (*Memoirs*, 55)

Even though Kingsley emphasises more than once throughout his autobiography that *Memoirs* 'is not a book of literary criticism, or of criticism of any kind' (*Memoirs*, 230), he frequently cites extracts from his subjects' writings and analyses them. Due to the fact that Kingsley was a professional writer, this occupation with literature that is in evidence throughout *Memoirs* is hardly surprising. What is interesting here, however, is the manner in which he draws parallels between the nature of a writer's works and his personality, especially because he affirms in the preface to *Memoirs* that his own novels are 'firmly unautobiographical' (*Memoirs*, xv).

In order to further illustrate Larkin's multi-faceted personality, the author quotes a number of poems (and/or extracts from poems) which he analyses. One of these, an unpublished poem called 'THE WAY WE LIVE NOW' (*Memoirs*, 60), shows Larkin's humorous qualities and his 'talent for light verse' (*Memoirs*, 60). Kingsley Amis remembers the poem from a lost letter from the 1950s (cf. *Memoirs*, 60) and indicates that it is 'to be recited in a clear Welsh voice' (*Memoirs*, 60, emphasis original). It is quoted here in full length:

I let a fart in the street and a woman looked round;  
I pissed on the fire, and got myself covered in ash;  
I had half an hour with a whore and came out in a rash,  
So I let my sperm fall in the brim of an old hat I found.

I vomited over my shoes in the bogs at the Pheasant;  
I slipped in the road, and came down with my hand on some slime;  
Life is performing these actions time after time

Till Death makes our body smell worse than it does at present.  
(*Memoirs*, 60)

Similarly to the story about incontinence, Kingsley Amis admits with reference to this poem that Larkin 'would not have wanted to see [this poem] published in his lifetime, perhaps ever, but I think it comes in well here, before we get down to the serious stuff.' (*Memoirs*, 60) What the author means with the 'serious stuff' is Larkin's inclination to solitariness and depression. Given that 'the great Larkin theme' was 'death and the fear of death' (*Memoirs*, 62), it seems significant that even in the above-quoted humorous poem Larkin mentions the word 'Death' in the last line, however comical this reference may be. Another poem, 'Aubade' (1977) (cf. *Memoirs*, 62), from which Kingsley cites and analyses a passage, casts no such humorous light on the subject of death. On the contrary, it reveals Larkin as a poet with a depressive nature:

The dread  
Of dying, *and being dead*,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.  
(*Memoirs*, 62, Kingsley Amis's emphasis)

This extract from 'Aubade' is instantly followed by the account of an event from real life, namely a conversation between Larkin and Amis about death:

On first reading these words, I at once remembered a conversation that ended with Philip saying, 'I'm not only [or perhaps 'not so much'] frightened of dying,' then shouting, 'I'm afraid of being dead!' (*Memoirs*, 62, annot. original)

After the narration of this conversation, the author quotes another passage from 'Aubade' which further exemplifies his subject's terror of being dead. By means of interlacing literary quotations and personal criticism with anecdotes from real life, Kingsley Amis brings life and literature into a close relationship. His analysis makes visible the reciprocal influences that the spheres of life and literature exert on each other, especially as far as writers' lives are concerned. Finally, Kingsley Amis's personal review of Larkin's morbid poem 'Aubade' passes into a description of the latter's death and funeral. Contrary to his announcement in the preface, the author does not spare emotion here, but allows himself to admit his loss:

My sorrow at his death and my abiding sense of loss is tinged with regret. He was my best friend and I never saw enough of him or knew him as well as I wanted to. If I had, I might have been able to tell him, among other things, that he was a wonderful poet whose work would last. But as it is I have to fall back on hoping he knew I thought so. (*Memoirs*, 64)

#### 4.2.2. The sketches

##### 4.2.2.1. ‘Cambridge’

As opposed to the ‘essays’, the ‘sketches’ deal with specific, temporally limited episodes in the author’s life. ‘Cambridge’ thus focuses on the period between 1961 and 1963, when the author lived in Cambridge and taught at the university. (cf. *Memoirs*, 216) The presence of this time frame does not mean, however, that this sketch – or any of the other sketches – is chronologically structured, nor does the author apply any narrative techniques that are not in evidence in the essays. Similarly to the portraits, Kingsley uses ‘reportorial narration’ (Stanzel, 47) and represents a teller-character whose emphasis is found in the narrating rather than the experiencing self. The emphatically essayistic introduction, in which a newspaper article is cited, establishes the narrating self as the primary point of reference:

On the morning that I sat down to draft this, I read (*The Times*, 28 December 1989) that that year ‘more students joined Cambridge University from state schools than from the independent sector,’ after a campaign designed to show that the place was not a closed shop for the public schools. (*Memoirs*, 216)

Throughout the chapter, the narrating self remains the dominant voice of the narration. We frequently come across narratorial comments in brackets or in between commas, and the use of the present tense constantly accompanies the past tense of retrospective narration. Furthermore, Kingsley even makes cross-references by means of footnotes, which inevitably stress the presence of the narrator. In ‘Cambridge’, one of the footnotes provides additional information about Kingsley’s enjoyment of teaching. In the running text, he notes that, however satisfying he found ‘seeing your pupil take your point almost before you have formulated it’ (*Memoirs*, 227), teaching consumed so much of his time and energy that it held him back as a writer, which is why he ultimately left Cambridge (cf. *Memoirs*, 227). In the footnote, an additional, if secondary, train of thought about teaching is expressed, as Kingsley experienced a pleasure of a different order when he taught:

I still miss those supervisions, for a rather different reason. They offered the only context I have found in which serious, detailed and exhaustive discussion of literature is socially practicable. You cannot say in your club or dining room, ‘Let’s have a look at what Eve actually tells Adam about her conversation with the serpent,’ without at best seeing the other fellow’s eyes glaze over. (*Memoirs*, 227<sup>n32</sup>)

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<sup>32</sup> When the reference of a quotation is marked with the designation “*n*” it indicates that the relevant extract is taken from a footnote rather than from the running text.

Apart from this conscious emphasis on the narrative process, report and dialogue alternate, even though reportorial narration is clearly the dominant mode. Similarly, descriptive passages and value judgements in both the past and present tenses are frequently loosened up by dialogue passages.

To come back to the introduction of the chapter, the initial quotation of the newspaper article prompts Kingsley Amis to compare the present situation (at the moment of narration) to the time when he still taught at Cambridge, which was almost thirty years before the narrative act. He notes that already then ‘a movement among younger dons aimed at’ (*Memoirs*, 216) showing that Cambridge was also open to pupils from state schools. These observations inspire the author to criticise the educational system at large: ‘Our present educational system is in a mess, but I am going to go on leaving it alone [...] I have very little idea of what it [Cambridge, *annot.*] is like now, except uninhabitable.’ (*Memoirs*, 216) He does not only find fault with the present situation, but assures us that he was already disappointed by Cambridge University when he got to know it from within. As he informs us, he had gone to Cambridge primarily because ‘it was a whole flight of steps up the academic hierarchy from Swansea (although I am still not clear how that matters, if it does)’ (*Memoirs*, 217), where he had occupied a teaching post before. Contrary to his hopeful expectations, Kingsley did not encounter extensive literary discussions among the teaching staff at Cambridge University:

I had thought, vaguely but confidently, that its common rooms and elsewhere would abound with original and well-grounded talk about English literature. It proved hard to find. What I got was talk about intra-Faculty discord and personal quarrels, syllabus changes and retentions, the proportion of Firsts to other classes, the attendance at old so-and-so’s lectures – inevitably, no doubt, but discussed far more exclusively than I remembered from my provincial days, when a not necessarily very profound remark about Traherne or Tennyson would come up now and then.’ (*Memoirs*, 217)

Apart from the academic disillusionment, the author fiercely disliked the social atmosphere at Cambridge due to the pretentiousness among the academia (cf. *Memoirs*, 218). The anecdotes that follow indicate that it was mainly dinner parties with not enough alcohol and stiff ‘college feasts’ (*Memoirs*, 218) which upset the author’s sensibilities. Kingsley’s general declaration of distaste merges into a series of anecdotal accounts about a number of evenings either spent with horrible people or on dreadful occasions. In one of these anecdotes which is especially outspoken and provoking Kingsley describes two evenings with Andrew Sinclair, fellow don at Cambridge and writer, whose books Kingsley finds ‘unreadable’ (*Memoirs*, 220).

Without mincing matters, the author portrays Sinclair as an ill-mannered curmudgeon who cannot stand his round of drinks. The second evening proves especially disastrous, as Sinclair had already failed to invite the Amises to his house for the second time and it was then agreed that they should go to the pub. In the pub, however, the following scene, which the author seems to depict in meticulous detail, occurs:

‘This one’s on me,’ said Sinclair firmly and unarguably as we moved towards the bar. ‘What will you have?’

‘A large gin and tonic, please.’ On this point my pub code says you must balance the risk of insulting the chap by asking specifically for a double against that of being given a single. The balance this time came out as shown.

‘With ice?’ he pursued, inviting me to go to the whole hog.

‘Yes please.’

When the drinks came, Sinclair plunged his hand confidently into his top inner breast pocket. As I a dream I watched that confidence vanish in an instant, to be as quickly replaced by puzzlement, disbelief, consternation. Soon he was doing an imitation of a free-falling parachutist frenziedly trying to locate his unpulled ripcord. Finally his movements slowed, ceased, and shame possessed him. ‘I must have left my wallet in my other jacket,’ he said.

[...] I was too shaken to fight back. I omitted to offer to lend him a few quid, cash him a cheque, ask Arthur, the landlord, to do so, and just paid up. The rest I forgot, but I doubt if I ever saw the house where the builders had been. At any rate, Sinclair’s books stopped arriving on my doormat.’ (*Memoirs*, 221)

In contrast to his nights out with unpleasant drinking companions, Kingsley describes his relationship with his students as enjoyable. His ‘most memorable encounters in Cambridge’, he informs us, ‘were not with any kind of senior persons but with undergraduates’ (*Memoirs*, 224). A few of these students ‘had become [] sort of friend[s] of the family’ (*Memoirs*, 226) and regularly visited Kingsley’s house. Criticising the fact that ‘the social gap between the dons and the undergraduates at Cambridge (and no doubt elsewhere) was too wide’ (*Memoirs*, 226), the author indicates the ‘semi-open house Hilly and I kept in Madingley Road’ (*Memoirs*, 226) in a kind of insinuation:

No doubt their chief reason for dropping in was to catch some of the pearls of wisdom I might be letting fall, though the attractiveness of our au pair conceivably came into it. (*Memoirs*, 226)

What Kingsley Amis does not say, but what nevertheless rises to the surface at the end of the chapter, is that his marriage must have been highly problematic by the time he was living in Cambridge. The author left Cambridge because he needed more time for his writing; he wanted to go to Majorca, where he had got to know the poet Robert Graves (cf. *Memoirs*, 227), but the breakup with Hilly thwarted these plans:



So in due course I found myself saying to the infinitely kind and decent Herbert Butterfield, then Master of Peterhouse, 'Sir, with great regret I want to resign my Fellowship at this college.'

'In heaven's name, why?' he asked in his unassuming way.

I gave a selective explanation, laying stress on a writer's need for solitude, being outside the hurly-burly, etc.

'Yes,' said Butterfield, having heard me out. 'Romanticism. That's what they used to call it in my day. The belief that you can help yourself to become an artist or a better artist by going somewhere remote or in foreign parts.' But he raised no difficulties, indeed wished me well.

In the event I did not go to Majorca and lead the life of an artist like someone of an earlier generation. I got no further than London, where I had not lived since 1940, and settled there with a new wife. I have been back to Cambridge a couple of times for a couple of hours at a time, and felt no flicker, except of personal remorse. I should never have gone there. Well, it was partly romanticism of a different order that had taken me there in the first place, in 1961. (*Memoirs*, 227f.)

It may be an over-interpretation to suggest that the failed 'romanticism' of Kingsley's trip to Majorca and the 'personal remorse' he feels about Cambridge are an indication of the regret and emotional pain connected with his first wife, Hilly, which is voiced in the preface and in 'Family', and reflected in the poem 'Instead of an Epilogue' at the end of the book. If one chooses to see this passage in such a light, the sentence 'I should never have gone there' does not only refer to Cambridge but may also be viewed as an allusion to his marriage breakup. The separation itself is not even discussed, but only hinted at through the mentioning of the 'new wife' and the author's move to London. Despite the fact that the words 'romanticism' and 'remorse' feature here, this passage is an extreme example of emotional understatement. In this context, it is certainly significant how infinitely small the amount of time is that the author allows in the text for these essential aspects of his private life, especially when they are compared to how amply some anecdotes about going to dinner parties or other social/public events are described.

With reference to Genette, Rimmon-Kenan analyses the nature of time in narrative texts, which is expressed in 'the relations between 'story-time and text-time' (Rimmon-Kenan, 44). In this respect she distinguishes three different parameters, namely 'order', 'duration' and 'frequency' (Rimmon-Kenan, 46). Under duration, which is the relevant aspect here, Genette 'examines the relations between the time the events are supposed to have taken to occur and the amount of text devoted to their narration.' (Rimmon-Kenan, 46) In order to arrive at a measuring instrument, Genette suggests

constancy of pace, rather than adequation of story and text, as the 'norm' against which to examine degrees of duration and textual length, e.g. when each year in the life of a character is treated in one page throughout the text. (Rimmon-Kenan, 52)

If constant pace is seen as the norm, two forms of modification can be made out, namely 'acceleration' and 'deceleration' (Rimmon-Kenan, 52). On the side of acceleration, which is achieved by devoting a short segment of the text to a long period of the story, the scale ranges from *ellipsis* (maximum speed) to all kinds of more or less drastically accelerated *summaries*. A summary is a condensation or compression of a certain story-period into a relatively brief statement of its major features. (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 52f.) On the other side of the spectrum, one speaks of deceleration when a long segment of the text corresponds to a short period of the story. Here the scale ranges from the *descriptive pause* (minimal speed), in which some segment of the text refers to zero story duration to *scene*, which can take on the form of dialogue or a detailed account of an event (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 53f.).

According to Rimmon-Kenan, 'acceleration and deceleration are often evaluated by the reader as indicators of importance and centrality' (Rimmon-Kenan, 56). Thus, the more important events and conversations are normally narrated in detail (i.e. decelerated), while the less important ones are condensed (i.e. accelerated). (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 56) This rule, however, is not always observed. In *Memoirs*, for example, the conventional relationship between the time an event is granted in a text and its significance to the author is reversed and undermined, as can be deduced from the above-quoted closing paragraphs from 'Philip Larkin' as well as the author's discussion of his narrative approach in the preface. Kingsley Amis either curtails and sums up highly important events such as the author's marriage breakup considerably (*summary*), or even elides them (*ellipsis*), while he often narrates clearly secondary occasions such as dinner parties in great detail (*scene*). As Rimmon-Kenan maintains, such an inversion of importance with regard to story-time and text-time can result in irony. (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 56). In *Memoirs*, however, this upside down relationship between story-time and text-time does not have a humorous effect, but simply draws the reader's attention to narrative gaps the author indicates and refuses to fill.

#### 4.3. From microstructure back to macrostructure: narrative situations and narrative rhythm

If one compares the ‘essays’ with the ‘sketches’, one does not detect a huge difference between them at first sight. As has been shown in the close readings of various passages, both chapter types make use of the same techniques of characterisation and modes of narration, juxtaposing reportorial narration with scenic presentation. Furthermore, both are loosely structured, comprise essayistic passages, heavily rely on anecdotes, and privilege the narrating over the experiencing self. Despite all these similarities with regard to the basic narrative techniques, however, there is one important discrepancy which must not be overlooked: the two chapter types have different foci. While the emphasis of most essays lies in the portrayal of a person/character *other than the narrator*, the sketches concentrate more on the *author’s own experiences*, although even here Kingsley talks about other people a great deal more than one would expect. If one tries to categorise *Memoirs* within Stanzel’s typological circle (see Stanzel, xvi), there is no doubt that the book is written in the first-person narrative situation, which Stanzel distinguishes from the authorial and the figural narrative situations. However, the first-person narrative situation has two sub-categories, namely the quasi-autobiographical first-person narrative situation (cf. Stanzel, 201) and the peripheral first-person narrative situation (cf. Stanzel, 202). In applying Stanzel’s terminology to *Memoirs*, it can be said that the essays tend to be written in the peripheral first-person narrative situation, whereas the autobiographical first-person narrative situation<sup>33</sup> prevails in the sketches.

According to Stanzel, the peripheral first-person narrator is distinguished from the autobiographical first-person narrator insofar as ‘the narrator himself does not stand at the centre of the events’ (Stanzel, 205). He is located at the periphery of the narrated events and his function is that of a witness, biographer, observer, or chronicler. (cf. Stanzel, 201) The autobiographical first-person narrator, by contrast, ‘is at one and the same time the main character, standing at the centre of the action, and the narrator.’ (Stanzel, 205) In other words, the hero of the story and the narrator

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<sup>33</sup> As Stanzel is concerned with narrative *fiction* in *A Theory of Narrative*, he uses the prefix *quasi* to describe this type of narrative situation, thus speaking of the ‘*quasi*-autobiographical narrative situation’ (Stanzel, 212). This thesis, however, deals with autobiography – not fiction –, which is why autobiography cannot be imitated and the prefix *quasi* becomes redundant in the present context. When the term autobiographical first-person narrative situation is used here, it therefore refers to the same characteristics as Stanzel’s quasi-autobiographical first-person narrative situation.

are identical in the autobiographical first-person form, which Stanzel considers as the ideal type of first-person narration. (cf. Stanzel, 201) He maintains that the relations between the narrating and the experiencing self are balanced here. Although the experiencing self claims the greater part of the narrative, the narrating self is continuously present. Through the recognised importance of commentaries by the narrating self, an equilibrium between the two selves is achieved. (cf. Stanzel, 210) The most important point of departure for the interpretation of an autobiographical first-person narrative is thus the field of tension which establishes itself between the two selves of the narrator, i.e. the narrative distance. (cf. Stanzel, 210) In the peripheral narrative situation, by contrast, the two selves are not of equal importance, as mediacy and the act of narration are emphatically overt here. (cf. Stanzel, 205) The most significant function of the peripheral first-person narrator is

the mediation or subjectivizing of the narrated events [...]. The actual meaning of the narrative lies not in how the main character and his world are in themselves, but rather in how they are experienced at some distance by a narrator who observes, experiences, assesses. (Stanzel, 205f.)

As a consequence, a significant feature in the personality of any peripheral first-person narrator rests in his perception, which at least partly derives from his relationship with the main character(s). (cf. Stanzel, 205f.) Thus, the tension between the character of the narrator and that of the protagonist(s) is of primary importance for the meaning of any peripheral first-person narrative and must be considered in an interpretation. (cf. Stanzel, 207)

In *Memoirs*, the essays and the sketches are not separated into two blocks but appear in mixed order. The first chapter, for example, is an essay, the second and third chapters – ‘Schools’ and ‘Oxford’ – are sketches, the fourth chapter, ‘Philip Larkin’ is an essay, and so on. Consequently, the focus constantly shifts between the author/narrator and his characters, as the first-person narrative situation alternates between its peripheral and autobiographical forms. In Stanzel’s approach, this variation between narrative situations or between different modes of a narrative situation during the course of the narrative process is called the ‘[d]ynamization of the narrative situation’ (Stanzel, 63). If a narrative shows frequent transitions in its narrative situations (or in the variations of one narrative situation), it has a strongly pronounced ‘narrative rhythm’ (Stanzel, 69); on the other hand, if one narrative

situation (or one variation of a narrative situation) is noticeably dominant throughout the text, the narrative rhythm is considered weak<sup>34</sup> (cf. Stanzel, 69).

We have established that the first-person narrative situation of *Memoirs* is mainly a peripheral one in the essays and primarily an autobiographical one in the sketches. But this is by no means the end of the story, as the narrative situation does not remain fixed within individual chapters; it may also change from passage to passage, depending on whether the narrator's focus lies on his own self or on another character/other characters. From these frequent microstructural transitions between and within chapters it can be concluded that the narrative rhythm of *Memoirs* is decidedly strong. If, in a next step of the analysis, one takes a look at the grander picture, i.e. the book as a whole, the question arises which variation of the first-person narrative situation prevails. Is *Memoirs* predominantly a peripheral first-person narrative or an autobiographical first-person narrative? From a quantitative perspective, one would have to opt for the peripheral variation, as the majority of the chapters are essays. This answer is additionally backed up by the author's discussion of his narrative approach in the preface, as he announces to focus on others rather than himself and to stay away from centre stage (cf. *Memoirs*, xvf.). It is here, however, that Stanzel's differentiation of first-person narrators reaches its limits, as *Memoirs* is not a continuous narrative with a single, developing protagonist or an identifiable plot. If *Memoirs* is seen as a peripheral first-person narrative, one has to ask which character *other than Kingsley Amis* qualifies as the protagonist. *Memoirs* features a huge number of characters, who may act as protagonists within single chapters or passages, but none of them come close to reaching the status of a protagonist overall. Who, if not Kingsley Amis, is the hero in *Memoirs*? As has been noted in a different context before, Kingsley functions as the narrative lynchpin of his autobiography. It is he who binds together all the mini-memoirs that make up this book and all the characters it comprises, for all their fates entwine in nothing but his person and his narrative act; he weaves them into the narrative of his life, however discontinuous, achronological and episodic this narrative may be. Consequently, the peripheral first-person narrative situation may dominate microstructurally as well as quantitatively, but on the level of macrostructure, *Memoirs* ultimately – and against all evidence – has to be classed as an autobiographical first-person narrative.

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<sup>34</sup> The terms strong and weak are no value judgements. Whether the narrative rhythm of a text is strong or weak has no consequence for its quality.

#### 4.4. Reception and personal reflection

When Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* were published in 1991, the public interest was enormous. Indeed, '[n]o book he wrote, not even *Lucky Jim* [his first and most famous novel], attracted so much publicity on its first appearance' (Anon., 'Obituary: Sir Kingsley Amis', *The Times*). Its reception, however, was fiercely divided. One group of reviewers was extremely critical, judging *Memoirs* as morally repugnant and depthless. John Nelson, for example, notes that 'the list of people and objects that have offended the Amis sensibilities' is '[e]ncyclopedic' (Nelson, John). Although he admits that *Memoirs* is 'not all misanthropy and -ogyny' (Nelson, John), he accuses the author of having compiled the book simply to 'settle old scores' (Nelson, John). He maintains that '[r]eading this collection of essays and sketches is a bit like listening to a bristly British clubman, over whisky and sodas, who has been cursed with total recall' (Nelson, John). One of the most devastating reviews appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*; Craig Brown does not only criticise the content of the book, but also the style it is written in:

Amis's chosen tone, decked in the chumminess, tetchiness, and naughtiness of the lounge bar, appears relaxed and all-embracing, but is in fact extremely limiting. It is perfectly designed for prickly and very funny descriptions of self-aggrandizing strangers. Among these strangers, each lampooned and dismissed in two or three pages, are Lord Snowdon, Arnold Wesker, Roald Dahl and Tom Driberg. Amis met them once or twice, found them abnormally irritating and/or absurd, and now wipes them out with blissfully nasty anecdotes, related with his singular skill for the mimicking of affection. (Brown, Craig)

Even those critics who confess to having enjoyed reading *Memoirs* are taken aback by the outspokenness with which Kingsley reveals dubious details about other people, especially because he is so reticent about his own private life. Bakshian, for instance, praises the 'mature blend of penetration, justifiable bile, humor, warmth, and the occasional trace of regret' (Bakshian) he finds in *Memoirs*, yet also laments the fact that Amis shares so little about himself with the reader:

The only thing that is slightly amiss about the author's own *Memoirs* is that they are only very slightly Amis, a mixture of delicacy and shame keeping the spotlight off the narrator's inner and private lives and on the foibles of friends and acquaintances. (Bakshian)

In a similar vein, Conarrore praises *Memoirs* as '[p]rolific, entertaining [and] quotable' but describes Kingsley Amis as 'nasty' (Conarrore) and warns readers to stay away from the author:

If he invites you to dinner, or more likely, for drinks, don't go. Otherwise you're apt to become grist for his satiric mill. The most thankful citizens of London these days, I suspect, are the ones who never dined many a few with Sir Kingsley, and hence don't show up in his mischievous 'Memoirs.' (Conarroe)

*Memoirs* was not only commented on after its first publication, but echoed again in the immediate aftermath of the author's death. As the unnamed author of an obituary in *The Times* shows, Kingsley's autobiography started to be seen in a more differentiated light after a few years had passed. Noting that *Memoirs* 'blew up a fine literary dust', this reviewer maintains that

[o]nly when the dust had settled did *Memoirs* become recognised at least by some for what it was, an assembly of highly collectible anecdotes which would have entertained any dinner party (not comprised of maiden aunts) or literary saloon bar. The storyteller was back at work, but revealing little about himself apart from his dislikes: reluctance by others to stand their round of drinks came very high on the list. (Anon., 'Obituary: Sir Kingsley Amis', *The Times*)

The polarised reception of *Memoirs* and the extreme positions some reviewers occupy is not just a cry of moral condemnation; more importantly, it shows that Kingsley Amis's approach breaks with the conventions of the autobiographical genre. The public outrage can only partly be explained by the fact that *Memoirs* violates legal as well as emotional rights. It is incontestable that his revelation of private and partly highly embarrassing episodes of peoples' lives is ethically problematic; every autobiographer has to bear in mind that the genre is referential and thus deals with real people whose private spheres ought to be respected, rather than just literary characters.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the author has not only caused the media's indignation by overstepping the mark with regard to the right for privacy, he has also undermined readers' generic expectations. 'As one might predict, given his celebrated distaste of the obvious, the result is not your conventional chronological narrative' (Conarroe). It is almost as if *Memoirs* were an anti-autobiography: instead of adhering to the confessional model of the genre, the author creates a multitude of narrative gaps, trying to reveal as little as possible about himself and as much as possible about others, which results in a kind of prose that is anecdotal, full of biting humour, and sometimes reads like 'uncensored gossip' (Conarroe). According to the aforementioned obituary in *The Times*, '[t]he limelight was there' in *Memoirs*, 'but [...] the private person remained hidden.' (Anon.,

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<sup>35</sup> For an extensive discussion of the 'ethics of life writing' see Paul John Eakin's essay 'The Unseemly Profession': Privacy, Inviolate Personality, and the Ethics of Life Writing' in his book *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (142-186).

‘Obituary: Sir Kingsley Amis’, *The Times*) In a sense, this observation is true, and yet there is no reason why the reader should come away with feeling cheated; while it is legitimate to accuse the author of indecency about others, he cannot be denied the right to keep himself to himself. Apart from that, the author’s private persona does not stay quite as hidden as one may think. In fact, the attentive reader learns quite a lot about Kingsley Amis, although this learning process occurs in a roundabout rather than a direct way. While the author tells other people’s stories, glimpses of his own self are revealed bit by bit, and can be grasped in the selective mirror that the narrative process provides: a profound vein for melancholy, an unexpected vulnerability, and a considerable portion of guilt are only a few examples.

At the risk of digressing, this chapter shall be closed by way of a comparison. The experience of reading Kingsley Amis’s *Memoirs* may be echoed by a passage in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, in which the protagonist, Geoffrey Braithwaite, talks about reading Mauriac’s *Mémoires*:

Mauriac [...] writes his ‘*Mémoires*’, but they aren’t his memoirs. We are spared the counting-games and spelling-bees of childhood, that first servant-girl in the humid attic, the canny uncle with metal teeth and a heedful of stories – or whatever. Instead, Mauriac tells us about the books he’s read, the painters he’s liked, the plays he’s seen. He finds himself by looking in the works of others... Reading his ‘memoirs’ is like meeting a man on the train who says, ‘Don’t look at me, that’s misleading. If you want to know what I’m like, wait until we’re in a tunnel, and then study the reflection in the window.’ You wait, and look, and catch a face against a shifting background of sooty walls, cables and sudden brickwork. The transparent shape flickers and jumps, always a few feet away. You become accustomed to its existence, you move with its movements; and though you know its presence is conditional, you feel it to be permanent. Then there is a wail from ahead, a roar and a burst of light; the face is gone for ever. (Barnes, 108)



## 5. Martin Amis's *Experience: A Memoir* (2000)

### 5.1. Macrostructure: narrative approach and structural design

#### 5.1.1. Narrative motivation and approach

'The Amis story – senior and junior – is familiar enough to even the casual reader of the mid-market and broadsheet press.' (Rusbridger) Having grown up with a father who was a renowned novelist, Martin Amis knows what it is like to be in the spotlight of the media, - "the usual stuff", as Amis calls it.' (Rusbridger). Following in Kingsley's footsteps, Martin has become an established novelist himself, and is an even bigger celebrity: he has often been referred to as 'the Mick Jagger of literature' (Roe) or the 'Bad Boy' (Chen in Amis, 'English Literature's 'Bad Boy' Pens His Memoir') of English letters. However, Martin Amis is not only known for his professional achievements as a novelist; unsurprisingly, his private life has also been widely discussed, and the media has capitalised on the public interest in his person.

As heir to a famous father, companion from childhood to the rich and gifted, a successful novelist by age 24, good-looking, well-off, and, before his marriage, a notorious womanizer – in other words, as an extremely annoying fellow – Amis had long been a malice-inspiring target. (Catmull)

In the years of 1994 and 1995, Martin Amis 'underwent a technicolor, wide-screen epic of a midlife crisis' (Catmull), which is reflected in *Experience* and has been part of his inspiration for writing the book. During this difficult phase, the following events rocked the author's world: he broke up with and divorced his first wife, the philosopher Antonia Phillips, with whom he has two sons, Louis and Jacob, and started a new relationship with the American/Uruguayan novelist Isabel Fonseca; his cousin, Lucy Partington, who had disappeared 21 years earlier, was revealed to have been one of the victims of Britain's most notorious serial killer, Frederick West; he found out about the identity of his adult daughter, Delilah Seale, whom he had fathered some 20 years earlier in a short affair with a married woman, Lamorna Heath, and met her for the first time; his beloved father, Kingsley Amis, died in October 1995 from the consequences of a fall and possibly from the effects of alcoholism and early Alzheimer's disease; he parted from his longtime literary agent, Pat Kavanagh, and replaced her with a new booker, Andrew 'The Jackal' Wylie, who secured a large advance for his new novel, *The Information*. In this process, he lost a close friend, the writer Julian Barnes, who is also the husband of Pat Kavanagh; on

top of all that, he suffered a severe dental crisis – all his teeth were pulled out and part of his lower jaw rebuilt after the removal of a tumour. (cf. Kakutani and Catmull) ‘To particularize Amis’s special hell, every one of those events was gleefully, sneeringly, jeeringly recounted in the British press.’ (Catmull) He was highly criticised for leaving his wife and sons, his change of agents was interpreted as sheer greed, and his expensive dental treatments were downplayed to being merely cosmetic. (cf. Catmull and Rusbridger) The author’s difficult relationship with ‘fame (otherwise known as the media)’<sup>36</sup> (*Experience*, 5f.), serves as a background foil for the whole book. It comes to the surface again and again throughout *Experience*, and its first mention occurs as early as page five and six in a long footnote:

Actually there’s a good reason, a structural reason, why novelists should excite corrosiveness in the press. When you review a film, or appraise a film-director, you do not make a ten-minute short about it or him (or her). When you write about a painter, you do not make a sketch. When you write about a composer, you do not reach for your violin. And even when a poet is under consideration, the reviewer or profelist does not (unless deeply committed to presumption or tedium) produce a poem. But when you write about a novelist, an exponent of prose narrative, then you write a prose narrative. And was that the extent of your hopes for your prose – bookchat, interviews, gossip? Valued reader, it is not for me to say this is envy. It is for you to say this is envy. And envy never comes to the ball dressed as Envy. It comes dressed as something else: Asceticism, High Standards, Common Sense. Anyway, as I said, I don’t complain about all that – because fame is so great. (*Experience*, 6n)

As Rusbridger observes, the very fact that Martin Amis’s story is so familiar ‘to even the casual reader of the mid-market and broadsheet press’ (Rusbridger) forms an important point of departure for the author’s impulse ‘to write the story himself – to reclaim it from the unauthorised version that is out there.’ (Rusbridger) Consequently, this desire to ‘recover some measure of control over his own life story’ (Rusbridger), or, in the author’s own words, the stirring ‘to set the record straight (so much of this is already public)’ (*Experience*, 7) is one major aspect of Martin Amis’s narrative motivation. In the first chapter of *Experience*, ‘Introductory: My Missing’, Martin openly discusses his narrative urge, asking himself the following question: ‘I am a novelist, trained to use experience for other ends. Why should I tell the story of my life?’<sup>37</sup> (*Experience*, 6) The answer he gives is more

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<sup>36</sup> As Linda Richards notes, Martin Amis has been described as ‘the most celebrated and vilified novelist of our time.’ (Richards in Amis, ‘January Experiences Martin Amis’)

<sup>37</sup> The author’s self-conscious treatment of the reasons for writing *Experience* points to the fact that he is an overt narrator, or – in Stanzel’s system of narrative theory – operates as a teller-character. (cf. Stanzel, 114)

complicated, however, than his need to settle a few scores with 'The Fourth Estate' (*Experience*, 277).

According to Moss, Martin Amis's narrative motivation appears to be threefold: filial, personal, artistic.' (Moss, 'The Art of Autobiography') First, he feels the urge to mourn his father and write about their special case of a father and a son both being successful writers (cf. Moss, 'The Art of Autobiography'):

I do it because my father is dead now, and I always knew I would have to commemorate him. He was a writer and I am a writer; it feels like a duty to describe our case – a literary curiosity which is also just another instance of a father and a son. (*Experience*, 7)

Second, he wants to set the record straight with the British press – as has been mentioned above –, but he also seeks 'to speak, for once, without artifice. Though not without formality' (*Experience*, 7) (cf. Moss, 'The Art of Autobiography'). Both aspects of this reason are closely linked with the author's need to regain control over his own life story. On the one hand, Martin attempts to rescue it from the scavengers of the media, hoping that 'this version will last longer than yesterday's *Daily Mail*.' (Amis, Martin as cited in Rusbridger). On the other hand, he deplores and wants to counteract life's general shapelessness:

The trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The twists are either predictable or sensationalist. And it's always the same beginning; and the same ending (*Experience*, 7).

This impression is reiterated towards the end of the book, which further underlines the longing to obtain control via narrative means:

My life, it seems to me, is ridiculously shapeless. I know what makes a good narrative, and lives don't have much of that – pattern and balance, form, completion, commensurateness. (*Experience*, 361)

The third reason for Martin to write his autobiography, as Moss observes, 'is more complicated, and perhaps the most intriguing: how does a novelist who, like others before him, is wary of autobiography set about writing it?' (Moss, 'The Art of Autobiography') Apparently, Martin Amis was fascinated by the challenge of writing in this form, which is 'alien' (Moss, 'The Art of Autobiography') to a novelist, yet critical of it at the same time. 'We live in the age of mass loquacity,' (*Experience*, 6) he writes:

[W]hat everyone has in them, these days, is not a novel but a memoir. [...] We are all writing it or at any rate talking it: the memoir, the apologia, the c.v., the *cri de coeur*. Nothing, for now, can compete with experience – so unanswerably authentic, and so liberally and democratically dispensed.

Experience is the only thing we share equally, and everyone senses this. (*Experience*, 6)

Naturally, these three different aspects of Martin's narrative motivation are not isolated from each other; the author's filial, personal and artistic reasons for composing *Experience* that Moss lists are all interconnected. One could argue that there is a fourth narrative driving force which is not part of Moss's enumeration: the writing of one's story is therapeutic, and Amis has used autobiography as a means of self-inspection to come to terms with the traumatic events of 1994-1995, especially the death of his father, as the following statement in the first chapter of *Experience* confirms:

Someone is no longer here. The intercessionary figure, the father, the man who stands between the son and death, is no longer here; and it won't ever be the same. He is missing. But I know it is common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity. My father lost his father, and my children will lose theirs, and their children (this is immensely onerous to contemplate) will lose theirs. (*Experience*, 7)

His father Kingsley is not the only person for whom he grieves; his cousin Lucy Partington and his daughter Delilah Seale have also left emotional gaps in Martin's life. As he informs us in the last paragraph of 'Introductory: My Missing', Martin has a photograph of each of these two girls on his desk. 'The photographs are kept together, and for almost twenty years their subjects lived together in the back of my mind. Because these are, or were, my missing.' (*Experience*, 8)

The author's experience of the many crises he suffered in 1994-1995, which add up to his mid-life crisis, has made him acutely aware of the universality of death. Martin Amis regards the mid-life crisis as something 'intrinsic and structural' (*Experience*, 63) to life, through which 'a realignment' can take place, 'something irresistible and universal, to do with your changing views about death (and you ought to have a crisis about that. It is critical to have a crisis about that).' (*Experience*, 64)

#### 5.1.2. Themes, overall structure and structural principles

The structural principles which underlie *Experience*, as well as its main themes, are closely related to the author's narrative motivation. In order to come to terms with life's 'amorphousness and ridiculous fluidity' (*Experience*, 7), he opposes it with structural and narrative patterns. Despite the fact that Martin Amis does not recall the events from his life chronologically – he moves up and down the time scale freely, going 'back and forth across the years of his various growings-up' (Meagher) –

*Experience* is a thoroughly structured book. As the author writes, he may be wanting 'to speak [...] without artifice', but 'formality' (*Experience*, 7) is nevertheless paramount to him.

Macrostructurally, *Experience* is divided into two parts: 'Part One: Unawakened' and 'Part Two: The Main Events'. In the first part, which makes up two thirds of the book and consists of fifteen chapters, the author jump-cuts between various eras and episodes of his life (cf. Roe), including the fate of his cousin Lucy, the death of his father, his parents' and his own divorce, and his dental problems. In the second part, he picks out three 'main events', i.e. three exceptionally formative 'ordinary miracles and disasters' (*Experience*, 357) of his life, and gives in-depth accounts of them in three respective chapters: '1: Delilah Seale' deals with his finding out about the identity of his adult daughter Delilah and meeting her for the first time; '2: One Little More Hug' recounts the final weeks and the death of his father, and '3: The Magics' is about the birth of his daughter Fernanda in November 1996. Although we already learn about these incidents throughout the first part of *Experience*, the author emphasises their centrality by retelling them separately and in more detail in 'Part Two'. The main body of *Experience* is closed with 'The Magics', – the last chapter of 'Part Two', but the book does not end there. In fact, *Experience* goes on for another twenty pages, which consist of a three-part appendage: In the 'Postscript' Martin reflects his trip to Poland in 1995, during which he visited Auschwitz and Birkenau ('Postscript: Poland, 1995'), while in the 'Appendix' he settles accounts with the media; he criticises Eric Jacobs, his father's former biographer, whom he sees as a representative of the Fourth Estate, for, among other things, publishing an inappropriate and disrespectful account of Kingsley's final days very shortly after the latter's death ('Appendix: The Biographer and the Fourth Estate'). Finally, *Experience* is completed with the 'Addendum', which is written in the form of a letter to the author's deceased aunt Miggy – Lucy's mother ('Addendum: Letter to my Aunt'). 'This is a letter I will never send, in a book you will never read', Martin writes as an introduction. 'Still, I couldn't conclude without addressing some words to you, however briefly and tentatively.' (*Experience*, 383) He closes *Experience* with this letter, because it is crucially important to him to ensure himself of his aunt's 'blessing' (*Experience*, 384) of his book. When he had already started writing it, his aunt expressed doubts about his project of 'attempting to memorialise [...] Lucy' (*Experience*, 383), but when Miggy was introduced to

Martin's baby daughter Fernanda, she finally did give her approval. Thus, Martin expresses his gratitude to her and sends her his love.

Thematically, three interrelated aspects lie at the heart of *Experience*. First, the father-son relationship between Kingsley and Martin runs through the entire book; memories of Kingsley both open and close its main body. (cf. Keulks, 24) The second thematic crucible is the author's coming of age, – his passage from innocence to experience (cf. Meagher), as the title indicates. Although '[t]he author comes of age not once, but repeatedly during the course of his first fifty years' (Meagher), the years of 1994 and 1995 constitute an incredibly intense and condensed period of maturation, – his mid-life crisis: 'The theme is clear,' Amis says of the period: 'partings, Sunderings, severances.' (*Experience*, 198) Thus, the third main theme lies in the book's focus on the years of 1994 and 1995, which form the epicentre of the author's consciousness (cf. Anon., 'Familiengeschäfte'), 'the book's pregnable pivot, the wound to which the text recurs again and again' (Wood, 'The Young Turk'). '1994 and 1995 had not gone out of their way to persuade me that I was immune to disaster; and no one is spared the main events' (*Experience*, 287), Amis writes in 'One Little More Hug'. Thus, the years of 1994 and 1995 form the temporal anchor of *Experience*, from which

the narrative takes off in all directions: to 1973, when *The Rachel Papers* was published and Lucy disappeared; to home life at Swansea, to a Brighton crammer in 1967, to Majorca with his mother in flight from Kingsley's infidelities, to cruising the King's Road looking for girls and hash with his luckless friend Rob. (Walsh 'Night Train Through a Dark Wood')

*Experience* is an incredibly complex, digressive and dense autobiography; it encompasses 'everything from F.R. Leavis and the function of literary criticism to Auschwitz' (Diederick, 181) and makes use of a rich pallet of narrative techniques. Nevertheless, one can discern *two major structural principles* which inform the overall structural design of the book and are realised in the macrostructural as well as the microstructural dimension of the narration, namely *oppositonality* and *parallelism*. Thus, it will be discussed in the following sections how these two structural elements are realised in their various forms throughout *Experience*.

## 5.2. From macrostructure to microstructure

### 5.2.1. Oppositionality

#### 5.2.1.1. Innocence vs. experience

The principle of oppositionality is ubiquitous in *Experience*; it manifests itself on various structural levels as well as in different thematic areas. However, there is one fundamental macrostructural contrast from which all other oppositions derive, namely the dialectic relationship between *innocence* and *experience*. As Martin Amis's autobiography is essentially about coming of age, it is informed by the determinism that 'innocence will necessarily become experience, song turn to growl.' (Wood) Towards the end of *Experience*, Martin muses about this opposition: "Life is mainly grief and labour" he notes, quoting his father Kingsley:

That's true, Dad. Life is mainly deaths and babies; ordinary miracles and ordinary disasters, the white magic of growth, and then the other magic at the other end of the line, the black magic, just as feverish, and just as out-of-nowhere. (*Experience*, 365)

The dialectics between innocence and experience, which is intertextually derived from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), does not only preside over *Experience*, it even gives the book its title.<sup>38</sup> (cf. Diederick, 271)

Similarly to Blake, Martin Amis juxtaposes the innocent world of childhood against the darker adult world of corruption and experience. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* work via contrasts and parallels to criticise the ways in which the cruel experiences of adulthood demolish what is good in innocence, while also conveying the weaknesses of the innocent perspective. (cf. Santos) In an analogous vein, Martin Amis opposes his adolescent, innocent self with his more experienced adult self by including his own 'mortifying college correspondence' (Handler) from 1967 to 1971.

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<sup>38</sup> Keulks makes a point that, in fact, Kingsley Amis's *Letters* (2000) – and not William Blake – should be viewed as the origin of the book's title. In a letter to Robert Conquest, written eight years after he had last seen his second wife, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Kingsley reflects on marriage, concluding with a statement that Keulks sees as an epitaph for Martin's memoir: 'Well, it's all experience, though it's a pity there had to be so much of it.' (Kingsley Amis to Robert Conquest, *Letters*, 1078) (cf. Keulks, 206) Among other quotations from the *Letters*, Martin Amis does cite this episode in *Experience* (214). However, considering the structural parallels between Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Martin's *Experience*, it seems more likely that Blake's famous work is the title-giving source, even though the above-mentioned quotation adds a nuance. Furthermore, Martin – unlike Kingsley – does not condemn the experiences he has made and balances the many difficult incidents recounted in *Experience* with positive ones, such as the finding of his daughter Delilah and the birth of Fernanda.

### 5.2.1.2. Narrative distance: Osric vs. Martin

From 1967 to 1971, Martin was first a pupil at a Brighton boarding ‘crammer’ and later a student of English at Oxford University. During this period, he wrote frequent letters to his father and his stepmother, Elizabeth Jane Howard, explaining how ‘Kafka is a fucking fool’ (*Experience*, 10) and how ‘I consider ‘Middlemarch’ to be FUCKING good’ (*Experience*, 11). (cf. Adams) These letters, which ‘stand for innocence in the Amis universe’ (Adams), punctuate the first part of *Experience* (cf. *Experience*, 12); they are chronologically ordered, with every letter appearing as the final section of each chapter in ‘Part One: Unawakened’.<sup>39</sup> According to Packer-Fletcher, the letters mirror the struggles of an adolescent and his coming of age. At the same time, however, they demonstrate how this young man begins to form his own point of view and his personal style as a writer. (cf. Packer-Fletcher) The letters, which are full of exaggerated formulations and show Martin as ‘all flop and peeve, head snot-full of intellectual ambition’ (Ferguson), have a genuinely humorous effect. They are funny in themselves, but the comedy is greatly heightened by the contrast of voices arising from the juxtaposition of the letters with the main text; the insightful, mature voice of the narrator is opposed with the daredevil, over-the-top voice of the letter-writer. The following extracts come from the first letter, which is dated 23 October 1967:

Dearest Dad and Jane,

Thanks awfully for your letter. So we all appear to be working like fucking fools. I seem to be flitting manically from brash self-confidence to whimpering depression; the English is all very fine, but the Latin I find difficult, tedious, and elaborately unrewarding. It would be so boring if it bugged up my Oxford Entrance paper. [...]

[...] I do enjoy the English but I must say that I get periods of desperately wanting something else to occupy myself with. The prospect of teaching has lost its glow because it means that I will be dealing with the same *sort* of thing for the next 4 years without much of a break. I hope you don’t think I’m off the idea of Eng. Lit., because I find myself suffused with an ardour for sheer quantity of consumption. In my last few days in London I read ‘Middlemarch’ (in 3 days), ‘The Trial’ (Kafka is a fucking fool – in 1 day), and even here I manage a couple of novels a week (plus lots of poetry). Its [*sic*] just that I’m a bit cheesed off with applying myself to the same ideas all the time – but I shouldn’t think its [*sic*] anything that a paternal – or step-maternal – harangue won’t correct. I’m sorry to be a bore, and it’s probably merely a phase – might

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<sup>39</sup> Consequently, there are fifteen letters interspersing the fifteen chapters of the first part of *Experience*.



even be character-building, who knows. (*Experience*, 9f., emphases and annotations original)

The narrator does not allow the letters to stand for themselves. In fact, he frequently comments on and annotates ‘this embarrassing correspondence’ (*Experience*, 9) in footnotes and brackets, thus drawing a sharp, immediate contrast between the experiencing self (the letter-writer) and the narrating self (the teller-character who assesses the letters and their author). At the beginning of the second chapter, ‘Rank’, Martin Amis even devotes a whole page of the main text to evaluating the first letter. Despite the fact that he partly identifies with who he was in 1967, he thoroughly criticises the personality of the experiencing self as well as the style the letter is written in:

It would be nice to say that I ‘make no apologies’ for my early letters [...]. But I do: I make fervent apologies for them. And they get worse. It all gets worse. I really am very sorry. The toiling periphrases, the tally-ho facetiousness: this I can forgive. My dismissal of Kafka is ridiculous, and is only partly counterbalanced by the approximate justice of the PPS – and what *was* it with me and the word *fine*? But at least, here, I can recognize myself. Elsewhere this letter seems to have been written by a stranger: I mean its tone of pampered intolerance, its political stupidity; I am repelled by the thought-clichés and unexamined formulations, herd formulations.’ (*Experience*, 12, emphases original)

In this extract, the narrative distance, that is to say, ‘the tension between the older, matured and more sensible ‘I’ as narrator and the ‘I’ as hero’ (Stanzel, 82) is indicated by the narrator’s use of the present tense on the one hand (‘make’, ‘do’, ‘make’, ‘get’, ‘gets’, ‘am’, ‘can’, ‘is’, ‘is’, ‘can’, ‘seems’, ‘mean’ ‘am’), and the past tense (‘*was*’) on the other hand. According to Stanzel, the narrative distance is a measure for the psychological and temporal distance from which the narrating self now recounts the feelings and considerations which the experiencing self had at the time. (cf. Stanzel, 95) Thus, ‘[t]he past tense signifies for the narrator, and therefore for the reader, real past time and keeps the present time of the first-person narrator free from these views’ (Stanzel, 95). Through the contrast between the past and the present tenses, the narrator emphatically dissociates himself from his previous conception and the reader must conclude that the ‘narratorial ‘I’ (Stanzel, 95) has undergone a change since the time of the narrated events. As Stanzel explains, in many first-person texts<sup>40</sup> the narrating self seems to refuse total identification with the experiencing self. (cf. Stanzel, 99) In *Experience*, the considerable narrative

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<sup>40</sup> Stanzel refers to ‘first-person novels’ (Stanzel, 99), but his argument is applied to autobiography here, hence the generalisation.

distance created by the contrast between the letters and the narration as well as between present and past tenses (within the narration) is further augmented by the fact that occasionally the narrator switches to the third person when he talks about his young self. According to Stanzel, ‘the variation in pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘he’ with reference to the earlier self of the first-person narrator’ is ‘[t]he most pointed form’ (Stanzel, 99) which the narrating self’s attempt to distance himself from the experiencing self can take. Martin Amis does not say ‘he’ when he refers to his younger self; instead, he gives himself a different name: he calls his adolescent self ‘Osric’ (*Experience*, 15, 17, 18, 34, 110, 119, 131, 153, 167n, 173n, 191n, 231n, 239, 240n, 270n, 271n).

Osric is not a random name; it has a famous literary source. Originally, Osric is a character in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, whom Martin Amis has borrowed for the portrayal of his adolescent self. In *Hamlet*, Osric is a minor figure who is introduced in Act 5, Scene 2 in order to summon Hamlet to the fencing match with Laertes, during which Hamlet dies. Osric, an inferior courtier, can be characterised as ‘a coxcomb, a fop, a dandy’ (Weller, ‘Summary of Act 5, Scene 2’). He is overdressed, pretentious, and flourishes his big hat at Hamlet when he enters the scene; he delivers his message in ‘highly mannered language’ (Anon., ‘*The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*: Character Directory’; also cf. *Hamlet*, 5.2.105-111), and tries to impress Prince Hamlet with his extravagant appearance and behaviour, but the latter makes fun of the former’s need for approval and social recognition (cf. Weller, ‘Summary of Act 5, Scene 2’). Through the intertextual reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the employment of the Osric persona, Martin Amis creates such a large gap between his earlier and his present self that at times it almost seems as if Osric were disconnected from the narrator. Of course one never fully succumbs to the illusion that Osric may physically be a different person from Martin, but the narrative distance is indeed extreme. With the help of narratorial comments, the author compares and identifies his adolescent self with Osric, the ‘attendant lord’ (Adams) from *Hamlet*. At the beginning of the second chapter, ‘Rank’, for example, he makes the following judgement about his teenage self: ‘The nineteen-year-old hero of my first novel’,<sup>41</sup> he writes,

‘was described in one review as ‘both a gilded and repulsive creature.’ I accept this description, for my hero and for myself. I was an Osric. (*Hamlet*: ... [*Aside*

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<sup>41</sup> *The Rachel Papers* (1973)

to Horatio] Dost know this water-fly?')' (*Experience*, 15, quotation from *Hamlet* and annotation as in original)

In the footnote corresponding to this passage, Martin recalls that his father played Osric in a college theatre production in Swansea in 1953 (cf. *Experience*, 15n). This memory of his father prompts him to draw additional parallels between his adolescent self and the character from *Hamlet*:

Now I recall his [Kingsley's, *annot.*] Osric routine, very flirtatious, all eyelash and limp wrist. As Osric says of Laertes: 'an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing.' [*Hamlet*, 5.2.107-108, *annot.*] That was me, in 1967.' (*Experience*, 15n)

Similarly to the Osric in the Shakespearean tragedy, the Osric of *Experience* is intrigued by fancy language and extravagant clothes; thus, he uses the word 'fine' extensively,<sup>42</sup> trains himself to say 'Mondee' and 'Fridee' instead of 'Mon-day' and 'Fri-day' (*Experience*, 16, emphasizes original), because he finds it fashionable and posh,<sup>43</sup> and writes one of his letters to his father and stepmother in the form of a prose poem (cf. *Experience*, 17). Furthermore, Martin Amis has also adopted Osric's eccentric style of clothing from *Hamlet*: Shakespeare's Osric wears a large hat, showing his insecurity by taking it off and putting it back on repeatedly in order to please the prince, who provocatively changes his perception of the temperature from cold to hot and back again in order to mock Osric (cf. *Hamlet*, 5.2.81-104 and Weller, 'Summary of Act 5, Scene 2'). Analogously, the young Martin Amis aka Osric also both has an extravagant dress style and is unsure of himself, as the following self-characterisation illustrates: 'I was a drawling, velvet-suited, snakeskin-booted undergraduate' (*Experience*, 131); one source of Osric's inferiority complex, which he covers up with his pretentiousness, is his body; Osric has a problem with his lack of height:

I was then about five-foot-two (and had only another four inches to go) [...]. I minded being short chiefly because it seemed that about half of womankind was thereby rendered unapproachable. (*Experience*, 12)

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<sup>42</sup> Cf.: The narrator's comment on Osric's first letter which has already been cited above: 'and what was it with me and the word *fine*?' (*Experience*, 12, emphasizes original)

<sup>43</sup> The narrator comments on this habit with the help of a dialogue between him and his two sons, Louis and Jacob:

[...]

- Then why do you say Mondee and Fridee and Sundee?
- Jesus. I trained myself to do it in my teens because I thought it sounded posh.
- Why d'you do that? asked Louis with sincere puzzlement.
- Because it used to be cool to be posh.

His head snapped round.

- Did it?... Christ...

(*Experience*, 17, emphasizes original)

### 5.2.1.3. Comedy vs. tragedy

It has been noted before that the Osric letters as well as the narrative descriptions of his adventures are inherently comical; one cannot help but smile with amusement at the image Martin Amis creates of his adolescent self, of whose pretentiousness he is lovingly critical:

I didn't like working. What I liked was bunking off school and hanging out with my friend Rob and betting in betting shops (not the horses: the dogs) and mincing up and down the King's Road in skintight velvet and grimy silk scarves and haunting a coffee bar called the Picasso, and smoking hash (then £8 an ounce) and trying to pick up girls. (*Experience*, 13)

Bearing in mind the intertextual reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is fair to ask what role the comedy of the Osric persona may play in the overall composition of *Experience*. In *Hamlet*, Osric's structural function is rather limited; he is introduced as late as the final act, his only tasks being to deliver the King's request that Hamlet meet Laertes in a fencing match and to umpire the duel. The King's message could easily have been conveyed by letter and need not have been brought to Hamlet by a new character, which – apparently – makes Osric structurally irrelevant. Nevertheless, Osric fulfils an important function in *Hamlet*: shortly before the inevitably unfortunate ending of *Shakespeare's* tragedy – all the major characters except Horatio die –, Osric's appearance serves as comic relief. Osric does not only amuse Hamlet on stage, but also entertains the audience, who have to brace themselves for the looming catastrophe. In a similar vein, Martin Amis employs 'the Osric archive' (*Experience*, 173n) as well as his descriptions of Osric's colourful personality as a form of comic relief, which Leonard interprets as 'avoidance behaviour' (Leonard). In the middle of one of Osric's letters – approximately halfway through Part One of the book – the author elucidates the compositional purpose of the letters in a long narratorial comment within square brackets:

The present letter is incomplete, so this is definitely the time and place to clarify the structural function of these letters [...] With Osric here, what we are seeing is the first pass, the first lunge at language. Always a painful sight – but ignore it. Structurally, that's what these letters are for: to allow the reader, hard-pressed by the world as he is, to enjoy a few moments of vacuity, of luxurious inanition, before coming to the matter ahead. (*Experience*, 150f.)

Apart from giving the reader an impression of where Martin Amis started off as a writer, the letters, which are interspersed throughout Part One, thus provide comic relief before and in between the more difficult aspects of the author's life story. One

of these emotionally challenging parts of Martin Amis's life, for example, is the fate of his cousin Lucy Partington.

Apparently, the author finds it hard to talk about what happened to Lucy, as he foreshadows her disappearance, but then quickly drops the subject again:

Over the Christmas of 1973, experience – in the form, as I now see it, of an acquaintance with infinite fear – entered my life and took up residence in my unconscious mind. [...]

But before we face experience, that miserable enemy, let us have some more innocence, just for a while.

(*Experience*, 36)

The above-cited extract is followed by a light-hearted 'Letter from School' in which Osric asks his father and step mother's allowance to move out of the residential home of his Brighton crammer and into a flat in order to enjoy 'a *bit* of independence during my last days of independence, as it were' (*Experience*, 37, emphasis original). The letter is only two pages long, but the topic of Lucy's abduction and death is not resumed for another fourteen pages. At the beginning of the next chapter, 'Learning About Time', the author instead describes his travels during his gap year in 1968, when he went to Majorca in a Mini Moke with three friends in order to 'disturb the peace of one of the world's greatest living poets, Robert Graves.' (*Experience*, 39) This joyful episode is ensued by a comic incident during which Martin's half-brother Jaime, who was a child at the time, got drunk and suffered a fast-motion hangover because he refused to dilute the wine he was allowed with his supper with water:

What followed was a stark paradigm of drunkenness, astonishingly telescoped. Jaime laughed, danced, sang, bawled, brawled, and passed out, all within fifteen minutes. Then about half an hour later we heard a parched moan from his room. Jaime was already having his hangover. The voice was faintly saying, 'Agua!...Agua!...' (*Experience*, 49, emphasis original)

Still delaying writing about Lucy's disappearance, the author moves on from this section to depict a conversation he had with his mother in 1977; wanting his mother's opinion, he informs her that Lamorna Seale, a married woman with whom he had an affair, claims that he is the father of her two-year-old daughter:

- She [Lamorna, *annot.*] talked about her daughter. And then there was the photograph, Mum. She gave me the photograph.

- Yes, dear.

It was ready in my pocket. It showed a two-year-old girl in a dark flower dress, smocked at the chest, with short puffed sleeves and pink trim. She had fine blonde hair. Her smile was demure: pleased, but quietly pleased.

My mother snatched it from my hand.

- Lamorna says I'm her father. What do you think, Mum?

She held the photograph at various distances from her eyes. She held it at her arm's length, her free hand steadying her glasses. She brought it closer. Without looking up she said,

- *Definitely.*

(*Experience*, 51, emphasis original)

Only after these various digressions, so it seems, does Martin Amis feel ready to concentrate on Lucy's disappearance; the following passage serves as the transitional link for the resumption of this topic:

Lamorna was still some months away. As I sat at my desk in the palacio [...], I had a different consanguineous absence on my mind. On my mind? In my mind. Somewhere at the back of it. (*Experience*, 52)

The 'consanguineous absence' the author mentions here is of course Lucy Partington. In the remaining chapter, he begins to circle the subject of her disappearance, but he does not fully focus on it yet; he chooses a back door to enter the room where his memories about Lucy and her disappearance live: as an introduction, he narrates how his mother Hilly cleaned her house in Spain 'with her usual thoroughness but with none of her usual zest' (*Experience*, 52), because she was awaiting her sister's (Lucy's mother Miggy's) visit the summer after Lucy's disappearance (cf. *Experience*, 52). Furthermore, he describes what a typical Christmas looked like for the Amis family around that time, and, finally, how this harmony was irretrievably destroyed by Lucy's disappearance:

Typically around that era I would spend Christmas Eve buying all my Christmas presents and then drive around London in the white Mini (which started at least 50 percent of the time), picking up my sister, my brother, and perhaps my brother's girlfriend and then heading for the big house in Barnet, the car full of presents, bottles, crisp bags, beercans and joint-ends, and feeling like a vampire racing against the sunset in his packed coffin to get to the castle before dusk. Christmas was a dark time in England, the lights going out everywhere from 24 December to what felt like late January, so that the whole world was as black as Aberdeen.

The house on Hadley Common was a citadel of riotous solvency – not just at Christmas but every weekend. There was a great sense of in-depth back-up, a cellar, a barrel of malt whisky, a walk-in larder: proof against snowstorm and shutdown. I think it was that Christmas morning that all four Amises, with breakfast trays on their laps, watched *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* – then the visit to the pub, then the day-long, the week-long lunch. And with Kingsley the hub of all humour and high spirits, like an engine of comedy... I felt so secure in that house – and, clearly, so insecure elsewhere – that I always experienced a caress of apprehension as I climbed into the car on Sunday night, any Sunday night, and headed back to the motorway and Monday, to the flat or the flatlet, the street, the job, the tramp dread, the outside world. And, more than this, the outside world now had someone missing from it. On the night of 27 December 1973, my cousin Lucy Partington disappeared. (*Experience*, 52f.)

The above-cited passage shows a number of striking microstructural oppositionalities. Thus, the security provided by the author's family, the inside world, is contrasted with the threat represented by the outside world. This opposition is enacted within the first as well as the second paragraph of the quotation. In his car, Martin feels safe, and the description of him going home for Christmas conveys a feeling of happiness, even though he uses the metaphor of a 'coffin'. In the outside world, by contrast, everything is dark and menacing. Within the family circle, joy reigns, with his father embodying humour, 'like an engine of comedy', while around this secure island, he always experiences 'a caress of apprehension'. This fear is greatly magnified by the traumatic event of Lucy's disappearance; the author has had to realise that the outside world is capable of thwarting the security of the family by inflicting tragedy on it. Apart from the oppositionalities that are at work in this extract, the second structural principle, parallelism, also plays a role here: Lucy's disappearance, which is articulated in the last sentence of the second paragraph, is prefigured in the last sentence of the first paragraph. The fact that the lights go out everywhere in England around Christmas symbolises and foreshadows Lucy's vanishing. On an abstract level, the final sentences of both paragraphs have the same meaning, as the name 'Lucy' means light ('the lights going out' and 'Lucy Partington disappeared'). Consequently, the contrast between the inside and the outside worlds is doubled with the polarity between light and darkness.

Considering the enormous emotional impact Lucy's disappearance must have had on Martin Amis, one may argue that his display of 'avoidance behaviour' (Leonard) – as Leonard terms the above-mentioned strategy of delaying a certain aspect of the narration – is not surprising. However, one must be careful not to fall prey to psychological over-interpretation. While it has been illustrated above that the author *postpones* writing about Lucy, it cannot be proven that this means he actually *avoids* it. It may take time for him to get to the core of the matter, but from a quantitative perspective, Martin Amis actually devotes a great deal of text-time to Lucy's fate. The chapter following these various digressions in 'Learning about Time', 'Bus Stop: 1994', for example, concentrates almost exclusively on this subject, and Lucy is mentioned in various other contexts throughout *Experience*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The first mentioning of Lucy's ghastly fate, for example, occurs as early as page five, in the form of a summary: 'The Rachel Papers appeared in mid-November, 1973. On the night of 27 December my cousin, Lucy Partington, who was staying with her mother in Gloucestershire, was driven into Cheltenham to visit an old friend, Helen Render. Lucy and Helen spent the evening talking about their future; they put together a letter of application to the Courtauld Institute in London, where

It is certain that the author uses the Osric archive as a form of comic relief, for he even explains this technique in an above-cited narratorial comment.<sup>45</sup> In this remark, Martin does not even mention *his* personal needs but solely refers to the *reader*; thus, it has to be doubted whether *comic relief*, which is a literary term, can be equalled with *avoidance behaviour*, which is a psychological mechanism. Despite the fact that *Experience* is not a novel but a work of autobiography and consequently has to stay true to the way things occurred in real life, the author nevertheless has artistic freedoms such as evading chronology and reordering events in accordance with his stylistic preferences. Instead of interpreting the inclusion of the Osric letters and the humorous narrative passages as avoidance behaviour, it may thus be necessary to consider an alternative explanation: Could it be the case that the juxtaposition between comic and tragic passages in *Experience* is simply Martin Amis's artistic expression of the natural occurrence of events in his life? A statement by the author in an interview with Linda Richards decidedly points in this direction. In this interview, Martin Amis notes that '[n]atural symmetries just presented themselves and I followed the novelist's instinct, stringing things together by theme rather than by chronology' (Amis, Martin. Interview. 'January Experiences Martin Amis'). One can thus infer that the comic episodes in *Experience* are simply as important as the tragic events, because they are also part of the author's life, indeed part of his self. Seen from this perspective, Martin Amis just found oppositionalities to naturally occur in his life and 'patterned' them with the help, for example, of the intertextual references to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As – from the standpoint of the literary analyst – there is no definite answer to the question whether it is legitimate to "diagnose" the author with avoidance behaviour or not, it is best to eschew psychological uncertainties and stay close to the *text*. While the existence of narrative patterns such as oppositionality can be verified in a text, their psychological implications lack ultimate proof.

Psychologically, we may thus not be able to say with certainty why Martin Amis embedded his autobiographical narrative within such a complex system of oppositionalities; however, it is better to take for granted that he 'followed the

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Lucy hoped to continue studying medieval art. They parted at 10.15. It was a three-minute walk to the bus stop. She never posted the letter and she never boarded the bus. She was twenty-one. And it was another twenty-one years before the world found out what happened to her.' (*Experience*, 5) Furthermore, Lucy also appears on the very last page of the book in 'Addendum: Letter to my Aunt' (cf. *Experience*, 385).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. "Structurally, that's what these letters are for: to allow the *reader* [...] to enjoy a few moments of vacuity [...] before coming to the matter ahead." (*Experience*, 151, emphasis added).



novelist's instinct' and to use the instruments of narrative and structural analysis to discover the patterns the author has laid out for the reader. One of these patterns, to come back to the original argument of this section, is the contrast between comedy and tragedy. Thus, the innocent, youthful tone of the Osric letters as well as the various humorous narrative episodes that have been discussed above stand in sharp contrast to the graveness with which the author talks about the tragedies in his life. If we recall Osric's light-hearted style of writing his letters, we become even more conscious of how understandably serious, angry and full of grief the narrator's voice is when he talks about what happened to Lucy. In the extract below, for example, he describes David Partington's (Lucy's brother's) state of mind after Lucy's fate became known in March 1994, echoing his situation in the aftermath of her disappearance in December 1973:

David would need to nerve himself to open a newspaper. Because it was all ready to begin again: waking in the middle of the night getting to sit for hours weeping and swearing. This was his condition on the day after the disappearance. 'Lucy didn't come home last night.' There was nobody in her room and the made bed had not been slept in. There was certainty of disaster. And there was my poor cousin (I hate thinking about this), out in the courtyard, crying and raising his clenched fists and saying, 'If anyone has done anything to her...'

Weeping and swearing, cursing and sobbing: there ought to be a word for that. [...] 'Grieving' won't quite serve. This is something anterior. It is, I think, not a struggle to accept but a struggle to believe. (*Experience*, 62)

#### 5.2.1.4. Lucy Partington vs. Frederick West

The oppositionality between Lucy Partington and Frederick West is the most extreme variation of the all-informing contrast between innocence and experience. However, Frederick West, the serial killer who abducted and murdered Lucy Partington in December 1973, is too evil to fully belong to the realm of experience; the atrocity of his deeds pines for a category of its own: *guilt*. Talking of his idyllic childhood and foreshadowing West's crimes, Martin Amis notes that '[i]nnocence attracts its two main opposites: experience and guilt.' (*Experience*, 135) While Lucy personifies pure innocence, Frederick West is the embodiment of guilt. In his review of *Experience*, John Walsh states that

[t]he story's villain is Fred West, bringer of death, despoiler of innocence, world's worst father. Amis returns to him again and again, unable to leave his ghastly shade alone, figuring him as a sadist but also a cretin, attacking him a monster, dismissing him as a nonce. (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood').

When Martin Amis refers to guilt as the opposite of innocence, he does not only have in mind Frederick West, even though Lucy's killer is the main target of his hatred. As the author remarks in a footnote, 'Frederick West [...] was a paedophile' (139n), and Martin's intensive narrative occupation with Lucy's fate brought more deeply buried memories of his childhood to the surface, namely his own painful experiences of child abuse. In a subsection of the chapter, 'The City and the Village', called 'It Im Again, Dai', Martin recounts three incidents from his childhood, during which he was sexually abused by strangers: in Swansea by a Welsh boy (cf. *Experience*, 135-137), in Cambridge by a number of older boys in school (cf. *Experience*, 138), and in the Amises' house in Princeton by a guest of his parents while the latter were having a party downstairs (cf. *Experience*, 139-140). The remembering process concerning the paedophiles who violated Martin as a child, but also concerning Frederick West, who abused his own children, induces the author to consider paedophilia in a more general light. Consequently, he makes the following judgement about paedophiles towards the end of the relevant sub-section:

Paedophilia means 'love of children'. And paedophiles will say that that is all they are doing: loving children. [...] Paedophiles hate children. They hate children because they hate innocence, and children are innocent. Look at them. They come here naked – but not quite. To the fit pair of eyes they come here thoroughly armoured: with native honour clad. (*Experience*, 141)

This extract contains a twofold opposition: on the one hand, the apparent 'love of children' by paedophiles is contrasted with their real hate of children, while on the other hand, the innocence, nakedness and honour of children is opposed with the hate and the implied guilt of paedophiles.

Martin Amis, who has read all the books about Frederick West, one of which is Brian Masters's *She Must Have Known: Trial of Rosemary West* (cf. *Experience*, 63), characterises 'Frederick West [] [as a] childkiller, [a] seeder of nightmares' (*Experience*, 171n), as someone who 'lied as unstoppably as he stole.' (*Experience*, 196n) Furthermore, he notes that West had 'Quilpian eating habits' (*Experience*, 71). Despite the fact that West apparently had very bad teeth, which Martin Amis interprets as an unjust irony in view of his own dental problems, they seem to have been strong enough for the following procedures:

He would take the hind end off a loaf of bread and top it with a brick of cheese. He would stroll around the house eating an onion like you'd eat an apple. An onion? (*Experience*, 71)

Lucy Partington, by contrast is portrayed as an extraordinarily religious, spiritual (cf. *Experience*, 170-171) and ‘powerful’ (*Experience*, 149, emphasis original) person whose ‘presence was somehow infinitely self-sufficient and self-determining’ (*Experience*, 149). Apart from that, she ‘understood the innocence and mystery of animals, and she wrote about them with a clairvoyant eye, even as a child’ (*Experience*, 148). Thus, Lucy clearly and emphatically belongs to the realm of innocence, while West represents the extreme version of experience, i.e. guilt.

Throughout the whole book, Martin Amis keeps coming back to the wound of Lucy’s disappearance, as John Walsh observes in his review of *Experience*:

The ghastly fate of Lucy Partrington at the hands of Fred West spreads its icy fingers through all the book’s relationships, as if everything warm and domestic and safe were inevitably headed for risk and entropy. (Walsh, ‘Night Train through a Dark Wood’)

Lucy’s strong narrative presence in *Experience* is striking. It may be observed, for example how the image of Christmas being ‘a dark time in England’ (*Experience*, 52), which has already been cited in a different context is picked up again several chapters later, namely at the beginning of ‘Him Who Is, Him Who Was!’ (cf. *Experience*, 110-111). Here the author returns to the contrast between light and darkness; noting that St. Lucy’s Day is the shortest day of the year, he refigures Lucy’s disappearance with the help of the vanishing-light metaphor which he has used before. (cf. *Experience*, 52 and 110f.):

December 23 is now established as the shortest day – the year’s midnight. Lucy Partington disappeared on December 27. There was an energy crisis that year, and no street illumination that night. The year was 1973 but the darkness was seventeenth-century. (*Experience*, 111)

The contrast between light and darkness, personified by Lucy Partington and Frederick West respectively, is a variation of the all-informing oppositionality of innocence and experience. With regard to Lucy, the author notes that ‘[e]verything about her, even her name, pointed towards the light. Given this, I cannot find order or meaning in a darkness so deep and durable.’ (*Experience*, 172) While ‘Lucy was gentle, was kind, was sane’ (*Experience*, 61), Frederick West ‘had been a colossus of mendacity, the enemy and the opposite of truth.’ (*Experience*, 196) Martin Amis is unable to find a reason behind the fate that was inflicted upon his cousin; it is impossible for him to comprehend the circumstances that allowed such complete, diametrical opposites to meet, as the following quotation demonstrates:

My family cannot understand the extraordinary collision that allowed him to touch our lives, and I have no wish to prolong the contact. But he is here now, in my head; I want him exorcised. (*Experience*, 71)

In order to illustrate the total polarity between Lucy and West, and their respective mindsets of light and darkness, and in order to perform the exorcism, Martin Amis compares two pieces of writing with each other at the end of the chapter 'The Problem of Reentry':

The death of Lucy Partington represents a fantastic collision (collide: 'from *col-* "together" + *laedere* "to strike"). It is what happens when darkness meets light, when experience meets innocence, when the false meets the true, when utter godlessness meets purity of spirit, when this –

Hi May it your Dad Writeing to you. Or lette me have your telephone number...or Write to me as soon as you can, please may I have to sort out watt Mr Ogden did to me, my new Solicitors are Brilliant I Read What you sead about me in News of the that was loyalty you read what Scott canavan sead he had –

– meets this:

things are as big as you can make them –  
I can fill a whole body,  
a whole life  
with worry  
about a few words  
on one scrap of paper;  
yet the same evening,  
looking up,  
can frame my fingers  
to fit the sky  
in my cupped hands.

(*Experience*, 172)

As Joyce correctly notes, Martin Amis 'juxtaposes an articulate juvenile poem of Lucy's against a comically misspelled and Neolithic missive that the hideous West scratched out in his prison cell.' (Joyce) One critic, an unnamed reviewer in *Die Zeit*, maintains that the author's stylisation of the contrasts between innocence and experience, light and darkness, truth and lie represents literature's answer to an incomprehensible crime (cf. Anon., 'Alle Haben Geweint'). It is important to note that the death of Lucy Partington is not only a tragedy for the author and his family, because Lucy was only one of at least eleven victims. When the West murder series became known in March 1994, it had a huge public impact; it was a trauma that affected the whole of Great Britain, which is why the crimes of Frederick West are

not just ‘public knowledge’, but ‘*national* knowledge’ (*Experience*, 61, emphasis original).

On the one hand, Martin Amis writes about Frederick West because he needs to exorcise him from the orbit of his family and from his thoughts; on the other hand, however, his narration of Lucy’s fate represents a public rebuttal, because the media did not handle the subject responsibly. Martin explains that late in 1995, West’s interrogation tapes were played, and the press allowed his version to appear unchallenged. (cf. *Experience*, 72) Consequently, Lucy’s sister Marian campaigned against the press and ‘won a public rebuttal’ (*Experience*, 72). Martin Amis notes that his book, too ‘is a rebuttal’ (*Experience*, 72). As a writer, he feels the need to ‘confirm, solidify, perpetuate’ Marian’s rebuttal, [b]ecause otherwise these things are lost in the daily smudge of newsprint’ (*Experience*, 72). After quoting and criticising extracts of the newspaper coverage, in which it was said, inter alia, that Lucy and West had had an affair, the author reiterates the fact that he refutes both such claims and this style of journalism: ‘That is what it said, in the press, unchallenged. I rebut it. This book rebuts it.’ (*Experience*, 72)

As a structural principle, oppositionality is ubiquitous in *Experience*, which is why not all of the forms it takes can be analysed here. One may be tempted to think that this omnipresence of the contrast between innocence and experience paints a black-and-white picture, but this is not the case; on the contrary, through the numerous variations in which Martin Amis compares and distinguishes the realms of innocence and experience he adds many shades of colour and consequently never simplifies matters. As will be seen in the next section, the same complexity adheres to the second major structural principle, i.e. parallelism.

### 5.2.2. Parallelism

Similarly to oppositionality, parallelism is also omnipresent throughout *Experience*. Prefatorily, it is important to distinguish between two different categories within parallelism, namely *referential-thematic* parallelism and *thematic-structural* parallelism.

The first group comprises parallels which have been directly transferred from life to the page, which means that the parallelism exists *a priori*, as it derives from the narration of *inherently similar* events. Thus, referential-thematic parallelism comprises parallels in which similarity is already present in the nature of the events

themselves (in real life) and is only thematically mirrored in the text through the very fact that more than one such event is narrated.<sup>46</sup> Death and loss, for instance, constitute an important topic in Martin Amis's memoir because he has had to deal with the passing of many loved ones, such as Lucy Partington, Lamorna Heath, Bruno Fonseca, Sally Amis (his sister), and most importantly, Kingsley Amis. Through recounting his experiences regarding these various deaths, the author tells parallel tales of loss and bereavement, which – by accumulation – draw a general picture of death. Another example of referential-thematic parallelism in *Experience* is Martin's narration of the three sexual assaults he suffered as a child.<sup>47</sup>

The second category of parallelism, on the other hand, encompasses those parallels, in which a thematic aspect is reflected in the structure of the text, hence the self-explanatory term *thematic-structural*. The most prominent thematic-structural parallelism in *Experience* evolves from the relationship between Martin and his father Kingsley,<sup>48</sup> whose parallel development is narratively mirrored in the book with the help of two narrative techniques, namely *narrative oscillation* and *repetition*.

#### 5.2.2.1. Parallel lives: father and son

Martin and his father 'forged a strong, enduring bond of love' (Begley), and *Experience* is in part an act of filial commemoration (cf. Begley) triggered by Martin's experience of his father's death.<sup>49</sup> This 'father-son-ness at the heart of the book' (Rusbridger) is already established on the very first page of *Experience*.

Significantly, Martin Amis's memoir opens with the word 'Dad.' (*Experience*, 3) However, it is not spoken by Martin, as one may expect, but by the author's eleven-year-old son Louis. The child's utterance is followed by the father's reply – 'Yes?' (*Experience*, 3), which is itself ensued by a paragraph explaining how his own father would have responded: "Yeeess?" with a dip in it, to signal mild but invariable irritation.' (*Experience*, 3, emphasis original) (cf. Diederick, 181) As James Diederick observes in his monograph *Understanding Martin Amis*, '[t]his

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<sup>46</sup> Despite the fact that referential-thematic parallelism may be a fascinating object of study, it will not be discussed in detail here, as the focus of this thesis lies in narrative and structural analysis. Thus, the ensuing sections concentrate on the second group of parallelism, i.e. thematic-structural similarities.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. section 5.2.1.4.

<sup>48</sup> In section 5.1.2. the relationship between Amis père and fils has been identified as one of the three core themes of the memoir.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussion of Martin Amis's narrative motivation see also section 5.1.1.

opening precisely establishes the patriarchal focus and preoccupation of the memoir that follows.’ (Diederick, 181) But it does more than that; it also introduces the technique of *narrative oscillation* which the author uses throughout the whole book, constantly shifting the focus of the narration between Kingsley’s life and family on the one hand and Martin’s life and his own family on the other hand. (cf. Anon., ‘Alle Haben Geweint’) In order to demonstrate this pendular movement of the narration, the opening of *Experience* shall be quoted at length:

- Dad.

This was my older son, Louis, then aged eleven.

- Yes?

My dad would have said, ‘...Yeeeeess?’ – with a dip in it, to signal mild but invariable irritation. I once asked him why he did this and he said, ‘Well I’m already here, aren’t I?’ For him, the Dad-Yes? interlude was a clear redundancy, because we were already in the same room together and established as having some kind of conversation, however desultory (and unenlivening, from his point of view). I saw what he meant; but five minutes later I would brace myself for an especially vehement affirmative. I was a teenager until I broke the habit. Children need a beat of time, to secure attention while the thought is being framed.

This is from *I Like It Here* (1958), Kingsley’s third and most close-to-life novel:

‘Dad.’

‘Yes?’

‘How big’s the boat that’s taking us to Portugal?’

‘I don’t know really. Pretty big, I should think.’

‘As big as a killer whale?’

‘What? Oh yes, easily.’

‘As big as a blue whale?’

‘Yes, of course, as big as any kind of whale.’

‘Bigger?’

‘Yes, much bigger.’

‘How much bigger?’

‘Never you mind how much bigger. Just bigger is all I can tell you.’

There is a break, and the discussion resumes:

... ‘Dad.’

‘Yes?’

‘If two tigers jumped on a blue whale, could they kill it?’

‘Ah, but that couldn’t happen, you see. If the whale was in the sea the tigers would drown straight away, and if the whale was...’

‘But supposing they did jump on the whale?’

... ‘Oh, God. Well, I suppose the tigers’d kill the whale eventually, but it would take a very long time.’

‘How long would it take one tiger?’

‘Even longer. Now I’m not answering any more questions about whales or tigers.’

‘Dad.’

‘Oh, what is it now, David?’

‘If two sea-serpents...’

How well I remember those vastly stimulating chats. My tigers weren’t just ordinary tigers, either: they were sabre-toothed tigers. And the gladiatorial bouts I dreamed up were far more elaborate than *I Like It Here* allows. If two boa constrictors, four barracuda, three anacondas and a giant squid...I must have been five or six at the time.

In retrospect I can see that these questions would have played on my father’s deepest fears. Kingsley, who refused to drive and refused to fly, who couldn’t easily be alone in a bus, a train or a lift (or in a house, after dark), wasn’t exactly keen on boats – or sea-serpents. Besides, he didn’t want to go to Portugal, or anywhere else. The trip was forced on him by the terms and conditions of the Somerset Maugham Award – a ‘deportation order’ he called it in a letter to Philip Larkin (‘forced to go abroad, bloody *forced* mun’). He won the prize for his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, published in 1954. Twenty years later I would win it too. (*Experience*, 3)

*The Rachel Papers* appeared in mid-November, 1973. [...]

- Dad.

- Yes?

Louis and I were in the car- the locus of so many parental dealings, after a while, when the Chauffeuring years begin to stretch out ahead of you like an autobahn.

- If nothing else was changed by you not being famous, would you still want to be famous?

A well-executed question, I thought. He knew that fame was a necessary by-product of acquiring a readership. But apart from that? What? Fame is a worthless commodity. It will occasionally earn you some special treatment, if that’s what you’re interested in getting. It will also earn you a far more noticeable amount of hostile curiosity. I don’t mind that – but then I’m a special case. What tends to single me out for it also tends to inure me to it. In a word – Kingsley.

- I don’t think so, I answered.

- Why?

- Because it messes with the head.

And he took this in, nodding.

\* \* \*

(*Experience*, 3-5, emphases original)

From the very beginning of *Experience*, the narrator takes on the role of a teller-character: he quotes dialogues from both real life and fiction (Kingsley’s novel *I Like It Here*), cites a passage from a document (one of Kingsley’s letters to Philip Larkin), uses abstract language and concepts (cf. for instance ‘clear redundancy’, ‘commodity’ and ‘fame’), and emphasises the remembering process with the help of mnemonic expressions (cf. ‘I remember’, ‘In retrospect’). Consequently, it can be inferred that the narrative distance in this passage is considerable and that the



narrating self dominates over the experiencing self. Furthermore, the narrator asserts his strong presence by means of the above-mentioned technique of narrative oscillation: The opening conversation between Martin and his son Louis prompts the narrator to recall the conversations he had with his father when he was a child. These memories are followed by a long quotation from *I Like It Here* (1958) and a comparative analysis of the dialogue between the fictitious David and his father on the one hand and the real-life conversations between Martin and Kingsley on the other hand. The trip to Portugal from *I Like It Here* seems to have been inspired by real life events, as Martin later informs us that his family went there after Kingsley had won the Somerset Maugham Award for his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, in 1954. After drawing a parallel between himself and his father by referring to the fact that he won the very same prize for his own first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in 1973, there is a break and the narrative focus shifts back to the original conversation between Martin and Louis: the author repeats the initial Dad-Yes? interlude<sup>50</sup> (cf. *Experience*, 5), and continues their exchange. Similarly to David in *I Like It Here* (and, by inference, to Martin as a child), Louis asks multiple questions and his father answers them dutifully. Their conversation is interrupted again by some general thoughts about fame, which brings the narrator's attention back to Kingsley for a short moment, but then the dialogue is resumed.

The unnamed reviewer of the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, who also observes the shifts between Martin's and Kingsley's respective lives and families in the opening of *Experience*, notes that this oscillation of the narrative focus, which structurally implements the father-son theme, continues in bigger circles throughout the whole book. (cf. Anon., 'Alle Haben Geweint') Through these ongoing narrative shifts, *Experience* features the parallel development of a father and a son: While Kingsley declines from middle age – his prime as a family patriarch – to his final physical incapacitation and 'awkward lurch towards death' (Ferguson), Martin progresses 'from adolescence [...] to the double edged rewards of early middle age: success, fatherhood, self-knowledge, new teeth' (Ferguson). The parallel between Martin and his father's respective developments is of course not absolute: in one sense, it is an example of inverted symmetry, as *Experience* features Martin's and Kingsley's respective *first* and *last* halves of life. Nevertheless, the similarities are undeniably striking; Kingsley's development ends with illness and death, while

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<sup>50</sup> The Dad-Yes? interlude is again repeated on pages 15 and 16 in *Experience*.

Martin's maturation from the pretentious, youthful Osric to a renowned middle-aged writer is completed by his own physical crisis and a heightened *awareness* about death: Martin painfully gains his insights about the fugacity of human existence from his mid-life crisis.<sup>51</sup> His lifelong dental problems, which culminate in the loss of all his teeth and painful dental reconstruction, constitute an important part of his mid-life crisis. Following the painful extraction of his upper teeth, the author voices his feelings of desperation in face of his new physical reality:

Hopelessly compromised and contingent, my lower teeth were still there. But in the new space above them, impossible to misidentify, was a darkness, a void, a tunnel that led all the way to my extinction. (*Experience*, 85)

As this quotation illustrates, Martin Amis's dental trauma, which parallels Kingsley's final illness, leaves him with a new awareness and a fear of death. Unsurprisingly, this anxiety about human fugacity is greatly magnified by his father's death. Gavin Keulks identifies '[d]eath and absence [as] the existential fulcrums upon which *Experience* rests' (Keulks, 219), and observes how the subject of Kingsley's death is repeated in two different contexts of the book: In the first chapter, Martin describes the void his father's passing created within him:

Someone is no longer here. The intercessionary figure, the father, the man who stands between the son and death, is no longer here; and it won't ever be the same. He is missing. (*Experience*, 7)

In the second part of *Experience*, this idea is taken up again and elaborated just before Martin describes Kingsley's final moments:

It is 1995 and he has been there since 1949. The intercessionary figure is now being effaced, and there's nobody there between you and extinction. Death is nearer, reminding you that there is much to be done. There are children to be raised and books to be written. You have got work to do. (*Experience*, 345)

Here, the technique of repetition is used both to give emphasis to the passage/s and to make a connection between the two extracts. Despite the fact that over three hundred pages lie between the first and the second mentioning of the phrase 'The intercessionary figure', the reader knows immediately that Martin is talking about his father; furthermore, the word 'death' also reoccurs in the second extract. Within the first quotation, the phrase 'is no longer here' is reiterated, and the phrases 'there's', 'there is' and 'There are' also qualify as repetitions.

The relationship between Amis père and fils owes a great deal of its strength to the fact that they have taken similar decisions in life: Not only does Martin follow

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<sup>51</sup> Also see section 5.1.1. on Martin Amis's mid-life crisis.

into his father's professional footsteps by becoming a novelist himself,<sup>52</sup> but his path is also analogous to his father's with regard to one important aspect of his private life: both Kingsley and Martin leave their respective wives for another woman when their children are still young. Because Martin experienced the pain of his parents' divorce as a teenager, he is painfully aware of the emotional consequences his separation has on his sons. Knowing that his father is the only one who can fully understand what he is going through, Martin turns to Kingsley for solace (cf. Kakutani). In a moving passage about Kingsley's and his own experiences with divorce, Martin describes how his father supports him through this difficult phase after he has left Antonia Phillips:

‘Stopping being married to someone,’ he [Kingsley, *annot.*] had written, ten years earlier, ‘is an incredibly violent thing to happen to you, not easy to take in completely, ever.’ He knew I was now absorbing the truth and the force of this. And he knew also that the process could not be softened or hastened. All you could do was survive it. That surviving was a possibility he showed me, by example. But he did more. He roused himself and did more. ‘Talk as much as you want about it or as little as you want’: these words sounded like civilization to me, in my barbarous state, so dishevelled in my body and mind. Talk as much or as little...I talked much. Only to him could I confess how terrible I felt, how physically terrible, bemused, subnormalised, stupefied from within, and always about to flinch or tremble from the effort of making my face look honest, kind, sane. Only to him could I talk about what I was doing to my children. Because he had done it to me.

And he responded, and he closed that circle: his last fatherly duty. (*Experience*, 99)

The various repetitions that occur in this extract (‘He knew’ – ‘And he also knew’, ‘survive’ – ‘Surviving’, ‘did more’ – ‘did more’, “‘Talk as much [...] or as little[...]” – ‘Talk as much or as little...’, ‘Only to him could I’ – ‘Only to him could I’, ‘terrible’ – ‘terrible’, ‘And he’ – ‘And he’) are used both for the effect of emphasis and to draw attention to the parallel experiences of Kingsley's and Martin's divorces. When Martin Amis has to go through the process of divorce, it ‘deepens [his] bond with his father’ (Diederick, 184). While Martin learns to understand what Kingsley first went through in the 1960s when he separated from his first wife Hilly and again in the 1980s when his second wife Elizabeth Jane Howard left him, he can also fully forgive his father for causing a childhood trauma with his departure from

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<sup>52</sup> The notion of a father and a son both being successful writers is already introduced in the opening with the discussion about the Somerset Maugham Award. Different aspects of this professional parallelism between Kingsley and Martin is taken up again and again throughout *Experience*. Note, for example, the repetition which symbolises this similarity in their lives in the following sentence towards the end of the first chapter: ‘He was a writer and I am a writer’ (*Experience*, 7).

the family and expresses his gratitude for his father's support through this difficult phase.

#### 5.2.2.2. Repetition in other contexts

Repetition has been analysed here on an exemplary basis within the father-son theme, but this is not the only thematic context in which Martin Amis makes use of this device. In fact, he applies repetition with regard to all kinds of topics and on both the level of macro- and microstructure. In Martin's long discussion about his dental problems, for example, repetition plays an important role: Throughout his memoir, Martin spends a lot of time in the dentist's chair, and the recurrence of these medical sessions is echoed by the fact that the phrase 'the hands of Mike Szabatura' is repeated time and again (cf. 76 (twice), 84 (twice), 85, 113, 337). Furthermore, the author uses repetition to emphasise the importance of certain events, such as the moment when he is thirteen years old and learns from the Welsh house keeper Eva Garcia that his father has an affair with a 'Fancy Woman'<sup>53</sup> (*Experience*, 100, emphasis original).

- You know your father's got this fancy woman up in London, don't you?

- No. I didn't know.

My informant was Eva Garcia (pronounced Gahcia). [...] Eva was terrible and great; she was one of the divinities of my childhood, and so it was quite right, I suppose, that she should be the one to end it, at a stroke, with that sinister sentence... (*Experience*, 104)

The conversation continues a page later, after some general information about Eva and her role as the family's nanny in Swansea:

- No. I didn't know.

[...]

- Has he really?

She addressed me with the narrowed stare and flat smile of reckoning I remembered from my childhood in the valleys. She said gauntly,

- Ooh aye.

(*Experience*, 105)

This cruelly casual moment, which ends Martin's childhood and introduces him to the realm of experience, constitutes an 'emotional watershed in Martin's life' (Diederick, 183), a wound to which he keeps returning (cf. *Experience* 104, 105, 129, 142). As the author notes some thirty pages after the first narration of this crucial moment, 'Eva Garcia ('You know your father's got this fancy woman up in London...Ooh aye') hoisted me out of my childhood, in Cambridge in 1963.'

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Jane Howard.

(*Experience*, 129) Abruptly, Martin's innocence is destroyed by a single question, but he also observes that

[i]t was not Eva's fault, of course, but [...] her peculiarly Welsh privilege, in Cambridge, in 1963, to tell me that all this was over. The first act was over. Only when I came to write the present book did I realise how much I lost and how far I fell in the course of that brief sentence: 'You know your father...?' Childhood, the grandparents, the Partingtons, the village, the animals, the garden, innocence, even Eva herself: all wiped out. (*Experience*, 142)

The author's continuous employment of the technique of repetition has an important effect on the structure and the language of *Experience*, which is very stylised and at times seems even poetic. James Diederick also observes how this poetic quality is created through repetition: '*Experience* is a profoundly literary book', he writes. '[E]schewing chronology, it employs the poetry of recurrence and return to deepen its themes' (Diederick, 182). Joan Acocella, whom Diederick cites, goes even one step further and compares *Experience* to 'a Symbolist poem', because '[t]he great points are made not symphonically but by accumulation' (Acocella, 186, as cited in Diederick, 183).

### **5.3. From microstructure back to macrostructure**

#### 5.3.1. The role of the narrator

It has been demonstrated throughout the previous sections of this chapter that Martin Amis takes on a very active role as a narrator. In the truest sense of Stanzel's use of the term, Martin is a 'teller-character' (Stanzel, 144), for he constantly displays an acute awareness of the narrative communication process, within which he self-knowingly functions as a 'transmitter' who conveys information to a 'receiver,' the reader' (Stanzel, 146): he frequently cites documents (mostly letters and works of literature), comments on his own narration, and eschews chronology by continuously performing fast-paced, ingenious shifts between scenes and narrative foci; occasionally, he even addresses the 'gentle reader' (*Experience*, 45) and allows the audience precious insights into his narrative techniques. In the following quotation, for example, he openly discusses the reason behind his use of parallels and footnotes:

My organisational principles [...] derive from an inner urgency, and from the novelist's addiction to seeing parallels and making connections. The method, plus the use of footnotes (to preserve the collateral thought), should give a clear view of the geography of a writer's mind. If the effect sometimes seems

staccato, tangential, stop-go, etc., then I can only say that that's what it's like, on my side of the desk. (*Experience*, 7)

Footnotes are a standard technique in *academic* writing, but only very rarely occur in *creative* texts. In *Experience*, they accompany the running text from start to finish, functioning as a 'constant bottom-of-the-page descant to the main action' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood'); it is not uncommon to find as many as three footnotes on a single page in Martin Amis's memoir, and sometimes they even spread to the next page. As John Walsh observes in his review of *Experience*, the sub-plots Martin unravels in his footnotes are 'full of chatty bits and pieces, family details, literary nods' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood'). The author uses this 'profusion of asterisks, daggers, double daggers, gloss and cross-reference' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood') as a tool to create a separate space for minor details such as 'another memory that doesn't actually belong in the real text' (Amis, Martin. Interview. 'January Experiences Martin Amis'). This 'grading system' between 'primary interest' and 'secondary interest' (Amis, Martin. Interview. 'January Experiences Martin Amis') makes sure that the flow of the main narrative is not obstructed by long digressions within parentheses or dashes in the running text; furthermore, it echoes the dense complexity of the author's thought processes and reflects the mindboggling simultaneity with which multiple memories present themselves in the human mind (cf. Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood').

In texts written in the first-person narrative situation, the relationship between the two personas of the narrator, i.e. the narrating and the experiencing selves, is determined by the *mode* of the narration. Within the concept of narrative mode, Stanzel distinguishes between overt mediacy of narration (telling) and covert mediacy of narration (showing), which creates the illusion of immediacy in the reader. (cf. Stanzel, 141) As far as the figure of the *narrator* is concerned,

[t]he opposition mode [ ] refers to the contrast between transmission by a teller-character and transmission by a reflector-character, or between teller and reflector, for short. (Stanzel, 144)

While a teller-character informs, records and, most importantly, *narrates* by making the communication process overt, a reflector-character never verbalises his perceptions, feelings and thoughts in an effort to communicate them. (cf. Stanzel, 144) In contrast to a teller, a reflector never *narrates*, but only 'reflects, that is, he mirrors events of the outer world in his consciousness, perceives, feels, registers, but

always *silently*' (Stanzel, 144, emphasis added). In the first-person narrative context, the function of the teller-character is common to those kinds of protagonists in whom the narrating self is clearly visible. By contrast, protagonists who are 'actualized only as an experiencing self, and who therefore restrict themselves to the reflection of experiences not overtly communicated, are reflector-characters.' (Stanzel, 145)

From the insights we have gained so far it can doubtless be asserted that the author-narrator-protagonist of *Experience* functions as a teller-character. Too emphatic and self-aware is his narrative presence, too discernible and prominent the narrating self to assume anything else. However, in some passages throughout the book, Martin Amis steps out of his role of the wise, lucid narrator, and does not view his experiencing self from a distance and with self-knowledge. The relevant passages, in which the narrative distance between the two selves of the narrator is considerably reduced, all deal with events from the period of the author's mid-life crisis around 1994 and 1995.

In Part One of the memoir, most of these sections where the narrating self loses its 'privilege over the experiencing self' (Cohn, 151) are concerned with the subject of the author's teeth. In the following passage, which is an example of the withdrawal of the narrator, Martin Amis sits in the dentist's chair, facing the imminent extraction of his upper teeth:

Millie [the dental assistant, *annot.*] stands by with her secondary implements. The smocked shoulders of Mike Szabatura [the dentist, *annot.*] bend into their work. First the sour tweakings and piercings of the jabs, one after another (twelve, fifteen?), until my eyes seem to be brimming with them. Next Mike Szabatura produces the deep plastic horseshoe and starts lining it with the potent adhesive. A civilised pause as we wait for things to solidify, things to liquefy.

Goodbye. Goodbye. This is goodbye. You hated me. I hated you. I loved you. Be gone. Stay! Goodbye. I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you. Goodbye.

The hands of Mike Szabatura, with the horseshoe now wedged against my palate, bear down, and tug. In the rhythmical creaking something gives and something catches. My right forefinger flickers up to indicate the right canine: unwilling to abjure its talent for pain, this tooth will fight to the very end. Another trio of injections. And Millie is close, with her rinser, her vacuum-cleaner, her masked face. Another San Andreas of wrenching and tearing – of ecstatic sundering.

- Wait. Your teeth are still there.

I cannot control my tongue which dances up to meet the dangling bridge. Something light drops on to it – a piece of severed root – and slithers off sideways. The aromatic hands of Mike Szabatura are now exerting decisive force. And it is gone – the gory remnant whisked from my sight like some terrible misadventure from the Delivery room.

Clearly and firmly I said,  
- I find I can talk.  
(*Experience*, 84f.)

In this quotation, the voice of the narrator is not discernible; the person who says goodbye to his teeth is the one in the dentist's chair rather than the one in front of his computer writing the memoir. What is so striking in this extract is that both the past *and the present tense* belong to the experiencing self.<sup>54</sup> As Dorrit Cohn informs us, this specific use of the present tense is called 'historical, or narrative present', but in a first-person context she prefers the term '“evocative” present' (Cohn, 198); it represents a 'peculiar grammatical make-believe' in which "the speaker, as it were, forgets all about time and recalls what he is recounting as vividly as if it were before his eyes" (Jespersen, 239, as cited in Cohn, 198). Even though this evocative present must logically refer to a past experience, [it] momentarily creates an illusory ('as if') coincidence of two time-levels, literally 'evoking' the narrated moment at the moment of narration. (Cohn, 198)

Through this 'apparent synchronization' (Cohn, 198) of two time levels generated by the evocative present as exemplified in the above-quoted passage from Martin Amis's 'gruesome dental saga' (Catmull), the author temporarily switches from dissonant to consonant self-narration. Thus, the narrative distance between the two selves is bridged because Martin presents his painful experience of the tooth extraction 'without corrective hindsight' (Cohn, 157). It is not until the very end of this extract that the narrator reappears, as the experiencing self is directly quoted ('Clearly and firmly I said, - I find I can talk.');

this use of direct discourse announces the return of the narrator. Through the author's employment of the evocative present tense, the reader is brought extremely close to the scene and feels as if he or she were experiencing the agonising dental treatment side by side with the protagonist. Instead of *telling* us about this ordeal by giving an analytic description of the event, Martin Amis really *shows* us what it is like to have your teeth extracted by letting us perceive it through his eyes.

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<sup>54</sup> By contrast, in passages where the voice of the narrator is clearly discernible, the present tense is assigned to the *narrating self* so it can distance itself from the actions, thoughts and feelings of the experiencing self. In the following quotation, for example, the present tense clearly belongs to the narrating self, as the narrator voices an opinion in essayistic fashion: 'I claim that a writer is three things: literary being, innocent, everyman. Well, this thought was *all* everyman. Not every man will have to see what I saw; but every man will think this if he does' (*Experience*, 85, emphasis original). The thought the author is talking about here refers to how the hollow space in his mouth, where his upper teeth had been, made him aware of death.



In the second chapter of Part Two, '2: One Little More Hug', which deals with the final illness and death of Martin's father Kingsley, the passages where the experiencing self takes centre stage are much more frequent than anywhere else in *Experience*. On first sight, the structure of this chapter does not differ from the other chapters in Martin's memoir, as the author continues to make temporal digressions and to include footnotes and quotations. If one takes a closer look, however, one notices that '2: One Little More Hug' has a unique diaristic quality. Not only does Martin Amis frequently quote his private notebook,<sup>55</sup> but the whole chapter reads like a diary itself: paragraphs are often introduced by extremely short sentences that only give the date or the day of the week, as one would do in a diary entry.<sup>56</sup>

Sunday, 17 September. I have just learned how Kingsley spent Saturday night. He was, as my mother said, 'very active'. Whereas I can feel the essential family flaw – passivity – seeping over the rest of us. Mum is a ghost. Shouldn't I be the strong one? Kingsley needs to go to hospital. I don't want to frighten him. I don't want him to frighten me.

Who is in charge? Where's the doctor? His bowel specialist will not make housecalls – he is too grand, too gastroenteritic. We are reduced to looking in the Yellow Pages – for the jobbers and cowboys. Mum got a quote for a home visit: sixty quid... We are an articulate family but we are heading towards speechlessness. We are doing what Kingsley is doing. We are becoming speechless. (*Experience*, 302)

While autobiography is a public text, a diary is usually a private document not intended for publication (cf. Randall, 148); thus, the author-narrator-protagonist of an autobiography communicates with his audience, whereas a diarist first and foremost communicates with his or her own self and is consequently often engaged in an inner monologue. As we can see in the above-cited passage, *Experience*, which is obviously a published autobiography, includes diaristic elements. Apart from the dating at the beginning and the use of the evocative present, this passage contains

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. the following passage:

Here is a notebook entry for Wednesday, 27 September:

K's agitation. Some internal psychodrama that he will never say anything about you or anyone else. He hasn't got the words. Though he might do it on the page, if he gets back.

This is strenuous moonshine. He wasn't coming back. Words and memories were leaving him: like banks of lights and switches, sighing as they closed down.

(*Experience*, 319f.)

Also note that Martin Amis occasionally includes notebook entries in Part One of the memoir (cf. *Experience*, 204, 205, 209, 236 and 237).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. 'A week later.' (297), 'Sunday, 17 September.' (302), 'Wednesday, 20 September.' (313), 'Sunday, 24 September.' (319), 'Tuesday, 3 October.' (323), 'Saturday, 7 October.' (325), 'Thursday, 12 October.' (339), 'Tuesday, 17 October.' (346), 'Friday.' (351), 'Saturday.' (351), 'Sunday.' (353).

three rhetorical questions, which indicate that Martin is trying to make sense of and handle the situation of his father's imminent death.<sup>57</sup>

If we recall Stanzel's definition of narrative distance as 'the temporal and psychological distance' (Stanzel, 95) that separates 'the two phases of the narratorial 'I' (Stanzel, 212f.), it is not surprising that the gap between the narrating and the experiencing selves is bridged in those passages in *Experience* that deal with the author's dental trauma and his father's death. Martin Amis started undergoing dental reconstruction in 1994, and his father passed away in 1995; *Experience* was published in 2000, which means that a maximum of five years lie between the occurrence and the narration of those events. In relation to the fifty years the book covers overall,<sup>58</sup> this is very little time. As a general rule, the narrative distance becomes smaller or larger depending on how much time and learning lies between the moment of experience and the narrative act. Stanzel points out that 'confusion and lack of orientation of experience' become an integral part of the narrative process if the narrator 'has not yet attained this distance from the experiencing self of the surveyed life or has attained it only partially' (Stanzel, 214). The closer the experiencing self stands to the narrating self temporally, the more limited is the power of 'memory as a catalyst capable of clarifying the substance of experience' (Stanzel, 214).

In *Experience*, the narrative distance is narrower in passages about events from the author's mid-life crisis in 1994-1995 than in sections dealing with Osric's adventures. This does not mean, however, that the gap between the two selves of the narrator becomes smaller and smaller as the narration progresses. Even though *Experience* features the process of Martin Amis's maturation, his development is not

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<sup>57</sup> With regard to life writing theory, it is interesting that Martin Amis imitates the notebook form only in connection to his father's illness and death. As Bryony Randall informs us in her article 'Britain: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Diaries' in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, there is a specific form of diary writing called illness diary. (cf. Randall, 149) In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Randall observes a striking increase in 'illness diaries, particularly those with terminal illnesses' (Randall, 149). Even though Randall's use of the term illness diary refers to a diary written by the sufferer rather than a person close to the patient, the following argument appears to be relevant in context with Martin's diary of his father's final weeks. If a diary records someone's terminal illness, it is 'written with the mortality of the author very much in mind. The diary as a genre is particularly suited to such life stories where chronology is crucial; the specific duration of the illness and the timing of its development is recorded in detail since much of the purpose of such texts is to express the importance of time for those who are only too acutely aware that their own is limited.' (Randall, 149f.) As Martin Amis has to watch his father die, his time is limited too, and his acute awareness of the fact that he is running out of time to spend with his dying father is registered in *Experience* through the imitation of the notebook form.

<sup>58</sup> *Experience* deals with the first fifty years of Martin Amis's life, i.e. from shortly after his birth in 1949 to 1999, when he was writing his memoir.

traced chronologically. As the author tacks and darts at the various stages of his life, he contracts and expands the narrative distance according to the momentary focus of the narration. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that, predominantly, *Experience* is a highly self-conscious and literary book. However, by interspersing the prevailing mode of dissonant self-narration with passages of consonant self-narration, Martin Amis adds nuance to the narrative texture of *Experience*. The occasional withdrawal of the narrator grants the experiencing self recurrent moments of independence and allows the reader precious insights into the history of the author's self.

### 5.3.2. Generic hybridity

The structural complexity resulting from Martin Amis's ingenious employment of narrative techniques makes it difficult to assign *Experience* to a single generic category. Indeed, *Experience* is 'not an autobiography in any strict sense' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood'), but 'a hybrid' (Diederick, 181), as it incorporates elements of various literary genres. One major generic ingredient that adds to the book's hybridity is biography: Apart from tracing the author's own development from childhood to age fifty, *Experience* includes a moving memoir about Lucy's fate and, most significantly, an extended portrait of the author's father, 'the irascible Sir Kingsley' (Begley). It would be a simplification, however, to claim that Martin writes a biography of his father *within* his own autobiography, because he interweaves his own and his father's life stories rather than telling them separately. Furthermore, Martin Amis does not give a complete account of Kingsley's life, but concentrates on his *relationship* with his father as both a son and a writer. In her study of postmodern autobiography, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gudmundsdóttir claims that autobiographies in which the narrator writes about his or her parent's life create a unique generic scenario. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 190) These texts are necessarily hybrids, as they neither fully comply with the conventions of autobiography nor biography. The parent-child relationship informs these autobiographies both thematically and structurally, she maintains, for the lives of the narrator and his subject 'are so intertwined, the nature of family history is such that [...] the perspective inevitably shifts back and forth from autobiography to biography.' (Gudmundsdóttir, 190). Viewing the conflation of autobiography and biography in a more general light,

Eakin remarks in *How Our Lives Become Stories* that the type of autobiography in which the writer dedicates a considerable part of the text to telling someone else's story has blossomed in late twentieth century life writing. He notes that modern-day autobiographers demonstrate an increasing awareness of the fact that '[i]dentity [...] is always negotiated interpersonally, relationally' (Eakin, *How*, 40) and that 'the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others' (Eakin, *How*, 43). In order to provide a theoretical tool for the analysis of this trend in modern autobiography, Eakin comes up with a new sub-genre, classifying autobiographies which highlight the relational dimension between individuals as *relational autobiographies* (cf. Eakin, *How*, 85) or *relational lives* (cf. Eakin, *How*, 69).

Since Martin Amis both commemorates his father and features their parallel developments in his memoir, *Experience* clearly falls into this category of the relational life. Apart from biography and the relational life, the book contains two more generic ingredients, namely the diary and the letter: As we have seen in the preceding sections, *Experience* incorporates both diary entries and letters,<sup>59</sup> and the second chapter of Part Two of the book, '2: One Little More Hug' echoes the structure of a notebook. Furthermore, certain passages throughout the book create the impression that *Experience* is a private 'letter to his family and closest friends' (Wood). This resemblance to the genre of the letter is particularly emphasised when 'at times the apostrophing word 'you' crops up in the text' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood'). This 'you' (*Experience*, 125, 155, 182, 199, 208, 210) refers to the dedicatee of Martin's autobiography, i.e. his second wife Isabel Fonseca.<sup>60</sup> Due to these sudden, unexpected switches from the first to the second person, it feels 'as if the whole 400-page cat's cradle of reminiscence were an extended appeal for understanding' (Walsh, 'Night Train through a Dark Wood') devoted to Martin's wife. Another reviewer, Katherine Catmull, also makes this connection between the apostrophing 'you' and Isabel Fonseca. To Catmull, the passages where the author 'addresses himself to 'you'' are especially 'deeply felt moments' (Catmull) which strengthen and deepen the book: 'These odd, daring shifts startle like sudden small

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<sup>59</sup> Apart from Osric's college correspondence, Martin includes and quotes other letters too (e.g. a letter to Julian Barnes, the fictive letter to his aunt Miggy or his father's letters).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. 'That night you came bellydancing out of the bathroom wearing (a) *your* silk bathrobe and (b) my teeth. Both were then removed. This was the war against shame.' (*Experience*, 125, emphasis added) This passage refers to the day on which Martin Amis first got his dental prosthesis, with which he felt very uncomfortable.

explosions – but something softer than explosions: like a tenderness bursting into bud. (Catmull)

Despite the fact that Martin Amis conflates so many different genres, *Experience* does at no point seem awkwardly pieced together. On the contrary, this generic complexity in no way hinders the narrative flow of the book, for Martin manages to interweave the generic components with remarkable elegance.

#### 5.4. Reception and personal reflection

The photograph on the cover of *Experience* shows Martin Amis as a small child, holding a cigarette in his mouth and staring fiercely at the camera.<sup>61</sup> The illegal act of a young boy smoking (or its allusion) echoes the author's media image as the enfant terrible of English Literature. Thus, the angry look Martin gives in this picture is directed at the British press, and he continues to glare ferociously at The Fourth Estate throughout his memoir. In fact, part of Martin's motivation for writing *Experience* originates from his desire to settle accounts with the press<sup>62</sup> and its notoriously bad treatment of his person. Despite the fact that he severely criticises the media in *Experience*, the book was – surprisingly – predominantly well received. Upon first publication in 2000, however, it 'once again kicked up the sulphur of disdain' (Brown, Allan); early reviews of Martin's memoir criticise the passages describing Lucy's death. Alleging that Martin did in fact not know Lucy as well as he claims, they accuse him of utilising her tragic fate as a means of increasing book sales and impute that his hurt and anger about her death is contrived. (cf. Ferguson) Later reviews, by contrast, are more lenient concerning Martin's treatment of Lucy's death, conceding that '[t]hese passages add spirit and nuance' (Ferguson). Ferguson, for example, does not see why Martin's display of anger should be manufactured:

And yes, the anger Amis exudes can seem at times more of a writerly than a cousinly anger – but it's still anger, hot and glinting, and his job is, after all, to be a writer, not a cousin, so why on earth not? (Ferguson)

Putting the criticism about Lucy's death aside, most reviewers unanimously agree that *Experience* is a literary masterpiece, commending Martin Amis not only for his writerly expertise, but also for his emotional openness. Ferguson, for

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<sup>61</sup> See Appendix II.

<sup>62</sup> Also see section 5.1.1.

example, praises *Experience* as a ‘unique tale, consummately told, of age, change, filial love and mortality’ (Ferguson), in which ‘[t]he spirit of honesty lunges at you’ (Ferguson). Reviewers are particularly impressed by how Martin Amis recaptures a certain degree of innocence in a memoir which is haunted by the unavoidable loss, betrayal and pain inherent in human life (cf. Diederick, 192). At some point in *Experience*, Martin Amis remarks with amazement of his mother that, by some miracle, she regained her innocence after experience had come upon her: ‘My mother was innocent. Then experience came, and she experienced it. And then she got her innocence back again. I have always wondered how she did that.’ (*Experience*, 106) Through the writing of this memoir, Martin manages to perform a similar miracle: In the face of death and loss, *Experience* surprises the reader by preserving a spirit of reconciliation and recompense. (cf. Keulks, 223) As Katherine Catmull writes in her review,

somehow innocence meets experience and yet becomes innocence again. His marriage dies, father dies; but a new marriage and a new child are born. A face is rebuilt and becomes his face. (Catmull)

In 2001, *Experience* was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Nonfiction, and it is now generally recognised as Martin’s finest work yet. (cf. Diederick, 182n, and Brown, Allan). This ‘fluidly structured meditation on love and loss’ (Adams) is a very moving book, ripping right into the heart of its readers. Moreover, *Experience* is a work of remarkable artistry. Through amalgamating and conflating various literary genres and narrative techniques, it expertly ‘navigate[s] the shadowed alleys and sinuous canals of memory’ (Keulks, 205). Martin Amis does not hide behind the ‘highly structured, deeply patterned aestheticism’ (Keulks, 205) he displays in *Experience*, instead utilising it as an instrument to ‘allow[] the reader access to some of the most private recesses of [his] mind’ (Keulks, 207). Thus, *Experience* evokes an image of the author’s self that resembles a palimpsest, made up from countless layers of memory and experience.

## 6. Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream: A Memoir* (2002)

### 6.1. Macrostructure: narrative approach and structural design

Having published thirteen novels and several books in other genres, Elizabeth Jane Howard is a successful and established writer. However, she 'shares a common fate with many women, in that she is better known for her attachment to a famous man than for her own achievements.' (Merritt) Despite the fact that several of her novels have been made into films, most notably the 'Cazalet Chronicle', a series of four novels about family life in Britain during the Second World War, more people undoubtedly know her for her affair and subsequent marriage to Sir Kingsley Amis than could name any of her books. (cf. Merritt) Due to the heavy news coverage of their relationship as well as its fairly recent discussion in the three biographies about Kingsley,<sup>63</sup> his son Martin's memoir, *Experience* (2000) and Kingsley's *Letters* (2000) this literary couple is not only familiar to those readers with a special interest in the arts, but in fact to most people in Great Britain. In her autobiography, *Slipstream*, which was published in 2002, Elizabeth Jane Howard gives *her* side of the story, describing her eighteen-year relationship with Kingsley from their first encounter at the Cheltenham Literary Festival in 1962 (cf. *Slipstream*, 334) to their break-up in 1980 and subsequent divorce in 1983. Contrary to Kingsley, who hardly features Jane in his *Memoirs* (1991) as he never overcame his resentment towards her caused by her departure, Jane paints a forgiving, in-depth picture of her third husband and their marriage. Despite the fact that a considerable amount of text-time is devoted to that part of Jane's life in her autobiography, however, *Slipstream* is much more than the account of a literary marriage and its slow implosion; in fact, it covers a remarkable time span of almost eighty years, tracing the author's development from shortly after her birth in 1923 to the point just before the book's publication in 2002.

As reviewers have observed, *Slipstream* is 'an old-fashioned kind of memoir, recalling a long life of privilege and impressive connections' (Merritt). Due to its strict chronological structure, *Slipstream* is by far the most traditional autobiography out of the three works discussed in this thesis. Preceded by a preface and a "cast of

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<sup>63</sup> Eric Jacobs's *Kingsley Amis: A Biography* (1995), Richard Bradford's *Lucky Him: The Life of Kingsley Amis* (2001), and Zachary Leader's *The Life of Kingsley Amis* (2006).

characters' that reads like a who's who of the postwar art, theatre and literary worlds' (Merritt), the book falls into four parts:<sup>64</sup>

Featuring her wealthy but isolated middle-class upbringing, Part One starts with Jane's first memory and ends with her wedding to Peter Scott, the naturalist and wildlife painter (and son of the Antarctic explorer) in 1942. Part Two deals with the author's struggles as a wife and mother – her daughter Nicola was born in 1943 – and her decision to leave her family in order to become a writer, which constitutes one of the three most important turning points in the book. Parts Two and Three consequently allow insights into Jane's efforts of making a living as a woman writer, which were repeatedly obstructed by financial pressures and lack of time due to her various jobs as a model for *Vogue*, books reviewer, and TV correspondent. Apart from information about her career, Parts Two and Three also give a detailed account of Jane's unhappy love life – her many affairs with married men, especially her relationships with Romain Gary, Laurie Lee, Arthur Koestler and Cecil Day-Lewis, and her brief second marriage to Jim Douglas-Henry, the Australian correspondent and writer of ghost stories. While still married to Jim, Jane fell in love with Kingsley after first meeting him at the Cheltenham Literary Festival in 1962, of which she was director (cf. *Slipstream*, 334); this incident, which led to her third marriage, represents the second significant turning point of her life. Part Three describes Jane's relationship with Kingsley from its beginning as '*a coup de foudre*' (*Experience*, 33, emphasis original) to many years of happy marriage and its slow disintegration in the late nineteen-seventies, closing with their move from Lemmons, their large Georgian country estate in Hadley Common, which Jane ran by herself, to Gardnor House in Hampstead. Finally, Part Four outlines the last few years of Jane and Kingsley's crumbling marriage up to her decision to leave him in 1980, which is the third turning point of this autobiography. After her breakup with Kingsley, Jane slowly regained her energy and had a lot more time to write, which led to her long-awaited financial breakthrough as a writer: the 'Cazalet Chronicle',<sup>65</sup> which she published in a period of only seven years, finally made her rich. With regard to the author's private life, Part Four includes a frightful episode occurring in her early seventies: after a TV appearance, she received a letter from a fan declaring his interest in her. After extended letters on both sides she met him and fell in love with him, but he

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<sup>64</sup> Part One consists of eleven, Part Two of fourteen, Part Three of thirteen, and Part Four of seven chapters. Both the four parts, and the forty-five chapters overall are unnamed.

<sup>65</sup> *The Light Years* (1988), *Marking Time* (1991), *Confusion* (1993), and *Casting Off* (1995).



turned out to be a conman. Due to the fact that she has since made a novel out of this incident, *Falling* (1999), she does not go into detail, instead describing the pleasures and pains of old age and her quiet life in her large country house in Suffolk, Bridge House, where she enjoys her spacious garden.

In the preface of *Slipstream*, Elizabeth Jane Howard openly discusses her narrative approach and her motivation for writing this book. Opening with a series of rhetorical questions, she asks herself why one should embark on the project of writing one's autobiography:

Why write about one's life? Because of the times one has lived through, the people met and known and loved? To show how interesting, virtuous, or entertaining one has been or become? Or to trace one's inward journey – whatever kind of evolution there has been between the wrinkled howling baby and the wrinkled old crone? (*Slipstream*, xiii)

After this general inquiry, which enumerates a series of general reasons for writing a memoir, the author moves on to the more personal motives behind her autobiographical enterprise. While for many writers, she explains, their art is 'their chief means of communication with their readers', she has found that for her, 'writing is often my chief means of communication with myself. I write to find things *out* as much as, and sometimes more than, to tell them to other people.' (*Slipstream*, xiii, emphasis original)

Jane's view of writing as a way of self-examination and a quest for the real self attests to Stanzel's claim that in the first-person narrative situation, the narrative represents a continuation of the experience of the self, which is why any first-person narrator's motivation to narrate is existential rather than barely aesthetic. (cf. Stanzel, 213) Despite the narrator's manifold transformations on the journey from 'the wrinkled howling baby' to 'the wrinkled old crone' (*Slipstream*, xiii), he or she remains connected to his or her earlier self 'by numerous existential threads' (Stanzel, 213). Furthermore, Stanzel claims that if a first-person narrator 'looks back at the mistakes and confusion of his or her life from the distance of mellow age', he or she 'can usually recognize some kind of pattern' (Stanzel, 213f.). Echoing Stanzel's argument, the following quotation from the preface of *Slipstream*, in which Elizabeth Jane Howard explains the title<sup>66</sup> of her autobiography, proves that it is not

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<sup>66</sup> Referring to Jane's explanation of the title of her autobiography, one reviewer asks whether there is 'an oblique reference here to the title chosen by Martin Amis for his own memoirs, *Experience*' (Carpenter). This question seems legitimate, especially considering Jane even refers to 'Martin's admirable book *Experience*' (*Slipstream*, 406). She points out that his description of her and Kingsley's moving house from Lemmons to Gardnor House is incorrect: He 'thought I was trying

a contradiction to both elucidate the confusions of one's younger self and still feel connected to it no matter how dramatically one may have changed over time:

Speaking as a very slow learner, I feel as though I have lived most of my life in the slipstream of experience. Often I have had to repeat the same disastrous situation several times before I got the message. That is still happening. I do not write this book as a wise, mature, finished person who has learned all the answers, but rather as someone who even at this late stage of seventy-nine years is still trying to change, find things out and do a bit better with them.' (*Slipstream*, xiv)

The adverbial phrases 'most of my life' and 'several times' and the words 'repeat' and 'same' are an indication that Jane identifies a pattern within herself, i.e. being a slow learner. Maintaining that it is important to assume 'responsibility for what one is' (*Slipstream*, xiii), Jane takes this behavioural pattern as the starting point for her narrative inquiry of herself. Through her autobiographical account of her life, which she compares to 'a household book of accounts' (*Slipstream*, xiii), she seeks to find out how much she has gained from her experiences. Thus narratively weighing the debits and credits sides against each other towards the end her life, Jane intends to clarify the following questions:

what has been acquired, to what purpose has it been put, was too much paid for it and did it teach anything? How much has been learned by experience? Have patterns of behaviour and responses changed? Have I discovered where I am useful and useless, how I am nourished and starved? Have I tried to change those faults and weaknesses in me that are open to alteration? Have I learned to accept realistically what is immutable? (*Slipstream*, xiii)

Both the chronological structure of *Slipstream* as well as the simile of the 'household book of accounts' conform to the generic model of *autobiography proper* which is based on Gusdorf's early thoughts about the genre. Gusdorf points out that 'autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time' (Gusdorf, 37). This chronological retracement serves 'the most secret purpose' (Gusdorf, 39) of the autobiographical enterprise, which Gusdorf identifies as an attempt of salvation through self-justification at the end of life:

The man who recounts himself is himself searching for his self through his history; [...] Autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man<sup>67</sup> who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain, fritted away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure. In order to be reassured he undertakes his own apologia. [...] The literary work in which he offers himself

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to be a martyr by not using professional movers' (*Slipstream*, 406), but she actually did employ people to help.

<sup>67</sup> Despite the fact that Gusdorf speaks of 'man' only, I maintain that this argument can equally be applied to a woman's autobiography.

as example is the means of perfecting his identity and of bringing it to a successful conclusion.’ (Gusdorf, 39)

As Gusdorf has us know, autobiography’s systematic search for the true self originates from the Christian tradition of self-examination through the confession of sins (cf. Gusdorf, 33). Due to the fact that Christian destiny represents a dialogue of the soul with God, autobiography developed in the spiritual context as a tool for confession and self-improvement, for ‘every action, every initiative of thought or conduct, can call everything back into question’ (Gusdorf, 33). In his brief review of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Gusdorf observes that ‘Augustine’s great book is a consequence of this dogmatic requirement’ (Gusdorf, 33) of confessing one’s sins. Interestingly, he compares *Confessions* to a ‘balance sheet’ (Gusdorf, 33, emphasis added), with the help of which Augustine presents himself before God.

Similar to Augustine’s religious ‘balance sheet’ (Gusdorf, 33), Elizabeth Jane Howard’s secular ‘household book of accounts’ (*Slipstream*, xiii) is an attempt at justification and reassurance towards the end of a life. Instead of offering her balance sheet to God, she acts as her own judge, providing ‘witness that [s]he has not existed in vain’ by narratively reconstructing ‘a destiny that seems to [her] to have been worth the trouble living.’ (Gusdorf, 39)

At the very end of *Slipstream*, after narrating the hallmarks of her long life on more than 470 pages, Elizabeth Jane Howard returns to the simile of the household accounts she establishes in the preface. However, before completely closing the accounts book, she draws a different kind of comparison, juxtaposing two opposing summaries of her journey, made at different points in her life:

When I was about eight, I remember lying in bed in Scotland one night and saying to myself, ‘You have ridden on an elephant, you’ve worn puttees, and you’ve been out in a boat to catch sea trout,’ and being deeply impressed with my wealth of experience. This zenith of sophistication was soon overtaken. If I were to lie in bed now with a more recent list, I would say, ‘You’ve written twelve novels and as much again in other forms, you’ve travelled to seventeen countries and you’ve planted nearly a thousand trees.’ I am less impressed, because now I know I could have done much better and more. (*Slipstream*, 475f.)

Despite the fact that Jane wishes she had made better use of her time and learned from her mistakes more quickly, the ultimate balance she draws is positive. Noting that her lifelong emphasis on learning is still intact, since she is still trying to better herself at her old age, she is adamant that she does not ‘want to live with [...] nostalgia and regret wrapped round me like a wet blanket. I want to live enquiringly, with curiosity and interest for the rest of my life.’ (*Slipstream*, 476) As writing

represents her chief means of communication with herself and a tool for self-improvement, she is grateful that she can still write at the age of seventy-nine. Drawing her ultimate conclusion, Elizabeth Jane Howard looks at all the plusses and minuses of her life, which are now enshrined in the book she has just completed, and she is able to deliver a lenient verdict:

When I do look back, as indeed I've had to do to write this book, the household accounts don't seem so bad. I've made a good many mistakes, some rather expensive, but I think I've more or less paid for them. I've slowly learned some significant things – perhaps most of all the virtue, the extreme *importance* of truth, which, it seems to me now, should be continually searched for and treasured when any piece of it is found. This book has been in search of some of that. (*Slipstream*, 476f.)

Interestingly, writing is not the only means with which the author presents her development to the reader; supporting the written text, there is a photographic text that adds another nuance to the impression the recipient gets of Jane's autobiographical journey: the front cover of *Slipstream* features a photograph of the young Elizabeth Jane Howard, with her dark, intense eyes gazing at the reader. On the back of the book are 'the same eyes, but 60 years on, in a face lined with experience of life.'<sup>68</sup> (Colvin) As Colvin remarks in her review of *Slipstream*, 'All Your Life You Are Changing', this is the picture the readers of Jane's novel series, the 'Cazalet Chronicle', will be familiar with, while the 'raving beauty' is 'the image her lovers would remember – if any were still alive.' (Colvin)

## 6.2. From macrostructure to microstructure: the turning points

According to the autobiography theorist Michael Sheringham, analysing the turning points of a text can bring powerful insights into the structure of its narrative. In his entry 'Conversion and Turning Points' in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, he informs us that in autobiography, 'conversion is inevitably bound up with the way lives are given narrative shape.' (Sheringham, 'Conversion and Turning Points', 233) Consequently, it is 'fruitful to view turning points as part of the language of autobiography' (Sheringham, 'Conversion and Turning Points', 233). Responding to this notion of the turning point as a structural element of narrative, the three most important turning points in Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream* will be discussed in

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<sup>68</sup> See Appendix II.

detail in the ensuing sections; thus, the causes, circumstances and consequences of 1) her decision to leave Peter Scott and become a writer, 2) her meeting Kingsley Amis, and 3) her leaving Kingsley Amis will be examined closely. As remains to be shown, all three of these turning points are closely connected with the main themes that lie at the heart of this autobiography, namely the author's life-long quest for love and her development and daily struggles as a woman writer.

#### 6.2.1. Leaving Peter Scott and becoming a writer

Soon after her wedding to Peter Scott in 1942, Elizabeth Jane Howard discovered that she did not love her husband. She felt trapped in the relationship to Peter, who was fourteen years her senior and did not know how to handle the responsibility of her young age: 'As he was so much older, I assumed that he knew a great deal that he didn't' (*Slipstream*, 122), Jane writes. Despite their comfortable life style, she was unhappy as she found it difficult to relate to her husband. Their lack of progress 'in intimacy' (*Slipstream*, 122) was partly due to Peter's frequent absences during the war; his career as a naval officer forced Jane into leading a 'hotel life', making her feel 'bored and lonely' (*Slipstream*, 126). Furthermore, the marriage was overshadowed by the attitude of Jane's mother-in-law, 'the sculptor Kathleen Scott, who had married Lord Kennet after her first husband died' (Andrew Brown). 'K', as she was called in the family, made Jane feel unwelcome and was a bully. At one point, when they were taking a walk together, K delivered the following shocking speech to Jane:

'I suppose you've realized now that Pete only married you to have a son.' I said, no, I hadn't, but my heart began to pound. She looked me straight in the eye and then said, 'If you ever make Pete unhappy I shall want to stab you. I should enjoy doing it.' [...] Then she put her arm in mine and said, in a quite different voice, 'Oh Jenny, you're very *young*. Let's go *home*.' And we went. (*Slipstream*, 140)

After Jane had given birth to her daughter Nicola in 1943, things did not become easier. Not only did K force her to 'return to the charge as soon as possible' (*Slipstream*, 139), since she had not had a son, but Jane also had complicated feelings of guilt about Nicola. Due to the fact that Nicola had been taken away from her and into the care of nannies straight after her birth, the nineteen-year-old Jane had difficulties in bonding with her baby daughter; she had 'bouts of depression about motherhood' (*Slipstream*, 139). As she had no one to confide in, she concealed her

‘fear and anxiety about motherhood and the guilt that’ she ‘didn’t have the maternal feelings that were expected’ (*Slipstream*, 126) of her.

Although Jane observes that ‘Pete was a gifted and interesting man’ (*Slipstream*, 190), she felt essentially isolated within the marriage, because he did not take a serious interest in her as a person:

I could never really talk to him seriously about anything – he wasn’t interested in me, really, or in anyone else, in that way. As so many men do, he wanted me to settle down to marriage and a family, so that he could pursue matters that did interest him. (*Slipstream*, 190)

After a series of unhappy extramarital affairs, Jane realised that she would not find self-fulfilment while married to Peter, and decided to leave him after only five years of marriage. This decision does not so much constitute a significant turning point in this autobiography because Jane took the initiative in the separation, but because she did so for a significant reason: she wanted to be a writer. In the last year of her relationship to Peter, she had written half a novel and – despite considerable anxieties about the unfinished book (cf. *Slipstream*, 178) and feelings of extreme guilt about Nicola (cf. *Slipstream*, 190) – she was firm about pursuing her career: ‘I wanted to be a writer and I couldn’t do it married to him.’ (*Slipstream*, 199f.) Due to the fact that she refused to ask Peter for financial support, it was not possible for her to both keep Nicola *and* be a writer, for ‘[i]n those days, a woman could not get a mortgage, nor was there childcare for working mothers.’ (Colvin); she had no choice but to leave Nicola behind in the family home, visiting every week, ‘miserably aware of how unsatisfactory this was’ and feeling ‘guilty’ (*Slipstream*, 198).

After making arrangements to live with her father and his mistress Ursula for the first few months, Jane left Peter Scott in the summer of 1947, ‘in a taxi, with two suitcases and ten pounds.’ (*Slipstream*, 195) When she moved into a flat of her own in Blandford Street after some time, it was apparent to her that she had given up all the comforts of middle-class married life and was in immediate financial trouble, as the following description of her first night in the new apartment illustrates:

I remember my first night there, a bare bulb in the ceiling, wooden floors full of malignant nails, the odour of decay that seeped through the wet paint smell and the unpleasant feeling that everything was dirty except my bedclothes. Above all, I felt alone, and the only thing I was sure of was that I wanted to write. (*Slipstream*, 196)

In order to get by financially, Jane, who was now ‘chronically short of money’ (*Slipstream*, 201) had to take on several jobs, such as modelling for *Vogue* or working night shifts at a radio station (cf. *Slipstream*, 197). Despite these

distractions, she was ‘determined to be a writer at any cost, to put it first’ (*Slipstream*, 198), and continued writing her novel. It was finished in 1950, and she found a publisher immediately: After chasing her around the table in his office, threatening that he would not publish *The Beautiful Visit*, Jonathan Cape agreed to represent her and paid her an advance of £50. (cf. *Slipstream*, 202) The following year, *The Beautiful Visit* was awarded the ‘John Llewellyn Rhys Prize’ (*Slipstream*, 214) for any young novelist under thirty. Cape tried to claim ten percent of the prize money, but Jane ‘had become a professional’ (Brown, Andrew) and ‘kept my riches to myself’ (*Slipstream*, 214).

During the following decade, Elizabeth Jane Howard continued writing and publishing novels, but she could not make a living from writing alone; although her books were well received, she still had to keep part-time jobs (cf. Brown, Andrew). Apart from financial adversaries, she had difficulties on another front of her life, namely love.

#### 6.2.2. Meeting Kingsley Amis

Throughout the 1950s, Elizabeth Jane Howard had a series of relationships with – mostly married, and famous – men ‘who regarded her talents as very much less interesting than theirs’ (Brown, Andrew). As she repeatedly notes throughout her autobiography, Jane considered love as ‘the most important thing in the world’ (*Slipstream*, 155, also cf. 178, 216). However, none of her affairs satisfied her ‘great hunger to be loved, to *be* in love.’ (*Slipstream*, 178, emphasis original) Notwithstanding the fact that she tended to fall for married men who ultimately stayed with their wives, she wanted nothing more than a conventional relationship: ‘intimacy, affection, being first in each other’s lives – I wanted, as much as I wanted to write.’ (*Slipstream*, 216) Due to her extraordinary beauty which Jane finds hard to acknowledge (cf. *Slipstream*, 273) but which is documented in the many photographs in this autobiography, ‘men queued to fall in love with Howard’ (Brown, Andrew). Nevertheless, she had little confidence in herself and in love, as all of her liaisons were short-lived and ended unhappily, as the following quotation demonstrates:

I thought I was cut out just to be a kind of extra for people. There would never be anyone who would take me seriously or put me first in his life. I wanted much the same as everyone else – to love one person, to live with them, to have their children. But I also wanted to be a writer, and it was here that the most serious difference between the sexes revealed itself to me. Men could be novelists, prime ministers, doctors, lawyers *and* fathers. It was a much trickier

combination for women. None the less, tricky or not, it was what I wanted. (*Slipstream*, 251)

Unexpectedly, in October 1962 she found a partner with whom it seemed she could combine both her desire for love and her career as a woman writer: Kingsley Amis. She first met him at the Cheltenham Literary Festival, which she had been appointed to organise. The *Sunday Telegraph* team, who were sponsoring one evening of the festival, had invited Kingsley Amis to participate in a panel on 'Sex in Literature'<sup>69</sup> (cf. *Slipstream*, 334). Jane was furious that they had contacted him without consulting her, for she 'felt slightly frightened at the prospect of him coming; I thought he would be an 'Angry Young Man' who would think the whole thing was silly.' (*Slipstream*, 334) After the event, Jane kept Kingsley company, as he 'wanted to stay up and drink. [...] What had begun as a social duty turned, during the ensuing hours, into something quite different.' (*Slipstream*, 338) They talked until four in the morning, and immediately fell in love, as Kingsley's love letters and poems of the time prove.<sup>70</sup> At the end of the evening, Kingsley asked her to meet him in London; 'When he kissed me, I felt as though I could fly.' (*Slipstream*, 338)

After the festival, Jane told herself

it was no good falling in love with Kingsley, who was married with three children. I'd simply be back in the familiar peripheral position, waiting for phone calls: surely I'd learned enough about what that was like to know it deflected me from writing and made me miserable. Surely by now I'd learned *that*. When I got back to London, and was winding up festival business, Kingsley rang me. And I found myself instantly agreeing to meet him in a bar in Leicester Square. (*Slipstream*, 339, emphasis original)

Despite the fact that they were both married with other partners, 'theirs was an established liaison' (Brown, Andrew) by the winter. The following summer, they eloped on a holiday to Spain, and were discovered by a journalist.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, Kingsley's already wrecked marriage dissolved and they set up in London together. Soon after that, Philip and Martin, Kingsley's teenage sons, were living with them and Jane became their stepmother.<sup>72</sup> In 1965, they were married, and 'for the first few years, they were wonderfully happy.' (Brown, Andrew)

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Amis comments on Kingsley and Jane's first meeting in the following way: 'The panel discussion which Jane had organised and which Kingsley attended was on 'Sex in Literature': one of God's dud jokes.' (*Experience*, 33n)

<sup>70</sup> Cf. 'Kingsley Amis wrote poems, in which Howard appeared as a fairytale princess, and exquisite love letters.' (Brown, Andrew)

<sup>71</sup> Cf. '[W]e knew that our unofficial elopement was common knowledge' (*Slipstream*, 348).

<sup>72</sup> In his memoir, *Experience*, Martin Amis memorably expresses his gratitude to Jane for having been his 'wicked stepmother: she was generous, affectionate and resourceful; she salvaged my schooling and I owe her an unknowable debt for that. [...] When I see her now I resent our vanished



Elizabeth Jane Howard had finally found what she had longed for: ‘At last,’ she writes, ‘I thought, life was everything I could ever have hoped for and it had come about in a situation that had seemed to have no chance of any permanence.’ (*Slipstream*, 354) Both Jane and Kingsley were successful novelists, and their relationship was filled with ‘affection and approval’ (*Slipstream*, 354), but unfortunately, this state of affairs was not to last.

### 6.2.3. Leaving Kingsley Amis

A few years after they had moved into Lemmons,<sup>73</sup> ‘a Georgian house set in three acres in London’s northern suburbs’ which ‘sheltered a rambling collection of family and friends’ (Brown, Andrew), Jane and Kingsley’s marriage started to crumble. As Jane sees it, their relationship was gradually undermined by Kingsley’s drinking and his disinterest in domestic matters (cf. Brown, Andrew), which eroded all intimacy and affection (cf. *Slipstream*, 377). In the eight years they lived there, the author explains, she wrote less and less and felt constantly tired (cf. *Slipstream*, 375) because Kingsley did not share any responsibilities:

Kingsley being unable to drive, and having absolutely nothing to do with our finances, meant I was a part-time secretary and chauffeur, as well as getting in food, cooking it and clearing it up. (*Slipstream*, 375)

She felt isolated in a household with five men and her aging mother, and suffered from fatigue and depression. While commending Kingsley for being ‘one of the most disciplined workers’ she had ever known, getting up and writing every morning ‘[n]o matter how bad a hangover he had’ (*Slipstream*, 379), Jane herself experienced a severe ‘writing block’ (*Slipstream*, 413). Slowly but surely, she began to realise that ‘Kingsley no longer loved me’ (*Slipstream*, 395). Having grown dependent on her because of his phobias and his enjoyment of domestic comfort, ‘he needed me, but he no longer wanted me’ (*Slipstream*, 395), as Jane recognises.

Elizabeth Jane Howard paints a tender and painful picture of her disintegrating marriage with Kingsley. Where there had been so much love in the beginning, only resentment was left towards the end. ‘There was one moment’, she writes, however,

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relatedness, cancelled by law but not by feeling. I also admire her as an artist, as I did then.’ (*Experience*, 215, emphasis original). In the a footnote on the same page, he further compliments her on her achievements as a writer: ‘As far as I am concerned she is, with Iris Murdoch, the most interesting woman writer of her generation. An instinctivist, but an elegant one (like Muriel Spark), she has a freakish and poetic eye, and penetrating sanity’ (*Experience*, 215n).

<sup>73</sup> They had bought Lemmons in 1969 (cf. Brown, Andrew).

when all this was different. I was standing by the window in our bedroom one morning, looking out the window and feeling very sad. He came to me, put his arms around me and gave me a long, gentle kiss, and said, 'I used to be so much in love with you.' Before I could say anything, he turned and walked out of the room. It was like meeting a loving ghost suddenly, who vanished before I could respond. I stayed by the window until I stopped crying. But that evening, after work, when I tried to talk to him, he'd retreated. Insulated by whiskey, he was withdrawn and dismissive. (*Slipstream*, 417)

Not only was Kingsley's affection gradually swept away by alcohol, but he even turned misogynist towards the end of their relationship: 'he had little use for women', Jane explains. 'He regarded them as intellectually inferior, and often as 'pests'[...]. Women were for bed and board, and he'd ceased to be interested in either.' (*Slipstream*, 413f.)

Deciding that she no longer wanted to be trapped in this loveless marriage, Jane left Kingsley in December 1980. Once again, she had no money, nowhere to go, and only a half-finished novel<sup>74</sup> to take with her. Sadly, Kingsley 'maintained an implacable resentment' (*Slipstream*, 438) towards Jane for the rest of his life, even refusing to see her when he was dying. Despite the fact that she does not conceal Kingsley's weaknesses in her portrait of him, she is lenient and forgiving; noting that he had 'once said in a newspaper interview that the worst thing that had happened to him was meeting me' (*Slipstream*, 447), Jane points out that that is not the case for her: 'there were many things about him that I still loved – and shall always love.' (*Slipstream*, 447) She does point out, however, that it was heartbreaking for her when he died,<sup>75</sup> because this 'second parting' (*Slipstream*, 447) entailed that there was no chance of reconciliation (cf. *Slipstream*, 447).

After the breakup of her third marriage, Elizabeth Jane Howard settled down to a more quiet life and concentrated entirely on her writing. Yet again facing monetary difficulties at first – her novel *Getting It Right* (1982) was politely received but did not sell very well –, she was finally able to restore her finances (cf. *Slipstream*, 456) with the bestselling novel quartet the 'Cazalet Chronicle', and her next book, *Falling* (1999), which were also adapted for television and film respectively.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Getting It Right* (1982)

<sup>75</sup> Curiously, Jane gets the year of Kingsley's death wrong, stating that 'Kingsley had died on 22 October 1990' (*Slipstream*, 447), while in fact he died five years later than that, namely on 22 October 1995.

<sup>76</sup> Krishnamma, Suri, *The Cazalets*. UK, 2001, and Powell, Tristram. *Falling*. UK, 2005.

### 6.3. From microstructure back to macrostructure: women's autobiography

From the perspective of autobiography theory, women's autobiographies constitute a variation of the genre that includes specific traits which need to be considered separately in the process of analysis. According to Gudmundsdóttir, these so-called 'autogynographies' (Stanton, 13, as cited in Gudmundsdóttir, 129), as women's autobiographies are called in the jargon of autobiography studies, 'add an extra dimension to the autobiographical project' (Gudmundsdóttir, 128), namely 'the subject of gender' (Gudmundsdóttir, 97).

As Gudmundsdóttir has us know, theoretical publications on women's autobiographies have proliferated in the last two decades (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 112) and focus mainly on three aspects: 'self-representation, questions of identity (collective versus individual), and the public versus the private (male versus female)' (Gudmundsdóttir, 112). It is an acclaimed fact that gender plays a decisive role in women's life narratives, for the female 'autobiographers' lives, social positions and relationships are all formed by it.' (Gudmundsdóttir, 138) As Eakin points out however, it is faulty to maintain that the process of women's identity formation is inherently different from men's, credibly arguing that 'the criterion of relationality applies equally *if not identically* to male experience', arguing that 'all selfhood [...] is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines' (Eakin, *How*, 50, emphasis original). Consequently, the difference that feminist theorists of autobiography find in women's life writing does not lie in female selfhood per se but in the themes that occur frequently in autogynographies. According to Gudmundsdóttir, these thematic concepts specifically observed in women's autobiography are a) accounts of 'how the authors became writers' and b) of 'how the autobiographers write on their relationship with the mother' (Gudmundsdóttir, 97). In an analysis of an autogynography – and *Slipstream* qualifies as such – it is thus paramount to examine how the author structures her autobiography around the moment of becoming a writer and around her relationship with her mother (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 98). Therefore, it shall be questioned in the ensuing sections whether Gudmundsdóttir's claim that women's autobiographies are 'preoccupied with writing and the mother' (Gudmundsdóttir, 101) holds true for the specific instance of Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream*.

### 6.3.1. The writing life and struggles of a woman writer

As Guðmundsdóttir has found out through studying a large number of women's autobiographies, '[b]ecoming a writer' in these texts 'is usually linked with freedom from the mother, from madness and/or from traditional female roles.' (Guðmundsdóttir, 101) She maintains that

[t]he pattern the accounts often follow can be described in terms of unhappiness, struggle, or depression until they start writing. [...] The move the writers describe is from being defined by others (family, tradition, doctors) to self-expression and liberation (Guðmundsdóttir, 101f.).

As can be deduced from the analysis of the turning points in *Slipstream*, this argument certainly holds true for Elizabeth Jane Howard's decision to become a writer, which necessitated her separation from her husband and child: 'I was [] determined to be a writer, at any cost, [...] and I had to do it alone.' (*Slipstream*, 198) Gender most definitely plays an important role in Jane's self-fulfilment as a writer, for she was caught up in female, domestic stereotypes from which she needed to rid herself several times in her life. Furthermore, Guðmundsdóttir argues that in many women's autobiographies, '[e]very other event in their lives is subordinated by the story of how they became writers' (Guðmundsdóttir, 139). In *Slipstream*, however, this cannot be said to be the case; while it is true that her description of becoming a writer constitutes an important moment – indeed a turning point – within the narrative, it would be an exaggeration to claim that every other event has to be viewed with regard to this single aspect of her life. It is important to bear in mind that Jane's memoir covers a time period of almost 80 years and consequently touches upon a wide range of topics. As far as the theme of writing itself is concerned, Guðmundsdóttir's theory is not reflected, for Jane does not only focus on the starting point of her writing career, but on the writing life as a whole: *Slipstream* is interspersed with comments about the day-to-day struggles of being a writer, especially a woman writer.

Jane's journey of becoming a writer already begins in her childhood, when she wrote 'an interminable book about a horse' (*Slipstream*, 44) for English composition with her governess as well as several theatrical plays (cf. *Slipstream*, 64). Despite the fact she 'never had the slightest intention of becoming a writer' (*Slipstream*, 64) in her childhood and adolescence, for acting was her first career choice, she certainly benefited from her exercises in creative writing while growing up. When she did decide to become a writer and leave the conventional path of being

a full-time wife and mother, she had to overcome several obstacles: her lack of formal education – she was home-schooled and never went to university (cf. *Slipstream*, 79f.) –, the financial trials involved in surviving as a writer (cf. Wade), and her socially disadvantaged role of being a divorced woman starting her career in an era before the arrival of feminism and a wife partly putting her career on hold for the wellbeing of her husband and family (cf. Carpenter). Apart from realistically describing ‘the salad days of a writer’s creative life’ (*Slipstream*, 244), which involves a lot of ‘solitary, difficult work’ (*Slipstream*, 295) and a struggle to find a continuity in writing while having to keep other jobs (cf. Wade), Jane also includes the rare moments of magic which the writer is occasionally granted. When she describes the feeling of just having completed a novel, for example, one instantly knows how much joy it can bring to see one’s own creation in its finished state:

I finished *After Julius* on a dark grey evening in November. The feeling after completing a novel is for me like no other. It’s as though with the last sentence, I have released a great weight that falls away, leaving me so empty and light that I can float out of myself and look down at the pattern of the work I’ve made. I can see all at once what I have been pursuing for so long. It’s a timeless moment, a kind of ecstasy – a state of unconditional love – that has nothing whatever to do with merit or criticism. Of course it goes, dissolves into melancholy and a sense of loss. Parting with people one has been living with for so long and know so intimately is poignant: they are more lost to you than anyone you meet in life. They remain crystallized exactly where you left them. Altogether, it’s an occasion that makes one feel very strange for some time afterwards. (*Slipstream*, 355)

### 6.3.2. The mother-daughter relationship

Gudmundsdóttir observes that most women autobiographers ‘represent the mother as an obstacle on the way to self-representation and they tend to define themselves against the mother’ (Gudmundsdóttir, 101). Thus, so her line of argument, the mother is seen as ‘the main obstacle towards the freedom they desire’ and the autobiographers ‘are writing against the mother, but also for her and with her.’ (Gudmundsdóttir, 138) While Elizabeth Jane Howard had a poor relationship with her mother due to the latter’s lack of love for her daughter, it cannot be said that Jane presents her mother as an obstacle on her path to becoming a writer. However, Gudmundsdóttir voices a second argument in connection with the mother-daughter theme in women’s autobiographies, which can be said to be echoed – with slight variation – in *Slipstream*: she observes how the descriptions of women autobiographers’ feelings towards the mother follow a similar pattern: ‘the mother is

a constant presence; then evokes repulsion or even hatred; and finally denotes an absence of strong feelings or pity' (Gudmundsdóttir, 101).

Reading *Slipstream*, one is aware from the very beginning that Jane spent much more time with her nanny in her childhood than with either of her parents. Born in 1923, Jane was raised according to the standard of middle-class England between the wars, namely in material comfort but emotional frigidity. (cf. *Slipstream*, 12) Particularly in her early childhood, Jane felt 'inferior' to her brother Robin, who 'was younger, infinitely more attractive and a boy' (*Slipstream*, 4), and who was everybody's favourite, particularly her mother's (cf. *Slipstream*, 11). Detecting a generational parallel in this behaviour, she notes that her mother was treated in exactly the same manner by 'her mother', coming 'a poor last' (*Slipstream*, 15, emphasis original) compared to her siblings. As a child, Jane felt that her 'desperate love for [her] mother' was 'unrequited' (*Slipstream*, 26); furthermore, her family subscribed to the then quite normal ethos that 'parents didn't openly admire or extol their children's behaviour and talent' (*Slipstream*, 61). It is painful to read when Jane remarks how, slowly but surely, she realised that

I would not get from my mother what I wanted – the kind of uncritical affection that transcends everyday mishaps, arguments or wrong-doing on my part. Now, I think that she made efforts to love me, but she couldn't do anything without criticism, and I suspect she experienced it herself from *her* mother. I felt constantly on trial: her approval had to be earned and I wasn't much good at earning it. (*Slipstream*, 60, emphasis original)

Conforming to Gudmundsdóttir's pattern, Jane's feelings for her mother changed from unreciprocated love to 'a fog of boredom and impatience' (*Slipstream*, 260) when she was grown up; for as long as her mother lived, the emotional barriers never broke down between them. (cf. *Slipstream*, 199f.) After her death – Jane had taken care of her at Lemmons – the feeling of impatience was replaced by grief and 'self-recrimination' (*Slipstream*, 394), and Jane shed tears 'for my mother, for the loss of her love and mine' (*Slipstream*, 404).

The biggest source of recurring regret and guilt in Jane's autobiography (cf. Merritt), however, is not her behaviour as a daughter but her own failure as a mother, as she sees it. She reproaches herself continually throughout the memoir for having followed the practice of her parents by leaving her daughter in the care of a nanny, only visiting once a week. As a consequence, Nicola 'remained a stranger to her until adulthood' (Merritt), and Jane 'felt guilty about her, as I'd never felt about anything

else in my life' (*Slipstream*, 137). Her reflections on the subject of her daughter show, however, that she has learned from her mistakes:

I see now that Nicola and I had the worst possible start in life, and that most of what happened to me wouldn't happen now, but this is hindsight, which, by its nature, is no good at the time. I can say now, and could have said for many years, that I love my daughter as much as I love anyone in the world, but the bad start led to much unhappiness for both of us, and I, being the elder, must accept the blame. (*Slipstream*, 139)

Luckily, Jane's relationship with Nicola, to whom *Slipstream* is dedicated, has grown to be a very loving one over the years, so the generational spell of unrequited love between mothers and daughters has been broken in the family.

### 6.3.3. The narrative form

A lot of early feminist texts about women's autobiographical writing claim that autogynographies are formally different from men's autobiographies in that they are more experimental and that women are bound to question generic rules more than male autobiographers. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 99) Scholars from this early period in feminist autobiographical theory, such as Jelinek, tend to describe women's autobiography as 'fragmented, formless, anecdotal, disruptive, subversive' (Gudmundsdóttir), while more recent scholarly literature point out that these descriptions may equally apply to men's autobiography, countering that

such claims limit the study of autobiography and are not open to the many possibilities life-writing offers; a mode of writing which has always been a hybrid one (Gudmundsdóttir, 99).

Felicity Nussbaum, for example, criticises Jelinek's opinion that women's autobiographies are inherently fragmented, anecdotal, disruptive and interrupted, even when basically linear (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 99, referring to Nussbaum, 'Eighteenth-Century Women's Autobiographical Commonplaces', 153). Similarly to Nussbaum, Gudmundsdóttir points out that – contrary to its themes – the generic conventions of autobiography are not gender-based, even though it may be tempting to think so (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 100). Interestingly, *Slipstream* proves this point precisely, for its narrative is in no way fragmented or disruptive. Although this autobiography includes many anecdotes, its narrative approach is straightforwardly chronological, conforming entirely to the generic conventions of autobiography proper. True to Cohn's concept of dissonant self-narration, Elizabeth Jane Howard takes on the role of the old, 'enlightened and knowing narrator who elucidates [her]

mental confusions of earlier days' (Cohn, 143). Despite the fact that Jane frequently points out that she is 'trying to write [] without hindsight' (*Slipstream*, 291), the narrating self displays superior knowledge over the experiencing self (cf. Cohn, 143) and is thus clearly the dominant force. In fact, her very usage of the word 'hindsight' draws attention to the presence of the narrating self and the considerable distance between the two selves of the narrator that is so characteristic of Stanzel's model of the classic autobiographical first-person narrator.

#### **6.4. Reception and personal reflection**

When Elizabeth Jane Howard's autobiography was published in 2002, its reception was 'rather muted' (O'Brien), as one reviewer of the paperback edition of *Slipstream* observes. Many commentators deplore the fact that '*Slipstream* is not a fancy memoir that concerns itself with the problems of remembering and forgetting, the putting down a life on paper' (Anon., 'Her Psychiatrist Fell in Love with Her'), instead presenting the reader with 'a direct and factual' (Chisholm) account of the author's life. Apart from finding fault with the structural simplicity of this 'straightforward' (Anon., 'Her Psychiatrist Fell in Love with Her') autobiography, they also criticise the amount of literary 'gossip' (Annan) Jane includes in her memoir, noting that they 'could have done without some of the lists of who was at which party or who came to stay' (Thwaite). Nevertheless, there are other reviewers who admire Jane's skills as a 'documentarist' (Wade), with which she chronicles the goings on of the artistic and intellectual circles in London from the 1940s onward. No matter how much Jane is criticised for the traditional narrative design of her memoir, critics cannot help but admire the courageously self-revealing honesty (cf. Thwaite and Mathieson) with which she discloses her experiences. Furthermore, there is a consensus among reviewers that *Slipstream* is a 'compulsively readable' (Wade), 'brave [...] and vulnerable book' (Thwaite). Due to her talent for anecdotal detail and her 'gift for drily comic observation' (Thwaite), Jane manages to constantly entertain her readers, for which she is given credit by the critics (cf. Carpenter).

When Elizabeth Jane Howard started writing her third novel, *The Sea Change* (1958), she drew her inspiration from a philosophical question: 'How could one



change, and how much?’ By way of exploring this question fictitiously, Jane intended to find out ‘what people could change in themselves, and what was immutable’ (*Slipstream*, 294). In her autobiography, she also displays a constant interest in the idea of change, and her life-long desire for self-improvement shines through on every page. Interestingly, this emphasis on self-development is reflected stylistically in *Slipstream*, for Jane speaks with a voice of someone ‘who has ‘done’ therapy’ (Anon., ‘Her Psychiatrist Fell in Love With Her’). As one reviewer notes, the ‘book’s style and content is [...] influenced by what she painfully learned about facing up to uncomfortable truths’ (Chisholm). Due to her desire to continue learning even towards the end of life, Jane ‘comes across as an enormously resourceful and sympathetic figure’ (O’Brien). Despite the fact that it is quite obvious to the reader how much Jane has grown as a person throughout her life, she ‘repeatedly asks questions of herself’ (Wade) and even has a tendency to ‘belittle herself’ (Thwaite) in her memoir. Jane may feel that she has lived ‘in the slipstream of experience’ (*Slipstream*, xiv), but her self-doubt and self-deprecation are unnecessary, for the fascinating account of her industrious and bohemian life offers ample evidence that she has lived life to the full and ‘has carried something valuable away’ (Thwaite). Her desire to continue learning despite her old age is incredibly admirable. As she still embraces change and regards it as a learning opportunity, she can see the positive side of the aging process, and thus retains an optimistic outlook on life:

I can still learn. One of the good things about living longer is that we have more time to learn *how* to be old. It’s clear to me now that inside the conspiracy of silence about age – because of the negative aspects of the condition – there is the possibility of art: that is to say that it can be made into something worth trying to do well, a challenge, an adventure. (*Slipstream*, 476, emphasis original)

## Conclusion

Autobiography theory is a vibrant academic discipline, which has constantly been growing and adapting to both new findings in other fields of research and changes and developments in the practice of the genre. Not only have theories of the self been revised to account for the intersubjective nature of identity (cf. Egan, 1), but the ubiquity of narrative has also been acknowledged, leading to the recognition of narrative as an integral part of selfhood. Thus, the construction of identity is now generally perceived as ‘intimately interwoven with the autobiographical process [], a process that appears to be narrative in nature’ (Brockmeier, ‘Identity’, 456). Due to the fact that ‘autobiography is an ‘extension of the life-long process of identity formation’ (Smith, Thomas R., 28), autobiography does not merely *reflect* identity, but is one of its very *construction* sites. (cf. Brockmeier, ‘Identity’, 456)

In the process of narrating our lives, we create and hold up a mirror against our selves. When analysing texts of autobiography, it is paramount to bear in mind, however, that this mirror is anything but an objective surface picturing an unbiased truth. Contrary to the physical mirror image, the autobiographical mirror is not mimetic. Thus, it is subject to limitations of selectiveness, subjectivity and distortion. On the one hand, autobiographers have to select their material, shaping it into a specific narrative form that is only capable of telling *one version* of their lives. On the other hand, their vision is impeded by the imperfection of memory and the consequent inaccessibility of the past. However, these limitations of the autobiographical process are not necessarily a disadvantage. On the contrary, they allow autobiographers to utilise their creative powers and find innovative ways of narratively representing and (re)constructing their identities. Because of the inventive forces that are intrinsic in the autobiographical process,

[every] autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from the outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. (Gusdorf, 45)

The very distortion of the autobiographical mirror is in fact an expression of one of the most fascinating qualities of the genre, namely the co-existence of referential and fictional elements. According to Gudmundsdóttir, who studies life writing from a postmodern perspective, autobiography operates on the ‘borderlines’ (Gudmundsdóttir, 263) between the historical and the imaginary, for it is a ‘creator of

both fact and fiction' (Gudmundsdóttir, 272). As opposed to poststructuralist scholars who have claimed that autobiography is indistinguishable from and dissolves into fiction (cf. de Man, as cited in Prosser, 249), she maintains that

[f]iction is not a negative term in autobiography, it does not diminish autobiography's truth-value, or the referential aspects of autobiography. Rather, fiction is used [...] as a vehicle for the telling of a life, as a tool for making memories come alive, and for fashioning some sort of self-image. (Gudmundsdóttir, 273)

Despite the fact that fictional elements in the autobiographical process have been widely investigated and acknowledged by scholars of autobiography,<sup>77</sup> Gudmundsdóttir's dynamic metaphor of the borderline seems to open up new ways of studying autobiographical texts. One of the areas she recognises as a zone of cross-fertilisation between fact and fiction<sup>78</sup> is in fact 'narrative structure' (Gudmundsdóttir, 263), which is particularly interesting in relation to the approach of this thesis. Based on my experiment of analysing three autobiographical texts from the double perspective of autobiography studies and narrative theory, I believe that narratology – and especially models of first-person narrative fiction as well as theories on the representation of consciousness – has a great deal to offer to the study of the autobiographical process. In the act of translating their selves into stories, autobiographers make use of narrative techniques and structural principles, which are the very building blocks of narrative identity construction. As narratology holds a blueprint for decoding these structures, it should be embraced as a powerful tool that can help us increase our knowledge of the relation between narrative and the self in autobiography.

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<sup>77</sup> See for example Lejeune, 'Pact', 11; Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France*, 33; Prosser, 249; Blowers, 115; Eakin, 'Foreword', ix.

<sup>78</sup> Other borderlines between fact and fiction Gudmundsdóttir names are the relationship between remembering and writing, the treatment of gender, the writing on experience of crossing cultures, the presence of biography in autobiography, and the use of photographs in autobiography. (cf. Gudmundsdóttir, 263)

### *Appendix I – Photograph of the primary authors*



Image source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-486941/Spicier-novel-literary-feud-raging-Amis-dynasty-Marxist-critic.html> (Accessed 7 October 2008)

#### Geoffrey Levi:

‘Family of controversy: From left: Martin Amis, his stepmother Elizabeth Jane Howard and her husband Kingsley Amis’ (Levi, ‘Spicier than a novel’)

#### Martin Amis:

‘I and my father are flanking Elizabeth Jane Howard. Hampstead, late 1970s: towards the end. (*Dmitri Kasterine/Camera Press*)’ (*Experience*, first section of photographs, emphasis original)

## *Appendix II – The title covers*<sup>79</sup>

### **1. Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* (1991)**

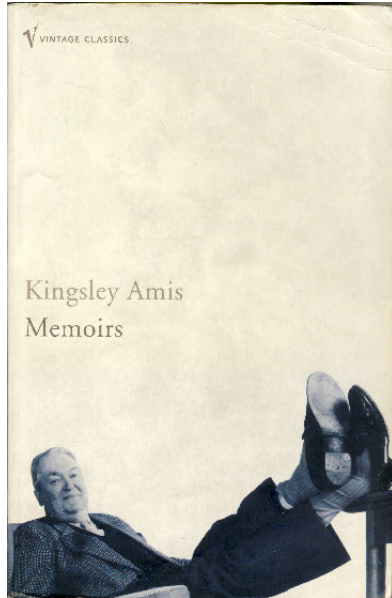


Image source:

Electronic scan of the front cover.

Also see:

<http://www.guardianbookshop.co.uk/BerteShopWeb/viewProduct.do?ISBN=9780099461067>

(Accessed 8 February 2009)

### **2. Martin Amis's *Experience: A Memoir* (2000)**

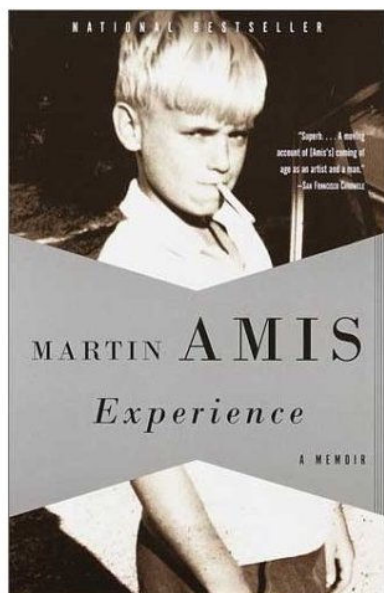


Image source:

<http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/41DD0HHCK9L.AA480.jpg>  
(Accessed 8 February 2009)

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<sup>79</sup> Referring to the editions used in this thesis (see bibliography).

### 3. Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Slipstream: A Memoir* (2002)



Image Source of the front cover:

Shelburne Studios, New York.

[http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/411QV09M4JL.\\_SL500\\_AA240\\_.jpg](http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/411QV09M4JL._SL500_AA240_.jpg)  
(Accessed 8 February 2009)



Image source of the back cover:

Michael Trevillion, Trevillion Picture Library. Electronic scan.

Also see:

[http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/leisure\\_and\\_culture/arts/book\\_now\\_literature\\_festival/1-2\\_november\\_events.htm](http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/leisure_and_culture/arts/book_now_literature_festival/1-2_november_events.htm) (Accessed 8 February 2009)

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## *German summary – Deutsche Zusammenfassung*

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit dem Thema der britischen Autoren-Autobiografie, wobei die Rolle des Erzählaktes und der Identitätsbildung im autobiografischen Prozess besondere Berücksichtigung findet. Die Arbeit gliedert sich in zwei Teile, die aus je drei Kapiteln bestehen: einen Theorieteil, in dem Konzepte der Autobiografietheorie und der Erzähltheorie präsentiert werden, und einen Analyseteil, in dem drei Autobiografien von britischen Autoren – Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis und Elizabeth Jane Howard – mit Hilfe der im Theorieteil erarbeiteten Konzepte untersucht werden. Die drei Primärtexte bieten sich zur gemeinsamen Analyse an, da die Autoren in einem familiären Verhältnis zueinander stehen: Martin Amis ist der Sohn von Kingsley Amis, und Elizabeth Jane Howard ist Kingsleys Exfrau und Martins ehemalige Stiefmutter.

Das erste Kapitel präsentiert die Wurzeln der Autobiografie und die Entwicklung der Autobiografietheorie, geht aber vor allem auf die generischen Charakteristika der Autobiografie ein, die sie von anderen literarischen Gattungen abgrenzen. Im Hinblick auf den Analyseteil wird eine Arbeitsdefinition des autobiografischen Genres entworfen, die speziell auf die Merkmale der britischen Autoren-Autobiografie und auf die zu untersuchenden Primärtexte zugeschnitten ist. Als Ausgangspunkt dient dabei Philippe Lejeunes Definition von Autobiografie als eine von einer realen Person verfasste retrospektive Prosaerzählung, deren Schwerpunkt die Geschichte des Lebens und der Persönlichkeit des Autors ist.

Das zweite Kapitel setzt sich mit Konzeptionen der menschlichen Identität und deren Einfluss auf die autobiografische Praxis auseinander. Sowohl traditionelle als auch moderne Modelle des Ich werden vorgestellt. Ein spezielles Merkmal zeitgenössischer Subjektivitätstheorien ist, dass sie das Erzählen als einen wesentlichen Bestandteil menschlicher Identität betrachten. Sowohl im Bereich zwischenmenschlicher Interaktion als auch gedanklich wendet der Mensch fortwährend narrative Techniken an, die Teil des Prozesses der lebenslangen Identitätsbildung sind.

Im dritten Kapitel geht es um die Funktion des Erzählens in der Autobiografie, wobei der Zusammenhang zwischen dem Erinnerungsprozess, dem Phänomen Zeit und der Tätigkeit des Erzählens beleuchtet wird. Weiters werden erzähltheoretische Konzepte von Franz Karl Stanzel, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan und

Dorrit Cohn vorgestellt, die als Untersuchungswerkzeuge für die Analyse der Primärtexte dienen, wie z.B. die Erzählmotivation eines Autors oder die narrative Distanz zwischen dem erzählenden und dem erlebenden Ich des Erzählers.

Im vierten Kapitel wird die Autobiografie von Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (1991), mit Hilfe von erzähltheoretischen und autobiografietheoretischen Konzepten analysiert. Die Erzähltechniken, derer sich der Autor bedient, werden sowohl makro- als auch mikrostrukturell betrachtet. Kingsleys Autobiografie weist eine genre-untypische Erzählstruktur auf, da sie nicht aus einer zusammenhängenden Erzählung sondern aus einer Reihe von Mini-Memoiren besteht, die exemplarisch untersucht werden. Ferner ist der ungewöhnliche Zugang des Autors dadurch ersichtlich, dass er wenig Privates von sich selbst – dafür aber umso mehr intime Details seiner Zeitgenossen – preisgibt und sein Stil eher essayistisch als erzählerisch ist.

Das fünfte Kapitel widmet sich der Autobiografie von Martin Amis. *Experience: A Memoir* (2000) weist eine hoch komplexe, achronologische Erzählstruktur auf und bedient sich intertextueller Referenzen zu Shakespeares *Hamlet* und Blakes *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Obwohl der Autor zwischen verschiedenen Perioden seines Lebens hin- und herspringt und im ersten Teil des Buches nach jedem Kapitel einen Brief aus seiner Schul- oder Studienzeit einstreut, kristallisieren sich die Jahre 1994 und 1995 als zeitlicher Schwerpunkt heraus. In dieser Zeit, in der der Autor seine Midlife Crisis durchlebte, starb auch sein Vater Kingsley, dem in der Erzählung eine zentrale Position zukommt. *Experience* ist ein autobiografisches Hybrid, das Elemente verschiedener Genres wie der Biografie, des Briefes oder des Tagebuches beinhaltet.

Gegenstand des sechsten und letzten Kapitels ist Elizabeth Jane Howards Autobiografie *Slipstream: A Memoir* (2002). Howards Buch weist von allen drei Primärtexten die traditionellste Struktur auf, da die Autorin ihr langes Leben strikt chronologisch Revue passieren lässt. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit kommt in diesem Kapitel jenen thematischen Schwerpunkten zu, welche die Autobiografietheorie als spezielles Merkmal der Frauen-Autobiografie betrachtet, wie z.B. das Ergreifen des Schriftstellerberufs und die Mutter-Tochter-Beziehung.

Die Analyse der drei Primärtexte verfolgt keinen vergleichenden Zugang; vielmehr wird jede Autobiografie einzeln untersucht. Die verwendeten Werkzeuge aus der Autobiografie- und der Erzähltheorie orientieren sich dabei an den spezifischen Anforderungen des konkreten Textes.



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