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**JONATHAN COE'S LIKE A FIERY ELEPHANT:  
THE STORY OF B.S. JOHNSON  
A DIALOGUE WITH BIOGRAPHY**

VANESSA GUIGNERY

In *The Art of the Novel* (1986), Milan Kundera writes: “The novelist destroys the house of his life and uses its stones to build the house of his novel. A novelist’s biographers thus undo what a novelist has done, and redo what he undid” (144–45). While sharing Kundera’s mistrust of the biographical genre, Jonathan Coe devoted seven years of his life to writing *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2004), his five hundred page biography of B. S. Johnson, a writer who committed suicide at the age of forty in 1973. These two British writers differ greatly in their literary aesthetics. When Johnson published his first novel in 1963, he broke new ground on the British literary scene at a time when writers such as Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and William Cooper were producing novels that relied on traditional narrative techniques and indulged in social realism. Johnson for his part was awed by the daring innovations of modernist writers such as Joyce and Beckett, interested in the emergence of the French Nouveau Roman as advocated by Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, and admiring of the formal experimentations of such contemporaries as Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, and Eva Figes. The protagonist of Johnson’s novel *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (1973) sums it up in a conversation with the author: “Your work has been a continuous dialogue with form” (166). Among his well-known formal devices is the division of the page in two columns in *Albert Angelo* (1964), one for the character’s thoughts in italics, the other for direct speech in roman type. One may also recall his famous novel-in-a-box, *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book composed of twenty-seven unbound sections which the reader could shuffle and read in any order apart from the first and the last, which were marked as such.

Jonathan Coe (born in 1961), on the other hand, has been considered as the author of fairly conventional novels set within the realist mode of political

fiction and the tradition of English comedy and satire, for instance in *What a Carve Up!* (1994), *The Rotters' Club* (2001) and *Number 11* (2015). Although Coe regularly experiments with narrative, genre, perspective, and voice, his books are generally marked by a persistent adherence to such supposedly exhausted tools as plot, characterization, and suspension of disbelief. Unlike Johnson, Coe sees “the high modernism of Joyce and Beckett as a straight-jacket the novel had to break out of” (*Like a Fiery* 6), and firmly believes in the benefits of storytelling and in the enchantment of imagination.

Johnson's own purpose was to explore the depths of his own self, to convey the truth of his experiences and emotions through first-person narrations that revealed the extent of his painful involvement with his own past. The guiding principle of his work is pronounced in *Albert Angelo*: “telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality” (167). This credo of truth-telling is very far removed from Coe's practice as a novelist, but it is certainly not alien to the art of the biographer, all the more so in the case of Johnson, who “wrote novels only about *himself*” so that “the relationship between B.S. Johnson the novelist and ‘B.S. Johnson’ the—hero? central character? subject?—of his own novels is . . . slippery” (*Like a Fiery* 68). A biography of Johnson may therefore postulate, to a certain extent, a continuity between his life and his work, and verge on the category of what French theorist Antoine Compagnon archly calls “vieuvre” (in Dosse 84)—a pun on “vie” (life) and “œuvre” (works). One may note that this intertwining of life and work in Johnson's production from 1959 to 1973 stands in contrast to the defense of the impersonality of the work of art advocated by Gustave Flaubert, Kafka, Beckett, the writers of the Nouveau Roman, and modern avant-gardes, but also by such theoreticians as Roland Barthes in his seminal essay “The Death of the Author” (1968) and Michel Foucault in “What is an Author?” (1969), texts that are contemporaries of Johnson's literary production. More specifically, these developments in literature and theory contributed to the decline of the biographical genre from the 1950s to 1970s (Broqua and Marche 2), rendering it an anachronistic oddity: “So antithetical are biography's premises to those of the intentional fallacy, the death of the author, and the rise of poststructuralist skepticism—not just toward facts, but toward the idea of the coherent individual—that biography has become a sign of theoretical inadequacy” (O'Connor 384). The context has changed, however, and the last four decades have been marked by a redefinition, reinvention, and revitalization of the biographical genre, of which Coe's biography of Johnson itself is a stimulating example.

Still, taking into account the aesthetic differences between Johnson and Coe, one may wonder why a fairly conventional writer—Coe—should have

decided to write the biography of a fairly experimental writer—Johnson. Coe himself refers to this enigma, what he calls “the apparent paradox of a novelist who loves (traditional) novels writing the biography of a novelist who seemed to hate them” (*Like a Fiery* 67). But as Alexis Tadié remarks, “intellectual disagreement does not exclude empathy with the subject” (559). The originality of Coe’s biography is that it manages to combine the two essential aspects of Johnson’s novel-writing in its very form: on the one hand, he implements the principle of truth-telling which is expected from a biography and is advocated by Johnson for the novel; on the other hand, he challenges the established genre of biography and proposes formal innovations that deconstruct some of the biographical conventions as well as echo some of the devices used by Johnson in his novels. In the introduction to his biography, Coe mentions that he empathizes with Johnson, for the latter has come to know “what it’s like to force yourself to work within a set of assumptions that you fundamentally distrust”—in Johnson’s case, the assumptions of the novel. Coe adds: “In my case, these are the assumptions that underpin the writing of—and public appetite for—literary biography” (7). As Coe points out, because Johnson’s work consistently throws down gauntlets, it also “forces you to question your most fundamental assumptions about any kind of writing process” (35).

Before starting this analysis, one must point to the impossibility of setting down biography’s main criteria or paradigms as a genre, all the more so as we are deep into the “era of suspicion,” to use Nathalie Sarraute’s expression, and conventions such as the linearity of the narrative, the quest for exhaustiveness, the consistency of the individual subject, the narrative principle of causality, and the invisibility of the biographer seem by now to be exhausted, or at least they need to be put “under erasure” since they are probably inaccurate and yet necessary (Derrida in Spivak xiv). As early as the 1920s and 1930s, Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey experimented with new forms of biographies (what Woolf called “The New Biography” in her 1927 essay), which implied a “reconfiguration of the literary field” (Gualtieri 359). At the start of the new millennium, as suggested by Antoine Compagnon and Philippe Roger, the biography is necessarily “postbiographic” (483), by which they mean that it has become an “art of challenges” as it has to reinvent its form and procedures and confront the difficulty of coming “after”—after the deconstruction of conventional biographies, after the era of suspicion and exhaustion. The neologism can be related to other temporal “post” categories (postmodernist, postcolonial, postracial, postfeminist, postindustrial, posthuman), and may suggest that biography as a genre—and the human being as a subject—has reached the end of its timeline. However, the prefix “post” which marks a boundary not only connotes an ending—what Kwame Anthony Appiah has called “the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture” (348) which

distances, transcends, and goes beyond what precedes—but also indicates a new beginning. As Heidegger observed, “[a] boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (154). The post-ness of biography therefore suggests that a critical glance is being cast on the genre, not with the aim of condemning it to oblivion but rather of rejuvenating it by devising new configurations.

In addition, and as noted by Robert Dion and Frédéric Regard, the biographer who is a writer himself has no other option but to “experiment with new writing modalities” (19), as he cannot but reflect on his own practices. Bearing in mind this specific context, this essay aims to examine to what extent Coe’s biography is “postbiographic” in the way in which it engages a dialogue with the conventions of biography (such as linearity, exhaustiveness, the quest for truth, and the invisibility of the biographer), but also with his subject’s own guidelines for the novel (as Johnson was advocating for chaos, fragmentariness, truth, and the visibility of the author in his work).

#### ORDERING THE CHAOS

If one starts from the frame, a cursory look at the table of contents of *Like a Fiery Elephant* shows that Coe divided his biography into three main parts with anaphoric titles: “A life in seven novels,” “A life in 160 fragments,” and “A life in 44 voices.” The seven novels are the ones Johnson published, and the combination of “life” and “novels” already echoes Compagnon’s concept of “vieuvre.” The 160 fragments are the extracts from letters, manuscripts, and reviews that Coe inserts in his main text, constantly interrupting it and thus denying any sense of genuine continuity. Finally, the 44 voices are those of people whom Johnson knew and whom Coe interviewed; the last section is composed of extracts from these interviews, moving back and forth between various voices in a polyphonic mode, without any direct intervention from the biographer. The first paratexts and the very structure of Coe’s biography thus immediately convey the impression of careful organization through the echoing titles and numerical precision, while simultaneously opening lines of flight as the multiple fragments and voices deny any reassuring completion, in a way that echoes the main tenets of the postmodernist episteme.

The numerical insistence in the titles<sup>1</sup> draws the reader’s attention from the start. Why 160 fragments? Why 44 voices? Coe remarked that there was no particular reason for this and that the numbers were a mere “coincidence” (Guignery, “Interview”), an interesting comment considering that Johnson himself was obsessed with numbers and very superstitious about them. For instance, he had an obsession with the number 29, was persuaded he would

die at the age of 29, and the number continually recurs in his work (Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction* 212–13). In Coe's biography, fragment 29 (95–96) first appears to be a rather innocent extract from a letter addressed by Johnson to a woman he loved, but within it Johnson alludes to a friend of his who was to commit suicide a few years later, thus maintaining a discreet connection with Johnson's obsession. In addition, Coe's remark points to the notions of randomness and arbitrariness that were regular concerns of Johnson's (Guignery, "Celebrating the Chaos" 111–13). Johnson's aim, in his novels, was to faithfully represent randomness, be it that of memory or the mind itself, which work by fits and starts, and not in an orderly or linear way (as shown in *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, in which the narrator's thoughts and memories come in an accidental order), or the arbitrariness of the development of cancer which afflicted his friend Tony (as recorded in *The Unfortunates*) and his mother (in *See the Old Lady Decently*). He tried to reflect this chaos in the form of his books by opting for perforated and discontinuous narratives. In Coe's novel *The Rain Before It Falls* (2007), the elderly lady Rosamond comes to the same conclusion—"Perhaps chaos and randomness are the natural order of things" (224)—and Coe may thus have aimed to hint at this erratic dimension in the very structure of his biography. The post-ness of biography may therefore rely on this choice of a format that does not replicate the well-built models of the past but reflects the postmodernist inclination for contingency, fragmentation, discontinuity, montage, and collage.

In addition, "A life in 160 fragments" is itself divided into eleven chapters when one might have expected *A History of B.S. Johnson in 10 ½ Chapters*, but the fraction in the title of Julian Barnes's famous novel finds an equivalent in fragment 46 (here again, an apparently random number) of the biography. Fragment 46 is indeed missing from the central part of the book and added as an afterthought in the coda, thus disrupting the chronological order of the fragments. Interestingly, Coe refers to Johnson's archives as "a sort of large-scale version of *The Unfortunates*. That is, a narrative, not entirely lacking in order (remember the sections marked 'First' and 'Last'), but never intended to be read in a strictly linear sequence: rather, something to be shuffled and arranged randomly by the reader, as a way of replicating the chaos of life and the unstructured human consciousness" (435). Coe admits that his own handling of the archives has not always been systematic, and that he sometimes tended to choose files at random (436), maybe also a way of "replicating the chaos of life."

In the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973), Johnson pointed out that the nineteenth century was characterized by a fairly teleological and ordered vision of the world, which found an equivalent

in the conventional realistic novel, and entailed the use of narrative devices conveying an impression of order, control, stability, and continuity. In the second half of the twentieth century, the new scientific premises, especially pertaining to the notion of entropy, changed our vision of the world, which was now seen as chaotic and disordered, without a recognizable and reassuring pattern. Johnson argued that his task as a contemporary artist was, to use Beckett's words, "to find a form that accommodates the mess" (in Johnson, *Aren't You* 17). However, as Johnson realized, "writing is a way of ordering the chaos" (in Burns 92), and therefore betraying it and not faithfully representing it. "[T] here is a great temptation," he wrote, "for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, which cannot do anything other than falsify" (*Albert* 170). This pattern is inadequate and unfaithful but maybe necessary. In the same way, Coe's biography (just like any biography) had to impose a pattern on Johnson's life (which explains why the middle section mainly follows a chronological order), even if that existence was evidently more chaotic and complex than the biography might suggest. This persistence of a pattern may be considered as one of the limitations of the genre, which cannot be totally overcome or bypassed, even in the age of postbiography.

In 1998, in a scathing review of Victoria Glendinning's biography of Jonathan Swift, Terry Eagleton precisely deplored the fact that most biographies follow the same structure, moving "predictably from parentage, birth and education to career, progeny and death," which, according to him, belies the very idea that their subject might be unique (28). For the narrator of Alain de Botton's fictional biography, *Kiss & Tell* (1996), the linear dimension in which a life is told, though the most common, cannot be faithful to the way that life was lived: "Though a life might in some analogies be compared to an alphabet starting at A and ending at Z, it could never be experienced in such a grammatical straight-jacket" (19). Coe was aware of this incongruity, which explains why, even if he tried at first "to write the book chronologically" (in Guignery, *Novelists* 42), he was soon dissatisfied with this approach so that the "life in 160 fragments" opens on a series of false starts and anxious questions: "How to begin . . . ? 'B.S. Johnson was born on 5 February 1933.' And then what? His first word? Footstep? Nappy change?" (35). These impatient interrogations echo Hermione Lee's question at the beginning of her biography of Virginia Woolf (1997), when she wonders how previous biographers worked—"How do they begin?" (3), she asks—and she argues that: "What no longer seems possible is to start: 'Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on 25 January 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and of Julia Stephen, née Jackson'" (3). This impersonal formulation belongs to a chronicle or a notice, but not to the biographical

construction Lee or Coe had in mind, hence the detours taken by the latter at the start of his biography. A common feature of Lee's and Coe's books is their self-reflexive interrogation of past forms, and search for new modes, a metatextual dimension that may be characteristic of the postbiography or maybe the biographical genre as affected by the postmodernist episteme.

The mistrust of linearity might also explain why Coe placed fragment 46 at the end of the biography, disrupting both the chronology of Johnson's life (the fragment deals mainly with the 1950s) and Coe's own narrative. When fragment 46 is missing from the main text, Coe addresses the reader in a footnote: "You will notice, by the way, that Fragment 46 is missing. This is because it was almost the last thing that I found while going through Johnson's archive, so I think you should read it at the end of the book"—a remark that probably arouses the reader's curiosity and introduces suspense, a common strategy in fiction writing. But Coe also adds between brackets: "(No flicking forward, by the way: this is a bound object, a work of 'enforced consecutiveness', not some box full of loose sections to be shuffled and read in any order that you choose!)" (128)—a playful reference to the unbound format of *The Unfortunates*. Through this jocular and ironic self-reflexive comment, Coe suggests that a form of linearity persists in his biography, as opposed to Johnson's more discontinuous novels. Thus, the post-ness of biography does not mean that the genre has entirely transcended what some may consider its limitations, as it still retains an attachment to age-old conventions.

Both in Coe's biography and in Johnson's novels, the reader may thus feel simultaneously the sense of randomness and the tendency to accommodate the chaos: in Johnson's novels, the pull towards chaos seems to predominate, whereas in Coe's biography, the pull towards order may be said to prevail. For all his organizing skills however, the biographer was confronted by another challenge posed by the genre of the biography or post-biography, namely the awareness of its necessarily fragmented and incomplete nature.

### **"FRAGMENTS ARE THE ONLY FORMS I TRUST" (BARTHELME 98)**

As suggested earlier, the 160 fragments correspond to the long quotations Coe inserts in his main text. They are fragments because they are rarely quoted in full and thus point to the necessary incompleteness of any biography. No matter how hard the biographer attempts to achieve exhaustiveness, he will end up with fragments and holes, partly because he cannot include everything and needs to make selections, and partly because some documents or facts will be missing. Coe warns the reader in the introduction: "There will be gaps, where . . . I will not have been able to find out as much as I would have liked" (9), a comment that recalls the narrator's definition of biography



in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984)—“a collection of holes tied together with string—and his exposition of the biographer's partial failure: “consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that,” “think of everything that got away” (35). The die-cut rectangle through pages 149–52 of Johnson's *Albert Angelo*, a literal void, may be considered as the equivalent of such a gap that eradicates—or maybe conceals—information (Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction* 208–213).

In *Like a Fiery Elephant*, the absence of a piece of information or an explanation sometimes confounds the biographer to such an extent that he shares his frustration with the reader instead of hiding it behind a falsely neat surface. For instance, Coe wonders why Johnson, unlike all the other schoolboys, was not sent back to his parents a year after his evacuation from London in 1941: “Why? What were they trying to keep him from—or keep from him? I somehow feel that an obvious explanation must be staring me in the face. But I still can't see it” (49). Later on, referring to the “seemingly insoluble riddle” of a “manifestation of [the] Goddess” in 1955, Coe remarks: “I seemed to be confronted by a gap in my narrative which could never be filled in. The facts were simply lost, lost beyond recovery” (423). When reading Frank Lisauer's letters to Johnson, Coe reflects: “Somewhere there must be (or must have been) an equal volume of correspondence on Johnson's side, which is a maddening thought” (431)—maddening because Coe was never able to find it. Johnson's final days also form “a big conundrum”: “There was one thing that bugged me more than anything else, though. In Diana Tyler's memory of her final Sunday with Johnson, there was a significant gap” (422). At the end of the book, Coe reproduces a passage that Johnson deleted from his earliest drafts of *Albert Angelo*, and mentions that there was another long section that Johnson cut out because it was “boring” (but which might shed light on some of the gaps in the biography), and the biographer exclaims: “Cuts! Yes, cuts!” (445). In all these quotes, one feels the vexation of the “industrious biographer . . . conscientious about unravelling mysteries, and tying up loose ends” (422), but one also perceives his honesty in his blunt admissions of failure—a quality most revered by Johnson.

One of the possible benefits of these lacunae is that they encourage the biographer to confront the methodological issues they raise and to look for different ways to write about a life when material is missing. In Coe's case, it entails laying bare for the reader the very process of researching and writing a biography, and allowing more space for hypotheses, speculations, and conjectures, thereby redefining the foundations and frontiers of the biographical genre.

It would be wrong of course to assume that any biography could ever give access to an intelligible, complete, and accurate totality, even though that

might be the illusion given by some biographies. Hermione Lee (who has written biographies of Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, and Penelope Fitzgerald) recalls a commonplace belief about the genre: “Biography sets out to tell you that a life can be described, summed up, packaged and sold” (4), which she hastens to disclaim: “Woolf spent most of her life saying that that idea of biography is—to use a word she liked—poppycock” (4). This mistaken conception of biography is ironically echoed by Julian Barnes in his review of David Cesarani’s biography of Arthur Koestler: “Here, the biography implicitly states, is the objective truth about the creature in examination; here are the key facts, the emotional turning points, the requisite local color, and the final judgment on the work” (“The Afterlife” 24). While the assertive forms “here is,” “here are” grant solidity to the sentence and to the biographical genre, the expression “the creature in examination” deprives the subjects of their humanity and autonomy and reduces them to a mere object which can supposedly be neatly circumscribed. Barnes’s caricatural description leaves the reader in no doubt about his opinion on biography, which can only give an illusion of completeness. In his review of the fourth volume of Flaubert’s correspondence—which he argues “has always added up to Flaubert’s best biography” (*Something* 195)—Barnes asserts: “Biography gives us the crane-shot, the time-elision, the astute selectivity” (245). Such an assessment is now commonly accepted in contemporary biographies (or post-biographies) and few biographers would pretend to be offering a “complete” life.

In the introduction to *Like a Fiery Elephant*, Coe had already informed the reader about the fragmentariness of his biography: “the book you’re about to read has the look, at times, more of a dossier than a conventional literary biography. It contains its fair share of guesswork, and was compiled with plenty of selectivity” (8). He added: “The result will be fragmentary, unpolished” (9). This incomplete and unrefined outcome is what Johnson himself was trying to achieve in his novels and films as he sought to reflect the chaos and fragmentation of reality. Discussing the narrative form of *Trawl* in a letter to his friend Anthony Smith on 20 August 1964, he wrote: “I want in my new novel . . . only to move freely between fragment and fragment” (Archives). In *Albert Angelo*, the author-narrator describes his book as being “about the fragmentariness of life, too, attempts to reproduce the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, my life, and to echo it in technique, the fragmentariness” (169).

The very form of Coe’s biography, with its accumulation of fragments, might therefore be faithful to Johnson’s aesthetic credo and perception of his own life, while simultaneously being emblematic of the necessarily partial dimension of the biographical genre, which is not only due to “misfortune or

obstruction or sometimes sheer inertia” as suggested by Coe (9), but also to the fact that the biographer cannot incorporate everything and needs to be selective. According to Hayden White, a genuine biographical or metahistorical construction entails emplotment, that is, taking decisions, making choices, selecting (7), and as Michel de Certeau notes, in historiography as in biography, “everything begins with the gesture of setting aside” (16). The biographer’s subjectivity is exposed in this crucial stage of selection during which, to return to Julian Barnes’s metaphor, “[t]he trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores” (38). While Barnes’s description of the process brings to mind the swift efficiency and expertise of the skilled fisherman, it fails to convey how agonizing the task of sifting through facts and documents can be for the biographer.

On the other hand, Coe—who imagined he would write a short biography but ended up publishing a 486-page book after seven years of research and composition—insists on how daunting it is to condense the details of a man’s life, a process which “requires grotesque, enormous acts of compression and selection” (*Like a Fiery* 35). The adjectives “grotesque” and “enormous” may sound hyperbolic but faithfully reflect the biographer’s feeling of dependency during that necessary stage. For Johnson, who constantly pleaded for the systematic telling of truth (even in novels), this selection procedure is flawed, as it implies a distortion of the life told: “Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification” (*Aren’t You* 14). Faced with this aporia, the biographer might as well throw up his hands in despair and exclaim: “How, then, can a biography be anything other than one big lie, from start to finish?” (*Like a Fiery* 35). In spite of this understandable frustration and of misgivings towards the possibility of telling the truth about a given life, Coe understands, accepts, and advocates the necessity for selection and adds to it a creative dimension: “no pretence of inclusiveness, no aspirations towards objectivity. The biography as creative enterprise, artwork: the chaos of reality rigorously sifted through, selected and moulded into appealing narrative shapes” (35). Coe thus opposes the traditional claims to scientificity and objectivity (promoted for instance by the publishers of the *Dictionary of National Biography*), and presents his biography as “artwork” which “moulds” reality (instead of faithfully reflecting it) in an attempt to captivate readers and retain their attention. Such a description seems far removed from the biography’s usual positioning of truth as its ultimate goal, what Frédéric Regard refers to as an “epistemophilic desire” (*La Biographie* 15). One of the specificities of a postbiography such as Coe’s which explicitly acknowledges its fragmentary and selective dimension, lies in the way it fulfils the “epistemophilic” project while telling a story.

### THE TEMPTATION OF STORY-TELLING

Paradoxically enough, Johnson shirked from fiction in his own novels: for him, “telling stories is telling lies” (*Albert* 167) and “a serious novel must not be a work of *fiction*, it must tell the *truth*” (Coe, *Like a Fiery* 204). Coe, on the other hand, entitled his biography *The Story of B.S. Johnson* and insisted that his purpose had been “to tell the story” of Johnson (9, 421). He was thus pointing to the fundamentally hybrid dimension of his book, one which drew from the particulars of both fiction and biography. His readers certainly perceived the generic indeterminacy of the book. When Anthony Smith was sent the typescript, he wrote to Coe that it read “like a novel”: “Your story (!) gripped me narratively right the way through” (in Ghose). In his review of the book, Robert Winder argued that Coe had “produced a glorious hybrid: a gripping and absorbing novel posing (for appearance’s sake) as a life” (48). The words used by Smith and Winder (story, novel, gripped, gripping, absorbing) do not belong to the familiar lexicon of biographies but pertain more to thrillers and mysteries. While Coe admitted the book was not a novel, he also said: “in many ways, I do not really see any essential differences between this book and my novels. The writing of them felt very similar in fact.” The creative process was indeed similar as, once he had assembled all the material, Coe realized he then “had to write a story, a narrative” (in Guignery, *Novelists* 42), which was fine by him since he gleefully belongs to that category of writers who still believe in the enchanting thrill of story-telling: “Stories . . . remain the bedrock of the novel; narrative curiosity . . . remains the centrifugal force which draws readers back to the novel” (Coe, *Like a Fiery* 6). Coe’s ambition was therefore to recreate that narrative curiosity within his biography of Johnson, hence his use of strategies habitually developed in fiction.

It is quite common to consider the biography as a hybrid form, mixing facts and fiction writing devices. Although Coe, like the narrator of Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, is “aiming to tell the truth” (96), he often bluntly admits to hypothesizing: “I imagine (although Johnson would not of course have approved of that), or speculate (which is not much better, but what else can I do?). . . . I believe, or at least I have a strong *hunch* (half of this book is composed of hunches—had you not realized this by now?) . . .” (Coe, *Like a Fiery* 203–204). The epanorthosis (marked by the use of four near synonymous verbs) and the self-reflexive comments between brackets point to the biographer’s unease with his conjectures, which are maybe inaccurate and yet necessary.

Coe delights in intertwining truth and imagination both in his biography and in his own novels, one of which draws inspiration from gaps in Johnson’s

life. As a biographer, Coe laments the lack of information on Johnson in the mid-1950s, which leads him to speculate; as a novelist, this gap is a source of excitement: “So much of this period is lost, lost beyond retrieval. If I were to write a novel about B.S. Johnson . . . this is the period I would home in on: so little is known, which leaves so much scope for the imagination” (*Like a Fiery* 64). This is partly what Coe does in his novel *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010), when he includes a memoir written by the protagonist’s father, in which the latter reveals his latent homosexuality (245–81). This memoir actually draws from the coda of Coe’s biography (the missing fragment 46), which discusses the mysterious relationship between Johnson and Michael Bannard in the 1950s, and includes a deleted episode from Johnson’s novel *Albert Angelo*, relating a similar unusual friendship between two men (Guignery, *Jonathan Coe* 128–31). Life and fiction thus interweave over the years, and lead the biographer-novelist-detective to elaborate a theory—or maybe only a story—about Johnson’s supposedly latent homosexuality. In his coda, Coe therefore belies the provocative assertion of a fictional Dickens in conversation with his biographer Peter Ackroyd: “biographers are simply novelists without imagination” (Ackroyd 797).

Commenting on the coda, Anthony Smith wrote to Coe: “You . . . have the pace of a thriller ending . . . disclosing material by which I was taken aback” (in Ghose). The coda or missing fragment reads indeed like a detective-style investigation into Johnson’s mysterious friendship in the 1950s, as well as into the causes of his suicide in 1973. Coe arouses the reader’s curiosity early on by introducing Michael Bannard as a man who “won’t crop up very often in the story of B.S. Johnson. But when he does, he will certainly make his presence felt” (41). He then maintains suspense by postponing fragment 46 until the end, and presents it as “my own, highly personal—and, yes, speculative—thoughts” (9), as well as “merely ‘a story about B.S. Johnson’” (421, italics in the original). He also remarks: “It’s not the only story I could tell about him . . . it might not even be a true story. But it’s the story that took hold of my imagination” (421). This story had its foundations in a “few things [Coe had] been told about Johnson—both his early life and his last few months—that left [him] feeling curious” (422), and on the “significant gap” in the last hours of his life between the time when he was last seen (when he was about to have dinner with a mysterious “friend from Paris”) and the discovery of his body after his suicide. The coda reveals that Johnson may actually have spent his last evening in the company of a friend (Michael Bannard) he had not seen for many years. Coe notes: “The way it was taking shape in my head now, my story about B.S. Johnson almost had a happy ending, with this unexpected reunion between two long-separated friends,” and he adds:

“It was annoying, though, that there seemed to be no surviving letters to support this version of events” (431). Deprived of evidence, the biographer has to give way to the fiction writer who takes over in the coda: “of course, we can never know something like that. Not for certain. It’s a good story, that’s all; and that’s probably why it appeals to the novelist in me” (447). Instead of providing a reassuring closure, the coda nevertheless ends with a series of unanswered questions that expose the remaining grey areas: “Why?” (429), “Was it what he felt in 1973?,” “Did such a scene *really* take place . . .?,” “What does it mean, then?” (447), “Did he believe that, I wonder?” (447).

Such questions, as well as words such as “story,” “version,” and “novelist” point in a direction that differs from the biography’s quest for facts, truth, and pieces of evidence, but they explain why Coe should insist on considering his biography as part of his novelistic production, and the reader can certainly feel the shadow of the novelist behind the biographer. And yet, this presence seems at odds with the traditionally expected invisibility of the biographer—not to mention the novelist—in a biography, another convention Coe cheerfully subverts.

#### A VERY VISIBLE METABIOGRAPHER

A quite common—though in fact rarely respected—criterion of biography is that of the invisibility of its author. To paraphrase Barthes, the biographer is better thought of as dead and absent from his text. However, self-effacement and impersonality are mere illusions, and the biographical approach is also sometimes an autobiographical journey. Writing about Boswell, Jean Vивиès remarks: “To write the story of another . . . is to look for oneself through the other” (in Regard, *La Biographie* 76). Pace Barthes, there can be neither neutrality nor invisibility of the biographer in a process that fully involves his own self and subjectivity. To quote Frédéric Regard, “the interpretation of the other’s life inevitably engages the biographical author in a hermeneutic task from which, in psychoanalytical terms, a process of ‘transference’ cannot be excluded” (“The Ethics” 400). Coe is very much aware of this process and notes at the beginning of the coda to his biography: “You might end up thinking . . . that this tells you more about me than it does about him” (421). In fact, Coe sometimes provocatively stages himself in his very text. Thus, his introduction is self-reflexively entitled “The Industrious Biographer” and opens with a quotation from Johnson’s novel, *Trawl*: “*I . . . always with I . . . one starts from . . . one and I share the same character . . . are one . . . one always starts with I*” (1), a quote that will be repeated as the last words of the biography (454). In the introduction, this passage is followed by Coe’s first sentence,

whih, quite logically, starts with "I" but also with a memory of when Coe was thirteen and discovered Johnson through his film *Fat Man on a Beach* (1975). Four pages later, Coe recalls other autobiographical facts, such as his university days at Cambridge and how he read his first Johnson novel.

At regular intervals in the biography, Coe will thus intervene to refer to significant events in his own life, both in the main text and in the footnotes, recalling on a minor scale the endnotes to Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) or the footnotes to Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), through which the narrators end up telling the story of their own lives. In *Like a Fiery Elephant*, when Coe includes an extract from Johnson's diary dated 19 August 1961 about having a drink at the White House Hotel in Abersoch, he plays the part of the intrusive narrator and adds a footnote which pastiches the style of Fielding or Sterne (two of Coe's favorite writers): "Students of coincidence will be interested to learn that, 150 miles away, Mrs Janet Coe, of the parish of Lickey on the outskirts of Birmingham, was labouring to give birth to a baby boy, Jonathan by name, who made his entry into the world on that very day" (104). When referring to Johnson as a "fanatical deadline keeper," Coe inserts another footnote: "At the time of writing I am three years and 254 days late delivering this biography" (202). As he is about to write about Johnson's suicide, Coe remarks that he signed the contract for his biography eight years before, and in the meantime has written two novels and "played a role . . . in the parenting of two children" (375).

In addition to these autobiographical snippets, the biographer intervenes to comment on the progression of his work and the difficulties he encounters, a dimension that recalls Johnson's own metafictional devices in his novels. Referring to his last novel, *See the Old Lady Decently*, Johnson declared: "To be absolutely honest the process of writing must enter into it" (in Bakewell 13). In his biography, Coe announces from the start that he will "try to be honest": "where I lapse into speculation, I shall try to be upfront about it" (9). He therefore regularly draws attention to the foibles of his work but also more broadly to the limitations of the biographical genre, thus turning into a "metabiographer," a term that was used by Sandra M. Gilbert to refer to Virginia Woolf when she wrote her parodic biography *Orlando* (1928), in which she exposed the flaws and imperfections of Victorian and Edwardian biography. Gilbert defines a metabiographer as "a writer who both deploys and criticizes the form in which she is working" (xxix), while Marion Faber identifies Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Mozart* (1977) as a metabiography for its "questioning of the method and perhaps the very act of writing biographies" (202). Edward Saunders, for his part, argues that "metabiographical texts make the process of writing a biography visible to the reader" (333). This corresponds indeed

to Coe's practice as he uses the conventions of the biography, but every so often, interrupts the course of his book to lament the constraints and limits of the genre or wonder how he might relate a particularly difficult episode. As he comes to the point, for instance, when he needs to relate Johnson's death "in a few pages," Coe allows himself "a short digression" and shares his doubts with the reader: "How can this be done? How can these pages be written?" (375).

Coe's self-reflexive comments and questions throughout his biography reveal the extent to which he kept interrogating the form within which he was working (thus maybe creating a postbiography), just as Johnson had never stopped questioning the form of the novel within his (at least partly) fictional production.

Virginia Woolf rightfully called biography "[a] bastard, impure art" (in Lee 10): on the one hand, the biographer needs to transmit the facts of a life, "something of granite-like solidity"; on the other hand, he/she has to reveal the inner truth of a personality, "something of rainbow-like intangibility" (Woolf 229). Woolf came to the conclusion that it was not possible to combine factual demands with intimate truth in the same piece of work, and recommended writing two separate books: "Let the biographer print fully, completely, accurately, the known facts without comment. Then let him write the life as fiction" (in Lee 10).

Coe may have managed to reconcile the two dimensions in only one book by conveying facts about Johnson's life while remaining truthful to the latter's commitment to formal innovation, so that his biography is both a dossier about Johnson's life and a mimetic homage to some of the devices he used in his novels. While Johnson denounced fiction as lies and advocated the genre of the novel as a "vehicle for conveying truth," Coe allowed both truth and fiction into his creative biography so as to form "appealing narrative shapes" (35) that testify to his double identity as a fairly conventional novelist and an innovative biographer. If Coe essentially mistrusts the genre of biography because of its numerous limitations and because it cannot make interesting the fact that on 17 August 1965 its subject "sat at his desk for six and a quarter hours, and wrote 1,700 words of *Trawl*" (194), he nevertheless fully embraced the genre to try and renew it. To that extent, *Like a Fiery Elephant* may therefore be "postbiographic" in the way it proposes new "shapes" for biography, based on a dialogue with its subject's own work and theory for the novel, as well as with the conventions of the biographical genre.

## NOTES

1. Coe's eleventh novel is entitled *Number 11*, a number that recurs throughout the book.



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