

Writers' Biographies
and Family Histories
in 20th- and 21st-
Century Literature

Writers' Biographies and Family Histories in 20th- and 21st- Century Literature

Edited by

Aude Haffen and Lucie Guiheneuf

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INTRODUCTION

AUDE HAFFEN

UNIVERSITÉ PAUL VALÉRY-MONTPPELLIER III

This collection of essays arose from a symposium convened in September 2013 at Paris-Sorbonne University by the research team VALE (*Voix Anglophones, Littérature et Esthétique*, EA 4085). The following contributions on British, American, Canadian and French life writing focus on the dynamic processes of generic hybridization, textual fusion and merging of personal and auctorial identities involved when a writer narrates a literary life—the life of another writer—or rescues from oblivion her or his parents’ life histories to exhume, or invent, her or his own genealogy.

Encounters

The encounters between the biographers (or their various narrative *personae*) and their biographees featured in this volume set generic frameworks, epistemic paradigms and ontological realms in motion. Fiction, in its various forms—from carefully argued hypotheses to bold imaginative fantasy—, is shown to supplement and even supersede dry, incomplete factual accounts of lives, inserting itself into archival lacunae, exploring secrets, questioning dubious testimonies and giving narrative expression to traumas that resist articulation in straightforward pacts of referential truth.

The lives captured, emplotted, photographed, discussed, fantasized and transfigured in the works under study are those of the biographers’ literary forefathers and foremothers (Peter Ackroyd writing on Shakespeare, Liz Lochhead on Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Janice Kulyk Keefer on Katherine Mansfield, Jonathan Coe on B. S. Johnson, Lila Azam Zanganeh on Vladimir Nabokov); of artistically active older writers (Nicholson Baker on John Updike); of living friends and lovers (Virginia Woolf on Vita Sackville-West, her model for Orlando); or the lives of the biographer’s dead parents (Doris Lessing’s, Alfred and Emily, and Christopher Isherwood’s, Kathleen and Frank).

Artistic kinship, tough love and the anxiety of influence are clearly at play in Nicholson Baker's unorthodox tribute to John Updike, as Yannicke Chupin underlines. But writers' biographies may also be characterized by aesthetic divergences and other salient differences between a biographer and her or his subject: Jonathan Coe's traditional fictional poetics and social satirical bent stand in stark contrast to B. S. Johnson's bold literary experiments and mistrust of stories, as Vanessa Guignery points out. And the blissful fusion Lila Azam Zanganeh seems to experience with Vladimir Nabokov—which, as Elsa Court shows, expresses a reader's personal and literary communion with an author's life and works—is all the more intriguing when we take into account everything that separates the budding Iranian-French writer from the major American novelist, regarded by some as emblematic of a Western literary canon dominated by dead white males.

The (auto)biographical stage¹ this volume explores is therefore a site of negotiation between distinct lives, personalities, generations, styles and aesthetics, featuring interauctorial² dialogues and legacies. Biographical texts morph into literary echo chambers—Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare*, as Catherine Mari shows, celebrates a poetics of textual absorption. Elsewhere, they become haunted spaces—in Isherwood's *Kathleen and Frank*, as Aude Haffen analyses, Kathleen's diaries, supposedly “dead” archival texts, return to inhabit her son's “living” writing. As new artistic works, these biographies may claim originality and affirm their own singularity of tone and style, and yet they are also “double-voice songs” (Boyer-Weinmann 2005, 9), the fruit of literary “*corps-à-corps*” (ibid. 443, quoted by Yannicke Chupin), that is, they are necessarily indebted works, caught up in relations of filiation and influence.

They involve intergeneric and intersemiotic encounters when a playwright (Liz Lockhead) dramatizes a novelist's life (Mary Shelley's) or vice versa (Peter Ackroyd's account of Shakespeare's life); when a novelist (Virginia Woolf) writes about a poet (Elizabeth Barrett Browning). In Isherwood's family (auto)biography, the motif of the theatre, the author's apparent vocation as a child, is ubiquitous, and in Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*, fiction and history, but also writing and photography, voice and vision, complement and challenge each other.

¹ On the “biographical stage” [“la scène biographique”] as an unstable zone of experimental communication and hermeneutics involving at least two actants, the biographer and the biographee, see Dion and Regard 2013, 10.

² See Schabert 1990, 5. Ina Schabert pits the notion of “interauctoriality” (i.e. literature as a humane space of empathetic encounters between writers), to her the cornerstone of biographical literature, against that of intertextuality (i.e. literature as a textual fabric where new texts are generated by other texts).

Such “queer amalgamation[s]” (Woolf 2008, 100, quoted by Catherine Mari) cross generic, epistemic and ontological boundaries, and are the hallmark of the experiments in New, meta- or post-biography our contributors discuss.

“Life’n’works”³: beyond impersonality

The following essays share the premise that the figure of the author, undermined by French literary modernity and Anglo-American modernism’s emphasis on the impersonality of art, expelled from the critical interpretation of her or his works in the name of “the intentional fallacy” (Beardsley 1954),⁴ proclaimed “dead” as a person pre-existing the book (Barthes 1967), exposed as an ideological “functional principle” constraining the free circulation of fiction and perhaps doomed to cease to exist one day (Michel Foucault [1969] 2001), has survived—a persistence which the experimental self-renewal of twentieth and twenty-first century writers’ biographies bears witness to and, perhaps, generates.

There may indeed be an immeasurable chasm between life and art. Literature may be closer to an inter- and metatextual patchwork than to a mirror of a pre- and extra-textual reality. Stéphane Mallarmé announced the poet’s “*disparition élocutoire*” (“the disappearance of the poet speaking”) in “Crise de Vers” (1897):

The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, mobilized by the clash of their inequality; they light each other up through reciprocal reflections like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones, replacing the rhythm of respiration perceptible in

³ My translation of the French coinage “*vieuvre*.” This hybrid word, invented by Antoine Compagnon (1983, 15), is quoted by Vanessa Guignery in her chapter on Jonathan Coe’s biography of B. S. Johnson. Guignery uses it to argue that both Johnson’s poetics and Coe’s life-writing practice posit a “continuity” between life (*vie*) and works (*œuvre*)—once a tenet of literary history, this continuity was challenged by the theory of the “impersonality” of art and has been revisited in contemporary life writing’s “redefinition, reinvention, and revitalization of the biographical genre.”

⁴ This article, which is about how one should interpret a poem correctly, claims the irrelevance of anything extrinsic to the text—in particular of bio- and genetic criticism—and locates the aesthetic value of a poem entirely within the text itself. It is considered to be a theoretical cornerstone of American New Criticism. See Regard 1999, 12-14; Dion and Regard 2013, 8.

the classic lyric breath or the personal feeling driving the sentences. (Mallarmé 2007, 208, trans. Barbara Johnson, slightly modified)⁵

Marcel Proust silenced, it seemed, biographical criticism once and for all in his essay “La méthode de Sainte-Beuve,” written in 1908-1909, by reasserting the hiatus between the creative self and the psychological, social, sexual self: “A book is the product of another self than that which we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices” (Proust 1971, 221-22, my translation).⁶ The impersonal Anglo-American modernist age pronounced the artist’s personality a romantic anachronism or a philistine confusion between personality and art.⁷ Thus, all in all, as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault note, modern poetics and criticism dissociated the works from the individual voice, breath and feelings of their authors—“inscription” replaced “expression,” and language, not the real life of a writing subject, appeared as the only source of every new literary utterance (Barthes 1967, par. 3-4; Foucault [1969] 2001, 820-21).

And yet, as recent scholarly exploration of life writing in relation to the figure of the author has highlighted (Broqua and Marche 2010; Dion and Regard 2013), far from being exhausted by the aesthetic movements and critical trends which affirmed the autonomy of artworks cut off from the contexts of their creation, the literary quest for the truth of artistic and literary lives has pursued new ways of approaching the biographees’ self/ves and creative processes. In 1896, around the same time Mallarmé’s “Crise de Vers” was published, Marcel Schwob composed a collection of short biographies, *Vies imaginaires [Imaginary Lives]*: intertwining factual and imaginary, fantastical or mythical elements, these *Lives* celebrate the singular, irregular and bizarre bents of empirical existences—and thereby their resistance to typologies and general ideas (Schwob [1896] 1986, 7-8)—, as Robert Dion recalls in his study of the intricate links uniting

⁵ [L’œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l’initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s’allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l’ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.] (Mallarmé [1897] 2003, 248-49)

⁶ [Un livre est le produit d’un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices.]

⁷ In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) for example, the idea that the artist’s personality and existence matter at all is disparaged when Stephen Dedalus voices his artistic credo—art’s essential impersonality: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” (Joyce [1916] 1977, 194-95)

biography and fiction. In 1920s-1930s England, the “New Biography”⁸ broke away from the codes of bulky Victorian lives, with their artless compilation of facts into “two fat volumes” (Strachey [1918] 2009, 6) and their emphasis on moral character, by bringing the biographee’s personality and the biographer’s own style and imagination to the fore. Virginia Woolf’s take on the genre proved even more iconoclastic than Lytton Strachey’s, as Floriane Reviron-Piégay claims, blazing new trails by drawing liberally on fictional devices and glibly transgressing all kinds of boundaries. Viewed from a synchronic perspective, the “New Biography,” which celebrated and rejuvenated “the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing” (Strachey, *ibid.*), also appears as an alternative to the disembodied, autotelic, impersonal modernist aesthetics that supposedly ruled over the period.

Closer to us and to the majority of the artistic works analysed by our contributors, postmodernist fiction and poststructuralist (postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytical, deconstructionist) literary criticism have revived a situated, gendered, historically contextualised auctorial subject.⁹ Authors continue to be cancelled out and sacrificed in the name of the text’s polysemous autonomy: the notion of “writing” [*écriture*] has transposed their empirical traits to a “transcendental anonymity” (Foucault [1969] 2001, 823) and they have been dethroned from their privileged position of authority so that a plurality of reader interpretations may take pride of place. However, the author needs to be acknowledged and re-examined as a “figure” (Barthes [1973] 1975)¹⁰ or “something of a subject” (Foucault [1969] 2001, 838-39)—not an absolute, originating, free subject, but a relative one, situated within and dependent on discourse (Dion and Regard 2013, 11).

Recent developments in reception theory such as *lectures contrauctoriales* (Rabau 2012) also bring to light the pragmatic need for an auctorial figure, if only to allow readers to construct their interpretations *against* this figure: auctorial validation of meaning may not have been totally abolished by Barthes-inspired critical theory—instead

⁸ Lytton Strachey’s preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is often read as a manifesto heralding the advent of the “New Biography.” In her chapter, Floriane Reviron-Piégay stresses the seminal dimension of this text, but qualifies its revolutionary impact and centrality by recalling that some Victorian biographers had already breathed new life into the genre, and highlighting Virginia Woolf’s sometimes underestimated contribution.

⁹ See Dion and Regard 2013, 12-13.

¹⁰ “In the text, in a way, I *desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection) as he needs mine” (Barthes [1973] 1975, 27).

the authors' authority over the way texts are read may only have been transferred to the works themselves, viewed as self-contained, consistent entities, immune to self-contradiction and thus *de facto* impeding an actual free plurality of readings.¹¹

With their embedded critical relation to the biographee's work, modernist and contemporary writers' biographies attempt to conjure, capture, deconstruct and re-imagine this elusive creating "subject." Insofar as they are also *autobiographies*, family biographies do the same: irony is wielded so as to call into question predetermined meta-narratives allegedly meant to account for human and artistic trajectories (Aude Haffen), and in their "queer combination of metalepsis and *opsis*," visual evidence is dialectically challenged by the written text while fictional stories interrogate referential truth and history (Frédéric Regard). "Something like a subject" may tentatively appear within open and plural texts which, poised between the dead and the living, amalgamate personal memories with family archives, and their author's artistic self-invention with her or his biographical imagination.

The uses of (bio)fiction: from trespassing to subversion

Willingly or not, openly or implicitly, biographers sign a pact with fiction. They may extrapolate conjecture about possible events from scarce archival materials and weave imaginary facts into their narrative (Mari). Or they may foreground the artificiality of their reconstructions through metabiographical asides and other self-reflexive elements disrupting the illusion that the textual fabric or staged performance coincides with the biographee's life as it was lived in the real world (Latham, Toussaint, Guignery). Parody and pastiche (Reviron-Piégay, Court, Dion) or the insertion of forged evidence (Court) may be used to expose the potential for sham or distortion lurking in serious biocritical discourse, making readers question narrative and discursive codes, as well as their own cognitive reception.

Our contributors' focus is not so much on the theoretical debates that have flourished alongside postmodern literature to examine whether or not strict ontological boundaries should be drawn and criteria established to

¹¹ On this idea, and on the notion that the auctorial figure remains a "hermeneutic norm" to overthrow or a rival to challenge for the reader not only to interpret the text, but also to "use" it—"to write, rewrite, think, act," see Rabau 2012.

separate historical narratives from fictional ones (Regard, Latham),¹² as on the pragmatic uses of fiction¹³ and their effects—e.g., how infusing fictional elements into a supposedly true life-story enables biographers to transgress validated life-patterns and subvert gender essentialism; how sowing doubt in the reader's mind regarding the reality status of an illustration or documented *biographème* reshuffles conventional hierarchies between life and art, and questions which one copies the other; how exhibiting the artifice of writing and its inherent intertextuality through literary grafts and echoes may help the novelist/playwright-(auto)biographer evade the imperative to appear as an individual genius, the sole author of her or his works.

Playfully fictionalizing Vita Sackville West's life through the male/female, real/imaginary figure of Orlando and having Elizabeth Browning's life perceived by her cocker spaniel Flush allow Virginia Woolf not only to write about a woman's lives, but also to shed light on what it means to do so (Reviron-Piégay). Liz Lochhead's "biographical adventure" with Mary Shelley, whose life she represented in the five different versions of her bio-play *Blood and Ice* (from 1982 to 2009), is also a way to pursue her gendered agenda by revising an androcentric literary history (Toussaint). These hybrid biographical enterprises, mixing the codes of referentiality with those of fiction and dramatic writing, challenge the male-dominated canon. Like postmodern historiographic metafiction as defined by Linda Hutcheon (1988), biofiction and biodrama represent subaltern lives, bring

¹² See Thomas Pavel (1986), quoted by Frédéric Regard. For Pavel, the theoretical debate regarding the definition of fiction opposes "segregationists," who differentiate on ontological and narrative grounds between fictional and referential worlds, and "integrationists," who contest such clear-cut distinction and grant fiction some truth-value. See also Dorrit Cohn (1999), who argues that fiction has distinctive narrative features, which can be highlighted in liminal, hybrid cases such as fictional biographies, and Hayden White, who may be one of the most emblematic theoreticians associated with the "panfictionalist" postmodern episteme, consistently blurring the borders between fiction and history and emphasizing the fictional dimension of any sort of narrative (White 1987, 57). Note also that the hybridity of postmodern biofiction can be studied in the light of the theory of "possible worlds," as Monica Latham suggests (see for instance McHale 1987, quoted by Latham).

¹³ See Alexis Tadié 1999. Tadié argues that fiction is not about *mimesis*, truth and falsehood, but about a cognitive and linguistic *praxis* involving the reader's response, the text with its speakers and utterances, and their contexts. In other words, if various fictional uses of language can be identified, there is no need for an ontological dichotomy between fictional and referential utterances.

into existence unrealized events and reveal unrecorded realities in order to undermine official hierarchies and cast doubt on narratives received as true history.

The conservative bias of many traditional accounts of authors' lives can also be contested by family biographies. In Doris Lessing's biography of her parents, the dialectical tensions between text and photographs, like those between fiction and history, expose the clichéd idealization of conventional family life and subvert the patriarchal model (Regard). Christopher Isherwood's queer poetics of hybridization and performance neutralizes the binary schemes that produce either straight masculine subjects or deviant homosexual ones, and thereby his auto/biographical narrative deconstructs its own myths and avoids the pitfalls of psychology and teleology (Haffen).

Queerness, heterodoxy, a disregard for established hierarchies and a tongue-in-cheek relation to academically authorized, socially validated representations characterize these new hybrid modes of biographical enquiries through which, as Robert Dion and Vanessa Guignery remark, the genre keeps redefining and reinventing itself.

About this book

The ten chapters of this volume are grouped into three sections, although their themes naturally overlap and echo one another.

Part One, "Writers Biographizing their Parents," features two essays. In "Leg(acy): History, Fiction, Photography in Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*," Frédéric Regard analyses the dialectical tensions which run through Doris Lessing's family biography *Alfred and Emily* (2008). Structural binary opposites such as fact and fiction, text and photography, biography and autobiography, or absence and presence, he argues, neither blend nor clash, but are "structured," that is, both separated and inseparable.

In "Christopher Isherwood's Family Auto/Biography: the Genealogy of a Queer Style," Aude Haffen highlights how *Kathleen and Frank* (1971) blurs the lines between family biography and autobiography, but also between Isherwood's and his parents' writings. The author's playful textual juxtapositions, which stand in lieu of a proper individual literary style, subvert the silent ideologies underlying traditional accounts of artistic lives.

Part Two, "Staging Another Writer's Life: Biofiction and Biodrama," opens with Floriane Reviron-Piégay's essay "*Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933): An Anatomy of Virginia Woolf's New Biography." Reviron-Piégay foregrounds the humour and comic spirit that pervade these two works, linking them to some of the core innovative features of the "New Biography"—an irreverent disregard for taboos and hierarchies, freedom from rigid categories, a (meta)literary awareness of the gaps between life writing and real life. She shows that by biographizing "two strong transgressive women," one of them her lover, and by casting a dog in the dual role of biographee and biographer, Virginia Woolf subverts a male-dominated genre oblivious to the specificities of women's lives.

In the following chapter, "*Blood and Ice: Liz Lochhead's Frankensteinian Biography of Mary Shelley*," Benjamine Toussaint analyses how the possibilities offered by theatre allowed Liz Lochhead to follow in the footsteps of Muriel Spark's 1951 *Mary Shelley* and revisit the life of the author of *Frankenstein*, achieving a subtle balance between the "intra-theatrical," which points to the artifice of dramatic writing, and the "extra-theatrical," which mimetically conjures a "real" life on stage. Enhanced with puns, intertextual hints and *mise-en-abyme* effects, *Blood and Ice*, Toussaint argues, is a condensed and dramatized representation of a woman artist's life, freed from the patriarchal bias of literary history.

Monica Latham's essay, "Thieving Facts and Reconstructing Katherine Mansfield's Life in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Thieves*," focuses on the "cross-over" genre of "biofiction," which fuses the apparently opposed poles of reality and imagination. Both a metabiography staging its own impossible quest for the truth of Mansfield's life and an entertaining novel grafting plausible stories on scrupulously researched *biographèmes*, *Thieves* appeals, Latham shows, to many different readers, with various sorts of expectations.

In the concluding essay, Robert Dion approaches the complex interplay between biography and fiction through the notion of "transposition." While the novel, he explains, borrows from real life to confer more substantial density to its fictional worlds, conversely, biography borrows from fiction in order to (re)shape factual materials and make them more meaningful to the contemporary reader. Examples of fictionalization drawn from a varied corpus of 1970s-1990s biographical works—hypotheses and imagination, anachronistic analogies, autobiographical self-projection, pastiche and apocryphal invention, figural points of view, parodies of erudite critical discourse—testify to the constitutive hybridity and multifarious vitality of the genre, while raising the question of the ethics of the biographical hermeneutic imagination.

Part Three, “Biocritical Games and (Post)biographic Displacements,” foregrounds how recent biographies combine the figure of the biographer/critical reader, the biographee’s works and personality, and “the conventions of the biographical genre” (Guignery), staging a playful trilogy between them.

In “Jonathan Coe’s *Like a Fiery Elephant: the Story of B. S. Johnson: A Dialogue with Biography*,” Vanessa Guignery points to the converging dynamics between contemporary biographical writings and deconstruction, poststructuralism and the postmodernist episteme. She highlights how Coe’s 2004 biography of an experimental writer wary of fiction and obsessed with truth-telling challenges the conventions of the biographical genre, just as his biographee had challenged those of novel-writing: shedding linearity and completion to embrace “contingency, fragmentation, discontinuity,” Coe tries to reflect the chaos and randomness of existence that Johnson was striving to convey through his own formal innovations; but far from denigrating fiction, Guignery argues, Coe celebrates the virtues of the biographical imagination, which allows him to reconstruct the story of Johnson’s life.

Peter Ackroyd’s biography of William Shakespeare (2005) may not be as experimental and “postbiographic,” but in “*Shakespeare: The Biography* or ‘The Art of the Roux’ according to Peter Ackroyd,” Catherine Mari suggests that the biographer’s imagination colours his biographee’s life-narrative, while his text absorbs Shakespeare’s language in the same way as the playwright had assimilated previous writings into his own works: Ackroyd’s apparently traditional, chronological, objective biography of Shakespeare is thus suffused with the novelist-biographer’s personality, and with his view of literature as a symbiosis with voices from the past.

In “Nicholson Baker’s *U and I, Or, the Virtues of Non-Reading and Non-Research Biography*,” Yannicke Chupin stresses the liberating irreverence and originality of Nicholson Baker’s unauthorized biography of John Updike, written in 1992, while his biographee was “still a living and booming [novelist].” Chupin shows that the biographer tosses aside chronology, completion and accuracy, and shifts the focus from “the truth of the biographical material” to that of “the biographical relation that binds the narrator to his subject.” Thus, she claims, biography is not at odds any more with a deconstructionist or poststructuralist emancipation of reading from auctorial authority.

Lila Azam Zanganeh’s playfully provocative biographical essay on Vladimir Nabokov emulates Nabokov himself in making biographical reality “a very subjective affair,” Elsa Court argues in the final chapter, “‘A Peculiar Relationship with Life’: Netting the Butterfly Hunter in Lila

Azam Zanganeh's *The Enchanter*." The biographer/creative reader gives free rein to her personal fancy and intuition so as to rescue a "true" Vladimir Nabokov exuding happiness from the figure of cruelty and gloom produced by dominant academic criticism. Court claims that for all its ludic virtuosity and irreverent pastiches, Lila Azam Zanganeh's essay is rooted in her thorough engagement with the Nabokovian universe, and that her admittedly insane, obsessive passion for her biographee actually takes the novelist's exhortation to his readers to be supremely attentive and creative to its extreme.

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PART I

WRITERS BIOGRAPHIZING THEIR PARENTS

CHAPTER ONE

LEG(ACY): HISTORY, FICTION, PHOTOGRAPHY IN DORIS LESSING'S *ALFRED AND EMILY*

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Prelude: life writing as “demonstration”

Alfred and Emily, Doris Lessing's biography of her parents, is composed of two separate sections entitled respectively: “PART ONE Alfred and Emily: A Novella” (3-148), and “PART TWO Alfred and Emily; Two Lives” (151-274). The first section is a fictional reconstruction of her parents' individual lives had they not met; the second is a more classic biographical evocation of her parents' real life, very often verging on autobiography. In her short Foreword, the author offers a few explanations for this curiously hybrid structure—if structure is still the word. In the “novella” section, she had “tried to give [her parents] lives as might have been if there had been no World War One” (vii). Still, Lessing remarks, it was the war that permitted Emily McVeagh's encounter with Alfred Tayler: the war hero had been sent to recover from his wounds at the hospital where Lessing's mother was a nurse. To Lessing, her parents never fully recovered from the Great War, her father because he had lost most of his right leg in the Trenches, her mother because she had lost the great love of her life to the war. This is precisely what Part Two had sought to investigate: how the author's parents' life was lastingly affected by such personal traumas.

But the trauma is also collective, shared, a disorder that one inherits, a legacy that is handed down from generation to generation, a symptom of the persistence of history through different means, although still at a subjective level. The trauma may then be repressed, and even forgotten, notably through fiction. Lessing had indeed imagined other lives for her

real parents; she had given them the imaginary lives that they, as real-life persons, would most probably have wanted had not the war tragically altered their destinies. The “novella” is thus a description of reality freed from its tragic twists of fate: reality made right, so to speak, returned to its “normal,” but dehistoricized dimension. The novella is nevertheless inseparable from the more historicized second section, which relates the biographer’s parents’ life as it was actually lived: a post-war life, that is to say a life haunted by history, but also a life of smashed hopes and frustration on a poor South Rhodesian farm, lived by the whole family, including the author.

The process of life writing in all its contradictions is therefore presented as some sort of therapeutic work:

The war . . . squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free. (vii)

Life writing is here defined less as an attempt to retrieve the past of one’s parents, than as an attempt to recover from one’s own personal trauma, the trauma of having had to cope with traumatized parents, of having had to grow up among the ghosts of the past. This lends substance to Paul Fussell’s argument that in the memory of historical events and in the culture of the past we always recognize our own buried lives (Fussell 1977, 335). To write a biography of one’s parents, Lessing suggests, is to experience a recognition of oneself. It is to give life in order to take one’s life back; in a writer’s case, it is to give life in order to produce oneself as an author and artist.

Life writing is also explicitly associated with a visual experience (“the trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me”). Lessing had been anxious to “get free” by making the trenches less visually present. This was quite obviously made possible through the fictional reconstruction of the past—a negation of history, a self-blinding. I want to argue, however, that this was also made possible through a process of “unblinding”: through the adoption of a different way of looking at the war and its side-effects, through a different way of looking at her parents. This is where, according to me, the use of photographs is of crucial importance, notably in the second section of *Alfred and Emily*. As Lessing’s formulation suggests, it is all a question of “monstration” (from the Latin *monstrare*, to show, to bring to knowledge, to make visible): her biography is a way of showing her parents, of transforming them into a spectacle; it is also a way of “demonstrating” herself, of freeing herself of the “monstrous” phantom of the Trenches (a “monster” is always made into

a show), of unclasping the stifling hold of the phantom squatting over her shoulders. Biographical writing serves to “demonstrate” oneself by making reparation for injury and loss, but also eventually by acknowledging the “monstrous legacy.” This, I contend, is how Lessing finds both her own true voice and a new perspective for the wound: a wound, psychic and physical, that is ignored, forgotten, covered, but also revealed, rediscovered, and above all semiotically transfigured, as we shall see.

Insects, trauma, writing

Thomas Pavel distinguishes between two kinds of writers and critics: the “segregationists,” who want to enforce a law of separation between fiction and non-fiction, and the “integrationists,” who insist that our lives are made of “mixed” realities, if only because we use language to describe them (Pavel 1986, 12, 29). Doris Lessing would no doubt be part of the “integrationist” school. Her biography of her parents does indeed lend itself to being read as an “integrated” whole, since the two sections taken together form a “mixed” reality, one that clearly blurs the line of segregation between fiction and non-fiction. This might be argued of each separate section as well. For instance, when the second section includes lists of books of fiction—ranging from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Sleepy Hollow* to *Alice in Wonderland* and the *Just So Stories*—Lessing is very careful to record that amidst this “stream of books” which “kept pouring through [the] house” (169), were also history books, notably on the Great War (165-69). One might add here that this diversity of books, and the psychic life they fed, were definitely as real as the hardships of farming in colonial Africa, and that the pages in which the three aspects of life—farming, fiction, history—are combined in *Alfred and Emily* may be said to accommodate “mixed” utterances. More obviously “mixed” is the first section, in which Emily, the real-life young girl who would later become the author's mother, is granted the work and authority finally denied her in life—a fiction that remains plausible, but still a fiction, blatantly contradicting the historical reality alluded to by the various biographical data.

This “mixed” nature of Lessing's book is precisely what induced me to use the term “structure” only very reluctantly in my “Prelude.” Instead, I propose to think of Lessing's book in terms of “stricture,” a notion I use in its pathological sense of “a morbid narrowing of a canal, duct, or passage” (*OED*), and which I borrow from a little-known 1990 lecture by Jacques Derrida, entitled “Fourmis” (Derrida 1994). “Fourmis” is the French word for ants. Starting from a dream his friend Hélène Cixous told him she had

had, about a male ant, “*un fourmi*”—a grammatical impossibility in the French language: an ant is always “*une fourmi*”—, Derrida seeks to define “sexual difference” in terms that do not rely on the concept of “structure,” which he understands as a signifying system based on paired opposites. He then comes to remark that a “stricture” is what characterizes all insects, a word whose etymology, *inseco*, is particularly ambiguous according to Derrida, as it may mean both to section, to divide into sections, and to bind together, to repair (as in *insectus*). *Insecta*, Derrida concludes, is the name of all the living organisms that are therefore both cut and uncut, a curious paradox that is indeed embodied in insects, and in ants in particular, the very emblems of all such notched beings, cut in the middle and yet uncut, severed and yet tied, separated and yet repaired, amputated and yet made whole (76). Whereas a structure relies on the existence of clear-cut binary opposites—black vs white, man vs woman, love vs hate, fiction vs reality, and so on—a stricture is defined as what both brings forth the possibility of the structure and simultaneously challenges its binarism.

Seen through this lens, *Alfred and Emily*, with its two widely diverging but at the same time complementary halves is not so much a hybrid biography of Lessing’s parents as a “notched” narrative of their life: the book is both sectioned and unsectioned, cut and uncut, severed and repaired, preventing any rigid structuring from settling in and freezing the separate worlds into fixed, binary opposites. And if Lessing’s book may be said to be “strictured” like an insect, one of its most intriguing chapters inevitably takes on a particular dimension. Indeed, in the second part of the book, the reader comes across a seemingly irrelevant four-page set called “Insects” (Lessing 2008, 223-27), in which the author meditates on her childhood phobia of insects (except for butterflies). I suggest that those pages should be central in our understanding of the whole enterprise of life writing, as it may be argued that the author’s biographical evocation of her parents’ life, with its two halves, is evidence of a finally detraumatized reconciliation with sectioning.

The point I want to make is that Lessing’s book manages to “insect,” that is to say both to separate and to bind, the two versions of her parents’ life, as a way of coming to terms with her childhood phobias (of which her terror of insects should be seen as a mere displacement)—including her horror of amputation. As a matter of fact, such “insectioning” is evinced in the very titles of each part, with the punctuation chosen by the author playing a significant role: both “Alfred and Emily: A Novella” and “Alfred and Emily; Two Lives” are titles that are “strictured,” cut into two segments and yet at the same time uncut, since in each case the separated limbs remain linked, thanks to either a colon or a semi-colon, two marks

of punctuation which do not serve as tight partitionings but as invitations to interpretation—and reinterpretation. For instance, the colon, which normally introduces an explanation of what precedes, is made particularly problematic as the two real-life names of Alfred and Emily are given to the characters of a “novella.” As for the semi-colon used for the title of the second section, it equally forbids any rigid partitioning since Alfred and Emily are introduced as having had “two lives,” in a part that is yet supposed to be a record of their married life.

In such an “integrationist” world, in which no part should ever be dissociated from its counterpart, in which no element or fragment should be opposed to another, there can be no precedence of fiction over reality, and vice versa. As one progresses through the book, it appears that this is mainly due to the fact that the source of the enunciation has not been fixed and stabilized, structured. This is particularly the case when the narrator of the fictional section betrays her presence as the author of the whole book by calling the supposedly imaginary characters of Emily and Alfred respectively “my mother” and “my father” (24, 26). In the brief “Explanation” sub-section (139-48) terminating the first section—and by the same token physically separating the two larger sections of the volume, like the notch of an insect—the limit between fiction and memoir is equally challenged. The author, who is now no longer the narrator of the novella, justifiably calls Alfred and Emily “my parents,” “my mother,” “my father” (*passim*). She also closes this sub-section with a three-page long excerpt (145-48) from the 1983 *London Encyclopedia*, telling the history of the Royal Free Hospital, a historical landmark where Lessing’s mother was indeed a nurse, which further blurs the limit between fact and fiction in the novella section. This sub-section definitely “strictures” the book, introducing continuity instead of discontinuity, so that the dominant trope of Lessing’s biography may be said to be metalepsis, a figure of rhetoric defined by its capacity to produce “intrusions that disturb,” that is to say to collapse the difference between fiction and reality, or at the very least to keep it problematic (Genette 1988, 88).

“Metalopsis”

What complicates things even further in this respect, is that the “Explanation” sub-section also includes two photographs of Lessing’s father in army uniform (Lessing 2008, 143-44). To be more accurate, the reader is made to assume that those are indeed photographs of the author’s father, as no caption comes to establish the man’s identity. True, this particular soldier’s identity may to some extent be easily ascertained since

the second photograph (144) had already appeared in the first volume of Lessing's autobiography, *Under My Skin*, published fourteen years earlier, with an explicit caption: "My father, Alfred Cook Tayler, in 1915."¹ Still, how are we to account for the author's choice to suppress such captions in *Alfred and Emily*? One possible answer is that withholding such crucial information whenever visual evidence is provided exacerbates the identity trouble that seems to characterize this biography, as we have seen. But it may also be argued that in deleting captions, Lessing may have wanted to turn her readers first and foremost into viewers, of turning biography into a way of looking at her parents, and of transforming her parents into a spectacle, by which I mean for the time being: an *opsis*, a purely optical phenomenon, a form of representation famously indicted by Aristotle as being inferior to the tragic plot.² Lessing's strategy would therefore consist in producing herself as the author of her parents' life by lending new meaning to the tragic plot of their life through its "spectacularization." This queer combination of metalepsis and *opsis*—which I call "metalopsis"—is indeed supported by a specific use of family photographs, throughout *Alfred and Emily*.

For the sake of brevity, I choose to concentrate only on the pictures in which Lessing's parents are visible. The first two photographs to be shown in the book are portraits of Lessing's father and mother at an age when they had not yet met, that is to say at a time when the future was open, and Alfred still had his two legs. Those two photographs appear just after the title page and before the start of the novella, as if it were the novella's responsibility to take over the story held in store by each of the two portraits, and, so to speak, keep the promises made by the images of these two healthy-looking youths. This imaginary version of reality is nevertheless soon exposed as a purely fictional reconstruction when the two photographs placed in the "Explanation" sub-section show Lessing's father in army uniform. As we already know, the second photograph of this set (144) shows a handsome young officer, standing confidently in front of the camera, placidly smoking a cigarette, while somewhat perplexingly leaning on a crutch, as if he had been wounded in action. But it remains impossible to tell whether this man was amputated, and

¹ See Lessing [1994] 1995, 87ff.

² "A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us." (Aristotle, Book 6)

Lessing's caption in *Under My Skin* is of no help. Those photographs are nevertheless almost immediately followed by a third picture (148), which closes the first section, showing Alfred lying in hospital, with a shy nurse sitting by his bed, looking neither at the camera nor at the patient but at her sowing (or knitting). One surmises that this final document is meant to illustrate the true-life meeting of the author's parents, an interpretation confirmed by the reproduction of the same picture in Lessing's autobiography with the explicit caption: "My father, after he had had his leg cut off, in his room at the Royal Free Hospital, with my mother, Sister McVeagh" (Lessing [1994] 1995, 87).

This picture logically appears just before the beginning of Part Two, that is to say just before the beginning of the more classic biographical section of the book, implying that what was to ensue had in fact been in preparation on that particular hospital bed. The war has taken place, and the very first photograph the viewer is presented of the biographer's parents as a couple suggests that their future was already closed, that destiny (symbolized by the needle work) had already woven its threads: positions had been fixed, both figuratively and literally. Ironically, the union of those two lives, the wounded war hero and the modest nurse, means not the beginning but the end of hope. Still, on the page immediately following the title page of Part Two, the first photograph to be found is a portrait of Alfred and Emily as a happy married couple (150). It is utterly impossible to guess that the smiling young civilian, firmly standing on his two legs, is in fact a crippled, shell-shocked war hero: the wooden leg is so elegantly concealed that Alfred and Emily look like a "normal" couple, a particularly handsome one into the bargain. In all respects, the photograph does conform to the norm of bourgeois family photography, seeking to project an image of the parental couple as an ideally matched pair.³

Of course, the narrative thread has not as yet been picked up, the real-life section has not as yet really begun. Still, just opposite this photograph, Lessing makes room for a long quotation, clearly identified as an excerpt from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which the narrator explains that there are wounds to the soul which do not recover as easily as bodies do, and that there can be terrible invisible "after-effects" (151). The image of perfect marital happiness is therefore blurred by the juxtaposed text, which is made to function as some sort of negative, extended side caption, and which, although it is given as a quotation—so that the responsibility of the enunciation is delegated to Lawrence's narrator—manages to expose the

³ On this, see Hirsch 1997, 10-11.

photographic evidence as a superficial, fragile representation of life. The photograph is made to appear as an artificial cliché, just about to be shattered to splinters by the narrative of Lessing's parents' real life.

Such a dialectics between text and image is everywhere at work in the second section of *Alfred and Emily*. This is particularly the case of a group of three photographs in which the author—then a teenage girl—appears in the company of her parents and of her younger brother (208-09). Assuredly, the three pictures put together conform once again to the conventions of familial snapshot photography, as they propose an image of familial relations which seems to promote the patriarchal family as the norm. Any voyeur who would not care to read the text—and this is one of the temptations experienced by any reader of biographies—would derive the overall impression of an ideal family unit of white settlers, affecting the traditional pose of all families at home, thus also projecting the reassuring image of British familial happiness in the heart of the African bush. What will strike the more careful viewer, however—a viewer who will also have been a reader, therefore—is that the pets are the only members of the family to be shown any sign of affection.

In the first, full-page picture of mother and daughter (208), a smiling, lively-looking teenage Doris holds a puppy (it might be a fluffy one) on her lap while her mother is looking absent-mindedly at the camera, seemingly unaware of her daughter's presence. In the second photograph (209, upper picture), the same girl is standing in the background, offering again the face of a happy, slightly older teenager, while her brother is crouching in the foreground holding a big dog in his arms. The father is sitting on a chair, his wooden leg clearly visible next to his son's bare left knee, hence the disturbing similarity between the two limbs. Although he looks definitely happier than his wife on the preceding photograph, Lessing's father's right arm, instead of reaching out to embrace his children, rests on his right knee, just above the wooden leg, a gesture which strongly, though unconsciously, suggests that the trauma of amputation is the origin of the divide between the two generations. In the third photograph (209, lower picture), Lessing's brother is seated on a low chair holding a big cat. His sister and his mother are standing behind him, separated by what is probably the same dog as in the second picture, each extending a hand to the dog's head. The poignant detail this time is that the mother's and the daughter's hands almost join, almost touch each other, but seem to be suspended in mid-air, as if contact were never to be established. Doris's face shows no sign of happiness; nor does her brother's.

In all three photographs, the image of an idealized familial happiness is therefore systematically contradicted by what the visual evidence reluctantly, or unconsciously, reveals: instead of showing familial harmony, the photographic evidence unwittingly betrays a rift. The photographs thus paradoxically illustrate the text, since Lessing's narrative does indeed portray a divided family, with the parents forming an unhappy pair and the mother and the daughter at loggerheads—"I hated my mother," Lessing confides (179). It also seems that the text only says in fact what the pictures might show to the viewer if looked at from a different perspective: the perspective of an author turned analyst, belatedly perceiving what was abnormal, the poignant details in the apparently normal image of familial happiness. In other words, the real-life narrative exposes the almost invisible truth behind the still, flat life of the photographic image; it transforms the image of familial harmony into a spectacle, exposes family snapshot photography as a spectacle for the others. More importantly, it teaches us to correct our vision of familial happiness by allowing a tension to emerge between photographic evidence and textual record.

This explains why the photographs cannot be looked at properly without at the same time reading both the novella and the biographical narrative: to some extent, the pictures can only be made into a spectacle—the "demonstration" can only be carried out—if they also become what William Mitchell calls "image-texts," that is to say images that signify only inasmuch as they problematize the "relations of the visual and the verbal" (Mitchell 1994, 89 note 9). This is undoubtedly part of Lessing's strategy of "authorization": by disturbing the familial look, by introducing trouble into the institutionalized image of familial happiness, by opening a space of resistance within the hegemonic familial gaze,⁴ she definitely turns herself into an artist instead of remaining a traumatized daughter simply confessing her hatred for her mother. The art of "metalopsis" consists in producing two "illustrated" narratives which are made to enter into a dialectical relationship, and through this dialectics to undo the objectification of the still photographs.

In Lessing's case, life writing is therefore bound to be a composite practice, meant both to smooth out the wound revealed by the photograph, to soothe the sense of loss—this is what the novella does by proposing a fictional reconstruction of history—and at the same time to expose this wound by deconstructing the myth of the ideal patriarchal family, the myth of the family as stable and monolithic, with the mother and the father

⁴ See Hirsh 1997, 101-04.

serving as role models for their children. *Alfred and Emily* is thus emblematic of a “postmodern” poetics: Lessing’s biography definitely articulates her questioning of bourgeois domesticity on an “ironic rethinking of history” (Hutcheon 1988, 5), which is made particularly conspicuous through narrative self-reflexivity as well as through a dialectics of the visual and the textual. Put in Lacanian terms, the family photographs are used not as an archival material meant to satisfy the curiosity of a voyeuristic reader; they are used rather to expose the tension between a subject who is constituted as an image from the outside, photographed by the gaze of the other, as an object, and a subject who uses writing to dis-objectivize and resubjectivize herself (Silverman 1996, 19)—a process which implies that familial relations should be seen from the mature author’s vantage point, and by the same token made into a spectacle, in Debord’s sense of the word: “a worldview that has actually been materialized, that has become an objective reality” (Debord 2013, thesis 5).

Coda: “legacing” the father

I wish to argue as a conclusion that the process of “demonstration” finds its most “objective reality,” its emblem, in a specific figure, that is to say: in the representation of a shape, and also, more subtly perhaps, in a form of expression, in the semioticization of that very shape. This figure, which I take to articulate “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” that defines the inscription of trauma within literature (Caruth 1996, 3), is the “leg”—both the referential missing paternal member and its more or less explicit, more or less disguised, signifier, encrypted in Lessing’s choice of the term “legacy” (“monstrous legacy”) when dealing with her own personal post-war trauma.

As we know, in order to efface “the monstrous legacy” of the war, Lessing uses in the first part of *Alfred and Emily* the fictional freedom of the novella to remember her parents differently. This reconstruction is achieved by actually re-memorizing the father, that is to say by reattaching a leg to the amputated father, thereby ignoring the tragedy of historical factuality. But Part Two of *Alfred and Emily* chooses eventually not to forget the historical legacy of the Great War. The father’s leg is now mentioned as unmistakably missing from the start in the biographical narrative, although at the same time allowed to figure in the foreground of one of the most poignant family snapshots (209, upper picture): the severed limb is then represented *in absentia*, metaphorically, in the form of the wooden prosthesis, a visual shape that is perceived as an unexpected