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TOWARDS THE BORDERLINE POETICS: *ALFRED AND EMILY* BY DORIS LESSING

If one were to identify a single area in contemporary literary practices, where the “borderline poetics” comes most powerfully to the fore, one would necessarily need to point to the life-writing domain. Undoubtedly, in recent years, life-writing genres have not only claimed their centrality in the academic discourse, but also managed to attract wide readership. Most importantly, however, they manifest the borderline characteristics (a free interplay of fact and fiction and the genre-bending features in particular) in a manner and to an extent that can hardly be matched by any other type of contemporary literary production. The present paper discusses a text which powerfully manifests the borderline poetics. *Alfred and Emily* by Doris Lessing, a 2008 narrative about the parents of the Nobel Laureate set on the outskirts of the falling British Empire, on the one hand incorporates and accommodates the two seemingly opposite orders, namely fictional and factual; on the other it resists being categorised as belonging to only one, clearly defined genre (e.g. autobiography or biography). The aim of this paper is not to decide upon the story’s unequivocal generic affiliation, but rather to observe the dynamics between factual and fictional realms – the dynamics which lies at the very heart of any life-writing practice.

KEYWORDS: Doris Lessing, memoir, auto/biography, genre, borderline poetics

“Must we have lives?”
(P. Fitzgerald 2000: 3)

“Peut-on aimer un genre?”
(G. Genette 2012: 129)

“We are enjoying a golden age of biography”
(D. Lessing 1995: 14)

THE LAWS OF GENRE

Jacques Derrida’s 1980 essay entitled “The Law of Genre” begins with an imperative: “Genres are not to be mixed” (202), followed by the philosopher’s own declaration: “I will not mix genres” (ibid.). However, despite its apparently unequivocal opening, the essay by no means offers an appraisal of norms, clear and impassable demarcations and generic purity. Though Derrida recognises the fact

that a given text cannot belong to no genre¹ and, thus, always contains “identifiable and codifiable traits” that allow to determine its singular or plural class-membership (211), the titular law of the genre [“a counter-law which constitutes this very law” (205)] is, in fact, “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (206). He states that disruptions of generic marks – those “anomalies” which he further defines as “impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, deformation, [...] cancerization, generous proliferation or degenerescence” (204) – point to the essential “axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment” (212). In short, according to Derrida, generic taxonomy is both possible and impossible, while the law of genre can operate only when it opens itself to transgression.

It seems to me that the fundamental difficulty to conform to the “strict, normal, normed, or normative definitions of the genre” (214) can be particularly observed in the field of life writing whose specimens² appear to be specifically prone to risk “impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (204). Critical recognition of both a free interplay of fact and fiction that life narratives exercise as well as genre-bending characteristics of those texts have led to their categorisation as essentially borderland or threshold narratives and, consequently, representatives of, what I shall call, the “borderline poetics”³. As I have already signalled, the markers of the borderline poetics are primarily twofold⁴. First, the life writing narratives always negotiate their position between literary and artistic functions and the historic or objective demands. In other words, they occupy a threshold space between fiction and fact. Any process of creating a life, of “making [it] up”, is limited or guarded by facts, inerasable incidents from one’s life, and the “responsibility to likeness and the need for accuracy” (H. Lee 2005: 28). However, its true significance reaches well beyond the concepts of falsity or truth. In a classical, yet still amply valid GUSDORFIAN interpretation of life narratives, a given specimen

is unquestionably a document about a life and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for

¹ There is “no genreless text”, Derrida says (212).

² I.e. autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, biographical novels. The appendix to Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* offers a list of sixty genres of life writing (S. Smith and J. Watson 2001: 253-286).

³ Among the life-writing critics who have borrowed the term “borderline” from the psychology lexicon and have been consistently using it to refer to various (auto)biographical practices, one should mention Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson (S. Smith and J. Watson 2001) as well as Leigh Gilmore (L. Gilmore 1994) and Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir (G. Gudmundsdottir 2003). However, it appears that the credit for introducing the term to life writing studies needs to be given to Linda Hutcheon in her 1989 study titled *The Politics of Postmodernism* (L. Hutcheon 2002: 157).

⁴ A dynamics between self and other, auto- and (Coetzee’s) *autre*-biographical narratives (D. Attwell 1999: 394) could be noted here as another marker of the borderline poetics. According to Laura Marcus, contemporary works of self writing cannot by any means be classified as traditional autobiographies since they refuse to acknowledge and secure “the much desired unity of the subject and the object of knowledge” which characterises traditional autobiographical writing (5).

his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. It is therefore of little consequence that the *Mémoires d'autre-tombe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his *Voyage en Amérique*; the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of travelers' moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal. (43)

The second marker of the borderline poetics that I should like to list here is the narratives' already mentioned resistance to being categorised as belonging to only one, clearly defined genre⁵ – the phenomenon already addressed by some of the critics in the field. For example, James Olney states the following: “The finest biographies as the very condition of their being the finest biographies – always and invariably reveal clear and compelling traces (and often much more than mere traces) of autobiography” (429). Every autobiography is also an “autothanatography” (12), Nancy K. Miller says elsewhere. In her brilliant reading of genealogy of memoir entitled “Are Memoirs Autobiography?”, Julie Rak pays attention to the transgendered nature of this type of writing since – all at once – it blends private and public; its subject may be one's self or the others; it is equally written “by the most powerful public men” and “the least known, most private women” (316); it describes “writing as process and writing as product” (317). What is more, “memoir” is inconsistent in number and gender: the term can be both singular and plural (and mean the same!⁶) and, most interestingly, it has been both a masculine and feminine noun⁷. Finally, it profoundly violates the laws of genres since it can be “a document note or a record, a record of historic events based on the writer's personal knowledge or experience, an autobiography or a biography, an essay, or a memory kept of someone” (ibid.). As a result, it is impossible not to agree with G. Thomas Couser and his definition of the memoir as a “threshold genre” (12).

Following the above-made remarks, the aim of the present paper is to discuss Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* – a profoundly transgeneric *mélange* which takes major interest in Lessing's parents – as a manifestation of the borderline nature of

⁵ One should note a peculiar paradox between an almost unanimous appreciation of gender-bending characteristics of life narratives and, simultaneously, an insistence on coining new generic categories and desire for classification among life writing scholars. For example, in recent years, a venerable genre of autobiography has been substituted by, among others, autobiographics (Leigh Gilmore), autofiction (Serge Doubrovsky), autoportrait (Michel Beaujour), autothanatography (Nancy K. Miller), autopathography (G.Thomas Couser), biomythography (Audre Lorde), heterobiography (Philippe Lejeune), otobiography (Jacques Derrida), or periautography (James Olney).

⁶ Not everyone agrees on identical meaning of memoir and memoirs. In his *Memoir. A History* Ben Yagoda concludes: “‘memoirs’ usually cover the full span of [someone's] life, ‘memoir’ has been used by books that cover the entirety *or* some portion of it” (1).

⁷ Rak notes that after the centuries of fluctuations, the Middle French masculine word *memoire* became feminine; yet it lost its second “e” which would be a clear mark of a feminine noun in French (316).

life writing. I wish to see Lessing's volume as a re-markable text, namely the one which can be incessantly re-marked (i.e. re-labelled) regarding its generic affiliation and, consequently, can be seen as a re-markable (i.e. outstanding⁸) example of the borderline poetics of life writing

“DISCIPLINED BY...”

Published in 2008, *Alfred and Emily* was neither Doris Lessing's first narrative in which her parents featured prominently, nor the writer's first encounter with life writing⁹. She wrote about them and their lives – first critically and then, gradually, with more compassion and empathy – in both fictional and, traditionally speaking, non-fictional forms: in the novel *Martha Quest* of 1952, in “My Father” from the non-fictional account *A Small Personal Voice* of 1974, or in the first volume of her memoir entitled *Under My Skin* of 1994¹⁰. In fact, towards the end of Chapter One of *Under My Skin*, Lessing defines herself as “brought up in [a family] crippled

⁸ Though my paper ostensibly privileges Lessing's narrative (since, I believe, it reveals and manifests the markers of the borderline poetics and its generative capacity in the superior manner, often unattainable to other specimens), other texts could serve here as an exemplification of my claim. For example, *Scenes from Early Life* (2012) by the British novelist Philip Hensher is a particularly interesting (and quizzical) manifestation of the two phenomena that I have identified as essential for the borderline poetics. Though subtitled “a novel”, the book is in fact an autobiography of Zaved Mahmood, Hensher's husband. However, from the narratological point of view *Scenes from Early Life* can by no means be categorised as an autobiography since the narrative violates the fundamental rule of the genre formulated by Lejeune, i.e. the equation author = narrator = character. “Author's [sic!] note” declares: “*Scenes from Early Life* is the story of one upper-middle class Bengali family, a novel which is told in the form of a memoir. The narrator speaks in the voice of Zaved Mahmood, the author's husband, who was born in late 1970s shortly before the outbreak of the war of independence” (309). Equally to its generic status, the question of the book's ontological premises should be met with considerable puzzlement. Is it predominantly a work of fiction (both a subtitle and a commentary in the acknowledgments part seem to suggest so)? Or, does the book largely inhabit the relatively safe domain of facts and historical accuracy guaranteed by its character's unquestionable referentiality and, consequently, should be approached as a work of non-fiction? Of course, it is impossible to provide the above-posed questions with definitive answers (which could actually be read as another marker of the narrative's borderline quality).

⁹ Over the years Lessing experimented with a variety of life writing forms: an autobiography (*Under the Skin* of 1994 and *Walking in the Shade* of 1997), a travelogue (*African Laughter* of 1992), or a pet memoir (*On Cats* of 2002). She has also theorised on the genre of autobiography, most explicitly in Chapter Two of *Under the Skin*, where she talks about distrust of history (“I read history with conditional respect” [11]), essential unresolvedness of autobiographical projects (“How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?” [12]), plurality of autobiographical selves (13), as well as creating and making up one's past and memories (ibid.).

¹⁰ Moreover, all five volumes of the series *Children of Violence* as well as *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* include directly identifiable autobiographical facts. Lessing acknowledged her parents' presence in works of fiction and non-fiction in an interview with Margaret J. Daymond (236).

by war [World War I]” and “having the poison running in [her] veins from before [she] could speak” (10). She further adds:

We are all of us made by war, twisted and warped by war. [...] I used to joke that it was the war that had given birth to me, as a defence when weary with the talk about the war that went on – and on – and on. But it was no joke. I used to feel there was something like a dark grey cloud, like poison gas, over my early childhood. (ibid.)

In the first volume of her memoir, Lessing trenchantly diagnoses her parents, and subsequently herself, as the victims of World War I, whose lives have been irrevocably damaged and crippled by the experience of the conflict. To the 75-year-old Lessing, Alfred and Emily are both profoundly tragic figures¹¹. Her father, suffering from shell shock as well as pain related to an amputated leg, never fulfilled his dream of becoming an English farmer and ended his life, gravely ill and deeply unhappy, in Africa. After her fiancé drowned in a ship sunk by a torpedo, Lessing’s mother, torn between social demands and her own desires, decided to get married to a wounded soldier she had nursed in the Royal Free Hospital in East London, i.e. Alfred Tayler, and thus chose the prospect of having children (in whom she was later gravely disappointed) and forsook her career.

It is the realisation of her parents’ tragic fate that appears as an impetus and a prime motive for Lessing’s writing of *Alfred and Emily*. One may also speculate that it was the interview conducted by Margaret J. Daymond a few years before completing the volume that might have provided Lessing with an idea for this book. Towards the end of their talk, Daymond concludes that “autobiography is disciplined by what actually happened” or “the best recovery [one] can make of it” (240). Then, she encourages Lessing to finish the following sentence: “[A]nd the characters are disciplined by...”, which, after a moment of hesitation the writer completes saying “...by what’s possible” (240). Undoubtedly, the dynamics between “what actually happened” and “what was possible”, between truth and fiction, lies at the heart of Lessing’s narrative which opens with a biographical fantasia, an alternative story of Alfred’s and Emily’s lives. In keeping with this, the “Foreword” to the volume voices Lessing’s reason unambiguously:

The war, the Great War. The war that would end all 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.

If I could meet Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve the lives I have given them. (viii)

¹¹ “The chapter heading for my mother in this saga would be a sad one”, Lessing poignantly states (4).

Alfred and Emily is an extraordinary *hybride*, as Gérard Genette would most likely call it. Its first part, entitled “Alfred and Emily: a novella”, preceded by two photographs of Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh (taken separately), comprises three distinctive segments: a fictional story of Lessing’s parents followed by their *faux* obituaries; the “Explanation”, in which the writer provides justification for various diegetic choices she has made when writing about her parents’ “imagined” lives¹²; and, finally, an encyclopaedic entry devoted to describe the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead where Emily McVeagh used to work as a nurse¹³. Reiterating Lessing’s observation, one could claim that the section of the novella is disciplined by “what is possible,” while the remaining parts are organised around the idea of “what happened”. Indeed, the fictional story of Alfred and Emily is an attempt to write against history – both individual and global. Delivered chronologically by the 3rd person omniscient narrator¹⁴, the story opens with the meeting of Alfred and Emily at a village cricket match in 1902 when they are introduced to one another by Mrs Lane, a mutual friend. Lessing does not change any of Alfred’s or Emily’s personal traits¹⁵ – the former is extremely enthusiastic, highly likeable, (“his smile was certainly enough to win the heart of anybody” [7]), compassionate and hard-working; while the latter is clever, energetic and independent, a rebellious spirit who was cut off from her father’s approval when she decided to become a nurse, instead of going to the university.

At the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century “Emily and Alfred were at the top of their lives, their fortunes – of everything” (24), the narrator of the novella states. But this phrase is immediately followed by an autobiographical intrusion of Doris Lessing (one of many) which disturbs the coherence and “purity” of the fictional narrative: “‘If only we could live our good years all over again’, my mother would say, fiercely gathering those years into her arms and holding them safe, her eyes challenging her husband as if he were responsible for the end” (ibid.). Lessing’s narrative does not only allow her parents to re-live their good years, but also makes it possible for them to survive. In this invented account, World War I does not break out¹⁶ and, consequently, Alfred remains at home, gets

¹² “Writing about my father’s imagined life, my mother’s, I have relied not only on traits of character that may be extrapolated, but on tones of voice, sighs, wistful looks, signs as slight as those used by skilful trackers” (139). The “Explanation” part provides the readers with some clarification as to the origin of individual episodes (e.g. life in London), the main characters (e.g. Daisy, Bert and Betsy) and the key choices made by the two protagonists (e.g. Emily’s decision not to re-marry).

¹³ This section is also preceded by two photographs of her father in army uniform.

¹⁴ One should add that Lessing is not consistent in internal divisions of her novella, i.e. length and marking the individual chapters (e.g. “1902”, “August 1907”, “The Best Years”).

¹⁵ Apparently in line with her belief that “you can’t change your behaviour no matter how much you want to; your own behaviour is there, with you, engraved in stone, unfortunately” (M. Daymond 2006: 240).

¹⁶ In this way *Alfred and Emily* can be read as welcoming another genre, historical fantasy, in a similar way to some contemporary fictional works such as Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*. According to the narrator of the novella, in the 1920s, “Britain was wealthy, was booming, was at

married to a local girl with whom he has two boys and becomes a successful farmer; Emily, on the other hand, marries Dr William Martin-White, a cardiologist from the hospital where she works, who dies in 1924 of a heart attack, not in the sea during the Great War as happened in real life. Lessing cunningly combines real-life events with fantasy. For instance, when, in 1916, Emily announces her engagement to Martin-White, Alfred attends the party on crutches as his appendix burst out a few weeks before. “In life”, Lessing explains, “my father’s appendix burst just before the battle of the Somme, saving him from being killed with the rest of his company” (31).

For Lessing, providing Alfred with his “dream life” proves to be much easier than accomplishing the same with Emily, who “lived her entire life bounded by rules, regulations and discipline” (54). Forced by Martin-White to give up her career and, instead, turned into a perfect hostess, unhappy and childless woman, Emily finds her true liberation only when her husband dies. “I shall not be throwing myself on to a funeral pyre”, she declares (62); instead, using her late husband’s resources she establishes an organisation (the “Martin-White Foundation”), which runs schools for the poor and offers new methods of teaching kids based on storytelling. She even falls in love with a Scottish storyteller, one Alistair McTaggart. She becomes a free and independent woman, a truly Lessing-esque figure.

Finally, the last offices delivered by Lessing to her parents are to allow them to “die in [personal] character” (J. Barnes 2009: 177). Since World War I has not destroyed his body and spirit, Alfred can die as a very old man – at his farm and surrounded by his big family, one could further speculate. Emily dies of a heart attack as an activist after she has remonstrated some boys for tormenting a dog. “Hundreds of people came to her funeral”, Lessing concludes, giving her famous fictional mother the funeral that the real one could not have in Africa.

The second part of the volume, entitled “Alfred and Emily; Two Lives”, as opposed to the previous section, is almost exclusively governed by “what happened”. Though composed of a plethora of distinctive narrative forms, the story of Lessing’s mother and father unmistakably remains the narrative’s major thematic dominant. Like Part One, it is predominantly a filial narrative¹⁷, a (real) memoir of parents by their daughter (G. Couser 2012: 154). The section opens with a photograph of

a level of prosperity the leader writers and public figures congratulated themselves and everybody on. Britain had not had a war since the Boer War; nor were there wars in Western Europe, which was on a high level of well-being. It was enough only to contrast the dreadful situation of the old Austrian Empire and the Turkish Empire, in collapse, to know that keeping out of war was a recipe for prosperity” (83-84). Interestingly, and paradoxically in light of Alfred’s real experience of war, the social and political tensions of the 1930s forced Alfred to conclude: “This is a silly, petty, pettifogging little country, and we’re so pleased with ourselves because we’ve kept out of a war. But if you ask me I think a war would do us all the good in the world. We’re soft and rotten, like a pear that’s gone past its best” (132).

¹⁷ The story could be further divided into patriographical and matriographical episodes.

Alfred and Emily¹⁸ and a short biographical essay¹⁹ in which Lessing once again ponders over the “monstrous legacy” of World War I and the effect it had on her parents’ lives. Alfred, once a “vigorous and healthy man” (152), was – both physically²⁰ and mentally²¹ – invalidated by the war and died a broken man, defeated by illness and the traumatic memories of the Trenches. For example, Lessing recalls that “at the breakfast table he might say to my mother, ‘I was dreaming of Tommy again’, or Johnny or Bob” (154). Although she had no “visible scars”, Emily was “as much a victim of the war as [Lessing’s] father” (172). The writer, who throughout her life fought “titanic battles” with her mother (183), realises that Emily – cut off from her family, forced to live on an African farm and to play the role of a wife and mother which she found in no way satisfying²² – was turned into a deeply unhappy figure and concludes:

Nothing that she ever told, or was said about her, or one could deduce of her in that amazing girlhood, so busy, so full of achievement, or of her nursing years, about which we had the best of witnesses, my father himself, or the years in Persia, so enjoyable and so social, nothing, anywhere, in all this matches up with what my mother became. Nothing fits, as if she were not one woman but several. (156)

However, quite unexpectedly, half way through the piece, the narrative shifts its interest and what was a memoir of the others now becomes a memoir of self, in which Lessing starts recalling her childhood: her Irish au pair girl (Biddy O’Hallowan), her self-education, the books she used to read²³, among other events of her life. This instability and transitivity of the object of knowledge is a characteristic feature of this as well as nine subsequent sections²⁴ of “Alfred and Emily; Two Lives”,

¹⁸ What can be seen as a special form of paratext, the photograph shows Alfred and Emily together, not separate as in the images which preceded the novella, which clearly implies biographical veracity of the section.

¹⁹ “One may write a life in five volumes, or in a sentence”, Lessing states (152), clearly showing preference for the former.

²⁰ His artificial leg may be seen as a symbol of “artificiality” of his “real” life – as opposed to the “imagined” life he might have lived if the war had not broken out.

²¹ Lessing diagnoses her father as suffering from shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder (153-154, 170).

²² In *Under My Skin* one can read: “There is no need to look for memories of ‘abuse’, cruelty and the rest. I remember very well – though how old I was I do not know – leaning against my father’s knee, the real one, not the metal-and-wood knee, while my mother chatted on and on in her social voice to some visitor about her children, how they brought her low and sapped her, how all her talents were withering unused, how the little girl in particular (she was so difficult, so naughty!) made her life a total misery. And I was a cold flame of hatred for her, I could have killed her there and then. [...] What a mistake she has made in having them [kids] at all” (29-30).

²³ Like a diligent historian, Lessing provides a reader with a full list of titles she read as a child (166-169).

²⁴ They are entitled “A Women’s Group”, “Sister McVeagh”, “Insects”, “The Old *Mawonga* Tree”, “Provisions”, “Provisions – in Town”, “My Brother Harry Tayler”, “Getting-off-the-Farm”, and “Servant Problems”.

which – all highly episodic, inconsistent and disjointed – address (in order of appearance) the following issues: motherhood and women rights in the 20th century, young Doris’s pet calf called Demi, African insects, her parents’ house and farm, post-colonial Africa and current politics (Robert Mugabe), history, Edwardian food, Lessing’s brother Harry and her relationship with him, life in Africa during World War II. A similar *mélange* can be observed as far as the pieces’ generic affiliation is concerned: biography is intertwined with autobiography, filial narrative with bildungsmemoir, travelogue with autotopography²⁵, socio-historical observations with pure fiction²⁶.

Similarly to Part One, “Alfred and Emily; Two Lives” ends with two deaths. Firstly, that of Lessing’s father, whose obsession with World War I and his fellow soldiers grew stronger towards the end of his life; as may be observed when he says: “I think of them, yes, I do, there’s never a day I don’t think of them, oh, such fine young chaps...”, he says, when close to his deathbed, and adds: “If the shrapnel hadn’t got me I would have died with them, and sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if I had” (259). However, one learns very little about her mother’s demise. In its place the final pages of the volume offer a scene of Emily hosting a group of RAF soldiers. One sentence particularly resonates with the memoirist: “‘She’s a good sort,’ said the RAF lads. ‘She’s a real sport, your mother’” (272). Accordingly, the volume can be ultimately seen as the writer’s instrument for coming to terms with her mother’s legacy, a therapeutic act of other- and self-repair, an attempt to understand Emily and, one could speculate, forgive her. The final sentence, which offers a subtle hint of reconciliation²⁷, reads as follows:

The RAF did at last get home, and they wrote letters, we wrote letters, and my mother sold the house, when my brother married, and for the short years before she died, at seventy-three²⁸, she spent her afternoons and evenings playing bridge with other widows. She was, they all said, a very good bridge player. (274)

²⁵ For example the photographs included in the volume, as well as pieces of the narrative concerned with the memories of physical objects (house, furniture, clothes).

²⁶ “Provisions – in Town” is a study of African cuisine as well as the relationship between masters and servants delivered in the form of a fictional story (by the 3rd person present-tense narrator) whose coherence is nevertheless disturbed by a single autobiographical paragraph (in the past tense) which reads: “I returned to Southern Rhodesia less than ten years after I left it and I was immediately surprised by the amount of meat. Every fridge was stacked with it, including the vegetable trays. ‘We couldn’t have eaten all that meat’, I cried. ‘Impossible!’ But we did” (243).

²⁷ I would like to pay attention to the striking similarity between the ending of *Alfred and Emily* and the final pages of Alice Munro’s “Dear Life” (i.e. the last of four autobiographical “stories” from the 2012 collection also called *Dear Life*), which is, unmistakably, the latter’s attempt to come to terms with her deceased mother, her difficult legacy and their invidious relationship. Interestingly, both attempts came at the very end of Lessing’s and Munro’s literary career.

²⁸ The age of death of fictional and historical Emily is the same.

POSITIVE EXCEPTIONALITY

Gérard Genette's "Des genres et des oeuvres" opens with the story of a sultan who has stopped visiting his fifty concubines and who, when inquired by his distressed lovers about the reasons for his sudden frigidity, confesses: "Hélas, [...] j'aime un autre harem"²⁹ (129). However, the celebrated French structuralist does not summon this anecdote in order to investigate sultan's erotic life, but to pose a question about the condition for an aesthetic relation one might have with a class of texts, with a genre; and so he asks: "peut-on aimer un genre?"³⁰ (ibid.). Having agreed on essential "impurity" of any genre ("Rien n'est tout à fait singulier, rien n'est absolument générique"³¹ [150]), Genette concludes that "le monstreux pourrait éventuellement procurer un 'plaisir'"³² (156-157). A first step to appreciate "mélange" or "hybride" (209) is what Genette calls "la conscience générique"³³ (161), i.e. knowledge of the genre and its laws, which, subsequently, guarantees a recognition of "l'exceptionnalité positive," namely "en tout cas un mérite en soi, qui permet à une oeuvre d'être, dans sa catégorie, non pas la meilleure ni la première, mais bien la seule élue, ce qui certainement vaudrait mieux que toute autre élue"³⁴ (244).

Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* is neither the best, nor the first borderline text, but "re-markability" of this narrative – a story which occupies a threshold space between fact and fiction and incessantly negotiates its generic status – is, I am convinced of the fact, truly and singularly exceptional.

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²⁹ "Alas, [...] I love another harem". Own translation.

³⁰ "Can one love a genre?"

³¹ "Nothing is quite singular, nothing is absolutely generic".

³² "The monster could eventually provide a 'pleasure'".

³³ "Generic consciousness".

³⁴ "Positive exceptionality [...] in any case a merit in itself, which allows a given work to be in its own category, neither the best nor the first, but the only choice, the one which is certainly worth more than any other choices".

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