

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

---

## Where the Past and the Present Intersect

Englund, Lena

*Published in:*  
Movement and Change in Literature, Language, and Society

Published: 12/05/2020

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*  
Englund, L. (2020). Where the Past and the Present Intersect: Memory and Regret in Doris Lessing's *Going Home, Under My Skin and Alfred and Emily*. In J. Kuortti, & S. Ruokkeinen (Eds.), *Movement and Change in Literature, Language, and Society* (pp. 249–265). Nomos. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201147512>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Part III**

**Between Times and Places**



## Chapter 12

### Where the Past and the Present Intersect: Memory and Regret in Doris Lessing's *Going Home*, *Under My Skin* and *Alfred and Emily*

– Lena Englund

I wish I could switch on a new light  
so that I could see me before I saw myself.  
(*Going Home* 129)

#### Introduction

The *autobiographical* plays a significant part in Doris Lessing's oeuvre and permeates much of her writing. This has been noted by a number of scholars, among them Susan Watkins, Elizabeth Maslen, Leah Anderst and Tasiyana Javangwe.<sup>1</sup> Lessing's literary career spans seven decades, beginning in the late 1940s with her first novel *The Grass Is Singing* which was published in 1950 and ending in 2008 with the publication of her last novel *Alfred and Emily*. Thus she remains one of the most central authors of the twentieth century, taking on a wide variety of topics in her fiction and nonfiction. In her autobiographical texts, a few themes are repeatedly revisited, relating to her Southern African childhood and youth, the troubled relationship she had with her mother as well as her political affiliations in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the sober and generally unapologetic nature of her writing, a certain sense of regret emerges in her autobiographical texts in connection to these themes in particular. This aspect of her writing has previously not been studied to any significant degree. By

---

1 Susan Watkins, *Doris Lessing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Maslen, *Doris Lessing* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2014); Leah Anderst, "Feeling with Real Others: Narrative Empathy in the Autobiographies of Doris Lessing and Alison Bechdel," *Narrative* 23, no. 3 (2015): 271–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2015.0017>; Tasiyana D. Javangwe, "Born out of My Ownself: (Re)claiming the Self in Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin*, Volume I, 1919–1949," *Journal of Literary Studies* 25, no. 2 (2009): 40–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564710802321545>.

examining regret in Lessing's autobiographical texts, new insights can also emerge with regard to the complex relationship between the past and the present. Regret inevitably relates to the past but remains a sentiment firmly placed in the present. Jeffrey K. Olick's ground-breaking work *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*<sup>2</sup> mainly addresses issues of national memory and politics. In the present I draw also on psychological approaches to regret and apply them to Lessing's autobiographical texts.

The first primary text to be considered in this chapter is Lessing's first memoir *Going Home* (1956),<sup>3</sup> which recounts a trip she made to Southern Rhodesia only a few years after she had left the colony for London in 1949 while she was leaving her communist ideals behind. Another important text is the first part of her actual autobiography, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (1994),<sup>4</sup> which, as the title indicates, tells the story of her childhood and upbringing on a Rhodesian farm as well as her adolescent and young adult years in Salisbury. In order to come full circle with Lessing's writing, her final memoir *Alfred and Emily* (2008)<sup>5</sup> will also feature in my analysis. Two themes in particular are of interest for a discussion of regret. Lessing's political activities in Salisbury in the 1940s when she was a member of a communist group offer insights into the concept of regret and how it relates to memory, as she returned to this period in her life a number of times in her writing and questioned her involvement in the political movement. A second relevant theme concerns her parents and how profoundly the First World War affected them.

In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing gives her parents alternative lives, what could have been had the war never happened. As Maslen concludes,

It is fitting that this last book [*Alfred and Emily*] ends where she began, back in Africa. Yet in the long decades of her life and work the enormous scope of her writing is astounding, and we do not do her justice when we try to tie her to a narrow range of concerns or insist on prioritizing one as paramount. Social justice, colonial life, racism, femi-

---

2 Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203941478>.

3 Doris Lessing, *Going Home* (London: HarperPerennial, 1996 [1956]). Further references to the novel are given parenthetically, preceded by *GH*.

4 Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (London: Flamingo, 1994). Further references are given parenthetically, preceded by *UMS*.

5 Doris Lessing, *Alfred and Emily* (London: HarperPerennial, 2008). Further references to the novel are given parenthetically, preceded by *AE*.

nism, environmental issues, sex – they are all addressed. [...] Above all, she knows that everything within our own experience and beyond it interconnects, that the past paves the way to the present and future, whether we like to remember it or not.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Lessing's unsentimental and often ruthless grasp of her own life and memories, as Maslen as well alludes to above, a certain sense of regret is, after all, detectable in her autobiographical writing and in relation to her parents, first and foremost. My argument for this chapter is that this regret has actually been something of a driving force and inspiration for Lessing, without which some of her works may never have been written. Regret is thus not seen merely in a negative light, but as a source of creativity that allows the writer to reconsider her life and examine it from multiple perspectives. Lessing mastered introspection in her writing, without ever losing sight of her own shortcomings. The regret expressed in her writing is thus often subtle, sometimes only discernible between the lines, while it from time to time is directly emphasized. As autobiography balances between the past and the present, so does personal regret as portrayed by Lessing.

### *Regret and Memory*

In her essay "Writing Autobiography" from 1999, Lessing states that "[m]emory isn't fixed: it slips and slides about. It is hard to match one's memories of one's life with the solid fixed account of it that is written down."<sup>7</sup> This points to the fluidity of autobiography and its unresolved issues relating to truth and personal experiences. A most useful discussion of this dilemma is presented in Leigh Gilmore's work *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001).<sup>8</sup> Lessing adds that autobiography essentially is an "interim report,"<sup>9</sup> and this is a perceptive observation. It supports the analysis of her autobiographical writing in this context, as the different texts clearly connect with one another but remain objects of a specific period of her life.

---

6 Maslen, *Doris*, 103.

7 Doris Lessing, "Writing Autobiography," in *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, edited by David Fuller and Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154.

8 Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

9 Lessing, "Writing," 154.

This also relates to the notion that autobiography always reveals more about the author at the time of writing the text, not necessarily about the period which is the focus of the text. “Once I read autobiography as what the writer thought about her or his life. Now I think, ‘That is what they thought *at that time*’.”<sup>10</sup> This is significant also from the perspective of regret. As for the autobiographical project itself, it does not seem to trigger feelings of regret per se, as Lessing asks why we “have this need to bear witness” and concludes that we tell stories because “we have to.”<sup>11</sup> Such a statement remains matter of fact, just as much of Lessing’s writing generally is.

Regret has a natural connection to temporality, and Olick goes as far as saying that “regret is the emblem of our times.”<sup>12</sup> Memory and time are also connected, and autobiography is often seen as the manifestation of that relationship. However, memory is also more complex than that. As James Olney concludes, memory “is both recollective and anticipatory.”<sup>13</sup> Further, he states that “[m]emory reaches toward the future as toward the past, and balance demands a poised receptiveness in both directions” and that, finally, “[t]he life-writer who draws on memory does so in full awareness that the temporal position he or she occupies is the present moment of the past.”<sup>14</sup> Returning to the concept of regret, an obvious conclusion would be to connect it to the past and decisions done earlier in life which have, for one reason or another, proven to be poorly made. The following definition is therefore useful for the present study: “Regret is a burden that a consciousness can place upon itself only if it possesses memory, emotions and a sensitivity to counterfactual possibilities”.<sup>15</sup> Reading Lessing’s autobiographical texts will hopefully show that regret does not necessarily have to be merely and solely a burden; it can, as stated earlier, be turned into a positive force as well.

As for temporal aspects of regret, Patrick Eldridge asserts that regret is not only connected to the past, but “we can also anticipate future events as

---

10 Lessing, 154.

11 Lessing, 159.

12 Olick, *Politics*, 14.

13 James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-writing* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 343.

14 Olney, *Memory*, 343, 344.

15 Patrick Eldridge, “Regret and the Consciousness of the Past,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 5 (2017): 646, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8p46>.

later becoming regrettable.”<sup>16</sup> This suggests that regret stretches into the future as well, creating a “complex temporal structure.”<sup>17</sup> *Alfred and Emily* is an interesting work in this regard, as it could be seen as an example of what Eldridge terms in the following way: “Through regretful memory we relive a past moment in which we could have done otherwise and wish we had, but this moment is now seen from a present moment in which the past cannot be undone.”<sup>18</sup> In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing does not relive a moment that belonged to her, as she rewrites the lives of her parents creating fictive realities as if the First World War had never existed. Such a reality would obviously mean that she would not have been born either. The second part of the novella/memoir is therefore more relevant, as she goes into more detail about her parents and their lives, partly in a similar manner to *Under My Skin* but with a different purpose. In terms of regret, this last memoir can also be set apart from the other two analysed here. Eldridge further presents regret as giving an alternative to past events, as it offers a “counterfactual course of actions.”<sup>19</sup> This is presented in *Alfred and Emily*. Lessing writes in her Foreword about the burden of the First World War, and concludes that if she could meet her parents 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” (*AE* viii). Here, the regret is not Lessing’s own, but belongs to her parents. A more detailed discussion of the war and the regrets she connects with her parents in her autobiographical texts will follow later.

Regret is a thoroughly studied phenomenon from the perspective of psychology as well. Erika Timmer, Gerben J. Westerhof and Freya Dittmann-Kohli explore retrospective regret among people in their forties and older, and state that “[r]econciliation with one’s own past is especially important in accepting life’s finitude.”<sup>20</sup> They define *regret* in two ways:

‘to feel sorry for’ or even ‘to remorse’ implying that the person is responsible for the regretted event. [...] In contrast, the term can also be used in the sense of ‘to lament’ or ‘to bemoan’, referring to an expression of a feeling about given events or states.<sup>21</sup>

---

16 Eldridge, “Regret,” 647.

17 Eldridge, 647.

18 Eldridge, 647.

19 Eldridge, 659.

20 Erika Timmer, Gerben J. Westerhof, and Freya Dittmann-Kohli, “When looking back on my past life I regret ...”: Retrospective Regret in the Second Half of Life,” *Death Studies* 29 (2005): 626, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180591004660>.

21 Timmer, Westerhof and Dittmann-Kohli, “Looking,” 628.

The former would be seen as internal regret and the latter as external. This is echoed in another study with a more explicit psychological approach. Denise R. Beike and Travis S. Crone also define regret as “a counterfactual emotion,” and they divide regret into two categories: open and closed regret.<sup>22</sup> Open regret would refer to things that were unfinished and closed regret to things that had been brought to a close.<sup>23</sup> The connection between memory and regret has also been explored in the field of psychology, for example by Ian Davison and Aidan Feeney in their study from 2008. Their conclusion is that “the way we remember over time shapes the regrets we end up with.”<sup>24</sup> They also state as one of their findings that “the tendency of our regret to become more general over time may decrease the pain of the regrettable events in our lives.”<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between general and specific regrets here means events that for example span long periods of time, such as studying at university or being married to someone, or, in contrast, events “which can be traced to a unique point in time.”<sup>26</sup> Again, the temporal dimension is emphasized as the two types of regrets have different relationships to time. Lessing’s need to write and rewrite her own life from many different perspectives suggests that time; the past, present and future, all intersect and cannot exist without one another. This can be tied in with regret as well, as Davison and Feeney argue that “a degree of reasoning or self-explanation may be required to determine which aspects of life one regrets.”<sup>27</sup> In the examination of Lessing’s texts that follows, this is an important notion as it implies that autobiographical writing manifests that reasoning and self-explanation which are needed in order to establish regretted events and to find ways to come to terms with them.

---

22 Denise R. Beike and Travis S. Crone, “When Experienced Regret Refuses to Fade: Regrets of Action and Attempting to Forget Open Life Regrets,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2008): 1545, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.008>.

23 Beike and Crone, “Experienced,” 1546.

24 Ian M. Davison and Aidan Feeney, “Regret as Autobiographical Memory,” *Cognitive Psychology* 57 (2008): 401, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2008.03.001>.

25 Davison and Feeney, “Regret,” 401.

26 Davison and Feeney, 389.

27 Davison and Feeney, 389.

### Political Involvement

Lessing's political activities in the 1940s in Salisbury have been well documented in the first volume of her autobiography in particular. In *Under My Skin* she analyses her involvement in detail, and how she became engaged in the communist movement to begin with. She declares, simply, "I had become a Communist" (UMS 259). This statement is immediately followed by justifications for such politics, and an implicit note about younger people not being able to fully understand what seemed so compelling about communism:

In my case it was because for the first time in my life I was meeting a group of people (not an isolated individual here and there) who read everything, and who did not think it remarkable to read, and among whom thoughts about the Native Problem I had scarcely dared to say aloud turned out to be mere commonplaces. I became a Communist because of the spirit of the times, because of the *Zeitgeist*. (UMS 259)

These events coincided with her divorce from her first husband Frank Wisdom and her leaving her two children John and Jean. "I knew I was going to leave. Yet I did not know it, could not say it, I am going to commit the unforgivable and leave two small children" (UMS 261). This echoes what Davison and Feeny explained about reasoning and self-explanation being required in order to determine one's regrets. Lessing knew she would be judged for her decision, but comes to a simple conclusion when going through the reasons for her leaving her husband and children: "I would not have survived" (UMS 265). Again, she remains matter of fact and unapologetic.

*Going Home*, for its part, was written during a period in Lessing's life when she was moving away from communism. She writes in *Under My Skin* that from her first interest in communism, it took four to five years to become more critical towards the movement. "By 1954 I was no longer a Communist" (UMS 397). *Going Home* was published in 1956. The interesting temporal aspect here is obviously that when writing the first part of her autobiography in the early 1990s, nearly 40 years had passed since leaving communism behind. When writing *Going Home*, not much time had lapsed and the retrospection she offers in *Under My Skin* makes a significant contrast to the thoughts and events that are expressed in *Going Home*. Being able to examine these two different documents together makes the question of regret even more relevant. Lessing explains why she was a communist in *Going Home*, after having found out that she was very much unwanted in Southern Rhodesia by the government: "I am, of course, consid-

ered so undesirable in these parts because I am a Communist” (GH 82). Furthermore, she argues that “I believe that in a decade the Communist countries of the world will be freer, more democratic (in the political, as well as the economic sense of these words) than the Western World, which is rapidly becoming less free, less democratic” (GH 82). This bold statement comes, however, with an afterthought: “If I did not think this I would not remain a Communist” (GH 82). Lessing summarizes her political agenda in a single sentence: “[i]t is a fight for basic human rights. If I were not a Communist I would be doing exactly the same thing” (GH 83).

Perhaps it was the unapologetic nature of the comments above that prompted Lessing to write several afterwords to her original text in *Going Home*. The first afterword, dated September 26, 1956, is mainly about Lessing being informed about her status as prohibited immigrant upon her return to London in August the same year. The second postscript is dated January 6, 1957, and Lessing uses this to give updated information on the political situation in Southern Rhodesia. She also comments on the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the subsequent actions by the Soviet Union: “In this book I have made various statements about the possibility of Communism becoming democratic. Since writing it, the Soviet intervention in Hungary has occurred” (GH 237). The third afterword is titled “Eleven Years Later,” dated May 1967. Again, Lessing talks about her communism and how she had a party card and considered herself a communist while writing the book: “I am not one now” (GH 247). She also acknowledges that her comment about communist countries becoming more democratic proved to be “untrue” (GH 249). A final comment towards the end of the postscript is revealing with regard to Lessing’s political thoughts: “[n]o government, no political party anywhere cares a damn about the individual” (GH 252). This shows disillusionment not just with regard to communism but state politics in general.

The development throughout *Going Home* and its many postscripts and afterwords is clear, and in terms of regret, Lessing’s political activities and involvement in communism can be considered a general event as it spanned several years and was something she returned to time and again in her writing. The question is, however, whether these political views embody true regret; decisions made by an earlier self that later proved regrettable. The fourth afterword titled “Twenty-six Years Later,” dated March 1982, gives some insight into this question. Lessing outlines how she has read *Going Home* for a new edition: “I have been forced to read, then, the record of my changes of mind about communism. Embarrassing. I would prefer not to have them exposed, because, like others of my kind, the former reds, I wonder how it was possible that I held such views” (GH 253).

Here, Lessing seems to be suggesting that her communist affiliation was regrettable, and that she at this later stage in life could not conceive of why she had become involved in the movement to begin with. The final afterword dated October 1992 (when Lessing presumably was already working on the first volume of her autobiography) does not explicitly touch upon the subject of communism, but the topic obviously plays a significant part in *Under My Skin*.

Communism and having been a communist clearly caused some feelings of regret for Lessing, as she felt the need to return to this particular period in her life; a period which was actually rather brief; only a few years according to her own account (*UMS* 275). As Beike and Crone conclude, “[t]he pain of regret often persists despite the passage of time.”<sup>28</sup> Another of their conclusions is also that actively trying to forget events that cause regret may lead to intrusive thoughts and a lasting negative impact.<sup>29</sup> Writing and rewriting her youth in this manner, Lessing clearly felt no need to try to actively forget her communist activities. Her autobiographical texts imply that feelings of regret connected to her communist past escalated as she aged. However, as she maintained throughout her writing, her communism was mainly related to racial inequality in Southern Rhodesia: “The good citizens of Southern Rhodesia knew that all ideas to do with improving the lot of ‘the munts’ were Communist” (*UMS* 367). Lessing remembers that she joined the communist party in London too when she had relocated there, “for reasons which I still don’t fully understand” (*UMS* 275). Another retrospective thought worth mentioning here is the following remark: “I was never committed with all of myself to Communism” (*UMS* 284). A subtle regret, or at least a desire to explain or excuse her actions, can be detected here.

These various passages and paragraphs from *Going Home* and *Under My Skin* show that Lessing’s attitude towards communism transformed over the years, and this is particularly visible in the different afterwords and postscripts to *Going Home*. From a temporal perspective, the added notes on the text provide an interesting approach to regret as well. Time is essential, as highlighted by for example Eldridge. Davison and Feeney’s comment on how we remember having an impact on the regrets we are left with is relevant here too.<sup>30</sup> The periodic nature of *Going Home* and its many postscripts makes it almost diary-like, spanning several decades and

---

28 Beike and Crone, “Experienced,” 1549.

29 Beike and Crone, 1550.

30 Davison and Feeney, “Regret,” 401.

showing fragments of the travels Lessing undertook in Southern Rhodesia shortly after her relocation to London. *Under My Skin* offers another perspective, a more coherent whole, and a much wider scope, where her communist years are only part of the story, remembered long after the fact.

### *Parents and the Great War*

Lessing's autobiographical texts evolve to a great deal around her parents and her childhood in Southern Rhodesia, for example as retold in the *Children of Violence* series about Martha Quest. The fact that she wrote and published an entire novella/memoir about her parents and their lives and what could have been had the First World War never actually happened testifies to the need to explore them and their lives in connection to her own, but also as separate individuals and people in their own right. It is an act of setting them free and herself as well in the process. *Under My Skin* is an important text as it gives a detailed account of Lessing's childhood and upbringing and her relationship to her parents. At the core of these memories and stories is the Great War and how it changed the course of her parents' lives. This is where a most profound regret makes itself visible and Lessing repeatedly returns to her mother and father and all their shortcomings and challenges as parents: "I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?" (UMS 17). This reveals that Lessing is fully aware of the difficulties any autobiographer is faced with when attempting to write their own story, relating to anxieties about truth and verifiability. This has been discussed for example in Javangwe's article<sup>31</sup> on constructions of the self in *Under My Skin*. It also relates to the question of temporality and to how one sees one's life at different stages. This is where the question of regret comes in.

In an interview from 2009 with Hermione Lee, Lessing states that *Alfred and Emily* is "a pretty anti-war book and quite harrowing, of course, because what happened to them [her parents] was bad."<sup>32</sup> She explains that she gave her parents the lives she thought they would have wanted, making her father an English farmer and giving her mother a life where she could use all her talents and energy.<sup>33</sup> Lee addresses the fact that Lessing

---

31 Javangwe, "Born."

32 Hermione Lee, "A Conversation with Doris Lessing," *Wasafiri* 24, no. 3 (2009): 19.

33 Lee, "Conversation," 20.

often wrote about her parents as “quite disappointed, thwarted, angry and bitter” and asks if *Alfred and Emily* is “a kind of atonement.”<sup>34</sup> This suggests mutual regret, and Lessing responded that the book did make her feel better.<sup>35</sup> The term regret is mentioned as well, but not in relation to the war or her parents but in connection to Zimbabwe and its present state at the time of the interview.<sup>36</sup> Another indirect reference to regret comes when Lessing asked “why we remember what we do remember”: “I think the reply to that by psychologists would be that you remember what is important. I wonder if that’s true. I think not necessarily at all.”<sup>37</sup> The fluidity and fragmented nature of memory haunted Lessing in her writing as well, and she asserts in *Under My Skin* that “we make up our pasts” and she eventually calls memory “a careless and lazy organ” (*UMS* 13). Even here is an undertone of regret, relating to the inconsistencies of human memory and our ability to wilfully forget and rewrite our past.

As the focus is on Lessing’s parents, some notes on regret and gender are relevant here. Timmer, Westerhof and Dittmann–Kohli study how perceptions of regret change over time and argue that “[r]econciliation with one’s own past is especially important in accepting life’s finitude.”<sup>38</sup> They use the term *ego-integrity* as “a state in which persons can see their lives as a harmonious whole.”<sup>39</sup> The results of their study show that men tend to remember war to a greater degree than women, and that women feel more regret with regard to missed opportunities in life, such as getting an education.<sup>40</sup> Their conclusion is that four areas in life cause regret among people past their youth and young adult years: “mistakes and bad decisions, hard times, problems and losses in social relationships and missed educational opportunities.”<sup>41</sup> A final comment they make is worth noticing here, and that concerns younger adults (under the age of 40) having more possibilities to undo bad decisions that caused regret. Here, Lessing’s autobiographical writing becomes particularly relevant, as autobiography is an attempt to “claim your own life” and as “self-defence” since other people may write biographies about one’s life (*UMS* 14). This supports the thought that writing and rewriting her life in this manner is a way of getting away from pos-

---

34 Lee, 20–21.

35 Lee, 21.

36 Lee, 21.

37 Lee, “Conversation,” 24.

38 Timmer, Westerhof, and Dittmann–Kohli, “When looking,” 626.

39 Timmer, Westerhof, and Dittmann–Kohli, 626.

40 Timmer, Westerhof, and Dittmann–Kohli, 640.

41 Timmer, Westerhof, and Dittmann–Kohli, 642.

sible regret; that through facing it it will become manageable. In terms of Lessing's parents, their regret was mainly connected to hard times and the war in particular. The notion of men remembering war and women missed opportunities fit in too.

*Under My Skin* begins with her parents and their experiences during the First World War, setting the tone for the entire book. They met at the hospital ward where her father was being treated after the amputation of his leg and her mother worked as a nurse, grieving the drowning of a man she had loved (*UMS* 6–7). After relocating to Southern Rhodesia to become farmers, things did not go as planned. “My mother must have realized almost at once that nothing was going to happen as she had expected” (*UMS* 58) and “[b]oth of them believed, and for years, that a change of luck would bring them success” (*UMS* 59). This did not happen, and Lessing's mother took to the bed for an extended period of time, thinking she had a heart condition: “Then my mother got out of bed. She had to” (*UMS* 68). This is unsentimentally written, though not without empathy, in the autobiography, and a slightly more nuanced version is offered in *Alfred and Emily*: “She got up, and what that must have cost her I cannot begin to imagine. She was saying goodbye to everything she had expected for her life in this colony” (*AE* 158). Things did not improve on the farm after that, and Lessing recounts how ten years after moving there, right before her father was diagnosed with diabetes, “affairs on the farm were bad” (*AE* 173). Again, Lessing does not resort to simple pity or regret, but offers a more complex analysis of her parents' troubles: “It was entirely their fault, but how could they have seen it? [...] It was themselves, their nature” (*AE* 173–74). The farm proved less suitable than expected, and growing maize was a poor choice when other farmers were moving on to grow more profitable tobacco (*AE* 173–75).

The scars of war and what could have been affected not only the parents, but also Lessing herself by extension. *Alfred and Emily* was written more than a decade after *Under My Skin*, but to some extent the book already exists within the autobiography:

These two people, these sick and half crazy people, my parents – it was the war, it was the First World War, that was what had done them in. For years I kept bright in my mind, like scenes from a film, what they would have been without the war. She, a jolly, efficient Englishwoman, probably running the Women's Institute for the whole of Britain, or some nursing service, not the kind of woman I would have much in common with, but the point was, she would have become herself, not this harried over-wrought victim. And I only had to look at pictures of

my father, before the war – these idealizations refused any of the other chances and choices life comes up with, but I was sure about one thing: my father had been strong, vigorous, in command of himself, this is how he would have gone on – and now he was an invalid, with no hope of ever being well again. (UMS 156)

This lengthy passage highlights the regret of her parents, expressed by themselves from time to time but also as perceived by Lessing herself as she remembers the anger she felt, “angry to the point of being crazy myself” (UMS 156). But the passage also shows Lessing’s reluctance or outright refusal to accept them as they were. The phrase – “she would have become herself” – points to this, and suggests that Lessing refused to see her mother as anything but a victim of circumstances, reducing her to a mere shadow of what she was always intended to be. Her mother is depicted as being so deprived by life that she was not even fully herself.

These difficulties strengthened Lessing’s desire to leave the family, to escape (UMS 157). And Lessing did leave, at a young age, and married young after having met Frank Wisdom in Salisbury. Another kind of regret is tied to this, merely in the shape of “Tigger,” Lessing’s childhood nickname.

Nicknames are potent ways of cutting people down to size. I was Tigger Tayler, Tigger Wisdom, then Tigger Lessing, the last fitting me even less than the others. Also Comrade Tigger. This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. (UMS 89)

Lessing refers to Tigger throughout the book, for example when coming home from the Convent where she went to school. “Tigger entertained her Mummy and Daddy to the point where they wept with laughter” (UMS 121), and then when getting married at nineteen to Frank: “There was a graceless wedding, which I hated. [...] In the wedding photographs I look a jolly young matron. It was ‘Tigger’ who was getting married” (UMS 207). When Lessing started having doubts about her marriage after the birth of Jean, she writes the following: “I felt as if handcuffs were on my wrists and chains around my ankles. But I smiled and chattered. Tigger was always friendly and affectionate and competent” (UMS 241). ‘Tigger’ thus becomes a separate persona, a manifestation of the regret Lessing felt with regard to her life and the roles expected of her. From a temporal point of view, this is particularly noteworthy as the regret that comes with ‘Tigger’ seems to be anchored in the past and not the present. Javangwe’s conclusions about ‘Tigger’ are overall more positive, claiming that “there is no

contradiction in the coexistence of these identities.”<sup>42</sup> The way ‘Tigger’ is portrayed suggests, however, that instead of being a liberating force, the role or persona was mainly confining.

Despite there being certain elements of regret in Lessing’s texts, she remains perceptive with regard to the temptations of hindsight and remorse: “[W]hy do we expect so much? [...] Who promised us better? When were we promised better?” (UMS 312). These are valid questions, and she returns to similar patterns of thought in *Alfred and Emily*: “How attractive are the tidy conclusions of hindsight! How satisfying the *of course* of the back-looking perspective” (AE 173). A final realization reveals no regret at all: “There is really nothing much we can do about what we are born with” (UMS 377). This sentiment is in direct contrast with the earlier fantasies about what her parents’ lives could have been like, and it exemplifies the complex nature of regret that can be detected throughout her autobiographical writing.

Simultaneously, there is a sense of regret in terms of what was and could have been (and what could not have been), but also of immense resources and possibility, and something more permanent and solid; an un-moving, unyielding force. *Under My Skin* ends with the words “[t]he door had shut and that was that” (UMS 419), echoing her mother’s phrase when she for example cut her hair: “*Right! That’s that!*” (UMS 6, 8) or when her plans to start a school on the farm did not work out; “[a]nd that was *that*” (UMS 69). Lessing repeats this in *Alfred and Emily* as well after her father’s funeral: “And so, that was that” (AE 260). This phrase – “that was that” – works as a shield against sentimentality and remorse, against Lessing’s mother and her inexhaustive efforts to sort out her children’s adult lives. It is the absence of regret, but still born out of it. Lessing’s autobiographical texts are throughout unrelenting towards herself and offer great insight not only into her life but into the introspective process that goes with remembering in such a public fashion. Sometimes she expresses regret in an explicit and overt manner, and sometimes she lets it slip between the lines. “That was that” suggests an attempt at ego-integrity as defined by Timmer, Westerhof and Dittmann-Kohli,<sup>43</sup> and also echoes what Eldridge stated about how “the past cannot be undone.”<sup>44</sup> “That was that” acknowledges this, and makes the painful parts of the past more bearable.

---

42 Javangwe, “Born,” 48.

43 Timmer, Westerhof, and Dittmann-Kohli, “Looking.”

44 Eldridge, “Regret,” 647.

## Conclusion

The three works examined here were written during different periods of Lessing's life; *Going Home* being her very first memoir, *Under My Skin* the first volume of her actual autobiography, and *Alfred and Emily* her very last novella/memoir. Their perspectives on regret differ too, as *Going Home* depicts the travels she undertook before becoming a prohibited immigrant to the country of her childhood and youth, painting a vivid and immediate picture of the people she met and the places she visited. More interesting than the text itself are the postscripts, which reveal increasing feelings of regret as the author grew older. The same can be said for *Under My Skin* and its depictions of Lessing's communist activities. The role of her parents cannot be understated with regard to her writing, and particularly with regard to undercurrents of regret throughout her childhood and early adulthood. Publishing *Alfred and Emily* becomes not only a tribute to her parents and the skills and qualities they possessed, but also a bridge across generations of hurt and loss. The war that "did them in," the Great War, still affected Lessing herself too which she acknowledges in *Under My Skin* (UMS 10). She also explains that the war "does not become less important to me as time passes, on the contrary" (UMS 8). This makes it even more fitting that her last novel would be about her parents and the war, coming full circle as Maslen<sup>45</sup> noted as well, though her comment had more to do with Africa being the location. *Alfred and Emily* also exemplifies how regret, even on behalf of others, can become a creative and positive force.

The war and regret related to the novel further imply that intergenerational trauma is at play in Lessing's autobiographical texts. This trauma as manifested through her shell-shocked, disabled father, and her mother whose life did not turn out as planned, takes on a near physical shape in Lessing's writing. A relevant question here is whether intergenerational regret is also at play. The unfulfilled dreams of her parents haunted the author to such a degree that she felt compelled to reinvent their lives for them, to give them what she thought they would always have wanted. An allusion to this is present in *UMS*, where Lessing writes the following: "I do think the unfulfilled dreams and desires of parents affect their children" (UMS 186). The context here is about being physically fulfilled, but connections can be made with more concrete hopes and dreams as well. Lessing takes on the regrets of her parents in her writing, thoroughly processing them and herself too. The intersection of the past and the present,

---

45 Maslen, *Doris*, 103.

“the present moment of the past” as Eldridge put it, in the texts examined here allow for both personal and political regret to become part of a greater purpose.

This can be related to Lessing’s political past as well. While writing *Going Home*, she still apparently at least to some extent considered herself a communist, to such a degree that she felt the need to express her regrets about this in the afterword dated March 1982. This supports the idea that regret is transformed as time passes, not necessarily becoming less acute but changing shape and form and even becoming more ingrained in oneself, part of not just one’s history and past but also something which is very much a part of the present and stretches into the future; who a person is to become. Regret can inspire new beginnings and create new futures. This also highlights where the actual strength of autobiography lies; not in its depictions of the past but in its lack of linearity, in its temporality that defies all attempts to define and contain it. Autobiography might not even exist without the presence of regret. As Lessing herself concludes in her chapter on writing autobiography, when reading a book one might find it exciting and engaging, only to think that it is quite uninteresting when returning to it at a later time.<sup>46</sup> The same can be said for memory and regret: a painful and embarrassing memory may seem less disturbing at another point in one’s life: “Well, the book hasn’t changed: you have.”<sup>47</sup>

## Bibliography

- Anderst, Leah. “Feeling with Real Others: Narrative Empathy in the Autobiographies of Doris Lessing and Alison Bechdel.” *Narrative* 23, no. 3 (2015): 271–90. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2015.0017>.
- Beike, Denise R. and Travis S. Crone. “When Experienced Regret Refuses to Fade: Regrets of Action and Attempting to Forget Open Life Regrets.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2008): 1545–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.008>.
- Davison, Ian M. and Aidan Feeney. “Regret as Autobiographical Memory.” *Cognitive Psychology* 57 (2008): 385–403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2008.03.001>.
- Eldridge, Patrick. “Regret and the Consciousness of the Past.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 5 (2017): 646–63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8p46>.

---

46 Lessing, “Writing,” 163.

47 Lessing, 163.

- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Javangwe, Tasiyana D. "Born out of My Ownself: (Re)claiming the Self in Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin*, Volume I, 1919–1949." *Journal of Literary Studies* 25, no. 2 (2009): 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564710802321545>.
- Lee, Hermione. "A Conversation with Doris Lessing." *Wasafiri* 24, no. 3 (2009): 18–25.
- Lessing, Doris. *Going Home*. London: HarperPerennial, 1996 [1956].
- . *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*. London: Flamingo, 1994.
- . "Writing Autobiography." In *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, edited by David Fuller and Patricia Waugh, 153–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . *Alfred and Emily*. London: HarperPerennial, 2008.
- Maslen, Elizabeth. *Doris Lessing*. Tavistock: Northcote, 2014.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203941478>.
- Olney, James. *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-writing*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Timmer, Erika, Gerben J. Westerhof and Freya Dittmann-Kohli. "When looking back on my past life I regret ...?: Retrospective Regret in the Second Half of Life." *Death Studies* 29 (2005): 625–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180591004660>.
- Watkins, Susan. *Doris Lessing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.

