The Truth Criteria of Autobiography: Doris Lessing and Telling the Truth

Abstract

This paper examines the notion of the "true" narrative, using the example of Doris Lessing in order to explore some of the truth criteria of contemporary autobiography. My assumption is that autobiography subscribes to a variety of historically changing truth criteria and that authors seek to conform to certain of them by engaging appropriate codes. Firmly committed to "telling the truth" in her writing, Lessing has consistently problematized the actual telling of the truth. After she wrote a sequence of autobiographical novels, the fact that biographies were in the making moved her to "tell the truth" in an autobiography. I examine how she constructs "the truth" in *Under My Skin* (1994). Textual analysis shows that besides factual evidence, she implicitly appeals to three truth criteria: wisdom, psychoanalysis, and transgressiveness.

Keywords: Autobiography theory, truth criteria, Doris Lessing, narrative theory

Experience glides along insouciant of truth until it needs to be remembered or reconstructed. In the first secular autobiography, Rousseau invoked the notion of truth as a defense. Telling the truth meant countering the lies spread by his enemies with a different account and interpretation (his own). In the twentieth century the concept of truth in life writing has been problematized in multiple ways: self-knowledge is impossible, memory fallible, the written word inadequate to express experience. Yet the existence of untruth, the fear that one will disappear for posterity in a cloud of misinformation and false interpretations, keeps the concept alive. "In the year just finished, 1992, I heard of five American biographers writing about me," writes Doris Lessing in *Under My Skin,* by way of justifying her autobiographical project. But for Lessing, the notion of telling the truth in

autobiography hovers precariously between the urge to fend off falsehoods and a reluctant awareness that any "truth" is an after-the-fact construction. Post-psychoanalytical author that she is, she understands that telling the truth about the self is a contested notion and devotes a full chapter of her autobiography (Chapter 2) to problematizing it. She begins the chapter by stating: "You cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our old friend, the Truth, is first" (11). She addresses the shortcomings of memory and speaks of changing perspectives. Thus, "Why do you remember that and not that? … Memory is a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one" (13). And "Telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the landscape changes with every turn in the path " (12). It is hardly possible to write autobiography today without such disclaimers. This paper examines the notion of telling the truth, and the construction of the truth, in autobiography, using the example of Doris Lessing. By looking at her specific case, I hope to take a step toward illuminating some of the means by which contemporary autobiographers make truth claims.

"Telling the truth is the most familiar of the rules we associate with autobiographical discourse," writes Paul John Eakin (2001: 115). Many other critics make the same observation.[1] Theoreticians of autobiography theory broadly concur that the genre of autobiography brings with it the expectation that the author will tell the truth. At this point the waters muddy, however. What is meant by the truth?

For the influential autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune, the criterion that differentiates autobiography from fiction is referentiality. For Lejeune, the "referential pact" in the case of autobiography is in general coextensive with the "autobiographical pact," the "autobiographical pact" being that which defines autobiography as a genre. The "autobiographical pact," which Lejeune outlined in his *Le pacte autobiographique* of 1975, is accepted by many as the defining criterion of autobiography. For Lejeune, autobiography does not have formal features that distinguish it from fiction, but is a contractual genre. The author formally extends the autobiographical contract to the reader by giving his narrator and his protagonist the same name as his own as it appears on the title page of the work. He or she thus assumes responsibility for the identity of the protagonist with himself. This identity of proper names orients the attitude with which the reader reads the work right from the start. Autobiography, Lejeune proceeds, is, like all scientific or historical discourse, a referential genre. Such genres "claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not 'the effect of the real,' but the image of the real" (Lejeune 22). These genres therefore all tender a "referential pact." Lejeune explains: "The referential pact, in the case of autobiography, is in general coextensive with the autobiographical pact. …. The formula for it would be … 'I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'"(22). Lejeune qualifies this proposition by stating that the oath rarely takes such an abrupt and total form. "It is a supplementary proof of honesty to restrict it to the <u>possible</u> (the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know

it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.)" (22). Thus, the autobiographer implicitly guarantees to tell the reader the truth as it appears to him or her and inasmuch as he or she knows it. It follows that purposely lying would be a breach of contract. In sum, referentiality, according to Lejeune, springs from demonstrable authorial intention, where the demonstration lies in the work's conformity to a specific coded practice.

It is a significant accomplishment to construct criteria and devise a rule of thumb for inclusion or exclusion in an amorphous and rapidly changing genre like autobiography. Yet subsequent theoreticians have pointed out the problems with Lejeune's definition. Timothy Dow Adams (1990) reasonably objects that Lejeune draws a line where in fact there is a grey area. In particular, authorial intention itself does not always neatly fall on one side or the other of the line. Adams observes that "many autobiographers, not entirely certain themselves, try to remain deliberately ambiguous about genre" (8). Serge Doubrovsky (1993) finds that a novelistic style compromises the classification of a work as "autobiography" and proposes the term "autofiction" for a factual work that is written like a novel. Given the ubiquity of novelistic devices in autobiography, Doubrovsky's conception of "autobiography" appears oddly restrictive. Yet "autofiction" has caught on as a term and is perhaps a more appropriate designation for most works in which an author writes about his or her life than "autobiography."[2] Leigh Gilmore (1994) objects to Lejeune's reduction of the truth of autobiography to referentiality. She believes, and I agree, that "autobiography draws its social authority from its relation to culturally dominant discourses of truth telling and not, as has been previously been

asserted, from its privileged relation to 'real life'" (14). Not only does Lejeune's privileging of referentiality curtail the complexity of the question of the truth, according to Gilmore, but it falsely suggests that the truth is something that is out there to be grasped and sets the self up as the privileged grasper, thereby engaging a notion of self-ownership, while ignoring the production of truth and identity by discourse (76-77). Both she and Smith and Watson (2001) insist that not just the author, but also the reader, is crucial in the production of autobiographical truth. As the latter write, "Autobiographical truth … is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life …. Persuasion to belief is fundamental to the pact between narrator and reader" (13, 28).

Theorists thus hesitate to exclude intention, execution, conception, or reception from the production of autobiographical truth and, with the exception of Lejeune, shy away from making definitive pronouncements on the exact relative importance of each and avoid specifying standards of evidence. As a result, the issue of truth in autobiography clouds over. To further complicate matters, truth is asserted to come in many flavors; as Timothy Dow Adams states: "As if this confusion of genre were not problem enough, critics of autobiography must also distinguish between historical truth, propositional truth, personal truth, psychological truth, narrative truth, and conditional truth." (8) "Emotional truth" is another favorite; it has been said to excuse lying (Miller 2007, 542, citing Patricia Williams). Truth is seen to have a variety of opposites, including lying, fiction, evasion, and implausibility. By consequence of these swirling truth types, there is hardly an "autobiography" that

cannot claim some kind of truth and conversely, no autobiography whose "truth" cannot be attacked on some ground. It is rare to encounter a work that compels one to check off all criteria on each theorist's list: the author intends factuality, abstains from fictional techniques, is satisfied that his or her autobiography is the final word about his or her life story, and impresses the reader as true. In reality one encounters myriad ostensibly factual works that are rife with misrememberings, omissions, and embellishments; works whose content corresponds to what is known about the author's life but employ fictional techniques; works that fictionalize but impress readers as true (an often cited example is Richard Wright's *Black Boy*); and works of which it can be argued that they are true to the author's present emotions rather than to the facts of the past.

I am interested in the relation between concept and praxis, between the truth criteria an author explicitly declares or implicitly engages in a given work and his or her formal construction of "the truth" in the work. In the name of what is truth *claimed? A*nd how is truth *made*? Does the truth that is made correlate with the truth that is claimed—or not? Are regularities or patterns discernable across autobiographies? Since the answers to these questions, formulated in the abstract, can only be guessed at, not supplied, I undertake here a much more modest enterprise: I closely examine a particular case in order to see what illumination it yields. For my test case, I choose Doris Lessing, because she is an author who has been unusually preoccupied with the truth, and one who has been determined to produce it in her writing, including in her fiction.[3]

Before embarking on a discussion of Lessing's conception of the truth and her construction of it in *Under My Skin*, I wish to clarify my focus on truth criteria and truth construction through some further reflections on the question of autobiographical truth. As many critics have pointed out, the public does expect a work labeled "autobiography," as Doris Lessing's is, to be broadly true to fact. As Eakin writes, "Why would we bother to read it in the first place if we did not believe in autobiography as a primary expression of biographical truth?" (1985: 10). While the public accepts minor retouchings, it does not tolerate major deviations from fact. Outright falsifications, such as Binjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent Holocaust autobiography, have met with outrage. Lessing herself points out that readers have an appetite for true stories. "Readers like to think that a story is 'true.' 'Is it autobiographical?' is the demand" (*Under My Skin* 160). "Extraordinary, this need for the autobiographical. … A need for the literal, facts, the exact" (*Walking in the Shade* 306-307). Truth to fact is what the generic label "autobiography" guarantees. But factuality, I would like to argue, is only the move by which autobiography opens its game. Playing the game requires more. Neither the author nor the reader finds mere factuality in and of itself wholly satisfactory. Both want something more.

For an author, and especially one who like Lessing decides to write her autobiography late in life, producing an autobiography is arguably anxiety-provoking, for one is, after all, packaging and presenting the self for posterity. Even if one's works have already secured one's immortality, in an autobiography one is creating the immortality of one's person. Writing an autobiography is therefore quite a different enterprise from drawing on one's own experiences in order to craft

a fictional story. It has a different telos. It demands perfection, finality: it is a "last word." How to write, then? How to do this job well?

As for the public, I believe that whereas it *demands* factuality of autobiography, it actually *hopes* for more. Thus, the public hopes for a better kind of truth, not just factual truth: for the kind of "true story" that only the person him or herself can tell; for a true story to which the reader can relate; for a true story that expands one's horizons and teaches about life and people. There is a big difference between receiving a mere set of accurate facts and reading a great life story, such as one might expect from one of the most famous of contemporary writers. Such a person's autobiography, in particular, is under pressure not just to give the bare facts, but to offer up a true story on a higher order of truth.

Thus, truth is not just produced by author and reader, but the author, in order to conjure the truth, must negotiate a spot where the reader's various demands of and hopes for autobiography intersect: the expectation of factuality (the reassurance that this is a true story, not made up); but then also, perhaps, the desire for intimate revelation (curiosity about the author—the wish to know more about her); the desire for identification (can I apply this to my own life?); the desire for instruction (will I find out something useful that I didn't know before?); the desire for revelation (I want my eyes opened with startling truths—not closed in boredom); and of course, the desire for pleasure (a good read).

It therefore seems plausible to assume that autobiography seeks to present itself as true to the reader not merely by proffering Lejeune's famous autobiographical pact, which ostensibly serves as a guarantee of the work's nonfictional status by

asserting the identity of the protagonist and the author, but in other ways as well, namely by engaging, though the inclusion of appropriate textual elements, codes that represent certain truth criteria. The criteria might be, for example, truth-as-fact, truth-as-intimate-revelation, truth-as-psychology, truth-as-wisdom, or truth-as-the way-I-feel-about things-in-retrospect. The code "factuality," to pick a relatively straightforward example, might entail the use of dates, facts, detail, and/or chronology. The choice and implementation of the criteria and the codes reflect a necessary negotiation (in the author) between the self-portrait that he or she prefers and wishes to project and what he or she thinks the readership will accept and appreciate.

The purpose of the criteria and the codes is above all to enhance the value of the factual text, not to reinforce the distinction between factual and fictional writing. The dividing line between factual and fictional writing is more surely located in the contract, anchored in the proper name, that the author offers the public (Lejeune's autobiographical pact) than in the presence or absence in the text of particular styles, techniques, or devices, even if such elements seem to signal, "This is autobiography!" or "This is fiction!"[4] Whether a set of formal characteristics locks in what Dorrit Cohn called "the distinction of fiction" (Cohn) and hence the distinguishability of fictional and factual writing has been much debated and is currently very much questioned.[5] Certainly, fiction has developed a complex set of characteristic codes (such as the five codes Barthes enumerates in *S/Z)* as well as formal devices*;* yet just as certainly, fiction and nonfiction have a long history of strategically borrowing each other's codes and devices. It has long been recognized

that first-person fiction can ape autobiography to the point of unrecognizability. A narrative theorist of the 1950s, Käte Hamburger, went so far as to claim that first-person novels were not "fiction" at all, but "feigned reality statements" (313). Not only can fiction's codes turn up in autobiography, but autobiographers' borrowings from the repertoire of fictional techniques do not necessarily respect the laws of nature. Thus, autobiographers conventionally use dialogues even though they could not possibly remember a dialogue from the distant past verbatim; and even the seemingly inalienable cornerstone of fiction, the narrator's ability to read other minds, turns up in "factual" genres, Lessing's *Under My Skin* being a case in point. As for truth, fiction also aims at truth on some level, and it can very well engage some of the same truth criteria as autobiography. Truth-as-psychology, the premise of the psychological novel, is an obvious example.

But these borrowings and convergences do not mean that there are not two separate traditions. Interpenetration does not imply that two categories, both of which authors and the public have an interest in maintaining, melt into one. Structuralist narratology intensively pursued the study of the codes of fictional narrative. My assumption is that factual narrative has, correspondingly, developed its own set of codes, and that autobiography specifically has developed an evolving set of devices both for prospering as a genre and for signaling its truth. By "evolving," I mean that the truth criteria and the codes autobiographers avail themselves of necessarily change over time. I concur with Leigh Gilmore's insistence on the historicity of the truth criteria of autobiography; as she writes in *Autobiographics*, "Whether and when … any particular text appears to tell the truth,

[has] less to do with that text's presumed accuracy about what really happened than with its apprehended fit into culturally prevalent discourses of truth and identity" (ix). Thus, for example, Rousseau's famous declaration at the start of the *Confessions*, "I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being!" (17) would, if re-used today, fall flat as a tool to convince readers that the work would deliver the promised transparency, for readers no longer believe that an individual is privy to his secret soul, even if they believe in an Eternal Being. It follows that Doris Lessing's truth criteria and construction of the truth will mirror contemporary norms.

"Truth" is a word Doris Lessing uses a great deal, both in her two-volume autobiography and elsewhere. "Telling the truth" is her often-reiterated goal as a writer. She uses the word "truth" boldly and confidently. But closer inspection shows that she uses it with a spectrum of shades of meaning that testify that the notion for her is quite complex. For example, she has often, as will be discussed in more detail below, articulated the idea that fiction is "truer" than factual writing. In *Under My Skin* she presents herself as the privileged knower on the subject of her own life. She commits herself to factual accuracy, albeit with certain caveats. Thus, she states up front that she intends to exercise discretion out of consideration for the living, which means that she will have to omit or change some material above all in her second volume. And she expresses reservations about historical writing, which so often presents not the true picture but a "cracked mirror" (*Under My Skin* 11). She complains that memory is selective and that one's perspective changes over time. "I am trying to write this book honestly," she writes. "But were I to write

it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?" (*Under My Skin* 17). Beyond assuring the reader that she wants to be honest, she does not spell out explicit truth criteria. Yet the shades of meaning of "truth" she articulates in in her previous writings as well as in passing in her autobiography will, as we shall see, play into her construction of the truth in *Under My Skin*.

First, truth for Lessing means truth to fact. Thus, in *Under My Skin* she complains that the film script that was devised for her autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* gave far too large a part to the Cohens, whom she had made up. "My interest in the series was a historical one. Truth. Facts. All that. I was caught on my own cowardice. Over and over again in my life I've been sorry when I softened or changed truth for some reason, to satisfy outside pressure, or to make things easier" (161). She painstakingly explains why she put the Jewish family in this early autobiographical novel—she did so in order to motivate Martha's knowledge of politics though she grew up "isolated in the bush" of Southern Rhodesia--but later the film script causes her to regret her choice to convey a fact (her own early awareness of politics) through invented dramatic action (Martha's interaction with the Cohens), even though this choice made good novelistic sense. By inventing these characters, she sought to achieve greater effectiveness through a seemingly harmless fictionalization. But Lessing refuses invention in her fiction if she believes that such invention would destroy verisimilitude. She recounts in the second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, that she was furious when the publisher Knopf offered to publish her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, if she put in an explicit rape of a white woman by a black man (7-8). Such a rape would to her

mind not have been verisimilar, not at all consonant with the racist atmosphere in Rhodesia that she was trying to convey. Putting in a rape would have amounted to misrepresentation, a willful and dishonest hoodwinking of the reader for the sake of greater effect. Evidently for Lessing, some types of fictionalization have a provisional working agreement with the truth, whereas others do not.

Second, Lessing uses the word "truth" to mean the correct interpretation of the facts that is theoretically accessible to the x-ray vision of one who can see through official lies and ideology. Lessing's addiction to truth in her fiction, to truth as what happened or what very likely could have happened--an addiction that sits uneasily with her vocation as novelist and creates problems and paradoxes for her--is perhaps explained by the post World War I climate in which she grew up and by her interest in politics. A "distrust, even contempt of government and authority" (*Under My Skin* 16) marked the generation of her parents, who had been scarred by what they had once believed was the "war to end war" (*Under My Skin* 7, 9). The widespread distrust of any official government line was borne out later by the enormities of Hitler, then Stalin, first covered up but then brought to light. Lessing is sensitive to a spectrum of political lying. First, there are the conscious lies. In *Walking in the Shade* Lessing, a former Communist, indicts Communists with routine lying (59). But conscious lying shades into the kind of empty rhetoric that governments and authorities generally spout in order to propagate an ideology that they half-believe in. Lessing describes herself as one who "all her life" believed that the emperor was naked (*Under My Skin* 17). Truth in this context is conceptualized as oppositional, rebellious, bold.

Third, and closely related, Lessing uses "truth" to mean the way things really work, in contrast to a collective false consciousness. Thus, beneath the unconscious self-deception of the idealistic young men who voluntarily fought in World War I, or the self-interested racialist beliefs of the whites in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, lies another, truer narrative. Even more so than in the second case, truth is conceptualized here as something ulterior, something that requires considerable thought and effort to discern. It requires an inquiring mind, intelligence, and persistence to see through the tissue of obfuscation in which common opinion has wrapped the real. The belief that truth is ulterior impelled Lessing and her fellow Communists in her youth: she writes that Communists believed themselves to be initiates who looked beneath the surface and thought they knew how things really worked (*Walking in the Shade*, 240-241).

Although these initiates liked to think that they had succeeded in removing the bag over their collective heads and therefore saw clearly, in fact, Lessing admits, grasping the truth in this interpretative sense came very close to, and could also be understood as, construction. This brings us to Lessing's fourth use of the word "truth": truth resides in the notion that a perceived ulterior truth itself is a construction— perhaps a fiction. Communists believed that truth was suffering, according to Lessing in *Walking in the Shade*: "What could truth be but that unspeakable suffering is the price exacted by 'life itself' in its tortuous progress upwards—always upwards, it goes without saying" (241). But she ruthlessly demystifies truth-as-suffering: "The root of communism—a love of revolution—is, I believe, masochism, pleasure in pain, satisfaction in suffering, identification with the

redeeming blood" (241). Here we arrive at a deeply relativistic notion of truth, at the idea that "the truth" constantly changes over time. These days, she points out, people believe in a different truth: "A later generation used 'where it's at'. The truth, hard facts, the real experience – which, in the absence of war or revolution, was soon to be found in drugs, hallucinogens, illusion." (241)

Hovering ahead of Lessing's disquisition on ulterior truth, on the horizon of her remarks, is the fatal realization that interpretation, as Shoshana Felman argued in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," "while seemingly filling the *hole*, in reality only makes it *deeper*" (173). Lessing appears to envisage this possibility, but it is not her ultimate destination. She continues to cherish the concept of truth and wants to use it. It is too useful to bury in this fashion. Instead of advancing toward complete skepticism, she retreats, when discussing her ideal of truth in the context of fiction writing, to the shallower waters of truth, to her firm sense that she knows, at any given moment, what the truth is. Wallace Stevens' lines in his poem "On the Road Home" sum up this kind of retreat from a theoretical skepticism to a belief in one's own sense perceptions: "It was when I said, 'There is no such thing as the truth,' That the grapes seemed fatter. The fox ran out of his hole" (164). Truth is what emerges in the sensuous present. Thus fifth and finally, when Lessing discusses her ideal of truth in the context of her writing, what she generally means by truth is correspondence with the way she experienced life-- place, people, things, atmosphere--at a particular time. She has a firm sense of certainty in her knowledge of this kind of truth. She knows precisely what it is that she would like to convey. The problem that remains for her is how to do it.

We now come to the interface of truth and narrative. How does one *narrate* the truth, thus conceived? Lessing has agonized extensively both in writing and in interviews over the "how"—how best to tell the truth, to give a sense of the real. Thirty-two years prior to *Under My Skin*, her acclaimed novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) addressed that very topic. In Lessing's own word *The Golden Notebook* is about the inadequacy of writing—any kind of writing--to express experience. Her writer-protagonist Anna Wulf complains about the "thinning of language against the density of our experience"(259) and therefore decides to keep four notebooks, each of which aims to capture "the truth" of experience in a different way: a day-to-day diary, a record of politics, an autobiographical novel, and a memoir about the same period. Finally Wulf decides that she failed; there is an irreconcilable split between any kind of writing and experience.[6] Neither her novel nor her autobiographical or factual writing has captured the truth. Lessing's protagonist expresses wistfulness about the medium of film because the camera eye can record "everything." " Truth" here is conceptualized as an immersive totality that hovers elusively beyond the reach of any genre of writing.

At the start of *Under My Skin* Lessing goes further by implying that the truth of experience hovers ungraspably beyond any act of memory. To a considerable degree, her execution belies her expressions of doubt. She remembers a great deal, and in very great detail, and she displays confidence in narrating it. When she arrives at the period that formed the basis for the *Martha Quest* novel, however, namely adolescence, the old tension about the relative truth claims of autobiographical fiction and memoir resurfaces. Suddenly Lessing starts to

articulate doubts about whether her earlier representation in *Martha Quest* was not "truer." "When I wrote *Martha Quest* I was being a novelist and not a chronicler. But if the novel is not the literal truth, then it is true in atmosphere, feeling, more 'true' than this record, which is trying to be factual," she writes (162). Indeed, as of this point she does start to write more of a straightforward factual memoir, as if to differentiate her autobiography from *Martha Quest*. In the 1990s, precisely when she was writing her autobiography, she repeatedly expressed the idea that novels are truer than factual writing. In her 1993 Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she writes: "Currently I am writing volume one of my autobiography, and ... I have to conclude that fiction is better at 'the truth' than a factual record. Why this should be so is a very large subject and one I don't begin to understand" (ix). In a contemporary interview with Earl G. Ingersoll of July 9, 1993, she likewise expressed doubts about her autobiographical writing. The reader-conscious Lessing feared that that people would be disappointed, because her novels (autobiographical novels) were better, "truer." "If you're writing a record, a personal history, you're really writing from a different part of yourself, very much more detached, and people are going to find that disappointing. I'm sure of it" (236). What is that "different part" of herself? If it is what Proust called "voluntary memory," one is put in mind of Proust's own polemic against its "pictures," which "preserve nothing of the past itself" (Proust 47). Lessing herself wavers in assigning the reason for the superior truth of her novels to the fact that she was younger and closer to events when she wrote the novels, or to the fictional genre itself, which gave her more leeway to create the atmosphere of a particular time. In the

interview she voices both ideas: "It is impossible not to write from where you are now. A kind of world-weary tolerance creeps in, which is not at all the mood you were in when you were twenty-four. In fact, the novels, I think, give more of the flavor of that time" (Interview with Ingersoll, 229). And "All I can say is that fiction has it over the 'truth' every time" (Interview with Ingersoll, 239). Thus in sum, Lessing has much more confidence in the result of an act of creation than in the result of a consciously willed act of memory, which by its very nature bifurcates the writer between the present impulse to write and the effort of reconstructing the past.

Lessing obviously felt challenged by the genre of autobiography. What makes her case a particularly interesting one is that she felt driven to tell the true story of her life on account of biographers, yet expressed chronic dissatisfaction at the limitations imposed by factual writing. My objective here is to examine how, under the circumstances, she goes about accomplishing her goal of constructing "the truth" in her autobiography.

In my examination of *Under My Skin*, I focus specifically on the childhood chapters up to age 14 (Chapters 1-8), which comprise roughly 150 pages, because in this initial section, despite Lessing's caveats about changing perspectives and memory, her production of the truth can go forward virtually without constraints. It is not vexed by her own previous rendition in *Martha Quest.* Nor does she have to clip the wings of the truth out of consideration for the living—as she says she must in narrating her life after 1949, when she left Southern Rhodesia. The second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, which covers 1949-1962, is in

fact quite discreet. In *Walking in the Shade* Lessing writes more of a memoir of the times, accounting for much of her life in terms of the circumstances and mores of the day. But from her early years in Southern Rhodesia, as she writes, "there are few people left" (*Under My Skin* 11). Nothing stands in the way of an intimate confession. Finally, in the childhood chapters of *Under My Skin*, she is writing about things that are mainly known only to her and need not fear potential competing accounts.

Lessing's way of pursuing the "truth" in the eight childhood chapters is very nearly the reverse of the filmic truth advocated by Anna Wulf. She does not render the surface, but excavates the depths. She asks, why did things happen the way they happened? She designates this as the concern of an old person. "Old people may be observed peering into their pasts. *Why?* –they are asking themselves. *How did that happen?"* (12) Like Rousseau, she gives an account that is heavily peppered by interpretation. She pursues two principal methods: First, she speaks in a strong narratorial voice, which represents the truth of the present of the writer, authoritatively proffering a set of generalizations that convey a seventy-year-old's wisdom about people and life. Second, she recreates the feelings and perceptions of the young person she once was, using a palette of novelistic techniques.

To give some examples of her generalizations: "An intense physicality, that is the truth of childhood" (18). "Small children are always trying to keep things in their proper places" (19). "There is no way of conveying in words the difference between child time and grown-up time" (109). Her autobiography has themes: episodes and details relate to these narratorial truths as illustrations of them. Lessing the

narrator reaps the fruits of a project of self-understanding, a project that she clearly accomplished before she started writing her autobiography, so that the stories she tells of her life become exemplifications of conclusions she has drawn about herself rather than the means by which she discovers such truths.[7] She nails down her character traits, insisting above all on two: her rebelliousness against authority and her over-sensitivity, the fact that she has "several skins too few" (26). Early on, she says, she compensated for her fragility by developing a bouncy, outgoing, social outward personality that was "a protection, a shield, for the private self" (20), which she calls "the Hostess" and which is also reflected in her childhood nickname, Tigger. She also tries to get to the bottom of these personality traits and finds them in early childhood influences. Her rebelliousness mirrors her parents' distrust of authority after they had become disillusioned with nearly everything and especially the government on account of World War I (85). Her over-sensitivity comes above all from her sense that her mother didn't love her.

In order to recreate her childhood perceptions and feelings, Lessing avails herself freely of novelistic techniques. She alternates between summary and scene (to use terms introduced for fiction by Percy Lubbock). Scenes, although ostensibly "memories," are often given in the present tense for vividness. She renders both singular and repeated events in scenic form. One of the singular memories that allows her to conclude that children experience the world physically is as follows: "I am trying not to cry, while being lifted up in tight squeezing hands, and put in front of my father's body, told to grip the front of the saddle, a hard jutting edge I

just stretch my finders to hold. I am inside the heat of horse, the smell of horse, the smell of my father, all hot pungent smells." (18)

Another memory that illustrates the same theme of the physicality of children's experience is cast as an iterative scene, also in the present tense. Lessing tells how she detests being tickled:

"And then the moment when Daddy captures his little daughter and her face is forced down into his lap or crotch, into the unwashed smell …His great hands go to work on my ribs." (31)

Her point that children want things to stay in their proper places is illustrated in an unmediated-vision style worthy of Sartre's Roquentin: "When in bathing costumes [adults] seem all pale flesh and unpleasant revelation. Loose bulging breasts. Whiskers of hair under arms, matting or streaming water like sweat. … Enormous pale bodies, like milk puddings, sloshing about in out-of-control water that smelled cold…" (19-20)

Her point that children experience time differently from adults is illustrated by an ingeniously long-drawn-out scene of nap time as a child experiences it. Little Doris does not want to take an afternoon nap, but her mother, who wants free time to write a letter to England, insists on the nap. Time passes slowly for the child. Much space—five printed pages--is devoted to this nap. Lessing uses a variety of fictional techniques. First-person retrospective narration cedes to narration in the historical present, making the creep of time palpable. Then Lessing shifts to an omniscient perspective. Writing in the third person, she takes her mother's point of view, then reverts to the child's. She calls little Doris "the child" and renders her

thoughts in free indirect discourse—which, however, she interrupts with a first-person interior monologue. After transitioning back to the third-person account, Lessing finally, in a striking paralepsis, tells us her mother's thoughts. The pages devoted to the nap accomplish several purposes. Above all, we experience, at excruciating length, a child's sense of time. The contrast between the child's and the adult's sense of time, as well as the clash between the child's interests (I'm not sleepy!) and the mother's (I want an hour to myself!) are brought home to us.

Lessing uses so many novelistic devices in this part of *Under My Skin* that it is pertinent to ask what makes this work an autobiography other than the fact that the author tells us it is one. One specific device that shores up the generic classification of autobiography is the inclusion of a photo section in the text. Thus, authentic documents in the form of visual material shore up what Lessing says about her parents, Persia, Africa, etc. This is not exactly Lessing's old cinematic truth, but it testifies to her belief in the value of visual documentation in the pursuit of truth. Roland Barthes makes the case for the authenticating power of photography forcefully in *Camera Lucida*. According to him, whereas language must struggle to combat its inherent fictionality, photography effortlessly succeeds: "Language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements; we convoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentification itself" (87). Photography is "an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*" (88—and thus a hedge against the fallibility of memory: "The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on

the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (88-89). Timothy Dow Adams, discussing Barthes along with subsequent theorists of photography who emphasize that photos distort, concludes: "Apparently no amount of appealing to logic about the obvious distortions of photographs can quite sway viewers from the popular idea that there is something especially authentic or accurate about a photographic likeness" (1994: 466). Linda Haverty Rugg distinguishes between the "'naïve' use of photographs," where photographs "appear as a 'natural' and expected supplement to the autobiographical text," and a sophisticated, reflective use that shows "consciousness of the problem of referring to the self in language and image" (2). There is no evidence to suggest that Lessing uses photographs other than in the "naïve" popular tradition: to complement, complete, and authenticate her verbal account.

To summarize thus far: the first truth criterion in *Under My Skin* is narratorial wisdom, and it is buttressed by illustrative evidence in the form of childhood material by Lessing's selection and foregrounding of certain elements in the referential account. The "referential account" resembles a novel in parts, but Lessing reinforces her commitment to the autobiographical pact, to referentiality, by including photographs of herself and her family. A second truth criterion is psychoanalysis. As we have seen, Lessing often conceived of the truth as something ulterior. This ulterior quality of truth expresses itself in the childhood portion of *Under My Skin* in her recourse to depth psychology. Lessing's views are informed by psychoanalysis, sometimes overtly. Thus, she considers it of "the deepest

psychological importance" (102) that, when she is 7 or so, she bandages a twig and murmurs the name of a little boy with whom she is in love – thus creating a symbolic analogy with her father, who lost a leg in the war. Besides this Oedipal insight and her otherwise Oedipal relations with her parents (she adored her father and hated her mother), her belief in the formative influence of unremembered childhood events, her assumption of infantile sexuality, and her remarks about the deceptiveness of memory are consonant with the insights of psychoanalysis. No one could accuse Lessing of not being an independent thinker, but she is also a psychoanalytically informed one who has intelligently applied psychoanalytic theory in interpreting her own life and the lives of others. Thus, for example, she postulates that "Our lives are governed by voices, caresses, threats we cannot remember" (22), and she uses this idea as a key to explain various irrational adult behaviors.[8] To wit: she is certain that her younger brother's irrational fear of grasshoppers as an adult derives from a comment made by a woman who looked after them as children that "if he doesn't keep his mouth shut a grasshopper will jump down into his appendix and claw its way out through his stomach" (60). The comment left her little brother terrified and tearful, but as an adult he does not remember the incident, whereas she, the older sibling, does. More hypothetically, she concludes that her own irrational response as an adult to the American male voice, which she finds beyond all measure seductive, cajoling, soothing, and promising, can be traced to the presence of an American family friend in her infant years in Persia (22). Between the two World Wars psychoanalytic insights about childhood ousted the pre-Freudian romantic "myth of childhood," and in the post

World War II period they gradually became what Jerome Bruner calls "folk psychology" (Martens 36). To the late twentieth-century reader, therefore, Lessing's psychoanalytically informed interpretations of her own childhood and childhood generally seem insightful and "right."

But what Lessing gets more generally from psychoanalysis (or perhaps more accurately from the age of psychoanalysis) is the idea that the true is not the overt, the conventional, or the socially acceptable, but rather the latent, the unlikely, and the transgressive. The true is the hitherto unsuspected, the latent-brought-to-light, and daringly uncovered. This third truth criterion, the idea that the truth is a relatively shocking thing that lurks beneath, is fed by modern media practice, which dictates that the extreme and unusual is more newsworthy than the expected or routine. We instinctively accept that the "same old" does not merit our attention, whereas the novel, the different, and the transgressive has a claim on it. Publicity interests mingle with the waters of truth in this third mode of truth production. To make a truth claim, Lessing thus makes bold claims; in giving examples she privileges those that pack the most punch, not shunning overstatement; and she seeks to make her examples, which are frequently chosen to be extreme, all the more vivid by availing herself of fictional techniques, even though these transgress the norms of factual writing. This autobiography is the opposite of demure. Lessing is not a careful historian, but a bold quester after keys that explain life, a radical philosopher in the style of Nietzsche, who dismissed received ideas in order to lay bare the shocking true causes of human action, and she readily adopts the truth criterion of transgressiveness. Telling the truth in this autobiography does not

just mean revealing intimate details—though Lessing does that. It does not just mean adopting a frank, tell-it-all tone, as in the women's confessions of the 1970s (Felski), though Lessing certainly adopts such a tone. Rather, it involves pushing at the boundaries of what the reader expects, and even sometimes at the boundaries of the plausible.

To give one outstanding example, Lessing insists not just on her hatred for her mother (this comes as no surprise to readers of women's autobiographies), but on her very strong sense, not just in retrospect but <u>already as a very young child</u>, that grownups, and in particular her mother, are deceitful and manipulative. Thus her vividest early memory is of her mother lying to her: "The vividest early memory was – not the actual birth of my brother – but my introduction to the baby. I was two and a half years old." There follows a flashbulb-style memory of the room and the scene. "The cot was well above my head, and she [her mother] was bending past it and saying persuasively, "It is your baby, Doris, and you must love it.. … The baby I do not remember. I was in a flame of rage and resentment. It was not my baby. It was their baby. But I can hear now that persuasive lying voice, on and on and on, and it would go on until I gave in. The power of that rebellious flame, strong even now, tells me it was by no means the first time I was told, lyingly, what I must feel. For it was not my baby. Obviously it was not. … I hated my mother for it. I hated her absolutely." (24-5)

Psychological studies have shown that sibling birth is one of the four best remembered events of early childhood, second only to emergency room trauma (Usher and Neisser 155-165). So it is not surprising that Lessing remembers the

birth of her brother vividly. It is a commonplace that a two-year-old who acquires a younger sibling is jealous, and later in the text Lessing acknowledges being intensely jealous of her brother, a docile child whom her mother and nearly everyone else prefers to her. But she gives her memory of her brother's birth this strange twist: what she remembers above all is her mother's lie. And, psychoanalyzing herself, she even ventures to penetrate into the realm of childhood amnesia: she asserts that the strength of her rebellious passion at this maternal lie when she was two testifies that it was "by no means the first time" her mother lyingly manipulated her feelings. Later the behavior of various adults supports her suspicion of them—for example, the captain of a boat tells her to sit on a raw egg, assuring her it won't break (47) -- but her claim for her early, rather than retrospective, recognition of her mother's lies is extraordinary. Other women's autobiographies involve a deceptive mother—Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood* is an outstanding example—but in contrast to Lessing Sarraute is careful to present her mother's deceptions as her own memory constructions.

Rousseau initiated secular autobiography as a transgressive genre, one that purported to make an open confession and that gave details about his intimate life. George Sand, his first female follower, chided him for being indiscreet about others (76). She wrote her own autobiography much more circumspectly, dilating on her early years and her relationships with her mother and grandmother rather than flaunting her notorious adult life for posterity. Discretion was a hurdle for women autobiographers, but by the later twentieth century many women shed their compunctions and wrote confessionally, indeed boldly. Lessing, a novelist who

cannot shake the idea that the novelistic is "truer," and who cannot resist using her novelist's toolbox when she writes her autobiography, creates the impression of truth in her account of her childhood and early adolescence not by adopting a factual style and not, strictly speaking, by being confessional in the conventional sense either, but by being transgressive, by overstepping the boundaries of what one would normally expect a person to say about him or her self. Confession is Lessing's horizon, which she attempts to push back. It is as if she cannot settle comfortably into confession—much less into history—but is impelled to seek an edge.

In *The Golden Notebook* Lessing located such success in her pursuit of truth as she gives herself credit for in the juxtaposition of the four different notebooks. She stated in a 1966 interview about the work as a whole: "Well at least I think it's more truthful because it's more complex" (Interview with Howe, 429). In her autobiography, too, she aims at the truth through multiple means. Truth is a compound here as well. For a start, she extends the "autobiographical pact": the Doris Lessing whose name appears on the title page is the same Doris Lessing née Tayler who is the protagonist of her narrative. She uses her identity with her protagonist as a prerogative to assert her superior authority on the subject of her life to that of any biographer. Then, as we have seen, through the means by which she crafts her verbal narrative, Lessing makes an implicit appeal to three different truth criteria. The first of these is wisdom: she, the narrator, a wise old woman, imparts the fruits of her experience and her analyses in the form of generalizations that in common parlance are called "truths." The second truth criterion is

psychoanalytic. Psychoanalysis has conspired with other sources of what Paul Ricoeur famously called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" to make us believe not only that the truth is hidden, but that the hidden is the true (33). Thus Lessing's choice to delve below the surface, below the facts, to find the psychic wellsprings of character and behavior, is a broadly persuasive move; for where does the truth lie, if not there? Lessing's quest for the hidden, moreover, does not push her narrative into the obscure and potentially tedious passageways of the particular but, rather, allows her to move her life story into the broad avenues of typicality, where it connects up with what the reader knows about life. Thus whereas her account of her childhood experiences is full of details and particulars, she often uses specific incidents, specific scenes from her childhood, to illustrate general psychological insights about the way children experience the world. These are insights to which the reader can relate. Likewise, whereas her analyses are aimed at explaining why she, Doris Lessing, became the person she was, they echo well-known psychoanalytic ideas that ring familiar and hence true. The third truth criterion is transgressiveness, meaning that the truth is "the unheard of," the unconventional, the barely thinkable. Finally, Lessing uses one non-narrative device to signal the truth: photographs. Whereas the title of the book, "Under my Skin," testifies to her intention to head for the depths, the truth below the skin is rounded off with a bit of skin: the photos in this autobiography serve as placeholders for the real, the historical, the documentable.

In *Under My Skin* Lessing wondered how different her autobiography would be if she wrote it at age eighty-five. As if to put her question to the test, she returned to

autobiography in her late eighties. *Alfred and Emily* purports to be the story of her parents, but Lessing in fact rapidly veers into a return engagement with her young self. In her new autobiographical venture, she does give the kaleidoscope a turn, especially in the way she tries to understand her mother and not just assert that she always hated her. In *Alfred and Emily* she no longer wrestles with the problematics of truth. In fact, she deliberately writes the first half of the book as a fiction about what her mismatched parents' lives should have been like before launching into an account of their actual lives. But her moves are similar to those in *Under My Skin*. She includes authenticating photos, in fact some of the same photos she published in *Under My Skin*. And she engages the same truth criteria. She writes from a stance of wisdom attained. A number of her insights are psychoanalytically informed. She adopts three strategies that defy convention sufficiently to be considered transgressive. First, she vexes biography by creating a fiction-fact hybrid: she juxtaposes the fictitious placid lives her parents ought to have led with their actual displaced, conflicted, sorry destinies. Second, in the fictional rewrite of her parents' lives, she takes the liberty of changing history. As Molly Pulda shows, she erases World War I, the event that precipitated the marriage of her parents, who should never have married each other, and which "squatted over" her childhood (*Alfred and Emily*, viii), afflicting her with a lifelong case of "postmemory" (Pulda 4-5). World War I simply does not happen in her fictional biography of her parents, and thus they never marry each other, but lead relatively fulfilling alternative lives. Yet Lessing, in a deftly ironic move, builds into her story the kind of war longing that preceded World War I and thereby signals that war is a permanent threat: the

desire to be soldiers besets English males and inspires them to volunteer in foreign wars down to the end of her tale, when Alfred's sons are middle-aged men. Third, in the "nonfictional" part she subordinates life writing to the goal of making a point--something she did not permit herself to any comparable degree in *Under My Skin*—and that point is an extreme one. *In Under My Skin* she wove a close mesh between exemplary episodes and overarching points. But in *Alfred and Emily* she selects most of her material in order to drive home her point that her family's lives were warped, hexed, and intolerable. She casts her parents' real story as a tragic drama in which trauma-studded circumstances stunt the potential of every member of the family: her father, left one-legged by the Great War, struggles with Rhodesian farming until felled by diabetes; her mother, not cut out for farming, bemoans the ravages that African moths have wrought on her elegant English dresses; her brother survives the sinking of the Repulse at the cost of mental cloudiness for the rest of his life; she herself suffers unremittingly from her mother's attempts to control her. The story is heavily biased toward gloom and horror. As Virginia Tiger notes in her review of *Alfred and Emily*, "a psychological climate of pain washes over the entire novella" (24).

Lessing's specific techniques--her use of exemplification, her inventive use of particular novelistic devices, the precise ways in which she shocks the reader with transgressive material, and her characteristic messages—give her work a personal signature. The truth criteria Lessing engages in her autobiography are, however, not unique to her. Her generalizations, her wise pronouncements, can be seen as a variant of an ancient desideratum for autobiography. Imparting the fruit of one's

experiences to others for their edification and inspiration forms the legitimation for many autobiographies, starting with Augustine's. Psychoanalysis can likewise be seen to have ancient roots: Gilmore demonstrates convincingly that the religious confession, complete with its rules and restrictions and its incorporation of an authoritative role for the listener, is autobiography's most important forebear, and she rightly identifies psychoanalysis as the modern-day descendant of the confession (107-125). Psychoanalytic insights enter autobiography with the reception of Freud. They become prominent in the interwar years, for example in Mabel Dodge Luhan's *Intimate Memories: Background* (1933), and are pervasive after World War II in the works of authors too numerous to mention. Leiris, McCarthy, and Barthes are among the most famous. As for transgressiveness, the genre is under pressure especially in our day, when so much autobiographical writing competes for attention, to do something others have not yet done or are only beginning to do, or in other words, to push truth in the direction of novelty and sensation. Claire Martin commented on her story of childhood abuse *In an Iron Glove*, originally published in French in 1965, that an earlier publication would have shocked audiences too much, but that later would have been too late, because "you can't arrive last with a book like that. You have to be a bit at the head of the line" (Iqbal and Dorion 76, my translation). When conventions solidify through reuse, it is time for something new, something unheard of. In her book on the childhood memoir boom of the last fifteen years, *Contesting Childhood*, Kate Douglas writes that "since the early 1990s a wave of traumatic remembering has permeated autobiography" (85). The thematics of trauma are only one form that

transgressiveness can take, but inasmuch as it has become pervasive at least in this form, I am tempted to call transgressiveness the "reality effect" of autobiography, because it incorporates the same paradox as Roland Barthes's famous "reality effect," namely that there exists a code of the uncoded (Barthes, "Reality Effect"). To be sure, transgressiveness may be more than just a truth criterion. Autobiographers who flaunt extreme material are frequently accused of having financial motives, as Eakin discusses apropos of Kathryn Harrison's 1997 incest story, *The Kiss* (2001: 119). The three truth criteria Lessing engages in *Under My Skin*—wisdom, psychoanalysis, and transgressiveness—thus all reflect traditional or contemporary norms. Admittedly, all of these criteria exist in a relationship of tension with the referential imperative. But this underlying disharmony is not enough to prevent them from being packaged into a work that legitimately bears the label autobiography, because it falls well within the generic norms of autobiography in the present day.

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[1] E.g., Adams 1990, 9; Miller 358; Douglas 45.
[2] Gasparini gives a detailed account of how the term's meaning has snowballed, 295-300.
[3] Cf. Roberta Rubenstein, 24.
[4] Gasparini, 301, notes that the identity of names is neither a sufficient nor a necessary criterion for establishing the autobiographical character of a text, since it is found in "autofabulation"—fictions that project the real author into imaginary situations. Yet the identity, he asserts, does tend to reinforce the autobiographical pact.
[5] In *The Emergence of Mind* David Herman in his editorial introduction disputes what he calls the "Exceptionality Thesis," namely the claim that "readers'

experiences of fictional minds are different in kind from their experiences of the minds they encounter outside the domain of narrative fiction" (8). Thus he disputes Cohn's claim that only fiction can render the mind transparent. Brian Richardson upholds the "distinction of fiction," asserting that fiction and nonfiction are different speech acts despite the many works that employ boundary-transgressing techniques, in "Telling Postmodern Lives: The Difference of Fiction," lecture given at the Narrative Matters Conference, American University of Paris, May 31, 2012.

[6] See John L. Carey, "Art and Reality in *The Golden Notebook.*"

[7] I disagree here with Javangwe, who believes that Lessing "give[s] birth to self-identity through the autobiographical act" (43).

[8] She spells out this insight in some detail, *Under My Skin*, 35.