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Vanja Vukićević Garić* and Predrag Živković*

Crossing the Walls: Reading Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* as a Hopeful Dystopia

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Abstract: Lessing's short novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* encapsulates all the dominant narrative, political, and philosophical preoccupations of its prolific author. Straddling the genres of socio-realistic dystopia and post-apocalyptic fantasy, it self-consciously reflects on many questions relevant to contemporary readers. Drawing on the main premises of postmodern poetics, particularly on its ontological concerns, and on more recent theories about new 'critical dystopias' in literature, this article points to the multi-layered utopian aspects present at different levels of the text. Moreover, applying philosophical and sociological concepts of Jean Baudrillard to the interpretation of Lessing's symbolic and narrative strategies, such as his notion of the alienation of death in capitalist society, the article shows how this novel can be read not only as a critique of materialist culture and a study of deprivation and isolation with serious psychological and civilizational consequences, but also as a hopeful play with ontological borders implied in the imaginative rethinking of our private and shared realities.

Keywords: dystopian, utopian, zone, 'it', alienation, emancipation, imaginary, real

1 Introduction

Described as a political, feminist, psychological, realist, and, ultimately, surrealist and science-fiction author,¹ Doris Lessing is a literary embodiment of one of those

¹ In one of the pioneering articles on *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Betsy Draine (1979) rightfully asserted that descriptions such as 'realist' had become highly misleading and, indeed, anachronistic, since even from the publication of *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing's move towards

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prolific and hard-to-pin creative energies whose variety, in terms of genre, style, and thematic preoccupations, often challenges the assumptions of fixed literary theories and conventional critical readings. Being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, she was described by the Swedish Academy as “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny.”² Her short novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) is an example of this variety and visionary insight in miniature: it is a vivid and detailed socio-realist depiction of a dystopian world, which, albeit spatially and temporally unspecified, bears many symbolic similarities to Lessing’s and, indeed, our own contemporary reality. In addition to being a social commentary and a psychological study, it is also a fantasy, an allegory, an almost mythical representation of both individual and, at some level, collective subconsciousness, which manifests itself in the articulation of instinctive and escapist voyages away from the civilizational breakdown, positioning the novel in the subgenre of so-called space fiction or, more precisely, inner-space speculative fiction. Even though it does reflect on the complex and culturally constructed nature of gender roles, it must be said that its political, psychological, and sociological implications extend beyond an exclusive focus on ‘the female experience.’

The novel’s social, psychological, and, more to the point, ontological examinations resonate with an apocalyptic lure and uncertainty, along with references to accompanying fear, frustration, and alienation of an almost quarantine-like world. As Rosenfeld indicates, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* clearly fits into the genres of dystopia and post-apocalypse, as it

shows the disappearance of the organizing principle. In its place, we get social chaos. The larger social organization is replaced by primitive tribes, reconstituted families who struggle for an edge in a hostile wasteland. (Rosenfeld 2005, 45)

Nevertheless, in tune with less conspicuous and more postmodern conventions of post-apocalyptic fantasies, it offers stimuli for re-thinking the contemporary world and, consequently, for growth, which is subtly contemplated as a potential existing on both the individual and the collective level. The walls of a quarantine-like situation in the novel, obviously symbolizing limits imposed on habitual existence as well as the safety of a domestic space, are constructed by an external and also internalized force: the menacing and fascinating ‘it,’ which is an inscrutable and wide-spread phenomenon that asserts itself as the ‘unsaid’ cause, as well as one of the effects, of the confinement. Once shown and comprehended as a construct,

non-realistic modes of allegory, fantasy, expressionism, and science-fiction had become far too obvious.

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2007/summary/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

however, all the walls are de-constructed and the alarming 'it' shifts into the past, becomes an *ex-it*, which marks an exit from the dystopian situation. This article focuses precisely on the deconstruction of walls, in the symbolic terms offered by the narrative and in the wider socio-philosophical and humanistic sense provided by its more eclectic reading. It aims at showing that Lessing's novel can be read in the light of postmodernist poetics with a liberating effect, due to the implicit narrative self-consciousness and explicit ontological concerns, represented primarily in the 'crossing-the-wall' *topos* and in the blurring of generic boundaries. Even though there has always existed a deeper affinity between the genres of utopia, dystopia, science fiction, speculative and space-fiction, postmodernism has particularly intensified their cross-fertilization in its deliberate esthetics of hybridization and mixing of narrative strategies. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* contains a strong utopian and optimistic impulse, despite its apocalyptic urban landscapes, which positions the text in the more recent and hybrid forms of critical dystopias, or even critical utopias (Moylan 2000, 2014; Seyferth 2018). Similar to Moylan's concept of critical dystopia, Mohr recognizes a "dystopian-utopian continuum" (Mohr 2007, 7) in the feminist texts from the 1970s onward, arguing in favor of the oppositional utopian narrative elements that transform traditional and classical dystopias, promoting difference, pluralism, and multiperspectivism. In its narrative and symbolic assertion of alternative worlds and diverse modes of perception, Lessing's novel can certainly be read as a postmodern feminist "transgressive utopian dystopia" (Mohr 2007). Moreover, it addresses multiple potential forms of transgression in a sense that can be compelling for contemporary readers surrounded by various challenges of the (post) pandemic and (post)apocalyptic context.

2 Journeys Beyond the Walls – Escapism or Emancipation?

The Memoirs of a Survivor (henceforth *Memoirs*) is set in an unnamed city at an undated time and is narrated by an unnamed middle-aged single woman who has lived through and survived the consequences of a gradual breakdown of what had seemed to be a developed urban society. While registering the devastating social, cultural, economic, political, and ecological effects of the collapse, she continually keeps its cause obscure and unspecified, referring to the catastrophe merely as 'it,' stressing the fact that it was a common experience:

We all remember that time. It was no different for me than for others. [...] But perhaps it would be better to develop this later, stopping only to remark that the use of the word 'it' is always a sign of crisis, of public anxiety. [...] I shall begin this account at a time before we were talking

about 'it'. We were still in the stage of generalized unease. Things weren't too good, they were even pretty bad. A great many things were bad, breaking down, giving up, or 'giving cause for alarm', as the newscasts might put it. (Lessing 1976, 7 and 8–9)

Apart from the convincing report of the survivor's surroundings, the shared and often understated anxiety, the life on the streets as well as the interior of her flat, the detailed and elaborate description also includes what emerges as a fantastical layer of the narrative. The realist and naturalist mode is only partly subverted when the protagonist-narrator starts to experience a reality behind the wall of her flat, a parallel world that turns into a psychological voyage towards a half-known, intimate past and a possible future – this dream, hallucination, or deep-buried memory, whatever we name it, becomes increasingly vivid with acute details and gripping images. The reality beyond the wall, which coexists with the surrounding chaos and to which the narrator keeps returning, further branches out into two layers: the 'personal,' characterized by the restrictive indoors and suffocating atmosphere of an unhappy childhood, and the 'impersonal,' set in a more spacious and airy although messy space, which will eventually, in the final transforming vision, become an exuberant and beautiful garden. In the reality within the walls of her ordinary life, however, the narrator is suddenly left in charge of a teenage girl named Emily, accompanied by her unusual pet Hugo. It soon becomes evident that the 'personal' dimension of the life behind the wall is, in fact, Emily's early childhood, highly oppressive in its excessively pedantic upbringing and that, furthermore, Emily is the narrator's own alter-ego, a young version of herself. The trips into the parallel world thus grow into a sort of highly empathetic investigation of the reasons why the girl became what she is: solitary and serious, obedient but untrusting, eager to please but shut within herself, capable yet deeply insecure, like a prisoner. The narrator watches her grow and turn into a young woman, falling in love, suffering, overcoming many challenges in the 'real' social world of the collapsing civilization. Her observations on Emily's (*her own*) psychological, social, sexual, and physical development contain Lessing's well-known feminist awareness of the traditional ambivalences of women's role in a male-dominated world. However, a more general contemplation of human suffering within the confinements of the given roles is also in focus here. Through the depiction of a breakdown of a society in which many familiar norms eroded, and alternating this depiction with the descriptions of the mental and emotional voyages beyond the wall, Lessing outlines a story and a history of anxiety and isolation, personal as well as communal, but also one of liberation. In the final pages of the novel, the wall opens up for all the characters: the narrator and Emily, Hugo and Gerald (Emily's boyfriend), and all the little children of Gerald's gang are led by a benevolent and omnipotent female figure; what previously figured as an escapist fantasy or a symbolic dream, a painful hallucination

or a veiled memory, gains the clarity of an allegorical meaning. As Guido Kuns puts it, although Lessing often forecasts “madness as the inevitable, or indeed as the only appropriate mode of existence in our kind of world,” she also “always presents the transcendence of disaster and madness” (Kuns 1980, 79). The exit from the confinements of the collapsing world into a vision of freedom and solidarity is infused with pantheistic and optimistic overtones. In the light of the novel’s closing vision, which merges the realist and fantastical layers of the novel, the entire story of the numerous journeys behind the wall and, in particular, the reversibility of these journeys and their intertwinement with the ‘regular’ and the ‘ordinary’ existence on a daily basis, suggests that there is a strong association between mental boundaries and existential limits.

Many readings of Lessing’s increasing shift from realism to the realms of fantasy have taken an ideological stance. Whereas some readers have deplored its socially futile escapism, others praised its potential to provide a healing and liberating vision that breaks the socio-realist limits which tend to define, condition, and narrow human perspectives. Draine mentions some of these opposite views, joining the long line of critics who consider the readers’ response to the question of the effect and effectiveness of the fantastic, allegorical literature as irrelevant. She states:

The debate on the essentially ideological grounds both represents and provokes an automatic response: either ‘I believe in the rational approach to experience and therefore condemn the mystical fantasy of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*’ or ‘I agree with Lessing that the world has extra dimensions open only to intuition, dream and fantasy, and thus I hail the mind-stretching vision in *The Memoirs*.’ The critic’s response is to transcend such initial personal responses to the themes in the act of exploring how the novel itself operates [...]. (Draine 1979, 52)³

On the other hand, some of the more recent readings have celebrated precisely the therapeutic potential of the theme itself, focusing on Lessing’s use of the Sufi idea of the necessary equilibrium between rational and intuitive faculties and intellectual and spiritual modes of existence (Fahim 1994). Complementary to this, the visionary excursions have been interpreted in the light of their power to heal trauma and break the bondage of rigid thinking that can cause personal and societal disaster (Lin 2019). Furthermore, as several authors have noticed, Lessing’s turn towards fantasy and speculative fiction is closely related to her constant concern with the questions of “scale” and “human evolution” (Hanson 2016; Sergeant 2016). The debate is, in effect, as old as art (and theory of art) itself. Is what we call fantastic literature – *a hole in the wall*, to use the visual and metaphoric image introduced in *Memoirs* – an

³ Published in the late 1970s, it is no surprise that Draine’s article draws heavily on the still strong and highly relevant premises of Formalism and Structuralism, with their respective insistence on the text’s autonomy and its self-contained structures.

illusionary and, eventually, a delusionary escape into an unsubstantial world, basically unrelatable to the immediate social reality, or is it an invigorating esthetic and critical flight which can provide tools for interrogating and possibly changing the world as we know it? Can textual acknowledgment of an alternative reality be an invitation to an emancipatory journey, with all the risks and promises contained in its potential to deconstruct and transform readers' usual assumptions and habits of perceiving, expressing, and experiencing the extra-textual world as well?

In his lucid study of the poetics of postmodernism, Brian McHale suggests that all forms of textual play with borders – and fantasy genres are always that, more or less self-consciously – foreground ontological questions and subvert usual dichotomies such as world-text, real-imaginary, life-death. One of the numerous ways they achieve this thrilling or disorienting effect is by means of constructing a 'zone' – a heterotopian space that can be either a world-within-a-world or a world parallel to 'this' (mimetically depicted) world, different and independent but in some senses connected, which is exactly what we find in *Memoirs*. The *zone* in this novel is created by typically postmodernist and deconstructionist devices: by “*juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition and misattribution*” (McHale 2004, 45; original emphasis). The space behind the kitchen wall sometimes appears as a comforting opposition to and sometimes as a reflection of the collapsing reality outside the narrator's flat. Several critics have already stressed the usual pattern of Lessing's fictional works which trace the progression from external to internal chaos and disintegration, in which the external is eventually viewed mostly as a mirror image of the internal (Cederstrom 1980, 117; Jost 1987, 45–66), focusing mostly on the psychological potentials of the imaginative journeys and the exploration of one's private memory. Yet, there is a wider social and cultural significance detectable in the investigations of *other* spaces, particularly if they exist as an integral part of the immediately observable one, and a dystopian one at that. Drawing on the distinction between “classical dystopias” and more topical forms of the so-called “critical dystopias,” both Moylan (2000, 2014) and Seyferth (2018) underline the inherent ambivalence and, hence, hopeful aspects of the latter. Even though Seyferth does not mention Lessing's fiction in his analysis of the representative critical dystopian novels of the 1970s, it is obvious that *Memoirs* fits into this category (and not only chronologically) in which dystopian characteristics are less gloomy and more speculative than in the admonitory classical dystopias. They subtly affirm an utopian idea, a dream, and not “a blueprint to be carried out” (Seyferth 2018, 2). As Mohr, also drawing on Moylan's distinctions, pointed out, these new utopian dystopias preserve “a less fixed, non-normative content” (Mohr 2007, 9), promoting heterogeneity and ambiguity. They, in fact, contain a utopian space – a *zone*, to use McHale's term,

or an *enclave*, to use Moylan's – not as a uniform background concept, but as a very part of the dystopian setting: a dynamic and fluid counter-site contained within the realistic and obviously dystopian site. Indeed, what we see in *Memoirs* is

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in a time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (Moylan 2000, 195)

In *Memoirs*, the utopian enclave is represented not only in the final vision of the Eden-like garden into which the main characters enter crossing their habitual spaces and multiple deprivations imposed on them. It is also identifiable on 'this side of the walls,' inside the realistic dimension of the narrative, for example, in the narrator's care for Emily,⁴ in Emily's and Gerald's care of the homeless and unruly children and, in particular, in their little 'household' that, although temporary offers a promising example of the value of sharing, of the importance of returning to nature and craftsmanship. In the middle of an urban collapse of a developed civilization, this community is an optimistic enclave that thrives as an environment-friendly small-scale economy in which every part contributes to the well-being of the whole. Everyone has a task to perform and they perform it gladly, establishing the values of togetherness, resourcefulness, honesty, and basic solidarity.

Solidarity is, in effect, one of the two fundamental concepts which Lessing's novel states in its ambiguously utopian under-text; the other one is *spirituality*, understood as a neglected human capacity to see alternatives and open up to intuition and imaginative projection into other dimensions of life, the other 'zones' of existence. The narrator describes the act of crossing the wall as a gradual realization, as a growing, as an "opening into comprehension" (Lessing 1976, 10). Narrative introduction of the other reality coincides with the description of the narrator's incipient and developing awareness of it. The question "how do we get to know a change – any sort of change and *really* know it – unless we become part of it?" emerges as a central one for the reading of Lessing's novel of 'transition' into another world, especially since this change is seen as a challenging sociological phenomenon with deeper epistemological and, in fact, ontological implications. As sociologist Erving Goffman asserted in analyzing the

⁴ She first considers her own duty of taking care of Emily as a burden, as a "nuisance," but soon realizes how irresponsible that feeling is and accepts full-heartedly her role as a guardian. Cf. Lessing (1976, 24 and 25).

individual and societal responses to the “astounding events” in our culture, such as the ‘it’ in Lessing’s novel, our first reaction to extraordinary times is to try to explain them by employing familiar systems of beliefs and traditional cosmologies. If they do not seem to work, we wait for a natural or social discovery that would provide an explanation and a solution to the “mystery.”⁵ One of the most prominent features of our technologically and scientifically advanced civilization has been to “tolerate the unexplained but not the inexplicable” (Goffman 1986, 30). What texts such as *Memoirs* seem to tell us is that a time comes when it is necessary to develop a certain degree of tolerance to the “inexplicable” and, moreover, to embrace it as a new space for rethinking and re-explaining of the explained.

Of course, as it has already been noticed, the novel can be interpreted as a sharp criticism of an increasingly materialistic civilization and man’s overstated reliance on conventions, rules, and the “cold eye of rationalism” (Kuns 1980, 82) and, hence, the affirmation of spirituality can be ascribed to Lessing’s growing adherence to the Sufi teachings.⁶ Still, the mystical symbolism in the final pages of the novel bears a wider message that transcendence of the immediate contexts, even though essentially an individual act, is profoundly connected to the faculties of empathy and solidarity towards others, other perspectives and other, diverse and alternative modes of being. Since utopia, etymologically speaking, is *no-place*, it is only consistent that it should not propose a fixed solution and “a finished ‘product’” (Mohr 2007, 9), but an imaginative possibility, a voyage, mapping not a solid and rigidly defined space, but directions – always plural and manifold, in order to prevent monolithic and totalitarian aspects inherent to classical utopias. That is why *Memoirs* can be categorized as a borderline form straddling post-apocalyptic and postmodern utopian text: Lessing’s narrator-survivor’s fantasy journeys display the walls as something terrifying but also permeable, unstable, inviting us to consider the same possibilities for the walls of our own various contemporary confinements. It contains hope as an underlining element of all truly critical dystopian narratives, since its hybridist narrative modes are valuable in a way that transcends the traditional realism versus fantasy debates, inviting the readers to think out of the box and affirming multiplicity and play with borders. As Moylan has it, such texts

teach their readers not only about the world around them but also about the open-ended ways in which texts such as the ones in front of their eyes can both elucidate that world and help to develop the critical capacity of people to know, challenge, and change those aspects of it that deny or inhibit the further emancipation of humanity. (Moylan 2000, 199)

5 Cf. Goffman (1986, 28–9).

6 Cf. Hardin (1973) and Fahim (1994).

3 The 'It': Alienation of the 'Real' and the Reality of Alienation

Even though the question of alienation is one of the topical issues Lessing foregrounded in many of her texts, *Memoirs* in particular can be described as a case study of forced adaptability, lending itself easily to different philosophical and sociological perspectives. There is a striking phenomenological connection between the dystopian discourse, presented both realistically and symbolically in *Memoirs*, and the theories proposed by Jean Baudrillard. The walls in Lessing's narrative can be compared to the deceptively wide but, in effect, terrifyingly limited world of simulacra in Baudrillard's sense,⁷ and their dissolution can be justifiably understood here as an attempt to bring the alienated human, forcefully and painfully as the process may be, into awakening. The process inevitably includes the shattering of proprietary illusion rooted in the tradition of capitalist society and even more than that: it suggests a deconstruction of conventionalized notions of birth and death which also became, in the contemporary network of simulacra, alienated from humankind. Apocalyptically mapping the boundaries of people's astonishment, or a lack of it, while they face their own possible and probable disappearance, Lessing also points to a looming and hopeful possibility of compensating the technological civilization and its language of cold reason with more humane and wholesome realities: precisely those realities that had been continually marginalized by the technological mindset to which modern civilization has granted prevalence.

The 'it' in *Memoirs* is a great mystery which, despite several attempts to define it by the narrator, remains unidentified. She starts to explain it at more than one occasion, such as: "I think this is the right place to say something more about 'it'" (Lessing 1976, 135), only to defer it all over again, as general reflections on the human condition take over, as well as digressions into personal experience as she accommodates the still vague 'it' into her own daily life with Emily. The 'it' is, at first, conceived as something that comes from the outside world of collapsing society. It is what Goffman called, as cited above, an "astounding event," a crisis: a frame-breaking incident which leads to confusion and an erosion of norms, something exceptional that challenges conventions and even civilized behavior, potentially leading to savagery and environmental disaster. This radical change in the regular course of lives is first reflected in a material, technological, and also ecological breakdown, but then, as can be expected, in a psycho-social reaction to it. The 'it' becomes internalized, an interior as much as an exterior phenomenon, private as

7 Cf. Baudrillard (1994).

much as public, both a secret and a reality. The ‘it’ imposes isolation, despite the fact that it is a general experience. It is an unspecified but all-pervading reason why everyone is advised to stay home, shut in their personal spaces, which is exactly what enables the narrator to start her other-world excursions and her explorations of memory.

The metaphor of the room surrounded by recognizable walls, or the *zone*, to use McHale’s term again (but now denoting a realistic and empirically familiar ontological level), contains an idea of internal obedience to the given limits and their acceptance. This internalized control, along with delusional ‘privacy,’ driven by fear as much as by indifference towards the idea of critically contemplating its nature, is a result of an alienated existence in which the deviations from normality are simply ignored:

And as for the public, the outer world, it had been a long time since that offered the normal. [...] While everything, all forms of social organization, broke up, we lived on, adjusting our lives, as if nothing fundamental was happening. It was amazing how determined, how stubborn, how self-renewing, were the attempts to lead an ordinary life. (Lessing 1976, 19–20)

While assuming how “we can get used to anything at all” and how there is nothing whatsoever “that people won’t try to accommodate into ‘ordinary life’” (*ibid.*, 20), Lessing’s narrator foregrounds the question of alienation: not only in the social, cultural, and psychological sense of estrangement from other people but in the profoundly existential terms of alienation from the fundamental categories of life and death. Baudrillard, in his famous and controversial *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), convincingly shows how manifestations of death’s reflection upon life have been drastically reduced over time, which, of course, parallels the different ways in which the mystery of death has been conceived, framed, and responded to in various periods. In the era of an aggressive capitalist system, death became reified: an equivalent to a loss in labour market, a deficiency in daily production. Also, it is excluded, banned from every-day discourse as a dangerous ambiguity and an unsolvable secret, a sort of redundancy. Baudrillard argues that

[w]e speak less and less of the dead, we cut ourselves short and fall silent: death is discredited. End of a solemn and detailed ‘death in the family’: we die in hospital, death has become extraterritorial. The dying lose their rights, including the right to know when they are going to die [...] No more vertigo of death, only dereliction [désaffecté]. And the immense funeral cortège is no longer of pious order, it is the sign of dereliction itself, of the consumption of death. In consequence, it grows in proportion to the disinvestment of death. (Baudrillard 2017, 290)

In the world of Lessing’s text, where the critical and crucial ‘it’ became a “*game we were all agreeing to play*” (Lessing 1976, 21; original emphasis), a specific existential

framework is created in which the phenomenon of death has lost its sacral dimension, normally expressed in the rites of mutuality and rituals of compassion. It has been “adapted to” and reduced to a “silent death” in Baudrillard’s sense, inarticulate and monitored perhaps in laboratories and hospitals, where “being cured is just an alibi for banning speech” (Baudrillard 2017, 290–1). Connecting the logic of capitalism with the alienation of death, as well as with the death of alienation, since the suppression of death as an occasion for symbolic social exchange creates suppressive and alienated societies, Baudrillard stresses the opposition that exists between the capitalist principle of linearity and accumulation (of money, of products, of information, of time) on the one hand and the dissolving, non-linear, and unpredictable forces associated with death on the other. As in the gift-exchange rituals that were so important for ‘primitive’ communities, there is an inter-changeability, a two-way communication that is inherent to the experience of death too (in thinking about one’s own death, in the anxiety surrounding it, in the context of loss due to the death of close persons, etc.), quite unlike the calculated one-way principle of capitalism. It is important to mention that Baudrillard does not regard death in merely literal terms, as an end to physical existence, a perishing of the body, but also in the wider and symbolic sense of an ending of existing relations, the decomposition of the established system, a far-reaching change, a significant transformation. Lessing’s narrator-survivor is aware of this significance, having gone through the transformation herself: when she finally crosses over into the dimension beyond her kitchen wall at the end of the novel, her narrative and ontological status is changed – her retrospective narration takes the form of a memory of her task to learn this change, her memoirs are a testimony of the task completed. Furthermore, she is aware of the repetitive quality of this fundamental category that frames, determines, sets in motion, and always paradoxically eludes human existence when she asks:

But is it possible to write an account of anything at all without ‘it’ – in some shape or another – being the main theme? Perhaps, indeed, ‘it’ is a secret theme of all literature and history, like writing in invisible ink between the lines, which springs up, sharply black, dimming the old print we knew so well, as life, personal or public, unfolds unexpectedly and we see something where we never thought we could – we see ‘it’ as the ground-swell of events, experience [...] Very well then, but what was it? (Lessing 1976, 136; original emphasis)

Trying to come close to a kind of answer, she slips into questioning the very authenticity of the experience of ‘ending,’ asserting that it has been like that many times before, always, in fact:

I am sure that ever since there were men on earth ‘it’ has been talked of precisely in this way in times of crisis, since it is in crisis ‘it’ becomes visible, and our conceit sinks before its force. For ‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the form of earthquake. (*ibid.*)

In the periods of crisis of the existing structures, the 'it' is brought forth again, drawn from the temporarily marginalized and de-socialized position into the focus of contemplation; it is re-evoked from the silence and "disinvestment" of which Baudrillard speaks. The very repetitiveness of 'it,' of death in its various forms, contains a germ of relief. When the narrator-survivor in the novel states that "It', perhaps – on this occasion in history – was above all a consciousness of something ending" (*ibid.*), she actually articulates a well recognizable doubt: can we really state that we are living in an authentic world and, hence, can we truly claim the authenticity of its breakdown, of its apocalyptic ending? Are we not surviving merely one of the numerous copies of disaster? The answer to this question could be unmistakably liberating, as it is a call for re-thinking the actual and the imaginary, the real and the symbolic, and the interactive spaces between them. As Baudrillard writes, "life, like everything else, is a crime if it survives unilaterally [...]," since it should be an act of social exchange and "*a social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary" (Baudrillard 2017, 222; original emphasis).

In *Memoirs*, the examples of multilateral acts of social exchange, framed by the realist dystopian setting which is in turn framed by a fantastical utopian ending, are celebrated as an alternative path towards a meaningful resolution of the real. Narratively, this multiple framing is realized in the form that Brian McHale calls a "posthumous discourse" or a voice "from beyond the grave" (McHale 2004, 230), since the ontological status of the narrator is, to say the least, ambiguous. For, on the one hand, she obviously survived to narrate her experience, while on the other, she has certainly reached a different status and consciousness from the one she had as a character in the narrated events. All memoirs represent, in a way, a narrative testimony of survival, but in Lessing's novel the ontological dialogue between different, apparently remote but in fact co-existent worlds is intensified by challenging the borders between psychological and social realism. These memoirs, as well as *Memoirs*, are a self-conscious fantasy in which the 'it' that triggers it, and which deliberately remains unspecified, can stand for external and internal motivations, but is, in all cases, a fundamental and defining existential phenomenon. The narrator's retrospective contemplation of 'it,' which includes both hindsight as well as the immediately lived experience, both the survival itself and the modes of putting it into a story, invites us to consider the walls delineated by 'it' as something that can be crossed over, or crossed through, as the novel's closure shows it is precisely that position from which she narrates. This method classifies *Memoirs* as a self-conscious postmodernist text which, in addition to that, performs one of the most serious functions of postmodern fantasies: it foregrounds the ontological play with the

borders and walls of the ‘Real,’ imaginatively preparing us, as Brian McHale suggests, for the one border we shall all certainly have to cross.⁸

4 Conclusion, or *Ex-it*

The central metaphorical image of the novel and the one that unites the crucial thematic and ideological concepts of solidarity and spirituality, collaboration and higher awareness, is depicted in the narrator’s dream (or vision) of a tall room where people stand, first in an “idle and undecided” way (Lessing 1976, 72) and then starting to contribute to the process of bringing an intricately designed carpet to life (*ibid.*, 72–3). The carpet had obviously been ragged and colorless, lifeless and messy, but after a succession of individual contributions, carried out without competition, but in “only the soberest and most loving cooperation” (*ibid.*, 73), it reveals its beautiful pattern, glowing and perfectly matched. Regardless of her subsequent distancing from that room and that image, the memory of it remains in the narrator’s subconsciousness as a latent reminder of her task of recurrent mending, cleaning, rubbing, and reordering of the spaces on the other side of the wall. It is a private and a public call: the process of repeated tidying-up symbolically represents the necessity to revise our existing cultural forms and norms,⁹ including traditional dichotomies, particularly in times of crises and in the face of ‘astounding events.’ Lessing goes beyond the limits of the traditional forms of dystopia and (post)apocalyptic narrative; she constructs –realistically, not idealistically – utopian spaces, zones, or enclaves within the dystopian setting and she develops a mythological, allegorical, and fantastical narrative layer parallel to the realistic one, which frames and, eventually, dominates the narrative perspective and voice. In that manner, she creates what we can call a ‘hopeful postmodernist dystopia,’ since the textual play with narrative and ontological borders subtly points to the possibilities of extra-textual deconstruction of limits that tend to define and confine our individual and societal contexts.

Memoirs, in particular its final vision, embraces the idea that the individual must be connected to the collective in two different impulses: in the tendency to withdraw from the oppressive structures of civilization and in the need to reconstruct its order

⁸ McHale made a captivating proposition, quoting Gabriel Josipovic, which can be stated as an underlying notion of his entire study of the ontological dominant in postmodernist fiction, and that is that all narrative strategies that come close to “posthumous discourses” present its writers and readers alike with a sort of “dress-rehearsal for death” (McHale 2004, 231).

⁹ A similar interpretation is offered by Walker: “It is a vision of community loose and devoid of social roles but united though the human need and power to order, to find pattern, a meaning which transcends time” (Walker 1988, 112).

in bridging the distance between the alienated, yet fundamental categories of life. This is why hopeful and implicitly critical dystopian texts, such as *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, as we tried to suggest in this article, are relevant in contemporary contexts. The walls of isolation, whether they are constructed due to medical, social, political, technological, or ecological crises, or are ‘simply’ mental projections solidified through emotional pain, can be crossed over, transcended rather than escaped, through patient and hopeful examination of their alternatives.

As Lessing herself was aware, humanities and art can offer a valuable perspective on the walls our societies tend to build,¹⁰ for various reasons, and on the possible ways of decomposing those walls, of turning the threat of ‘it’ into a memorable experience, an ex ‘it,’ an exit from a dystopia and an entrance into an emancipatory space. This is one of the novels that, albeit written almost five decades ago, reflects many issues our civilization faces today, reminding us that the work on the beautiful, many-colored, intricate mosaic-like carpet we are all called to weave “must continue, would go on always” (Lessing 1976, 73).

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¹⁰ Her statement from *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* (1987) is worth considering here: “Writers comment on the human condition, talk about it continually. It is our subject. Literature is one of the most useful ways we have of achieving this ‘other eye,’ this detached manner of seeing ourselves; history is another” (Lessing 1987, 8).

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