The good parodist: beyond images of escape in the fiction of Doris lessing

Ridout, Alice Rachel

THE GOOD PARODIST: BEYOND IMAGES OF ESCAPE IN THE FICTION OF DORIS LESSING

ALICE RACHEL RIDOUT

M.A. BY THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

1997

ALICE RACHEL RIDOUT
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM M.A. BY THESIS, 1997

THE GOOD PARODIST:
BEYOND IMAGES OF ESCAPE IN THE FICTION OF DORIS LESSING

ABSTRACT

In her earlier fiction, Doris Lessing presents images of escape from what Cohen and Taylor term "everyday life". These images of escape, such as the vision of the "noble city, set four-square" in Martha Quest and Martha's plunge into the muddy veld pothole in A Proper Marriage, are framed by realism. In positing an escape from 'realism' (understood as both literary form and "everyday reality") they suggest the inadequacy of realism. However, the success of these images is limited as they attempt to posit an "outside", a project which postmodernism has taught us, is bound to fail.

Lessing increasingly replaces these images of escape with parody. Parody more fundamentally interrogates realism and allows Lessing to negotiate an escape whilst recognizing her implication in contemporary society. My model of parody takes its lead from Linda Hutcheon's consideration of "serious parody", as marking "the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique" (A Theory of Parody, 1985). This, I argue, is the intersection of Lessing's political and aesthetic projects.

Lessing's use of parody also provides her with a useful strategy for negotiating subjectivity. I argue that whilst she questions the liberal humanist self, she does not completely reject it. She is "post-humanist" rather than "anti-humanist".

Lessing's "space fiction" seems to signal a return to the project of positing an "outside" implied by her images of escape. However, I illustrate how her space fiction is equally subject to the problematic politics of parody. Just as parody "installs" a pre-existing text to "subvert" it, so space fiction "installs" the Earth in order to critique it.

The "dual-codedness" of parody is, I conclude, perfect for Lessing's multiple projects.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
'DEAR WRITER', 'DEAR STUDENT', 'DEAR POOH' 7

CHAPTER ONE
'IMAGES OF ESCAPE' 15
(Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage)

CHAPTER TWO
REHEARSALS FOR A PARODIC PERFORMANCE 36
"If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner." 36
(The Grass is Singing)
'Take two': cutting hair and gender 53
(The Summer Before the Dark)

CHAPTER THREE
"'WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BE INSTEAD?'": 64
COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

CHAPTER FOUR
LAING AND "ANTI-HUMANIST BULLYING" 93

CHAPTER FIVE
THE POSTMODERNITY OF THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK'S "MOMENT" 106
1962: "A crisis over representation" 106
"Why not, simply, the truth?" 110
The "battleground" 128
The Four-Gated City: 130
humanism, realism, metafiction and mothering
"Parody is a perfect postmodern form" 140

CHAPTER SIX
PARODY AS A STRATEGY OF ESCAPE 145
"Her own flat" 145
"'Communist Cloud-Cuckoo Spit'" 156
Saying "something about the conventional novel" 166

CHAPTER SEVEN
BEYOND PARODY? 169
"Writing beyond the ending" 170
"Inner logic" 175
The politics of space fiction 189

CHAPTER EIGHT
"PARODY REGAINED?" 196

CONCLUSION
PARODY AND TOTALITARIANISM 214

BIBLIOGRAPHY 224

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Pat Waugh for being so inspiring and helpful throughout my student years at the University of Durham. It was on her 'Post-war Fiction' course in my second year as an undergraduate that I first read Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, and the rest, as they say, is history!

I would also like to thank my parents for, quite simply, everything - from financial support to cups of tea, from proof reading to simply being at the other end of a telephone! Thanks are also due to my sister for reminding me of the subversive nature of laughter when I needed it most. "The gang" at Fonteyn Court certainly helped with this! For supporting me throughout what proved to be pretty tough undergraduate years, I would also like to thank Daniel Hayden whose influence on my work is, *indeed*, still evident! Thanks, also, to Kevin Capuder for my title - 'The Good Parodist'!

Finally thanks are due to the British Academy for the studentship which enabled me to do this Masters, and to Diana Collecott, Palacky University and the British Council for the opportunity to lecture in the Czech Republic.

In Memoriam
Charles Harry Valentin
1974 - 1993

"Like every other writer I get letters all the time from young people who are about to write theses and essays about my books [...] They all say: 'Please give me a list of the articles about your work, the critics who have written about you, the authorities.' [...]

These requests I answer as follows: 'Dear Student. You are mad. Why spend months and years writing thousands of words about one book, or even one writer, when there are hundreds of books waiting to be read. You don't see that you are the victim of a pernicious system. And if you have yourself chosen my work as your subject, and if you do have to write a thesis - and believe me I am very grateful that what I've written is being found useful by you - then why don't you read what I have written and make up your own mind about what you think, testing it against your own life, your own experience. Never mind about Professors White and Black.'

'Dear Writer' - they reply. 'But I have to know what the authorities say, because if I don't quote them, my professor won't give me any marks.'"

Doris Lessing
'Preface' to The Golden Notebook

"Pooh began to feel a little more comfortable, because when you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it."

A.A. Milne
Winnie-the-Pooh

INTRODUCTION:

'DEAR WRITER', 'DEAR STUDENT', 'DEAR POOH'

> It may seem rather surprising to you (a reader whom I shall presently identify) to open a book on literary theory and be confronted with an account of adultery.[1]

This comment of Pearce's is one I would like to take as a starting point for a brief explanation of my choice of opening quotations. For, if to start "a book on literary theory" "with an account of adultery" is "rather surprising", to commence a thesis on Doris Lessing with a quotation from Lessing to the effect that I am "mad", must seem absurd. However, it shows me using the strategy Lessing upholds for dealing with the 'postmodern condition'.

Lessing's strategy finds its ideal embodiment in Mathlong, the African black leader who Marion wants to write to, in order to comfort him in his political imprisonment:

> He was the man who performed actions, played roles, that he believed to be necessary for the good of others, even while he preserved an ironic doubt about the results of his actions.[2]

I am not suggesting that this thesis is "for the good of others", but I certainly preserve "an ironic doubt about the results"! However, the parallels I would like to identify are, first, between Mathlong's self-conscious role playing and my self-conscious awareness of the position from which I write (the 'student' identified by Lessing). The second parallel is between Mathlong's investment in those roles "even while he preserved an

---

1. Lynne Pearce, Reading Dialogics (Interrogating Texts Ser. London: Arnold, 1994) p.1.

2. Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook (1962. Preface, Doris Lessing. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993) p.520.

ironic doubt", and my use of postmodern theories, whilst retaining "ironic doubt" about "the results" of this borrowing because of the incompatibility of both feminist politics and Lessing's privileging of "experience", with postmodernism's "strong thesis" of the multiple "Deaths of the Subject, History and Metaphysics".[3]

In my conclusion I make a gesture towards overcoming these problems of my situatedness, and the incompatibility of politics and "experience" with a "strong thesis" of postmodernism, by recontextualizing Lessing's fiction and the theory of parody. In this conclusion, I attempt Lessing's challenge of "testing it against your own life, your own experience".

Winnie-the-Pooh's comment "that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it", points, both to the important theme of 'representation' in this thesis, and also to the development of this thesis. Pearce's promise to "presently identify" her reader, is relevant here as I would identify my reader as a fellow "victim of a pernicious system", according to Lessing. Within this system there is a certain tradition of the 'one-author-study'. Partly because of Lessing's own discouragement (quoted above), this project, when it was "a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside" me, was to be a study of several novels by *different* authors. In fact, I had the idea of an "image of escape" when reading Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark. The "image of escape" which dominates this novel is Panther Canon, "one of those abrupt fissures with which the earth in the

---

3. Benhabib argues in her book, Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), that what she calls the "strong thesis" of postmodernism, is "incompatible with and in fact renders incoherent feminism as a theoretical articulation of a struggling social movement" (p.210-11). I return to Benhabib's argument later (see below, p.101).

Southwest is riddled".[4] In this canon, "The Ancient People" had lived and Thea identifies with the "Cliff-Dweller" women who would make "graceful jars"[5] to carry the water in. This "understanding of those old people came up to her out of the rock-shelf on which she lay":

> They were not expressible in words, but seemed rather to translate themselves into attitudes of body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation ...[6]

Thea understands that this physical experience feeds her creative powers:

> She had not been singing much, but she knew that her voice was more interesting than it had ever been before. She had begun to understand that - with her, at least - voice was, first of all vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood.[7]

This "image of escape" which so celebrates the physical and, particularly, the female body, reminded me strongly of Martha's plunge into the mud in A Proper Marriage. The "ceremonial gravity" of Thea's daily bath in Panther Canon, is echoed in Martha abandoning herself to "the warm rocking of the water" in the "pothole" of "heavy mud".[8] Just as Thea, through her singing, identified with the "Cliff-Dweller" women because of their artistic pottery, so Martha notices that "in the jelly spawn were tiny dark dots of life" because "she felt the crouching infant, still moving tentatively"[9] in

---

4. Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (1915. London: Virago, 1982) p.369.

5. Cather, The Song of the Lark, op.cit., p.377.

6. Cather, The Song of the Lark, op.cit., p.376.

7. ibid., p.381.

8. Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage (Children of Violence 2 1954. London: Paladin-Collins, 1990) p.177.

9. Cather, The Song of the Lark, op.cit., p.178.

her own stomach. As illustrated in the above quotation, Thea feels confident about her singing because of her experiences in Panther Canon. Similarly, Martha and Alice feel "free and comfortable in their minds, their bodies felt relaxed and tired"[10] following their plunge into the mud. Lying in her bath afterwards, Martha "traced the purple stretch marks with one finger, and felt something like satisfaction mingled with half-humorous appreciation of the ironies of her position".[11] Like Thea, Martha is lead to "satisfaction" with female creativity by her experience of this "image of escape".

This parallel encouraged me to identify further images of escape in Lessing's Children of Violence series, for example, the loft Martha shares with Thomas in Landlocked.[12] Another obvious example is Martha's vision of "a noble city, set foursquare" in Martha Quest.[13] Martha's "noble city" shares a further similarity with Thea's Panther Canon, because these images of escape survive as suppressed subtexts until they re-emerge at the conclusion of the novel or series. Thus, Martha's "noble city" returns as Mark's ideal "city in the desert"[14] at the end of The Four-Gated City, and Panther Canon triumphs at the end of The Song of the Lark as the source of Thea's ideas for her successful singing performances:

---

10. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.179.

11. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.180.

12. Doris Lessing, Landlocked (Children of Violence 4 1965. St Albans: Panther-Granada, 1967) p.102-3 and p.123.

13. Doris Lessing, Martha Quest (Children of Violence 1 1952. St Albans: Panther-Granada, 1966) p.17.

14. Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City (Children of Violence 5 1969. London: Panther-Granada, 1972) p.596-8.

> 'You're as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canon. Didn't you get some of your ideas down there?'
> She nodded. 'Oh, yes! [...] I don't know if I'd ever have got anywhere without Panther Canon.'[15]

However, the suppression of these images of escape, despite the importance allotted them by these conclusions, points to a problem.

After her experience of Panther Canon, Thea is nearly trapped into marrying the very man who organized that experience, the already married Fred Ottenburg. Martha of A Proper Marriage, returns from the mud "pothole" to her role as wife, and Martha of Martha Quest is still stuck in her parents' mud hut despite her vision of an ideal city. These images of escape are, therefore, contained by "everyday life"[16] expressed, usually, by 'realism', which, in the words of Patricia Waugh, "presents history as linear chronology, presents characters in the terms of liberal humanism, allows for the possibility of free will and responsible moral choice".[17] (Waugh's definition emphasizes that, whilst I am referring to a literary form by using the term 'realism', it is a form which upholds a certain ideology, one which Lessing seeks to escape.) These images of escape, whilst providing some temporary release, are not, I would argue, one of the most successful "strategies,

---

15. Cather, The Song of the Lark, op.cit., p.554.

16. This is a phrase used by Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life (1976. Rev. ed. "Introduction to the Second Edition: Life After Postmodernism." London: Routledge, 1992).

17. Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1984) p.128. This definition is also quoted below in the sub-section entitled "The Four-Gated City: Humanism, Realism, Metafiction and Mothering" of Chapter Five, where I discuss Lessing's interrogation of realism within the framework of Waugh's Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.

tactics and plans for escaping and resisting reality, the reality we refer to is that of contemporary Western society".[18] You cannot live "everyday life" in a "pothole"!

Having discovered the impulse or need to "escape" expressed by these images, I then searched for "escape attempts" which *did* engage with "everyday life", rather than attempted to posit an 'outside' like Panther Canon, the ideal city or a mud pothole. Tracing this notion of "escape" through Lessing's work, several things emerged. One, was the *importance of escaping* for Lessing, whether from the novel tradition she had inherited, from the "everyday life" identified by Cohen and Taylor, from the political identities available to her (particularly that of 'Communist') or from her situatedness as a white expatriate. These "escape attempts" were expressed in her novels through images of escape, parody, "inner space fiction" and science fiction. Another thing which emerged, was the dual importance of *parody* to Lessing's attempts to resist both 'realism' and "everyday life" in a liberal humanist society which privileged its white, male and married members. Parody can function as a mode of resistance to both formal 'realism', and to the identities or "life scripts" made available by society. This is the dual function of 'Free Women' in The Golden Notebook. Thus, Lessing increasingly emerged as the exemplary figure for this study. She traces the very move from images of escape to parody which I wanted to examine. Furthermore, she seems to be "plugged" into "a collective unconscious" which allows her to anticipate social or intellectual movements, as Dean suggests in his interview with her:

> You anticipated Women's Lib. You anticipated, I suppose, a new school of psychoanalysis, the Laing school; I suppose you'd call it, the divided self.

---

18. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.43.

> And you in a sense anticipated a move towards the mystical.[19]

More importantly, from my perspective, The Golden Notebook demonstrated the need to work *within* conventions in order to subvert them, and it problematized our access to 'history', five years before postmodernism announced with Derrida, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte".[20]

My definition of parody would probably be attacked by a critic like Rose, for running "the dual risks of reducing parody to meta-fiction at the expense of acknowledging the other traditionally defining characteristics of parody such as its comic structure and effect, and (after having eliminated the comic from parody) of even suggesting that all meta-fiction is parody".[21] However, Rose also identifies that "the peculiar 'dual-codedness' of parody allows it to renew and present that which it is parodying".[22] Agreeing with Hutcheon, that "we must broaden the concept of parody to fit the needs of the art of our century",[23] it is this "peculiar 'dual-codedness'" I have focused upon. It allows Lessing "to renew and present that which [she] is parodying" from 'realism' to 'history', from Communism to mothering.

---

19. Doris Lessing, Putting the Questions Differently: Interviews with Doris Lessing, 1964-1994 (Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll, 1994. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1996) p.92.

20. "There is no outside-text." Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Hopkins UP, 1976) p.158. The English translation of this statement was, of course, later.

21. Margaret A. Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern (Literature, Culture, Theory 5, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) p.94-5.

22. Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern, op.cit., p.153.

23. Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms (London: Routledge, 1985) p.11.

When this was "a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside" me, therefore, this shift from images of escape to the 'dual-codedness' of parody was to be the framework through which I would read several authors. The time and space constraints of an MA, however, pointed to the benefits of working out my model of parody through one exemplary author. Lessing was, for all the above reasons, an obvious choice. The initial plan is, however, still evident in the structure of this thesis. I privilege the theoretical, over the chronological, relations between the texts. The chapters of this thesis are organized along the continuum I have identified. I start with Lessing's attempts to reach an 'outside' through images or moments of escape, and work towards Lessing's acceptance of implication and the resulting strategic use of parody. Her "inner space" and science fiction interestingly disrupt this progression. This emphasis on my theoretical framework renders it inevitable that, whilst novels which are particularly illustrative of this theory of parody are given a great deal of attention (The Golden Notebook), others are relatively neglected (Landlocked, The Fifth Child, the science fiction series, The Diaries of Jane Somers etc.). Similarly, books on literary theory, gain more attention than secondary criticism on individual texts by Lessing.

I should like to conclude this introduction by noting that Lessing's comments concerning "young people who are about to write theses and essays about my books", did, indeed, make me feel like "a Bear of Very Little Brain"! I have yet to write my 'Dear Writer' letter to her.

CHAPTER ONE

'IMAGES OF ESCAPE'
(MARTHA QUEST AND A PROPER MARRIAGE)

> "She looked away over the ploughed land, across the veld to the Dumfries Hills, and refashioned that unused country to the scale of her imagination. There arose, glimmering whitely over the harsh scrub and the stunted trees, a noble city, set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces."[24]

> "For if she remained in the colony when she had wanted to leave it, got married when she wanted to be free and adventurous, always did the contrary to what she wanted most, it followed that there was no reason why at fifty she should not be just such another woman as Mrs Quest, narrow, conventional, intolerant, insensitive."[25]

Lessing's Children of Violence series is central to an understanding of her work and life. Written over seventeen years, from 1952 to 1969, it not only charts but enacts her changes in perspective and writing strategies. That the Doris Lessing who wrote Martha Quest in 1952 is a very different person from the Lessing who wrote The Four-Gated City in 1969 is, I believe, partly due to the experience she gained from the actual writing of the Children of Violence and The Golden

---

24. Doris Lessing, Martha Quest (Children of Violence 1 1952. St Albans: Panther-Granada, 1966) p.17. In Chapter One, this novel will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

25. Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage (Children of Violence 2 1954. London: Paladin-Collins, 1990) p.50.

Notebook. In the 1971 Preface to The Golden Notebook, Lessing herself admits:

> I was so immersed in writing this book, that I didn't think about how it might be received. I was involved not merely because it was hard to write [...] but because of *what I was learning as I wrote.* [...] The *actual time of writing,* then, and not only the experiences that had gone into the writing, was really traumatic: *it changed me.*[26]

Written between volumes three and four of the Children of Violence, The Golden Notebook is often said by critics to fracture the unity of the series.

It is certainly the case that Lessing did not write the series from a single narrative position. Therefore, the retrospective voice is not a stable one. Margaret Scanlan has argued that the series lacks unity because of these shifts in perspective which are not unified by an interest in "memory as theme and as novelistic device".[27] Scanlan suggests that The Four-Gated City would be more satisfying as a separate novel rather than as the final volume of Children of Violence. The genre of the series novel leads us to search for references back to Martha's past. Instead:

> The many radical shifts - in place, time scale, cast of characters, style - are not balanced by the depiction of an internally consistent "historical" Martha Quest; instead we have an almost amnesiac character who usually forges on unencumbered by memory.[28]

---

26. Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook (1962. Preface. Doris Lessing, London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993) p.10 (my emphasis).

27. Margaret Scanlan, "Memory and Continuity in the Series Novel: The Example of *Children of Violence*" (Modern Fiction Studies 26 1980) p.75-85.

28. Scanlan, "Memory and Continuity in the Series Novel: The Example of *Children of Violence*", op.cit., p.85.

Rather than take up the debate concerning the unity of Children of Violence, I want to explore what Lessing was "learning as [she] wrote". I will consider the reasons why Lessing found "many radical shifts" necessary for expressing her changing outlook. As she states in a "Note from the Author" at the end of Schlueter's edited collection of her essays and interviews entitled A Small Personal Voice:

> I have changed my mind about politics since I wrote these essays.[29]

Reading Lessing as she asked The Golden Notebook to be read - for the "wordless statement" of "the way it was shaped"[30] - I hope to trace her "[changes of] mind about politics" through the forms of the novels.

The Children of Violence series is exemplary of many strategies critics have identified as "feminist". Lessing's resistance to that label is a problem and contradiction for feminist critics, as Nancy Walker identifies:

> Both Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing have rejected even the label of feminist, even though Atwood's Surfacing and The Handmaid's Tale and Lessing's The Golden Notebook and her Children of Violence series are widely regarded - even canonized - as feminist texts.[31]

Whilst Walker notes this resistance, she argues that "it is impossible to ignore the socio-political implications"[32] of their fictions. Agreeing with Walker,

---

29. Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice (1974. Ed. Paul Schlueter, London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994) p.237.

30. Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.13.

31. Nancy A. Walker, Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990) p.151-2.

32. Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit., p.152.

my critique of Children of Violence is a "feminist" one. However, Lessing's resistance to that label is significant, as is her sense of the writer's role:

> Once a writer has a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences, it seems to me he must become a humanist, and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad.[33]

I hope to recognize that her concern is for the condition of humankind, and for the need to change society for the benefit of *all* oppressed groups. Indeed, much of Lessing's fiction suggests that change is necessary for the survival of the human race.

It is striking that Children of Violence reads almost like a textbook of twentieth century 'feminist' strategies. Lessing's blurring of autobiography and fiction illustrates what some feminist critics have understood as a desire to share "female experience" with her readers[34] and others have theorized as a subversive "border crossing" of genre boundaries.[35] She writes "beyond the ending"[36] of "proper marriage"[37] and even beyond the end of history in the apocalyptic ending of The Four-Gated City. She carries out a critique of the

---

33. Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice*, op.cit., p.10. I discuss Lessing's attitude to humanism and realism in 'The Small Personal Voice' below.

34. Nancy Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit., p.3. Quoting Carolyn Heilbrun, Walker argues that: "'Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives...'".

35. Maggie Humm, Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991).

36. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

37. Doris Lessing's ironical title of the second book in Children of Violence.

nuclear family and of patriarchal society as one which enabled World Wars to occur. She presents female friendship in its various guises and interrogates women's relationships with men. Nancy Walker has also identified the frequent use of irony and fantasy as a characteristic strategy of twentieth-century woman writers, and Martha Quest often views her situation with irony and imaginatively escapes through daydreams. Connected to all the examples of subversive strategies identified above, particularly those explored by Walker of irony and fantasy[38], is Lessing's interrogation of realism as a means for expressing her "female experience". It is this problematic use of realism and her increasing use of fantasy, which I want to consider, first, in relation to Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage.

When using realism, the image of escape from, or the "moment" outside[39] the 'reality' portrayed, becomes particularly important. Looking back from Lessing's later work such as The Four-Gated City, The Golden Notebook and her science fiction 'Canopus in Argos: Archives' series, which are comprehensive attempts to envision alternative realities, critics have pointed to the images of escape in Martha Quest as the seeds of these fully expressed alternatives. Nancy Bazin has placed the epiphanic "moments of revelation" in a modernist tradition, finding parallels (and important differences) with Joyce and Lawrence. Bazin argues that Lessing alters the tradition which she inherits from the modernists. Reading backwards from a retrospective knowledge of Lessing's move towards Sufism, Bazin suggests that to integrate the knowledge and experience

---

38. Nancy Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit.

39. Nancy Bazin's "moments of revelation" work in much the same way as my "images of escape". See her article entitled "The Moment of Revelation in Martha Quest and Comparable Moments by Two Modernists" (Modern Fiction Studies 26 (1980): 81-98).

of the "moment" into everyday life is one of Lessing's main projects:

> It is not simply, as in Lawrence and Joyce, a moment of climatic synthesis; in Lessing's view the moment of revelation must become an integral and recurring part of our lives so that we can learn and change. The pain which Martha experienced during her moment and the risk involved in the total relinquishment of self are part of the price which must be paid for our salvation.[40]

If we also consider the quantity of daydreaming Martha does throughout Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage, it would seem Bazin is justified in suggesting that the imaginative, alternative reality[41] indicated by these "moments" is as, if not more, important than the 'reality' of everyday life which Lessing's use of realism seems to privilege. Indeed, these "moments" and her day dreaming seem to undermine the realism of the rest of the text.

Lorna Sage deals with this disparity by suggesting that there are two narrative forces at work. "On the local narrative scale, bad faith seems unavoidable,"[42] Sage comments. Martha marries a man she does not love, has a baby she does not want and lives in ironic acceptance of her fate to continually repeat old patterns, sharing Mr. Maynard's cynicism . However, Sage suggests, discussing A Proper Marriage, there is "another, larger-scale narrative that sets off the explosive trail laid in the first novel". The "moments" from Martha Quest, identified by Bazin, belong to this

---

40. Nancy Bazin, "The Moment of Revelation in *Martha Quest* and Comparable Moments by Two Modernists," op.cit., p.98.

41. The idea of "alternate realities" is explored by Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit.

42. Lorna Sage, Doris Lessing (Contemporary Writers. London: Methuen, 1983) p.35.

narrative and Sage identifies aspects of A Proper Marriage from this other narrative:

> The moment during Martha's pregnancy when she wallows naked in a rainstorm in a pothole in the veld comes from this other story; and so does her long-postponed love-affair with radicalism.[43]

This other narrative, Sage identifies as one of "growth", whereas the trapped existence Martha lives in 'reality' is a narrative of "repetition". Jeanette King identifies a similar duality in that Martha projects two images of herself - "the rebel and the romantic heroine"[44].

Whittaker suggests that Martha's continual attempts to escape are frustrated as freedom paradoxically lies within:

> Thus A Proper Marriage ends in a similar vein to *Martha Quest*: Martha escapes from one circle of tedium and begins a wider, new life. But the reader should be alerted by this time to the irony of her 'escape'; by now it is clear that Martha is fleeing from the contradictions in her own nature, and it is only a self-confrontation that can free her.[45]

What is needed, Whittaker suggests is not a "moving *onwards* in order to progress" but a "move *inwards*".[46] This allows Whittaker to connect the "moments" with Martha's attempt to escape and, therefore, she reinforces Sage's understanding of this other narrative as one of

---

43. Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.35.

44. Jeanette King, Doris Lessing (Modern Fiction, London: Edward Arnold, 1989) p.17.

45. Ruth Whittaker, Doris Lessing (Modern Novelists, London: Macmillan, 1988) p.46.

46. Whittaker, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.51. It is significant that Whittaker's phrase echoes Lessing's parodic identification of her own text, Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1995) as "*Category*: Inner-space fiction / For there is never anywhere to go but in."

progress and "growth". Whilst I would generally agree that this analysis, with its positive evaluation of the "moments" and daydreams, is valid, I think the relationship between Martha's "moments" and her desire to escape is rather more problematic.

Most of the "moments" or "images of escape" in Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage are associated with the land, with, Nicole Jouve would argue, "mud".[47] The "moment" she experiences towards the end of Part I, Chapter 2 in Martha Quest[48], is tied closely with the land - "the sight, a new one, caused her to forget everything else" (p.60). The landscape prepares her mind for her "experience" and perhaps even causes it. It is significant that it occurs within sight of her mud house and she associates it with the two bucks. Another moment associated with the "growth" narrative is when she appears before her parents in her newly-made, white dress

---

47. Nicole Ward Jouve, "Of Mud and Other Matter - The Children Of Violence" Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing, Ed. Jenny Taylor (London: Routledge, 1982) p.75-134.

48. "Suddenly the feeling in Martha deepened, and as it did so she knew she had forgotten, as always, that what she had been waiting for like a revelation was a pain, not a happiness; what she remembered, always, was the exultation and the achievement, what she forgot was this difficult birth into a state of mind which words like ecstasy, illumination, and so on could not describe, because they suggest joy. Her mind having been formed by poetic literature (and little else), she of course knew that such experiences were common among the religious. But the fact was, so different was 'the moment' from what descriptions of other people's 'moments' led her to believe was common that it was not until she had come to accept the experience as ordinary and 'incidental to the condition of adolescence' as she put it, sourly, and with positive resentment, that it occurred to her. Why, perhaps it is the same thing, after all? But if so, they were liars, liars one and all; and that she could understand, for was it not impossible for her to remember, in between, how terrible an illumination it was?" (Martha Quest, op.cit., p.61). Note the literary source of her knowledge of 'moments' and the sense that language is inadequate to describe her illuminating experience.

ready for Marnie's party. It is not what she hoped for - "it should have been a moment of abnegation; when she must be kissed, approved and set free" (p.80). In "order to regain that freedom" she walks through the mud to Marnie's car "feeling the mud sink around her slight shoes" (p.81). Her first kiss the same evening is whilst standing in the "red mud". The same pattern occurs again when Donovan dresses her for the party at the Club. She chooses to wade through the muddy water as an act of defiance and freedom:

> ... fell all at once into her element. She lifted her crisp white skirts in a bunch around her waist, and composedly walked in her gold shoes, the water lapping cool around her ankles, to the sidewalk, saying, 'Oooh, it's lovely, it's lovely, Don,' like a child paddling. (p.164)

Donovan's "Now, don't let the mud get on your skirts" (p.164) is echoed in the later incident the same evening with Perry. Perry tears the dress Donovan has created for her, when kissing her outside the Club in the mud. Whilst stitching her back into the dress "Donovan said that Martha was a disgusting girl, she had mud on her dress" (p.175). These complementary evenings concerning the same white dress and mud, point to the complexities of the relationship between the narrative of "growth" and that of "repetition".

For the first evening Martha makes the dress herself and it is, therefore, a defiant statement of self-definition, whereas the second time it is Donovan who styles the dress. Indeed, Martha realizes:

> Martha looked, and, in spite of her pleasure, was uneasy. It was not herself, she felt. (p.163)

Donovan instructs her that "... Matty you really must change yourself for a dress like this" (p.163). In her hatred for him, Martha becomes "terrifyingly herself". The escapist Cinderella fantasy which motivated Martha's

attempt to be her own fairy god-mother (in creating the dress and turning Billy into the 'prince' he could never be) has become a nightmare of self-alienation in which she has to adapt to roles in order to please men and conform to *their* projected images. The 'Martha' created by Donovan/fairy god-mother is certainly an escape from the mud hut/cinders of her home/hearth. However, whilst the dress/glass slipper fits, it certainly is not comfortable and she feels "uneasy" fitting into it and the gender role it symbolizes. Her defiant walk through the mud after this moment of alienation from the her own image, enacts her recognition of the importance of her mud home to the construction of her 'real' self. This is also a parallel to the fairy-tale, *Cinderella*, in that the cinders of the hearth give Cinderella her very name.

Similarly, the mud changes its relevance. Initially, on both evenings it signifies a rebellion - on the first, against her parents, on the second, it is a challenge to Donovan's construction of her as a cold, beautiful and aloof woman. However, at the end of both evenings it comes to imply sexual shame and male desire for her as a sexual object. The narrative of "growth" is frustrated by that of "repetition", and the moments of defiance or fantasy are contained by realism. Or, as King would put it, Martha's "deep-rooted desire to belong" which is "embodied in the image of the dance" compromises and contains her "rebelliousness". Thus, as Martha's "rebelliousness" is "displaced onto more socially acceptable goals, in particular the traditionally sanctioned goal of women, romantic love", so mud's signification changes from rebellion to an image of Martha's conformity to the pattern of popular romance[49]. The play between these two narratives is evident in the description of Billy's kiss:

---

49. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.17.

> She resented this hard intrusive mouth, even while from outside - always from outside - came the other pressure, which demanded that he should simply lift her and carry her off like booty - but to where? The red mud under the bushes? She pushed aside this practical and desecrating thought, and softened to the kiss; then she felt a clumsy and unpractised hand creeping down her thigh, and she jerked away, saying in a voice that annoyed her, because of its indignant coldness: 'Stop it!' (p.88)

The "practical and desecrating thought" of mud rescues her from the dangerous fairy tale of romance, of being carried off "like booty", the object of a narrative of male desire. However, the dress is also an attempt to create a narrative of escape for herself which will "lift her and carry her" away from her parents and the mud hut.

The narrative of "growth" which is concerned with Martha's quest for full selfhood and with a feminist narrative of escape is complicated by Martha's identity as a left-wing colonial. As a colonial and a female she has been brought up to invest in and adhere to the status quo, to succumb to the narrative of "repetition". However, as a Communist and feminist she yearns for change. She has also been taught to view England as her "homeland", and to view her "home", the mud house, as temporary exile.[50] Therefore, she is confused, self-contradictory and alienated. As Jouve argues, Martha's condition as a colonial means "*she's been born*

---

50. The dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 3 of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is pertinent to Martha's (and Lessing's) relation to England:

> Ros: I don't believe in it anyway.
> Guil: What?
> Ros: England.
> Guil: Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?
> Ros: I mean I don't believe it! (Calmer.) I have no image.

Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1967. London: Faber, 1968) p.77.

uprooted".[51] Paradoxically, therefore, Martha's attempts to escape are actually symptoms of her desire to belong to something.

For example, the Perry incident is related to her previous failure to conform which causes her to be labelled "toffee-nosed" (p.174). Her marriage to Douglas is also portrayed as being motivated by the public interest and happiness in the match. Martha is described as being "completely swept away by it all" (p.249):

> There were occasional cold moments when she thought that she must somehow, even now, check herself on the fatal slope towards marriage, somewhere at the back of her mind was the belief that she would never get married, there would be time to change her mind later. And then the thought of what would happen if she did chilled her. It seemed that half the town was celebrating... (p.249)

The irony with which Whittaker suggests we should view Martha's "escape" into Communism is fed by the fact that it is less the politics and desire for change that motivates Martha's decision, than this yearning to belong. She is drawn in by the promise of a romantic love affair with William and by an "adolescent longing to fling herself wholeheartedly into a cause".[52] After attending her first meeting of "Help for Our Allies", Martha longs to join the inner group of campaigners:

> She left, feeling like a child left out of a party, because they did not at once invite her to that meeting to which they would all now go. But the way William had blushed made her feel it would not be long before she would be one of them.[53]

---

51. Jouve, "Of Mud and Other Matter", op.cit., p.91.

52. Doris Lessing, A Proper Marriage (Children of Violence 2 1954. London: Paladin-Collins, 1990) p.369.

53. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p. 371-2.

It is this impulse to belong which motivates her to ask Solly if she can join his commune:

> 'Anyway, you can't live here,' he announced at last. 'For one thing, there aren't any women.'
> 'And you're not Jewish either,' he said. [54]

This incident illustrates how important racial and gender identities are to social arrangements in Lessing's South Africa[55]. Martha's critical attitude towards colonialism and her resistance to gaining her identity from the roles of wife and mother leave her alienated. In her essay, "Being Prohibited" Lessing describes her feelings when filling out an immigration form at the age of sixteen:

> I was not, as one says, politically conscious [...] But I already felt uneasy about being a member of the Herrenvolk. When the immigration official reached me, I had written on the form: *Nationality*, British, *Race*, European; and it was the first time in my life I had had to claim myself as a member of one race and disown the others. I remember distinctly that I had to suppress an impulse opposite *Race*: Human.[56]

Elaine Showalter's liberal feminism is critical of Lessing's drive towards collective identity.[57] Showalter sees the feminist goal as that of reaching the "female phase" of "*self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from

---

54. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.56 and p.57.

55. I explore these themes in my analysis of The Grass is Singing.

56. Lessing, A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.221.

57. "The change in Lessing's fiction from the individual to the collective, from the personal to the communal, from the female to the global, consciousness seems at first like an abrupt transformation. It has, however, been a systematic, willed process of escape from a very painful encounter with the self, with the anguish of feminine fragmentation." Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing (Rev. ed. London: Virago, 1977) p.309. Showalter is referring here to the move in Lessing's fiction from The Golden Notebook (1962) to Memoirs of Survivor (1975).

some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity".[58] What Showalter's liberal feminism fails to allow for is that this "turning inward freed from some of the dependency" might result in the "discovery" of a "self" different from that of liberal humanism. I shall consider later the importance of Laing's model of madness, and available collective identity positions, to Lessing's questioning of models of the "self" like Showalter's. Showalter also fails to recognize the enormous influence on Lessing of her colonial experience which was one of oppressive and extreme racial segregation and sexual discrimination.

Lessing's awareness of potential collective identities based on shared experiences of exclusion due to race and/or gender is the site of another contradiction in Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage, and in Lessing's use of images or moments of escape. Frank Kermode, discussing Joyce's theory of the "esthetic image" expounded in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (with which Bazin has compared Lessing's "moments") argues that:

> These two beliefs - in the Image as a radiant truth out of space and time, and in the necessary isolation or estrangement of men who can perceive it - are inextricably associated...[59]

Martha's "moments" are private, almost solipsistic. For example, even when she seems to share the experience of the veld pothole with Alice, they separate and "She was quite alone.".[60] They mark her out, as Bazin argues, as deserving the reader's admiration. Indeed, Jouve suggests, Martha Quest and the whole Children of Violence

---

58. Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, op.cit., p.13.

59. Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London: Routledge, 1957) p.2.

60. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.177.

series, is a "portrait of the artist as a young woman" who "never writes a line".[61] That Martha is able to "tune in" to Lynda's wavelength reinforces the idea that she is particularly sensitive and gifted. The difference is that instead of becoming a Joycean poet-priest, Martha becomes a psychic seer.

The isolated individualism of these "moments" is not wholly compatible with Martha's concern with group identities based on race and gender, or with her desire to belong. In The Golden Notebook the central character, Anna, *is* an artist. Lessing, in her 'Preface', acknowledges:

> The theme of 'the artist' had to relate to another, subjectivity. When I began writing there was pressure on writers not to be 'subjective'. The pressure began inside the communist movements...[62]

It is because this pressure came from movements and people whose politics Lessing supported that it was so powerful:

> 'Bothering about your stupid personal concerns when Rome is burning' is how it tends to get itself expressed, on the level of ordinary life - and was hard to withstand, coming from one's nearest and dearest, and from people doing everything one respected most: like, for instance, trying to fight colour prejudice in Southern Africa.[63]

This contradiction between the personal and the general which is heightened in The Golden Notebook by Anna's writer's block, in A Proper Marriage is emphasized by Martha's pregnancy:

> She was essentially divided. One part of herself was sunk in the development of the creature,

---

61. Jouve, "Of Mud and Other Matter", op.cit., p.128.

62. Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.12.

63. ibid., p.12.

> appallingly slow, frighteningly inevitable, a process which she could not alter or hasten, and which dragged her back into the impersonal blind urges of creation; with the other parts she watched it; her mind was like a lighthouse, anxious and watchful that she, the free spirit, should not be implicated; and engaged in daydreams of the exciting activities that could begin when she was liberated.[64]

The baby growing inside Martha threatens the boundaries of her sense of self. The 'Other' is within and fragments Martha.

Motherhood offers a threateningly impersonal identity which Martha must resist:

> Into this precarious balance burst Mrs Quest [...] stating continually that the deepest satisfaction in life was maternity and that *Martha must sacrifice herself to her children* as she had done [...]
>
> To which Martha reacted with a cold, loathing determination that she must *keep brightly burning that lamp above the dark blind sea which was motherhood*. She would not allow herself to be submerged.[65]

It is ironic that the sacrifice to the child which Mrs Quest insists on and Martha so determinedly resists, mirrors the sacrifices the Communist Party demands. Jasmine's advice to Martha concerning Douglas points to the suppression of subjective experience which Communism requires:

> 'We simply can't understand,' said Jasmine firmly, 'why you don't just leave. You really look awful, Matty.'
>
> 'Well, I don't get much sleep,' admitted Martha.
>
> 'Naturally not. And it's not doing you any good. You're quite useless at meetings - you talk the most dreadful nonsense, you know. We are all very sympathetic, but we do wish you'd get it over with.' And then, the calm, demure little face changing not at all: 'Besides, there might be a

---

64. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.167-8.

65. ibid., p.168 (my emphasis).

> revolutionary situation at any moment - and here you are *wasting time on personal matters*!'[66]

Mr Maynard's comment that "with the French Revolution for a father and the Russian Revolution for a mother, you can very well dispense with a family",[67] also draws attention to the parallel between the Party and family. As we have seen this parallel points to the contradiction between Martha's desire to escape and her desire to belong. Martha's escape into politics is, in fact, a route which traps her into another marriage and personal sacrifices. Indeed, both contradictions - of the personal with the general and of escape with belonging - are played out in Martha's experiences of marriage and pregnancy.

Her personal reaction to her marriage is to want to escape. However, by fitting her emotions to the shared experience of newly married wives Martha is comforted, believing her feelings to belong to wider, impersonal patterns. Whilst her impulse to escape is undermined, she remains self-conscious and critical of her desire to belong to these general patterns:

> After hours of determined concentration she would emerge with the phrase, 'Women hate men who take them for granted.' It would have done for a story in a magazine. But that impersonal 'woman' was a comfort - briefly, for no sooner had she reached it than she saw the image that the words conjured up [...] no sooner had Martha caught a glimpse of her than she must repudiate her entirely...[68]

The knowledge of her pregnancy similarly causes contradictory emotions:

> She was thinking of Alice; and in spite of her own deep persistent misery, her knowledge that the web

---

66. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.437 (my emphasis).

67. ibid., p.447.

68. ibid., p.84.

> was tight around her, she knew, too, that she was most irrationally elated.[69]

When she sees Dr Stern "for [herself]"[70] because of her mood of dissatisfaction, he consoles her by fitting her into the general pattern, the narrative of "repetition":

> And he did continue, using the words 'we', 'all', and 'everybody' in every sentence. She was both angrily humiliated and perversely appreciative of the situation.[71]

Her dual response acknowledges that the personal drive to escape and the desire to belong to something wider and more general, coexist, despite being contradictory impulses:

> She could not bear to think of the *everyone*, the *we* and the *all*. So everyone had moods in which they ran off to the doctor, that archpriest, who gave them bottles of tonic and assured them they were exactly like everyone else? [...] All the same, she said to herself, it is the mood which is the truth, and the other a lie. She could not maintain the conviction long. The irritable exhaustion faded at the idea of having another baby...[72]

However 'true' the "mood" of dissatisfaction with the old patterns, this "mood" does not lead to change as it is undermined by Martha's desire for a pattern to which she can belong.

The "*everyone*, the *we* and the *all*" used by Dr Stern to sooth Martha are gendered. Like the phrase Martha constructs to console herself ("'Women hate men who take them for granted.'"), Stern's statements explain Martha's feelings in relation to some collective "female

---

69. ibid., p.132.

70. ibid., p.353.

71. ibid., p.356.

72. ibid., p.357.

experience". This renders her feelings "natural". Therefore, this "mood", rather than being an impulse to escape or a desire for change, becomes part of the narrative of repetition Martha fears. Her emotions are re-interpreted by Stern as predictable reactions to an inescapable pattern:

> 'When I come to think of it, there isn't one of my women patients who doesn't come in to me a couple of years after her marriage, wishing she was out of it all. It's not much of a compliment to us men, I expect, but there it is, that's life.'[73]

However, whilst Martha gains a certain degree of "comfort" from "that impersonal 'woman'", it also presents a threat. Like the woman summoned up by her phrase "'Women hate men who take them for granted'", as soon as Martha pictures that woman "she must repudiate her completely".[74] So, too, Stern's spell of "*everyone*, the *we* and the *all*" breaks:

> The words 'I certainly shall not allow' succeeded in conjuring up such a picture of his marriage, such a complacent and uxorious young husband, that the spell snapped. She instantly decided that he had said to Douglas over the telephone, 'Well, old chap, you know what women are.'[75]

This contradiction of wanting to belong to a shared womankind whilst needing to "repudiate her entirely", of daydreaming of "a madonna-like woman with helpless infant in her arms",[76] "One of those warm, large, delightful, maternal, humorous females",[77] whilst recognizing the hidden reality of "the middle-aged woman who had done nothing but produce two or three commonplace

---

73. ibid., p.356.

74. ibid., p.84.

75. ibid., p.356.

76. ibid., p.357.

77. ibid., p.358.

and tedious citizens in a world that was already too full of them",[78] adds another dimension to the clash of the narrative of repetition with that of the desire to escape. This dimension directly addressed the relationship between femaleness and identity. It explores whether a woman can be self-defining, can write herself a narrative of escape, or whether, by her very femaleness, she is doomed to a certain set of identity positions.

The sense of doom in A Proper Marriage is very strong.[79] This may well be related to the historical events documented in the series, most importantly the Second World War. This doom is, however, frequently expressed in relation to Martha's roles as mother and daughter:

> She could not meet a young man or woman without looking around anxiously for the father and mother; that was how they would end, there was no escape for them. [...] She could take no step, perform no action, no matter how apparently new and unforeseen, without the secret fear that in fact this new and arbitrary thing would turn out to be part of the inevitable process she was doomed to. She was, in short, in the grip of the great bourgeois monster, the nightmare *repetition*.[80]

In order to break out of this cycle of repetition, it is implied that an interrogation and revision of parenting is necessary. Martha has to break out of her role as mother.[81] In her autobiography, however, Lessing seems

---

78. ibid., p.358.

79. "This feeling of doom, of fatality, is a theme - perhaps the main one - in Martha Quest." Doris Lessing, Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949 (London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994) p.262.

80. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.104.

81. See Chapter Eight below, entitled "Parody Regained?", where I argue that mothering is still an important issue for Lessing in The Good Terrorist and that she continues her search for alternatives.

to uphold an essentialist notion of gendered identity by stating that certain behavioural patterns are "natural" to child-bearing women. She discusses the tea parties of young breeding women she attended:

> It doesn't matter whether you like these women or not, or they like you. 'We have nothing in common!' Don't make me laugh, you have the biological basis in common, you are young women together and that's enough. [...] Oh, indeed, we should be careful of the company we keep, but young breeding women will spend time with others.[82]

We are returned to Dr. Stern's phrase - "'Well, old chap, you know what women are.'" - as a comforting explanation for behaviour, *and* as a refusal to grant women the individualized selfhoods which men claim as their unquestioned right.

In "The Small Personal Voice", Lessing states that the main theme of Children of Violence is:

> the individual conscience in its relations with the collective.[83]

As we have seen above, this theme can become the "individual conscience" in conflict "with the collective". If we complicate these issues further by placing them in the context of representational politics and approach them with an awareness of the politics of representation, we arrive at, perhaps, Lessing's most interesting ideas. I would like to turn aside from the Children of Violence series to take up the theme of the individual and the collective in relation to black and female identities in The Grass is Singing and The Summer Before the Dark.

---

82. Doris Lessing, Under My Skin, op.cit., p.233.

83. Lessing states that this is the main topic of Children of Violence in the essay "The Small Personal Voice", collected in A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.18.

CHAPTER TWO

REHEARSALS FOR A PARODIC PERFORMANCE

> "There was not a piece of crockery that was whole; and Charlie could feel the grease on the knife he held. He ate with distaste, making no effort to hide it, while Dick said nothing, and Mary made abrupt, unrelated remarks about the weather with that appalling coyness, shaking her ear-rings, writhing her thin shoulders, ogling Charlie with a conventional flirtatiousness."[84]

> "A woman sat in a public room, relaxed but observant, an official in a public organization, dressed like one, holding herself like one; but letting her life - or the words that represented her thoughts about her life - flow through her mind."[85]

"IF YOU MUST BLAME SOMEBODY, THEN BLAME MRS TURNER."[86]

(The Grass is Singing)

> Mary watched the farewell scene, that took place on the back steps, from the doorway. She was filled with wonder, and even repulsion. Dick was really sorry to see the end of this nigger! She could not understand any white person feeling anything personal about a native; it made Dick seem really horrible to her. (p.65)

---

84. Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing (1950. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994) p.176.

85. Doris Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark (1973. London: The Book Club-Cape, 1974) p.32.

86. Lessing, The Grass is Singing, op.cit., p.27. In this sub-section entitled "If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner." of Chapter Two, this novel will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

Mary's refusal here to identify black people as individuals becomes ironical in retrospect. The Grass is Singing explores Mary's relationships with her black servants, and, by portraying these relationships, the novel considers the interactions between power and this issue of identity. At the start of the novel Mary, as evident in the above quotation, "could not understand any white person feeling anything personal about a native". She regards them as objects. When they are described through her consciousness at the time of Dick's illness they are referred to as a "gang of natives", granted only a group identity. Indeed, when Mary has to supervise Dick's workers it is the strength they gain from this impersonal group identity as *black men* which she arms herself against:

> She still carried the long thong of leather looped round one wrist. It gave her a feeling of authority, and braced her against the waves of hatred that she could feel coming from the *gang of natives*. (p.111, my emphasis)

One of her servants is experienced in being treated like an object and, using a strategy like Gates' "Signifying' Monkey"[87], he works within Mary's attitude to turn it against her:

> He had had years of experience working for white women who treated him as if he were a machine; and he had learned *to present a blank, neutral surface*, and to answer in a soft neutral voice. [...] It was simply *as if he were not really there*, only a black body ready to do her bidding. And that enraged her too. She felt she would like to pick up a plate and *throw it in his face so as to make it human and expressive*, even with pain. (p.68, my emphasis)

---

87. Henry Louis Gates defines the "signifying' monkey" as a "trickster figure", and goes on to identify "signifying" as "the slaves trope". "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" in Henry Louis Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory (London: Methuen, 1984) p.286.

Mary's refusal to grant that natives have 'identities', is taken to a parodic extreme by this servant, effectively making Mary guilty about her attitude. Mary wants to force her servant into an expression of something "human". In playing the "signifying monkey", this servant has become only "a blank, neutral surface". As Gates argues, this strategy's success depends on breaking the link between the "blank, neutral surface" of signifiers, and any possible referent, or signified, such as pain:

> The Afro-American *rhetorical strategy of signifying* is a rhetorical practice *un*engaged *in information-giving*.[88]

Through his ability to *present* himself, paradoxically, as if he were *absent* ("as if he were not really there"), the "signifying monkey" becomes reference without any referent:

> The Monkey, in short, is not only 'a master of technique' [...] he is technique, or style, or the *literariness* of literary language, he is the Great Signifier.[89]

However, as Gates notes in another essay, "Criticism in the Jungle", this figuring of 'blackness' as absence, as "a blank, neutral surface", whilst potentially politically subversive when parodically performed, is also politically threatening when imposed by the dominant white community. Indeed, Gates' concern in this essay is with what 'blackness' is and could become. Traditionally read as "a negation", Gates notes the recent attempts to construct "an essence called 'blackness', a presence which our tradition has tried of late to will into being,

---

88. Gates, "The Blackness of Blackness" in Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.287 (my emphasis).

89. Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.288.

in order to negate two and half millenia of its figuration as an absence".[90] Gates is concerned by the danger of taking "the terms of one's assertion from a discourse determined by an Other", and he highlights "the irony implicit in the attempt to posit a 'black self' in the very western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation".[91] These are ironies Lessing makes visible (and invisible) in The Grass is Singing.

Dick's attitude towards the natives is ambivalent, pointing to these paradoxes of what their 'blackness' means. When Mary causes yet another boy to leave by forgetting to grant him time off to eat, Dick speaks to him to encourage him to stay:

> Speaking like this to a native, appealing to him, was contrary to Dick's ideas of relationship between white and black, but he was furious with Mary for her lack of consideration and tact. (p.78)

Whilst he does not think natives should be treated equally, he is forced by the labour shortage to treat them decently. Scolding Mary for losing this native he says:

> 'He's a human being, isn't he? He's got to eat.' (p.78)

However, immediately after this comment he warns Mary:

> 'You shouldn't expect too much. They are nothing but savages after all.' (p.78)

Mary is "disconcerted" by this contradictory approach of Dick's towards the natives:

---

90. Gates, "Criticism in the Jungle" in Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.7.

91. Gates, "Criticism in the Jungle" in Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.7.

> 'You can have your troubles with the natives, but I am not allowed to.' [...] But in spite of this [Dick's] perpetual angry undercurrent of hate [for the natives], she was disconcerted when she saw him talking to his bossboy perhaps, on the lands. Why, he seemed to be growing into a native himself, she thought uneasily. (p.139)

During the novel, Dick becomes for Mary a figure of absence, thereby, indeed, "growing into a native himself":

> Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal; while the thought of the African grew obsessive. It was a nightmare, the *powerful black man* always in the house with her, so that there was *no escape from his presence.* She was possessed by it, and *Dick was hardly there to her.* (p.167, my emphasis)

'White' and 'black' are inverted as figures of 'presence' and 'absence'. It is partly Dick's ambivalent attitude towards his 'black' natives which is to blame for his failure as a farmer. Needing their labour, Dick cannot base his relationship with them on an assumption that he has authority over them. As Jeanette King argues:

> The myth of white settlerdom rests on an image of the firm but just master, taking charge of an undeveloped country and the noble African child of nature who needs just such guidance. It is also a myth of male domination - of the strong hand needed to tame the wild. According to this ideology, Dick, with his boyish whistle, his love of the veld and his easy-going manner with the natives, is not 'man' enough to be a success.[92]

Moses is the servant who complicates Mary's attitudes towards 'blackness', 'whiteness' and identity. From her first violent encounter with Moses, their power relations are complicated. By whipping him she imposes her will on him in that he gets straight back to work.

---

92. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.12-3.

However, her immediate reaction is fear as the incident opens up direct interaction between them:

> For a moment the man looked at her with an expression that turned her stomach liquid with fear. (p.120)

Her reaction is contradictory:

> But mingled with her anger was that sensation of victory, a satisfaction that she had won in this battle of wills. She watched him stagger up the sacks, his great shoulders bowed under his load, taking a bitter pleasure in seeing him subdued thus. And nevertheless her knees were still weak: she could have sworn that he nearly attacked her in that awful moment after she struck him. (p.120-1)

She has gained power over Moses at the expense of having to grant him individuality. Indeed, for her, he is individualized for life.

She identifies him immediately when Dick sends him to be her house boy and it weakens her. In an inversion of the 'white' settlers' reading of 'blackness', the "darker weal across his black skin" makes 'blackness' signify individuality:

> When the man *presented* himself at the door, Mary recognized him as the one she had struck with the whip over the face two years before. She saw the scar on his cheek, a *thin darker weal across the black skin.* She stood irresolute in the doorway... (p.141, my emphasis)

She slowly learns to forget "the memory of that whip slashing across his face" (p.142) and overcomes her inability "to treat this boy as she had treated all the others" (p.142). However, in an incident when he, again,

forces her to recognize his needs as a human being[93] she feels "the same impulse that had once made her bring down the lash across his face" (p.143). As Lessing analyzes:

> What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip. (p.144)

When Moses threatens to leave, Mary, fearing the scenes with Dick, finds herself "shaking with sobs again, there, in front of the native!" (p.150). Moses has to touch her in order to steer her to her bed to recover:

> It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native. (p.151)

After this incident Moses decides to stay and returns to his usual behaviour:

> As always, he behaved as if he were an abstraction, not really there, a machine without a soul. (p.152)

However, when Mary returns to her cruel behaviour he resists it and "forced her now to treat him as a human being" (p.156). Mary "did not know what to do with this personal relation" and feeling "out of her depth"

---

93. The first incident is when Mary hits him because he asks her for time to go and get a drink when working in the heat. (The Grass is Singing, op.cit., p.120-1 and above, p.40-1.) The second time is when he is washing and through his body language demands she respects his privacy - "As she looked, he turned by some chance, or because he sensed her presence, and saw her. She had forgotten it was his time to wash. A white person may look at a native, who is no better than a dog. Therefore she was annoyed when he stopped and stood upright, waiting for her to go, his body expressing resentment of her presence there." (The Grass is Singing, p.143).

(p.153), she is "helplessly in his power" because of this "new relation between them" (p.154). Their battle of wills "like two antagonists, silently sparring" becomes "her obsession" (p.167), as I have quoted above:

> She was fighting against something she did not understand. Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal; while the thought of the African grew obsessive. (p.167)

At this point, Lessing cleverly cuts to an outside perspective - that of the white farmers, the Slatters. Charlie Slatter's selfish approach to Dick's situation changes as he is "shocked out of self-interest" by the deterioration of the Turners:

> He was obeying the dictate of the first law of white South Africa, which is: 'Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are.' (p.178)

Tony Marston provides an even more distanced point of view. With his "good, conventional education" (p.181), Marston is both shocked and pleased by Mary and Moses's taboo relationship:

> But then, he had read enough about psychology to understand the sexual aspect of the colour bar, one of whose foundations is the jealousy of the white man for the superior sexual potency of the native; and he was surprised at one of the guarded, a white woman, so easily evading this barrier. (p.186)

We are returned to the intensity of Mary's consciousness[94] for the description of the night of the murder, in which she is both a helpless victim and an active and willing party. This play between perspectives highlights the importance of social identities to personal selfhood. Not only, as we have seen, are the racial politics of white people's attempts to refuse

---

94. See King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.4-7, on the changes in perspective in The Grass is Singing.

black people the right to selfhood crucial to power relations and personal identity positions, but also gender relations play an important role.

It is the social rules of gendered behaviour which censored "A *woman* of thirty behaving like that!" (p.43, my emphasis) and made Mary turn to Dick Turner to "restore her feeling of superiority to men" (p.44) and overcome her identity crisis. When her married friends deny her the identity position of "'one of the girls'" (p.38) her "idea of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself" (p.43). During Dick's illness, Mary enjoys the position of white boss, but, in the words of Jeanette King:

> She is not however allowed to assume the role of the white boss, since she - as a woman - exists on the margins of the black/white power structure.[95]

Catherine Belsey discusses just such a clash of subject-positions:

> 'Identity', subjectivity, is thus a matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another.[96]

Significantly, she takes women as her "readily recognizable" example of this possible contradiction of "subject-positions":

> Very broadly, they participate both in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-

---

95. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.9.

96. Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1980) p.61.

> contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures.[97]

Privileged over the black servants in her access to the "liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality", Mary is also subject to this "specifically feminine discourse". Charlie's simple analysis, that it is exactly Mary's marginal "subject-position" as a woman which results in her failure with Moses, positions Mary at Belsey's cross-roads of "contradictory discourses":

> 'Needs a man to deal with niggers,' said Charlie. 'Niggers don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place.' (p.23)

The "pressures" on Mary prove to be tragically "intolerable".

The novel suggests that in a society which reduces blacks and women to subordinate and relational identity positions, a relationship between a black man and a white woman which asserts their personal identities, is doomed to a tragic conclusion. Just as Mary could not resist her murder, so does Moses wait for his pursuers to capture and punish him. Mary's town friends "didn't forgive her" for resisting social norms and running from the "widower of fifty-five" and "felt that in some way it served her right" (p.43). So, too, do Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant regard her as the one "who had let the side down" (p.25). Moses they can dismiss as "the black man who will thieve, rape, murder, if given half a chance" (p.23). It is Mary who is at fault for giving him that half chance, "but even she, since she was dead, was no longer a problem" (p.25). As Marston struggles to

---

97. Belsey, Critical Practice op.cit., p.65-6.

apportion blame[98], the incident becomes "the tragedy" which he cannot lift "above the confusions and complexities of the morning, and make of it, perhaps, a symbol, or a warning" (p.28). As Marston laments:

> I really can't be expected to act as judge and jury and compassionate God into the bargain! (p.28)

Perhaps this feeling is shared by Lessing and her readers. Moses remains an almost silent blank, "a figure of absence, a negation," in the text. As King says, "Moses's inner life remains largely inaccessible"[99]:

> Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, *it is impossible to say.* (p.206, my emphasis)

Whilst Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant explain his behaviour as that of "the black man who will thieve, rape, murder" we, as readers, are left with a more complex but mysterious image. Although Moses forced Mary to recognize that personal relationships do exist between white masters and their black servants, Mary still "could not understand" and it remained "really horrible to her" (p.65).

Along with her relationship with Moses, the aspect of Mary's behaviour which seems most shocking to the

---

98. "And then, if Tony had stammered out something about responsibility, he [Sergeant] would have looked significantly at Charlie and shrugged. Tony might have continued, ignoring the shrug and its implication of his wrongmindedness: 'If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner. You can't have it both ways. Either the white people are responsible for their behaviour, or they are not. It takes two to make a murder - a murder of this kind. Though, one can't really blame her either. She can't help being what she is. I've lived here, I tell you, which neither of you has done, and the whole thing is so difficult it is impossible to say who is to blame.'" (The Grass is Singing, op.cit., p.27).

99. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.6.

conventional Charlie Slatter is her "horrible parody of coquetry" (p.175). Mary's parodic performance of a hostess is as subversive of social norms as the strategy of the "signifying monkey". Similarly, the way in which her mistress-servant relationship with Moses parodies that of mistress[100]-lover, is transgressive. The scene with Moses in the bedroom is an example:

> Beside her stood Moses, and, as Tony watched, she stood up and held out her arms while the native slipped her dress over them from behind. When she sat down again she shook out her hair from her neck with both hands, with the gesture of a beautiful woman adoring her beauty. Moses was buttoning up the dress; she was looking in the mirror. The attitude of the native was of an indulgent uxoriousness. When he had finished the buttoning, he stood back, and watched the woman brushing her hair. 'Thank you, Moses,' she said in a high commanding voice. Then she turned, and said intimately: 'You had better go now. It is time for the boss to come.' (p.185)

Indeed, from the moment Mary breaks down and cries in front of Moses, a parallel with the relationship of lovers is made. Mary surrenders her will to his and he leads her to the bedroom. King has also recognized Mary's parodic role playing:

> In her relationship with Moses, Mary acts out the traditional female role in an almost parodic manner.[101]

Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble, that "gender is performatively produced",[102] it is, as Mary seems to realize, "always a doing".[103] However, Butler is quick to add it is "not a doing by a subject who might be said

---

100. In its other sense of secret sexual partner.

101. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.11.

102. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990) p.24.

103. Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.25.

to pre-exist the deed".[104] The subject is created as a gendered subject by its very performance of "manhood" or "womanhood". Therefore, whilst "it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible",[105] at least "a subversion of identity becomes possible". Butler points to the "subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects".[106] She goes on to express the multitude of possible changes and criticisms open to gender critics:

> As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act", as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.[107]

The greatest counter-argument to such a view of gender as performance and not an essentialist element of identity is the loss of agency. If all subject positions are effects of discourse, how can any subject be an agent for change? How can there be "self-criticism" without some notion of a core or authentic self to criticize? From what position of freedom can a subject *chose* to parody in order to subvert discourses, if he or she is constituted in and by only those discourses? Butler counters this argument with:

> Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*,

---

104. ibid., p.25.

105. ibid., p.145.

106. ibid., p.146.

107. ibid., p.146-7. This "exaggeration" is what the house boy discussed above used to make his white mistresses self-conscious and guilty about their attitude towards him. A great deal of the strategies I discuss for changing gender relations are pertinent to race relations, too.

> opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed.[108]

Here Butler seems to weaken her "strong thesis of the Death of the Subject"[109] in a recognition of feminism's need for a source of action, an "agency" for social change. The 'subject' understood as the coherent, liberal humanist self has clearly been killed by a discursively produced self for Butler. However, her expression here of new "possibilities of "agency"" is relevant to Lessing's explorations of the self. Lessing thoroughly interrogates the liberal humanist self, and, whilst she does not reject this ideology as completely as Butler, she is certainly working in the space which "the reconceptualization of identity" "opens up".

Lorna Sage has suggested that both The Summer Before the Dark and Briefing for a Descent into Hell confirm that "Lessing had for the moment depleted her resources as a writer".[110] She argues that the novels give "off a sense of incompleteness and thinness":

> This is connected, of course, with their themes - or, rather, theme, which is the grotesque and cramping *inadequacy of the 'identities' people find themselves saddled with* in mid-life.[111]

In a similar criticism of The Four-Gated City as the last novel in the Children of Violence series, Scanlan suggests that:

> The problem may be that writing a successful novel sequence depends, among other things, on a greater interest in personal history and a *greater faith in*

---

108. Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.147.

109. Benhabib uses this phrase throughout Situating the Self, op.cit.

110. Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.68.

111. ibid., p.68 (my emphasis).

> *the permanence of the self than Lessing has recently possessed.*[112]

Whilst agreeing with Sage, that the theme of The Summer Before the Dark is the "inadequacy of the 'identities' people find" available,[113] and with Scanlan's diagnosis of Lessing's loss of faith in "the permanence of the self", I reject the negative judgements accompanying these comments. Lessing's novels which abandon the liberal humanist self without being entirely certain of what to replace it with are, in effect, her attempts to work out the relationship between the postmodern and politics, and the effects of this relationship on the self.[114] These themes are central to contemporary debates, especially in feminism.

Susan Bordo, in her essay "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism", criticizes certain developments in feminism, especially those which use postmodern theory to question the gender categories[115] and erase the body:

> The deconstructionist erasure of the body is not affected, as in the Cartesian version, through a trip to "nowhere", but in a resistance to the recognition that one is always *somewhere*, and limited.[116]

---

112. Scanlan, "Memory and Continuity in the Series Novel: The Example of *Children of Violence*", op.cit., p.85 (my emphasis).

113. I am less keen to agree that this is *the theme* of Briefing for a Descent into Hell. It is certainly one of several themes, but I think the themes of apocalypse and alternative realities dominate this novel.

114. This is an important aspect of my reading of The Golden Notebook.

115. "We need to be pragmatic, not theoretically pure...". Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism." Feminism / Postmodernism, Ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990) p.153.

116. Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism." Feminism / Postmodernism, Ed. Nicholson, op.cit., p.145.

She takes issue with the tendency to disembody the self in postmodern theory:

> To deny the unity and stability of identity is one thing. The epistemological fantasy of *becoming* multiplicity - *the dream of limitless multiple embodiments*, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self - is another. *What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel everywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time* and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all.[117]

The answer to the question Bordo asks of "What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will" is, in reference to Lessing's work, of course, Johor[118]. Shikasta does seem to present what Bordo terms "the dream of everywhere". The 'Lock' creates a oneness between Rohanda and Canopus in which the "locatedness in space and time and ... the finitude of human perception and knowledge" symbolized by the body, are overcome:

> Shortly after that the Lock was established, and was a success, making missions and special envoys unnecessary. The minds of the Giants - or to put it more accurately, factually, *the Giant-mind - had become one with the mind of the Canopean System*, at first partially, and tentatively, but it was an ever-growing and sensitizing current.[119]

---

117. Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism." Feminism / Postmodernism, Ed. Nicholson, op.cit., p.145 (my emphasis).

118. Emissary in Doris Lessing, Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta: Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by Johor (George Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9) 87th of the Last Period of the Last Days (Canopus in Argos: Archives 1 1979. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994).

119. Lessing, Shikasta, op.cit., p.34 (my emphasis).

The "free flow of thought, ideas, information, *growth* between planet and planet across our galaxy"[120] renders the need for embodiment ("missions and special envoys") "unnecessary". Indeed, the Rohandan body during the 'Lock' "is no body at all" for the Rohandans are no longer "always *somewhere*, and limited". It is only when Rohanda falls into crisis and is re-named Shikasta that it becomes necessary for Canopus to send agents like Johor and Taufiq, actual *embodiments* of the SOWF ("substance-of-we-feeling"). It is significant that to sense oneself as an individual is seen to represent a fall from grace:

> ... everybody accepted that their very existence depended on *voluntary submission to the great Whole*...[121]
> I said that disobedience to the Master Plan was always, everywhere, the first sign of the Degenerative Disease ... and looked to find noble faces, and comprehending eyes that were so no longer, for on to the faces had come peevishness and *self-assertion*, and into the eyes, vagueness.[122]

I consider the politics of this space fiction below[123] in relation to both Shikasta and The Memoirs of a Survivor. At this stage, however, I would like to turn to The Summer Before the Dark to explore Lessing's use of parody (identified above in Mary's behaviour) in the paradoxical struggle to move away from traditional essentialist notions of gender, whilst acknowledging the need for agency and the biological 'fact' of the (female) body.

---

120. Lessing, Shikasta, op.cit., p.33.

121. ibid., p.41 (my emphasis).

122. ibid., p.65 (my emphasis).

123. See the sub-section of Chapter Seven entitled "The Politics of Space Fiction".

'TAKE TWO': CUTTING HAIR AND GENDER
(The Summer Before the Dark)

The Summer Before the Dark opens with this impersonal statement:

> A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting.[124]

And it is repeated a paragraph later with added domestic detail:

> A woman stood on her back *door*step, arms folded, waiting *for a kettle to boil.* (p.7, my emphasis)

She remains simply "the woman" until a few pages into the novel when she is identified:

> This woman was Kate Brown; to be accurate Catherine Brown, or Mrs Michael Brown. (p.11)

Even in this simple announcement of who this woman is, her identity splits. She has three different possible names (and the Mrs Michael Brown implicitly points to her maiden name). Even after this 'introduction', she remains "a woman", for example:

> A woman, as she might have done any time during the past several hundred years, stood under a tree, holding a crowded tray. (p.12)

This "woman" plans to spend her summer "running" the house for her son Tim:

> She, *the mother*, would run it. (p.15)

---

124. Doris Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark (1973. London: The Book Club-Cape, 1974) p.7. In this sub-section entitled "'Take two': cutting hair and gender" of Chapter Two this novel will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

However, she in fact spends her summer trying to understand "*Who* has been married all this time?"(p.183).

The identities offered to her as a woman, wife and mother are no longer adequate for her:

> The truth was, she was becoming more and more uncomfortably conscious not only that the *things she said*, and a good many of the *things she thought*, had *been taken down off a rack and put on*, but that what she really felt was something else again. (p.8)

This image of Kate taking her ideas "down off a rack", like items of clothing, is an important and recurring one. In the description of her appearance a few pages later, Kate is said to be wearing a dress from the "rail marked 'Jolie Madame'"(p.13). If Kate's ideas are like prefabricated items of clothing, her clothes are an idea of who she is or should be. By playing with this metaphor of clothing being like an identity and vice versa, Lessing shows Kate *wearing identities*. Kate has constructed herself according to gendered social roles, in just the way that Butler's notion of gender as performance suggests. Through the novel, Kate learns that she has been "performing" gender.

At the Global Foods conference, Kate keeps attracting men to the seat next to her, but "she wanted to sit quietly, to relax, to think" (p.46):

> Soon she discovered that if she wanted to be alone, she should sit badly, in a huddled or discouraged posture, and allow her legs to angle themselves unbecomingly. If she did this men did not see her. (p.47)

Learning this, Kate is shocked, finding it "really extraordinary":

> There she sat, Kate Brown, just as she had always been, *her* self, *her* mind, *her* awareness, watching the world from behind a facade only very slightly different from the one she had maintained since she

> was sixteen. [...] For she was conscious, very conscious, as alert to it as if this was the most important fact of her life, that the person who sat there watching, shunned or ignored by men who otherwise would have been attracted to her, was not in the slightest degree different from the person who could bring them all on again towards her by adjusting the picture of herself... (p.47)

Lessing makes the direct link with performance:

> This is what it must feel to be an actor, an actress - how very taxing that must be, a sense of self kept burning behind so many different phantasms. (p.48)

However, it is clear to the reader that Kate's self is not "burning", as Kate herself slowly realizes:

> She had been set like a machine by twenty-odd years of being a wife and a mother. (p.50)

She recognizes that the roles she has played have encouraged a certain identity which she begins to feel is irrelevant to her 'real' self. Considering what would happen if she replaced her role as mother with a job at Global Food she predicts:

> Then she would nourish and nurture in herself that person which was all warmth and charm, *that personality which had nothing to do with her*, nothing with *what she really was, the individual who sat and watched and noted* from behind the warm brown eyes, the cared-for skin, the heavy curves of her dark-red hair. (p.50, my emphasis)

In the experiments with her appearance which she carries out whilst staying in Maureen's flat, Kate learns that men respond to women who fit "the prints made by fashion", who are "'set' to attract men's sex" and that:

> ... for all her adult life, her sexual life, let's say from twelve onwards, she had been conforming, twitching like a puppet to those strings. (p.182)

Later in the novel, she walks past a building site and is not noticed. Out of sight she takes off her coat and

walks past again in "her fitting dark dress" with her hair tied "dramatically with a scarf". "A storm of whistles, calls, invitations." (p.213). Walking to and from as "sex object" or "an invisible" (p.214) her anger grows:

> She was trembling with rage: it was a rage, it seemed to her, that she had been suppressing for a lifetime. And it was a front for a worse, a misery that she did not want to answer, for it was saying again and again: This is what you have been doing for years and years and years. (p.214)[125]

Meeting Maureen, she announces that "'That's what it is all worth. That's all. Years and years and years of it.'" (p.214). Like the younger Kate, Maureen does not want to see it - "'Oh, don't, don't take on like that, don't do that, it's not like you.'"(p.214).

Earlier Kate had "followed herself" in the form of "a middle-aged woman with hair of dry brass - the dye had taken badly - high heels, a tight skirt" with "eyes forced full of vivacity, her voice urged full of charm" (p.182). What strikes Kate about this woman, "herself", is how she gains self-identity and self-respect only from the approval of others. Kate watches:

> ... how she looked long into every approaching face, male or female, to see how she was being noticed, *how she was fitting into expectation that had been set in that other person by the modes of the time.* (p.183, my emphasis)

The shock for Kate is that she had not been conscious of her role playing. When Kate is planning to go home early, Maureen's reaction to her makes her self-conscious. Finding Kate "deep inside skilled organization" as she reinstates herself over the

---

125. Note how the repetitions ("again and again", "years and years and years") tie this misery in with Martha's fear, discussed above, of "the great bourgeois monster, the nightmare *repetition*" (Martha Quest, op.cit., p.104).

telephone as mother and housekeeper, Maureen refuses to marry Philip. Maureen breaks Kate's spell with her silent accusation:

> 'What's wrong?' said Kate, and as she heard her voice, understood that there was in it everything there had *not* been when she had said so mechanically: 'Don't cry!'
>
> Kate's limbs were beginning to understand that they had been in some kind of a fever, which was now subsiding: they had already lost their pleasure in decision. Kate was all at once tired, and understood that she had been, for the last minutes, a little crazy. (p.198)

Maureen provides, or rather, forces, Kate to express, "everything there had *not* been" in her role as efficient mother. Kate later admits that she has "said absolutely anything I've felt" to Maureen, whereas "for years I've been doling out what I've thought and felt in small rations" diplomatically deciding who she "shouldn't say this to" and who she can tell (p.238).

It is seeing Kate lost in the "fever" of playing her role which causes Maureen to reject Philip:

> 'I'd do anything, I'd live alone for *always* rather than turn into *that*.' (p.199)

Maureen confronts Kate, forcing Kate to face her accusation that the role she offers the next generation is not good enough:

> 'Awful. Dreadful. Awful. You've no idea - can't you see? If you could just *see yourself*.' (p.199, my emphasis)

It is this that Kate has spent the summer learning to see and "in silence, now looked at *that*, her self of a few minutes before" (p.199). She discovers that the summer had changed her so much that Maureen was shocked to meet "Mrs Kate Brown". Kate does not make "sensible" consoling remarks:

> Kate sat down and kept silent. She was thinking that she had indeed made a long journey in the last months. Before it she could not have sat quiet, while a girl her daughter's age wept with misery because of her, Kate's, power to darken her future. Kate, at the other end of what she suddenly was feeling as a long interior journey, would have been 'sensible', made balanced remarks of one kind or another, attempted consolation - because she had still believed that consolation could be given. yes, that was where she had changed. She remarked: 'Where I think you may be wrong is that you seem to be thinking that if you decide not to become one thing, the other thing you become has to be better.' (p.199)

This is the crux of the novel. It is one thing to reject the role society has given you, but altogether another thing to attempt to find a new identity. As Bordo states in the above quotation, "to deny the unity and stability of identity is one thing". However, to find new modes of being "is another", because "the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time", our locatedness, therefore, in the possible identity positions society has to offer at this moment.[126] Kate doubts whether Maureen can find any "better" alternatives than marriage and motherhood, asking her "And what are you going to be instead?" (p.200), to which tears come back into Maureen's voice (p.201).

Indeed, the novel ends with a suggestion of the "dark" of the title which this "summer" comes "before". Maureen holds a party which she organizes over the telephone as efficiently, it seems, as Kate had organized her return home. The last image we are given of Maureen is of her "languishing gracelessly there in her William's arms":

> One could easily imagine them together, in their large house in Wiltshire or somewhere, deep in

---

126. Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism" Feminism / Postmodernism, Ed. Nicholson, op.cit., p.145. Quoted and discussed above (p.50-2).

> plentiful horses, children and dogs, everything according to the pattern, including their humorous comments on it. (p.240)

This lack of confidence in humour is traceable throughout the novel. Earlier Kate is described as giving "an appropriate smile" (p.15) when thinking of her husband's affairs, and of sharing "frank and certainly healthy laughter. (Laughter is by definition healthy.)" with her husband about the "first phase" ending (p.25). Yet "The point was, why the humorous grimace at all?" (p.25).

For Margaret Rose, to whom humour is an essential element of parody[127], this admission that laughter has failed, would render parody also useless. However, Hutcheon, Waugh and Hanoosh[128] highlight the self-conscious nature of parody. Significantly, this is an

127. Margaret A. Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern (Literature, Culture, Theory 5, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). Rose's definition of parody is that it performs a "comic refunctioning" (Parody, op.cit., p.52). She is critical of "the modern separation of the comic from the more meta-fictional and complex aspects of the parody" (ibid., p.155). Rose says, "many recent discussions of parody as meta-fiction have run the dual risks of reducing parody to meta-fiction at the expense of acknowledging the other traditionally defining characteristics of parody such as its comic structure and effect, and (after having eliminated the comic from parody) of even suggesting that all meta-fiction is parody" (ibid., p.92). Rose's focus on the "traditionally defining characteristics" of parody in Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern is both this book's strength and, to me, its weakness. I agree with Hutcheon's comment that "we must broaden the concept of parody to fit the needs of the art of our century" (*A* Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms (London: Routledge, 1985) p.11). Rose's model of parody, based on a substantial body of research into the history and usage of the term, proves limited in its potential applicability with Rose reading only Bradbury and Lodge through her model.

128. See, for example, Hutcheon's A Theory of Parody, op.cit. and A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1988), Waugh's Metafiction, op.cit. and Michele Hannoosh's essay "The Reflexive Function of Parody" (Comparative Literature 41 1989: 113-27).

element Kate notices is missing from the air hostesses in which she had "observed her own present condition" (p.56) the summer before:

> She cannot have been introspective or self-aware; for such a girl must necessarily be naive, to be prepared to do such work at all. (p.58)

Maureen's urging Kate to "just see yourself" (p.199) and Kate's experiments with her appearance have taught her self-consciousness. Having "followed herself" in the form of that "middle-aged woman" (p.182), Kate experiences a necessary disjunction of self which separates "what she really was" (p.50) from the "puppet" which conformed to the "strings" of others' expectations (p.182). To use Laing's terminology, Kate recognizes her "'true' self" as different from her "false self".[129]

Self-consciousness implies a perspective from an identity position other than that of what is socially visible. Indeed, the novel documents the strategic importance and usefulness of exactly this notion of a "'true' self". Lessing does create a gendered self which is "open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism" as described by Butler but her stance is *post*-humanist, unlike Butler's strongly *anti*-humanist stance.[130] To some extent Lessing's understanding of the self seems to

---

129. R. D. Laing uses this terminology throughout The Divided Self (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

130. Catherine Belsey's argument suggests to me that, in effect, the position Lessing takes up in relation to liberal humanism is similar to that of women in general. "Very broadly, [women] participate both in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and *irrational intuition*." (Belsey, Critical Practice op.cit., p.65-6 (my emphasis).) Lessing's interest in 'madness', "irrational intuition", is, indeed, one of her weapons against the liberal humanist self. I discuss this below (see particularly, Chapter Four, "Laing and 'Anti-Humanist Bullying'").

parallel Sartre's when he describes in Existentialism and Humanism, the common existentialist belief "that *existence* comes before *essence*"[131]:

> What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.[132]

Kate's "projection of [her] self"[133] involves creating a position from which she can "encounter" herself. She "defines [her]self afterwards" as "the individual who sat and watched and noted" (p.50), and from this "projection" she rejects the relational identity, that identity created not from what she "wills" but from others' "wills", which she had had:

> The light that is the desire to please had gone out. (p.237)

And it has been replaced with "a sense of self kept burning behind so many different phantasms" (p.48). Kate has learnt how to be an audience to her own performance of gender. Interviewed in a television programme about aging[134] it was interesting that it was this type of identity which Lessing saw as constant throughout her life. "There has always been the observer," she commented.

---

131. Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism (Trans. Philip Mairet, 1948. London: Methuen, 1989) p.26.

132. Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, op.cit., p.28. This, I would argue, is *post* rather than *anti*-humanist because, Sartre is retaining the notion of an "essence". Unlike liberal humanism, as he argues in Existentialism and Humanism, he starts his explorations of the self from its "existence".

133. Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, op.cit., p.28.

134. 'Seven Ages of Man', broadcast 16th August, 1996.

Kate expresses this self through her hair:

> Her experiences of the last months - her discoveries, her *self-definition*, what she hoped were now strengths - were concentrated here: that she would walk into her home with her hair undressed, with her hair tied straight back for utility; rough and streaky, and the widening grey band showing like a statement of intent. (p.237, my emphasis)

She does have to "walk into her home" (p.237) and a new hair style does not guarantee that she will not fall into her old role. However, the new self Kate has created does not, as we have seen, represent an essential inner sanctity. She realizes she will have to continue playing the mother and wearing "an appropriate smile" (p.15) when her husband tells her about his summer relationships, but she will be doing so self-consciously. Her hair is a deviation from the "clothes, hair-style, manners, posture, voice of Mrs Brown (or of Jolie Madame, as the trade put it)" (p.237). This deviation represents the self-consciousness and "critical distance" with which she will be returning to her roles. Her role playing now will be a "repetition with critical distance" of her previous behaviour, and this phrase, significantly, is Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody.[135] My argument is, therefore, that whilst Kate opens the novel *playing* the role of "the mother", "a base for members of the family" (p.15), she ends the novel *parodying* that role.

Kate has withdrawn from what her family demands her to be, to a "critical distance":

> 'But it seems to me as if little bits of me are distributed among my family, Tim's bit, Michael's bit, Eileen's piece - and so on. Or, rather, were distributed. Were. That's over.' (p.238)

---

135. Hutcheon states that "Parody is ... repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity". A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.6.

Her identity is no longer owned by her family and created in relation to their needs. As she says of her husband:

> 'What happens to him is always from the outside - it's impossible that I should be such a distance from him? ... quite obviously he's always listening to news from another continent. And he's never visited it nor intends to.' (p.238)

During the summer, Kate has made a "long journey" (p.199) to her own "continent" from where she can maintain a self-preserving "critical distance". Her hair belongs to that "continent" and not to her family:

> It was as if the rest of her, body, feet, even face, which was ageing but amenable, belonged to everyone else. But her hair - no! (p.237)

Like Maureen's hair doll with which she "shrieked" "'No, no!'" to William (p.241) before what is implied to be their inevitably impending marriage, Kate's hair is also a strategy of self-assertion:

> But now that it was important to her, a matter of self-preservation, that she should be able to make a statement, that she should be understood, then she would, and would not, do certain things to her hair... (p.237)

Indeed, Maureen's behaviour is an exaggerated parody of Kate's. Kate explained to Maureen that she was "going to make statements" through "how I do my hair" (p.238). Half and hour later Maureen has cut her hair off, plaited it into a doll and "her guests had been greeted by the hair doll, not her" (p.239). Each woman enforces the other's self-consciousness as they attempt to "open up" new parodic possibilities within the roles available to them. Kate's question - "'And what are you going to be instead?'" (p.200) - becomes their mutual quest, from the moment Maureen replied - "'What are *we* to do? What?'" (p.201, my emphasis).

CHAPTER THREE

"'WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BE INSTEAD?'":[136] COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

> "When I began writing there was pressure on writers not to be 'subjective'."[137]

> "And he teases me saying: 'And is the individual conscience going to produce your joyful communal unselfish art?' 'Why not? Perhaps the individual conscience is also a child learning to walk?'"[138]

Lessing had struggled with Kate and Maureen's questions in her earlier novel, The Golden Notebook. The Golden Notebook offers 'free women' as an ironic answer to Kate's "What are you going to be instead?" and gives several contradictory answers to Maureen's plea "What are we to do? What?". Lessing's return to these issues in The Summer Before the Dark (1973) eleven years after The Golden Notebook (1962), justifies Patricia Waugh's assessment of The Golden Notebook:

> On one level, of course, the novel is a failure. Doris Lessing has not yet formulated a viable alternative to the traditional novel, nor a viable

---

136. The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.200.

137. Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook (1962. Preface, Doris Lessing. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993) p.12.

138. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.312. In Chapter Three this novel (and its 'Preface') will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

> alternative politics to the male defined discourses of the Communist Party.[139]

Indeed, in documenting the failure of the Communist Party to provide Anna with an alternative to Kate's identity position as "the mother", we are reminded of the parallel made at the end of A Proper Marriage, between the sacrifice of the "personal" demanded by the Communist Party, and the threat Martha experiences from her family as a mother and a daughter.[140] The Golden Notebook does examine "alternatives" but Waugh is correct in arguing that they are not "viable".

Having agreed with Waugh's diagnosis of The Golden Notebook's failures quoted above, I also share her view of Lessing's success:

> She does, however, *'lay bare' their* [the traditional novel and the Communist Party's] *inadequacies* and thereby achieves a measure of release which breaks her own writer's block.[141]

Lessing's attempts to "lay bare" the "inadequacies" of the available answers to Kate's "What are you going to be instead?" are centred around her *theoretical explorations of the relation between "the individual" and "the collective",* and her *interrogation of realism.* The two are highly interrelated and to separate them is nearly impossible. In my attempt to first consider the collective identities available to Anna and explore some of the reasons for her rejection of these identity

---

139. Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1984) p.77.

140. See Mr. Maynard's comment that "with the French Revolution for a father and the Russian Revolution for a mother, you can very well dispense with a family" (A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.447) quoted above, p.31.

141. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.77 (my emphasis).

positions, I will, therefore, inevitably touch on Lessing's experiments with form.

In 'The Small Personal Voice', Lessing bemoans that her main theme in Children of Violence has not been recognized:

> It is this conflict which I am trying to explore in my series of novels, 'Children of Violence,' two volumes of which have appeared. Not one critic has understood what I should have thought would be obvious from the first chapter, where I was at pains to state the theme very clearly: that *this is a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective.*[142]

Earlier in the essay, Lessing identifies a need for a balance between individualism and the collective:

> One [perspective] sees man as the *isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary;* the other as *collective man with a collective conscience.* Somewhere *between these two,* I believe, is *a resting point,* a place of decision, hard to reach and precariously balanced. [...] The point of rest should be the writer's *recognition of man, the responsible individual, voluntarily submitting his will to the collective, but never finally;* and insisting on making his own personal and private judgements before every act of submission.[143]

However, in her 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook, five years after this essay, she admits that she had not discovered this balance, that she had had to write her way to it. To some extent, Anna's writer's block is her own and these blocks both revolve and resolve themselves

---

142. "The Small Personal Voice", collected in A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.18 (my emphasis). I have quoted this statement in the section above on Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage (p.35) where I analyse the "individual conscience in its relations with the collective" identity of 'woman'.

143. "The Small Personal Voice", A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.15-6 (my emphasis).

around these twin issues I have identified of subjectivity and form:

> At least I understood that the way over, or through this dilemma, the unease at writing about 'petty personal problems' was to recognize that *nothing is personal,* in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. [...] The way to deal with the *problem of 'subjectivity'*, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual[144] who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way *to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general,* as indeed life always does...[145]

The difficulty was not only "the problem of 'subjectivity'" but also that of finding a form to express the "resting point" between "the isolated individual" and "collective man with a collective conscience". She needed to discover this "point of rest", "hard to reach and precariously balanced", *and*

---

144. This was a very common Communist criticism during the mid-century. It is a criticism Sartre in his "defence of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it" (Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, op.cit., p.23) identifies as being levelled at existentialism by the Communists: "... we are also reproached for leaving out of account the solidarity of mankind and considering man in isolation. And this, say the Communists, is because we base our doctrine upon pure subjectivity - upon the Cartesian "I think": which is the moment in which solitary man attains to himself; a position from which it is impossible to regain solidarity with other men who exist outside of the self. The *ego* cannot reach them through the *cogito.*" (To support my claim that this was a common Communist criticism of the mid-century it is helpful to note that Existentialism and Humanism was published in 1946 (in French) and in 1948 (in English).)

145. Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.13 (my emphasis). Patricia Waugh makes the point about The Golden Notebook healing Lessing's own writer's block with a quotation from the interview with Raskin. See Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern (London: Routledge, 1989) p.205, and Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice (1974. Ed. Paul Schlueter, London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994) p.172-3: "Since writing The Golden Notebook I've become less personal. I've floated away from the personal."

make that "point" visible to her readers as well.[146] Interestingly, both 'The Small Personal Voice' and the 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook express disappointment at the critics' failure to see her point. In the same interview[147] as Waugh quotes from for evidence of Lessing's recovery from writers' block by "[becoming] less personal"[148], Lessing also describes her struggle with form:

> Maybe because I was *determined to reach people the form of the book* [The Four-Gated City] *has been shot to hell.* [...] I've had Children of Violence set up for twenty years. By the time I wrote the last volume I'd put myself into a damned cage, but it's *probably better now that I've heaved the rules out.* I'm very *proud of the form* of The Golden Notebook.[149]

Here Lessing makes a direct connection between her desire "to reach people" and her having "heaved the rules out" of the traditional novel. (I will return to "the form of the book" later.)

The solution Lessing proposes to the individual / collective contradiction in the above quotation from the 'Preface' seems indebted to post-structuralist thinking as she challenges the binary opposition of individual / collective by revealing their interdependence. It is surprising to find Lessing keen in the 1972 'Preface' to dissolve individuality into the collective when a year

---

146. These quotations are taken from the above extracts from Lessing's 'The Small Personal Voice' essay (op.cit.) and her 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook (op.cit.).

147. Lessing, A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., "Doris Lessing at Stony Brook: An Interview by Jonah Raskin, 1969, pp.65-81.

148. Patricia Waugh, op.cit., p.205. Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice (1974. Ed. Paul Schlueter, London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994) p.72-3.

149. Lessing, A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.69 (my emphasis).

later The Summer Before the Dark documents a crucial struggle for the survival of Kate's individuality in the face of pressure to conform to the "specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission".[150] The Summer Before the Dark asserts the need for Kate to distinguish herself from the collective identity of women, from the weight of being female implied by this quotation:

> *A woman*, as she might have done *any time during the past several hundred years*, stood under a tree, holding a crowded tray.[151]

The collective identity of this "woman" threatens Kate Brown, just as Dr. Stern's "number of young married women"[152] threatened Martha in A Proper Marriage. These are dystopias of collective identity. Kate realizes she has lived the "taxing"[153] roles of mother and wife, sacrificing a sense of self in order to distribute "little bits" of herself among her family.[154] She describes her "body, feet, even face" as belonging to "everyone else".[155] Martha refuses to do this and leaves her family for the Communist Party. However, as illustrated above,[156] the irony is that the Communist Party demands a similar sacrifice of selfhood as the role of mother. In The Golden Notebook, Lessing focuses on these contradictions between the individual and the collective and undermines the liberal humanist rational

---

150. Belsey, Critical Practice op.cit., p.65. Quoted above, p.44-5.

151. Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.12 (my emphasis).

152. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.355.

153. Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.48.

154. Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.238.

155. ibid., p.237.

156. Discussed above, p.31 and p.65.

self more radically than in the novels I have considered so far.

Anna Freeman is offered several collective identities into which she could melt her own individuality. Marriage, the Communist Party, Mother Sugar's Jungian archetypal myths, the label of 'Free Women' and the role of 'Artist' as determined by Mother Sugar and the Communist ideal, are all finally rejected. By considering in turn why she rejects each of these subject-positions, I hope to illustrate that Lessing does, indeed, "'lay bare' their inadequacies and thereby achieves a measure of release"[157].

The failure of marriage and the Communist Party to offer Anna a satisfactory subject-position are inter-related to some extent. In A Proper Marriage, as noted above, the Communist Party replaces Martha's family[158], but in A Ripple From the Storm, it is partly Martha's attitude *as a Communist* which leads her to marry Anton.[159] Just like Willi (Max) in 'The Yellow Notebook', Anton is the party leader. These relationships seem more reliant on the needs of the group dynamics than on love or sexual attraction. As Anna notes in 'The Yellow Notebook':

> Outside observers might have, and probably did, think the link-up was Willi and Maryrose, Paul and myself. [...] Of course the reason why these romantic, adolescent relationships were possible was

---

157. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.77; Quoted above, p.65.

158. See Mr. Maynard's comment quoted above - "'I suppose with the French Revolution for a father and the Russian Revolution for a mother, you can very well dispense with a family,' he observed." A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.447.

159. The marriage is described as "nothing but a formality". Doris Lessing, A Ripple From the Storm (Children of Violence 3 1958. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993) p.225.

> because of my relationship with Willi which was, as I've said, almost a-sexual. If there is a couple in the centre of a group with a real full sexual relationship it acts like a catalyst for the others, and often, indeed, destroys the group altogether. I've seen many such groups since, political and unpolitical, and one can always judge the relationship of the central couple (because there is always a central couple) by the relationships of the couples around them. (p.139)

Sex seems to destroy both these relationships. When Willi reclaims Anna sexually from Paul, Anna feels:

> I remember lying there and hating him and wondering why the only time I could remember him making love to me with any conviction was when he knew I had just made love to someone else.
>
> That incident finished Willi and me. [...] And so a 'sexless' relationship was ended finally, by sex. (p.148)

Similarly Martha's sexual relationship with Anton is a failure:

> The act of sex was short and violent, so short she was uninvolved. [...] There was something essentially contradictory between the image of the revolutionary, essentially masculine, powerful and brave, and how Anton had behaved with her in bed. Yet *the need in her to admire and be instructed was so great* that she was on the point of telling herself: It must be my fault and not his. And yet no sooner had she reached this *point of self-abnegation* than her experience told her there was something wrong with Anton.[160]

This "need in her to admire and be instructed" points to Martha's yearning towards "self-abnegation" in the face of the collective ideals of Communism. Martha is surprised and angry that Anton's treatment of her changes so greatly:

> She thought that ever since Anton had 'kissed her on the forehead' he had been taking her formally to the

---

160. Lessing, A Ripple From the Storm, op.cit., p.201-2 (my emphasis).

> Grill once or twice a week. On these occasions his manner towards her was different.
>
> Why does he do it? I don't like it, she thought... It's the way he does it - everything so careful and so planned, as if he were saying: Tonight I shall sleep with you and this is preparation for it. Most of the week I'm a comrade, a friend, and then *he turns me into something else.*[161]

These attempts to make shared Communist thinking the basis for marriage and children destroys the idealism, or what Anna terms, "naivety" necessary for believing in the myth of romantic love. Martha decides to marry Anton because "it's nothing but a formality after all, it will make things easy for him.".[162]

Anna's commitment to Communism also seems reliant upon this "naivety" which is destroyed by the growing evidence of the terrible nature of Stalin's regime.[163] As Sage argues, "Anna's wretchedness", her individual decision to reject the collective identity of 'Communist', "is displaced to make a public plot about the failure of idealism".[164] Jeanette King regards this

---

161. Lessing, A Ripple From the Storm, op.cit., p.222-3 (my emphasis). This provides a parallel to the incident discussed above when Donovan dresses Martha in *Martha Quest*, and then instructs her that she "really must change [herself] for a dress like this" (*Martha Quest*, op.cit., p.163).

162. Lessing, A Ripple From the Storm, op.cit., p.225.

163. Anna discusses three letters she has had from Comrades an this topic: "At that time I and similar types were spending a lot of time fighting inside the Party - *a naive lot we were*, trying to persuade people it was *much better to admit that things stank in Russia* than to deny it. Well, I suddenly got letters from all three of them - independently... The point is, these letters were interchangeable. [...] Well, surely the thought follows - *what stereotype am I? What anonymous whole am I part of*?" (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.63, my emphasis)

164. Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.53.

"plot" as a battle between "irony" and "naivety".[165] Whilst Anna finds the "elaborate ironies and complicities of the initiated"[166] one of the pleasures of Communist Party membership, ultimately she rejects them. Asked to play the game of disputing the quality of the novels proposed for publication, she tires of the unspoken ironies and refuses to participate:

> This is the overture, so to speak, to what is expected to follow. I will challenge him and he will argue. The end will be the same, because the decision has already been taken. The book will be published. [...] But suddenly I lose interest. I say: 'Very well, you'll publish it. There's no more to be said.' (p.309)

This incident precipitates her leaving the Communist Party.

King reads this incident as an act of Anna's assertion of naivety over irony, just as in her relationship with Paul/Michael:

> To love means to give birth to 'a spontaneous creative faith', existing in spite of the intellectual awareness of the probable end of that relationship. [...] Naivety is thus ultimately a creative force enabling a woman - for it is women who are shown to be in possession of this quality - to act *as if* her love will last forever, as it also enables the political idealist to pursue a vision, whatever political expediency might dictate as a wiser course of action.[167]

Whilst her naivety may have facilitated her happiness with Paul/Michael, the news Dr West brings of Michael

---

165. Jeanette King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.47-8. See also below, (p.123) where I discuss Anna's dream of Paul Tanner's "dry critical irony" defeating "the idealism in him" (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.536).

166. Quoted by King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.47.

167. King, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.48.

that he had escaped a "flighty piece"[168], also suggests it caused her to live as something less than she is capable of. If we consider her belief in a man's role to "name" women, to be called a "pretty flighty piece" is to be named "on such a low level that you ought to be angry"[169]. Her naivety also increased her shock and pain at his departure for Nigeria. Her story summary of the woman who became everything her lover had wanted of her, takes this notion of changing oneself for a relationship, of becoming what you are "named", to its negative extreme[170]. The reinstatement of the ironic, thinking Anna is presented, therefore, as a positive thing:

> And then *I thought how ironical* it was that in order to recover myself I had to use precisely that Anna which Michael dislikes most; *the critical and thinking Anna*. (p.297, my emphasis)

This "critical and thinking Anna" can, perhaps, be equated to the "observer" which Lessing has identified as her "sense of self kept burning behind so many different phantasms".[171] Following her own rejection of marriage and Communism, Lessing has identified "the observer" as a constant identity position throughout her life.[172] Indeed, in her essay 'You Are Damned, We Are Saved' in Prisons We Chose To Live Inside, Lessing describes these

---

168. "He told me just before he left he'd got himself involved with a pretty flighty piece." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.207.

169. Ironically, this comment is made by Anna herself to Saul. The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.508.

170. "Ella finds this story inside herself", in which a woman "becomes everything" her man "has criticized her for being at that moment when he drops her". "The point of the story is that this new personality has been created by him..." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.405.

171. Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.48.

172. Lessing in a television interview in the 'Seven Ages of Man' series, broadcast on 16th August, 1996 states: "There has always been the observer."

periods of naivety, when "the critical and thinking" self is suspended, as "lunacy".[173] She gives as an example of this "group lunacy" her own involvement in Communism. She describes the beliefs of the Communist group in Africa which she was involved with:

> We believed that everyone in the world would be living in harmony, love, plenty and peace. For ever.
> This was insane. And yet we believed it.[174]

The suspension of "the critical and thinking" self in favour of naive belief, is shown, in this essay, to be highly politically dangerous.

The next collective identities Anna rejects are Mother Sugar's Jungian archetypes. This rejection is based on her sense of crisis and change:

> I don't want to be told when I wake up, terrified by a dream of total annihilation, because of the H-bomb exploding, that people felt that way about the cross-bow. It isn't true. There is something new in the world. (p.415)

She sees more differences than similarities between her present technological, violent age and the past. Whilst she acknowledges Mother Sugar's archetypes and stories helped her, she wants to relegate them to a part of the process rather than view them as a final achievement:

> 'But now I can feel. I'm open to everything. But no sooner do you accomplish that, than you say quickly - put it away... *turn it into a story or into history.* [...] Yes, I know what you want me to say - that because I've rescued so much private pain-material -... and *"worked it through"* and accepted it and *made it general,* because of that I'm free and strong. Well all right, I'll accept it and say it. And what now? *I'm tired of the wolves and*

---

173. Doris Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside (New York: Harper, 1987) p.27.

174. Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.28.

> *the castle and the forests and the priests.* I can cope with them... But I've told you, *I want to walk off, by myself, Anna Freeman.*' [...] 'Because I'm convinced that *there are whole areas of me made by the kind of experience women haven't had before...*' (p.415, my emphasis)

Mother Sugar assumes Anna is implying that there have not been "artist-women", "women who were independent" and "women who insisted on sexual freedom" (p.415) before. As we have seen above, Anna's sense of the novelty of her experience is not particularly based on her position as a woman. The H-bomb is a new threat to both men and women.

Whilst Anna rejects Mother Sugar's archetypes because there has been so much change, Molly, and, therefore, to some extent Anna, reject the position of "free women" because there has not been enough change. Men, for example Paul/Michael, still view sexual relationships as "women against men" (p.198). Anna replies that, "that doesn't mean anything to me" (p.198) and later has to ask Paul/Michael:

> 'But why do you see marriage as a kind of fight? I don't see it as a battle!' (p.206)

Molly/Julia's retort to Anna/Ella's ironical suggestion that the sense of living "in a sort of sexual mad house" is the price they pay for being "free women", points to a lack of change, as does Anna/Ella's reply:

> Ella says drily: 'My dear Julia, we've chosen to be free women, and this is the price we pay, that's all.'
>
> 'Free,' says Julia. 'Free! What's the use of us being free if they aren't? I swear to God, that every one of them, even the best of them, have the old idea of good women and bad women.'
>
> 'And what about us? Free, we say, yet the truth is they get erections when they're with a woman they don't give a damn about, but we don't have an orgasm unless we love him. What's free about that?' (p.404)

After this exchange, Anna describes a change in Ella/herself:

> Ella finds herself in a new phase of mood. She becomes completely sexless. (p.404)

'Free Women' ends with Molly's complete rejection of that role by marrying. Anna turns to "matrimonial welfare work" (p.576) in an ironical acceptance of the failure of the subject-position "free women".

Anna's rejection of a tradition of female experience, of what Mother Sugar calls "a great line of women stretching out behind you into the past" (p.415), is, therefore, linked both to her repudiation of Mother Sugar's archetypes and to her ironic attitude towards her position as a "free woman". It is also, for O'Rourke (and for Mother Sugar), tied to her writing:

> ... Doris Lessing's ambivalence towards other women writers and, as the parodies within The Golden Notebook suggest, the idea of writing as a woman, indicates a consciousness of the possibly undesirable consequences of such an identification.[175]

O'Rourke goes on to argue:

> Whenever Lessing has addressed this area, either implicitly or explicitly, it has been in such a way that the claims of art and being an artist take precedence. *Art*, in some sense, *is understood to be beyond the humdrum claims of gender, class or race.*

---

175. Rebecca O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor, Jenny. ed. Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing (London: Routledge, 1982) p.209. Elaine Showalter holds a similar opinion of Lessing's attitude towards being a woman and labelled a feminist. In A Literature of Their Own she writes: "... Lessing has not yet confronted the essential feminist implications of her own writing..." (Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, op.cit., p.311).

> One is, or should aspire to be, an Artist creating Art.[176]

However, whilst Lessing's 'Preface' may uphold such an understanding of her position[177] I do not think the text of The Golden Notebook upholds O'Rourke's view.

For Mother Sugar, the 'Artist' seems to represent something absolute. The roles of 'artist' and 'woman', like the myths of the "wolves and the castle and the forests and the priests", are Mother Sugar's cures for Anna's "block" and inability to feel. Mother Sugar proposes that if Anna can identify with these collective identities she will be able to write again. Anna resists this:

> 'Of course, you are a real woman.' She [Mother Sugar] uses this word, a woman, a real woman, exactly as she does artist, a true artist. An absolute. When she said, you are a real woman, I began to laugh, helplessly... She was on the point of using the occasion to bring in the word 'art'... (p.218)

Anna's understanding of the 'artist' (and of being a 'woman') is different. She rejects the idea of the 'artist' as an "absolute" or a universal identity. When Mother Sugar asks, "Do you keep a diary?", Anna feels "so angry":

> I felt as if, in mentioning the diary, in making it part of her process, so to speak, she was robbing me of it. (p.219)ts

---

176. O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed., op.cit., p.209 (my emphasis).

177. "Of course this attempt on my part assumed that that filter which is a woman's way of looking at life has the same validity as the filter which is a man's way... Setting that problem aside, or rather, not even considering it..." Preface, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.11.

Indeed, Mother Sugar does seem to have robbed Anna of her diary, as it gives way to a scrap-book:

> [At this point the diary stopped as a personal document. It continued in the form of newspaper cuttings, carefully pasted in and dated.] (p.219, the square brackets are Lessing's)

For Anna it seems a "true artist" is "the small personal voice", not an "absolute", a collective or a universal voice. Her "block", as is evident from the pages and pages of writing presented in the notebooks, is not an inability to actually write. Rather, it prevents her from publishing that writing. Tommy realizes that with "whole books you've written for yourself which no one ever sees" (p.35), Anna's problem is not a creative "block". Tommy diagnoses fear, contempt or a lack of responsibility as the reasons for Anna's secrecy. Either, he tells her:

> 'You're afraid of writing what you think about life, because you might find yourself in an exposed position, you might expose yourself, you might be alone.' (p.54-5)

Or, Tommy suggests, it is a "sort of contempt" for her readership (p.55). Sharing Anna's opinion that "people aren't taking responsibility for each other", Tommy believes that not to share her "truth" with others is irresponsible:

> 'But you write and write in notebooks, saying what you think about life, but you lock them up, and that's not being responsible.' (p.55-6)

Anna herself realizes:

> 'If I saw it in terms of an artistic problem, then it'd be easy, wouldn't it? We could have ever such intelligent chats about the modern novel.' (p.56)

Instead, Anna "had been most looking forward to talking over with" Molly the three identical letters from the

three comrades Winters, Colhoun and Fowler which made her wonder, "What anonymous whole am I part of?" (p.63). The Communist suppression of "the small personal voice" is much nearer the reason for Anna's diaries being private than any "artistic problem". Anna identifies "a phenomenon in the arts" in 1957 in England which she had not foreseen:

> ... 'a whole lot of people, who've never had anything to do with the Party, suddenly standing up, and exclaiming, just as if they had just thought it out for themselves, that little novels or plays about the emotions don't reflect reality. The reality... is economics, or machine guns mowing people down who object to the new order.' (p.57-8)

Anna connects this with "Basil Ryan - the painter"[178] announcing that:

> '... he'd never paint again. He said it was because the world is so chaotic, art is irrelevant.' (p.57)

With this collective view of art prevalent, Anna's reluctance to publish is understandable, for, as Lessing says in the 'Preface', "there was no way of *not* being intensely subjective" (p.12-3). Unable to write in anything but "the small personal voice", Anna was, indeed, "afraid" of exposing herself or finding herself "alone", for the pressure to produce 'collective art' "was hard to withstand, coming from one's nearest and dearest, and from people doing everything one respected most" (p.12).

Whilst giving a lecture upholding "communal, unindividual" art forged "out of a group consciousness", and rejecting the "painful individuality of the art of

---

178. It is interesting to note Tommy's point that, "The thing about mother and Anna is this; one doesn't say, Anna Wulf the writer, or Molly Jacobs the actress - or only if you don't know them. They aren't - what I mean is - they aren't what they *do*..." (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.52).

the bourgeois era", Anna "began to stammer and couldn't finish" (p.312). Unable to believe in this Communist ideal of communal art or to write it, Anna both stops giving lectures and stops publishing. Jack believes Communism needs a long time before it will start being successful:

> 'Anna, communism isn't four decades old yet. So far, most of the art it has produced is bad. But what makes you think these aren't the first steps of a child learning to walk?' (p.312)

Anna's reply points to Lessing's theory of seeing the individual "as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective" (p.13):

> 'I don't know what to think. But I'm beginning to be afraid that I've been talking nonsense. Do you realize that all the arguments we ever have are about the same thing - the *individual conscience*, the *individual sensibility*?' And he teases me, saying: 'And *is the individual conscience going to produce your joyful communal unselfish art?' 'Why not? Perhaps the individual conscience is also a child learning to walk?'* (p.312, my emphasis)

When discussing her writing with Molly, Anna recognizes the phrases of communist jargon in their discussion, and inverts the Communist ideal of the individual's relation to the collective in art:

> 'After all, you aren't someone who writes little novels about the emotions. You write about what's real.' [Molly says.]
>
> Anna almost laughed again, and then said soberly: 'Do you realize how many of the things we say are just echoes? That remark you've just made is an echo from Communist Party criticism - at its worst moments, moreover. God knows what that remark means, I don't. I never did. If Marxism means anything, it means that a little novel about the emotions should reflect "what's real" since the emotions are a function and a product of a society...' (p.57)

This inversion, by claiming the individual is a product of the collective, renders "the small personal voice"

collective, "making the personal general" (p.13). It also involves the rejection of the Marxist, O'Rourke's and Mother Sugar's traditional models of the 'Artist'.

Whilst Lessing describes Anna's "block" as relating to "the disparity between the overwhelming problems of war, famine, poverty and the tiny individual", it is the ideal of the 'Artist' which really makes it impossible for Anna to write:

> But what was intolerable, what really could not be bourne any longer, was this monstrously isolated, monstrously narcissistic, pedestalled paragon. It seems that in their own way the young have seen this and changed it, creating a culture of their own in which hundreds and thousands of people make films, assist in making films, make newspapers of all sorts, make music, paint pictures, write books, take photographs. They have *abolished that isolated, creative, sensitive figure - by copying him in hundreds of thousands.* (p.12, my emphasis)

Lessing implies that Anna's idea of reaching collective art through the individual conscience has become a reality. Patricia Waugh sees this problem of relating the individual to the collective not only as a Marxist problem or "the writer's task for that time" (p.13) as Lessing proposes, but also as the feminist's task:

> Feminism must believe in the possibility of a community of address situated in an oppositional space which can allow for the connection of the 'small personal voice' (Doris Lessing's term) of one feminist to another and to other liberationist movements. [...] It seems to me that all along feminism has been engaged in a struggle to reconcile *context-specific difference or situatedness* with *universal political aims...*[179]

When Anna plays "the game" (p.480) she is trying to "reconcile" her "context-specific difference or situatedness" with the "universal" and "political". She

---

179. Patricia Waugh, Practising Postmodernism / Reading Modernism, (Interrogating Texts. London: Arnold, 1992) p.126 (my emphasis).

is attempting "the writer's task for that time" (p.13). In "the game", Anna first "created the room [she] sat in". Then she would "move out of the room, creating the house" and, moving further out until "slowly, slowly, [she] would create the world", she attempted to hold this cosmic vision alongside her mind's picture of her little room (p.480):

> Sometimes I could reach what I wanted, a simultaneous knowledge of vastness and of smallness. (p.481)

In Martha Quest there is a sense of Martha being stuck in the "smallness" of the mud hut. When she attempts to create a narrative of escape away from that, represented by the dress she makes, it is undermined by mud ruining her dress[180]. Looking out at the bush, it "was so familiar the vast landscape caused her only the prickling feeling of claustrophobia".[181] Escaping beyond her situatedness, Martha has a vision of "a noble city, set foursquare" and it is significant that:

> Outside one of the gates stood her parents, the Van Rensbergs, in fact most of the people of the district, forever excluded from the golden city because of their pettiness of vision and small understanding...[182]

Escaping from the "smallness" of her context-specific situatedness, Martha banishes it from her vision. This vision is closer to Anna's usual perspective, but Anna does not see herself as "stern and remorseless", "standing at the gate to exclude the unworthy".[183] Instead, Anna is "the unworthy" and her vision of the "universal" is not a utopian one like Martha's.

---

180. See my analysis of the dress and mud above, p.22-5.

181. Lessing, Martha Quest, op.cit., p.9.

182. ibid., p.17.

183. ibid., p.17-8.

Anna's understanding of the "universal political" is based on her experiences as a Marxist of collective identities, violence and injustice. As she says to Saul:

> 'It's all very well, but what we are saying, our attitude, stems from an assumption that people can be expected to be courageous enough to stand up for their individual thinking.' (p.494)

However, people give in to the pressures of the collective:

> 'Look, take us, there isn't one of us who hasn't done this thing, saying one thing publicly and another privately [...] There isn't one of us who hasn't succumbed to the pressure, fear of being thought a traitor. [...] So what I'm saying is that precisely the kind of person in our time who by definition might have been expected to be fearless, outspoken, truthful, has turned out to be sycophantic, lying, cynical, either from fear of torture, or prison or fear of being thought a traitor.' (p.494)

Now that Anna feels the Communist Party has failed her, she wants to escape into herself. In one of her dream sequences a "disinterested person" tells her:

> 'Anna, you are betraying everything you believe in; you are sunk in subjectivity, yourself, your own needs.' (p.534)

Whilst this is the nightmare of man as "the isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary", the "I, I, I, I, I" of Saul Green (p.487 and p.507), Anna's disillusioned attitude towards the Communist Party belongs to a negative vision of "collective man with a collective conscience".[184] As I have said above, Lessing hopes in her writing, as Anna attempts in "the game", to reach "a resting point":

---

184. "The Small Personal Voice", A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.15-16.

> Somewhere between these two, I believe, is a resting point, a place of decision, hard to reach and precariously balanced.[185]

That it is "hard to reach" is, for Anna, partly due to the pressures of the Communist Party not to be subjective, but also due to the weight of collective misery (or, at least, potential collective misery in a post-atomic world). There is, for example, the instance quoted above when her "diary stopped as a personal document" and "continued in the form of newspaper cuttings" (p.219). The collective, literally, silences "the small personal voice". The other image of the threat of the "universal political" violence to the individual is linked to Anna's "game" for it inverts her process. Instead of her mental journey away from the room towards a world wide vision, the world invades Anna's room in the form of newspaper clippings of disasters, war, violence, famine and scientific military inventions. This is a poignant image of Lessing's theme of "the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" and it is one she also uses in The Four-Gated City. To contemplate the similarities and differences between these two uses of this image is helpful, and leads into a consideration of the role of madness in Lessing's treatment of subjectivity and in her interrogation of liberal humanism.

Like Anna after her relationship with Michael/Paul, Mark "had lost innocence, naivety" and had become "cynical".[186] Both had become disillusioned with the Communist Party and this had resulted in isolation. ("Mark was alone."[187]) Anna was also particularly alone having moved out of Molly's flat and sent Janet to

---

185. ibid., p.15-6.

186. Doris Lessing, The Four-Gated City (Children of Violence 5 1969. London: Panther-Granada, 1972) p.308.

187. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.308.

school. The activity of covering their walls with the 'facts' of "the poisoned world" seems to *happen to* Mark and Anna.[188] In both cases it is an attempt "to see what was really happening - you know, *really* happening",[189] having lost the Communist Party as a conceptual framework through which to view the world. This activity of creating the world crisis on their walls, foregrounds issues of individuality and subjectivity. Mark is accused by his old communist friends of succumbing to 'subjectivity' because his maps do not recognize "nationalisms or politics":

> ... various ex-members of the old committee, now all differently aligned, had protested that Mark was showing 'subjectivity' - because the essence of the unconstituted committees anywhere is a readiness to manipulate and reclassify in terms of the nation and the political.[190]

"Overnight", therefore, Mark is labelled a "reactionary". Mark's walls do differ from Anna's in that Mark does include 'subjective' comments and items amongst the 'objective' news. "Facts objective and subjective", like "the first moon rocket" and "Lynda['s] dreams" share the same colour code on Mark's wall.[191] Soon after starting the project, "nobody, or rather, none of the old friends, was allowed into the study but Martha".[192] She helps Mark to collate information. However, Mark's room becomes a shared, collective experience:

---

188. The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.308: "In his study he had put up two enormous maps of the world: this at random, and without, or so it seemed, knowing what he was going to do with them when he had them up."

The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.563: "Anna found that she was spending her time in a curious way."

189. The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.308.

190. ibid., p.309.

191. ibid., p.448.

192. ibid., p.309.

> ... why did they, 'the children', think that he, Mark, spent so much time on manipulating this damned room? For himself? - well, partly, it got one's mind clear, it helped to fit one fact with another, which say what one liked, was the hardest possible thing to do - but no, *he did it for them.*[193]

It seems all his 'family' spends time contemplating his study. Brandon asks:

> ... 'why do you fix your room up like this? Because the way it looks to me is, it's just stating the problem.'[194]

Following the identification of the problem, the next step is a difficult one. It is what Mark is "waiting for" and the others admit they share his position:

> 'I did have to do this - you know, set out a problem, get the shape of it. But now - what? I sit here by myself, and just take it in.'[195]

As Brandon says, "so far" they are "just stating the problem",[196] and, due to The Four-Gated City's more apocalyptic vision and its positive portrayal of madness, the "problem" presented by Mark's study is a rather different "problem" from that presented by Anna's room. In The Four-Gated City, apocalypse is looming and 'madness' is the only route to survival. Therefore, there is a need to share this room and its message, particularly with the children. The possible 'madness' or, at least, depression, it may cause the individual are not presented as threatening or negative forces as they are in the 'Free Women' sections of The Golden Notebook.

---

193. ibid., p.450 (my emphasis).

194. ibid., p.455.

195. ibid., p.457.

196. ibid., p.457.

The Golden Notebook has a more practical and less visionary tone than The Four-Gated City. Anna feels threatened by erasure and must struggle to keep alive a sense of self and remain in control:

> It was as if she, *Anna, were a central point* of awareness, being attacked by a million uncoordinated facts, and *the central point would disappear* if she proved unable to weigh and balance the facts, take them all into account. (p.563, my emphasis)

There is a sense of a dual reality in The Golden Notebook which is linked to Anna's simultaneous vision of "smallness" and "vastness". On a vast scale, it is 'madness' to continue living as we do, but in the "small", everyday world, Anna is a mother who knows:

> ... that on the day Janet came home from school, she would become Anna, Anna the responsible, and the obsession would go away. She knew that Janet's mother being sane and responsible was far more important than the necessity of understanding the world; and one thing depended on the other. (p.564)[197]

In a sense, one needs to be 'mad' to live in either world, and certainly it takes great mental effort to try and live in both as Anna does:

---

197. Anna's responsibility for Janet acts like a passport back to everyday 'reality'. She is bitter that it is a responsibility men do not have to take on. (See, for example p.299 of The Golden Notebook.) Lynda in The Four-Gated City, rejects the responsibilities of the roles of wife and mother when she goes 'mad'. Martha, in contrast, takes on responsibility easily - sometimes too easily for her own good. She is drawn into the Coldridge household despite her efforts to tell herself: "... there is no reason in the world why you should feel guilty [about leaving]. None. It's not rational. It's not your responsibility, it never was." (The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.116) When Martha decides to shut herself off from the world for a period of inner exploration, the thought of her mother's immanent visit acts like Anna's daughter does, as a passport back to Martha "the responsible".

> This was 'the breakdown' she had foreseen; the 'cracking up'. Yet it did not seem to her that she was even slightly mad; but rather that people who were not as obsessed as she was with the inchoate world mirrored in the newspapers were all out of touch with an awful necessity. Yet she knew she was mad. (p.546)

Milt/Saul rescues Anna from her insanity:

> Then he went to a wall and began stripping off the bits of newsprint. [...] The job took a long time, over an hour. [...] At last he said: 'Well, that's fixed. Another soul for sanity.' (p.570)

Anna thanks him for 'saving' her and Milt's reply implies it was a case of a simple practical measure:

> 'Thank you for taking that nonsense off my walls. Thank you. Another few days and I really would have gone round the bend.'
> 'It's a pleasure. I'm a flop, Anna, at the moment of speaking, I don't need you to tell me, but there's one thing I'm good at, seeing someone in trouble and knowing what strong measures to take.' (p.573)

This incident is described in the 'Free Women' section of The Golden Notebook and, with its parodic tone, is, therefore, difficult to interpret. In her notebooks, Anna's encounter with 'madness' and with Saul Green is far more complex. I would also argue that her notebooks present madness more positively, more as it is viewed in The Four-Gated City, than in 'Free Women'. Indeed, in 'The Blue Notebook', when Anna finds herself thinking of Mother Sugar in a similar fashion to the way Milt is portrayed in 'Free Women', as a soul saver, she rejects her:

> I keep thinking of Mother Sugar, but in a new way, as if the idea of her can save me. From what? *I don't want to be saved.* (p.480, my emphasis)

The Golden Notebook's double sense of madness, both as a positive means of dealing with subjectivity in a violent and apocalyptic world (as it is predominantly viewed in

The Four-Gated City) and as a negative threat to "responsible" subjectivity, is an example of Linda Hutcheon's paradoxical, postmodern contradiction and duality.

Whilst Lessing's positive model of madness undermines the liberal humanist understanding of the self, it cannot wholly replace it. Indeed, as the 'Other' of the rational liberal humanist self, Lessing's portrayal of 'madness' is completely dependent upon the liberal humanist ideology it challenges. In some ways, indeed, it "manages to install and reinforce"[198] the liberal notion of 'self', in that the madness is a means of breaking through to what R. D. Laing, retaining a certain element of essentialism, calls the "'true' self".[199] I shall consider Lessing's debt to Laing in the next section, but would like to note here that Lessing was inevitably also influenced by existentialism in her considerations of the 'self'.[200]

I would agree with Elizabeth Dipple's evaluation of her relation to this dominant post-Second World War philosophy:

> Unlike Iris Murdoch, who actively rebelled against Sartre's brand of existentialism and its strong influence over European thought after World War II, Lessing never seemed conscious of being in its grip. The obvious philosophical content of her work is irregular and achieved through autodidactic experimental means. She has apparently pored over a wide range of narrative forms, but over no purely philosophical narrative [...]. Nevertheless, the

---

198. Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) p.1.

199. See, for example, R. D. Laing, The Divided Self (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) discussed in the next section.

200. I have identified some parallels with Sartre above.

> word "totalization"[201] which characterizes Sartre's philosophical gropings, together with his sense of biography as the ideal exponent of existentialism, goes far in describing some of the anomalies in Lessing's work.[202]

Identifying a "Sartrean formula" in Lessing's quest "for wholeness, for a totalization of experience that can unify the world and the self", Dipple draws a parallel between "Sartre's quest for totalization" and Lessing's Children of Violence series:

> In his unceasing quest to find a language for the self and a narrative to contain it, Sartre saw the infusion of all details of the whole *ensemble* of himself into his work as part of the totalizing process. [...] Lessing's quest has been parallel, combining as Sartre's did the sexual, social, existential, and political, but in her case an anti-existential mystical solution is found, and her work finally lacks the frustration and the personal futility that haunt Sartre's.
>
> Lessing may have picked up her early existential concentration on the freedom of the self partly out of temperament, and partly from the *Zeitgeist* of the Sartrean 1950s and 1960s.[203]

It is important to remember from our limited Western European perspective, Lessing's background as an expatriate in South Africa. Her experiences of the terrible inequalities and violent denial of personal freedom the white "settlers" imposed on the black "natives" is probably a more important source for her "concentration on the freedom of the self". As Sage argues, "The colonial experience - the colonial metaphor - is central to her identity as a writer." (p.11) This is not to deny the similarities, identified by Dipple, between Sartre's existential quest and that of Lessing's Martha Quest.

---

201. Laing also uses the term "totality" in The Divided Self, op.cit., p.17.

202. Elizabeth Dibble, The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988) p.239-240.

203. ibid., p.240.

My readings of Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage concentrate on Martha's attempts to write herself a narrative of escape which is rather similar to Sartre's "projection of the self":

> Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be.[204]

This is a lesson Lessing makes Martha continually *re*learn. To live the "narrative of repetition", accepting identities which, like Kate's "Jolie Madame" dress, are prefabricated, whilst dreaming of what you "wish to be" is easy but dangerous. It prevents Martha from becoming "what [she] purposes to be".

---

204. Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, op.cit., p.28.

CHAPTER FOUR

LAING AND "ANTI-HUMANIST BULLYING"

> "This theme of 'breakdown', that sometimes when people 'crack up' it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions, has of course been written about by other people as well as by me, since then."[205]

Lessing's positive view of madness is heavily indebted to Laing's work. In The Divided Self (1960), Laing describes schizoid people as split:

> The term schizoid refers to an individual the *totality of whose experience* is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he *experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation*; moreover, he *does not experience himself as a complete person* but rather as 'split' in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on.[206]

Anna's attempts to compartmentalize life in her four notebooks and to keep her different roles and selves

---

205. Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.8. In Chapter Four this novel (and its 'Preface') will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

206. Laing, The Divided Self, op.cit., p.17 (my emphasis).

separate[207] are strategies like the schizoid's 'splitting'. Indeed, Laing makes a connection between the "sane schizoid" and the "psychotic schizophrenic" ways of "being-in-the-world" and describes his aim thus:

> In describing one way of going mad, I shall try to show that there is a comprehensive transition from the sane schizoid way of being-in-the-world to a psychotic way of being-in-the-world.[208]

According to this model, what we see in The Golden Notebook as 'madness' is actually the experience which arrests Anna's progress from a "sane schizoid" dividing up of her life to a 'mad' "psychotic schizophrenic" way of being-in-the-world. Lessing states in her 'Preface', that this understanding of "breakdown" as "a way of self-healing" is a "central theme" (p.8), as I have quoted above.[209]

Laing identifies "three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person: engulfment, implosion, petrification".[210] Laing argues that:

> A firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of

---

207. "He prefers Janet to have left for school before he wakes. And I prefer it, because it divides me. The two personalities - Janet's mother, Michael's mistress, are happier separated. It is a strain having to be both at once." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.301.

208. Laing, The Divided Self, op.cit., p.17.

209. Whilst Lessing acknowledges that this "has of course been written about by other people" (probably she is referring to Laing), she privileges her exploration of this theme because: "Here it is rougher, more close to experience, before experience has shaped itself into thought and pattern - more valuable perhaps because it is rawer material." (Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.8). Lessing's debt to Laing, it seems, must be placed next to her debt to "experience".

210. Laing, The Divided Self, op.cit., p.43.

> identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity.[211]

In the face of this threat the individual often attempts to isolate him or herself:

> The main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation. Thus, instead of the polarities of separateness and relatedness based on individual autonomy, there is the antithesis between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment), and complete aloneness (isolation).[212]

This highlights the significance of the beginning of Anna's 'breakdown' occurring in relative isolation from others. As I have noted above, she had, just before her 'madness', stopped sharing living space with Molly and her daughter. Anna's inner explorations, therefore, occur in isolation[213] and they enforce that isolation:

> I telephoned Molly. When she answered I realized I could not communicate what was happening to me, I could not talk to her. (p.522)

Anna "could not communicate", just as, in Lessing's latest novel, Love, Again, Sarah cannot explain the

---

211. ibid., p.44.

212. ibid., p.44. It is helpful to note that this echoes Lessing's criticism of the two opposite understandings of the individual in relation to the collective: "One sees man as the isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary; the other as collective man with a collective conscience. Somewhere between these two, I believe, is a resting point, a place of decision, hard to reach and precariously balanced." ('The Small Personal Voice, A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.15.)

213. "An Anna is coming to life that died when Janet was born." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.480.

turmoil of falling in love to Benjamin without making him believe she is 'mad':

> She thought, If I were to tell this man, even try to tell him, watering it down, making it less, what I've been feeling all the time since I first met him, he would walk quickly away from the lunatic.[214]

Molly discovers that to learn you are not alone in your condition does not necessarily help:

> 'Anna, is it only me? I feel as if I'm living inside a sort of improbable farce.' 'No, it isn't only you.' 'I know, and that makes it even worse.' (p.522)

However, also like Love, Again, in which Sarah's 'insanity' in falling in love is parallelled by Stephen's, Anna's 'madness' occurs alongside Saul's. At one point Anna suggests that the 'madness' she is experiencing is actually his:

> Then there was a moment of knowledge, I understood I'd gone (*18) right inside his craziness: he was looking for this wise, kind, all-mother figure, who is also sexual playmate and sister; and because I had become part of him, this is what I was looking for too, both for myself, because I needed her, and because I wanted to become her. I understood I could no longer separate myself from Saul, and that frightened me more than I have been frightened. (p.512)[215]

Frightened of loving and being loved after the pain Michael caused her, it seems her relationship with Saul is an exorcizing enactment of that fear of 'engulfment' and jealousy. In her psychoanalysis with Mother Sugar, she re-lives "private pain-material" she had suppressed in order to feel again and then turns it into stories. With Saul she lives out the jealousy she suppressed with

---

214. Doris Lessing, Love, Again (London: Flamingo-Harper, 1996) p.312.

215. The "(*18)" is from the numbering scheme Anna started to use in her diary.

Michael and then (as indicated above) turns him into a myth of a 'saviour' in her 'Free Women' novel.

Another aspect of Laing's theory which seems to have influenced Lessing is his notion that:

> 'A man without a mask' is indeed very rare. One even doubts the possibility of such a man. Everyone in some measure wears a mask, and there are many things we do not put ourselves into fully. In 'ordinary' life it seems hardly possible for it to be otherwise.[216]

This influence is perhaps more traceable in The Summer Before the Dark than in The Golden Notebook. Kate Brown adopts, to some extent, a "false-self system" in which her "'true' self" is hidden behind her complying maternal identity.[217] Her belief that her "body, feet, even face" belong to "everyone else",[218] ties in with Laing's view of the "false self":

> We said that the *false self arises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of the other*, or with what are imagined to be the other's intentions or expectations.[219]

However, this is also evident in The Golden Notebook.

The Golden Notebook presents a similar sense of motherhood as a "false self" that one adopts and which is controlled by an-other's need - the child's:

> The control and discipline of being a mother came so hard to me, that I can't delude myself that if I'd been a man, and not forced into self-control, I'd

---

216. Laing, The Divided Self, op.cit., p.95.

217. I use Laing's terminology in my exploration of Kate's model of the self in the section above on The Summer Before the Dark. See above, p.60.

218. Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.237.

219. Laing, The Divided Self, op.cit., p.98 (my emphasis).

> have been any different [from Michael's determination that children will not "cheat him of his freedom"]. (p.299)

Anna's communist identity is also one which can act as a "false self":

> Had lunch with John, the first time since I joined the Party. Began *talking as I do with my ex-Party friends*, frank acknowledgement of what is going on in Soviet Union. John went into *automatic defence of the Soviet Union*, very irritating. Yet this evening had dinner with Joyce, *New Statesman* circles, and she started to attack Soviet Union. Instantly *I found myself doing that automatic-defence-of-Soviet-Union act*, which I can't stand when other people do it. She went on; I went on. For her, *she was in the presence of a communist so she started on certain cliches. I returned them.* [...] This evening Michael dropped in, I told him about this incident with Joyce. [...] At which Michael said: 'Well, what did you expect?' *He was speaking in his role of East European exile*, ex-revolutionary, toughened by real political experience, *to me in my role as 'political innocent'. And I replied in that role*, producing all sorts of liberal inanities. Fascinating - *the roles we play, the way we play parts.* (p.153, my emphasis)

This is partly a strategy for expressing one's "'true' self" from behind certain "masks" or roles, but what is particularly striking is that *Anna feels forced into saying things she does not believe in.* Like Laing's case of James who acts as his mother's "puppet",[220] Anna takes on these "false selves" according to the expectations of the other. Expected by the other person to act as an ex-communist, a Communist Party member, or a 'political innocent', Anna finds herself complying to these expectations.

This parallel between The Golden Notebook and The Summer Before the Dark's indebtedness to Laing, returns

---

220. "Puppet" is the label Kate gives herself for having performed the attractive woman for so many years. (The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.182.)

me to my above suggestion of these two novels' relationship. I proposed that The Golden Notebook was an earlier attempt to answer Kate and Maureen's questions - "What are you going to be instead?" and "What are we to do? What?". Following Anna's rejection of pre-existing, collectively constructed subject-positions and her recognition of their potential danger to her 'autonomy'[221], what, indeed, are the alternatives?

Lessing's positive understanding of 'madness' undermines the liberal humanist privileging of rationality but in everyday 'reality', it cannot replace "Anna the responsible". The importance of language in constructing the subject, which, as Belsey notes, is suppressed by liberal humanist realism, is recognized by Anna. For example, in the quotation above, the discourses of ex-communists, Communist Party membership and the 'political innocent' dictate what Anna says. At the start of the novel, Anna argues with conviction against anti-humanism:

> We're told so often that *human personality has disintegrated into nothing* under pressure of all our knowledge that I've even been believing it. Yet when I look back to that group under the trees, and recreate them in my memory, suddenly I know it's nonsense. Suppose I were to meet Maryrose now, all these years later, she'd make some gesture, or turn her eyes in such a way, and there she'd be, Maryrose, and indestructible. [...] And so all this talk, *this anti-humanist bullying, about the evaporation of the personality becomes meaningless* for me at that point when I manufacture enough emotional energy inside myself *to create in memory some human being* I've known. (p.114-6, my emphasis)

---

221. This is evident in the above quotation which describes "the roles we play, the way we play parts" (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.153; Quoted above, p.98). Anna suppresses her "'true' self" in order to perform the role the other person expects her to play.

However, Anna goes on to say that her memories have the "absolute assurance" of "a painting or a film" and has to ask herself:

> Am I saying then that the certainty I'm clinging to belongs to the visual arts, and not to the novel, not to the novel at all, which has been claimed by the disintegration and the collapse? *What business has a novelist to cling to the memory of a smile or a look, knowing so well the complexities behind them? Yet if I did not, I'd never be able to set a word down on paper*; just as I used to keep myself from going crazy in this cold northern city by deliberately making myself remember the quality of hot sunlight on my skin. (p.115, my emphasis)

Like Seyla Benhabib, Lessing, from a position of political engagement, argues against the "strong version of the Death of the Subject thesis":

> The strong version of the Death of the Subject thesis is not compatible with the goals of feminism. Surely, *a subjectivity that would not be structured by language, by narrative and by the symbolic codes of narrative available in a culture is unthinkable.* ... but nevertheless we must still argue that *we are not merely extensions of our histories, that vis-a-vis our own stories we are in the position of author and character at once. The situated and gendered subject is heteronomously determined but still strives toward autonomy.* I want to ask how in fact the very *project of female emancipation* would be thinkable without such a regulative ideal of *enhancing the agency, autonomy and selfhood of women.*[222]

Just as Lessing searches for a balance between the individual and the collective, Benhabib seems to suggest that there must be a balance between an "absolute assurance" of "the 'personality'", and "nothing", "the evaporation of the personality". This balance could constitute what Benhabib sees as a more useful "weak version" of postmodernism. (She constructs her

---

222. Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (Cambridge: Polity, 1992) p.214 (my emphasis).

understanding of postmodernism around the multiple deaths of "the Subject, History and Metaphysics").[223]

Linda Hutcheon's postmodernism seems to offer this sort of "weak version":

> Postmodernism manifests itself in many fields of cultural endeavor [...]. In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like *saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said.* The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight', and to subvert, or 'subvert', and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic - or even 'ironic' - one. Postmodernism 's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to *doubleness*, or *duplicity*. In many ways it is an even-handed process because *postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert* the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge.[224]

Throughout The Divided Self, Laing refers to a "'true' self", putting inverted commas around it, in a direct echo of Hutcheon's definition of a postmodern statement. As Hutcheon describes, this allows him to "install" the idea of an authentic self whilst also subverting it. Certainly Laing is able to "highlight" and "de-naturalize" the notion of a "'true' self" *whilst still using it.* Anna, as expressed in the above quotation, seems to share this "wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity". She wants the "novelist to

---

223. "Where Lyotard as well as the feminist friends of postmodernism go wrong is in their assumption that the end of meta-narratives, or the death of Man, History and Metaphysics (Jane Flax), allow only one set of conceptual and normative options. By sorting out from one another the *strong and weak versions* of these theses, I shall argue that the strong postmodernist position is incompatible with and in fact renders incoherent feminism as a theoretical articulation of a struggling social movement." (Benhabib, Situating the Self, op.cit., p.210-11, (my emphasis).)

224. Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.1-2 (my emphasis).

cling to the memory of a smile or look", whilst simultaneously "knowing so well the complexities behind them" (p.115; Above, p.99-100).

When Anna stops "cling[ing] to the memory of a smile or a look", to this notion of a "'true' self", she does, indeed, go "crazy". Following a dream in which "a television film was to be made about the group of people at the Mashopi hotel" (p.461), Anna loses her "absolute assurance" of her memory. As she watches the filming she realizes:

> Then I understood that the director's choice of shots, or of timing, was changing the 'story'. What would emerge on the completed film would be something quite different from what I remembered. (p.461)

Anna confronts the director with the question, "'Why did you change my story?'", but the director does not understand:

> 'But Anna, you saw those people there, didn't you? I only filmed what was there.' I did not know what to say, for I realize that he was right, that what I 'remembered' was probably untrue. (p.462)[225]

'The Black Notebook', which concerns her novel Frontiers of War based on these Mashopi experiences, concludes with Anna's loss of memory:

> I shall close this notebook. If I were asked by Mother Sugar to 'name' this dream, I would say it was about total sterility. And besides, since I dreamed it, I have been unable to remember how Maryrose moved her eyes, or how Paul laughed. It's all gone. (p.462)

---

225. I re-read this incident later in relation to the problematizing of 'representation' and 'history' in the sub-section entitled "Why not, simply, the truth?" in Chapter Five.

The "evaporation of the personality" is no longer "meaningless" to Anna.[226]

Anna recognizes that "when I manufacture enough emotional energy inside myself to create in memory some human being I've known" (p.115), she is doing just that - *creating* her version of 'reality'. This does not prove Anna's earlier argument that 'personality' exists. It proves that the realist novel[227] can "*create* in memory some human being", a 'personality'. Anna is later forced to re-visit her Mashopi hotel experiences in her dreams, guided by "the projectionist". This "controlling person insisted that":

> ... instead of doing what I always do, *making up stories about life, so as not to look at it straight*, I should go back and look at scenes from my life. (p.535, my emphasis)

It becomes apparent that perhaps Mother Sugar was right in assuming that Anna's writing does come from a similar creative impulse, or at least serves the same function in her life as Mother Sugar's archetypal myths.[228] Anna feels her novel, Frontiers of War, was written out of "nostalgia", which parallels Mother Sugar's ability to

---

226. Anna argues that "the evaporation of the personality becomes meaningless for me at that point when I manufacture enough emotional energy inside myself to create in memory some human being I've known". (*The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.114-6; Quoted above, p.99.)

227. From the amount of interest from film producers, and from Anna's own comments I am inclined to conclude that *Frontiers of War* is a realist novel.

228. See the quotation above (p.75-6) in which Anna complains to Mother Sugar that as soon as she retrieves a feeling she has to turn it into a story and put it away from her: "But now I can feel. I'm open to everything. But no sooner do you accomplish that, than you say quickly - put it away, put the pain away where it can't hurt, turn it into a story or into history. But I don't want to put it away." (p.414). This refusal not "to put it away" is, I would argue, linked to Anna's refusal to write another novel like Frontiers of War.

summon up a sense of endless past[229]. This "nostalgia", conditioned Anna's earlier understanding of the past, of 'subjectivity', and of representation, and is what blocks her from looking at life "straight". From this earlier understanding, Anna comments that:

> Heaven knows we are never allowed to forget that the 'personality' doesn't exist any more. (p.114)

This implies a nostalgia for a time when it did. The "projectionist", by forcing Anna to "go back and look at scenes from [her] life", questions the validity of her "stories" (p.535). This is the first step towards being able "to walk off, by myself, Anna Freeman". However, because "there are whole areas of me made by the kind of experience women haven't had before", (p.415; Above, p.76) this independent Anna Freeman will have to develop a new sense of self and new modes of agency. As I have already pointed out in my discussion of The Summer Before the Dark, this is Butler's proposed project for the future:

> Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of "agency"...[230]

Accepting the thesis I have been arguing that, to return to the quotation from Benhabib above:

> Surely, a subjectivity that would not be structured by language, by narrative and by the symbolic codes of narrative available in a culture is unthinkable.[231]

---

229. "She had the capacity to evoke a feeling of vast areas of time by a smile or a tone of voice that could delight me, rest me, fill me with joy - but I didn't want it just then." (p.415).

230. Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.147.

231. Benhabib, Situating the Self, op.cit., p.214.

It is to "language", "narrative" and "the symbolic codes of narrative available in a culture" that we must turn, in order to enhance "the agency, autonomy and selfhood of women".[232] Anna's 'madness' and her 'writer's block' are identified here by Benhabib, as wholly related, because Anna's crisis of faith in 'subjectivity' goes 'hand-in-hand' with her doubts over the 'representation' of her experiences.

---

232. Benhabib, Situating the Self, op.cit., p.214.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE POSTMODERNITY OF THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK'S "MOMENT"

> "The Golden Notebook was a momentous book - a book of its moment, opened up to subconscious and subcultural imperatives which the realist perspective had structured and suppressed."[233]

> "What I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political."[234]

1962: "A CRISIS OVER REPRESENTATION"[235]

Anna's loss of faith in her ability "to create in memory some human being I've known"[236] is at the crossroads of the themes of representation and subjectivity. The "thinning of language against the density of our experience" (p.273), which Anna observes in the fact that the short story by the comrade in Leeds can be read "as parody, irony or seriously" is partly (as

---

233. Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.55-6.

234. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.4.

235. Rebecca O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed. op.cit., p.218.

236. *The Golden Notebook*, op.cit., p.115. In Chapter Five this novel (and its 'Preface') will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

Betsy Draine points out[237]) the thickening of experience in relation to language. I would like to illustrate that to put the "'real' self" in "inverted commas", identified by Hutcheon as a postmodern gesture, involves putting the realism traditionally used to express this "'real' self" in inverted commas, too.

Lessing concludes her 'Preface' with the recognition that perhaps it is not necessarily a failure for a writer to be read in different ways from those he or she expected. This reverses Anna's negative reaction to the comrade's short story being potentially duplicitous, able to be read "as parody, irony or seriously" (p.273):

> ... it is not only childish of a writer to want readers to see what he sees, to understand the shape and aim of a novel as he sees it - his wanting this means that he has not understood a most fundamental point. Which is that *the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion only when its plan and shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't anything more to be got out of it.* (p.20-1, my emphasis)

Lessing is impressed by the variety of readings The Golden Notebook has been given by different people, from different perspectives, in different times. She describes how, ten years after its publication, she can still receive three letters about the novel in one week. Each letter she describes as wholly concerned with one theme - "the sex war", "politics" or the "theme of mental illness". "But," Lessing concludes, "it is the same book." (p.20).

---

237. Betsy Draine, "Nostalgia and Irony: the Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook", (MFS 26 1980) p.37-8. See the conclusion for further discussion of her point. For the 'Artist', the twin crises in 'representation' and 'subjectivity' are inseparable. A crisis in Anna's ability to 'represent' a 'subject' problematizes 'subjectivity', just as the death of the subject problematizes the possibility of 'representation'.

In contrast to Lessing's view of the book being "alive" and escaping "that moment of seeing" by being read differently in different contexts, many critics, including Lorna Sage and Rebecca O'Rourke, see The Golden Notebook's "plan and shape and intention" as exceptionally expressive of the problems of its "moment".[238] Sage contrasts Lessing to other postmodern writers:

> Because Lessing had *found a form that so exactly focused her struggles with/against realism,* it was a novel that persuaded its readers of the limitations of that shared language more painfully [...] than French new novels, or than anti-realist writing from America. Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet began from the culture of the unreal, the sub-real; Barth and Pynchon were reflexive jokers from the start. *But Lessing worked her passage, as it were, and documented the voyage.*[239]

O'Rourke distinguishes her from other women writers in a similar fashion:

> What is more distinctive about Lessing though, is that she continues to *write through* and *write out* her problematisation of form. Other women writers who consciously experienced a crisis over representation have, by and large, ceased to write.[240]

Without wanting to reduce my reading of this novel to an act of attaching the label of 'postmodern' (still less the label of 'feminist') to it, I do feel that the problems of its "moment" were those of postmodernism. I wish to consider The Golden Notebook's inter-related themes of representation and subjectivity alongside notions of and from the postmodern, particularly Linda

---

238. See the above quotation (p.106) from Lorna Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.55-6.

239. Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.55-6 (my emphasis).

240. O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed. op.cit., p.218.

Hutcheon's. Hutcheon's models of postmodernism and parody offer a helpful context for a novel which Lessing described as attempting to capture "the ideological 'feel' of our mid-century" ('Preface', p.11).

"WHY NOT, SIMPLY, THE TRUTH?"[241]

There are several aspects of Lessing's The Golden Notebook which can be aligned with Hutcheon's understanding of the postmodern. Just as Sage distinguished Lessing from French new novels and American anti-realism, so too does Hutcheon distinguish postmodern "historiographic metafiction" from these forms:

> It is the French New and also the New New Novel, along with American surfiction that are most often cited by critics as examples of postmodernist fiction. But by my model, they would, instead, be examples of late modernist extremism.[242]

This reflects Hutcheon's "model" of *what postmodernism is*:

> What I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political.[243]

Hutcheon's *post*modernism is *not* a continuation of modernism. It is *not* "late modernist extremism" with its experimental aestheticism. Therefore, texts like the French New Novel, and American surfiction are excluded from her understanding of the 'postmodern' as they do not attempt 'reference' to 'history' or anything external to themselves. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Hutcheon summarizes her understanding of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism thus:

---

241. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.77.

242. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1988), p.52. Hutcheon argues this throughout A Poetics of Postmodernism. Page references include: p.xii, p.40 and p.202.

243. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.4.

> On the one hand, the postmodern obviously was made possible by the *self-referentiality, irony, ambiguity, and parody* that characterize much of the art of modernism, as well as by its *explorations of language* and its *challenges to the classic realist system of representation*; on the other hand, *postmodern fiction has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life.*[244]

Anna's attempts to represent her 'history' and break down this modernist "separation of art from mass culture and everyday life", is one of the main themes of The Golden Notebook, and especially of 'The Black Notebook'. In 'The Black Notebook', history meets art in a "confrontation" which Hutcheon views as typically postmodern:

> This is the confrontation I shall be calling postmodernist: where *documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody.* At this conjuncture, a study of *representation* becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of *the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self*, in the present and in the past.[245]

Anna feels her Frontiers of War failed in its attempt to 'represent' 'reality'. Instead, it falsified the past by filtering it through her nostalgia:

> It is an immoral novel because that terrible lying nostalgia lights every sentence. (p.77)

However, in 'The Black Notebook's attempt "to create a new way of looking at life" (p.76), Anna finds it difficult to resist allowing cynicism to replace nostalgia as a "lying" frame:

---

244. Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.15 (my emphasis).

245. ibid., p.7 (my emphasis).

> I see I am falling into the self-punishing, cynical tone again. Yet how comforting this tone is [...] Yet that pain is *like the dangerous pain of nostalgia*, its first cousin and just as deadly. I'll go on with this when *I can write it straight*, not in that tone. (p.99, my emphasis)[246]

Anna is striving towards what Hutcheon calls "*a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society*".[247] Anna returns to the past of "art" by "revisiting" her own novel and to the past of "society" through her memories of Mashopi. As Hutcheon says in Irony's Edge, "Irony's edge cuts many ways",[248] and Anna has yet to learn at this stage in The Golden Notebook the "many ways" her "ironic dialogue with the past" will "cut".

Anna's aim to "write it straight" is one Hutcheon's postmodernism renders impossible. Anna asks herself:

> Yet now what interests me is precisely this - why did *I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a 'story'* which had nothing to do with the material that fuelled it. Of course, the *straight, simple, formless account would not have been a 'novel'*, and would not have got published, but I was genuinely not interested in 'being a writer' or even in making money. [...] I am simply asking myself: *Why a story at all* - not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. *Why not, simply, the truth*? (p.77, my emphasis)

The way in which this notebook's exploration into the "past of both art and society" is framed, points immediately to the reasons for "Why not, simply the truth?".

---

246. Later Anna describes herself reading this attempt to "write it straight", and pronounces that: "It's full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being 'objective'. (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.150.)

247. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.4.

248. Linda Hutcheon, Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (London: Routledge, 1994) p.176.

The word "Source" placed as a subdivision of 'The Black Notebook' alongside "Money", instantly problematizes Anna's access to "the truth". Does "Source" refer to the novel Frontiers of War as the "Source" of the "Money"? Or does, indeed, *can*, "Source" refer to the "truth" "of what had happened" as the "Source" of Frontiers of War? As Lessing comments in square brackets:

> For three years the black notebook had in it nothing but business and practical entries which appeared to have absorbed the memories of physical Africa. (p.72)

The "Source", or what Anna called "simply, the truth", has been "absorbed" by its "story", Frontiers of War. Anna had stated in a paragraph above the place where the notebook is "divided down the middle":

> Unreal - the novel is more and more a sort of creature with its own life. Frontiers of War now has nothing to do with me, it is a property of other people. (p.72)

The interpretation "other people" are reading into the novel certainly seem to owe more to their own perspectives than to Anna's "Source".[249] That this is the case is emphasized by the synopsis of Frontiers of War, now entitled Forbidden Love, which provides another framing devise for Anna's attempt to rewrite her memories "straight".

This synopsis was written "in parody" (p.74) of film makers' codes and language. As the "man at the synopsis

---

249. This can be cross-referenced to Lessing's own complaint quoted above that "other people" read The Golden Notebook in ways she had not meant it to be read. ('Preface', The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.20.) "But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled [...] as being about the sex war..." (ibid., p.8).

desk" tells Anna, "it's a perfectly good synopsis and written in their terms" (p.74). To Anna the absurd distance between her "Source" and this synopsis renders it obvious parody. However, as she has said "Frontiers of War now has nothing to do with me", it has become the "property of other people" who want to read it according to *their* codes. For example, Reggie Tarbrucke, from Amalgamated Vision has his own version:

> Your story is basically a simple love story. Yes it *is*. The colour thing is really - yes I know it's desperately important, and I couldn't agree with you more, how utterly beastly the whole thing is, but your story is really a simple moving love story. (p.259)

Through the interaction between, first, these versions of Anna's novel put forward in her own parodic synopsis as well as by people like Tarbrucke; secondly, her own analyses of her novel such as her angry reaction to Tarbrucke ("You were acute enough to see what the book was really about - nostalgia for death." (p.261)); and, thirdly, her attempts to revisit the past in order to "write it straight" (p.99), Anna comes to understand the reasons for "shaping a 'story'" (p.77). She realizes, in the words of Hutcheon:

> History as narrative account, then, is unavoidably figurative, allegorical, fictive; it is always already textualized, always already interpreted.[250]

The way Anna learns the impossibility of "[writing] it straight" from this interplay between fiction, 'fact' and

---

250. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.143.

'events'[251] can be illustrated by considering the representations of Paul Blackenhurst in the first section of 'The Black Notebook'.

Anna identifies Paul as "the young man I used in Frontiers of War for the character of 'gallant young pilot' full of enthusiasm and idealism" (p.87). He is therefore, also the "good-looking youth", Peter Carey in Anna's parodic synopsis:

> Dashing young Peter Carey, his brilliant scholastic career at Oxford broken by World War II, is posted to Central Africa with the sky-blue-uniformed youth of the RAF to be trained as a pilot. Idealistic and inflammable, young Peter is shocked by the go-getting, colour-ridden small-town society he finds, falls in with the local group of high-living lefts, who exploit his naive young radicalism. (p.73)

Peter Carey is portrayed as even further away than the "gallant young pilot" of Frontiers of War from the 'real' Paul Blackenhurst. Paul "was without any sort of enthusiasm", but with a "real coldness hidden by charm" (p.87). He had a talent for "deliberate rudeness" and "an upper-class arrogance" (p.87). He was also full of

---

251. 'Fact' and 'event' are Hutcheon's terms: "All past 'events' are potential historical 'facts', but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated. We have seen that this distinction between brute event and meaning-granted fact is one with which postmodern fiction seems obsessed." (Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.75.) Lessing's The Golden Notebook is no exception. Hutcheon goes on to argue that "because postmodern novels focus on the process of event becoming fact, they draw attention to the dubiousness of the positivist, empiricist hierarchy implied in the binary opposing of the real to the fictive, and they do so by suggesting that the non-fiction is as constructed and as narratively known as is fiction" (Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.76). Lessing does do the latter in The Golden Notebook, but still seems to value Anna's notebook attempt to describe the "Source" over the sentimental versions offered by the film companies. This is, however, mainly due to political considerations. Many of the versions constructed by the film companies erased what Tarbrucke called "the colour thing" (p.259).

"cynicisms", and used his intellect to calculate his chances for surviving the war:

> He did not believe for a moment he would be killed. He had worked out his chances mathematically; they were much better now than earlier, during the Battle of Britain. (p.88-9)

This emphasizes the contrast to "dashing young Peter Carey" who, "heart-broken" by "the cook's young wife", predicts his "tragic" death:

> Meanwhile his dark young love is lurking at the other end of the platform in a group of her own people. As the train steams out, she waves; he does not see her; his eyes already reflect thought of the death that awaits him - Ace Pilot that he is! (p.73)

Hayden White would call this a satisfaction of "the demand for closure":

> The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a *moral* drama.[252]

The "real events" of Paul's death in a careless, drunken accident lack this "moral meaning":

> He was standing on the airstrip, so Jimmy told me later[253], still half-conscious with alcohol [...] A plane came in to land, and stopped a few paces away. Paul turned, his eyes dazzling with the sunrise, and walked straight into the propeller [...] His legs were cut off just below the crotch and he died at once. (p.89)

However, already we can identify that the interaction of fiction with 'event' is influencing Anna's construction of that 'event' into 'fact'. This account is written in

---

252. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", On Narrative, Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981) p.23.

253. Notice that Anna's access to this 'real event' is through a narrative.

conscious opposition to the cathartic death of Peter Carey as is evident in phrases like, Paul's "nerves, well cushioned since birth by security, were not in the habit of signalling messages of doom" (p.89). Unable to give Paul's death "moral meaning" through "closure", Anna represents it in opposition to the code of "moral drama".[254] A careless, meaningless death ('event') is, therefore, transformed into an ironically appropriate conclusion to the life of an anti-hero ('fact').

This is an example of what Hutcheon terms, "the meaning-making function of human constructs".[255] This "function" is further illustrated in Anna's recognition of "truth" in her fiction.[256] Anna constructs Paul as a cold, upper-class cynic which, therefore, opposes "idealistic" and "naive" Peter Carey. Anna is shocked when she understands her opposition of these men - the 'real' and the 'fictive' Pauls - was 'wrong':

> Of course, now I recognize it as frustrated *idealism - now I write the word in connection with Paul it surprises me.* It's the first time I've believed he was capable of it. (p.101, my emphasis)

The "idealism" which was so much part of the fictive Paul is recognized in the 'real' Paul. Anna's realization that she has *constructed* 'facts' from 'events', and that her construction's "Source" is her (also constructed) "inscription" of those events in Frontiers of War and in her memory, parallels what Hutcheon claims "historiographic metafiction" teaches us:

---

254. Ironically, Paul is quoted by Anna as having said, "Broken hearts belong to old-fashioned novels" (p.109).

255. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.89.

256. This "border crossing" (Humm's term) of fiction and fact is an example of the questioning of the "binary opposing of the real to the fictive" identified by Hutcheon. (Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.76.)

> Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, *while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning.* And, even more basically, we only know of those *past events* through their *discursive inscription,* through their *traces in the present.*[257]

This understanding results in the "crisis over representation" O'Rourke identified.[258]

The Golden Notebook culminates with this "crisis" (and the related crisis in 'subjectivity'). The "controlling personality" or "invisible projectionist" of Anna's nightmares, forces her to look back over her past. In so doing Anna has to deal with the problem expressed by the dream she has towards the end of the novel about the "television film... made about the group of people at the Mashopi hotel". This is a perfect image of Hutcheon's point that:

> History is not made obsolete: it is, however, *being rethought as a human construct.*[259]

The 'set' the director was filming "was in fact the real thing: he had somehow transported the whole cast to Central Africa, and was filming the story under the gum-trees with even such details as the smell of wine rising off white dust, the smell of eucalyptus in hot sunlight" (p.461). However, Anna feels "uneasy" as the filming gets underway:

> Then I understood that the director's choice of shots, or of timing, was changing the 'story'. (p.461)

---

257. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* op.cit., p.97 (my emphasis).

258. Rebecca O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed. op.cit., p.218.

259. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* op.cit., p.16.

Anna asks the director "Why did you change my story?". He replies:

> 'But Anna, you saw those people there, didn't you? [...] I only filmed what was there.' I did not know what to say, for I realized that he was right, that what I 'remembered' was probably untrue. (P.462)

Hutcheon, like Anna, does not doubt that "those people" *were* "there", rather whether "those people there" are representable except as "human constructs". This is the crux of Anna's crises of faith in both 'personality' and 'representation'[260].

> Hayden White has suggested that:
>
> ... this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the *coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure* of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.[261]

Unable to give "real events" that "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" Anna despairs. Through her dreams of the "invisible projectionist" Anna attempts to rethink 'history' as a "human construct" and "work through" her crisis:

---

260. This is the reason for my having referred to this dream in Chapter Four above entitled "Laing and 'Anti-humanist bullying'". Hutcheon's choice of photography as one of the mediums she considers in *The* Politics of Postmodernism, also lends emphasis to the "projectionist" in The Golden Notebook. "There are still other paradoxes at the heart of the photographic medium," Hutcheon argues, "the subject-framing eye of the photographer is difficult to reconcile with the objectivity of the camera's technology, its seemingly transparent realism of recording." (Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.121.)

261. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", On Narrative, Ed. Mitchell, op.cit., p.23 (my emphasis).

> I knew this brief 'visiting' of the past was so that I should be reminded I had still to work on it. (p.537)

The "projectionist" shows Anna a series of "conventionally, well-made films" and pauses on the credits to highlight that Anna in named as the director:

> Then he would run another few scenes, every scene glossy with untruth, false and stupid. I shouted at the projectionist: 'But they aren't mine, I didn't make them.' At which the projectionist, almost bored with confidence, let the scenes vanish, and he waited for me to prove him wrong. (p.538)

These films suggest that Anna's accounts of her past are no closer to the 'truth' than the film makers' versions. Anna is now faced with a difficult task:

> And now it was terrible, because I was faced with the burden of *recreating order out of the chaos that my life had become*. Time had gone, and my memory did not exist, and I was unable to distinguish between what I had invented and what I had known, and I knew that what I had invented was all false. (p.538, my emphasis)

The "projectionist" challenges Anna, saying "How would June Boothby see that time? I bet you can't do June Boothby!". Anna finds that, indeed, she cannot:

> I was unable to stop the flow of words, and I was in tears of frustration as I wrote in the style of the most insipid coy woman's magazine; but what was frightening was that the insipidity was due to a very slight alteration of my own style, a word here and there only. (p.538)

When Anna returns to the "projectionist" dream for the last time in 'The Golden Notebook' (the notebook within <u>The Golden Notebook</u>) she felt she "'understood' why I had to sleep, and what the projectionist would say, and what I would have to learn." (p.549-550). She even feels she "knew it already" (p.550).

The projectionist allows just that "critical revisiting of the past" Hutcheon identifies as characteristic of "historiographic metafiction":

> Patches of the film slowed down for long, long stretches while I watched, absorbed, *details I had not had time to notice in life.* The projectionist kept saying, when I had got some point he wanted me to get: 'That's it, lady, that's it.' And because of his directing me, I watched even more closely. I realized that all the things to which I had given emphasis, or to which the pattern of my life had given emphasis, were now slipping past, fast and unimportant. (p.550)

Like Martha in The Four-Gated City, Anna's "revisiting" of the past is a step towards her goal "of recreating order out of the chaos" (p.538). Anna has to, as Martha realizes, do "some hard work, on recovering more of her past".[262] Both women "work" to recover "detail":

> She worked, *laying hold of a detail,* a cushion, a flower, a voice, the light on the lenses of a pair of spectacles.[263]

Like Anna working her way from her room to a cosmic perspective whilst trying to hold both in her mind[264], Martha and Anna need to hold *details* alongside their narratives.

As Martha "worked on her own mind, with her mind",[265] she, like Anna being "worked on" in her dreams by the "projectionist", moves towards different understandings of the past, her narrative of that past, and towards a new mode of subjectivity and agency.

---

262. The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.247.

263. ibid., p.243.

264. "Sometimes I could reach what I wanted, a simultaneous knowledge of vastness and of smallness." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.481.

265. The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.300.

Martha's work on the past is a continuous process which points to Butler's notion of the self as a continuous becoming, a performance.[266] However, in both these novels, the "observer" is privileged as a stable position. Martha asks Dr. Lamb whether his diagnosis of her having "schizoid tendencies" has anything to do "with that part of me that watches all the time". She asks him how he would describe "that part", and he wants her definition. Her reply points to the privileging of self-consciousness throughout the novel:

> The best part of me. The only part that is real - that's permanent, anyway.[267]

Self-consiousness is viewed as a valuable strategy in dealing with the "problem of 'subjectivity'"[268], just as metafiction is used by Lessing in her attempt at 'representation'. Hutcheon urges self-awareness of one's ideological position[269]. Similarly, Lessing's The Golden Notebook encourages self-observation of the writing and becoming processes. Just because 'events' and the self have 'lost' their "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure"[270], does not, Lessing seems to suggest, prevent a "[striving] toward"[271] the 'true', even if, like Laing,

---

266. Butler states that "gender is an 'act'". Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.146-7.

267. The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.249.

268. 'Preface' of The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.13.

269. "Many a theorist has noted the problems of saying anything enlightening about postmodernism without acknowledging the perspective from which it is said, a perspective that will inevitably be limited, if only because it will come from within the postmodern." (Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.15.)

270. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", On Narrative, Ed. Mitchell, op.cit., p.23.

271. "The situated and gendered subject is heteronomously determined but still strives toward autonomy." Benhabib, Situating the Self, op.cit., p.214.

one has to put it in inverted commas. The "projectionist", like Martha's 'real' self ("that part of me that watches all the time") facilitates just this *striving towards* and *process* of "recreating order out of the chaos my life has become" (p.538). Indeed, Lessing states in her 'Preface' that "chaos" can be a step in the process towards a "'real' self".[272]

Anna learns to replace her nihilistic despair with this process of "recreating". The film of Paul Tanner and Michael fighting into one person is an image of Anna's own task:

> Two men, who were the same, yet separate, seemed to be fighting, in a silent duel of wills to be in the film. One was Paul Tanner, the man from the working-class, who had become a doctor, and whose quality of *dry critical irony* was what had sustained him in his struggle, the quality, however, which had fought with, and slowly defeated the *idealism* in him. The other was Michael, the refugee from Europe. When these two figures finally merged, a *new person was created.* (p.536, my emphasis)

This image of "dry critical irony" fighting "idealism" parallels the battle between those two qualities in Anna herself.[273] This "new person" repeats Paul/Michael's message to Ella/Anna that they are "boulder-pushers", people who "spend our lives fighting to get people very slightly less stupid than we are to accept truths that the great men have always known":

> 'All our lives, you and I, we will use all our energies, all our talents, into pushing that boulder another inch up the mountain. And they rely on us and they are right; and that is why we are not useless after all.' (p.537)

---

272. "This theme of 'breakdown', that sometimes when people 'crack up' it is way of self-healing...". ('Preface', The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.8.)

273. Anna recovers from her rejection by Paul/Michael by returning to the "critical and thinking Anna" (p.297).

This reaction to the "crisis" in belief in history and the 'true', like Tom Mathlong's[274], is a positive strategy:

> He was the man who performed actions, played roles, that he believed to be necessary for the good of others, even while he preserved an ironic doubt about the results of his actions. (p.520)

Anna has learnt that, in Hutcheon's words:

> While all knowledge of the past may be provisional, historicized, and discursive, this does not mean we do not make meaning of that past.[275]

'The Golden Notebook' is Anna's attempt to do just that, just as The Golden Notebook is Lessing's. Betsy Draine comes to a similar conclusion in her reading of The Golden Notebook.[276] Draine views Anna's task in 'The Golden Notebook' as that of "becoming responsible for her own set of revaluations" following her "realization that knowledge cannot be perfectly objective and sure".[277] Draine (arguing against the accusations levelled at Lessing of romanticism) says that, although "Anna wishes her imagination could create a valid reality":

> Always she tests her imagination and valuations against observed reality - even as she recognizes the fact that observation itself is personal,

---

274. Betsy Draine argues in her essay, "Nostalgia and Irony: the Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook", that "Saul Green and Tom Mathlong represent for Anna two styles of putting her self-admonition into effect." (MFS, 26 1980, p.43.) Mathlong is as important as Saul Green in Draine's understanding of Anna's development: "Mathlong balances Saul's gift to Anna of passion and flexibility with his own gift of detachment and commitment." (ibid., p.44.)

275. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.149.

276. Draine, "Nostalgia and Irony: the Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook', op.cit., p.31-48.

277. ibid., p.45.

> relative, dependent on the constitution and experience of the mind that perceives.[278]

Draine concludes, therefore, that Anna and Lessing are not romantic in that "neither claims that imagination creates reality out of whole cloth". She goes on to draw a parallel to Nietzsche:

> But both are romantic in the ambiguous manner of Nietzsche. Like him, Lessing recognizes the pain of losing a coherent world view, once thought to be absolute.[279]

Draine agrees with Hutcheon's view that "this does not mean we do not make meaning of that past", as she identifies the novel's "moral center" in "Anna's commitment to the personal task of creating order and meaning in the one, immediate life that is her own".[280] The role of creative 'Artist', which had been undermined by these crises in 'representation' and 'subjectivity', is now reinstated as Anna takes on that role of 'Artist' in "creating order and meaning" out of her own life.

Hutcheon's point that the "metafictional" element of postmodern fiction is exactly what refers it back to history is peculiarly true of The Golden Notebook. As Lessing says in Under My Skin:

> This period, when the Cambridge RAF were with us, a time with its own flavour and taste, went to make up the Mashopi parts of The Golden Notebook, which I have just re-read. There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth.[281]

Anna's metafictional comments about her novel, Frontiers of War, connect with the 'real' by implying Lessing's own

---

278. ibid., p.45.

279. ibid., p.45-6.

280. ibid., p.46.

281. Lessing, Under My Skin, op.cit., p.314.

artistic problems and referring to Lessing's African experiences. The intertextual play here to a novel which does not exist (Frontiers of War), performs the same function as Lessing's 'Preface', by relating the problems of representation back to Lessing's 'real' experiences of "both art and history":

> This is the kind of novel that works toward a critical return to history and politics *through* - not despite - metafictional self-consciousness and parodic intertextuality.[282]

At no point is "closure" (White's term) achieved in The Golden Notebook as each textual level relates to another fiction, set of 'facts' or series of 'events', and the conclusion leads us back into that maze of intertexts. Forbidden Love, Frontiers of War, the four notebooks, 'Free Women', 'The Shadow of the Third', the short story synopses, the collection of parodies, The Golden Notebook itself as Lessing's novel, Lessing's previous body of writing and artistic problems, 'Anna's African experiences and Lessing's African experiences are joined later by Lessing's 'Preface' and autobiography, to create an interplay of texts and frames. This intertextuality problematizes the possibilities of both access to 'truth' and coherence of self, whilst affirming "the meaning-making function of human constructs"[283]. In the *absence* of direct access to 'truth' (or 'events') and of a coherent self, the "boulder-pushers" need to strategically construct those things.

I have quoted Anna's metafictional claim in the first section of 'The Black Notebook' that:

> Of course, the straight, simple, formless account would not have been a 'novel', would not have got published... (p.77)

---

282. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.61.

283. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, op.cit., p.89.

This reflects ironically on Lessing's The Golden Notebook, as this is, to some extent what The Golden Notebook *is*. Indeed, several critics, including, for example, Walter Allen have accused it of being just such a "formless account".[284] However, the "irony's edge cuts many ways" throughout the novel and Lessing's final achievement by putting a "formless account" in the notebooks[285] alongside the "novel" of 'Free Women', is to problematize either's access to 'truth' and to "lay bare" their inadequacies. She did, indeed, "shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement" (p.13).

---

284. "As a work of art, The Golden Notebook seems to me to fail. The structure is clumsy, complicated rather than complex. But all the same it is most impressive in its honesty and integrity..." (Tradition and Dream: A Critical Survey of British and American Fiction from the 1920's to the Present Day (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) p.298). The rejection of The Golden Notebook "as a work of art", the description of its structure as "clumsy", and the praise for its "honesty", all point to Anna's notion of a "straight, simple, formless account".

285. The notebooks are less a "formless account", than a series of experiments with different forms. Anna is often highly self-conscious about the particular form she has chosen. For example, when she decides to write down each day in detail: "It was then I decided to use the blue notebook, this one, as nothing but a record of facts. Every evening I sat on the music-stool and wrote down my day, and it was as if I, Anna, were nailing Anna to the page." (p.418).

THE "BATTLEGROUND"

This notion of The Golden Notebook being a process of problematizing and interrogation, rather than a set of answers, coincides with another aspect of Hutcheon's postmodern:

> ... the postmodern is, if it is anything, a *problematizing force* in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the commonsensical and the "natural". But it *never offers answers* that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited).[286]

It is this process of questioning which we have already identified as Lessing's success and failure. I have illustrated that Lessing 'lays bare' the "inadequacies" of collective identities and traditional understandings of 'history' and 'truth', whilst she "never offers answers" that completely reject what she is challenging:

> It is more a *questioning of commonly accepted values* of our culture (*closure, teleology, and subjectivity*), a questioning which is totally *dependent upon that which it interrogates.*[287]

The dual, contradictory nature of postmodernism leads Hutcheon to offer us the helpful idea of it being a "site of the struggle":

> Because it is *contradictory and works within the very systems it attempts to subvert*, postmodernism can probably not be considered a new paradigm (even in some extension of the Kuhnian sense of the term). It has *not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it.* It may mark, however, the site of the *struggle of the emergence of something new.*[288]

---

286. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.xi (my emphasis).

287. ibid., p.42

288. ibid., p.4 (my emphasis).

This notion of "the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new" is a helpful way of considering The Golden Notebook. I have explored above, Anna's struggles with 'subjectivity', with the relationship between the individual and the collective. Also I have documented Anna's interrogation of 'history' and 'truth'. The questioning of both 'subjectivity' and 'history' focus attention on 'representation'. Different modes of representation compete in The Golden Notebook in the attempt to create "something new". Indeed, Hutcheon further suggests that:

> It is the novel genre in particular that has become the *battleground* for much of this *asserting - and contesting - of liberal humanist beliefs* about the status and identity of art.[289]

I want to explore The Golden Notebook as a "battleground" of different modes of representation.

---

289. ibid., p.179 (my emphasis).

THE FOUR-GATED CITY:
HUMANISM, REALISM, METAFICTION AND MOTHERING

The link I have upheld throughout this thesis, between the realist novel and liberal humanism, is a well-documented one.[290] Belsey's Critical Practice illustrates this link mainly by focusing on the subject-position offered to the reader. Although Belsey would agree with Waugh's description of 'realism':

> *Realism presents history as linear chronology,* presents *characters in the terms of liberal humanism,* allows for the possibility of free will and responsible moral choice.[291]

Belsey places the ideological power of realism in its assertion of the reader's liberal humanist selfhood:

> Through the presentation of an intelligible history which *effaces its own status as discourse, classic realism proposes a model in which author and reader are subjects* who are the source of shared meanings, the origin of which is mysteriously extra-discursive. It thus does the work of ideology in *suppressing the relationship between language and subjectivity.*[292]

What Belsey calls "the transcendent position of knowledge constructed for the reader"[293] is the classical realist strategy by which "heterogeneity - variety of points of

---

290. Hutcheon acknowledges this, too, and references Belsey and Waugh: "The link between realism and the ideology of liberal humanism is a historically validatable one (see Belsey 1980; Waugh 1984)..." (A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.180).

291. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.128 (my emphasis). My discussion above of Lessing and Anna's struggles over the 'representation' of 'history' has already suggested that The Golden Notebook fails to do any of these things.

292. Belsey, Critical Practice, op.cit., p.72 (my emphasis).

293. ibid., p.83.

view and temporal locations - is contained in homogeneity".[294] Waugh similarly regards realism as a monolithic form but focuses this homogeneity on the author:

> The novel assimilates a variety of discourses (representations of speech, forms of narrative) - discourses that *always* to some extent *question and relativize each other's authority*. Realism, often regarded as the classic fictional mode, paradoxically *functions by suppressing this dialogue*. The *conflict of languages and voices* is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author.[295]

These differences in focus arise from these critics' different emphases. Waugh is considering ways in which *authors* have attempted to challenge the monolithic tendencies of realism through the use of metafiction, whereas Belsey is interested in the "critical practice" of *reading*. Hence, Waugh is more interested in authorial attempts to resist the position of "omniscient, godlike author" offered by realism, and Belsey seeks ways "to make a deliberate and ideological choice" "to refuse that position" of "transcendent" reader. Both emphases are useful when approaching Lessing. As we have seen, she uses metafictional devises to resist realism and its implications in The Golden Notebook, and the 'Preface' she added later, is a plea to her readers to recognize that project.[296]

However, whilst Lessing's practice in The Golden Notebook questions realism and humanism, her readers could be forgiven for not focusing on these themes as her famous essay 'The Small Personal Voice' expresses her

---

294. ibid., p.78.

295. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.6 (my emphasis).

296. See, for example 'The Small Personal Voice', A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.18; and the 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.14-20.

admiration for both. In 'The Small Personal Voice', Lessing argues that any writer who feels a sense of responsibility to his or her fellow human beings must become, or rather inherently is, a humanist:

> Once a writer has a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences, it seems to me he must become a humanist, and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad.[297]

She upholds the "great realists" like Tolstoy and Stendhal[298] and, as Clare Hanson points out, "presents herself as above all a humanist realist".[299] Clare Hanson's argument is that this understanding of Lessing is a false one and even suggests, in the light of Lessing's The Diaries of Jane Somers 'trick':

> The essay was in effect a piece of camouflage, which served the useful purpose of pointing the critics in the wrong direction, leaving Lessing free to pursue her own (devious) paths.[300]

Whilst I would not attribute to Lessing a conscious aim to mislead with this essay, I do agree that it has had a negatively controlling effect on the way in which her work has been read. Further, I agree that it is time "Her work should be seen as post-modern and post-humanist...".[301] As is evident in my readings of Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage and The Grass is Singing, in which I trace anti-realist strategies and highlight

---

297. 'The Small Personal Voice', A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.10.

298. ibid., p.8.

299. Clare Hanson, "Doris Lessing in Pursuit of the English, or, No Small, Personal Voice." In Pursuit of Doris Lessing, Ed. Claire Sprague (New York: St. Martin's, Macmillan, 1990) p.63.

300. ibid., p.64.

301. ibid., p.68.

challenges to the liberal humanist self, I agree with Hanson that Lessing "is not 'really' a realist".[302] However, even Hanson admits that realism is a mode Lessing has increasingly rejected[303] (thereby implying Lessing did, at the time of 'The Small Personal Voice', 1957, (just after A Proper Marriage) accept or use aspects of realism):

> ... Lessing retreats increasingly in her fiction away from realism as the English understand it. I think the retreat begins at least as early as *A Proper Marriage*, though one could argue that there is a good deal of unease even in The Grass Is Singing, the prototypical 'realist' Lessing novel, in the conventional view. From the time of The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City, certainly, Lessing *withdraws behind borrowed voices and masks* - and I'd like to stress that it is *very much a case of 'voices', of style, of language.*[304]

As we have seen in Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage, Lessing connects a resistance to the homogeneity of the realist form with an interrogation of the liberal humanist self.[305] Lessing replaces classical realism in Martha Quest and, even more so, in A Proper Marriage, with double-coded and contradictory narratives. As I have argued above, the "narrative of growth", that of the spiritual 'moments' and 'images of escape', exists alongside the "narrative of repetition" which presents a realist chronological documentation of 'events'. They exist in a contradictory tension which is not resolved and works much as Waugh, at one point, describes the metafictional novel:

---

302. ibid., p.64.

303. We are returned to her 'Note from the Author' quoted at the beginning of this thesis from the back of A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., which includes the famous 'The Small Personal Voice' essay - "I have changed my mind about politics since I wrote these essays."

304. Hanson, "Doris Lessing in Pursuit of the English" op.cit., p.66 (my emphasis).

305. See the section entitled 'Images of Escape' above.

> Ostentatiously *'literary' language and conventions are paraded, are set against the fragments of various cultural codes* [...] because the formal structures of these literary conventions provide a statement about the dissociation between, on the one hand, the genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and, on the other, the continuation of *traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate* vehicles for the mediation of this experience. *Metafiction thus converts* what it sees as the *negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism.*[306]

Martha recognizes "the negative values of" Dr. Stern's "narrative of repetition", the predictable pattern of married women's behaviour, into which he fits Martha. However, Martha does not reject it completely. Instead, she is "both angrily humiliated and perversely appreciative".[307] The project of converting "the negative values of outworn" narratives and "conventions" still lies ahead for Martha. It is, perhaps, not until she takes on the role of 'mother' in the Coldridge household that she successfully "converts" the "narrative of repetition" Dr. Stern offers her.

Initially, Martha resists the "claims" the Coldridge household makes on her:

> ... Martha knew that for the first time in her life she was in a setting where, if she chose to stay, there would be *no doubt at all of how she ought to behave,* to dress. She had *always resisted* such a setting, or the thought of it. If she took this job, then it *must be for a very short time. She felt attacked by the house - claimed.*[308]

---

306. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.11 (my emphasis).

307. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.356.

308. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.99 (my emphasis).

However, Martha is drawn in, partly by the practical consideration of her lack of money, but also by the pain she sees in Francis' face:

> The room upstairs [...] would be a god-send, until she could find a place of her own. But that would mean landing herself even deeper in this *terrible involving situation which had already involved her: the child's face haunted her.*[309]

Thus drawn into the situation, Martha stays, partly because she realizes her mistake in rejecting her daughter and this "terrible involving" family "situation", in favour of Communism's rejection of the family:

> 'I had a sort of silent pact with that child,' Martha went on. 'As if she were the only person who understood why I was doing it. I was setting her free. From *me*. From the family.'
> 'Yes, yes, yes,' came from the bed. 'It's true.'
> 'No, it was so terribly not true. I was mad.'[310]

Whilst Communism saw "the family" as "a dreadful tyranny, a doomed institution" which, when "there was communism everywhere", would be "abolished" "by decree", Martha identifies an irony:

> 'Isn't it funny? Do you know how many people have become communists simply because of that: because communism would do away with the family? But communism has done no such thing, it's done the opposite.'[311]

She goes on to argue the uselessness of the Communist ideal:

> What's the use of imagining *impossibly marvellous ways of living, they aren't anywhere near us,* are

---

309. ibid., p.104 (my emphasis).

310. ibid., p.80.

311. ibid., p.80-81.

> they?[312] You've got to accept ... parents have no choice but to be the world for their children.[313]

Unable "to be the world for [her] children", Martha takes a more positive attitude to her role in the Coldridge household. However, there are contradictions in The Four-Gated City. Lynda symbolizes a positive force for the future and her explorations of 'madness' are portrayed as crucial in the face of apocalypse. However, she seems to refuse that "parents have no choice but to be the world for their children". Repeatedly, Lynda is described causing Francis pain.[314] During her Christmas visit, Lynda challenges Martha to accept this inability to live "ordinary life":

> 'Why can't you accept it? Some people are just no good. Useless! No good. Not for ordinary life. I keep telling you. I told Mark when he married me. I told him. Why do you want to make everyone like yourselves?'[315]

Martha, however, sees the role of 'mother" as one she *has to perform*:

> One *ought to force oneself* to *recite the lines of this so ancient play*, whether one believed in them or not? She came back and back, to the same point, the only point of importance, she had to feel, about bringing up children [...] from the moment the eyes of a tiny baby focused and looked at you, so straight, and so seriously [...] then it was as if one had to *play games, marking time*, until the baby grew into the eyes. It was *not possible to take the games seriously*. But of course it *had all to be*

---

312. This is a charge that has been levelled at science fiction.

313. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.82.

314. For example, during Lynda's first Christmas visit home, Francis cries almost every night. (ibid., p.129 and p.131.)

315. ibid., p.133.

> *done right, to be played right ... yet it was all absolute nonsense.*[316]

Watching Phoebe be a 'mother' to these girls, Jill and Gwen, Martha perceives Phoebe's *lack* of self-consciousness:

> Phoebe, *apparently without any idea at all that she was behaving as if she had walked on to a stage and into the part of a mother* with adolescent daughters, was speaking lines that Martha remembered word for word from Mrs. Quest.[317]

This inability of Phoebe's to "play games", results in her suffering from the "tyranny" of the family, and needing psychiatric help:

> The 'breakdown' over she was more Phoebe than ever. If only she had been able to hold the 'breakdown', to explore it, develop it, use it; turning her back on it, she refused a chance to open and absorb. She became, instead, *more rigid, more controlled.*[318]

In contrast, Martha is able to live the "narrative of repetition" but with "critical distance"[319]. (She is able to do this, it is implied, because she was "able to hold the 'breakdown', to explore it, develop it, use it".) Like Kate Brown, therefore, Martha achieves a *parodic performance* of motherhood which is self-preserving:

> There were lines written ready to be spoken; there was a play set like a duty.[320]

---

316. ibid., p.403 (my emphasis).

317. ibid., p.402 (my emphasis).

318. ibid., p.409 (my emphasis)

319. This is Hutcheon's phrase: "Parody is ... repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.6).

320. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.402.

Martha's analysis of mothering thus parallels Kate and Butler's notion of gender identity being a performance. Martha's recognition of this performativity, like Kate's, is emancipating, and refers back to the debate over essentialism and feminist politics.[321] "Paradoxically", in the words of Butler, "the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency'."

Despite the "real" moments when Martha connects with one of the children "in the shared glance or acknowledgement, or amusement: *how ridiculous all this is*,",[322] the "narrative of repetition" continues. These "real" moments are put alongside this "narrative of repetition" to enact a critique of that "narrative of repetition", in a similar way to metafiction's opposing of "the fragments of various cultural codes" to "traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience".[323] Like using the strategy of metafiction in the face of realism, Martha's self-conscious, parodic performance of "the games", "converts what [she] sees as the negative values of outworn [...] conventions" like 'the family', "into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism", and into "ways of

---

321. "This is what it must feel to be an actor..." (The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.48). "Gender is performatively produced" (Butler, Gender Trouble,op.cit., p.24). See the discussion above, p.47-9. However, Bordo warns us against "the dream of limitless multiple embodiments, allowing one *to dance from* place to place and *self to self*" which erases the body as "a metaphor for our locatedness" (Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism" Feminism / Postmodernism, Ed. Nicholson, op.cit., p.145, my emphasis. Quoted above, p.51).

322. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.403.

323. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.11.

living"[324] "ordinary life"[325]. To abandon Caroline was not to "set her free" but to hand her over to a reconstituted family unit. No "constructive social criticism" was achieved, rather Martha enacted an exchange of "ordinary life" for the "impossibly marvellous ways of living" of the Communist Party. Phoebe's post-'breakdown' "disapproving determination that [Gwen and Jill] should be 'sensible'" results in her role as "a mother who was not playing games".[326] This resistance to "the narrative of repetition" fails almost as comprehensively as Martha's abandoning Caroline:

> They felt hated. Phoebe felt hated. The three females hardly spoke to each other.[327]

Instead of looking outside the "narrative of repetition" to "images" or "moments of escape", Martha finds positive and viable alternatives within that narrative by *parodically performing* it.[328] This positive use of parody points, I believe, to the means by which Lessing overcomes her "crisis over representation".[329]

---

324. Martha describes the Communist Party's rejection of the family as an act of "imagining impossibly marvellous ways of living" (Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.82).

325. Lynda claims that, "Some people are just no good. Useless! No good. Not for ordinary life." (ibid., p.133). Martha who has always resisted "ordinary life", learns to be "good" at it through this self-critical performance.

326. ibid., p.409.

327. ibid., p.409.

328. I consider the dangers of this strategy of parodic performance in my reading of The Good Terrorist in Chapter Eight entitled, "Parody Regained?".

329. I refer back to O'Rourke's comment - "Other women writers who consciously experienced a crisis over representation have, by and large, ceased to write." (O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed. op.cit., p.218.)

"PARODY IS A PERFECT POSTMODERN FORM"[330]

As the comment quoted above about Phoebe's failure "to hold the 'breakdown', to explore it, develop it, use it" suggests, The Four-Gated City charts the transition in Lessing's work from realism to, what she terms "inner space fiction" and science fiction. In effect this transition is from the use of "images of escape" within a realist framework to an entire "novel of escape" using realism.[331] The Four-Gated City (1969) and The Golden Notebook (1962) come from that period when realism and science fiction, or rather, "inner space fiction", were in dialogue with each other, creating what Bakhtin terms an "intentional stylistic hybrid":

> Every type of *intentional stylistic hybrid* is more or less dialogized. This means that the languages that are crossed in it relate to each other as do rejoinders in a dialogue; there is *an argument between languages*, an argument between styles of languages. But it is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather it is a *dialogue between points of view*, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the Other.[332]

Bakhtin goes on to identify this "argument between languages" as an inherent element of parody:

---

330. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.11.

331. In "Some Remarks" prefaced to Shikasta, Lessing comments that, "I feel as if I have been set free both to be as experimental as I like, *and as traditional*: the next volume in this series, The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five, has turned out to be a fable, or myth. Also, oddly enough, *to be more realistic*." (Shikasta, op.cit., p.8, my emphasis.)

332. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." 1967. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1981) p.76.

> Thus *every parody* is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, *languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another.*[333]

Understanding The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City as the "site of the struggle of the emergence of something new", as the "battleground"[334] where realism meets "inner space fiction", Bakhtin's comment points to the appropriate structure of parody to express this "argument between languages".

Lessing's "questioning of commonly accepted values of our culture (closure, teleology, and subjectivity), a questioning which is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates"[335] creates the contradictory duality which

---

333. ibid., p.76. Whilst Bakhtin is useful on the subject of parody, I use him sparingly as I find the cultural and political dimensions of Hutcheon's model of parody more helpful. For an account of Bakhtin's contribution to the development of the theory of parody see Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern, op.cit. Like Rose, Bakhtin's consideration of parody often focuses on its comic function. Indeed, when he divides the "manifestations of this folk culture" of the Medieval world into "three distinct forms" one of them is: "*Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular." (Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World. 1965. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984, p.5). The difficulties Bakhtin faced, writing under the Soviet Union's Communist regime, perhaps contributed to his interest in comic parody and its ambivalent dual-codedness. Lechte gives a brief and helpful description of Bakhtin's situation: "Largely for political reasons, he lived much of his life in self-imposed obscurity, taking up a professorship at the remote Mordovia State Teachers College in 1936, where, apart from one interruption in the 1940s due to rumours of a political purge, he taught until 1961." (John Lechte, Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity (London: Routledge, 1994) p.7.) I discuss the implications of situating the theory of parody I outline in this thesis, in a totalitarian regime, such as Lechte describes, in my final chapter entitled "Parody and Totalitarianism".

334. Hutcheon's terms from A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.4 and p.179.

335. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.42.

Hutcheon has identified as characteristic of the postmodern. This project of interrogation which I have traced throughout Lessing's novels, does intensify in The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City. Again, we are directed towards the suitability of parody for the expression of this project:

> Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.[336]

Jonathon Dollimore's identification of the Renaissance as a period of "rapid transition"[337] (a prevalent view, especially amongst new historicists) provides another helpful model for reading the "battleground" of Lessing's The Golden Notebook:

> In making sense of a period [or novel] in such rapid transition, and of the contradictory interpretations of that transition from within the period [novel] itself, we might have recourse to Raymond William's very important distinction between residual, dominant, and emergent aspects of culture.[338]

Dollimore goes on to describe the interaction of these elements of culture much as Bakhtin describes "the languages that are crossed in it [relating] to each other as do rejoinders in a dialogue":

> Non-dominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them.[339]

---

336. ibid., p.11.

337. "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, and the New Historicism" in Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton eds. New Historicism and Renaissance Drama (Longman Critical Readers. London: Longman, 1992) p.45.

338 ibid., p.49. (Dollimore references Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (1977) 121-7.)

339. ibid., p.49.

These "non-dominant elements" can be diverse, including "levels of culture appropriately described as subordinate, repressed and marginal".[340] In The Golden Notebook, there are, indeed, many "non-dominant elements". The two main elements are, perhaps, the *"residual" realism*, which is used whilst being parodied, and the *"emergent" voice of 'madness'*, of "inner space fiction". There are many other elements, of course. For example, the "subordinate" language of Mother Sugar's Jungian psychoanalysis; the "repressed" languages of the film makers which continually resist Anna's attempts to repress them; and the "marginal" voices of the "pretty bad" Communist novels sent to Anna (p.315), Anna's own Frontiers of War, and Saul Green's "short novel about the Algerian soldier" (p.556). Whilst this is, by no means, a complete account of the voices in The Golden Notebook, I do hope it has illustrated my point. This is that it is extremely difficult to identify a "dominant" voice in The Golden Notebook. The "dominant" element is, perhaps, that "observer" I have repeatedly pointed out in Lessing and her characters.[341] The Golden Notebook's "dominant" element is like Gates' "signifying monkey", who "is technique, or style, or the *literariness* of literary language, he is the Great Signifier"[342]. The "dominant" element *is* the notion of "hybridity", of self-conscious metafiction, of what I want to call 'parody'.

Parody thus seems to be a possible strategy for negotiating both the major themes I have identified of 'representation' and 'subjectivity'. Bakhtin's formal

---

340. ibid., p.49.

341. See above, for example, p.55, p.61 and p.74.

342. Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.288.

analysis of the "questions of stylistics"[343] points to the useful role parody plays in Lessing's attempt to "write through and write out"[344] the "crisis over representation". Similarly, Hutcheon's understanding of parody highlights its suitability for expressing the paradoxes of Lessing's *cultural* projects, her postmodern "problematizing" of 'subjectivity' and 'history'. That Dollimore's (and Williams') strategy for analysing culture and ideology can be so usefully applied to The Golden Notebook, also draws attention to the ideological and cultural assumptions (including, of course, the assumed model of 'subjectivity') behind every choice of voice or form. This is parody understood both as Gates' "parody-as-hidden-polemic"[345] and Hutcheon's "parody as a mode of emancipation".[346]

---

343. Bakhtin uses the phrases "questions of stylistics", "stylistic study" and "stylistic analysis" to describe his task in this essay. Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, op.cit., p.41-2.

344. O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor ed., op.cit., p.218.

345. Gates Jnr. ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory, op.cit., p.296.

346. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, op.cit., p.33.

CHAPTER SIX

PARODY AS A STRATEGY OF ESCAPE

> "Parody could be seen, then, as an act of emancipation: irony and parody can act to signal distance and control in the encoding act."[347]

"HER OWN FLAT"[348]

We can see parody working "as a mode of emancipation" in Anna's struggle with collective identities, discussed above. I considered a number of identities which, often seeming to offer a route of escape and to fulfilment, actually threatened Anna's individuality - marriage and family, the Communist Party, Mother Sugar's Jungian archetypes, the label of 'Free Women', and the role of 'Artist'.[349] I would like to return to this theme of the "individual conscience in its relations with the collective",[350] and to some of these collective identities, in order to illustrate the use of parody as a strategy of "emancipation".

Hutcheon argues that parody requires certain conditions "in order to be understood":

> Parody, like irony, can therefore be said to require a certain institutionalized set of values - both

---

347. Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.96.

348. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.145. In Chapters Six and Seven this novel (and its 'Preface') will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

349. See above, Chapter Three entitled "'What are you going to be instead?': Collective Identities in The Golden Notebook".

350. A Small Personal Voice, op.cit., p.18.

> aesthetic (generic) and social (ideological) - in order to be understood, or even to exist. The interpretive or hermeneutic situation is one based upon accepted norms, even if those norms only exist to be transgressed.[351]

The collective identities Anna rejects provide just these "institutionalized set of values" against which parody can "be understood". Furthermore, Anna's interrogation of these collective identities comes from within them. As Belsey notes of woman's relation to liberal humanism, it is a position of simultaneous "participation" and exclusion.[352] Humm, in her Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers, comments that "In these circumstances it is not surprising that the form that difference often takes in postmodern art is parody.".[353] The "circumstances" she is referring to include feminism's marginal relationship to the postmodern, and the point made by many critics working in postmodernism and feminism, that:

> The characteristic of postmodernism most specific to feminism is that it works within the very system it attempts to subvert.[354]

---

351. Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.95.

352. Belsey, Critical Practice op.cit., p.65-6.

353. Maggie Humm, Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers (Cultural Politics Ser. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991) p.15.

354. ibid., p.14.

This task of subverting from within is one Anna takes on, not only because she cannot escape to an 'outside',[355] but also because she does to want to completely reject all the collective identities she is offered. For example, her socialist ideals are things she wants to retain despite leaving the Communist Party. Similarly, whilst she leaves her husband (Max/Willi), breaking up a family, she still values her relationship with Michael/Paul and her child (Janet/Michael). Anna describes Ella encouraging Paul to be a father to her child:

> The motif of Ella's maternal love for Michael [her child]. She is always fighting to get Paul to be a father to the child and always failing. (p.195)

This perpetuates "the narrative of repetition" of marriage and family. However, Anna describes herself as happier keeping Michael (Paul in 'The Shadow of the Third') separate from Janet (Michael in 'The Shadow of the Third'):

> [Michael] prefers Janet to have left for school before he wakes. And I prefer it, because it divides me. The two personalities - Janet's mother, Michael's mistress, are happier separated. (p.301)

The ambiguity of the simultaneous continuity (of socialist ideals in the first example, and the family in

---

355. This is a point Hutcheon makes throughout her theories of parody and postmodernism: "Creed is right that postmodernism offers no privileged, unproblematic position from which to speak." (The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.153.) However, she also points out that feminisms do posit a place from which 'true' judgements can be made: "While feminisms may use postmodern parodic strategies of deconstruction, they never suffer from this confusion of political agenda, partly because they have a position and a 'truth' that offer ways of understanding aesthetic and social practices in the light of the production of - and challenge to - gender relations. This is their strength and, in some people's eyes, their necessary limitation. (The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.153-4.)

the second) and change, (by leaving the Communist Party and divorcing Max/Willi), illustrates the need for "a way to preserve continuity in discontinuity".[356] This can be another function of parody.

Anna's interrogation of the identity positions 'wife' and 'mother', does, indeed, use parody "as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance".[357] This is evident in the repeated descriptions of Anna moving into her own flat. The first time it is described (in 'Free Women') it is portrayed as Michael's decision:

> Michael had persuaded Anna, four years before, to move into her own flat. [...] She had moved, imagining he would share this life with her; but he had left her shortly afterwards. For a time she had continued to live in the pattern he had set for her. [...] She took a revulsion against her bedroom, which had been planned for Michael to share, and moved down to the living-room, where she slept and attended to her notebooks. (p.67)

This is an ironic repetition of Michael's 'home', a place he set up for his wife Muriel but from which he is absent. He describes his 'home' as his wife's:

> 'This is her house, Ella. To do as she likes in. It's surely the least I can do.' (p.204)

His wife, he describes as "a good mother" shrugging off Anna's question, "And she doesn't mind not having a man?" (p.205). This exchange Michael/Paul has with his wife, of a house for the services of 'wife' and 'mother', is one echoed in an idea I want to borrow from Irigaray:

> [Man's] endless construction of substitutes for his prenatal home. From the depths of the earth to the vast expanse of heaven, time and time again he robs femininity of the tissue or texture of her

---

356. Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.97.

357. ibid., p.20.

> spatiality. In exchange, though it never is one, he buys her a house, shuts her up in it, and places limits on her...[358]

Denying even the existence of his wife's "femininity", he dismisses Anna's accusation that his *not* putting "an end to it" is because "She might get a man who cared for her." He "places limits on her" by constructing her as "a very simple woman", who he contrasts to Anna (p.205). Ella/Anna "can't stand the fact that maybe it's how she likes to live" (p.205), and regards these suburban houses as "fragments":

> She left the discordant little house thankfully, as if escaping from a trap; and she looked down the street and thought that probably they were all like this, all in fragments, not one of them a whole, reflecting a whole life, a whole human being; or, for that matter, a whole family. (p.205)

However, she herself lives like this after Michael/Paul leaves her.

This is another description of her move into the new flat. In this description *she* finds herself the flat, but for Paul/Michael:

> Very cool, clear and efficient, she found herself a new flat and settled into it. It was a large flat, much too large for the child and herself. It was only after she had settled in it she understood the extra space was for a man. For Paul, in fact, and she was still living as if he were returning to her. (p.209)[359]

Anna's dreams inform her of this ironic repetition, by portraying her in a terrible parody of 'Mrs Tanner':

---

358. Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference." Toril Moi ed. French Feminist Thought: A Reader. Trans. Sean Hand and Roisin Mallaghan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) p.123.

359. She connects this with her "stupid faith and naivety" (p.209), the death of which I identify as the main reason for her rejection of both family and the Communist Party.

> She was in the ugly little house [...] She was Paul's wife, and only by an effort of will could she prevent the house disintegrating [...] because of the conflict between the rooms. She decided she must furnish the whole house again, in one style, hers. But as soon as she hung new curtains or painted a room out, Muriel's room was recreated. [...] And Ella saw herself standing in the kitchen, her hand on the pile of Women at Home; she was a 'sexy piece' (she could hear the words being said, by Dr West) with a tight coloured skirt [...] And Ella realized that Muriel was not there after all, she had gone to Nigeria to join Paul, and Ella was waiting in the house until Paul came back. (p.208)

This dreamt parody teaches Anna that whilst she was constructing a 'home' with Paul, she represented to him "the other side of the sober respectable little wife". This Anna realizes is "the smart, gay, sexy mistress", and that "Perhaps he really would like it if I were unfaithful to him and wore tarty clothes" (p.206).[360] Paul tells Dr West that it's "just as well he went" to Nigeria as he escaped a relationship:

> 'He told me just before he left he'd got himself involved with a pretty flighty piece. Heavily involved, it sounded.' (p.207)

The irony of Paul/Michael insisting on Anna setting up a repetition of his family's 'home' by buying her own flat, is heightened by Anna's recognition that he saw her as the "flighty piece".[361] The 'home' Paul persuades Ella to set up is a symbol of their being "heavily involved". As such, it threatens and transgresses Paul/Michael's construction of Anna as a "flighty piece" and, paradoxically, results in his need to escape and the

---

360. It is immediately after this dream that Anna realizes: "It occurred to her, for the first time, that the woman from whom Paul had had to separate himself [...] was herself. She was the flighty piece." (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.208.)

361. The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.208. See footnote above, number 360.

judgement that its "just as well he went". Anna has effected a "border crossing" (Humm's term) of the identities of 'mistress' and 'mother'. By "inscribing continuity" of the "narrative of repetition" and of the 'home' by living "in the pattern he set for her", whilst simultaneously, being his "flighty piece"[362], Anna enacts "a potentially constructive social criticism".[363] It is a critique which interrogates both the identity of 'mother' Paul constructs for his wife, and the identity of a 'free woman', interpreted by Paul as a "sexy mistress". Whilst these repetitions by "signalling ironic difference at the heart of similarity"[364] point towards parody, Anna only achieves 'parody' when she repeats the construction of a 'home' with self-conscious, "critical distance".

She does this by re-writing her move into too large a flat in terms of making room, not for a man, but for her notebooks:

> When I came to this new flat and arranged my big room the first thing I did was to buy the trestle table and lay my notebooks on it. And yet in the other flat in Molly's house, the notebooks were stuffed into a suitcase under the bed. [...] In Molly's house the notebooks were something I never thought about; and certainly not as work, or a responsibility. [...] When I came to this flat it was to give room, not only to a man (Michael or his successor) but to the notebooks. And in fact I now see moving to this flat as giving room to the notebooks. (p.417-8)

The notebooks become a "responsibility" thus parodying the "responsibility" inherent in the usual function of 'wife' and 'mother' in a 'home'.

---

362. The dream, by having Anna in the Tanner family 'home' but dressed as a "sexy piece", makes the ambiguity of Anna's role clear.

363. Waugh, Metafiction, op.cit., p.11.

364. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.x.

This parodic strategy is enforced by Anna's parody of Muriel Tanner's situation. In order to critique Paul's 'home' and attitude towards his wife, Anna describes Muriel Tanner's grievances in a parody of the letter she received from 'Mrs Brown'[365]:

> Ella said: 'One of these days I'll get a letter handed on by Dr West. "Dear Dr Allsop. Please tell me what to do. Lately I can't sleep at nights. I've been drinking hot milk before going to bed and trying to keep a relaxed mind, but it doesn't help. Please advise me, Muriel Tanner. PS. I forgot to mention, my husband wakes me early, about six o'clock, coming in from working late at the hospital. Sometimes he doesn't come home all week. I get low in my spirits. This has been going on five years now."' (p.205)

This is a step out of naivety toward the "critical and thinking" Anna.[366] However, Paul is able to return Anna's critique, similarly, by parodying his wife and the voice of "respectable" suburbia:

> 'Muriel might just as well say of you: Why on earth does she put up with being my husband's mistress, what security is there in that? And it's not respectable.' (p.208)

Later, "Ella finds [a] story inside herself" which surprises her as "there was nothing in her own experience that could suggest it" (p.406). In this story a man watches "himself play a role" of "serious lover" to a woman who, "after years of freedom, is over-ready for a serious love" and becomes "a jailor" (p.406). The story synopsis above this one, by describing a woman who becomes what her man "always wanted her to be" after he

---

365. "Their life together becomes full of phrases, and symbols. 'Mrs Brown' means his patients and her women who ask for help." (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.195.)

366. "And then I thought how ironical it was that in order to recover myself I had to use [...] the critical and thinking Anna." The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.297.

leaves her (p.405), reminds us of the differences between Anna's view of her situation and Paul's construction of Ella/Anna. The story which Anna does not recognize as coming from her experience, can thus be read as Michael/Paul's construction of their relationship. Significantly, Anna goes on to enact the role of jealous "jailor" with Saul Green.[367] Alongside parody, therefore, increasing self-consciousness helps Anna's healing. She recognizes what she fails to see in this synopsis - her previous conformity to Michael/Paul's construction of her as the "sexy mistress":

> But ten years ago, she realized, she had been feeling something that *she had not then recognized.* An emotion of satisfaction, of victory over the wives; because she, Ella, the free woman, was so much more exciting than the dull tied women. *Looking back and acknowledging this emotion* she is ashamed. (p.399, my emphasis)

This progression of emotions is outlined by Anna in a self-conscious description of what she *would do if* she wrote this novel. She describes Ella moving from emotions of triumph, to envy, to dependence on "this image of the other woman, the third" (p.193), and, thereby, enacts the process Lessing describes in the 'Preface', of, simultaneously, recording and learning her emotions:

> All sorts of ideas and experiences I didn't recognize as mine emerged when writing. The actual time of writing, then, and not only the experiences that had gone into the writing, was really traumatic: it changed me. (p.10)

The conclusion to the series of descriptions of 'home' makings is that:

---

367. The self-conscious performance of this role of "jailor" with Saul is portrayed as part of her self-healing process, again, illustrating "parody as a mode of emancipation".

> When Janet came home she found Anna in the process of finding another, smaller flat, and getting a job. (p.575)

This move, following the significances of Anna's previous living arrangements, is ambiguous. Described in the final parodic 'Free Women' section it implies both a positive attempt to be a free woman, and signals the death of her "naivety, which is another word for spontaneous creative faith" (p.197). Anna recognizes this loss of naivety:

> I would be incapable now of such trust. I, Anna, would never begin an affair with Paul. Or Michael. Or rather, I would begin an affair, just that, knowing exactly what would happen; I would begin a deliberately barren, limited relationship.
> *What Ella lost during those five years was the power to create through naivety.* (p.197)

The lessons learnt through her repetitions of 'home' and her self-consciousness, "destroyed this woman-in-love", preventing her from enjoying the pleasures of that experience, whilst protecting her from the pain. The loss of this "spontaneous creative faith" also marks the end of Anna's writing career in 'Free Women'. Anna decides to take a job, ironically, "doing matrimonial welfare work" (p.576). However, the conclusion of 'The Golden Notebook' (the notebook within The Golden Notebook) is more positive. It suggests that whilst Ella may have lost "the power to create through naivety", Anna has learnt to create in different ways, producing this "un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafiction".[368] Saul's opening line for Anna's novel points to the multiple splits in Anna (Anna/Ella; 'mother'/'mistress'; writer/social worker etc.):

> 'I'm going to give you the first sentence then. There are *the two women you are, Anna.* Write down:

---

368. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.124.

> The two women were alone in the London flat.' (p.554, my emphasis)

This provides, to some extent, an explanation for the two projected endings for Anna. That the first is the writing of The Golden Notebook, and the other is social work, points back to the duality of this strategy of parody:

> Parody, then, is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression.[369]

These "drives of conservative and revolutionary forces" are represented by the two conclusions. They are also the "drives" behind Anna's multiple and varied descriptions of the move into her new flat as a "good mother", "flighty piece" or "writer".

---

369. Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.26.

"'COMMUNIST CLOUD-CUCKOO SPIT'"[370]

"When in the Future They Look Back on Us" is the title of an essay in which Lessing describes herself attempting to do just that - "look back on us" - in order to strengthen "the observer":

> I spend a great deal of time wondering how we will seem to the people who come after us. This is not an idle interest, but a deliberate attempt to *strengthen the power of that "other eye"*, which we can use to *judge ourselves*. [...] There is no epoch in history that seems to us as it must have to the people who lived through it.[371] What we live through, in any age, is the effect on us of mass emotions and of social conditions from which it is almost impossible to detach ourselves.[372]

Communism was just such a "mass emotion". Lessing argues that she has learnt to be critical from watching "violent reversals" in "mass emotions", such as the changing attitudes to Communism:

> During the Second World War, from the moment the Soviet Union was invaded by Hitler and became an ally of the democracies, that country was affectionately regarded in popular opinion. Stalin was Uncle Joe ... Russia was the land of brave, liberty-loving heroes, and Communism was an interesting manifestation of popular will - which we should copy. All this went on for four years and then suddenly, almost overnight, it went into reverse. All these attitudes became wrong-headed, treasonable ...
>
> To have lived through such a reversal once is enough to make you critical for ever afterwards of current popular attitudes.[373]

---

370. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.309.

371. See above, Chapter Five, where I discuss the inaccessibility of the past.

372. Doris Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside (New York: Harper, 1987) p.6 (my emphasis).

373. ibid., p.6-7.

What Lessing is most critical of is the "you are damned, we are saved"[374] mentality which accompanies such "mass emotions".

In her essay, "Switching Off to See 'Dallas'", Lessing describes an experiment which successfully uses "classical brain-washing techniques" to turn a "Christian Scientist" "first into a Seventh-Day Adventist, then into a Stalinist Communist, then into a Liberal, then into a feminist, then into a hard-line atheist"[375] What Lessing notes about this experiment is exactly this "you are damned, we are saved" attitude:

> ... while this person is a feminist, Stalinist, convinced capitalist, that is *what she or he is, absolutely and definitely and finally, and prepared to die for it.*[376]

"Every one of us would succumb," Lessing argues, "unless we were suffering from certain types of schizophrenia".[377] She goes on to suggest that this experiment is "like a dawn after a long night" which signals the end of "The Age of Belief":

> Soon, soon, we will have left behind The Age of Belief, and its wars and tortures and hatred of another type of believer, soon we will all be free and, as all the philosophers and sages have recommended, we will all live our lives with *minds*

---

374. This is the title of another of the essays in Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit.

375. ibid., p.34. This is an idea which can be traced in The Golden Notebook, when Anna recognizes the different voices of "mass emotion" in Saul: "He talked, talked ... If I had tape-recordings of such times, it would be a record of jumbling phrases, jargon, disconnected remarks. [...] I sat and listened as the stream of parrot-phrases went past, and I labelled them: communist, anti-communist, liberal socialist." (The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.515.)

376. Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.34 (my emphasis).

377. ibid., p.35.

> *free of violent and passionate commitment*, but in a *condition of intelligent doubt about ourselves and our lives*, a state of quiet, tentative, dispassionate curiosity.[378]

This "condition of intelligent doubt about ourselves" parallels the "certain types of schizophrenia" Lessing suggests could resist brain-washing.

This is an understanding of schizophrenia as a condition of self-conscious duality, which, like Lynda's in The Four-Gated City, is interpreted by Lessing as a positive force of resistance. It is no coincidence that Martha in The Four-Gated City, is diagnosed by Dr Lamb as having "schizoid tendencies" which she immediately associates with "that part of me that watches all the time".[379] Lynda is also "someone who watches [her]self".[380] "The Age of Belief", Lessing seems to suggest in this essay, "Switching Off to Watch 'Dallas'", works very like psychoanalysis and its institutions do on people like Lynda:

> 'As the methods of society for control and manipulation became more refined, it was discovered that the extremities of physical violence were less effective than drugs ... ; and more effective than the drugs, were techniques of persuasion and brain-washing. By these means these members of the population with capacities above normal (those people now considered to be in the main line of evolution) were systematically destroyed, either by fear ... or by classing them with the congenitally defective ...'[381]

Significantly, Lessing makes this point from exactly that perspective she describes in "When in the Future They Look Back on Us". She attempts to imagine what "soon we

---

378. ibid., p.35-6, my emphasis. This Lessing describes as her "Golden Age". (ibid., p.36.)

379. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.249.

380. ibid., p.237.

381. ibid., p.439-40.

will be saying".[382] This is a "critical revisiting" of the present, as if it were the past (pointing us back to Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction").

Parody, I would suggest, in its self-observation, is the schizophrenic[383] form. If the schizophrenic can resist "brain-washing", parody could be an expression of that resistance. By being 'dual-coded', parody illustrates that "there is no such thing as being in the right",[384] because the *installed 'target' text can perform a critique* on the subverting parody *whilst simultaneously, having a critique performed upon it.* Parody, also, by "inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance",[385] acknowledges its implication in what it is criticizing. This implication and situatedness is recognized by Lessing as "the effect on us of mass emotions and of social conditions from which it is almost impossible to detach ourselves".[386] Indeed, in "Switching Off to See 'Dallas'", Lessing states that:

> We are all of us, to some degree or another, brain-washed by the society we live in.[387]

To this extent, these essays describe, not "prisons we choose to live inside", but prisons which we are always already implicated in.

Anna, in The Golden Notebook, enacts a "repetition with critical distance" of three letters she receives

---

382. ibid., p.539.

383. I am using this word as Lessing uses it - to refer to that self-critical duality Martha and Lynda both experience.

384. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.16.

385. Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.20.

386. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.6.

387. ibid., p.33.

from fellow Communist Party members, in order to illustrate just this notion of "brain-washing":

> 'To amuse myself, I typed out all three letters ... and put them side by side. In phraseology, style, tone, they were identical.' (p.63)

Anna's reaction is to question what "brain-washing" has been carried out on her:

> 'Well, surely the thought follows - what stereotype am I? What anonymous whole am I part of?' (p.63)

Just as Lessing writes through her "crisis over representation", so does Anna believe it is "a question of thinking out what it all means" (p.64).

As Anna rethinks her past commitment to the Communist Party, she realizes:

> Long *afterwards*, I remember thinking that in all those years of endless analytical discussion *only once did we come anywhere near the truth* (far enough off as it was) and that was when Paul spoke in a spirit of *angry parody*. (p.101, my emphasis)

Paul's parodies of Communism are recorded in detail by Anna. These parodies always point to Communism's implication in that which it aims to replace:

> Suppose that the black armies win? There's only one thing an intelligent nationalist leader can do, and that is to strengthen nationalist feeling and develop industry. Has it occurred to us, comrades, that it will be our duty, as progressives, to support nationalist states whose business it will be to develop all those capitalist unegalitarian ethics we hate so much? (p.101)

Paul repeatedly makes this point that, as rationalist attempts to plan society, Communism and capitalism are two sides of the same coin. They are both what Lessing calls "laboratories of social change":

> After all, what we have seen since the French Revolution [...] has amounted to a laboratory of experiment in different types of Socialism, different types of society, from the thirteen-year-long war regime of Hitler, which called itself National Socialism, to the Labour governments of Britain, from the Communist states of Russia and China, to Cuba, to Ethiopia, to Somalia, and on and on.[388]

This notion of a "laboratory" points, first, to the erasure of the critical "small personal voice" and, secondly, to the way in which experiments, set up to prove a certain thesis, can be interpreted in order to uphold that thesis:

> One mass movement, each a set of mass opinions, succeeds another ... And each breeds a certain frame of mind: violent, emotional, partisan, *always suppressing facts that don't suit it, lying, and making it impossible to talk in the cool, quiet, sensible low-keyed tone of voice* which, it seems to me, is *the only one that can produce truth.*[389]

It is this which Anna realizes at the end of The Golden Notebook. She admits that her "'attitude stems from an assumption that people can be expected to be courageous enough to stand up for their individual thinking'" (p.494). However, because so many of those people with "individual thinking", who want to oppose the dominant ideology (in this case, capitalism), do so through the Communist Party, they are "'frightened of being thought a traitor to the Party'". They start "'saying one thing publicly and another privately'":

> 'So what I'm saying is that precisely the kind of person in our time who by definition might have been expected to be fearless, outspoken, truthful, has turned out to be sycophantic, lying, cynical, either from fear of torture, or prison or fear of being thought a traitor.' (p.494)

---

388. Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.70.

389. Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., ibid., p.43 (my emphasis).

Saul's "automatic bark" that Anna is only producing "'middle-class talk'" points to exactly this "brain-washing" of individuals by "mass emotion".

Paul's parody, however, opens up[390] possibilities for criticism but from within the Communist Party. Parodying rational Communist planning, he suggests to Willi and the others:

> 'And because a government faced with the necessity of housing a lot of unhoused people fast, whether socialist or capitalist, will choose the cheapest available houses, the best being the enemy of the better, this fair scene will be one of factories smoking into the fair blue sky, and masses of cheap identical housing. Am I right, Comrade Willi?' (p.381)

Willi's response causes the critical Paul and Anna to laugh:

> Willi hesitated, then said: 'There will be certain outward similarities but ...' He was interrupted by Paul and myself, then Jimmy, in a fit of laughter. (p.381-2)

Paul rejects Maryrose's claim that "they're not laughing at what you say, but because you always say what they expect":

> 'No,' said Paul, 'you're wrong, Maryrose. *I'm also laughing at what he's saying. Because I'm horribly afraid it's not true.*' (p.382, my emphasis)

This notion of critical laughter in the face of these "mass emotions" is one Lessing upholds in "Switching Off to See 'Dallas'":

---

390. Hutcheon suggests that "the notion of parody as opening the text up; rather than closing it down is an important one" (A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.127).

> It means ... choosing to laugh.... (Lessing's punctuation) The researchers of brain-washing and indoctrination discovered that people who knew how to laugh resisted best. [...]
>
> Laughter is a very powerful thing, and only the civilized, the liberated, the free person can laugh at herself, himself.[391]

This returns us to Rose's definition of parody as "comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material".[392]

The full success of "brain-washing" is signalled by exactly this inability to parody and laugh. When Anna reads the short story by the Comrade in Leeds[393], she is unable to decide whether it should "be read as parody, irony, or seriously" (p.273). The laughter following her reading this story to her comrades, is "uncomfortable" and indicates not, a "critical revisiting" of the past, but the dangerous *nostalgia* Anna identifies in Frontiers of War:

> We all laughed again, and George said, 'Those were the days, say what you like.' (p.276)

Indeed, later in the novel Jimmy describes to Anna the 'true' story of Harry Mathews who shared the Leeds comrade's dream of Comrade Stalin calling him to the Soviet Union for advice. Harry's is certainly a "serious" and sad story.[394] His is the tragedy of being "totally inside the current myth" (p.309). This phrase is used to describe the book Anna attempts to stop Comrade Butte publishing:

---

391. Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.44.

392. Rose, Parody, op.cit., p.52.

393. I discuss this short story in relation to my own experience of the post-Communist Czech Republic in the conclusion.

394. See The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.462-466.

> The writing is bad, the story lifeless, but what is frightening about this book is that it is totally inside the current myth. If that useful imaginary man from Mars (or for that matter, a man from Russia) should read this book he would get the impression that (a) the cities of Britain were locked in deep poverty ... (b) the workers of Britain were all communist ... This novel touches reality at no point at all. (Jack described it as: 'communist cloud-cuckoo spit'.) It is, however, a very accurate recreation of the self-deceptive myths of the Communist Party at this particular time ... (p.309)

Comrade Butte's description of it as "honest" triggers Anna's loss of interest as she knows "the decision has already been taken. The book will be published" (p.309). Giving up her role as "critic" (p.310), Anna also chooses "this moment instead of another" (p.311) to decide to leave the Party.

As Comrade Butte "crashes" his fist down on the desk, shouting "'Publish and be damned!'", Anna and Jack share that critical laughter Anna shared earlier with Paul. Unable to read Butte's behaviour as ""serious" she laughs at its "irony" whilst recognizing that she works "for this firm, and am in no position to criticize" (p.310). Jack accuses Anna of being "arrogant about insisting on the right to be right" (p.319) in deciding to leave the Communist Party. His request is that she should "think about it" (p.319).

This returns us to Anna's initial "question of thinking out what it all means" (p.64). She attempts to do this in The Golden Notebook, and, like Paul, she gets "near the truth (far enough off as it was)" when she writes "in a spirit of angry parody" (p.101). As Hutcheon says:

> In their [today's art forms'] contradictions we may find *no answers*, but *the questions that will make*

> *any answering process even possible are at least starting to be asked.*[395]

In asking whether is has "'occurred to us, comrades, that it will be our duty, as progressives, to support nationalist states whose business it will be to develop all those capitalist unegalitarian ethics we hate so much?'", Paul is asking just such a question. In the context of this need for critical parody and laughter in order to resist those "techniques of persuasion and brain-washing" which are the "more refined" "methods of society for control and manipulation",[396] Saul's advice to Anna points to an effective strategy of resistance:

> 'In the first place, *you don't laugh enough,* Anna. I've been thinking. Girls laugh. Old women laugh. *Women of your age don't laugh, you're too damned occupied with the serious business of living.*'[397] (p.553, my emphasis)

Anna's reply points to the last collective identity I would like to return to, in order to explore parody as a strategy of escape:

> 'But I was in fact laughing my head off - I was laughing about free women.' I told him the plot of my short story, he sat listening, smiling wryly. (p.553)

---

395. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.231 (my emphasis).

396. These quotations are taken from the description of what psychoanalysis and its institutions did to suppress Lynda and others. (Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.439-40.)

397. This notion of being "too damned occupied with the serious business of living," also points to the dangerous lack of self-criticism which Lessing attempts to overcome by looking "back on us" or by constructing the perspective of that "useful imaginary man from Mars" (The Golden Notebook, p.309), as well as by using parody.

SAYING "SOMETHING ABOUT THE CONVENTIONAL NOVEL"[398]

Realism, in Belsey's words is "the presentation of an intelligible history which effaces its own status as discourse".[399] From Lessing's description of 'Free Women', it could be expected that it would conform to Belsey's description:

> There is a skeleton, or frame, called Free Women, which is a *conventional short novel*, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself. (p.7; my emphasis)

Crucially, 'Free Women' does not "stand by itself". Instead, it is a "frame" for "that mass of material" of the four notebooks and 'The Golden Notebook':

> To put the short novel Free Women as a summary and condensation of all that mass of material, was to say something about the conventional novel, another way of describing the dissatisfaction of a writer when something is finished: 'How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped?' (p.13)

The Golden Notebook is "shaped in the right way" to "make its own comment about the conventional novel" (p.13). The notebooks undermine 'Free Women's "presentation of an intelligible history" by presenting a series of alternative versions of that "history"[400], which also disrupt the linear chronology of 'Free Women'.

Furthermore, the notebooks highlight 'Free Women's "status as discourse" by providing a context in which 'Free Women' can only be read as parody. For example,

---

398. Lessing, 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.13.

399. Belsey, Critical Practice, op.cit., p.72.

400. See, for example the series of descriptions of Anna's move into her flat, documented above.

the experience of 'madness' Anna shared with Saul and which is explored by the notebooks in depth, is described in 'Free Women' as ending with Saul/Milt's removal of the newspaper clippings from her wall. Thanking him, Anna states that in "another few days, and I really would have gone round the bend" (p.573). Similarly, her relationship with Saul Green, in which she goes "right inside his craziness" and "could no longer separate" herself from him ('The Blue Notebook', p.512), is flippantly described in 'Free Women':

> 'And how about your American?' [Molly asks.]
> 'Well I had an affair with him.'
> 'Not the most sensible thing you ever did, I should have thought.' (p.575-6)

Indeed, the only way 'Free Women' gets "anywhere near the truth" of Anna's possessive jealousy for Saul is through the same "spirit of angry parody" (p.101) as Paul used:

> On the sixth day, she said, 'Milt, I want you to stay with me.' She said it in parody, a kind of angry self-punishing parody, and he said, smiling and rueful: 'Yeah, I know it's time to move on.' (p.573)

This rejection of realism through parody is also enacted in Anna's struggles to record her 'history' in her notebooks.[401] For example, she parodies realism's assumptions in 'The Blue Notebook'. 'The Blue Notebook' for "something like eighteen months" is taken over by daily entries "consisting of short factual statements" (p.411). Whilst at the time Anna felt "as if I, Anna, were nailing Anna to the page" and that, by recording each day at the end of it, she had "saved that day from chaos" (p.418), she realizes "all that is a failure too":

---

401. Anna's problematizing of 'representation' and 'realism' are inter-related issues which refer back to the section of this thesis entitled "Why not, simply, the truth?" in Chapter Five.

> The blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them. I expected a terse record of facts to present some sort of pattern when I read it over,[402] but this record is as false as the account of what happened on 15th September, 1954, which I read now embarrassed because of its emotionalism and because of its assumption that if I wrote 'at nine-thirty I went to the lavatory to shit and at two to pee and at four I sweated', this would be more real than if I simply wrote what I thought. (p.412)

This recording enacts a double critique of assumptions associated with traditional realism. First, by illustrating how different realism is from a factual account of 'reality', and thereby revealing realism's claim to record rather than create a 'reality' to be insupportable. Secondly, it questions realism's model of language as a transparent means for recording reality, by showing how even this "terse record of facts" has "become, *when I think*, not the form into which experience is shaped, but a series of meaningless sounds, like nursery talk, and away to one side of experience" (p.418). As is evident in the section above entitled, "Why not, simply, the truth?" in Chapter Five, Anna successfully problematizes traditional understandings of what it means to 'represent' and draws a conclusion that suggests that this problem is inherent to literature:

> Literature is analysis after the event. (p.210)

---

402. This tends to be the way realism believes itself to work. Anna's criticism of herself for her "assumption" that if she recorded the details of each day or of one day, then "this would be more real than if I simply wrote what I thought" can be compared with Woolf's criticism of Bennett's way of depicting 'character' by "[observing] every detail with immense care" ('Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in A Woman's Essays, Ed. Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) p.78). Woolf goes on to say, "That is what I mean by saying that the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there." (ibid., p.82).

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEYOND PARODY?

"But I am one who does not believe that other people's crises, should be cut short, or blanked out [...] I am sure that other people, and they would be those that a doctor might consider responsible, would have arranged for a doctor to come and take Charles into custody [...] But his state of mind - as far as I could judge it - seemed not unlike my own at times in my life which I have found most illuminating and valuable."[403]

"I did not go in, but stood there on the margin between the two worlds, my familiar flat and these rooms which had been quietly waiting there all this time. I stood and looked, feeding with my eyes. I felt the most vivid expectancy, a longing: this place held what I needed, knew was there, had been waiting for - oh yes, all my life, all my life."[404]

"In theory at least, there can hardly be more radical a way of escaping the flywheel of habit and the nightmare of repetition than by subverting realism altogether, by imagining that this world of objects and consciousness is not really where life is."[405]

---

403. Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell. 1971. (London: Flamingo-Harper, 1995) p.200.

404. Doris Lessing, The Memoirs of a Survivor. 1974. (London: Picador-Pan, 1976) p.15.

405. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.88.

"WRITING BEYOND THE ENDING"[406]

The Four-Gated City shares, to a great extent, the same position on the continuum between realism and parody as The Golden Notebook.[407] However, the conclusion of The Four-Gated City points to a new and different strategy of escape from the parody I have explored. The Golden Notebook's final 'Free Women' section reinstates the "nightmare of repetition"[408] which is "everyday life". Anna and Molly prepare "to be integrated with British life at its roots" (p.576). Raskin questions Lessing about this unexpectedly pessimistic conclusion:

> **Raskin**: Some of the things you've said about radicals and repression remind me of the ending of The Golden Notebook, which has puzzled me. Could you explain it?
> **Lessing**: When I wrote The Golden Notebook the left was getting one hammer blow after another. Everybody I knew was reeling because the left had collapsed. The scene at the end when Molly goes off and gets married and Anna goes off to do welfare work and joins the Labour Party was intended as a sign of the times. *I was being a bit grim about what I observed about me.* Women who had been active for years in socialist movements gritted their teeth and said, "Right, the hell with all this politics, we'll go off and be welfare workers." *They meant it as a kind of joke, but they carried out their program. They did everything and anything that took them out of politics.* Women who had refused to get married because they were dedicated to the cause made marriages which they would have found

---

406. This phrase is taken from Rachel Blau DuPlessis's book: Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

407. This is the main reason for my relative neglect of The Four-Gated City.

408. This phrase is used by Martha in A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.104 and 126, and by Cohen and Taylor in Escape Attempts op.cit. They actually quote A Proper Marriage (Escape Attempts, p.69).

> disgusting five years earlier. They regarded it as a kind of selling out.[409]

Lessing is certainly also "being a bit grim about what [she] observed about [her]" in her "Appendix" to The Four-Gated City. Just as in her interview with Raskin, quoted above, she described writing The Golden Notebook's conclusion from observations of what "everybody [she] knew" was doing, so she described to Hendin, The Four-Gated City's apocalyptic "Appendix" developing out of newspaper stories, out of the pages of The New Scientist:

> You asked about the ending of The Four-Gated City. I'm not saying that's a blue-print, but I think something of the kind is likely to happen. *One doesn't need to have a crystal ball to see that this is what's going to happen. You just have to read* [a newspaper]. There's a paper in England, for example, called The New Scientist, which is written in language that non-mathematical dopes can understand, you see, like me. You've just got to read that for a couple of months to see that far from the danger of war receding, it's sharpened, that far from our ecological problems being better, they're worse, and so on.[410]

Whilst both these conclusions, therefore, are pessimistic reflections of what Lessing sees around her, they are pessimistic for opposite reasons.

The Golden Notebook laments the *lack* of change and the depth of Anna and Molly's implication in "British life at its roots". This ending highlights the installing, conservative drive of deconstructive critique, but it rises above conforming repetition by being an ironic parody of the suitability of marriage and a job in welfare work as conclusions to "a conventional short novel".[411] However, in laughing at this conformity

---

409. Putting the Questions Differently, op.cit., p.17 (my emphasis).

410. ibid., p.42 (my emphasis).

411. 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.7.

to the "nightmare of repetition", Lessing also acknowledges the 'reality' of that threat, a 'reality' enforced by her acknowledgement that the source of this ending was that "Everybody I knew was reeling because the left had collapsed.".[412] As she says of the women who "did everything and anything that took them out of politics" even if it was becoming welfare workers and wives:

> They meant it as a kind of joke, but they carried out their program.[413]

This conclusion, thus expresses the fear of never being able to break out of the "narrative of repetition", whilst laughing at that inability.

The Four-Gated City, in contrast, explores the nightmare of apocalypse, *of never being able to enact the "narrative of repetition" again.* However, this end also signals the possibilities of a new beginning, even a new species as Martha declares that "'the new children'" "are superior to us", "they are beings who include that history in themselves and who have transcended it. They include us in a comprehension we can't begin to imagine.".[414] Joseph, the black 'new child', tells Martha that "one day all the human race will be like them".[415] However, we are left unsure how to interpret the information that Joseph has been identified as "subnormal to the 7th, and unfit for academic education".[416] The positive tone of Martha's letter from

---

412. ibid., p.17.

413. ibid., p.17.

414. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.662.

415. ibid., p.663.

416. ibid., p.664.

beyond the apocalypse[417] is certainly highly problematized by the racial identification of Joseph ("classed 3/4 Negroid (on appearance)"), the "administrative balls-up at base *again*" and the suggestion that Joseph is fit only for "work on the vegetable farm".[418] This extreme classification does, however, enact a critique by parodying our society's tendency to label people.

This paradox of signalling the end or, at least, an alternative, to "paramount reality",[419] whilst installing that very "paramount reality" enough to enact a critique of it, is one Katherine Fishburn explores. She terms this process "recognition" and "re-cognition", the results of which are, in Fishburn's analysis, undoubtedly subversive:

> In short, Lessing's science fiction opens the doors of perception to a fantastic, shape-shifting, and utterly unexpected universe. In so doing, it functions to transform the very world itself.[420]

The Four-Gated City certainly transforms the "conventional novel" which, as DuPlessis has identified in Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers, traditionally ends in marriage. Martha's marriage occurred at the end of Martha Quest,[421] the first novel in this series of five.

---

417. ibid., p.649-663.

418. ibid., p.663-4.

419. I am borrowing Cohen and Taylor's term from Escape Attempts, op.cit.

420. Katherine Fishburn, The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing: A Study in Narrative Technique (Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy 17 Westport: Greenwood, 1985) p.17.

421. Lorna Sage suggests that the end of Martha Quest "reads like a parody - as it's meant to - of a nineteenth-century ending. Martha has hardly begun." (Sage, Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.34).

Therefore, the four novels after Martha Quest are all "beyond" this traditional and conventional "ending". The Four-Gated City in going even further beyond that ending into an "utterly unexpected universe" is, according to DuPlessis' model of women's narrative strategies and Fishburn's understanding of science fiction, highly subversive. However, I want to go through these "doors" to the "fantastic, shape-shifting, and utterly unexpected universe" of Lessing's science and "inner space" fiction, in order to question Fishburn's unreserved belief in Lessing's science fiction's power to "transform". I will consider Briefing for a Descent Into Hell, The Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta, alongside Cohen and Taylor's question:

> Is fantasy primarily supportive or subversive of paramount reality?[422]

422. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.90.

"INNER LOGIC"[423]

Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971) and The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974) are often regarded by critics as similar texts. Published within three years of each other they could both be placed under Lessing's "*Category*: Inner-space fiction". The Memoirs of a Survivor returns to her experiments with this genre, following the publication of the 'realist' The Summer Before the Dark in 1973.

Fishburn's analysis of Briefing for a Descent into Hell centres around the issue of "whether we read this book as science fiction or psycho-drama".[424] Her attempts to decide whether Charles Watkins is "mad" or "a space voyager" seem rather guilty of the "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" approach to criticism! It is a relief to learn at the end of her chapter on Briefing for a Descent into Hell, that Fishburn does "not think that Lessing wants to convince us that Charles's experiences are literally real".[425] Fishburn similarly interests herself in the Survivor's reliability in The Memoirs of a Survivor, concentrating on the Survivor's "task that involves convincing us of its [the space behind the wall's] reality".[426] Fishburn is trying to document the "recognition" and "re-cognition" processes she identifies occurring during reading these novels. However, I think she is also upholding a much less complex notion of the opposition between 'reality' and 'fiction' than Lessing herself maintains. For Fishburn,

---

423. Briefing for a Descent into Hell, op.cit., p.200. In this sub-section entitled "Inner Logic" of Chapter Seven, this novel will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

424. Fishburn, The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.25.

425. ibid., p.34.

426. ibid., p.47.

to label these alternative realities - Charles's voyage and the Survivor's world through the wall - as 'madness', to read their accounts "only as psycho-drama",[427] is to reduce them to "simply the ramblings of a ... madman":

> To read the novel as a case study in madness, therefore, is to lose its major tension - that between the *conflicting versions of reality* that appear here.[428]

In arguing this, Fishburn illustrates resistance to Lessing's lessons concerning the problematizing of 'history', 'reality', 'everyday life' and the very category 'mad' evident in The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City. To suggest Charles's voyage and the Survivor's space through the wall are "inner-space" experiences, in my opinion, makes them no less valid or potentially subversive "versions of reality".

Fishburn's concentration on "narrative guide-leaders" is potentially helpful. However, she seems to strangely privilege the narrator as a 'person' with 'agency' separate from the author:

> On the question of Charles's sanity, I really *doubt that [Lessing] cares - as he himself of course would care* - whether or not we believe his wild tales of wandering on the Atlantic ocean or the plains of South America.[429]

This separation of the "guide-leader" character from Lessing the author, is a strategy which allows Fishburn to discard Lessing's comments to the contrary, and claim Briefing for a Descent into Hell for science fiction.

---

427. ibid., p.23.

428. Fishburn is referring here to Briefing for a Descent into Hell. The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.23 my (emphasis).

429. ibid., p.33-4 (my emphasis).

Briefing for a Descent into Hell is framed by Lessing's categorisation of this novel as "inner space fiction" because "there is never anywhere to go but in". This notion of discovering alternative realities within, continues the positive reading of 'madness' Lessing offers in The Golden Notebook, and takes up The Four-Gated City's critique of psychoanalysis and its institutions. Lessing has described The Memoirs of a Survivor as "an attempt at autobiography". She repeats this comment in an interview with Francois-Olivier Rousseau which upholds my argument that The Memoirs of a Survivor is also an *inner* alternative world:

> For years I had the project of writing *an autobiography originating from dreams.* I had to give it up because it was impossible to organize the dreams into a coherent sequence without making the whole work extremely artificial. In Memoirs of a Survivor, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. *Thus reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other* to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator's past. I have said that Memoirs of a Survivor was my imaginative autobiography.[430]

This explanation helps us to understand the three novels from this period (Briefing for a Descent into Hell, The Summer Before the Dark (with its seal dream series) and The Memoirs of a Survivor) as various attempts to do this. These comments further reclaim Briefing for a Descent into Hell and The Memoirs of a Survivor for "inner space" rather than science fiction. As such, it is possible to view these two novels through the framework of Cohen and Taylor's notion of "fantasy". Indeed, Lessing herself says of her 'Canopus in Argos' series:

---

430. Putting the Questions Differently, op.cit., p.147-8 (my emphasis).

> I wouldn't classify these books as science fiction [...] No, my novels are *fantasies*, or utopias in the truest, more precise sense of the term ...[431]

Briefing for a Descent into Hell and The Memoirs of a Survivor may be of the same genre but they are otherwise remarkably different. Briefing for a Descent into Hell is unusual in having a male central character. His journey into an alternative reality seems to be prompted by the "nightmare of repetition" which is represented in the letters from his mistress, wife and friends. He is like the man Anna rejects in The Golden Notebook, who remarks, "'I have a beautiful wife who I adore. I have work I like to do. And now I have a girl.'" Anna realizes that this is a script he is following:

> Ella understands that she is the girl, and that this enterprise, sleeping with her, is a sort of project or plan for a happy life.[432]

(This echoes the tone of Professor Charles Watkins's proposal to Constance Mayne: "'Let's go to bed.'" (p.194).) It is interesting to note that both his wife and his mistress were his students, and that he prompted the sexual relations with both of them, putting him very much in a position of control in these relationships.) This "nightmare of repetition" is expressed in his alternative reality by his repeating "Around and around and around ..." (p.59 and 61). Watkins's wife and mistress haunt him in his alternative world, too:

> Three women, all intimately connected with me, alike sisters perhaps, bound to me by experience I could not remember at all. (p.63)

Felicity (his wife), Constance (his mistress) and Vera are names which appear in his alternative reality as

---

431. ibid., p.107, (my emphasis),

432. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.402.

"laughing murderesses" and "witches" (p.65). In his inner space reality they have a magical hold over him at night in a parodic exaggeration of their power over him in 'reality'.[433]

This alternative reality is as apocalyptic and violent as it is a welcome escape, for it often exaggerates negative and violent aspects of the 'real' world. The description of the Rat-dogs, for example, draws a parallel with human behaviour. Although, when Charles Watkins first sees a Rat-dog, he declares it "a creature alien to me in every way" he goes on to admit similarities:

> Yet I was thinking that someone standing a hundred yards away might say, at a casual glance, that it and I were of a similar species, for I stood nearly as tall as it did, and I had a head growing where this dog-rat had one, and roughly similar arms and legs. (p.71)

The further descriptions of their incessant quarrelling and concentration on "sexual display, in attracting each other's attention, appropriating each other's sexual partners" (p.73) sustain this critical parallel. (Indeed, their matings are described as having "the variety of human matings" (p.74).) The monkeys which join the Rat-dogs in the city are described as "altogether more likeable and sympathetic" (p.76). The more favourable parallel between these animals and human beings is, however, dismissed as "self-flattery":

> A monkey's eyes, so sad, so knowledgeable, they are eyes that speak to the eyes of a human. We feel them to be human eyes. And what sort of self-flattery is that? For the eyes of most human beings

---

433. In his first letter to his wife-to-be (then his student), Charles Watkins expresses his fear of being trapped, "a pig in your pen": "But the yellow-hair *locked him in her pen* and fed him husks. Later a fatted calf? But I don't dare - Yes. Would you - *I've never dared, I've been alone for fear of that.*" (Briefing for a Descent into Hell, op.cit., p.183).

> are sharp, knowing, clever and vain like the eyes of the Rat-dogs. The depth that lies in a monkey's eyes by no means lies behind the eyes of all men. (p.76)

The parallel between human beings and the Rat-dogs is reaffirmed, over the similarities between the monkeys and human beings, when we read that "the Rat-dogs, saw the monkeys as inferior" (p.76). The "two races" are unable to co-habit the city peacefully for long. In the fighting which leaves "corpses lying on the central square" (p.78), the Rat-dogs run "about on all fours, killing the monkeys by random snapping bites with their sharp fangs" (p.83), until the "monkeys licked the sores of Rat-dogs, and Rat-dogs accepted it as homage or submission" (p.86). Thus, Charles Watkins's "fantasy" provides not an escape but an horrific, exaggerated parody of "paramount reality".

This is not a "maintainer fantasy" as understood by Cohen and Taylor:

> Maintainer fantasies then make the present enjoyable or more tolerable by transporting the self to a reality of delight, to a different modality of experience. This is more self-conscious and controlled than a schizophrenic dissociation from reality: there is indeed a split from the real world, but this split appears to be manageable.[434]

Charles Watkins certainly experiences "a split from the real world" but it is a split which does not suggest an escape from 'reality', rather it points to the unreality of 'reality'. Watkins seems to be experiencing that confusion of the boundaries and definition of 'madness' described by Anna in The Golden Notebook:

> Yet it did not seem to her that she was even slightly mad; but rather that people who were not as obsessed as she was with the inchoate world mirrored

---

434. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.101.

> in the newspapers were all out of touch with an awful necessity. Yet she knew she was mad.[435]

It is difficult to decide whether Watkins is 'mad' for having this journey to the island of the Rat-dogs, or whether people caught up in "everyday life" are 'mad' for continuing to live this "nightmare of repetition" without questioning it or positing alternatives.

We can read Watkins's account of these Rat-dogs in the same way as Rosemary Baines described listening to him:

> He was talking about getting out of the trap, getting out of prison, of *escaping* - that kind of talk. And it *did not seem as odd to us as perhaps you may think it should, because our own thoughts were running on similar lines* ... If you can call so disconnected and rambling a stream of words 'talking'. (p.199, my emphasis)

Rosemary Baines feels able to follow "similar lines" in Watkins's "rambling" as she is able to follow in her "own thoughts":

> While his remarks may have been scattered, there was *an inner logic to them*, a thread, which sounded at first like a repetition of certain words or ideas. Sometimes it seemed as if the sound, and not the meaning, of a word or syllable in a sentence gave birth to the next sentence or word. [...] Sounds, the function of sounds in speech ... we have *no way of knowing - have we? - how a verbal current may match an inner reality*, sounds expressing a condition? (p.200, my emphasis)

Rosemary Baines seems to offer a way of reading Watkins's madness which is similar to Lynda's "tuning in" to other "wave lengths" in The Four-Gated City. To accept the notion of alternative realities is to, at least, entertain the possibility of these alternative modes of expression upheld by Rosemary Baines and Lynda. Although Watkins's "stream of words" shows him to be "out of touch

---

435. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.564.

with [the] awful necessity" of continuing "everyday life", by reading these words differently we may discover their "inner logic" emphasizes an alternative perspective of equally "awful necessity".

The understanding between Rosemary Baines and Charles Watkins suggests an alternative 'reality' in which they have indeed grown "out of touch with an awful necessity".[436] This "awful necessity" is their "task" of saving the Earth from the consequences of the "divorce there has been somewhere along the long path of this race of man between the 'I' and the 'We'" (p.103). The inability of human beings to "save for a few, say We" (p.103) is seen from "inside the Crystal" (p.88) as "mad, moonmad, lunatick":

> To celestial eyes, seen like a broth of microbes under a microscope, *always at war and destruction*, this scum of microbes thinks, it can see itself, it begins slowly to sense itself as one, a function, a note in the harmony, and this *is* its point and function, and where the scummy film transcends itself, here and here only, and never where these mad microbes say I, I, I, I, I, for *saying I, I, I, I, is their madness* this is where they have been struck lunatic, made moonmade, round the bend, crazy, for *these microbes are a whole, they form a unity, they have a single mind, a single being*, and never can they say I, I, without making the celestial watchers roll with laughter or weep with pity ... (p.103, my emphasis)

The similarities here with the messages Lessing gives us in the final parts of The Golden Notebook are striking. Anna criticizes the selfish violence of Saul Green's "I, I, I, I, I":

> He talked - I found myself absent-minded, then with my attention half on what he said, realized I was listening for the word *I* in what he said. I, I, I, I, I - I began to feel as if the word I was being shot at me like bullets from a machine gun. For a

---

436. ibid., p.564.

> moment I fancied that his mouth, moving fast and mobile was a gun of some kind.[437]

Anna's alternative perspective in these concluding parts of The Golden Notebook allow her to hear this selfish individuality, just as Charles Watkins can see it from "inside the Crystal". Saul's "I, I, I, I" is emphatically "madness" to Anna because she "understood I could no longer separate myself from Saul".[438] Anna enters a different realm of knowledge, reading her situation as Rosemary Baines suggested we listen to Charles Watkins, for its "inner logic":

> I *knew* ... that whatever already is has its logic and its force, that the great armouries of the world have their inner force, and that my terror, the real nerve-terror of the nightmare, was part of the force. I felt this, like a vision, in a new kind of knowing. And I knew that the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I, I, of Saul and of Anna were part of the logic of war ...[439]

By casting almost "celestial eyes" on her situation, Anna discovers the impossibility of the "scummy film transcend[ing] itself" where "these mad microbes say I, I, I, I, I" (p.103). "I, I, I, I" is "part of the logic of war".

Despite making this discovery Anna cannot use this "new kind of knowing" which she equates with the knowledge of "nightmares". We could say of this intuitive knowledge, what Cohen and Taylor describe of fantasy:

> Such collective maintainer fantasies [...] hardly undermine the realities of everyday life, unless, of

---

437. ibid., p.487.

438. ibid., p.512.

439. ibid., p.513-4.

> course, a script should become available in which it is possible to embed the fantasy.[440]

The only script available for Anna "to embed the fantasy" in is her notebooks, later to become The Golden Notebook which, at least, interrogates "the realities of everyday life" even if to completely "undermine" them is impossible. However, Anna finds even this attempt to describe this "new kind of knowing" impossible:

> But now, writing it, and reading what I've written, there's nothing there, just words on paper, I can't communicate, even to myself when I read it back, the knowledge of destruction as a force.[441]

Indeed, the doctors and nurses are totally unable to understand Charles's knowledge gained from his view of the earth through "celestial eyes". Unable to communicate his vision to the doctor, Charles asks the nurse to "make him go away":

> I don't want him here. He's stupid. *He doesn't understand anything.* (p.61, my emphasis)

The doctor's comment after Charles's attempts to remember his role in his alternative reality is dismissive and highlights the doctor's inability to understand:

> Patient has religious delusions. Paranoid. Disassociated. (p.138)

These "religious delusions", alongside Rosemary Baines' ability to understand, do point to the possibility that a "script [has] become available in which it is possible to embed the fantasy".[442]

---

440. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.101.

441. Lessing, The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.514.

442. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.101.

Cohen and Taylor do recognize that there is transforming potential in fantasy (a potential which Fishburn over-emphasizes in her model of science fiction):

> The sense of having been somewhere else during these fantasies is often so acute that we may refer to them as *transformers* rather than maintainers. *Reality has changed. An escape has been made. But we always return*: unless, that is, either the *inner trip keeps going* (via the scripted path of mysticism or the less scripted path of madness) or [...] we can *find a script* actually to get the fantasy working *within* our paramount reality.[443]

Charles Watkins's fantasy, however, seems to offer a further option - that of discovering an alternative reality, the 'reality' described by Merk at the Celestial Conference:

> 'I must repeat [...] it is not all a question of your arriving on Planet Earth as you leave here. You will lose nearly all memory of your past existence. You will each of you come to yourselves, perhaps alone, perhaps in the company of each other, but with only a vague feeling of recognition, and probably disassociated, disorientated, ill, discouraged, and unable to believe, when you are told, what your task really is. [...] Some of you may choose not to wake, for the waking will be so painful, and the knowledge of your condition and Earth's condition so agonizing, you will be like drug addicts: you may prefer to continue to breathe in oblivion. (p.123-4)

The "script" offered to Watkins, Rosemary Baines and Frederick Larson is that they are members of the "Descent Team" from the Celestial Conference and have undergone "brainprinting". Cohen and Taylor's description of the limited options available to a fantasist proves ominous to the subversive potential of Charles's fantasy in Briefing for a Descent into Hell. Rosemary Baines and Frederick Larson bravely continue to explore their fantasies believing:

---

443. ibid., p.101 (my emphasis).

> But I am one who does not believe that other people's crises should be cut short, or blanked out with drugs, or forced sleep, or a pretence that there is no crisis ... (p.200)

However, the "unity" of "We" they so easily create when Charles walks into the "little Greek restaurant in Gower Street" saying "'I thought I would find you here'" (p.198), proves impossible to maintain. The novel closes (that is, before the 'Afterword') with Charles's letter to Rosemary Baines declining her "very kind invitation to dinner" (p.250), phrased exactly according to the rules of polite formality. This return to the "narrative of repetition" is due to Charles Watkins's decision to have electric shock treatment as he feels a "sense of urgency" in his need "to remember" (p.247). Instead of 'remembering' the Celestial Conference, and thus continuing his "inner trip", Charles is returned to his identity of married professor with a family, and the inevitable "return" to "paramount reality" is effected.

Returning to Cohen and Taylor's query over the "supportive or subversive" relation of fantasy to "paramount reality", I would suggest that Briefing for a Descent into Hell is more "supportive" than "subversive". The novel does enact a critique of psychiatry. Doctors X and Y are like the Consultant Psychiatrist at a teaching hospital and the neurologist with his Harley Street practice who, when asked to diagnose the hero of Lessing's film script, "agreed about nothing at all" (p.252). The consequence of having *two* "skilled and compassionate diagnoses" is to open up a space for Lessing's interpretation and, in the novel, for Rosemary Baines and even the reader's, diagnosis. Briefing for a Descent into Hell also enacts a thorough critique of modern Earth's individualism and propensity for war.

However, Briefing for a Descent into Hell does not "transform the very world itself".[444] The whole novel is contained within the institutions of psychiatry which return Charles Watkins to the "nightmare of repetition" noticeably unchanged.[445] Like Phoebe in The Four-Gated City, who, unable to "hold the 'breakdown', to explore it, develop it, use it", thereby "refused a chance to open and absorb", Charles Watkins becomes "more controlled"[446] by the "narrative of repetition" his fantasy was ironically attempting to escape. The subversive potential of Charles's relationship with Rosemary Baines is, as I have noted, contained because his letter to her terminates any further contact.

The Survivor of The Memoirs of a Survivor crucially differs from Charles Watkins in *accepting* the "chance to open and absorb". As I commented above, whilst sharing aspects of the genre of "inner space fiction", The Memoirs of a Survivor is very different from Briefing for a Descent into Hell. The escape into fantasy, into the world beyond the wall, is prompted by apocalypse in The Memoirs of a Survivor, rather than by the "nightmare of repetition" which seems to motivate Charles Watkins's journey. Indeed, the Survivor's situation resembles the script of Charles's alternative reality as described at the Celestial Conference, rather than his "everyday life". This is the peculiar achievement of The Memoirs of a Survivor. By encouraging us to focus our incredulity on the space beyond the wall, the "guide-leader" (to borrow Fishburn's term) is able to present a vision of post-apocalyptic London as the 'reality' from which she escapes.

---

444. Fishburn, The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.17.

445. See particularly the letters he sends after his recovery, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, op.cit., p.250.

446. Lessing, The Four-Gated City, op.cit., p.409.

Whereas in Briefing for a Descent into Hell, the destructive nature of human society is critiqued through Charles's description of the Rat-dogs on the island from which he is rescued by the Crystal, in The Memoirs of a Survivor, human society's self-destruction has become the "everyday reality". The Memoirs of a Survivor could be understood as documenting what happens to Earth if all the "Descent Team" from the Celestial Conference of Briefing for a Descent into Hell fail in their "task". In this, The Memoirs of a Survivor shares much with Shikasta. Unlike Briefing for a Descent into Hell, which is framed both by the institutions of psychiatry and by "everyday life" as we would recognize it, The Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta take place wholly within alternative realities. The issue of how far The Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta are "supportive or subversive" of "paramount reality" is, therefore, connected to the politics of situating the whole novel within an alternative world. These are, I would suggest, the politics of space fiction.

THE POLITICS OF SPACE FICTION

As I have suggested above in classifying The Memoirs of a Survivor with Briefing for a Descent into Hell as "inner-space fiction", the Survivor's trips through the wall and adoption of Emily can be read as "psycho-drama" (Fishburn's phrase). As Lessing suggests in the comment quoted above:

> In Memoirs of a Survivor, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. *Thus reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other* to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator's past.[447]

In this reading of The Memoirs of a Survivor as "psycho-drama", Lessing's use of fantasy is tied up with an exploration of the inadequacies of the Survivor's 'self', in the way suggested by Walker:

> Aware that creating a self is an act of fantasy, the ironic narrator observes ... her own creation and realizes that it is false and incomplete.[448]

Like Martha in The Four-Gated City who goes, in Walker's words, "through periods of self-willed detachment from reality in order to emerge whole and sane",[449] the Survivor's visits through the wall to her childhood allow her to revise "her own creation". Lessing's comment that The Memoirs of a Survivor was "an attempt at autobiography" points to the relationships between fiction and autobiography, narrative and self. These

---

447. Putting the Questions Differently, op.cit., p.148, (my emphasis).

448. Nancy A. Walker, Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990) p.11.

449. ibid., p.115.

Walker proposes are commonly inter-related themes in contemporary women's fiction:

> Not only does fiction blend into autobiography, but the fluidity of the individual self requires constant revision of the 'truth' about one's life story.[450]

The Survivor's explorations of the spaces behind the wall allow her to carry out this necessary "revision of the 'truth' about one's life story". Further, bringing up Emily allows the Survivor to examine and critique the socially available subject positions for women, for in Walker's words, "Emily grows into a parody of socially constructed womanhood".[451] In leading Emily through the wall, the Survivor enables them to "escape, imaginatively ... the scripts that have been written for them as women".[452] Gerald and his children's joining them extends Lessing's critique to all "the scripts that have been written" by this competitive, capitalist Western culture.

The "supportive or subversive" nature of the inner-space symbolized by the "alternate world" behind the wall can be assessed in a similar way to Martha's and Lynda's inner explorations in The Four-Gated City. These women, unlike, Charles Watkins, do achieve some measure of resistance to being institutionalized and contained by psychiatry or "everyday life". They are, however, framed by Lessing's dystopias of apocalypse. Whilst Lessing has claimed in an interview that the conclusion of The Four-Gated City is not a "blueprint", she does hold the belief that "something of the kind is likely to happen".[453] In this sense, The Four-Gated City's 'Appendix' and The

450. ibid., p.80.

451. ibid., p.170.

452. ibid., p.57.

453. Putting the Questions Differently, op.cit., p.42.

Memoirs of a Survivor are in line with that type of 'science fiction' typified by the novel which takes a future date as its title. These are imaginative projections of our future, but which are, of course, wholly contained within the limitations placed on our imaginations by our situatedness in contemporary society.

The Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta present what Walker terms "full-blown alternate worlds":

> In order to free themselves from the 'love story', some writers, such as Doris Lessing ... have used the mode of speculative fiction to propose full-blown alternate worlds - whether utopian or dystopian ...[454]

As the quotation above from Cohen and Taylor suggests,[455] it would seems that such "full-blown alternate worlds" are more "fundamentally radical"[456] than the parodic strategies Lessing uses in The Golden Notebook. However, I want to argue that Lessing's use of space fiction is subject to just the same political problematics as her use of parody.

For the criticism implicit in these "full-blown alternate worlds" to function they must "install" the world as we know it, just as parody must "install" the pre-existing narrative it is subverting. Fishburn suggests that:

> Because we are learning to recognize ourselves in what are the alien worlds (alternate realities) of [Lessing's] texts, we are also changing our views of what the world is like ... Ultimately, if she is successful in breaking through our perceptual

---

454. Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit., p.129.

455. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.88.

456. Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit., p.151.

> screens, she will force us to reconsider what reality itself might be.[457]

According to Fishburn's model of 'recognition' and 're-cognition', therefore, if we can recognize the twentieth-century we know in what is termed in Canopus's 'History of Shikasta' the "Century of Destruction", our understanding "of what the world is like" changes as, indeed, 'The History of Shikasta' informs us it will:

> Here we must emphasize that most of *the inhabitants of Shikasta were not aware that they were living through what would be seen as a hundred-years' war,* the century that would bring this planet to almost total destruction.[458]

The contradiction experienced by the reader between the installed "paramount reality" that we can recognize and the "alternate reality" which is so different from this "paramount reality", is further explored by Fishburn:

> Through her narrators, [Lessing] is forcing us to contend with information that is incompatible with the ordinary reality we are aware of experiencing on a daily basis. Yet she has placed this alien information in a setting that is familiar enough as fundamentally our own - no matter how strange or alien it might appear to be. We are left then with the dilemma of how much to believe and how much to discount in what we have read.[459]

This last sentence describes a process which I believe modifies the "transforming" power of Lessing's space fiction.

The reader is described by Fishburn in a process of discounting the "alien information". Lessing cannot create an "alternate reality" which we can "believe" and

---

457. Fishburn, The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.11.

458. Lessing, Shikasta, op.cit., p.112 (my emphasis).

459. Fishburn, The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing, op.cit., p.12.

in our process of rejecting the "information that is incompatible with the ordinary reality":

> ... we reveal the unsuitability of fantasy as a means for genuinely transforming our lives. It is only in rare circumstances, and amongst rare beings, that fantasy life feels solid and continuous enough to constitute some sort of alternative world, some escape from paramount reality, something which is more than Simmel's 'island in life'. Much of the time its transformative effects are more limited; it allows us to the think what we may not say, to see what is not there, to mentally compensate for some of the aesthetic or erotic inadequacies of landscapes and lovers.[460]

In rejecting Shikasta as an "alternative world, some escape from paramount reality", we are in danger of rejecting or, at least, being unable to use or enact the social criticism implicit in it because, unless "a script should become available in which it is possible to embed the fantasy" "we always return"[461] to "everyday life". As Walker argues, the "juxtaposition of fantasy to uncomfortable reality underscores this fact" that "fantasy is not in itself a solution".[462]

However, should Lessing succeed in installing the world as we know it to the extent that we do "believe" her, and so that the compatibility of her "alternate reality" is such that a "script" is "available in which it is possible to embed the fantasy", the radicality of Lessing's fiction would be greatly reduced. For example, an aspect of The Memoirs of a Survivor which is compatible with a "script" available to us in "paramount reality" is the description of the Survivor *observing* "reality" (in her case, post-apocalyptic London) through her window. This description upholds the "observer" Lessing repeatedly suggests is the only position from

---

460. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.105.

461. ibid., p.101.

462. Walker, Feminist Alternatives, op.cit., p.125.

which she can resist "paramount reality". The Survivor "Watching and waiting. Watching for the most part, Emily",[463] who Lessing describes as the "image of" the Survivor's "adolescence", echoes Kate Brown watching herself in another person in The Summer Before the Dark[464] and Sarah Durham watching herself fall in love (as the Survivor does in watching Emily fall in love with Gerald) in Love, Again.[465] Lessing's space fiction thus upholds exactly the position of self-conscious "watching and waiting" as Lessing arrived at through parody. This position is, of course, limited in its radicality and implicated in that which is observed. Whilst we may "embed" this position into our "paramount reality", the "Giant-mind" described by Lessing during the "Lock"[466] in Shikasta is wholly incompatible with "everyday life". Thus the more radical solution to the problems of identity and knowledge offered by this "Giant-mind", the "free flow of thought, ideas, information, *growth* between planet and planet across our galaxy",[467] has to be rejected, whilst the more conservative "observer" can be written into "everyday life".

I would conclude, therefore, that the politics of Lessing's space fiction are as problematic as her earlier explorations of madness and use of parody. Read as "psycho-drama" the Survivor's space beyond the wall shares with Anna's madness in The Golden Notebook and Martha's inner explorations in The Four-Gated City, limited possibilities for "transforming" "paramount reality". The politics of presenting "full-blown

---

463. Lessing, The Memoirs of a Survivor, op.cit., p.74.

464. The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.183.

465. "An interesting moment, when you observe one man sliding out of your heart while another slides in." (Love, Again, op.cit., p.205)

466. Lessing, Shikasta, op.cit., p.34.

467. ibid., p.33.

alternate worlds" function in such similar ways to the politics of parody that I am tempted to re-label Lessing's "space fiction", calling it instead "parody of Earth" fiction. Her space fiction offers the same implicated criticism as her parody. I agree with Cohen and Taylor's own answer to their question, "Is fantasy primarily supportive or subversive of paramount reality?":

> But - as we described - the way the authorities[468] allow for and even encourage such fantasies, might suggest that fantasy is not as radical and subversive an escape route as it might at first appear.[469]

Recognizing both space fiction's "non-subversive functions"[470] and its achievement of allowing a provisional escape, I would reformulate Cohen and Taylor's "supportive or subversive" into "supportive *and* subversive".

---

468. Cohen and Taylor are referring here to the prison authorities as their study started from their conversations with long-term prisoners in Durham prison.

469. Cohen and Taylor, Escape Attempts, op.cit., p.97.

470. ibid., p.98.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"PARODY REGAINED?"[471]

> "Doris Lessing shares, with many of her characters, a passionate vision of contradiction. That vision is sometimes displayed in familiar forms of paradox, incongruity, and parody. More pertinently and significantly, Lessing has turned her passion for incongruity into shaping principles in her major works, The Children of Violence series and The Golden Notebook."[472]

With The Good Terrorist (1985), Lessing returns to her strategy of parody, thus allowing me a "critical re-visiting" of the main issues raised by this model of parody. Lessing's use of parody in The Good Terrorist illustrates the possible dangers of using a strategy which "installs" as much as it "subverts", enabling me to re-emphasize parody's duality. It also reveals how appropriate such a 'dual-coded' strategy is for expressing Lessing's interrogation of the liberal humanist self and the essentialist notion of gender.

A brief consideration of the detailed description of Alice Melling from the perspective Alice believes Bob Hood has of her, demonstrates that The Good Terrorist considers many of the themes explored in Lessing's earlier fiction:

---

471. Margaret Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern, op.cit., p.242.

472. Claire Sprague, "'Without Contraries Is No Progression': Lessing's The Four-Gated City." (MFS 26 1980) p.99-100.)

> This man now gave Alice a long inspection, and Alice sat confidently, to be looked at. She knew how she seemed: the pretty daughter of her mother ... A middle-class girl with her assurance, her knowledge of the ropes, sat properly in the chair, and if she wore a heavy blue military jacket, under it was a flowered pink and white blouse.[473]

These themes include women in society ("Alice sat confidently, to be looked at"); the self-conscious construction of identities ("She knew how she seemed"); the mother and daughter relationship; class; the power of knowledge ("her assurance, her knowledge"); and the need to participate in middle-class discourse in order to get the socialist protest heard (the "military jacket" excused because of the "flowered pink and white blouse").

The context of this quotation (Alice attempting to save No. 43 at the Council office) draws our attention to the theme of the house as "home". "Home" is a space where the related needs for 'family', mothering, belonging, "identity work" (Cohen and Taylor's phrase), and resistance to both the "narrative of repetition" and "mass emotions"[474] can be negotiated - successfully, or otherwise. The fear of having been inescapably conditioned and created by one's upbringing, is one Martha in A Proper Marriage experiences as "the secret fear that" "she could take no step, perform no action, no matter how apparently new and unforeseen" which would not "turn out to be part of the inevitable process she was doomed to"[475]:

> She could not meet a young man or woman without looking around anxiously for the father and mother;

---

473. Doris Lessing, The Good Terrorist (London: Cape, 1985) p.24. In Chapter Eight this novel will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

474. This is Lessing's term from her essay "You Are Damned, We Are Saved", Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit.

475. Lessing, A Proper Marriage, op.cit., p.104.

> that was how they would end, there was no escape for them.[476]

This is a fear the residents of No. 43 share with Martha. Their taking on of 'false' accents which fail to hide their 'real' voices, upholds Martha's notion that this is an "inevitable process" and that any attempt to resist this "narrative of repetition" will be "doomed":

> Her voice was standard middle-class, but Alice knew this was not how Pat had started off. She was working too hard at it. [...] The only other person in this room, apart from Alice, with his own voice, unmodified, was Jim, the genuine cockney. (p.30)

Living in a squat is for many of the characters, one way to posit an alternative to the "homes" they were brought up in. The alternative space of the commune is one in which they can do "identity work" which resists the "narrative of repetition". That the commune is seen to provide an alternative to the family home where people can escape their childhoods, is evident in Alice's determination that she has "had all the bloody unhappy childhoods I am going to listen to":[477]

> 'Communes. Squats. If you don't take care, that's what they become - people sitting around discussing their shitty childhoods.' (p.130)

Alice's attempt to create a "home" at No. 43,[478] therefore, threatens those for whom the squat crucially represents an escape from "home", such as Faye:

---

476. ibid., p.104.

477. That the Communist Party failed to achieve its promised destruction of the family is discussed above in relation to The Four-Gated City.

478. "Oh, yes, all this love and harmony was precarious enough, Alice was thinking as she sat and smiled; just one little thing, puff! and it would be gone. Meanwhile, she put both hands around her mug of coffee, feeling how its warmth fed her, and thought : It is like a family, it *is*." (The Good Terrorist, op.cit., p.248-9.)

> 'I'm not going to contribute,' said Faye. 'Why should I? I like things the way they were.' (p.33)

Faye's reaction to the American professor[479], along with her lesbian relationship with Roberta, illustrate her determination to resist the roles of wife and mother. Living in the commune is part of her refusal to participate in the nuclear family unit upheld by the dominant ideology. Alice eventually realizes:

> They like it. Roberta, certainly Faye, like living in filth. (p.173)

It is during this incident of her going into their room to paint it, that Alice recognizes the lesbian couple's vulnerability, especially compared to the middle-class, heterosexual couple of Mary and Reggie:

> Mary and Reggie - those *householders*, as Alice contemptuously thought of them - sitting upright in their marriage bed, examining Alice, knew that nothing could ever really threaten them. But Roberta, for all her handsome, dark solidity, her motherliness, and Faye, like a flimsy chick or little bird huddling there behind Roberta's large shoulder, were vulnerable. (p.172)

Roberta attempts to protect by mothering Faye. Similarly, Alice plays the protective mother to the commune, which seems to be made up of vulnerable misfits (Pat excepted). Alice's parody of mothering in this novel is the negative side of the same coin as Martha's positive acceptance of this role in The Four-Gated City.

The Good Terrorist does give particular attention to mothering, towards which Lessing's attitude is ambivalent. She upholds the taking on of responsibility

---

479. "His 'line' - that the differences between human beings were genetically, not culturally, determined - incensed, as was to be expected, the Women's Movement, and Faye became hysterical at the mention of his name." (ibid., p.247.)

involved in mothering, but is acutely conscious of the possible dangers for women of that identity - 'mother'. Lessing directly confronts the paradox of feminism identified by Humm and Jardine as the "need to create an alternative social subject 'woman'" whilst recognizing the danger "that 'woman' quickly becomes an essentialist construct".[480]

Throughout The Good Terrorist breasts act as the image of 'woman' trapped in the identity of mother, of 'woman' viewed as an "essentialist construct". In relation to Roberta who seeks to resist this essentialist notion of woman and mothering, Alice recognizes that this image is limiting and contradictory to Roberta's self-projection as "butch and tough":

> [Alice] thought: What [Roberta] really is, is *just* one of these big *maternal* lezzies, *all sympathy and big boobs; she wants to seem butch and tough,* but *bad luck for her, she's a mum.* (p.129, my emphasis)

Alice, because she is portrayed as a "revolutionary" prepared to work 'within' the available social systems (as is evident in her wearing a "flowered pink and white blouse" under a "heavy blue military jacket" to the Council office[481]) is shown to be prepared to accept and work with essentialist sexual difference:

> She had never been able to see why the word 'genetic' should provoke such rage. [...] If that's how things were, then - they were. One had to build around that. (p.249)

To Alice, the essentialism signalled by breasts is perhaps not as threatening as it is to Roberta:

> Once, long ago during her student days, she had said [...] that women had breasts 'and all that kind of

---

480. Humm, Border Traffic, op.cit., p.12.

481. Lessing, The Good Terrorist, op.cit., p.24.

> thing', while men were 'differently equipped', and surely that must be genetic? (p.249)

These quotations illustrate Alice's ambiguity towards an essentialist notion of 'woman'.

Alice attempts to simultaneously recognize both a sexual difference and the dangers of accepting gender roles based on that difference. Indeed, Lessing describes Alice as occupying a "false position" in relation to feminism because of exactly this ambiguous attitude towards how we can define "femaleness". Whilst Alice shares Roberta and Faye's desire for equality, her personal experiences of patriarchy have taught her difference and inequality:

> When people probed her about her attitudes towards feminism, sexual politics, it was always this beginning [of her own experience of menstruating] (as she saw it) that she went back to in her mind. 'Of course people *ought* to be equal,' she would say, starting already to sound slightly irritated. 'That goes without saying.' In short, she was always finding herself in a false position. (p.250)

She asserts that taking on the role 'mother' was a choice freely taken by an autonomous human being, but she still describes this caring role as a gendered one:

> In the house in Manchester she shared with four other students she had been *housemother*, doing the cooking and shopping, housekeeping. She loved it. (p.17, my emphasis)

Indeed, the role does seem to give her considerable power[482]. Chris Weedon argues that using poststructuralist theory can help us to understand those women who, like Alice, choose to mother:

---

482. "In command of them, and of herself, Alice stood on the bottom of the stairs, exhausted, dirty..." (The Good Terrorist, op.cit., p.43)

> In order to understand why women so willingly take on the role of wife and mother, we need a theory of the relationship between subjectivity and meaning, meaning and social value, the range of possible *normal* subject positions open to women, and the power and powerlessness invested in them.[483]

Alice views her behaviour as a means of using "the range of possible *normal* subject positions open to women" to take her beyond traditional roles into social criticism and change. When Pat remarks that Alice does not mind doing all the work, Alice replies "But I am a revolutionary" (p.57). Choosing to mother is her way of defying middle-class life in a capitalist society. It is a role which gives her "meaning and social value", indeed, power, within the commune.

Unlike Jasper who starts living in communes after failing to get a job due to his bad degree, Alice *chooses* not to enter the job market. Jasper's argument that:

> ... she was nothing but a servant, wasting her life on other people. (p.17)

is a hypocritical reformulation of her middle-class mother's objections. Dorothy knows that Alice's lack of a career was a choice not a failure to find work:

> 'Oh *God*, why don't you get a job? Do something?'
> 'You seem to have overlooked the fact that we have over three million unemployed,' said Alice self-righteously.
> 'Oh, rubbish. You got a better degree than most of your mates. *All my friends' children of your age got jobs and have careers. You could have done too, if you had wanted. You didn't even try.'* (p.352, my emphasis)[484]

---

483. Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) p.18-19.

484. Notice how the "all" of Dorothy's "All my friends' children of your age got jobs and have careers," echoes Dr. Sterns's "narrative of repetition" in A Proper Marriage op.cit., p.356.

Dorothy refuses, however, to accept that Alice's life is different from her life as wife and mother. She does not see any subversive power or potential in Alice's position:

> 'But it turned out *you spend your life exactly as I did. Cooking and nannying for other people. An all-purpose female drudge.'* She laughed bitterly, demolishing all the lovely years Alice thought about so lovingly, killing the old Dorothy Mellings who shed warmth everywhere... (p.353-4, my emphasis)

Alice, in contrast views her mothering as "repetition with critical distance"[485] of Dorothy's life. Whereas Dorothy created a home for her nuclear family from which she hoped to propel Alice into a career and middle-class life, Alice's commune, which parodies the middle-class home, is the base from which, Alice claims, "We are going to pull everything *down*!". Dorothy responds to Alice's claim with cynicism:

> 'And then you are going to *build it all up again in your own image!* [...] Yes, I can see it all. Jasper will probably be Minister of Culture, he's the type for it. [...] And you'll be his willing aide.' (p.354, my emphasis)

Dorothy's attitude emphasizes that there is no outside from which to project a 'true', 'fair', 'utopian' society. This is a point Hutcheon repeatedly returns to in her books, as she herself notes:

> I keep returning to this question of the position, the "outside" from which much Marxist theorizing seems to come, because postmodern contextualizing contests its very possibility.[486]

---

485. This is Hutcheon's definition of parody. Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.6.

486. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.217.

In predicting that Alice's new society will still have its victims and its powerful, its "aides" and its "ministers", "one or two who do the work" (p.56) and those who neither work nor contribute, indeed, its Alice's and its Jasper's, Dorothy joins postmodern theorists in suggesting "there is no "outside" to be found".[487] This attitude sends Alice running out of the house screaming abuse at her mother, because Alice's role as 'mother' of No. 43 is "revolutionary" only if it helps to bring about a socialist revolution which makes everyone equal.

The extent to which Alice's reformation of No. 43 parodies her mother's creation of a family home is evident in the parallel descriptions of the parties. Her mother's successful middle-class parties find their revolutionary counter-part in the CCU party. Indeed, "it was her arms stretched round the great silvery saucepan that brought it [the memories of her mother's parties] all back" (p.232). The saucepan was bought for the CCU party and thus emphasizes the parallel. After the successful CCU party Jasper praises Alice's achievement:

> 'Clever Alice,' he said gently. 'It was wonderful, what you did.' (p.240)

However, when the climatic act of terrorism is being planned it clashes with Philip's funeral which Alice insists someone should attend. Having fed and housed this group of 'revolutionaries', Alice is no longer necessary to their plan:

> 'But somebody must be at his funeral.'
> 'You go. You aren't essential for the plan.'
> 'But I want to be there!' (p.363)

When Pat leaves the commune in Bert and Jasper's absence, Alice wants to leave, too. She recognizes that

---

487. ibid., p.217.

Jasper "made use of her" (p.265) and knows that what she needs is "To be free of Jasper." (p.258). Pat leaves because:

> 'Alice, I keep telling you, I am serious, unlike those two bloody lunatics of ours.' (p.260)

To be 'serious' thus becomes equated with going off to be trained at spy schools in order to work *within* systems such as the BBC. The other type of communists Muriel calls "useful idiots" who have a "vague and untutored enthusiasm for communism" (p.262). Comrade Andrew warns Alice of the dangers of the "games" these "useful idiots" play:

> 'They are playing, Alice, like little children with explosives. They are very dangerous people. Dangerous to themselves and to others.'
> 'And you aren't dangerous.' [...]
> 'No, Alice. If you do things properly and carefully, then only the people get hurt who should get hurt.' (p.244)

He also offers Alice the opportunity to join "our network" of planted spies in "a certain firm, with national importance" (p.177). Alice refuses, saying she "would go mad" (p.178)[488]. He points to her transformation of the house as evidence of her abilities

---

488. Interestingly this is what Lessing in Under My Skin calls Alice - "quite mad". Lessing claims that "A lot of people have not noticed that she is mad" because "political (and religious) movements and groups of an inspirational and revolutionary kind have room for any number of maniacs" (Under My Skin, op.cit., p.274). This is *not* the positive madness of Anna in The Golden Notebook, rather it is the "lunacy" of uncritical political commitment which Lessing describes in 'You Are Damned, We Are Saved'. It is "a lunacy of immense strength" (Prisons We Chose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.27). She goes on to say "that in these violent times the kindest, wisest wish we have for the young must be: 'We hope that your period of immersion in group lunacy, group self-righteousness, will not coincide with some period of your country's history when you can put your murderous and stupid ideas into practice.' (ibid., p.30).

in working within the system. On another occasion Andrew suggests she needs a holiday, to which she replies:

> 'I don't understand why you are always wanting me to do such middle-class things.' (p.245)

At the very beginning of the novel, however, it is Bert who argues "It goes against the grain, negotiating with the Establishment" and Alice is quick to retort "It doesn't go against my grain. I've done it often."(p.13). In declining Andrew's offer of a job as a spy within the Establishment, Alice fails to realize her own talents and for the first time in the novel feels trapped in her house and her relationship with Jasper:

> This house, for which she had fought, she now felt as a trap, ready to deliver her back to Jasper, from whom she must escape. (p.288)

For much of the novel, however, Alice uses her relationship with Jasper as a way to escape a sense of biological determinism. His homosexuality removes the necessity of having sex from her life. When Comrade Andrew is attracted to her she only just tolerates his touch:

> She did not like being touched, not ever! (p.178)

When Andrew touches her body, the breast, again, seems to signal an essential femaleness which Alice attempts to resist:

> ... he reached over with his right hand to lay it on her waist under her breasts. But she wouldn't, couldn't, have this, and irritably shook him off. (p.243-4)

In one incident, Alice is surprised by the feel of her own body, and experiences that surprise as a warning:

> Her fingers were sliding over the satiny warmth of her skin, and in a sweet *intimate flash* of reminder, or *of warning*, her body (her secret breathing *body*

> *which she ignored for nearly all of her time, trying to forget it*) came to life and spoke to her. (p.212, my emphasis)

To try "to forget" her body and her sex, is to resist the gendering of her role as 'mother'. She attempts, instead, to be a universal parent. When she goes slogan painting, Alice sprays after a statement of 'Women Are Angry', 'We Are All Angry...' (p.157) as if she does not consider herself to be included under the category of 'women'. Showalter, arguing for similarities between Woolf and Lessing, suggests that:

> The feminine ego is merged for Woolf into a passive vulnerable receptivity; for Lessing, into a *transmitter for the collective consciousness.*[489]

Like Alice, Showalter argues, Lessing is uncomfortable with feminism and attempts to "minimize" its influence on her writing. Showalter believes Lessing shares Alice's "false position" (p.250) in not having "yet confronted the essential feminist implications of her own writing".[490] Showalter's criticism goes to the heart of Lessing's interrogation of liberal humanism. Lessing is reluctant to make the sort of liberal feminist gesture Showalter would approve by simply depicting her female characters as having claimed the unity, autonomy, essence, and coherence of self usually reserved for the white males privileged by our dominant ideology of liberal humanism. Lessing's interrogation of the essentialist notion of "femaleness" is part of her expression of dissatisfaction with what Weedon (quoted above) calls "the range of possible *normal* subject positions open to women". Whilst Alice accepts that we have "to build around" the fact "that women had breasts 'and all that kind of thing'" (p.249), and thus upholds

---

489. Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, op.cit., p.311 (my emphasis).

490. ibid., p.311.

the essentialist notion of gender identity; she is also highly aware of Butler's point that "gender is performatively produced".[491] The description of Alice's clothes for her visit to the Council office (quoted above), is only one example of her putting on an identity with her clothes, much like Kate Brown, whose choice of dress from the "rail marked 'Jolie Madame'"[492] is also a choice of identity. However, in her "reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*",[493] Lessing is *not* killing the Subject.[494] Lessing, like Hutcheon's postmodernism, "does not deny subjectivity but [she] does challenge the traditional notion of its unity and its function".[495] Lessing's use of parody to question essentialism and the liberal humanist self, adheres to what Waugh identifies as the first lesson of Hutcheon's postmodernism - "that it is impossible to step outside that which one contests".[496] Lessing's parody of mothering in The Good Terrorist and her parody of the subject position 'free women' in The Golden Notebook install and critique the essentialist notion of gender and the liberal humanist subject.

Benhabib's insistence on the need to retain and enhance the "agency, autonomy and selfhood of women"[497]

---

491. Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.24.

492. The Summer Before the Dark, op.cit., p.13.

493. Butler, Gender Trouble, op.cit., p.147.

494. Benhabib argues that "The strong version of the Death of the Subject thesis is not compatible with the goals of feminism." (Situating the Self, op.cit., p.24.)

495. Hutcheon, The Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.164.

496. Waugh, "Review of A Poetics of Postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon", (History of the Human Sciences 1-2 1988-89) p.397.

497. Benhabib, Situating the Self, op.cit., p.214.

is echoed in Waugh's critique of Hutcheon's postmodern position:

> It is difficult to square political commitment with an acceptance of such a position because it is difficult if not ultimately impossible to avoid some form of essentialism if one is to espouse commitment.[498]

Therefore, the contradictory duality, or what Hutcheon would call "paradox", expressed by the phrase "essentialist construct" is appropriate for Lessing's model of the self. Those characters, such as Anna Freeman in The Golden Notebook, Kate Brown in The Summer Before the Dark, and Martha Quest in The Four-Gated City, who work their way to subject positions which allow them to criticize, but still function effectively in "everyday life", do so through the use of parody. Parody is both the mode of living and the formal expression of Lessing's paradoxical subjectivity.

The Good Terrorist, in contrast to the success of these characters, charts the failure of Alice's attempt to self-consciously create herself as a revolutionary earth-mother. This role collapses under its contradictions, especially its conflict with her other role of 'terrorist':

> She could not remember a point when she had said, 'I am a terrorist, I don't mind being killed.' (Here she was again impelled to get up from her chair, in a trapped panic movement, but again sat down.) (p.393)

As Andrew warned, the "games" of Bert and Jasper do become dangerous. The "wrong people" get hurt. Alice has failed to create an alternative parodic identity, and

---

498. Patricia Waugh, Rev. of A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, by Linda Hutcheon. (History of the Human Sciences 1-2 1988-9) p.399.

the novel ends with her being herself in need of a mother:

> ... looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had, perhaps, a bad dream, the poor baby sat waiting for it to be time to go out and meet the professionals. (p.397)

Unable to remember Peter Cecil, Alice's thoughts leave the reader with uncertainty as to whether Cecil is, indeed, "an official of some kind" (p.274) or whether he presents a threat to Alice. The failure of Alice in her role as 'mother' reflects also her political failure. She aimed to be a parent of a new world but instead her group caused only violence. No political message is made by the bomb as the IRA deny the action. Andrew's strategy of planting spies to work within the Establishment is upheld. Similarly, Lessing's strategy of criticizing the human tendency to become "a member of a group of raving bigots and lunatics" from a perspective *within* one of these groups is also upheld. Despite the "lunacy" of political groups like Alice's, Lessing argues, they continue to emerge:

> And yet such groups continually spring into existence everywhere, have periods when such beliefs are their diet, while they hate and persecute and revile anybody who does not agree with them. It is a process that goes on all the time and I think must go on, because the patterns of the past are so strong in us that criticism of a society and a desire to change it fall so easily into such patterns.[499]

In parodying the thriller genre which normally describes such a group putting their "murderous and stupid ideas into practice"[500] from a sympathetic perspective[501], Lessing criticizes from a position from which:

---

499. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.28.

500. ibid., p.30.

> You will understand absolutely how sane people, in periods of public insanity, can murder, destroy, lie, swear black is white.[502]

Lessing's description of Alice as "quite mad"[503] is because she chooses to live in this "mass lunacy" perpetually. Choosing to repeat "with critical distance" the thriller form usually used to express the action of a group believing "you are damned, we are saved", Lessing's use of parody works on a formal level to enact a more general critique of this tendency of human thinking.

However, it is not a simple case of 'working within' strategies succeeding where terrorism fails. Alice's attempts to work within the role of 'mother' warn of the dangers of the conservative, installing impulse of parody. As Waugh notes of Hutcheon's other model of postmodern duality - the paradox:

> Paradox is undoubtedly a problematic form for political resistance to take.[504]

The sense of threat and doom at the end of the The Good Terrorist suggest that Alice's future may match Faye's fate. As the pessimism of Dorothy's "And then you are going to build it all up again in your own image!" seems to acknowledge, socialism cannot project an ideal society from an ideological 'outside'. It is implicated in the very things it is attempting to overthrow. For example, Comrade Andrew giving Alice instructions whilst

---

501. Contrast, as an example, The Good Terrorist with Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls, in which the reader is encouraged to hope the soldiers / terrorists are successful in their act of violence (blowing up the bridge).

502. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.30.

503. Under My Skin, op.cit., p.274.

504. Waugh, History of the Human Sciences, op.cit., p.399.

attempting to seduce her, strongly suggests that communism will not undermine patriarchy. Alice's strategy of ignoring sex and the body, "trying to forget it" is no solution. The importance of sex to power relations is indisputable.

Alice's parody of her mother's life seems to repeat and install more clearly than it is able to criticize and subvert. However, it is important to recognize the more positive aspects of Alice's attempt. I would stress with Michele Hannoosh the "reflexive function of parody", that "the parody actually rebounds upon itself, calling itself into question as it does the parodied work, and suggesting its own potential as a model or target, a work to be rewritten, transformed, even parodied in its turn".[505] Alice does at least call into question the fixity of the role of 'mother', suggesting that parodic refunctioning of the role could be subversive. We are returned to the paradoxes and problematics of Hutcheon's postmodernism:

> ... the paradoxes of postmodernism do allow for answers - though only if you ignore the other half of the paradox.[506]

We could ignore Alice's choice to mother people and call her a victim of patriarchy's demands of women; or we could ignore Alice's feelings of being trapped and declare her a triumphant earth-mother asserting female qualities as her successful feminist strategy. Instead I would conclude with Hutcheon's comment that:

> To operate paradoxically (to install and then subvert) may be less satisfying than to offer a

---

505. Michele Hannoosh, "The Reflexive Function of Parody." (Comparative Literature 41 1989) p.114.

506. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.231.

> resolved dialectic, but it may be the only non-totalizing response possible.[507]

This paradoxical mode of operating is what I have termed parody (as Hutcheon herself does in her earlier works). Parody allows Lessing "to install and then subvert" as a strategy for negotiating her contradictory attempts to escape, whilst acknowledging her implication in the identity "scripts" available to her - from liberal humanism to Communism, from feminism to madness. Parody also crucially offers a formal strategy which expresses Lessing's dissatisfaction with the conventional realist novel. Just as Hutcheon suggests that "parody is a perfect postmodern form",[508] I would argue that parody is a perfect form for Lessing.

---

507. ibid., p.101.

508. ibid., p.11.

CONCLUSION

PARODY AND TOTALITARIANISM

> It is clear: we must tell the story of our asthma, not despite the fact that people are dying from it, but because they are not.
>
> One small detail remains: we have to learn how to do it.[509]

> Besides the postmodern self-consciousness here about the paradoxes and problems of historical representation (and self-presentation), there is also a very feminist awareness of the value of experience and the importance of its representation in the form of 'life-writing' - however difficult or even falsifying that process might turn out to be.[510]

Taking Hutcheon's identification of the "feminist awareness of the value of experience" as an excuse, and Lessing's advice to "read what [she has] written and make up your own mind about what you think, testing it against your own life, your own experience"[511] as a challenge, I would like to conclude with a personal story. This is an account of how lecturing at Palacky University in the Czech Republic has given me a different and affirming context for my understanding of Lessing's rejection of Communism in favour of postmodern parody. First I would,

---

509. Vaclav Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', Open Letters: Selected Prose, Ed. Paul Wilson. Trans. Paul Wilson, A. G. Brain, Erazin Kohak, Roger Scruton and George Theiner (London: Faber, 1991) p.350.

510. Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.167.

511. 'Preface' to The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.17.

however, like to use Lessing's own words to 'apologize' for my lack of immediate "experience" of Communist rule:

> I think people from East Europe and Central Europe will recognize that in what I am going to say, I will be talking as a Western European. I'm going to make half a dozen points, each one, of course, oversimplified.[512]

To guide me in my attempt to reconsider Lessing "the good parodist" in the context of the post-communist Czech Republic, I examine an essay by Vaclav Havel entitled 'Stories and Totalitarianism' which concludes with the above quotation.

Havel's concern with having "to learn *how*" to tell the "metastory" of "the struggle of the story",[513] seems almost postmodern in its concern for the issue of representation and in its self-consciousness. Of course, when we recontextualize his concern as arising from political expediency we are forced to recognize a different agenda. Havel's need "to learn *how* to do it" arises from the problem of saying the unsayable under a totalitarian regime without being silenced in prison. Indeed, his thesis in this essay is that totalitarianism suppresses not only political criticisms, but the "story" itself:

> Obviously, the totalitarian system is in essence (and in principle) directed against the story.[514]

The belief which upheld the totalitarian communist regime was that "it has fully understood the world and revealed the truth about it"[515]:

---

512. Asking the Questions Differently, op.cit., p.204.

513. Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', Open Letters: Selected Prose, op.cit., p.350.

514. ibid., p.333.

515. ibid., p.335.

> The fundamental pillar of the present totalitarian system is the existence of one central agent of all truth and all power, an institutionalized "rationale of history", which becomes, quite naturally, the sole agent of all social activity.[516]

In opposition to monolithic totalitarianism, Havel places literature, "the story", understood as a realm of multiplicity:

> The story has a logic of its own as well, but it is the logic of a dialogue, an encounter, the interaction of different truths, attitudes, ideas, traditions, passions, people, higher powers, social movements, and so on, that is of many autonomous, separate forces which had done nothing beforehand to define each other. Every story presupposes a plurality of truths, of logics, of agents of decisions, and of manners of behavior.[517]

This understanding of "the story" echoes many of the theorists (such as Bakhtin, Waugh and Hutcheon) who I have been applying to Lessing.

Hutcheon's identification of an "awareness of the value of experience and the importance of its representation in the form of "life-writing""[518] as a "very feminist strategy" of resistance, finds a parallel in Havel's view of his fellow prisoners' narratives as inherently anti-, or at least, pre-totalitarian:

> While I was in prison, I realized again and again how much more present, compared with life outside, the story was. Almost every prisoner had a life story that was unique and shocking, or moving. As I listened to those different stories, I suddenly found myself in something like a pre-totalitarian world, or in the world of literature. Whatever else I may have thought of my fellow prisoners' colorful narratives, they were not documents of totalitarian

---

516. ibid., p.333.

517. ibid., p.332.

518. Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.167.

> nihilization. On the contrary, they testified to the rebelliousness with which human uniqueness resists its own nihilization, and the stubbornness with which it holds to its own and is willing to ignore this negating pressure.[519]

However, Havel is faced by the need to get "the story" told outside prison walls, for he sees its removal from society as denying society a crucial (particularly under the repressive totalitarian regime) critical space:

> The destruction of the story means the destruction of a basic instrument of human knowledge and self-knowledge. Totalitarian nihilization denies people the possibility of observing and understanding its processes "from outside".[520]

This directly parallels Lessing's view of the writer's function expressed in her essay, 'When in the Future They Look Back on Us':

> Incidentally, I see writers, generally, in every country, as a unity, almost like an organism, which has been evolved by society as a means of examining itself.[521]

Lessing makes direct reference to the situation Havel is in, agreeing with his thesis of "the destruction of the story":

---

519. Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', Open Letters: Selected Prose, op.cit., p.338. Maud Ellmann in The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment (London: Virago, 1993) discusses the way in which starvation and imprisonment seem to encourage the production of writing. She also considers the "problem of *imprisonment*, exploring how the physical enclosure of the body corresponds to the semantic enclosure of the word." (The Hunger Artists, op.cit., p.89). She thereby provides a theoretic framework for the political reality of the multiplicity of stories found in prison identified by Havel.

520. Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', Open Letters: Selected Prose, op.cit., p.330.

521. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, op.cit., p.7.

> I think novelists perform many useful tasks for their fellow citizens, but one of the most valuable is this: to enable us to see ourselves as others see us.
>
> Of course in totalitarian societies writers are distrusted for precisely this reason. In all Communist countries this function, the criticizing one, is not permitted.[522]

This problem of the suppression of the "criticizing" function, and the need to tell "the story" outside prison walls but inside a totalitarian dominated country, is given consideration by Julian Barnes in his short story, 'One of a Kind'.

In this story, Barnes describes two Romanian writers who reacted very differently to the imposition of Communism on their country. One, Marion Tiriac, believing "that if you can't write exactly what you want to, then you shouldn't write anything" decided he had to choose:

> Silence or exile, you could say. Well, I chose exile. I lost my language, and half my talent. So I still have a lot to be despairing about.[523]

This was in contrast with his friend, Nicolai Petrescu:

> I chose silence and exile; he chose cunning.[524]

Petrescu plans "the wedding-cake novel", "a sort of Trojan horse"[525]:

> 'And then he finished it, and he called it, naturally, The Wedding Cake. He couldn't resist the title, and he put in a long passage of facile

---

522. ibid., p.7.

523. Julian Barnes, "One of a Kind." Modern British Short Stories, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) p.403.

524. ibid., p.404.

525. ibid., p.404.

> symbolism about a wedding cake, just to back it up. He wanted the book to be like one of Stalin's presents to his slave nations. He wanted it to stand there, grand and half-admired at first, but always unignorable. And then gradually, just by standing there, it would begin to make people wonder about it. And the longer it stood there and the more it had been praised, the more it would end by shaming and embarrassing those who had revered it.'[526]

It was to be his only work, his masterpiece. (Barnes' own ironic twist is to describe having seen "six or seven other titles by Petrescu" but cannot remember having seen The Wedding Cake in a Romanian book shop window.)

A novel dedicated to Communism is viewed here as a parodic strategy of resistance to a totalitarian regime. Most importantly, Marion Tiriac is portrayed as keen to view Petrescu's parodic novel positively, as an answer to Havel's "One small detail remains: we have to learn how to do it.". Tiriac gives Petrescu the epitaph: "One great ironist".[527] The Wedding Cake which ironically upholds the Communist ideal, parallels the story Anna reads to her Communist Party group in Lessing's The Golden Notebook:

> I made tea, and then I remembered a story that was sent to me last week. By a comrade living somewhere near Leeds. When I first read it, I thought it was an exercise in irony. Then a skilful parody of a certain attitude. Then I realized it was serious - it was at that moment I searched my memory and rooted out certain fantasies of my own. But what seemed to me important was that it could be read as parody, irony or seriously. It seems to me this is another expression of the fragmentation of everything, the painful disintegration of something that is linked with what I feel to be true about language, the thinning of language against the density of our experience.[528]

---

526. ibid., p.405.

527. ibid., p.406.

528. The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.273.

The reaction to this story describing a Petrescu-like text, is hostility and awkwardness, echoing the tone of Barnes' ironic conclusion to 'One of a Kind':

> When I finished reading this, no one said anything until George said: 'Good honest basic stuff.' Which could mean anything. Then I said, 'I remember having that fantasy myself, every word of it, except in my case I put right the policy for Europe as well.' Suddenly there was a roar of uncomfortable laughter, and George said: 'I thought it was a parody at first - makes you think, doesn't it.'[529]

It is notable that the laughter is "uncomfortable" yet breaks the tension of the silence. Duality resulting in comic effect, is significantly Rose's model of parody. The result of the ambiguity, as Petrescu predicts, is that it "makes you think, doesn't it". This, in itself, is a subversive activity in the face of Communism's monolithic message of absolute truth.

Betsy Draine deals with Anna's evaluation of the "thinning of language" thus:

> Within the Party, irony has become a prevailing quality of mind, so that it is no longer possible to hear or to read a sentence without wondering whether it is meant "as parody, irony or seriously" (p.259)[530]. Anna calls this "the thinning of language against the density of our experience" (p.259). If the ratio of language to experience has changed, however, it is not language that has thinned; rather subjective experience has thickened. On account of the breakdown of a single, absolute system of meaning (whether religious, political, or metaphysical), the modern mind has developed nets of suspicion, perversity and duplicity, which dived each moment of experience into multiple versions and interpretations of the original.[531]

---

529. ibid., p.276.

530. Page references to a different edition of The Golden Notebook.

531. Draine, "Nostalgia and Irony: the Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook', op.cit., p.37-8.

Under the imposition of a "single, absolute system of meaning" (where any "nets of suspicion" will be those cast by Party officials around any writer), the duplicity of language (that a sentence might be meant "as parody, irony or seriously") and the disintegration of meaning and experience into "multiple versions and interpretations of the original", become sites of potential subversion. What Anna deplores, Havel and Barnes' Petrescu need "to learn how to do".

Slowly, Anna comes to hold a more positive view of parody, using it herself with James Schaffer. However, their parodic use of conventions is repeatedly read as serious, and they give up their task:

> It was at this point that James and Anna decided they were defeated; that something had happened in the world which made parody impossible.[532]

Anna has come to recognize, though, that the Communist group she describes at Mashopi got nearest to the 'truth' through Paul's parodic tone:

> Long afterwards, I remember thinking that in all those years of endless analytical discussion only once did we come anywhere near the truth (far enough off as it was) and that was when Paul spoke in a spirit of angry parody.[533]

In a country where the "something [that has] happened in the world which [makes] parody impossible" is the imposition of a totalitarian regime, Havel did not consider "defeat" to be an option. His understanding of literature as having a "logic of a dialogue" emphasizes its duality, in a similar way to that in which I have shown Lessing's use of parody (and irony) to work. Recontextualized in a post-Communist country, Hutcheon's theory of the ambiguous politics of a form which

---

532. The Golden Notebook, op.cit., p.389.

533. ibid., p.101.

"installs" as well as "subverts" a previous text (or, at least, another voice) needs to be reconceived.[534] Placed alongside the monolithic, suppressive logic of a totalitarian regime, the duality of parody seems inherently subversive. It is, perhaps, an answer to Havel's statement of a need "to learn how" to tell the Czech Republic's "metastory".

I would like to conclude, finally, by asserting my "small personal voice", and relating an anecdote of my own which echoes Barnes's story of the two writers. This anecdote affirms that in a post-Communist Czech Republic critics have been quick "to learn how" to tell their "metastory". In my story, there are two critics. One is an eminent, traditional Czech professor (Hilsky); the other, a British, "radical" critic (Drakakis). The setting (ironically) is a British Council Conference in Prague on cultural studies, and the "battleground" is (again, ironically) Shakespeare. The eminent Czech professor, Hilsky, delivers a well-documented, historical and politically aware account of productions of Shakespeare's comedies through the various changing political backgrounds in Prague. His paper highlights the subversive elements of the performance of Shakespeare

---

534. Hutcheon's argument in The Politics of Postmodernism, that "Complicity is perhaps necessary (or at least unavoidable) in deconstructive critique (you have to signal - and thereby install - that which you want to subvert), though it also inevitably conditions both the radicality of the kind of critique it can offer and the possibility of suggesting change." (The Politics of Postmodernism, op.cit., p.152) needs re-working to fit the context of a Communist country. For, if the author has succeeding in overcoming the obvious danger of being read as "serious", that is, if parody has actually happened, then "change" has already occurred, too. That change is from the monolithic truth of Communism to duality, even multiplicity. The difference is that Hutcheon's "central paradox of parody", that "its transgression is always authorized" ceases to be the case under a Communist regime, where its "transgression" is most certainly not "authorized" (A Theory of Parody, op.cit., p.26).

under the Communist regime. It is a superb performance, and when he finally takes questions, the hall is silent with all eyes on the "radical", British critic of Shakespeare. The "radical", British critic, Drakakis, asks the valid question of how the productions coped with the conservative reinstatement of order at the end of Shakespeare's comedies, despite these productions' subversive political agendas. "Interpretation,"[535] replies the eminent, traditional Czech professor to the "radical", new historicist, cultural materialist, British critic, "is relative and context-specific.". Parodying the "radical", British critic's own terms, the eminent Czech professor puts the icing on "the wedding-cake"!

---

535. Sadly, I can only paraphrase as the British Council is still in the process of publishing the conference proceedings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Books by the same author are arranged chronologically according to the date of their first edition in English.)

Ahmed, Sara. "Structural Differences: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism." Diss. Wales U, 1995.

Allen, Walter. Tradition and Dream: A Critical Survey of British and American Fiction from the 1920's to the Present Day. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.

Ardener, Shirley, ed. Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps. Lectures on Women, Oxford University Women's Studies Committee, Michaelmas Term 1979. The Oxford Women's Ser. 5. London: Croom Helm, 1981.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. Rabelais and His World. 1965. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1981.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." 1967. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1981. 41-83.

Barnes, Julian. "One of a Kind." Modern British Short Stories. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. 400-406.

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction. Ed.

Malcolm Bradbury. 2nd ed. London: Fontana, 1990. 71-85.

Battersby, Christine. Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics. London: Women's Press, 1989.

Bazin, Nancy Topping. "The Moment of Revelation in Martha Quest and Comparable Moments by Two Modernists." Modern Fiction Studies 26 (1980): 87-98.

Belsey, Catherine. Critical Practice. New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1980.

Benhabib, Seyla. Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.

Bertelsen, Eve. ed. Doris Lessing. Southern African Literature. 5. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1985.

Bordo, Susan. "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism." Feminism / Postmodernism. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. London: Routledge, 1990. 133-156.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge, 1990.

Cameron, Deborah. Feminism and Linguistic Theory. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1985.

Cather, Willa. The Song of the Lark. 1915. London: Virago, 1982.

Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

Cohen, Stanley, and Laurie Taylor. Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life.

1976. Rev. ed. "Introduction to the Second Edition: Life After Postmodernism." London: Routledge, 1992.

Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Hopkins UP, 1976.

Dibble, Elizabeth. The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction. London: Routledge, 1988.

Draine, Betsy. "Nostalgia and Irony: The Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook." Modern Fiction Studies. 26 (1980): 31-48.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.

Ellmann, Maud. The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment. London: Virago, 1993.

Felski, Rita. Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.

Fishburn, Katherine. The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing: A Study in Narrative Technique. Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy. 17. Westport: Greenwood, 1985.

Fraser, Nancy, and Linda J. Nicholson. "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." Feminism / Postmodernism. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. London: Routledge, 1990. 19-38.

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. ed. Black Literature and Literary Theory. London: Methuen, 1984.

Giddens, Anthony. Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991.

Hannoosh, Michele. "The Reflexive Function of Parody." Comparative Literature 41 (1989): 113-27.

Hanson, Clare. "Doris Lessing in Pursuit of the English, or, No Small, Personal Voice." In Pursuit of Doris Lessing. Ed. Claire Sprague. New York: St. Martin's, Macmillan, 1990.

Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" Feminism / Postmodernism. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. London: Routledge, 1990. 157-175.

Havel, Vaclav. Open Letters: Selected Prose. Ed. Paul Wilson. Trans. Paul Wilson, A. G. Brain, Erazin Kohak, Roger Scruton and George Theiner. London: Faber, 1991.

Humm, Maggie. Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers. Cultural Politics Ser. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991.

Hutcheon, Linda. A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms. London: Routledge, 1985.

---. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1988.

---. The Politics of Postmodernism. London: Routledge, 1989.

---. Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony. London: Routledge, 1994.

Jouve, Nicole Ward. "Of Mud and Other Matter - The Children Of Violence." Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing. Ed. Jenny Taylor. London: Routledge, 1982. 75-134.

Kaplan, Sydney Janet. Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975.

Kermode, Frank. Romantic Image. London: Routledge, 1957.

King, Jeanette. Doris Lessing. Modern Fiction. London: Edward Arnold, 1989.

Kreyling, Michael. "Fee, Fie, Faux Faulkner: Parody and Postmodernism in Southern Literature." Southern Review 29 (1993): 1-15.

Kristeva, Julia. Revolution in Poetic Language. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.

Laing, R. D. The Divided Self. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.

Lechte, John. Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity. London: Routledge, 1994.

Lessing, Doris. The Grass is Singing. 1950. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994.

---. Martha Quest. Children of Violence. 1. 1952. St Albans: Panther-Granada, 1966.

---. A Proper Marriage. Children of Violence. 2. 1954. London: Paladin-Collins, 1990.

---. A Ripple From the Storm. Children of Violence. 3. 1958. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993.

---. The Golden Notebook. 1962. Preface. Doris Lessing. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1993.

---. Landlocked. Children of Violence. 4. 1965. St Albans: Panther-Granada, 1967.

---. The Four-Gated City. Children of Violence. 5. 1969. London: Panther-Granada, 1972.

---. Briefing for a Descent into Hell. 1971. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1995.

---. The Summer Before the Dark. 1973. London: The Book Club-Cape, 1974.

---. The Memoirs of a Survivor. 1974. London: Picador-Pan, 1976.

---. A Small Personal Voice. 1974. Ed. Paul Schlueter. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994.

---. Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta: Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by Johor (George Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9) 87th of the Last Period of the Last Days. Canopus in Argos: Archives. 1. 1979. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994.

---. The Good Terrorist. London: Cape, 1985.

---. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside. New York: Harper, 1987.

---. Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1994.

---. Putting the Questions Differently: Interviews with Doris Lessing, 1964-1994. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. 1994. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1996.

---. Love, Again. London: Flamingo-Harper, 1996.

Lodge, David. ed. Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader. London: Longman, 1988.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Theory and History of Lit. 10. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.

Marder, Herbert. "The Paradox of Form in The Golden Notebook." Modern Fiction Studies. 26 (1980): 49-54.

Mitchell, W. J. T. ed. On Narrative. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981.

Moi, Toril, ed. The Kristeva Reader. Trans. Sean Hand and Leon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

---. ed. French Feminist Thought: A Reader. Trans. Sean Hand and Roisin Mallaghan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

Nicholson, Linda J. Feminism / Postmodernism. London: Routledge, 1990.

O'Rourke, Rebecca. "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception." Taylor, Jenny. ed. Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing. London: Routledge, 1982. 206-226.

Pearce, Lynne. Reading Dialogics. Interrogating Texts Ser. London: Arnold, 1994.

Pickering, Jean. "Marxism and Madness: The Two Faces of Doris Lessing's Myth." Modern Fiction Studies. 26 (1980): 17-30.

Pykett, Lyn. Engendering Fictions: the English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century. Writing in History Ser. London: Arnold, 1995.

Rose, Margaret A. Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern. Literature, Culture, Theory 5. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

Sage, Lorna. Doris Lessing. Contemporary Writers. London: Methuen, 1983.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Humanism. Trans. Philip Mairet. 1948. London: Methuen, 1989.

---. What is Literature? Trans. Bernard Frechtman. 1950. London: Methuen, 1967.

Scanlan, Margaret. "Memory and Continuity in the Series Novel: The Example of Children of Violence." Modern Fiction Studies 26 (1980): 75-85.

Showalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing. Rev. ed. London: Virago, 1977.

Spender, Dale. Man Made Language. London: Routledge, 1980.

Sprague, Claire. "'Without Contraries Is No Progression': Lessing's The Four-Gated City." Modern Fiction Studies. 26 (1980): 99-108.

---. ed. In Pursuit of Doris Lessing. New York: St. Martin's, Macmillan, 1990.

Stoppard, Tom. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. 1967. London: Faber, 1968.

Taylor, Jenny. ed. Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing. London: Routledge, 1982.

Walker, Nancy A. Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990.

Waugh, Patricia. Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. New Accents Ser. London: Routledge, 1984.

---. Rev. of A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, by Linda Hutcheon. History of the Human Sciences 1-2 (1988-9): 397-400.

---. Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern. London: Routledge, 1989.

---. Practising Postmodernism / Reading Modernism. Interrogating Texts. London: Arnold, 1992.

---. ed. Postmodernism: A Reader. London: Arnold, 1992.

---. Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960-90. Oxford: OPUS, 1995.

Weedon, Chris. Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." On Narrative. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981.

Whittaker, Ruth. Doris Lessing. Modern Novelists. London: Macmillan, 1988.

Wilson, Richard and Richard Dutton eds. New Historicism and Renaissance Drama. Longman Critical Readers. London: Longman, 1992.

Woolf, Virginia. A Woman's Essays. Ed. Rachel Bowlby. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.