Chapter 2

The Future in a Different Shape:
Broken Form and Possibility
in The Golden Notebook

*The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1962, is a novel preoccupied with its own situation as contemporary fiction. Most obviously, it is concerned with its relation to bourgeois realism and modernism, and it incorporates discussions of both traditions into the various levels of its fictional discourse while undermining realist and modernist assumptions about the necessary hegemony of such levels. Perhaps less evidently, it is concerned with its relation to the older tradition of encyclopedic narrative, in which the entire range of knowledge and beliefs peculiar to a culture is comprehended and systematized, and it represents a deliberate attempt to encompass "most of the ideas we take for granted," which were in fact "born with the French Revolution," as Lessing subsequently explained in an interview. And it is vitally concerned with its relation to the ambiguous tradition of "women's writing" and sensitive to the political nature of the double bind constraining a female novelist who attempts either to continue in or to dissociate herself from this tradition. In short, it is a highly self-conscious and experimental work, and the fact that both its self-consciousness and its experimentation were ignored for most of the decade after its publication argues both

for the volatility of its subject matter and for the tenacity of critical presuppositions. During the 1960s and much of the 1970s reviews and critical articles dealing with The Golden Notebook regularly conflated separate characters, elided carefully distinguished plots, and glossed over flagrant contradictions, so that Lessing’s most ambitious fiction was in effect reduced to formal conventionality. The Golden Notebook was widely praised and influenced the thinking of a whole generation of female readers, but at the same time there was little critical understanding of what kind of novel it is.

Yet The Golden Notebook repeatedly addresses the question of its own generic self-definition. A passage of dialogue near the beginning of the first “Free Women” segment, for example, suggests some of the immediate consequences of assigning a work too quickly to received categories. Noting the attitudes that have apparently prevented Anna from producing a second novel, Molly observes plaintively, “After all, you aren’t someone who writes little novels about the emotions. You write about what’s real.” Anna reacts to the banality of the catchphrase “little novels about the emotions,” but despite her conviction that “many of the things we say are just echoes” and her judgment that her friend’s remark “is an echo from communist party criticism—at its worst moment, moreover,” she feels obliged to respond: “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 society....” The ellipses signal her uncertainty, for the need to assert a seamless continuity between “the emotions” and “what’s real” tacitly acknowledges that the distinction is a meaningful one; in point of fact,

Most reviewers seem to have begun from assumptions about the form and then come up with a reading that fits the assumptions. Robert Taubman is representative. Taubman expresses the hope that The Golden Notebook “will soon displace the Simone de Beauvoir paperbacks in the hands of all those who want what she is supposed to provide—a sort of intelligent woman’s guide to the intelligent woman”; he notes an “unusual structure” but believes it to be “less a matter of subtle organization than of simple, rather haphazard naturalism.” He closes the subject with the observation, “If there is anything new here, then it is an advance in naturalism; but in the sort of naturalism...that tends to devalue its object” (New Statesman, 20 April 1962, reprinted in On Contemporary Literature, ed. Richard Kostelanetz [Plainview, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1964], pp. 402–3).

it was extremely important for the reception of fiction during the postwar period *The Golden Notebook* chronicles. By the standards of those contemporaries who exerted most influence over Anna—and over Lessing, at least while she subscribed to the party line on literature—to write about the personal, the individual, the realm of "the emotions" was to descend into triviality; it was to fall short of the ideals of objectivity and comprehensiveness implied in the equation of "what's real" with conventional realism.

The equation was explicitly ideological. The debate over ways to resuscitate the realist novel was the focal point of Marxist literary aesthetics in Western Europe during the mid-1950s, and the persistence of the kind of writing that Molly dismisses as "little novels about the emotions" impressed British communists as evidence of regression to an antihumanism the more regrettable because it represented a division within the realist project itself. For Jack Lindsay, one of the most articulate of the orthodox critics of the period and a longtime friend of Lessing's, true art was essentially bound up with the external world and with social change; was both "a form of knowing and mastering reality" and "that which advances life." In terms of this fundamentally mimetic theory any kind of formal experimentation is by definition aberrant; modernism is thus merely "one aspect of the disintegration of our culture under imperialism," representing "the way in which components of an art-form break up as things-in-themselves and fail to blend in the proportions that produce great art." But because in such a theory disintegration and particularity are the chief enemies, a realism that restricts itself to rendering a part or aspect of the historical continuum, which is postulated as the ultimate context of human experience, is similarly antithetical to human progress. In Lindsay's view the contemporary writer must achieve "a new kind of unifying vision, a new sense of dynamic interconnections and of the position of the individual in history" in order to achieve an art form that is the aesthetic equivalent of the social force by whose agency "human unity can be realised...the organised proletariat."³


⁴Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties: The Novel in Britain and Its Future* (London: Lawrence
Raymond Williams, probably the foremost Marxist cultural theorist in England at the time, was even more insistent on the retrograde character of "little novels about the emotions," which he regarded as reversions to an "immature" realism. His emphasis in his classic study *The Long Revolution* is also on unity, specifically on synthesizing personal and social aspects of experience and thus reintegrating "personal" and "social" novels into a more inclusive whole; and the terms in which he couches his discussion are strikingly similar to those Anna chooses when she describes "the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life" (p. 61), and when she yearns for a Marxism that will bring "an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live" (p. 161). "When I think of the realist tradition in fiction," Williams writes, "I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons . . . . Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the
quality of general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms." Lorna Sage observes that this kind of statement is almost "a synopsis for The Golden Notebook," which places personal relations in a context so global that even the early volumes of the Children of Violence series, with their avowed commitment to "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective," seem parochial by comparison. Hardly a "little novel" by anyone's criteria, it continually urges the necessity of making connections and seeing things whole, processes that might seem to involve putting the emotions firmly in their place within an encompassing interpretive structure—in terms of Anna's renovated Marxism, making them "a function and a product of society." In certain respects it thus appears to stand as an exemplary response to the manifestos of Lindsay and Williams, forging a new order, insisting on the necessity of integration, and reasserting the claims of humanist aesthetics. Yet it is not itself ordered or integrated in terms of the realism that Lindsay and Williams are concerned to uphold, and in its systematic repudiation of traditional Marxism it expressly repudiates the whole critical and ideological stance implied in Molly's formulation "what's real." If it places "the personal" within a social and historical context, it is not by that token identified with theories maintaining that only subordination to this sort of context can grant "the personal" any significance. And this last point is important, because the phrase "little novels about the emotions" has connotations that Marxist theory of the period does not acknowledge and perhaps does not even recognize. In their ostensible triviality and concern with the private sphere, such "little novels" are likely to be both by and about women, to be, in other words, that dubious phenomenon "women's writing."

Some of what is at stake in this distinction between "the emotions" and "what's real" becomes apparent in Irving Howe's 1962 review,


which was influential in generating a widespread readership for *The Golden Notebook* in the United States. Howe virtually recapitulates the distinction, although in his absorption with the "fierce attachment to 'personal values'" that he, like Lindsay and Williams, sees as characteristic of novels "in recent years," he does not seem to notice the extent to which Lessing's characters have anticipated him. He accordingly commends the novel in familiar terms: Lessing understands that "the idea of 'personal relations' has been shaped by the catastrophes of our time and, in the form we know it, is not to be taken as an absolute or uncontaminated value." Not content with intimations, however, he goes on to reveal what kind of writer *is* guilty of exalting "personal relations" to undeserved eminence, in a passage worth quoting at some length:

Miss Lessing has a voice and a mind of her own. She is radically different from other women writers who have dealt with the problems of their sex, first in that she grasps the connection between Anna Wulf's neuroses and the public disorders of the day, and second in that she has no use either for the quaverings of the feminist writers or the aggressions of those female novelists whose every sentence leads a charge in the war of the sexes. The feminine element in *The Golden Notebook* does not become a self-contained universe of being, as in some of Virginia Woolf's novels, nor is the narrative voice established through minute gradations of the writer's sensibility, as in some of Elizabeth Bowen's. And Miss Lessing is far too serious for those displays of virtuoso bitchiness which are the blood and joy of certain American lady writers.  

The hostility of this diatribe seems to derive from the assumption that "women's writing"—not only writing by women but also writing that takes female experience as its primary subject matter—is a distinct and self-evidently inferior genre that perversely refuses to acknowledge its own mediocrity. If possession of "a voice and a mind of her own" allows Lessing to transcend the norm of "women writers who have dealt with the problems of their sex," in the process she has transcended a collection of stereotypically feminine attributes: inability to see the big picture or make abstract connections (such as "the connection between Anna Wulf's neuroses and the

---

public disorders of the day"), obsession with minutiae of the "sex
war" (manifested as either "quaverings" or "aggressions"), immer-
sion in the immediate and by implication domestic present (Woolf’s
"self-contained universe of being"), hypersensitivity (Bowen’s
"minute gradations of . . . sensibility"), or bitchiness (the "American
lady writer" that Howe has in mind is surely Mary McCarthy). Her
achievement has been to treat the sphere of "personal relations"
that has traditionally been the province of "women's writing" in a
way that presumes a governing structure of serious, "real" concerns.
In order to bestow this accolade Howe is driven to misread Les-
ing's novel drastically, conflating the two "breakdown" stories along with
the male characters involved in them and taking the end of "Free
Women" for the conclusion of the entire narrative.9 The misreading
is virtually required by the terms of his admiration. Lessing writes
about "what's real" and therefore must write the kind of realist novel
to which he harks back with thinly veiled nostalgia.10 In doing so
she surpasses expectation, rising above the conditions that hamper
female authors generally and in particular those female authors who
persist in dealing with the topic of female experience.

Howe thus applauds The Golden Notebook in terms that The Golden
Notebook itself calls into doubt and sets Lessing above other women
writers with the same imperviousness to irony that he manifests in
accepting without question that Anna and Molly belong above the
normal run of unfree women. By contrast, the development of the
"Free Women" narrative within the novel forces the recognition that
the benefits of tokenism accrue chiefly to the men who read "free"
as "available," so that the relative independence of the protagonists
emerges as merely another sort of constraint. Lessing is fully aware

9Ibid., pp. 18-20. There are other substantive errors. Howe claims that Anna is
"reduced to hysteria by a disastrous affair with an egomaniacal American writer," thus
taking occasion for cause and completely missing the central trope of "madness" as
insight; and he decries the "loss of critical objectivity [Lessing] had maintained in
earlier pages" in the Blue and Golden notebook descriptions of "breakdown," com-
pletely overlooking the critique of such "objectivity," which suggests it may not be
a self-evident desideratum.

10That this is also Anna's nostalgia in the Blue notebook, and that it was Lessing's
own nostalgia when she embraced the orthodox Marxist view of literature—during
the time of "The Small Personal Voice," for instance—is very much to the point of
what Lessing is doing with literary history in The Golden Notebook.
of how equivocal is any privilege that raises her above all the rest of her sex, especially when the basis for this privilege is a purely negative one, such as having avoided writing a "little novel about the emotions." If some of the remarks in the preface she wrote for the reissue of The Golden Notebook ten years after its initial publication suggest that she is uncomfortable with readings taking "the sex war" as her primary or sole focus, her insistence that "the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise" does not specify a kind of holism in which women's issues are exposed as partial and minor by being subordinated to an overarching intellectual framework. Indeed, the unity that results when the individual and the personal are subsumed under a governing premise is precisely what The Golden Notebook seems most interested in questioning. Such a unity is necessarily static, with no potential for development, because it postulates a preexisting intellectual structure that contains all possible meanings. There is no room for the future to appear "in a different shape," as Anna puts the matter at one point (p. 473). The Golden Notebook is not this kind of unity: it is made up of contradictory strands of narration that seem to resolve into ontological levels but end up resisting strategies of naturalization, and it deals with the political perils of assuming that there is a coherent, explicable universe and a "real story" that adequately reflects it. It is full of gaps that leave room for subsequent developments and full of different kinds of writing that hint at techniques for realizing the future in a different shape, especially Lessing's own future productions in a variety of genres: space fiction, satire, allegory, apocalyptic, and—particularly with the Jane Somers novels of the early 1980s—fictional "diaries" that obstinately refuse to allow female experience to be absorbed into a transpersonal context—"little novels about the emotions."

I

"The point is," insists Anna at the opening of the first "Free Women" section, "the point is, that as far as I can see, everything's cracking

up” (p. 3). It is a point that the novel goes on to consider at some length, most evidently in its treatment of the failure of a single world view to encompass the whole of twentieth-century reality. Both Anna and her creator have a particular world view in mind, the orthodox Marxism of the mid-1950s that is thoroughly repudiated as Anna herself moves toward “crack-up” precisely because it fails to stand for “the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe” (p. 360). But the critique of ideology in this novel goes much further, beyond narrowly Marxist principles to the more general set of presuppositions governing Western culture in the modern period, ultimately addressing the assumption that any world view can be adequate, that reality is the sort of thing that can be held together as a unified whole.

This assumption was what Lessing had found most congenial in Marxist aesthetics and upheld in her 1957 essay “The Small Personal Voice,” in which she made unity of vision the hallmark of the novels she termed “the highest point of literature,” the classics of nineteenth-century realism. In this essay she explicitly identified realism with both metaphysical and moral coherence: the great writers of the period produced “art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held, though not necessarily intellectually-defined, view of life that it absorbs symbolism” and had in common “a climate of ethical judgement; they shared certain values; they were humanists.” By the time she wrote The Golden Notebook, however, Lessing was publicly expressing her disaffection with both realism and the notion of an encompassing “view of life” that warrants the unequivocal sharing of “certain values.” Furthermore, she was linking unity of vision with the kind of unity of form that is an aesthetic requirement for the realist novel. Her aim, she said, was “to break a form; to break certain forms of consciousness and go beyond them,” and both kinds of breakage—of form and of

---

3In the introduction to Play with a Tiger (London: Michael Joseph, 1962), for example, Lessing criticizes the premises of theatrical realism and elaborates the Laingian equation of “breakdown” with “break-through” that informs the “mad” scenes of The Golden Notebook.
4Letter from Lessing to her publishers, Michael Joseph, quoted on the dust jacket
consciousness—turned her away from the realist tradition. In turning away she committed herself to crack-up, fragmentation, and discontinuity to an extent that her critics are only beginning to acknowledge. For despite a rhetoric of wholeness informing this encyclopedic novel, her emphasis throughout is on the complexity of experience, its intractability to integration, the difficulty of achieving coherence without inevitably succumbing to reduction. As a consequence, discontinuity achieves a significance that does not allow it to be simply subsumed under a "higher" unity: fragmentation, breakage, gaps, and lapses are precisely what allow possibility to emerge, on a number of levels. In effect, Lessing's theory and practice of fiction changed radically after "The Small Personal Voice," and The Golden Notebook assumes in the context of her later experiments the status of a transitional work, documenting her dissatisfaction with the conventions of not only nineteenth-century but also modernist fiction and mapping out directions for further and perhaps even more unsettling disruptions.

In The Golden Notebook her most obvious attack is on the coherence that realist fiction demands of characters, and the line she takes makes it clear that in the process she is throwing into question the assumptions behind most usual notions of identity. When Anna confronts her psychoanalyst (who has Jungian proclivities but a pointedly political name, Mrs Marks), she is challenging the rigid humanism that is the premise of both the realist novel and her own therapy:

Look, if I'd said to you when I came in this afternoon: Yesterday I met a man at a party and I recognised in him the wolf, or the knight, or the monk, you'd nod and you'd smile. And we'd both feel the joy of recognition. But if I'd said: Yesterday I met a man at a party and suddenly he said something, and I thought: Yes, there's a hint of something—there's a crack in that man's personality like a gap in a dam, and through that gap the future might pour in a different shape—terrible perhaps, or marvellous, but something new—if I said that you'd frown. [p. 473]
Under the premises of Anna's therapy the wolf, the knight, and the monk are archetypes, stock characters, finite in number, who together comprise all the possible human variations. In Mrs Marks's scheme of things, human nature is an unchanging essence that can manifest itself only in a fixed number of preexisting forms, so that recognition amounts to attaching the right label, assigning an individual to the proper category. The "joy of recognition" thus derives from the containing and controlling of possibility. Anna, on the other hand, anticipates kinds of people that elude classification because they elude containment; people who are, as she goes on to say, "cracked across" or "split" because "they are keeping themselves open for something." Earlier in the same conversation she had proposed that in the present age, possession of a coherent identity is damning evidence of limitation: "I've reached the stage where I look at people and say—he or she, they are whole at all because they've chosen to block off at this stage or that. People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves" (p. 469). Unity, integrity, self-consistency, she implies, are not privileged, as they are in traditional therapy and traditional characterization. To be whole by present-day societal standards is not to have resisted fragmentation but to have been reduced to a single fragment.

If these passages most patently foreshadow the advent of a man (Saul Green in the notebooks, Milt in the "Free Women" narrative) who will accompany Anna through "breakdown" as a psychological experience, they also suggest that for the novelist the problem with conceiving character in terms of preexisting forms is that such forms do not allow "the future"—that is, anything genuinely new and unassimilated by the dominant culture—to be represented. Much of The Golden Notebook deals with questions of representation, particularly with the failure of "language" (a shorthand term that usually seems to refer to the conventions of traditional realist fiction) to reflect contemporary life, and Lessing's protagonists are most acutely aware of manipulating debased discursive counters when they are concerned with describing people. Ella reacts with fury to Mrs West's "disinfecting phrases, lunatic fringe and career girls," which reduce her most passionate commitment and her whole lifestyle to safe cliches (p. 177), and the notion that a unit of language has "disinfecting" properties recurs much later on, in one of Anna's childhood recollections, in which she remembers lying "awake, re-
membering everything in the day that had a quality of fear hidden in it; which might become part of a nightmare. I had to ‘name’ the frightening things, over and over, in a terrible litany; like a sort of disinfection by the conscious mind before I slept” (p. 616). “Language” here, as in the “naming” involved in Anna’s therapy, is a means of making safe, of restricting to manageable dimensions, of ruling out the radically unknown. Similarly, after diagnosing Saul’s “mother-trouble” in the jargon of mid-fifties pop psychoanalysis, Anna denounces both Saul and herself for accepting even provisionally a vocabulary of ready-made insights: “I’m naming you, Saul Green, and I’m naming you on such a low level that you ought to be angry. You should be ashamed, at the age of thirty-three, to be sitting there taking this kind of banal over-simplification from me” (p. 581). Use of such easy and accessible designations confirms the adage, a staple of both psychoanalytic and popular wisdom, that there is nothing new under the sun, and especially that humanity consists of a limited number of recurring variations on an eternal theme. If the idea is at root reassuring because it insists that no crisis, when properly understood, is unique, personal, or without precedent, it soothes at the expense of allowing development, as Anna points out to Molly in the opening scene of “Free Women”: “[Mrs Marks] used to say, ‘you’re Electra,’ or ‘you’re Antigone,’ and that was the end, as far as she was concerned” (p. 5). But the novel that begins by raising the question of “the end” goes on to insist that “names” remain open-ended: the epithet “Free Women” does not “name” Anna and Molly definitively any more than the “Free Women” narrative constitutes the last word on the subject of who they are.

It is as a writer of fiction, specifically as a “blocked” writer who has previously produced one novel in the realist tradition, that Anna is most bothered by established conventions of “naming,” which not only rule out surprises but seem to remove the truth of immediate experience beyond the reach of representation. In a Black notebook entry attempting to describe the man she calls Willi, she chooses the adjectives Ruthless, Cold, and Sentimental but also the adjectives Kind, Warm, and Realistic and concludes in frustration, “In describing any personality all these words are meaningless” (p. 71). Yet the problem is less that such words lack meaning than
that they seem to mean too much, summing up a personality pre-
maturely in a way that makes further predication not only incon-
gruous but impossible. Anna's reminiscences about this man are
shot through with moments of realization that she has categorized
him out of existence—has excised his loneliness as inconsistent with
his self-righteousness and predictability, for example. The value-
laden language of everyday description presents a different but re-
lated difficulty: later in the same reflection she finds herself using
the word good and comments, "Of course [such words] mean noth-
ing, when you start to think about them. A good man, one says; a
good woman; a nice man, a nice woman. Only in talk of course,
these are not words you'd use in a novel. I'd be careful not to use
them." The word good, unlike the descriptive terms Anna has used
in trying to depict Willi, is too amorphous to be literary, implying
an unspecified value system, on the one hand, and on the other
hand, establishing nothing sufficiently "characteristic" to create
identity in the novelistic terms she is used to. Yet good does have
immediate application—it even seems to "name" a truth of a sort
outside the boundaries of her writing—and she goes on to qualify
the assertion that words of this kind "mean nothing": "Yet of that
group, I will say simply, without further analysis, that George was
a good person, and that Willi was not. . . And furthermore, I'd bet
that ten people picked at random off the street to meet them . . .
would instantly agree with this classification—would, if I used the
word good, simply like that, know what I meant" (p. 109). It is the
context of a novel that appears to rob the word good of its significance,
just as it is the requirement of producing a character in a literary
work that rules out apparently contradictory adjectives. Early in the
narrative Anna writes of her attempts to render her experience, "I
am simply asking myself; Why a story at all . . . Why not, simply,
the truth?" (p. 63), and this opposition, story versus truth, haunts
her as one meaning of her inability to write and as a paradigm of
the tendency of preexisting form to "block off" possibility in the
same way that people "block off" parts of themselves in order to
stay whole. Although the novel was invented to represent both
human personality and ethical touchstones for a culture—so much
so that Anna appeals to the example of the nineteenth century novel
in trying to convince Willi of the importance of George's bastard son
—she now believes that it "has been claimed by the disintegration and the collapse" (p. 110). It has reached a point in history where it stands in opposition to reality.

The notion that the truth has become alien to the forms originally created to express it is analogous to the notion, also pervasive in this novel, that history no longer admits of a Marxist interpretation. In both instances there is an apparent paradox: reality is incommensurate with realism; historical developments have rendered "the" historical viewpoint obsolete. In both instances the containing form—realism, Marxism—has become irrelevant because of a resistance on the part of the real, of history, to being contained, because of the phenomenon *The Golden Notebook* refers to variously as crack-up, fragmentation, or chaos. And of course realism and Marxism are allied in Lessing's background as ideologies of containment. During the period chronicled by this novel Jack Lindsay was calling on contemporary writers to return to a "consciousness of unity of process which is adequate to deal with all aspects of life, social, artistic, scientific, yet see each aspect in relation to the whole," in other words, to embody a unified consciousness in a unified form.16 But in *The Golden Notebook* Lessing chose to begin from a metafictionally split consciousness, by incorporating the dialogue about stories and truth into what is after all a story, using the established form to comment on its own limits, and went on to remake form to accommodate the "cracked" and "split" characters she was interested in depicting. To a great extent the requirements of characterization are given responsibility for wrenching the fictional discourse away from realism. As Anna tells a skeptical Mrs Marks, "I'm convinced that there are whole areas of me made by the kind of experience women haven't had before" (p. 471), and as a writer she is most interested in rendering the woman who is the product of this kind of experience. But she is up against a concept of identity formed and enforced by the literature that she herself (and Lessing herself) has espoused and helped produce; against "language" as guardian and guarantor of a humanism that perceives humanity as unchanging and that has in turn become rigid and conservative.

16Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties*, p. 84. Jenny Taylor also quotes this passage in "Situating Reading," p. 29.
An apparently unlikely ally, Philippe Sollers, theorist and practitioner of the *nouveau roman*, has written in similar terms about this sort of "language," which has created an apparently inescapable definition of identity and which requires another sort of language entirely (his own critical prose here plays on the attempt to transcend itself) to evade it:

Everything happens as though these books were henceforth written in advance: as if they were part of this all-powerful, anonymous language and thought which reign inside and outside, from public information to the mutest intimacy, with an exaggerated visibility which renders them invisible. Our *identity* depends on it: what is thought of us, what we think of ourselves, and the way our life is insensibly arranged. In oneself, one recognizes only a character from a novel. (In me, speaking to you, you recognize only a character from a novel.) What language would escape this insidious, incessant language which always seems to be there before we think of it?"  

The notion of identity sustained by "this all-powerful, anonymous language" rules out certain possible characters. In the terms Lessing proposes, it rules out the possibility that certain people can be written as characters, as Anna discovers when she tries to evoke the African leader Tom Mathlong by "naming" him:

I tried to make him stand in my room, a courteous, ironical figure, but I failed. I told myself I had failed because this figure, unlike all the others, had a quality of detachment. 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. It seemed to me that this particular kind of detachment was something we needed very badly in this time, but that very few people had it, and it was certainly a long way from me.  

[p. 597]

What Anna is discovering is that the old methods of "naming" are insufficient. In the course of the narratives in the Blue and Golden notebooks she learns how to go back over her experiences and "'name' them in a different way" (p. 616) in order to learn how to represent such a character, "cracked" or "split" in his "quality of

detachment” and needed “very badly in this time.” Mr Mathlong, barely sketched in this passage, is in fact a “different shape” for the future in several different senses—looking forward, for instance, to the cosmic disinterestedness of Klorathy in the *Canopus in Argos* series.

That the time requires new kinds of people is most evident early in the account of Ella, the protagonist of Anna’s fragmentary novel-in-process. Also a writer, Ella is composing the story of a character who discovers himself in the act of committing suicide and realizes that this act is implicit in the continuity of his life. Writing out of a barely acknowledged sense of her own dead-endedness, in both her life and her art, she reflects on her affinity with this situation: “I would find myself just about to jump out of an open window or turning on the gas in a small closed-in room, and I would say to myself, without any emotion, but rather with the sense of suddenly understanding something I should have understood long before: Good Lord! So that’s what I’ve been meaning to do. That’s been it all the time!” (p. 174). The plot is strikingly similar to that of Lessing’s own 1958 short story “To Room Nineteen,” in which a well-off, conventionally happy matron finds suicide in a continuum with all the other actions stemming from a life that has “nothing wrong” with it, while an ironically omniscient narrator contributes a running commentary underscoring the absence of alternatives. In both works the closure implied in traditional notions of character is deadly, and in both the suicide seems the inevitable culmination of a linear plot that works itself out so economically that the end is implicit in the beginning. The example of these stories suggests that in the absence of a gap through which the future can flow in a different shape, there can be no future.

Ella herself seems not only to arrive at this conclusion but to recognize the danger inherent in the fact that she is the protagonist of a traditional novel, for as she develops she begins to elude the Jungian theme of doubling that Anna has set out for her in the “theme or motif” of *The Shadow of the Third* (pp. 206–7) and begins to contemplate writing about the topic that Anna herself had set

---

against the Jungian archetypalism of Mrs Marks: "Perhaps next time I'll try to write about that—people who deliberately try to be something else, try to break their own form as it were" (p. 466). In her last appearance in the novel, shortly before the Yellow notebook itself "breaks down" into fragmentary metanarratives—ideas for short stories, parodies of contemporary modes of writing—Ella outlines the plot of an episode that eerily foreshadows the ensuing affair between Anna and Saul while in effect reversing the whole imbedding structure by suggesting that she is the author, Anna the character she has created: "I've got to accept the patterns of self-knowledge which mean unhappiness or at least a dryness. But I can twist it into victory. A man and a woman—yes. Both at the end of their tether. Both cracking up because of a deliberate attempt to transcend their own limits. And out of the chaos, a new kind of strength" (p. 467). For the characters in the story whom Ella seems determined to find by looking "inwards," crack-up and chaos are preconditions for novelty and in fact are required if such characters are to transcend their limits. But the notation is also self-reflexive, pointing to the sense in which Ella herself is implicated in the breaking of form, as a deliberate attempt on the part of Anna "to be something else . . . to break [her] own form as it were."

II

If on the metafictional level of writing about writing Lessing loads her discourse with statements of intent to break form, the characters she has created to populate the worlds of the novel in effect act out the dilemma of characterization that Anna has proposed, either achieving coherence by "blocking off" to the point where they become virtual caricatures—custom-ridden like Richard, monsters of denial like Nelson or DeSilva, emotionally leucotomized like Cy Maitland, literally mutilated like Tommy in the "Free Women" narrative—or, alternatively, so "cracked" and "split" that existing conventions seem wholly inadequate to portray them. The caricatured figures are overwhelmingly male. They tend to body forth professional, national, and sexual stereotypes and can be adequately "named" in a few well-chosen phrases. Richard, for instance, is first introduced with a negation: despite appearances, Anna tells Molly,
he should not be understood as "an enterprising little businessman, like a jumped-up grocer" (p. 24). The joke is that this is precisely what he is; his vast financial holdings and considerable power only make him more rather than less of a petit bourgeois, whose banal and predictable self-justification, "I preserve the forms" (p. 26), indicates the extent to which he himself is preformed and unchanging.

Richard's "blocked off" nature is revealed early in the "Free Women" narrative through his assumption that physical and emotional aspects of a personal relationship can be distinguished. Throughout the narrative this sexual version of the mind/body problem is associated with men—as Molly expostulates, "At least [women have] more sense than to use words like physical and emotional as if they didn't connect" (p. 31)—and suggests that the female perspective is at least relatively more encompassing than the male perspective. If Richard is the English version of the emotionally flattened male, strangely impotent in his power and promiscuity, his transatlantic equivalent is Nelson, the Canadian whose flamboyant behavior is associated (at least by the English) both with North Americans and with show business and who combines political acumen with a profound and wholly unacknowledged misogyny. Their Third World counterpart, the Ceylonese De Silva, is the Europeanized intellectual who has divorced the physical from the emotional to the point where he could pass as a textbook example of sadism. A slight variation on this type is Cy Maitland, the stock American

19It does not, however, suggest that women are morally superior to men, as is implied by Milt's sentimental (and self-serving) assertion near the close of "Free Women" that women are "tougher... kinder... in a position to take it" (p. 663). Gayle Greene points out that The Golden Notebook articulates an apparent paradox, that "contemporary society is 'worse for' men than for women, leaving them damaged, divided, dehumanized" ("Women and Men in Doris Lessing's Golden Notebook: Divided Selves," in The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], p. 280). As Lessing indicates, men have both power and privilege in this society, and it is precisely these advantages that prove damaging and limiting. Adrienne Rich sums up the situation in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 49: "To hold power over others means that the powerful is permitted a kind of short-cut through the complexity of human personality. He does not have to enter intuitively into the souls of the powerless, or to hear what they are saying in their many languages, including the language of silence. Colonialism exists by virtue of this short-cut—how else could so few live among so many and understand so little?"
from a Wyoming that never was, whom Ella services out of liking and self-denigration, the latter motive implied by the one trait the two of them have in common, indifference to the prospect of being killed (pp. 317–18). Cy both caps the other stereotypes and glosses them. “They talked about his work. He specialised in leucotomies: ‘Boy, I’ve cut literally hundreds of brains in half!’” (p. 328) The flat, factual tone of this passage, along with the boyish bravura and complete absence of self-irony in the exclamation, are indexes of how cut in half Cy himself is, and of how little of his professional competence is reflected on the personal level. Ella encapsulates the defining feature of all these men when “she thinks for the hundredth time that in their emotional life all these intelligent men use a level so much lower than anything they use for work, that they might be different creatures” (p. 457).

Tommy, the son of Molly and Richard, is perhaps the most developed of the stereotyped figures: developed in that he is represented as becoming a parody of the self-limited human being, in a particularly grisly and symbolic manner. Confronted at the beginning of “Free Women” with a comparatively unrestricted choice of life, in effect a choice of possible people to be, he is presented in that narrative as sliding into suicide with the same inevitability as the protagonist of Ella’s novel. He succeeds only in blinding himself, and this denouement turns into a solution to the problem of seeing too many alternatives. With his vision thus restricted, he first becomes “political” in a way that virtually parodies his mother’s life of activism, and at the conclusion is settling into his father’s role as a captain of industry, his blindness so intrinsic to what he has turned into that it is no longer mentioned. Molly articulates the paradox of his mutilation shortly after his return from the hospital, “He’s happy for the first time in his life .... he’s all in one piece for the first time in his life” (p. 378), and Tommy’s backward metamorphosis from a complex and deeply engaged young man to a single-minded and therefore coherent personality constitutes a fable pointing up how other characters are also self-maimed, self-blinded.20

20Elizabeth Abel views the Tommy of “Free Women” as Anna’s own “dark double, who confronts the same tormenting existential questions, vehemently denies that he is going through a ‘phase’ that differentiates his point of view from hers, and, on the brink of plunging into the same chaos she faces, chooses the alternative route of
Such stereotyped characters are exactly equivalent to the verbal cliches that define them; they are circumscribed by the "disinfecting phrases" of popular wisdom and psychoanalysis, "named" to the point of sterility in terms of professional, national, and especially sexual identity. They are only extreme versions, however, of a tendency to use self-definition as a means of closing off possibility that occurs in all the characters, including Anna and Ella. Both protagonists, in fact, allow themselves to be constrained by a word that, like good in Anna's meditation on literary language, is deeply ambiguous yet apparently meaningful. The word is real, and the two women use it primarily to intensify gender categories, as in a "real woman," a "real man," without being able to control the ways in which the word ultimately qualifies and narrows these categories. Like good, real has meaning: it "names" something that most people would claim to be able to recognize, although most people would not be able to explain how they recognize it. Like good, it also privileges one group of people over another, and such privileging is always political. Anna and Ella use the term in a variety of contexts and in a variety of tones ranging from affirmation to irony, but despite their consciousness and caution, they cannot evade the affinity between the essentialism of this real and the constriction of the realism that as writers they—and, of course, Lessing herself—want to renounce.21

blindness as the limitation that preserves control" ("(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 6, no. 3 [1981], 431). Roberta Rubenstein similarly argues for Tommy as projected "inner critic" in The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 103–4. The third and fourth sections of this chapter examine the notion of projection and some implications of the novel's structure: this analysis complicates, although it in no way discredits, Abel's and Rubenstein's arguments.

"In an important and relatively early article, "Alienation of the Woman Writer in The Golden Notebook" (reprinted in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, pp. 54–63), Ellen Morgan maintains that Lessing uses real unironically and that this usage is a manifestation of her own biologism, an aspect of authorial self-division explicable in light of the presuppositions about women and sex roles current in the early 1960s: "The woman writer in this situation is unlikely to conceive of the relative status of women and men in political terms; prevailing opinion convinces her that the condition of women in society is rooted in biological and psychological immutables. She may, nevertheless, be acutely sensitive to and resentful of the power dynamics which characterize female-male relations" (pp. 62–63). Elaine Showalter, in A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton Uni-
The "real woman" is first heralded by Mrs Marks, who uses the phrase to explain and approve of why Anna's sexual response to her lover Michael is contingent on how he accepts her. Anna observes, "She uses this word, a woman, a real woman, exactly as she does artist, a true artist. An absolute," and her reaction is to laugh (p. 237), although the analogy recalls an earlier, angrier passage in which the psychoanalyst invoked the cliche of the "true artist" as a sort of cosmic justification for shortcoming. In that episode, Mrs Marks tried to excuse what Anna perceived as impotence and sterility by appealing to the maxim "the artist writes out of an incapacity to live," and Anna noted a willingness to utter "commonplaces in her capacity as witch-doctor she would have been ashamed of if she were with friends and not in the consulting room" and went on to denounce the compartmentalization this retreat into banality implied: "One level for life, another for the couch. I couldn't stand it; that is, ultimately, what I couldn't stand. Because it means one level of morality for life, and another for the sick" (p. 62). The absolute status of "real woman" in the therapeutic context seems another instance of this principle, at least inasmuch as it purports to vindicate a debilitating level of emotional dependence and passivity. Yet in spite of a generally skeptical attitude toward essentialism and compartmentalization, both Anna and Ella cling to this notion of the "real woman," even on occasions when its limitations are clearly exposed.

For example, writing of the affair between Ella and Paul, which in many ways mirrors the affair between Anna and Michael, Anna observes,

Any intelligent person could have foreseen the end of this affair from its beginning. And yet I, Anna, like Ella with Paul, refused to see it. Paul gave birth to Ella, the naive Ella. He destroyed in her the knowing, doubting, sophisticated Ella and again and again he put her intelligence to sleep, and with her willing connivance, so that she floated darkly on her love for him, on her naivety, which is another word for a spontaneous creative faith. [p. 211]

versity Press, 1977); and Diana Trilling, in the Times Literary Supplement, 13 October 1978, 1165, make similar arguments. Gayle Greene points out, however, that "neither critic makes any distinction between Lessing and her protagonist" ("Women and Men," p. 294 n. 28). This discussion develops from Greene's observation.
If this passage expresses Anna's desire for an experience that is not, like Ella's story of the suicide, structured in an inevitable progression so that the end is implicit in the beginning, it also suggests that destroying "the knowing, doubting, sophisticated" self, or allowing a man to put one's "intelligence to sleep" amounts to a mutilation as catastrophic as Tommy's self-blinding. That this willed naïveté is tantamount to stupidity occurs to Anna when she describes, again after the fact, the climax of her abortive affair with Nelson: "Sometimes I dislike women, I dislike us all, because of our capacity for not-thinking when it suits us; we choose not to think when we are reaching out for happiness" (p. 485). But such perceptions are more often engulfed by nostalgia for a sort of sexual golden age, in which traditionally feminine dependency is written into the social structure. Thus Ella muses: "What is terrible is that after every one of the phases of my life is finished, I am left with no more than some banal commonplace that everyone knows: in this case, that women's emotions are all still fitted for a kind of society that no longer exists. My deep emotions, my real ones, are to do with my relationship with a man. One man. But I don't live that kind of life, and I know few women who do (p. 314). Her meditation is peculiarly ahistorical, as the Marxist Anna, if not the politically innocent Ella, presumably knows: while past societies have frequently prescribed monogamy for women (or at least for women of certain classes) they have never required reciprocity from men. The "kind of society that no longer exists" in which a woman has a "relationship with a man. One man" is in fact the kind of society inhabited in the fictional present by such women as Marion, Muriel Tanner, and Nelson's unnamed wife, that is, a society in which the woman has a "relationship" and the man has outside affairs and uses her as a source for everything from mothering to a clean shirt. Furthermore, that Ella locates her "real emotions" in a hazily ideal-

ized past is another indication that the word real is too restrictive to be meaningful in a contemporary context: paradoxically, it falls short of “naming” present reality.

The “real woman”’s counterpart, the “real man,” is also a relic of the past, although he is dying out far more rapidly; as Anna notes, “Women have this deep instinctive need to build a man up as a man... I suppose this is because real men become fewer and fewer, and we are frightened, trying to create men” (p. 484). He is never positively characterized, remaining equivocally defined by his contrast with “sexual cripples” (p. 484) on one hand and male homosexuals on the other: defined, that is, as someone who is both capable of and interested in heterosexual intercourse. He is not necessarily, however, someone who either likes or respects women, and consequently the value attached to his “real” status is gradually drawn into question. In “Free Women,” for instance, Anna, reflecting on the relationship between her homosexual lodger Ivor and her daughter Janet, asks herself, “What do I mean when I say he’s not a man? ... I know that with ‘a real man’ there would be a whole area of tension, of wry understanding that there can’t be with Ivor; there would be a whole dimension there isn’t now; and yet he’s charming with her, and so what do I mean by ‘A real man’?” (p. 391). The ironizing quotation marks suggest the extent of her doubt. The “real man” has been conceived as so inherently other than the self-abasing “real woman” that his polarization is manifested as misogyny, as Anna finally realizes, listening to the calculated derision of Ivor and his lover Ronnie: “The mockery, the defence of the homosexual, was nothing more than the polite over-gallantry of a ‘real’ man, the ‘normal’ man who intends to set bounds to his relationship with a woman, consciously or not. Usually unconsciously. It was the same cold evasive emotion, taken a step further; there was a difference in degree but not in kind” (p. 393). In this passage real is aligned with normal, a term already suspect because of its association with the evaluative labels of psychoanalysis. In a situation where Anna was exercising her critical facility, the “normal” man would be the man who is fatally blocked, hemmed in, circumscribed. It is thus the start of a reversion to conventionality—conscious, ironic reversion, but reversion nonetheless—when the Anna of “Free Women” vows, “By God, there are a few real men left, and I’m going to see
[Janet] gets one of them. I’m going to see she grows up to recognise a real man when she meets one” (p. 404), for the examples of recognizable “real men” that Lessing has provided within the novel offer women little potential for relationships. Perhaps the purest specimen is George Hounslow of the African reminiscences, the man who was identified as “good” in contrast to Willi. He is described as a throwback because he is “a man who really, very much, needed women,” but this need has specific dimensions: “George needed a woman to submit to him, he needed a woman to be under his spell physically. . . . When George looked at a woman he was imagining her as she would be when he had fucked her into insensibility” (p. 124). In line with this characterization he is a philanderer, as forthrightly polygamous as Anna and Ella are monogamous; as he tells the young Anna, “I could take you to bed now—and then Marie, that’s my black girl, and then go back to my wife tonight and have her, and be happy with all three of you. Do you understand that, Anna?” She reports responding “‘No’ . . . lying on behalf of all women, and thinking of his wife, who made me feel caged” (p. 133). In this confrontation the “real man” and the “real woman” are at a standoff. Both are thwarted by normality, hemmed in by the restrictions implicit in the qualification real, and prevented in particular from having any contact with each other.

The lure of the “normal” also affects Ella, who tries to interpret the period of deprivation after Paul has left by imaginatively looking back on it, in the process construing it as a completed action, over and done with, a story. She assures herself that “when she loved a man again, she would return to normal: a woman, that is, whose sexuality would ebb and flow in response to his. A woman’s sexuality is, so to speak, contained by a man, if he is a real man; she is, in a sense, put to sleep by him, she does not think about sex” (p. 455). This version of normality is an article of faith for her, although she does remark “How strange that one should hold on to a set of sentences, and have faith in them” (p. 455), effectively making into dogma the requirement of having one’s “sexuality . . . , so to speak, contained by a man.” When this credo is transposed to the level of Anna’s own experience, however, it crumbles under the pressure of its internal contradict-
tions, just before Anna herself crumbles, in the aftermath of the "deadly" night she spends with De Silva. During that night, finding herself as "cool, detached, abstracted" as her partner, she reflexively turns to a "set of sentences." "For I kept thinking stubbornly: Of course it's him, not me. For men create these things, they create us." But for the first time this attempt to pass on responsibility for her emotional state strikes her as unsatisfactory. "In the morning, remembering how I clung, how I always cling to this, I felt foolish. Because why should it be true?" (p. 501). The question becomes a preamble to the experience of "madness" that she shares with Saul Green, and it implies the condition that makes this experience liberating as well as devastating: Anna chooses to enter into Saul's breakdown, to participate in his anxiety state, and even, it seems, to fall in love with him in the first place. She can accordingly be "contained" by him in a way that is freeing rather than inhibiting because containment is her option, an option that she can, and does, terminate when necessary.23

The essentialist, rather Lawrentian notion of the "real" man and woman must yield if people are to "try to be something else, to break their own form as it were."24 Anna works through the concept of the sex-coded "real" at the same time as she works through the concept of a stable, "real" self. With Saul in the Blue and Golden notebooks she enacts parodic versions of traditional female roles: the jealous, vindictive woman scorned; the mewing, helpless victim ("Oh boohoo, and my dainty pink-tipped forefinger pointed at my...")

23In the Blue notebook she reports "lying in bed examining the phrase 'in love' as if it were the name of a disease I could choose not to have" (p. 558). Later she tells herself, "Well, I'll never suffer from my own anxiety state, so I might just as well experience someone else's while I get the chance" (p. 575). And she exerts control by denying it when she tells Saul, "You're going to have to break it. I ought to, but I'm not strong enough," inserting her lucidity into their temporary structure of interdependence: "Anyway, you'll go by yourself when Janet comes back" (p. 621).

24Elizabeth Wilson notes, "The Lawrentian ideal of relationships between men and women was influential in Britain in radical circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s" ("Rereading Lessing and de Beauvoir" in Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives, ed. Taylor, p. 68), and Nicole Ward Jouve observes aspects of "Lawrentian fulfillment" in the subsequent Landlocked ("Of Mud and Other Matter—The Children of Violence," in Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives, ed. Taylor, p. 79), but it seems reasonable to assume that Lessing was no less critical of "Lawrentian" influences than she was of Jungian or Marxist ones.
white, pink-tipped betrayed bosom” (p. 630)); the suffocating mother. And in a final climactic night she plays out with him “every man-woman role imaginable,” feeling “condemned to play them now because I had refused them in life” (p. 604). But in another sense this overriding of the “real” as an absolute value, along with the transcending of other categories that restrict human potential to the definable limits of “character,” has already occurred, indeed, is the structural premise of the novel as a whole. For Anna is already “cracked” or “split” into more than one character, most obviously in the persona of Ella, whose experiences tend to figure as no more “fictional” than Anna’s own because the four notebooks are always presented as equivalent, as on a single ontological level, more radically as the novel develops and the accounts of Anna’s life in “Free Women” and in the various “factual” notebooks become more and more divergent, giving rise to two distinct Annas who can be neither reduced nor subordinated to one another.

III

If one aspect of Anna’s “splitting” is the character Ella, Ella’s development serves to indicate how ambiguous the notions of “splitting”—and of character—can be. Initially presented as Anna’s fictional creation, Ella soon emerges as a version of Anna, a double or second self who both replicates certain of Anna’s experiences and adds new material that Anna has presumably suppressed from other notebooks. She thus appears to be a projection in the relatively straightforward sense of a mirror image, a different angle on Anna, and her name, with its similarly doubled central letter and final ā, suggests that she is a variation on the essential Anna, a product of simple and easily decoded substitutions.

But Anna’s sketch of the “main theme, or motif” of The Shadow of the Third complicates this construction of the relation between creator and character by introducing a psychoanalytical concept of projection that superadds desire and fear to the notion of the double. Within The Shadow of the Third, as Anna delineates the plot, Ella is to become increasingly obsessed with the image of “a serene, calm, unjealous, unenvious, undemanding woman, full of resources of happiness inside herself, self-sufficient, yet always
ready to give happiness when it is asked for"—precisely the "real woman" in her most idealized form—and eventually to recognize this woman as her own shadow, everything she is not but wants most to be (p. 27).25 Jungian therapy provides the theoretical basis for regarding such an apparently alien figure as potentially integral to the self, and for denominating the two selves in a dialectic of values: Ella thinks, "I have as a shadow a good woman, grown-up and strong and unasking. Which means that I am using with [Paul] my 'negative' self," and she then identifies the "third" of her obsession as her "positive" or "good" self (p. 20). In some ways, at least, Ella is also Anna's projection in this second sense, the reversed, wholly other self of desire, as Anna comments near the end of the Golden notebook when she calls Ella back into being: "After a while I realised I was doing what I had done before, creating 'the third'—the woman altogether better than I was" (p. 637). Ella in this passage represents the "good" Anna, but in earlier sections of the Yellow notebook she is the dependent, demanding woman who reacts with rage and despair to the conventions of sexual manipulation, an incipient "bad" Anna whom Anna fears and uses the notebooks to control. 26

Even if Ella is nothing but a projection of Anna, then, her relation to her original may still be shifty, inverted, difficult to recuperate. The correspondence may be positive, in which case revelations about Ella apply directly to Anna, or negative, in which case revelations about Ella apply inversely to Anna, describing what she is not but desires to be or fears becoming. But the project of reading Ella as a source of information about Anna is further complicated by the fact that the whole notion of

25Ellen Morgan notes that this woman functions as both a stereotype and a symbol of invulnerability to male-inflicted pain ("Alienation of the Woman Writer," p. 59).
26Ella is more representative than Anna. As Sydney Janet Kaplan observes in Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), "Ella . . . is revealed as tending more toward the conventional and the general than Anna. She is both more passive than the Anna of the blue notebook and more stereotyped. Her utterances echo sentiments from a popularized version of the psychology of sex that often sound just like the writing in the women's magazines Ella works for. The style of the yellow notebook is thus much cruder—and more incomplete—than in the others" (p. 155).
character as authorial projection presumes a theory of writing as unmediated self-expression, and presumes in addition an unproblematic distinction between fictional "fact" and fictional "fiction." Anna herself dismisses the self-expression theory, once again citing the intervention of preexisting forms, of the categories of a novel or a story, as evidence against the equation of the artist with her production: "I see Ella, walking slowly about a big room, thinking, waiting. I, Anna, see Ella. Who is, of course, Anna. But that is the point, for she is not. The moment I, Anna, write: Ella rings up Julia to announce, etc., then Ella floats away from me and becomes someone else. I don't understand what happens at the moment Ella separates herself from me and becomes Ella. No one does. It's enough to call her Ella, instead of Anna" (p. 459). By making Ella external, other than herself, Anna admits the possibility that other people may also serve as models for representation. "Why did I choose the name Ella?" she muses and launches into an anecdote about an Ella she met at a party, an anecdote especially disconcerting at this point in the narrative because the identification of the two characters has never before been seriously questioned. "Well, I would never do that," she concludes. "That's not Anna at all"—and goes on to incorporate the tied-back straight hair and the white, beautiful hands of this "real" Ella into the physical description of her erstwhile persona (p. 460), a move clearly implying that precisely because of the mimesis central to realist characterization there are respects in which Ella is not any sort of version of Anna. Furthermore, because she has invented not simply a fantasized self but a character, Anna sets in motion a system of conventions dictating an internal logic to Ella's behavior. Ella must act "in character," a requirement that rules out certain aspects of projection. In the passage that acknowledges Ella as Anna's "third," for example, Anna goes on to withdraw the identification, for Ella could not be so morally superior without violating her own coherence. The terms in which Anna couches this judgment, moreover, are fairly startling in their suggestion of how unstable the distinction between "real" and "fictional" character has become at this point, for in describing her own creation she identifies literary convention and nature, realism and reality: "For I could positively mark
the point where Ella left reality, left how she would, in fact, behave because of her nature; and move into a larger generosity of personality impossible to her" (p. 637, my emphasis). If the restrictions embodied in the literary tradition Anna is trying to evade seem here to have infiltrated the real world, seem to have become reified as natures impossible to transcend or transgress, it is equally true that the wording of this statement makes Ella as real, or as fictional, as Anna. The demands of realist characterization have granted Ella an autonomy that makes her resist naturalization as a "fictional" character within the dominant fiction.

The theory that Ella is a projection of Anna assumes that Ella's function in the novel is to reveal more about Anna, that Ella's story, correctly interpreted, augments and completes Anna's story. Together the Ella and Anna narratives should add up to a "whole person" and a "real story." But this adding up involves reconstruing "fiction" (about Ella) as "fact" (about Anna), and demands that "fictionalized" characters and incidents be rigorously subordinated: for instance, Paul Tanner is not "real" but Michael is; Cy Maitland is not "real" but De Silva is. Keeping the subordinations straight is surprisingly difficult, because even though there are stylistic markers—such as the retrospective commentary interpolated after a reported event ("Later he would say," "But it was only later she would use a phrase like")—which differentiate the discourse of the Yellow notebook from entries in the Black, Red, and Blue notebooks, such techniques do not signal which narrative is the imbedded one. As a consequence Anna's and Ella's stories invite comparison with, rather than reduction to, one another. Paul Tanner and Michael are clearly similar kinds of men from very different backgrounds (although the "fictional" Paul is far more fully realized than the "real" Michael), and Cy Maitland and De Silva are in their different ways equally mutilated, or equally caricatures. For the same sort of reasons, it is often hard to naturalize Ella's experiences as Anna's inventions or projections. Ella's life seems as detailed, as absorbing, and ultimately as important as Anna's.

This last observation seems especially incongruous in view of the notion that Ella represents a "splitting" of Anna. "Splitting" as a strategy ought to diminish character. Following this logic, one critic has surmised that in the Yellow notebook Anna projects herself as
both Ella and Paul, who take up, respectively, the romantic and the political aspects of her personality. Yet Ella is more than a partial Anna, and paradoxically, her apparent lack of sophistication—she has never been affiliated with the Communist party, never been to South Africa, never been in therapy—allows something new to emerge through her narrative: a concern with overtly feminist issues, as distinct from issues of class, race, and the collective human psyche. In the Ella narrative Lessing has omitted those intellectual categories that absorb the events of Anna’s life into a theoretical hierarchy. In the process she has omitted a number of the categories that trivialize Anna’s experiences as a woman.

The Marxist and Freudian-Jungian explanatory systems are the preexisting forms that Anna has criticized as preventing the radically new from making an appearance. Yet Anna allows her tenuous allegiance to these systems to mute some of the most significant aspects of her own experience, as if communism and psychoanalysis were in charge of “what’s real” and could rule out “the emotions,” the subject matter of what Molly scornfully termed “little novels”—by implication, of course, “women’s writing.” One of the most dramatic instances of such muting is the long entry in the Blue notebook in which Anna tries to record without conscious editing the events of a single day, in hopes of approaching “the truth” that obstinately eludes the discourse of a novel or a story. Lessing ironizes this project at the outset by making the day that Anna selects hardly a “normal” one, despite Anna’s desperate attempt after the initial writing to neutralize the most alarming implications (p. 368). In the course of this day she decides to leave the Communist party and is left, for good, by her lover of the past five years. Running along underneath the recounting of these two terminations, however, is a third theme of her reaction to her menstrual period, a hitherto invisible fact of her experience, which emerges with the deliberate attempt to “be conscious.” She describes her period, without apparent awareness of contradiction, as “an entrance into an emotional state, recurring regularly, that is of no particular importance” (p. 340); what assumes great importance in this account is her re-

vulsion toward her own reproductive capacities and by extension toward her sexual identity. In the course of a day spent among men or anticipating the arrival of a man, she is constantly darting into bathrooms to wash between her legs, "conscious of the possibility of bad smells" (p. 340). She does not connect this evidence of self-loathing with the failure of her power struggle with the overbearing John Butte or the breakdown of communications with Jack, her best friend within the party, nor does she interpret it in light of her passive attendance on Michael and her acceptance of his complete control over their affair. She does not interpret it at all, in fact; it does not count as datum even though it has emerged with stark clarity from the experiment in getting at "the truth," for within the cultural contexts of both the party and "personal relationships," misogyny is a governing assumption. In the same way, and in the same section, she dismisses female guilt as "irrational," "impersonal," and "a habit of the nerves from the past" (p. 365) and female anger at male privilege as "resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison" (p. 333), without in either case construing the impersonality she notes as an index of political significance. "Long ago, in the course of the sessions with [Mrs Marks], I learned that the resentment, the anger, is impersonal," she writes. "It is the disease of women in our time. I can see it in women's faces, their voices, every day, or in the letters that come into the office" (p. 333). But the Marxism she is familiar with does not "name" the situation of women as oppression, and the psychoanalytic tradition encourages her to classify female oppression as pathology, "the disease of women in our time," a phrase that reduces the phenomenon to beneath consideration.

In particular, Ella and Anna differ in the degree of their involvement with the condition that Betty Friedan, in a ground-breaking study published in the year following the publication of The Golden Notebook, was to call "the problem that has no name." Significantly, Anna encounters the problem in the course of canvassing for Communist party candidates:

Five lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had:

self-doubt. A guilt because they were not happy. The phrase they all used: “There must be something wrong with me.” Back in the campaign H.Q. I mentioned these women to the woman in charge for the afternoon. She said: “Yes, whenever I go canvassing, I get the heebie-jeebies. This country’s full of women going mad all by themselves.” A pause, then she added, with a slight aggressiveness, the other side of the self-doubt, the guilt shown by the women I’d talked to: “Well, I used to be the same until I joined the Party and got myself a purpose in life.” I’ve been thinking about this—the truth is, these women interest me more than the election campaign. [p. 167]

In *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan documented the same “going mad . . . in spite of husband and children or rather because of them,” the same overwhelming sense of futility coupled with self-doubt and guilt, among a large cross section of middle-class American housewives, and her analysis became a cornerstone of the ensuing women’s liberation movement. Anna, however, cannot fit her interest in “these women” into the traditionally political context of the Red notebook and finds their situation equally irrelevant to the focuses of the Black and Blue notebooks. In effect, she adopts the strategy of the party organizer, who, as she astutely notes, is displaying the same guilt reactions as the “women going mad all by themselves,” substituting party busy-ness for reflection on what such mass discontent may imply for her own life. She relegates “the problem that has no name” to the realm of the fictional, to the Yellow notebook, which begins barely two pages after this entry.

This first Yellow notebook section introduces Ella by placing her in an environment of specifically female concerns. Like Lessing’s later protagonist Jane Somers, Ella works for a women’s magazine, and it is in this capacity that she has become interested in the situation of the women her employer’s wife indelicately terms the “lunatic fringe,” the working-class housewives who write to the magazine’s medical column about their pervasive unhappiness. It is in this capacity also that she becomes involved with Paul Tanner, a psychiatrist from a working-class background who is sympathetic to these women; later sections add the compromising information that he may well be married to one of them. The possibility that Paul is on such an overt level an accomplice in oppression is one of the many factors undercutting his authority as a spokesman for the
party line of the period, and Ella’s middle-class perceptions, such as her lament for the death of the English countryside, are enriched and complicated rather than simply discredited by exposure to his orthodox Marxism.

Ella’s bourgeois Englishness enables her to discover the effects of sexual inequality without automatically assigning them to subsidiary status within an overarching system of interpretations. The problem to which she is passionately committed has, as Friedan observed, “no name”; because she cannot “name” it, Ella is able to perceive it as important. She and Paul come to refer to the letters constituting her “weekly dose of misery” as “Mrs Brown,” a provisional and synecdochic tag that “names” by laying stress on the personal rather than by locating the phenomenon within a theoretical schema. 29 The same kind of stress characterizes Anna’s controversial defense through Ella of the vaginal orgasm as “emotion and nothing else, felt as emotion and expressed in sensations that are indistinguishable from emotion” (p. 215). Ella insists on fidelity to what she feels, in the face of “evidence” maintaining that her feelings are irrelevant or, worse, that there are experts better qualified than she to know her responses. Paul’s anecdote about the female doctors’ boycott of a hospital lecture on the superiority of the clitoral orgasm reinforces the implication that when expertise is invoked against experience the expertise will be male, the experience female. “My dear Ella, don’t you know what the great revolution of our time is?” Paul asks. “The Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution—they’re nothing at all. The real revolution is, women against men” (p. 213). Ella demurs, but this version of the “revolution” permeates the Yellow notebook, pulling her story away from its ostensible focus on “the third,” the stereotypical feminine ideal projected as an emblem of

29Virginia Woolf uses “Mrs Brown” in a startlingly similar way—to counter Arnold Bennett’s and the Edwardian realists’ tendency to subsume the personal to a mass of economic and social documentation. See Woolf, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” in The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 99–111. Woolf’s writings and her writing practices may have had more influence on Lessing than scholars have yet been able to document; for instance, the “degeneration” of the notebooks into collections of newspaper clippings is suggestively reminiscent of the notebooks of clippings that Woolf assembled during the years in which she was preparing to write Three Guineas.
sanity, and recentering it around the behavior of men in a society where women’s subsidiary and instrumental status is taken for granted.

The use of this theme in the Yellow notebook is so arresting that it conditioned the early reception of the whole novel; as Lessing later noted with irritation, “I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis.”30 Her treatment of the “sex war” theme is especially volatile because she has chosen to tell—and retell over and over—one of the most familiar stories of the postwar period: the tragedy of the organization man, hemmed in and thwarted by convention and enforced domesticity, broken on the rack of postindustrial anti-individualism or in active rebellion against pressures to conform.31 She always tells it, however, from the point of view of a female figure whose customary function is to symbolize either

30Lessing, 1972 introduction to The Golden Notebook, p. x.
31Sloan Wilson’s Man in the Gray Flannel Suit is a paradigm of this story, but in a 1962 essay Ihab Hassan argued that virtually all important contemporary novels reacted against “the normative image of our culture,” which “can be projected in a series of preposterous or unctuous cliches. It is the image of an organization man who foregoes the ulcerous rewards of an executive suite, pottering about a house with a cracked picture window looking into the crack of another picture window, and viewing with apathy the coming caesars of our imperial state, the hidden persuaders and clowns of commerce of Madison Avenue.” According to Hassan, writers reacting to this “normative image” range from J. D. Salinger to Saul Bellow to Jack Kerouac, all having in common “the figure of the rebel-victim [who] incarnates the eternal dialectic between the primary Yes and everlasting No” and who is “perhaps one of the last exemplars of a vanishing conception of man”—“man” being both a universal and a masculine denomination, as his subsequent discussion makes clear (“The Character of Post-war Fiction in America,” in On Contemporary Literature, ed. Kostelanetz, pp. 38, 40). One writer that Hassan does not mention (he was far too minor, even at the time, to figure in such an essay) is Clancy Sigal, with whom Lessing had an affair and who is the prototype of Saul Green. Sigal’s novel Going Away (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), is an On the Road–style mensch novel, almost compulsive in its elaboration of clearly autobiographical minutiae. At times its bravura overwriting suggests the “romantic tough school of writing” that Lessing parodies on pp. 539–41. More often, passages recall excerpts from the diaries of Saul Green recorded in the Blue notebook. For example, reflecting on the information that a woman he had slept with had been picked up later the same night walking naked through the streets of Los Angeles, Sigal’s narrator muses, “Why was I feeling so horrified, so utterly paralysed by shame? Hers hadn’t been the only hand I had held right up to the gates of Norwalk” (p. 13). Saul Green foregoes the nod to horror and paralysis: “Got a letter from Jake in Detroit. Mavis cut her wrists with a razor. They got her to hospital in time. Pity, a nice girl” (p. 572).
freedom or thralldom (or, in a familiar irony peculiar to the genre, both), a figure who does not customarily have a point of view beyond the possible adjunct role implied in articulating the hero’s problem. In effect, she tells the other side of the dominant story of the fifties, and the act of telling the other side alters the story irrevocably. In the Yellow notebook the saga of the misplaced organization man who tries to alleviate the pain and ennui of midcentury alienation with an extramarital affair is told, first at length, in the section dealing with Ella’s five-year relationship with Paul Tanner, then more briefly in the episode involving Cy Maitland, then very briefly and explosively in the story of the unnamed Canadian. In effect Ella suffers through shorter and progressively more emphatic synopses of an encounter in which the salient features are unequal power, manipulation, and complete inability of the dominant partner to understand the inferior partner, or even to understand that anyone is there to understand.

The effect of these reiterations is shattering. It is not, however, Ella who shatters, succumbing to the psychic self-division Anna had planned for her, but the narrative itself that “breaks down” into different short fictions, at first naturalized as Ella’s projections (she “looks inward” to find them) but soon supplanting The Shadow of the Third entirely. The fourth Yellow notebook section consists entirely of short pieces of writing, numbered and captioned “A SHORT STORY” or “A SHORT NOVEL” and culminating in a parody entitled “THE ROMANTIC TOUGH SCHOOL OF WRITING” that accurately captures the sentimentality and banality intrinsic to the saga of the alienated rebel as young artist, this time the American “political” version:

Dave scratched his crotch, slow, owl-scratching pure Dave. “Jeez, Mike,” he said, “you’ll write it someday, for us all.” He stammered, inarticulate, not-winged-with-words. “You’ll write it, hey feller? And how our souls were ruined here on the snow-white Manhattan pavement, the capitalist-money-mammon hound-of-hell hot on our heels?” “Gee, Dave, I love you,” I said then, my boy’s soul twisted with love. I hit him then, square to the jaw-bone, stammering with love-for-the-

32As Anna does in the diatribe beginning, “Like all Americans you’ve got mother-trouble” (p. 581). Significantly, this is the passage in which Anna identifies her own “banal over-simplification.” She also accuses Saul of “feeling pleasure because you’ve provoked me into screaming at you”—she is, after all, also screaming about him.
world, love-for-my-friends, for the Daves and the Mikes and the Bud-dies. [p. 541]

This passage is followed by a single sentence, “If I’ve gone back to pastiche, then it’s time to stop,” and on that note the Yellow notebook ends forever, ostensibly “blocked” by Anna’s hypercritical awareness of the conventions conditioning her fragmented culture. Yet it is impossible to take at face value the thesis that such parody is simply a debased kind of writing, evidence of a divided con-sciousness fated to exhaust itself in sterile and meaningless pro-ductions. Anna’s construction of her “writer’s block” as a decline from wholeness and of self-conscious art forms as a degeneration from a healthily unreflective realism is as sentimental and banal as the assumptions of the “tough guy school” she parodies, implying a similarly romantic nostalgia for lost innocence. Furthermore, the parody and the sketches constituting the final section of the Yellow notebook do not function as dead ends within the novel as a whole. On the contrary, they serve as multiple openings into the accounts of psychic “breakdown” that follow in the Blue and Golden note-books and in the concluding chapter of “Free Women,” foreshad-owing selected events and thus glossing different aspects of these accounts while emphasizing the variant cultural codes at work in each. In effect, they add more voices, more versions, to the voices and versions already licensed by the convention of the frame story and the imbedded notebooks. And in the process they reinforce a growing awareness that in The Golden Notebook “the truth” is not a fixed reality that lurks behind the distortions of narrative form but a product of tellings and retellings. Or rather, that there is no truth apart from the telling, no real story, no authorized version, no van-tage point that allows experience to be viewed as a whole.

IV

Although in many respects Ella is a character as developed and individualized as Anna herself, her story stays shakily imbedded in Anna’s. Hints that the relation of container to contained might be reversed, so that Ella might emerge as author of Anna’s story (“A man and a woman—yes”), can be reconciled to the governing prem-
ise of "real" and "fictional" levels, albeit laboriously: such foreshadowings were "actually" written by Anna at a later date and deal with her own "real" experiences, which she fictionalizes through the device of Ella-as-writer. According to this naturalization Anna goes to such lengths because her "writer's block" has forced her to compartmentalize different aspects of her life as different kinds of discourse. Psychological fragmentation thus becomes the convention that allows the text to remain coherent.

But the requirement of depicting psychological fragmentation seems to elicit descriptive techniques that are also "cracked" or "split:" essentially negative in content, sketchy, tentative, presented as evidence of failure. That the experience of "breakdown" eludes description seems to be one of the most important things that can be said about it, and over and over Lessing manipulates a vocabulary of negative words and phrases to reiterate that the central truth of this kind of event remains out of reach and unarticulated. The third-person narrator of "Free Women" reports that Anna encountered "a reality different from anything she had known before as reality," but can describe it only in terms of what it was not: "It was not being 'depressed'; or being 'unhappy'; or feeling 'discouraged'; the essence of the experience was that such words, like joy or happiness, were meaningless" (p. 652). Similarly, Anna writes in the Blue notebook, "I knew, but of course the word, written, cannot convey the quality of this knowing" (p. 589), and in a key passage from the Golden notebook generalizes these observations further, codifying a theory that makes "language" a mute gesture toward the ineffable: "The fact is, the real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words. The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and the others won't" (pp. 633–34). Such passages employ a narrative strategy that is a virtual via negativa. On the most obvious level, "the people who have been

33Passages in the Blue notebook reinforce such a naturalization. For example, Anna writes, "I came across an entry which frightened me, because I had already written it, out of some other kind of knowledge, in my yellow notebook" (p. 572).
there, in the place in themselves where words, pattern, order, dissolve," are the only possible audience for Anna's comments; they are defined as the only people who could have any idea what she means. Yet insofar as these statements describe the incapacity of "language" to mean, they are meaningful statements, and insofar as they are meaningful statements they foreground the materiality of the novel, the fact that it is a construct of language. In such passages the fictional discourse is turned back on itself, calling attention to the conventions according to which novels signify, while framing and pointing up the implication that something significant is not being said. "Cracks" and "gaps" thus function as elements of description, implying the existence of something utterly new and unrepresentable, at least within the realist tradition.

Furthermore, Lessing does not confine "breakdown" to the realm of characterization. The climactic section of The Golden Notebook in which Anna's psychological "breakdown" occurs is itself broken down into two irreconcilable versions: the long, intense first-person account in the Blue and Golden notebooks describing the interaction between Anna and Saul Green, and the shorter, more dispassionate third-person account in "Free Women" describing Anna's descent into obsession and her deliverance by an American identified only as Milt. Taken separately, neither of these narratives exceeds the defining conditions of realism. The diary form of the first imposes a rigorously chronological order of discourse on events that paradoxically include loss of a sense of time (pp. 593–94); it also motivates a preoccupation with documenting exactly when in the course of the narrated action each entry was written. The deliberately traditional form of the second—Lessing has spoken of "Free Women" as "an absolutely whole conventional novel"34—presents Anna's collapse as the inevitable consequence of Anna's absorption in the chaos of current affairs and avoids replicating the conclusion of Ella's novel about suicide only by bringing in a fortuitous rescuer, another horrific version of the "real man," who confesses ingenuously after he has restored Anna to sanity, "I can't sleep with women I like" (p. 660). But at this point in The Golden Notebook, realist conventions

no longer suffice to create a framework within which these two stories can coexist. Both have as their protagonist a woman named Anna who is a “blocked” novelist and is going through some sort of crisis in the company of an American man: both are clearly versions of a single story and not, for instance, chronicles of two different “breakdowns” suffered in sequence by the same character. Indeed, the emphasis and tone, not to mention the conclusions, of the two accounts are so different that the Annas in each cannot be the same character. “Anna” has undergone a textual split, and in the course of The Golden Notebook she is never put back together again.

In the account set out in the Blue and Golden notebooks “breakdown” is an educational process, a “breaking through,”35 which Anna undertakes by deciding to enter into Saul Green’s “madness.” The experience at first forces to extremes her habitual self-division into active participant and detached, critical observer. “Meanwhile my anxiety state is permanent, I’ve forgotten what it is like to wake up normally,” she reports; “yet I watch this state I’m in, and even think: Well, I’ll never suffer from my own anxiety state, so I might just as well experience someone else’s while I get the chance” (p. 575). But the aim of the educational process is to dissolve boundaries, to the point where Anna longs to “be free of [her] own ordering, commenting memory” and feels her “sense of identity fade” (p. 585). As she moves further into “madness,” division becomes proliferation, prompted by a need to learn that provokes her to ask Saul at one point, “What do you think this thing is that makes people like us have to experience everything? We’re driven by something to be as many different things or people as possible” (p. 613). The question affirms a hitherto unrecognized positive aspect in the myriad examples of personal fragmentation that build up to this climax: role playing, discrepancies between spoken and body language, clichéd speeches made up of disparate shards of cultural discourses. To be something or someone different appears in this passage to be the most intense and authentic kind of knowing. By a peculiar in-

35Roberta Rubenstein plays on the dual implications of “break” in these two formulations throughout The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing.
version, fragmentation has become comprehension. The rhetoric of denial accordingly grows more intrusive, while long, cumulative sentences incorporate perceptions linked for the first time:

There was a kind of shifting of the balances of my brain, of the way I had been thinking, the same kind of realignment as when, a few days before, words like democracy, liberty, freedom, had faded under pressure of a new sort of understanding of the real movement of the world towards dark, hardening power. I knew, but of course the word, written, cannot convey the quality of this knowing, 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; and I knew how strong these emotions were, in a way that would never leave me, would become part of how I saw the world. [pp. 588–89]

By contrast, Anna’s “breakdown” in the “Free Women” account is presented as a direct reflection of her fragmented culture, rendered graphically in the image of a room whose four walls are completely covered with newspaper clippings. In this context, to break down is merely to succumb to a sort of societal entropy, for “madness” leads to nothing more than further disintegration. Milt accordingly intervenes as savior rather than playing the less familiar role of companion schizophrenic that is assigned to Saul Green.36 The narrator remains cool and detached and, like the narrator of “To Room Nineteen,” sets up the situation at the outset in a way that implicitly closes off possibility: “Anna discovered she was spending most of her time doing nothing at all; and decided the remedy for her condition was a man. She prescribed this for herself like a medicine” (p. 648). And Anna and Milt speak almost exclusively in cliches, which they recognize and acknowledge but seem unable to go beyond:

“They said you were a left-winger,” said Anna in appeal; interested that this was what she instinctively said in explanation of the state of affairs.

36Both Lessing and Clancy Sigal participated in R. D. Laing’s early experiments with hallucinogenically induced “schizophrenic” states, and many of Lessing’s insights in the “breakdown” scene reflect Laing’s.
"Vintage, post-war."

"I'm waiting for you to say: I and the other three socialists in the States are going to..."

"The other four." [p. 655]

Like the heightened rhetoric of the preceding account, such ironic exchanges are responses to the problem of "language" that has been a preoccupation of the novel. But rather than trying to articulate the radically new, the characters in "Free Women" are merely self-conscious about their manipulation of commonplaces. Irony distances them from the vocabulary of an exhausted tradition without making them any less dependent on that tradition. Milt's leave-taking is almost painfully reminiscent of Richard—"No, but let's preserve the forms, the forms at least of..." (p. 664)—and conventional form triumphs in "Free Women," leading the discourse inexorably toward closure on a note that amounts to a categorical betrayal of the promise held out at the beginning. In the course of the scene in Molly's flat that opens both "Free Women" and the novel itself, the narrator reports,

That they were both "insecure" and "unrooted," words which dated from the era of Mother Sugar, they both freely acknowledged. But Anna had recently been learning to use these words in a different way, not as something to be apologised for, but as flags or banners for an attitude that amounted to a different philosophy. She had enjoyed fantasies of saying to Molly: We've had the wrong attitude to the whole thing, and it's Mother Sugar's fault—what is this security and balance that's supposed to be so good? What's wrong with living emotionally from hand-to-mouth in a world that's changing as fast as it is? [p. 10]

But by the concluding section of "Free Women," which is also the last section of The Golden Notebook, both Anna and Molly have opted for security and roots, although their calculated use of irony signals that they are aware of the extent of the compromise. Anna plans to do social work and involve herself with the Labour party; Molly has committed herself to a loveless marriage. "So we're both going to be integrated with British life at its roots," says Molly, and Anna replies, "I was carefully avoiding that tone" (p. 666). But the tone is necessary if accommodation is to be distinguished from despair. The catchphrase that at the opening of the story signifies the intimacy
between the two women, "Odd, isn’t it?" (p. 3), recurs at the end, on the occasion of their separation: "It’s all very odd, isn’t it Anna?" (p. 666). "Oddness" has become the pervasive quality of a world distanced by irony, and having no more to discuss about such a world, the two women kiss and separate.

But "Free Women" is not the only narrative in The Golden Notebook, and the conclusion of "Free Women" is not the only basis for coming to a conclusion about the import of the novel as a whole. Speculating on the probable success of her convenient marriage, Molly observes, "There’s nothing like knowing the exact dimensions of the bed you’re going to fit yourself into" (p. 666), and the remark resonates as an epitaph for the story that Lessing herself ironically proffers as truncated and crushed into a predetermined shape by the requirements of a Procrustean realist tradition. The notebooks, on the other hand, present a very different resolution to the story about a novelist named Anna, one that directly addresses her “writer’s block” and in the process “cracks” and “splits” the containing form, completely unsettling the levels of “fictional” and “real” narration. The Golden notebook also ends with a separation, but that Anna and Saul part is less important than the each supplies the other with a new beginning, the opening line of a novel to be written. Anna’s gift to Saul, the sentence “On a dry hillside in Algeria, a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle” (p. 642), becomes the beginning of a short novel that “was later published and did rather well,” according to one of the two bracketed notes appended to the close of this section (p. 643). Saul’s gift to Anna, however, is the sentence “The two women were alone in the London flat” (p. 639), and this sentence is Lessing’s own opening to “Free Women” and thus to The Golden Notebook. The gesture might be interpreted as indicating

37The brackets recall Tommy’s remark in “Free Women,” “Why do . . . you bracket bits off? You give importance to one kind of feeling and not to others? How do you decide what’s important and what isn’t?” (p. 272). Certainly they seem intended to separate “editorial” or “narratorial” passages from those written by Anna, but within the naturalization such separations are especially dubious. At this point the whole framework of The Golden Notebook seems designed to force the questions: who is the author of the synopsis of Saul’s novel? Who is explaining that it “did rather well”? When naturalization runs rampant, the conventions of naturalization themselves “break down”: become exposed as flimsy and arbitrary devices for imposing hierarchical order on a narrative that gains little from the imposition.
merely that Anna is the author of "Free Women" and that "Free Women" is "really" framed by the notebooks rather than the other way around, in which case "Free Women" becomes simply another "fictionalization" of the "real" Anna's experiences, and the other characters in it emerge as further inventions or projections. Following this line of reasoning, Roberta Rubenstein points out that the Tommy of this section might well be a personification of Anna's "inner critic." But "Free Women" is not distinct from other sections of the novel, and in pursuing the logic of naturalization to its implicitly paradoxical conclusion Rubenstein brings criticism up against the limits of naturalization as a strategy for reading The Golden Notebook. She points out that the "editorial" comments linking "Free Women" to the notebooks cannot be attributed to an omniscient narrator once the omniscient narrator of "Free Women" has been revealed to be Anna; given the continuity of the narration, if Anna wrote "Free Women" she also wrote The Golden Notebook. Furthermore, the elusiveness of "the truth" has been one of Anna's central preoccupations, to the point where Anna has "already conceded that even in the Blue notebook/diary she fictionalizes her experiences," and as a consequence it is impossible to discern which aspects, if any, of the notebooks are not "fictional." Anna's practice of using writing as a means of "splitting" or "projecting" herself into different characters thus has no intrinsic boundaries: once the precedent is established, there is no compelling reason for maintaining that any of the characters described has an independent existence. And so Rubenstein proposes that even Saul Green is finally "real" only "within the layer of mimetic reality invented by Anna in the Blue and Golden notebooks," for "he becomes part of her own invention as soon as one moves back from that frame." He is "really," that is, only another aspect of Anna's fragmented consciousness, and the climactic Golden notebook section of the novel is therefore a drama of self-projection, not a communion of two psyches.

Ultimately this argument would seem to lead to the conclusion that all parts of the novel are equally "fictional," a conclusion making

---

39Ibid., pp. 104-5.
the "real"/"fictional" opposition irrelevant and indicating that the relation of one account to the other cannot be one of container to contained. But Rubenstein requires a controlling consciousness to preside over The Golden Notebook as its principle of unity and argues that "the narrative must establish a trust for the reader" by providing "a consistent mimetic reality supporting... the major characters of the novel." She consequently posits an "invisible Anna" who is "in fact the 'editor' of the entire work, interposed between the fragmented Anna of the notebooks and fictions and Doris Lessing herself." This "Anna" is neither the character in "Free Women" who is the author of the notebooks nor the character in the notebooks who is the author of "Free Women." Like "the Third" of the Yellow notebook, this third "Anna" is a sort of Jungian shadow, representing the "real" precisely inasmuch as she is not present within the fictional frame of reference, for she is not a character at all.

But if the authorial "Anna" is not in the story, she is completely unknowable. There is no basis for calling her "Anna" or for supposing that the experiences she recounts are in any sense her own. At this point in the naturalization "Anna" becomes indistinguishable from Lessing, and the fictional "real" becomes indistinguishable from reality.

Rubenstein's argument suggests that the attempt to resolve the two accounts by invoking a hierarchy of ontological levels first necessitates a drastic kind of hermeneutics, which insists on a "real" meaning violently at odds with the apparent one, and finally reduces the "real"/"fictional" opposition to meaninglessness anyway. What seems to be important about the accounts is not that one contains the other but that each is a version of the story about social

"Ibid., pp. 102, 107.
"The distinction between levels of reality—between fact and fiction within the narrative—is blurred in other ways. In the dream-vision of the Golden notebook Anna relates that she was required "to go back and look at scenes from my life," but one of these scenes is from the "fictional" Yellow notebook and involves the "character" Paul Tanner, who is "merged" with the "real" Michael, who had appeared to be Paul's prototype (pp. 616-17). And Saul, instructing Anna on how to begin her novel, says, "I'm going to give you the first sentence then. There are the two women you are, Anna. Write down: The two women were alone in the London flat" (p. 639, my emphasis), a statement insinuating that even Molly, prominent in "Free Women" and the Blue notebook and "fictionalized" as Julia in the Yellow notebook, is an invention and projection of Anna.
and personal "breakdown." Neither version is definitive. If the conclusion of "Free Women" emphasizes compromise and debilitating irony as effects of the closure imposed by traditional realism, the self-reflexive "conclusion" of the Golden notebook resolves anxiety into art, in effect subsuming the fragmentation of the social order to the novelist’s unifying vision and affirming that the way to redeem the time is to write about it. Lessing thus contrasts a realist and an implicitly modernist resolution, the first subordinating "art" to "life" (rather than being cured of her "writer's block" Anna moves on to more pressing concerns) and the second subordinating "life" to "art" (the "writer’s block" becomes the sole obstacle that must be "broken through," and production of The Golden Notebook itself is evidence of a return to wholeness). If the realist ending is insufficient, the Mobius-strip modernist "ending" is adequate only if artistic creation is the summum bonum, that is, if the "true artist" is placed outside and above social reality, like Stephen Daedelus's god of creation, "within or above or behind [her] handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence," or in Mrs Marks's more homespun formulation, creating out of an inability to live. Of course, this view of the artist has been thoroughly discredited within the novel.

The two narratives are thus not only irreconcilable; neither can be construed as taking precedence over the other. The Golden Notebook has no single "real" ending, nor is one ending offered as preferable. On the contrary, the two narratives, both alone and in combination, emerge as profoundly unsatisfactory. Lessing has "named" the problem as disintegration, fragmentation, incoherence, but she has not resolved it, either thematically or formally. Rather, she has suggested that resolution may not be precisely what is called for, that "gaps" and "splits" in the text, as in the personality, suggest ways of being more than one thing or person, and that this tentative realizing of multiple possibilities more effectively suggests the extent of the hitherto unknown or unrepresented than any structure imposing coherence.

Such an analysis suggests that by the time she wrote The Golden Notebook, Lessing had ceased to view novelistic coherence in terms of "a climate of ethical judgement" and saw in its claims of wholeness evidence of a limitation more damaging in that it was not perceived. To adopt Philippe Sollers's description, both the realist
and the modernist novel had become for her “the way this society speaks to itself” and thus an instrument of repression, “the manifestation of power in our time and a key to its mechanical, closed everyday unconsciousness.” To resist this “mechanical, closed everyday unconsciousness” she systematically subverted the most familiar forms that the novel has taken, subverting as well the assumption that such forms are the natural structure of all possible experience. Within the notebook accounts, for instance, “the game” that Anna plays is one analogue of novelistic form that parodies conventional notions of coherence. Something like a meditative exercise, “the game” initially seems to be a means of expanding consciousness and overcoming illusory divisions. To play it, Anna begins by “creating” in her imagination her immediate surroundings, then slowly enlarges her scope to “create” the house, the street, and, taking an aerial perspective, the city, the country, the continent, and the world—all the time keeping clearly in mind the early stages so as to achieve “a simultaneous knowledge of vastness and of smallness” (p. 548). But the kind of “simultaneous knowledge” that she seeks—in effect the omniscience of the nineteenth-century narrator combined with the omnipotence of the refined-out-of-existence twentieth-century artist—presumes a position of externality for the “creator” that is a kind of control: significantly, Anna envisions herself as placed above the spinning world that her mind encompasses. “Knowledge” of this sort presumes that there is a position of observation, and thus an angle of vision, that is “correct” and in this way imposes a particular form: the thing known is contained, distanced, and fixed. Anna’s published novel, Frontiers of War, was a product of this presumption and resulted from Anna’s having made a set of events from her past into a “story,” a product of hindsight, a re-viewing of experience sub specie resolutionis. She subsequently identifies her attitude toward these events as “lying nostalgia” (p. 63), and the “lie” is the one imposed by the requirements of “a story” as she has perceived it, a yearning for the apparent stasis and finish of a closed-off past comprehended completely.

It is only at the climax of her “breakdown” in the Golden notebook, when Anna finds herself viewing “conventionally well-made

films” that parody the conventions she herself has taken for granted in imaging this part of her life, that she realizes how limited her vision has been. “And what makes you think the emphasis you have put on it is the correct emphasis?” inquires the projectionist, who in this dream-vision embodies the ambiguous connotations of “project” while playing ironic Virgil to her Dante; and she notes the parodically Marxist use of the word correct, finally throwing into question the notion of a coherent world view arising from a privileged viewpoint (p. 619). “Literature is analysis after the event,” she had written earlier (p. 228), and much of the experience she undergoes has underscored that literature, as she has always understood it, invariably falsifies by refusing to acknowledge that “after the event” is only one perspective. But now the projectionist pushes further. “How would June Boothby see that time? I bet you can’t do June Boothby,” he says (p. 620), suddenly foregrounding someone who in Anna’s memory—and in The Golden Notebook—functions as a minor character. The irresistible implication is that every perspective is as “correct” as every other perspective, that the whole is constituted by all possible perspectives, and that therefore an apprehension of the whole is, strictly speaking, impossible. If fragmented perception is dangerous, the serious danger lies in mistaking a fragment for the truth in its entirety.

Because there is ultimately no one “correct” perspective, The Golden Notebook refuses to resolve into a single “real” story. The two accounts in “Free Women” and the notebooks place different emphases on the discussion of the writer’s role in a disintegrating society without arriving at the last word—without exhausting the possibilities for further stories. In The Golden Notebook Lessing is concerned to create the conditions that allow the future to make an appearance, not to indicate what shape it might take. Many of her later books, however, from The Four-Gated City to the Canopus in Argos series, deal very literally with “the future,” with action taking place in a time well after the time of writing, exploring prophetic genres from apocalyptic to space fiction and ultimately taking their direction from the insistence of the Blue and Golden notebooks that visionary experience cannot be entirely absorbed into psychological or political explanatory systems. Others, including The Summer before the Dark and the two pseudonymous Jane Somers novels, have pro-
agonists who resemble Ella in playing traditional female roles in preponderantly female worlds and might be the ironic products of Ella's musing, for unwillingly and often unwittingly they "break their own form, as it were."\(^{43}\) In aiming "to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped,"\(^{44}\) Lessing dispersed both character and plot, challenging the claims of a single holistic vision to contain the truth. In the process she at once fulfilled Anna's demand for "a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life" (p. 61) and opened up "cracks" and "gaps" into which future productions might pour, in diverse and unpredictable shapes.

\(^{43}\)The brilliant 1985 novel *The Good Terrorist* suggests a return to realism with a different, far more cynical ideology behind it: "postrealism" is one of the terms that might apply to it.