Doris Lessing

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In the wake of Lessing’s winning the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature, a flurry of discussion began querying her relevance to the twenty-first century. Most notably, Harold Bloom notoriously told the Associated Press, “although Ms Lessing at the beginning of her writing career had a few admirable qualities, I find her work for the past 15 years quite unreadable.” He added that the prize is “pure political correctness.” By “political correctness,” one might assume he’s alluding to Lessing’s secure place in representing the goals of the women’s movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. By contrast, *Doris Lessing: Interrogating the Times* demonstrates the continued relevance of her production to a variety of contemporary themes. Wrestling with late-twentieth-century ghosts that continue to haunt our most pressing twenty-first-century dilemmas, Lessing’s fiction and nonfiction demand a reformulation of some of our most taken-for-granted assumptions about the contemporary world and how we relate to that world. The three essays in Part One, “Joining the Centuries: Lessing from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century,” most obviously focus on reading Lessing in light of contemporary concerns.

Roberta Rubenstein’s “Notes for Proteus: Doris Lessing Reads the *Zeitgeist*” does what only a lifelong Lessing scholar could do—provide a much-needed overview of Lessing’s prolific oeuvre. Identifying Lessing with the mythic figure of the shape-shifting Proteus, Rubenstein, who “followed the author’s evolution one book at a time” as each work came into print, traces
how Lessing’s continual reworking of strategic themes has responded to the changing cultural environment and has been especially important to the lives of women. Expressed in a variety of genres—plays, poems, autobiography, memoirs, polemical and occasional essays, fiction, as well as librettos and sketches—Lessing’s vision is difficult to pin down. Giving form to Lessing’s protean qualities, Rubenstein unveils how Lessing’s writing remains connected to a “global canvas,” one in which “relentless wars and aggression between people of different races and ethnicities” threaten annihilation. She demonstrates as well how Lessing’s timely fictional renderings of race and sexuality, her candid depictions of vexed mother-daughter relationships, and her prescient commentary on aging shift as new cultural and political contexts demand new solutions. “[T]here is a strong quality of the seer in Lessing herself,” writes Rubenstein—Lessing has captured a zeitgeist and unveiled “the wounds of our times” (emphasis added).

Indeed, if any one literary work captured the imagination of the early women’s movement, it probably would be Lessing’s The Golden Notebook. However, Lessing, called “that epicist of the female experience” by the Swedish Academy that awarded her the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, treats gender and sexuality in a way that never lets us rest easy. There is a certain ambiguity for critics and readers in applying a feminist lens to Lessing’s work. Although Lessing herself has repeatedly challenged feminist approaches to her work, her very ambiguity toward feminism has allowed her the freedom to reimagine contemporary attitudes toward women in perhaps less restrictive ways. As Tonya Krouse and Robin Visel note in the other two essays in Part One, midlife and late Lessing works offer critiques to gender relations and rework troubling contemporary attitudes and assumptions regarding women’s roles. These essays readdress concerns that continue to haunt us—tensions between woman and writer, male and female, body and mind, and the personal and political. In doing so each essay demonstrates how Lessing dares to refashion these binaries in ways at times congruent to, at times challenging to, twenty-first-century thinking. Further, as Rubenstein’s and Visel’s essays demonstrate, Lessing explores the implications of rethinking these binaries for the older woman.

Likewise, Lessing rethinks the binaries that define female subjectivity, an issue that is foundational to much feminist theory and to Virginia Woolf, who remains an icon to feminist studies. In this light, Tonya Krouse’s essay, “‘Anon,’ ‘Free Women,’ and the Pleasures of Impersonality,” queries the importance of female subjectivity in Woolf, and examines how in The Golden Notebook (1962) Lessing’s aesthetic also becomes a theory of subjectivity. In particular, Krouse adeptly scrutinizes the predilection for the personal in the
formative *The Golden Notebook*, which, as Rubenstein notes, galvanized so many women’s personal and cultural lives. Reading *The Golden Notebook* “through and against Woolf’s theories in *A Room of One’s Own,***” Krouse identifies Lessing’s portrayal of two crucial issues that continue to challenge the female writer (and feminist theory): how to present an authorial subjectivity that does not imprison the self in a Cartesian, essentially male, mode of being; and how to understand the woman writer’s precarious relationship to pleasure.

Robin Visel, in “House/Mother: Lessing’s Reproduction of Realism in *The Sweetest Dream,***” suggests ways that Lessing further recasts the lingering binary divisions that are the focus of Krouse’s essay. Visel resituates the specter of the Victorian “Angel in the House” in the public sphere, where historical and cultural events are never isolated affairs. Visel thus identifies a newly imagined cosmopolitan house that reinvents the British middle-class family, a house that defies the boundaries of empire, patriarchy, and colonialism. Thus, maternity becomes not just a vehicle for reproduction, but a conduit for “revolutionary social change.” Reading Frances Lennox of *The Sweetest Dream*—and her predecessors Anna Wulf of *The Golden Notebook* and Martha Quest of *The Four-Gated City*—as haunted by Virginia Woolf’s “Angel in the House,” Visel investigates the tension between the “home-maker and the woman-who-writes-at-home.” In this twenty-first-century work, Lessing “resituates the London house of Anna Wulf and Martha Quest as the home of a new kind of mothering with the potential to resolve some of the ideological binaries and colonialisit hierarchies that bedevil her earlier characters.” Perhaps the most striking feature of this reinvention is Lessing’s attention to politics, especially left-wing politics, as it affects her artist-mothers. Politics and history are “embodied and housed in the Lennox residence. At Frances’s capacious kitchen table, Lessing skewers the dangerous naïveté of some of the big ideas of the twentieth century—Communist revolution, anticolonial nationalism, youth counterculture, and feminism—then reimagines them in more realistic, small-scale, familial terms.” Visel claims that in so doing Lessing seems “to make peace with her own ex-husbands and lovers, biological and surrogate children.” Thus the painful disjunctions between self and other, woman and writer, male and female, body and mind find a creative refashioning in the process of aging with the “ironic detachment and common sense” that it brings to Frances Lennox and perhaps to her creator.

This decentering of self and world is the focus of Part Two, “Engaging the Postmodern Death of History: Redefining Context and Historical Narrative.” As postmodernism emerged as a dominant paradigm in the 1970s, both Lessing and her critics began to engage with reality in new and challenging
ways. Previously accepted verities came into question as all narratives became contested. Jean-François Lyotard, perhaps most notably, declared all meta-narratives (narratives that previously provided a sense of certainty and guidance) dead.

The three essays in this section address Lessing’s engagement with this postmodern challenge. Noting Lessing’s changed relationship to certainty, Alice Ridout in “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?’: The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes” explores how Lessing’s turn from realism to speculative fiction reflects a paradigm shift that sheds light on the contemporary climate of “clashing moral certainties.” Comparing “The Small Personal Voice” essay (1957) and Prisons We Choose to Live Inside (1986), Ridout contends that Lessing’s early realist method of storytelling was driven by a moral vision and by certitudes that define the struggle of good against evil, while her later writings are marked by new uncertainties and the need for critical distance, notably in the form of science fiction and utopia. As Ridout suggests, “self-conscious doubt” supplants “moral certainty.”

Exploring Lessing’s proclivity for portraying imagined worlds in her later career, Ridout stresses that Lessing is indeed still engaged with the external real, but that her works serve to reveal the shaping narratives of existence while imploding those that prevent us from seeing clearly. Sandra Singer extends the ramifications of this postmodern challenge by taking it into the arena of political violence. Addressing the context of contemporary debates on terrorism in “London and Kabul: Assessing the Politics of Terrorist Violence,” Singer poses two key questions: What constitutes terrorism, and is terrorism ever justified? Defining terrorism as “indiscriminate violence” aimed at effecting the maximum shock value, and distinguishing it from legitimate guerilla warfare whose goal is armed resistance, Singer investigates how Lessing explores the problem of terrorism in the fictional The Good Terrorist and the nonfictional The Wind Blows Away Our Words and Other Documents Relating to the Afghan Resistance. As Singer notes, terrorism for Lessing is motivated by an egomaniacal desire for personal recognition. It is marked further by solipsism and the absence of responsible human agency. It is driven by a delusional, Alice-in-Wonderland-like fantasy that has proved to be truly dangerous. In contrast, Lessing sees the resistance to state-sanctioned oppression as necessary and justifiable. In particular, Lessing cites the Afghan mujahidin’s resistance to Soviet occupation. In this text, Lessing pleads for understanding of Islamic countries, the absence of which fuels the possibilities for further political violence. Reminding us of the historical context of national liberation struggles (including the American Revolution), Singer provocatively asks us to rethink through Lessing’s work our assumptions about terrorism.

The concluding essay of this section is Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis’s “The
Porous Border between Fact and Fiction, Empathy and Identification in Doris Lessing’s *The Cleft.*” In this essay, Perrakis keenly identifies the slipperiness of the contemporary historical narrative. No longer a record of fact or even a mimetic representation of cultural ills, Lessing’s twenty-first-century historical fable is one that is “porous,” oscillating between the unveiling of historical knowledge and the ever-precarious position of the teller of the tale. Evoking contemporary trauma theory, Perrakis contends that Lessing’s *The Cleft* dramatizes a reconceptualization of the past that also transforms the present, including ourselves, our personal relationships, and our relations with the global community.

Part Three, “Destabilized Genre as Social Critique,” extends how Lessing confronts the perplexities of the postmodern world by examining her changed relationship to narrative and genre. As the representation of what is real has become more labyrinthine, so too have the means used to render that representation, as Virginia Tiger attests in “love, again and *The Sweetest Dream:* Fiction and Interleaved Fictions.” In this essay, Tiger argues that love, again with its “complex comparative structural frame” relays a love story that “turns out to be no ‘love story.’” Its competing frames and its complicated windows serve less to tell the story of Sarah Durham than to comment on the lens through which we see romantic love. But even in this most obsessively personal of novels, Tiger points out that Lessing provides detachment not only by the double narrative structure but also by the movement in the beginning from “the omniscient Eye/Voice [narrator] to the writhing, burning intensity of [Sarah’s] focalizing voice.”

If the structure of love, again’s “competing narrative frames” opens up its narrow personal focus, “the competing narrative focalizations” of *The Sweetest Dream* expose “prevailing orthodoxies” and “cant.” Set within the political canvas of the “Condition of England” between the 1960s and ’80s, Lessing’s novel, as Tiger suggests, foresees the “twenty-first-century preoccupations with political correctness and those contrarians who expose its inflexible reductiveness.” Narrative as constructed events is a way of thinking, and too frequently a habit of thinking that fuels polarized habits and entrenched ideologies. These narrative dreams are shattered in this Lessing novel, particularly as they are confronted by daily political realities. The novel’s resolution, however, in contrast to that of love, again, is a life-affirming one in which the novel’s three key women “engage in small but sustaining acts of philanthropy” and, in doing so, represent “women who simply get on with it.” Thus, love, again and *The Sweetest Dream* in addressing the complexities of contemporary narratives and ideologies expand Lessing’s assertion in the 1971 introduction to *The Golden Notebook* that “shape” is a narrative in and of itself.⁵
Finally, Susan Watkins in “Writing in a Minor Key: Doris Lessing’s Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction” extends the ramifications of narrative to Lessing’s career-long concerns with race and colonization. For Watkins, colonialism is a way of thinking that becomes subtly infused in our culture’s master narratives. Watkins suggests that Lessing’s use of minor genres (the urban gothic, science fiction, and the picaresque) in her later fiction deterritorializes not only language but also the individual’s conception of the political world. Narratives purvey vision. If we are, in Susan Watkins’s words, “unable to find a safe home in familiar genres” in Lessing’s late fabular fiction, we are equally unable in these works to find a “safe home” in anachronistic definitions of race—conceptions of the other as “primitive” and as “animal.” Those outworn narratives sanctioned the imperialism and eugenics of the late nineteenth century (and continue to justify forays into the Middle East in order to bring the “enlightened” concept of freedom and democracy to a seemingly less fortunate world). Thus, *The Fifth Child* evokes the gothic to disrupt the narrative of family values that was enshrined in Thatcherite Britain (and which continues to engulf the American imagination). *Ben, In the World* uses the picaresque to critique “the pseudo-Darwinian hierarchies” that “position white masculinity at the apex of an evolutionary chain”—hierarchies which then justify the imperialist narrative as salvific. *Mara and Dann*, in its self-reflexivity, employs a science-fiction disaster narrative to unveil the reactionary and “racist cultural constructs of the animal, the primitive, and the tribe” that so frequently infuse agendas of fear.

Lessing’s critiques of our contemporary world, however, never lose sight of the personal. The three essays in Part Four, “Reflections on Early, Midlife, and Later-Life Lessing,” interrogate the relationship between Lessing’s life and works in three formative periods of her life. Pat Louw in “Domestic Spaces: Huts and Houses in Doris Lessing’s African Stories” examines the expression of the colonial tensions of the 1930s in Rhodesian architecture and their inscription in Lessing’s African stories. Tying the experiences of the young Lessing to the adult author’s art, Louw notes how the Lessing of the 1930s instinctively rebelled against the ideological implications of the settlers’ attempt to create a barrier between the house and the outside world. Similarly, Louw interrogates the adult author’s use of the structures of the hut and house in her African stories, arguing that they are used not simply as background, but as a conduit for critiquing the entrapments that are inherent to colonial thinking.

Suzette Henke’s “The Challenge of Teaching Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* in the Twenty-First Century” examines the attitudes and assumptions of mid-twentieth-century England and midlife Lessing embodied in *The*
Golden Notebook. Beginning her essay by noting the novel’s impediments for a generation of students who have no historical memory of the iron curtain or the cold war (and whose experience of the real is filtered through the all-encompassing grid of the present), Henke provides four lenses through which to view “Lessing’s epic narrative.” Delineating the “four P’s: Global Politics, Sexual Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodern Narrative,” Henke braids together in each category Lessing’s own comments about what she was trying to do, the attitudes of the time, texts from The Golden Notebook, and Henke’s own responses when she first read the novel in the early 1970s. The result is an interwoven tapestry of the life and times of midcentury Lessing and midcentury England and America.

Henke then skillfully weaves into this midcentury tapestry the concerns of contemporary life. “It all comes round again,” as Henke remarks, with “the ghost of McCarthyism invidiously resuscitated” in attitudes toward contemporary terrorists that are “attended by many of the political dangers similar to those earlier associated with the Red menace of Communism.” Henke also suggests the novel’s experimental form challenges “formulaic thinking,” thereby querying contemporary “cultural dogma.” As Henke observes, The Golden Notebook’s Molly Jacobs uncannily predicts the backlash and moral conservatism of future generations.

In “Sex after Sixty: love, again and The Sweetest Dream,” Ruth O. Saxton conjoins the issues of women, aging, and sexual pleasure. Saxton suggests that not until love, again and The Sweetest Dream does Lessing boldly confront the conundrum of female pleasure after sixty, when the world would prefer not to see the older woman or, if it does see her, sees her as a dried peach. What dismays Saxton about Lessing’s portrait in love, again of Sarah Durham’s “eroticized theatrical summer” in which she falls in love twice, each time with a much younger man, is that Sarah “reveals ageist reactions to her own body” and “avoids physical intimacy because of her distaste for her changing body.” In contrast, Frances Lennox of The Sweetest Dream is able to move beyond the traditional “all-encompassing role of nurturer/caretaker” and to enjoy a second marriage at sixty. In this marriage it is “[t]he big bed, rather than the big kitchen table, [which] is now ‘the emotional center of her life.” Frances is able to “encounter her mirror, recognize change,” set “a few limits on her previously unlimited nurturing of others,” and experience the death of her mother-in-law and her assumption of the role of older woman without “yearning” for the past or “her younger body” and without “denying herself sexual pleasure” or a fulfilling relationship. Like Henke, Saxton ties the fate of Lessing’s two older protagonists to her own responses on first reading the novels and to the author’s life, subtly suggesting that Lessing’s
refusal to grant Sarah Durham sexual pleasure may be tied to “a profound unmet yearning for maternal love mistaken for ‘love’ of a man.”

If all three essays in this section remind us of the strong autobiographical links between Lessing’s fiction and her life, they, and indeed the whole collection, also suggest how Lessing uses her life and art to interrogate the times in which she is living. Never satisfied with easy answers, Lessing continues to play the role of a gadfly, stinging or stirring her readers into questioning contemporary shibboleths and urging them to adopt “the detached, curious, patient, investigative attitude” mentioned in Prisons We Choose to Live Inside (qtd. in Alice Ridout’s essay, “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?’: The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes,” in Part Two). Such an attitude would disrupt rigid constructions of right and wrong, good and evil—what Ridout argues Lessing defines in Prisons We Choose to Live Inside as “you are damned, we are saved” cultural habits. In fact, Lessing suggests that our survival depends on moving out of these narratives. As Ridout notes in “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?’” it is precisely this “you are damned, we are saved” narrative that legitimates the “War on Terror.” As rationales such as this one seem to increasingly permeate global venues, Lessing’s oeuvre becomes increasingly relevant.

NOTES

7. See Alice Ridout’s chapter, “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?’: The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes,” in Part Two of this collection.