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Notes for Proteus

Doris Lessing Reads the Zeitgeist

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In the early 1970s British novelist Margaret Drabble called Doris Lessing “Cassandra in a world under siege” for her uncanny ability to anticipate social and political trends well before they were recognized as part of the Zeitgeist.¹ Four decades later, the observation still holds. One example of Lessing’s ahead-of-timeliness is her novel The Good Terrorist (1985), which was published nearly two decades before the word “terrorist” became so uncomfortably central to the daily world news and nightly private anxieties.² Lessing was frequently mentioned for the Nobel Prize in Literature before the Swedish Academy acknowledged, rather belatedly, her significant place in contemporary letters by awarding her that prize in 2007 at the age of 88, making her its oldest recipient.

A different figure from Greek mythology might also be instructively used to describe Doris Lessing: Proteus, the shape-shifter who, when caught, metamorphosed into multiple other shapes. Lessing is one of the literary world’s most accomplished shape-shifters. Few other writers have successfully published in so many different formal “shapes” or genres: plays, poems, polemical and occasional essays, autobiography, memoirs—both factual and imaginative—and, of course, fiction. Even within the last category, the genre for which Lessing is best known, the shapes shift to embrace short stories, novellas, novels, and two multinovel series. These fictions are in turn distributed among diverse literary genres, from psychological realism to speculative
fiction, fable, and fantasy. To this eclectic list one can add a graphic novel, a volume of London sketches, two librettos for opera scores, and several collections of pieces devoted solely to the subject of cats.3

Further, many of Lessing’s fictions themselves unfold through formal shape-shifting, from a novel-within-a-novel to diary and journal entries, parodies, and an assortment of fictional “documents”—correspondence, book reviews, newspaper clippings, lectures, medical charts, and archival reports. Considering the protean Doris Lessing, the contemporary reader might well ask: is this prolific writer one or several? The answer is: if not several, then (at least figuratively) more than one. During the 1980s Lessing published two novels pseudonymously, under the name Jane Somers, to test her premise that it was especially difficult for unknown writers to achieve the publication of “first” novels. Interestingly, her British editor didn’t recognize that she was the author of The Diaries of Jane Somers; her American editor, who figured out that Jane Somers was Doris Lessing, agreed to support her experiment by publishing the novels pseudonymously.4

Even under her own name, for nearly six decades Lessing has continued to surprise her readers by remaining several steps ahead of their expectations. However, the qualities of variety and unpredictability would not by themselves account for Doris Lessing’s reputation as one of our era’s preeminent living writers. Rather, many of her readers, particularly during the period when her publications coincided with the most active years of the women’s movement, have been profoundly shaped not only academically but personally by their engagement with her fiction. Lessing’s renderings of the female condition—as expressed through Anna Wulf of The Golden Notebook and Martha Quest of Children of Violence in particular—are central texts for a generation’s thinking about their lives as women (and men): emotional independence; sexuality, the body, and heterosexual relationships; female friendships; motherhood; aging; political engagement and disengagement; psychological development; insanity; unconventional consciousness and spiritual quest; the pathologies of history; utopian and dystopian futures.

The Golden Notebook, Lessing’s acknowledged form-breaking masterpiece, remains influential as a compelling imaginative chronicle of a pivotal moment in Western social and political history that appears to have been captured between the covers of the novel almost as it was happening. Since the novel’s publication in 1962, Marxist Communism in what is now the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe has collapsed. Thus, the sections of the novel that chart Anna Wulf’s love-hate relationship and subsequent political disillusionment with the British Communist Party are now perhaps more of historical interest than are other parts of the novel.5 Nonetheless, it
is unsettling to come across certain passages—including newspaper headlines and stories, among the many that the emotionally distressed Anna clips and pastes into her notebooks when she is unable to write—that easily could have appeared in today’s newspapers. Two items from the 1950s will suffice as examples: first: “MOsLEM WORLD FLARES. . . . [Express],” dated October 17, 1951; second:

Title II of the McCarran Act specifically provides for the establishment of so-called detention centres. Far from directing the creation of such centres, the law authorises the Attorney-General of the U.S. to apprehend and detain “in such places of detention as may be prescribed by him . . . all persons as to whom there is reasonable ground to believe that such persons probably will engage in or probably will conspire with others to engage in acts of espionage and sabotage.” (emphasis and ellipsis in original)

Although not all newspaper clippings that appear in The Golden Notebook are as timely as these examples, together they suggest—from a distance of more than half a century since the decade during which the novel is set—that Anna Wulf/Doris Lessing was symbolically “cutting up history” in order to create, in as direct and vivid a form as possible, both a digest and a deconstruction of the political, social, and moral chaos of the 1950s. Either Lessing was extraordinarily prescient, or the more things change, the more they remain the same. Indeed, some of both.

Fortunately, experiences that were termed the “battle of the sexes” and the “sex war” during the mid-twentieth century no longer rage in quite the destructive ways in which Anna Wulf experienced and chronicled them. However, contemporary college students—particularly women—still find validity in the narrative representations of sexuality and emotional vulnerability in heterosexual relationships that so profoundly distressed Anna Wulf. The ramifying divisions and collisions between the roles of mother and lover, writer and political idealist, along with the brilliant textual mirroring of those divisions, remain invigorating, whether for first-time or returning readers.

The sheer ambition of the novel’s experimental structure—the form that, to Lessing’s dismay, was virtually overlooked when The Golden Notebook was first published—has received its due attention and critical understanding, yet it retains the power of its originality. One of my students, reading the novel for the first time, remarked that the narrative and psychological “hall of mirrors” in which she found herself was one of the most exciting, albeit confusing, literary experiences she had ever had.

In The Golden Notebook and Children of Violence, Lessing incorporated
a broad spectrum of ideological, political, and psychological issues, not only those primarily of concern to women. Filtering through fiction her experiences as an idealistic Communist in Southern Africa and later as a disillusioned Marxist in England, she outlined the costs of utopian thinking and overly idealized political engagement, issues that continue to resonate in contemporary experience even though the political picture has changed significantly. Through her depictions of complex mother-daughter relationships—most notably, Martha and her mother, May Quest, as well as the unnamed Narrator and the young Emily Cartwright of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*—Lessing laid bare relationships that may uncomfortably remind some readers of difficult relationships with their own mothers. Long before the subjects of aging and physical decline reached the foreground of scholarly consideration and contemporary cultural analysis, she explored their vicissitudes: Kate Brown of *The Summer before the Dark* (1973) takes a life-altering spiritual journey as her maternal role fades; in *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* (1983), Jane Somers, a woman in the prime of life, must come to terms with her responsibility to the elderly and infirm Maudie Fowler; sixty-five-year-old Sarah Durham of *love, again* (1996) struggles—again, in midlife—with the consequences of longing and unrequited desire.

Even Lessing’s speculative fiction—from the apocalyptic *Four-Gated City* (1969), *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), through the *Canopus in Argos* series (1979–83), to two recent novels set on the African continent several millennia into the future—may be read as instructive fables about life on this earth during our own era of relentless aggression and destruction. Although Ifrik, the postapocalyptic African continent where *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) and *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005) are set, is metaphorically an even darker place than the Southern Africa of Lessing’s earliest fiction, Mara’s quest echoes Martha’s quest in telling ways. The shape-shifting author is both the optimist who can imagine a more hospitable future and the resolute realist-pessimist who questions whether human nature will ever evolve in ways that might accommodate such potentialities.

There is a quality of urgency to much of Doris Lessing’s writing that often overtakes felicities of style; she seems less interested than many writers in the aesthetic qualities of language and narrative form. An observation made by Margaret Drabble more than thirty years ago remains true: she “is not obsessed with form but with content, and she does not care whether the form she finds is new or old, fashionable or unfashionable, as long as it serves her purpose.” Moreover, one does not read Lessing for her sense of humor—unless to appreciate her dry, ironic voice. Critics occasionally find themselves...
perplexed, wondering whether certain stylistic choices are artistically intentional or the consequence of the author's interests lying elsewhere. What some critics regard as aesthetic slackness, Lessing considers authorial freedom. As she has expressed it, "What's marvelous about novels is they can be anything you like... There are no rules." 

Indeed, the rule-breaking *Golden Notebook* represents both thematically and formally the limits of language and of traditional narrative form to capture the complex texture of lived experience. Lessing regards that novel as her attempt to "write a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped" (*GN*, xix). Through its multiple narrative forms, styles, and perspectives, its disruptions of chronology, and its Möbius-strip-like metafictional structure, the novel brilliantly represents the opposition between aesthetic grace and emotional authenticity: the "raw unfinished quality" that the blocked writer Anna Wulf regards as the most valuable dimension of her life is directly mirrored in the "crude, unfinished, raw, tentative" quality of many passages in the novel (*GN*, 225).

In a panel of writers who gathered in 1991 to discuss the literature that emerged from the women's movement of the 1960s and '70s, Vivian Gornick observed of *The Golden Notebook* that "Lessing's infamous clumsiness as a writer is actually used to brilliant strength. I think she is one of the great so-called bad writers." While not everyone would concur that Lessing is a "bad writer" (or that she is a "great" one), many of her readers would agree that she is not one to whom they go for her craft. At times she can be irritatingly didactic, cranky, blunt, and prolix; there is a side of her that enjoys the soapbox. One only need read *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*—the published text of the Massey Lectures she gave for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1985—to come straight up against Lessing the didactic moralist and lecturer. The voice of the polemical Lessing can also be heard in Anna Wulf's repeated, emphatic shorthand phrase "the point is...", to say nothing of the didactic passages in such novels as *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, *The Good Terrorist*, *Mara and Dann*, and *Shikasta*.

Yet a number of Lessing's novels resist the didactic impulse, instead assuming the shape of fables with the author enjoying the position of the traditional oral storyteller whose words are later recorded. In *The Cleft* (2007), she adopts the perspective of a male Roman senator who endeavors to reconstruct the unwritten history of the human race as it evolved from a single (female) gender to the complications and pleasures of heterosexuality. However, just when some readers may begin to wonder what happened to the “shapes” they remember from Lessing’s defining realistic novels such as *The Golden Notebook*, she publishes such demonstrably mimetic novels...
as love, again and The Sweetest Dream, or a collection that includes stories deeply grounded in realism, such as “Victoria and the Staveneyes” and “A Love Child,”13 as if to remind her readers that the observant social realist has not vanished permanently but merely has chosen to shift shapes once again.

Like Proteus, who in some versions of the myth can foretell the future, there is a strong quality of the seer in Lessing herself. For many years a student of Sufi mysticism, she frequently embeds in her fiction allusions to or transformations of Sufi teaching stories or focuses on emergent strands of the contemporary Zeitgeist well before they have reached her readers’ awareness. She does not regard her prescience as a quality unique to herself. In an especially revealing image, she has commented that writers who take their profession seriously “place their fingers on the wounds of our times. . . . [T]he author should be something of a prophet, tracing a thing before it is fully apparent, grasping a subject before it becomes a trend, stretching out one’s antennae into the universe to sense its most subtle vibrations.”16 Of her attraction to Sufism—which validated preoccupations that were already present in Lessing’s fiction, such as her interest in breaking through conventional ways of thinking and being—she has explained, “[F]or people like myself unable to admire organized religions of any kind, [Sufi] philosophy shows where to look for answers to questions put by society and by experience—questions not answered by the official purveyors of knowledge, secular or sacred.”17

Elsewhere, Lessing has affirmed that writers have an almost collective function, “like a sensitive organ which tends to notice things that other parts of humanity don’t. . . . I think writers, without exception, have had the experience of writing as if they were vessels. . . . [Y]ou just plug into a wavelength of some kind.”18 She obviously tapped that experience to explore such ideas through several characters in The Four-Gated City. Learning under the tutelage of the clairvoyant Lynda Coldridge and others who aspire to higher forms of consciousness, Martha Quest develops the capacity to “plug into” other people’s thoughts. That novel, the final segment of Children of Violence, reflects the detailed social and psychological realism that distinguishes Martha’s development over the course of the entire series—only, at the end, to shift quite unexpectedly into an apocalyptic appendix set some years into the future. In the more spiritually evolved civilization of that future, a small group of children possess the visionary capacities that Martha struggled to acquire and for which Lynda Coldridge was deemed “crazy” and dysfunctional.

Lessing’s prescience occasionally mingles with her literary shape-shifting in another sense. Through the complex narrative structure of The Golden
Notebook—its interweaving of fact, fiction, and “truth” and its pressure on the very limits of language to capture experience—the form-breaking metafiction is now regarded as an early expression of the postmodern, a term that had not yet entered the critical vocabulary of literary analysis when the novel was originally published in 1962. Further, Anna Wulf’s relentless microscopic analysis of her multiply divided “self” as she experiences psychological breakdown anticipates the now-commonplace postmodern idea of the self as a social construction. The Golden Notebook marks a shift from the humanist ideal of wholeness to the poststructuralist/postmodern view of the self as a fiction in which parts or fragments do not necessarily cohere.¹⁹

Perhaps Lessing’s sensitive antennae, her unusual capacity to “notice things” that others miss, developed as a result of her role as an outsider—a position initially thrust upon her by the circumstances of her birth and childhood but one that she subsequently cultivated. She was born of English parents in Persia (now Iran), grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and emigrated to England (still England) when she was thirty. Even these few biographical details regarding Lessing’s formative years in areas of the world that were—and still are—in significant political and social transition suggest her fortuitous proximity to some of the major political upheavals of the past and current centuries. A writer who consistently challenges orthodoxies, she is an iconoclast who, ironically—and to her own dismay—has become an icon. Some years ago, she was recommended by England’s Queen Elizabeth for a New Year’s Honour but refused the designation: when selected for the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) in 1977, she politely refused, claiming, “there is no British Empire.” Subsequently, she also refused the honor of Dame of the British Empire (D.B.E.), but ultimately accepted the award of Companion of Honour for “conspicuous national service” in 2000 because, as she explained it, “you’re not called anything—and it’s not demanding.”²⁰

It is stimulating and gratifying to follow a living writer book by book, an unfolding experience with both intellectual and emotional dimensions that is impossible for Lessing’s newer readers to duplicate. Speaking of my own experience, I recognize what a privilege it is to have followed the author’s evolution one book at a time. I remember the exhilaration I felt each time I—then a newly minted professor and scholar—began to read Lessing’s novels the moment after they arrived in my local bookstore. Those who have discovered Lessing and her sizable oeuvre more recently no doubt have found
it quite daunting to contemplate reading several shelves of her books. I say this not critically but as a factual observation: scholars who have come to her work recently inevitably lack the full picture of the complex and protean Doris Lessing. They cannot fully recapture the remarkable sweep, variety, and occasional sheer quirkiness (graphic novel? opera libretto? verbal sketches of London scenes? portraits of cats?) of the author’s oeuvre as it has evolved and shifted shapes over six decades, during which it has both anticipated and anatomized the contemporary Zeitgeist. On the other hand, recent scholars have established fruitful new avenues of inquiry, including postmodern, post-colonial, and international perspectives.\(^{21}\)

Yet the self-educated Doris Lessing has never welcomed academic attention to her work and is, for the most part, quite resistant to the idea of scholarly criticism. In her 1971 introduction to The Golden Notebook, she sounded a scolding note that she has repeated elsewhere in different ways. Of literary critics, she remarked,

> Why are they so parochial, so personal, so small-minded? Why do they always atomise, and belittle, why are they so fascinated by detail, and uninterested in the whole? Why is their interpretation of the word critic always to find fault? . . . That valuable person who understands what you are doing, what you are aiming for, and can give you advice and real criticism, is nearly always someone right outside the literary machine, even outside the university system.\(^{22}\)

Adding an even more pointed objection to scholars who aspired to analyze and deconstruct The Golden Notebook, Lessing protested that “the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion only when its plan and shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn’t anything more to be got out of it” (GN, xxvii, emphasis in original).

The large and diverse body of scholarly and critical writing generated in response to Lessing’s oeuvre confirms that readers have ignored her objections to such analysis. Clearly they have not reached the point where “there isn’t anything more to be got out of” her work. The critical discourse that her fiction (in particular) has generated is deeply felt, often drawing on each scholar’s own personal experience as it intersects with ideas that Lessing has so compellingly rendered. Scholars and nonscholars alike who came of age academically during the 1970s and ’80s and read Lessing’s fiction as it first appeared in print frequently claim to have been profoundly changed by it.\(^{23}\)
Those decades were especially transformative years for women in academe, as feminist theory and scholarship blossomed in academic conferences and into print, entered the critical discourse, and transformed (permanently, one hopes) the academic debate along an enormous spectrum from word to action: from the exposure of until-then unexamined gender bias in canon formation and critical analysis to the exposure of the same gender bias operating in the culture that shaped hiring and tenure decisions in departments of literature and other disciplines.

During that era of social and scholarly ferment, Lessing spoke directly and immediately to the condition of many of her readers. Her fiction seemed to capture, explore, and express, realistically and passionately, vital knowledge about where “we” were then—the “we” consisting of a broad audience of academic and nonacademic, female and male, feminist and nonfeminist readers. Although the experience may be difficult for younger scholars and newer readers of Lessing to understand from this later point in time, then it seemed as if everyone “knew,” or felt they knew, Anna Wulf and Martha Quest personally. Certainly, no one who aligned herself or himself with the women’s movement as it gathered momentum during those years could profess ignorance of *The Golden Notebook*, despite the irony: Lessing objected to the novel’s appropriation by feminists, complaining that the narrative was not read in the “right way” when it was published (GN, xiv). Regretting that its ambitious experimental design was virtually overlooked in favor of its usefulness as a “weapon in the sex war” (GN, xii), she was chagrined that what most seemed to galvanize her readers was her ability to represent so convincingly the vexed intimate relationships between women and men and the important connections between the personal and the political.

The novel’s articulation and anatomy of what it meant to be a “free woman” at that historical moment was such a revelation that, looking back from the vantage point of five or six decades (depending on whether one chooses as the starting point the years during which the novel is set or its publication date), it is not surprising that other dimensions of the novel attracted less attention. In a dialogue in the Yellow Notebook between Anna’s fictional alter ego Ella and her friend Julia, Ella remarks, “My dear Julia, we’ve chosen to be free women, and this is the price we pay. . . .” Julia responds, “Free! What’s the use of us being free if [men] aren’t?” (GN, 438–39). To her psychiatrist, Mother Sugar, Anna Wulf says, “I believe I’m living the kind of life women never lived before. . . . There is something new in the world. . . . I want to be able to separate in myself what is old and cyclic, the recurring history, the myth, from what is new, what I think or feel that might be new . . .” (GN, 452–53; final ellipsis in original). Similarly, Martha Quest of *The Four-
Gated City experiments on herself in her quest not only to understand but to gather into herself extrasensory capabilities and a new sense of human possibility.

A good friend of mine who recently reread The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City told me that her first reading of those novels in the early 1970s made so vividly clear what was then termed the “sex war”—an often negative dynamic between men and women that operated not only in the larger culture but in her own private life—that she was galvanized into action: the novels literally empowered her to leave an unhappy albeit “proper marriage” and create a new life. As she put it, “I feel a bit like a Doris Lessing character.”

Times have changed. Though one should not generalize from one woman’s experience to suggest that Lessing’s groundbreaking novels functioned as, among other things, the catalyst for uncouplings, it does suggest that reading Lessing was—and continues to be—not simply an intellectual experience but a personal one that directly affects her readers’ lives. At a reading of her work in Washington, DC, in 2004, Lessing commented, in response to a question from a member of the audience, that women of the current generation lack a sense of history. In her view, they take for granted what she called “the greatest revolution of our time”: liberation from fear of unwanted pregnancy through the advent of effective methods of birth control. She emphasized, however, that credit for this enormous social change goes not to the women’s movement but to major advances in reproductive technology, including the birth control pill.

In addition to Lessing’s persistence in challenging conventional thinking and orthodoxies of all kinds, a noteworthy element of her oeuvre is her predilection for “reprising” or revisiting explorations of previous themes and characters, as if to suggest that no book can ever be the last word on a given subject, since both she and the world inevitably continue to change. The very idea of a series—Lessing has published two multivolume series—suggests that certain characters and/or themes resist containment within a single volume. For the five-volume Children of Violence, Lessing drew directly on her own experience growing up in southern Africa and, later, in England, to chart the life of Martha Quest from adolescence to maturity. During that extended period of time, both Martha and the social/political realities of the world in which Lessing lived and wrote radically changed. Twice during the seventeen years that encompass the publication history of Children of Violence, Lessing interrupted her progress on the series to write novels that were not a part of it: The Golden Notebook and the largely forgotten, out-of-print Retreat to Innocence (1956). Each of these “interruptions” was an essential and pivotal transition in Lessing’s literary development.
The second five-volume series, *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, enabled Lessing to develop further the form of social and political extrapolation she had initiated with *The Four-Gated City*. Through speculative or “space” fiction, she created narrative fables that, while participating in the fantastic, can be understood as transformations of realistic themes articulated elsewhere in her oeuvre. As she expresses it, she first imagined *Shikasta* as a “single self-contained book. . . . But as I wrote I was invaded with ideas for other books, other stories, and the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope with more capacious possibilities and themes.”

The series is still technically incomplete; at various points, although not recently, Lessing has expressed her intention to write a sixth volume.

In one sense, the *Canopus in Argos* series reprises one of Lessing’s earlier ventures into speculative fiction: the “inner space” fiction of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* straddles realistic and fantastic domains. Inwardly, Professor Charles Watkins may be gifted with exceptional psychic powers and in touch with deeper spiritual understanding; outwardly, he is regarded and treated by medical science as an amnesiac patient who has lost, at least temporarily, part of his mind. Resembling Watkins in certain ways, the emotionally fragile seer Lynda Coldridge of *The Four-Gated City* cannot function in the ordinary world and is regarded as crazy by the medical establishment. However, in *Shikasta* (1979), Lynda reappears in a redemptive role and her extrasensory powers are taken seriously. Indeed, in *Shikasta*, such collisions of worldview are projected, all too presciently, onto a global canvas that features, among other events, an attempt to understand the “Century of Destruction” (the twentieth century) as a record of relentless wars and aggression between people of different races and ethnicities. A “mock trial” initiated by the Combined Youth Armies of the World—the very name suggests generational conflict—also symbolically expresses global conflict as the clash between “White Races” and “Dark-skinned Races.” Once again, Lessing anticipated through speculative fiction written in the twentieth century the climate of aggression that marks the twenty-first century. The “war on terrorism” precipitated by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11/01 is only one of numerous wars and conflicts currently raging somewhere on the planet between tribes, races, nations, and generations over ideologies, territories, resources, and religions.

By contrast, in the book that she calls her final one, *Alfred and Emily* (2008), Lessing revisits the subject of war from an altogether different angle, imagining an alternative version of the early twentieth century in which the Great War never happened. In its absence, her father and mother proceeded to live their lives undamaged—rather than, as they were in fact, physically...
and emotionally damaged—by the “Great Unmentionable.” Remarkably, in this revisionist fantasy, Lessing’s parents do not marry each other—almost as if she has imaginatively erased herself from their troubled history as well.

Another major theme in Lessing’s work, the volatility of heterosexual relationships, is reprised throughout her oeuvre. *Play with a Tiger* (1962), published the same year as *The Golden Notebook*, gives dramatic form to a conflicted, emotionally destructive but ultimately constructive relationship between two characters named Anna and Dave, who reappear in almost the same roles in narrative form in Anna Wulf’s struggle with her alter ego Saul Green. In *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, the second volume of the *Canopus in Argos* series, the “sex war” and the vagaries of romantic relationship take the form of a fable with spiritual as well as emotional and political implications.

Three pairs of sequels, each of which began as a single, self-contained novel, demonstrate still other expressions of Lessing’s fondness for revisiting ideas first explored in her previously published narratives. Writing as Jane Somers in *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*, she explores the disturbing exigencies of the process of aging and the condition of old age for women, a subject that spills over into a sequel, *If the Old Could . . .* (1984). Similarly, Lessing returns to the story of the anomalous biological and social “throwback” of *The Fifth Child* (1988) with *Ben, In the World* (2000), a sequel apparently prompted by numerous letters and questions from readers who asked her “what happens to Ben?” after the first novel ends. Although the adventures of the siblings, Mara and Dann—who survive their encounters with hostile adversaries and unfavorable conditions for survival in postapocalyptic *Ifrik* (Africa)—seem to achieve resolution by the end of the eponymous novel, *Mara and Dann*, they continue in the awkwardly titled sequel, *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005). Even the title and central preoccupations of love, *again* (my emphasis) foreground the author’s return to explore “the habit of loving,” a subject about which she has written extensively. In the latter novel, the middle-aged protagonist Sarah Durham is several decades older than Martha Quest, Anna Wulf, and the female protagonists of most of Lessing’s shorter fiction. In “The Grandmothers” (*The Grandmothers: Four Short Novels*, 2003), Lessing extends the theme in still another—this time, decidedly unconventional—direction: two women whose friendship lasts for decades choose as their lovers each other’s sons.

Still another example of Lessing’s interest in reconsidering ideas expressed in her own earlier accounts, *The Sweetest Dream* (2001) provides a mellow return visit to the politically and socially transformative decades of the 1960s.
and ‘70s, earlier imaginatively rendered in *The Four-Gated City*. Indeed, the novel completes a geographical circle begun in *Children of Violence*. Over the course of that series, Martha Quest develops from adolescence to young adulthood in the imaginary southern African country of Zambesia, reaches maturity in London, and eventually dies—in the apocalyptic coda that concludes not only the novel but the series—in the service of highly evolved consciousness and collective spiritual growth. In *The Sweetest Dream*, also set in London and Africa, the direction of the geographical trajectory is reversed. Middle-aged Frances Lennox finds herself the mother figure for and emotional center of a diverse group that includes not only her own and others’ children and assorted friends but also her own mother-in-law, her former husband, his former wife, and his daughter—very like Martha Quest who, during the same time period in London, functions as the mother figure and emotional center of Mark Coldridge’s similarly unorthodox family. A member of Frances’s extended family—her former husband’s daughter, Sylvia—contracts a fatal disease in the service of her idealistic mission as a doctor in Zimlia, an imaginary country in Africa.\(^{39}\)

It is not that Doris Lessing has run out of new ideas and simply recycles older ones. Rather, she apparently revisits the terrain of her earlier fiction to reconsider and often to shift the emphasis, introduce new perspectives, or draw different conclusions. These reprises may also reflect Lessing’s interest in cycles of experience and of history. For example, the Martha Quest–like character of Mara, so central to the first *Mara and Dann* novel, recedes in importance—in fact, she dies early in the second narrative—while her brother, General Dann, literally commands the foreground. In the sequel, Lessing further embellishes the portrayal of postapocalyptic Ifrik, a continent where social and cultural structures have further deteriorated and the primitive law of the jungle is even more evident.

Even in her nonfiction, Lessing has frequently cycled back, whether literally, artistically, or psychologically, to revisit earlier preoccupations and emotionally significant sites. Memoirs such as *Going Home* (1957) established the strand of what might be called the intertextuality of return within Lessing’s own writing. *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992), a version of “going home” published more than three decades after the first memoir, traces the author’s four visits to Zimbabwe following the cancellation, after more than thirty years, of her listing as “prohibited immigrant” from the country of her emotional, artistic, and imaginative genesis. In 1988, during the second of her four visits to Zimbabwe between 1982 and 1992, Lessing finally overcame a deep inner resistance to revisiting the site of her family home and farm in the bush outside of Harare (Salisbury in her youth).
Although she knew that the earth-and-grass hut of her childhood had succumbed to the elements years before and that “every child who has left home to become an adult knows the diminishing of the first trip home,” the visit to the site was nonetheless emotionally wrenching. There, confronting the “magnificence, the space, the marvel” of the place, she understood it as “a privilege . . . a blessing” to have spent her childhood in the idyllic bush country of southern Africa (*Laughter*, 314–15).

Lessing’s return visit to the Macheke Hotel outside of Harare, fictionalized in *The Golden Notebook* as the Mashopi Hotel, was similarly revelatory. She discovered that her fictional version of the place had entirely supplanted whatever “true” memories she might once have had. Like Anna Wulf, who struggles with an obstinate “other-self” (*GN*, 130), Lessing discovered that her invented version of the hotel and the people she associated with it were so deeply entrenched in her memory that she could not even recall the proprietor’s actual name.

What happened in Macheke I described, changed for literary reasons, in *The Golden Notebook*. But how much changed? All writers know the state of trying to remember what actually happened, rather than what was invented, or half invented, a meld of truth and fiction. It is possible to remember, but only by sitting quietly, for hours or sometimes for days, and dragging facts out of one’s memory. . . . (*Laughter*, 72)

Elsewhere in the memoir of her four visits to Zimbabwe, Lessing observes that “Every writer has a myth-country. . . . Myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth” (*Laughter*, 35). Since for years Lessing has probed the interstices and overlaps between truth and fiction, memory and imagination, her acknowledgment of the blurred boundaries between them is especially moving and illuminating. In the African “myth country” and other settings, the author has always been interested in examining “what is real?” and “What is the truth?” She explores such questions both through mimetic realism and through the manifestly unreal: detours into imaginary environments as diverse as inner and outer space, frozen polar landscapes, altered terrestrial geographies, and mysterious rooms beyond an apartment wall; or by way of characters who possess exceptional mental powers and therefore apprehend quite differently the same world in which we live.

It is illuminating for readers to participate in the spirit of “revisiting” by returning literally to the beginning: to Doris Lessing’s first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). One discovers, already there, both the author’s perspicacity and her extraordinary ability to register states of mind and consciousness
that can be fully understood only within their specific social, ideological, and psychological contexts. Late in the novel, the narrator describes the final day in the life of Mary Turner, a woman living in racially divided southern Africa who, under the pressures of “the colour bar” and the collapse of her marriage, has slowly lost her sanity. Dimly, she anticipates her imminent annihilation by her black house servant, Moses, whom, over the course of the novel, she has emotionally emasculated and reduced to an object. The omniscient narrator evokes Mary’s paranoia and her claustrophobic psychological state, observing that

it seemed as if the night were closing in on her, and the little house was bending over like a candle, melting in the heat. She heard the crack, crack; the restless moving of the iron [roof] above, and it seemed to her that a vast black body, like a human spider, was crawling over the roof, trying to get inside. . . . She was shut in a small black box, the walls closing in on her, the roof pressing down.41

In her African stories in particular but also elsewhere in her fiction, Lessing similarly blends physical and mental domains so seamlessly that the external world mirrors the interior world of her characters in crucial ways. An especially illustrative passage occurs in one of Lessing’s classic African stories, “The Old Chief Mshlanga.” The fourteen-year-old narrator, the daughter of white settlers, is ignorant of the serious error of racial protocol she is about to make as she treks across the southern African veld to pay an uninvited visit to a native chieftain in his village. En route, she experiences a disturbing “new fear” in a familiar landscape in which, until that moment, she had felt safe:

I had read of this feeling, how the bigness and silence of Africa, under the ancient sun, grows dense and takes shape in the mind, till even the birds seem to call menacingly, and a deadly spirit comes out of the trees and the rocks. You move warily, as if your very passing disturbs something old and evil, something dark and big and angry that might suddenly rear and strike from behind. You look at groves of entwined trees, and picture the animals that might be lurking there; you look at the river running slowly, dropping from level to level through the vlei, spreading into pools where at night the bucks come to drink, and the crocodiles rise and drag them by their soft noses into underwater caves. Fear possessed me. I found I was turning round and round, because of that shapeless menace behind me that might reach out and take me.42
Although for reasons of space I have primarily emphasized Lessing’s longer fiction, I should note that she is equally accomplished in the short story form. Another of her classic stories deserves mention here. Few first-time readers of the frequently anthologized story “To Room Nineteen” could anticipate its startling ending from its deceptively understated opening sentence: “This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings’ marriage was grounded in intelligence.” Beginning so coolly, the story ends shockingly with Susan Rawlings sequestering herself in a spartan hotel room on the final day of many such days in which, without explanation, she deliberately absents herself from her life as a wife and mother of four children. The chilling penultimate paragraph reads:

She had about four hours. She spent them delightfully, darkly, sweetly, letting herself slide gently, gently, to the edge of the river. Then, with hardly a break in her consciousness, she got up, pushed the thin rug against the door, made sure the windows were tight shut, put two shillings in the meter, and turned on the gas. (428)

Of any writer who is both so protean and so prolific, scholars and readers may well ask, how will Doris Lessing be regarded in fifty or a hundred years? Which of her novels and stories will continue to be read—and, indeed, reread—in future decades of the twenty-first century? I speculate that she will be remembered for the sheer scope, breadth, vividness, and depth of her endeavor as a chronicler of major strands of contemporary experience. Certain of her novels—The Golden Notebook and the Children of Violence series—will endure beyond our own era as vivid renderings of important cultural transitions. As Doris Lessing’s protagonists and the forms of her work have shifted shapes and have evolved to address new ideas, she has stretched her readers’ imaginations, creating new maps of consciousness and experience. Readers go to her narratives as they go to the great nineteenth-century realists—Lessing’s own professed models in the novel form—for the rich texture of their renderings of lived experience, along with their profound psychological insight into the human condition. Her major novels continue to engage contemporary readers because they are, in the best sense of the term—and one that could not be fully appreciated when her early narratives were first published—historical novels. Through Martha Quest and Anna Wulf, Lessing registered for a time beyond her (and our) own the emotional and other dislocations of sensitive, intelligent women as they lived through an especially turbulent era of social change in the mid-twentieth century and stumbled upon, or invented, new paths to self-realization and spiritual matu-
rity. Deconstructing social and political history at diverse turns, Lessing has given narrative form and visibility to patterns, pathologies, and potentialities in the contemporary moments she has observed that remain instructive for twenty-first-century readers, if only for her anatomy of the undertow: the dark side of the liberating assumptions of the women’s movement.

In *The Golden Notebook* the blocked writer Anna Wulf regrets that she is incapable of writing “the only kind of novel which interests [her]: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life” (*GN*, 59). Although Anna Wulf may not have succeeded in her effort, scholars and readers concur that Anna’s creator has indeed written several such novels. As Lessing mused about *The Golden Notebook* to an interviewer in 1980, “The idea was that people might look back in 100 years’ time, if they’re interested, and find a record of the kind of things people thought about and talked about during these years.”\(^44\) More recently, she explained to an interviewer, “*The Golden Notebook* will stay because I do think it’s a very good report of the time. . . . [N]o one could write *The Golden Notebook* now, because the time has gone.”\(^45\)

In fifty or a hundred years, readers will likely still be interested in precisely that dimension of Lessing’s fiction—not simply as historical record but as vivid imaginative creations, rendered in varied aesthetic forms and shapes. The author’s circuitous imaginative path through the mid- and late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has taken readers and critics of her work on an extended and remarkable journey: from Africa to England to inner space and outer space and back; to alternative futures for Africa and its fantastic double, Ifrik; and, tracing a different route, back to the possible beginnings of the human race, to say nothing of vital regions of the heart. As the protean shape-shifter has evolved, so also have her readers. May Doris Lessing continue to surprise us.

NOTES


3. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis takes up the shape-shifting theme in her discussion of Lessing’s crossing of various kinds of boundaries, of genre, gender, and species, in her
search for new and appropriate forms through which to express her late-life creativity. See her essay “The Porous Border between Fact and Fiction, Empathy and Identification in Doris Lessing’s The Cleft” in Part Two of this volume [editors’ note].


5. See Suzette Henke’s discussion of the difficulties of teaching contemporary students about the political context of The Golden Notebook in her chapter, “The Challenge of Teaching Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook in the Twenty-First Century,” in Part Four of this volume [editors’ note].


7. See discussions of Lessing’s depiction of women’s sexuality and of the tension between the mind/body, woman/writer, and personal/political dichotomies that women experience in the chapters in this volume by Krouse, Saxton, Tiger, and Visel. See also Henke’s discussion of women’s sexuality in The Golden Notebook in Part Four [editors’ note].


10. For example, in a review of The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog (2005), Geraldine Bedell attempts to justify Lessing’s sometimes awkward writing. She observes, “The unwieldy, apparently naive title of Doris Lessing’s latest novel gives quite a lot of clues as to what follows. This is a meandering, episodic book, peopled by disconnected characters, told in pared-down, at times, almost perfunctory prose. I think we have to assume that this is deliberate: the apparently uncrafted quality of the novel is crafted to mimic an oral storytelling tradition, reminiscent of ancient epics in which characters had more role than psychology.” “Ancestral Voices,” The Observer, July 3, 2005, http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,1519819,00.html#article_continue (accessed July 28, 2009).


13. See Alice Ridout’s discussion of the political implications of the vision of the writer in Prisons We Chose to Live Inside in her chapter, “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?’: The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes,” in Part Two of this volume [editors’ note].


run Neth, in *Conversations*, 104–5.


20. In December 2003, a leaked file that was highly embarrassing to the British government and royalty revealed a list of famous individuals—over 300 since World War II—in many professions who had refused ceremonial honors. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3338583.stm (accessed July 28, 2009). Jan Hanford writes, “December 31 1999: In the U.K.’s last Honours List before the new Millennium, Doris Lessing was appointed a Companion of Honour, an exclusive order for those who have done ‘conspicuous national service.’ . . . The list was selected by the Labour Party government to honor people in all walks of life for their contributions to their professions and to charity. It was officially bestowed by Queen Elizabeth II.” Doris Lessing Web site, maintained by Jan Hanford at http://lessing.redmood.com/biography.html (accessed July 28, 2009).


Golden Notebook and is listed that way in the bibliography to this volume [editors’ note].

23. Gayle Greene cites a number of writers and readers—male as well as female—who asserted that The Golden Notebook changed their lives. See Changing the Story, 52–53.

24. See Tonya Krouse’s comparison of The Golden Notebook and A Room of One’s Own as foundational texts in the women’s movement in her chapter, “‘Anon,’ ‘Free Women,’ and the Pleasures of Impersonality,” in Part One of this volume [editors’ note].

25. Thanks to S.H. for permitting me to quote her here.


27. Several scholars have also pursued versions of “reprising” through literary analysis of Lessing’s work. See Jenny Taylor, ed., Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); and Claire Sprague, Re-Reading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Sprague illuminates a variety of patterns of repetition in Lessing’s fiction, from characters’ names to larger motifs.


30. As she commented in an interview in 1994, “I want to write volume six, but I always seem to get sidetracked into something else.” “Describing this Beautiful and Nasty Planet,” interview by Earl G. Ingersoll, in Conversations, 240.


32. With regard to Lessing’s prescient identification in Shikasta of one aspect of international conflict as that between generations, it is noteworthy that, in a number of countries whose citizens are the most virulently anti-Western, a significant proportion of the population is under thirty. U.S. Census Bureau International Data Base, http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/groups.php (accessed February 23, 2010).


36. See Susan Watkins’s discussion of the ideological implications of the minor
genres in which *The Fifth Child*, *Ben, In the World*, and *Mara and Dann* are written in her chapter, “Writing in a Minor Key: Doris Lessing’s Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction,” in Part Three of this volume [editors’ note].


39. See discussions of *The Sweetest Dream* by Ruth Saxton, Virginia Tiger, and Robin Visel in this volume [editors’ note].


44. Lessing, “Writing as Time Runs Out,” in *Conversations*, 90.