“What Is the Function of the Storyteller?”

The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes

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In an interview with Christopher Bigsby in 1980, Doris Lessing raises a crucial question: “why do we tell stories? What is the function of the storyteller?” She admits that it “is a thought that [she] can’t come to terms with.” It is a thought that Lessing has, however, tried to come to terms with on several occasions throughout her career in her interviews and essays and, of course, in her own stories. Her most famous attempt to answer this question is her 1957 essay “The Small Personal Voice.” Although I do not dispute the importance of this essay as an early declaration of Lessing’s beliefs, it has received excessive critical attention in relation to other statements she has made regarding the function of the storyteller. Furthermore, it continues to be cited without adequate acknowledgment of how much Lessing’s vision of the storyteller has changed. Most particularly I want to contrast the popularity of “The Small Personal Voice” with the relative neglect of Lessing’s Massey Lectures, sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which were published under the title Prisons We Choose to Live Inside in 1986. This text offers a different notion of the function of the storyteller from that offered in “The Small Personal Voice,” one that leads us to consider the influence of the failure of Communism on Lessing’s sense of why she writes. This exploration of the changes in why Lessing writes provides an illuminating context for the more controversial and widely discussed change...
in how she writes—her rejection of realism in favor of “space fiction.”

This narrative of Lessing’s development from a realist to a speculative writer was one Lorna Sage traced in her short monograph on Doris Lessing for the Methuen “Contemporary Writers” series. Sage’s book exemplifies how “The Small Personal Voice” has been used to understand Lessing’s sense of the function of the storyteller. Following her reading of that essay as an expression of Lessing’s commitment to realism, Sage goes on to trace Lessing’s “exemplary transformation from a socialist realism that recalls her nineteenth-century predecessors, to the speculative forms she borrows from ‘mystical’ writing and space fiction.” This shift in how Lessing writes is widely accepted by critics. It appears again as a central thesis of Jeannette King’s 1989 book on Lessing, in which she traces the “significant stages” in the development of Lessing’s fiction and the “variety of formal experiments” Lessing “has undertaken.” King further argues “that those experiments were a necessary and inevitable consequence of her search for literary forms which would allow for a more radical critique of Western culture.” Again, “The Small Personal Voice” is used to explicate Lessing’s attitude toward realism and to demonstrate her understanding of the function of the storyteller. However, despite her interest in the relationship between Lessing’s literary choices and her cultural critiques, King fails even to include Lessing’s publication of Prisons We Choose to Live Inside in 1986 in her chronological table of Lessing’s life and publication. Nor does she use those lectures in the body of her work to provide a context for understanding the changes in how Lessing writes. Much more recently, Nick Bentley’s essay “Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook: An Experiment in Critical Fiction” in Doris Lessing: Border Crossings again uses “The Small Personal Voice” to assist in understanding not just Lessing’s attitude toward realism but also, to borrow Bentley’s phrase, “the nature of fiction itself and the relationship between literary forms and politics” but makes no mention of Prisons We Choose to Live Inside. Perhaps critics have neglected Lessing’s later nonfictional work because The Golden Notebook is itself so self-conscious and theoretically aware that, as Bentley argues, it functions as critical theory. Lessing’s cultural and theoretical critiques are so clearly apparent in her later fictional work that critics have felt less need to turn to her later nonfiction to understand her changing sense of the function of the storyteller. I hope this chapter will function as a corrective to that neglect by demonstrating how helpful Prisons We Choose to Live Inside is for giving us insight into what Lessing perceived her role as a writer to be in her post-Communist world.

Playing the storyteller myself, I will describe the highly significant contexts in which I first discovered Prisons We Choose to Live Inside a decade
ago. I was completing a master’s thesis on Lessing while posted as a visiting exchange lecturer at Palacky University in the Czech Republic. Inevitably, I became fascinated by the ways in which Lessing had been and was being interpreted and presented in that political context. For example, the tiny English department library, which had not yet received enough funds to update its old Communist collection of books, had multiple copies of Lessing’s *Children of Violence* series only up to *A Ripple from the Storm,* before Martha Quest becomes disaffected with Communism. Instead of updating its libraries, Palacky University was focusing its spending on new staff. Once the university had “purged” itself of Party members, it was faced with an extreme shortage of lecturers. The English department’s post-Communist head of department, for example, had spent the Communist years doing manual labor in a boiler room because he had been considered too critical of the regime to remain in the academy. In an attempt to update methodology and fill the many vacancies, Palacky University employed a high number of mainly American and British lecturers, often with international funding that I frequently heard being described rather cynically as “guilt money.” (My post, for example, was funded by the British Council.) Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, many of these lecturers were themselves disaffected Western Communists like Lessing, who were trying to work through the failures of the ideology they had once believed in passionately. They created an interesting community of ex-Communist English speakers in the Czech Republic. Therefore, perhaps I should not have been surprised to discover in an English-language bookstore in Prague multiple copies of a Lessing text I had never seen in any British bookstore. That text was *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside.*

I returned to Durham University in England during the Christmas break to submit my master’s thesis. Through a great coincidence, my supervisor was cohosting a lecture series that included Lessing as one of the speakers. As a graduate student working on Lessing in the department, I was honored to be invited to join Lessing and a small group of lecturers for dinner. I discussed my thesis with her and told her the anecdote about her *Children of Violence* novels in the English department library at Palacky University. She immediately said to me, “There is a book I wrote that you would find helpful but very few critics ever talk about it. It’s called *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside.*” These were the rather peculiar contexts in which I first discovered *Prisons,* and they certainly informed my reading of the text. The post-Communist context in which I first purchased a copy of *Prisons* and Lessing’s own personal assertion of both its usefulness and its relative neglect by critics are very important starting points for this essay.
During debates in the 1980s and '90s over the definition of “postmodernism,” many critics drew attention to the contradictory ways in which the term implies the continuation of modernism by repeating the term within itself, as well as the rejection or completion of modernism and the start of something new through the prefix “Post.” Similar debates are now swirling around the term “postfeminism.” Likewise, in describing *Prisons* as a “post-Communist” text I mean to imply exactly this kind of contradictory relationship of continuity and rejection between Lessing’s text and Communism. *Prisons* itself teaches us the importance of these contradictory patterns. In the lecture “You Are Damned, We Are Saved,” Lessing discusses the “structures” or “patterns” of belief that enable groups in society to confidently assert the title of the lecture: “you are damned, we are saved.” Even when the ideas are new, Lessing argues, the pattern of believing yourself and your group to be right while everyone else is wrong is the oft-repeated “heritage of the structure of Christian thought.” It is, of course, this “heritage” that George W. Bush drew on to legitimate his “War on Terror.” *Prisons* can be read as Lessing’s own attempted jailbreak out of this heritage and these patterns of thought—a kind of rethinking that is particularly engaging given our current political climate.

Drawn to *Prisons* by Lessing’s own insistence on its importance and to a new awareness of the relevance of Communist and post-Communist contexts to Lessing’s work, I started to compare *Prisons* with Lessing’s more famous manifesto, “The Small Personal Voice,” and I was struck by how Lessing’s sense of the function of the storyteller had changed. The first main difference is in how Lessing describes the relation of the individual, who is usually the storyteller, to the group. In “The Small Personal Voice,” Lessing makes her famous statement that the *Children of Violence* series “is a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective.” This is also a theme of “The Small Personal Voice” itself. She rejects both “man as the isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary” and “collective man with a collective conscience” in favor of a compromise between the two, what she describes as “a resting point, a place of decision, hard to reach and precariously balanced.”

She concludes “The Small Personal Voice” with two contradictory visions of how the storyteller can achieve this balance. First, Lessing suggests that “the minimum act of humility for a writer” is “to know that one is a writer at all because one represents, makes articulate, is continuously and invisibly fed by, numbers of people who are inarticulate, to whom one belongs, to whom one is responsible.” This vision of the writer representing, being fed by, belonging to, and being responsible for the inarticulate mass is a utopian
one that Lessing repeats elsewhere during this period of her career and clearly demonstrates the influence of Communist models of the artist and the collective on Lessing. For example, in a 1969 radio interview with Studs Terkel, Lessing states: “Our function as writers, I maintain, is to express what other people feel. If we’re any good, it’s because we’re like other people and can express it.”\(^\text{17}\) In her 1971 preface to *The Golden Notebook* she describes “making the personal general” and suggests that “growing up is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.”\(^\text{18}\) Ironically though, one of the functions of the preface she added to *The Golden Notebook* was to correct what she perceived to be the misreading of the novel by exactly these “numbers of people who are inarticulate, to whom one belongs.” Here Lessing also famously refutes that the novel represents its feminist readers. Although the novel clearly represented and made articulate (to borrow from Lessing’s quotation above) a hitherto inarticulate mass of proto-second-wave feminists, Lessing refused to belong to or be responsible for those readers. This contradiction echoes the tension that Lessing’s character Anna feels in *The Golden Notebook* when she is delivering her lectures celebrating collective art. She starts to stammer, cannot finish the lecture, and then stops giving the lectures altogether, because she cannot help but realize that the Communist art she has been reading in her job at the Communist Party is “dead literature.”\(^\text{19}\) The “flashes of genuine art” are all born from “undisguisable private emotion.”\(^\text{20}\) This valuing of art because it expresses the private and personal is the basis of the second formulation of the storyteller’s relation to the collective that Lessing offers in “The Small Personal Voice.”

Lessing concludes “The Small Personal Voice” by emphasizing the individual as opposed to the collective:

> The novelist talks, as an individual to individuals, in a small personal voice. In an age of committee art, public art, people may begin to feel again a need for the small personal voice; and this will feed confidence into the writers and, with confidence because of the knowledge of being needed, the warmth and humanity and love of people which is essential for a great age of literature.\(^\text{21}\)

Lessing clearly contradicts herself in “The Small Personal Voice” in her attempt to find that balance between the “isolated individual” and “collective man.” She argues first that it is only by initially recognizing that the individual is already part of and responsible for the collective that the writer can succeed, but then suggests that the small personal voice of the individual
storyteller connects individuals in order to form the collective. However, the models share an assumption that a balance between the individual and collective can be achieved even if it is difficult. Also, in both models Lessing expresses a positive attitude toward the collective, which is another example of the influence of Communism on her thinking at this time.

In *Prisons*, Lessing is much more skeptical and negative about how the collective operates. “What we live through,” she says, “in any age, is the effect on us of mass emotions and of social conditions from which it is almost impossible to detach ourselves.” Given this more negative notion of the collective, the individual, and particularly the individual storyteller, becomes even more important. At the end of *Prisons*, Lessing states that “[e]verything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own ways of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures.” Although this echoes her notion of the novelist talking “as an individual to individuals, in a small personal voice” that I have quoted above, it is a very different understanding of the individual’s relation to the collective from that described in both “The Small Personal Voice” and the preface to *The Golden Notebook*. Instead of “making the personal general” as a means of solving the problem of the subjective, isolated individual as she proposes in “The Small Personal Voice,” the collective constantly threatens to annihilate the individual in *Prisons*. Her statement in *Prisons* that “the detached, curious, patient, investigative attitude” is “the most valuable thing we have in the fight against our own savagery, our long history as group animals,” contrasts with her claim in “The Small Personal Voice” that “literature should be committed.” This contrast is one example of the rejection of Communism that is apparent in *Prisons* and marks it as a post-Communist text. Lessing’s negative model of the group in *Prisons* results in the storyteller taking on a very different function in *Prisons* from the one assigned in “The Small Personal Voice.”

In “The Small Personal Voice” Lessing argues that once a writer accepts responsibility for the effects made on readers, “he must see himself, to use the socialist phrase, as an architect of the soul.” She goes on to argue that “if one is going to be an architect, one must have a vision to build towards.” Furthermore, “[i]t is not merely a question of preventing an evil, but of strengthening a vision of good which may defeat the evil.” The moral certainty of Lessing here has been echoed by those who argued for military intervention in Iraq and by those who continue to argue for intervention in other states on the grounds of rightness of cause. This sense of the moral function of the novel is intimately related to realism in “The Small Personal Voice.” She states with great certainty that the “highest point of literature” was the nineteenth-cen-
tury realist novel and goes on to “define realism as art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly held, though not necessarily intellectually defined, view of life that it absorbs symbolism.”

In *Prisons*, Lessing is keen to celebrate writers of science fiction and utopia rather than realism. She suggests that the writer’s function is not to build up a vision of the good but to criticize. In an interesting and not entirely convincing move, she positions utopias as “criticisms of current societies.” She ignores and erases their possible social function as “visions to build towards” and instead insists that utopias and science fiction create critical distance and detachment from the real world. In *Prisons* she identifies novelists’ most useful function “for their fellow citizens” to be that of “enabl[ing] us to see ourselves as others see us.” The vision of good and the moral certainty that she calls for in “The Small Personal Voice” is replaced with self-conscious doubt in *Prisons*. In her interview with Bill Moyers for PBS in 2003, Lessing makes this change very clear when she answers Moyers’s question as to whether it is the “mission of writers to give us a vision” by flatly stating that “I don’t think writers should have missions.” Earlier in the same interview, Lessing dismisses her young Communist dreams as “rubbish.” When Moyers asserts that “dreams are not rubbish,” Lessing retorts that “[they’re] rubbish if they lead you to very unrealistic actions. That’s what’s bad about them. If you’re dreaming about wonderful Utopias, and great horizons, and great dawns and all that, you’re not really seeing what’s there, and what could be done.”

Admittedly, this critique of Communism as being blind to “what’s there” and as unprepared to engage with real problems is evident much earlier in Lessing’s work. For example, in *The Golden Notebook*, Richard (Molly’s capitalist ex-husband) tells his son that if he were chief of police trying to hunt down the Communists he would ask them one question: “Would you go to an undeveloped country and run a country clinic for fifty people?” He believes that all Communists would refuse because of their belief that the whole system needs to be changed. Anna, listening to Tommy describing his father’s strategy, has to admit the validity of its critique. *The Golden Notebook* is in many ways Lessing’s own notebook in which she started to work through the philosophical and formal consequences of her rejection of Communism and of what she perceived to be the moral certainties of realism. Therefore, there are several moments, such as this one, that already point toward *Prisons*. In notes she added to a reissue of *The Golden Notebook* in 1994, Lessing acknowledges this herself: “I was writing my way out of one set of ideas, even out of a way of life, but that is not what I thought while I was doing it.” Thus the change in Lessing’s vision of the storyteller from
one who provides moral certainty to one who encourages critical doubt does seem to be intimately related to her rejection of both Communism and realism. Furthermore, it is a vision that seems particularly helpful to explore in our current political climate of clashing moral certainties.

A further change in Lessing’s model of the storyteller is in her attitude toward the novel’s function as a source of knowledge about places and people that the reader and the general public are ignorant of. In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna expresses a strongly negative view of the changing function of the novel:

> I find that I read with the *same kind of curiosity* most novels, and a book of reportage. . . . Yet I am incapable of writing 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. . . . I have only one, and the least important, of the qualities necessary to write at all, and that is curiosity. It is the curiosity of the journalist.36

Clearly, it is important to recognize the difference between Lessing’s fiction and her nonfictional essays and interviews, as well as to realize (as I mentioned above) that in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) Lessing is already rethinking the vision of the storyteller’s function that she presented in “The Small Personal Voice” (1957).37 This is her character Anna Wulf thinking, not Lessing herself. However, this section from *The Golden Notebook* echoes “The Small Personal Voice” closely enough that it is reasonable to assume that these were ideas that Lessing herself grappled with as an author between 1957 and 1962. This section clarifies some of the ideas present in “The Small Personal Voice” by describing the contemporary novel as a “function of the fragmented society” and by clarifying the “moral passion” of the realist novel as being “the quality of philosophy.”38 The example she uses in *The Golden Notebook* is Thomas Mann, whom she describes as “the last of the writers in the old sense, who used the novel for philosophical statements about life.”39

It is noticeable that all of Lessing’s examples of “great realists” are white males despite there being prominent women in that tradition. Similarly for Lessing, the “great” Communists were all male, although again there were also women in that tradition. Thus, despite her early commitment to progressive socialist politics there seems to be no awareness of gender equality in her representation of the tradition of “great realists.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that the novel in which Lessing writes herself out of both realism and Communism—*The Golden Notebook*—was read as a “trumpet for Women’s Liberation.”40 A more detailed examination of Lessing’s resistance to feminism is
beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to acknowledge that her rejection of both realism and Communism could well be more closely related to her gender than Lessing likes to admit. Lessing's later novels *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Sweetest Dream* (2001) demonstrate a much more nuanced understanding of the gender politics within the Communist movement than Lessing demonstrated earlier in her career. It is pertinent that Lessing suggested that she wrote *The Sweetest Dream* instead of the next volume of her autobiography, implying that its contradictions were ones she herself had faced.

In direct contrast to her apparent despair at the new function of the novel as an “outpost of journalism” expressed in *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing seems keen to celebrate this function of the novel in her 2003 interview with Bill Moyers. Following her confident statement that writers should not have missions, Lessing draws attention to the way in which novels function to introduce “areas of life which we haven’t thought of before, that haven’t really been in public consciousness until that novel.” She goes on to give the examples of the “great Southern novelists” who have brought our attention to America’s Deep South and to the Russian novelists who have taught us of Russia, concluding with the thought that “that is a function of the novel we forget.” Anna’s rejection in *The Golden Notebook* of novels that teach of unknown areas of life, and of the curiosity that motivates the writers and readers of those novels, is reversed in this 2003 interview and in Lessing’s celebration of curiosity and investigation in *Prisons*. This represents a very significant shift in Lessing’s sense of the role of the storyteller and function of the novel.

In the 1980 interview from which I have taken the title of this paper, Christopher Bigsby asks Lessing why she moved away from the nineteenth-century realism she aligned herself with in “The Small Personal Voice.” Her answer helps to explain her movement from commitment and moral certainty to doubt and critical distance that I have outlined, and it illustrates that why and how Lessing writes are connected. In her reply to Bigsby, Lessing explains her move away from realism as a reaction to changes in the real world: “you cannot any more get comfort from old moral certainties because something new is happening. All our standards of values have been turned upside down, I think.” This sense of uncertainty is present in “The Small Personal Voice,” but what seems to have changed by the time of *Prisons* (1986) is Lessing’s willingness to explore and celebrate the possibilities of the new uncertainties.

This change in Lessing’s attitude toward uncertainty seems to be related to her loss of conviction in Communism. I want to refer at this point to the speech “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World,” which

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Václav Havel delivered when he was president of the Czech Republic, in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on July 4, 1994, because its similarities with Lessing’s *Prisons* illustrate the ways in which *Prisons* particularly speaks to and out of a post-Communist context. Lessing’s belief that we are living in a changing world is echoed by Havel: “Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period.” Havel expresses exactly the same type of frustration with the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of our scientific knowledge of ourselves as Lessing does in *Prisons*. He juxtaposes technological advancements, such as being able to see Earth from space as “another star in the sky,” with the sense that “we do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn.” This echoes Lessing’s repeated opinion throughout *Prisons* that “we do know more about ourselves now than people did in the past, but . . . very little of this knowledge has been put into effect.” Admittedly, Havel’s and Lessing’s diagnoses of why all this knowledge is failing are very different. Havel claims that it is because modern scientific knowledge is fundamentally inadequate. It “fails,” he says, “to connect with the most intrinsic nature of reality and with natural human experience.” In contrast, Lessing believes that the knowledge we have of ourselves is extensive, but that we fail to apply it in our everyday lives and institutions because of fear and because of the ways in which governments maintain control over the information.

Despite this difference between Lessing’s and Havel’s understandings of the contemporary world, the similarity in their thought is more significant. Speaking in 1985 and 1994, respectively, Lessing and Havel agreed that the world was undergoing a paradigm shift. Even more significantly, both authors call for a similar solution: a reimagining of the individual’s relationship to the collective, to the cosmos even, that is self-conscious or self-transcendent. Havel calls for a return to an “awareness that we are not here alone nor for ourselves alone, but that we are an integral part of higher, mysterious entities against whom it is not advisable to blaspheme.” This type of awareness, Havel argues, “endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence.” This vision of the self offers a critique of selfish egotism similar to Lessing’s vision in which she argues that we can achieve moments when we realize that the “I am right, you are wrong” attitude we so often live by is, in her words, “quite simply, nonsense.” She explains: “All history, development goes on through interaction and mutual influence, and even the most violent extremes of thought, of behaviour, become woven into the general texture of human life, as one strand of it.” This is a temporal model of humanity’s relation to the universe that closely parallels Havel’s spatial model of the individual
as being part of something much larger than him- or herself. For Lessing, time eventually weaves every idea into the “general texture of human life,” and for Havel we are always “an integral part of higher, mysterious entities.” Both writers stress the interrelatedness of human beings. Lessing’s wish that we “learn how to look at ourselves and at the society we live in, in that calm, cool, critical, sceptical way which is the only possible stance for a civilized human being,” is closely aligned with Havel’s conclusion: “Transcendence as the only real alternative to extinction.” The solution to this problem of the individual’s relation to the collective is for the individual to escape the limitations of his or her own perspective through purposeful self-conscious questioning or through self-transcendence.

I have explored these parallels between Lessing’s and Havel’s political visions for two main reasons. The first is that the parallels between Lessing’s Prisons and Havel’s “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World” are a further indication of the fact that Prisons is helpfully understood in a post-Communist context. It is a text marked by Lessing’s concern for Communist states and by her loss of belief in Communism. “The Small Personal Voice” presents, in contrast, a Communist view of the function of the artist as a committed “architect of the soul.” Whereas “The Small Personal Voice” attempts to find a model for the artist’s function that borrows from the socialist model and, therefore, privileges realism, Prisons expresses the need for a new paradigm altogether. This difference points to the fact that why Lessing writes affects how she writes. Throughout her career, Lessing has insisted that form and content are inseparable in her work. Her description of the structure of The Golden Notebook as making a “wordless statement” is one of many examples of her asserting that her form has content and is inseparable from it. Clearly, her narrative forms are as intimately related to why she writes. Her conception of the function of the storyteller has moved away from one in which the writer is the confident defender of ethical goodness with a clear realist vision to impart to one in which the artist’s function is to criticize and question. This new artist whom Lessing envisions should try to alienate the reader from him- or herself and the world so that he or she may view it with self-conscious doubt. It is because of this goal that Lessing has been drawn toward parody (as in “Free Women” in The Golden Notebook) and “space fiction” (as in her Canopus in Argos series). Lessing’s use of the analogy of wanting to see the world “as, perhaps, a visitor from another planet might see us” implies that creating imagined galaxies as she does in Canopus in Argos offers her critical distance from the real world. In Prisons, Lessing relates utopias to science fiction and, in turn, sees them both
as expressions of the detachment she is calling for. This problematic reading of utopias positions them as detached criticisms of society, not as visions of moral certainty. This allows Lessing to position science fiction in a long and illustrious tradition that is juxtaposed with the long realist tradition she celebrates in “The Small Personal Voice.” It is clear from this that in Lessing’s own mind her move from commitment to detachment is directly related to her rejection of realism in favor of space fiction. The pattern of the changes in Lessing’s writing as it emerges in these later stages of her career tends to get told in two separate stories—one about her rejection of realism and one concerned with her rejection of Communism. In her preface Lessing insisted that the main lesson of *The Golden Notebook* was supposed to be “that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize.” *Prisons* makes it clear that these two stories about *why* and *how* Lessing writes must not be divided off from each other.

The second reason for my having positioned *Prisons* in a post-Communist context is that this may offer an explanation for why Western critics have largely failed to acknowledge the importance of this text in Lessing’s oeuvre. As Lessing herself explains in *Prisons*, societies west of the iron curtain have not experienced what it is like to have the artist’s function curtailed as it was in Communist countries:

We live in an open society. . . . One only has to meet people from behind the Iron Curtain, particularly from the Soviet Union, where ideas are not allowed to circulate, where information is suppressed, where there is a close, claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere, to be reminded how very fortunate we are, even with all the defects our societies do have. We are fortunate in that we are able to teach ourselves what we will . . .

I think we should make more use of these freedoms than we do.

Indeed, it was exactly the experience of meeting people from behind what was the iron curtain that enabled me to more fully engage with and understand the importance of *Prisons*. As I have attempted to suggest throughout this essay, the rhetoric of “I am right, you are wrong” that Lessing is so keenly critical of in *Prisons* has been creeping back into the media and into our political vocabularies and visions—if, indeed, it ever left. This is a particularly important and relevant time to engage in more appreciative readings of *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* and to take up Lessing’s call to “make more use of these freedoms than we do.”
NOTES


2. Ibid.


6. Ibid., 10–11.


8. Ibid., 2–3.


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 15.

16. Ibid., 24.


20. Ibid., 311.


22. This is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s famous formulation in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” There is a similar contraction between Eliot’s desire to erase the individual personality of the poet and his assertion that only poets with personality and emotions know the significance of erasing those things. As he says: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but
an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” T. S. Eliot, Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963), 29.

23. Lessing, Prisons, 6.

24. Ibid., 73–74. I think Lessing’s shift in vocabulary from the word “collective” that she uses in “The Small Personal Voice” and the preface to “group” here is significant because the word “collective” had positive connotations in Communist thought. The word “group” does not have the same Communist implications.


28. Ibid., 11.

29. Ibid., 8.

30. Lessing, Prisons, 7.

31. Ibid.


33. Ibid., 3. This comment highlights how problematic Lessing’s reading of utopias is in Prisons. In Prisons she insists that utopias function as criticisms of society not as visions of a better future. She positions them as the forefathers of science fiction rather than of Communism. However, utopias can be read as both. They can be criticisms of current society that encourage intelligent doubt and critical distance, as well as being committed visions of a better society that encourage socialist politics.


35. Lessing, “A Reissue of The Golden Notebook,” in Time Bites: Views and Reviews (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 140. This essay is also titled Introduction 1993 [to The Golden Notebook] and is cited that way in the bibliography to this volume [editors’ note].


39. Ibid.


42. See the author’s note that prefaces The Sweetest Dream.

43. Lessing, “Bill Moyers Talks with Doris Lessing,” 6. (Page number taken from printable version.)

44. Lessing, “The Need to Tell Stories,” interview by Christopher Bigsby, 72.


46. Ibid.
47. Lessing, Prisons, 5. Lessing’s italics.
49. Lessing, Prisons, 60.
50. Prisons We Chose to Live Inside was first delivered as the five-part 1985 Massey Lectures, which were broadcast in October 1985 on CBC Radio’s “Ideas” series.
52. Lessing, Prisons, 16.
53. Ibid., 71.
55. Please refer to my comments above concerning the phrase “post-Communist.”
58. Lessing, Prisons, 44.
59. Ibid., 7.
61. Lessing, Prisons, 76.
62. On this note, I would like to dedicate this essay to my students and colleagues at Palacky University, who still did not take an open society for granted when I met them in 1996; and to all those who dare to “make more use of these freedoms” than we usually do.