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The Porous Border between Fact and Fiction, Empathy and Identification in Doris Lessing’s *The Cleft*  

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As she approaches the end of her ninth decade, Doris Lessing continues to search for new and appropriate forms to express her late-life creativity.¹ Very often these forms are experimental and exploratory, involving the crossing of various kinds of boundaries, of genre, gender, and even of species.² These crossings almost invariably involve characters in difficult or painful experiences that detach them from old ways of thinking or being and open them up to the possibility of new kinds of speculation and growth. In this essay I argue that in *The Cleft* (2007)³ Lessing portrays the porous nature of all three borders (genre, gender, and species) in her fabular tale of the supposedly first people, the all-female Clefts, and their offspring, the first males. The crucial feature of the fable that mediates the reader’s response to the gender-stereotyped “pre-people” characteristics of the Clefts and males⁴ is its narration through the lens of the older Roman Senator and historian, Transit. Transit’s narrative, itself a genre crossing that combines fact and fiction, history and literature, fits what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction.”⁵ Not only are postmodern novels “intensely self-reflexive but . . . also [they] . . . re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge.”⁶ Transit’s narrative raises the very questions about the history/literature divide and the borders of truth/fact/fiction that Hutcheon addresses in her discussion of the
status of historiographic metafiction. Transit’s memoir, set in the context of first-century Rome, both constructs and questions the gender assumptions of his time, while his struggles to narrate the Clefts’ story from surviving millennium-old fragments capture a historian’s efforts to decipher, verify, and interpret his material. Both narrative layers suggest the porous border between history and fiction. Indeed, we will see below that Transit is self-consciously aware that the ancient scrolls he is working with are already the product of interpretation and fiction-making.\(^7\)

In working with these ancient fragments, Transit must struggle not only with the remoteness of the records of the Clefts but also with the horrific nature of the story they tell—the atrocities that result from the Clefts’ sudden new capacity to give birth to male children. Because these records deal with two levels of trauma—the Clefts’ response to overwhelming, traumatic change and the males’ response to physical and psychological abuse—Transit’s role as a historian is a complex one. He must respond with sensitivity to the brutal events described without becoming too implicated in their horrors. Dominick LaCapra calls this difficult narrative task “empathetic unsettlement.”\(^8\) This “desirable empathy” involves a “mode of representation . . . that inhibits or prevents extreme objectification and harmonizing narratives.”\(^9\) Objectification “denies or forecloses empathy”\(^10\) by distancing or detaching us from others’ horrific experiences so that we are not made uncomfortable by their pain. Harmonizing narratives are those narrations of extreme events “from which we derive reassurance or a benefit,”\(^11\) using the terrible suffering of others for our own well-being—for example, for “something career-enhancing, ‘spiritually’ uplifting, or identity-forming for oneself or one’s group.”\(^12\) I will argue that Transit, like the responsible historians of extreme events discussed by LaCapra, manages (usually) to create an experience of “empathetic unsettlement” in which he and the reader feel empathy for the traumatic experience of both the Clefts and the Monsters without losing their objectivity or without trying to use the tales for their own advantage. Because we see the Clefts and males’ difficult journey to individualized personhood through the lens of Transit’s (usually) balanced empathy and detachment, we come to appreciate not only Transit’s struggles to understand his material but also the early peoples’ own slow development of the capacity to empathize with each other. Further, we gradually also come to understand that in Transit’s wrestle with this highly charged, gendered material, his own understanding of his relationship to the gender attitudes of his day is changed.

Before examining further the implications of LaCapra’s formulation of empathetic unsettlement for Transit’s relationship to his historical material, I want to examine the psychological theory underpinning the concept of empa-
Empathy has both an emotional component and a cognitive one. It requires a balance of emotion and thought, objectivity and subjectivity. The individual must be capable of easing up the boundaries of self in order to allow the “trying out quality to the experience, whereby one places one’s self in the other’s shoes or looks through the other’s eyes. . . . [D]istinctions between self and other blur experientially.” However, this vicarious experience of the other’s emotions is temporary, and is followed by a return to one’s own feelings and needs. Further, one must be objective enough to understand what the other is feeling, not just to experience it emotionally. This balance of identification with the other’s emotions and cognitive understanding of them is necessary for successful empathetic response.

To find this balance an individual must have self-boundaries that are not too rigid, and not too open. If the boundaries of the self are too rigid, she will not be sufficiently open to the emotions of the other to experience them. She may misunderstand the other’s emotions or project her own onto them. Or she may experience the other’s emotions as a threat. Similarly, if an individual’s self-boundaries are too open or weak, she will be engulfed by the feelings of the other and will not be able to maintain or return to her own emotions and needs. So a balance between identification with, and detachment from, the other is required for a successful empathetic response. With Lessing’s women focalizers the boundaries of self often tend to be porous, and the women are often in danger of losing their self-identity in their empathetic response to the other. Anna Wulf’s over-identification with her lovers Michael and Saul Green in The Golden Notebook is an extreme example of this. For the male narrator examined here the boundaries of self tend to be more self-enclosed and need to be opened up if he is to feel empathy for the other, especially for the other who is very different.

Lessing expands the dimensions of the empathetic response by developing the possibilities for detachment. Detachment increases the range of aspects of the self and the other with which an individual can feel empathy. By allowing sufficient distance from the demands of the ego or from the limitations in an individual’s self-understanding that block his responsiveness to the other, detachment facilitates the connection of empathy to otherwise denied or disassociated parts of the self and to an otherwise alien other. Thus detachment
and empathy go hand in hand. Each kind of experience feeds and enables the
other. What Lessing adds to this description of detachment is an awareness
of deeper levels of self to which an individual can become attuned in both
the self and in the other. To reach these deeper levels of self requires disci-
pline and effort and is often associated in Lessing’s work with undergoing
a difficult or painful experience that detaches the individual from old ways
of thinking or being. The acquisition of this kind of detachment frees the
individual not only to empathize more widely but also to see his world anew
and to speculate and ask questions about it in ways that he could not have
done before. We will see Transit undergoing this process of deepening detach-
ment as he becomes exposed to painful aspects of the ancient records and
of his own experiences. As a result he becomes capable of wider sympathies
and greater questioning. And thus his historical work becomes not only the
compilation and interpretation of the Clefts’ ancient records but also the dis-
covery (and at times invention) of the meaning of their experience and of his
own.

The reader, too, becomes implicated in the sorting out of truth from fic-
tion in Transit’s story and his historical work. On one level we read the story
of Transit’s attempt to accommodate himself to the records left by a people
who lived millennia before his time and whose experiences and mind-sets
are radically different from his own. The “ancient scrolls and fragments of
scrolls” (60) that Transit must order and make sense of contain records of
the oral tales of the first females, the Clefts, and the radical disruption of
their lifestyle when they suddenly begin giving birth to male children. On
another level these records plunge readers into the disturbing world of the
highly gendered characteristics of the early Clefts and males. While Lessing
gives primacy to the Clefts’ ability to nurture and to maintain a cooperative,
peaceful lifestyle, she critiques their seeming obliviousness: they are also slow,
heavy, porpoiselike creatures who spend much of their time half in and half
out of the sea, existing in a dreaming, almost totally unself-conscious state,
“an eternal present” (31). It is not by accident that these first females are usu-
ally referred to as Clefts, not women, throughout the ancient records. Thus
as Lessing herself admits, the work is “not politically correct.” Not only
are the Clefts physically and mentally different from humans as we know
them but also they are types rather than individualized characters, named for
the functions they perform; that is, each cave “family” consists of “the Cleft
Watchers, the Fish Catchers, the Net Makers, the Fish Skin Curers, the Sea-
weed Collectors” (10–11). The first males (first called Monsters, later called
Squirts) bring another set of stereotypical features into this genetic soup.
They are adventurous and daring but initially lack adult language and a full
range of emotions. Being already one step away from the first people, they are more self-conscious than the early Clefts, but they also lack individuality. Each group is powerfully driven by biological need. It is only when the two groups begin to mix, first physically and then more slowly culturally, that the resulting hybrid species begins to acquire the traits necessary for individualized human development—not only the ability to care for and perpetuate the species or to explore, adapt, and hunt but also the ability to self-consciously think, understand, and empathize.

Here again as she did in *The Fifth Child* (1988) and *Ben, In the World* (2000), Lessing blurs the boundaries between the human and the animal. In so doing she risks confusing or alienating her readers who do and do not identify with the Clefts and the Monsters. However, I believe Lessing gives the reader a clue on how to read her fable by setting the extreme gender descriptions found in the ancient mythic tales in the context of Transit’s metafictional tale of historiography. Thus we encounter the prehuman characteristics of the Clefts and males in the context of Transit’s own concern about how to respond appropriately to the disturbing nature of the collection of bits and fragments of records that he has acquired.

From the beginning Transit must struggle with the porous border between fact and event, myth and history in the material with which he works. The ancient scrolls are themselves already an interpretation of the Clefts’ response to the sudden birth of the males. As Transit points out, the “official story” recorded by the Clefts—“the one that they taught to their Memories” (those responsible for passing down the oral history from generation to generation)—does not contain all the records that have been saved. A very early fragment, containing a “sickening” account of the atrocities committed by the Clefts on the very first Monsters, was saved separately, presumably by a minority group, and was never considered part of the official record (23–24). We will see below that Transit’s response to this contested early record blurs even further the border between fiction and history.

The creation of the new hybrid species, the human race, out of the physical and cultural mixing of the Clefts and males comes only at the price of dealing with the shock and trauma of facing difference, of dealing with the alien other and gradually learning to accommodate to and then empathize with it. The reader too must face this shocking encounter with extreme gendered difference, and it is only Transit’s combination of objectivity and empathy toward the ancient records that makes possible the reader’s ability to understand and empathize with the slow growth into individualized personhood of the Clefts and males. However, some reviewers, put off by the accentuated, stereotypical sexual differences of the Clefts and the males in the old
records, do not respond to Lessing’s use of Transit’s narrative as the vehicle for the ancient tale’s presentation. I will argue that Transit’s role is crucial to the metafictional layering of the novel. While Transit self-consciously struggles to make meaning of the ancient records, creating the story of the Clefs and the males’ gradual growth through their painful interactions, Lessing’s fable captures the way Transit’s own self-understanding changes through his encounters with the old records. Both the story of Transit’s individual growth in perspective and the story he tells of the specieslike growth of the Clefs and males come together in Lessing’s carefully orchestrated narrative of the encounter of genders and cultures and the rich new selfhoods that result. The interplay between Transit’s growing empathy toward the women in his life and the lessening of differences between the gender extremes of the Clefs and the males in the story of the ancient records he crafts is, I believe, the whole point of Lessing’s fiction—that is, Transit in his life and the Clefs and the males in the records grow in their ability to empathize with the other gender.

Lessing has previously used this pattern of a more evolved narrator who is himself changed by his interaction with a less advanced civilization in Shikasta, although Johor is not only affected by his involvement with Shikastan archives but also directly intervenes in Shikastan reality. Transit plays the subtler role of the historian whose attempt to make meaning out of human-kind’s first records changes both him and the narrative he puts together. In the end it may or may not affect the understanding of his civilization. But as with Shikasta, Lessing here seems to be also attempting to influence the understanding of her readers, wryly suggesting that our own gender attitudes may prevent us from acquiring the deeper level of human understanding that sees us all as “One—one Race or People” (24).

The kind of changes necessary for the birth in the Clefs of what Geraldine Bedell calls “person-hood” are not easily accomplished. The written records of the Clefs’ oral tales capturing the moment when the females suddenly begin giving birth to males involve horrors of a kind not easily dealt with by Transit or the reader. One of the most interesting features of Transit’s role as narrator is his wrestling with the problems of a historian dealing with personal accounts of extreme or limit events. Transit possesses or learns to acquire the balanced empathy that historian Dominick LaCapra advocates for historians dealing with such sensitive material—an empathy that is “responsive to the traumatic experience of others” without appropriating their experience. To do this Transit must engage with the kind of issues raised by LaCapra in dealing with personal accounts of traumatic narratives. For example, LaCapra discusses the danger for the historian of overidentifying with traumatic material, especially eyewitness accounts, and of
experiencing a “secondary or muted trauma.” LaCapra notes that the use of “objectification within limits” serves as “a protection of the researcher especially in areas in which traumatic suffering is marked and the tendency to identify fully with the victim may be compelling.”

Transit confronts this problem when he begins recording the birth of the first Monsters and the Clefts’ cruel treatment of them—most were put out to die, a few were kept as pets and mutilated. Transit seems to be consciously working at finding the balance between objectivity and identification advocated by LaCapra. Transit stresses both his identification with and his separateness from his material. He notes, “I am writing this, feeling some of those ancient long ago emotions. I note that Maire [the Cleft narrating this incident] in her account said ‘we’ and ‘us’ identifying with the first Clefts, just as I cannot help identifying with the very first males” (23). However, like a responsible historian, Transit is “actively aware . . . of the need to come to terms with . . . [his] implication in, or transferential relation to, charged, value-related events and those involved with them.” Thus Transit is able to step back from his identification with the first males and to bring both empathy and objectivity to his account of the early Clefts’ cruelty toward the first baby boys. As he concludes, “Shock after shock was felt by this community of dreaming creatures and it was their helpless panic that caused their cruelty” (33). Here Transit seems to satisfy LaCapra’s comment that empathy is “on some level necessary for understanding.” It seems clear that Transit would not have been able to respond to these early records at all if he had not been capable of both detachment from his identification with the Monsters and some empathy toward the early behavior of the Clefts.

However, the balance of detachment and empathy is not always enough or even possible. The blurring of the relationship between fiction and history, identified by Linda Hutcheon as germane to historiographic metafiction, is intensified by Transit’s response to the first brutal fragment already left out of the Cleft’s official records. While Transit chooses not to include this first fragment of the Clefts “told by someone in shock” that details the “sickening” ingenuity of “the cruelties thought up by the old females” (21), he does not leave it out because he thinks it is exaggerated or inaccurate. Rather he accepts the authenticity of this record—“there is something too raw and bleeding about the account of the cruelties to be fake” (24)—but still avoids including it. “It is too unpleasant. I am a Monster and cannot help identifying with those long-ago tortured infants, the first baby boys” (21). Here Transit’s reaction suggests that this first fragment induces too strong a secondary trauma for him to cope with it. Thus his account reminds the reader of how porous the border is between fiction and history, identification and detach-
ment. Moreover, the fact that the official records of the Clefts had already left out this brutal first fragment suggests exactly what historians beginning with Hayden White have been at pains to point out—that history is based on records that are themselves the product of interpretation.32

Transit’s self-conscious struggle as he works at turning the ancient scrolls into a comprehensible narrative is highlighted often and variously. Despite his generally empathetic response to the Clefts’ early records (with the exception of that first fragment), Transit makes it clear that he feels a certain distance from his material. This distance, I feel, is crucial to the reader’s acceptance of Transit’s historical efforts. He describes himself as having a tendency toward “scepticism,” which, he feels, “has made me able to take on the task of telling the tale of our real origins,” a tale that “does have elements of legend” (27). His acknowledgment of the fabular quality of the ancient records aids his detachment and is crucial to his ability to work with the disturbing documents.33 While a historian’s total objectivity in interpreting the past is now viewed with suspicion,34 Transit’s believability is strengthened by his ability to detach himself to some extent from the gender attitudes of his time. He notes, “I have always found it entertaining that females are worshipped as goddesses, while in ordinary life they are kept secondary and thought inferior” (27). This detachment aids Transit’s conscious avoidance of overidentifying with his material or assuming the voice of the victim (whether Cleft or Monster)—tendencies mentioned by LaCapra as inappropriate for developing “an ethics of response for secondary witnesses.”35 Transit’s skepticism also identifies his sophistication as a historian aware of the at least partially fictive nature of historical narrative.

Transit’s sophistication and awareness are immediately seen in his interpretation of the first fragment that he includes: “a record of an interrogation by one of us—that is, the males . . .—of a She, or Cleft” (25). Transit immediately notes that the “interrogator is in a position of power; and that locates it late in our long history” (25), but it is “preserved by the method used by the females, the memorising of a history” and this places it among “very early events indeed” (25). So this is a late example of preserving ancient oral history. Here Transit’s response to his material is both sensitive and discriminating. Rather than responding to this material in a purely objective manner, using what LaCapra calls “excessive objectification,”36 Transit seeks to be sensitive to the subject position and voice of the records.

Transit also acknowledges the role of ideology in preserving historical memory.37 Noting that the ancient records have been kept locked up in “prison” and some of them even destroyed not only because of the violence they contain but also because of their controversial account of the begin-
ning of the human race, Transit concludes, “[p]erhaps it has been felt that an account of our beginnings that makes females the first and founding stock is unacceptable” (27). Transit’s comment here acquires a deeper irony, as some early reviewers of the novel also felt it unacceptable to portray the first humans as porpoiselike females, lacking curiosity or daring.

Transit’s skepticism and irony are clear in his comparisons of the Cleft’s account with two alternative contemporary creation stories. Regarding the official story taught in the Roman schools in which “males were the first in the story and in some remarkable way brought forth the females” (25), Transit ironically comments that it remains “unexplained” how this was accomplished (26). Regarding the creation story current in the new Christian “sect”—“the first female was brought forth from the body of a male”—Transit ironically remarks, “[s]ome male invented that—the exact opposite of the truth” (27).

Here Lessing foregrounds the cultural and ideological input in foundational records from the past and deliberately points to her rewriting of the biblical story of Adam and Eve (as well as Roman creation myths). In doing so she uses the kind of parodic postmodern intertextuality associated with historiographic metafiction that “uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony” (Hutcheon, 298).

Similarly, Lessing plays with Transit’s attachment to the goddesses Artemis and Diana and his use of them to try to understand the power of Maire, the first Cleft to visit and mate with the males. The power of this illusion is then undercut as Transit muses that “[i]t is not possible to imagine anything that could banish Artemis, or for that matter pretty Diana, from their positions in our hearts” (117). The similarity between the names Maire and Mary only deepens the irony of Transit’s comment.

Both Transit and his creator are clearly aware that myths of origin have ideological implications. However, it is the ideological implications of Lessing’s focus on gender in her mythic story that have bothered some of her critics. Lessing, however, is, I believe, both more sophisticated and more even-handed in her creation of a gendered myth of origins than some of her detractors have realized. The primacy of her first female protohumans is balanced by their links to their sea-creature past. The liveliness and curiosity of the first males is balanced by their neediness and vulnerability. Lessing herself comments on the relationship between the genders in the book by noting that while the males “pep up” the genetic soup of humanity, they were “a haphazard species” who always needed to be looked after and died “much too easy.”

The real point of her myth of origins, however, as we shall see, is the absolute interdependence of the Clefts and males for the creation and then the evolution of the human race.
As in *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five,* isolation or an attitude of superiority by one group, whether it is defined by gender or by territory, leads to the malaise of all. Indeed, a comparison of *Marriages* and *The Cleft* is very instructional. In both books the boundaries erected by human arrogance or fear must be crossed if the human species is to survive. Thus Al*Ith* must leave the security and comfort, but ultimate stagnation, of the seemingly utopian world of woman-centered Zone Three to learn to understand and eventually love the cruder, more militaristic, but also less self-satisfied and more questioning, world of male-dominated Zone Four. Further, Zone Three’s arrogance and xenophobia as well as Zone Four’s repressive laws and extreme militarization have hurt their own Zone’s well-being and that of the whole. Neither the highly evolved women of Zone Three nor the militaristic men of Zone Four, or for that matter the warlike, woman-ruled tribes of Zone Five, can exist without the others. It is only when the boundaries between the territories and the gendered attitudes associated with them begin to give way and there is free movement between the zones that the well-being of the whole can be achieved. What perhaps makes Lessing’s later novel harder for some readers to deal with is that the Clefts are more primitive and closer to their sea-creature forebears than the slightly more evolved Monsters. As such the Clefts are more foundational and likely to survive but also less open to change and less creative in adjusting to new circumstances than the males. But, as in the earlier fable, both genders, albeit with modified versions of their characteristics, are necessary to the well-being and advancement of the human race. Boundaries must be literally and figuratively crossed as Al*Ith* goes down to Zone Four and Maire goes over the mountain to the valley of the males.

However, unlike the highly imaginative but little individualized storyteller from Zone Three, who is very much in the background of his retrospective narrative, the more factually oriented, conservative historian, Transit, is very much in the foreground of his present-tense narrative. Indeed, Transit’s personal experience is crucial to his historical storytelling. From the outset Transit makes it clear that he has been able to empathize with the ancient records in large part because of events in his own experience. He has young children from a much younger second wife, his first wife having died and his first two sons having been killed while fighting with the Roman army in the north. His early career involved little empathy for either his wife or sons. He was too “ambitious,” and, as Transit notes, “[I] had very little time for my wife and less for my boys” (55). Aware now of the loss he has experienced in not having really known his first two sons, Transit spends many hours in the nursery observing his second family. It is his observation of his young daughter and
son’s first discovery of their sexual differences and their different reactions—she is “shocked, envious, repelled”; he is proud and assertive of “his equipment” (60)—that enables Transit to “at least try and take on . . . my history of that ancient, long-ago time” (62). His observation of his children and his study of the ancient texts each make the other more understandable.

We see Transit’s openness to his material in his refusal to judge or assert superiority over the very early behavior of the Clefts and males. When Maire and Astre, the first two Clefts to establish relations with the males, leave the valley of the males after their first visit with them, Transit records, “[t]heir time for conception had come and gone (76)—though of course they had no idea of that” (76). But then he immediately adds, “[b]ut when we say things like that now, ‘they did not know,’ ‘they were so primitive,’ ‘they were too ignorant’—the gamut of dismissing phrases—well I, for one, wonder. How do we know what they knew, and how?” (76). Here Transit captures the “the process of attempting to assimilate” the data of the past (rather than the actual assimilation) that Hutcheon claims is “foregrounded” in historiographic metafiction. Transit leaves space in his account for, indeed emphasizes, what he and his civilization do not know or understand about the early Cleft’s knowledge.

Transit’s self-conscious questioning of how much he really understands the gender relations in the Clefts’ story leaks into his telling of his own story. While Transit had laughed at the gender discrepancies in Roman attitudes toward women, he himself initially assumes the superiority of age, knowledge, and experience over his much younger second wife, Julia, whom he describes as “a clever little provincial girl” (56) who “was almost completely ignorant” (57). However, as Transit works with the manuscripts of the Clefts and lovingly observes the development of his second family, he also observes Julia’s increasingly nontraditional female behavior—her lack of interest in nurturing her children, her socializing in sophisticated ruling circles, and her sexual promiscuity. At first he judges Julia harshly, comparing her “selfish, self-indulgent, amoral” behavior unfavorably with his mother’s virtue, “piety, and strength of character” (59). When this has no effect on her, he settles for warning her to be careful in her promiscuous sexual life.

Transit’s final reference to Julia, however, suggests a change in the dynamics of their relationship and in his attitude toward her. On this occasion, it is she who warns him, spelling out the dangers of allowing rumors to circulate about building a new house—prominent people have had their houses confiscated by the current tyrant, Nero, she tells him. She concludes by shaking him and calling him a “foolish old thing” (176). This scene forces Transit to become aware of how Julia really sees him; her exasperated tone and words
suggest not the veneration he had assumed but impatience and annoyance at his lack of understanding of the current political realities about which she is very much aware.

Even more interesting is the narrative placing of this personal digression. Transit includes the story of his scolding by Julia only after he has described late in his tale the great “rage” between the Clefts and the males. At this stage in the records the interactions between the Clefts and males are considerably more organized and advanced; young boys stay with their mothers until around five or six, after which time they go off to live with the men and older boys in the valley by the great river. Maronna, the head of the Clefts at that time, and the male leader Horsa increasingly clash over the males’ carelessness in taking care of the little children (a number of boys die in the great river and in other ways) and over the men’s dislike of the women’s scolding and nagging (172). This rage, which Transit comes to realize was the culmination of a series of fights, finally leads Horsa to decide to go away for a while with the men and boys on a great expedition. Transit’s ability to connect the Clefts’ impatience with the men’s behavior to Julia’s scolding of him over the rumor of the new house suggests how his work with the records of the Clefts has opened him up to his own gender assumptions.

What is most interesting for my purposes about Transit’s account of the great expedition and, in particular, the accident that cripples Horsa, is the porous nature of the history/fiction, detachment/identification divide in Transit’s response to Horsa’s accident. While Transit’s careful empathetic balance of detachment and identification in his treatment of the ancient records had been established in his earlier work, this balance is now temporarily lost. In describing Horsa’s feelings when he lies crippled on the sand, thrown back by waves after attempting to reach the far horizon, Transit is overcome with an identification so intense that it is balanced by no corresponding detachment. Exclaiming over the crippled Horsa, “I feel he is my younger self, perhaps even a son” (215), Transit fails to maintain the objectivity identified by LaCapra as necessary to prevent the historian from falling into unrecognized transferences and projections. Transit assumes that Horsa’s desire to reach this new land is not because he aspired to “finer dimensions in life,” but rather because like the Romans, Horsa was a “coloniser” at heart (216). Here Transit identifies Horsa’s pain with that of Rome itself, hurt in its need to expand (216). Thus Horsa’s suffering becomes that of Transit’s two sons, “lying somewhere in those northern forests” (216), giving their lives so that Rome could “outleap itself . . . grow . . . reach out” (216).

Identifying Horsa’s suffering with the pain Rome has endured in its expansionist drive to increase its empire, Transit mourns anew the death of
his first two sons even as he celebrates Rome’s desire to extend its boundaries “far and further, wide and wider” (216). Transit’s projection onto Horsa of his own feelings about the Roman Empire provides the reader with her own experience of ironic detachment from Transit’s narrative. As he rhetorically asks, “Why should there ever be an end to . . . Rome, to our boundaries?” (216), the reader, of course, knows that soon enough Rome will fall to the Germanic tribes from the north. Thus after carefully establishing Transit’s balanced approach to his material, the novel here undercutsthat reliability and “blurs the line between fiction and history.”

Perhaps in showing Transit’s unbalanced identification with Rome’s imperialistic goals, Lessing is suggesting that humankind will take longer to come to terms with its imperialistic desires than with immature attitudes toward gender and sexuality that polarize the differences between the sexes. While the dangers of imperialism and sexism are often intertwined in Lessing’s work, increasingly in her oeuvre Lessing has come to concentrate more on the dangers of imperialism than of gender discrimination. While the early works seem to detail more fully the difficulties of sexism than of imperialism, the two seem to be balanced in *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, in which the different genders are associated with different territories and stages of development, and the healing of the gender split is linked to the healing of the malaise gripping geographical regions and even species. But increasingly in her outer-space and fabular fictions Lessing has suggested that the aggressive behavior associated with imperial empires plays havoc with humankind’s ability to advance and to survive the grave challenges with which it is confronted, especially that of climate change.

Whatever Transit’s imperialistic blindness, Lessing parallels the psychological development of mature gender attitudes in Transit’s life story to his account of the sexual and cultural evolution of the Clefts and the males. In Transit’s personal life story we find a growing awareness that he and Julia are far more equal and in mutual need of each other than Transit originally imagined. Just as Julia presumably saves Transit’s life by warning him of the danger of rumors about building a new house, so earlier Transit had warned Julia of the danger of going to her lover’s wedding lavishly dressed, riding in an elegant chariot provided by the lover himself (149). Each needs the perspective and understanding of the other to survive.

Similarly, by the end of Transit’s narrative of the ancient records, Maronna, having screamed herself hoarse after learning of the death of most of the young boys on Horsa’s great expedition, can see and respond for the first time to the real grief that Horsa feels over their loss and can take him in her arms and comfort him. Likewise, Horsa can get beyond his usual percep-
tion of Maronna as a critical, scolding presence and see her pain and vulnerability. Thus instead of feeling threatened and wanting to escape, he can reach out with tenderness to comfort her also. This moment of mutual succor and empathy marks the maturing of not only the two individuals, Maronna and Horsa, but also of the two peoples, the Clefts and the males, into one people, the human race. Maronna and Horsa have widened the boundaries of self and become capable of experiencing the feelings of the other without losing their sense of self. Since they are representative figures, their balance of identification and detachment implicitly suggests that the Clefts and the males will begin to understand not only that they need each other but also that they are capable of empathizing with each other. It is at this point that the rock containing the Cleft, the symbol of the one-dimensional identification of the Clefts with their sexuality, is destroyed and the women are forced to move to a more capacious beach symbolizing a more capacious sense of self. This event marks the end of the ancient scripts recording the division of the Clefts and males into two peoples based on their sexual difference. The splendid new beach to which the women move upon the destruction of the Cleft will “soon house all the women and the children and the visiting men too” (257).

The careful balance of identification and detachment acquired by Transit in working with the ancient records of the Clefts (with a few exceptions) details the gradual lessening of the purely sexual identities of the Clefts and males and the growth of empathetic understanding between them. At the same time, Transit reveals his personal progress in dealing with the gendered assumptions of his time. But the historical metafictional penchant for undercutting whatever values are established is still operative. Transit’s combined personal memoir and historical reconstruction will not prevent the fall of his society, and his imperialistic attitudes suggest that fall may be necessary. However, despite this obvious irony, Lessing’s prophetic voice still emerges from this disturbing fabular fiction to implicitly demand that we cast a speculative and detached eye on the gender assumptions governing our own civilization and that we both see and query the imperialistic patterns obscured by familiarity and by too little distance from the theater of our lives. Here we see the ongoing creativity of Lessing’s late-life writing as she continues to try out new experimental forms for goading her culture to question the stories it tells itself about gender relations and imperial ambitions.

NOTES

1. See “Another Model of the Aging Writer: Sarton’s Politics of Old Age” by Anne
Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis

M. Wyatt-Brown in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 49–60. Wyatt-Brown offers three models for writers’ late-life productivity. Lessing’s creativity in her late 80s seems to fit Wyatt-Brown’s second trajectory, that of writers “liberated by the possibility of radical change” (52). See also my article “Navigating the Spiritual Cycle in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Shikasta*,” in *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Women Writers*, edited by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 47–82, in which I argue that Lessing’s “move from inner-space to outer-space fiction . . . offers us a fascinating example of midlife creativity” (47).


5. See Linda Hutcheon’s article “‘The Pastime of Past Time’: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction,” *Genre* 20 (Fall–Winter 1987): 285–305, where she defines the postmodern nature of this generic category and then discusses its relation to historical fiction and earlier, traditional notions of the verifiability of history.

6. Ibid., 285–86.


9. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 102, 103.

10. Ibid., 40.

11. Ibid., 41–42.

12. Ibid., 99.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


19. Judith Jordan explains that the empathetic response is not global; the individual may respond to some aspects of the other or self but not others (155). See my discussion concerning accessing deeper levels of the self in “Navigating the Spiritual Cycle” (50–59).


22. In “Writing in a Minor Key,” in Part Three Watkins makes a similar point about the effect of Lessing’s crossing of species boundaries in *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, In the World* [editors’ note].

23. See Whites’ distinction between event and fact (“The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 43–44).


26. See “Navigating the Spiritual Cycle” where I briefly discuss Lessing’s concern in *Shikasta* with influencing her readers (75–76).

27. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 41.

28. Ibid., 102.

29. Ibid., 100.

30. Ibid., 105.

31. Ibid.

32. See note 7.

33. Readers of Lessing’s fable would do well to emulate Transit in this regard and
similarly acknowledge the fabular quality of the tale. Watkins in “Writing in a Minor Key” in Part Three argues that Lessing’s more recent fabular works have often been misinterpreted by British critics because they fail to understand Lessing’s use of minor genres.


35. LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 98.

36. Ibid., 99.

37. See Hutcheon’s discussion of the ideological implications of writing about history in historiographic metafictions (297, 300).

38. As Ursula Le Guin comments in her review of The Cleft, “Women are passive, incurious, timid and instinctively nurturant; without men, they scarcely rise above animal mindlessness. Men are intellectual, inventive, daring, rash, independent, and need women only to relieve libido and breed more men” (“Saved by a Squirt”).

39. Co-editor Debrah Raschke points out that Transit is referring here to Genesis 2, not Genesis 1, which describes the simultaneous creation of the genders. Neither, of course, is purely Christian, and Transit seems unaware of the New Testament myth of creation, which emphasizes that in the beginning there was the “Word” (John 1: 1–14).


42. Hutcheon, “‘The Pastime of Past Time,’” 295, emphasis in original.

43. A similar hint of the wide distribution of gender-linked attributes within as well as between sexes is also found in the ancient records. Thus from the beginning there were Clefts who wanted to spend time in the Valley with the males and men who enjoyed caring for children and being with the Clefts in the caves (143–44, 162).

44. LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 99.

45. Hutcheon, “‘The Pastime of Past Time,’” 293.
