Just as the supposed subject of *The Golden Notebook*, women and men, was all the reviewers could see, so the immediate subject of *love, again, love* in old age, was surprising and shocking and the fact that the novel has a rather complicated structure was hardly noticed.\(^1\)

My point of departure in discussion of *love, again*\(^2\) (a novel I have never much liked, much less enjoy) is the plaintive, yet accusatory comment in Doris Lessing’s *Walking in the Shade*, volume 2 of the autobiography, where she is engaged in her habitual gesture of swatting at critics as though they are irritating blackflies, to modify Coetzee’s felicitous phrase.\(^3\) For a writer whose narratives insist on, not artifice, but rather their own artificiality, it is useful to explore *love, again* as well as *The Sweetest Dream*\(^4\) prompted by the observation here and recalling the hybrid nature of the Lessing project. Authorial will-to-power over her own fictive texts Lessing most certainly demonstrates, interrupting narrative with autobiographically sourced digression, “signs of the times” interpolations, summary, parody, pastiche, or interspersed letter. On record as relishing how “prodigiously adaptable”\(^5\) the novel is by nature, it not being bound, indeed having “no rules,”\(^6\) she once remarked, “Nearly all my books have weak patches but that is because I’m the kind of writer I am, which means I’m always trying things out and I’m very seldom interested in a perfect book.”\(^7\)
As a means to examine such elements in *love, again*, I shall turn as well to the 2001 fiction *The Sweetest Dream*, which offers a rich area of comparison by way of representing a reclamation of the Condition of England novel and traditional classic realist text. In contrast, *love, again* (rather like *The Golden Notebook’s* rejection of *A Ripple from the Storm’s* novelistic form) marks a repudiation of the seemingly obsolete realist form. It must be stressed that, however different in formal modalities, both novels in their fictional representation of the lives of older women mark what will become an increasingly dominant concern in the twenty-first century. Encapsulating the end of one era for the benefit of the beginning of the next, these two salient stories about older women journey toward the millennium in their recasting of both gender and sexual roles. While *love, again* adopts a complex comparative structural frame to provide some detachment from and perspective on its heroine’s eroticized obsession, *The Sweetest Dream* places—and therefore makes sense of—its heroine’s aging within a specifically political frame of global politics. Another matter to be explored in both books in a comparative way will be the four seemingly simplistic questions I want to pose: When does a novel begin? What’s involved in a novel’s title? When does a novel end? And how do beginning, title, and ending relate to structure?

The structure of any narrative is like the opposite of—say—the carapace of a turtle. You cannot see it, but it determines the shape and nature of the creature—rather in the way a seagull’s skeleton determines its wingspan and thus flight pattern. And the effects of the narrative structure are experienced over time, a long time. *The Sweetest Dream* amounts to 479 pages while *love, again* clocks in at 352 pages. And the reader’s experience of those many pages typically oscillates between confident expectation and desultory distance. This is true of most narratives, for, as Frank Kermode has observed, “any fiction of some length and complication . . . contains parts that are ignored when any reader [experiences and] thinks of the whole.” Which is to say that a whole sequence amounts to more than the sum of its parts and, certainly, the plot’s sequential episodes. For while the *love, again* narrative moves from first to last page without chapter breaks, pursuing a helixlike course, this old sweet song at twilight turns out to be no “love story.” And it certainly is not a single or monologic story.

As readers of *love, again* know, the sixty-five-year-old protagonist, Sarah Durham, is handsome, sensible, cool, collected, her daily life revolving round a successful career as a writer/administrator for a London fringe theater. That theater, The Green Parrot, becomes infatuated with a recently recovered feminist Julie Vairon, a late-nineteenth-century Martinique quadroon, living her...
adult and last years in France’s Midi. Her haunting music, and coolly intelligent journals, become the germinating seeds for an operatic play Durham writes while others attend to its production and eventual performances. As casting and then rehearsals for the production get under way in the magical hot summer of 1985, the entire company—not slowly, but surely—surrenders to Julie’s erotic enticements. Stephen Ellington-Smith, a wealthy arts patron, confesses to Sarah that he has been—and for some time—desperately in love with the long-dead woman; thus his financial support of as well as engaged commitment to the enterprise. Sarah is described, as few other novelists might have the courage to so depict a woman past her prime, as having reached “the heights of common sense . . . the evenly lit unproblematical uplands where there are no surprises,” thus giving twenty-first-century novelists permission to write of older women beyond such unfavorable platitudes as the haranguing hag, withering widow, or sulfuric witch. Yet Sarah allows herself to become obsessed by a twenty-eight-year-old narcissistic actor, the bisexual Bill who is playing one of Julie’s lovers. Following that assaultive coup de foudre, Sarah discovers that Andrew, the forty-year-old actor playing another of Julie’s lovers, has fallen in love with her. And she more deeply in love with Henry, the thirty-five-year-old American director of the play. For while Mann’s Death in Venice is one of a host of intertextual allusions—by my count sixty-five—and an appropriate one for love, again’s meditation on old age and romantic seizure, Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream or Austen’s Emma best invokes the atmosphere where the other and many—six more to my count—character actors and producers become besotted with one another, including the actress Molly McGuire playing Julie, who falls in love with the play’s patron, Ellington-Smith.

Love, again’s whole sequence amounts to more than a sum of its parts, for as Sarah—and thus the novelist, Lessing—reflect, we each have our own to-be-excavated story, though it may not occupy a centrality of position, jostling as each does with yet another. Subsidiary characters, Jean-Pierre, a French mayor who sponsors the Julie Vairo festival in Provence, a wealthy American backer, Benjamin Greenfield, who finds his own erotic release in artistic ventures, Sonia, a theater producer (sharp, decidedly young and female and impatient to shake up the Green Parrot’s old regime), Stephen’s echt Oxfordshire wife, Elizabeth, with her lesbian liaison Norah Daniels, are among the subplots, two of which erupt more and more strenuously as the novel moves toward its conclusion—that of Hal, Sarah’s pompous, selfish brother, who by any social-class register represents a patriarchal pillar of the British establishment. Then too there is Joyce, his misfit daughter, anorexic, drug-drawn and dirty, whom Sarah—in a recasting of the surrogate mother/
daughter dyad of The Memoirs of a Survivor or If the Old Could, as well as The Sweetest Dream—takes on as her responsibility.

If plot has been defined by a contemporary critic, J. Hillis Miller, as “the neat folding together of elaborate narrative materials [a complication and an unraveling or denouement] in a single resolution, leaving every story line tucked in,” then love, again’s plot differs from its structure. The former, with its narrative unity of beginning, middle, and end, is represented by the protagonist’s coming of age. Nothing much actually happens to Sarah Durham, though readers nearly smart in the brine of her anguish, into which we are constantly submerged. She inhabits a region of inconsolable need, longing, and grief, entering the state of desire the older woman had thought solely the prerogative of younger ones. The love depicted here can be likened to a fire in the blood, “Lessing align[ing] herself with the medieval pre-romantic tradition that considers love a sickness, from which one must eventually recover.” True as this gloss is, readers again are struck by Lessing’s millennial prescience in embodying that kind of romantic obsession and inflamed eroticism in a sixty-five-year-old woman. In the ensuing year’s inspection of her past, “trying to shine light into the dark places” (349), Sarah Durham will come to recognize that the state of emotional disarray one describes as being in love has its generative source in early infancy: the adult state of anguish is not only “what a baby feels when it is hungry and wants its mother” but also “the baby’s longing for something just out of its memory” (350). At the end of her year’s ordeal, she remains celibate: the aged female.

Plot, however, must be distinguished from structure, as we remember waslimply the case in The Golden Notebook. Love, again is a sister text of The Golden Notebook. “Like the story of Anna Wulf, The Golden Notebook’s protagonist, Sarah’s experience is doubled by that of [Julie Vairoj], the imagined woman Sarah is writing about.” And this double-decker strategy of storytelling amounts to love, again’s narrative structure. Anna’s double, Ella, the heroine of Anna’s novel “The Shadow of the Third,” lives contemporaneously, sharing Anna’s historical time and gendered station. Shaped by the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, Julie’s life (1865–1912) is transparently different from that of the “free woman,” whom Sarah embodies. Illegitimate daughter to an upper-class French estate owner in the West Indies and his mulatto mistress, Julie is educated beyond her rank, “her prospects and even her possibilities” (16), only to fall in love with Paul Imbert, an army officer, and accompany him on his return to France. True to the epoch’s conventions, his family determines on an appropriate wife, Julie being thrust aside. She falls more deeply in love with Remy Rostand, a French aristocrat, who, in turn, must marry for station, not love. Thenceforth, she lives in soli-
tude, her modest cottage sequestered in a forest of cypress and pine, with a nearby insistent and audible river coursing toward a whirlpool. Occasionally, she tutors the children of surrounding landowners while always she writes music, draws, paints, and keeps a remarkable journal, whose cold intelligence—like her second-period music—makes counterpoint by way of near cruel commentary on erotic raptures and the negative excitement of romantic obsession. Still young when the bourgeois master printer, Phillipe Angers, asks her to marry him, and on the cusp of marriage—the conventional ending to a nineteenth-century novel—Julie kills herself by drowning, thereby fulfilling that other conventional closure to a nineteenth-century novel—as we know from, for example, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* or Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth.*

Julie Vairon’s life acts as a template for the contemporary romances that do not, of course, run smoothly. While belonging to “the genre of . . . storytelling represented by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* [and] A. S. Byatt’s *Possession,*” like the structure of *The Golden Notebook* with its embedded notebooks, *love, again* interleaves the melancholy tales of the (fictional) entries from Julie’s journals, written necessarily in the first person, their insertions indicated typographically in italics. The tactic used to shift from Sarah Durham’s internal focalizing consciousness to the entries themselves is a narrative voice in the third person, diegetically placing the frame:

Remarks about her future husband continue, and they are calm, sensible, one could say respectful. There is, however, an entry describing a day in her married life. I shall wake up in that comfortable bed beside him, when the maid comes in to do the fire. . . . A week before the mayor . . . was to marry them . . . she drowned herself in the pool where the gossips said she had killed her baby. (25)

In contrast to *The Golden Notebook’s* notebooks, which engender a fictional recasting in “Free Women,” Julie’s journal fragments engender their duplication in Sarah’s life. *L*ove, *a*gain’s “narrative unfolds on several levels and each level repeats the same patterns . . . [Sarah’s] infatuations echo[ing] those of Julie Vairon.” Julie’s three loves become Sarah’s three loves. Julie’s music, with its “uncomfortable patterns of sound, continually repeating but not exactly, changed by a note or a tone [with a] sequence of notes [being] changed into a different mode” (71), becomes the pattern for the narrative structure that is provided in *love, again,* with its multiple repetition with variation on the none too innocuous matter of falling in love. Julie’s cool and crystalline journals are matched by the dry accusations and critical commen-
tary Sarah turns upon her own experience of being romantically in love. One example from the perspective of Sarah’s monologue with herself:

I could easily jump off a cliff. . . . People killing themselves for love do it because they can’t stand the pain. Physical pain. I have never understood that before. The broken heart. But why should an emotional hurt manifest itself as a physical anguish? Surely that is a very strange thing. (216)

Julie’s spinning down into her death in the river’s whirlpool is recast in Sarah’s descent, deep and deeper into a psychic whirlpool, with “forgotten selves . . . appearing like bubbles in boiling liquid” (212), as she observes and concludes: “She was obviously dissolving into some kind of boiling soup, but presumably would reshape at some point” (212). The Julie Vairon tale acts finally as the inverse template for the conclusion, but not closure, of a contemporary tale about women released from the poison that is love denied. No female fatality, Sarah Durham is a survivor; she knows that, in order to ward against “the dangerous animal that might attack from an unexpected place” (342), she must never relax vigilance.

“When does a novel begin?” was another question I posed. For the reader the novel begins with its opening sentence: “Easy to think this was [italics mine] a junk room silent and airless in a warm dusk, but then a shadow moved, someone emerged from it to pull back curtains and throw open windows” (1). This set piece of description of the room gives us the primary psychological setting of the story; readers will come to learn that the inventory of the room is an inventory of the protagonist’s sensibility, a sensibility that will undergo change, including the excavation of hypocritical memory. When does a novel’s beginning end? Is it the first paragraph? The first chapter? But this novel has no chapters.

Deliberately and as distanced as a camera’s long shot, the external narrative voice—what I shall call the Eye/Voice—advises in the second sentence: “It was [italics mine] a woman, who now stepped quickly to a door and went out, leaving it open” (1). And fifteen sentences later, still in the past tense and still impersonal, the Eye/Voice observes, “not a young woman . . . a woman of a certain age, as the French put it, or even a bit older” (1). Lucid, measured, objective with ironic implication concealed beneath the dry, cool tone, the Eye/Voice is silenced when it is cut across by a recording of the love plaint of the troubadour, Countess Die:

I must sing, whether I will or not:
I feel so much pain over him whose friend I hold myself,
For I love him more than anything that is . . . (2)

Although the not-young woman has yet to be named, the voice of the protagonist herself seeps into the discourse, displacing the judicious voice of the narratorial Eye/Voice. Readers are now placed in the focalizing consciousness of Sarah Durham, experiencing for the first time the novel’s adopted narrative strategy of moving from Eye to I, from omniscient narrator to limited consciousness, from the diegetic to the mimetic. “The Countess Die was too disturbing . . . she was altogether too much affected by this old troubadour and trouvère music . . . she was restless, and she was feverish” (2–3). With the arrival of Stephen Ellington-Smith and the second frame of the Julie Vairo tale, love, again’s beginning ends and the plot proper begins. Without question, the novel has—to quote Lessing again—“a rather complicated structure.”

A complicated structure intimately tied to its title. A novel’s title is part of its text, the first part of it, in fact, that readers encounter—and therefore has the abiding ability to compel as well as condition our initial response. Here it is not the name of the central character, as in Moll Flanders, Tom Jones, Clarissa, or—for that matter—Martha Quest. As title, love, again could mark a theme, as do Austen’s Sense and Sensibility, Golding’s The Inheritors, and Lessing’s Briefing for a Descent into Hell. But it has been hitched to a resonant musical quotation: Marlene Dietrich’s lifelong signature song. It appears on the front page in this double-decker novel as “love, again a novel,” both inscribed deliberately in lower case. Using a novel as part of its title is a first, according to my review of past Lessing titles. Is its presence here a pointer to that capaciousness of a literary form that she has, frequently, declared to be “much more truthful” than autobiography? Or is it a gesture toward the mercurial fictiveness of the writing enterprise itself, which in this case demanded the repudiation of the classic realist text?

But before readers begin the beginning of love, again a novel, we are made to move through five initial computerlike windows: one-page salaams to eight “great cartographers” of sexual passion, including Proust, Colette, and Goethe. A second window, the acknowledgment page, lists twenty-five writers from D. H. Lawrence through Aphra Behn and Andrew Marvell. A third window opens to quote a verse from William Butler Yeats’s “Memory,” his Maud Gonne plaint of unrequited love. A fourth window opens with the title, sans its informing double a novel. And a fifth and final window quotes a fragment from Dietrich’s crystalline “I’m falling in love again, Never wanted to . . . .” My guess is these five windows, in conjunction with the double-decker structure and the double-decker narratorial shift from the
7: love, again, and The Sweetest Dream

detachment of the omniscient Eye/ Voice to the writhing, burning intensity of
the focalizing voice, are directed toward Lessing’s long-announced conviction
that the personal is never primary.

Precisely such a terrain belongs to the classic realist text whose subject is
always the ongoing life of society, where individual lives are enmeshed within
political, economic, and historical encomia. And if the sister text of love,
again is The Golden Notebook, then The Sweetest Dream gains by being
in sororial affinity to The Four-Gated City. (In this comparison, however,
one must set aside the latter’s speculative “APPENDIX”.) 37 Responding to
cultural, political, psychological, sexual, and intellectual change, both The
Four-Gated City and The Sweetest Dream represent long-standing narrative
critiques of postwar Britain, with The Sweetest Dream giving fictional shape
to large social questions and to the individual’s experience of them as either
coercive or liberating. A documentation, depiction, and diagnosis of three
decades ranging from the so-called Swinging Sixties through the eighties with
their ethic of greed, this capacious canvas has characters enough to embar-
rass a nineteenth-century Russian novel. (By my count, there are thirty-two
named characters, one of whom, the African President Matthew Mungozi,
makes his initial appearance on page three hundred and sixty, viz., ninety-
eight pages before the fiction’s end.)

The Sweetest Dream’s central figure is Frances Lennox, a divorced
woman writer in her forties with two adolescent sons. Distinctly different
from love, again’s mapping of its heroine’s movement from the whirlpool
perils of romantic obsession in her journey toward detachment, The Sweet-
est Dream places the aging of its heroine over three decades in an explic-
itly political frame. At the same time, in The Sweetest Dream’s recasting of
the Angel in the House, 38 Frances Lennox is figured as the manager of her
sons’ friends, most of whom are deranged, melancholic, confused, and cer-
tainly disaffected. Indeed, it is a carnival cast of misfits that wanders through
her house and Lessing’s text: druggies; an anorexic stepdaughter; discarded
wives; adolescent dropouts swaddled in sleeping bags; indulged and infran-
tile “kids” who shoplift on principle, “liberating” Biba dresses or expensive
books because all property is theft; Rose, a vicious tabloid journalist; weak,
unhappy sons—such as Colin—who drink too much; corpulent and corrupt
African politicians and civil servants; fat cats who work for international
agencies such as “Global Money” and “Caring International.” Then there is
Frances’s former husband, Johnny Lennox, a selfish, dishonest, greedy, vain,
and all too seductive Communist Party comrade. True to its alignment with
the realist text’s focus on the forces and institutions that decide the course of
lives, The Sweetest Dream presents the seventies, which from one end of the
(non-Communist) world to the other was to have bred “a race of Che Guevara clones” (188). Here universities—particularly those in London, as the text insists—are presented caustically as in “almost continuous celebration of Revolution, with demonstrations, riots, sit-ins, lockouts, battles of all kinds.” Seething everywhere were these young heroes:

and Johnny had become a grand old man, and the fact that he was an almost entirely unrepentant Stalinist had a certain limited chic among these youngsters who mostly believed that if Trotsky had won the battle for power with Stalin then communism would have worn a beatific face. (188)

Its title suggesting not theme so much as occluded irony and regret, The Sweetest Dream represents a plural text where, instead of love, again’s competing narrative frames, in this novel there are competing narrative focalizations. Disparate, yet interlocking, vocal strands emerge from the constantly shifting points of view. However, three presiding women, each of a different (therefore antagonistic) generation, dominate. Frances Lennox—the text’s primary focalizer—is an especially conscientious mother. In the novel’s opening episode, she stands in her kitchen, an inviting table set for sixteen before her, cooking potatoes flavored with celeriac, creamed spinach, buttered carrots, wine-basted lamb stew, providing food to youngsters she was convinced “did not eat ‘properly’ unless it was at this table” (14). Cape gooseberries, lychees, passion fruit, guavas, Stilton cheese will come to follow as the years are transcribed: “These days there would be nothing remarkable in the witty little spread . . . a swallow visiting from the plenitudes of the future,” as Frances will come to think (87). (As a self-consciously realist novel about London during the three decades, The Sweetest Dream lets us, for example, remember and relish the sixties specifics of Biba mini dresses, Vidal Sassoon haircuts, Elizabeth David recipes for Poulet farci en cocotte or Dindonneau farci aux marrons mode d’Artois.)

Frances Lennox is the all too familiar Lessing figure, the reliable maternal woman: the middle-aged wise woman who undertakes the responsibilities of households, the fatigued manager who organizes food, spooning out suppers and suggestions and becoming, mostly, a sponge for the discordant needs and demands round her table. To compare Sarah Durham with this character is to recognize just how much the protagonist of love, again is, by way of her solitary valiance, a singularly different kind of heroine and how very much the narrative strategies of the two novels differ, despite the fact that each addresses the resolute realities of women as they age.

Kitchen, basement, attic, storied house of many rooms, the once elegant
Hampstead home *The Sweetest Dream*’s extended family inhabits is another familiar trope, that of the house as cultural, political, and economic metonym for nation. Each level, indeed each room, serves as the repository for what amount to the competing political posturings and passions of the sixties—from unreconstructed Stalinism, to libertarianism, the New Left, and women’s liberations. The upper regions are occupied by Frances’s ex-mother-in-law, the German-born patrician Julia Lennox. The ex-daughter-in-law resides a level below, and the two grandsons, Andrew and Colin Lennox, one more level below.

No one said, “Why does Julia need four rooms?” The house was hers. This rackety over-full house, people coming and going, sleeping on floors, bringing friends whose names she often did not know, had at its top an alien zone, which was all order.

Frances and Julia are the dominating presences in the first two decades. Frances’s ex-husband Johnny Lennox’s stepdaughter, Sylvia, presides over the last decade, the novel having abruptly departed for Zimlia, the newly independent African nation, clearly based on Lessing’s Zimbabwe. Sylvia, now in adulthood a qualified doctor, flies there as a missionary angel to heal the sick in a village, and to set up a rudimentary school and clinic. Such is the large scope of this novel that readers are pulled into this increasingly corrupt country, where a wholly narratorial voice, neither neutral nor impersonal, judges.

And Zimlia, ill-governed before on ill-digested Marxism and tigs and tags of dogma, or remembered sentences from textbooks on economics, now rapidly plunged into corruption. Immediately currency began its steady, but rapid devaluation. In Senga [Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital city] the fat cats got fatter everyday and out in places like Kwandere [Sylvia’s village] money that had descended into a trickle now dried up altogether.

Here the shattered dream implied by *The Sweetest Dream*’s title is African liberation, with Sylvia facing daily the fact of greed, poverty, incompetence, and—in her capacity as a physician in an impoverished rural Catholic mission—the slim sickness, which in the early eighties (President Mugabe having declared AIDS an invention of the whites) was misdiagnosed as pneumonia, tuberculosis, diarrhea, skin lesions.

That it is the character Sylvia Lennox who comes to manage this African mission—so far away from the multitudinous gifts, capacities, and excesses
of London and starving for food, medicines, books—is particularly apt. For it is through her figure that the novel turns its implicit indictment of the wastefulness and indolence of the non-African world. In adolescence an anorexic, sitting at Frances Lennox’s groaning table with its chicken stews, breads, cheeses in Julia Lennox’s house with its solidity, safety, permanence, “each room so full of things that had an exact purpose, serving a need among a multiplicity of needs” (367), Sylvia had to be literally nursed back to life through the ministrations of the two competent women, Frances and Julia. That anorexia prefigures the starvation Sylvia will come to know in Africa, Zimlia being the recipient of incompetent ministrations from abroad: donations from a “Global Money” or “Caring International” are as extravagant and useless as, for example, grandiose tractors by the hundreds that will rot and rust for want of spare parts, fuel, know-how.

The terrible waifs, druggies, thieves, and middle-class dropouts who once bickered round Frances’s table, subscribing to the various dogmas of universal liberal idealism, become players in the world. In adulthood they are as uninformed, indulgent, and self-absorbed as they were in adolescence. Only now there are dangerous consequences, as we discover when they are reintroduced in The Sweetest Dream’s African section. Andrew Lennox has become a preening, besuited “Caring International” delegate living in luxury hotels, while Rose Trimble has grown fat as a muckraking journalist who (for a purpose) pleases Zimlia’s Marxist regime, slandering the family she had sponged off in earlier years to satisfy her adolescent envy of and rage against the privileged Lennox household. Thus, to further her career, Rose ends Sylvia’s work at the Mission hospital by writing a smear piece charging Sylvia with being a close associate of a deported South African spy. “Sylvia was a doctor, people knew she had created a hospital in the bush where none had existed. She had fallen foul of the government, too bad,” as the narrative voice stonily summarizes (446).

Unproblematic as is The Sweetest Dream’s chronological narrative, its title announces its overall agenda, one set to debunk inherited habits of mind, first fostered by the Communist Party where—according to Lessing’s long-held position—the habit of polarization came to contaminate critical judgment. Thus does this novel anticipate twenty-first-century preoccupations with political correctness and those contrarians who expose its inflexible reductiveness. More unsparingly than in any other of the works, The Sweetest Dream is fueled by the conviction that cant must be exposed and prevailing orthodoxies laid bare. So the vainglorious slogans of sixties radicals are stripped clean along with the self-serving shibboleths of seventies feminists and the righteous rhetoric of eighties anticolonialists. In this densely inhab-
ated Condition of England novel, the consistent object of vilification is the unthinking adherence to dogma that leads believers to commit heinous acts in pursuit of one utopian dream or another.

And how does this huge, brave, contradictory novel end? Returning to the questions first posed, that endings may mark critical points for analyses of plot as well as structure, I would suggest that—in contrast to *love, again*, which merely stops—*The Sweetest Dream* concludes. To the earlier death of Julia—and her representative meaning as an individual shaped by the legacies of two world wars—is added that of Sylvia, whose dream of making a better world had been so sweet she worked herself to death. A chilled and chilling novel, it does show the importance of individual acts of charity—most frequently that unsung labor that is the work of women: Rebecca, the Zimlian housekeeper at the Mission, or Sister Molly, the fiercely independent Irish nun. For all its derisive debunking of politically correct feminism, *The Sweetest Dream* is really about women who simply get on with it. (In keeping with the novel’s conviction that cant must be exposed, neither Rebecca nor Sister Molly would ever describe their work as the kind conventionally expected of women; nor would they countenance the notion of women’s roles, a phrase of which they would not so much disapprove, as deplore.) Julia, Frances, Sylvia: these are the women who engage in small but sustaining acts of philanthropy. So readers are persuaded that the novel’s resolution is a life-affirming one. The novel closes some thirty years after it has begun—in the Hampstead kitchen with a newly configured family group round the deal table—and Frances’s granddaughter Celia, fourth-generation Lennox female, spinning, spinning, spinning. “The little girl did not want to be gathered in and held, she spun around on herself, singing for herself and to herself . . .” (479).

Turning back to *love, again*, *The Sweetest Dream*’s contrasting companion, let me reiterate the question, “When does a novel end?” Conclusions are so frequently the least real part of a novel; “But it wasn’t an end, it wasn’t a real end”—as a young child in A. S. Byatt’s *A Whistling Woman* fiercely protests at the conclusion of a long, intricate, and magical tale. Northanger Abbey’s narrator may famously observe that her “readers will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity” as the final chapter—in characteristic Austen fashion—summarily winds up lives and loves. *L*ove, *again* does not offer such a windup, but something of an open-ended ending. Lessing has her novel stop in the middle of a conversation between Sarah and her two nieces. Apparently they have been talking about their recently divorced father, who is Sarah’s demanding, infantile, and confident brother Hal: “*Please* don’t be too
nice to him,’ Briony said to Sarah, ‘or we’ll never get him married again’” (352). It is the novel’s last sentence.

Readers are left resonantly but ambiguously up in the air. Can this then be the ending of a novel about lust and love in old age? To be sure, readers have revisited the very room we entered on the first page: Sarah discarding the accumulated mementos, thus symbolically stripping away false memories. Just as she has inspected herself before the mirror at the novel’s beginning, so at its ending she interrogates her image, seeing a woman now, after merely one year, ten years older. To be sure, the reader has been offered an epiphanic moment in a penultimate scene where, alone in a London park, Sarah “witnesses a mother whose brutal . . . preference for one of her children [her son and not the older daughter] awakens a suppressed memory [that she too had been] rebuffed and unloved.” Her unquenchable craving for love had this source. So even love, again is informed, even infused, by the figure of Lessing’s mother, the author—then in her seventh decade—still picking at a festering wound long since in need of benign neglect. I remain convinced that such a reductive explanation for the yearnings of erotic need—mapped we will remember by those acknowledged cartographers Proust, Goethe, Richardson—represents yet another of those “weak patches” of a Lessing enterprise. [L]ove, again is a work powerfully strengthened by structural design, thus moving a novel about an older woman’s experience well beyond merely bathetic inventory of the anguished loins of old women.

NOTES

7. Ibid., 93.
9. Lessing, A Ripple from the Storm, vol. 3 of Children of Violence (London:
7: love, again, and The Sweetest Dream


10. With their thumb on the wrist of a population well beyond its first prime (yet healthy and wealthy enough to purchase self-help specialties), publishers have produced a battery of books on many aspects of aging since 2000, including *The New Love and Sex after 60* by Dr. Robert N. Butler and Dr. Myrna I. Lewis (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002). On August 23, 2007, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, in its most comprehensive national survey of sexuality among older Americans, *Love and Sex after 60*, reported that some are active sexually well into their early eighties and many through their sixties. Providing the first clear picture of sexuality in later life, the survey was based on interviews that researchers at The University of Chicago and the University of Toronto undertook with 3005 Americans from fifty-seven to eighty-five years of age. John H. J. Bancroft, “Sex and Aging,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 357.8 (August 23, 2007): 820–22.


12. “Sarah’s male counterpart and close friend . . . [is] so completely in love with his fantasy image of the long-dead Julie that he sees no alternative to suicide” (John Hobbs, “Love, Again,” *America* 175.18 [1996]: 25). One of the germinating seeds for the novel, the nature of grief, came to Lessing (as she remarked during an interview) when she spoke with a friend who had fallen in love with his great-aunt, on seeing her portrait. “When someone tells you something like that, of course, you smile. But it was no laughing matter. I tried to make practical remarks to him, but he wasn’t going to have it. In fact [he] committed suicide.” Helena de Bertodano, “Life Is Stronger than Fiction,” *Daily Telegraph*, April 11, 1996, 5.


26. Describing an inexplicable grief from which she suffered for several months, Lessing observed: “What is interesting is that it expresses itself in physical pain—a heart-
ache so appalling that you could throw yourself off a cliff to get away from it” (de Bertodano, “Life,” 5).


34. Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).

35. “[T]o my surprise, I discovered—in writing my autobiography—that fiction is much more truthful: it’s a question of memory, what is remembered and the huge stuff of what isn’t,” Lessing remarked in an October 1997 reading (which I attended) at New York City’s 92nd Street Y. On the subject of autobiography and the confessional mode, Lessing has been famously cranky, dismissing biographical parallels in works as obviously autobiographical as the Martha Quest series while admonishing critics for not attending to its encoding in The Memoirs of a Survivor, whose title page includes “an attempt at an autobiography.”


39. The speculative pleasure of matching fiction to biographical fact is provided, once again. An “Author’s Note” introduces the text, instructing readers that “I am not writing volume three of my autobiography because of possible hurt to vulnerable people. Which does not mean I have novelized autobiography.” Lessing, The Sweetest Dream, n.p. That disclaimer would seem to follow directly in the footsteps of the last paragraph of her second volume of autobiography, Walking in the Shade. “For about six years,” Lessing writes of life from 1962 to 1968 (during which time was written, not coincidentally, The Four-Gated City with a middle-aged Martha Quest supervising a household of disoriented lives), “I proved my rapport with the times by becoming a housemother—now that is a sixties’ word—for adolescents or young adults who either lived at 60 Charrington Street or came and went. All of them were in some kind of trouble: were ‘disturbed,’ were being seduced by drugs, were alcoholic, were having serious breakdowns, were known to the police” (403). Despite the author’s caveat, novel and autobiography should be conflated, the fictive enterprise merging with Lessing’s life-long engagement in autobiographical fiction. See Robin Visel’s chapter 3 in Part One of this collection, “House/Mother: Lessing’s Reproduction of Realism in The Sweetest Dream,” which also talks about Lessing’s reference to cultural artifacts of the 1960s [editors’ note].
40. Such a metonym for nation is a particularly appropriate trope for the realist novel in its depiction of the social, the political, and the historical. Recalled in this context is not only the Victorian squat in *The Good Terrorist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985) but also the Bloomsbury edifice in *The Four-Gated City* and the seemingly sturdy block of flats in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*.

41. Here a consistent authorial gesture in Lessing’s fiction occurs. The novel’s author savagely indicts Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe, depicted in the character of Comrade President Matthew Mungozi, whose seduction into greed—like that of Mugabe—is likened to other “immensely rich, dissolute and corrupt rulers of the new Africa and new Asia” (365).


44. Bell, “Possessed,” 491.

45. See Ruth Saxton’s discussion of this same theme of maternal deprivation as the source of Sarah’s frustrations in love in her chapter “Sex after Sixty: *love, again* and *The Sweetest Dream*” in Part Four of this volume [editors’ note].