Chapter Eight

Doris Lessing: Introduction

Doris Lessing has often said that she regards her lack of formal education as an advantage, and deplores what she sees as the damage done to children’s imagination and love of literature by current educational practices. In an interview in 1964 she claimed that ‘one of the advantages of not being educated was that I didn’t have to waste time on the second-rate’ and was able to read ‘the classics of European and American literature’. She does concede that ‘there are huge gaps in my education, but I’m nonetheless grateful that it went as it did’ (Newquist 5). She believes that to encourage an interest in literature, young people ‘should be taught in such a way … where they’re encouraged to flit their way from flower to flower … and not be made to write detailed essays about something, because it puts them off’ (Ingersoll 238). She admits that ‘having their writing taught is the price writers have to pay so that academics will help to keep it alive’, but dislikes ‘all this nitpicking’ (Ingersoll 238). This distrust of the academy is certainly connected with her unwillingness to be categorised, but could also arise from an insecure suspicion that her ideas might not stand up under close scrutiny. She denies being a didactic writer, and claims that ‘to tell stories, to read them, to create them, that operates in a completely different mode … . Not intellectually, not ideologically’ (Montremy 196);

I am not seeking to influence the reader, to make him think such-and-such a thing as I do. I would simply like to be able to tell myself that I aroused the reader’s curiosity, that I made the reader more attentive, more alert intellectually, and that following the little therapeutic jolt that reading represents, he asks questions, regardless of what they are. (Rousseau 154)
Her novels, essays and interviews are, however, full of moral judgements and rhetoric, and some of her opinions are illogical and contradictory. A more conventional education may, rather than having ruined her imagination and closed her mind to benign influences, have developed her critical faculty and encouraged her to examine her beliefs and prejudices more coolly before broadcasting them to a readership of ‘devoted fans’ who despite her protests, think of her as ‘a teacher’ (Lessing, ‘Author Chat’ 5).

Writing, for Lessing, is a vocation, a compulsion, a matter of temperament. She believes ‘that children who have had to struggle psychologically have a tendency to be good writers’. She says that as far back as I can remember, I observed, I was aware of what was going on around me, and what was not being said. … Something must have happened to me very early, something which I don’t remember and which determined this temperament, this vocation of the observer on the lookout, this vocation of writer. (Rousseau 153)

She told Thomas Frick, ‘I became a writer because of frustration, the way I think many writers do’ (158). Rather more mundanely, she answered the question ‘What motivates you to write?’ by saying, ‘What motivates me to keep on writing is that I have earned my living from it for the last forty years. I am a work animal’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 200); and she told Ingersoll in 1993, ‘I have to write: it’s a neurosis. … I get out of balance … if I don’t write’ (240). She tends not to dwell on the question, answering fairly briefly when asked, but she insists that writing comes from a quest to understand, not an impulse to teach.

The creative process is mysterious to her: ‘there’s a sense … in which one is surprised by what comes out. You can set a thing up as much as you like, but it’s different when you do it’ (Gray 115). She talks of ‘working on a
certain book in my head and I’m watching very wryly how this raw thing is going to take shape. There’s nothing to be done about it’ (Thomson 190). On a more optimistic note, however, she believes that ‘a lot of writers, when they write, are much cleverer than when they are not writing, because I do think you tune into ideas, or sensations of some kind’ (Forde 217). The detachment, the feeling of one part of the mind watching another, is nevertheless still present: ‘If you take certain stories … and visualize what the stories say, and watch what your mind does, you learn a very great deal about yourself’ (Forde 217). In this way she discovered ‘a pattern of disaster’ (218) in her mind that she thinks arises from the second world war, and that characterises her writing. Her characters sometimes come from life, but others, ‘well, I don’t know where they come from. They just spring from my own consciousness, perhaps the subconscious, and I’m surprised as they emerge’ (Newquist 4-5). The act of writing is for her not difficult; she admits to being ‘too prolific’ (Howe 434); but asked about the diversity of her writing career, and her constant experiments with different forms and genres, she laughingly replied that she has been ‘obsessed, all the time, with ordering reality’ (‘It Wasn’t Quite So Simple’).

Her struggle to deal with her readers’ interpretations of her work is well illustrated by the case of The Golden Notebook. She was so concerned with what she regarded as misinterpretations of this novel, published in 1962, that she gave an interview to Florence Howe in 1966 specifically ‘because she wanted to say things about The Golden Notebook to American readers’ (419); she wrote a new Preface to the novel for the 1971 edition, explaining her intentions and deploring the inferences of her readers; and even in 1981, she
was still distressed by the fact that ‘hardly any of my readers has seemed prepared to see the book as a whole’ (Schwarzkopf 102). Eleven years later, she has finally accepted that her ‘intellectual statement’ in the novel was so overwhelmed by the ‘blast of energy’ in which it was written that ‘something else came across, and that is what affects people. So I don’t get cross at all now’ (Forde 216). Nevertheless, since the publication of *The Fifth Child* in 1988, she has often expressed a pained surprise at the variety of interpretations it has generated. ‘I don’t know any writer who isn’t continually astonished at what we’re supposed to be up to,’ she told Thomson (191). Leaving the question of odd allegorical interpretations aside, though, she has insisted to a number of interviewers that Ben is not evil, ‘merely someone who’s in the wrong place’ (Ingersoll 235). She tries to console herself for her anxiety at ‘how far apart the intention of the author and the comprehension of the reader can be’ with the thought ‘that a book is a living thing which can bear many kinds of fruit’ (Schwarzkopf 103), but the frequency with which the subject arises in interviews, and her propensity to write forewords, prefaces, author’s notes and afterwords to her fiction demonstrates that she has not entirely rid herself of this concern. As she told Bigsby, ‘if you write a book which you don’t see as moral believe me your readers do, and that’s something that I can’t ever quite come to terms with’ (‘Need’ 72).

Her perfect reader would ‘look at what a writer has to offer and take what is offered – not complain that he’s not doing something else’ (Ingersoll 232). Depending on what she is writing, she is more or less conscious of her audience: ‘if you write a book like *African Laughter*, you have to be aware. If you write a book like *The Four-Gated City*, you don’t think about what’s out
there, because it spoils what you’re inventing’ (240). Asked what advice she had for young writers, she replied, ‘You have to create those readers who want to read you. How? The only way is to write absolutely honestly about your own experiences and not think about it’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 203). Writing some of her work, however, she has deliberately tried ‘to reach the youth’ (Raskin 13), and has found that they are more open to her non-realistic stories, especially the space fiction (see Gray 118). In general, she believes that as a reader ‘you should not bring your own agendas to a book. You should not be looking for your political messages, your own ideas. On the contrary, you should be rather passive. You should allow no barrier between yourself and what the author is saying’ (Kurzweil, ‘Evening’ 16).

Her idea of what makes a good novel is rather harder to establish, because it is not a question in which she is particularly interested. She told Dean, ‘I don’t believe all that much in perfect novels. What’s marvelous about novels is that they can be anything you like. That is the strength of the novel. There are no rules’ (90-1); and ‘there is a place for novels that have ideas and shake people up and then die’ (93). She is impatient with ‘these forms that we set up for ourselves’, but recognises that the novel has to leave much of reality out, and this was the impetus for The Golden Notebook: ‘Every writer’s tormented by this kind of thing because we know that as soon as you start framing a novel, then things get left out’ (Gray 115). This despair fed into the form of the novel:

You see, actually that [the ‘Free Women’ section] is an absolutely whole conventional novel and the rest of the book is the material that went into making it. … One of the things I was saying was, well, look, this is a conventional novel … . There it is, 120,000 words; it’s got a nice shape and the reviewers will say this and that. And the bloody complexity that went into it and it’s always a lie. And the terrible
despair. So you’ve written a good novel or a moderate novel, but what does it actually say about what you’ve actually experienced. That truth is, absolutely nothing. (Howe 428)

She herself, nevertheless, reads ‘a lot of novels with the aim of informing myself’ because ‘regardless of its possible literary qualities, a novel supplies us with a fund of information’ (Rousseau 150). She tends to describe rather than prescribe: she is much more likely to use the phrase ‘a novel is …’ than the phrase ‘a novel should’; for instance, she told Montremy,

the novel is whatever each author makes of it. There are no ‘tricks’. It simply exists – tries to exist in what is being written. That could take the form of a vast architecturally complex composition or a simple linear novel in accordance with whatever is happening at the moment in which it’s being written; (196)

and in the New Straits Times discussion, she said, ‘I enjoy reading and it continues to be a great adventure. A novel is so unpredictable; it comes up with so much’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 202). But finally in 1992 she was drawn to say, ‘I do think a novel should have that quality that good novels do have that makes you think about life. Forgive me for the cliches, but it should enlarge your mind and not narrow it’ (Upchurch 222).

As for the broader picture, ‘one begins with the idea of transforming society … through literature and then, when nothing happens, one feels a sense of failure’ (Oates, ‘One Keeps Going’ 38). At first, she says, she ‘firmly believed’ that being a writer meant ‘changing the world. I saw it as my duty to be politically active, to take the field against injustice, and wherever I went, standing or sitting, to discuss political subjects’. However, she later realised that

the writer is nothing but an isolated voice in the wilderness. Many hear it; most pass by. It has taken a long time for me to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day. They only waste their energy senselessly and bar
their vision from the universal themes of humanity which know neither
time nor space. … All ideologies are deceptive and serve only a few,
not people in general. (Schwarzkopf 105)

With *The Golden Notebook*, she says, she ‘wanted to tell a story which neither
political positions nor sociological analyses were capable of exhausting’, not a
‘treatise on feminine stereotypes of the ’60s’ (Montremy 193). She is
impatient of the fact that ‘all writers get asked by interviewers this question:
“Do you think a writer should … ?” The question always has to do with a
political stance. Note that the assumption behind the words is that all writers
should do the same thing’ (Kurzweil, ‘Unexamined’ 205). In response to one
critic, who called ‘her ventures from realism into science fiction … “a plain
evasion of her duty”’, she ‘belligerently defends her right to do whatever she
likes: “There is no such thing as duty. You write something and people either
like it or they don’t”’ (Bertodano). To close her interview with Josephine
Hendin in 1972, she quoted Tolstoy: ‘“the function of art is to make that
understood which in the form of argument would be incomprehensible”, … and
that is what I feel about writing’ (56).

In order to convey her ideas, she has sometimes found it necessary to
adapt her style. She is uneasy about language:

Words are contaminated, full of traditional associations, above all in
psychology, in religion, in the interior world … Hence, I find myself
forced to write by analogy, in order to avoid the mundane. *Memoirs of
a Survivor* is the direct result of my meditating about the inadequacy of
language. I write as in legends or in fairy tales, by means of metaphors
and analogies. (Torrents 66-7)

Talking to C.J. Driver in 1978, she gave several reasons for what he calls the
‘deliberate clumsiness’ of her style:

First, she used the image of digging with a small spade in a huge pile of
sand; if she were to take sides in the life/art debate, she would
obviously take the side of life: that is, she always tries to validate her
vision of things by referring to the contingent world, even when her work is at its most visionary. … She is more concerned with the validity her vision of life gives her work than with any kind of inner artistic consistency. …

Then, when she started writing, she had had very little formal education … ‘A lot of the bad grammar, the strange punctuation, the clumsiness of my first things was simply a function of my lack of education’ …

Thirdly, her method of work contributes. She spends a great deal of time thinking about her work before she writes anything; then she does a rough sketch very fast indeed; then she re-writes the sketch at great length, though still obviously working at a pace that would alarm most writers; then she cuts a great deal; and then ‘I don’t polish it – that would be entirely the wrong word, because in a way I roughen it; I try to get it simple, clear, which for me is the same as getting it right’. (19-20)

She agreed when Driver also suggested to her, inter alia, that ‘the apparent clumsiness is often the clumsiness of a character’s desire to express to herself, or himself, exactly what she, or he, is perceiving, thinking, feeling’ (20). Many of her sentences end with ‘… what?’ The questioning, the groping for the correct word, thus becomes part of her prose style. She believes that all her books ‘indicate, sometimes in spite of myself, the existence in us of an inexpressible dimension stronger than the theories through which we may attempt to channel it’ (Montremy 198). Her most important technique for expressing the inexpressible is to attempt to interrogate not only facts and phenomena but language itself to achieve her ultimate aim, ‘a truthful book’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 203), even though

I am forced to recognize again and again how fast language encounters boundaries. How, for example, can deep perceptions be clothed convincingly in words? That’s where language begins to limp deplorably and realizing this, I plunge sometimes into a creative crisis. (Schwarzkopf 106)

She is not at all reluctant to use symbolism, and ‘treasure[s] parables, metaphors, fables, and allegories … literary forms that are simple yet excellent in suiting my purposes of explaining the most profound spiritual phenomena’
(Schwarzkopf 106). She feels no compulsion to be original in her symbolism:

all the Jungian archetypes which appear in The Memoirs of a Survivor, for example, are intentionally familiar, if not hackneyed. She said to Bikman,

Now you can go through a writer’s work and say, ‘Writer X is fascinated by the symbol’ – I don’t know, a rose or a seagull. But what is interesting is not that there should be a rose or a seagull or a teacup or whatever, but what use is made of it, how it develops. Because it can be a metaphor in one book and it can be something quite specific in another. (61)

Symbolism, then, can help when language becomes a barrier, as it were helping the writer to bypass the reader’s intellect and reach the unconscious mind.

Freedom is a difficult concept for Lessing. She ironically entitled her novel within The Golden Notebook ‘Free Women’, and demonstrated how Anna and Molly, although in one sense free of normal conventions like marriage, are absolutely bound by their connections with others, especially their lovers and their children:

I was simply trying to understand what was happening to us, to all of us, who refused to live according to ‘conventional morality’. And who all encountered, nevertheless, many difficulties, submissive to the point of absurdity in our need to proclaim our freedom. (Montremy 198)

‘We want it all to be simple, on a platter,’ she said to Torrents in 1980, ‘… but we have forgotten that no one owes us anything and that pain and sacrifice are necessary to find the right path, for moral equilibrium’ (69). She argues with Bigsby about the determinism he sees in her work:

While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present. (‘Need’ 76)

Freedom is constrained but still real:

I think that the patterns of people’s lives are determined by their society and by their characters and upbringing, of course. But what I’m
interested in in people is not what makes them like everybody else, and what you can expect because they had this and that upbringing, but something else that can fight them out of it or make them different. (Bertelsen 132)

She denies that she intentionally expresses a fatalistic view that ‘there is no point in playing a role in the social world or indeed in attempting to intervene in history at all’, or that, in her space fiction, ‘individuals seem to be admired to the extent that they realize that their chief function is to submerge themselves in a generality’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 75). Also, she says that ‘despite a certain spiritual and moral superiority over the Earthlings, my denizens of distant galaxies are finally equal to us human beings again’ (Schwarzkopf 107). She did admit to Michael Dean, however, that she had always felt herself ‘sitting in judgment of [her] civilization … and perhaps it’s not much use’ (87). She can feel strongly about issues, but is more interested in understanding than judging:

When I am passionately angry about something, I think that something is terribly wrong and something else is terribly right, and I identify with the right and I can hate the wrong. This produces this pure flame of energy. But it’s extremely suspect, and I try to suppress it, because life isn’t like that, not at all. (Bertelsen 142)

Considering specific issues in isolation, such as European colonisation of Africa, takes too narrow a view to be just: ‘If you’re going to say in Southern Africa that the problem is that the whites want to enslave the blacks and that’s the end of it, you’re overlooking a great deal else’, such as that the black regime in Nigeria was corrupt and ‘not a paradise’, and that ‘India is as full of … color prejudice as anywhere’ (Bertelsen 125).

There is a tension, in much of Lessing’s writing, between the simple black and white picture, the ‘pure flame of energy’ of fanaticism and righteousness, and the knowledge that ‘life is not like that, not at all’. This
tension is possibly the most interesting thing about Lessing as a writer. She has been attracted in her lifetime to the party line, the belief in a utopia just around the corner, but as she says, ‘I never wished to offer a program of ideas or behavior guides. If I had been in possession of such programs I certainly never would have written’ (Montremy 193). Her being a writer made her finally unable to sustain her communist beliefs: a writer like Lessing cannot fail to be aware that life is not simple enough to be explained by the economic view of man: ‘When I was in the Communist Party years ago, everything was pushing me toward what was called “the great problems of the hour”. But I sensed that in my books it was also a matter of another thing, a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious’ (Montremy 197). But her attraction to communism is as much a part of her essential nature as her urge to write; and her urge to explain ‘simply’ what she was trying to do in novels like *The Golden Notebook* and *The Fifth Child* similarly comes into conflict with her desire to let her readers be stimulated by her work and make up their own minds. She is an inveterate rhetorician who despises rhetoric.

In the following chapters I look at some of these contradictions as they affect her fictional writing. The first chapter concentrates on an early story set in Africa. In the long story ‘Hunger’, Lessing was explicitly attempting a simple morality tale about right and wrong, and she believes it was a failure. I examine to what extent it succeeds and fails, on her own terms, and also in a broader ‘post-colonial’ context. The second chapter looks at conflicting ideas of the individual and universality of experience in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, a novel which Lessing described as ‘an attempt at autobiography’. Thirdly, I look at the extremes of distance in her novels of the 1970s and 1980s; the
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*Canopus in Argos* series on the one hand, and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* on the other. The questions of determinism and individuals’ control over and responsibility for their own actions are important in these novels, and the vast range of different points of view they dramatise makes an interesting case study in this fruitful area of creative tension.
Chapter Nine

Doris Lessing’s ‘Settler’s Problem’: The Ethics of Representation in ‘Hunger’.

Doris Lessing’s background as a child of English settlers in Southern Rhodesia gives her critics a whole line of attack which seems to have no relevance for a more ‘central’ English author like Iris Murdoch. Africa is (or was at the beginning of her writing career) a vital source of her inspiration as a writer – what she called in the Preface to her second volume of African Stories the ‘landscape which is always there’ (Sun 11), but her stories of the settler life she knew have drawn the attention of post-colonial critics. Anthony Beck, for example, in his article ‘Doris Lessing and the Colonial Experience’, writes that ‘there is little in the way of overtly hostile judgements made by the author about her characters, only a wry, detached observation which adds up to very little by way of the condemnation of white racialism’, and that ‘there is noticeably little sign of any radical alienation from the values and attitudes of the English colonial establishment’ (66-7). Lessing might repeat to him what she said to an interviewer in 1986, ‘What you want me to do is to write didactic novels’ (Bertelsen 125). He seems to have missed the biting satire which is directed against the white population in stories such as ‘A Home for the Highland Cattle’ and ‘The Black Madonna’; the latter story, Lessing writes, ‘is full of the bile that is produced in me by the thought of “white” society in Southern Rhodesia as I knew and hated it’ (Sun 11). Beck goes on, later in his essay, to say that sociological surveys conducted in the late 1950s and 1960s exhibited ‘a remarkable congruence’ (72) with her portrait of Southern Rhodesian society. It seems to surprise him that a perceptive writer of fiction can observe society with a truth that matches the findings of sociologists.

Lessing herself is, inevitably, quite familiar with the particular dilemmas a novelist faces when writing realistic fiction, especially when one is politically aware. In her 1957 essay ‘The Small Personal Voice’ she writes,
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‘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’ (24). However, in an interview in 1969, she says, ‘I am intensely aware of, and want to write about, politics, but I often find that I am unable to embody my political vision in a novel’ (Raskin 15). And by 1980, she says, ‘I've lost my moral indignation completely. I certainly try to understand what is happening. That’s quite different from trying to think what ought to be happening’ (Bikman 59). She is talking here specifically about feminism, but for a novelist, it is clear that ‘moral indignation’, the ‘pure flame of energy’ (Bertelsen 142), sometimes needs to be suppressed in favour of an effort to ‘try to understand what is happening’.

The particular problem of representation of ‘the other’ in a colonial context is exemplified by two African characters who appear in her early work; Moses in The Grass is Singing and Jabavu in the long story ‘Hunger’. In the first case, the African is seen entirely from the outside. Moses is not demonised, but neither is he explained. He remains mysterious, and the action is presented almost entirely through the eyes of the white characters.

Questioned about the problems created by her identification of Moses and Africans with darkness and mystery, she replied,

You know, I’m not aware of it. There was a long time when I thought that it was a pity I ever wrote Moses like that, because he was less of a person than a symbol. But it was the only way I could write him at that time since I’d never met Africans excepting the servants or politically, in a certain complicated way. But now I've changed my mind again. I think it was the right way to write Moses, because if I’d made him too individual it would’ve unbalanced the book. I think I was right to make him a bit unknown. (Bertelsen 133)

Moses is almost an embodiment of indeterminacy in the novel, and if he were less of a mystery much of the narrative tension would disappear. In fact, for a short time, necessarily after the murder, he is used as a focaliser. The narrator rather uncertainly wavers between knowing his mind: ‘this was his final
moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent’ (219), and not admitting knowledge: ‘what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say’ (219-20). But for the most part his motivation is completely unknown, and this could leave her open to the kind of criticism Salman Rushdie makes of Paul Scott in his 1984 essay ‘Outside the Whale’. He does not accept Scott’s harshness ‘in his portraits of many British characters’ as justification for the fact that ‘the [Raj] Quartet’s form tells us, in effect, that the history of the end of the Raj was largely composed of the doings of the officer class and its wife. Indians get walk-ons, but remain, for the most part, bit-players in their own history’ (113). Robin Moore objects that ‘he denies that Raj history is Indian history, even though the British ruled India’ (139). Fiction writers in any case must limit their scope: perhaps Rushdie would now believe more strongly in the right of authors to make their own decisions about their subject matter.

It is also tempting for some critics to see a novel like The Grass is Singing as a reinforcement of the myth of the threat the African poses to the safety of white settlers, especially women. Katherine Fishburn explores this possibility, but finds evidence for the fact that the myth is not attributable to the author or the narrator, but to the characters themselves, ‘all of whom are convinced they are themselves (living) in a manichean’ allegory’ (‘Manichean’ 4). Lessing herself supports Fishburn’s tentative conclusion in a 1980 interview: ‘With the anonymity [of Moses] I tried to sum up how the white people would see someone like this because they wouldn't see him very much as an individual at all’ (Thorpe 100). Mary Turner, however, has been forced to see Moses as an individual, and it is partly the conflict between this and her innate white settler belief in the impossibility of a personal relation between them that drives her to insanity. The ‘plurality of meaning’ (Fishburn,
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‘Manichean’ in the novel – a novel which some critics see as having a meaning ‘so self-evident, so readily accessible, that no formal exegesis is necessary’ – leaves Fishburn with no firm conclusions.

In contradiction to objections such as Rushdie’s that the Indians should play a larger part in novels about the Raj, there is another line of criticism which questions whether the colonisers have a right to describe the colonised at all, whether from the inside or the outside. Lorna Sage in her book *Doris Lessing* calls this question Lessing’s ‘settler problem’:

To explain Moses, to write him out, might well be to white him out, even if one did it very differently from the newspaper clipping’s stereotype [in the novel] of the thieving houseboy. But then again, to leave him blank, in a book so conscious of the oppressive function of silence, is deeply embarrassing. (27-28)

On the other hand, when, in the novella ‘Hunger’, one of the stories in the collection *Five* published in 1953, Lessing tries the subjective approach and writes entirely from the point of view of the black characters, Sage believes that in this case ‘her attempts to represent Africans directly are haunted by the sense that she is behaving, if only metaphorically, like a colonizer, inhabiting their space, claiming to speak for them’ (28). This is a dilemma indeed, and one suspects that some writers might feel so constrained by it that they are prevented from expressing themselves at all, like Anna in *The Golden Notebook*, unable to write due to an overwhelming feeling that any narrative is somehow in bad faith. In an article in *Australian Book Review*, John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan wrote:

What worries me is that the terms of discussion seem to have (as in literary theory) become instruments of restriction, whereby a writer might actually avoid grappling with issues of racism and dispossession simply because whatever s/he says is going to be ‘incorrect’ from someone’s point of view.

Isn't it just as ‘imperialist’ to sit back and say nothing, write nothing, as to risk falling into certain ways of seeing or not fully grasping the nature of a problem? (36)

Lessing is as conscious of these problems as anyone, but it has not discouraged her from attempting a variety of solutions, despite the objections
of some of her critics. Anthony Chennells wrote in an article on the Zimbabwean response to Lessing’s African stories that ‘problems of narrative’ are raised by this story:

How far are whites absent in a story where the black subjects are produced by a white writer? How far is ‘Hunger’ a product of white ideology even if the ideology is certainly liberal and probably socialist? Such questions, which may seem unacceptably racist in other contexts, assume a very real significance in a country where … blacks are concerned to control the literary discourse of an independent Zimbabwe. (Chennells 35)

This article is at least in part an examination of the attitude of ‘cultural nationalists’ in Zimbabwe, so Chennells’ criticism is at one remove, but it is difficult to accept that ‘unacceptable racism’ should be thus transmuted merely by the concerns of later ‘cultural nationalism’ into a dismissal of her relevance and worth. He goes on to say, however, that if ‘the sense of a Zimbabwean nation is not sufficiently strong in her work’, it is not surprising, ‘considering the period when she lived in this country, … for even in the early 1950s the collapse of European empires in Africa was impossible to foresee’ (38-39); and that although ‘Lessing’s oppositions of settler capitalism and romantic anti-capitalism may no longer be relevant items in a Zimbabwean discourse … her art recognises equivalent tensions to those which are familiar today and her discourse around those tensions refuses closure’ (39). It is interesting that, twenty years later, she introduced a more utopian picture of a pre-white society in Zimbabwe in her space fiction novel *Shikasta*, where she describes ‘a tribe with a particularly agreeable nature, being peace-loving, good-humoured, laughter-loving, natural story-tellers, and skilled in the crafts’ (199) whose land was invaded by ‘sticks of people’ who were ‘as clumsy as if they had been cursed’ (200) and who treated them ‘with a coldness and a contempt which they did not understand’ and suppressed rebellion ‘with extremes of cruelty and ruthlessness’ (201). The cultural nationalists of 1990s Zimbabwe would find little to dispute there.
Another attack on European writing about colonial societies comes from Chinua Achebe, who wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in ‘an attempt to give a less “superficial” picture “not only of the country – but even of the Nigerian character”’ (Innes 22) than Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* and similar novels. He decided that ‘the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted and well-intentioned’ (Innes 12). We know that Achebe read *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness* before he wrote *Things Fall Apart*, but I have not found any reference by him to Lessing’s African stories. ‘Hunger’ was published five years before Achebe’s novel, and although of course it is set in a different part of Africa, Lessing’s sensitivity to the Africans’ culture and knowledge of their ways seems nearer Achebe’s than that of Cary or any of the other authors of ‘appalling novels about Africa’ (Innes 12) he deplores. Achebe’s principal arguments with *Mister Johnson*, according to C.L. Innes, are concerned with the rootlessness of the African protagonist, and the portrayal of the African community and its leaders as selfish, greedy and despotic, making ‘arbitrary and individualistic’ decisions (24). *Things Fall Apart*, on the contrary, ‘demonstrates the intricate relationship between a man’s individual psychology and the social context in which he has grown up’ (24). The language of the narrator is full of echoes of ‘expressions and proverbs used by Okonkwo, Obierika and others ... and thus the identity of the narrator as spokesman for the Igbo community is emphasized’, whereas ‘Cary’s narrative voice is quite distinct from the voices of any of his characters’ (33). It can be noted, however, that the narrator in *Things Fall Apart* does occasionally talk confidentially over his characters’ heads directly to the reader. In the following passage, the narrator is breaking a taboo of his tribe by hinting that the *egwugwu*, the nine ‘great masked spirits in the clan’, may not in fact be spirits at all:

Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springly walk of Okonkwo.
And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the
titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. (63-64)

It is in fact the unmasking of one of the egwugwu in the presence of the
uninitiated that sets off the train of events which leads to Okonkwo’s disgrace
and suicide, and the narrator, here acting similarly, is very far from acting as ‘a
spokesman for the Igbo community’.

In ‘Hunger’, Lessing is no doubt aiming to ‘represent’ and ‘make
articulate’ some of the ‘numbers of people who are inarticulate’, as she wrote
in ‘The Small Personal Voice’. In contrast to Cary, she shows very clearly the
sense of community which is under threat from colonial exploitation. She does
not depict the pre-colonial period as a golden age. Through Jabavu’s mother,
she criticises ‘the old times’ which his father longs to recapture:

The old man is tired and speaks slowly. He has said all this very often
before. His family listen and yet do not listen. What he says already
exists, like words on a piece of paper, to be read or not, to be listened to
or not.

‘What is happening to our people?’ he asks, sorrowfully. ‘What
is happening to our children? Once, in our kraals, there was peace,
there was order. Every person knew what it was they should do and
how that thing should be done. The sun rose and sank, the moon
changed, the dry season came, then the rains, a man was born and lived
and died. We knew, then, what was good and what was evil.’

His wife, the mother, thinks: He longs so much for the old
times, which he understood, that he has forgotten how one tribe harried
another, he has forgotten that in this part of the country we lived in
terror because of the tribes from the South. Half our lives were spent
like rabbits in the kopjes, and we women used to be driven off like
cattle to make wives for the men of other tribes. She says nothing of
what she thinks, only: ‘Yes, yes, my husband, that is very true.’ (254)

There is not as much emphasis in ‘Hunger’ as in Things Fall Apart on the
ritual life of the village. There is an implication that this has already been
considerably undermined by contact with white civilisation, which in Achebe’s
novel is only beginning. The local Greek trader, for example, provides a
powerful temptation for the villagers: they sell him, at his urging, the surplus
produce which they would otherwise have stored for lean times, and spend the
proceeds on luxuries from his shop. The story focusses on the hunger of
Jabavu, a sixteen year old village boy, for the attractions of civilisation, so there is little detailed description of the community he is rejecting. The old ideas of the village are mentioned, but ‘Jabavu does not despise these ideas: simply, they are not for him. There is no need to despise something from which one is already freed’ (244). After some experience in the city, however, as he prepares himself for a year in prison, he begins to realize the value of the ‘old ideas’ of community in the village:

... in the tribe and the kraal, the life of his fathers was built on the word we. Yet it was never for him. And between then and now has been a harsh and ugly time when there was only the word I, I, I – as cruel and sharp as a knife. The word we has been offered to him again, accepting all his goodness and his badness, demanding everything that he can offer. (378)

Coming at the close of the story, this rejection of individualism and affirmation of the community values represented by the political leader Mr Mizi has an affinity with Achebe’s concern to present the place, however uncomfortable, of each member of the village in his community, even though Lessing’s stated intention was primarily to present communist ideals. The characters in ‘Hunger’ who have forgotten the old ways have gone badly astray; and on the other hand Okonkwo is not totally integrated into his society any more than Jabavu is, although he deeply believes in its religion and customs. Simply, he is on the side of the older, pre-contact generation, where Jabavu is on the side of the younger. But Okonkwo, through his ambition and his desperate need to live down his father’s reputation for laziness, has his own form of individualism which leads him to various actions that contravene the traditions of the tribe, and eventually causes the rash action that ends in his death. Both Okonkwo, a middle-aged elder of his clan, and Jabavu, a youth of sixteen, are described by their narrators as child-like in their pride and ambition for individual glory.

Another criticism of Mister Johnson is that there is no sense of the different African languages; Johnson can communicate with any other
Africans, whereas Achebe makes it clear that difficulties in communication are common between Africans from different regions. Lessing’s Jabavu has taught himself English from scraps of newspaper salvaged from the Greek store, and has had a little practice with a man from the next village, five miles away, and it is only thus that he can communicate at all with many other Africans when he reaches the town. Perhaps it is a little unrealistic that his English should be so good when it has had so little use, but at least Lessing does not ignore the question.

The language of the narrator of ‘Hunger’ is deliberately simple, echoing the dialogue, although there is not the use of proverbs in the narrative that is found in *Things Fall Apart*. The more traditionally-minded characters in Hunger, like Jabavu’s father and brother, speak in metaphors in very much the same way as the villagers in *Things Fall Apart*. In ‘Hunger’, the father says, ‘When I hear the tales that are brought from the white man’s town my heart is dark as a valley under a raincloud’ (255). Okonkwo’s father says, ‘Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them’ (6). And there is a similar type of personification of parts of the body in the two texts: ‘Jabavu says to his feet: Now walk on, walk. But his feet do not obey him’ (279). Okonkwo’s second wife Ekwefi says to her friend, ‘I cannot yet find the mouth with which to tell the story’ (34). The language of everyday is often figurative, but the metaphors are based on concrete aspects of nature and the human body rather than abstractions. The impression of simplicity in ‘Hunger’ is increased by the fact that the narrative voice is in the present tense throughout. Innes distinguishes the pace of *Things Fall Apart*, ‘with its numerous digressions and episodic structure, reminiscent of oral composition’ (33), from Cary’s ‘breathless pace’ in *Mister Johnson*.

Although the present tense is part of the technique Cary uses in *Mister Johnson* in order to carry the reader ‘unreflecting on the stream of events’ (Innes 17), Lessing’s present tense in ‘Hunger’ allows pauses for contemplation. The pace
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of the story is still somewhat faster and more linear than *Things Fall Apart*, which to western readers may seem padded out with unwarranted detail. In Chapter Eight, for example, there is a paragraph devoted to Okonkwo’s taking snuff, ending, ‘Then he remembered he had not taken out his snuff-spoon. He searched his bag again and brought out a small, flat, ivory spoon, with which he carried the brown snuff to his nostrils’ (45). The western reader expects this to lead somewhere – perhaps he will find some unexpected item in his bag which will advance the story; but it has no apparent function but to describe the everyday apparatus of Okonkwo’s life. In ‘Hunger’, there is no such ‘irrelevant’ description – anything like this would contribute materially either to the setting, the plot or to character delineation, and in this way the story is closer to the expectations of European readers. The main problem with the narrative style is that occasional lapses into more sophisticated language draw attention to its studied simplicity, and these uncertainties of tone can seem patronising. For example, the narrative breaks away from Jabavu’s point of view in the description of a conversation he has during a meeting:

> He cannot know that this man spoke only so as to see his face clearly, for he comes to all such meetings pretending to be like the others in order to return later to the Government office which wishes to know who of the Africans are troublemakers and seditious. Before the meeting is over, Jabavu has told this friendly man his name and his village, and how much he admires the men of light, information which is very welcome. (321)

It is necessary to move to the outside view so that we can appreciate Jabavu’s naivety, but this is a little clumsy, and the use of the word ‘seditious’ is out of keeping with the simplicity of the narrative voice.

Perhaps only a Southern African would be qualified to judge the authenticity of Lessing’s representation of their life in the villages and the cities. Chennells’ article quoted above is interested only in the political aspects of her writing and does not discuss the accuracy of its factual details. However, she mentions in her autobiography that one of her African stories
was submitted by a Nigerian under his own name for a short story competition and thus ‘proved itself “politically correct”’ I feel (for it seems the new dogma is that whites cannot write about blacks)’ (*Under 113*). It is interesting that Lessing felt that she could not write about black Africans as individuals until she had been away from Africa for some time:

> I wrote *The Grass is Singing* in Rhodesia as a white person and my contact with blacks as equals was just non-existent. ... You couldn’t have a really equal relationship with a black person. ... By the time I’d come to write ‘Hunger’ I’d lived in England for quite a long time and I’d known a great many Africans and Jamaicans, and so on, as people. I no longer thought in terms of color. (Thorpe 100-101)

She was able to learn more about African village life and life in the townships from people she met as equals in England than from her own experience in the country itself: ‘The background came from Africans I knew, who would describe, when I asked, exactly how this or that was done in a village, how things were in the locations and shebeens of Salisbury’ (*Walking 70*). In any case, ‘Hunger’, as a factual representation of black African society during colonial times, appears to compare quite well with stories by authors with more direct personal knowledge. One of Lessing’s outstanding skills as a writer (and one which she often, to the detriment of her work, feels the need to suppress) is her ability to create a world seen convincingly through the eyes of others. One of her most effective ethical techniques is one of alienation – looking at familiar things from an unfamiliar perspective; as Shklovsky wrote in his essay ‘Art as Technique’, making ‘the familiar seem strange’ – removing ‘objects from the automatism of perception’ (21). This tendency becomes more marked in her later work, notably *The Four-Gated City* and the space fiction, but even in this early work it is salutary to see the city as Jabavu sees it, and to share in his puzzlement and wonder, knowing the impossibility of someone in his position ever being able to participate in the wealth of the civilisation he covets, and which most of those who will read this story take for granted. The narrative is full of vividly imagined details, for example when
Jabavu’s brother Pavu is asked to make his mark he ‘is ashamed because he has never held a pencil and the paper feels light and difficult to him, and he clutches it between his fingers as if it might blow away’ (268), and Jabavu is fascinated by the ‘shiny metal clasp’ (272) on a case belonging to the Samus when he first meets them. There is much ethical content in such a story – as Lessing said in an interview in 1983, ‘Who could not write about the African coming to town, because it’s such a story’ (Gray 113). And as she makes clear in the Preface to the 1973 collection in which the story was reprinted, it was the ethical dimension of the story that most interested her:

Of the five long stories, or short novels in *Five, Hunger* which is reprinted here is the failure and, it seems, the most liked.

It came to be written like this. I was in Moscow with a delegation of writers, back in 1952. It was striking that while the members of the British team differed very much politically, we agreed with each other on certain assumptions about literature – in brief, that writing had to be a product of the individual conscience, or soul. Whereas the Russians did not agree at all – not at all. Our debates, many and long, were on this theme.

... I was thinking about what Russians were demanding in literature – greater simplicity, simple judgements of right and wrong. We, the British, had argued against it, and we felt we were right and the Russians wrong. But after all, there was Dickens, and such a short time ago, and his characters were all good or bad – unbelievably Good, monstrously Bad, but that didn't stop him from being a great writer. Well, there I was, with my years in Southern Africa behind me, a society as startlingly unjust as Dickens’s England. Why, then, could I not write a story of simple good and bad, with clear-cut choices, set in Africa? The plot? Only one possible plot – that a poor black boy or girl should come from a village to the white man’s rich town and ... there he would encounter, as occurs in life, good and bad, and after much trouble and many tears he would follow the path of ...

I tried, but it failed. It wasn't true. (*Sun* 10-11. First ellipsis mine, others Lessing’s.)

More recent concerns about the right to represent were not as prevalent when ‘Hunger’ was written, and as we have seen, Lessing saw it as her duty to represent the inarticulate and powerless, very much as Mulk Raj Anand must have felt when writing novels like *Coolie* and *Untouchable*. Anand is of Indian race, and it does not usually occur to critics to question his right to represent the illiterate and inarticulate, but his life, cosmopolitan and
sophisticated, was nevertheless obviously very different from those he wrote about – perhaps almost as different as Lessing’s from Jabavu’s.

As a story of the struggle between good and evil, how far does ‘Hunger’ succeed? Lorna Sage dismisses it as ‘a version of urban pastoral, tinged with dubious nostalgia for the collective conscience’ (Sage, Doris Lessing 29). This takes too simple a view of the story. The basic plot may be susceptible to this kind of analysis: Jabavu, a youth who has never left his kraal, longs for the excitement of the white man’s city. He leaves his family, travels to the city, and is faced with a clear choice; to join the freedom fighters, and live a life of dedication and hardship, or to become a member of a criminal gang. He drifts into the criminal gang, partly against his will, and ends by being tried and imprisoned as a thief. In prison, he is offered another chance to be accepted as one of the freedom fighters, which we are led to believe he will take. A simple story, with heroes – Mr Mizi and the Samus in their political struggle – and villains – Jerry, the leader of the gang, and Betty, the weak, demoralised girl who falls for Jabavu and snares him for the gang. But Lessing being Lessing, she cannot help introducing shades of grey into her black and white fable. Firstly, as I show above, it is made clear that the old life of the tribe and the village was no golden age, and certainly its present is not made to seem especially wholesome; the life of the village has already degenerated to a large extent. Secondly, there is the ambiguous character of Mrs Kambusi, Betty’s landlady and the operator of a shebeen, an illegal liquor house selling the potent and toxic skokian to the Africans in the township. In spite of her immoral activity, she gives Jabavu a clear warning to escape the criminal life and the charms of Betty, and to join Mr Mizi and his group. He sees her at first as ‘a nice woman of the old kind, decent and respectable’ (295); his new life in the city has been enough of a shock already to make him think of the old life he despised as something intrinsically good, and he is grateful to hear her
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speak in his own language. It is she who first makes explicit Jabavu’s choice between good and evil:

When I heard you had fallen in with the men of light before you even entered the city, I asked myself what kind of good luck it was that you carry with you! And then I remembered that from their hands you had fallen into those which we now see lying on the table, twitching crossly because what we say is not understood. Your luck is very mixed, my friend. And yet it is very powerful, for many thousands of our people enter this city and know nothing of either the men of the light or the men of darkness … save what they hear through other mouths. But since it has fallen out that you have a choice to make, I wish to tell you, speaking now as one of your own people, … that you are a fool if you do not leave this girl and go immediately to the house whose number you know. (298)

But she is clever and shrewd, and soon regards him with contempt when he does not take her advice. She cannot be viewed as a figure of evil, even though she is not an effective power for the good. For Beck, Lessing ‘expresses unmistakable scorn for moderates like Mzingeli with characters like “Mr Mizi” and “Mr Samu” with their concern to demonstrate their own spineless “respectability” to the Europeans, who despise them and harass them’ (70). He is again wide of the mark: in this case he sees irony where none was intended. Mizi and Samu are rather pompous; Mr Samu has a way of talking to individuals as if he is addressing a crowded lecture hall, and ‘Mr Mizi is like an old bull who is used to his power. His face is not one a young man may easily love, for there is no laughter in it, no easy warmth’ (322). But there is no doubt Lessing intends them as worthy characters, whether or not she succeeds.

Lessing, in trying to write a simple morality tale, succeeds in her picture of evil as frightening and at the same time hard to resist, but as many before her and since have found, the good are especially difficult to make attractive. In making Jabavu turn once more to the traditions of community as his only
hope of salvation from the evils of civilisation, she is not only affirming an ethical system which is culturally appropriate for an African villager, but also presenting a psychologically convincing outcome. Jabavu’s desire to belong once again after the horror of his short criminal career has a ring of truth, despite Lessing’s own rejection of it. Her opinion that the story is a failure may not be because it is in the end too simple, but because she could not make it simple enough – in other words, the Russians were wrong.

In their *Australian Book Review* article, Kinsella and Ryan say, ‘when people write about others, it’s as if they're putting down on paper a kind of *dream* about others; there isn't, after all, any real accurate depiction. ... The sort of person the dream might claim to “represent” is usually indignant at it’ (38). People in ‘subaltern’ positions, like Jabavu or his mother, or Okonkwo and his wives, or like Munoo in *Coolie*, are not able to write and publish, so someone literate needs to speak for them if their stories are to be heard. This is a paradox which has occurred to many post-colonial writers. Innes points out that ‘Achebe uses the written word brought by the colonizers in order to record and recreate the oral world obliterated or denied by them’ (35). But without this apparent breach of faith, how are we ever to begin to comprehend the world of ‘the other’? Wolfgang Iser believes that

> literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. ... Thus it is perhaps one of the chief values of literature that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives. (‘Indeterminacy’ 44-45)

Lessing’s attempt to simulate the life of Jabavu may seem occasionally patronising or even ham-fisted, but, as a political piece, it was unusually sensitive and penetrating for its time and circumstances, and in aesthetic terms, it has merits of form and style which go beyond its utility.
‘Hunger’ is a clear example of a fiction which could be in no way construed as autobiographical, and which makes an attempt to represent the Other. In the next chapter, I will consider a novel published over twenty years later, in which Lessing draws on her own life for a more complex type of moral fable.

1 A ‘manichean allegory’ is defined by Fishburn as ‘an allegory that functions … to reinscribe the power and dominance of the white colonial ruling class’ (2).
Chapter Ten


Memoirs of a Survivor was first published in 1974, and is the second of what Lessing has described as her ‘unrealistic stories’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). The first was the even more enigmatic Briefing for a Descent into Hell. The ‘unrealism’ of this novel resides mainly in its elastic use of time, and in the ability of the narrator to enter, at certain times, another world beyond her living room wall. The ‘real’ setting of the novel is an unnamed English city, in the near future when for some mysterious reason civilisation is crumbling. Gangs or tribes of people are moving through the city, heading for the north-west where they believe, on scanty evidence, life will be better. The narrator, a single middle-aged woman about whom we learn virtually nothing, is mysteriously put in charge of a young girl, Emily, who has for a pet a hybrid cat/dog, Hugo, an animal who comes to embody the old-fashioned virtues of loyalty and honour, when they are largely abandoned by humans. Beyond the wall of her flat, the narrator finds herself in a large house, whose rooms are at first shabby and over-furnished, but the condition of which changes constantly. This is the ‘impersonal’ world; shortly after Emily’s arrival, the narrator begins to be subjected, beyond the wall, to a child’s-eye view of an oppressive nursery where ‘personal’ scenes from the childhood of Emily and her baby brother are played out. Meanwhile, in the ‘real’ world, Emily goes unnaturally rapidly through the stages of adolescence, becoming the lover and helpmate (the old-fashioned word is quite appropriate here) of Gerald, the leader of one of the gangs gathering in the streets outside. As conditions worsen and the danger
increases, Gerald tries to civilise a gang of children who have never known family life, and who are without loyalty, friendship, memory or even much language. In the same way that Harriet’s refusal to exclude Ben from the family in *The Fifth Child* destroyed her family, this crusade of Gerald’s breaks up his former gang, which had set up a community in an abandoned house. Cannibalism and violence become common among these children, and the narrator, Emily and eventually Gerald are besieged in the flat until the wall finally opens and admits them to a new world.

*Memoirs* is subtitled, in the early editions, ‘an attempt at autobiography’. Lessing complains, ‘curiously, no one noticed it, as if that precision was embarrassing’ (Rousseau 148). This is not strictly true: of a random sample of ten contemporary reviews, only half do not mention the autobiographical element, and of the other five, four quote the subtitle and discuss it in some detail. Victoria Glendinning says, ‘it is a very devious piece of self-revelation, and it reads like a novel.’ With the insight Lessing has now provided into her early childhood with Volume One of her (more literal) autobiography, *Under My Skin*, it is obvious that Emily’s childhood beyond the wall is indeed a vivid re-creation of her own early years in Persia; and the adolescent Emily in the ‘real’ world of the novel is recognisable as the clever, polite, uncommunicative teenager who would spend the day with neighbouring farming families in Southern Rhodesia, who would read and eat, like Emily, ‘ingest[ing] images through [her] eyes, calories by mouth’ (*Under* 110), and enjoyed her competence at practical, homely skills: ‘doing these things I was truly happy’ (*Under* 103). But without this external information, it is unreasonable for her to expect all her readers to identify and focus on the
autobiography in a work which has so many other angles – fantasy, dreams, prophecy, social comment, psychological study, fable; one reviewer even called it ‘a ghost story of the future’ (Maddocks 58). Also, it is rather unfair for her to complain when people fail to notice the autobiography in this work, since she often criticises readers for seeing too much autobiography in her other fiction.

Perhaps the most obtuse attitude to this novel is to call it science fiction, and then compare it unfavourably with the classics of the genre. Rosalind Wade, in her review of the book, finds ‘her predictions are in line with every other science fiction fantasy about the kind of existence we may one day be obliged to endure’ (213), as if the predictions were the purpose of the exercise. Lessing does not always like classifying even the Canopus in Argos novels as science fiction, let alone her other works. In 1991, asked ‘why do you choose to write science fiction every now and then?’ she answered, ‘I’ve only written two unrealistic stories, and I’m unaware that they are science fiction’ (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). In an earlier interview, however, she claimed that Shikasta was the result of her wanting ‘to write the Bible as science fiction’ (Gray 116). Information gleaned from interviews, although undeniably valuable for establishing the intentions and beliefs of authors expressed outside their fiction, can be contradictory. Lessing (along with other writers) obviously becomes impatient with some interviewers, while finding others much more congenial. Talking to Brian Aldiss, for example, she seems relaxed, and uses the term ‘science fiction’ in a way she would challenge in another context. To hold her to a comment made in passing, or in a defensive mood, just because it has been recorded and published, is unfair. However, she
is consistent in her dislike of labels, and contempt for those who use them of her. The habit of mind that categorises a work of art in order to judge it is understandably exasperating to a novelist who experiments with forms and techniques, as Lessing does, purely as a means to an end. She says, ‘I wouldn’t classify those books [the Canopus series] as science fiction. They don’t have much to do with “science”, that is, scientific knowledge and technology. I leave that to my colleagues who really know something about technology’ (Schwarzkopf 107). Definitions are next to impossible for such concepts, anyway. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, towards the end of a 7-column entry on ‘definitions of SF’, concludes, ‘there is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of sf will ever be established’ (Clute 314). Most of the definitions discussed, however, could be applied to Memoirs of a Survivor; it is set in the future, it deals with a world where ‘a given set of changes’ is introduced into a common background of ‘known facts’ (312), and it ‘offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way’ (313). Lessing’s assumption that science fiction has to be concerned with science and technology is, it seems, somewhat outdated, but it is clear in Memoirs of a Survivor that she wants to avoid being pinned down to a scientific explanation of the disintegration of this civilisation. References to ‘whatever the danger was that had first set populations on the move away from it’ (13) are deliberately evasive. Three-quarters of the way through the novel, a section begins, ‘I think this is the right place to say something more about “it”’ (135), and the reader feels, at last, that the mystery is about to be revealed. But
‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the forms of earthquake, a visiting comet ... ‘it’ can be, has been, pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men’s minds, the savagery of a religion.

‘It’, in short, is the word for helpless ignorance, or helpless awareness. It is a word for man’s inadequacy? (136)

The only tangible clue is the deterioration of the air quality towards the end – everything else is as much a result of ‘it’ as an identifiable cause, or even symptom. Whatever ‘it’ is, despite its being a world-wide situation – ‘things went on there just the same as they did with us’ (102) – in England it is spreading from the south-east. ‘We knew that all public services had stopped to the south and the east, and that this state of affairs was spreading our way’ (12). The precise nature of the threat to life as a result is made clear – it comes from the gangs of refugees moving through the city and gathering numbers as they go – as are the low-technology strategies for sustaining life without the conveniences of civilisation, and the vulnerability of everyone to the predations of their neighbours and other humans. There is also a range of ‘new diseases’ (138) with no identifiable causes. The air pollution spreading from the south-east apparently will not threaten all life, however; as the city empties of humans, it is taken over by

plants, which grew and grew, taking over streets, pavements, the ground floors of buildings, forcing cracks in tarmac, racing up walls ... life. When the spring came, what a burst of green life there would be, and the animals breeding and eating and flourishing. (185)

If animals can breed and eat and flourish, why not humans? This is where science fiction, as a definition, breaks down for this novel, with its refusal to answer such questions. Lessing told Nissa Torrents that this novel ‘is the direct result of my meditating about the inadequacy of language. I write as in legends or in fairy tales, by means of metaphors and analogies’ (67). The
language here – the constant but unsuccessful attempts to define ‘it’ and the
use of rhetorical interrogatives – invites a metaphorical interpretation. Betsy
Draine says that the novel records ‘how the institutions of a technological and
bureaucratic society collapse from inner corruption’ (54). But, in spite of a
tendency of many critics to read moral or social criticism into the narrative,
there is no implication of this ‘inner corruption’. The threat is something now
beyond the control of the human race, whether originally caused by us or not,
that exemplifies ‘man’s inadequacy’ (136). It would be possible to build a
case for the disintegration of air quality having been caused by an ecological
collapse of some kind brought on by the excesses of civilisation, but there is
nothing in the text to support the argument either way.

A similar vagueness attends the rhetorical position of the novel. As in
_The Making of the Representative for Planet 8_, the beginning of the novel
makes explicit mention of the narrator – a first-person narrator – remembering
and telling her memories of ‘that time’ (7), yet the narrator passes at the end of
both these novels into a dimension outside the frame of tangible reality.
Reading the ending closely, one can see what many reviewers missed; the
narrator watches Emily, Hugo, Gerald and ‘his children’ following ‘that One
who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into
another order of world altogether’ (190), but where is the narrator? She does
not follow them herself, and she only saw the One (‘the one person I had been
looking for all this time’) ‘for a moment, in a time like the fading of a spark on
dark air’ (190). She is ‘the survivor’, the narrator of these self-consciously
authored memoirs, but in what world is she living when she writes? Betsy
Draine is right to say that Lessing desires to unify two worlds in this novel –
‘in the one role, she uses the familiar techniques of the realistic novel ...; in the other she experiments with the techniques of fable, allegory and myth’, but that ‘she demonstrates the will but not the means to unify her vision’ (61). If she had gone into the new world with the others, we could at least say that she had some kind of rhetorical position, however enigmatic, but as it is, with civilisation at an end around her, and the world beyond the wall having vanished and folded itself up as the others pass through it, she leaves herself nowhere. This is all the more puzzling since she constantly draws attention to her position as narrator within the memoirs. No amount of openness to mystical notions or metaphorical interpretations on the part of the reader can overcome this difficulty.

Lessing’s description of this novel as autobiography is one that it would be unreasonable for critics to ignore, however much one is determined to discount intention, since it appeared originally as the subtitle of the novel. She expanded quite considerably on this point in a 1985 interview:

For years I had the project of writing an autobiography originating from dreams. I had to give it up because it was impossible to organize the dreams into a coherent sequence without making the whole work extremely artificial. In Memoirs of a Survivor, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator’s past. (Rousseau 147-8)

Four of the ten reviewers pick up the suggestion that the world behind the wall is a dream world. Another calls it a ‘looking-glass land’ (Ackroyd). Lessing boasts of the fact ‘that the word “dreams” is never used from start to finish’ (Dean 93) in Memoirs. At one point she describes the present ‘reality’ as
‘remarkable and dreamlike’ (114), but she may indeed have avoided the actual word ‘dreams’. Dreams have always been important to Lessing and have featured in all her novels to some extent. She relates in Volume Two of her autobiography her psychiatrist’s pleasure in the fact that she dreamt Jungian rather than Freudian dreams, which are ‘altogether more personal and petty’ (Walking 36), despite her own unease with these labels as well as others. But the ‘dreams’ in Memoirs are apparently her own life, part of the ‘attempt at autobiography’; so the small girl who experiences the ‘prison’ of the ‘personal’ scenes is both the narrator and Emily, this oppressive childhood being meant somehow to represent a universal experience. The baby heard crying disconsolately, even from the other side of the wall, when eventually found is not Emily but her mother – ‘the finding had about it, had in its quintessence, the banality, the tedium, the smallness, the restriction of that “personal” dimension’ (134). One of Lessing’s more stable beliefs is in the universality of personal experience. She uses it to justify writing about ‘petty personal problems’ because ‘nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own ... growing up is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares’ (Golden Notebook, Preface 13). So the ‘dreams’ and the elastic time-world of the novel do not need to be rationalised, even though the little girl Emily would in ‘real’ time be nearer the narrator’s age, given the very particular nature of that nursery – the furniture, the clothes and the practices being those of European culture in the late Victorian or Edwardian period – and given that the main action of the novel is evidently set in the late twentieth century. Emily, the narrator, and Emily’s mother are all merged into one continuous being. The choice of name has its
own significance, too; Lessing’s mother was christened Emily, named after her own mother, who died young. And the character Emily, at times at least, is everywoman, a victim of ‘the emotional hurts which are common, are the human condition, part of everyone’s infancy’ (*Under 25*). When her friend June leaves the city without a word of farewell, Emily cries ‘as a woman weeps, which is to say as if the earth were bleeding’ (151). The narrator can do nothing: ‘I sat there, I went on sitting, watching Emily the eternal woman at her task of weeping ... I had to listen. To grief, to the expression of the intolerable’ (151). The narrator’s helplessness is, as it were, wired into the story. Because she is observing her own past – observing ‘a young self grow up’ (*Under 28*) – she has to watch without participating, as she cannot change what has already happened. Naturally this impotence carries over into the dream world behind the wall. The only intervention she makes in the ‘personal’ world there is when she finds the baby who is Emily’s mother crying and takes her up to comfort her: ‘A pretty, fair little girl, at last finding comfort in my arms’ (134). After this, the impersonal world behind the wall begins to disintegrate into anarchy, ‘or perhaps it was only that I was seeing what went on there more clearly’ (140), which is at its height when instead, moving beyond the wall, she finds gardens, layers of gardens under ‘a fresh delightful sky ... that I knew was the sky of another world, not ours’ (141), and though it was hard to maintain a knowledge of that other world with its scent and running waters and its many plants while I sat here in this dull, shabby daytime room, the pavements outside seething as usual with its tribal life – I did hold it. ... Towards the end it was so; intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in ‘ordinary’ life, as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it. (143)
Perhaps the achievement of intervention with Emily’s mother is what enables this breakthrough to the simultaneous knowledge of both worlds, which presumably allows the escape from the helplessness of the ‘real’ world at the end of the novel.

The autobiographical element extends beyond the narrator’s experience of ‘ridiculous impatience, the helplessness, of the adult who watches a young thing growing’ (84-85), which is helplessness not only because she cannot change her own past which is repeated in Emily’s present, but because ‘the biological demands of her [Emily’s] age took a precise and predictable and clock-like stake on her life’ (85). The disintegrating society of the city, in which the narrator, once again, takes little part and acts principally as an observer, represents a general worsening of conditions ... as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past – represented by gangs of young and anarchic people – go by, and vanish. These are the wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse. (*Under 28-9*)

This is an interpretation of the novel none of the ten reviewers made. They all saw the disintegration of civilisation and the lawless gangs as a projection into the near future, rather than a metaphor for what has already happened in the twentieth century.

‘To me,’ Lessing says, ‘nothing seems more simple than the plan of this novel’ (*Under 28*). This simplicity is not, however, readily apparent, and she must have expected, after twenty-five years of writing for publication, that her readers would not all interpret the book exactly as she intended. The reviewers who picked up the autobiographical hint could see that it was Emily who
represented the narrator’s childhood. One added, ‘perhaps also Lessing’s own child, Peter’ (Rubenstein 21) – and if Peter, why not the two older children left behind in Southern Rhodesia? But to take the child Emily as the universal child, representative of ‘the human condition’, ignores the other child behind the wall, the adored little brother. What happens to the cosseted and indulged child, while the ignored one grows up too fast? One example appears in Lessing’s 1995 novel, *Love, Again*, where the protagonist, Sarah, has a younger brother, Hal (Lessing’s own brother’s name was Harry). Her memories of their childhood follow the same pattern as that of Emily and her baby brother, and of the young Doris and her brother Harry which is described in *Under My Skin*. Harry Tayler is a background figure in the two volumes of autobiography published so far, distancing himself from his unhappy mother’s nagging and attention-seeking by becoming ‘polite, cool; [he] appeared to listen but took no notice’ (*Under* 158); ‘Harry, as it would now be put, was not a man in touch with his emotions’ (*Under* 371). So the real person became self-sufficient in the extreme, and shut off his emotions. The man in *Love, Again*, though, is an overgrown child, making outrageous demands of other people, a ‘big babyish man, with his little tummy, his little double chin, his self-absorbed mouth’ (332) even in his sixties, by which age the real Harry described in *African Laughter* has become ‘a cautious man, slow to react, but not cut off by silence from what he saw around him’ (35), not only because of his new hearing aid, but from a more receptive attitude to his sister.

There is no little brother in the ‘real’ world of *Memoirs*. Glendinning points out, ‘this is a woman-centred book,’ although Lessing claims otherwise: ‘A middle-aged person – the sex does not matter – observes a young self grow
up’ (*Under 28*). However, if it were depicting a male narrator watching a young boy grow to maturity, the novel would be unrecognisably different. Specifically female aspects are fundamental — Emily’s ‘woman’s tears’, the frustration and cruelty of Emily’s mother, Emily’s choosing to be Gerald’s assistant, ‘the leader of the commune’s woman’ (99), rather than ‘a chieftainess, a leader on her own account’ (98) because she is in love. The narrator insists that this state of affairs is realistic, in spite of Emily’s ‘capacities and talents’ (98); ‘This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one’ (99).

There is a conflict between this insistence on the truth of this portrait of an individual with a specific history, and the claim that she represents everyone. The belief that all experiences are universal, which Lessing has used to justify writing about the personal, sits awkwardly with the belief in the individual she talks about in her 1985 book *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*: ‘Everything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own way of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures’ (83). *Memoirs of a Survivor* gives little clue as to how this individual is formed, ‘the individual, in the long run, who will set the tone, provide the real development in a society’ (*Prisons* 82), unless it is by being the excluded one, the unloved, the exile in one’s family and society. By implication, these are the people, like Lessing, like her narrator in *Memoirs*, like Martha Quest and a long line of protagonists ending, for the moment, with Mara in *Mara and Dann*, who have the critical eye needed to view their society with detachment, who can stand out against the group, while the secure, integrated people who have been happy
in childhood fit easily into society and unthinkingly conform to its rules.

These are the people who would seem to be described by another of the narrator’s absolute statements:

“How else do things work always unless by imitation bred of the passion to be like? All the processes of society are based on it, all individual development. … There was some sort of conspiracy of belief that people – children, adults, everyone – grew by an acquisition of unconnected habits, of isolated bits of knowledge, like choosing things off a counter … But in fact people develop for good or for bad by swallowing whole other people, atmospheres, events, places – develop by admiration. (51-52)

Many of her characters – most of the protagonists of her novels – seem, on the contrary, to have been formed by the opposite; by a reaction against emulation of others, a resistance to conformity. In Under My Skin, she recalls ‘the unforgiving clarity of the adolescent, sharpened by fear that this might be your fate too. “I will not, I will not,” I kept repeating to myself, like a mantra’ (157). Sometimes it seems, in The Golden Notebook, The Four Gated City and particularly in Briefing for a Descent into Hell, that she believes madness itself is the path to enlightenment, and that society’s attempts to cure the insane are really an attack on these people’s connection with reality and truth. But in Walking in the Shade, Lessing discusses this at some length, and insists ‘I do not believe that ultimate truths come from being crazy. I’ve seen too much of craziness,’ in spite of what she implies in The Golden Notebook ‘whose structure, at least, says that an over-aridity can be cured by “breakdown”’ (243). She sees her propensity to write about madness as a pattern in her own mind, which ‘has to be in other people’s minds, must be, for we are not sufficient to ourselves’ (244). Somehow, there must be a way of
accommodating these conflicting beliefs in individuality and universality. In the preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she says

> Nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can’t be yours alone.

So far, this denies uniqueness, but makes no claim for universality. But the paragraph ends, ‘one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares’ (13). Everyone? She frequently uses hyperbole – she says ‘no one’ noticed *Memoirs* was an autobiography, meaning many people did not; and in this case she perhaps means many people share one’s experiences when she actually says ‘everyone’ does. Can it make sense to say, though, that experiences can be both unique to individuals and universal? Lessing obviously feels that she is a unique person, but it is an intellectual discipline for her to insist that other people have the same experiences and feelings, and therefore, of course, the same rights. It is in this sense a political belief. But it excludes the possibility, which is of vital interest to most novelists, that other people may be profoundly different to oneself, and that recognising that difference and allowing for it can also be a worthwhile intellectual discipline. This belief, while allowing her to see the tyranny of the *zeitgeist* over her own life and those of others, and providing her insight into the behaviour of young people because she can see in them her own remembered youth, places a damaging restriction on her perceptions which carries over into her novels, where her characters are too often blurred and dulled into similarity. It carries little conviction when the narrator of *Memoirs* claims that the amoral children of the underground ‘were ourselves. We knew it’ (160). This is chiefly a
problem in her novels: in her non-fiction and short stories characters are more sharply observed, and often spring much more vividly from the page. Often what one critic or reader finds convincing or effective will fail to please another. The brief review in the *New Yorker* finds that the scenes beyond the wall are ‘vivid and raw, and have a disturbing power; in comparison, the scenes that depict the social horrors of the future are flat and unconvincing’ (110); whereas Peter Ackroyd finds ‘the looking-glass land ... too contrived to be taken as seriously as Miss Lessing [sic] intends’ and Glendinning believes that ‘when she plunges deep into wall-melting mysticism and oral-anal regression, fewer people may want to follow her’. The Jungian and Freudian symbolism of the events beyond the wall, particularly the hackneyed Jungian archetypes, irritates several reviewers. Lessing is, of course, quite conscious that her symbolism is not original: ‘I always use these old, hoary symbols, as they strike the unconscious’ (Tomalin 174). And the virtues of her style are also a point of dispute. Dinnage claims that ‘the very flat-footedness of her style becomes an asset in embodying a strange or exotic theme; she is at her best when her narrative realism is used in the service of an imaginative vision’ (138), while Ronald Bryden says ‘Doris Lessing’s intelligence is swifter and finer than the prose style she commands. For that reason, her prose works better on plain reality than on the tuppence-coloured uplands of the surreal’ (‘On the Move’ 827). Most would agree with Rubenstein, however, when she writes, ‘it is not gracefulness of style that has held Doris Lessing’s growing audience, but rather, a steadily high level of intellectual energy and provocative ideas, embodied in and through her characters’ (21).
And this is what Lessing seems to be trying to achieve, particularly in her novels. Her ‘provocative ideas’, which she might call ‘a series of queries – to myself, to other people’ (Bikman 61) are, as she keeps warning us, not dogma. She is the kind of writer, she says, ‘who uses the process of writing to find out what you think, and even who you are’ (Walking 228) and ‘the aim of a novel is always ... to comment on things in motion’ (Rousseau 153). Unresolved dilemmas like the individual versus the universal may constantly cloud the water, but the penetrating mind of the writer will never stop seeking clarification in the murky depths.

After *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Lessing did not publish another novel for five years. The new novel was the first in her *Canopus in Argos* ‘space fiction’ series, in which the questions of individuality and group values are once again significant. In the next chapter I consider some of the implications of the cosmic view on the ethical world of her fiction.

1Interestingly, the reviewer for the periodical *Psychology Today* (Ornstein) does not even mention the world behind the wall, surely a fertile source of psychological speculation.
Chapter Eleven

Floating Away: Alienation and Distance in Doris Lessing’s Space Fiction.

'You have to write cold,' Lessing said to Sedge Thomson in 1989, ‘You can’t write hot; otherwise it’s no good’ (190). In order to ‘write cold’, Lessing has found it necessary to stand back, to detach herself from her subject matter, even when it is based on her own life, or on political issues about which she feels strongly. Many critics have noted her cool, detached voice, some with approval, like Diane Johnson, who describes her ‘particular, somewhat chilly and omniscient voice’ (7), and some, like Beck, taking issue with the ‘wry, detached observation’ (66) with which she views the whites in Southern Rhodesia in her early fiction. Lessing herself obviously knew what she was doing at some level, although in 1981 she said ‘it has taken me a long time to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day’ (Schwarzkopf 105). In her interview with Brian Aldiss, she attributes her cosmic point of view partly to star-gazing in Africa as a child: ‘You automatically start thinking in terms of millions of years if you take that point of view’ (172).

This tendency to view human life in macrocosm is, of course, most obvious in her space fiction series, Canopus in Argos, but it was by no means a new technique for her. Anna, in The Golden Notebook, plays a game in which she sits and takes herself progressively further away from herself, viewing herself at last from a great height, and in Landlocked, the chapter after Martha’s lover Thomas leaves begins with a detached view of a street in which Martha stands. ‘From the sky, the town would announce itself as much by trees as by buildings … . Night or day, it was trees, then buildings, that showed where man had staked his claim on the grass-covered high veld’ (196). The view then expands to ‘nearly a hundred miles away’ (196), where the Quests’ abandoned house has ‘sunk to its knees under the blows of the first wet season after the Quests had left it’, and then expands into time; ‘For how many
millions of years has the central plateau stood high and dry, dry above all, lifting upwards to the drought-giving skies?’ (197). The cosmic view is then directed towards Europe, where ‘cities still stood in ruins and people in the cities expected a hungry winter’, where ‘forty-four million people had died in the last war. (But what was the use of saying forty-four million ... when one could not feel more than, let’s say, half a million, and even that with difficulty, after long strain)’ (197-8). Lessing’s use of distancing as an ethical method is here quite clear.

The related technique of viewing society through alien eyes can be seen even earlier, in The Grass is Singing, which originated from an interest in the point of view of an outsider, a young idealist from England (see Thorpe 99), in the climactic events of the novel, and in ‘Hunger’, where white society is viewed through the eyes of a black village boy newly arrived in the city. As I mention in Chapter Nine, this could be seen an example of the defamiliarisation process in fiction postulated by the Russian Formalist Shklovsky. Shklovsky’s ideas contributed to Brecht’s ‘verfremdungseffekt’ or alienation effect, whereby he tried to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally involved in a play so that they may be intellectually aroused instead, and thus (in theory) more open to the political message. Robert Arlett discusses Brecht’s possible influence on The Golden Notebook, claiming that the undercutting of assumed or expected versions of reality parallels Brechtian distancing technique ... and it is also a reflection of the complexities of modern experience and of the difficulties in reaching a moral stance in the face of those complexities. (70)

Lessing’s version of the alienation technique is, however, a little different to Brecht’s, and resembles Marcuse’s view of the responsibility of the artist, which he describes as ‘artistic alienation’, as explained by Fishburn:

For him, the function of the artist is to oppose the status quo and the state – an opposition that implies a commitment to those who are adversely affected by the status quo and who cannot articulate (or perhaps even see) their subordination to the needs of the state. (Unexpected Universe 8)
Lessing, unlike Brecht, usually seems to have no objection to her readers’ identifying with the characters in her fiction, although it is true she does not always actively encourage it. For her, the important thing is to show other points of view, to challenge the mainstream values. ‘I like to think that if someone’s read a book of mine, they’ve had ... the literary equivalent of a shower. Something that would start them thinking in a slightly different way perhaps’ (Frick 164).

Logically, authors could write from any point of view, including their own, to challenge their reader’s thinking. The author’s own point of view will always be different to that of the reader in some ways, and very subjective personal writing can indeed be very enlightening. One assumes that Lessing is more or less speaking from her own viewpoint when her subject is a white woman with a similar history to her own. Without assuming absolute equivalence, for example, one ascribes much of the subjective experience of Martha Quest in the first four novels of the *Children of Violence* series to the author. She expresses annoyance at questions about what aspects of her books are autobiographical – ‘in a sense, everything *has* to be autobiographical, of course; but on the other hand, you can also say that it isn’t autobiographical at all, because as soon as you begin writing it changes into something else’ (Tomalin 173) – and believes it is not important for the reader to distinguish autobiography from fiction. Nevertheless, Eve Bertelsen noticed in her 1986 interview that she would talk about Martha Quest, and Lessing would respond by talking about herself (143), which betrays a strong autobiographical identification. Discussing her subject matter with Stephen Gray, she said,

You start off with your life and the need to define yourself and this frightful struggle to make this statement of what you are, to find out what it is. Then you do sort of float away from that, instead of being embedded in it, you see yourself from a distance. (118)

It is interesting, though, that in this exploration of her own identity, her sexual, emotional and political life is covered in depth, while her writing is entirely
ignored. Martha Quest is not creative in any way. Even in *The Golden Notebook*, although the main character, Anna, is a writer, she suffers from writer’s block.

Leaving aside the question of exact identification with Martha and Anna, there are many clear examples of her deliberately setting out to inhabit subjects significantly different from herself. One striking instance is *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, where she was initially not only writing in the first person of Jane Somers, but impersonating her as well, keeping her own authorship secret for some time. Commenting on this experience, she said, ‘It’s amazing what you find out about yourself when you write in the first person about someone very different from you’ (Frick 163). And an extra layer of impersonation is added when Jane Somers, as narrator/protagonist, makes herself imagine in detail the daily experiences of other characters in the novel – ‘Maudie’s day’ – ‘I wrote Maudie’s day because I want to understand’ (134), and later ‘A Day in the Life of a Home Help’ (189), as well as her own day, ‘Janna’s day’ (131). As a character, Janna is struggling to really see (as Iris Murdoch would say) other people, and imagining and narrating their experiences from their own points of view is part of her method. She even becomes a novelist, writing a romantic novel during the course of the narrative, based on what she has learned about Maudie’s life.

In 1972, Josephine Hendin remarked to Lessing,

I get the feeling sometimes in many of your stories that people see each other as though they were space travelers looking at aliens on another planet – that somehow the distance between people is sufficiently great, or between people and the lives they are leading. The sense of disillusionment becomes so great that there’s a feeling of immense distance. (44)

This interview predates the *Canopus* series by seven years, and shows how these techniques were evident in her work long before she started actually setting novels in outer space. Lessing replied to Hendin’s comment, ‘This business of using people from outer space is a very ancient literary device, isn’t
it? It’s the easiest way of trying to make the readers look at a human situation more sharply.’ However, with this sharpness of the view there is a sacrifice in the emotional and thus intellectual impact fiction can have when it concentrates on the microcosmic, individual experience.

The two novels which comprise *The Diaries of Jane Somers* were the first books Lessing published after the *Canopus* series (the last of which is still *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*, despite her stated intention as late as 1993 (Ingersoll 240) to write a sixth.) They allow her once again to exercise her talent for describing minute details, which was somewhat quelled in the space fiction novels. The gritty, grimy, silk and satin world of Jane Somers springs almost palpably from the pages, and this naturalism is a welcome celebration of imperfect human life; a relief in contrast to the distant Canopean eye which usually disdains such close attention to detail, and looks at movements of humans from a galactic perspective. Lessing said in 1980, ‘what is not realistic is slippery ground. One must accumulate enough daily details in order that the reader isn’t lost, since he requires the presence of mundane details so that he can then respond to the irrational’ (Torrents 67). Mundane details are not completely absent from the space fiction series; the second, *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* and the fourth, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, are both fables told from the point of view of, not literally Earthbound, but planet-bound colonial subjects of the Canopean empire, and Volume 1, *Shikasta*, contains entries from the diaries of a teenage girl with a very tenuous grasp on the cosmic view of her brother George, an incarnated Canopean agent. It is no coincidence that these are the most readable and memorable parts of the series.
Katherine Fishburn writes, ‘it is in science fiction, a form she has come to by circuitous routes, that she is able to oppose the politics of the status quo to best advantage and to affirm her commitment to the greater good of humanity’ (*Unexpected Universe* 10). The omniscient Canopeans, however, are unable to explain their understanding of ‘Necessity’ to non-Canopeans, and need to promote an ethic of blind obedience to a higher order believed to be benevolent – the instructions for ‘a safe and wise existence on Shikasta’ to a tribe that showed ‘honesty, hospitality, and above all a hunger for something different’ in a time of degeneration, are ‘moderation, abstention from luxury, plain living, care for others’ and so forth, ‘and above all, a quiet attention to what is most needed from them, obedience’ (139). Rachel Sherban, in *Shikasta*, says ‘you don’t understand something until you see the results’ (324): as Jeannette King notes, ‘this smacks suspiciously of the end justifying the means’ (79). In *Marriages*, none of the characters can fathom the reasons for the orders they receive from The Providers, although Al Ith has a suspicion that it is to do with ending complacency and stagnation in her Zone. Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments* constantly asks her Canopean mentor Klorathy the wrong questions, but he never suggests to her which are the right ones; and she performs the rituals prescribed by Canopus with rigour but no understanding. And in *The Sentimental Agents*, Johor is able to suggest some strategies to various Volyen communities to fend off the worst disasters of the Sirian invasions, but is unable to provide enlightenment.

Talking to Brian Aldiss, Lessing explained the origin of the *Canopus* series:

I read the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the New Testament, and the Koran. I found the similar idea of the warner or prophet, who arrives from somewhere and tells the people they should behave differently, or
Canopus, then, occupies the position of God – all-knowing, virtually immortal, although their omniscience does not give them omnipotence, as The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 shows: when the forces of cosmic nature are at work, even Canopus cannot prevent the physical annihilation of all life on Planet 8. In the first four volumes, Canopus appears all-wise, lofty, self-sacrificing and compassionate. In Shikasta, the archives betray little humour, no anger, but much sorrow for the inhabitants of Shikasta, the Broken One, formerly ‘Rohanda, which means fruitful, thriving’ (27), known to the novel’s readers, of course, as Earth. As King says, ‘a reversal takes place whereby those stories of human behaviour which are most familiar and accessible to the real reader are presented as illustration of conduct too extreme for the comprehension of the implied reader – the Canopean student’ (73). The next three volumes are narrated by a variety of puzzled non-Canopeans, with the implication that Canopus is far beyond and above normal human understanding. (The inhabitants of the Galaxy are, at least those directly involved in these stories, ‘human’, even though they do not all inhabit Earth.) King comments, ‘the alternative order [the Canopus sequence] offers has a potentially authoritarian dimension which seems to turn away from the openness and multiplicity of meaning and value which many see as the strengths of Lessing’s work’ (92). If none but Canopeans can know what to do, and all of Earth’s inhabitants can do no better than try to attune themselves to obedience without understanding, this is merely another type of revealed religion like Christianity – which is described in the fifth volume, The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire, as ‘one of the most savage and long-lasting tyrannies ever known even on that unfortunate planet’ (127). Rainsford points out in Authorship, Ethics and the Reader that an author ‘is most impressive and instructive when he confronts the reader with a sense of the
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author as one who is subject to the same ethical principles and liable to the
same moral failings as anybody else, who is not necessarily innocent of any of
the forms of corruption or oppression that his work describes’ (213). The
religious overtones may be a residue of the series’ basis in the sacred texts, but
whatever Lessing’s intentions, she appears, in writing in this way, to be
assuming moral superiority over, or at least greater wisdom than, the rest of the
human race. She told Minda Bikman in 1980, ‘You know, whenever one
writes a book like *Shikasta*, it’s a series of queries – to myself, to other people
– as ideas’ (26). But a query can be as rhetorical as a statement. As Knapp
says, ‘in short this [*Shikasta*] and the following volumes of *Canopus* depict
totalitarian systems but neglect to question the premises on which they operate’
(139). There is a remarkable vagueness, as well, about the nature of the
‘higher purposes’ (131) which have been forgotten on Shikasta. They certainly
do not involve the pursuit of scientific knowledge, since science comes under
scathing attack several times as a ‘totalitarian, all-pervasive, all-powerful
governing caste’ (115). Canopeans do not want inquiring minds in Shikastans,
just obedient behaviour, and ‘to identify with ourselves as individuals … is the
very essence of the Degenerative Disease’ (55).

A new tone appears in the series with *The Sentimental Agents*. The
satire is broad and unsubtle, and it is sometimes difficult to recognize the
angelic beings of the first four novels in the jaded civil-servant types of this
novel. In the first paragraph, Klorathy writes to his superior, Johor,

I hereby give notice, *formally*, that I am applying to be sent, when I’m
finished here, to a planet as backward as you like, as challenging as you
like, but not one whose populations seem permanently afflicted by self-
destructive dementia. (11)

The ‘self-destructive dementia’ is linked to ‘attacks of Rhetoric’ (11) from
which not even the Canopean agents are immune. Lessing clearly intends to
deflate the lofty Canopeans of the four first novels in this book. She would
like to believe that ‘despite a certain spiritual and moral superiority over the
Earthlings, my denizens of distant galaxies are finally equal to us human beings again’ (Schwarzkopf 107), and in *The Sentimental Agents* she tries to undermine the solemnity of earlier depictions. However, as Rothstein wrote in a review of the novel, ‘whatever promise it offers of satire and enlightened vision dissipates into cliche and platitude. The humour falls flat, the rhetorical jests become tiresome and the political insights seem derivative’ (7). She herself said that she ‘lost my way all through that book. I’ve never enjoyed anything so much’ (Aldiss 170). I do not agree with James Gindin ‘that one grace Doris Lessing lacks, for good or ill, is a sense of humor’ (588). That she can write with a light and very amusing tone is evident in some of her short stories, and especially in *In Pursuit of The English*. But *The Sentimental Agents* is not funny at all; it is a one-joke book, and it savours of self-indulgence.

'I hate rhetoric of all kinds. I think it’s one of the things that stupefies us – the use of words to stop your thinking’ (Aldiss 170). As Wayne Booth wrote in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, ‘everyone is against everyone else’s prejudices and in favor of his own commitment to truth’ (70). Booth finds that fiction cannot help being rhetorical; ‘the author’s judgment is always present’ (20); but even if fiction can be written that does merely ‘put questions, both to myself and to others; ... explore ideas and sociological possibilities’ (*Sirian Experiments*, Preface 12), without implying any moral judgements, the *Canopus* series is not of this type. As Rothstein says, *The Sentimental Agents* is ... itself a ‘rhetorical book’. Like the political cliches Mrs Lessing satirizes, it calls for the ‘great will, the great purpose, the great decision’. It leans back on the ‘cunning of history’. It establishes absolutes of good and evil. And if political rhetoric ignores differences and distinctions, and submerges the individual in undulant swells of universal platitudes and invocations, Mrs Lessing’s position is not too different. (22)

It is interesting, also, that the English language stands in for all language. In the Galaxy, there are evidently no language barriers. Canopeans and Sirians can communicate by language with everyone in the Galaxy, although they
presumably have languages of their own (the words ‘Shikasta’ and ‘Rohanda’ come from some language other than English, which implies that the documents in the Canopean archives from which Shikasta and The Sentimental Agents purport to be extracts have been translated into English.) Perhaps they have developed some hi-tech or super-human ability to decode all languages: one might expect this from gods. But the inhabitants of all three zones in Marriages can speak directly to each other, even though there has been little contact between them. Given her interest in language difficulties in Memoirs of a Survivor, for example, where language seems to be disappearing from the savage children of the underworld, and her sensitivity to language differences in ‘Hunger’, this is odd. Lessing would no doubt regard this as an example of the critical ‘nitpicking’ (Ingersoll 238) she dislikes so much, but something like this which starts the reader wondering about not realism, which is obviously irrelevant here, but basic plausibility, weakens the force of these novels.

The utopian theme is a major thread in these novels. She herself describes the space fictions as ‘fantasies, or Utopias in the truest, most precise sense of the term’ (Schwarzkopf 107). The Utopias she depicts are all under threat. She points out that she never describes Canopus itself ‘very closely, because to describe goodness is almost impossible for us – we’re not good enough to’ (Aldiss 170). Canopus remains implicit in the background, a paradigm of good which foreigners like the Sirian Ambien II in The Sirian Experiments are always trying to fathom, but which remains beyond comprehension. The difficulty of describing goodness has its corollary in the narrative imperative of tension; there needs to be a threat of some kind, an ordeal to be faced, for narrative to be compelling. Utopias exist – or have existed – all over the Galaxy, but apart from the ineffable planet of Canopus itself, they fall from grace. Related to this is the idea of apocalypse. This is most obvious in Shikasta, where Earth comes closer and closer through the
millennia to almost total annihilation by an unspecified catastrophe at the end of ‘the century of destruction’ (436) (which is, in an odd concession by the Canopeans to the Christian tradition, also referred to as ‘The Twentieth Century’). After the catastrophe, a new Utopia begins to appear, inspired or organised by Canopean agents, of cities built in accordance with the mysterious Necessity – Armageddon, clearly, is followed by The New Jerusalem. The Biblical parallels begin to take on a ludicrous aspect when we are presented with a friendly jaguar who not only is uninterested in eating sheep, but helps the sheepdog round them up. The people are happy enough to eat meat: ‘we bought some sheep and made a fire and cooked some meat, and got ourselves fed’ (446) – note that the slaughtering of the sheep is passed over in silence – but the jaguar is content with ‘maize porridge and some sour milk’ (442).

In Marriages, Utopia is Zone 3, a matriarchy where life used to be pleasant and easy. However, it has become complacent and stagnant, and must mingle with the brutal patriarchy of belligerent Zone 4 to revitalise itself, before it can re-establish its Utopian status. The implied ethics in Marriages are rather more ambiguous and plural than those elsewhere in the series. Al’Ith, Queen of Zone 3, sacrifices herself at the behest of the enigmatic Providers, the gods whom no-one questions and which we must presume, in the cosmology of the series, are in fact Canopus. First she must marry Ben Ata, the king of the warlike Zone 4, which under her influence becomes more peaceable and prosperous. She bears him a son, but is then banished and returns to Zone 3, while he in turn marries the bandit queen of Zone 5, all in accordance with orders from above. Al’Ith suffers, Christ-like, for the redemption of her people, who reject her, and she disappears into the disembodied and rarefied Zone 2 at the end of the novel.

In The Sirian Experiments, Utopias come and go as conditions change, as the well-intentioned but puzzled Ambien II gradually creeps towards
Canopean enlightenment. *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* is another doomed Utopia. Planet 8 was a model planet, a colony of Canopus, everything in accordance with the Necessity, until the Cosmos turned against it and engulfed it in ice. The few survivors, bodily dead, metamorphose into a spiritual being of unknown destination which is ‘The Representative of Planet 8’, and which is presumably re-incarnated somewhere else in order to write this account, a self-conscious narrative related by Doeg, the keeper of memories and teller of tales, at a later time: the novel begins, ‘You ask how the Canopean Agents seemed to us in the times of the Ice’ (11). A feature of the utopian situation on Planet 8 is the way the inhabitants see themselves. Their names and identities are linked not to themselves as individuals but to the role they play in society. Thus, for example, Alsi, the animal keeper, becomes Doeg, the teller of tales, when she is needed in this role. The destruction of life on Planet 8 means there are fewer roles to play, so finally those who are left fuse together to become The Representative. Utopias, at least in Lessing’s imaginary worlds, are intolerant of individuals thinking for themselves.

The apocalyptic imagination needs a golden age, a Utopia which has been destroyed by the forces of evil, or the unconscious power of the Cosmos, and to which a post-apocalypse world may return. Knapp sees two advantages for Lessing in Utopian fiction: ‘While on the one hand it provides escape from an altogether imperfect reality, it furnishes on the other hand a detached and often impartial perspective for scrutinizing the human condition’ (Knapp 131). Why her imagination has this apocalyptic tendency is something she does not entirely understand; in her mind, ‘somewhere or other, there is a pattern of disaster. So you have to ask, where did it come from? Is it in all our minds? Is it because of the war? Which is what I think. So it’s in my mind. I don’t like it very much’ (Forde 217-8). The war – both world wars, but especially the second – understandably made an indelible impact on Lessing’s mind and
thus on her writing. In *Landlocked*, the novel in the *Children of Violence* series set directly after World War Two, the incredulity of characters when presented with incomprehensibly huge statistics about the war is described several times. Lessing’s need to step back from the world in order to see and take in the scale of the catastrophe is possibly one reason for her taking on the form of space fiction, as well as for her rather pessimistic view of human endeavour. But the cosmology of these novels suggests a human impotence in the scheme of things which amounts to determinism. When Christopher Bigsby tackled her in 1980 on the problem of determinism in her work, she replied,

> I don’t think like this. I find it very difficult. ... You see it as either/or. While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present. (‘Need’ 76)

‘Literature,’ Lessing said in 1994, ‘shouldn’t be treated as a kind of blueprint for a better way of correct thinking. ... The idea that one can get pleasure and excitement from reading has disappeared somewhere’ (Ingersoll 232-3). However, it is impossible not to regard a book like *Shikasta* as didactic. It finishes thus:

> I am writing this, sitting on a low white wall ... People are all around me, working at this and that. ... everything makeshift and even difficult but doesn’t seem so, and everything is happening in this new way, there is no need to argue and argue and discuss and disagree and confer and accuse and fight and then kill. ...

> I can’t stop thinking of them, our ancestors, the poor animal-men, always murdering and destroying because they couldn’t help it. ...

> And here we all are together, here we are ... (447)

As for pleasure and excitement, they are more elusive in the *Canopus* series than in most of Lessing’s other work, and there even seems to be an occasional echo of ‘that dull thump that comes when writers have been writing because they felt they ought to’ (Kurzweil, ‘Unexamined’ 206). She may not have been writing from a sense of duty or intentionally expressing moral or political
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opinions, and she is obviously sincere when she says that she writes from the ‘holistic part’ of her mind, rather than the ‘critical part’ (Kurzweil, ‘Unexamined’ 206). However, when Michael Dean asked her in 1980 whether she had ‘always felt [her]self sitting in judgment of your civilization’, she answered, ‘Yes, I have, and perhaps it’s not much use, but I think it was the way I was brought up’ (87). The ‘critical part’ of her mind cannot help but influence the ‘holistic part’. Although, as she repeatedly insists, literature does not have to be about anything, she still hopes to ‘stimulate people to think, ... entertain them and make them aware of things which in the whirlpool of the everyday they might not see or hear’ (Schwarzkopf 106). And she does: the Canopus series does give a new perspective on human life, but that view which is apparently so detached is the creation of a human being, and, once this simple fact has occurred to her readers, the strength of her rhetoric has the potential to make them suspect a didactic intention.

Lessing says her Utopias are in the tradition of Thomas More and Plato rather than Orwell or Huxley (Schwarzkopf 107). The comparison that suggests itself to some critics is Swift. In an article about Briefing for a Descent into Hell, Hynes noted that Lessing’s ‘rat-dogs and monkeys wage war and mate indiscriminately (like Swift’s Yahoos)’ (227), and in The Four Gated City, Martha’s disgust at ‘the hideously defective bodies’ (522) of her fellow Londoners has a Swiftian echo. Linda Taylor, reviewing The Making of the Representative for Planet 8, notes that Lessing’s perspective in her space fiction is similar to Swift’s in Gulliver’s Travels, but ‘while Swift knew his rational beings were essentially absurd, Lessing, like Gulliver, takes them too seriously’ (370). With hindsight, we can see that Lessing treated Canopus more disrespectfully in her next book, but Taylor’s comments are still just – Volume 5 modifies but does not nullify the image of Canopus in the first four volumes.
Margaret Ann Doody, in *The True Story of the Novel*, says that ‘the novel demonstrates that people can and should get out of their cocoons’ (467). Most narratives do tend to endorse this view, if only because staying in the cocoon is not interesting – if nothing happens, nothing can be told. Philip Thody points out, further, that many twentieth century writers presume that there is something wrong about wanting to lead an ordinary untroubled life. The chorus of the Women of Canterbury, in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, who ‘do not want anything to happen’, are typical in this respect of the target audience which the characteristically twentieth century writer is trying to hit where it hurts most. (166)

The work of Doris Lessing that demonstrates the imperative to break out of the ordinary and untroubled cocoon of existence most perfectly is *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, part one of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, a microcosm of human life that really does ‘change how people see themselves’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 72), and even provides a kind of practical personal morality with respect to other people which is more difficult to find in *Canopus*. On first reading *The Diaries*, the most immediately influential impression for some readers would be Jane Somers’ care about appearances, such is the absorbing and convincing nature of the writing. One soon realises, though, that Jane is at first an unreliable narrator, and that it is her opening up to Maudie and the other old women she befriends wherein her moral strength lies, and which gets her out of her comfortable but restricting cocoon. Lessing makes this quite clear:

> Old age and the physical deterioration of others naturally seem to be something repugnant, shocking to us; and we protect ourselves from it with a barrier of disgust. But the real reason for this disgust is fear, the fear that sooner or later we too will be that object of disgust. Unless we are extremely lucky, that’s what’s facing us, and I think it is best to try to get used to it. That is what my narrator, Jane Somers, did when she took on the responsibility for the old lady. And if I made of her an egotistical and rather inane person at the beginning of the novel it was because I also wanted the discovery of old age and misery to come as a shock for her. (Rousseau 147)
Her didactic intention is clear, but in *The Diaries* she manages, as Booth would say, to ‘raise an important question in a lively form’ (*Rhetoric* 285), without seriously compromising the integrity of the narrative. In the *Canopus* novels, cocoons are not often available to most of the characters, and this is partly their point. Canopus agents do not cocoon themselves. They are brave and apparently benevolent (as the British believed themselves to be in their imperial days.) Transience is the greatest theme of the *Canopus* series, and cocooning is an attempt to shore up defences against transience, an attempt which will always in the end be useless. The space fiction novels offer no alternative to fatalism and despair. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, on the other hand, in spite of its chill wind of old age and mortality, implies that a human being may learn a little by allowing others to get beneath one’s defences, which is not only the subject of this novel, but the way it works upon the reader. The irony is perhaps that Lessing succeeds best with conveying her sense of the recalcitrant nature of reality when she attempts to impersonate a new novelist, and leaves aside the self-conscious experiments with novelistic form and its relation to reality that had preoccupied her since *The Golden Notebook*. She says herself that she is ‘much more interested in a bad novel that doesn’t work but has got ideas in it that I am to read yet again the perfect small novel. ... *Shikasta* is a mess, but at any rate it’s a new mess’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 82-3). The ‘mess’ that is *Shikasta* contains passages that are truly moving, like Johor’s visit to Zone Six (the Shikastan purgatory) near the beginning of the novel, and Rachel’s journal; and other sequences that do make the reader look again at a defamiliarised reality, such as the Canopean history of Shikasta from which ‘excerpts’ are included; but the vastness of its scope, which is part of its message, also partly causes its frequent failure to engage with the reader’s intellect through emotional involvement. Compassion for an anonymous mass is difficult to sustain without detailed portrayals of individual’s experiences with which the reader may feel some empathy. It may
be a book like those she believes have a place: ‘novels that have ideas and shake people up and then die’ (Dean 93). But Lessing’s principal creative talent lies with the other type of distancing; that of imaginative impersonation of other individuals, and *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is as good an example of this capacity as anything else she has written. Life on Earth may be, by Canopean standards, pitifully short, but imaginative literature can sometimes give some clues as to how to make it worth living.
Chapter Eleven

Floating Away: Alienation and Distance in Doris Lessing’s Space Fiction.

'You have to write cold,' Lessing said to Sedge Thomson in 1989, ‘You can’t write hot; otherwise it’s no good’ (190). In order to ‘write cold’, Lessing has found it necessary to stand back, to detach herself from her subject matter, even when it is based on her own life, or on political issues about which she feels strongly. Many critics have noted her cool, detached voice, some with approval, like Diane Johnson, who describes her ‘particular, somewhat chilly and omniscient voice’ (7), and some, like Beck, taking issue with the ‘wry, detached observation’ (66) with which she views the whites in Southern Rhodesia in her early fiction. Lessing herself obviously knew what she was doing at some level, although in 1981 she said ‘it has taken me a long time to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day’ (Schwarzkopf 105). In her interview with Brian Aldiss, she attributes her cosmic point of view partly to star-gazing in Africa as a child: ‘You automatically start thinking in terms of millions of years if you take that point of view’ (172).

This tendency to view human life in macrocosm is, of course, most obvious in her space fiction series, Canopus in Argos, but it was by no means a new technique for her. Anna, in The Golden Notebook, plays a game in which she sits and takes herself progressively further away from herself, viewing herself at last from a great height, and in Landlocked, the chapter after Martha’s lover Thomas leaves begins with a detached view of a street in which Martha stands. ‘From the sky, the town would announce itself as much by trees as by buildings . . . . Night or day, it was trees, then buildings, that showed where man had staked his claim on the grass-covered high veld’ (196). The view then expands to ‘nearly a hundred miles away’ (196), where the Quests’ abandoned house has ‘sunk to its knees under the blows of the first wet season after the Quests had left it’, and then expands into time; ‘For how many
millions of years has the central plateau stood high and dry, dry above all, lifting upwards to the drought-giving skies?’ (197). The cosmic view is then directed towards Europe, where ‘cities still stood in ruins and people in the cities expected a hungry winter’, where ‘forty-four million people had died in the last war. (But what was the use of saying forty-four million ... when one could not feel more than, let’s say, half a million, and even that with difficulty, after long strain)’ (197-8). Lessing’s use of distancing as an ethical method is here quite clear.

The related technique of viewing society through alien eyes can be seen even earlier, in *The Grass is Singing*, which originated from an interest in the point of view of an outsider, a young idealist from England (see Thorpe 99), in the climactic events of the novel, and in ‘Hunger’, where white society is viewed through the eyes of a black village boy newly arrived in the city. As I mention in Chapter Nine, this could be seen an example of the defamiliarisation process in fiction postulated by the Russian Formalist Shklovsky. Shklovsky’s ideas contributed to Brecht’s ‘verfremdungseffekt’ or alienation effect, whereby he tried to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally involved in a play so that they may be intellectually aroused instead, and thus (in theory) more open to the political message. Robert Arlett discusses Brecht’s possible influence on *The Golden Notebook*, claiming that the undercutting of assumed or expected versions of reality parallels Brechtian distancing technique ... and it is also a reflection of the complexities of modern experience and of the difficulties in reaching a moral stance in the face of those complexities. (70)

Lessing’s version of the alienation technique is, however, a little different to Brecht’s, and resembles Marcuse’s view of the responsibility of the artist, which he describes as ‘artistic alienation’, as explained by Fishburn:

For him, the function of the artist is to oppose the status quo and the state – an opposition that implies a commitment to those who are adversely affected by the status quo and who cannot articulate (or perhaps even see) their subordination to the needs of the state. *(Unexpected Universe 8)*
Lessing, unlike Brecht, usually seems to have no objection to her readers’ identifying with the characters in her fiction, although it is true she does not always actively encourage it. For her, the important thing is to show other points of view, to challenge the mainstream values. ‘I like to think that if someone’s read a book of mine, they’ve had ... the literary equivalent of a shower. Something that would start them thinking in a slightly different way perhaps’ (Frick 164).

Logically, authors could write from any point of view, including their own, to challenge their reader’s thinking. The author’s own point of view will always be different to that of the reader in some ways, and very subjective personal writing can indeed be very enlightening. One assumes that Lessing is more or less speaking from her own viewpoint when her subject is a white woman with a similar history to her own. Without assuming absolute equivalence, for example, one ascribes much of the subjective experience of Martha Quest in the first four novels of the *Children of Violence* series to the author. She expresses annoyance at questions about what aspects of her books are autobiographical – ‘in a sense, everything has to be autobiographical, of course; but on the other hand, you can also say that it isn’t autobiographical at all, because as soon as you begin writing it changes into something else’ (Tomalin 173) – and believes it is not important for the reader to distinguish autobiography from fiction. Nevertheless, Eve Bertelsen noticed in her 1986 interview that she would talk about Martha Quest, and Lessing would respond by talking about herself (143), which betrays a strong autobiographical identification. Discussing her subject matter with Stephen Gray, she said,

> You start off with your life and the need to define yourself and this frightful struggle to make this statement of what you are, to find out what it is. Then you do sort of float away from that, instead of being embedded in it, you see yourself from a distance. (118)

It is interesting, though, that in this exploration of her own identity, her sexual, emotional and political life is covered in depth, while her writing is entirely
ignored. Martha Quest is not creative in any way. Even in *The Golden Notebook*, although the main character, Anna, is a writer, she suffers from writer’s block.

Leaving aside the question of exact identification with Martha and Anna, there are many clear examples of her deliberately setting out to inhabit subjects significantly different from herself. One striking instance is *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, where she was initially not only writing in the first person of Jane Somers, but impersonating her as well, keeping her own authorship secret for some time. Commenting on this experience, she said, ‘It’s amazing what you find out about yourself when you write in the first person about someone very different from you’ (Frick 163). And an extra layer of impersonation is added when Jane Somers, as narrator/protagonist, makes herself imagine in detail the daily experiences of other characters in the novel – ‘Maudie’s day’ – ‘I wrote Maudie’s day because I want to understand’ (134), and later ‘A Day in the Life of a Home Help’ (189), as well as her own day, ‘Janna’s day’ (131). As a character, Janna is struggling to really see (as Iris Murdoch would say) other people, and imagining and narrating their experiences from their own points of view is part of her method. She even becomes a novelist, writing a romantic novel during the course of the narrative, based on what she has learned about Maudie’s life.

In 1972, Josephine Hendin remarked to Lessing,

I get the feeling sometimes in many of your stories that people see each other as though they were space travelers looking at aliens on another planet – that somehow the distance between people is sufficiently great, or between people and the lives they are leading. The sense of disillusionment becomes so great that there’s a feeling of immense distance. (44)

This interview predates the *Canopus* series by seven years, and shows how these techniques were evident in her work long before she started actually setting novels in outer space. Lessing replied to Hendin’s comment, ‘This business of using people from outer space is a very ancient literary device, isn’t
it? It’s the easiest way of trying to make the readers look at a human situation more sharply.’ However, with this sharpness of the view there is a sacrifice in the emotional and thus intellectual impact fiction can have when it concentrates on the microcosmic, individual experience.

The two novels which comprise *The Diaries of Jane Somers* were the first books Lessing published after the *Canopus* series (the last of which is still *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*, despite her stated intention as late as 1993 (Ingersoll 240) to write a sixth.) They allow her once again to exercise her talent for describing minute details, which was somewhat quelled in the space fiction novels. The gritty, grimy, silk and satin world of Jane Somers springs almost palpably from the pages, and this naturalism is a welcome celebration of imperfect human life; a relief in contrast to the distant Canopean eye which usually disdains such close attention to detail, and looks at movements of humans from a galactic perspective. Lessing said in 1980, ‘what is not realistic is slippery ground. One must accumulate enough daily details in order that the reader isn’t lost, since he requires the presence of mundane details so that he can then respond to the irrational’ (Torrents 67). Mundane details are not completely absent from the space fiction series; the second, *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* and the fourth, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, are both fables told from the point of view of, not literally Earthbound, but planet-bound colonial subjects of the Canopean empire, and Volume 1, *Shikasta*, contains entries from the diaries of a teenage girl with a very tenuous grasp on the cosmic view of her brother George, an incarnated Canopean agent. It is no coincidence that these are the most readable and memorable parts of the series.
Katherine Fishburn writes, ‘it is in science fiction, a form she has come to by circuitous routes, that she is able to oppose the politics of the status quo to best advantage and to affirm her commitment to the greater good of humanity’ (Unexpected Universe 10). The omniscient Canopeans, however, are unable to explain their understanding of ‘Necessity’ to non-Canopeans, and need to promote an ethic of blind obedience to a higher order believed to be benevolent – the instructions for ‘a safe and wise existence on Shikasta’ to a tribe that showed ‘honesty, hospitality, and above all a hunger for something different’ in a time of degeneration, are ‘moderation, abstention from luxury, plain living, care for others’ and so forth, ‘and above all, a quiet attention to what is most needed from them, obedience’ (139). Rachel Sherban, in Shikasta, says ‘you don’t understand something until you see the results’ (324): as Jeannette King notes, ‘this smacks suspiciously of the end justifying the means’ (79). In Marriages, none of the characters can fathom the reasons for the orders they receive from The Providers, although Al Ith has a suspicion that it is to do with ending complacency and stagnation in her Zone. Ambien II in The Sirian Experiments constantly asks her Canopean mentor Klorathy the wrong questions, but he never suggests to her which are the right ones; and she performs the rituals prescribed by Canopus with rigour but no understanding. And in The Sentimental Agents, Johor is able to suggest some strategies to various Volyen communities to fend off the worst disasters of the Sirian invasions, but is unable to provide enlightenment.

Talking to Brian Aldiss, Lessing explained the origin of the Canopus series:

I read the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the New Testament, and the Koran. I found the similar idea of the warner or prophet, who arrives from somewhere and tells the people they should behave differently, or
else! … My language is not religious so I did it in space-fiction terms and created a good empire. (Aldiss 170)

Canopus, then, occupies the position of God – all-knowing, virtually immortal, although their omniscience does not give them omnipotence, as The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 shows: when the forces of cosmic nature are at work, even Canopus cannot prevent the physical annihilation of all life on Planet 8. In the first four volumes, Canopus appears all-wise, lofty, self-sacrificing and compassionate. In Shikasta, the archives betray little humour, no anger, but much sorrow for the inhabitants of Shikasta, the Broken One, formerly ‘Rohanda, which means fruitful, thriving’ (27), known to the novel’s readers, of course, as Earth. As King says, ‘a reversal takes place whereby those stories of human behaviour which are most familiar and accessible to the real reader are presented as illustration of conduct too extreme for the comprehension of the implied reader – the Canopean student’ (73). The next three volumes are narrated by a variety of puzzled non-Canopeans, with the implication that Canopus is far beyond and above normal human understanding. (The inhabitants of the Galaxy are, at least those directly involved in these stories, ‘human’, even though they do not all inhabit Earth.)

King comments, ‘the alternative order [the Canopus sequence] offers has a potentially authoritarian dimension which seems to turn away from the openness and multiplicity of meaning and value which many see as the strengths of Lessing’s work’ (92). If none but Canopeans can know what to do, and all of Earth’s inhabitants can do no better than try to attune themselves to obedience without understanding, this is merely another type of revealed religion like Christianity – which is described in the fifth volume, The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire, as ‘one of the most savage and long-lasting tyrannies ever known even on that unfortunate planet’ (127). Rainsford points out in Authorship, Ethics and the Reader that an author ‘is most impressive and instructive when he confronts the reader with a sense of the
author as one who is subject to the same ethical principles and liable to the
same moral failings as anybody else, who is not necessarily innocent of any of
the forms of corruption or oppression that his work describes’ (213). The
religious overtones may be a residue of the series’ basis in the sacred texts, but
whatever Lessing’s intentions, she appears, in writing in this way, to be
assuming moral superiority over, or at least greater wisdom than, the rest of the
human race. She told Minda Bikman in 1980, ‘You know, whenever one
writes a book like Shikasta, it’s a series of queries – to myself, to other people
– as ideas’ (26). But a query can be as rhetorical as a statement. As Knapp
says, ‘in short this [Shikasta] and the following volumes of Canopus depict
totalitarian systems but neglect to question the premises on which they operate’
(139). There is a remarkable vagueness, as well, about the nature of the
‘higher purposes’ (131) which have been forgotten on Shikasta. They certainly
do not involve the pursuit of scientific knowledge, since science comes under
scathing attack several times as a ‘totalitarian, all-pervasive, all-powerful
governing caste’ (115). Canopeans do not want inquiring minds in Shikastans,
just obedient behaviour, and ‘to identify with ourselves as individuals … is the
very essence of the Degenerative Disease’ (55).

A new tone appears in the series with The Sentimental Agents. The
satire is broad and unsubtle, and it is sometimes difficult to recognize the
angelic beings of the first four novels in the jaded civil-servant types of this
novel. In the first paragraph, Klorathy writes to his superior, Johor,

I hereby give notice, formally, that I am applying to be sent, when I’m
finished here, to a planet as backward as you like, as challenging as you
like, but not one whose populations seem permanently afflicted by self-
destructive dementia. (11)

The ‘self-destructive dementia’ is linked to ‘attacks of Rhetoric’ (11) from
which not even the Canopean agents are immune. Lessing clearly intends to
deflate the lofty Canopeans of the four first novels in this book. She would
like to believe that ‘despite a certain spiritual and moral superiority over the
Earthlings, my denizens of distant galaxies are finally equal to us human beings again’ (Schwarzkopf 107), and in *The Sentimental Agents* she tries to undermine the solemnity of earlier depictions. However, as Rothstein wrote in a review of the novel, ‘whatever promise it offers of satire and enlightened vision dissipates into cliche and platitude. The humour falls flat, the rhetorical jokes become tiresome and the political insights seem derivative’ (7). She herself said that she ‘lost my way all through that book. I’ve never enjoyed anything so much’ (Aldiss 170). I do not agree with James Gindin ‘that one grace Doris Lessing lacks, for good or ill, is a sense of humor’ (588). That she can write with a light and very amusing tone is evident in some of her short stories, and especially in *In Pursuit of The English*. But *The Sentimental Agents* is not funny at all; it is a one-joke book, and it savours of self-indulgence.

'I hate rhetoric of all kinds. I think it’s one of the things that stupefies us – the use of words to stop your thinking’ (Aldiss 170). As Wayne Booth wrote in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, ‘everyone is against everyone else’s prejudices and in favor of his own commitment to truth’ (70). Booth finds that fiction cannot help being rhetorical; ‘the author’s judgment is always present’ (20); but even if fiction can be written that does merely ‘put questions, both to myself and to others; ... explore ideas and sociological possibilities’ (*Sirian Experiments*, Preface 12), without implying any moral judgements, the *Canopus* series is not of this type. As Rothstein says, *The Sentimental Agents* is ... itself a ‘rhetorical book’. Like the political cliches Mrs Lessing satirizes, it calls for the ‘great will, the great purpose, the great decision’. It leans back on the ‘cunning of history’. It establishes absolutes of good and evil. And if political rhetoric ignores differences and distinctions, and submerges the individual in undulant swells of universal platitudes and invocations, Mrs Lessing’s position is not too different. (22)

It is interesting, also, that the English language stands in for all language. In the Galaxy, there are evidently no language barriers. Canopeans and Sirians can communicate by language with everyone in the Galaxy, although they
presumably have languages of their own (the words ‘Shikasta’ and ‘Rohanda’ come from some language other than English, which implies that the documents in the Canopean archives from which *Shikasta* and *The Sentimental Agents* purport to be extracts have been translated into English.) Perhaps they have developed some hi-tech or super-human ability to decode all languages: one might expect this from gods. But the inhabitants of all three zones in *Marriages* can speak directly to each other, even though there has been little contact between them. Given her interest in language difficulties in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, for example, where language seems to be disappearing from the savage children of the underworld, and her sensitivity to language differences in ‘Hunger’, this is odd. Lessing would no doubt regard this as an example of the critical ‘nitpicking’ (Ingersoll 238) she dislikes so much, but something like this which starts the reader wondering about not realism, which is obviously irrelevant here, but basic plausibility, weakens the force of these novels.

The utopian theme is a major thread in these novels. She herself describes the space fictions as ‘fantasies, or Utopias in the truest, most precise sense of the term’ (Schwarzkopf 107). The Utopias she depicts are all under threat. She points out that she never describes Canopus itself ‘very closely, because to describe goodness is almost impossible for us – we’re not good enough to’ (Aldiss 170). Canopus remains implicit in the background, a paradigm of good which foreigners like the Sirian Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments* are always trying to fathom, but which remains beyond comprehension. The difficulty of describing goodness has its corollary in the narrative imperative of tension; there needs to be a threat of some kind, an ordeal to be faced, for narrative to be compelling. Utopias exist – or have existed – all over the Galaxy, but apart from the ineffable planet of Canopus itself, they fall from grace. Related to this is the idea of apocalypse. This is most obvious in *Shikasta*, where Earth comes closer and closer through the
millennia to almost total annihilation by an unspecified catastrophe at the end of ‘the century of destruction’ (436) (which is, in an odd concession by the Canopeans to the Christian tradition, also referred to as ‘The Twentieth Century’). After the catastrophe, a new Utopia begins to appear, inspired or organised by Canopean agents, of cities built in accordance with the mysterious Necessity – Armageddon, clearly, is followed by The New Jerusalem. The Biblical parallels begin to take on a ludicrous aspect when we are presented with a friendly jaguar who not only is uninterested in eating sheep, but helps the sheepdog round them up. The people are happy enough to eat meat: ‘we bought some sheep and made a fire and cooked some meat, and got ourselves fed’ (446) – note that the slaughtering of the sheep is passed over in silence – but the jaguar is content with ‘maize porridge and some sour milk’ (442).

In *Marriages*, Utopia is Zone 3, a matriarchy where life used to be pleasant and easy. However, it has become complacent and stagnant, and must mingle with the brutal patriarchy of belligerent Zone 4 to revitalise itself, before it can re-establish its Utopian status. The implied ethics in *Marriages* are rather more ambiguous and plural than those elsewhere in the series. Al Ith, Queen of Zone 3, sacrifices herself at the behest of the enigmatic Providers, the gods whom no-one questions and which we must presume, in the cosmology of the series, are in fact Canopus. First she must marry Ben Ata, the king of the warlike Zone 4, which under her influence becomes more peaceable and prosperous. She bears him a son, but is then banished and returns to Zone 3, while he in turn marries the bandit queen of Zone 5, all in accordance with orders from above. Al Ith suffers, Christ-like, for the redemption of her people, who reject her, and she disappears into the disembodied and rarefied Zone 2 at the end of the novel.

In *The Sirian Experiments*, Utopias come and go as conditions change, as the well-intentioned but puzzled Ambien II gradually creeps towards
Canopean enlightenment. The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 is another doomed Utopia. Planet 8 was a model planet, a colony of Canopus, everything in accordance with the Necessity, until the Cosmos turned against it and engulfed it in ice. The few survivors, bodily dead, metamorphose into a spiritual being of unknown destination which is ‘The Representative of Planet 8’, and which is presumably re-incarnated somewhere else in order to write this account, a self-conscious narrative related by Doeg, the keeper of memories and teller of tales, at a later time: the novel begins, ‘You ask how the Canopean Agents seemed to us in the times of the Ice’ (11). A feature of the utopian situation on Planet 8 is the way the inhabitants see themselves. Their names and identities are linked not to themselves as individuals but to the role they play in society. Thus, for example, Alsi, the animal keeper, becomes Doeg, the teller of tales, when she is needed in this role. The destruction of life on Planet 8 means there are fewer roles to play, so finally those who are left fuse together to become The Representative. Utopias, at least in Lessing’s imaginary worlds, are intolerant of individuals thinking for themselves.

The apocalyptic imagination needs a golden age, a Utopia which has been destroyed by the forces of evil, or the unconscious power of the Cosmos, and to which a post-apocalypse world may return. Knapp sees two advantages for Lessing in Utopian fiction: ‘While on the one hand it provides escape from an altogether imperfect reality, it furnishes on the other hand a detached and often impartial perspective for scrutinizing the human condition’ (Knapp 131). Why her imagination has this apocalyptic tendency is something she does not entirely understand; in her mind, ‘somewhere or other, there is a pattern of disaster. So you have to ask, where did it come from? Is it in all our minds? Is it because of the war? Which is what I think. So it’s in my mind. I don’t like it very much’ (Forde 217-8). The war – both world wars, but especially the second – understandably made an indelible impact on Lessing’s mind and
thus on her writing. In *Landlocked*, the novel in the *Children of Violence* series set directly after World War Two, the incredulity of characters when presented with incomprehensibly huge statistics about the war is described several times. Lessing’s need to step back from the world in order to see and take in the scale of the catastrophe is possibly one reason for her taking on the form of space fiction, as well as for her rather pessimistic view of human endeavour. But the cosmology of these novels suggests a human impotence in the scheme of things which amounts to determinism. When Christopher Bigsby tackled her in 1980 on the problem of determinism in her work, she replied,

> I don’t think like this. I find it very difficult. ... You see it as either/or. While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present. (‘Need’ 76)

‘Literature,’ Lessing said in 1994, ‘shouldn’t be treated as a kind of blueprint for a better way of correct thinking. ... The idea that one can get pleasure and excitement from reading has disappeared somewhere’ (Ingersoll 232-3). However, it is impossible not to regard a book like *Shikasta* as didactic. It finishes thus:

> I am writing this, sitting on a low white wall ... People are all around me, working at this and that. ... everything makeshift and even difficult but doesn’t seem so, and everything is happening in this new way, there is no need to argue and argue and discuss and disagree and confer and accuse and fight and then kill. ...

> I can’t stop thinking of them, our ancestors, the poor animal-men, always murderering and destroying because they couldn’t help it. ... And here we all are together, here we are ... (447)

As for pleasure and excitement, they are more elusive in the *Canopus* series than in most of Lessing’s other work, and there even seems to be an occasional echo of ‘that dull thump that comes when writers have been writing because they felt they ought to’ (Kurzweil, ‘Unexamined’ 206). She may not have been writing from a sense of duty or intentionally expressing moral or political
opinions, and she is obviously sincere when she says that she writes from the ‘holistic part’ of her mind, rather than the ‘critical part’ (Kurzweil, ‘Unexamined’ 206). However, when Michael Dean asked her in 1980 whether she had ‘always felt [her]self sitting in judgment of your civilization’, she answered, ‘Yes, I have, and perhaps it’s not much use, but I think it was the way I was brought up’ (87). The ‘critical part’ of her mind cannot help but influence the ‘holistic part’. Although, as she repeatedly insists, literature does not have to be about anything, she still hopes to ‘stimulate people to think, ... entertain them and make them aware of things which in the whirlpool of the everyday they might not see or hear’ (Schwarzkopf 106). And she does: the \textit{Canopus} series does give a new perspective on human life, but that view which is apparently so detached is the creation of a human being, and, once this simple fact has occurred to her readers, the strength of her rhetoric has the potential to make them suspect a didactic intention.

Lessing says her Utopias are in the tradition of Thomas More and Plato rather than Orwell or Huxley (Schwarzkopf 107). The comparison that suggests itself to some critics is Swift. In an article about \textit{Briefing for a Descent into Hell}, Hynes noted that Lessing’s ‘rat-dogs and monkeys wage war and mate indiscriminately (like Swift’s Yahoos)’ (227), and in \textit{The Four Gated City}, Martha’s disgust at ‘the hideously defective bodies’ (522) of her fellow Londoners has a Swiftian echo. Linda Taylor, reviewing \textit{The Making of the Representative for Planet 8}, notes that Lessing’s perspective in her space fiction is similar to Swift’s in \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, but ‘while Swift knew his rational beings were essentially absurd, Lessing, like Gulliver, takes them too seriously’ (370). With hindsight, we can see that Lessing treated Canopus more disrespectfully in her next book, but Taylor’s comments are still just – Volume 5 modifies but does not nullify the image of Canopus in the first four volumes.
Margaret Ann Doody, in *The True Story of the Novel*, says that ‘the novel demonstrates that people can and should get out of their cocoons’ (467). Most narratives do tend to endorse this view, if only because staying in the cocoon is not interesting – if nothing happens, nothing can be told. Philip Thody points out, further, that many twentieth century writers presume that there is something wrong about wanting to lead an ordinary untroubled life. The chorus of the Women of Canterbury, in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, who ‘do not want anything to happen’, are typical in this respect of the target audience which the characteristically twentieth century writer is trying to hit where it hurts most. (166)

The work of Doris Lessing that demonstrates the imperative to break out of the ordinary and untroubled cocoon of existence most perfectly is *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, part one of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, a microcosm of human life that really does ‘change how people see themselves’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 72), and even provides a kind of practical personal morality with respect to other people which is more difficult to find in *Canopus*. On first reading *The Diaries*, the most immediately influential impression for some readers would be Jane Somers’ care about appearances, such is the absorbing and convincing nature of the writing. One soon realises, though, that Jane is at first an unreliable narrator, and that it is her opening up to Maudie and the other old women she befriends wherein her moral strength lies, and which gets her out of her comfortable but restricting cocoon. Lessing makes this quite clear:

Old age and the physical deterioration of others naturally seem to be something repugnant, shocking to us; and we protect ourselves from it with a barrier of disgust. But the real reason for this disgust is fear, the fear that sooner or later we too will be that object of disgust. Unless we are extremely lucky, that’s what’s facing us, and I think it is best to try to get used to it. That is what my narrator, Jane Somers, did when she took on the responsibility for the old lady. And if I made of her an egotistical and rather inane person at the beginning of the novel it was because I also wanted the discovery of old age and misery to come as a shock for her. (Rousseau 147)
Her didactic intention is clear, but in *The Diaries* she manages, as Booth would say, to ‘raise an important question in a lively form’ (*Rhetoric* 285), without seriously compromising the integrity of the narrative. In the *Canopus* novels, cocoons are not often available to most of the characters, and this is partly their point. *Canopus* agents do not cocoon themselves. They are brave and apparently benevolent (as the British believed themselves to be in their imperial days.) Transience is the greatest theme of the *Canopus* series, and cocooning is an attempt to shore up defences against transience, an attempt which will always in the end be useless. The space fiction novels offer no alternative to fatalism and despair. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, on the other hand, in spite of its chill wind of old age and mortality, implies that a human being may learn a little by allowing others to get beneath one’s defences, which is not only the subject of this novel, but the way it works upon the reader. The irony is perhaps that Lessing succeeds best with conveying her sense of the recalcitrant nature of reality when she attempts to impersonate a new novelist, and leaves aside the self-conscious experiments with novelistic form and its relation to reality that had preoccupied her since *The Golden Notebook*. She says herself that she is ‘much more interested in a bad novel that doesn’t work but has got ideas in it that I am to read yet again the perfect small novel. ... *Shikasta* is a mess, but at any rate it’s a new mess’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 82-3). The ‘mess’ that is *Shikasta* contains passages that are truly moving, like Johor’s visit to Zone Six (the Shikastan purgatory) near the beginning of the novel, and Rachel’s journal; and other sequences that do make the reader look again at a defamiliarised reality, such as the Canopean history of Shikasta from which ‘excerpts’ are included; but the vastness of its scope, which is part of its message, also partly causes its frequent failure to engage with the reader’s intellect through emotional involvement. Compassion for an anonymous mass is difficult to sustain without detailed portrayals of individual’s experiences with which the reader may feel some empathy. It may
be a book like those she believes have a place: ‘novels that have ideas and
shake people up and then die’ (Dean 93). But Lessing’s principal creative
talent lies with the other type of distancing; that of imaginative impersonation
of other individuals, and *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is as good an
example of this capacity as anything else she has written. Life on Earth may
be, by Canopean standards, pitifully short, but imaginative literature can
sometimes give some clues as to how to make it worth living.
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Doris Lessing: Conclusion

According to Doris Lessing, ‘good novels … [make] you think about life’ (Upchurch 222), and ‘the function of real art, which I don’t aspire to, is to change how people see themselves’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 73). Rather mitigating the effect of her modest rider to the latter statement, she added, ‘I wonder if we do. If we do it is very temporary.’

The thoughtfulness she would like to inspire could take many different forms. It may be a change of view in empathy with one of her characters, like Jabavu in ‘Hunger’ or Maudie in The Diary of a Good Neighbour; or it could be a cool distant perspective like that of the Canopeans. In either case, it would not be desirable for the reader to sustain such a state of mind, so she need not despair over its temporary status. As Iser says, literature gives ‘to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 44-45), and she herself believes novels ‘should enlarge your mind and not narrow it’ (Upchurch 222). This implies an incremental process. If one were to read ‘Hunger’, feel empathy with Jabavu, and continue feeling that way, it would close one’s mind to the next fictional experience, and the purpose would be defeated.

She has herself quoted instances of her novels making people think and change their ways, but in directions other than those she envisaged. She tells an anecdote about ‘two extremely rich young Americans’ who read A Ripple from the Storm, ‘a fairly sardonic book about politics, and they were so inspired by the book that they’d gone off to join the Communist Party’ (Thomson 191). She is sometimes amused, sometimes alarmed, and sometimes
angered by these wayward interpretations. Readers cannot be blamed, though, for failing to recognise or accept her intentions, especially when the implications of what she proposes are, when examined carefully, contradictory or unreasonable. The determinism implicit in the Canopus novels is something she is loath to admit, but it has been observed by so many interviewers and critics that she cannot dismiss it as merely the ‘nitpicking’ of unsympathetic academics. The Canopus series might expand the minds of its readers, and make them look at themselves and their world differently, but Lessing cannot draw a limit to the views the novels inspire. She cannot reasonably say that we should read her novels and be encouraged to think about our lives and ourselves, but desist when it comes to speculating on the views of their author, or make sure that we are acquainted with her intentions before we form our opinions.

Her realisation after 30 years of writing that writers must ‘distance themselves from the political questions of the day’ in favour of ‘universal themes of humanity which know neither time nor space’ (Schwarzkopf 105) is most obviously represented by the Canopus series; but although there is a slight shift towards greater emphasis on ‘universal themes of humanity’ in some of her later novels, it is not consistent. Her criticism of Anna Karenina for being ‘a story about nothing, about a local society, a very local, temporary set of social circumstances’ which is ‘not rooted in any human nature’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 71) could be made with equal justice of The Grass is Singing: that particular brutal settler society was local and temporary. Both Tolstoy and Lessing portray the effect of these circumstances on individuals, and this is what the novel is particularly good at. Human nature does not exist in a
vacuum. Novels set in a particular society are necessarily limited to their particular settings: Lessing may find this constricting, but it does not detract from the value of these novels. In several books she has tried to overcome this problem by broadening her scope – for example, in Shikasta, in The Sirian Experiments, and most recently in Mara and Dann, which depicts the adventures of Mara and her brother Dann as they travel northwards through Africa (called Ifrik in the novel), encountering many different types of society. In other novels, though, she concentrates her attention on a very specific social situation. The Grass is Singing is of course one of these, but so are more recent novels like The Diaries of Jane Somers, The Fifth Child, The Good Terrorist and Love, Again; and these are at least as successful as her more ‘universal’ books. In fact, in Under My Skin she claims that her early stories and novels ‘are a reliable picture of the District in the old days. That is, from a white point of view’ (162), and that they are ‘true in atmosphere’ (162). She is conscious that the times they record have now ‘most irrevocably gone’ (161), implying that the particularities of that time are intrinsically important; and Tolstoy may well have felt the same about nineteenth-century St Petersburg.

Social and political criticism is never really far from her mind, however much she tries to suppress the ‘pure flame of energy’ which arises when she thinks ‘that something is terribly wrong and something else is terribly right’ (Bertelsen 142). This is usually a creative tension, as it is when she makes a point of showing both sides. In Shikasta the narrator describes in an ‘Illustration’ of ‘The Shikasta Situation’ the white colonisation of Southern Rhodesia from the point of view of the Africans; but after describing their subjection, the narrative shifts to focus on an English farmer, a veteran of the
First World War who, despite his wooden leg, managed his life with ‘patient
determination’, who was nothing but ‘a man fighting poverty’ (206). This is
not a difficult situation for her to imagine. The white farmer is clearly her
father. This was the situation which formed her: the situation which showed
her early in life that, however evil a social system might be, the individuals
involved are not to be simply divided into wicked oppressors and virtuous
subjects.

She carries this denial of the simple black and white picture into The
Fifth Child, insisting in later interviews that Ben is not evil, just born in the
wrong time, and that her interest was in the difficulty a ‘civilised’ society has
in dealing with such a misfit. It may indeed be difficult for many readers to
regard a child who strangles pet dogs and cats before the age of two as
anything less than evil, and Jeannette King observes that ‘it has been called a
“horror story” by some critics’ (107). Lessing makes a point of describing
Ben’s ‘lonely terror’ (123) of the institution where he was sent for a few
months and nearly drugged to death, starved and restrained in a strait jacket,
but the effect of her descriptions of his antisocial behaviour, his ‘inhuman eyes’
(116), his destruction of the family unit, is stronger, and the fact that his mother
is only able to control him through his fear of being returned to captivity tends
to outweigh any sympathy the reader might momentarily have felt for the
goblin child.

In writing about her social and political beliefs, she is aware enough to
make the attempt to show both sides, but in her latest novel, Mara and Dann, a
tendency which is probably unconscious towards a kind of aesthetic system of
morality becomes quite marked. The protagonists and the people on their side
are, for example, all tall and slender, in contrast to the brutal and mindless Hennes, a race of clones, and the ‘short and thick’ (36) Rock People who are stupid and cruel. There are the brown tunics which never wear out which Mara occasionally finds useful but are nevertheless unbearably ugly to almost everyone. In the second volume of her autobiography, she criticises one of her fellow delegates to the Soviet Union for the Authors World Peace Appeal in 1952, Naomi Mitchison, for ‘patronizing the Russians about their aesthetic sense’ (*Walking* 71), and seems to be implying that tastes are relative rather than absolutely good or bad, but such absolutes of aesthetic judgement have appeared throughout her work. Martha Quest, coming to London in 1949, finds the clothes and interior décor of the middle classes ugly, and ‘the people had no sort of charm or flair’ in spite of the fact that ‘money had been spent’ to maintain the ‘expensive shabbiness, dowdiness’ (*Four Gated City* 35). This is offered as indirect but thinly veiled social criticism, akin to the aesthetic judgements offered thirty years later in *Mara and Dann*. D.J. Taylor notes similar descriptions of ‘ugliness and ugly clothes’ (39) in other English novels of the 1950s, and claims that they were ‘lodged in genuine observation’ (38), but even the contrasts Lessing draws between the Africans and the colonials have an aesthetic element. In ‘Hunger’, Jabavu rejects his mother’s beautiful earthenware plates for the white enamel plates of civilization; in *Shikasta* the natural grace and beauty of the Africans is contrasted with the ‘stiff solemnity’ and ‘awkwardness’ of the white conquerors (200). She would certainly deny the proposition that grace, charm, tallness and slenderness equate with moral superiority, but it is nevertheless implicit everywhere in her work.
That Lessing, despite her assertions to the contrary, feels superior to much of the human race is nowhere more clearly evident than in *Shikasta*. The impetus to dramatise in space fiction the ‘idea of the warner or prophet, who arrives from somewhere and tells the people they should behave differently, or else!’ (Aldiss 170) does not arise from a modest and humble attitude to her fellow humans. As she told Dean, she has always almost automatically criticised and judged the society she lives in. Lorna Sage notes in her article ‘Lessing and Atopia’,

In distancing her narrative voice from the ‘warring certainties’ of what she would see as local politics, she has arrived at a bleak picture of cultural imperialism. The celebrations of difference in *Canopus* are undercut and contradicted by a totalizing urge, which becomes more – not less – insistent by virtue of the postponement of total order. … The reader … often feels dismissed, excluded – or … colonized – by a benevolent (and therefore even more exasperating) authority. (166)

The satirical urge is often associated with such a feeling of superiority. Lessing, however, is not a satirist. Successful satire needs not only a feeling of superiority, and an implicit moral framework from which to oversee society, but also an emotional disengagement, a sophistication and a lightness of touch which are not part of Lessing’s equipment as a writer. David Lodge, in an essay on Evelyn Waugh, writes that ‘satire in any era is a kind of writing that draws its energy from an essentially critical and subversive view of the world, seizing with delight on absurdities, anomalies, and contradictions in human conduct’ (‘Waugh’s Comic Wasteland’ 29). What is missing from Lessing’s work is the delight – instead she is angry and earnest in her critical views. Her funniest work, like *In Pursuit of the English*, sometimes comes close to satire but soon falls back into a more tolerant and sympathetic mode. The broad
satire she attempted in *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* fails because the tone is too heavy and insistent.

Lessing is not unusual as a writer in having an involuntary urge to express her moral views and influence her readers. Few writers are without it; perhaps it is even part of the motivation of most writers: George Orwell believed that there was ‘no such thing as genuinely non-political literature’ (373). The post-colonial ‘settler problem’ Lessing faces in her African novels and stories is an inevitable dilemma at the root of all narrative, but it is only at its most extreme that it draws critical attention, at least out of the politicised context of post-colonial or ideologically based critical traditions. Either one writes autobiographically, refusing to inhabit or ‘colonise’ any consciousness but one’s own, and draws the charge of ignoring other points of view, or one attempts empathy for the Other and risks being seen as patronising and arrogant. Lessing tries to overcome this problem by asserting that ‘one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares’ (*Golden Notebook*, Preface 13). She has experimented with many different points of view and narrative voices, but, especially in her realist novels, her most common strategy is to speak personally, whether in the first or third person, in a particular tone that assumes communality of experience and opinions, especially among women. She accuses George Eliot of ‘womanly certitude’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 71), but throughout her own novels a type of character recurs; a knowing, wry, capable woman who understands how things work, and who is able to communicate with others of her kind by means of a shorthand of words and looks. Anna and Molly in *The Golden Notebook* are the most obvious examples, but there are also Janna and Joyce in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*,

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Harriet and her mother Dorothy in *The Fifth Child*, Alice’s mother and her friend Zoë in *The Good Terrorist*. The impression of ‘womanly certitude’ is emphasised by the fact that these women, even when they are not the central characters, frequently voice attitudes very similar to those we know to be Lessing’s, and seem often to be morally central to her novels. Her belief in the universality of the personal finds an expression in characters like these, at the same time lending a dulling uniformity to her characterisation. Some critics, nevertheless, are beguiled. Patricia Waugh, who writes very perceptively on the problems in Iris Murdoch’s work, claims that

through her women questors and housekeepers from Martha to Alice in *The Good Terrorist* … Lessing suggests that the continued existence of the human race will depend upon the displacement of the primacy of the ‘masculine’ values of war and competition by those such as care and nurturance, at present associated with women and thus regarded as secondary. (208)

To name Alice, who participates in a terrorist attack in London which kills and maims civilians, and whom even Lessing regards as ‘quite mad’ (*Under* 274), as a role model seems little short of irresponsible.

One major conflict implicit in her ethics is between individual freedom of thought and the urgent need she often expresses in her novels for individuals to submerge themselves into the values of the group: the inelegantly named ‘SOWF’ – ‘Substance of We Feeling’ – the presence and absence of which plays so important a part in *Shikasta*, versus what makes individual people interesting, valuable and different. She expresses both these ideas, which cannot but be contradictory, so often that it is hard to understand how she can hold them both in her mind. However, the tendency is for submission to group values to be endorsed in the fiction, and the importance of the individual to be raised in the non-fiction and interviews. It may be that, because in the fictional
world she is the creator of the group values, she naturally feels confident in recommending obedience to those values; whereas talking as a real individual in the real world, she feels more strongly how crucial in her own life her independence of thought has been. Once again, this could easily be interpreted as arrogance, however unconscious this pattern of thought might be.

She distrusts language and regards it as inadequate to express the full range of human experience, and she hates ‘rhetoric … the use of words to stop your thinking’ (Aldiss 170). In various ways she has tried to overcome these problems. *The Golden Notebook* is one example: in that case she tried to use the form of the novel ‘to make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped’ (*The Golden Notebook*, Preface 13). In parts of this novel, and later in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, her narrators attempt to write descriptions of whole days with no omissions, trying in this way to combat the selective nature of fiction. She would not wish her narratives to conform with Brooks’ theory of the nineteenth century novel that ‘the state of normality is devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration’ (139). The attempt to be comprehensive is, of course, doomed to failure, and, as Iser says,

> no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader’s eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader’s imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text. (‘Reading Process’ 57)

Lessing’s attempts to do so are usually brief enough to be interesting, but she still has a tendency to leave too little to the reader’s imagination, and this, along with the ‘womanly certitude’ of many of her characters, can occasionally lead to tedium. Even the questing, interrogative quality she often builds into
her prose – the question marks at the ends of statements, the interruption of sentences with ‘… but what?’ – seems to arise from a kind of confident agnosticism which language cannot express but which nevertheless exists as a foundation of her ethical system. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is another attempt at a solution to the inadequacy of language; writing ‘by means of metaphors and analogies’ in order to avoid ‘contaminated words’, full of ‘traditional associations’ (Torrents 66-67).

Her definition of rhetoric is highly rhetorical: rhetoric does not have to mean ‘the use of words to stop your thinking’, but is more properly regarded as the use of words to persuade others of one’s meaning. Its relation to truthfulness is not at all stable: a rhetorician is not automatically a liar. She herself, naturally, is at her most rhetorical when at her most earnest and concerned to convince her readers of the truth of her statements. The Preface to *The Golden Notebook* is a highly rhetorical piece of writing, full of generalisations and condemnations of society, teachers, critics, academics; insisting that, although ‘no one seems to think it … there is something seriously wrong with our literary system’ (20). This kind of rhetoric may indeed, on analysis, be intended by Lessing to stop our thinking – at least where it disagrees with her thinking – but despite her evident desire to persuade everyone of the evils of the ‘literary system’, most readers would find its style too strident to be convincing. William Pritchard, in a 1995 article titled ‘Looking Back at Lessing’, observes that ‘critical accounts of Lessing’s contribution and stature as a writer of fiction mainly bypass her style by acting as if she didn’t have one, or at least that it is of not much account, since the substance of what she says is so important’ (321). He mentions the progression
from the ‘leisurely, extremely conventional novelese’ (321) of the early novels, to the ‘toneless solemn inner journeys’ (323) of the early 1970s, concluding that ‘I would trade the last twenty years’ worth of Lessing’s novels for the stories and sketches’ in *The Real Thing*: ‘Lessing’s prose here has the kind of relaxed power and delicacy … that has been so absent from the anguished, hard-driving, monumentally solemn world of her longer fictions’ (323-4).

As for symbolism, she falls into difficulties when her intentional use of the familiar archetypes becomes overuse. She believes that the ‘old hoary symbols … strike the unconscious’ (Tomalin 174), but readers who are sensitised to these symbols, like some of the reviewers of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, are likely to erect a barrier automatically against such obvious attempts to speak directly to their emotions, just as her more strident rhetorical statements may work against her.

Michael Magie extrapolates a ‘composite image’ of Lessing from her fiction, in a 1977 article:

She is the woman possessed of a strong commitment to rationality and to moral responsibility for herself and others, but afraid that reason and morality may deprive her of joy and yet fail to yield her the truth. Moreover, what truth they do teach suggests that human powers, taken singly or altogether, are not after all very great. … Out of such fears and desires, and with penetrating intelligence, she turns to the rest of us, saying, ‘You see this bit of lovely, consoling nonsense. Our only hope lies in that. Embrace it.’ (532)

This acute analysis was written, impressively, before the publication of the first novel in the *Canopus* series. Despite all this, however, Lessing is a hugely influential writer. *The Golden Notebook* is clearly recognisable as a source of inspiration for much of the English ‘women’s fiction’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and Joyce Carol Oates states confidently that it ‘has radically changed the consciousness of many young women (‘One Keeps Going’ 37). All her books
(except *Retreat to Innocence*, the one book she has refused to let her publishers reissue) are still in print. Her new publications are routinely reviewed in the major journals. Early in 1999 her publishers arranged an Internet ‘Author chat’ session, and virtually every one of the questioners paid a tribute of some kind to Lessing’s influence in their lives as a moralist or a teacher. The manifold contradictions in her system of beliefs – the conflict between determinism and free will, the group versus the individual, the wish to see books and education made readily available in third world countries while at the same time condemning the education system as a brainwashing enterprise – arise out of her restless quest for the truth. Had she been through the conventional education system, she may have been able to rationalise and perhaps even reconcile some of these contradictions. She may have developed her critical faculties more highly in order to subject some of her more outrageous generalisations and beliefs to a more rigorous analysis. She may think twice before making statements like ‘every adolescent is like every other adolescent’ (Thomson 186), and ‘there is only one way to read, which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you, reading only those …’ (*Golden Notebook*, Preface 17-18). But a Doris Lessing who dutifully finished school and proceeded to a conventional university education would be a very different writer. She stimulates criticism, and her arguments are not of a kind calculated to silence her critics: the agenda, nevertheless, is hers. However much opinions differ, she has broached many huge subjects like colonialism, the position of women, the nature of politics, the treatment and diagnosis of mental illness, environmental destruction, education – subjects far too numerous to list. Her great quality as a writer is her questing, combative
attitude, and the critic, however necessary and rational the criticism and
analysis may be, would be unreasonable to wish it otherwise. As Magie says,
‘Doris Lessing is worthy, I believe, of being disagreed with’ (531).