Comparison and Conclusion: Courage and Truthfulness

The quest for truth in fiction is the most important preoccupation these three authors share, along with their colleagues and predecessors throughout the novel’s history. Murdoch said, ‘the concept to hang on to is truth. Let justice look after itself’ (Hartill 86); Lessing, when writing her autobiography, reread *The Golden Notebook* and concluded ‘there is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth’ (Under 314); and Naipaul said that his intention in writing *A House for Mr Biswas* was ‘to achieve a novel “indistinguishable from truth”’ (Michener 68). Their approaches to this oxymoronic quest, however, are all different, and the works they have produced in its pursuit are broad-ranging and diverse, the variety manifesting itself not only between the three authors, but within the career of each.

It is interesting to note the extent to which these three authors have followed parallel paths without intersecting. They all live in the south of England, they are of a similar generation of writers: although Naipaul is thirteen years younger than the others, they all published their first novels between 1950 and 1957; but they have had little to say about each other, or indeed, in the case of Naipaul and Murdoch, about any of their contemporaries. Naipaul mentioned Lessing as one of his contemporaries about whom there was ‘some element of discussion’ (Blandford 51) while he himself was ignored, without volunteering an opinion of her work, while Lessing told Joyce Carol Oates that although she agreed Naipaul was an ‘excellent writer … somehow I don’t feel the rapport with him, the kind of sympathy I feel for someone like Vonnegut’ (‘One Keeps Going’ 39). She has been more generous about Murdoch, whom she mentioned in *Walking in the Shade* in
conclusion with Jack Lindsay, who wrote ‘fanciful, whimsical novels, like Iris Murdoch, but nothing like as good’ (83); and who, she told an interviewer, was ‘unique, surely – not at all like any other English writer’ (Hale 180). Murdoch is commonly at a loss when asked about her contemporaries, and has made no comments I have discovered about either Lessing or Naipaul. Not only have they failed to make much impact on each other, but there is also an odd lack of critical comparison of the three. Lessing and Murdoch are sometimes discussed within the same book or article, as they both come into the category of ‘woman writer’, however little they would wish to be labelled thus, and Lessing and Naipaul, similarly, are both dealt with by post-colonial critics. It is surprising, though, that these three writers, who have all been prolific and well-reviewed on the whole, who have all won their share of the major literary prizes and honours, and who have received roughly equivalent amounts of critical attention, are rarely to be found under discussion together in any one forum. Because Naipaul is seen as a writer from Trinidad rather than a part of the British tradition, he is often left out of mainstream surveys of the modern British novel which include Lessing and Murdoch despite the fact that a critic like James Wood names him as ‘the only really important novelist working in England’ between 1950 and 1980 (‘Martin Amis’ 186).

This kind of categorisation – either as a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘post-colonial writer’ – is understandably unwelcome to an artist, but the problem is to an extent compounded by the material each of them chooses to write about. All writers are limited in the subjects they can choose, since their themes must arise out of a deep personal knowledge and experience, not out of a wish, like that Doris Lessing expressed in 1969, to write about ‘Chinese peasants’ or ‘the
Algerians in the FLN’ (Raskin 15): however passionately they might feel about various causes, without a profound understanding of what lies behind the political and social aspects of other people’s lives, writing about them will necessarily be essentially false and therefore of no value. Iris Murdoch’s characters, therefore, however much she, and her critics, might deplore the fact, are principally drawn from the educated middle class in England, and many of her characters are civil servants, although they are not all, by any means, materially secure: the pressures of poverty are very real to many of her characters, for example, Tim and Daisy in Nuns and Soldiers, Emily in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat. The fact that these people are like herself and the people she knows in their social environment and circumstances does not mean that they are similar to her in other ways. Her philosophical creed makes her attempt to respect the inexorable necessities of life in her novels; and although she has not always succeeded in making her characters fully rounded, and they are often driven by similar demons, she has created during her career a diverse range of characters.

Her subject matter has certainly never been as varied as Lessing’s, who, starting with the stories and novels set in Africa, has ranged to realistic fiction set in London, among refugees, revolutionaries and intellectuals, and intergalactic and futuristic fantasies. In the process she has picked up many labels:

first I was a “color-bar” writer … then it changed and I was a Communist writer. … Then there was a whole string of things that I’ve been – one of them was feminist. ... Then there was the Sufi label … oh yes, then mysticism. And now it’s the space-fiction label. (Gray 119)

This constant shift of focus may come from an urge, perhaps not fully understood or admitted, to express social and political views in her fiction, and
trying to solve the inevitable problems this entails by changing the settings of her novels and using different perspectives, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic. The tension in her writing between these extremes, between recognising the value of individuals and feeling the necessity of their submitting to the greater good of the community, the planet, or the universe; between a consciousness of the uniqueness and particularity of people and the belief that all experience is shared – these tensions have driven her to seek solutions in many different genres. However, although there have been some marvellous results along the way, she cannot reconcile the irreconcilable.

Naipaul’s creative tension lies elsewhere. It is perhaps most fruitful when his naturally fastidious nature is constrained by his passion for accuracy and truth to examine closely what he is most distressed by; or when his instinct to withdraw from experience is combated by his fear of extinction – a fear which is only compounded by the fact that extinction is itself a consoling idea for him. He dramatised this tension most clearly in *A House for Mr Biswas*: although the character Mr Biswas was based on ‘someone like’ his father, he was in many ways tormented by Naipaul’s own form of mental anguish, probably transmitted from father to son: the recently published letters between them while Naipaul was at Oxford in the early 1950s show a close identification between them; in fact, in a letter to his sister in 1951, Naipaul wrote:

> as I grow older, I find myself doing things that remind me of Pa, more and more. The way I smoke; the way I sit; the way I stroke my unshaved chin; that way in which I sometimes sit bolt upright; the way in which I spend money romantically and foolishly. … The more I learn about myself, the more I learn about him. (*Letters* 139)
Naipaul’s richest source of subject matter has always been his own background, and later his experience as an immigrant and traveller. Even those of his characters who have very different life stories from Naipaul’s own will share some elements of their experience and sensibility with their author: they will be expatriates like Bobby and Linda in the story ‘In a Free State’, or they will be Hindu Indians, like Santosh in ‘One out of Many’, or even simply people who feel themselves detached from their social settings, like Mr Stone. In his later work, of course, he has felt the need to make his narrators as indistinguishable from himself as possible.

Naipaul’s preoccupation with his own place within his fictional world, his insistence that the reader is not to be subjected to the ‘bogus adventure’ (Niven 163) of an invented character, ensures that his point of view is seen to be his own, and that he makes no claims for its universality or objectivity. This is, in its way, a version of what Murdoch aspires to by doing what is apparently the very opposite: making herself disappear in her work. She says, for example, that

it is always a danger for the novelist to write a book about himself. It’s like the James Bond story. The hero has his faults, but he’s always successful, clever, brave and sexually attractive. … It’s very dangerous. It brings all life into a single focus, peripheral characters become cardboard figures or victims of the hero. (Appleyard)

Naipaul’s books ‘about himself’, however, avoid this danger because of his scrupulous candour: he never portrays himself as ‘brave and sexually attractive’, and although he is patently successful and clever, he feelingly recalls his times of failure and depression, and the peripheral characters in _The Enigma of Arrival_ are not ‘cardboard figures’; they are mysterious beings of whom only a small glimpse is permitted through the eyes of the narrator. The
problem Murdoch perceives with writing about oneself is the distortion of reality by fantasy, in contrast with the truth of real imagination. Naipaul himself relates much the same problem, taken to lethal extremes, with the writing of the Trinidad cult figure and murderer Abdul Malik, (later fictionalised as Jimmy Ahmed in *Guerrillas*): ‘fiction never lies: it reveals the writer totally’. Malik had been encouraged to believe that he was a writer by admirers in England, and his ‘primitive novel is like a pattern book, a guide to later events’ (‘Michael X’ 67). He wrote his fantasy of power, convinced himself of its truth, then attempted to live it, with horrific consequences.

Naipaul has described the act of writing as ‘fraudulent’ (Walcott, ‘Interview’ 8), and because he feels that his place in the world is not a settled thing, not something which he can take for granted, he needs to make it clear that he is a prism through which the reader’s vision is distorted. His place in the world of his own writing has become an integral part of his material as a novelist.¹

Murdoch, on the other hand, with a more secure sense of her place in the world, feels no such impulse, but instead is guided by the wish to emulate the great writers in European tradition. She wishes not to be a prism but a lens – perhaps a magnifying lens, but although she may enlarge the peculiarities of her characters, she hopes not to distort them. Writing in the first person, she naturally sometimes distorts characters through the narrator’s eyes, but the distortion is in this case part of the fiction. Her narrative voice, in the third person, is highly idiosyncratic. Her narrators take an artist’s delight in details. Interiors are described lavishly, with a care which shows their importance in her characterisations. Tallis’s kitchen tells us a lot about Tallis’s dreary, put-upon life, just as Mor’s cramped suburban semi-detached house reflects his
concluded suburban marriage. This concern for particulars is part of her attempt to ensure that she remains truthful. If she imagines a character enmeshed in the details of his whole existence, it is less likely that he will become a fantasy figure. It is also less likely that he will be unfairly treated either by the author or the reader. She has no wish to write melodramas, with cardboard characters.

Lessing has paid less attention than Naipaul and Murdoch to her narrative voice; on the whole, she is a more instinctive writer than either – which is not, of course, to say that she is unaware of many of these issues, although she does not seem unduly concerned with the problems of representation some of her critics have identified in the fiction set in Africa. Her narrator is commonly a third person voice, although she has attempted a variety of impersonations in the space fiction and the novels leading up to it, and as Jane Somers she writes, as befits a diarist, in the first person. But even in *The Diaries*, when attempting to write ‘in the first person about someone very different to’ herself (Frick 163), someone who ‘knew nothing about a kind of dryness, like a conscience, that monitors Doris Lessing whatever she writes and in whatever style’ (*Diaries*, Preface 6), she sometimes lapses into the dry, cool, detached voice which so characterises her third person fiction. Janna asks her niece Jill to ‘write an article about the influence of the two world wars on fashion. *I watched her face.* … She listened. *I watched her.* Strained she was, but trying’ (*Diaries* 170, emphasis mine). This is thoroughly typical of Lessing: the wisdom of the old, concentrated on the young; the detachment, the notion of ‘trying the idea out’ on people and watching their reactions. Her narrators in the space fiction are often similarly detached but interested in the fate of lesser beings. Johor, in *Shikasta*, pities the Earthlings but can do little
to help them; even Doeg in *The Making of the Representative* feels himself superior in his strained but willing attention to Johor’s message. In *The Golden Notebook*, the core novel is written in the third person, while the ‘material’ for this novel, the contents of the five notebooks, are in the first person. The first person is thus, in this case, used for the attempt to include the whole experience, while the third person is used for the ‘conventional’ novel which is shown to be leaving so much out. Her rhetorical position in her first person novels is sometimes less clear. It is not necessary for it to be explicit, as it is in diary novels like *Jane Somers* or Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea*, or in *The Enigma of Arrival*. However, in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Making of the Representative*, she makes the narrator’s position so enigmatic that it is virtually unimaginable, which reflects on the credibility of the narrative. On the whole, Lessing’s narrative persona is knowing and dry, even when she is posing rhetorical questions. She manages to make the questions part of an impression of wisdom – her unwillingness to make pronouncements can sometimes have as strong an effect as the pronouncements she does make. She is, perhaps without intending or realising the fact, a very rhetorical writer, in the sense that she tries, quite obviously, to persuade: more so than Naipaul, who narrates his uncertainties and writes always from an earthbound point of view – the point of view being part of the narrative; or Murdoch, who sometimes allows her characters to use rhetoric, which then, commonly, trips them up.

None of these novelists is a satirist, as I have shown. Murdoch is too concerned with the individual to make the requisite broad, judgemental generalisations; Lessing makes the generalisations, but her tone is too earnest
for satire, and when she tries, it usually fails because she cannot maintain the necessary detachment and delight in absurdity; and Naipaul, although he might be said to have begun with satire – although this is a matter of opinion – has become too interested in unexpectedness, in understanding his characters and their idiosyncrasies, to write satire. Humour, of course, is another matter, and Murdoch and Naipaul both regard humour as integral to their kinds of writing, not in the sense of the novels being full of jokes or verbal wit, but in the sense of the absurdities of life cutting across the path of tragedy. Lessing said she thinks some of her writing is ‘quite funny. That note of dry irony’; but then, asked if humour was important in her fiction, she replied,

I don’t know if it is important. I find a great deal comic … I find myself laughing during the day because I can’t believe I actually heard what I have heard on the radio … Newspapers are really funny … the immense pomposity of them. (Upchurch 223-4)

Funniness in daily life is well portrayed in the memoir *In Pursuit of the English*, for example, and sometimes in the autobiographies, but despite the ‘dry irony’ in her novels, few of her fictional characters are allowed enough space to act comically – Alice in *The Good Terrorist* being, perhaps, an exception. Humour is not in her range of deliberate ethical strategies, as it is with Naipaul, who offers it to ‘combat the dissatisfaction the reader will feel at something that appears to end without solace for men’ (Medwick 61); or with Murdoch, who said, ‘a novel which isn’t at all comic is a great danger, aesthetically speaking’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 230). Critics have said of both Murdoch and Naipaul that their early humour is missing from their later books, but, although the reader may not laugh out loud so often in the later work, the comic perspective is still there, the absurdities and contradictions of life
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viewed from a slight distance, whereas Lessing is usually too close to her
characters to maintain that perspective. The ‘dry irony’ belongs more often to
the character than the writer.

Choosing the appropriate form for each novel is extremely important to
all three novelists. Murdoch is the most committed to the conventional novel
form, but has frequently described a struggle with the form, whose ‘satisfaction
… is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions
or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter’ (Kermode, ‘House
of Fiction’ 63). This is, in her view, not a new problem, but is rather
something that the great novelists have always dealt with, and that will always
betray the lesser. However, she sees the society of the nineteenth century as a
more hospitable one for the novelist, because of certainties that we have now
lost, and also because of the increase in self-consciousness in the modern
period which makes it ‘difficult to write as they did without an element of
pastiche’ (Magee 535). Lessing’s problem with the novel is more specific to
the post-war period, although she also sees it as a generic problem with the
form – ‘every writer’s tormented … because we know that as soon as you start
framing a novel, then things get left out’ (Gray 115) – which was the impetus
for The Golden Notebook. However, she believes that because ‘you cannot any
more get comfort from older moral certainties because something new is
happening’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 71), the conventional novel form as it was in the
nineteenth century is now obsolete, and she has therefore made many
experiments with the form to express the sensibility of the new age, which
arose ‘the moment you have a shot of the earth from space’ (Gray 118). Many
of these experiments are not absolutely new; it is their combination that is
original. She has ranged from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, not only
from novel to novel, but within several of her novels, and will use any type of
writing she feels answers her purpose: fables, diaries, archives, memoirs, or
even, if it seems appropriate, the conventional novel again: she says, for
example, that ‘what interests me about [The Making of] the Representative is
that all my speculations in the “who-am-I” department are in there; you
couldn’t put those in an ordinary novel, but it’s quite easy to put them in that
type of book’ (Gray 118). Her experimental period was mainly the time from
The Golden Notebook in 1962 to The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire
in 1983; since then she has written more in the traditional ‘microcosmic’ realist
mode. After the space fiction, she seems to have accepted that the
macrocosmic view does, after all, have its limitations, and, given her stated
belief that ‘one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares’
(Preface, The Golden Notebook 13), writing about individuals is equivalent to
writing about the whole of humanity. As I have discussed, there are troubling
contradictions in this view which often have adverse effects on her fiction.

For Naipaul, the imperative to ‘find the correct form’ for ‘the material
that possess you’ (Burn 4) is paramount, and has led to his development of an
inimitable narrative persona and style. He maintains that using a borrowed
form will distort the writer’s material, which in the case of his fiction is his
own experience of expatriate life and his perspective on societies to which he
does not feel he belongs. In this sense, because his circumstances are the
product of a peculiarity in the history of the British empire – the importation to
Trinidad of indentured Indian labourers after the abolition of slavery – his
material is very much the result of his specific history and thus needs a
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specifically developed form to express it; more generally, though, he feels that because ‘the great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked … the novel as a form no longer carries conviction’ (‘Conrad’s Darkness’ 244). However, he considers that this problem of finding the correct form is one which has always been present to writers – indeed, Tolstoy said the same thing – and that the novel, apt though it was for ‘the early people who used the fictional form … to illuminate things that the other forms couldn’t do’ (Schiff 148) was soon exhausted, and became a burden to later writers. The novel, though, is a protean form and can be adapted to the needs of all kinds of writers, and, although Naipaul in his later work, and Lessing in her middle period, may have felt impatient with it and wished to break away from the tradition, the tradition has contained, in its history, many such rebellions.

Ideas about justice are basic to all ethical systems, and therefore have a profound effect on the type of morality novelists imply in their work. Neither Murdoch nor Naipaul have any great confidence in justice as an absolute value. Murdoch said ‘the concept of justice is a very difficult one unless you use it in a secular context … truth and love are much more fundamental concepts’ (Hartill 85-6). She realises that novelists are in a sense judging their characters, while believing that it is ‘difficult for the novelist to be a just judge’ (Haffenden 35). She constantly tries to suppress her judgemental impulses, and feels disappointed when she does not succeed in presenting characters with sympathy, and thus disposes the reader to condemn or dislike them. Naipaul regards justice with even more suspicion, and in Finding the Centre wrote that the conviction ‘that there was justice in the world’ is ‘at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives’ (38). He, too,
believes that truth is a more important concept than justice: ‘I always feel that to come to some comprehension or acceptance of what is true is itself a kind of liberation’ (Medwick 61). Naipaul has generated more critical condemnation than Murdoch through the determination to be truthful, partly because Murdoch’s fictions are so plainly fictional. Naipaul has based his fiction, from the start, on thinly veiled versions of real societies, whether it is Elvira in *The Suffrage of Elvira* or Isabella in *The Mimic Men*, both based on Trinidad, or the unnamed African country in ‘In a Free State’. The criticism does not disturb him, however, because ‘unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one’s done some writing one has not really done much’ (Wheeler 44). Murdoch, on the other hand, has been occasionally criticised for making her characters too odd, but does not arouse the ‘squeal of pain’ Naipaul often does. Their differences in background have also influenced their critics. Naipaul complained in an early essay how ridiculous it would be if the criticisms made of his novels were made of an English novelist:

Imagine a critic in Trinidad writing of *Vile Bodies*: ‘Mr Evelyn Waugh’s whole purpose is to show how funny English people are. He looks down his nose at the land of his birth. We hope that in future he writes of his native land with warm affection.’ (‘London’ 11-12)

Lessing’s background has also drawn a type of criticism of her fiction which Murdoch has avoided, once again, particularly in respect of her subject matter and her technical decisions regarding representation of Africans. Her attitude to justice is not quite as well reasoned as that of the other two novelists: although she realises the danger of the ‘pure flame of energy’ (Bertelsen 142) inspired by her sense of justice, its effect can be felt in her earnest tone and occasionally in her easy generalisations about the nature of societies. But she
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still intends to write to explore a subject rather than to say ‘what ought to be happening’ (Bikman 59), and succeeds to the extent that critics like Beck can find ‘little in the way of overtly hostile judgements made by the author about her characters, only a wry, detached observation’ (66). Social criticism is, however, common in her novels, although her political views have not been dogmatic since her communist days, and even then ‘I sensed that in my books it was also a matter of another thing, a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious’ than ‘the great problems of the hour’ (Montremy 197). This is, as I have said, often a source of creative tension for her, as, when she becomes aware that she is making judgements and criticising societies, she sometimes deliberately includes an explanation in mitigation of the behaviour or situation she is criticising.

Despite Lessing’s impatience with the conventional forms of fiction, she has no objection to using symbolism, and will use the ‘old hoary symbols’ (Tomalin 174) when she believes they will be effective. Murdoch is more cautious about symbolism, and, where it occurs in her novels, would prefer it to be seen as a part of a character’s point of view rather than the author’s, and regards it as a fault if ‘fantasy and realism are visible and separate aspects in a novel’ (Hobson). Naipaul is similarly cautious, and dislikes plays ‘where people are in a way symbols’ (Hamilton 19). He believes that it can be ‘fraudulent’ to ‘try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience’ (Hamilton 17), although symbols can grow out of ‘instinct and through dreams and all kinds of senses’ (Bryden, ‘The Novelist V.S. Naipaul’ 4). Because, for Murdoch and Naipaul, individuals are of greater intrinsic importance than for Lessing, they are less interested in using symbols to make
generalisations. Symbolism may arise naturally for them, but they are wary of allowing it to carry too much weight in their fiction.

The readership which each of these novelists attracts is rather disturbingly affected by the way they are able to be categorised. Lessing has gained and lost readers throughout her varied career, for example when those who regarded her as a realist writer on women’s issues were antagonised by her space fiction and refused to read it. Naipaul attributes his long period of comparative obscurity to the fact that readers labelled him according to his background instead of taking him on his merits: he has also, not entirely unwittingly or unwillingly, antagonised many of those who are interested in post-colonial literature with his refusal to ignore ‘what is disagreeable’ (Kakutani) in developing countries: Lessing, also, is impatient with the propensity of people, for example, ‘to see the race feelings as if they’re confined to Southern Africa … that the problem is that the whites want to enslave the blacks and that’s the end of it’ because by doing that ‘you’re overlooking a great deal else’ (Bertelsen 125), and with the kind of criticism attitudes like this engender.

Each of these three authors has shown, by their extensive published self-commentary throughout their careers, their serious and distinctive approaches to the ethical problems they have discovered in the writing of fiction. For each of them there have arisen tensions in their attempts to solve these problems, which to have a greater or lesser extent fed into their creative processes. For Murdoch, the most productive of these tensions is between her philosophical ideas and their inadequacy to the problems which she makes her characters face in her novels. Rupert in A Fairly Honourable Defeat is the
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clearest example of the dramatisation of this inadequacy, but it can also be seen in Mor’s difficulties in The Sandcastle, in the increasing problems of the procession of wives in the novels of male adultery face with their attempts to be good, and with Bradley’s self-deceptions in The Black Prince. The fact that she has always denied being a philosophical novelist is interesting, but does not detract from the fact that her philosophy, perhaps unconsciously, is constantly put to the test in her novels. There are other tensions she is more conscious of, as well; for example, the tension between the dramatic form of the novel and the absurd and contingent nature of the reality she is trying to portray, between fantasy and imagination, and between open and closed novels, and these are related to her loyalty to what she saw as the great qualities of the form. Her loyalty to this ideal, and her modesty in trying to attain it, may have prevented her from having the courage to adapt the form to suit her own talents in the way Lessing and Naipaul have.

Lessing’s clearest creative tensions are perhaps more troubling, as they seem to arise from a failure to subject her beliefs to critical analysis. She tries to reconcile concepts like determinism and free will, and the value of the individual versus the group, by assertion rather than by argument, and sometimes she appears to ignore the inconsistencies altogether. Lack of courage is not her problem: she has never hesitated to try a new way if the old one has stopped working for her. In ‘Hunger’ she tried to present a simple story, but in this case her instinct for complexity and ambiguity rescued it from a damaging simplicity: she saw through ‘the great questions of the age’ to ‘a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious’ (Montremy 197). On the other hand, Memoirs of a Survivor is damaged by its assumption that all experience
is common to all, which is contradicted by the individual experiences it describes. And in the space fiction, her implicit assumption of superiority over the human race taints the series, together with the assertion that the welfare of the group – the community, the race, the universe – is more important than the welfare of individuals, while there is a welcome reassertion of the value and interest of individual lives implied in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* and the subsequent fiction, even though her persistent belief in the commonality of experience has continued to dull her characterisation.

Naipaul, of the three, has brought the ethical problems he perceives most firmly under his control. He found difficulties in writing about his observations of a life he did not understand, and he therefore began to write directly and concretely about his own background, and produced *A House for Mr Biswas* before the age of thirty. He wanted to express a sense of lostness and exile, not specific to one race or situation, and so he wrote *In a Free State* in five parts, dramatising a variety of sensibilities, all affected by post-colonial disorder. He found difficulties and contradictions with inventing narrators and putting them in the situations he wanted to write about: he therefore, in *The Enigma of Arrival*, made his narrator scrupulously himself to avoid falsity. He has had the penetration and self-awareness to find solutions to the ethical problems he has encountered, and the courage to carry them through. The creative tension, the impulse which has fuelled his career, is, as Michener says, ‘the opposing pull’ of the wish for ‘withdrawal from the fray’ and ‘the fear of giving in’ (73), and the mixture of fascination and disgust which fixes his attention on what he finds most unpleasant.
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Although each of these novelists places truthfulness high on their scale of values as artists, their approaches are, as I have shown, in many ways different. All artists must solve their own dilemmas in their own ways: to recommend Naipaul’s steely vision to Murdoch, or Murdoch’s tolerant, ambiguous and comic approach to Lessing, is to misunderstand this basic fact. That they have all succeeded in some measure is clear from the interest they have each aroused among readers. Almost all of their novels are still in print and of interest to the critical community, and if they are not universally admired or understood, it is necessary to remember Lessing’s admission, in the Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, that ‘the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion *only* when its plan and shape and intention are not understood’ (21), and that, as Kermode writes, ‘the only works we value enough to call classic are those which, and they demonstrate by surviving, are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities’ (*Classic* 121).

All the same, their approaches to identifying and tackling the ethical problems they have perceived in writing fiction have had clear consequences in their work. Murdoch had the education and discipline needed to develop a philosophy of fiction, but her devotion to the Platonic ideal of the great artist – perhaps, in the end, her humility – prevented her from being bold and egotistical enough to recognise that the ideal did not entirely suit her talents, and that she should be a little more experimental with the form, and in consequence she found that ‘one’s ability to improve is … extraordinarily limited’ (Biles 122). Lessing does not lack the egotism, but her impatience with formal education and suspicion of rationality means that her experiments
with a vast range of forms have never resulted in a coherent, credible vision. Naipaul, partly through his own unusual background, highly educated yet not culturally secure, has been compelled to analyse very carefully his own needs as an artist, and has had the intelligence to develop the forms which have suited those needs as his career has progressed, a process of self-fashioning which has not pleased everyone, but which has allowed him to write such brilliant yet different novels as *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*. Neither Lessing nor Murdoch have developed progressively through their writing careers as Naipaul has, Lessing because she would not look critically enough at the beliefs on which she based her novelistic world, and Murdoch because she was trying to attain the impossible by emulating other artists and their forms. Modesty and humility are admirable qualities, but it may be that Murdoch was too well endowed with them to become a truly great novelist. Irrationality and lack of self-criticism are less attractive, and when combined with the egotism of the artist, as in Lessing’s case, they can cause some grandiose failures. Naipaul alone of the three has the necessary egotism combined with the self-critical and analytical skills to achieve the courage and truthfulness of the great writer.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{However, as a travel writer, he claims ‘I travel not to write about myself but to look at the world’ (Rashid, ‘Last Lion’ 166).}\]