

‘Doris Lessing Versus Her Readers: The Case of *The Golden Notebook*.’ *Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook*, ed. Tapan K. Ghosh. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2006.

Doris Lessing Versus Her Readers: The Case of *The Golden Notebook*

By Gillian Dooley

Doris Lessing is a major force in contemporary English literature, holding a unique position as an iconoclastic, outspoken critic of society and politics with a sage-like, almost magisterial status. However, she has not always been content with the ways her books have been read, and has expressed her disquiet in interviews, essays and other publications.

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”¹ and she wrote a new Preface to the novel for the 1971 edition, explaining her intentions and deploring the inferences of her readers. 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”.² Eleven years later, she had 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”.³ 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,”⁴ she told Thomson. 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”,⁵ 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.”⁶

She has, however, not always felt that writers should not espouse a moral position in their work. 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.”⁷ She told American novelist Joyce Carol Oates that “one begins with the idea of transforming society ... through literature and then, when nothing happens, one feels a sense of failure”.⁸ She realized 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.⁹

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”.¹⁰ She ends the Preface thus:

it is not only childish of a writer to want readers to see what he sees, to understand the shape and aim of a novel as he sees it – his wanting this means that he has not understood a most fundamental point. Which is 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. (20-21)

The resignation implicit in this wise and thoughtful statement is nevertheless hard-won, and negates much of what she has said in the preceding pages of the Preface. In it she rails against her reviewers, “friendly ... as well as ... hostile ones”, who she says “belittled” the book “as being about the sex war” (8). She says that “some books are not read *in the right way* because they have skipped a stage of opinion” (9, my emphasis). This so clearly contradicts her closing statement quoted above that it makes us question whether she intends her argument to be taken seriously.

Lessing is a strange combination of self-awareness and short-sightedness. In her Preface she admits that she lost her “sense of perspective about critics and reviewers” (14) over *The Golden Notebook*. She goes on,

Recovering balance, I understood the problem. It is that writers are looking in the critics for an *alter ego*, that other self more intelligent than oneself who has seen what one is reaching for, and who judges you only by whether you have matched up to your aim or not. ... But what he, the writer, is asking is impossible. ... Why should there be anyone else who comprehends what he is trying to do? After all, there is only one person spinning that particular cocoon, only one person whose business is to spin it. (14)

Once again, she gives the impression of a hard-won wisdom and resignation. She seems to admit that this is too narrow a definition of a critic's role. Elsewhere she has said that with *The Golden Notebook* "I didn't know I was writing what I was writing"¹¹ – and if she was not aware of what she was aiming for, how is a critic supposed to know? Even when she has a definite plan, she says, "you can set a thing up as much as you like, but it's different when you do it."¹² She also concedes that she took on too much with *The Golden Notebook* – it "was a failure in a formal sense. ... It was so ambitious, it couldn't help but fail."¹³ However, that does not worry her. 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,"¹⁴ and "there is a place for novels that have ideas and shake people up and then die".¹⁵ She is impatient with "these forms that we set up for ourselves," but recognizes 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".¹⁶ This despair is reflected in 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. The truth is, absolutely nothing.¹⁷

She has received many letters from readers of *The Golden Notebook*.

She told Thomas Frick that 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."¹⁸

However, although she says she is "grateful to the writers, and delighted that what I've written can stimulate, illuminate – or even annoy," she is disturbed by the fact that

one letter is entirely about the sex war, about man's inhumanity to woman, and woman's inhumanity to man, and the writer has produced pages and pages all about nothing else, for she – but not always a she, can't see anything else in the book.

The second is about politics, probably from an old Red like myself, and he or she writes many pages about politics, and never mentions any other theme. ...

The third letter ... is written by a man or a woman who can see nothing in it but the theme of mental illness.

But it is the same book. (20)

Once again, she cannot accept that her readers do not see the book as she intended it. But 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".¹⁹

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.²⁰

Lessing is particularly contemptuous of the education system. She has often said that she regards her lack of formal education as an advantage – in the Preface she refers to it as “lucky escape” (17) – 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”.²¹ 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”.²² 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”.²³ This distrust of academia is certainly connected with her unwillingness to be categorized, but could also arise from an insecure suspicion that her ideas might not stand up under close scrutiny. Her critique of education in the Preface is extremely crude. Some of her examples of bad teaching and exaggerated respect for the literary “authorities” may be based in fact, but the picture she gives is a gross caricature of western educational practice. No competent teacher of

literature would regard criticism as “more important than the original work” or expect their students to “spend more time reading criticism and criticism of criticism than they spend reading poetry, novels, biography, stories” (19). She totally ignores the fact that the purpose of reading criticism is not to become indoctrinated by the authorities, but to stimulate one’s own thinking and participate in intellectual debate; and that the discipline of “writing detailed essays” is an essential part of learning to be a critical thinker. She praises the oral tradition of Africa, claiming that “everywhere, if you keep your mind open, you will find the truth in words *not* written down” (18), surely a strange position to be held by someone who has published millions of written words.

Interestingly, she says that it was from present or former Marxists that “she got intelligent criticism” for *The Golden Notebook* (14). Marxism as a political system, she says, went wrong (14) but nevertheless “has become part of ordinary thinking” (11). The idea that everything is connected to everything else – “that an event in Siberia will affect one in Botswana” (14) is important. But freedom, political or otherwise, is a difficult concept for Lessing. She ironically titled 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.²⁴

“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.”²⁵ This seems to imply the importance of the subjective, but one of Lessing’s more commonly expressed 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. 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. ... Growing up is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.

(13)

It is difficult to accommodate these conflicting beliefs in individuality and universality. It is overwhelmingly obvious that Lessing feels herself to be a unique person, but it is an intellectual discipline for her to believe 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 a novelist, that other people might be profoundly different to oneself, and that recognizing that difference and allowing for it can also be a worthwhile intellectual discipline.

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.²⁶

There is a tension, however, 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 she claims that "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."²⁷ Her being a writer probably 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.²⁸

But her attraction to the simplicities of 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* similarly comes into conflict with her desire to let readers be stimulated by her work and make up their own minds.

She is an inveterate rhetorician who despises rhetoric: "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."²⁹ Her definition of rhetoric is highly rhetorical: rhetoric is not "the use of words to stop your thinking". It is more properly defined as the use of language to persuade others. 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 generalizations 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 might 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.

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.”³⁰

Despite her irrationality and inconsistency, however, Lessing is a hugely influential writer. *The Golden Notebook* is clearly recognizable 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”.³¹ 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.³² 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 might have been able to rationalize and perhaps even reconcile some of these contradictions. She might have developed her critical faculties more highly in order to subject some of her more outrageous generalizations and beliefs to a more rigorous analysis. She might think twice before making statements like “every adolescent is like every other adolescent”,³³ 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 ...” (17-18).

But a Doris Lessing who dutifully finished school and proceeded to a conventional university education would have become 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 might be, would be

unreasonable to wish it otherwise. As Magie says, “Doris Lessing is worthy, I believe, of being disagreed with.”³⁴

¹ Florence Howe, “A Conversation with Doris Lessing,” *Contemporary Literature* 14.4 (1973): 419.

² Margarete von Schwarzkopf, “Placing their Fingers on the Wounds of our Times,” [1981] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 102.

³ Nigel Forde, “Reporting from the Terrain of the Mind,” [1992] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 216.

⁴ Sedge Thomson, “Drawn to a Type of Landscape,” [1989] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 191.

⁵ Schwarzkopf 103.

⁶ Christopher Bigsby, “The Need to Tell Stories,” [1980] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 72.

⁷ Schwarzkopf 105.

⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, “One Keeps Going,” [1972] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 38.

⁹ Schwarzkopf 105.

¹⁰ Jean-Maurice de Montremy, “A Writer is not a Professor,” [1990] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 193.

¹¹ Bigsby 76.

¹² Stephen Gray, “Breaking Down These Forms,” [1983] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 115.

¹³ Michael Dean, “Writing as Time Runs Out,” [1980] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 90.

¹⁴ Dean 90-91.

¹⁵ Dean 93.

¹⁶ Gray 115.

¹⁷ Howe 428.

¹⁸ Thomas Frick, “Caged by the Experts,” [1987] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 164.

¹⁹ Montremy 196.

²⁰ Rousseau 154.

²¹ Roy Newquist, “Talking as a Person,” [1964] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 5.

²² Ingersoll 238.

²³ Ingersoll 238.

²⁴ Montremy 198.

²⁵ Nissa Torrents, “Testimony to Mysticism,” [1980] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 69.

²⁶ Edith Kurzweil, “Unexamined Mental Attitudes Left Behind by Communism,” [1992] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 205.

²⁷ Montremy 193.

²⁸ Montremy 197.

²⁹ Brian Aldiss, “Living in Catastrophe,” [1988] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 170.

³⁰ Michael L. Magie, “Doris Lessing and Romanticism,” *College English* 38.6 (1977): 532.

³¹ Oates 37.

³² Doris Lessing, “Author Chat Transcripts: *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* by Doris May Lessing,” *Barnesandnoble.com* (20 January 1999, 7.00 p.m. ET) Online, Internet, 27 January 1999.

³³ Thomson 186.

³⁴ Magie 531.