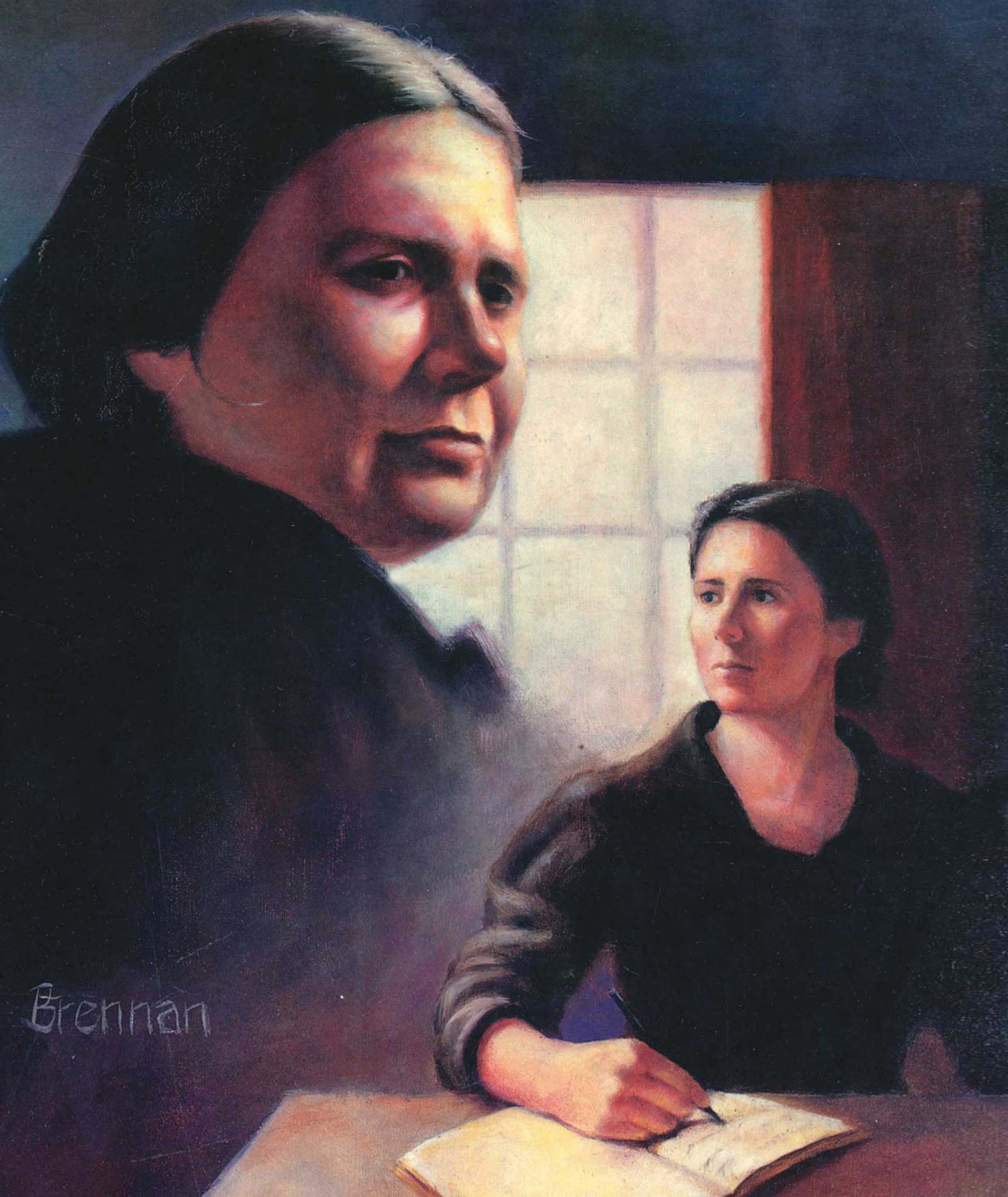


Modern Critical Views

DORIS LESSING

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



Modern Critical Views

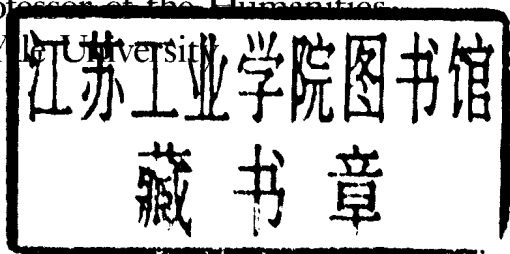
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Edited and with an introduction by

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DORIS LESSING

Modern Critical Views

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William Wordsworth
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Editor's Note

This book brings together what I judge to be the most useful criticism yet published on the fiction of Doris Lessing, arranged here in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Nancy Sales and David Parker for aid in researching this volume.

The editor's introduction takes up the unhappy stance of dissenting from the judgments of many of the critics who follow. Centering upon the story "The Habit of Loving" and on *The Golden Notebook*, I suggest that there are acute limitations to Lessing's achievement, limitations caused by her too-literal distrust of her own language.

James Gindin begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a study of Lessing's intense commitment to social justice in her earlier work. *The Golden Notebook*, by common consent her most influential novel, is read by Dorothy Brewster as a composite image of our society's dilemmas, and by Paul Schlueter as an exercise in self-knowledge. Frederick R. Karl, surveying both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*, suggests that Lessing's earnestness and ideological distrust of personality make her work rather too vulnerable to apocalyptic yearnings, despite what he judges to be her considerable achievements.

In a subtly balanced analysis of Lessing's characteristic dilemma, Patricia Meyer Spacks pictures "Lessing's heroines retreating from intolerable experience into the wider expanses of conscious or subconscious reshaping of it." Lynn Sukenick, examining the dialectic of feeling and reason in Lessing, insists that "the careless homeliness of her style" is more than compensated for by "an elusive quality called maturity," a defense that to this editor seems wholly ideological, whether applied to Lessing or to any other writer. Whether the esoteric elements in Lessing's ideology, such as the Sufism expounded by Nancy Shields Hardin, can help to persuade us when the narratives and their rhetoric cannot remains problematic. Barbara Hill Rigney, expounding *The Four-Gated City*, associates Lessing's dialectics of liberation

with those of R. D. Laing, an association that parallels Laing's schizophrenia-as-salvation with Lessing's hysteria-as-sanity. In a similar defense of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Roberta Rubenstein argues that the book is "an innovative and effective fusion of form and idea" despite its "stylistic lapses," which to me seem surely more than "occasional."

Lessing's speculative or science fiction is analyzed with a touch more detachment by Lorna Sage, who concludes that the novelist is ironically willing to confirm her own sense of cultural marginality by exploiting and indeed exhausting the available conventions of a popular genre. Catherine R. Stimpson, in an overview of the Martha Quest novels, shrewdly evades aesthetic judgment and implies that Lessing's "politics of mind" are inadequate, yet affirms that the saga of Martha provides us with "goads to growth." Finally, reviewing Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, the novelist Alison Lurie finds in it "energy, invention, and originality," qualities palpably lacking in *Canopus in Argos*. Whether Lurie's optimism about Doris Lessing's future work, or my acute pessimism as to its continued stylistic decline, will prove to be justified cannot now be adjudicated. Certainly Lessing's work raises for all of us, in extreme form, the question as to whether ideological appeal now tends to substitute itself for the values intrinsic to narrative art.

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Editor's Note | vii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| <i>Harold Bloom</i> | |
| Doris Lessing's Intense Commitment | 9 |
| <i>James Gordin</i> | |
| <i>The Golden Notebook</i> | 27 |
| <i>Dorothy Brewster</i> | |
| Self-Analytic Women: <i>The Golden Notebook</i> | 45 |
| <i>Paul Schlueter</i> | |
| Doris Lessing in the Sixties: The New Anatomy of Melancholy | 77 |
| <i>Frederick R. Karl</i> | |
| Free Women | 95 |
| <i>Patricia Meyer Spacks</i> | |
| Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction | 103 |
| <i>Lynn Sukenick</i> | |
| The Sufi Teaching Story and Doris Lessing | 121 |
| <i>Nancy Shields Hardin</i> | |
| "A Rehearsal for Madness": Hysteria as Sanity in <i>The Four-Gated City</i> | 133 |
| <i>Barbara Hill Rigney</i> | |
| <i>Briefing for a Descent into Hell</i> | 151 |
| <i>Roberta Rubenstein</i> | |

| | |
|--|-----|
| New Worlds | 171 |
| <i>Lorna Sage</i> | |
| Doris Lessing and the Parables of Growth | 183 |
| <i>Catharine R. Stimpson</i> | |
| Bad Housekeeping | 201 |
| <i>Alison Lurie</i> | |
| Chronology | 209 |
| Contributors | 211 |
| Bibliography | 213 |
| Acknowledgments | 215 |
| Index | 217 |

Introduction

I

The best known of Doris Lessing's short stories, "The Habit of Loving," still serves to introduce both her authentic virtues and her very severe limitations as a writer of fiction. George Talbot, a London theatrical personage (sometime actor, occasional producer, sporadic reviewer), is gently but firmly jilted by "the love of his life," who has been in Australia during the years of the Second World War. A youngish sixty, he grieves, fails to win back his divorced wife, catches severe influenza, and is nursed back to health by a song-and-dance performer, "a small, thin, dark girl," named Bobby Tippet. George and Bobby marry; at thirty-five, she seems childlike to him. But to herself, and to her youthful lover of twenty, she seems already past fulfillment. Two passages between George and Bobby are wholly representative of Lessing's strength and weakness, early and late. The first turns upon the fine phrase of the title, "The Habit of Loving":

In the morning she looked at him oddly, with an odd sad little respect, and said, "You know what, George? You've just got into the habit of loving."

"What do you mean, dear?"

She rolled out of bed and stood beside it, a waif in her white pyjamas, her black hair ruffled. She slid her eyes at him and smiled. "You just want something in your arms, that's all. What do you do when you're alone? Wrap yourself around a pillow?"

He said nothing; he was cut to the heart.

"My husband was the same," she remarked gaily. "Funny thing is, he didn't care anything about me." She stood considering him, smiling mockingly. "Strange, ain't it?" she commented and went

off to the bathroom. That was the second time she had mentioned her husband.

That phrase, "the habit of loving," made a revolution in George. It was true, he thought. He was shocked out of himself, out of the instinctive response to the movement of skin against his, the pressure of a breast. It seemed to him that he was seeing Bobby quite newly. He had not really known her before. The delightful little girl had vanished, and he saw a young woman toughened and wary because of defeats and failures he had never stopped to think of. He saw that the sadness that lay behind the black eyes was not at all impersonal; he saw the first sheen of grey lying on her smooth hair; he saw that the full curve of her cheek was the beginning of the softening into middle-age. He was appalled at his egotism. Now, he thought, he would really know her, and she would begin to love him in response to it.

Poor George is quite mistaken; he never will really know her, and she never will love him. He is the archetypal Lessing male, in the habit of loving even as he is in the habit of living. Shrewdly observed by Lessing, nevertheless he is not *there* sufficiently to bear observation. Like most "realistic" representations, he is a reduction, and so a caricature, though a very effective one. Bobby begins as a caricature also, but her final, self-willed transformation reverberates with a mimetic force beyond caricature:

One morning she announced she was going to have a birthday party; it would be her fortieth birthday soon. The way she said it made George feel uneasy.

On the morning of her birthday she came into his study where he had been sleeping, carrying his breakfast tray. He raised himself on his elbow and gazed at her, appalled. For a moment he had imagined it must be another woman. She had put on a severe navy blue suit, cut like a man's; heavy black-laced shoes; and she had taken the wisps of black hair back off her face and pinned them into a sort of clumsy knot. She was suddenly a middleaged woman.

"But, my darling," he said, "my darling, what have you done to yourself?"

"I'm forty," she said. "Time to grow up."

"But, my darling, I do so love you in your nice clothes. I do so love you being beautiful in your lovely clothes."

She laughed, and left the breakfast tray beside his bed, and went clumping out on her heavy shoes.

That morning she stood in the kitchen beside a very large cake, on which she was carefully placing forty small pink candles. But it seemed only the sister had been asked to the party, for that afternoon the three of them sat around the cake and looked at one another. George looked at Rosa, the sister, in her ugly, straight, thick suit, and at his darling Bobby, all her grace and charm submerged into heavy tweed, her hair dragged back, without makeup. They were two middleaged women, talking about food and buying.

George said nothing. His whole body throbbed with loss.

The dreadful Rosa was looking with her sharp eyes around the expensive flat, and then at George and then at her sister.

"You've let yourself go, haven't you, Bobby?" she commented at last. She sounded pleased about it.

Bobby glanced defiantly at George. "I haven't got time for all this nonsense any more," she said. "I simply haven't got time. We're all getting on now, aren't we?"

George saw the two women looking at him. He thought they had the same black, hard, inquisitive stare over sharp-bladed noses. He could not speak. His tongue was thick. The blood was beating through his body. His heart seemed to be swelling and filling his whole body, an enormous soft growth of pain. He could not hear for the tolling of the blood through his ears. The blood was beating up into his eyes, but he shut them so as not to see the two women.

One could read this as a parody, perhaps indeliberate, of a slogan in T. S. Eliot, thus rendered as: "Males cannot bear very much reality." Presumably Bobby's bitter self-reductiveness is Lessing's own. What is striking, and indubitably an aesthetic strength, is the extraordinary effect of the supposedly unbearable reality upon poor George. That is my second "poor George," reflecting the reaction of a fifty-five-year-old male literary critic to Lessing's "realistic" reduction of male attitudes. "Who is the interpreter and what power does he or she seek to gain over the text?" is a superb Nietzschean question. An answer, not un-Nietzschean, would be to remind the reader (and the critic) that the critic interpreting here is frequently assailed by feminist critics as "*the* patriarchal critic." Not un-Nietzschean also would be the related answer, reminding the reader that Doris Lessing is the inter-

preter, and that the power she seeks to gain over the text of life is always reductive: tendentious, resentful, historicizing. Do we know at the conclusion of "The Habit of Loving" what George Talbot is *really* like, simply because Lessing has told us, so vividly, the very worst things that can be said about him?

II

Lessing's one undisputable achievement remains her immensely influential novel *The Golden Notebook*. The oddity of this achievement is that the book is very much a transitional work, resembling neither her early social realism nor her later, rather grim ventures into speculative fiction. *The Golden Notebook* has mothered hordes of feminist novels, and yet it is hardly what would now be considered "feminist" writing by most critics of that persuasion. Not that Lessing is a contemporary version of George Eliot, a woman so strong as a novelist and so majestic as a moralist that her vision is not much more gender-oriented than was Shakespeare's. Critics who compare Lessing to George Eliot or to Turgenev do her an ill service, as she simply is not of that eminence. She is a contemporary George Gissing or Olive Schreiner, and inflating her importance, though inescapable in current literary and sexual politics, finally may sink her without trace. *The Golden Notebook* will survive, I think, because its rugged experimentation with form rises out of socially realistic concerns, and is therefore undertaken against the grain, as it were.

At the center of *The Golden Notebook* is Lessing's assumption that her Anna Wulf is a paradigm for all contemporary women. But is she? At one moment Anna gives us her erotic credo, which is presumably Lessing's also:

The closest of all bonds; neurotic, pain giving, the experience of pain dealt and received; pain as an aspect of love; apprehended as a knowledge of what the world is, what growth is.

Whether or not this is a universal experience, its equation of pain, worldly knowledge, and growth is certainly the dialectic of experience in *The Golden Notebook*. Someone as removed as I am from Lessing's stance is in no position to challenge her dialectics, but only to wonder whether her own rhetoric is adequate to her proclaimed vision. About twenty-five pages from the end of the novel, Anna Wulf crawls into bed with the precise expectation of a particular dream:

I also knew what I was going to be told. Knowing was an "illu-

mination.” During the last weeks of craziness and timelessness I’ve had these moments of “knowing” one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet these moments have been so powerful, like the rapid illuminations of a dream that remain with one waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die. Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want. Perhaps better with music? But music attacks my inner ear like an antagonist, it’s not my world. The fact is, the real experience can’t be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words. The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and the others won’t. But once having been there, there’s a terrible irony, a terrible shrug of the shoulders, and it’s not a question of fighting it, or disowning it, or of right or wrong, but simply knowing it is there, always. It’s a question of bowing to it, so to speak, with a kind of courtesy, as to an ancient enemy: All right, I know you are there, but we have to preserve the forms, don’t we? And perhaps the condition of your existing at all is precisely that we preserve the forms, create the patterns—have you thought of that?

What this passage manifests (despite Lessing’s intentions, I suspect) is that Anna Wulf is a failed writer, who cannot master “Words. Words.” Lessing could be defended only by the assertion that Anna Wulf does not speak for her author, here or elsewhere, which is improbable. Certainly Lessing’s speculative fiction *Canopus in Argos: Archives* perpetually relies upon the “terrible shrug” of saying:

The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and the others won’t.

Novels, like poems, cannot be written with rows of asterisks, a circle perhaps, or a square. As a prophet of consciousness, Lessing increasingly is humanly impatient in regard to language, an impatience that sometimes she can render with poignancy. Ultimately, it is her refusal to sustain or be sustained by societal ideas of order that drives her on towards speculative

fiction, and towards speculative doctrines, as in Martha Quest's reading preferences in *The Four-Gated City*:

books on Rosicrucianism and the old Alchemists; Buddhist books . . . Yoga . . . Zoroastrianism and esoteric Christianity . . . the I Ching; Zen, witchcraft, magic, astrology and vampirism; scholarly treatises on Sufism; the works of the Christian mystics . . . everything rejected by official culture and scholarship.

The impulse is ancient and honorable, and recapitulates a tradition that goes from the Gnostics on through Blake and Yeats to such of our contemporaries as James Merrill and Thomas Pynchon. Yet Pynchon's Kabbalists, working out his doctrine of sado-anarchism, thoroughly exploit the limits of language, as do Merrill's occult personages and celebrants. Lessing's visionary fiction has some cognitive strength and considerable pathos, but the reader must fight through to them against Lessing's own language, which is, all too frequently, a kind of drab shrug. Doubtless the novel itself is a societal idea of order, a repressive convention that a prophet must transcend or circumvent in the struggle towards moral and spiritual liberation. Consider D. H. Lawrence, who achieved prophetic authority while remaining a strong novelist in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, but who then became impatient, and so gave us *The Plumed Serpent* and the other novels of his final phase. Lawrence was a great poet, with preternatural verbal gifts, and so a fairer comparison for Lessing is her exact contemporary, Iris Murdoch. How do Lessing and Murdoch compare, as novelists and as seers?

Both may be called Platonic novelists, though only Murdoch is actually a Platonist, while Lessing is a post-Marxist materialist who has wandered into Sufism in the honorable spirit of the fierce Spanish anarchists who fought against Franco, while seeking a religion in Rosicrucianism and other assorted dank crankeries. Murdoch is a great storyteller, master of double plots and of endless surprises, while if you read even *The Golden Notebook* for the story then you may as well hang yourself. Neither Murdoch nor Lessing is proficient at depicting memorable personages, Murdoch because she runs to recurrent, set types, and Lessing because she cannot be bothered, since she has ceased to believe that we have (or ought to have) individual personalities anyway. Murdoch is an admirable comic writer, while there is not the slightest evidence that Lessing and her characters have any sense of humor whatsoever. The largest difference is that Murdoch trusts words, and has the discipline to order them.

Since both Murdoch and Lessing have the same underlying subject, which is the erotic war between men and women, Murdoch's superiority is

palpable in representing the almost infinite nuances of the sexual agon. Men and women fall in love in Murdoch, as they frequently do in reality, but in Lessing they almost invariably deceive or are deceived, in a quest for power over others. Though clearly I prefer Murdoch, Lessing has the stronger extra-literary appeal in an age of ideologies, all of them promising liberation. Yet *The Golden Notebook* and certain moments in the Martha Quest novels should endure, because Lessing is very much a representative writer for our time. She has the spirit, if not the style, of the age.➤

