

BOOK REVIEWS

Claire Sprague

REREADING DORIS LESSING: NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF DOUBLING AND REPETITION.

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987. Pp. 210 \$22.00

Reviewed by Katherine Fishburn

First as president of the Doris Lessing Society and then as editor of its prestigious newsletter, over the years Claire Sprague has received worldwide recognition for her own work on Lessing and for her knowledgeable and enthusiastic advocacy of Lessing scholarship. Now, with the publication of *Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*, she is assured of even more critical acclaim, as she tackles here the troubling and difficult paradox that while Lessing's "ideological journeys have been extravagant, her narrative adventures have been modest" (2). It is a problem that has haunted Lessing scholars for years: how to reconcile Lessing's heretical ideas with such seemingly orthodox narratives? But are they so orthodox after all? Not according to Sprague, who argues that Lessing "has created her own usable past, one that leaps from nineteenth-century realism to the post-World War II (or postmodern) world, that excises the modernist example" (181). Although Sprague takes the position that "Lessing's example is radical," she also gracefully concedes: "To say why and how is not easy" (2). It is the saying of "why and how" that constitutes the very real contribution of this important new book on Doris Lessing.

Resisting the chronological patterns of most critical studies, Sprague has set out, in Lessing's words, to "shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: talk through the way it was shaped" (Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, 1971). Appropriate to her "rereading" of Lessing's fiction, the shape of Sprague's book is dialectical—a design that allows seemingly unrelated texts to comment (wordlessly) on one another. Thus, in Part I, "Antiphonal Narratives," Sprague juxtaposes two early neglected novels, *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and *Retreat to Innocence* (1956), allowing both texts a new prominence through this juxtaposition. In Part II, "Remembering Mirrors," she juxtaposes what she calls "The Martha/Anna Novels," with special emphasis on *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969); then in an astonishingly bold and effective series of juxtapositions, she includes in this section a chapter on "Mothers and Daughters/Aging and Dying," in which she discusses Martha and May Quest, Janna and Maudie (from *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*), and Alsi and the Representative(s) (both from the *Canopus in Argos* series). In Part III, "Colonialism In and Out of Space," she juxtaposes the "Radical Politics" of *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) (chapter 7) to Lessing's architectural symbolism in a range of other texts, old and new (chapter 8: "From Mud Houses to Sacred Cities: Martha Quest to Ambien II"). The almost dizzying effect of these juxtapositions is to bring to conscious attention what we have

overlooked before: the remarkably unconventional nature of Lessing's apparently unremarkable texts.

This is the value of Claire Sprague's book. She takes what is subtle and diffused in Lessing's texts and focuses our attention so unremittingly on it that we are almost overwhelmed by this sudden insight: for everywhere she looks, whether it be at form or character, Sprague sees connections, doubling, repetition, dialectics. Arguing that "pattern and meaning in Lessing's fiction interpenetrate in complicated and unexpected ways," Sprague suggests that "Lessing's dramatic projections are a way of questioning and enlarging the singleness and stability of personality—especially for women—and of narrative conventions" (4-5). And Sprague is right: seen from this perspective, Lessing's example is a radical challenge to the old social scripts and narrative patterns.

Although no one who reads this book will ever again think of any of Lessing's novels as quite the decorous works we once thought them, I want to recommend especially Sprague's rereadings of three novels: *Retreat to Innocence*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, and *The Golden Notebook*. Unraveling the complex patterns of proper names in these novels, Sprague opens them up to new meanings—in the case of the first two, rescuing them from virtual critical oblivion and assigning them a significance they have never before achieved. *Retreat to Innocence*, for example, is generally overlooked as the worst of Lessing's early realism. But Sprague finds there a "profusion of A and M names" that combine with "Jan's teaching stories . . . to create a resonance that realistic narrative—at least as Lessing perceives such narrative—does not contain" (49); in sum, it is not as textually innocent as its title suggests. The unappreciated *A Ripple from the Storm* Sprague capably defends as "a superb political novel, an exploration at once satirical and painful of the contradiction between the surfaces of political discourse and the realities of political manipulation" (132). And in her discussion of Anna's various "secret sharers" (a term borrowed from Conrad and given rich new meaning here), Sprague opens up *The Golden Notebook* in a wholly original fashion, suggesting that the "doubling, multiplication, and interchanging of the self . . . mottles the realistic surface of the novel. People, events, and settings, connect, merge, and separate in ways not always easy to define. Anna's 'others' are at once real and not real. They are almost freestanding figures, 'almost' in the sense that so many are fictions created by Anna" (82-83).

As this brief summary of her argument suggests, Sprague's discussion of Lessing's "secret-sharers" has implications not just for a rereading of *The Golden Notebook* but for rereadings of other twentieth-century women's fiction, especially if used in conjunction with Rachel Blau DuPlessis's splendid study, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). Sprague also includes important new information about Lessing's African roots. In chapter 8, "From Mud Houses to Sacred Cities," for example, she describes an "old stone city . . . known as the Great Zimbabwe Ruins" that lay not too far from Lessing's childhood home in what was then known as Southern Rhodesia (164). Speculating that these ruins helped inspire "the stone foundations and the stone center of Charles Watkins's inner city" in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Sprague reminds us of the work to be done in tracing the influence of Lessing's African upbringing on her fiction (166). In this chapter Sprague also reminds us of

Lessing's indebtedness to other ancient cultures by demonstrating how the ideal city described in *Canopus in Argos* "incorporates cross-cultural ancient, medieval, and Renaissance conceptions of the sacred city" (168). Nor is Lessing's borrowing without controversy, for she has taken from "Babylonian and Iranian sources" what Sprague regards as "her most startling borrowing"—that is, the "endorsement of the doctrine of astrological fatalism" (169).

Sprague concludes her study of this remarkable twentieth-century writer (whose twenty-first novel, *The Fifth Child*, has just come out) with an assessment that echoes and gives new meaning to the complaint of one of Lessing's heroines that she is haunted by the "monster repetition": "If Lessing's diction and syntax have been simple, her repetitions and her explorations of language—its silences and sounds—have not been simple. The transformation of the monster repetition into something sacramental and desirable represents a complex journey" (183). For readers of Doris Lessing it has also been a complex, often difficult journey, one that Claire Sprague has made at once more accessible and more rewarding.

Read—and reread—this book.

David Lowe

RUSSIAN WRITING SINCE 1953: A CRITICAL SURVEY

New York: Ungar, 1987. viii + 208 pp. \$18.95

Reviewed by Victor Terras

To produce a critical survey of forty years of a major literature in a mere 200 pages is a precarious and thankless task. A large number of works, many among them of no great appeal, must be read and placed in their proper context, their salient features identified and their relevance and value stated in a few pithy sentences. The author does not enjoy the privilege of the scholar who has chosen a favorite author, school, genre, or theme. He must react even to those works which he finds boring or distasteful. If he wants to bring his survey up to the present, more or less, he faces the further difficulty of working against time, since whatever he may observe may become outdated within a few years.

David Lowe has met the challenge of his undertaking most creditably. I have noted no very significant omissions. Among Soviet writers, I missed Rimma Kazakova, Lev Kassil, and Boris Polevoi (upon a random check of the index). Emigre literature poses more of a problem. It is difficult to keep track of, difficult to classify and organize, and often difficult to evaluate due to its exotic (from a Russian viewpoint) context. I would consider Lidia Alekseeva, Olga Anstei, Boris Filippov, Gaito Gazdanov, Yury Ivask, Dmitry Klenovsky, and a few others at least as important as some of the writers or poets whose names do appear in the index.

Of course no reviewer will agree with all of Lowe's value judgments. I find his opinions, on the whole, sound and well informed. They tend to be stated lucidly and with concision. For instance, the essay on *Doctor Zhivago*, though