

## The Space in Time: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*

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"The novel," wrote Doris Lessing in her preface to *The Golden Notebook* (1962), "is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion *only* when its plan and shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape, plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't anything more to be got out of it."<sup>1</sup> In this view, the novel is most vibrant when still in a state of healthy turmoil, before process has been turned into product, and the work, still to be bounded and defined by interpretation, has not yet settled into permanent form. The ideal reader will locate energy, liminally, between forms and across boundaries, in the spaces between shapes, and will thus confer value upon transitionality. Not surprisingly, in the fiction written after *The Golden Notebook* the lines of demarcation are constantly eroded. In *The Four-Gated City* (1969) walls are at one moment encaging, divisive barriers and protective screens; at the next collapsible drawbridges, horizontalizing themselves into points of access. Rooms, which in the early novels and stories represent the disintegrative compartmentalization of the self in a fragmented modern world, open out into stark new freedoms in *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and into the boundless psychological space of mental breakdown in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971).

*Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974)<sup>2</sup> is, along with the above three novels, a transitional or threshold work and was the last milestone along Lessing's fictional journey into the "inner space" of the psyche prior to the launching of her work into "outer space" in the science fiction that followed. In this novel Lessing takes to extreme lengths the erosion of categories and classifications, thus rendering of indeterminate status conventional alternatives and oppositions such as sanity and madness, freedom and determinism, outmoded and radical values. The flashbacks to domestic archetypes, by demonstrating how traditional norms often sanctioned the perverse and fantastic, rub out the boundaries between the "normal" and the "abnormal," and the lines between human and animal, and childhood and maturity, are similarly obscured: Emily's cat-dog is called "almost human" when it behaves with a nobility least like ourselves, and she herself is at once an immature teenage girl and a pioneer of the new post-catastrophe world, one of the new breed of survivors. Most importantly, Lessing places at indeterminate points along the same continuum not only the visions perceived through the inner wall of the room and the public chaos beyond the outer wall of the building, but also the two chief categories of experience behind the inner wall, which are designated "personal" and "impersonal." In the

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962; rpt. London: Granada, 1973) 22.

<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing, *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974; rpt. London: Picador, 1976). Page references are given in parentheses in the text of the article.

realm of the "impersonal," says the narrator, "there was a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility . . . the space and the knowledge of the possibility of alternative action . . . one could walk into another room altogether, choose another scene. But to enter the 'personal' was to enter a prison, where nothing could happen but what one saw happening, where the air was tight and limited, and above all where time was a strict, unalterable law" (40).

The "personal," which seems to represent the early Marxist, dialectical materialist aspect of Lessing's writing, refers to the socially conditioned and programmed self—to what had to happen in a wholly determined and invariable, time-trapped reality. In this realm are to be found the experiences which, historically, explain Emily and which, during the catastrophe, most prevent people from adapting to the new order. Meanwhile, the "impersonal," which represents the Jungian and Laingian dimensions of Lessing's thought, refers to alternative modes of being and altered states, whether imaginative or drug induced, of dreams or the subconscious; or to another, rival world or parallel universe made up from the range of possible eventualities which, in quantum theory, are contained in any given set of circumstances. Time is a crucial aspect and condition of both of these regions of experience, which may signify, respectively, time-bound and timeless realities, the actual and the possible, the causal and the contingent. What inexorably happens in the "personal" realm, where "time was a strict unalterable law," is offset by an alternative set of events improvised, minute by minute, in a continual present in the "impersonal" one: "On the next visit it was not the same room, and my preoccupation with it was altered—and so with the other rooms, other scenes, whose flavours and scents held total authenticity for the time—they lasted and not a moment longer . . . whenever I re-entered the rooms after a spell away in my real life all had to be done again" (59, 61). To be authentic the self, like the novel form in Lessing's view, never occupies the same room or space for very long but is perpetually remaking its meaning, "shifting and melting and changing, where walls and doors and rooms and gardens and people continually recreated themselves, like clouds" (70). The narrator alleges that this "extraordinary" impersonal region, with its archetypal rivers, forests, and gardens, and its anarchy of alternatives pressing constantly against the security of the given reality, is but "an extension of [her] ordinary life" and of the historically determined personality—"a wind blew from one place to the other; the air of one place was the air of the other" (143)—and that she exists in a "continuing relation" to both the destructive forces of the personal, materially conditioned world, and to the more beneficent and expansive presence of the alternative reality. The way to travel the continuum from one order of being and time mode to the other, it seems, is to develop a capacity for the continual reordering of experience, an alertness to the reconstitutive possibilities of things, and a readiness to "do everything again" comparable to that exhibited in the improvisational talents and new technologies of Gerald's young pioneers.

The narrator admits, however, that the task of extending the "ordinary" or "real" life into the "extraordinary" region is not one that she herself is "able to carry through" (59). The result is that the relationship of the two through-the-wall worlds in the novel is left deliberately problematic, and questions about their epistemological and teleological status dictated by the concerns of con-

ventional realism—such as whether the other world is called into existence by the narrator's emotional disturbances or is itself the cause of them—are effectively declared irrelevant. In some instances the two worlds appear to be equatively connected, in others merely juxtaposed (as with Emily's twin-traumas as infant in an Edwardian-style nuclear family and adolescent girl jilted for a twelve-year-old rival in the postcatastrophe chaos). At times one seems to act as a touchstone for the other, as when the present reality confirms what is learned from the wall-memories, while at other times the passage from one to the other is presented as an escape and retreat—for example, from irreparable public collapse into private mysticism in the ending—which places the two in stark opposition.

One possibility is that the narrator, in her apparent telepathizing of images from Emily's childhood, is, as Lorna Sage has suggested,<sup>3</sup> hypothesizing a composite past for Emily out of her own experience, inventing as much as she recalls. In this endeavor there is a superimposition of personal upon historical and mythological time, each of which is spatialized in the geography of the room. Thus, Emily's sweeping out the dead leaves refers immediately to her attempt to expunge the personal memory of soiling the infant's cot, but also implies a sweeping away of dead values and a deadening way of life on behalf of the whole society so that a new start can be made ("the whole place should be cleaned out," says the narrator). The nursery scenes, though charged with a personal urgency, have an archetypal quality, a quality of having happened to everyone (sibling rivalry, Oedipal tensions, oral-anal regression), and a case-study anonymity that makes them read like a psychology textbook. These are the experiences of an irredeemably past world: they represent the whole historical legacy of Western rationalism which presses upon the twentieth-century personality and incapacitates it in the face of the catastrophe that it has brought about.

Another option, apart from that of pure fantasy, is that the other realm has the independent reality and futuristic dimension of the science-fiction world and constitutes a power before which the narrator is only a passive instrument. "I had never had a choice," she protests, asserting the "very strong feeling" that she "was being taken, being led, being shown, was held always in the hollow of a great hand which enclosed my life, and used me for purposes I was much too beetle or earthworm to understand" (90-91). She was, she claims, led into the rooms (rather like the astronaut in the closing sequence of Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* by a superior benign force, a "presence" felt to be supervising her development and evolution.

Of course, Lessing's point is most likely that there is really no distinction between any of these: that the divisions between observed and imagined realities, past and possible worlds, the factual and the fantastic, are themselves invalid. The fault lies with the limited apparatus of perception available to the Western mind and brought by the reader to the novel—a way of thinking that habitually divides, distinguishes, and disconnects instead of looking for unity

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<sup>3</sup> Betsy Draine, "Changing Frames: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*," *Studies in the Novel* 11.1 (1979): 57, 60.

and connectedness. The moment when we fix a boundary between experiences, turning an open space into a closed shape, is also the moment when those experiences cease to be "alive and potent"; when "there isn't anything more to be got out of" them. *Memoirs* is thus a subversive and partly self-undermining novel, and most especially so at the end, where the reader is left floundering in midair, in a kind of hermeneutic vertigo. It is not merely that we switch frames here, and that what has been the secondary frame in the novel—the inner world of the narrator—suddenly becomes the primary reality, just when we had got used to thinking of this world, in secondary terms, as an imaginative or allegoric extrapolation from her "real life." What happens is that one frame—the primary, external reality—simply disappears. The reader may not accept the new frame which the characters vanish into at the end, but is unable to return to the old one since it is no longer there, and can therefore neither go on nor go back. The reader, argues Betsy Draine, "is forced to step outside both frames and disengage himself from the act of participation in the novel as world. This is experienced as a repudiation of the text as a whole . . . The breaking of frame here consists of a breakdown in the apparatus by which the novel was intended to convey its vision; it is not, as with Borges, an event designed to break, in turn, the reader's misconceptions about the nature of frames."

This begs the question, however, of whether the essential vision meant to be conveyed was the oneness of the inner and outer worlds, and raises the further question of whether Lessing has the means and will to unify her dual vision or simply chooses not to demonstrate the continuity of the realities to the reader, who does not get to share the novel's climactic encounter with the mysterious cosmic mother-goddess (the latter is situated, Sufically, beyond words, and the narrator can only say "nothing at all"). The disengagement forced upon the reader at the end is not necessarily a negative, postmodernist repudiation of the text, though it may be something as self-consciously metafictional in tendency and as unsatisfactory in execution, and more accurately adumbrative of the science fiction that followed.

An alternative possibility is that the existing apparatus of unification and the very idea of frames are themselves useless, and that the novel, in a very Borgesian and quiet positive way, does indeed break reader misconceptions about these things by insinuating that the kind of vision (and reader) required to unify the doubleness has not yet been evolved. "And this is my difficulty in describing that time," the narrator announces. "Looking back now it is as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected. But then, one life excluded the other, and I did not expect the two worlds ever to link up. I had not thought at all of their being able to do so, and I would have said this was not possible" (26). The two worlds were not expected "ever to link up"—that is, as they have done since and do now, in the next century or at some unspecified future time, when the period of catastrophe memoir'd here is long past and survived. The assumption is that the unification has taken place at some indeterminate point in time between the period recalled and the projected future (neither of which is defined) in which the narrator is conceived as writing, and one natural inference, which the novel hints optimistically at, is

that it has somehow evolved out of the young pioneers' capacities for improvisation in the face of technological collapse.

The chief talent of Gerald and his group is, importantly, the fluid power of combination; the ability to turn the process of disintegration into one of fruitful reintegration by dismantling and reconstituting machine and tool parts for more practical and serviceable uses. The priority which these resourceful salvagers give to the exploratory space in which possibilities eventuate ensures that nothing is allowed to stagnate or to reach that terminal shape, that finality of definition, after which nothing can be got from it. This visionary talent for endless recombination has not only guaranteed the physical survival of the race; it appears also, in some unexplained way but chiefly by dint of an ambitious imaginative synthesis on the part of the author, to have got mystically indexed to the ability to unite the two through-the-wall worlds of the narrator. The novel, written ostensibly for a hypothetical, futuristic readership and an advanced, imponderably unified sensibility, affects a vision not available to our own fragmented consciousness. The memoirs are presented to a reader who does not exist yet and in whose presence the narrator, as in much postholocaust fiction, is looking back on what for us is still the future. Imaginative space, and its freedom for the random combination of alternative possibilities, has thus been resolved, somewhat unsatisfactorily, into temporal space; and the time-bound and timeless realities redefined in terms of conventional realism's more mundane options of present and future time. From the spatialized time of a dead history, mapped in the psychic "rooms" of an obsolete Western consciousness, Lessing's novel leaps, through a space *in* time, towards that ideal reader who locate value between shapes and across boundaries—a purely imaginary reader to whom a narrative of imaginary events is addressed.