

# Apocalypse and Utopia in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*

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Since 1962, when *The Golden Notebook* was published, each of Doris Lessing's novels has revolved around the same type of crisis. The main character suffers a serious breakdown—or goes raving mad, as the case may be. This personal crisis is the protagonist's reaction to his or her surroundings, or rather, to the state of the world. Doris Lessing's main characters, ever sensitive and intelligent, often with great political and social awareness, experience the world as an absurd, chaotic, murderous place which encroaches on their sensibilities and tests their rational and emotional faculties up to and beyond the breaking point. It is not surprising, then, that Doris Lessing is often thought of as a modern Cassandra, forecasting doom and disaster for humanity and presenting madness as the inevitable, or indeed as the only appropriate mode of existence in our kind of world. However, it is not so often noted that Doris Lessing always presents the transcendence of disaster and madness. The holocaust which takes place in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and is referred to in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), does not destroy humanity; nor does the breakdown and madness period analyzed extensively in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Four-Gated City*, *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* represent the final psychological situation of the various protagonists.

*The Golden Notebook* offers a good illustration of the opposition between the protagonist's apparent defeat and her actual victory. Anna Wulf, in the last episode of "Free Women," which terminates the novel, abandons the struggle for individual and social independence: after her breakdown, she joins the Labour Party and goes in for social work, which, within the framework set out in the novel, is a tame compromise after all the fuss over personal freedom and the stress put on the necessity to transform society. But the "Free Women" narrative is a story within the story, and in it Anna Wulf gives an ironic and deliberately flat and conventional picture of herself. The real Anna Wulf, her real crisis and her reactions to it, are mainly to be found in the last episode of the Blue Notebook and in the subsection also entitled *The Golden Notebook*. There we see that the mental crisis Anna goes through is much deeper, much more violent, and much more of a threat to her sanity than the conventional breakdown in "Free Women." But at the end of the *Golden Notebook* section,<sup>1</sup> Anna has a vision about "boulder-pushing," i.e. the task of working at a transformation of humanity. The terms of that passage are very hopeful and purposeful: boulder-pushing must be done and will in the end be successful no matter how hopeless the task may seem—and Anna agrees to put her shoulder to the stone. This is the real end of *The Golden Notebook* and the purposeful optimism of this ending is especially striking when compared to a discussion about boulder-pushing between Paul and Ella (who is another fictional projection of Anna) in the *Yellow Notebook* (*G.N.*, p. 182): there boulder-pushing was seen in very defeatist terms, as a hopeless task which only naïve idealists would think of undertaking and which Ella-Anna would be well advised to give up. So, in spite of a certain obfuscation by the fact that the defeatism of the last "Free Women" episode fills the closing pages of the novel, *The Golden Notebook* does in

<sup>1</sup>*The Golden Notebook* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 529. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *G.N.*

fact end with an affirmation of newly-gained strength and confidence in spite of the chaotic absurdity of the modern world.

A similar difficulty of interpretation appears in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. The protagonist shares the insight of the gods and has come to his most profound illumination when the doctors, those normal, rational members of society, call him mad. The second half of the novel then presents the gradual return of the traveler to "normality," to the confinements of rationalism and materialism, to his conventional role as Professor Charles Watkins. Again, the book ends in an apparent defeat: electroshock has knocked the last traces of insight and of metaphysical searching out of Watkin's brain. But the episode just before the final electroshock therapy tells us about the abnormal Violet Stoke, who in a strange way is also touched by restlessness, and who refuses to become "normal" again. Moreover, one of the last things Watkins does in the novel is to write a noncommittal, dismissive letter to Rosemary Baines, who had earlier been stirred into consciousness by Watkins himself and who is now pressing him to continue his search. Watkins may have completely lost his grandiose insights, but among us there will always be a Violet Stoke or a Rosemary Baines who will go on searching: the future is not completely hopeless. This same optimism in the face of all that is negative in our world can be seen in *Briefing* in the divine vision the traveler is granted before the descent: there will be a worldwide crisis, but after that life will continue on a higher level, in a new dimension.<sup>2</sup>

*The Memoirs of a Survivor* follows the familiar pattern of crisis and transcendence, but there are some remarkable innovations in that pattern. Whereas in the preceding novels the world crisis was postulated in the future and never precisely defined or explained, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*—itself situated in the future—gives a detailed description of the breakdown of civilization and indicates the reasons for that breakdown. The novel is an account of a highly complex technological civilization such as ours, collapsing not spectacularly by the dropping of a bomb or under pressures from outside, but breaking down from within. The collapse at the beginning only threatens material comfort and social order, but goes on inexorably and leads to a dangerous, bestial kind of life where the laws of the jungle again prevail. The "kids from the underground," who are the last inheritors of this nasty world, have regressed further into savagery than the children in *Lord of the Flies*: there is no ritual decorum anymore, nor any tribal coherence, only the stark necessity to survive by killing. While this world is dying, however, another one is coming into being. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* presents two dimensions of action: the dimension of reality, outside, in the streets, and the dimension of fantasy (or is it hallucination, dream, ESP, madness?), i.e. the narrator's experiences behind the wall. These two levels are worked out in a sort of chiasmatic evolution: at first they are completely separate, but gradually they come together and intersect, and the level of reality grows less and less important at the same time as the level of fantasy grows in meaning and clarity. In opposition to *Briefing*, where illumination once gained later decreases and is finally lost, *Memoirs* grows through external chaos to internal illumination and eventual radical transformation. The structure of the novel as a whole is, as always in Doris Lessing's novels, for all their concern with absurdity, chaos, and madness, very rational and carefully balanced.

The level of reality is a "dystopia," but one which carries an uncanny resemblance to our present-day reality; after all, gangs, disorder, pollution,

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<sup>2</sup>*Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 118-19. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *B.D.H.*

defective public services, and an increasing paucity of goods and resources are not completely unknown nowadays. The remorseless breakdown of civilization is further made more credible because it is presented as a complex process, not as just unrelieved grim doom. Indeed, there is also a very strong positive aspect emerging from all the difficulties: a new sense of togetherness comes into being: a strong feeling that people need people to cope with the adversities of a collapsing world. When gangs are being formed on the pavement outside the narrator's flat, this evolution carries an element of danger and threat, but a closer acquaintance with the life of the gangs reveals the honesty, the resourcefulness, the solidarity, and the infinite adaptability of the young. In reverting to the small-scale economy of barter, to craftsmanship in fixing and mending, to the necessity of working with one's hands, life seems to be gaining in quality as much as, or more than, it is losing in technical sophistication. There is, in the midst of the growing chaos, a faint hope, a possibility that these youngsters will be able to avert the worst and to start a new way of life. But this hope is naïve. Modern man, even these unruly but resourceful young people, is crippled in his very soul and unable to renew himself. It is this defect in human nature, this essential, fatal shortcoming that will in the end be man's—and civilization's—destruction.

What this defect is, becomes clear during the narrator's wanderings behind the wall, where her experience falls apart into two areas, the "personal" and the "impersonal," neither of which seems at first to bear much relevance to what is going on in the streets. It soon becomes clear, however, that the world of reality and the world behind the wall are connected, and that reality is indeed explained and reflected by the fantasy experience.

By means of flashback-like visions, the "personal" lets us in on scenes from the early childhood of Emily, the girl who was so inexplicably entrusted to the narrator. The atmosphere emanating from all these various scenes is suffocating, oppressive. The baby Emily first learns about life in an efficient but loveless family where everything is regulated by the clock, where life has congealed into conventions, rules, and inescapable duties. The children are considered as possessions and have to function as prescribed by tradition and decorum. Playfulness and spontaneity are swiftly rebuffed, and the child is conditioned to conform to the patterns expected of it. This education is inevitably a crippling, disabling experience: it produces people who cannot find within themselves the depth of feeling and understanding which makes life worth living, or who can respond to each other with natural warmth. Instead, people grow up to take refuge in convention, in the rules and the organization of an impressive material civilization in order to conceal their inner emptiness. This is precisely the kind of civilization that we see breaking down in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*: a highly complex materialistic, technological civilization that cannot last because it is built on sand. The soul of man has become a desert, and things fall apart because the center cannot hold.

The scenes from the "personal," which at the beginning seem to be concerned only with the life of one particular family sometime in the past, soon acquire a more general relevance when it is pointed out that not only Emily has been educated in this way, but in fact everybody has: Emily is only an example, one link in a chain.<sup>3</sup> The "personal" experience thus fulfills a central function in clarifying the total meaning of *Memoirs*: Doris Lessing points out why our culture

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<sup>3</sup>*The Memoirs of a Survivor* (London: Octagon Press, 1974), pp. 128-29. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *M.S.* The paradigmatic quality of Emily's education accounts for the apparent contradiction in the text which situates that education in "Edwardian" times (cf. p. 39) and in a "Victorian" atmosphere.

is disintegrating. As in her preceding novels, we have to look in ourselves to see the corrupting evil for which we are responsible: we have amputated our humanity, and now we have to suffer the consequences.

The chaos, the violence, the disruption of life which is taking place in reality is mirrored in another area of the narrator's experience behind the wall, in the realm of the "impersonal." The domain of the "impersonal" is a vast house with many mansions in a very bad state of repair. The rooms have been soiled and wrecked as if by a malicious poltergeist and each time the narrator cleans up a place (does a bit of boulder-pushing), it is ravaged again the next time she enters it, or it can no longer be found. This house behind the wall, once a magnificent dwelling with beautifully decorated rooms, is now a ruin, and falls further apart, no matter what you try to do. And yet there is hope, for chaos is movement and, as such, better than the stagnant oppressive atmosphere of the "personal"; chaos is also opportunity, because new things must again and again be put in the place of what has been broken. The task of building something new out of the chaos may seem dispiriting and even hopeless, and one's efforts may be thwarted by a kind of universal malice (the "anarchic principle" or "poltergeist" in *Memoirs*, p. 95) or the "principle of joy in spite" in *The Golden Notebook* (p. 408), but still it makes sense to try again because there is the Presence, and there is the multilayer garden, and there are others contributing their piece of cloth to make—magically, unexpectedly—a beautifully patterned carpet.

In Doris Lessing's more recent novels, the idea of a paradise underlying the hell of this world is a recurring theme. That paradise is, however, a hidden one which you can only see if you have learned to look with all your faculties, and not just with the cold eye of rationalism. Its clearest expression is perhaps to be found in *Memoirs* (pp. 135-36), where the narrator stumbles through wreckage and rubble onto an incredibly peaceful and beautiful garden and finds that under that garden, there is another one, equally beautiful, equally fruitful, and equally sunlit. One must learn to look through reality to the Reality underneath, which is many-layered and inexhaustible. That garden is found accidentally, just as a dull carpet all of a sudden acquires colorful depth when one patch is added (*M.S.*, pp. 69-70), and just as the solid wall appears to have flowers under its dull white paint, flowers and patterns which you can only see if the light falls on it from a certain angle (*M.S.*, p. 14). One remembers the episodes in *Briefing* where the ruined city on the plateau seems to exist in a perfect shape and proportion in a sort of numinous light, not unlike a golden, four-gated city (*B.D.H.*, pp. 88-89), one remembers that even the bloodthirsty ratdogs there may have a bright halo transforming their ugly shapes (*B.D.H.*, p. 90), and one remembers that, seen from the Crystal, the movements and transformations on earth in its chaotic evolution make a harmonious pattern (*B.D.H.*, pp. 92 ff.). In all these instances, Doris Lessing is suggesting the presence of a deeper, spiritual reality hidden under the chaotic surface of this material world. Her latest novels have argued again and again that our rational, scientific approach to reality is cutting us off from—rather than bringing us closer to—enlightenment and enrichment as human beings. Madness as a form of superior insight and the concomitant dichotomy between the rational and the irrational constantly reappear in her novels.

The relationship between the superficial reality and the hidden, deeper reality which Doris Lessing takes for granted, is a curious one. On the one hand, there is a constant effort on the part of the deeper reality to make itself known to people living in the material, superficial reality hence the hallucinations, the madness, the feats of ESP, the dreams, etc.; hence also the signs and symbols in history (e.g. in *B.D.H.*, pp. 108, 110-11, 115, 123) emanating from that superior

reality and designed to waken humanity up from the sleep, the stupor it has allowed itself to sink into. In *Memoirs* this presence of a reality of a different order is not only manifested beyond the wall: on this side of the wall, in ordinary reality, there is Hugo, the cat-dog, the animal that does not exist in the normal order of things, the ugly freak which at the end, in the other reality, turns out to be "a splendid animal, handsome, all kindly dignity and command" (*M.S.*, p. 190). On the other hand, however, there remains an abyss between the two realities which human beings do not seem able to cross by their own strength. Doris Lessing never presents a gradual transition, a growth from one reality to another; it is always the other, the superior Reality which reveals itself, which all of a sudden opens up. Hints from "over there" may have been coming to individuals or groups of people, but the final revelation is always "given" to them, never consciously achieved by them. All you can do is to be "open," to be "waiting" till whatever it is comes to you and when it does—always after a crisis—no reasons are given, no explanations are necessary: the Crystal takes you into itself, or the wall opens and you walk into a new world.

This Utopian theme, the entry into a transcendent world as an alternative to the collapse of the present world, is used in *Memoirs*, as opposed to *Briefing*, as a triumphant conclusion to the novel: the last inhabitants of this cold, polluted, dying world, even the apparently unredeemable "kids of the underground," step into "another order of world altogether" (*M.S.*, p. 182). A Utopian vision, which had been faintly foreshadowed in a rather naïve escapist vision of the simple, happy countrylife in North-Wales (*M.S.*, pp. 31-32), thus becomes true in infinitely more grandiose dimensions, in a divine world. It is indeed remarkable how strong the religious connotations of Doris Lessing's presentation of a transcendent world are. It is fairly easy to interpret, for example, the evolution of the protagonist (his "travel") in *Briefing* in terms of search for grace, fall into sin, and final redemption. *Memoirs* also suggests a process of redemption by divine grace. There are even very strong pantheist overtones in *Briefing*, as well as in *Memoirs*. In *Briefing* it is made clear (*B.D.H.*, pp. 120 ff.) that the bad state of the world is the result of the fact that earth refuses to remain in contact with the Harmony that reigns over the cosmos, a Harmony which itself is an emanation of the fact that all the cosmos is One: the divine light irradiates the whole cosmos, down to man, beast, plant and stone. In *Memoirs*, the narrator during her rambles in the strange house beyond the wall always feels an all-pervading presence which she cannot define, but which she has always been familiar with—and which is referred to as "the one Presence who was the air they breathed—though they did not know it, was the Whole they were minuscule parts of, their living and their dying as little their personal choice or wanting as the fates and fortunes of molecules in a leaf are theirs" (*M.S.*, p. 87). It is this Presence, this One who, at the very end of *Memoirs* draws everybody to her and "went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether" (*M.S.*, p. 182).

One could argue that the view of reality which has developed in Doris Lessing's novels since *The Golden Notebook* has moved further and further away from the social realism which is the traditional province of the novel and which Doris Lessing herself practiced with great relish and skill in her early fiction. It is indeed possible to argue that the emphasis given to dreams, ESP, madness, to a mutation of the human race, to the Utopia of a transcendent, pantheist existence as the alternative for the apocalypse of empirical reality, add up to a private mythology which might easily lose its relevance for those readers who are not prepared to believe in this big step from social realism into the realm of the irrational and the absolute. But this line of argument must certainly be corrected. When reading *Briefing* or *Memoirs*, the two books which seem to

depart most from what is generally considered to be "reality," one is struck by the acuteness and precision of Doris Lessing's observation of ordinary reality at the same time as one is struck by her powerful "mythological" projections. Doris Lessing is evidently not in danger of losing touch with reality in her novels. It is precisely the sharpness of her analysis of reality (as well in the sense of setting as in the sense of psychological outline of character) which strengthens the impact of the mythical dimensions so strongly present in her later work. It is of course true that Doris Lessing has moved away from the traditional reflection of social reality, from the "slice of life" in her work, but her development is not an escapist one culminating in a fantastic, private, and possibly irrelevant vision. Rather she is trying "to push the boulder up the mountain" by widening the reader's view of reality and by confronting him with the problems and options which are fundamentally at issue in our times. Doris Lessing's criticisms of what is wrong with our civilization are very clear, and her projections for our future are neither desperate nor absurd. In so doing she may be using her fiction to a purpose that is both extremely necessary and relevant to our time.