

ESSAY REVIEW

SOME RECENT CRITICISM OF DORIS LESSING

In 1962 'Doris Lessing's following among the literary intelligentsia in the US was miniscule': by 1973 things had clearly changed, and the character of the new following can to some extent be gauged from the first of the books under review.¹ The overwhelming majority of contributors are women, and more than half the articles on specific works deal with one novel, *The Golden Notebook*. The editorial emphasis is spelt out in a fighting introduction by Annis Pratt. The selection is seen as pointing the way for future critics to 'turn their attention to social and feminist appraisals, as well as comparisons between the work and that of other authors in the continuum of both women's fiction and of Western literature in general'.² This positive programme is reinforced by an explicit hostility to 'aesthetic' or formalist approaches, which are repeatedly characterised as 'narrow':

We will do justice to [the] fiction not by seeking to judge it within narrow formalist bounds but by giving ourselves to its values and by keeping our mind's eye open to the sentence of death under which our age thinly lives.³

The result is a lively, stimulating, often rewarding volume; but it does at times demonstrate how the anxiety to avoid one sort of narrowness can push us into another. It is of course a fallacy that formalist criticism can ever be dispensed with entirely, since works of art derive part of their meaning from their form; and Mrs Lessing herself is quoted by Howe as complaining against critics who misread *The Golden Notebook* 'as a kind of latter-day feminism' precisely because they failed to notice its formal shaping: 'the way it's constructed says what the book is about . . . it was a highly structured book, carefully planned. The point of that book was the relation of its parts to each other'.⁴ Perhaps as the result of Mrs Lessing's insistence, *The Golden Notebook* receives a generally balanced treatment, avoiding both the formal pedantries of the extremist New Critics and the free-wheeling social-feminism that the editorial seems at times to prescribe. But only one other novel receives this fullness of treatment, in Douglass Bolling's contribution, 'Structure and Theme in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*': in view of the formal complexity of Mrs Lessing's art in *The Grass is Singing*, and even more remarkably in the 'Children of Violence' series, it is a sad omission.

Other imbalances are revealed on the contents page: nothing specifically on the short stories, or the poetry; no consideration of the African works as a whole; nothing (except in passing) on the four 'Zambesian' novels of

¹ A Pratt and L. S. Dembo (eds), *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies* (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1974), xi, 172pp. Rh\$17.20 (This is a reprint in hard cover of the Autumn 1973 issue of *Contemporary Literature*, a Special Number on Doris Lessing). The quotation is from F. Howe, 'A conversation with Doris Lessing', *ibid.*, 2.

² *Ibid.*, x.

³ *Ibid.*, quoting D. Bolling, 'Structure and theme in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*', *ibid.*, 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

'Children of Violence'; no attempt to study the shape of the author's career as a whole; no systematic engagement with that central Lessing problem, the relationship of her fiction to history and historical process.

The contribution by Michele Wender Zak (*The Grass is Singing*: A little novel about the emotions) exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of a quasi-ideological approach. She is appropriately insightful about the Marxist assumptions underlying the work, and about the way the protagonist Mary Turner becomes the victim of a male-sexist society. She draws on the relevant works of R. D. Laing for a terminology to describe the mental condition into which Mary is forced. But, because she fails to heed the formal shaping of the work, she falls into an absurd conclusion:

One rather wishes, in fact, that Mary had been able to sustain the 'false self' that preceded the accidentally overheard conversation.³

One might equally wish that King Lear had got on better with his daughters (which is no doubt what one would be forced to conclude after a social and geriatric appraisal of Shakespeare's play). Zak's account of the plot reduces it from a highly-patterned causal sequence to a vague chronological flow, punctuated by 'meanwhile', 'at about this time', and 'then'; and it is only to be expected that she should fail to make the significant connections which are surely the point of the novel. Lessing does more than show that economic structures determine psychological and therefore sexual patterns: she offers a careful study of the authoritarian psychological dynamic that maintains the economic and political *status quo*, diagnosing it as a neurosis of which Mary's madness becomes an extreme, illuminating, and fully tragic, instance. Again, insisting on the Marxist and feminist aspects, Zak misses the equally potent Freudian elements in the novel. Mary's repressive behaviour towards black people is intimately connected with her denial of her own sexuality. Lessing balances Marxist economic determinism with Freudian psychological determinism, so that the physical order and human consciousness are seen as a continuum. *The Grass is Singing* is not, as Zak dismissively describes it, among Lessing's 'slightest' works. It is seminal: in some ways the most intense and compact realisation of the author's master-theme of the 'integration of consciousness'.

Irritating too, is Zak's assumption that the work is set in South Africa, and concerns an Afrikaner community. (We are explicitly told in the novel that it is set in Southern Rhodesia, and that the Turners, though 'poor white', are *not* Afrikaners but members of an English community: even the name of the district, Ngesi, is meaningful.) It betrays a lack of curiosity about detail that undermines some of our confidence in the critic's conclusions, but is characteristic both of ideologically-based criticism, in general, and much American Lessing criticism in particular.

E. Hinz and J. Theunissen's contribution ('The Pieta as Ikon in *The Golden Notebook*') is particularly rewarding — an example of the kind of insight that flows when critics exploit a particular social and cultural theme, but discipline and develop their findings by a constant close scrutiny of the texts. Their delicate extraction of the latent pictorial image (ikon) from the narrative, and their consequent discussion of its significance, are most revealing. The ambivalent face of the Great Mother archetype in Western culture, Lessing's anxiety about the destructive aspect of it, and the way that anxiety is worked into the novel, are central to any reading of *The Golden Notebook*. Again, one only wishes that the authors had pushed their conclu-

³ Ibid., 73.

sions further. From Mary Turner's problem with her mother and her own maternal role, to the supreme act of vicarious motherhood rendered by the narrator of *Memoirs of a Survivor* — this concern straddles Doris Lessing's entire career. As it is, the essay leaves unclear whether it is merely a local concern of Lessing's most overtly feminist novel.

What does emerge from the Pratt and Dembo volume, in so far as it seeks to appropriate Mrs Lessing for feminist and 'social' ends, is paradoxically a sense of her largeness, her subtlety, her roundedness. It is instructive that more than one contributor denies her a sense of humour. Any lack of humour is surely in the critics, as readers of *In Pursuit of the English*, or, indeed, the 'Children of Violence' novels, will know. The equally conventional notion that her 'style' is graceless is also repeated. Some day it will be possible to do full justice to Doris Lessing as an artist, but a certain amount of dust will have to settle first.

Paul Schlueter's book⁶ is usefully set against the Pratt and Dembo volume. For all their occasional narrowness, the *Contemporary Literature* critics write with a degree of engagement with their subject, and even passion. Schlueter's style and approach are exemplified in these opening sentences:

The pressures of our time frequently force upon sensitive people a greater awareness not only of the era itself but also of the individual in that era. In particular, such an awareness frequently takes the form of an analysis either of the complicated and bewildered individual in the world, or of the manner in which that individual relates to other human beings. Such 'personal relations', as they have been called . . .⁷

His text consists mostly of plot-summaries, broken by passages in which 'themes' are identified (though what the author is doing with them, what their mutual relations in the total structure are, are questions not pursued), or various suggestions made about which writers have 'influenced' the passage in hand. Lawrence is a favourite, and one gets the sense that Schlueter thinks Mrs Lessing is somehow respectable *because* she writes under such an august influence. The possibility that when she describes sex, for example, she might be writing under the influence of her own experience, is not canvassed. This book is aimed presumably at a college audience: no serious critic will find anything substantial or original in it.

Schlueter's insensitivity to what has been described as Lessing's African background, but is in fact her Southern Rhodesian foreground, is equally distressing. It has yet to be acknowledged by American criticism that Lessing's novels are by no means about 'Africa' in general — the enterprise would be portentous if they were — but very exact scrutinies of a particular African society, the one in which she was raised. *The Grass is Singing* explores the psychological mechanisms of a white, English-speaking farming community in one area of Rhodesia. Of course the intention is to generalise from that to Rhodesia as a whole, and, on one level, to white-ruled Southern Africa (which she collectively terms 'South Africa') as part of the same racial and political pattern. But the working details are fiercely local. The 'Zambesian' volumes of 'Children of Violence' are even more intimate in their focus. As Murray Steele shows, Lessing works, for example, with the intricacies of Southern Rhodesia Labour Party politics, reflecting historical decisions

⁶ P. Schlueter, *The Novels of Doris Lessing* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973), x, 144pp., US\$5.95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

and personalities under the most flimsy fictionalisations.⁹ Overseas critics can hardly be expected to know perhaps, that the volumes contain a precise geography of Salisbury, including the naming of actual streets, hotels, public buildings (including the statue of Rhodes); but they might at least notice that 'Zambesia' is a country, not a town, as Schlueter⁹ has it, and located explicitly between Northern Rhodesia and South Africa, and west of Moçambique. Mrs Lessing, for her own reasons, has repeatedly made warning-off noises, disparaging attempts to see autobiographical or even historical details in these 'fictions'. Meanwhile, critics comment at will upon her 'commitment to link private consciousness with historical event',¹⁰ while no attempt, other than Steele's has been made to examine what that means with reference to anything actual. Mrs Lessing should indeed not naively be 'confused with her heroines';¹¹ but the relation between her and them is often an intimate one, as anyone will discover who cares to chart the writer's life month by month between 1938 and 1949, side by side with that of her fictitious Martha Quest.

Lessing, in sum, is currently receiving a rather limited kind of critical attention. Since her fiction is so hotly relevant to our times, it is only natural that she should be appropriated by embattled causes and attract critics whose primary interest is in the issues she raises. Perhaps this is a necessary first phase of her general acceptance by the literary public. One simply hopes that a broader (rather than increasingly narrow) criticism will soon follow, perhaps indeed helped forward by the essays collected by Pratt and Dembo. It would be a loss if the general reader, to whom she has so much to offer, were meanwhile deterred and estranged by the more extreme positions taken by her present following.

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⁹ M. C. Steele, *Children of Violence' and Rhodesia: A Study of Doris Lessing as Historical Observer* (Salisbury, Central Africa Historical Association, 1974), 28pp. Rh\$1.30

⁹ Schlueter, 55

¹⁰ L. Sukenick, 'Reason and feeling in Doris Lessing's fiction', Pratt and Dembo, *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies*, 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102.