

The Freedom of Exile in Naipaul and Doris Lessing

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AT THE END of the first "Free Women" section of *The Golden Notebook* Anna Wulf, the fictional author of the notebooks which form the basis for the whole novel, sits looking down on her material "as if she were a general on the top of a mountain, watching her armies deploy in the valley below."¹ Anna as army commander is a sad irony, isolated as she is (a few lines earlier we were told "it was only alone, in the big room, that she was herself"), and fragmented to the very end as her fictions remain. This image of the self-deluding writer of fiction is worth unpacking. Its contents are the necessities of the writer of reflexive fictions and the writer as a free agent.

The image's assumption of command, the writer as controller of fictions, is an irony which links the writing of *The Golden Notebook* precisely to the reflexive fictions of the last twenty years. Fiction has become the imposition of a subjective vision and the writer cannot be separated from the solipsistic fiction, ordering fantastic armies to do fantastic things which never exist outside the writer's head. The general also stands alone, above the fiction, in an isolation which is a form of exile from the battle he seeks to control. He has issued his orders. He expects to control events according to the pattern he dictates. He has the illusion that he is free to give his own shape to the events he rules over. In his world he is the free agent and nothing can be predetermined to inhibit that freedom.

The Golden Notebook in its entirety affirms precisely these things: the illusion of freedom, the fact of isolation and the reflexivity of fiction. Taken together these three things give the book a powerful claim to being a central statement about writing

fiction in the modern world. But putting it that way seems rather demeaning, as if solipsism had gone so far that the only subject left for writers is their most personal problem, how to write. Of some current American writers one might suspect that to be true. It is not, however, true in the main of writers who did not develop inside the amorphousness of the metropolis. Doris Lessing herself, and Naipaul, have neither of them ever quite lost the sense of a social being, of belonging in or being exiled from a society. Perhaps because small colonial societies are small enough to have a recognizable shape and identity both of these writers have a strong social sense which minimizes the solipsism and subjectivity of metropolitan life. They both carried this social consciousness with them into their exile, and it rules all their later thinking. Exile is not too strong a word for their transfer to the metropolis, since it represents a flight towards freedom of a kind, at least the freedom granted to the writer of fiction. Both of them, however, came to find even this freedom illusory. Their two central statements about freedom, both composed in the amorphousness of metropolitan London, reflect their common experience of exile.

One of the objects held up for sombre contemplation in the Epilogue to *In a Free State* is the ancient vision of Egypt depicted in the tomb paintings of Luxor. The vision records life's pleasures,

... the pleasures of the river, full of fish and birds, the pleasures of food and drink. The land had been studied, everything in it categorized, exalted into design. It was the special vision of men who knew no other land and saw what they had as rich and complete. The muddy Nile was only water: in the paintings, a blue-green chevron: recognisable, but remote, a river in fairyland.²

After his adventure with the tourists and the desert children scrambling for their sandwiches, Naipaul's journal offers further musings about this vision of the land exalted into its pleasurable design.

Perhaps that had been the only pure time, at the beginning, when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it as complete. But it was hard, travelling back to Cairo, looking with my stranger's eye at the

fields and the people who worked in them, the dusty towns, the agitated peasant crowds at railway stations, it was hard to believe that there had been such innocence. Perhaps that vision of the land, in which the Nile was only water, a blue-green chevron, had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb. (p. 246)

The international tourist finds it hard to credit the innocence of that vision of a land rich and complete in its freedom from strangers' eyes and foreign empires. In precise contrast Naipaul's own artistic vision proclaims the modern reality. *In a Free State* defines modern freedom as a ruinous exile.

It is even possible to argue that in this note Naipaul was thinking of his own cause for yearning, the world of *A House for Mr Biswas*. Certainly for him, as a memorial to Seepersad Naipaul and his own cultural origin, that earlier book could stand as "something for the tomb." Its subject is the house which becomes his castle and his freedom. This "stupendous" achievement, as Mr Biswas sees it, the tenure of "his own portion of the earth," is the conclusion of a struggle he recognizes at the outset of the second half of the book. He has reached Port of Spain, the city, at last, and has been enjoying the sense of space — free space and free time — which the new urban life briefly gave him. Then that sense of space and light and freedom evaporates.

His freedom was over, and it had been false. The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating.³

Biswas for once recognizes the constraints on freedom, and forgets his fantasies of escape. The determinism of home, one's culture and one's past, all of which shape the present and condition the future, makes the dream of freedom and escape false. By the end of the book Biswas' freedom becomes his home, though by then his dream of escape has already sent his son Anand, the author-surrogate, into his exile in dark northern libraries and private hysterias. The author of *In a Free State* is just such an exile, free of the constraints of home but painfully aware of the price of such freedom.

Naipaul and Doris Lessing are by any criterion serious writers. The modernist preoccupation with reflexivity does not for them mean in any narrow sense writing about writing nor in any broad sense Pynchon's "parables for paranoids," a tag which has Joyce's "puzzles for professors" behind it. They write about themselves as social beings whose vision of society is more central than their vision of the self, however the two may interact. In their two central books, *In a Free State* and *Golden Notebook*, they confront the issue of freedom with honest pain, and make it part of their vision of society — in ways which are wholly personal and therefore intriguingly different.

Up to *Biswas* Naipaul was finding himself — identifying his home and his own identity, the one a mirror for the other.⁴ After *Biswas* he said he felt unemployed, and his next two novels showed it (this was when he also started his journalism). *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* is an "English" novel, *The Mimic Men* an attempt to readjust his perspective into that of the exile who now looks outward instead of homeward, the free man who imposes order on his freedom by giving it the shape of words. Not till the three stories with that splendidly suggestive title *In a Free State* came out in 1971 did he make the complete adjustment to the condition of a permanent freedom, exile from the "place" which held Biswas as a condition of the writer's existence. Thereafter everywhere is alien, man is an urban guerrilla, and even the Trinidad of his next book, *Guerrillas*, is a foreign landscape. The home which Salim tries to build in *A Bend in the River* is the explorer's homeland, Africa, no home at all. The books which have followed *In a Free State* are in their central position essentially repetitions of the position explored in the 1971 book.

In a Free State has a unity exclusively of theme, because it is three separate stories framed in a pair of personal anecdotes. The anecdotes and the stories all illustrate what are called on page eight "casualties of freedom," political victims of the homelessness which Naipaul now identifies as the basic condition of modern life. Naipaul himself has said that *In a Free State* is about power and powerlessness,⁵ though it is easier to link that theme with *Guerrillas* than with its predecessor. Landeg White

has said more pointedly that his theme is again homelessness, but not just the homelessness of West Indians as in *The Mimic Men*. Homelessness is now seen as a universal feature of the modern world, afflicting all races, even the former colonial rulers, even those who occupy the "capital of the world" (p. 21). It is an extension of the unrelentingly bleak vision glimpsed in *The Mimic Men* when Kripalsingh with nicely modulated irony records his sense of freedom in what he calls "the final emptiness: London and the home counties."⁶ Freedom is empty. Home is that vision from the tomb of the early Egyptian artist, that illusory home from which we are all now exiled. We are prisoners of metropolitan freedom. *In a Free State* is a relentlessly wide-ranging vision of the casualties of freedom, and it is essentially about Naipaul's own condition, the permanent exile alienated from his home.

The first two stories of *In a Free State* assert the determinism which shapes the exile and the malign freedom which brutalizes him. At the end of his story Santosh, in a double image of causality and prisons, acknowledges the "endless chain of action" which took him out of the hills to Bombay and from Bombay to Washington and from Washington to being a U.S. citizen for life (p. 55). In the next story at the end of his narrative Dayo's brother asks "show me the enemy" — his life is dead, and he doesn't know who to blame for it all (p. 102). By the end we know that his only friend Frank is his keeper, the male nurse, the warder of his prison. The third and longest story is equally deterministic, but its central characters are still less capable of comprehending the damage done to them, and their conclusion does not even allow them the grace of recognizing the true nature of the trap they are in. Bobby's insistence on knowing his world is belied by his mistakes. Time and time again the settler attitudes of Linda turn out correct.

The nature of this crippling freedom is most clearly indicated in the journal stories which form the prologue and epilogue to the book. The prologue tells of the first victim, the tramp, an Englishman who calls himself a "citizen of the world" — an echo of Charlie Chaplin, the tramp of *The Gold Rush* and the exile who gave himself that title when he was driven out of Hollywood

for proclaiming himself a Communist. (The book is full of film references, in all three of the stories, usually inaccurately remembered, as if Hollywood is the only common culture any longer). The tramp talks, but not to communicate. "He looked for company but needed solitude; he looked for attention, and at the same time wanted not to be noticed" (p. 12). He is the apotheosis of Bobby in the third story, the exiled Englishman. The other passengers on the ferry to Egypt are described as "casualties" of an Egypt now freed from its conquerors. They are the ones returning to Egypt as outsiders who are described as the "casualties" of Egypt's new freedom, the final declaration of Egypt's independence after so many centuries of colonial domination.

The Epilogue returns to this freedom and colonial domination, and it is in this point — linked unobtrusively in the prologue to the passengers on the ferry — that we can see why Naipaul said the book was about power and powerlessness. In the Epilogue he begins with the Chinese circus in Milan, and after describing his Egypt, a country still dominated by the postcolonial attitudes of tourism, he returns to them as the new conquerors. As a tourist — himself the free exile — he records the vision on the Luxor tombs, "the special vision of men who knew no other land and saw what they had as rich and complete." This vision of a rich and complete homeland has been banished by the centuries of imperialism, from the Romans to the British and now the Chinese. "So many empires had come here" (p. 246). And it is in that vein that Naipaul wonders — "Perhaps that vision of the land, in which the Nile was only water, a blue-green chevron, had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb." The book then closes with the vision from the news photos, of the Egyptian soldiers defeated in the desert war — "lost, trying to walk back home, casting long shadows on the sand."

We are all aliens, it seems, the colonists and the colonized, all made casualties of that bleak freedom which is modern life. The three stories offer first Santosh, the exile in the city he calls the "capital of the world," left to eat, drink and sleep for a certain number of years and then die; then the nameless asylum inmate, Dayo's brother, the already-dead man, watched over by Frank,

the male nurse or prison warder who is accompanying him to that ironic act of social integration of his brother's wedding to a white girl, counterpoint of Santosh's wedding to the *hubshi*. And the final story offers Bobby and Linda, neither married with any more intimacy than Santosh or Dayo, the would-be exiles in a freedom which is as powerless as the exile of Santosh and Dayo's nameless brother, sheltering in their compound in a "Free" country with its capital city of which Naipaul says "everyone in it was far from home" (p. 104). The reference to *Heart of Darkness* (p. 161), that charismatic document of colonialism, has more truth than Bobby and Linda know, although of course they have none of the power which Mistah Kurtz took on in his Belgian colony. Everyone in this book is a victim, even the leftover settler colonel, playing his manic power-game with his black servants in the heart of the wilderness.

In the end Naipaul's diagnosis is exemplified in the Epilogue, by that futile act of protest he himself takes on when the Egyptian whips the Arab boys away from the tourist sandwiches which are being tossed to them. It is a futile protest which changes nothing and underlines the outsider-exile-tourist-free status of Naipaul himself. Outside everything, homeless and free, he can do nothing about the state of society as he witnesses it. The book is a wholly despairing act of witness to the illusory freedoms which man now enjoys.

Naipaul offers a parodic vision of his own status by presenting himself as a permanent tourist in the two journal entries which frame the book. It proclaims his authorial role with a hint of ironic reflexivity. Doris Lessing, once she left Africa, came to share something of this status with Naipaul, and her writing has developed in similar patterns. Just as Naipaul began in Joycean fashion creating his identity through his home in the fiction up to *Biswas*, so she wrote the five "Children of Violence" novels to create her vision of herself in modern society. Then, just as Naipaul had to come to terms in *The Mimic Men* and *In a Free State* with the fact of exile in the metropolitan vacuum, after the home had been identified and therefore put behind him, so Lessing came to face her new "free" existence as a woman in London. Out of this came that monumental work of identity and

reflexivity, *The Golden Notebook*. It was actually written after *Landlocked*, the last of the novels set in Zambesia and before *The Four-Gated City* which was set in London and forms the apocalyptic conclusion to the "Children of Violence" series. *The Golden Notebook* was written in 1962 when Lessing was in the same position as Naipaul when he wrote *In a Free State* — in permanent exile, her social identity established through the mirror-image of young Martha Quest, now coming to terms with the freedom of isolation in the metropolis. In her case of course there was the added nuance to the idea of freedom in being a woman. Hence the running title of the five sections of the book: "Free Women," which comprise the short novel made out of the material of the notebooks. The title "Free Women" is of course quite as ironic in its undertones as Naipaul's "Free State." It denies all the four freedoms, political, psychological, sexual and ultimately even the freedom of writing fictions.

The earlier Martha Quest novels describe a series of searches for a collective, a term derived both from Marx's concept of unalienated human society and from Jung's collective unconscious, the race memory of man and his history. All the collectives Martha settles in are unsuccessful, and the Zambesian novels end with fragmentation, the defeat of the individual's search for a collective. Neither family, marriage nor politics can offer much in the way of social or intellectual cohesion, and existence is both politically and psychologically alienated.

As the young Martha recognised, each group, community, clan, colour, strove and fought away from the other, in a sickness of dissolution; it was as if the principle of separateness was bred from the very soil. . . . Martha could feel the striving forces in her own substance; the effort of imagination needed to destroy the words *black, white, nation, race* exhausted her.⁷

Fragmentation is a means of coping with the pressures of human society, but an utterly self-defeating device. It is not surprising that after *The Golden Notebook* Lessing began to examine the individual in isolation, and to explore madness used as a means to block off the pain of this fragmentation. Madness actually prevents fragmentation, because it is a retreat into the cohesiveness of total subjectivity. Alienation is so potent a force that

escape into madness (also called alienation) is the only ready means to cope with it. Exploration of madness along those lines subsequently became Doris Lessing's subject until she began the *Shikasta* space fictions, based on her *Sufi* experience.

The Golden Notebook thus stands as a growth point, a stage of transition from the social study of "Children of Violence" to the psychological studies of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Memoirs of a Survivor*. The chief subject of *The Golden Notebook* is the implication of mental breakdown as "freedom." Like the "Children of Violence" sequence it is a quest book, a kind of Hegelian-Marxist quest, progressing from the thesis of the ironical self-awareness which stimulates the reflexive form of the whole book, to the antithesis of breakdown and destructive madness, and eventually towards the synthesis of a full consciousness, a union of objective and subjective. Like the conclusion of *The Four-Gated City* and the later novels its conclusion, if we can call it that, propounds a new collective consciousness, accessible beyond the limits of both reason and madness.

The four notebooks represent different kinds of fragmentation. The red notebook is basically Anna Wulf, the political animal. The yellow notebook is the fictional product, Ella. The blue notebook is Anna's diary and the black notebook is the record of breakdown and madness. The "Free Women" sections together comprise a reflexive fiction, made by and making the Anna of the notebooks. Doris Lessing herself said that this frame story was a kind of defeatist parody of the difficulties of writing realistic fiction.⁸ In the notebooks the freedoms of the "free women" are political, psychological, sexual and fictional, and they are all cripplingly fragmented. Even fiction distorts by imposing patterns. Anna comments on her fictionalizing of Ella in the yellow notebook, "as soon as one has lived through something, it falls into a pattern." One analyses, one imposes patterns, and the pattern distorts the reality. Not even the freedom to write realistic fictions is a true form of freedom. *The Golden Notebook* records the range of freedoms open to modern, urban, alienated and deracinated woman, and each is shown to be as crippling as the freedoms Naipaul analyzes in *In a Free State*.

One might argue of course that the whole novel is itself a cohesive unity, a creation which draws the fragments into itself and establishes by its very reflexivity a collected consciousness. There is the "golden notebook" section, written by Anna as "I," which brings the four fragments together. The golden notebook section is Anna with the American Saul Green, and is followed by the final section, number five, of "Free Women" which returns to the two women, Anna and Molly, presented in the third person, with whom the book opens. Together they round off the reflexive fiction, since on page 624 of the golden notebook Saul gives Anna the opening sentence of her new novel, "The two women were alone in the London flat," which opens the whole work. The cohesion is signalled by the circular shape of the fiction.

That is of course a false cohesion by Doris Lessing's own criteria. Through what we can see as the ultimate development of its reflexive nature it ends as a fictionally and therefore falsely unified set of fragments. Real fictions are as fragmentary, or else as distortingly patterned, as real life, and the golden notebook which draws all the other coloured notebooks into itself is still itself a fiction. There is a fearsomely logical defeatism in this structure. It is the novelist's admission that even the unifying consciousness of the novelist and her pattern-making cannot survive the falsifying pressures of the fragmented consciousness.

In both of these studies of modern freedom what we usually think of as freedom seems to be definable only in negatives. If Naipaul alone were the subject this would be right. His vision is utterly relentless. But Lessing is more adventurous, more hopeful perhaps, than Naipaul, and has nuances in her attitude to freedom which offer a rather more optimistic perspective than the negations which Naipaul on his own would confine us to. It is not of course difficult to be less pessimistic than Naipaul.

In the ending of *The Golden Notebook*, as in the apocalyptic conclusion to *The Four-Gated City*, we can see the beginnings of a vision of a new freedom, the synthesis beyond madness, which appears most fully in *Briefing*. Madness is, to begin with, an escape from fragmentation. It offers a new cohesion, a wholly subjective vision unhindered by objective reality. But it is soli-

tary, and therefore on its own is just another variety of fragmentation. Beyond it therefore Lessing posits the developed collective, the *karass* (a term taken from Kurt Vonnegut) or community of developed minds, which underlies all of Lessing's space fiction. It is not so much an inheritance from Grandfathers Marx and Freud, who between them gave the word "alienation" its double force in politics and psychology, as a development of Jung's collective unconscious or race memory. Madness can provide an access to that subterranean or subcutaneous collective. Saul Green the novelist in the golden notebook represents the Jungian chaotic unconscious, a creative force but still a fragment. Anna in that section partly under the stimulus of Saul briefly does acquire the collective sense while she is mad and undergoes her cinematic reruns. She loses it in the final "Free Women" section when she returns to a kind of normality with all her fragments "buttoned up" as she wryly puts it, leaving her free only to record the fragmentation in the uncollected notebooks. The brief moment of collective vision is there, although against all the notebooks runs the story of Tommy, in the "free women" sections, who after reading the coloured notebooks tries to commit suicide and survives permanently blinded, a fate which one might regard as a distinctly unpromising augury for the real reader of the book.

Probably Lessing's fundamental preoccupation at this point in her writing was with writing itself. Her title directs our attention to the structure of the notebooks. Naipaul's title on the other hand is directed at the human condition generally. Implicitly it is about loss, the deprivations of the free state of exile. All his journalistic books have titles which presume loss, from the images of the slave trade signalled in *The Middle Passage* and *The Overcrowded Barracoon* through the affliction of *An Area of Darkness* and *A Wounded Civilisation* to the dystopia implied in *The Loss of El Dorado*. Lessing is more inward than Naipaul, and one consequence of that inwardness shows up quite distinctly the kind of thinking that separates them. Their differences are most vivid in their attitudes to sex.

In the nineteenth century the standard defence against individualism, solipsism, the death of God and a sense of oneness

with the universe was of course invariably love. Tennyson may have offered it in the form of solitary Mariana, Browning as Perseus rescuing Andromeda and Arnold as the newlyweds looking out over Dover Beach, but it had the same centrality for all of them. We are more sceptical these days and might hardly notice that the three stories of *In a Free State* take no account of it. Love there appears only as Santosh getting his U.S. citizen's ticket through sex with the *hubshi* woman, or Bobby in the hands of the male whores in Africa. There is no love, only sex, an exercise which separates couples instead of joining them. Lessing offers a different vision. Sex gives access to the collective, or at least supplies unifying visions. It offers one in *The Four-Gated City* when Martha is with Jack and has her vision of the Edenic city even down to its lions and lambs, the utopian city which in all the "Children of Violence" series stands against the dystopian reality of exile and fragmentation in London. Jack helps Martha to that utopian vision rather as Milt the American surrogate for Saul Green in *The Golden Notebook* gives Anna freedom by tearing down all the newspaper cuttings which are imprisoning her mind, as a kind of payoff for helping him with his sexual hangups. The "endless chain" of freedom which imprisons Santosh offers no such liberation.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Golden Notebook* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 60. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent references to works first referred to in notes will be cited in the text.
- ² *In a Free State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 241.
- ³ *A House for Mr Biswas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 316.
- ⁴ See Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981).
- ⁵ *The Guardian*, 4.10.1971.
- ⁶ *The Mimic Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 8.
- ⁷ *Martha Quest* (London: Panther), p. 56.
- ⁸ Introduction to *The Golden Notebook* (London: Panther), p. xvii.