

Areas of the Mind:
"The Memoirs of a Survivor"
and Doris Lessing's African Stories

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE constitute a subject of enquiry in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*; they are also the circumstances of its being, of its place in Doris Lessing's *oeuvre*. The form she gives to experience in this novel is partly a product of her immediate concern, which is an account of the questions about survival that come with the collapse of a culture, and form also emerges more generally from her cumulative experience as a person and as a writer. In particular, the spatial divisions into which she has organized experience in *Memoirs* can be seen to have evolved from the recorded divisions of experience in the white settler lives of her African stories. What she observed as a pattern of behaviour amongst settlers from England in an alien country like Rhodesia (as it was then) seems to have given Lessing herself an epistemology, a way of perceiving and of placing certain tendencies in social life which she has carried with her into her later fiction. Recent criticism has begun to acknowledge the continuities from Africa to Europe in Lessing's work,¹ but little detailed exploration has yet been made of the specific ways in which the products of her imagination still manifest the shaping power of her early observations.

The subject of cultural continuity with which Lessing is concerned in *Memoirs* does not continue directly from her African fiction, but the shape, the way in which she finds it possible to give narrative form to the areas of experience with which she is concerned, does demonstrate a re-emergence of the shape of experience recorded in the African stories. The immediate subject matter of *Memoirs* is what dominates the latter half of *The Four-*

Gated City, for it is in Lynda Coldridge's "madness" that Lessing locates the question of how human capacities which might be vital to a culture's survival come to be ignored, or even suppressed, and where she postulates their recovery. Lessing pinpoints her purposes in creating a Lynda by quoting from the teaching of a thirteenth-century Sufi Master and by using Idries Shah's way of locating the relevance of such teaching to the twentieth century:

Sufis believe that. . . the human being's organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to . . . a need. In this age of the transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space.²

While *The Four-Gated City* studies the loss of potentially valuable capacities, *Memoirs* dramatizes the way their recognition and recovery might occur by taking up very directly the claim made by Idries Shah. The "transcending of time and space" is a capacity being developed by the narrator as she travels increasingly frequently through the wall of her living room to witness, to lift to clearer consciousness, otherwise inaccessible knowledge. In these journeys of the narrator's mind, Lessing suggests that certain human capacities can usefully be conceived of territorially — as areas possessed and so visited by the mind — and it is specifically this suggestion which can be traced to the African fiction. Lessing establishes the importance of these areas by showing, as the narrator recounts Emily's story, that the journeys the narrator makes impose demands on her which correspond to those entailed in the more familiar journey to adulthood that the young girl is making in ordinary life. The narrator's extraordinary ventures correspond to what is recognizable and so ordinary in Emily's story: both journeys show that these characters have to bring together contrary elements in their experience and, in responding to these contraries, to recognize their own way forward. Emily's chief decision comes when she has to acknowledge that despite her love and her culturally taught sense of responsibility, she can no longer sustain Gerald in his attempts to rescue the children of the underground. The narrator is able to understand the needs underlying Emily's choice to break from her role

with Gerald because in the encounters beyond the wall of her flat she has recognized her own and other peoples' neglected creative capacities and responsibilities.

Presenting her readers with access to neglected areas of the mind is something Lessing has often undertaken, but although the metaphor of the soul or mind's journeying is generally a familiar one in fiction, its direct treatment in realistic mode in *Memoirs* is one that Lessing's readers will probably not recognize immediately from their own lives. Fiction's more familiar way of depicting access to neglected areas of experience, the dream, is one which Lessing herself has often used. Her choice for *Memoirs* of a less easily placed mode of access to otherwise closed areas of the self was probably made because the journeys through the wall could place an emphasis on *how* characters gain access to what they need to know rather than simply on what is learnt. Besides emphasizing the process of re-discovery, Lessing's choice enables her to affirm a point central to her story: her narrator, before consciously recognizing her own needs, finds herself responding constructively to the breakdown of order in her everyday world.

The journeys through the wall give a three-fold space to *Memoirs*, and this article will pursue how this spatial division of experience and resultant ways of knowing arise both from the narrator's immediate responses to her circumstances in *Memoirs* and, at a deeper level of continuity in Lessing herself, from the nature of white settler life in Africa. The first two spaces are given definition in *Memoirs* as the signs of breakdown in society become increasingly difficult to ignore. As the groups of people about to migrate gather on the pavement opposite her flat, the narrator retreats into her room, which she treats as a fortress, a place where the old, orderly decencies of life can be sustained. She stands behind her curtains thinking of her security "in here," watching with dismay what is happening "out there." In particular, the evident change in individual being disturbs her and reinforces her withdrawal into her custom-filled abode. She says of the first "pack" of travellers who gather outside:

They had relinquished individuality, that was the point, individual judgement and responsibility, and this showed in a hundred

ways, not least by one's instinctive reaction in an encounter with them, which was always a sharp apprehension, for one knew that in a confrontation — if it came to that — there would be a pack judgement. They could not stand being alone for long; the mass was their home, their place of self-recognition. They were like dogs coming together in a park or a waste place. . . . this description is true of course of any group of people of any age anywhere, if their roles are not already defined for them in an institution.⁸

The quality of the retreat, the point from which all the narrator's observations are made, is rendered chiefly by its contrast with what is disturbing in pavement life. The flat's layout is carefully described, as are its colours, which "were predominantly cream, yellow, white, or at least enough of these to make it seem that walking into the room was walking into sunlight" (p. 14). But thereafter, actual description is infrequent; it is a place of waiting, a once secure but now shrinking world. The need for such a place in each life is given when Emily arrives and asks immediately for her room. As the narrator says, "[s]he needed, she needed very much, to know what walls, what shelter, she was going to be able to pull around her, like a blanket, for comfort" (p. 18).

The opposition between "out there" and "in here" is thus a familiar one which is heightened until it cannot be ignored by the events with which the narrative deals. It is clear that Lessing has chosen a period of rapid social collapse for her story because in it the structures and processes of ordinary life, which are usually invisible in their familiarity, are suddenly thrown into the sharp relief of failing confidence. We are shown life through the wrong end of a telescope; within this altered spatio-temporal scale, the narrator's account of clinging to the ordinary enables Lessing to convey the contingency of a culture while examining its specific nature.

In addition to this division into familiar, possessed space and alien, threatening space, Lessing provides the space through the wall. As has been said, the possibility of moving "through" apparent barriers has partly the same purposes that dreams often have in fiction. When the narrator says of her first journey that she "did not that first time achieve much more than that there were a set of rooms" (p. 15), she indicates that while the images and events beyond the wall are not of her own choice, recognition of

them is generated within her. For example, she gradually recognizes a connection between her worries over Emily and what she sees through the wall, so that a degree of conscious reciprocity is set up between the images of this area of the mind and what she needs in order to recognize and understand changes in her everyday world.

Within the area "through" the wall, the narrator distinguishes between her experience of the "personal" realm as she calls it, and the other, the realm of possibility. Although the latter is frequently composed of abandoned, derelict, or desecrated rooms which the narrator feels compelled to try to restore to order, it also contains a promise — "in that realm there was a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility . . . of alternative action" (p. 40). By contrast, the personal world is 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 and long, oh my God, it went on, and on and on, minute by decreed minute, with no escape but the slow wearing away of one after another. (p. 40)

The decision to render the mind's new capacity as an area, as discoverable territory, is clearly linked with the narrator's self-defensive division into two distinct areas of her experience in her collapsing world. The third realm is a kind of alternative or addition to the narrator's diminishing social life, but the world through the wall is not like a day-dream: it is neither an escape nor a compensation for loss. Its bearing on the ordinary is too strong.

The subject of a collapsing culture and Lessing's vision, her chosen way of depicting a response to need, have both shaped the formal patterning of space used in *Memoirs*; it is also possible to trace this patterning to features of settler life depicted in Lessing's earlier African stories. In particular, her decision to depict human faculties territorially has evident roots in experiences of Africa as they are recorded in her early fiction.⁴ In the society she knew in Southern Africa, there were three very distinct realms of being which sprang forcibly from geographically different territories. These three territories can be paired (with some qualification) with those used in *Memoirs* as follows:

- "in here": the white settler community and its mores
 "out there": the settler view of Africa, the land and its people
 "through": memories of their original culture, of "Home";
 which settlers use in self-definition.

Obviously the greatest change from the African divisions to those used in *Memoirs* has occurred in the last category, but continuities can be perceived in all of them. For the first category, Chapter 1 of *The Grass Is Singing*⁵ demonstrates that the settler ethic is designed to ensure the protection and preservation of the group. The ethic operates in a retreat which has vivid spatial definition. For example, in the short stories, there are frequent descriptions of the gardens which surround settler homesteads, gardens where luxuriance is an index of prosperity gained at the expense of the land and its people. These gardens are a buffer-zone between bush and homestead, they are Lessing's perception of how a fortress mentality will show itself in ordinary times. Furthermore, the short stories frequently use an adolescent innocent as narrating consciousness so as to reveal the peculiarities of this constricted world with its standards which "other people could not be expected to understand, a standard that had nothing to do with beauty, ugliness, evil or goodness" (I, 161).⁶ It is a world ruled by unquestionable habits whose inhabitants, because it is "so far out, away from everything" and because, as the child puts it, "we have all got to go on living together," cannot tolerate people who do things differently.

"Don't you see? It's not what people do, it's how they do it. It can't be broken up." (I, 161)

This defensiveness has its obvious parallels in *Memoirs* in the narrator's retreat into her flat and in Emily's need for the security of walls which can be pulled around her like a blanket. Although there is nothing vicious or oppressive "in here" in the narrator's retreat, as there is in the settler ethic, retreat does shape the narrator's perceptions. At first she can see the migrating groups only as those who have succumbed to a pack mentality. This is presented less as an inability to see things as they are than the narrator's not recognizing a need to perceive the travellers more fully in the early stages of social collapse. Conversely, the settlers

have a distinct need for the ethic, the attitude and perceptions, that they practice.

The parallels between the pavement life "out there" and Africa lie less in their essence than in the emotional relationship, the hostile resistance to the surrounding world, that is practised by the settlers and, for a time, by the narrator. The dimensions of the subjectively felt antithesis are more varied in the African stories, but there is a central similarity. The settlers are shown choosing to remove themselves from an alien, surrounding way of life which they consequently fear. So too the narrator fears the activities of the pavement pack as she stands watching from behind her curtains. Many writers besides Lessing have depicted the settlers' fear of the people they oppress and of whom they must remain ignorant. But her perception that the land itself has also to be treated in this way is a less familiar topic. In these stories, the settler community is shown in a familiar closing of ranks against social or moral threats, but the more disturbing, psychic threat comes from the land. In "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange," Mrs. Gale, a middle-aged woman who has found her consolations for the aridity of her well-heeled farm life in her English-type garden, sits gazing at the mountains which lie beyond a deep, rocky gorge. She feels that these mountains have "crystalised her loneliness into a strength" (I, 80), but in order to gaze at them she has had to learn to ignore the intervening gorge which, with its sudden descent into tropical palms, slow brown river and crocodiles, speaks of a sudden life she has been denied and of which she cannot afford to be reminded. She allows herself the daily pleasure of sitting in her expensive garden (the water for the fountain has to be pumped from the river hundreds of feet below) and gazing at "her mountains." Then the De Wets arrive. They are young and caught in the turmoil of turning sexual passion into married love. In her sympathy for the girl who does not like her husband's recipe for the transformation — children — Mrs. Gale offers to show her "my mountains" (I, 88). Her consternation when her guest fails to see the mountains but responds with delight to the view of "my river" (I, 88) makes Lessing's point clear. Landscape is seen selectively through the distortions of need.

Distortions like this are seen to be at the core of settler life and they are the result of a double filter: personal need plus a cultural consciousness which actively denies people access to their environment. In "The Old Chief Mshlanga," Lessing writes of a child raised on metropolitan literature who cannot see the world she lives in until a change in her reading matter takes her into it. Then, as she says, "slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil" (I, 17). Conversely, moments of personal crisis can reveal to Lessing's protagonists that their relationship to the land they live on is incomplete or wrong. In "Winter in July," Julia is grappling with an unwelcome change in her domestic life. She stands in her garden looking back at the house in which she has lived with her husband and his brother for ten years and notices that the "large, assertive barn of a place" looks "naked, raw, crude," a perception that leads her to acknowledge that "[t]here had always been times when Africa rejected her, when she felt like a critical ghost" (I, 219). The most explicit treatment of the extreme consequences of an inability to relate is given in *The Grass Is Singing*, where resistance culminates in Mary Taylor's madness and her conception of her death as the bush avenging itself.

Lessing does not show the land and its creatures to which the settlers dare not relate as potentially benign, any more than she presents the settlers' perception of its destructive powers as a full reality. Africa's power to disturb even those not crippled by their position as exploiters appears in such stories as "The Sun between Their Feet," Lessing's account of watching two dung beetles attempt to push their ball of dung up an impassable rock.⁷ The narrator intervenes and attempts to redirect them, but uselessly, for having once chosen their route, the beetles seem unable to alter their decision. At sunset they have still achieved nothing. Their futile efforts are set against a biologist's apparently detached account of how the dung beetle works. It

"lays its eggs in a ball of dung, then chooses a gentle slope, and compacts the pellet by pushing it uphill backwards with its hind legs and allowing it to roll down, eventually reaching its place of deposit." (II, 163)

The incompleteness of this generalized account supports a ro-

manticizing assumption about nature's mechanisms: because such creatures have evolved for one function, their design will ensure the success of their efforts. From this, the determined designs of the natural world are perceived as a good. By insisting on the futility of the beetles' efforts, Lessing challenges easy assumptions about natural ordering being simply a good and points instead to the possible horror of unadaptable capacities. That given capacities in the natural world can be imprisoning is a recognition akin to the one invited by the presentation of the "personal" in the area through the wall of *Memoirs*. In addition, the reductions of the textbook view are very close to those which, in self-defence, Lessing's settler characters have to make about the land. In their necessary hostility to Africa, most settlers use attacking generalizations as the safest form of defence, but some have no defences. Like Dick and Mary Taylor, they are either sottishly bound to the land or in mindless flight from its horrors. In all cases, the beauty and the harshness of the ordering in the natural world cannot be held together in their minds.

In addition to their practical purposes of exploitation, which lead these settlers to experience Africa as a physically dangerous land, they are exposed to danger by a blindness to the present that living in chosen memories of "Home" can bring. It is here that the third territorial parallel between these stories and *Memoirs* can be seen. Of the two kinds of encounters through the wall, the "personal" ones have the clearest parallels in settler life. Their stories abound with characters who are imprisoned, usually painfully and often absurdly, within memories or tokens of the culture they have left behind. These characters usually left England after World War I,⁸ feeling that society was finished and had no place for them. Africa seemed a land of promise and so they rejected their origins. But, as they struggle in a new country and as the established settlers' sterile *mores* claim them, so they defensively select pleasurable memories of "Home," making their once despised origins seem ever more attractive. Thus the divide between them and Africa that is demanded by the settler ethic is reinforced by the distortions of memory. The comic side of this process is captured in stories like "A Home for the Highland Cattle." Marina Giles, in flight from the monotony of Britain and desperate to

leave the hotel she has been put in as an immigrant, rents a flat and its furniture. She acquires with the two-roomed flat a servant, Charlie, and, in the living room, a "very large picture of highland cattle." Its owner, Mrs. Skinner, tells her that because "[i]t used to hang in the parlour when I was a child, back Home" (I, 246) and because it has been everywhere with her, it may not be moved. The picture itself means little to Mrs. Skinner except as a way of subduing her tenant. On the other hand, it takes on constructive possibilities for Charlie who, unable to muster bride-price for Theresa, comes to believe that the picture will be an effective surrogate. Although she eventually stops resisting the local attitudes, Marina makes a last fighting gesture when she acknowledges the absurdity in Mrs. Skinner's embodied memories by giving the picture to Charlie so that he may marry the now pregnant Theresa. Mrs. Skinner knows she has done well in getting £8.00 for the "broken" picture, but to assert her control, she makes sure that Charlie is jailed for some other petty pilfering; this time Marina hasn't the energy to resist. Objects from "Home" are again touched on for their comic potential in "Flavours of Exile." The narrator's mother clings to the remembered delights of "'a pie made of real English gooseberries'" (II, 113) with genuine pleasure as well as her need to assert herself against her family. Neither her gooseberries nor her later memories of pomegranates in Persia can transplant to Africa. In "Lucy Grange" the attempt to revitalize memories, this time the effort to sustain a city-bred taste in music, books, and pictures, is treated for its painful consequences. Although she can make the surfaces of her person and her home charmingly attractive, and although her poise seldom fails her, Lucy's holding to a remembered standard actually exposes her to a travelling salesman's lust. Her case is evidently a familiar one, for her local reputation as different is enough for him to recognize her vulnerability, alone on the farm with her alien standards. His professed appreciation of her refinement does not fool Lucy for long, but nevertheless she cannot resist the appeal of a proffered cultural kinship.

The thematic point in both the comic and the painful *exposé* of defensive memories is that these characters, who cling to inappropriate or distorted memories in their geographical separa-

tion from their cultural origins, are choosing to retreat into a falsehood. The norm they resurrect is false and imprisons them in attitudes which effectively prevent any kind of assimilation of their new land. These characters have much in common with something that the narrator of *Memoirs* recognizes in her encounters through the wall with the "personal" facet of that realm. In the scenes of Emily's Victorian childhood, the narrator recognizes that she is seeing the irresistibility of the cultural forces which have shaped the girl and which were equally active in Emily's mother's upbringing (p. 134). In the settler stories, the tricks of selective memory create the cultural lie, but *Memoirs* expresses a harsher view of cultural inheritance. Moving on from the settlers' use of antipathies between cultures, Lessing shows that even a homogeneous cultural tradition is built on inherent contradictions which are driven into each personality being produced. For example, when Emily is given her baby brother to hold she knows that she is not actually holding the child and so she is bewildered by the praise that she gets. Through the narrator's recovery of this scene, we know that when Emily "held" and loved that baby, she did so "with a passionate, violent, protective love that had at its heart a trick and a betrayal, heat with a core of ice . . ." (p. 125). Emily is clearly helpless before these contradictions; they also surface from time to time in the older generation, but again they cannot be consciously acknowledged. When her father tickles Emily as part of a required bedtime game, the narrator recognizes in his expression conflicts which, because his wife remains oblivious to the child's shrieks as she is subjected to "great hands that squeezed and dug into her ribs," he himself cannot recognize. The narrator sees

a wonderfully complex expression — guilt, but he was unaware of that; appeal, because he felt this was wrong and ought to be stopped; astonishment that it was allowable and by her, who not only did not protest, but actively encouraged him in the 'game'; and, mingled with all these, a look that was never far from his face at any time, of sheer incredulity at the impossibility of everything. (p. 80)

The collision that Emily's parents impose on her is repeated in scenes such as the one when, as a baby, she explores herself

with simple curiosity and then is confused and grieved by her mother's horror that she should have tried the taste of her own excrement. Revulsion at such "dirtiness" is something which Emily must internalize against herself, and so her weeping in confusion and grief sounds continually through the passages of the "personal" as they are traversed by the narrator. It sounds again in the daily realms when Emily knows that she cannot have Gerald to herself because a group leader is expected to have many women. In the affair with Gerald, Lessing is dealing with constraints of two kinds: cultural and natural. In Lessing's thinking, sexual love has little to do with cultural shaping; it does not seem to be purely biological; but it is clearly independent of cultural forces. Secondly, there are the needs that her parents as agents of culture have instilled in her. From them she has a need to be loved and a strong sense of responsibility which is shown, for example, to Gerald as a gang leader. Her passion is not returned in kind by Gerald and her learned tendencies come into collision with her obligations to Hugo (her independent being) and her own future.

Despite the narrator's efforts to find her in the "personal" realm, Emily is left alone with her guilt and has to find ways of suppressing her evident disgrace until it is secret and forgotten. Against the processes of cultural imprisonment is set the world of possibility. When the narrator sees it, it is in forlorn condition; its physical state offers little. Because of these signs of destruction or neglect, her sense of its promise is usually conveyed in the narrator's feelings, such as her sense of an inexplicable familiarity about the room which is welcoming to her although it is disordered. She speaks also of a benign presence in this territory, "a strong, soft presence, an intimate, whose face would be known to me, had always been known to me" (p. 90). The mystical element in these encounters is very strong when she speaks of the feeling that she "was held always in the hollow of a great hand which enclosed my life, and used me for purposes I was too much beetle or earthworm to understand" (p. 91). There are, in addition, occasional images of simple, free, and profound delight: the egg with its infinite potential; the double garden and its unex-

pected abundance; the carpet whose design can be brought to life by those who find the matching pieces.

There is no such promise in Lessing's African stories. Some characters recognize that the country has much of its own to offer, but they can see this only through the eyes of the exploitative settler. Therefore, while Africa's herbal remedies can be used to save the life of a white child, these remedies are not there for whites to launch on the market, there can be "No Witchcraft For Sale." The most that these perceptive settlers can achieve is an increased understanding of others who may share a common plight. For example, Margaret in "A Mild Attack of Locusts" learns to measure the actual probabilities being conveyed in the farmers' extravagant expressions of despair when locusts arrive. Similarly, Mrs. Slatter in "Getting Off the Altitude" is helped into a relatively tranquil later life by recognizing that she is not alone in her suffering and that her errant husband is to be pitied, for in his life he too has "something terrible . . . something awful" (II, 135) which he cannot expose but with which he has to live.

In Lessing's treatment of the "personal" in *Memoirs*, she has moved away from seeing the imprisoning factors of culture in the lies which result from the choice of false memories, to a belief that the power to imprison is inherent in acculturation itself. In this respect there is both continuity and change in Lessing's thinking. Although her general view of cultural heritage has darkened, she has also, since leaving Africa herself, found reason and courage for a degree of optimism, of faith in human creativity. The African stories deal with trapped creatures, with people imprisoned by false memories and occasionally with animals held within rigidly limited capacities. Emily, the similarly trapped product of her inherited traditions, is not finally like either of these African creatures. In the period of dissolution which *Memoirs* presents, the foundations of her heritage are laid bare for re-examination. Rapid change means that she lives with an intensity that allows nothing to remain hidden, and she finds that in order to choose for herself she must outgrow both what her spontaneous capacity to fall in love and what her upbringing have taught her. The importance of her reply to a question about Gerald, "he knows where to find me" (p. 170), is that she recognizes that she can

no longer support him in his efforts to rescue the underground children, those who have never learnt the wish to join a community and its necessarily regulated life. Besides falling in love with him, everything in Emily's history has led her to want to be Gerald's companion, to be mother to his household. But this need brings her into conflict with her response to her actual circumstances, which is to teach the children to want to create and participate in an ordered life by engaging them in shared communal responsibilities. But, as Gerald's mate, such sharing is impossible and she finds herself, despite her egalitarian ideals, cast in a hierarchical division as the authority over those who must obey. Emily's experience seems to be equivalent to what the narrator saw of the contradictions imposed on her in childhood. When Emily makes it clear that she will no longer respond to Gerald's need for her support, she is recognizing that for her, the way forward does not lie in the forms of responsibility that her past has taught her. Ultimately, it is because she returns to her individual needs, embodied at this point by Hugo, that she survives the end. In the narrator's final vision, Emily's choice for a new self makes it possible for Gerald, and then his children, to follow.

The correspondences outlined here between activities traceable to areas in Lessing's settlers' minds and the three-fold space of *Memoirs* are not primarily ones of content but of an epistemological structuring. What Lessing observed of settler life in Africa has been translated into patterns now bearing a more generalized significance in her fiction. Thus the patterning does not remain fixed in content although the elements of conflict within person or group retain sufficient similarity for her to depict them through similar formal patterning. It is the shaping relationship between "in here," "out there," and "through" which is the point of continuity in her work. As Lessing's thinking has evolved in response to her move to Europe and to changes in the world around her, so the material providing the content of these areas of the mind has changed, but the effective relationship between them remains a constant in the analysis on which her fiction is built.

If it is accepted that there are continuities between these works, and that the three-fold representation of human experience is one that Lessing has again found appropriate in depicting times of

crisis in civilization, then the next question which arises will be about the significance of such continuity and change in her work.

There will be several related answers to such a question; in the spirit of continuity, three will be suggested here. The first takes up the point from which discussion began: the development of Lessing's body of work can be seen in itself to display the principle she is exploring in *Memoirs*. The subject of continuity in change is particularly clear in the transformation she has wrought on the function of remembered, enshrined culture in the use of journeys through the wall in *Memoirs*. What was, in the African stories, depicted as the operation of a cultural lie is taken up again in the encounters with the "personal" to show how acculturation imposes imprisoning contradictions on people, rendering them unable to make choices. Accompanying these scenes is the promise of alternative action: Lessing's affirmation that creativity is still within peoples' grasp is placed in the same area. The juxtapositioning suggests that continuity need not rule out change, and it is this claim that the developments in Lessing's own *oeuvre* demonstrate. Since leaving Southern Africa, she has managed something that is relatively rare: although deracinated, she has found material for her creative imagination in a new, partially unknown culture. She has changed. At the same time, she has continued to use the perceptions and their suggested formal embodiment attained in Africa.

The second significant feature of the continuity within change in Lessing's work lies in what she has made of her experience of the transience of culture. Having seen the arbitrary imposition (standards which have "nothing to do with beauty, ugliness, evil or goodness") of an alien way of life in Africa, she knows that a culture grows out of a series of choices, is not immutably linked to a world, and therefore need not necessarily imprison its members. She knows that the experience of transience may be frightening, but she finds hope in the promise of change which it may bring. Holding together both the fear and the hope gives Lessing a wider vision and a greater faith in individual capacities than is possessed by many of her contemporary writers.

In one of her earliest essays about herself as a writer, "The Small Personal Voice" (1957), Lessing says that she finds most

contemporary novelists to be sunk in "the pleasurable luxury of despair" (*A Small Personal Voice*, p. 11). Naming Camus, Sartre, Genet, and Beckett, she says that their work expresses only a "tired pity" (p. 11) for people and she contrasts this with the humanism of nineteenth-century novelists like Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Dickens. For Lessing, humanism with its attendant realism is grounded in the concept of individual responsibility in times of change and in a difficult but loving faith in individual capacity. Further, she finds her contemporary British writers (the Angry Young Men) provincial because they cannot or will not recognize the connections between their own world and the momentous changes occurring in societies like Russia or China. For herself, she says she seeks to avoid extremes: either private despair or the other set of simplifications in the economic view of man as a collective being.

Living in the midst of this whirlwind change, it is impossible to make final judgements or absolute statements of value. The point of rest should be the writer's recognition of man, the responsible individual, voluntarily submitting his will to the collective, but never finally; and insisting on making his own personal and private judgements before every act of submission. (p. 12)

As a case in point from *Memoirs*, Emily has been engaged in trying to sustain old forms of life, not in retreat like the narrator, but while adapting to the possibilities that remain amidst general disintegration. Thus the first household that she runs with Gerald is filled with sensible designs for self-sufficient living. But it takes only a moment for the underground children to lay waste all of it. This picture of the possibilities of adaptation and of the swiftness of destruction reveals a vision which Lessing's African experience has given her and which British-bred novelists seem to lack. Their provincial blindness to "the whirlwind of change" is equivalent in *Memoirs* to the narrator's blinkered clinging to the ordinary (she does not notice, until Emily takes her upstairs, that her block of flats has been transformed into a busy market-place) while Emily's adaptability and final willingness to let it all go belongs to Lessing's own African perception of the transience of a culture. To her, the British nation displays the same provincialism as its

writers and seems, in its "habit of languid conformity which is . . . like dry rot" (p. 16), unable to recognize what is happening in the world at large. Lessing is free of this provincialism and it seems that her freedom owes much to her own escape from an inherited culture. As with a writer like V. S. Naipaul, knowing what it is to be deracinated has enabled Lessing to receive more consciously and to explore more actively the larger achievements and failures of humanity.

Finally, the continuity from Africa to the picture of a northern European culture in collapse, can help to illuminate the way that *Memoirs* demands to be read. It has many of the qualities of a fable, its design is one which offers pithy exposition rather than the novel's more usual, leisurely picture of the principles of human behaviour. In its final scene of apotheosis, it might seem to suggest that as in parables, the reader must make a conscious translation from what is actually depicted to what is being exemplified. But if such a reading were to mean that the journeys through the wall, the mind's capacity to develop new powers, are seen simply as metaphor, as a vehicle for an idea, or are understood simply as a narrative device for filling in those aspects of Emily's history which she herself cannot recall, and as giving images to represent the belief in alternatives — this would be wrong. *Memoirs* demands to be read as realism. The journeys through the wall *are* like dreams in that Lessing asks us to accept them as an event, as an actual way of recognizing that which is already in us but which lies as yet unacknowledged.

This is where the territorial continuity from her African work may help by providing a retrospective comprehension of what has been asked of the reader. In settler evocations of "Home," actual physical territory has been appropriated by the memory and transformed into a mode of thought which then becomes a barrier between person and environment. Lessing asks us to accept that the process could be reversed. An existing barrier could be surmounted if thoughts to which the narrator of *Memoirs* needs access occupy a territory which she might learn to visit. Readers who know the first direction from experience, might not find its reverse wholly inconceivable.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Jenny Taylor, ed., *Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Re-reading Doris Lessing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), particularly Nicole Ward Jouve, "Of Mud and Other Matter: The *Children of Violence*," pp. 75-134, and Rebecca O'Rourke, "Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception," pp. 206-26.
- ² Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City* (1969; rpt. London: Granada, 1972), p. 461.
- ³ Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974; rpt. London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 34; hereafter cited parenthetically.
- ⁴ It is possible that Lessing's account of the wall her narrator traverses, with its pattern in the paint and the sunlight which seems to make possible her journey, also has its own origin in a childhood experience in Africa. Lessing describes her own bedroom wall thus:

There were areas of light, brisk graining where Tobias the painter had whisked his paint-brush from side to side; then a savage knot of whorls and smudged lines where he had twirled it around. What had he been thinking about when his paint-brush suddenly burst into such a fury of movements? There was another patch where he had put his hand flat on the whitewash . . . at a certain moment of the sunrise, when the sun was four inches over the mountains in the east, judging by the eye, that hand came glistening out of the whitewash like a Sign of some kind.

(*Going Home* [1957; rpt. London: Granada, 1968], p. 52).
- ⁵ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950).
- ⁶ The African short stories have been variously published and collected; parenthetical references here are to Doris Lessing, *Collected African Stories* (London: Triad/Granada, 1979), Vol. I: *This Was the Old Chief's Country* and Vol. II: *The Sun between Their Feet*.
- ⁷ This account has certain affinities with the sequence in *The Golden Notebook* when Anna and her friends see millions of brightly-coloured grasshoppers mating after the night's rain. Their numbers make their efforts, particularly their mis-matching in size, seem "absurd, obscene, and above all, the very emblem of stupidity" (*The Golden Notebook* [1962; rpt. London: Granada, 1973], p. 407).
- ⁸ Like Lessing's own father and Mr. Quest in the *Children of Violence* series; see Doris Lessing, "My Father" (1963), rpt. *A Small Personal Voice* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 83-93.
- ⁹ The context of *Memoirs* makes it impossible for Emily to have had the kind of childhood the narrator witnesses; presumably Lessing wishes to indicate the generalized reference of these scenes.