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Politics, Letters and the Novel of Ideas: Doris Lessing's Archive

In her 1971 preface to a reissue of *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Doris Lessing complained that the British reading public had misread the book because they did not know how to read a novel of ideas.

> [T]here is no doubt that to attempt a novel of ideas is to give oneself a handicap: the parochialism of our culture is intense. For instance, decade after decade bright young men and women emerge from their universities able to say proudly: 'Of course I know nothing about German literature.' It is the mode.[1]

Lessing was right. British literary culture, and above all the influential taste-making apparatus of our discipline which had become institutionalised in the universities, has been hostile to the novel of ideas. Jeanne Marie-Jackson's *The African Novel of Ideas* (2021) follows Lessing in seeking to defend the form (a key one in African writing) against what she calls 'Eurocentric literary standards, often limitedly rooted in psychological depth to demonstrate character development'.[2] In this article, I will briefly anatomise the academic hostility to the novel of ideas, then look at what Lessing's work, and her archive, can contribute to our understanding of the form. These are rich resources that prompt a rethinking of the tradition of the novel of ideas and may help us to overcome some of the parochialism of which Lessing accuses us.

Novels of ideas give a central position to staged debates between characters about political, social, religious or philosophical ideas. Such debates were a normal feature of Victorian novels by the likes of George Eliot, Samuel Butler and George Meredith, but the modernist generation (and perhaps above all Henry James) rejected it. James accused George Eliot's novels of being 'too clever by half' and set out to write 'some little exemplary works of art' that would have 'less "brain" than *Middlemarch*' but 'more *form*'.[3] Novelists of ideas like H.G. Wells, G.K. Chesterton and Rose Macaulay were cast aside, as were the great Russian novelists of ideas, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky (James called their books 'fluid puddings'). Henry James, abetted by F.R. Leavis and others,

established an agenda for the novel that prioritised psychological realism, rich characterisation, and the romantic and financial doings of the upper-middle class.

What is remarkable is the extent to which the animosity towards the novel of ideas persists in the contemporary academy, even while the marketplace proves more forgiving: writers including Zadie Smith, Kamila Shamsie and Ian McEwan have found popular success this century with novels of ideas. Sianne Ngai's recent *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020) takes on the form, arguing that novels of ideas are gimmicky because of the awkward way in which they incorporate 'readymade' ideas into the text, which operate as a '"transportable intellectual unit," a *deja là* or self-standing proposition'.[4] For Ngai, many of the characteristic formal devices of the novel of ideas – she lists 'Allegory, direct speech by narrators, and direct speech by characters' – are in fact 'ancient didactic devices' that work to 'distance the novel from its métier – narration – and systematically push its form closer to those of the essay, lecture, or play'.[5]

The generic hybridity that Ngai finds gimmicky raises important questions about the relationship between a writer's archive and their fictional work. As readers of novels of ideas, we become used to situations in which ideas that the author advocates for in pamphlets or journals are also articulated, discussed and sometimes thrown into doubt in a novel. For example, H.G. Wells's ideas about progressive taxation were set out in works of social criticism such as *This Misery of Boots* (1907), but also in novels of ideas such as *A Modern Utopia* (1905), where they are discussed and tested.[6] Working with Doris Lessing's archive, and in particular reading her opinionated letters about politics, sex and literature, we become aware that the ideas and arguments that she discusses with her correspondents feature, 'readymade', in her novels. Although (as is also attested in her archive) Lessing was a keen reader of Woolf, Joyce and Proust, she does not fit the modernist paradigm described by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): 'within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails'.[7] Lessing's approach chimes more with Amanda Anderson's defence of the political novel of ideas, 'capturing through literary art the lived commitment to ideas'.[8]

Reading Lessing's letters of the 1940s with these questions in mind, it is perhaps surprising to note the sense of moral crisis that was already present in the ways she thought about her own commitment to communism. Her early attraction to communism had been born from her colonial experience in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where she

lived until 1949. This was one of the most racist colonial regimes in Africa – Chinua Achebe was shocked when he travelled there as a citizen of newly independent Nigeria in 1960.[9] Rhodesia would declare its independence from Britain in 1965, still under minority White rule, only switching to majority rule in 1980 when Robert Mugabe became prime minister of an independent Zimbabwe. As Lessing writes in several letters, the trade union movement in Southern Africa during the midcentury was seeking to protect the wages of White workers, and viewed Black Africans as a threat to pay and conditions. In Southern Rhodesia, it was only the revolutionary left that had a critique of the 'Colour Bar' (which was the name for the apartheid-like system that prevailed in Southern Rhodesia). As an anti-racist, Lessing gravitated towards communism, but there was no Communist Party branch in Southern Rhodesia that was recognised by the Comintern, so Lessing and her friends set out to create one (a tiny talking shop, it was never recognised). After joining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) some time after her arrival in Britain in 1949, Lessing, along with the other intellectuals of the first New Left, publicly and dramatically left the Party in 1956, following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the twentieth congress and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution in that year. *The Golden Notebook* dramatises the intellectual debates that led to this departure and their psychological impact on its protagonist.

Because 1956 is represented as such a point of crisis for Anna Wulf – the semi-autobiographical Lessing-ish figure in *The Golden Notebook* – readers may get the impression that Lessing was uncritically infatuated with communism from the early 1940s up to that date. The letters tell a different story and show Lessing in a number of crises of commitment, much earlier. Take the amazing letter that Lessing wrote to her lover John Whitehorn on 15th August 1945: V-J Day. Here she describes her 'tribulated state of mind' after reading Arthur Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945) - one of a number of books by leading ex-communists that sought to awaken the communist-sympathising left to the realities of life in the Soviet Union. 'In short I am engaged in a mental crisis', she writes, expanding in some detail on the political context and also investigating the psychology of commitment. She explains to John, who was not a communist, what it felt like to become one:

> I meet [a] group of communists, filled with Marxist theories and dialectics, and in the space of a few months absorb the lot, everything falls into a beautiful pattern and all one's rather arid open-mindedness vanishes while one falls not only in love with

> several communists but communism in general…But the best of all is the way that everything can be explained in terms of the class struggle. This state lasts for various lengths of time, in some people I suppose for ever, but in me for about a year. I don't expect I have ever been so happy in my life as during this time.[10]

This letter, triggered by a Koestler-induced crisis of commitment, immediately resonates with the novels set during these years from Lessing's *Children of Violence* sequence: *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *Ripple from the Storm* (1958) and *Landlocked* (1965). Even though *A Proper Marriage* was published while Lessing was still a member of the CPGB, it is fair to say that in all three of these novels (and also in *The Four Gated City* (1969) when Martha Quest encounters more communists in London), the third person narration is often eye-rollingly ironic as it reports the fervid commitment of its various communist characters.[11]

One promise that the archive might offer to the optimistic scholar is an opportunity to observe Lessing's own fervid communism in the wild, before it became another exhibit to be ironically displayed in her novelistic menagerie. But in fact, just like her later novels, Lessing's letters from the 1940s often find ways to stand ironically apart from the language and the agreed scripts of communist commitment. The letters document Lessing debating communist prescriptions about art, defending artistic autonomy and joking about socialist realism. In a letter to Smithie, she even writes a parodic, mock-socialist-realist poem:

> hey nonny nonny,
> Put on your overalls, start up the motor,
> I'll give you sixpence, If you beat the quota.
> Put up the banners and take up the spanners…ad lib.[12]

The letters already deal self-reflexively, then, with a set of ideas that Lessing herself thinks of as somewhat 'readymade', gimmicky even. They experiment with ways of articulating arguments and ideas in voices other than Lessing's own, and standing at an ironic distance from them – an effect which Lessing took to an extreme in her later novel of ideas *The Good Terrorist* (1985), where a group of young comrades tragically talk themselves into bombing a hotel by adopting the rote phrases of communist language. But while Lessing's letters and novels ironise some ideas some of the time, she never leaves behind the exploration of a 'lived commitment to ideas', in Anderson's phrase. Indeed it might

be said that irony is the tool she uses to explore what such a commitment might mean.

The debate about Koestler, for example, which triggered her V-J day letter, crops up again in *The Golden Notebook*. Anna writes in her red notebook (the one reserved for her interactions with the Communist Party):

> Koestler. Something he said sticks in my mind-that any communist in the West who stayed in the Party after a certain date did so on the basis of a private myth. Something like that. So I demand of myself, what is my private myth? That while most of the criticisms of the Soviet Union are true, there must be a body of people biding their time there, waiting to reverse the present process back to real socialism. I had not formulated it so clearly before. Of course there is no Party member I could say this to, though it's the sort of discussion I have with ex-party people. Suppose that all the Party people I know have similarly incommunicable private myths, all different? I asked Molly. She snapped: 'What are you reading that swine Koestler for?'[13]

It is not just the contents of her earlier letter, but also some of its communicative, formal and generic features, that are mobilised in this novel. Across Lessing's fiction and her archive the question of the addressee is foregrounded: to whom can you, a communist, talk about your doubts? Lessing made a show of being able to confide in John Whitehorn as a non-communist: 'I envy your detachment, which must save you much agonising'.[14] She asked John not to speak to Smithie about her agonised conscience. The epistolary form does not prevent Lessing from operating as an ironic omniscient narrator, describing how people fall in love with communism and then out of it again.

A few weeks after that V-J day letter, Lessing replies to Smithie, who had first sent her Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar*. Unlike John, he was a committed communist. And here we notice a total contrast in approach: her letter to Smithie attempts to absorb Koestler's arguments in a display of dialectical reasoning and to nudge Smithie back onto the path of commitment: 'You should try and get the broad development of things as a whole,' she tells him, 'When its a question of us surviving at all (human beings) why should one get excited if Molotov talks nonsense about culture? He does. He will. So he should, if its o.k. in the long run.'[15] This letter articulates significant areas of disagreement with communist theories of culture and opens up an ironic distance between the writer and those ideas. But it also presents a completely different

relationship to the ideas than we saw in Lessing's letter to John: perhaps the ideas are better than the ways they are being lived; perhaps we have to tolerate some bad ideas because they are stubbornly attached to the one truly indispensable one (communism). The lesson of Lessing's archive is that there is no form – essay, letter or notebook – where the content of an idea or argument is separable from its mode of articulation, or from its relationship to its addressee(s).

So I cannot sympathise with Sianne Ngai's argument that novels of ideas fail as novels because they incorporate readymade ideas articulated elsewhere. When you go looking for an idea in the wild, it often turns out to be not readymade, but just as problematically boxed in with irony, point-of-view, equivocation and even free indirect discourse, as those in novels. Lessing marks this hybridity in the very structure of her novels: *The Golden Notebook* itself takes an archival form, with the frame narrative interspersed with Anna's four notebooks in a sheaf of documents. Like the best novels of ideas, it brings to consciousness the problem of how, in its fictional lifeworld – through thought, speech and documentary report – ideas are represented, challenged, communicated, misunderstood and lived. But such questions are a quality of writing itself, just as present in Lessing's letters as in her novels, and do not belong exclusively to the aesthetic of the novel form.

Lessing's novel *Re: Colonised Planet 5: Shikasta: Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by Johor (George Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9)* 87th of the Period of the Last Days (1979) – the first in her *Canopus in Argos: Archives* space-fiction series – takes us still further in this direction. Its readers encounter an even more heterogeneous bundle of letters, reports, lectures and other documents: some from the perspective of the alien civilisation observing the whole history of our planet, some produced by the humans under observation. As in Lessing's more obviously autobiographical fiction, *Shikasta* critically interrogates both colonialism and communism, including through staged discussions of ideas in character-character dialogue. Both Lessing's letters and her novels debate ideas in very direct ways – ways of which post-Jamesian novel criticism has taught us to be wary. Across her letters and her fiction, Lessing is always thinking about the emplacement of ideas and arguments, who is speaking and to whom, how implicit shared understandings about agreed scripts allow a writer (of a letter as much as of a novel) to stand at an ironic distance from ideas and arguments articulated on the page. An archive like Lessing's provides us with a powerful impetus to rethink and revive the category of the novel of ideas, not least because key texts like *The Golden Notebook* and *Shikasta* remake the novel of ideas *as* an archive.

Notes

1 Doris Lessing, 'Preface' in *The Golden Notebook* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007) pp.7-21, pp.13-14.

2 Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2021) p.32.

3 Henry James, letter to Grace Norton (1873), in Leon Edel (ed.) *Henry James: Letters* (Cambridge, MS: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974) p.351.

4 Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2020) p.106.

5 ibid. p.118.

6 See Benjamin Kohlmann, *British Literature and the Life of Institutions: Speculative States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) pp.154-188.

7 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.181.

8 Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp.16-17.

9 Chinua Achebe, 'Traveling White' in *Africa's Tarnished Name* (London: Penguin, 2009) pp.10-16, p.12.

10 Doris Lessing to John Whitehorn, Typescript Letter, 15 August 1945, BACW, DL/WHI/035, p.1.

11 I have explored how Lessing's communism plays out in her 1940s letters at greater length (although in a different context) in Matthew Taunton, 'Communism by the Letter: Doris Lessing and the Politics of Writing' in *ELH* 88.1 (2021) pp.251-80.

12 Doris Lessing to Leonard Smith, typescript letter, 14 May 1947, The Keep, SxMs62/2/72. I have added lineation to what is presented in the letter as a continuous line of prose.

13 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, p.156.

14 Lessing to Whitehorn, 15 August 1945, typescript letter, BACW, DL/WHI/035, p.3.

15 Lessing to Smith, 4 December 1945–13 December 1945, typescript letter, The Keep, SxMs62/2/31, p.8.

Author Biography

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