

Sex and the New Woman in *The Golden Notebook*

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Doris Lessing is not a feminist, and *The Golden Notebook* is not a feminist novel—Lessing's remarks outside her fiction have been numerous and emphatic enough finally to convince everyone of these facts.¹ But the reasons for a great deal of confusion in the not-so-distant past about the aims of *The Golden Notebook* are extremely significant, for this novel provides more insight into the lineaments of liberation than any other contemporary work by and about women. Women read Lessing with the same intensity and anxiety that accompany their own philosophical and pragmatic struggles to create a new, viable selfhood. As Alison Lurie says, we come to Lessing "to find out, first, How it really is, and second, What to do about it."² Because *The Golden Notebook* asks all the questions that obsess women striving for liberation, it seems imperative to find out why Lessing has tried to suggest only some of the answers.

Moreover, what Lessing considers the novel's true subject—the relation between the individual and his society—far from denying its feminist value only increases its relevance to the contemporary women's movement. For women have been dehumanized and victimized largely because of the limitations of their sanctioned social roles and their remoteness from the larger political context in which they exist. If they are to emerge as fully developed individuals they must learn to establish their own relation to the world without relying on men as intermediaries. As a novelist Lessing is famous (in some eyes, infamous) for her "inclusiveness," and *The Golden Notebook* is the last and greatest of her novels to be fully inclusive. While the book explores in detail and in depth virtually every situation, idea and feeling that may involve a woman, Anna herself inquires into all of the world, all of life. The reader who is herself striving to be genuinely intellectual as well as liberated feels that she has a true counterpart in Anna, a companion who is in

¹ To quote the most specific statements about her own intentions and about the novels, respectively:

"... we should make sure that mankind doesn't destroy itself in the next twenty-five years I'm impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters." "Doris Lessing at Stony Brook: An Interview," with Jonah Raskin, *New American Review*, No. 8 (January, 1970), p. 175.

"What *The Golden Notebook* is taken to be by practically everyone is a latter-day feminism." Instead, it really concerns ideas about freedom, that "have to do with the individual in relation to his society and the rights of the individual." "A Conversation with Doris Lessing (1966)," with Florence Howe, *Contemporary Literature*, 14 (Autumn, 1973), p. 424.

² "Wise-Women," *The New York Review of Books*, June 14, 1973, p. 19.

the same way torn between the fragmentation of her personal life and the need to comprehend society, the whole world, with all its unbearable paradox and contrariety. As Anne M. Mulkeen says, "Who else in contemporary literature besides Doris Lessing has given us a heroine (or a hero, for that matter) for whom this vision of world unity is the most basic of drives, the most burning of longings?"³

It is apparent, from the beginning of the novel, that Lessing's "free" women regard their own sexual and social status with a great deal of conscious irony—they have the desire for freedom without a satisfactory achievement of it, and they are willing to admit that even their desires are not always pure. However, while feminism is not, sexuality is the prime impetus for Anna's struggle to establish meaning, dignity and pleasure in her existence, and her sex life is the context in which much of this struggle occurs. But because Lessing characters are fully conscious social beings, sex is always intimately connected with and finally subordinate to the state of affairs in the world, to all forms of social injustice and political destruction, in essence—to war. This is why sex can never be a refuge from the world and why Anna's voice in *Play with a Tiger* (a generally ineffective dramatic variation on the Saul section of the novel) is small with despair and conscious shame: "Put your arms around one other human being, and let the rest of the world go hang—the world is terrifying so shut it out. That's what people are doing everywhere, and perhaps they are right."⁴ By the time of *The Four-Gated City* (1969) sex finally yields completely, through the self-defeating perversity of Martha's purely sexual companion Jack and the pointlessness of her physical relation with Mark, to the problems of the world and becomes, at least for that space in recent and projected history, irrelevant.

While the barriers that bring Lessing to dispense with sex in her latest novels are implicit in the agony of male-female relations in *The Golden Notebook*, much of the excitement generated by that book lies in the conviction that sexuality is also the source of the deepest human happiness. But because Anna refuses to exclude anything from her apprehension and experience of life, she is faced with certain unbearable paradoxes. As she says to her analyst, Mrs. Marks ("Mother Sugar"), "the dream of the golden age is a million times more powerful [in the

³ "Twentieth Century Realism: The 'Grid' Structure of *The Golden Notebook*," *Studies in the Novel*, 2 (Summer, 1970), p. 268. Mulkeen's is an interesting analysis of the interlocking patterns of thought provided through the four notebooks to pose an "ideal of underlying unity" counteracting the disintegration in the personal lives of the characters and in their world.

Focusing on the various selves and functions of Anna as writer, Joseph Hynes, too, emphasizes the "organic unity" of the novel in his extremely thorough structural study, "The Construction of *The Golden Notebook*," *The Iowa Review*, 4 (Summer, 1973). Although I don't agree with Hynes on every point, his reading is, as he intended, "both broad and precise enough to serve as a basis for whatever thematic interpretation one may wish to make" (p. 113).

⁴ (1962; rpt. London: Davis-Poynter, 1972), p. 76.

present age] because it's possible, just as total destruction is possible. Probably *because* both are possible."⁵ The apprehension of everything involves perceiving the interrelatedness of the bases for hope and despair, and because this interrelatedness is too horrible to bear, " 'People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves' " (p. 402). But, paradoxically, the result of blocking off, of fragmenting the human personality, is actual insanity. Beneath the superficial order of Anna's life, represented by the division of her notebooks into four separate categories—her past, her political life, her existence as a writer, and her inner psychological struggle—is a terrible conflict held in tension. This conflict intensifies throughout the novel until it explodes into madness with her male counterpart, Saul Green.

Out of the predicament of a divided modern world emerges a new female creature " 'living the kind of life women never lived before' " (p. 403). This woman exists in conflict both with the principles she must create to fit her new freedom and new belief in equality with men and with the old attitudes which carry over from the period of her accepted submission. The young Martha Hesse of *Landlocked*, the fourth volume of the series *Children of Violence*, asks her lover Thomas: " 'Do you think it will take long for our [women's] nerves to catch up with our new principles?' " Characteristically of Lessing, the answer is both pessimistic and suggestive: " 'Centuries, very likely. Perhaps there'll be a mutation though. Perhaps that's why we are all so sick. Something new is trying to get born through our thick skins.' "⁶ Despite her emerging independence, the new woman must fight her own tendency to dissolve into self-pity at the threat of rejection by her man. Probably the sharpest criticism in Lessing is aimed at "the new note women strike, the note of being betrayed." She sees it as a pervasive tendency, described by Anna as "in the books they write, in how they speak, everywhere, all the time" (p. 509).

But while "the weak soft sodden emotion" (p. 539)⁷ of the woman betrayed may be contemptible for its hypocrisy, as Lessing seems to suggest, there is no doubt that the new woman suffers deeply in her relations with men. Of course plenty of reasons are given for the difficult personalities of all the important men in the lives of Lessing women. The world situation is presented as far more crippling for men than women—war has exiled them, obliterated their relatives, and in its aftermath is still destroying their friends. Moreover, as possessors of the privilege of professions men like Saul and the fictional Ella's Paul are more vulnerable than women to the terrifying dilemma of at-

⁵ *The Golden Notebook* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), p. 184. Hereafter page references to this edition are cited in my text.

⁶ (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), p. 385.

⁷ Ellen Morgan, in her excellent article analyzing the fatal discrepancy between Anna's spontaneous responses and her permitted judgments about sexual relations, feels that the terms in which Anna describes this "note" predictably reflect her tendency to disparage women rather than blame men. "Alienation in the Woman Writer," *Contemporary Literature*, 14 (Autumn, 1973), p. 479.

tempting to function morally within a corrupt society. Nevertheless, the intense suffering sustained by Lessing men does not justify or even explain their inability to commit themselves to women. A more convincing reason, as Ellen Morgan suggests, is "that society teaches men not to allow themselves to be fully trusting, open, and involved emotionally with women."⁸ But because the Lessing woman appears not to understand that men are thus negatively conditioned, she seems to accept inadequacy or cruelty as natural and even inevitable in the man she loves, refusing at almost every crucial step in the relationship to confront her lover with his irresponsibility.⁹ Furthermore, while female nature is always changed by every serious, and even casual, affair, the men slip in and out of relationships apparently completely unaffected. Although Anna and Saul do raise themselves together to a new level of health, or at least minimal mental balance, the cynical self-centeredness (always in the personal, never in the social sphere) of Michael and Paul is not softened by love, and Martha in *Landlocked* is powerless to prevent not only her own loss of Thomas but also his destruction.

This assumption of the disparity between the capacities of men and women to be committed to each other is a serious limitation in Lessing characters, beyond the limitations her "free" women ironically perceive in themselves. It may also indicate a failure in authorial vision, for while Lessing's construction of the inescapable paradoxes of the "inclusive" life seems fatally accurate, the paradoxes within sexuality appear contrived. The sense of women suggested by the portrayal of sexual relations in *The Golden Notebook* is oddly at variance with the qualities revealed in their other functions in life—with their independence and strength and above all with their extraordinarily acute perception of the world. The women who have the courage to be led by this perception in other areas and at rare moments in their relations with men pose a challenge to their habitual sexual selves.

ii

As a writer and a political radical Anna exists primarily as a highly developed and troubled child of her age rather than as a woman. She is disgusted with her first novel and torn by the dilemma of writing a second out of a fragmented consciousness. She has become disenchanted with the Communist Party because participating in it has only intensified the split within instead of healing it as she had hoped. Thus, her struggle to satisfy the creative and political needs of her being is not defined, or limited, by her femininity. But some of the consequences of her professional and social commitments draw her into painful awareness of the difficulties of women in a society dominated by men. In the conversation with the television editor who wants to buy the rights to her novel

⁸ Morgan, p. 474.

⁹ There are some painful moments in Florence Howe's interview with Lessing when Howe, after accurately accusing all the male characters in the book of being "very unpleasant," backs down in the face of Lessing's assertions that (1) the men are "terrific"! and (2) a man can't be downgraded because he has left a woman. "A Conversation with Doris Lessing (1966)," pp. 427-28.

Frontiers of War, Anna expresses her opposition to his truth-denying commercialism through an ironic parody of his intentions to distort the story for his own uses. At first her irony is light, controlled; as his hostility deepens, it becomes wilder and almost hysterical. Of course the editor resents the (human) criticism of his values, but Anna's irony, implying an assertion of her intellectual and moral superiority, is an unforgivable transgression of the established limits of female graciousness, or submissiveness. Coming from a woman ironic criticism is not simply a challenge—it is an insult, and the editor takes it as such. Afterwards Anna collapses “into depression, then angry self-disgust. But the only part of that meeting I am not ashamed of is the moment when I was hysterical and stupid” (p. 248).

Of course most women never have even the chance to challenge a man on professional, human terms. Much of the work Anna does for the Communist Party brings her face to face with the debilitating existence of the conventional woman. Answering her correspondence and canvassing from door to door, she is struck by the number of bored, guilty women “going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them” (p. 146). However, as Lessing accurately perceives, not just men but certain types of professional women capitalize on the domestic bondage of the majority of women. The work which gives Ella, the heroine of Anna's novel, the “‘purpose in life’” to save her from madness is on a magazine called, aptly, *Women at Home*. Aimed at the working class, this publication (like so many American women's magazines, whether geared for the swinger or the homebody) owes its success to appeasing the desires of frustrated women while steering clear of their real and desperate needs.

However, Anna, like so many “free” women, is not emancipated from domestic routine, primarily because of her child Janet. She suffers from “‘the housewife's disease’”—the pressure of worrying over practical details—a tension which creates an inescapable barrier against pleasure, both physical and mental. Much of Lessing's fiction reverberates with the frustration of the emancipated mother as she tries to juggle her personal needs against the needs of her children. This dilemma is complicated, rather than eased, by the woman's conscious desire for children as a joy in themselves and a fulfillment of her own human potential. (Martha, in the *Children of Violence* series, provides an exception to the general recognition of maternal need. Her sharply ambivalent response to her unplanned pregnancy is not surprising, given that her “proper marriage” is a personal disaster. But, although it is not painless for her, abandoning her daughter Caroline to the upbringing of Douglas' colonial family suggests an unsettling degree of personal indifference to her own offspring and political indifference to the fate of the next female generation.) Like Susan Rawlings in “To Room Nineteen,” whose “soul was not her own, as she said, but her children's” during their early years,¹⁰ Anna is not free to discover the essence of her private self—both its creativity

¹⁰ *A Man and Two Women* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963), p. 274.

and its destructiveness—until Janet leaves for boarding school: “An Anna is coming to life that died when Janet was born” (p. 468).

But while the comparably free woman can identify with Anna up to this point, there may be a disruption in sympathy when sexuality enters the picture. Not only does Anna’s lover Michael (not atypically of Lessing men) ignore Janet as a person, failing to join in Anna’s positively sensuous enjoyment of the child, he resents the little girl for depriving him of her mother. Worse, in the early morning while Anna’s thoughts are tensely focused on the need for haste in the practical processes ahead, he inflicts himself sexually on her in virtual punishment for her maternal responsibility. Of course the disruption in identification derives not from Michael’s behavior but from Anna’s response. Neither outwardly nor inwardly will she criticize her lover.¹¹ Passively, Anna supports the *status quo* which is demeaning to both sexes. She excuses Michael’s petulance about Janet, denigrating maleness by rationalizing, “If I were a man I’d be the same” (p. 286), and denigrating femaleness by suggesting that her biological role alone is responsible for her involvement with the child.

This attitude presents a striking contrast to the extreme feminist position as it can be represented by the 1969 Manifesto of the New York Redstockings, one of the most militant and radical women’s lib groups. The Redstockings see male supremacy as the root of all forms of social exploitation, including those not directly concerned with women. And all men are responsible for male supremacy—“*All men* have oppressed women.” They reject the notion that institutions are sources of oppression because “To blame institutions implies that men and women are equally victimized” They also “reject the idea that women consent to or are to blame for their own oppression.”¹²

The compromise view, so emphatically denounced above—that men and women are equally victimized, with its converse implication that they are also equally responsible for the state of things—does not seem foreign to the spirit of Lessing’s work and the conscious attitudes of her female characters. The notion of equal responsibility is suggested by the success and self-respect with which many women in her fiction contribute to the aesthetic, psychological and political thought and work of the world. However, in the context of the sexual relationship, Anna’s self-respect becomes twisted into self-denial, her voice takes on more than a tinge of sexist submissiveness. Anna curbs her resentment against

¹¹ To be completely fair to Lessing, she does imply, outside the fiction, that it is possible for the “semislave” to stand up to her man. However, if the woman allows herself to be bullied by his consequent accusations that she is man-hating and unfeminine, she “deserves everything she gets” in the relationship. Strictly just as this may be, Lessing’s emphasis characteristically falls on the woman’s failure, not the man’s transgression. “On *The Golden Notebook*,” *The Partisan Review*, 40 (Winter, 1973), pp. 15-16.

¹² “Redstockings Manifesto,” *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women*, ed. Betty Roszak and Theodore Roszak (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 272-74.

Michael who has no equivalent to "the housewife's disease" "because he will spend his day, served by secretaries, nurses, women in all kinds of capacities, who will take this weight off him" (p. 285). Doggedly and—here is where she becomes so irritating—smugly, she tells herself that the anger she feels is "impersonal." "It is the disease of women in our time. I can see it in women's faces, their voices, every day, or in the letters that come to the office. The woman's emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison. The unlucky ones who do not know it is impersonal, turn it against their men" (p. 285).

In some ways the mutual sympathy and support characteristic of female friendships in *The Golden Notebook* seem to belie the traditional vision of woman's nature revealed in Lessing's portrayal of sexual relations. Women in her fiction respond to each other both emotionally and intellectually—they are affectionate, though rather decorous and restrained in physical demonstrativeness, and they spend most of their time together in frank and thorough analysis of the meaning of their lives. Even if another woman poses some kind of threat to their own security, they usually feel an immediate, instinctive sympathy with her condition, are vitally incapable of the "catty" response of the defensive conventional woman. Thus Anna is not simply concerned about females personally close to her—her daughter, experiencing a preadolescent bewilderment in the face of Ronnie is and Ivor's homosexual hostility, and her friend Molly, embroiled with son and ex-husband. But she is also capable of sympathy for all kinds of women *as women*—Mrs. Boothby, Edwina Wright the American television editor, even the wives of her lovers—who are in some way opposed to her own principles or pleasure.

But friendship between women in Lessing is finally defined by relations with men, in obvious contrast to the intense solidarity of feminist groups whose closeness in some cases excludes men and extends frankly to lesbianism. As Anna says more than once, "our real loyalties are always to men, and not to women" (p. 46).¹³ If women in her fiction are sexually oriented at all, they are deeply heterosexual. Furthermore, homosexuality is seen as a threat to female integrity. Leaving Julia's house to live independently, Ella admits that the move is "like the break-up of a marriage" (p. 385), and her subsequent relations with her friend become "chilly." Their old warmth together is restored only on a new basis—mutual complaining about men—the "enemy." Not able to bear the thought of herself as "a bitter spinster" (p. 388), feeling her own feminine viability threatened by this attitude, Ella decides to stop indulging in conversations about men with Julia. She believes that "two women, friends on a basis of criticism of men are Lesbian, psychologically if not physically" (p. 389). We may share the disapproval of closeness between women on this negative basis, but question whether friendship is inevitably disrupted or even limited by sex. It is hardly convincing that sexuality, in any form, must fade from the picture before women

¹³ This misplaced loyalty amounts, at its worst, to "Uncle Tomism"; as Morgan says, Ella and Julia "share a minority group psychological orientation" (p. 472).

can experience the kind of psychic intimacy and mutual self-discovery that unite Martha and Lynda in *The Four-Gated City*.

iii

“Challenged now, I would say that every woman believes in her heart that if her man does not satisfy her she has a right to go to another. This is her first and strongest thought, regardless of how she might soften it later out of pity or expediency” (p. 127). To the woman in Lessing’s fiction sex is the most important aspect of her relations with men, and basic sexual compatibility is necessary to the survival of a relationship. Given this compatibility, the Lessing woman—unlike many both inside and outside feminist consciousness—has no trouble experiencing a complete and joyful sex life that illuminates her whole existence. But even with a satisfying physical relation, she has plenty of sexual problems, some emanating from world conditions which affect men and women together, but others relating to primary differences between her sexual nature and that of man. The woman’s desire is monogamous, as opposed to his; promiscuity in women is not natural, but rather a form of despair. Unlike some feminists who assert equal sexual rights with men and insist that they too not only will but can experience pleasurable sex without love, the woman in Lessing’s fiction often voices the age-old female complaint that love is a necessary condition for her pleasure, wailing that the situation just isn’t fair. In its broad outline, at least, a pretty traditional view of male-female dichotomies and inevitable conflicts.

Anna’s view of sexuality involves a complicated interrelation between the dependency of the woman’s pleasure on the man’s desire and her need to create this desire in him: a woman’s sexuality will “ebb and flow” in response to a man’s, “A woman’s sexuality is, so to speak, contained by a man, if he is a real man” (p. 390). But in order to experience this passive pleasure, it is often necessary for the woman to actively build the man’s confidence in his ability to be the kind of man who can determine her response. As Dagmar Barnouw points out, Anna is somewhat ambivalent about the necessity of this kind of mutual sexual dependence.¹⁴ And when the process backfires in brief, miserable encounters with men who turn on women, blaming them for their own impotence, she decries her tendency to be masochistic: “what terrifies me is my willingness. It is what Mother Sugar would call ‘the negative side’ of the woman’s need to placate, to submit” (p. 414). For the reader, a basic question that emerges from the jumble of Anna’s admittedly neurotic love-life is, what is Lessing’s idea of “positive” female submission?

Anna is painfully aware of herself as an easily dominated, “conciliatory” woman with a tendency to refuse men who really want her. She has been trying—particularly since the time of her psychoanalysis—to overcome these negative tendencies; as she emerges from her traumatic relation with Saul she seems to have been at

¹⁴ “Disorderly Company: From *The Golden Notebook* to *The Four-Gated City*,” *Contemporary Literature*, 14 (Autumn, 1973), p. 496.

least partly successful, and the reader achieves some sense of Lessing's vision of self-respecting female compliance. However, before this final affair many of Anna's feelings about sex are expressed and some, as Ellen W. Brooks suggests,¹⁵ may be worked through in her novel about Ella and Paul, whose relation is an obvious counterpart to hers and Michael's. Anna is particularly concerned with the attitude she calls "naivety," the state of mind in which a woman begins a relationship that she knows will end badly. Although Anna understands the destructive schizophrenia of Ella's reaction to Paul, she nevertheless describes this naivety as a virtue of the feminine spirit, "a spontaneous creative faith" (p. 183). Moreover, even the sobered, retrospective writer views her characters after their first love-making—gullible, hurt woman and calculating, confused male—as "fellow-victims of some cruelty in life neither could help" (p. 167). Thus, while Ella bitterly resents how Paul insists on the artificial mistress-wife separation and then focuses all his sexual hostility on herself as his mistress, she never attacks him with the truth, never attempts an honest discussion of *why* he is hostile and what *both* of them should do about it. Adopting a defensive pose instead and participating in the hostility, she creates an intentionally false picture of her sex life with other men and so justifies and perpetuates his enmity.

Ultimately Ella refuses even to feel bitter toward Paul. Through complicated and unconvincing theorizing about "a third self" each of them possesses, she rationalizes Paul into a position of moral superiority: "So this bitterness I feel growing in me, against him, is a mockery of the truth. In fact, he's better than I am, in this relationship . . ." (p. 180). The ugliness of bitterness, resentment, criticism *in itself* is a reiterated theme of *The Golden Notebook*. This is the primary reason why Ella and Anna limit their relations with other women similarly oppressed sexually and why they refuse to confront men with their unfairness. It is the basis for the self-imposed subjugation of women obviously equal with men in other respects. The conviction that self-respect demands repressing resentment generated within the sexual context is strongly expressed at times when the female character believes that she is being both realistic and morally honest. There is no indication, at such crucial moments in the novel, that the protagonist's attitude does not represent Lessing's vision of female integrity. Probably the most shocking single example of this kind of self-sacrificial morality comes at the end of Anna's totally recorded day, when Michael calls at eleven o'clock to say he can't come after all. (As in Paul's case, it is implied that Michael is beginning another affair.) Anna not only refuses to confront her lover with what is, at the least, an incredible lack of simple human consideration, since she has cooked a special dinner and kept it waiting all evening for him. She also will not allow herself to become indignant: "Then it strikes me as odd that I should be angry over such a little thing, and I even laugh" (p. 313). She falls asleep crying, "the sleep-crying, this time all pain" (p. 314), but it is better to incur suffering than

¹⁵ "The Image of Woman in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*," *Critique*, XV, No. 1, p. 105.

to inflict it; she has again evaded the most repugnant vision of all—the vision of herself as an angry, nasty woman.

Of course the Lessing heroine is strongly aware of the need to respect herself in ways which the liberated woman can support. Ella cannot forgive herself for having used “conventional arguments” (p. 158) to get rid of the husband who was sexually repellent to her, for having seized on his experimental infidelity, in opposition to her own moral code, in order to avoid separating on the agonizing basis of the truth about their mutual feelings. But, failing to learn from the past, Ella evades the truth with Paul in much the same way. When she finally confronts her lover with the statement that the mistress-wife separation he insists on is a sham, it is because the relationship is already over. “Ella was angry. ‘Every night you lie in my bed and tell me everything. I am your wife.’ As she said it, she knew she was signing the warrant for the end. It seemed a terrible cowardice that she had not said it before” (p. 184). Sadly, the truth can create only an end, not the beginning of something different.

Just as Lessing’s portrayal of sexual relations is not limited to analyzing the dialectics of psychological process, so Anna’s struggle with the problem of self-acceptance does not stop short of confronting her femaleness on the most intimate physical levels. Rather surprising—for its extremity—is Anna’s positively paranoiac revulsion toward menstruation. She attempts to disavow prudishness by declaring her acceptance of certain intimate bodily functions (“I don’t mind my own immediate lavatory smells”). But the “bad smell” of her menstrual flow disgusts her—she refers to it as “an imposition from outside. Not from me” (p. 291). The same kind of over-scrupulous concern about smells related to sexual processes compels her to wash after love-making so that her daughter will not be “disturbed” by the smell, even though her mother presumably “likes it” (p. 286). The reader hardly expects Anna to wallow in these body smells, or to accept the test suggested, with apparent seriousness, by the feminist Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*: “If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood—if it makes you sick, you’ve got a long way to go, baby.”¹⁶ But Anna’s complete failure—for all the frankness of her introspection—to see her horror of menstruation as a problem for herself, or any woman, is disturbing. Finally, it is impossible to determine whether the author intended the discrepancies in Anna’s attitudes toward intimate body functions to reveal another aspect of her self-division, or whether Lessing too sees such distinctions as normal and shares Anna’s belief that her revulsion is “instinctive” (p. 290) and therefore unavoidable.

In her relation with Paul, there is much that Ella regards with shame, more that disappoints the liberated reader. However, through Ella Anna offers an interesting view of the orgasm that is in some ways supportive of genuine female integrity at the same time that it challenges a widely accepted feminist analysis of woman’s sexual needs: “. . . for women like me,” Ella says, “integrity isn’t chas-

¹⁶ (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), p. 42.

tity, it isn't fidelity, it isn't any of the old words. Integrity is the orgasm" (p. 279). And integrity is, specifically, the vaginal orgasm. Although she concedes that the clitoral orgasm is "more powerful (that is a male word) than the vaginal orgasm" which "is emotion and nothing else," clitoral stimulation is in comparison "a substitute and a fake, and the most inexperienced woman feels this instinctively" (p. 186).

A challenge to Ella's sexual creed is provided by one of the most popular documents in comparatively recent feminist literature—"The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" by Anne Koedt (published, undated, by the New England Free Press). According to Koedt, the clitoris is the sole "area for sexual climax" and women who accept the idea of vaginally caused orgasm are confused because they fail to locate the center of the orgasm and because they are allowing themselves to be "defined sexually in terms of what pleases men." One of the main reasons why men are reluctant to accept the physiological findings of such scientists as Masters and Johnson is the fear that women will turn from men to other women for sexual pleasure: "The establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual *institution*."

From Ella's reactions, described above, to the purely clitoral orgasm, it might seem that she has been negatively conditioned by masculine views of woman's sexual needs. But Lessing's vision of danger in emphasizing the clitoris does not (at least ostensibly) lie outside the heterosexual institution. For Paul begins to stimulate Ella manually not as a way of giving her pleasure but in order to extricate his essential personal self from the relationship. Ella finds this new kind of pleasure exciting, but also resents it, "Because she felt that the fact he wanted to, was an expression of his instinctive desire not to commit himself to her" (p. 186). For Ella vaginal orgasm is as much the result of the man's willingness to give as to receive pleasure. And, although Lessing may ignore—or even evade—the question of the physiological location of sexual pleasure, her idea about the relation between commitment and pleasure is both valid and moving: full penetration of the penis is the embodiment of a man's willingness to give his most intimate self to a woman, and without this commitment on his part total satisfaction in her response is not possible. Clearly Lessing's belief in conventional sexual differences between men and women is in many areas questionable or unacceptable to the liberated reader, but in certain other areas her insistence on the woman's right to full human consideration may result in a transcendence of sexual traditionalism.

iv

The only serious love affair in which we see Anna directly involved from beginning to end is the final relationship of the novel—her descent into madness with Saul. As in her other sexual relationships, the context in which Anna struggles with and against Saul is the destructive political state of the world. But in the last affair the political context is more frequently and thoroughly articulated than in previous ones, its relation to the innermost self consciously explored to the furthest limit. Moreover, Anna shares with Saul, in a way that she has not with anyone else, a sense of the increasing loss of individual freedom in the world.

Both experience this fact "in the substance of [their] flesh and nerves, as true" (p. 485); together they turn outward to the alien world and inward to their own psyches and realize they cannot separate themselves from the horror of the world because their own terror is part of a generalized malevolent force: "I felt this, like a vision, in a new kind of knowing. And I knew that the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I, I, of Saul and of Anna were part of the logic of war . . ." (p. 503).

But despite this shared vision and the deep mutual compassion that grows from it, their alienation from the world and from their own damaged spirits inevitably creates sexual alienation from each other. If Saul is capable of greater empathy with a woman than Paul-Michael, he is also more deeply threatened by her. Split not two ways like his predecessor, but three, Saul can be Anna's "brotherly and affectionate" lover, displaying the pleasure of genuine sensuality as it is so beautifully evoked in a rare moment in the short story "One off the Short List": "He felt she was flesh of his flesh, his sister in the flesh. He felt desire for her, instead of the will to have her . . ." ¹⁷ Affectionate companion of her mind, as well, he understands her problems as a woman, "naming" her on a higher level than she has ever known from a man before. At other times he is the "womaniser," the "rake," sexual exploiter of women, who defines his freedom by his promiscuity. At still other times he becomes a frightened child, terrified of life, clinging to Anna as to a mother for warmth and comfort or defying the mother through his sexual transgressions with other women and afterwards pleading for forgiveness.

The destructive elements of their sexual relation assume a recurrent pattern: Saul, sadistically, punishes Anna for her possessiveness by sleeping with other women and then comforts her with tender love for his betrayal. Anna, masochistically, yields to his bullying and to the eternal female enemy which she calls "joy-in-spite." The result of submitting to this evil principle in both herself and Saul is self-hatred. Sitting alone in bed, naked after making love, and hearing Saul's feet pacing on the floor above her "like armies moving" (p. 523), for the first time Anna experiences her body as repulsive. ". . . I looked at my thin white legs and my thin white arms, and at my breasts. My wet sticky centre seemed disgusting, and when I saw my breasts all I could think of was how they were when they were full of milk, and instead of this being pleasurable, it was revolting" (p. 524). Like a revelation under a strong, hallucinatory drug, a powerful physically experienced image imposes itself on reality, challenging the deepest reserves of psychic strength to reorient themselves toward self-acceptance, toward the creation of a new image that will make life bearable.

This basic psychic reorientation begins when Anna dreams of herself and Saul, both principles of joy-in-spite incarnate, dancing together in a celebration of destruction and kissing in love. Perceiving the naked terrible essence of herself and

¹⁷ *A Man and Two Women*, p. 33. This story is otherwise noteworthy for its extreme chauvinism—not so much the obvious and intended male chauvinism of its protagonist, but the incredible self-sacrificial *female* chauvinism of his prey. Barbara Coles is so inherently good and resistant to sexual denigration that she can manually stimulate Graham back to potency when he wilts during the course of his attempt to rape her!

Saul and the participation of each in the horror of the other, Anna proves to herself a willingness to face the reality of what they are. When she wakes she is rested and "filled with joy and peace" and, remembering Mother Sugar, thinks "that perhaps for the first time I had dreamed the dream 'positively'" (p. 508). Understanding and accepting her own nature and that of Saul is connected, of course, with understanding and accepting the nature of life. But Anna's acceptance of "a terrible irony, a terrible shrug of the shoulders" at the root of life (p. 542) does not mean submitting to it. She realizes that the response to the terrible irony must be a kind of courage strange to her—"a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life" (p. 543). She also realizes that this "small painful endurance" is to be equated with the first blade of grass that will push up again thousands of years after the bombs have destroyed the earth. "But the point is," she says, having the last word in a dream conversation with Mother Sugar, her old mentor and antagonist, "I don't think I'm prepared to give all that much reverence to that damned blade of grass, even now" (p. 544). Anna is finally unwilling to accept the soothing of the individual consciousness that comes from giving in to inevitable pessimism, that takes the burden off the imagination and restricts the moral response to gestures of petty comfort. This moment of existential realization and positive rebellion in *The Golden Notebook* constitutes, for me, the height of the genius and humanity of Lessing.

But after this peak of insight and moral response, the remainder of the novel is something of a come-down. Of course Anna's re-emergence into a life of art and politics is all that can realistically be hoped for. Overcoming her writer's block at last, she follows the first sentence Saul writes for her to create an aesthetic whole out of the fragmentation of her life: ". . . Anna Wulf's response to her problem, child of her time as she must be, is basically Doris Lessing's. She puts together a book which reflects, reveals, is, but finally attempts to contain, to move outside of and view, the disintegration in the world and in its author."¹⁸ Lessing states outside the novel that Anna's first step into the world represents an abdication of her political values. Like Molly's intended marriage, Anna's decision to quit politics and become a "welfare worker" is "a kind of selling-out."¹⁹ However, it seems necessary to differentiate, as Lessing apparently does not either within or outside the novel, between the nature of Molly's decision and Anna's. While Molly's choice involves a knowing breakdown of personal integrity, I think Florence Howe is right to interpret Anna's plans to join the liberal establishment as a commitment to "boulder-pushing."²⁰ There seems to be no viable alternative for the discouraged leftist activist.

In ending their relationship Anna and Saul indicate both that they accept the ultimate irony of the nature of life and that they can still believe in a basis of radical hope for people who are united in awareness. Solemnly and joyfully too they promise each other that what can be envisioned can exist: "We've got to

¹⁸ Mulkeen, p. 264.

¹⁹ "Doris Lessing at Stony Brook: An Interview," p. 178.

²⁰ "Narrative, History and Prophecy," *The Nation*, August 11, 1969, p. 117.

believe in our beautiful impossible blueprints' ” (p. 546). They see themselves as a “team,” not simply with each other but with all other individuals who genuinely understand what is wrong with the world: “‘we rely on each other all the time . . . we’re the ones who haven’t given in, who’ll go on fighting’ ” (p. 549).

However, the sexual terms on which they part somewhat undercut the force of the self-respect and courage of Anna’s union with Saul on a political, and simply human, basis. For Anna’s return to sanity seems to involve a return to the *status quo*, a peaceful and pleasurable reacceptance of at least some aspects of traditional male-female roles.²¹ Saul admits he enjoys “‘a society where women are second-class citizens,’ ” enjoys “‘being boss and being flattered’ ” (p. 516). Despite the characteristic tinge of amused irony in her tone, Anna is serious in responding by commending Saul for his lack of hypocrisy—the kind of honesty he displays is the most a woman can realistically hope for. Even more discouraging to the liberated reader is Anna’s consciously self-respecting compliance with Saul’s consciously self-respecting command to perform the traditional womanly task for her man: “‘I never thought I’d say to a woman, cook for me. I regard the fact that I can say it at all as a small step towards what they refer to as being mature’ ” (p. 547). What galls is not that she actually does the cooking but that she should accept, with no apparent irony this time, this chauvinistic proof of Saul’s maturity. In fact, true to Anna’s abiding tendency toward self-effacement, the focus at the end of the novel is on Saul’s moral superiority. Though Anna takes the first and most difficult step toward ending the relation, she makes the outcome of her effort dependent on Saul’s supposedly greater strength. “‘You’re going to have to break it. I ought to, but I’m not strong enough. I realize you’re much stronger than I am. I thought it was the other way around’ ” (p. 531).

Although Lessing is obviously not interested in constructing an argument about the relative courage of men and women, Anna’s attitude at the end of the novel is disappointing to the woman who believes in the possibility of genuine equality in a heterosexual relationship. Anna’s position is especially discouraging not because it necessarily means a betrayal of women but because it is a betrayal of Anna herself—of the particular woman who has the imaginative and intellectual power to comprehend the hidden root of life and the moral power to refuse her reverence to “‘that damned blade of grass’ ” even if it is the only thing left on the earth. Furthermore, Saul’s “strength” rests on his ability to detach himself from Anna, his instinctive reluctance, like the other men in the novel, to commit himself in any permanent way to a woman. If one believes that freedom and commitment are not incompatible, may even in some way be mutually necessary, then the effect of excusing men for their particular nature is a subtle denigration of that nature. Although she is left alone and miserable woman ultimately rests on a higher moral plane than man. It may be that any view short of complete acceptance of one’s own equality with every other type of human creature will

²¹ There seems—unfortunately—no basis, especially after Anna and Saul’s relation has been played out, for Brooks’ assertion that “‘They transcend the man-woman dichotomy, realizing their human bi-sexuality’ ” (p. 108).

have a self-aggrandizing boomerang effect, and perhaps—in some sense—this effect is really the point behind self-effacement.²²

Regardless of the sexual point of view finally represented by Anna's behavior and thought, the philosophical import of *The Golden Notebook* seems to me inescapably accurate: what one perceives—the condition of the world—is terrifying, but how one perceives it, with self-respect and courage, constitutes the value of living. Apparently to Lessing, after attaining this realization, there is nowhere to go. Not willing to accept this impasse, as she sees it, she moves outside the body and sexuality in *The Four-Gated City* and outside the world into an absolute spiritual order in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, to save hope at the cost of its relevance to reality. From the perspective of her recent creative efforts, for all its failings *The Golden Notebook* remains her most powerful work. Although Lessing returns to the world in *The Summer Before the Dark*, only in *The Golden Notebook* is the struggle for meaning rooted in sex where men and women come together with the greatest challenge to real equality and the greatest possibility for regeneration.

²² Patricia Meyer Spacks comes to much the same conclusion in her perceptive discussion of “‘defensive narcissism’” in the women of *The Golden Notebook*: “self-love disguises itself as humble acceptance of things-as-they-are, betrays itself by the nature of its evaluation of the Other (i.e., the masculine), but provides protection by embracing limitation while seeming to regret it, and by defining feminine limitation in flattering terms.” “Free Women,” *The Hudson Review*, 24 (Winter, 1971-72), p. 569.