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June 2014

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Recommended Citation

Ingersoll, Earl G. and Lessing, Doris (2014) "Writing for Balance: A Conversation with Doris Lessing," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 40, Article 13.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol40/iss1/13>

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Writing for Balance: A Conversation with Doris Lessing

EARL G. INGERSOLL

Ingersoll: I take it you don't much like interviews.

Lessing: Well, the basic fact is that there are extremely few very good interviewers. But the point is that readers, when they read interviews, never realize that writers can only answer what they're asked. They don't see that the interview is really the mind of the asker of the questions, not the answerer of them. You can't really make this point every time you give an interview. I have given whole interviews where not one question has interested me in the slightest. The other thing, of course, is that you always answer the same question, over and over and over again.

Ingersoll: Is this because your interviewers don't do their homework and don't look at the kinds of questions that have already been asked?

Lessing: No, they don't. Never. I can't remember what year it was, some time in the early '80s, I was traveling; I went to a lot of countries in that year. I think that it was the year I went to Japan and Italy and Spain and Scandinavia. It occurred to me that in every country I had been asked the exact same questions. What is emerging is a kind of international literary mind. Which is a bit terrifying, really, when you come to think of it.

Ingersoll: Like the inevitable question about your being a Marxist and about your interest in Sufism—I've sensed those repetitions myself in going through the interviews. . . . What are you working on now?

Lessing: Well, I'm currently writing my autobiography, the first volume, where I'm trying to write about my involvement in politics. That

This interview took place on July 9, 1993 in London.

is extremely difficult because it is impossible not to write from where you are now. A kind of world-weary tolerance creeps in, which is not at all the mood you were in when you were twenty-four. In fact, the novels, I think, give more of the flavor of that time. I wrote a book once called *A Ripple from the Storm*, which was not only the most autobiographical book I've written, but it really does give the flavor of that time. So I always recommend that to people; if they want to know, they read that. It was about 1942, '43, '44, which is a pretty short time, with that particular lunatic flavor.

Ingersoll: And this is volume one of the autobiography?

Lessing: Yes, it goes to 1949. And I don't see how I can possibly write volume two.

Ingersoll: When can we expect to read volume one?

Lessing: It will be out next year. I'm just tidying it up now and it'll be going in to the publisher's, probably in October. It's going to have photographs, which always makes a book slower to produce. It'll be interesting to see what happens, because from time to time I say to myself, I'm writing a book about a little country that nobody gives a damn about now, nobody gave a damn about then. Why do I assume that anyone's going to be interested?

Ingersoll: Any influence of the autobiography on other writing you're doing? Do you feel that by going back to that early experience you're tapping into anything?

Lessing: No. . . . It's very strange, because the first thing is, why do you remember what you remember? Why aren't you remembering other things? This is the first question, and it seems to me the central one, which we take for granted. For everybody, there are whole stretches of time, months perhaps when you can only remember—I don't know what—a rainstorm or a cat crossing the street. Why?!

The other thing, of course, is that I know that, as you get aged and tolerant, you soften things up. Everything's very abrasive in life, you know. Later, you just want to laugh gently. But that isn't how it was when you were living it.

Ingersoll: You've told earlier interviewers how depressed you are when your fiction is read autobiographically.

Lessing: The first volumes of *Martha Quest* are the most autobiographical. I put in my autobiography what *is* and what *isn't*. It's certainly true about the emotions—these abrasive, adolescent emotions. They are all truer than anything I can possibly say now. But the facts are not necessarily true, because I change things around. *Proper Marriage* is more or less true, with differences, and I've *said* what the differences are. *Ripple from the Storm* is *very* autobiographical—of course, people are always fitted together to make a composite. And after that, no, it just all shreds apart. I don't really think it's useful for me to say this or that is autobiographical. I know people get terribly upset about *Martha Quest* when I say such-and-such things are not autobiographical because they like to think they are.

Ingersoll: Really, then, the watershed is about *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*.

Lessing: The watershed was before *Landlocked*. And that is very true in atmosphere, that sort of feeling, but not necessarily fact. . . . You have to ask, What do they mean when they say "autobiographical"? If I say, Well, I changed Gottfried Lessing, who was my second husband, and borrowed someone else's husband—I was bringing up Gottfried's son at that time and he was still alive then—but the fact of the matter is that the two men were very similar psychologically. And there were parallels, so I could say, It's not autobiographical and it is autobiographical with equal truth.

Ingersoll: In *The Four-Gated City* you have Paul take Lynda and Martha to the Cafe Royal, and the narrator asserts: "They looked as if they were characters from two different novels; Lynda, he thought, had a look of *Women in Love*, while Martha looked like a New Woman from Bernard Shaw." The reference to *Women in Love* indicates that Lawrence was still part of your consciousness at that time. What was there about him or his work that was useful to you as a writer or a thinker?

Lessing: I started reading him in Southern Rhodesia before I'd even left the farm. He was among the first of the modern writers I read. His writing had an enormous effect on me because of the vitality of the man. I've just reread *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley*, and I cannot recall now the enormous pleasure and shock of that prose. It was so vivid! That was the main thing. Everything comes alive when he talks about it, doesn't it? That's his great quality. And a book called *Aaron's Rod*. I never read him for his ideas, you know; I don't think that's his

virtue. I read him for his vitality—unforgettable scenes, one after another.

Ingersoll: Even *Aaron's Rod*?

Lessing: Yes. Do you remember those humorous scenes about the narrator being fairly drunk? It's *so* funny! And there's "hills that prowl like tigers around the horizon." Anyway, I think some of his ideas are absurd.

Ingersoll: I was surprised that you mentioned *Aaron's Rod*, because that's not a novel that women I know care for very much. They think it's rather anti-women.

Lessing: I never thought of it as being anti-women. Well, he left a wife, if that's the objection. Men often do, don't they? Well, for that matter I left behind two children—who am I to complain?

No, you see, I don't approve of this way of looking at Lawrence. I don't see the point of it. I think you should look at what a writer has to offer and take what is offered—not complain that he's not doing something else.

Ingersoll: Something that you want him to do, rather than what he wants to do.

Lessing: Yes... People complain that he has a very amateur attitude toward sex—he certainly has. But his *basic* attitudes toward sex, I like: he has an enormous reverence for sex; he doesn't dismiss it and diminish it and make ideological pornography of it. Which is a nice change these days. But the technicalities of his love-making—I feel one might put them on one side and forget about them.

But I'll never forget the excitement of reading him, the pleasure of this man. I mean, this Australian book—I don't know if you've ever read it. It was the same excitement.

Ingersoll: Oh yes, *Kangaroo*.

Lessing: Yes. That continent, I will never be able to see it in any other way, and it's really this wonderful, wonderful vitality in the man.

Ingersoll: That's interesting because in the States he is often judged so politically *incorrect* that one can often go to a conference and find no

papers on Lawrence because some people don't want to admit they read him.

Lessing: Well, you know, he's had an *enormous* influence. You can see it in all kinds of people's writing. This political correctness business—I think that it's so silly, most of it, and it's bound to pass. Probably I shouldn't say this, because I'll be lynched, but your country is intellectually an extremely hysterical country. The great movements arise and disappear over the horizon, and I think this one will too. In the meantime I think it's doing a lot of damage, because literature shouldn't be treated as a kind of blueprint for a better way of correct thinking. This isn't what literature is about at all.

Ingersoll: To go back to Lawrence, do you feel some degree of sympathy in the sense that your readers have had the arrogance to try to tell *you* how to write. I know that you get these responses from people like, Why don't you go back to writing in the realist mode? Why don't you give up this fantasy, this "space fiction"?

Lessing: There are people who will say to me, Why do you waste your time writing realism? What I object to is the narrow-mindedness of both sides. I don't see why people shouldn't enjoy both equally. People get into entrenched positions. I think—and I'm sure I don't have to tell any academic this—people take possession of something like an attitude, and they may defend the position and what they *own* so that after a bit it ceases to matter what the writer is trying to say because it's more important to defend a position. And this is particularly true with political correctness.

Ingersoll: So that writers and their work become the possessions of people who have some vested interest in reading them in a particular way.

Lessing: Yes, I think it happens all the time. The idea that one can get pleasure and excitement from reading has disappeared somewhere. I think you should try and get from a writer what is there. How do I put this? Well, *you* know this, a book is a great offering of some kind to the human spirit, to the human mind. You should look at that *first*, get *that* first. If you want to criticize, you can always tear anything to pieces.

Ingersoll: It's rather like being invited to a dinner party and criticizing the hostess for not having dishes you would have preferred.

Lessing: Yes. And Lawrence has had this immense effect—he has, for better or for worse. But when he was first writing, his ideas certainly had some currency, because a lot of people had them. He wasn't the only one to be slightly in love with what we now call Fascism. A lot of them then admired strong men—it was fashionable. A lot of people had mild anti-Semitism and didn't criticize each other for it. But I'm sure that a lot of people—well, I know this because I know them—have read Lawrence with benefit. They've never read him because they admire his ideas, as far as I know—all this sacrificing of women on altars in Mexico—but what a book about Mexico! His travel writing is *superb*. So he's flawed, that's all.

Ingersoll: *The Real Thing*, as it's called in the States, or *London Observed*, the collection of stories and sketches which recently appeared, is a surprising work to me.

Lessing: Not really. Why?

Ingersoll: You have a sketch called "In Defense of the Underground," and I think the collection could be called "In Defense of the City," or "In Defense of London," because you obviously love this city.

Lessing: Yes, I do.

Ingersoll: And that's surprising, because there's been so much city-bashing in our time.

Lessing: There's a kind of fashion to knock London. You know how these fashions go. It's fading a bit now, but it's impossible to read anyone saying anything about living here without an obligatory sentence or two saying how ghastly the place is—from people who I happen to know have a wonderful life. You know, it's just the fashion. They have beautiful houses, nice gardens, wives and children they like or don't like, or husbands; they go to the theater, the opera, and have a life of peaches and cream. And yet they knock this city where they *choose* to live. I find it so despicable and so tedious, so I thought I would come in on the other side.

Ingersoll: Good for you!

Lessing: It really is a wonderful city to live in. Last weekend I was in Regents Park Theatre with a young friend of mine; I took her to see

Romeo and Juliet, and what bliss! Which we take for granted. There it is and anyone can go anytime.

Ingersoll: You say in one of the sketches that London offers you a tremendous feast of possibilities.

Lessing: All the time. All the time. Obviously the people who knock London have never lived in a small town like Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, or they wouldn't knock it.

Ingersoll: Your affection for the city seems somewhat unusual, because you grew up out in the bush.

Lessing: I went into the city of Salisbury at the age of eighteen. That's when I really left the country behind. Since then, I've been living in cities.

Ingersoll: But your childhood was spent...

Lessing: ...out in the bush. Yes.

Ingersoll: I was impressed when you said that the experience was the making of you as a writer—I don't mean to be putting words in your mouth—in that it allowed you to grow up independently as a young woman in ways that you could not have elsewhere.

Lessing: Not *then*, anyway. I think it's changed so much now everywhere. But when I met English women of my generation I suddenly recognized how extraordinarily lucky I'd been. Not least, because I was out of the English class system, which is such a killer. It really is! Out in Southern Rhodesia, this kind of thing didn't exist. That was a great benefit. Also, women were much freer, even then. Women used to go off in cars, with men, into the bush, or by themselves, and I can't remember anyone ever saying they shouldn't or raising an eyebrow. Women farmed by themselves—there were quite a few of them—all these things which were taken for granted. I was very lucky....

Ingersoll: In your earlier interviews, you seemed to be really struggling against the interviewers' efforts to make you say that Ben in *The Fifth Child* represented some embodiment of evil. I didn't see him that way.

Lessing: There were two things I was fighting against in those interviews. One was that Ben was evil, when he is merely someone who's in the wrong place, because if he'd been in a forest somewhere 20,000 years ago he wouldn't be "evil" at all. The other thing is what this book is supposed to be about. People instantly say, Well, it's about . . . I don't know what. Make it up—genetic discovery, or mutations.

Ingersoll: I've been amused by your story of people coming up to you and trying to tell you what *The Fifth Child* is "about."

Lessing: Yes! A French woman came in here and before she even sat down said, Well, *The Fifth Child* is obviously about the Palestine problem. I said, Wait a minute. . . . The energy for that book came from my anger about Afghanistan. It was a blocked fury that translated itself into that book. Writers understand this instantly. Sometimes people say, Oh, is that book about the Afghan problem? No, it isn't, but it was fueled by Afghanistan.

Ingersoll: We started out talking about interviews and interviewers, and you've said that we interviewers always ask the same kinds of questions. What kinds of questions don't we ask you that you wish we did?

Lessing: I was in Denmark, and I'd been answering questions for three weeks in various countries. Suddenly the woman who was interviewing me said, Clearly the most important influence in your life has been the First World War. I could have wept with pleasure and relief that someone had noticed this obvious fact. But this doesn't happen very often. Anyway now I've written about it in my autobiography so no one will be able to say I haven't spelled it out.

I'll be curious to see what happens when the autobiography comes out. What is going to be disappointing is that there are two different voices: one, when you're writing a novel, and this one. If you're writing a record, a personal history, you're really writing from a different part of yourself, very much more detached, and people are going to find your other voice disappointing. I'm sure of it.

I don't know if you remember in *The Golden Notebook* there are two different parts where a group of people go down to a place I call Mashopi. When I'm writing autobiography I come to this, and I write some things about the people. When I end that chapter, I read *The Golden Notebook*. And all I can say is that fiction has it over the "truth" every time.

Ingersoll: I especially liked those scenes; they're very powerful: the scene with the insects and the pigeon-shooting scene.

Lessing: It's very much better than what I've just written in my autobiography, because it's more developed. You can't do that in an autobiography. When you think about it, there's been a lot of a life when you reach seventy-four.

Ingersoll: You mentioned in an earlier interview that you'd just reread *Martha Quest*. Do you often reread your own work?

Lessing: Sometimes. I must go back and read *Four-Gated City* again. I haven't done that for a very long time. Last time I read it, I rather liked it. I find that my first two *Martha Quest* books have a great, exuberant, rather crude vitality, which I don't have anymore. It was much too black-and-white. You get all full of *ifs* and *buts* as you get older.

Ingersoll: One of the things I liked about *The Four-Gated City* was that there's so much comment on the literary scene.

Lessing: Is there? Good. I shall have to go back and read it.

Ingersoll: Yes. A lot about writers and academics and literary scholarship. There was a writer who was rather hard-up for money...

Lessing: Oh yes, I remember.

Ingersoll: ...and had typed a novel because that was his way of working...

Lessing: That was true.

Ingersoll: That was true? You knew someone like that?

Lessing: Yes.

Ingersoll: ...and then went back and did a handwritten manuscript, complete with erasures and revisions.

Lessing: Well, that was true, because that was the golden age of selling manuscripts to America, and this writer was so hard-up that he did this to keep his wife and children fed.

Ingersoll: You don't seem to have very much patience with us academics.

Lessing: I don't know. I seem always to be meeting academics and visiting with them and going to their universities and quarreling with them. What more do you want?!

Ingersoll: Yes, but you told one interviewer that you don't even think literature should be taught in universities.

Lessing: Yes, but the point is if it isn't taught what's going to happen to poor literature? I've come to the conclusion that universities have become the equivalent of medieval monasteries where learning is being preserved, because look what's happening outside. I keep getting letters from universities in what we call the Third World, saying that they cannot afford to buy my books, can I send them some? And I do. And don't you think that's terrible? Because that means that nobody can afford to buy any books. Poor people can't afford them, and the libraries can't buy them.

Having their writing taught is the price writers have to pay so that academics will help to keep it alive. *You* know how I think literature should be taught. It shouldn't be taught in such detail. But it's no good saying that, because that's the way it's taught.

Ingersoll: It shouldn't be taught in such detail?

Lessing: Well, I don't like all this nit-picking.

Ingersoll: The analysis?

Lessing: Yes. I don't see what it's got to do very much with the literature. . . . Well, there are two things involved here, aren't there? One is interesting young people in literature, where it should be taught differently, and I have no doubt about that. It should be taught in such a way—and it's much harder to teach like this—where they're encouraged to flit their way from flower to flower. That's what I think. And not be made to write detailed essays about something, because it puts them off. That's one aspect of it.

The other is that I know there are whole university departments staffed by people and this is what they do. I mean, what's the good of quarreling with it? It's what goes on. I see the academic approach rather as the price one has to pay for having all this interest kept alive in literature.

Ingersoll: A good deal of what goes on in the classroom is often talking about how the novel is put together, and students themselves often say, You've taken it apart and I can see how it's working, but I like it less than I did when I read it before class. Your taking it apart has killed some of my joy in just reacting to it.

Lessing: There's the story about the scientist who dismembers a butterfly and then asks, Where's the butterfly gone to?

What I feel is there's no point in my saying this, because by now there are two or three generations of people in literary departments who've been trained to do this kind of thing. And between people who think like this and writers *truly* there is a gulf, because we don't understand each other at all. When I go to lecture, sometimes I'm asked questions which I literally don't understand. I've no idea what people are talking about. And it's the same with most other writers I know. What's happened is that the process has become an end in itself, I think. That's fine, but I just don't want them putting young people off enjoying literature, which I've enjoyed so much in my life, and still enjoy so much.

Ingersoll: You get a lot of mail from your readers, don't you? Your non-academic readers.

Lessing: Yes, I do. When I've had a book out, I'm always interested to see what will come in. I've had a lot of letters about *African Laughter*, of course.

Ingersoll: I was interested in the response you got to *The Good Terrorist*.

Lessing: Oh, I had such a lot of letters, some of them from people who by the grace of God had not been swept up into the Red Brigades. And one or two fairly sardonic ones from Ireland. Well, more than one or two, describing people who lived *as if* they were revolutionaries. One said, "I don't know if you realize it, but if you set up a style as a revolutionary you need never after go to a meeting: you have an identity, you have clothes, you have a vocabulary, and that can be it for the rest of your life." And of course you meet them everywhere. They're lucky then if they don't get swept up into something bad.

Ingersoll: Your readers who write you letters then give you a sense of audience?

Lessing: They're obviously very different, you know. I mean, the people who liked *African Laughter*. In New York, for the first time in my life, I had this experience. I was in a very prestigious place, and it was packed. I was talking about *African Laughter*, and about ten minutes after I started, people were walking out. Quayle and Gore were coming on TV in an hour, and I got the feeling I was in competition there. *But* at the end of that lecture—and I cut it short because people obviously were bored—one woman came up to me and said, "When are you going to talk again about *yourself*?" On the other hand, when I went to Washington I had the most wonderful audience I've ever had—packed full of people who knew all about Africa and wanted to hear me talk about Africa. But, you see, these people might not have read anything else I've written. I mean, why should they? I don't expect everyone to have the same interests.

Ingersoll: As I say, I am interested in how writers develop a sense of an audience, because as you're writing here in this house you have to be aware there's a world of people out there who are going to read what you write.

Lessing: Well, if you write a book like *African Laughter*, you have to be aware. If you write a book like *The Four-Gated City*, you don't think about what's out there, because it spoils what you're inventing.

Ingersoll: An earlier interviewer, who had read the file of your reviews at *The New York Times*, commented on how negative some of the earlier ones were.

Lessing: Very. Particularly of *The Golden Notebook*. Particularly the ones done by women.

Ingersoll: I was wondering how much of that sense of those negative, early reviews went into the writing of the Jane Somers books?

Lessing: Not really, no. I was interested in writing under another name to see what would happen.

Ingersoll: Writing under a pseudonym was very risky, wasn't it?

Lessing: I haven't been forgiven for it here. They did very well in other countries, particularly well in France, of all places. Would you have

expected that? They did very well in Scandinavia and in Germany. But they did not do well here, or in America. . . .

Ingersoll: You obviously love to write.

Lessing: I have to write: it's a neurosis. It's true. I get out of balance, you know, if I don't write.