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Androgyny or Catastrophe: Doris Lessing's Vision in the Early 1970s

Nancy Topping Bazin

Doris Lessing's novels of the early 1970s offer readers a rare kind of wisdom—one which has been nourished by Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism, which she admires. Unlike Lessing's earlier fiction which was simply influenced by the ideas of Sufism, three of her novels—*Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974)—are literally Sufi fables—that is, symbolic stories, each of which “illuminates truth” (qtd. in Shah, *The Sufis* 14). The Sufi truth illuminated by these novels is that “life is One,” and that because we have long ignored that truth, we now have an urgent choice to make between oneness and catastrophe. In these novels Lessing insists that unless we consciously and actively choose that personal wholeness and recognition of our inherent oneness with others and with nature, which I term “androgyny,” we shall destroy all, or almost all, of the life on this planet.

Lessing uses the word “wholeness” or “Oneness” rather than androgyny, but I believe the more contemporary and revolutionary term “androgyny” will more fully enable us to realize her meaning. Androgyny was symbolized in ancient Greece by hermaphroditic god/goddesses who had the “double” power of the male/female, and therefore the full power of the original androgynous deity. As Ernest Becker states in his book *The Denial of Death*, “The hermaphroditic image represents a striving for wholeness, a striving that is not sexual but ontological. It is desire . . . for . . . unity with the rest of nature, as well as for a completeness in oneself. It is a desire for a healing of the ruptures of existence, the dualism of self and body, self and other, self and world” (225). Because Sufism

concerns itself with this same ontological striving for wholeness (Lessing, "Ancient Way" 52), its art similarly creates images depicting "the human soul in search of, and in progress toward, final harmony and integration with all creation" (Shah, *The Sufis* 38). Theosophic Sufis tell us that we must get back in touch with the divinity—that is, the potential androgyny or wholeness or full power—in each of us. The duty of the theosophist or Sufi (such as Lessing) is "to keep alive" in the human being his or her "spiritual intuitions" (qtd. in Ryan 9), because human beings, through intuiting their own wholeness, will in turn intuit their Oneness with each other and with Nature (Shah, *The Sufis* 223).

As an ardent student of Sufism who has expressed in her nonliterary writing her admiration for the ideas of a modern-day Sufi leader, Idries Shah (Lessing, "Ancient Way" 47, 52–53; "In the World"), Lessing follows the Sufi tradition of subtly teaching Sufi ideas through literature. Thus, without being polemical and without mentioning Sufism per se, Lessing writes stories to convey her urgent message (see Hardin; Seligman; Galin).

Like other Sufis, Lessing feels she has special sensitivities that enable her to see not only the importance of androgyny (personal, social, and cosmic unity) but also the inability of other people to share her insight. This general insensitivity is related, she thinks, to the fact that Western patriarchal societies have discouraged the development of several powers, labeled and denigrated in this culture as "feminine," which Lessing believes should be encouraged and studied; these include extrasensory perception, intuitions, dreams, and journeys into "inner space." According to Lessing, these are the means of perceiving our potential for wholeness and for the creation of "whole" societies; in other words, they put us in touch with the godlike powers necessary for realizing what many feminists refer to as the "androgynous vision."

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* the protagonist Charles Watkins takes a Laingian journey into "inner space" in an effort to remember something he has forgotten (Bolling 556). This something is, in fact, the Sufi truth he is supposed to convey to others. In the course of his voyage we learn that the "gods" had chosen him to be one of the "Descents," that is, one of those Sufis put on Earth "to keep alive, in any way possible, the knowledge that humanity, with its fellow creatures, the animals and plants, make up a whole, are a unity, have a function in the whole system as an organ or organism" (128). This knowledge had been, and will continue to be, conveyed to the "Descents" not through any lengthy "briefing," because they would forget words, but rather through "brain-printing," so that, according to the gods, "You'll find it all there, when you need it" (133–134). Thus Watkins is unaware of the exact nature of his quest, and yet he knows he feels guilty because he has forgotten something. We find him, then, desperately trying to recover the Sufi knowledge printed within his brain. Watkins ultimately fails to retrieve this information, because two insensitive psychiatrists refuse to allow him to do what he believes will allow him to "remember" and so complete his "voyage." As representatives of social order, they see him as an amnesiac who must be made to recall something quite different—his "outer," absurd roles as unappreciated husband, father, lover, and

colleague. Shock treatments, the “cure” recommended by the psychiatrists, put him in touch not with his inner power but with his inane social existence, about which he has had many doubts in the past. Indeed, throughout his stay in the hospital, the psychiatrists have hindered rather than helped him to reach his own goal. For example, once when he recalls his mission—“It’s knowing, Harmony. God’s law. That’s what it is. Let me . . . let me . . . I must . . . let me get up”—the doctor tells him, “Now now shhhhhh, don’t get excited, there’s a good chap” (143). These psychiatrists enforce passivity and “normality,” which is, in fact, madness, upon those who seem “mad” and who are essentially alone in their efforts to reestablish contact with what is sane. Like everyone else, these doctors have been trained and socialized to resist and repress the only knowledge that can prevent what Lessing calls the oncoming “catastrophe” (109).

Lessing makes clear that even if Watkins had successfully recalled his task as a “Descent” (or Sufi), his fellow human beings would probably have persecuted him for his attempts to remind them of the fundamental fact that “life is One” (129, 132). Despite everyone’s sense that “his or her potential had been left unfulfilled” (163), people resist accepting the truth that will make them realize their full potential. Individuals resist knowledge of the truth of Oneness because to discover it, they must become fully alive, and it is much easier to remain asleep and to “breathe in oblivion” (133, 139).

As Lessing so ably suggests through her fiction, androgyny is a radical concept that would necessarily revolutionize people’s lives. Individuals would have to admit that all people are interdependent and that each must then be cared for and not regarded as “other” or “alien”; they would have to see that humankind is dependent upon nature, and that therefore people must not destroy or pollute it; human beings would have to perceive themselves as part of an organic unity or cosmic harmony, and as part of that unity, all barriers based upon class, race, or sex would have to be eliminated (Lessing, “Ancient Way” 52). During Watkins’s voyage into inner space, he suddenly sees humankind as the gods do: human beings, who believe themselves “normal,” are in fact “mad” for refusing to become “we”: “saying I, I, I, I, is their madness . . . for these microbes are a whole, they form a unity, they have a single mind, a single being, and never can they say I, I, without making the celestial watchers roll with laughter or weep with pity” (109). Watkins describes the current situation and recognizes that his “divorce” between “I” and “we” is rapidly moving us toward a “catastrophe”—the destruction of all life: “Some sort of a divorce there has been somewhere along the path of this race of man between the ‘I’ and the ‘We,’ some sort of a terrible falling-away, and I (who am not I, but part of a whole composed of other human beings as they are of me) hovering here as if between the wings of a great white bird, feel as if I am spinning back . . . into a vortex of terror, like a birth in reverse, and it is towards a catastrophe” (109).

Moreover, to change one’s attitudes and behavior is difficult and often painful; therefore, human resistance to seeing the necessity for wholeness or androgyny is strong. Unwillingness to believe in the oncoming catastrophe that will result from this inability to achieve personal, social, and cosmic wholeness

is equally intense, for it involves accepting death as inevitable not only for millions of others but also for oneself. As Ernest Becker points out in *The Denial of Death*, the "deepest need" of human beings "is to be free of anxiety of death and annihilation." Since it is "life itself" that awakens this anxiety, people "shrink from being fully alive" (66). Lessing shares this insight of Becker's and therefore has little hope that human beings will awaken in time to avert the catastrophe. In the event that they prefer not to confront the threat of a catastrophe, the task of the Sufis will then be to assist "the Earth's peoples through the coming Planetary Emergency in which all life may be lost" (132). However, since psychiatric experts, among others, interfere with the efforts of people like Charles Watkins to become "whole," there may be few leaders during and following the catastrophe. Certainly Watkins, forced to return to a zombie-like but so-called "normal" existence, would not be ready to help. Perhaps Lessing's fictional representation of one man's failure to remember the fundamental truth is meant to provoke sensitive readers to succeed where he has failed.

Kate Brown, the protagonist in *The Summer Before the Dark*, is seemingly successful in her quest to become "whole"; however, her return to her family at the end of her summer "journey" may force her to forget what she has learned. Formerly at home, and even later at work, she was so restricted to female roles that the narrowness of her existence had created in her not "virtues" but a "form of dementia" (92). Guided by her dreams and the insights she gained during her peculiar illness, she achieves a rebirth. As a consequence, she may be able in the future to combine positive masculine qualities (such as self-confidence and independence) with positive feminine qualities (such as her talents as unifier and nurturer). She struggles against old habits that interfere with her becoming androgynous: for instance, she must constantly resist those "feminine" characteristics which are the negative products of her former polarized role. These include becoming childlike in her dependency, demanding an excessive amount of attention and flattery, and preoccupying her mind with the trivial details linked with housekeeping. Throughout the summer Kate spends without her family, she has been forcing herself to do what Lessing says the student of Sufism must do, namely, "find out why you believe the things you do believe; examine the bases of your ideas" ("Ancient Way" 47). Once Kate has found out why she believes what she does, she can perhaps change her attitudes and behavior; she can come "alive." She must battle against her usual inclination, encouraged in women by a sexist society, to withdraw into a state of nonbeing, into a lifestyle determined by the wishes of others. Confronted with the threat of nothingness or nonbeing, she must assert herself and stop assuming the self-sacrificing role which she had previously felt she must assume, even when others in her own family had felt oppressed by it. Wearing her hair as she likes it becomes the outward symbol, as much for herself as for others, of her right to be. It is meant to remind her of what she has learned during the summer.

Lessing never underestimates the pain and difficulty involved in escaping from the past which has determined how one lives. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* she uses the image of the drowning kitten abandoned in a "slippy-sided

zinc pail" from which it struggles desperately and unsuccessfully to escape. Kate Brown, like her predecessor Charles Watkins, feels like that kitten. Facing old age—the "dark" ahead—she might well repeat Watkins's words and feelings: "It has been flung in, an unwanted, unneeded cat to drown, better dead than alive, better asleep than awake, but I fight, up and up into the light, greeting dark now as a different land, a different texture, a different state of the Light" (137).

In all her novels Lessing has been interested in the quest for the fully realized self, but in the novels published between 1971 and 1974, and in the preceding novel *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the focus shifts significantly from survival of the self for its own sake to survival of the self for the sake of the survival of the species. I use the word "survival" because Lessing demonstrates repeatedly that the prevailing forces work very actively and effectively for destruction rather than the realization of wholeness in the individual or in society.

In *The Summer Before the Dark* the survival of Kate's "self" and the survival of the "species" are both dependent upon the elimination of female and male roles. By a thorough examination of the concept of mothering, Lessing demonstrates both the effect of being confined to the nurturing, self-sacrificing role of the mother and the effect of not feeling obliged to develop any motherly qualities. The restriction placed upon Kate by her role as mother has led her to become destructive to herself and to others—for example, to her husband and to her son Tim, both of whom feel oppressed by her dependence upon them for her fulfillment. When they and the rest of the family go away to different parts of the world for the summer, Kate's *raison d'être*, which has been her role as mother, is destroyed. This annihilation of self is the catastrophe in Kate's life which parallels the catastrophe facing the society in which she lives. The catastrophe facing her male-dominated society, however, is caused not by its overemphasis upon motherly or nurturing qualities but by its failure to develop such qualities in its leaders.

The absence of "mothering" on a national and international scale is indicated by the fact that governments are indifferent to the needs of millions of citizens not only for food, heat, light, and decent clothing but also for love, sympathy, and a sense of being needed and feeling important. Ideally, governments, with a kind of motherly love, would make possible the satisfaction of these fundamental human needs. During her breakdown Kate appears in public looking unfashionable in her choice of clothes and hairstyle, and because of that, she, a doctor's wife, learns what it feels like to be poor (unprovided for), and hence "invisible" (170): she finds herself unable to command the respect and attention of shopkeepers, waitresses, and potential lovers. She realizes there is a "monstrous baby" inside her wanting "to be soothed and smiled at and given attention on demand" (175); but the right to have these needs satisfied depends, in a nonandrogynous society, upon one's pocketbook.

The failure of governments to act with motherly love and concern for every individual as well as for nature has meant that societies are increasingly unable

to function in a healthy manner. Violation of the organic unity necessary to the health of both the social and the natural worlds has set off a catastrophe which, if not stopped, will destroy not just civilized life but even life itself.

This serious social crisis provides the backdrop for the crisis in Kate's life and illustrates on a mass scale, as her life illustrates on a smaller scale, the consequences of the absence of androgyny. The catastrophe in this novel is not the product of one major accident, as it was in *The Four-Gated City*; rather, it is an ongoing process, the mushrooming effect of which already defies the possibility of its being arrested and reversed. An energy failure is in progress (1-2); masses of people are dying of starvation in England (213); much of the British population is unemployed (215); the government finds itself incapable of providing basic necessities—such as nontoxic food, air, water, and soil for its people—and both natural and social disasters affect a growing number of citizens (3). Rational thought and behavior become increasingly impossible in such a society, for all possible choices seem mad. Maureen, the young woman in whose house Kate rents a room, feels that any choice she makes will be meaningless; and, like Lessing, she has lost hope for any political solution to the problems. Her attitude represents the nihilistic attitude of the young; she exclaims hysterically to Kate: "It doesn't matter a damn what you do. Or what I do. That is the whole point of everything. It's what no one can face up to" (242). No adult has provided Maureen with a worthwhile model or with a reason to change this nihilistic view; she says, "Whatever it is that is important, if it is, if anything is, then no one has told me about it" (243). But Lessing does not condone Maureen's attitude. As in Kurt Vonnegut's works, the articulation of the attitude that nothing matters is meant to provoke in us this reaction: "Hey, wait a minute; yes, it does matter."

Lessing's horror of people who have no sense of guilt or commitment is revealed still more clearly in her next novel, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in which the catastrophe is in its later phases. There, bands of children, four to ten years old, have no sense of guilt or gratitude, and so feel free to hurt others indiscriminately. Lessing wants us to feel our responsibility for these "children of violence"—to recognize the nightmarish monsters we are creating. Lessing is, as she says of Vonnegut, "moral in an old-fashioned way." Vonnegut, she says with admiration, "does take the full weight of responsibility, while more and more people are shrugging off the *we should have* and *we ought to have* and *we can if we want* and coming to see history as a puppet show and our—humanity's—slide into chaos as beyond our prevention, our will, our choice. The strength of Kurt Vonnegut . . . derives from his refusal to succumb to this new and general feeling of helplessness." Readers who will appreciate Vonnegut's qualities most, she says, are those who "dare to believe that while there is life, there is still life" ("Vonnegut's Responsibility" 141, 142).

Lessing, then, wants us to awaken before it is too late; however, because she sees today's human beings as inadequate, she believes that the needed awakening has a better chance of happening through the cultivation of dreams, the development of extrasensory perception, and the exploration of "inner space."

Hope lies in a mutation or evolution that will give us increased control over these little-understood sources of knowledge. As she stated at Rutgers University in 1972, she has little faith that leftist political movements can reach people in time. As a writer inspired by Sufism, she tries to awaken us through more subtle, less analytical means, and her protagonists learn through fantasies, dreams, and other excursions into the mind.

In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the crisis is deepening and moving rapidly toward the annihilation of all life. The events that have led up to the crisis in this book are not specifically named, but one assumes they are no different from the sorts of events in the news in the 1970s: several children in a New York community given appendectomies before the real cause of their symptoms, polluted water, was discovered; poisonous chemicals detected in mothers' milk in Michigan but the nursing of babies not yet discouraged; New York and New Jersey beaches closed because of sewage, source unknown; oil spills in California and Texas; a chemical barge overturned off the New Jersey coast; Chinese nuclear fallout causing Pennsylvania farmers to give their cattle stored feed; Hudson River fishermen forced to restrict the kinds of fish they catch because of the human-made pollutant PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl); the illegal dumping of PCB along certain roads in North Carolina; and the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. In any case, when the book opens, anarchy reigns; gangs pass through the city; other "tribes" form and leave; the government exists but is unable to govern.

According to the woman recounting the story—the "Survivor" of the title—a major impediment to resisting the conditions that led to the catastrophe is the facility with which human beings "get used to anything at all. . . . There is nothing that people won't try to accommodate into 'ordinary life'"; "the enemy," she reflects, "was Reality, was to allow ourselves to know what was happening" (*The Memoirs of a Survivor* 18–19). This attitude prevails both within the government and within individuals. The government in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* promulgates the impression that there is no crisis, and Lessing's protagonist explains why: "The administrators lived cushioned against the worst, trying to talk away, wish away, legislate away the worst—for to admit that it was happening was to admit themselves useless, admit the extra security they enjoyed was theft and not payment for services rendered" (107). They, too, share in what Becker calls "the denial of death"—that is, the death of their own identities, for if they acknowledge the catastrophe, they admit their total ineffectiveness and hence their nonexistence. The Survivor and her young dependant, Emily, also try hard to block out the reality. Knowing that, in fact, any escape is impossible, the woman continues to tell Emily the "story" of how they will escape to her friends' farm in Wales. As the woman talks, she sees in this girl a longing for "good bread, uncontaminated water from a deep well, fresh vegetables; love, kindness, the deep shelter of a family" (34). This farm represents to them both "safety, refuge, peace—utopia" (32). Her story of what their life will be like on the farm is a "fantasy," a "fable"; there "'life' would begin, life as it

ought to be, as it had been promised—by whom? When? Where?—to everybody on this earth” (33–34). This androgynous vision of the life that could be helps them forget the reality of the catastrophe that they are experiencing.

So, too, a belief persists that because there is still some kind of life, there is still some hope. For example, the Sufi vision of a carpet persists in the woman’s dream world. On the carpet is an “intricate” design that is incomplete, a “pattern without colour,” that people can bring to life by providing the colored scraps of material necessary to complete it. Optimistically, the woman believes that “the work in it continued, must continue, would go on always” (79–81). Similarly, her visionary moments when she passes “behind the wall” make her feel that she is in the hands of benevolent forces she does not understand, and she willingly gives herself up to them: “Very strong was the feeling that I did as I was bid and as I must; that I was being taken, was being led, was being shown, 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” (101). Like Charles Watkins, she has a connection with the gods; she is their instrument. To be that instrument, however, she must discover the hidden truth, the necessary knowledge that can save humankind from self-destruction. Just as Kate Brown learns from her dreams and Charles Watkins and Martha Quest (the protagonist of the *Children of Violence* novels) learn from their bouts with madness, so, too, the woman in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* learns from her daydreams “behind the wall.” Sufi belief is that the human species is evolving, for “our future depends upon it” (Shah, *The Sufis* 61). Lessing agrees that to avert the catastrophe, such an evolution must occur; and by having her characters learn through dreams, madness, and even lesser understood mental phenomena, she indicates the possibility of this evolution.

Lessing believes, then, in the human potential but, as revealed through the attitudes of her characters, this faith coexists with disillusionment and despair. The young idealists in the book, Emily and her boyfriend, Gerald, are ultimately disillusioned—Emily when she cannot get the children in her charge to accept responsibility for themselves, and so is forced into the role of the Authority, and Gerald when he has to admit the extent of evil possible in a child, even in a four-year-old. In the end, Emily and Gerald have to conclude that they cannot save these most extreme of the many “children of violence” depicted in Lessing’s fiction—namely, the Underground “kids,” made monstrous by the fact that they have no conscience. The time for saving those children has clearly passed; it is far too late. Furthermore, Emily and Gerald are, in turn, forced to confront what Lessing is forcing us to confront, the “inadequacy” of human beings (154). According to Lessing, we are inadequate because we continually repeat the mistakes of earlier generations since we fail to learn or are incapable of learning from their mistakes. The increase in our technological power for destroying ourselves is not matched by an increase in our power to save ourselves from stupidities that can create a communal disaster. Attempts by some to avert this disaster are noble, but easily destroyed by the surrounding hostile society or by the inadequacies of the participants. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*

we are told that occasionally out of the destruction more idealistic communities would develop: "Disciplined, but democratic (when these people were at their best, even a child's voice was listened to with respect); all property worries gone; all sexual taboos gone (except for the new ones, but new ones are always more bearable than the old); all problems shared and carried in common." But such idealistic communal relationships lasted only weeks or months or "perhaps with luck even a year or so" (167).

Ironically, the only creature in this novel capable of fidelity and commitment (besides the speaker, who is left over from the past) is Emily's fantastic pet—a strange, yellow, ugly dog with a cat's face and eyes. This creature dominates the book and, gradually moving us by its loyalty, becomes unforgettable. He is loyal to Emily while her mother, her boyfriend, Gerald, and her best girlfriend, June, are not. Although already betrayed by her own mother for her brother and by Gerald for other girls, Emily cannot imagine that her closest friend, June, with whom she has literally "slept," could leave her without even saying good-bye. Emily had saved June from a state of economic and psychic disaster by taking her into her home and loving her. Emily's grief at June's departure/betrayal is evoked by the realization that if even June is incapable of gratitude and commitment, then "everything is spent, nothing is left, nothing can be expected" (171). Similarly, Gerald feels despair when he has to admit that the Underground children are absolutely incapable of gratitude and commitment, totally devoid of any conscience whatsoever; they feel free to do whatever comes into their heads. They are capable of being generous with a person one moment and of killing that person the next. Realizing that he must abandon all hope for them, Gerald's "face was all incredulity and pain"; he could not "bear what those children had become," and "to give them up was to abandon—so he felt—the best part of himself" (213). To lose faith that the children can be different is to lose faith in the future. In this novel, which is not in her *Children of Violence* series, Lessing has depicted the ultimate children of violence; they are human monsters and they are not redeemable. Through all this we feel the presence of the peculiar cat-dog, a creature superior to the human beings whom he silently observes. But he, too, is helpless and impotent to do anything; he cannot even leave the room, for he is in constant danger of being eaten by the desperate human creatures outside.

At the end of the novel Emily, Gerald, the cat-dog Hugo, and the old woman who narrates the novel are disillusioned and left alone in the city with dangerous Underground children. There is no alternative to this intolerable situation except the dream of its androgynous opposite. Once again the old woman, Lessing's counterpart, slips "behind the wall" into fantasy. There, finally, she finds "the one person I had been looking for all this time. . . . She was beautiful. . . . I only saw her for a moment, in a time like the fading of a spark on dark air—a glimpse" (216). And there beside her in this vision

was Emily, and beside Emily was Hugo, and lingering after them Gerald. Emily, yes, but quite beyond herself, transmuted, and in another key, and the yellow beast Hugo fitted

her new self: a splendid animal, handsome, all kindly dignity and command, he walked beside her and her hand was on his neck. Both walked quickly behind *that One* who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether. Both, just for an instant, turned their faces as they passed that other threshold. They smiled. . . . Seeing those faces, Gerald was drawn after them, but still he hesitated in a fearful conflict, looking back and around, while the brilliant fragments whirled around him. And then, at the very last moment, they came, his children came running, clinging to his hands and his clothes, and they all followed quickly on after the others as the last walls dissolved. (216–217, emphasis added)

This vision of the One is the androgynous vision of paradise, of utopia, of the wholeness we hunger after and could achieve, but seemingly lack sufficient will to achieve here on Earth. Lessing warns us that the choice is androgyny—wholeness, oneness, unity—or catastrophe, and that we are now heading stupidly and rapidly toward the latter.