**“Unanchored fragments of print”: Lessing’s experiments with drama and poetry in the late 1950s.**

Nick Bentley

Keele University

September 2014

n.bentley@keele.ac.uk

**“Unanchored fragments of print”: Lessing’s experiments with drama and poetry in the late 1950s.**

In the final “Free Women” section of *The Golden Notebook* (1962)*,* Doris Lessing has her protagonist Anna Wulf pin cuttings from newspapers and various statements about politics and literature all over the walls of her living room, which are then collectively described as “unanchored fragments of print” (624). Anna then tries, in vain, to make sense of the connections between these examples from contemporary politics and culture. Although, as Lessing has stressed, the novel is not autobiographical, this image neatly captures Lessing’s own concerns in the late 1950s and early 1960s about the disconnection between words and their meanings, and the style adopted by contemporary literary and political writing. It also suggests her thinking about the relationship between different modes and genres of writing, and whether certain forms might allow her to explore new ideas and thoughts. Alongside narrative fiction, this period sees Lessing experimenting with a number of forms including memoir (*Going Home*, 1957); the documentary novel (*In Pursuit of the English*, 1960); the cultural essay (“The Small Personal Voice”, 1957); drama (*Each His Own Wilderness* 1958; and *Play With a Tiger* written in 1958, first produced 1962); plays for radio (*The Day Stalin Died*, 1958), plays for Television (*After Dinner*, 1959;and *The Truth About Billy Newton*, 1961), adaptation (*The Grass is Singing* adapted for BBC Television, 1962), andpoetry (*Fourteen Poems*, 1959).[[1]](#endnote-1) This is in addition to her continuing to write and produce novels and short stories (*A Ripple From the Storm*, 1958; *The Habit of Loving*, 1957).

In this essay I am particularly interested in Lessing’s plays and poetry of this period. The plays can be seen to have direct ties with some of the fiction she produces, especially *The Golden Notebook*,while the poems can be seen to be “unanchored” from her other work in that they eschew the narrative framework embedded in her fiction, drama, memoir and documentaries, offering a free-floating relationship with her prose writing and with her fiction in particular, which remains (or rather emerges) as still her primary form of literary production following this period. It should be remembered, however, that Lessing experiments with other forms throughout her career producing, some poetry and a number of radio and TV plays alongside her prose narratives (fiction, non-fiction and autobiography). *Fourteen Poems*, and her two main prose dramatic works *Each His Own Wilderness* (1958) and *Play with a Tiger* (1962) appear at a moment that has been identified as a period of profound change and crisis for Lessing in terms of both her personal and professional life. While there has been relatively little work done on the importance of Lessing’s dramatic and poetic works during the period, in this article I will argue that this body of work is important in its own right and also as way of developing our knowledge of the context of Lessing’s experimentation with form at this time. Instead of seeing her poetry, plays, fiction and essays as discrete works, much is gained from seeing them as indicative of a general trend in Lessing’s aesthetic and political thinking and practice. Indeed, the unanchored image introduced in *The Golden Notebook* provides a useful model for thinking about the connections to be made across Lessing’s writing at the end of the 1950s and into the new decade. As Roberta Rubenstein argues, correspondences between *Play With a Tiger* and *The Golden Notebook* “emphasize the way in which various pieces of Lessing’s own work, like Anna’s several notebooks, reformulate and recast some of the same clusters of experience, image, and idea” (*The Novelistic Vision* 100). Mona Knapp suggests that “the plays of this period were written concurrently with *The Golden Notebook* and are thematically related to it”, citing Lessing’s work as the theatre critic for *The Observer* in 1958 as inspiration for her own playwriting (*Doris Lessing* 68).

Extending Rubenstein and Knapp’s points, I will emphasize that Lessing’s exploration of different literary modes and forms in *The Golden Notebook* connects fruitfully with the drama and poetry she produced in the second half of the 1950s. In particular, I will discuss the play *Each His Own Wilderness* (and to a lesser extent *Play With a Tiger*)and *Fourteen Poems*. I will identify four aspects of Lessing’s thinking revealed in her plays and poetry that connect with the more well-known fictional and non-fictional prose narrative of the period. The first of these is her concern with becoming increasingly frustrated by the inner machinations and theoretical underpinnings of the Communist Party politics and I will also suggest that one of the aims in the play and in some of the poems is to interrogate Marxist methods of dialectical argument (as inherited from Hegel). A second contemporary concern of the period, played out in *Each His Own Wilderness* in particular, is a generational conflict over the efficacy of contemporary left-wing political commitment. Thirdly, the plays and poetry reveal Lessing’s concerns with the increasingly fraught nature of sexual relationships and gender politics. Alongside the generational and sexual politics, there is an interest in examining the personal relationship with geographical location manifest in sentiments of exile and the physical, emotional and cultural distance she feels between southern Africa and her still relatively new home of London in the late 1950s. This last theme is revealed in many of the poems, as Paul Schlueter has identified, as a binary opposition between nature and culture (“The Other Doris Lessing”).

I have argued elsewhere that a key influence on Lessing’s novels and plays during this period was Bertolt Brecht’s theories concerning political theatre, as it was for many of those associated with the New Wave of British drama in the later 1950s.[[2]](#endnote-2) Brecht's work became known more widely in Britain after the Berliner Ensemble came to London in 1956 and a number of reviews and articles were produced at that time including an editorial by John Willet in the *Times Literary Supplement* and Kenneth Tynan's reviews of *The Good Woman of Szechwan* at the Royal Court Theatre.[[3]](#endnote-3) Lessing was aware of Brecht’s work and Robert Arlett, in particular, has produced a convincing reading of the influence of Brechtian theatre techniques on her fictional practice in *The Golden Notebook*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Mona Knapp, in contrast, suggests that ‘the influence of Bertolt Brecht […] is absent from Lessing’s dramas […] Clearly Brecht’s development of the epic theatre as a catalyst for real social change made little impression on Lessing’ (70). I am inclined, however, to follow Arlett’s position on the influence of Brecht on Lessing’s drama of this period. Rejecting a reliance on bourgeois realism, Brecht argues that in order to maintain a radical political literature in a changing society new experimental forms are required: “We shall not stick to too detailed literary models; we shall not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative [...] Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change” (*Aesthetics and Politics* 82). In the second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing recounts the impact of seeing Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble perform *Mother Courage* in Paris in 1950, and in her own experiments in drama she takes from Brecht the technique of dramatizing political concerns and presenting them to an audience in such a way that they should then be persuaded to continue the discussion outside the theatre (47). Lessing also notes her admiration for Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop during this period, Littlewood being a dramatist who was also clearly influenced by Brecht. In *Walking in the Shade* she writes of Littlewood: “she was a great director, a great force in the theatre […] she made theatre in provincial towns with no money, no resources: political theatre, satirical morality plays, improvised theatre” (*Walking in the Shade*, 1997, 278). It is this kind of political theatre that Lessing attempts in her two main plays of the period *Each His Own Wilderness* and *Play With a Tiger*. In her notes on directing the latter she writes: “When I wrote *Play with a Tiger* in 1958 I set myself an artistic problem which resulted from my decision that naturalism, or, if you like, realism, is the greatest enemy of the theatre” (3). Brechtian techniques used in the play are also referred to in the director’s note: “I wrote the play with an apparently conventional opening to make the audience expect a naturalistic play so that when the walls vanished towards the end of Act One they would be surprised (and I hope pleasantly shocked) to find they were not going to see this kind of play at all” (3).

*Each His Own Wilderness*, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958, is perhaps not as experimental as *Play with a Tiger*, and indeed as Susan L. Carson notes, referring to comments made in 1960 by Caryl Churchill, that the earlier Lessing play has usually been regarded as an example of the kitchen-sink realism of the angry playwrights of the late 1950s. *Each His Own Wilderness*, however, also suggests Brechtian approaches in its deployment of characters who engage in political ideas and contemporary debates that promote a direct engagement with the audience. It is an example of dialectical theatre in which the main theses and antitheses are supplied in the discussions between Myra, a woman in her late 40s who has been actively engaged in left-wing politics from the 1930s to the present, and her son Tony, who has just completed his national service and who voices a sceptical apathy to the effectiveness of any form of political activism in the contemporary world. Most of the play is taken up by discussions between these two characters, although offset with other characters that reveal aspects of the debates in Myra and Tony’s dialectic. The characters are divided along generational lines with four in their mid-40s and older, and three in their early 20s and late teens. Lessing, then, can be seen in this play to be engaging with concerns amongst many New Left writers of the period with the political role of the young, and in particular, suspicion towards the rise of what are seen to be Americanized youth subcultures in Britain in the late 1950s. This was a hot debate during the period, and there are several articles in the left-leaning journals *The Universities and Left Review* and *The New Statesmen* on the issue of youth during the late fifties by writers such as Colin MacInnes, Stuart Hall, Michael Kullman, Derek Allcorn and Clancy Sigal (with whom Lessing was having an affair in the late 1950s).[[5]](#endnote-5) Many writers of the New Left were concerned with the impact of the economic boom and how it was affecting traditional class structures, economically and culturally, and, in particular, the influence it was having on young people. Greta Duncan and Roy Wilkie, for example, in an article in *Universities and Left Review* make the point that: “Teenagers are accused not only of lacking a sense of responsibility, but of having no respect for their elders […] It is striking that most people talk of teenagers in negative terms” (24). Duncan and Wilkie carried out interviews with teenagers in Glasgow and in part attempted to counter this popular moral panic about the behaviour of youth. Stuart Hall, writing in the same journal, argued that youth was perceived as a “problem” as a result of the way in which new social and cultural contexts emerging during the period affected how youth related to both the parent and dominant culture. In particular, Hall identifies how the political and ideological sensibilities of adolescents were influenced by the advent of consumer society, resulting in a consequent decline in the identification with collective class frameworks and a rise in individualism. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean that youth was politically conservative behind a surface of cultural radicalism. As Hall writes, “Instinctively, young working class people are radical. They hate the stuffiness of the class system, though they cannot give it a political name […] they feel and experience these things in private, emotional ways, for this is how adolescents encounter the world” (2).

Perhaps the key figure espousing a negative articulation of youth subcultures in the period is Richard Hoggart. In his 1957 work, *The Uses of Literacy*,he writes about the “Juke-box Boys”, which he describes in their milkbar environment in the following terms: “this is all a thin and pallid sort of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life” (248). In Lessing’s play, when Myra learns of Tony’s intention to abandon his degree and become an electrician she replies in terms that chime with Hoggart’s description: “I suppose you’ll spend jolly evenings in the local coffee bar, join a skiffle group, become a scruffy little bohemian, one of the neo-conformists, enjoying all the postures of rebellion from safe positions of utter respectability” (*Each His Own Wilderness*, 178). Tony, it is shown, has a much more considered position of political apathy than Hoggart’s teenagers, but it is evident that Lessing is using the dramatic medium in order to engage her audience in this topical critical debate. Indeed the need to engage youth in political struggle was a recurring topic in much of the left wing print media of the period. In *Play With a Tiger* the subject of youth is again touched upon. Set in 1958, Lessing has Anna Freeman, the central female character of the play, although aged thirty-five, identify herself in the following terms “Yes, I’m an adolescent and that’s how I’m going to stay” (49). Adolescence is associated here with a desire to resist conformity and thereby reject the conventional forces of dominant culture to effect a containment of individual and collective, political resistance. This is contrasted with contemporary (American) youth, which is described by the other main character, Dave, a rootless American drifter, who is also in his thirties thus: “At the street corners the kids are not prepared to fight the world. They fight each other. Everyone of us, we were prepared to take on the whole world single-handed. Not any longer, they know better, they’re scared” (37). Dave’s opinions are far from endorsed by the play as a whole, but at this moment this reading of contemporary youth as apolitical and overly individualized, with their passions spent on subcultural in-fighting rather than challenging the system, seems to be corroborated by Lessing.

Not all commentators on youth associated with the left were critical of youth culture. Colin MacInnes, for example, who wrote a number of articles on the subject in the late 1950s as well as his ground-breaking novel on youth subcultures *Absolute Beginners* took a far more positive view of the potential of youth to engage in political activity, although this tended to be a politics of the everyday that eschewed official party frameworks. At the end of *Absolute Beginners*, for example, the unnamed teenage hero decides to leave Britain in response to the violent attacks on black and Asian immigrants in Notting Hill and Nottingham in the summer of 1958. The teenager registers a celebration of an emergent multiculturalism amongst some youth cultures, most notably in the jazz clubs, but he also notes the development of what can be seen as quasi-fascist attitudes amongst others, most notably in his one-time friend ‘the Wizard’ who join a neo-fascist group called the White Protection League, as well as the Teddy Boy character ‘Ed the Ted’ whose random acts of violence are often directed towards the non-white population of London, indicating the involvement of youth subcultures in the street violence in the Notting Hill area in 1958.[[6]](#endnote-6) Although initially planning to leave Britain, the teenage hero of the novel realises ultimately that to leave the country represents a victory for the right wing and the book ends with him vowing to return to “Napoli” (the nickname he has given to Notting Hill) to welcome the new immigrants, implicitly suggesting an involvement in anti-racist politics. Although there is no evidence that Lessing knew MacInnes or his work, she would have known the Notting Hill area well having lived there for a short period when she first arrived in London.[[7]](#endnote-7) The so-called race riots of the summer of 1958 are not mentioned in *Each His Own Wilderness* as the play was first performed in March of that year, but the play enters into the debates around political commitment of youth through the conversations between Myra and Tony in particular. At one point she comments “The young are so boring. I’ve come to the conclusion I can’t stand anyone under the age of 35” (131), and she castigates youth for their political apathy marking Tony as representative of his generation: “I do wish young people would join in these demonstrations. Why don’t you? – we’re such a middle aged lot. Why do you leave it all to us?” (109). Tony does not respond directly to this question, however, his indifference to (and implicit critique of) Myra’s political activism suggests his rejection of his mother’s call to arms. The play frequently returns to the differing attitudes to political activism represented by the older and younger generations, but ultimately it rejects a satisfying resolution of the way forward out of this dialectic, suggesting that the very framework of the argument is itself inadequate.

Jenny Taylor describes *Each His Own Wilderness* as “an ‘issue play’ very much concerned with youth and nuclear disarmament” and Lessing’s engagement with 1950s generational politics is, to a certain extent, carried through into her poetry collection *Fourteen Poems* published a year later, as is an interest in dialectical argument in literary form.[[8]](#endnote-8) There has been very little criticism to date on this volume of poetry, the exceptions being by Mona Knapp and Paul Schlueter, with Robin Graham also writing a short article on Lessing’s poetry published in the 1940s with some reference to *Fourteen Poems*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Schlueter in particular produces a valuable essay in this context in his groundwork on the publication of Lessing’s poetry, which includes readings of several of the poems found in the collection. *Fourteen Poems* was published by Scorpion Press in 1959 and was limited to a run of 500 copies, 50 of which were signed by Lessing. Graham identifies four categories for Lessing’s 1940s poetry: “descriptive nature poems; poems which invoke the fabulous; satirical character sketches; and what are clearly more political poems”, and this typology can to a certain extent be applied to the 1959 collection (92). The volume collects together poems she produced in the 1940s and 1950s and although the settings are obscure, certain phrases suggest that most were composed after Lessing moved to London in 1949: the first in the volume “Under a low cold sky”, for example, suggests a familiar image of a cloud-covered London; and in ‘Dark Girl’s Song’ the female speaker mentions her lover visiting “the country of cold canals […] where the Northern spires are” (9), which may be a reference to Clancy Sigal’s visit to Yorkshire in the late 1950s from which he produced his documentary novel *Weekend in Dimlock*.[[10]](#endnote-10) The poem “Exiled” attempts to make a connection between the speaker and “all the sick world’s exiles” (19). In this poem Lessing reminisces with a certain amount of nostalgia “Where once I trod or dreamed I trod/Would dizzy with quarrelling constellations” recollecting the expanse of the rural Rhodesian sky, also recorded in some of her novels and travel writing. “Fable”, although written and first published before Lessing arrived in London in 1949, can also be seen in hindsight (and in the context of it being included in this volume of 1959) as another nostalgic poem. It opens with the lines:

When I look back I seem to remember singing

Yet it was always silent in that long warm room

Impenetrable, those walls, we thought,

Dark with ancient shields. (21)

The feeling of the whole volume, then, is of a speaker located in a cold northern European climate looking back, often nostalgically, to a southern hemisphere which is most often associated with a natural landscape of warmth and expanse, although specific locations are rarely mentioned in the collection. The kind of nostalgia Lessing adopts, however, is not a straight-forward longing for the past but represents more of what Susan Watkins, following Dennis Walder, has identified as a “critical and creative nostalgia” that interrogates the (post-)colonial context of Rhodesia.[[11]](#endnote-11) The third stanza of “Fable” begins: “Yet, for all it was quiet and warm as a hand,/ If one of us drew the curtains/ A threaded rain blew ceaselessly outside”. The image here is of an unidentified threat to the security and stability offered by the domestic space, the poem suggesting later that “a new wind blew”. Interestingly, this metaphor anticipates Harold Macmillan’s reference to the decolonization of Africa as a “wind of change”.[[12]](#endnote-12) That the creative nostalgia embedded in this colonial context finds expression in the form of a poem reveals Lessing attempting to find ways to articulate a trope that appeared to be circulating both in Lessing’s other work and in public discourse more broadly. As Watkins shows, the attempt to write back to Lessing’s colonial past is tied up with her experimentation with literary form during the period: “Through the 1950s […] creative nostalgia is a key element, which allows Lessing to begin to create an unease in her use of the realist form” (*Doris Lessing* 52).

Another poem in the collection, “Exiled”, also gestures towards later literary critical paradigms in terms of postcolonialism and diaspora studies in its focus on the experiences of forced migrants and their longing for home.[[13]](#endnote-13) These migrants are seen as

Wandering homeless,

Carrying in their bones like legacies

A memory of streets or valleys

Made in their images. (19)

The trauma of migration is thus written into the very bodies of those unable to physically engage with the environment they recognize as home. Schlueter argues that this is a poem “celebrating the speaker’s dreaming of returning home vicariously” and points out that “Lessing was not only an emigrant from Rhodesia but also a ‘prohibited alien’ because of her other writings about Africa” (253), a situation Lessing writes about in *Going Home*. Within the personal context of the poem there is also, however, an element of essentialism in Lessing’s tying of individual to (national) location. Later in the poem we get the lines “For what man prospers out of his sun and soil?” and an African the speaker encounters provides the sentiment “I was born in the next valley. I am sick, being so far from home”. This sentiment is certainly at odds with celebrations of the nomadic and migratory spirit as perhaps the opposite diode of the human condition in terms of a fixed location. As Salman Rushdie notes in his novel *Shame*, “I sometimes think roots are a conservative myth designed to keep us in our place”, and there is an element of conservatism to Lessing’s essentializing impulse in this poem (86). The second and third stanzas move from general thoughts about migration to the speaker’s specific context of being located by the “pale nostalgic sea, washing like memory/On and on, over the crumbling chalky rocks”, presumably a reference to the south coast of England as the edge of the barrier to the return to “home”. This description of home however is qualified in other Lessing texts of the period and perhaps indicates something of the perpetual longing for a past that remains ever out of reach, whilst at the same time recognizing the necessity to engage in the personal experience of the current location. This sense of “transcendental homelessness” (to borrow a term Georg Lukács associates with the novel as a literary form) begins to destabilize the very notion of home as a fixed location (*Theory of the Novel*). As Watkins argues with respect to two other Lessing works of this period, *Going Home* and the short story “The Old Chief Mshlanga”, “Acknowledgement of relativity and specificity in relation to colonial histories and racial difference questions any absolute understanding of the landscape of Africa as ‘home’ for the narrator, or anyone” (34). The nostalgic longings for the past in the poems are fleeting and often confined to dreams, nevertheless they reveal a recurring concern. Alice Ridout has argued that Lessing, in fact, belongs to that group of “third culture” children who are often the children of ex-patriots who locate themselves not in a particular location, but as part of a cosmopolitan, transnational culture that transcends single national identities. As Ridout argues, this is seen most forcefully in Lessing’s biography *Under My Skin*. Some of the poems problematize the identification of Lessing as fully integrated into a “third culture”, however they do foreground the experience of leading one’s adult life in a location many miles away from the country of one’s developmental years. The roots/routes context of a poem such as “Exiled” is another dialectic that perhaps is not resolved conclusively.

This stalled dialectic may be the only thread that connects the poems in the volume, which are notable for their variety of form and subject matter, although formally most could be described as short lyric poems. Some use conventional rhyming patterns, some use free verse, some have complicated patterns of rhythm and rhyme, and it is this divergence of styles that suggests a writer experimenting with poetic form, trying to find a voice and style with which she can be comfortable. The subject matter is also wide-ranging: a few poems recount close, often sexual relationships. “Under a low cold sky”, for example, talks of the speaker’s reflection on what appears to have been a brief sexual encounter with a “stranger, too well known” in which they “died together in a fume of leaves” – “dying” taking on the conventional Renaissance metaphor here for sexual consummation (9). In the pair of poems “Older Woman to Younger Man” I and II, the speaker talks of what appears to be an illicit affair, in which the “woman of many summers” (10) reconfirms her promise to keep the affair with the younger man secret and connects with a prominent theme also explored in *Each His Own Wilderness*. The combination of generational and sexual politics that were clearly on Lessing’s mind during this period find expression in this pair of poems.

Famously, Lessing stressed that she did not set out to write *The Golden Notebook* as a feminist book and the same can be said of the gender politics of the poems; nevertheless some of them interrogate prevailing gender codes of the period in a way that resonates with the later novel. “Plea for the Hated Dead Woman”, for example, which combines references to *Hamlet*’s Ophelia with the suicide of an unidentified woman who has left behind five children, opens up a critique of the differing social responses to male and female suicides. This poem, like *Each His Own Wilderness*,also interrogates a thesis/antithesis/synthesis model of argument. It opens:

Wrath sunk her water-stopped in weed;

Nor ever can those silences

Compel the sympathy we need

To thaw our frozen consciousnesses. (12)

This is followed by the introduction of a one-sided diatribe against the dead woman from a voice that is presented as a prevailing attitude, one wearied by war and unwilling to offer sympathy to anyone who has committed suicide:

The world’s steel-slaughtered innocents

Plead dumbly for their grudging share

From our strained stores of pity, whence

You ask us to find more for her![[14]](#endnote-14)

The antithesis to the charge, however, is effectively silenced because argument cannot be engaged with the dead woman. The main poetic voice tries to supply a surrogate counter-argument by attempting to understand the contexts that have driven the woman to suicide, but the fact that the interlocutor is now dead means any synthesis represented by an agreement that the woman deserves sympathy remains frustratingly unsatisfied. The poem ends with the line: “There is no argument with bone”, emphasizing the unequal dialectic (and perhaps recollecting Hamlet’s discourse with Yorick at the graveside).

This interest in the breakdown of dialectical reasoning is perhaps most fully rendered in the short poem ‘Night-Talk’, which begins with two voices on separate lines presented in quotation marks:

“Dark it is where darkness falls upon the sight.”

“And yet where darkness is there must be must be light.” (17)

The poem opens with a traditional thesis and antithesis represented by two interlocutors engaged in an argument. However, the lines are unbalanced due mainly to the (unnecessary) repetition of “must be” in the second line. This disrupts the balance of what would otherwise be two strict iambic pentameter lines. The second “must be” also has the effect of questioning the confidence of the second speaker’s position. The argument enjoined by these two voices, however, appears to be outside of the consciousness of the main speaker – the third voice that is introduced in line 3: “Those voices argue from that place beyond the bars”. In this context, the “sleep” the speaker refers to later in the poem suggests that the first two voices are external to this expression of an inner consciousness, with line 4 identifying that the head is being used as an “anvil for the tedious argument”. The final line “Everything is black on the starlit sight of order” suggests that conventional argument leads not to enlightenment and elucidation as would be expected by the conventional process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, but to the blackness of not knowing. The Hegelian model itself is rejected as belonging to the starlit sight of order, which really involves pretence at elucidation while in effect real meaning remains ‘black’ or obscured.

Another theme that emerges in some of the poems is that of geographical distance and the feelings of exile. “Jealousy” begins with this sense of physical and temporal, as well as emotional, distance: “So two years, a continent, a sea/Of cold division” (23). “Under a Low Cold Sky” suggests a past sexual relationship, the memory of which manifests itself in anthropomorphic natural images; “small talking bushes, grass’ and ‘sly snares in voices, trees” (9). This relationship suggests a series of revenant memories that are painful. The first stanza uses the typical image of sexual coition as a petit mort: “We died together in a fume of leaves” and those leaves return in a more ominous note in the last line in which the speaker’s awakening in the night from a dream of the lover produces “an acrid sense of leaves”, the decay of the natural world echoing the demise of the relationship. Formally, with its mix of trimeter and tetrameter lines and its suggestion of rhyme and repetition, the poem points towards a striving for order and the certainties of a strict rhythm. As with the relationship, however, this rhythmical and rhyming order remains frustratingly out of reach, half remembered and disrupted by unsettling dreams and ghosts. The use of subtle rhymes with the rejection of solid structure gives several of the poems a sense of order and disorder locked in perpetual struggle and gestures towards one of the main themes Lessing went on to develop in *The Golden Notebook*. As Knapp argues: “It is the friction between tradition and experimentation which gives these poems their intriguing, if not earthshaking, quality” (72). In these poems the order has not yet broken down, however it is perpetually under threat, as in “Song” which has several end rhymes, couplets, and repeated words, but rejects a strict pattern across the three stanzas.

It is difficult to offer comments on the poems collected in this volume as a whole but it can be seen that although disparate and often obscure, they represent Lessing experimenting with different forms of literary expression in response to a growing frustration she has with the adequacy of the conventional realist novel to represent the sense of fragmentation and disconnection she observes in contemporary politics and culture. In terms of personal relationships the arrangement of poems conveys oscillation between feelings of being tied to past loves and of moving on emotionally. Although in the middle of the volume lies “New Man” with its post-apocalyptic intimation of a new kind of humanity, the volume ends with “Jealousy”, the emotion that appears to be shared by both the speaker and the lost love. Ending the volume with this poem suggests that the time to move on has not yet been reached and that the volume reveals not a development but an enclosed meditation on the complexities of current and past relationships. The poems represent an important aspect of Lessing’s writing during this period and warrant closer investigation in relation to the bigger issues and debates she is considering, both in terms of her life as a writer and in terms of her responses to contemporary politics, culture and society in the 1950s. Taken together, the poetry and the drama can be seen to be rehearsing ideas about form and content that are developed more fully in *The Golden Notebook*. Their interest for the Lessing scholar and wider reader, however, is not simply as an adjunct to the fiction but also as valuable works in their own right, worthy of further study and certainly of re-print in some form. They reveal a writer grappling with issues of (post-)colonial dislocation, disillusion with the philosophical rationale behind communist politics, and an interrogation of dominant gender codes, presented in a literary form that deviates from the narrative prose style for which Lessing is most well-known.

**Works Cited**

Allcorn, Derek. “The Unnoticed Generation.” *Universities and Left Review* 4 (1958): 54-58. Print.

Arlett, Robert. “The Dialectical Epic: Brecht and Lessing.” *Twentieth Century Literature* Spring 33:1 (1987): 67-79. Print.

Bentley, Nick. “The Young Ones: A Reassessment of the British New Left’s Representation of 1950s Youth Subcultures.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8:1 (2005): 65-83. Print.

Duncan, Greta, and Roy Wilkie. “Glasgow Adolescents.” *Universities and Left Review* 5 (1958): 24-25. Print.

Graham, Robin. “Twenty ‘New’ Poems by Doris Lessing.” *World Literature Written in English* 18 (1979): 90-8. Print.

Hall, Stuart. “Politics of Adolescence?” *Universities and Left Review* 6 (1959): 2-4. Print.

Knapp, Mona. *Doris Lessing*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 984. Print.

Kullman, Michael. “The Anti-Culture Born of Despair.” *Universities and Left Review* 4 (1958): 51-54. Print.

Lessing, Doris. *After Dinner*. ITV. 24 Sept. 1959. Television.

----. “The Day Stalin Died.” *The Third Programme*. BBC. 22 Mar. 1958. Radio.

----. “Each His Own Wilderness.” *Play With a Tiger and Other Plays*. London: Flamingo, 1966. 99-186. Print.

----. *Fourteen Poems*. Northwood: Scorpion Press, 1959. Print.

----. *Going Home*. London: Michael Joseph, 1957. Print.

----. *The Golden Notebook*. London: Grafton Books, [1962] 1973. Print.

----. “The Grass is Singing.” *Theatre Four*. BBC. 26 Mar. 1962.Television.

----. *The Habit of Loving*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957. Print.

----. *In Pursuit of the English*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960. Print.

----. *Play With a Tiger and Other Plays*. London: Flamingo, 1966. Print.

----. *A Ripple From the Storm*. London: Michael Joseph, 1958. Print.

----. “A Small Personal Voice.” *Declaration*. Ed. Tom Maschler. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957. 11-28. Print.

----. *The Truth About Billy Newton*, BBC. 5 June 1961. Television.

----. *Walking in the Shade: Part Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962*. London: Harper Collins, 1997. Print.

Louw, Pat. “Inside and Outside Colonial Spaces: Border Crossings in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*.” *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*. Ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins. London: Continuum, 2009. 26-43. Print.

Lukács, Georg. *Theory of the Novel A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: Merlin Press, 1971. Print.

Macmillan, Harold. “Address given to Members of both Houses of the Parlia­ment of the Union of South Africa.” *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961.* London: Macmillan, 1972). 473–82. Print.

Rebellato, Dan. “Brecht in Britain.” *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 148-54. Print.

Ridout, Alice, and Susan Watkins, ed. *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*. London: Continuum, 2009. Print.

Ridout, Alice. “Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin*: The Autobiography of a Cosmopolitan ‘Third Culture Kid’.” *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*. Ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins. London: Continuum, 2009. 107-28. Print.

Rubenstein, Roberta. *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. Print.

----. *Literary Half-Lives: Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal and Roman à Clef*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. London: Picador, 1983. Print.

Schlueter, Paul. “The Other Doris Lessing: Poet.” *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon: Essays in Honour of Harry T. Moore*. Ed. Lawrence B. Gamache and Ian S. MacNiven. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1987. 249-60. Print.

Sigal, Clancy. “Nihilism’s Organization Man”. *Universities and Left Review* 4 (1958): 58-65. Print.

----. *Weekend in Dimlock*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1960. Print.

Taylor, Jenny. “Introduction: Situating Reading.” *Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing*.Ed. Jenny Taylor. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982: 1-42. Print.

Thomson, Peter. *Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.

Tynan, Kenneth. *Tynan on Theatre*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964. Print.

Walder, Dennis. “‘Alone in a Landscape’: Lessing’s African Stories Remembered.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43:2 (2008): 99-115. Print.

Watkins, Susan. *Doris Lessing*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Print.

Willett, John. “Bertolt Brecht: An Iconoclast in the Theatre.” *Times Literary Supplement*. 9 March (1956): 141-42. Print.

----. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. London: Methuen, 1959. Print.

----. *Brecht in Context*. Revised edition. London: Methuen, 1998. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review*. London: New Left Books, 1979. Print.

1. I am grateful to Paul Schlueter for tracking down some of Lessing’s less well-known work for Television and Radio. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although Brecht's writings are of an earlier period, they only became widely discussed by the British Left in the 1950s and 60s, see Williams, 1979, 216. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Willett’s “Bertolt Brecht: An Iconoclast in the Theatre” is the front page editorial of *Times Literary Supplement*, for March 9th, 1956. Tynan's several articles on Brecht in the fifties (1956-1959) are collected in *Tynan on Theatre*. John Willett's book *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* was also an important publication in the influence of Brecht in Britain in the fifties. See also Willett, *Brecht in Context*; Thomson, *Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children*; and Rebellato, 'Brecht in Britain'. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In his essay “The Dialectical Epic: Brecht and Lessing”, Arlett argues that it is possible to “make a case for Lessing’s familiarity with Brechtian strategies” (Arlett 70), although he does not cite evidence in Lessing’s own work other than referring to the section in *The Golden Notebook* where Willi is described as having a habit of whistling ‘Mac the Knife’ and remembers “a man named Brecht” in the Frontiers of War section of the novel (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* 126-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Allcorn, “The Unnoticed Generation”; Stuart Hall, “Politics of Adolescence?”; Michael Kullman, “The Anti-Culture Born of Despair”; and Sigal, “Nihilism’s Organization Man”. See also Bentley, “The Young Ones”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Although the “White Protection League” is fictional it almost certainly refers to the real White Defence League that was formed in Britain in 1957, which was run by the neo-Nazi Colin Jordan from an office in Notting Hill. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lessing discusses her time at Denbigh Road, W3, in Notting Hill in *Walking in the Shade*, pp. 1-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Taylor, ‘Introduction: Situating Reading’, 26-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Knapp, *Doris Lessing*, pp. 71-4; Paul Schlueter, ‘The Other Doris Lessing: Poet’; Robin Graham, ‘Twenty “New” Poems by Doris Lessing’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For an account of the importance of Clancy Sigal as an influence on Lessing’s work and characterisation see Roberta Rubenstein’s 2014 book, *Literary Half-Lives: Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal and Roman à Clef*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Watkins, *Doris Lessing*, p. 32; Walder, “‘Alone in a Landscape’: Lessing’s African Stories Remembered”. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Harold Macmillan included this phrase in a speech he gave to the South African Parliament in February 1960. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This topic is indeed one of the central focuses of the edited collection *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, edited by Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum, 2009). See in particular, the essays by Pat Louw and Alice Ridout in this collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In a letter to Edward Thompson, the historian, Lessing explains that the poem was actually begun in the 1940s at a time when Lessing was angry with her mother. The introduced voice, therefore, could approximate to Lessing’s annoyance with what might have been her mother’s support of a conventional castigation of the unnamed woman’s suicide (*Walking in the Shade*, p.194). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)