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“Without Contraries There is no Progression”: Splitting and Multiplicity in

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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A key aspect in *The Golden Notebook*, by British writer Doris Lessing, is the analysis of how women in the 60s are forced to resort to an internal split to find an exit to their situation within the social and familial microcosm they inhabit. Rather than about simple split, we should talk about fragmentation, since we do not only find couples of characters representing the divided self of the main character, but rather groups of alternative and incomplete selves, where each element stands for a fragment that results from the splitting of the original self. Apart from the richness that this multiple split provides concerning the psychological analysis of the characters, the reader is witness to yet another reflection of multiplicity and fragmentation in Lessing's work: the almost infinite variety of literary styles, points of view and voices that the writer employs to enrich the already suggestive subject of the fragmentation of the self, a self that will no longer be considered to be monolithic or homogeneous.

The Golden Notebook, by Doris Lessing, has often been described as a Chinese box, where each part of the novel seems to be embedded in a superior whole: a similar process is at work when it comes to the treatment of the characters within this novel. The concept of repetition is, precisely, a most important element in any psychological approach to works by this writer: rather than repetition or

duplicity, we could make reference, when studying the splitting of the self, to fragmentation and multiplicity. The fragments of the 'ur-personality' that are the result of the splitting of the self, while having, each of them, its own peculiarities and standing for different parts of the original self, are similar and often even symmetrical: the concept of repetition could be said to be, therefore, deeply linked to that of splitting. While Lessing is conscious of the existence of a whole tradition in this direction, both literary and symbolic, in the figure of the 'double' or 'dopp elganger', in her stand as a post-modernist writer, she undertakes the task of playing with this concept, blurring and scattering its borders, while trying to discover its literary and healing possibilities.

The concept of the double that starts to be developed in literature in the 19th c. is subversive in itself, since it undermines stable notions of the homogeneity of the individual by presenting such individual as split into two different selves, often in opposing moral terms of good and evil. While the 'classic' double is always masculine, Lessing radically subverts this concept by presenting in *The Golden Notebook* couples of feminine doubles (Anna/Molly, Anna/Ella) and masculine doubles of an original feminine self (Saul/Anna, Nelson/Ella). In the novel, therefore, there are no masculine/masculine couples: this transcends the classical notion of the doppelganger and confronts the reader with the defiance of the humanist conception of a unified self, providing a 'post-modern' interpretation of the subject as a cultural and social construct.

In *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing makes reference to British poet William Blake, using one of his better-known proverbs: "Without contraries there is no progression" (Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3). Indeed, Lessing's

central character in *The Golden Notebook* (Anna, whom we could equate to the 'original self') contrasts with, relates to, is placed in a permanent dialogue, and confronts those other selves that represent negative or incomplete parts of herself. In Lessing, groups of doubles composed by two women usually establish dialectical relationships: strongly bonded to each other, apparently similar, but intimately opposed; from this contrast, from the opposition between what is unique in each of their personalities, growth emerges. Such is the case with Molly, a friend of Anna so similar to her that their friends often mistake the one for the other. Anna is envious of Molly, most specifically of the latter's ability to adopt different roles. When Saul, Anna's lover, urges Anna to write about "the two women you are" (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 554), Anna understands that Molly is, in fact, a part of herself that has been endowed with an objective and external existence. At that moment, Anna is able, since she has recognised Molly and the ability she envied in her as a part of herself, to separate from Molly. Likewise, Anna has to confront and become conscious of the existence of those other 'selves' she meets, so as to integrate them into herself or reject them. The function of these projected selves is to collaborate in the integration of the self, complementing each other: chaos and conflicts bear a curative function in the definition of the self.

While the relationships between feminine doubles are basically harmonic and slow-paced, masculine/feminine groups of doubles unleash a series of destructive powers that threaten to destroy the whole self. Thus, Tommy, Nelson, Da Silva and Saul constantly question Anna and her conscience, producing movement and fast-paced action in the plot and in Anna's personal development. In this sense, their effect in Anna's healing (here, understood as 'integration') is much more violent. These selves embody negative displaced characteristics that Anna will not admit as

her own. Men in *The Golden Notebook* are cynical, brutal, egocentric, even violent, and their main function seems to be to interfere, to interrogate and to question: in this sense, it is easier to identify them with the usual formulation of the doppelgänger. In the novel, they represent what Anna terms “the malicious irresponsible principle” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 506): ‘malicious’ should be understood here not only in a moral sense, but rather as something that, by mining the convictions of the original subject, allows growth and healing to take place.

These masculine doubles threaten, at times, to impose themselves and prevent the original self from being restored (similarly, Hyde threatened to prevent Jekyll from returning in R. L. Stevenson’s classic *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). On a biographical note, it is interesting to observe how Lessing’s autobiography provides us with an example of an “alternative” personality in her childhood, a comic-relief self that acts as a mask to be shown to the world: ‘Tigger’ Lessing, a “personality expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport . . . An extrovert, in that it was a protection for the person I really was, “Tigger” an aspect of the Hostess” (Lessing, *Under my Skin*, 89).

These menacing masculine characters are finally deformed into caricatures: thus Saul, who is the most menacing and violent part of Anna’s self, finds his outlines blurred until he gets mixed and confused with the most comic and deformed aspects of other negative selves such as Da Silva and Paul Blakenhurst, in the figure of the *projectionist*: this diffuse figure stands for Anna as the essence of menace, “the principle of joy in destruction” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 518): all the peculiarities of the negative characters that Anna and her feminine doubles meet converge in this evil figure. The projectionist is an ironic character that reminds

Anna of her failures and highlights those negative aspects of herself that she will not admit as her own. Dreams and nightmares about the projectionist will only cease when Anna herself “becomes” the projectionist, integrating him in herself: “this time there was no male disguise. I was the female dwarf figure” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 518): at this stage, Anna will also be able to separate from Saul and overcome her creative block.

Apart from the compilation of all the negative selves that is the projectionist, the main negative “self” that Anna has to face in the book is Saul. He stands for all those negative qualities Anna would hate to admit in herself: he is an egocentric, domineering character, with no ability for empathy. The persistent contact between him and Anna, (since they share Anna’s flat and they develop an intimate sexual relationship) places Anna on the brink of losing her own identity to him. The inner golden notebook (pages 529 to 599) is in this sense the tale of a fight between two opposing personalities that complement each other, mixing and becoming a blur in the process. In Lessing’s words, Anna and Saul

‘break down’ into each other . . . They hear each other’s thoughts, recognise each other in themselves . . . In the inner Golden Notebook, which is written by both of them, you can no longer distinguish between what is Saul and what is Anna (*The Golden Notebook*, 8).

After these experiences of confrontation, recognition, rejection, projection and assimilation, animosity disappears and opens the way for a new, creative relationship: Anna provides Saul with the beginning of a novel, while Saul helps

Anna to overcome her creative block by giving her the first sentence for her new work. The definitive integration is thus described by Anna:

I felt towards him as if he were my brother, as if, like a brother, it wouldn't matter how we strayed from each other, how far apart we were, we would always be flesh of one flesh, and think each other's thoughts (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 556).

Multiplicity, and the chaos and fragmentation derived from it, is not limited exclusively to the different parts of the characters' selves: splitting in *The Golden Notebook* is also extended to the literary and the stylistic. Thus, we find the fragmentation of points of view, the non-existence of an omniscient, unitary narrator, and the use of diverse narrative devices, all of which deny the homogeneity of the literary work. Within *The Golden Notebook* we find, interlaced, a "realist" short novel as established by the 19th c. canon (*Free Women*), and a series of heterogeneous and even contradictory discourses, represented by the different notebooks. The organisation (or rather, partition) of Anna's experience in several pieces responds to her need to escape fragmentation and chaos; as Lessing explains: "She keeps four [notebooks] and not one because, as she recognises, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness – of breakdown" (*The Golden Notebook*, 7). None of the notebooks contains, on its own, a definition of what or who Anna is.

Therefore, Anna divides her experience into four different notebooks: "a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue

notebook which tries to be a diary” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 418). Within each of the notebooks we also find gaps in the narrative: crossed out sentences, asterisks, newspaper clippings... This artificial division of reality tries to shape and re-elaborate external reality: as Anna acknowledges, “words are form, and if I am at a pitch where shape, form, expression are nothing, then I am nothing” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 419). This attempt to compartmentalise experience will soon, however, show itself to be a failure: the external chaos produced by the breakdown of the surrounding social and historical order is graphically presented in the surplus of information that Anna tries to make sense of by including newspaper clippings in the yellow notebook and in the walls of her room.

The five parts that the novella *Free Women* is divided into are interlaced with the four notebooks: Sprague analyses these notebooks and the different parts of *Free Women* as “environment mirrors of the self” (90) and they are, in fact, mirrors for Lessing to place her main character, Anna. However dissimilar the different structural tones used may seem (stream of consciousness, film scripts, clippings, diaries...), they mirror each other: for example, both Anna and her ‘projected’ self, Ella, are writers who are becoming disenchanted with politics and overcoming difficult familial and sentimental problems. What could be the purpose of re-writing the main novel (i.e. *Free Women*) in a series of mirrored images, slightly different in their structure and subject matters? Once more, we must notice how Anna’s job as a writer affects her observation and interaction with the world, displacing a direct relationship between world and novel and letting literature act as a mediator. Anna tries, by turning her experience into fiction, to assimilate the world, her difficult place and role in society, and her relation with those around her. The status of the four notebooks as a reflection of different aspects of her life is acknowledged by Anna:

“obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 211).

After this effort of splitting and analysing experience, Anna is frustrated in her attempt to produce a coherent and lineal story. The notebooks start to interfere with each other, and reality is no longer separate from fiction. For example, the blue notebook, the one devoted to “truth” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 418) invades the yellow notebook: reality and fiction become one in Anna’s mind, and in the transcript of her mind that is found in her notebooks. The blue notebook becomes a symbol of Anna’s failure, since its form (a diary) presupposes a function (the immediate description of reality) that it no longer fulfills. From page 475 onwards, the blue notebook shows no dates.

All four notebooks are abruptly put to an end by Anna in her frustration when she becomes aware of her inability to understand reality: thus, for example, the black notebook ends after the inability to narrate a dream “about total sterility” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 475), and the yellow notebook (the one she uses to develop literary ideas), is finished with the comment: “If I’ve gone back to pastiche, then it’s time to stop” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 475). Words are felt as no longer valid to describe experience. Faced with this failure, Anna recurs to the golden notebook in a desperate attempt to unify her self: “I’ll pack away the four notebooks. I’ll start a new notebook, all of myself in a book” (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 528). This notebook shows a series of characteristics rescued from each of the previous notebooks: there are no dates; the loss of the sense of time and reality is reflected in the narrative form, and there is a recurring use of streams of consciousness and the narration of dreamlike and hallucinatory experiences.

Thus, the inner Golden Notebook integrates the different parts of experience that Anna had tried to analyse separately (and unsuccessfully) in the four previous notebooks. The process of integration simultaneously at work in Anna's self, as we observed, is thus reflected in the golden notebook: "now that they [=the notebooks] are finished, from their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*" (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 7): a celebration of the integration of all the disperse and split-off parts, of the creation of a complete self.

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