



'Oh, there are so many things I want to write'
**Becoming an author: Doris Lessing and the Whitehorn Letters
from 1944 to 1949¹**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the narrative process identified in the Whitehorn Letters, written by Doris Lessing from 1944 to 1949, as historical documents that form a single, coherent whole. Their significance is assessed by means of an epistemological reflection that sheds light on the path by which the young Lessing established her identity as an author (Bieder, 1993). In the letter-writing process, Lessing declares her aim to become a writer. The letters also characterise the writer as a historical subject, and describe the relationship between this historical subject and the individual who writes the correspondence. Since the letters formulate a coherent discourse about Lessing's authorial identity, I investigate whether using a model for reading them may be beneficial. I believe that additional nuances could be detected in her narratives by revisiting Lessing and examining, in the centenary of her birth, some hitherto unknown parts of her writings, as these letters represent.

KEYWORDS: Doris Lessing, Whitehorn Letters, Written correspondence, Archives, Narrative, Authorial identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the process undergone by the young Doris Lessing writing from the Colonies until the time she arrived in London in 1949. The materials for my analysis are the

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Whitehorn Letters, a collection deposited at the Doris Lessing Archive held at the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at the Library Archives, University of East Anglia (hereinafter, UEA), UK. Lessing met Pilot Officer John Whitehorn in 1943 and she started writing to him in 1944, when he moved from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to India, until 1949. A love affair, intimacy, friendship and comradeship are all intertwined in the letters, where Lessing's two main aspirations at the time come together: being a writer and leaving Southern Rhodesia for London. The attempt to contextualise (Núñez Seixas, 2017) leads us to Lessing's autobiography (1995), where she writes that as a young member of the Southern Rhodesia Labour Party, she met three students from Cambridge, UK, "sent to the Colony to learn how to be pilots [and] were good friends" (Lessing, 1995: 311). Soon they all shared the "pleasure it was, talking (...) not as confrontation, rhetoric, accusation" (Lessing, 1995: 311), about literature and politics. Lessing remembers the laughs but also the cynicism that pervaded their meetings (Lessing, 1995). Nevertheless, for her "they were a confirmation and a promise" (Lessing, 1995: 311). This "promise" might well be encapsulated in the young woman's dream about future possibilities. In her own words, Lessing affirms that they "changed me (...) because they brought England close, as somewhere I might really be one day (...) the very second the war ended" (Lessing, 1995: 311).

The Doris Lessing Archive opened in 2015 and holds the letters under discussion here. In 2008, Whitehorn's step-son, Francis Fitz-Gibbon, gave Professor Christopher Bigsby the letters and other Lessing papers covering the 1969-2007 period. Bigsby in turn deposited them in the UEA Archives. When my research began I was able to read a portion of Lessing's correspondence written over several decades. It included the Whitehorn Letters which are a collection of 110 letters sent to John Whitehorn and his friend Coll MacDonald in five years. Some of the letters are addressed individually and others to both of them. Lessing also refers to their mutual friend Leonard Smith (Smithie) in some of the letters. I also had the opportunity to listen to recordings of two interviews conducted by Bigsby with Lessing in 2008, in which they discussed this particular collection of letters, among other topics.²

After visitors enter the Archives' Reading Room door, they invariably stop to look at the huge photograph of the writer on one of her visits to the UEA. Dressed in a deep blue kaftan, Lessing is sitting on a theatre seat, slightly leaning over a young lady who is squatting down by her side, probably asking her a question. From the Reading Room window, the trees look as if they were part of a framed, art composition. In the corridor on the other side, there are three smaller photographs on display: a sketch of Lessing making a speech in 2002,

² My warmest thanks to Archivist Dr Justine Mann for her generous assistance, as well as to Bridget Gillies for her patience and help. I also wish to thank Dr Jos Smith, Director of the British Archive for Contemporary Writing, for his time and his helpful support.

Lessing receiving an honorary degree at the UEA in 1985, and the 1950 edition cover of *The Grass is Singing*. This gives a slight indication of how much Lessing's legacy is appreciated at the UEA. As Sanne Koevoets says, "libraries and archives offer the potential of empowerment to marginalised subjects, and (...) they indeed are experienced as either peaceful or exciting spaces by many researchers as well" (Koevoets, 2013: 142) and although the letters were only recently made available to the public, access to them now fosters synergies between readers and researchers that promote awareness of the Archives' collections.³

I agree with Margaretta Jolly (2008) that letters have value if they are regarded as public documents that may reveal truths about their authors. My first visits to the Archive were focused on Lessing's correspondence with some of her contemporary writers. However, I later allowed myself some leeway to go beyond the initial focus of interest, and looked for associated material (Kaplan, 1990) so in addition to the documents I was searching for, I decided to request access to the Whitehorn Letters. Although the sentimental appeal of the letters (Fravet, 2004) was not my primary concern, when I read the Whitehorn Letters, some questions emerged that went beyond Lessing's expression of her infatuation with Whitehorn. In my view, the relationship between them, described in the Whitehorn Letters, goes beyond the reader's expectations, as it contains a wealth of communication between Lessing, Whitehorn, Coll and Smithie that formed the basis of an affective community where none of the three men involved appropriated Lessing's gradual empowerment as a writer. Within this community, the love story between Lessing and Whitehorn was but a part of a historical narrative that is ripe for exploration.

What follows is an account of my investigation of Lessing's letters to Whitehorn, treating them as historical documents that contain a narrative process that develops through the progression of the correspondence. The significance of these letters which cover various aspects of human nature, the first half of the 20th century and the making and outlook of an author, can be explored by an epistemological reflection. This approach will shed some light on the path by which the young Lessing established her identity as an author (Bieder, 1993). In the letters, Lessing clearly states her aim to become a writer. The description of her days in Southern Rhodesia renders the letters valuable documents for understanding her attempts at increased agency and autonomy in identifying herself as a writer. The letters also interestingly characterise the writer as a historical subject, and describe the relationship between this historical subject and the individual who wrote the correspondence. I argue that Lessing's aim here was to make her condition as a writer visible to herself and to others (Martos Pérez, 2016) by developing a narrative that was addressed both to her three friends and to herself. Thus, these letters are an avenue through which Lessing pursues and fights to establish her authorial identity, creating "a paper trail" (Clapp, 2012: 10) of evidence through

³ A few items are accessible online. See <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/library/archives/bacw/featured>

the narrative sequence of her written correspondence. The documents reflect the complexity of the personal and social transition involved in her migration process including her decision to leave Africa and to establish herself as a writer in Europe, and her negotiation of the benefits and costs this entailed. I suggest that it is useful to develop a model to read these letters in order to gain further knowledge about Lessing's authorial identity processes, whose centrality during her early years is crucial to better understand Lessing's determination and strength to follow her path as a writer.

The Whitehorn Letters are historical documents that bear witness to Lessing's early work and life trajectory (Verdejo & Chacón, 2018). They also display a coherent discourse that conveys Lessing's awareness of who and what she was, and her determination to make every effort to achieve her purpose. These letters show the progress of events in Lessing's life at the time. And, following Altman, they have a value as connectors (Altman, 1982) capable of joining distant points and serving as a bridge between sender and receiver. This epistolary exchange can then be seen as a legacy (Verdejo & Chacón, 2018) that brings to the fore how Lessing negotiated her way to establishing her identity as a writer. I will try to show whether these letters serve to illuminate how Lessing managed to create the order to express what moved her to write. To achieve my purpose, my questions are a compass to explore how Lessing established and developed her identity as an author: are these letters creators of meaning in themselves, by being mediums through which a reaction is obtained (Altman, 1982) in the reader? Similarly, how can these letters shed light on Lessing's experience as a young woman who was struggling to become a writer? And finally, how well did Lessing manage to reconcile her anxieties as a writer and the demands of the written text? The interest of the Whitehorn Letters lies, then, in the young Lessing's production and the construction of her identity as a narrator, using words displayed in letters as a narrative that had to be born in order to be told and made public. It may be useful to remember Lessing's awareness that she "was a part of an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa" (Lessing, 1995: 160). Briefly, since the end of World War II in 1945 and its aftermath of destruction, the world experienced the confrontation between the two of the powers that made the defeat of fascism and Nazism possible. Thus began a conflict between two worlds that defended their economic, political and ideological systems, physically developing their geostrategic interests. The Cold War marked the post-war international policy, creating different influential areas: the United States and its allies represented capitalism and liberal democracy; the USRR, with its satellites and communism. A new map of the world order was to be designed, originating a process of decolonisation in the old European empires located in different continents.

2. CONDITIONS FOR DORIS LESSING TO BE A WRITER

A trail, an overpass, a road... the use of metaphors includes these letters in an area of study whose “les escripteurs frontière n’est plus aussi claire entre, ou entre les objets” (Dauphin, 1995: 91), as letter-writing is a symbolic place where the trace, the text and the process meet (1995: 91). The letters contain vibrant discussions and descriptions of the process Lessing was continuously engaged in as she was becoming a writer, an ever-present theme that runs parallel to her wish to leave Southern Rhodesia for England. The correspondence between Lessing and Whitehorn covers a five-year period from Whitehorn’s leaving Southern Rhodesia to the time when Lessing was seeking to find accommodation for herself and her son, Peter, in London, where they arrived from Africa in June 1949. The Whitehorn Letters show that the degree of intimacy between Lessing and Whitehorn hovered at the boundary between two realms: one pertains to the private, intimate domain, the other to the literary and educational arena, as recurring subjects of their correspondence.

Lessing arrived in Southern Rhodesia from Kermanshah (now Iran) with her parents and younger brother when she was five years old. She had read voraciously from early childhood, and was acutely observant of the world around her (Lessing, 1995: 135; 60-63, 160, 192, 196). Lessing’s was “the world of books” (Lessing, 1995: 95).⁴ As Julia Kristeva explains, “the human being [is] a subjectivity in permanent creation; we are never finished” (Kristeva, 2002: 184). I contend that, in her involvement with the process of writing, Lessing would be facing a vital, on-going process of self-discovery (Kristeva, 1969; Karpf, 2018); on her way to finding her voice as a writer; she was “translating experience into words” (Rice, 2002: 180), giving meaning to the construction of her identity. Lessing was never afraid to ask questions and listen to the answers she received (Lessing, 1995). While asking questions did not always result in an answer (Lessing, in Gray, 2004), the creative process was a network-like process that opened up a myriad of dynamic possibilities (Lyons, 2012). Understood as a “social practice” (Barton & Hall, 2000: 6; Rodríguez Martín, 2014: 147), Lessing’s writing in the Whitehorn Letters reflects her ongoing visibility within a literary system that was taking shape during the years when the correspondence took place. These letters are the multi-voiced expression of a woman writing private documents that would expand their scope and meaning into broader discourses, made public by means of a dynamic exchange of interests, needs and purposes shared among the individuals to whom they were addressed. As Honneth (1995) informs, the intersubjective process of mutual recognition strongly contributes to the construction of identity in a life process. For Judith Butler, recognition is a notion envisioned as a desirable form of communication, the Other is “a

⁴ Lessing describes the library of the Convent where she studied for four years as a child as “a treasure cave.” Before reading *Oliver Twist* or *Vanity Fair*, the nuns made her ask for her parents’ permission (Lessing, 1995: 95).

reflection” of ourselves, thus offering chances for recognition (2008). In my view, the appreciation of, and respect for, her skills as a writer, the friendly recommendations of new readings and the qualified feedback received contributed to fuelling a basic notion of self-esteem and agency and encouraged Lessing to publicly make her case.

Something that stands out in the Whitehorn Letters is Lessing’s desire for having optimal conditions for writing, which seems to constitute a biographical trope. The setting for the discourse was Africa and the discourse time period (Kristeva, 2017) was the five years of Lessing’s life while she was writing the letters. At that time, Lessing was concerned with how to divide her time between her job as a typist, her duties as a member of the Communist Party, and the demands of her roles as a wife, a mother, and a daughter who struggled across an intimate dilemma towards her parents and her family life. A number of the Whitehorn Letters show that she found it difficult to meet the physical and emotional conditions required for writing, even from a young age, and she stressed the fact that she needed time and space to do it. This can be illustrated by the following statement in one of her earliest letters to Whitehorn: “I toy with the idea of living exclusively for the things of the mind” (Lessing, letter 008, Tuesday, Jan 1945),⁵ mentioned in her autobiography as well: “I was fighting hard for time to write” (Lessing, 1995: 369).

Some letters are useful in understanding Lessing’s efforts to overcome the obstacles she encountered in her desire to develop both her imagination and her skills in order to become a writer. They show Lessing struggling to be able to write amidst the many demands on her time: “I havnt [sic] written a damned thing myself for some time. No time” (Lessing, letter 052, 2nd May 1946). Lessing’s determination has also been noted by Lara Feigel (2018), who refers to the various occupations that Lessing engaged in in addition to her duties within the Communist Party (Feigel, 2018). Feigel remarks that this period of Lessing’s life “can seem as if dominated by amatory matters” (Feigel, 2018: 105-106) and adds that both Gottfried and Doris Lessing led meetings and discussions for the communist cause, with the consequence that political work finally became the primary purpose in Lessing’s life at the time, love being relegated to a secondary plane (Feigel, 2018). It can therefore be argued that it was Lessing’s commitment to the Communist Party (which included giving speeches and writing for the local Party newsletter) and to the many other claims on her time, that made her aware of her need to detach herself in order to be more available and engage in writing.

Lessing’s days were not only devoted to the Communist Party, household duties and her job at the office, but they were also dedicated to writing short stories, plays and her first novel draft. In her autobiography, Lessing tells that she was writing some poetry that was published “in a magazine called *The New Rhodesia*, whose editor was N. H. Wilson”

⁵ Dates are not always clear in some letters, as, for example, on this one.

(Lessing, 1995: 299). Making reference to the end of World War Two (1995: 322), she follows by saying that at that time she was “writing *The Grass is Singing*” (Lessing, 1995: 325). The novel was published in 1950 in London by Michel Joseph. Her relationship with Gottfried Lessing was making her question married life at the time, although her concern had to do with the intertwining dilemma of marriage and morality (Lessing, letter 013, 15th February 1945). All these demands affected her ability to commit herself to her writing, to the point of admitting that she was “overworked and cant cope and want to write and havent time” (Lessing, letter 012, 12th February 1945). Romanticism and political discussion were obvious motifs in Lessing’s letters; however, as Mary A. Favret’s says (2004: 10), the reading scope and appreciation of the letters cannot be coloured by how Lessing presented herself privately and publicly as a writer. Within the compendium of intimate details, such as the account of her experience of pregnancy and labour (Lessing, letter 058, 24th Sptember 1946; letter 059, 11th October 1946), Lessing manages to use her letter writing to establish her priorities and states her firm decision to make more room for writing. Two years after having claimed her difficulties to handle an array of duties she would plainly exclaim: “Oh, there are so many things I want to write” (Lessing, letter 064, 25th March 1947).⁶

3. ‘I WALLOW HAPPILY IN BOOKS’

While some of the Whitehorn Letters bear witness to Lessing’s commitment to communism, they are also proof of the process Lessing was undergoing in turning herself into a writer, against all odds. Lessing was clearly setting her stall out to be an author and she underwent a twofold process: she felt the need to feed her passion for reading and learning, while at the same time seeking suitable models to learn from. Lessing’s love for books is also shown in her autobiography in reference to when she learnt to read: “I learned to read and triumphantly entered the world of information (...) and then books themselves” (Lessing, 1995: 60). Lessing’s words reflect that it was a major event for her as a child; as a result, she discovered a world of opportunities that involved an appreciation of the meaning of the world around her. And reading was not only a pleasurable activity but a way to educate herself. Lessing’s craving for suitable educational models can be seen in her sharing her readings of classical and contemporary authors with Whitehorn and Coll, as in her statement that “the (...) books I can read constantly (...) are Dostoievsky⁷ and Woolf. (...) I have never found a poet that I can read at any time, like any of these writers” (Lessing, letter 051, 22nd March 1946). Similarly, there is evidence of her appreciation of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*,

⁶ The heading of this letter reads: “Heavens knows, about the 25th March.” The year is 1947 in the Archives’ transcription of the letter. See footnote 5 above.

⁷ The Archives’ transcription adds: [Dostoyevsky].

as when she muses to Whitehorn: “I’d like an enormous room with nothing in it, in the middle of a garden. It must be white, and very high, with a desk and a chair and a vast divan covered with bright cushions. That’s all. Outside flowers. Occasionally you might come to visit me but in between, nobody. The sea must be outside the windows” (Lessing, letter 070, 4th May 1947). We know that Lessing was reading *The Waves* while she was working on a draft of her first novel, although no explicit mention is made if this “first novel” was *The Grass is Singing*; nearly a year after the above letter she writes “Woolf again” (Lessing, letter 084, 24 Feb. 1948) and insists on the difficulties she faces when trying to write: “My novel (...) is miles in advance of the first draft. It has good bits in it” (Lessing, letter 086, 15th August 1948). As her work progressed she continued to yearn for sufficient time to write. We now know that the novel developed as she coped with multiple duties, both personal and public, which competed for her attention in her daily life. She claims: “I feel to make the thing fuse would need two months all by myself in the desert writing and never speaking to anyone. Needless to say this is quite impossible. It [her novel] really has got good bits in it. It has also bloody bits in it” (Lessing, letter 086, 15th August 1948).

It is important to acknowledge that Lessing did not keep her hunger for reading and learning a private concern shied out from her correspondents. Although the letters tell of a passion for Whitehorn that went beyond the kinship she shared with Coll or Smithie, she foremost confessed her interest in reading, as well as her need to write. Lessing is transparent on this: “...have been seeing plays, films, listening to music and acquiring culture” (Lessing, letter 052, 2nd May 1946). Lessing, as a writer in the making, felt that her independence as an artist may have been blighted by the absence of a formal education. That is why she begs for understanding from the recipient of the letter, an exercise in *captatio benevolentiae* that contains a fine sense of irony accompanied by a characteristic good mood: “Do you consider my tendency to write long, illspelt and ungrammatical letters? In case you hadn’t suspected it, I had better point out that I haven’t been taught to reason logically” (Lessing, letter 009, [19th January 1945]).⁸ This apparent lack of logic drove Lessing to a natural appreciation of her ability and to throw herself into what she felt was her task as a writer. She was a constant reader, as evidenced by her mentioning countless authors, and she was encouraged in this by John, Smithie and Coll.⁹ The support she was asking for was met by Smithie’s role in

⁸ Letter dated by the Archive.

⁹ In the five-year correspondence period, Lessing mentions her readings of Jane Austen, Baudelaire, Arnold Bennet, Henry Bordeaux, Tom Brown, Byron, Carlyle, Chekov, Donne, John Dos Passos, Dostoevski, T.S. Eliot, Ford, Anatole France, Gautier, Heredia, Herodotus, John Hersey, G.M. Hopkins, Kafka, Omar Kayam, Keats, Sydney Keyes, Lamb, D.H. Lawrence, Rosamund Lehmann, Sinclair Lewis, Compton Mackenzie, Mallarmé, Katherine Mansfield, André Maurois, Plato, Proust, Sappho, Madame de Sévigné, Shakespeare, Silone, Edith Sitwell, C.P. Snow, Swift, Tolstoy, Wanda Wassilevska, Webster, Whitman, Virginia Woolf and Lin Yutang.

Lessing also mentions Balzac and Ezra Pound, but states that she had read their works before these letters were written. Sometimes Lessing writes only titles, as with *Huckleberry Finn*, *Micheline et l’Amour*,

revising and correcting what she called her “first novel.”¹⁰ The spelling mistakes in a number of her letters could be the result of fast typing, but may have been caused by her uncertainty and her desire to have her writing corrected. Her humility did not hide her concern, as when she tells Whitehorn about Smithie’s correction of her first novel’s draft. Lessing observes that

Smithie has been very good over it. He said it was ‘brilliant’ in bits, and on the level of a woman’s magazine story in others. (...) [Smithie] is putting it into shape for me, a very necessary work. Have suggested, if it is any good, that we be co-authors, but from time to time have a feeling that the combination of Smithie’s subtlety and my blood sweat and tears might be rather startling. (...) And I couldn’t say adequately how grateful I am to him for doing it. (...) if left to myself I should just throw it into a drawer and start on the next (...) And if it never comes to anything, well it’s been interesting doing it, and I’ve learnt a lot (Lessing, letter 052, 2nd May 1946).

The business side of being a writer was an increasing concern for Lessing. She asked somebody else to revise and correct her novel for her. And by offering Smithie to be listed as co-author of the book, Lessing acknowledged his vital contribution. Therefore this was a two-way, give-and-take process. Their collaboration involved her positive, sometimes intuitive, consent, aimed at having her work legitimised. Her perseverance is noteworthy, as her modesty: “...as when giving a lecture, (...) one always imagines oneself smaller than one is” (Lessing, letter 056, 14th August 1946). Although Lessing was increasingly certain of her authorial identity and she shared her appreciation of it with the three men she corresponded with, sometimes she preferred to remain detached from the outcome of her work: “But if one didn’t believe, as one wrote a thing, that it wasn’t too bad, nothing would ever get written. It is only afterwards you can afford to be objective” (Lessing, letter 056, 14th August, 1946).¹¹

As seen above, the letters reflected her doubts as well as her provocative twists on her reading, such as those on Byron’s poetry. Lessing wrote to Coll that she “understands [Byron] is a great poet” (Lessing, letter 041, 19th October 1945). She wittily admits that she was “for hours, reading religeously line by line” (Lessing, letter 041, 19th October 1945) to finally acknowledge that afterwards she got up at midnight to copy some verses, possibly in an attempt to grasp the poetry that she was evaluating: “I must in fairness say that I have only volume one, and presumably vols. 2 and 3 would be better.” (Lessing, letter 041, 19th October, 1945). Nonetheless, the humorous nature of the anecdote and the immediacy of the letters written to Whitehorn show that Lessing developed a close bond with him. She

Stephen Hero, “Philosophy of Betrayal on Koestler and White,” *To the Lighthouse, Jacob’s Room*, or states that she is reading “detective stories” (Lessing, letter 092, 28th September 1948) without naming the authors.

¹⁰ We know that Lessing’s first novel was *The Grass is Singing*. Nevertheless, in these letters she only speaks of a “first novel,” without providing a title.

¹¹ The letter’s heading reads “About 14th Aug.”

confessed her feelings by using a lyrical tone that was often found as a final touch in the letters: “I wish you were here and we could get into a car and rush off to the sea and spend the afternoon in the sun eating oranges. Darling” (Lessing, letter 070, 4th May, 1947). Whitehorn’s support for Lessing can be seen through how she responded to him during the years of their correspondence. As his letters are not available, the extent of his feelings for her cannot be assessed; however, the continuous conversation she engaged in with him reveals how Whitehorn met both an educational and emotional need in Lessing’s life. Her comments on what she was reading give the impression that some of the books may have been his recommendations. When he sent Lessing his books —“I have just received a packing case full of your books” (Lessing, letter 019, 21st March 1945)— her love for books is clear from her words. She expressed her appreciation for what books represented for her, as part of a cultural imaginary that populated her mind: “and as a result am precipitated into woe, because I can’t think of nothing more terrible than to have to give away one’s books, and therefore shall console myself with the thought that after the war I shall send them or bring them all back again” (Lessing, letter 019, 21st March 1945). Five years later, practical reasons would lead her to leave behind any possessions that were not strictly necessary for her journey to London.

The process of writing the Whitehorn Letters was part of Lessing’s training and education. Moreover, they were an opportunity to share her *gusto* for reading both classical and contemporary authors, as well as her disposition for debate. For example, in connection with classical references such as Keat’s *Hyperion*, she made an inquisitive comment on Greece’s past *grandeur*: “I remember that it flowered out of millions of slaves, which people tend to forget. I hope you don’t” (Lessing, letter 038, 24th September, 1945). While she discussed her views on her readings, as for example her admiration for Lamb’s “literary discussions and references” which run parallel to her “amazement” at Lamb’s silence about Keats or her dislike of Shelley and Byron (Lessing, letter 042).

Lessing also described her growing process of becoming a published author, as when she says that she was finishing stories, a novel or a play, and sending them to be published, examples of her strong commitment to making her work visible.¹² A similar dialogue thread shows her trust in MacDonald’s guiding role, as some letters addressed to him demonstrate, when Lessing openly asks: “What does *credo quod incredibile* mean? Please dear Coll bear in mind that I have never been educated. (...) Could you please tell me who or what *Attridae* was? It sounds classical c.f. Edith Sitwell ‘she, *Atridae* like, devours her blood?’ Gottfried doesn’t know. Further, why was Saturn kicked out of heaven? c.f. Keat’s *Hyperion*. Have been reading Keats with a sense of duty...” (Lessing, letter 038, 24th September, 1945). Her reference to this ‘sense of duty’ may well be connected to her impressions on Byron’s poetry,

¹² Letters 062, 063, 064, 069, 077, 100, 102 are clear in this respect.

referred to above. While Byron seemed to cause an effect on her similar to falling asleep, Keats is taken as a classical necessity; she reads him because it may open avenues to nurture her cultural interests. Her words also evoke the pleasure she takes in seeing her growth in her reading process, as observed when, for example, she says that having read Herodotus she has “returned to Webster and Ford with relief [and] with passionate admiration” (Lessing, letter 059, 11th October 1946). Later on in the same letter she adds that she would “give anything to see the Duchess of Malfi on the Stage” and follows to inform that she is “reading Sappho, who has my unqualified approval. One day I shall come to Cambridge, and you can teach me Greek. Poor Coll, what a task. (...) Also, reading the plays of Shakespeare that I havent. In short, I lie in bed, and wallow happily in words’ and continues informing that she has also read the letters of Mme. de Sevigné ‘with much interest’ (Letter 059, 11th October 1946)¹³. This letter, addressed to Coll, is particularly relevant because in it Lessing describes her experience of labour without omitting details as regards her pains and the physical description of her newly arrived son. After her description she is able to detach herself from a more emotional narrative by changing the subject and offering a review of her readings, as mentioned above, while she is in hospital recovering from labour. Lessing puts an end to the letter offering Coll to send him a parcel with food and informing of her son’s name, Peter Nicolas (Letter 059, 11th October 1946). This letter is preceded by one addressed to Whitehorn, in which Lessing described her first son and her daughter’s births. It is interesting to read how the narrative develops about this particular subject: “I have often thought that women get so used to all kind of earthy processes, like menstruation, and pregnancy, which they hardly notice, that we forget how horribly they might strike you who never suffer them. A woman takes so much of this kind of thing in her stride” (Lessing, letter 058, 24th September, 1946). The naturalness of women physiological processes is discussed by Lessing as unknowable by men. Lessing’s words unveil empathy and criticism. With “how horribly they might strike you,” Lessing shows an understanding of men’s lack of education and knowledge about women. Her criticism might well indicate that the experiences lived by women as regards their bodies’ cycles belong to a realm that men do not seem to be prepared to understand (‘how horribly they might strike you’), thus acting as a force of culturally insurmountable differences.

4. THE WRITER

When Smithie returns the draft of the novel to her after correcting it Lessing claims that she is “incapable of judging (...) what is good or bad that I write” (Lessing, letter 057, 25th August 1946). The desire to be somehow guided in her path to becoming an author conveyed

¹³ Mme. de Sevigné will be a reference figure in the novel *Love, Again* (1997).

a need to let someone else take a lead role as a teacher or mentor. Her dedication demanded a companion who would read her narratives while she was teaching herself and developing her skills. Lessing's initial motives should be used as a reference to read the letters: the paths, diversions and achievements of a young woman pursuing the space, time and conditions to discover her voice as a writer. Her autobiography provides an explanation of why and how she wanted to be a writer, and how she was positive that in coming to England she was "doing what [she] had to do, which was to write" (Lessing, 1998: 123). In her autobiography, Lessing (1995: 12) focused on recounting her past, and admitted that memories can be blurry as they unfold and colour experience. However, readers often approach texts from the past from the "perspective of present-day knowledge and concerns" (Kenyon, 1996: xxi). The Whitehorn Letters, written fifty years before Lessing's autobiography, contain abundant signs that she wanted to find untrodden paths to incorporate aspects or states of her public and private life into her novels, short stories and drama pieces. The Whitehorn Letters are an ongoing conversation that is notable due to the permanent absence of the interlocutors. This absence turns into presence through a "correspondence utopia," as Ricardo Piglia refers to it, because it annuls the present and makes the future the only possible place for dialogue (Piglia, 1992: 84). Geographical distance and historical events such as World War II meant that the flows of communication between people were very different from what we expect today, as was the case with Lessing and Whitehorn, Coll and Smithie. Understood as a social practice, the communication among the four was a private network designed to share knowledge and understanding, persistently animated by Lessing's lengthy epistles.¹⁴ There was, indeed, a stark contrast between the notion of letter writing, and the often cryptic brevity and paucity of content we are used to today. The use of social media and electronic devices such as mobile phones make it possible for individuals to send and receive messages instantly, but may deprive people of the opportunity to engage in a more extended and thoughtful communication process.

Nevertheless, the encounter with the addressee ("You") allowed Lessing to express herself openly in the texts, using irony, twinkly use of language, witty jokes and remarks, and lengthy discussions. For example, Lessing's ideological revelations include her anxieties towards the Communist Party and about being a communist. Her scepticism emerged as she voiced her doubts as to whether Communism could transform the world into "the perfect liberal society" (Lessing, letter 038, 24th September 1945) and she went on to say: "I cant see anything ahead for any of us who are not asleep but suffering and probably death. How can we escape it? I dont think I shall join the comunist party though I might as well admit that I havent the right temperament. I couldnt submit to discipline as I should (...) I have lost my faith in the party being necessarily the only way to Utopia (...) All I know is I want to be

¹⁴ Some letters are up to eight typed pages (May 2nd. 1946; Monday, 29th September 1947).

left in peace to write. Whether it will be any good or not, I don't care at all" (Lessing, letter 038, 12th September 1945). Perhaps she meant that as a witness to "the agony that is going on everywhere" she could not find reasons to think that Communism "as a culture would [...] be able to alleviate [it]" (Lessing, letter, 038, 12th September 1945). On a different note, and as mentioned above, her conversation continuously referred to her being involved in writing "a novel" (Lessing, letters 079, 080 and 091) and to her awareness that she was on the right path to writing "increasingly better," as she joyfully told John (Lessing, letter 092, 28th September, 1948). I contend that Lessing had a fundamental need to channel her narrative efforts as a subject who narrated herself. The fact that she had three readers who meant so much to her in personal terms, also meant that she sought their complicity. She shared her own truth and she used her intelligence to engage her readers. She did not turn herself into a character; she was not her own prisoner, but provided information about herself as a writer: "[...] in a gesture of defiance against Fate I sat down and started my new novel¹⁵ ten days ago, on the same day that I started work on Parliament, and I have finished 20.000¹⁶ words in a rush" (Lessing, letter 070, 4th May, 1947).

Lessing's letters do nothing to hide her infatuation with John but, more importantly, they also signal a determination fuelled by a concern on Lessing's part. This is also noticeable when her journey to London is imminent. In a letter dated November 6, 1948 she writes an advertisement for Whitehorn to send it to the *New Statesman* asking for a companion to share accommodation in London. In the advertisement, she speaks of herself as "writer" and explains that she has "put in that bit about a writer, because I intend to write in every spare moment" (Lessing, letter 093). On December 20, 1948, she wrote to Whitehorn about the "short stories in my head, all clamouring to be written" (Lessing, letter 100). To my mind, these letters present an elliptical dialogue with Lessing's interlocutors, which turned into a monologue due to the circumstances. The monologue becomes a kind of self-narration for the writer, a narrative necessity (Mäkelä, 2013) of her experience. But this written confession to three eager friends reframed her role as a lover and a friend to that of a writer. Her creative spirit drove her to be a narrator, and the sequence of her letters was the fabric to forge her identity and purpose as a writer, and to increase an understanding of others' meanings and intelligence. By giving a prominent role to her daily circumstances, entangled with her concern about her task as a writer, Lessing turned these topics into the subject matter of the narrative fabric she was beginning to create. The only apparent disorder in the narrative thread is the use of a first-person narrator that remains when faced with conflict or unexpected circumstances, as seen in the occasions she shared her critical judgement of her writing (Letter 057, 25th August, 1946). The biographical details included in the letters lead us to explore the nature of her writings. The refracting angle of this nature points towards her

¹⁵ No title is provided by Lessing.

¹⁶ Underlined in the original text.

narrative fiction, throbbing with a dream transformed into a life purpose. It is revealed as a privileged place in the development as a writer who wished to experiment in different narrative realms. We only have to think of her decision to write a science fiction series after a productive period of realist works, and her return to realism with the two Jane Somers novels under a pseudonym.¹⁷ Lessing's works are thus creatures born in a way that liberates them and brings them to life; they are characterised by a polyphony that was already present in her earlier correspondence. The "plot" in the Whitehorn Letters is marked by an act of surrender to what Lessing felt was her life's task, saying yes without dismay (Zambrano, 2018: 127): an ongoing self-affirmation inspired by her indefatigable faith. That affirmation is what gives these documents clarity, unity and a purity of purpose that would live in the acts of creative freedom Lessing always intended to produce.

5. CONCLUSION

The Doris Lessing Archive provides some clues to find the source of Lessing's affirmation of her identity as a writer. Some of these are contained in unpublished documents such as the Whitehorn Letters, which reveal insights into Lessing's authorship. The cultural history of letter writing is enriched by the contributions of this unique and invaluable collection of 110 letters by the young Lessing because it provides opportunities to further know and appreciate the conditions lived and overcome by Lessing over the course of five years, the period when she decided to take a path in the writing career. The information made available in these letters is personal and historical. They can be read as an information hub of Lessing's evolution in her awareness of the path she had to follow to become a writer and of the risks she faced by leaving her family, home town and country. The period in which the letters were written marks a stage that was a cornerstone in Lessing's life, determinant in the shaping of a decision that would be essential in her newly born career as a writer. In this process she was supported by her commitment to her purpose, and by the guidance and understanding of her correspondents. These letters are thus testimony that increases our understanding of how a life is changed by a proactive personal disposition and by historical and social circumstances. In the Whitehorn Letters, Lessing attempted to negotiate, undo and reframe notions of identity regarding family, marriage and marital status, education, commitment to politics and

¹⁷ See Lessing's "Preface" to *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1985). Lessing's explanation that she was the author of the two novels aroused some critical discussion. To name but a few of the contributions dealing with this particular issue, see Andreu Jiménez (1991), García Navarro (2001, 2003), Hanson (1990), Maslen (1994), Sage (1983). As for Lessing's choice of a variety of narrative formats, Susan Watkins (2010) offers knowledge on Lessing's delivery of narratives about the postcolonial subjectivity that might be thought of as "minor." In Watkins' terms, they would respond to Lessing's refusal to be encapsulated in "the territoriality of genre" (2010: 150). Other contributions on this theme can be found in Hanson (in Taylor, 1987), Rowe (in Taylor, 1987) and Taylor (1987).

her own subjectivity. The historical period in which these letters were written speaks of an individual fully aware of the present and knowledgeable about the past. This led Lessing and her contemporaries to become part of a historical community that belonged to a world still subject to the relationships, interests, mandates and exchanges between the metropolis and the British Colonies. The physical distance between herself and the recipients meant that letters were the only possible means of communication between them so consequently served as vehicles for the cultural relationship between the colony (Southern Rhodesia, India) and the metropolis (London), where Lessing migrated to develop and establish her writing career.

When Lessing was living in Southern Rhodesia as a young woman, dealing with her amorous life, the personal realm converged with her public life as a writer. I suggest that Lessing was interested in crafting a historical narrative of the start of her writing career, the construction of her identity as an author being the backdrop to the written relationship between Lessing and the small group to whom she addressed her letters. She had the talent and skill to present reality as it was, problematising the fact that she was challenged every day as she attempted to immerse herself in writing and publishing. At the same time, Lessing honestly questioned her perceived limitations due to what she felt as a lack of a formal education. She allowed herself to ask and receive answers; she encouraged advice, criticism and corrections from Whitehorn, Coll and Smithie, while she also directed her narratives at these readers, who served both as audience and providers of feedback. The three young men shared a distinctive role as a remarkable supportive network in Lessing's construction of her identity as a writer. Power was evenly distributed between the four of them and, significantly, Lessing did not doubt her own authority.

Similarly to what would happen with her future short stories and novels, in these letters Lessing worked on a pared down style, which was neither wasteful nor excessive. There are no signs of grandiloquence in her prose, which was taking shape at an early stage through the dense, vivid writing style of her early correspondence. The non-linear essence of her narrative, as footprints left by Lessing in the *Whitehorn Letters*, anticipate a writer who would make her style, characters and settings distinctive. This set the stage for her future mastery of dialogues, free indirect discourse and her characters' afflictions and inner life. Among the intimate and political matters, literary issues became increasingly prominent in the correspondence up to the very last letters, with Lessing's imminent departure for England. The last two letters of the collection, written once Lessing had arrived in London, mark the end of the *Whitehorn Letters* collection. New perspectives, projects, acquaintances were in the horizon, which may account for the end of this correspondence cycle. As in her autobiography, Lessing was "looking forward, with never a glance behind [her]" (Lessing, 1995: 418). These letters as a whole leave readers with the impression that Lessing had

fought to be and was in the right place, preparing to face the challenges she would encounter in her path to becoming a writer.

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