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Science-fictionalization of trauma in the works of Doris Lessing

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to show Doris Lessing's literary endeavors into the world of science fiction from the perspective of trauma theory. Lessing's preoccupation with modern reality is clearly visible in even the most experimental of her later narratives. Trauma theory finds justification for setting narratives in another dimension: science fiction mode allows for multiple perspectives on the same events, as well as a faithful representation of psychological states experienced by the protagonists. This paper traces science-fictional developments in Lessing's fiction from the watershed Four-Gated City to the Canopus in Argos: Archives series: Lessing's first literary adventure fully set in a space-fictional dimension.*

Key words*: science fiction, traumatic experience, working through*

1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing has been noted for her interest in the "big ideas" such as "the end of imperialism, the hope and failure of communism, the threat of nuclear disaster and ecocide" (Greene 1994, 1), or "colonialism, politics, the roles of women in relation to men and to each other" (Whittaker 1988, 4), to name a few. Such commitment to serious social issues naturally led her to fascination with realism, which is an acknowledged primary mode of representation in her early writing such as *The Grass Is Singing* or the *Children of Violence* series. However, what has also been frequently noted and criticized is Lessing's transgression of the conventional realist form. Already in her early fiction Jeanette King (1989) finds "tensions between the novel's themes and the realist form" (14), which are demonstrable by the lack of closure in *The Grass Is Singing* (4), or an unusual ending to the bildungsroman narrative in the story of Martha Quest. Starting from *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing increasingly challenged convention, until she completely broke free into the world of science fiction, where she found "the opportunity to range freely in time and space and to find metaphors to express her concern with contemporary problems and issues" (Ingersoll 1994, x). Interviewed by Brian Aldiss, the

writer justified her inclination towards science fiction, and accorded the genre the status of "the best social criticism of our time" (1994, 169).

Never before had Doris Lessing met such negative responses from the readers, as when she started experimenting with science fiction. The critics were puzzled by Lessing's early inclinations towards the genre, fearing these could preclude her further development (Rubenstein 1979, 240). The public were then deeply dismayed by *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, and accused Lessing of turning her back on realism and the truth, or an unjustified escape into science fiction (Aldiss 1994, 169). In my paper I wish to argue that Doris Lessing's venture into the mode of science fiction was to an extent motivated precisely by the kind of commitment her writing exemplifies. Trauma studies find justification for experimentation with form, engaging multiple voices and perspectives which take place in Lessing's later fiction. Science fiction proves a viable mode for the allegorical representations of contemporary traumas, as well as an outlet for dealing with them, either in a way of traumatic repetition, denial or working through.

2. SCIENCE FICTION SCENES OF TRAUMA IN THE FICTION OF DORIS LESSING

Trauma studies have raised a debate around the modes of witnessing and representing modern history due to the very scope of atrocities which occurred during the twentieth century. Along with the testimony of the Holocaust, and the two World Wars a crisis of witnessing was proclaimed (Felman and Laub 1992, xvii), for trauma, which is a rupture in experience, inevitably entails a breakdown of communication. Several critics have commented upon the value of literature in accessing traumatic experiences. Felman and Laub (1992) consider "literature and art as a precocious means of witnessing – of accessing reality – when all other modes of knowledge are precluded" (xx). Geoffrey H. Hartman (2003) argues that literature can explore the difficult relationship between words and wounds, and has its way of enabling the reader to perceive the wounds even if the words seem to be inadequate: "Literature both recognizes and offsets that inadequacy. If there is a failure of language, resulting in silence or mutism, then no working through, no catharsis, is possible. Literary verbalization still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (259). Dominick LaCapra (1987) sees the potential in novels for making "challenging contact with reality and history" (14), which enables dialogical responses and reinterpretations of history (108). Laurie Vickroy (2002) investigates literary strategies in trauma narratives that "go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression among others" (3), as well as employ "many voices, emotions and experiences . . . to produce individual and collective memory, and to counteract silence and forgetting" (Vickroy 2002, 27). In this paper I will argue that Doris Lessing's use of science fiction is a way of accessing traumatic reality of modern times.

The development of science-fictional elements in Lessing's writing was gradual, and such course might have even been prefigured by the interest in dream or visionary reality that her early characters display. For instance, King (1989) points out that Martha's early visionary experience in the first volume of *Children of Violence* lays foundations for

experimental ventures into science fiction in *The Four-Gated City* (17). In later pieces the characters' visions become even more prominent parts of the narrative: in *Memoirs of the Survivor* or *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, they might be seen as dissociative responses to overwhelming reality. Finally, in *Canopus in Argos*, space fiction becomes an alternative valid reality in which the reader is drawn to infer conclusions about the state of the modern world and a possible development of contemporary historical reality.

The Four-Gated City ([1969] 1972) is the first novel in Lessing's career which engages science-fictional mode. The volume is the last in the *Children of Violence* series, which presents Martha Quest's story of maturation. Yet, this bildungsroman narrative is unconventional in many ways. When *The Four-Gated City* opens, Martha Quest is about thirty, which is "an age when the typical bildungsroman often concludes" (Klein 2000, 85), and in the conclusion of the story Martha is far from becoming an assimilated member of society. Instead, Lessing shows modern civilization in the need of a change. Martha, who is a 'child of war' influenced by her father's memories of the First World War, intently listens to the various news of conflicts and violence throughout her life. Her life-story is a repetition of atrocity. In *The Four-Gated City*, through the incorporation of science fiction elements, Lessing shows the twentieth century world trying to deal, at both a personal and universal level, with history as trauma.

At the beginning of the novel Martha arrives in post-war London which is a landscape of ruin. Martha can eventually see the impact of the Second World War herself, without the intermediacy of the news reports: cracked houses, streets full of rubble and water-filled craters (46-47). But even though London has not yet heaved itself up from the aftermath of war, the historically bad time continues with new dangers looming on the horizon. There is a war going on in Korea; Russia and America are in the nuclear arms race; various countries across Africa fight against the white man (218). England also hardly seems to be a safe place, with new atomic weapons, poisons and gases being developed secretly in factories all over the country (189). Modern civilization is a world full of terror and violence, which "was expressed in a number of separate events, or processes, in this or that part of the world, whose common quality was horror; and a senseless horror. To listen, to read, to watch the news of any one of these events was to submit oneself to incredulity: this barbarism, this savagery was simply not possible… it can't be happening" (218).

During this hectic time, Martha begins to work for the Coldridges: as a nurse to their child, and an assistant to Mark, who works as a writer. The atmosphere of the Cold War penetrates into the household. All of the adult inhabitants become fixated on the new historical reality. Mark puts up two maps in his study in order to trace precise war developments, protests, famine, poverty, the production of various warfare tools and contamination through chemicals and radioactive waste all around the world. Red flags denote "atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, large bombs, small bombs . . . and the establishments which developed them, made them, and sold them" (308); black flags mark "factories and laboratories which researched, made and sold, materials for germ warfare, and drugs used in the control and manipulation of the brain" (309); yellow flags indicate areas of contamination "by bomb-blast, fall-out, the disposal of radioactive waste, concentrations of chemicals used for spraying crops, and oil discharged from ships" (309). Martha's job is to extract adequate information from newspapers and

reports, and mark any changes and developments so that they could see what was "*really*[1] happening" around the world (308).

But instead of finding a realistic explanation to these events, Lessing engages the voice of Mark's mad wife. Lynda, it turns out, is capable of hearing other people's thoughts, and she encourages Martha to discover some paranormal capacities of her own. They both work on the alternative possibilities of the mind: they have mysterious glimpses of the future, and soon their findings begin to be registered in Mark's studio along with the dry newspaper facts. Now, all of the walls are occupied by maps, including the ceiling, which serves as a registry of space travel. A fact like "*A rocket launched from the earth lands on the moon*" is linked with "*Lynda dreams* [of] *a great glaucous eye which is struggling to maintain life* [and] *receives in it a dart*"[2] (448). Mundane and paranormal happenings are equated in an attempt to reflect the whole scope of human experience.

As the novel progresses, the situation in England seems to be turning worse as more and more people engage in senseless fighting and rioting against each other in an uncontrollable manner: workers against workers, students against students, and policemen standing in ranks against each other (624). The *Appendix* to the novel prophesies the final cataclysm, an atomic blast, finally rendering life on the British Isles impossible. Martha and Lynda's unique abilities assure the survival of the few: they manage to initiate certain preparations before the cataclysm occurs. The whole Coldridge family engage in a rescue enterprise, building houses on the coasts of the islands, to where people flee when the catastrophe occurs. From the letters exchanged between members of the family, the reader learns they have been scattered around the globe. Martha ends up on a desert island with a group of people, building a new society. Their society grows, the children being born with much more developed capacities of 'seers' and 'hearers' (660) − an effect of post-atomic mutation.

Martha's quest ends up in a submission to what appears to be a form of madness, which obviously is no way to live in the well-established society of a conventional bildungsroman. By subverting the convention, and transforming the realist narrative into science fiction, the writer allows a certain working-through of trauma in the novel. Instead of having the main protagonist adapt to the ambiguous standards, Lessing shows the standards as invalid and in need of transformation. Civilization, which now stands for war, violence, and atrocity, has lost its value. It collapses in order to be reborn along a new paradigm of values, which the science fiction mode helps to establish. Martha survives not because she has managed to successfully integrate her experience into an ongoing life narrative, but because the world has ceased to provide a viable reality for a conventional working-through. The new world provides a context for an integration that in the previous one would still remain a disintegration. On the level of form, Martha's story is no longer a bildungsroman, as the convention proves equally invalid in the face of modern history. What is more, the protagonist's voice is lost on the way: the *Appendix* engages multiple voices in a fragmentary account of new reality, which goes on, even if Martha might already be dead.

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[1] Italics in the original.
[2] Italics in the original.

Even though *The Four-Gated City* and Lessing's subsequent novels were written during the 1960s-1970s and inspired by the developments in British New Wave science fiction, the writer was never considered a proper representative of the movement, with all her due reputation of a realist writer. She definitely shared with other representatives of the genre the presumption that "the End of Man, by annihilation or mutation, was a real, even an immediate possibility" (Greenland 1983, 9). But "having too little formal training" in the genre (Ingersoll 1994, x), Lessing chose the term 'space fiction' to describe her endeavors. In Colin Greenland's (1983) *The Entropy Exhibition* Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is mentioned as a classic example of 'inner-space' fiction (62).

In case of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, critics have actually been debating whether to read the novel as psycho-drama or science fiction (Fishburn 1985, 23-24), as the meaning of Charles Watkins's visionary experience changes according to which reading one decides to undertake. From the point of view of trauma theory, Watkins's visions may be the dissociative imaginings of a traumatized patient, a statement of denial of the surrounding world. However, Katherine Fishburn (1985) argues in favor of reading the novel as science fiction, as then "all accounts of reality in the novel are, theoretically, valid" (24), and Charles Watkins is on a real journey in an alternative universe. If the novel is treated as science fiction, he is not a mentally disturbed patient but an alien with a larger perspective on human issues. Thus, in science fiction, a potential for working-through is found, which is, however, unrealized with the patient's return to mundane reality.

Lessing's Charles Watkins from *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) embarks on an inward journey in which he imagines/recalls (at the time it is difficult to establish) being shipwrecked at sea, and his raft carried over the ocean in a haphazard manner. In (external) reality he is a patient admitted to a psychiatric hospital, apparently suffering from amnesia. While two doctors try to account for his present state of consciousness, he remains oblivious to reality, drifting off into the world of his imagination and dreams, which have the quality of an experience outside time and space, and revolve around the imagery which belongs to the poetics of trauma. In one of his retrospective dreams, he is forced to abandon his ship after the aliens on the Crystal came and kidnapped all of the crew. In another he leaves the safety of the ship, and his life turns into senseless drifting 'round and round' off-shores and without possibility to reach them. Landing on a desert island he becomes a witness to an atrocious war between two animal species, and confronts the destruction of the environment: the sea around has thickened with "hundreds of corpses from the war on the plateau . . . And everywhere I saw fishes and sea creatures floating bellies up, and on the sea were patches of oil, dark and mineral-smelling. … and elsewhere were sheets of light like a subtle electric fire which was radioactivity from factories and plants on shores oceans or continents away" (87-88). Finally, the Crystal arrives and Charles is transported to an inter-galactic conference during which he finds himself among other missionaries who were sent to Earth to save it.

Even if this is just the dream of a madman, it retains features characteristic of traumatic experience: Charles's connection to other human beings is destroyed when he is neglected by the Crystal, and his life turns into "cycles and circles and circuits" (22) of traumatic repetition, devoid of a sense of time: "The Cape Verde were to starboard – when? Last week? Last *when*?" (5). According to Roger Luckhurst (1998), the experience

of trauma is prone to science-fictionalization, and abduction narratives may serve as a means of coping with traumatic occurrences. "The very impetus that generates the abduction scenario" lies in the insupportable gap in the structure of memory, which was brought about by the event: "[s]uch an abyssal vanishing compels narrativization: it demands stories to be told" (37). Genre stories suture the gap most easily, assigning structure to the ungraspable experience. The conviction, consistency and comfort that is derived from abduction narratives may eventually blur the traumatic content of the gap to the point where it is no longer determinable (Luckhurst 1998, 38).

Such is definitely the case of Charles Watkins, whose life story bears little resemblance to what is happening in the patient's imagination. The doctors who try to account for his condition make various hypotheses, such as that he might have committed a crime and ended up overcome with remorse to the point of madness (Lessing 1971, 13). The discernible sense of guilt which pesters him in the world of imagination would confirm the doctors' real-life hypothesis about him being a sort of criminal suffering from the trauma of the perpetrator. Soon, however, the doctors find out that Charles Watkins is in fact a Cambridge University Professor in the department of Classics. In the course of time, as new pieces of information arrive in letters from friends and family, any definite statements are made impossible. His wife does not contribute any viable reason as to why her husband would be "under stress" (148), as he is generally "the opposite of the kind of person who has a breakdown" (156). The doctors try to approach the patient by encouraging his own testimony: "try to talk more clearly and slowly, so that we can hear you properly" (11). The 'talking cure' fails, however, because they cannot understand the patient's mutterings: "Because when you're muttering, we can't hear you. And it is very important that we hear what you're saying" (12). Most of the testimonies Charles provides turn out invalid in the face of the verifiable facts of reality.

In the novel, the possibility of a faithful account, and thus the successful integration of a traumatic story, is renounced. The various perspectives give no definite answer as to what exactly has led to the present mental condition of the patient, but the traumatic nature of his disorder is strongly implied. The patient's war experience is another powerful suggestion for what might have led to the gap in memory. The protagonist claims to have participated in the Second World War. Once he admits to it, he is invited by a doctor to write down whatever he might recall. He writes an account of a mission in Yugoslavia, on which his partner died. Left on his own, he joined a guerrilla group in order to fight the enemy, and fell in love with a beautiful girl named Konstantina, who was also killed. Nevertheless, soon after being given the protagonist's account, the doctors receive a letter from the partner, who supposedly died on that very mission, saying that the protagonist never fought in Yugoslavia. He did, on the other hand, experience a considerable dose of discomfort and fear especially that all of his companions were killed, twice: once in North Africa and once in Italy. It is therefore possible that he did suffer a considerable deal of terror during the war, yet from the context of the narrative it is difficult to establish the precise traumatic event which led to the current breakdown.

All the investigations finally come to a dead end, as the patient is miraculously brought back to normal functioning through shock-treatment. He cannot recall the unusual journey he has been through, and what caused it in the first place. The author, who reveals herself in the after-word to the novel in order to take her stance, does not provide a straightforward explanation, but allows the matter of his illness to remain in the

field of uncertainty. Human experience does not always allow for a label, and whatever happened to the protagonist serves only as an example of what cannot be categorized (278). Nevertheless, if the experience cannot be articulated, it falls into the category of "unclaimed experience" (Caruth 1996), and therefore whatever happened to Charles can be treated in terms of trauma.

If the role of literature is, as Geoffrey H. Hartman (2003) puts it, to teach us "to read for what is without words" (259), then this aim is truly achieved in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Doris Lessing depicts the mind of a man captured in an alternative reality, in which he has a clear vision of the world full of grief, menace, fear and sorrow. It is the science fiction mode that allows the writer to elaborate on the nature of the experience, and show how it truly lies outside the limits of normal existence, and yet is so deeply rooted in real fears and real menaces. By the interplay of accounts and the realness of which remains in the field of speculation, Doris Lessing manages to capture the 'unclaimed experience' in the way Charles spoke of his journey: "I am describing the sensation, for I cannot say what was the fact" (Lessing 1971, 17).

A similar vision of two alternative realities is presented in *Memoirs of the Survivor* (1976). The Survivor relates her story in a way typical of testimonial literature: she assumes "relationship and responsibility to others beyond personal interests" (Vickroy 2002, 5). With a detached look, she observes the dissolution of society as we know it: the disappearance of the institution of family, the gradual increase of levels of aggression among groups of children roaming the streets and attacking passers-by. She recalls the various news of violence coming from different parts of the country, and remembers observing hordes of angry young people passing under the windows of the decrepit building she lived in. In the post-apocalyptic world she begins to have visions of an alternative reality beyond the wall of her apartment.

Throughout the novel the narrator struggles with the narrative form in search of a valid representation of history. She does not have a "sense of agency characteristic of being in control of the narrative" (Vickroy 2002, 5). She does not grasp the chronology of events, and delivers a fragmentary account of 'it', returning to the concept at different stages of the narrative. Half-way through her memoir she wonders whether she should have actually began her account "with an attempt at a full description of 'it'" (136), but realizes it would have been difficult to establish "a particular moment marking . . . 'its' beginning" (135). Escaping chronology, 'it' again surfaces as trauma. Disrupting the shape of the novel, 'it' has nevertheless become the essence of the narrative, confronting the heroine with questions pertaining to the meaning of life and death.

The intertwining visions, which further disturb the chronology, might be treated as a symptom of the dissociation of the Survivor's psyche in the face of the overwhelming reality; an escape into another dimension. The wall in her flat reveals the strangest locations: empty rooms and houses at various stages of disorder. Initially, the world behind the wall poses problems that can easily be defined and solved. The rooms simply need some kind of restoration work, "like the rehabilitation of the walls or furniture cleaning, putting order into chaos", which gives that realm the quality of "a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility" (40). Soon, however, a heavy mood enters this dimension as well. The protagonist discovers that no matter how much work has been done, with each new vision she has to start from the beginning. The "lively and loving anticipation" is soon replaced by "lowered vitality" and "discouragement" (59). In "the realm of anarchy, of change, of impermanence" (61), she cannot expect to return to the

places she has fixed. Within the next installments of the vision, the rooms behind the wall are ruined by complete disorder, used as refuse dumps, or taken over by nature.

In real-life the degeneration progresses to such a degree that it cannot be overcome: the youngsters make an attempt at organizing themselves into a small community, and fail. It is in the visions that an outlet can be found for the remaining constructive energies. The final scene in the novel encompasses the narrator and the other characters in a joined vision of walking through the dissolving walls of the apartment, into images beyond description: "it's hard to say exactly what happened. We were in that place which might present us with anything . . . walls broken, falling, growing again; a house roof like a forest floor sprouting grasses and birds' nests; rooms smashed, littered, robbed; a bright green lawn under thunderous and glaring clouds and on the lawn a giant black egg. . . (189). The vision combines both the destructive and creative forces of nature. Perhaps it is only through the ultimate breakdown of the old reality that a new beginning is possible − signaled by the presence of the giant egg on the lawn at the end of the novel, which not only in Christianity but also in many primitive mythologies symbolizes the beginning of new life or creation (Eliade 1975, 21-22).

This conclusion makes it difficult to establish whether the protagonist, under the pressure of terror, has finally slipped for good into the world of imagination in an act of denial, or whether this is in fact a working-through of her traumatic experience. It can be argued that Doris Lessing employs science fiction elements for the same purpose as in *The Four-Gated City* − to make viable the existence of another dimension of reality, and allow her characters to work through the traumatic experience. The visionary, unrealistic dimension, is the site of the actual survival of the protagonist, and ultimately justifies the existence of these memoirs.

As Doris Lessing enters the galaxy Argos, she is "invaded with ideas for other books, other stories, and the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes. It was clear I had made – or found – a new world for myself, a realm where the petty fates of planets, let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution expressed in the rivalries and interactions of great galactic Empires" ([1979] 2002, 8). The series does achieve the two ends at the same time: in spite of the obviously science-fictional setting, it is still a reflection of Lessing's social commitment. In fact, she grapples with aspects of the history of the civilized world which are well-known to the modern reader. Each volume represents civilization in the flux of change, the various facets of downfall and progress. The form in which the accounts are put forward speaks arbitrarily of the possibility of working through the traumatic history of the twentieth century.

The whole bulk of the volumes is a mock-historiographic collection of writings from various parts of the empires in the galaxy of Argos. Lessing rejects the realist tradition not only by setting the story in a fictional universe, but also through formal experiments. The interrelation of the documents of which the series is composed can only be fully perceived as one reaches the end of the narrative. The artificially long titles of the novels are meant to create an impression of authenticity, for example *Shikasta* is an anthology of "Personal psychological historical documents relating to visit by Johor (George Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9) 87th of the Last Period of the Last Days". The writer takes various measures to keep up this illusion of genuineness: the volumes consist of reports and chronicles, they are enriched with additional notes and bibliographies, and cross-referenced. The series engages multiple voices speaking from various settings; their

actual location in time is difficult to establish, as time is measured differently on each of the visited planets. Throughout the volumes, Lessing challenges the notion of history as one officially established interpretation of facts. Her account is a truly 'dialogical' endeavor which negotiates between the personal, psychological and historical. Thus, a non-homogenous version of history emerges from the multiple narratives that the series combines, telling the reader more of the nature of events than any conventional historiography would.

The first volume of the series, *Shikasta*, emerges not only as a stance on the history of Argos, but also as a powerful voice "restructuring the fiction that is our history" (Fishburn 1985, 10). The initially "fruitful" and "thriving" (Lessing [1979] 2002, 27) planet of Rohanda, whose vicissitudes in fact mirror those of Earth, is finally renamed as Shikasta, "the broken, the hurt one" (62). Lessing traces the gradual collapse of the planet by evoking the usual social and political concerns. The crisis manifests itself, for instance, in acts of "aimless, random, unorganized violence characteristic of small groups of the young, male and female" (290). Apart from that, poverty, hunger, and epidemics threaten human lives around the globe. The world is full of individuals, elaborately described as various 'terrorist types', whose dissatisfaction also leads to acts of violence. The scope of deterioration is finally embraced by the Mock Trial that takes place near the end of the narrative, in which various social groups bear witness to the injustice and misery they have come to experience.

The fate of Rohanda/Shikasta/Earth, torn with internal conflicts, is actually dependent on the external influences of other stronger planets in the galaxy and interstellar arrangement. Ultimately, the Catastrophe – external to both human nature and the influences of the powerful empires – takes place, which is, as in *Briefing*, "what that word *dis-aster* implies: a fault in the stars" (35). The closure is somewhat prefigured at the beginning of the volume: "This is a catastrophic universe, always; and subject to sudden reversals, upheavals, changes, cataclysms, with joy never anything but the song of substance under pressure forced into new forms and shapes" (14). In this made-up universe, which is an allegory of life on Earth, catastrophes are repetitious, violence ubiquitous, and human beings fallible and cruel. However, in any breakdown there is a potential for a breakthrough. By the end of the novel, Shikasta recovers from the Catastrophe, cities are rebuilt, their mystical properties restored through their particular shapes, and a new age begins.

Similarly, the third volume in the series is another statement on the instability of human civilizations in the flux of history, out of which they might either emerge victorious or collapse. With *The Sirian Experiments* (Lessing [1980] 1994), the reader is back on Shikasta, or Rohanda, as the narrator of this volume prefers to call it. The book is "an attempt at a re-interpretation of history, from a different point of view" (20) − that of Ambien II − a female representative of the Sirian colony on Rohanda. The report aims to fulfill "the duty of a historian to tell the truth as far as possible" (18). Initially prosperous and technologically advanced Sirius makes impressive use of the lands they colonized for the progress of the empire. They appear to mean no harm, yet they use the new lands for various kinds of experimentation, and they are not always capable of predicting what their experiments might lead to. Ambien II, while acknowledging the impact of Sirian experiments on Rohanda, realizes that the laws of the universe are unpredictable, which casts a shadow on the future of the Sirian Empire: "There is nothing that can be done to arrest . . . the laws of the universe. . . We see them on Rohanda exaggerated and

displayed, but there is never anything that can stay the same. You know that from your own Empire! Has there been a single culture you have established that has not changed and fallen away?" (227-228).

By a process of identification with those whose life is threatened, Ambien is shaken from her detached historical perspective, and forced to empathize with the suffering of the planet's inhabitants. What is more, for the first time in her life she begins to feel that her existence is equally at risk. Seeing that not even the magnanimous agents of Canopus are free from the evil influence of the planet of Shammat, she becomes apprehensive, even if the nature of their power cannot be fully taken in: "'Shammat is not merely an external tyranny?' . . . I felt weighted with a half-knowledge, something too much, too painful, too dark – a long dark wail that was inward" (172). This unacknowledged force is dangerous and might turn deadly: "Between my functioning being, the familiar mechanisms of Ambien II, senior official of Sirius, member of a race that did not expect to die, except by some quite fortuitous event, such as a meteorite striking a Space Traveller – between that state of consciousness, and the real urgent apprehension of the fact: you may very well be murdered at any moment, there was really no connection. I really could not 'take it in'" (205). Her experience of the real Rohanda, truly outside the range of usual Sirian experience, surfaces as traumatic, marked with fear for her life and not fully comprehensible.

Throughout the whole series, Doris Lessing seems to be creating her own mythology explaining the laws of the universe. She does not draw on any scientific method, as no scientific method applies to the apparently accidental occurrences on the planets, their downfalls and upheavals. The primary law governing the universe is chaos, instability and change. The fates of the planets are driven by external cosmic forces, and they cannot be explained by their very nature. The notion that nothing is stable in the universe is taken to the extreme in the subsequent volume of *Canopus in Argos: Archives* − the gradual demise of Planet 8. In this volume, however, Lessing again discovers in destruction the potential for development and transcendence: the "making of the representative for Planet 8" is achieved at the ultimate decline of the civilization of the planet.

In *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* ([1982] 1994) the cause of the disaster is for the first time recounted from the perspective of those actually involved. The news of starry misalignment in relation to Shikasta was reported as a statement of scientific fact in the documents written by Johor or Ambien II: external, if caring, observers. The inhabitants of Planet 8 seem incomparably more affected: their territories will be afflicted by the upcoming ice age. For them the scientific fact is much less palpable, and renders them speechless: "What could we conceivably find to say strong enough to outweigh what everybody had to live with day and night: this knowledge that because of events unknown to us, certain movements of the stars (cosmic forces, as Canopus phrased it, though these words did nothing to lessen our bewilderment) were causing our Home Planet, the lovely Planet 8, to wither and die" (54). The nature of the experience is understood as threatening and inevitable, and the scope of it remains ungraspable by their normal cognitive competences: the catastrophe is seen as "a peril we did not understand" (54).

In *The Making of the Representative of Planet 8*, the progress from individual trauma towards transcendental experience is emphasized, as in the final scene all the dying inhabitants become unified in some sort of communal transcendental being. It seems that

if the author wanted to finish the series on a positive note, this would have been the right time to stop. But the story goes on in yet another repetitious representation of human folly entitled *Documents Relating to the Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* ([1983] 1985). Indeed, the narrative strikes a pessimistic note from the very first pages, and it seems to overtly introduce a story which has already been told: Klorathy, a Canopean agent, finds "himself on a planet whose dominant feature is the same as Shikasta's . . . one, whose populations seem permanently afflicted by self-destructive dementia" (11). The volume has been considered "a repetitive reworking of material used in the preceding volumes" (Whittaker 1988, 114), and it truly comprises of many previously introduced motifs, especially in the representation of the crumbling empire.

The final book of the series takes the reader to the fringes of the Argos galaxy, to the planet Volyen and its satellites, which have also found themselves in a crisis and susceptible to the influences of stronger empires. The depiction of Volyen, as a place corrupted by propaganda and full of violence, is reminiscent of Shikasta. Poverty and inequity have led to an outburst of violence which has now forgotten its origin, and become "killing for killing's sake" (62). "Liberty or Death" (63) is the motto which triggers the spiral of violence. As the propaganda of violence thrives, not even the most noble of the protagonists can stay immune to its enchanting power. Volyen is also called to bear responsibility for the subjugated colonies in a mock-trial − similar to the one held on Shikasta in the first volume. The mockery is even greater as it is not only difficult to establish who the culprit is but also provide witnesses.

Science fiction in *Canopus in Argos: Archive* serves Lessing as a useful mode to create a parable of modern reality. The series revolves around many identifiable social and political issues such as poverty, inequality, injustice and the complex problems of responsibility: of those in power for their subjects, of the colonizers for their subjugated nations, of human beings for the existence and exploitation of other species. Lessing's vision of the galaxy allegorically representing our world is that of life being permanently threatened with violence and extinction. Each of the volumes tells a similar story, which can be seen as a re-enactment of the same traumatic occurrence, of which terror, helplessness and violence are the core characteristics. The burden of traumatic experience is felt in its repetitiousness and incomprehensibility: it escapes logical modes of understanding, and calls for a mythical explanation. The fifth volume only adds to the repetitive quality of the experience: the concluding "..." (220) in the fifth volume is the ellipsis for many similar stories that could still be written about the galaxy of Argos, but do not need to be mentioned as their conclusions will be the same. In the *Canopus in Argos: Archive*s there is potential for both working-through and endless repetition of the catastrophic age.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Briefing for a Descent into Hell, as well as Lessing's more unequivocally science-fictional novels, as *The Memoirs of the Survivor*, *The Four-Gated City*, or the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series, abound with images of destruction and the end of civilization. Such frequent evocations of the theme of the end of the world can be seen in terms of re-enactments of the myth of eternal return: the world succumbs to destruction in order to regenerate, as explained by Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos*

and History (1991). The imagery that permeates through Lessing's fiction shares certain characteristics with the visions from primitive mythologies: "a series of calamities announce the approach of the end of the world" (Eliade 1991, 126). "Signs that the final catastrophe is imminent" could be various: wars (Eliade 1991, 134-135), a threat of deluge (Eliade 1975, 54-55), or "the universal conflagration" (60). In the myth of the eternal return, this end is "of the same nature as the "Chaos" preceding Creation, and . . . hence the end [is] indispensable for every new beginning" (48). As Eliade (1975) claims "*for something genuinely new to begin, the vestiges and ruins of the old cycle must be completely destroyed*. In other words, to obtain an *absolute* beginning, the end of a World must be total" (51).

A final catastrophe in mythical thinking is a way to renew the world to its original state of "purity and integrity" (Eliade 1991, 106). Similarly, the re-emergence of images of war, violence, decline of family and environment in Lessing's fiction does not have to be treated merely in terms of traumatic repetition. Lessing's fiction actually transcends the myth of the eternal return in such a way that instead of restoring the pristine model of the world, it offers the possibility of the development of a new quality. In her science-fictional writings, Lessing is re-working the myth of the eternal return by transposing individuals into a future of chaos, and making them "capable of experiencing a higher working of the mind, transcending ordinary limitations, through which humanity can proceed to a higher level of evolution" (King 1989, 28). Her gloomy view of history as a repetition of catastrophes is redeemed by an assertion of an individual, who ends up enriched by the experience.

Lessing seems to be very much aware of the nature of modern experience and science fiction allows her to demonstrate the whole spectrum of human reactions in the face of it, such as acts of denial, traumatic repetition and working-through. Visionary experience proves an easy escape for such characters as Charles Watkins or the Survivor. Others, especially the inhabitants of planets in *Canopus in Argos*, are captured in the vicious circle of repetition. The actual repetition of disaster might be overwhelming, yet Lessing does offer some consolation as to the future of humanity by making development possible through disintegration. In science fiction Doris Lessing finds a potential for working through the experience of trauma.

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