

Doris Lessing's versions of Zimbabwe from *The Golden Notebook* to *Alfred and Emily*

Anthony Chennells

Department of English

University of Pretoria

Pretoria 002

Arrupe College

16 Link Road

Mount Pleasant

Harare

Zimbabwe

chennells@arrupe.ac.zw

Throughout her long career, Doris Lessing frequently wrote about Rhodesia or Zimbabwe often giving the country fictional names including Anna Wulf's Central Africa in *The Golden Notebook*. Anna dismisses her account of the country as falsified by nostalgia but her *Black Notebook* contains energetic debates about what the country would be like if blacks emerge victorious from an anti-colonial war. In *African Laughter*, her accounts of her visits to Zimbabwe in the 1980s and early 1990s allow Lessing to consider how accurately these debates anticipated what the country became. Her narrative moves through delight at the new nation to disillusionment at the opportunities that are being wasted. Disillusionment is also the dominant mood of *The Sweetest Dream* a novel partly set in the newly independent Zimlia and Zimbabwe is explicitly discussed in an influential article called 'The Tragedy of Zimbabwe'. In the 1990s she wrote the two volumes of her autobiography and several

episodes of the Rhodesian section of the first of these are re-worked in sketches in her final book *Alfred and Emily*, part novella and part memoir of a Rhodesia that was for her parents an extension of the trauma of the First World War. In each of these different types of narrative Lessing assumes a different subjectivity and there is no single objective account of the country. Her narrative choices require that Lessing's versions of Zimbabwe are nearly always provisional.

Key words: narratives of Zimbabwe; fiction and factuality; nationalism in Marxist Leninist historiography; urbanisation; Zimbabwean independence; illusions and disillusionment; spiritual power; reporting Africa.

The Golden Notebook is structured with the framing narrative *Free Women* and the five notebooks which are Anna Wulf's attempts to separate and then to report objectively on parts of her life. These are as different from one another as British communists peddling the lies that the Soviet Union tells about itself, or parenthood living out its responsibilities, or authorship, or the protean personalities men and women assume in their sexual relationships. The Black Notebook adds to that range the experiences of a group of socialists in Central Africa during the Second World War. When she re-reads this notebook Anna dismisses what she has written about the group in the colonial capital and the Mashopi Hotel as 'full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being "objective"' (Lessing 1962, 135). Nostalgia is selective memory that valorises one set of memories that retrospection has made agreeable and forgets others because they are disagreeable even though when they were experienced they seemed as important as those which nostalgia has filtered out. Central Africa cannot be objectively present in the Black Notebook since it is created in fiction which veils in nostalgia its referent outside the fiction.

Nearly fifty years later the debates among the communists and their fellow travellers about the country and its future provide opportunities to see how far *that* imagined past and the future that was imagined *then* can be identified in the Zimbabwe of Lessing's later writing. In this paper while I shall refer to Lessing's fictional accounts of Central Africa in *The Golden Notebook* or Zimlia in *The Sweetest Dream* as well as Rhodesia or Zimbabwe in her autobiographies, journalism, travel books, I recognise how elusive objectivity is. The travel writer's subjectivity alters as her observations become more informed and less general and autobiography conventionally struggles between the remembering self and the various phases of the self that is remembered. Both types of writing may attempt to provide an objective record but what is objectively recorded is probably the process of representing or recalling. The journalist claims naturally to be providing a truthful record of time and place unlike the novelist who, when she uses Zambesia or Central Africa or Zimlia as the setting for a fiction, has no obligation to subordinate its story to an agreed historical narrative of what Rhodesia and Zimbabwe were or are *really* like. Lessing (1994, 162) claims that this freedom from fact provides a different sort of truth. '[I]f the novel is not the literal truth, then it is true in atmosphere, feeling, more "true" than this record [her autobiography] which is trying to be factual'.

One side of the debate in the Black Notebook on what Central Africa may become is informed by current Marxist dogmas which Anna Wulf refers to as the line. The authority of hindsight informs our reading of these dogmas now but at the time Anna registers them ironically as idealist systems whose analyses of the present and projections in the future have no connection with the colony's economy and the collectives that it has reproduced. Black and white vanguards drawn from the trade unions will provide the way forward since as a 'first principle...the proletariat was to lead the way to freedom' (83). This 'admirable and simple' project immediately confronts two obstacles. There are 'no black trade unions'

because they are ‘illegal and the black masses were not developed yet for illegal action’ and the white trade unions ‘jealous of their privileges, were more hostile to Africans than other sections of the white population’ (83). These are substantial contradictions indeed but the position of the proletariat within the revolution is a ‘principle too sacred to question’ (83). For Marxist Leninists it is taken for granted that Black Nationalism is ‘a right wing deviation’ and has no place in any future political order (83). That independent Africa having defeated imperialism would form itself around new nation states was theoretically unimaginable.¹

The most dogmatic of the Marxists, Willi Rodde, predictably rejects the nation state as the form that any country liberated from colonialism will assume. To annoy him, Paul Blackenhurst, a fellow-traveller of the radical group, produces a ‘whimsical fantasy about what would happen in an imaginary white-settled Colony when the Africans revolted’ (85). Despite twenty-years toil by European Marxists ‘to bring the local savages to a recognition of their position as a vanguard...a half-educated demagogue who ha[s] spent six months at the London School of Economics create[s] a mass movement overnight, on the dogma “Out with the Whites”’ (85). The demagogue is duly imprisoned on trumped up charges and ‘left leaderless, the black masses t[ake] to the forests and the kopjes and bec[ome] guerrilla fighters’ (85). There they ‘slowly succumb[] to black magic, and the witch-doctors’ and ‘in a fury of moral condemnation’ the whites ‘beat them up, torture[] them and hang[] them’ (85). Lessing’s narrative is drawing on contemporary reports of the formation of Mau Mau and its repression which were available to her when she was writing *The Golden Notebook* although Anna recalls that Paul’s ‘fantasy’ is imagined nearly ten years before the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya (85). Paul refuses to allow his vision to be constrained by what in the 1940s was an accepted truth: blacks would be defeated if they take up arms against white settlers. Instead he offers what are even more exuberant fantasies than blacks resorting to arms: ““Suppose the black armies win? There’s only one thing an intelligent nationalist leader can do, and that is

to strengthen nationalist feeling and develop industry.” The duty of the progressives will be “to develop all those capitalist unegalitarian ethics we hate so much...there will be no alternative” (85). Whether it is socialism or capitalism that has transformed the newly independent state, Paul “can predict that in fifty years all this fine empty country ... [will be filled with] factories smoking into the fair blue sky, and masses of cheap identical housing” (369-70).

The transformation that was created by the industrial expansion during and after the Second World War and the early years of the Federation, the economic activity energised by the spurt of settler optimism in the years immediately following Smith’s unilateral declaration of independence and the beginnings of Zimbabwe’s independence boom, each serving different political agendas and economic systems, together created the great sprawl of townships surrounding Harare and Bulawayo centred on the industrial areas of the cities. When Lessing made her various trips to Zimbabwe in the 1980s she experienced at first-hand how correctly Paul had envisioned the future. The unthinkable had happened and black armies had defeated the settlers and they had done this principally in the name of Zimbabwean nationalism. The ‘new suburbs qualify as towns in their own right’, she records in *African Laughter*, and to build them ‘all the indigenous trees are cut down, the roads laid out, usually on a grid pattern, and then the houses go up in a dusty or muddy plain’ (Lessing 1992, 370). The houses repeat what the local authorities built when Rhodesia had come to terms with the permanence of its black urban populations. Thousands of houses ‘are crammed as closely as the old houses built under the whites: the new suburbs, like the old, look what they are, desperate attempts at cheap housing’ (370).² These suburbs have no connection with the land and ‘[t]o reach the bush, the trees of their heritage, [the newly urbanised] have to leave the townships and make excursions into “the country”’ (370). The modern city has produced a people for whom the countryside has become a discrete and alien space. Comrade Mugabe should have prevented

‘this short-sighted policy’ (370). In identifying Mugabe as the creative force to realize what Zimbabwe should have become Lessing ironically adopts in her own voice a tone familiar forty years before: disbelief that if there were flaws in the Soviet Union, Comrade Stalin could have known about them;³ a refusal to confront the truth that vicious systems are kept in place because they serve the ends of their leaders. Her thoughts on the new suburbs are contained in her record of her second trip in 1988 when Zimbabwe’s future seemed to be set fair. In that echo from her communist past idealism as a sustained evasion of truth anticipates her later bitter disillusionment with what Zimbabwe has become.

Paul Blackenhurst knows that his youthful radicalism will be put aside after the war. His family are wealthy industrialists and it is not improbable that one day he will fly over this part of Central Africa inspecting his “overseas investments...and look down on smoking factories and housing estates and...remember these pleasant, peaceful pastoral days” (370). But *The Golden Notebook* locates the debate between Willi and Paul in a scene that is neither pleasant nor pastoral. The group are staying at the Mashopi Hotel where much of the Black Notebook is set and they walk into the bush. The first rains have fallen and millions of white butterflies ‘hatched or sprung or crawled from their crystalises...were celebrating their freedom’ (356) so that ‘the blue air was graced with them’ and they appear ‘a white glittering haze over green grass’ (357). Beyond them millions of brightly coloured grass-hoppers are coupling but unlike the butterflies these are ‘crude green and crude red, with the black blank eyes staring – they were absurd, obscene, and above all, the very emblem of stupidity’ (357). Paul rejects these responses to the insects as a subjective aesthetic. The butterflies are not “celebrating the joy of life, or simply amusing themselves ... They are merely pursuing vile sex, just like the ever-so-vulgar grasshoppers” (357). They are performing what their species-nature determines that they perform and because “nature is prodigal...[b]efore many hours are out, these insects will have killed each other by fighting, biting, deliberate

homicide, suicide or by clumsy copulation” (359-60). Paul is parodying Stalin in this bleak acceptance of what is self-evident in life but, even if Anna had not signalled the parody, the larger implication is obvious: socialism and capitalism will, at some point in the future, offer Central Africa an identical sprawl of low-cost housing for urban workers. In the name of progress a future black government will raise the banner of nationalism which it will claim is being serviced by programmes which whether it designates them as capitalist or socialist will have similar consequences. Our public moralities born out of ideological allegiance will claim that the one is exploitative while the other directs mankind to a fulfilled future. In the context of the *Black Notebook*, however, our interpretations of ideology are emotional readings as little informed by their content as our agreement that the butterflies are beautiful and the grasshoppers are grotesque is informed by their instinct to reproduce. Whatever ideology justifies the creation of the industrial cities, the newly urbanised will experience the new suburbs in the same way. The pleasant pastoral that Paul imagines is already an illusion. “If we had ears that could hear,” he says, “the air would be full of screams, groans, grants and grasps. But as it is, there reigns over the sunbathed veld the silence of peace” (370). This cliché of rural southern Africa in the last sentence is made possible only because we are unable to register the completeness of the context. Willi and Paul both speak truthfully to ways of responding to the same experience but the experience obdurately refuses to be contained within either man’s response. Whatever else they speak to it is not necessarily the real because as *The Golden Notebook* shows in its details and structure a single subject never stands in a fixed relationship to a stable reality. Our responses are inevitably relativist although in the novel it is the orthodox communists who find this proposition most threatening.⁴

In *Under My Skin*, Lessing makes only a two line reference ‘to the Mashopi parts of *The Golden Notebook*’ (Lessing 1994, 314). This is at the end of a chapter which recalls in detail

her energetic involvement with the communist group in Salisbury. ‘There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth’ she adds (314), an enigmatic addition since the fictional author dismisses the fictional memoir of the Black Notebook as nostalgic distortion and author of the autobiography subverts the accuracy of how memory recalls the experience of place. Lessing refuses any certainties in representation when on the second journey recorded in *African Laughter* she stops at Macheke which she (1992 72) has identified as the original of Mashopi and has lunch at the hotel. The dining-room is unchanged and Lessing imagines the ghosts of companions ‘brought back by this resurrection of old haunts. “You see?” I silently addressed them. “It has all happened just as we said...well, not just as we said”... imagining the precise degree of irony each face would show”’ (300). Enigma transmutes into the haunting of memory and resolves in the multiple possibilities of a present that was once a future and that now only irony commands.

After she wrote *The Golden Notebook*, except for the fictional re-creations of what she calls Zambesia in *Landlocked*, Lessing began once again to write about Zimbabwe only when Zimbabwean independence in 1980 set aside the prohibition orders preventing her from visiting Rhodesia and she could travel back to Zimbabwe when she chose. *The Golden Notebook* shows that the particularities of the Central Africa of the novel can be homogenised by ideologies or ignored by popular culture or obscured by nostalgia. In the record of her journeys, Lessing has a chance to record the country with the accuracy that new encounters allow. In *African Laughter* she writes of the three journeys she made in the 1980s and a visit in 1992. The first journey is in 1982 to a country where both black and white are marked in different ways by the traumas of the war, the whites by the anger of defeat so that any flaw in the new regime is recorded with relish while the blacks are anxious that liberation will not have substituted one set of hard taskmasters for another. On the second trip she is able to share the exhilaration of 1988 when the 1987 unity accord between Nkomo and Mugabe

seemed to guarantee that the economic prosperity of the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence would create an inclusive society where the regional, ethnic and racial divisions of the past would be put aside. She finds a country marked by 'vitality, exuberance, optimism, enjoyment' (Lessing 1992, 147). There is freshness in people speaking freely and registering their anger when the ideal they hoped and fought for or at least supported has not been realised. "How is it that we had that terrible war and now all we see is people like yourself, who have forgotten about us, getting rich in Harare?" rural elders ask an arrogant official from town (232). The delight in the new order can also meld into uncritical acceptance of whatever choices the ruling party makes. A black party official tells Lessing that the power of the civil service must be checked so that a bureaucracy cannot "hold up things when we make decisions". When Lessing replies that some would argue "that a responsible civil service can prevent the excesses of a bad government", she is told confidently that "Our government isn't bad, it is good, and it will do what is best for everyone" (232-3). That remark is unanswerable and Lessing offers it as a symptom of an unease which jostles with her delight in the new order. Officials who believe in the value of multi-party democracy defend the one party state and people who are not Marxists speak as if they are and this habit of conforming to what is pronounced at the centre creates an official class whose members 'present a smiling united front to anyone from outside who might be a critic' (233). This is a repetition of what Anna Wulf records again and again of a self that the communist party divides into public and private personas.⁵

Lessing's later accounts of Zimbabwe saw that the new nation has created new divisions to replace the familiar divisions of race with which she was raised. During the second journey she records looking eagerly for principles of unity that will draw together disparate elements. An important organisation in her narrative is the Book Team that travels from Harare into areas remote from the centre where decisions are made and which encourages rural women to

write (or get someone to write on their behalf) about their experiences and their views of life. When Lessing first travelled with the team one book had already been created and printed, *Let Us Build Zimbabwe Together*, which provides practical solutions to everyday problems and ‘ignor[es] the slogans and rhetoric that cause political activists to believe that if you shout sequences of words long and loud enough, that in itself is enough to change things’ (237). After listening to discussions about the contents of a third book, Lessing reflects that the project is cutting across divisions of region, language, ethnicity and clan and the contents of the books come from experience. ‘Making these books is not at all a question of sitting in an office Harare and writing down inspirational precepts’ Lessing notes (237). In a culture accustomed to being harangued by officials from the centre the books create a new centre that allows rural women ‘to take control of their lives’ (240), to write back to Harare. The Book Team uses the published word to create new centres and transcend divisions between city and countryside.

Throughout her record of the second journey Lessing speaks of Robert Mugabe with considerable respect although when one reaches the end of the book, this respect is only a phase in a narrative that combines the four visits into a single journey of disillusionment. Even when she shares the exuberant optimism of 1988, it is modified by a scepticism born from experience in the communist party. She notes that ‘all talk of Mugabe is fuelled by idealism, of a kind frightening to some people who remember similar talk about despotic leaders’ (153). Despite this moment of scepticism, she rebukes a United Nations official who says of African leaders that they ‘meet no one but each other, at international conferences, and since they are all crooks they think everyone is’ (265). Lessing indignantly protests that Mugabe is not a crook and, with the examples of other states as an admonishment, he is trying to prevent corruption creeping up on Zimbabwe. “‘I see you’ve succumbed to the place. People do’” is the official’s response. The only reason Mugabe hasn’t imprisoned all

the crooks is that if he did, “he wouldn’t have any supporters left” (266). For Lessing he is speaking out of an ignorance that knows only the cities and has not encountered the energy born of hope in the rural areas. In this she is supported by an Aid worker who tells the official, ““The Revolution may have gone bad [in Harare]...but down in the villages it is still the future...[W]hat goes on in the Communal Areas and Resettlement Areas has all the War of Liberation behind it. It *is* the Revolution””. Reading these exchanges gives us reason to doubt whether Lessing’s record of at least her second journey is the product of a detached objectivity. Nostalgia falsifies the memories that Anna Wulf recorded in her Black Notebook. Succumbing to the illusion that Zimbabwe is successful because it is the creation of a popular armed struggle suggests that Lessing’s objectivity has already been compromised. The productions of the Book Team allow the countryside to speak to the cities but there is no evidence that the cities listen or that a national peasantry commands a single voice. Lessing tells the United Nations’ official that his experience of the cities misleads him but the voices of the countryside are diverse in their own ways. Lessing chooses to identify with people who work with the Book Team and it is their voices she recalls. Is she selecting what she wants to hear because of what she wants to believe and succumbs to the illusions that her enthusiasm has selected for her? But that reading would wrongly privilege one exchange in one of the journeys. *African Laughter* can be read as a narrative which by its end assumes a form in which the disillusionment of the later journeys has as much authority as an impression of place as do the illusions of the earlier ones.

The country as she write about it during her third visit in 1989 is beginning to unravel. Corruption continues to be ubiquitous in the political class; ‘marxism and censorship keep[] the newspapers infantile’ (346); AIDS, barely mentioned in her account of the previous journeys, is suddenly ubiquitous and lethal, a literal and metaphorical rebuke to the earlier optimism. The races recall the past differently as they always have but generations also

possess different memories and this threatens the ruling elite. Two veterans of the Liberation War speak with bitterness of a new generation that is coming into being that ‘cannot remember we won Zimbabwe for them’ (396). Lessing meets an important minister who was a former freedom fighter and who when she recalls the Liberation War speaks of it with ‘licensed phrases like War against Imperialism, Forces of the People but...soon the Authorized Version [gives] way to her own thoughts and words’ (398). She tells Lessing about the ‘trials in the bush, in the wilderness, people hanged and shot because they were convicted of – well, what? Treason, of course, but it was a power struggle, that was the point...All those Comrades, good Comrades, had been killed but it was for their suspected ambition’ (398-9). Ambition, it is implied, both during the war and now in contemporary Zimbabwe is the prerogative of only the small group that comprises the political class.

The fourth and final journey in 1992 is recorded as a series of impressions connected by a single idea: ‘The people have given up hopeful expectation’ (431), a remark that has moved us a long way from the confident voices that the Book Team records during her second journey. There is only one mention of the Book Team. It has had a difficult year as ‘Two ministries have found the women’s book unpalatable’ although high-level intervention saved it (432). This suggests that if the centre listens at all, it is as likely to be threatened by what it hears as to be inspired. The country of this journey is in the grip of drought whose effects are recorded in literal detail while it functions as metaphor for catastrophe that has none of the revelation of apocalypse. The corruption of the new political class dominates Lessing’s account of her third journey but in this journey a new concern has replaced it: ‘A meteorological expert: “Corruption? Don’t make me laugh...Bad planning? So what! They’ll learn. No. Southern Africa is drying up, that’s the news. That is the only news”’ (436). And the account of the journey ends with a question: ““All people care about is, Are the rains going to come in November?”” (437) In *Mara and Dann*, drought has rendered the entire

continent uninhabitable and as Ifrik it is a mythic site set in some remote future time where social certainties collapse and ideologies are redundant, contingent as they are on predictable successions of seasonal wet and dry.

The Zimlia sections of *The Sweetest Dream* can be read as an extended fiction of the more disillusioned moments of Lessing's third and fourth journeys recorded in *African Laughter* although an Author's Note explains that the novel is an attempt to recapture 'the spirit of, particularly, the Sixties' which to an older Lessing 'seems surprisingly innocent' (Lessing 2001, Author's Note), perhaps in its capacity to dream at all. The novel, in fact, is not rigorously contained within that decade and the Author's Note observes that 'events described as taking place at the end of the Seventies and early Eighties in fact happened later by a decade'. If Zimlia is read partly as a response to Zimbabwe, and it is nearly impossible not constantly to recall Zimbabwe in the Zimlia sections, the 1990s is the decade in which Sylvia Lennox works for eight years as a doctor in Zimlia. But democracy has not yet come to South Africa and the violent invasions of white-owned farms which began in Zimbabwe in February 2000 are ten years in the future when Sylvia leaves Zimlia for the last time (456). Lessing's indifference to an accurate correlation between historical events and the events in the novel directs us to the implications of the title. The principal dream which was sweet for some is of Marxism's brave new world but the 1960s saw most of Europe's African colonies becoming independent states and an Africa its public morality exemplary from its struggle against imperialism was as sweet and powerful a dream as any.

The first encounter with Zimlia is through Franklin Tichafa,⁶ a boy on a scholarship in London from his mission school. He is spending his holidays in the Hampstead house of the Lennoxes, the family to which all the principal London characters are connected. Franklin's home is a 'few grass huts in the bush, no electricity, no telephone, no running water, no

toilet'(151) and the mission once seemed rich to him. Now he has to adjust to 'the complex riches of London'(151) although its complex political perspectives are as confusing as its material abundance. He resolves his confusion by lapsing into an envy that poisons him: '*I want. I want it. I want. I want*' (152), wishes that are immediately satisfied when he accompanies two of the wilder teenagers in the Lennox house on a shop-lifting expedition in the West End. When Johnny Lennox, the Stalinist ideologue in the novel, toasts 'To the liberation of Zimlia', the slogan is a joke for Franklin that is both exciting and scaring speaking as it does only to his private ambitions (165) which a free Zimlia will accommodate. Twenty years later independent Zimlia has Franklin as its Minister of Health. His indifference as a boy to the ideologies of an African revolution whether they are nationalist or socialist or both is one way in which the novel suggests that outside the approved rhetoric there is little formal ideological content in Zimlia's liberation movements or in the independent state. When we encounter Franklin again as a minister he is in the company of the representatives of 'Global Money' and 'Caring International' (297). With the aid agencies Franklin reverts to his teenage envy in London and fawns on the Caring International agent, begging that he ensures, "'Generous, generous aid for our poor exploited country'" (300).

The novel registers with bitter scepticism Africa as a saving dream of a new world. The heirs to the British Stalinists betrayed by the dismantling of the Soviet Union have turned to Africa for inspiration and Colin Lennox, Johnny's son, who is contemptuous of his father's slogans explains the logic of their new allegiances. "'All their idols have turned out to have feet of clay'", he says, and since they "'have to love a leader'" Africa supplies them with "'an unlimited supply of great leaders...thugs and bullies and thieves'" (340-1). The attacks in that remark are as much against the New Left as they are against Africa's many leaders but they are part of a larger question that the novel addresses and which Lessing's writing after Zimbabwean independence constantly reverts to. How does one write objectively of

Zimbabwe since as she remarks (2004, 241) it ‘will take a long time for Mugabe’s version of history to be corrected, if it ever is’? Zimlia similarly evades accurate reportage. Zimlia’s president, Matthew Mungozi, ‘gravitates by instinct to dictators’ (363) and particularly admires China, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He is consequently attractive to ““progressive opinion”... [A]ll the former Stalinists, the liberals who have ever loved a strong man, [say, “He’s pretty sound, you know”]... And people who ha[ve] been deprived of the soothing rhetoric of the communist world f[i]nd it again in Zimlia’ (363). When Sylvia Lennox returns briefly to London from Zimlia, one reason for her return is to rescue Zimlia’s realities from the propaganda of Zimlia’s progressive allies. The progressives become authorities only because the British press is entirely indifferent to Zimlia and indeed the entire continent, an indifference that a London editor masks with two well-worn phrases: ““it doesn’t do to judge them by our standards...And it’s a completely different culture”” (371). Colin Lennox expresses what would have been Lessing’s own response: ‘[H]aven’t we had our bellies full of not judging Africa by our standards?’ (371). Implicit in this question is the obvious but unspoken assumption that if we do not use our own standards to judge the morality of situations, there is no integrity in the moral judgments that we make. Learning to recognise the virtues of the other should not require that we put on hold our own moral agency.

Much of *The Sweetest Dream* is set in a remote rural area surrounding the mission where Sylvia works as a doctor. This setting gives rural Zimlia a proximity and familiarity which provides a perspective with which to register and condemn the consequences of the British media’s easy evasions of the public moralities of a distant country. Even if one is in the country, as are the agents of the international aid communities, well-funded conferences in Senga’s luxurious hotels provide a buffer from Zimlia’s realities. The conferences themselves transmute destitution into theoretical abstractions: ““The Perspectives and Implications of

Poverty” (441), ‘the World’s Threatened Ecostructure’ (441) and ‘The Ethics of International Aid’ (437). These titles float above what the reader has experienced: the utter deprivation of the rural people, a devastating drought that has added another level of deprivation and aid organisations whose continental gaze is incapable of registering the needs of the particular. For much of the novel the nation exists only at the level of slogan until the AIDS epidemic draws rural poor and privileged bureaucrats alike into a community of the dying and the dead.

The indifference to the country of the British media and unfocussed reports of aid agencies provide Lessing with an opportunity to engage with Zimlia in its detailed particularity. But the novel does more than show that the slogans of the ruling party have little relation to the lived experience of rural poverty. The final chapters of *The Sweetest Dream* register spiritual processes that cannot be accommodated within the causes and effects which Western rationalism ascribes to the contingencies of life. Many people in Zimlia inhabit an enchanted world which the scepticism of the disenchanted West registers only with contempt. Sylvia respects the local traditional healer, the ‘*n’ganga*’ as the novel refers to him, who knows that he has no herbal cure for AIDS (322) but can effect cures for conditions that “our medicine cannot reach” (355) and which have a spiritual origin. When disease presents symptoms that her medically trained mind identifies, she is impatient with other explanations. Mr Mandizi, the senior local government official, attributes the death of his child and the sickness of his dying wife—she is clearly dying of AIDS—to their being bewitched and Sylvia at once protests that he is “an educated man” (324). But she slowly comes to understand ‘how deeply the lives of the black people she lived among were embedded in superstition, and what she wanted was to understand it all, not to make what she thought of as “clever intellectual remarks”’ (p. 350). In this respect she resembles Lessing herself (1998, 319) who when she had finished *The Golden Notebook* recalls that ‘I had so thoroughly reached the end of a

whole spectrum of ideas, thoughts and feelings that the [spiritual] world I had excluded as “impossible”, as “reactionary”, was surrounding me, pressing in, making its claim’. Lessing’s own spiritual quest can begin only when she has overcome what she (318) describes as ‘the brave stoicism of atheism’. Sylvia by contrast draws some consolation from the realisation that ‘[s]omeone subscribing to the miracles of the Roman Catholic Church should not accuse others of superstition’ (Lessing 2001, 350). Although Sylvia works and worships with the people on the mission she is conscious that in their lives ‘there was an area where ... she could not go and must not criticise’ (350).

If Sylvia hesitates to venture into the arcane beliefs of the people around her, Lessing’s novel shows no equivalent hesitation and the conclusion of the novel is crowded with spiritual agencies whose efficacy in the narrative depends on the belief or scepticism that the reader brings to the text since the novel provides both spiritual and secular explanations for what happens. Sylvia’s assistant recovers some bedpans that are in a smashed packing case delivered to the site of a new hospital which was never completed (325). Sylvia later hears that in order to prevent looting Mr Mandizi has asked the ‘*n’ganga*’ to “put a curse on anyone who stole from the cases or even laid a finger on them” (354) and as the AIDS epidemic kills more and more people the rural people attribute the deaths to the desecration of the hospital. A British journalist writes a sensational account of Sylvia’s part in looting the hospital and the government closes the mission hospital and names her as a South African agent. These are the bureaucratic muddles of an incompetent state apparatus rather than mysteries but when Sylvia prepares to leave Zimlia, she returns to the mission for the last time and finds Joshua, the father of two boys who have helped her in the mission hospital, is himself on the edge of death. AIDS makes him appear little more than a heap of rags but he has enough remaining strength to seize Sylvia’s wrist and curse her. Whatever the curse, its implications are too horrible for the children to translate and as his grip tightens he interrupts

his cursing only long enough to make her promise that she will take his children to England. Sylvia has never called in favours from Franklin but now she takes the children into Senga and demands that he uses his influence to get passports for the boys. His protests are formed around the clichés of a defensive nationalism: to take the children to England is to “steal away our children” (459); in African culture orphans are unknown; if rural people believe that “AIDS is the fault of the government because you’ve turned out to be such a bunch of crooks”, as Sylvia says, she is repeating malicious “gossip...rumours spread by South African agents” (459). But when she tells Franklin of the dying Joshua’s curse and grips the minister’s wrist, showing him the circle of bruising on her own wrist, it is Franklin’s turn to look uneasy. “Are you cursing me too?” (460) he asks, thinking that she looks like a witch. His fears of her powers are enough to persuade Franklin to deliver the boys’ passports in time for their flight to London.

These competing world views were once a familiar formula in colonial novels: rational Westerners control blacks by exploiting superstitious fears that whites can engage with spiritual forces that are beyond black understanding.⁷ Shortly before the encounter in Franklin’s office, Lessing breaks the narrative of Sylvia and the two children travelling from the mission to Senga to speak of ‘*n’gangas*’ summoning President Matthew ‘to night sessions’ where men and women, ordinary workers in the day, become transformed at night and ‘painted, wearing animal skins and monkey hair, dance[] themselves into a trance’ and tell the grovelling Comrade Leader what he must do lest ‘he...displease the ancestors’ (p. 457). The president returns from these sessions to ‘his fortress house, to plan for his next trip to meet the world leaders, or a conference with the World Bank’ (p. 457). The ordinary business of international political and economic encounters conceals an abyss filled with spiritual forces whose powers defy what the West would claim as rational understanding.

Franklin's unease at Sylvia's witch-like authority and the power of spirit mediums to displace Comrade Matthew's Marxism are not spasms of a spiritual atavism that linger in the modern state. They are present in the novel as forces with potentially formidable consequences.

Sylvia has been cursed, twice at least, and after she has arrived in London accompanied by the children, and has introduced them to her family, she dies in her sleep. She has been sick with malaria and is exhausted by overwork at the hospital but the children have no doubt that their father's curse has caused her death. In its rush of successive events, the narrative allows either to be possibilities. Only the scepticism or belief of the reader would confidently identify a principal cause. No Zimlian in the novel, however, would have a moment's doubt that people can become the agents and victims of malicious spiritual forces. The respect that the novel allows for these powers appears to validate the London editor's claim that Africa should not be judged by British standards. I would like to suggest, however, that a preface Lessing wrote to a later edition of *The Golden Notebook* may be more illuminating in accounting for the spiritual powers in this much later novel. Lessing (1971, 7) explains that Anna's notebooks are an attempt to 'separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness—of breakdown'. But Lessing (7) explains that 'formlessness' is not something to be feared but welcomed as it can mark an 'end of fragmentation'. As Anna and her lover 'break down' in the Golden Notebook, the last of the notebooks, they 'break through the false patterns they made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve'. In each of the books that I have discussed Lessing refuses to provide opposing versions of reality that confront and exclude one another, requiring that readers choose between them. That would be fragmentation. Formlessness implies that meanings flow into one another and that our understanding is tentative and our conclusions provisional. Africa is not as the editor implies the incomprehensible other to the

rational familiarity of Britain. Its spirituality has a reality and should not be dismissed, as Sylvia does, with the word ‘superstition’, a word crowded with arrogant scepticism.

Included in the account of her third journey in *African Laughter* is the outline for a story or a film which shows us a leader who is by nature a solitary intellectual, a man of integrity driven by a sense of service to the nation and its people but who is remote from them. The imagined leader legislates against corruption but he cannot implement his own law because his wife is deeply implicated. But his caution and her charm are insufficient to retain the loyalty of the people. This sketch is fleshed out in *The Sweetest Dream* to provide an account of Comrade Matthew’s personal and political life. In the sketch, the leader restrains his avaricious wife, Gloria. In the novel the wife prevails and Comrade Matthew can take his place ‘among the immensely rich, dissolute and corrupt leaders of the new Africa and new Asia...[and does] not sit silent when they display their wealth and boast of their avarice’(2001, 365). The trickle of funding that once descended from Senga to the poor rural areas ‘now dried up altogether’ (365), telling images in a novel where drought is the dominant trope of the land.

No direct connection is made between President Mugabe and the leader in the sketch and Comrade Matthew. Two years after *The Sweetest Dream* appeared, however, Lessing wrote an article, ‘The Tragedy of Zimbabwe’, a version of which was published in the *New York Review of Books* and in which she attacked Mugabe by name.⁸ Zimbabwe is written as a paradise and a wealthy one too although when it was still Rhodesia whites ensured that blacks experienced that paradise as a harsh police state. ‘But paradise’, she wryly observes, aware that Marxist terminology cannot be discarded altogether, ‘has to have a superstructure, an infrastructure, and by now it is going, going – almost gone. One man is associated with this calamity, Robert Mugabe’ (Lessing 2004 232). The rest of the article is an indictment of what she regards as the unnecessary destruction of the Zimbabwe economy and its legal and

political systems. The wife who tried to corrupt the leader in the sketch and succeeded in corrupting Comrade Matthew is no longer fictional. 'There are those who blame Mugabe's first wife Sally from Ghana for what seemed like a change in his personality. She was, this Mother of the Nation, corrupt and unashamed of it'(253). The article was written during the invasions of white-owned farms. In Lessing's account the land re-distribution that followed the invasions was a failure partly because the people who acquired land are from the urban middle class, who have no contact with the land and have neither the capital nor the technological skills to farm with the professional skill that the dispossessed whites commanded. The farms become little more than a rural destination for excursions at weekends. Lessing's article speaks of the white farmers as 'inventive, industrious, with their ability to make do and mend...[a] people proud of their resourcefulness'(240). This view informs her fictional characters the Pynes, white farmers in *The Sweetest Dream*, whose successful farm was 'bought as virgin acres without so much as a cleared field on it', and now has a large house and a range of farm buildings and a dam. 'All their capital was in it. There was none when they came' fifty years before (2001, 352). In the article something that closely resembles the envy that motivates Franklin both as a boy and as a minister is the driving force of the Liberation War. Mugabe's promises during the War of Liberation of land for all is translated into everyone owning a 'house like a white farmer's, the spreading acres, the black menials – effortless ease'(2004, 239). Zimbabwe in Lessing's article is not a place transformed by revolution but a country where a white elite has been replaced by another and new black elite, the leaders of the ruling party, who are driven by no other motive than a determination to enrich themselves. This article is the nearest Lessing comes in her writing about Zimbabwe to offer an account that does not lend itself to other possible interpretations. Claiming for itself an incontrovertible authority it is satisfying the expectation we bring to journalism that it provides facts.

Rhodesia and Zimbabwe are both present in Lessing's last book, *Alfred and Emily*. It begins with her final novella which audaciously imagines what her parents' lives could have been had the Great War never happened but which is replaced in the second half by sketches of her and her parents' life histories: recalling what Rhodesia made of her parents or episodes from her Rhodesian childhood and early adulthood. The novella is sunny with optimism at the realised potential of her parents and streaked with nostalgia which is necessarily ironic because we know that its narrative is provisional on impossibility. The Great War did happen and her parents ended up in Rhodesia which was for them as settlers who never made much money 'part of that monstrous legacy [of the war]' (2008, viii). The thematic structure of the factual second part of *Alfred and Emily* is of loss and fragmentation signified for example in the beautiful dresses which her mother carefully packed ready for the colonial balls and garden parties which never happened and which, when the child's curiosity uncovers them in their trunks, have been shredded by moths.

In the sketches that make up this part of the book there is an absence of achieved purpose and cumulatively they refuse a purposeful unfolding to Rhodesian or Zimbabwean history. One sketch is of Lessing's brother, Harry Tayler, who was one of the few survivors when his ship the *Repulse* was torpedoed in the Second World War which left him not only deaf but in his own words "with everything dulled. Muffled" (254). Thirty years later, during the Liberation War, Harry is on patrol and the truck he is travelling in hits a boulder and he knocks his head on the back of the cabin. When he recovers from the effects of the blow, "everything was so bright and clear... This was what I was like before the *Repulse*. That blow on the head had sent me back to normal. I was suddenly my real self, you see. I was suddenly myself" (254). For a moment it seems as if we are on the edge of restoration and revelation. But the chapter in which his story is told ends with his saying: "[For] most of my life... I simply haven't been here at all" (254). An absence both of self and of revelation is what I draw from

Harry's story and Lessing's narrative ruthlessly pursues the pointlessness of Rhodesia which echoes what she has implied is the loss of purpose in Zimbabwe. The war, in which a slight accident restores to Harry his self, ends with the defeat of white Rhodesia and, a conventional racist who refuses to live under a black government, Harry goes to live in South Africa when South African democracy was still a utopian fantasy. His love for and knowledge of the Zimbabwean bush was not enough for him: he had a fatal need for white-ruled Rhodesia. In South Africa, he soon had a heart attack and died long before his time, his heart broken perhaps at exile from a Rhodesia that no longer existed. *Alfred and Emily* ends with the death of another exile, Lessing's mother, but her exile is from England. She misunderstood, however, where she belonged and whether she liked it or not, exile had made her into a Rhodesian. In *Walking in the Shade* Lessing (1998, 33) offers the cruel truth that 'my mother lived in, belonged to, Africa. Her yearnings after London pea-soupers and jolly tennis parties were mere whimsies'.

Lessing remarks often enough that had she remained a conventional Rhodesian wife and mother she would have taken to drink or simply gone mad or (e.g. 1994, 265) 'become even more reactionary and racist than the ordinary run of whites'. Famously, though, she called the account of her visit to Rhodesia, seven years after she had left forever, *Going Home*, a title that ironically repeats her parents' habit of referring to England as home. For Lessing there is no irony in the title or its sentiment. She remarks (1957, 34-5) that if she really observes wherever she is living, 'a terrible feeling of insecurity and improbability comes over me. The fact is I don't live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the kopje'. For the rest of her life she wrote about the country as a place with which she was uniquely and intimately involved. But whether she was writing about Zimbabwe as a real place or as a fiction, the country is always given provisional meanings which refuse to be contained within some definitive account.

Notes

¹ An established truth among Soviet ideologues was that the creation of the Soviet Union had overcome what Lenin referred to as ‘the nationalities question’ and the central Soviet would be a model for a post-imperial world (Gililov 1983, 135-52).

² Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (2001, 13) observe that ‘[t]he problems faced by colonial administrators continue to face their post-colonial counterparts, but in an exacerbated form; they include the stabilization and sustainable reproduction of an urban workforce; housing and health; transport; and representative local government structures’. The exacerbation is understandable as when they wrote the urban population had grown as a percentage of the national population from 19.8% in 1962 to 34.7% in 1997.

³ In Lessing (1962, 143-4) Anna discusses with her communist friends their need to think that Stalin was ignorant of Soviet atrocities.

⁴ Lessing (1962, 380) imagines Soviet reviewers’ dissatisfaction at the representation of Africans in *Frontiers of War* which fails to satisfy an ideological formula. The young black girl should not have been the daughter of a cook but ‘an African organized worker from a factory’ for ‘true artistic verity’ is to be found only in the typical.

⁵ Anna’s Blue Notebook, for example, records communists in London trying to unravel the implications for the British Communist Party of the Twentieth Congress of the party in the Soviet Union and ‘a leading comrade...deliberately dividing the truth into two – one a mild truth, for the public meeting of forty, and another, a harsher truth, for a closed group’ (Lessing 1962, 411-12).

⁶ Tichafa is a Shona word meaning ‘we shall die’.

⁷ Probably the most famous use of this formula is in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* where a rifle, false teeth and an almanac that dates a solar eclipse are all used to affect supernatural power.

⁸ Lessing (2004 , 375) notes that the article was 'first published as "The Jewel of Africa" (in an edited form to suit American tastes) in the *New York Review of Books*, 10 April 2003'. My quotations are from the original article which was published a year later in *Time Bites*.

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