

DORIS LESSING'S INNER SPACE NOVELS

Alina-Dana Vişan

Lecturer, PhD, "Eftimie Murgu" University of Reşiţa

Abstract: We have tried to do a brief presentation of Doris Lessing's inner space novels, that is, novels dealing with their characters inner journeys by the end of which the characters are either healed from their psychological issues or they are turned into new and better human beings. After the short presentation of the three inner novels, we shall analyse only one of them, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, which is unique in Doris Lessing's creation, being the only novel having as central character a man.

Keywords: inner space novels, journey, outer, protagonist

1. INTRODUCTION

The inner space novels reveal clearly Lessing's intention to explore, not external reality, but the world within. In the preface of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the writer states that she was writing a work of "inner space fiction" because "there is never anywhere to go but in".

The inner-space novels share a sick society whose individuals need to discover meanings in their lives. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, catastrophe can be averted by reducing the pressure created by gender roles, and thereby creating true equality. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* feature characters who function in multiple levels of consciousness. This consciousness allows them to adapt to the ever-changing universe. These characters must discover their own truth in order to recover health and wholeness. (Friedow, 2002: 118)

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown's inner journey represents her search for a new identity, which is a tortured investigation of the nature of appearance and reality, an investigation into what was true and false in her roles of woman, wife and mother. She is brought by her sense of emptiness, largely induced by her husband's escapades, to seek release from these roles, to try to uncover those roots in her being from which a new vitality could grow. Kate's search is a *conscious* search for a new and final integrity. At the same time, *subconsciously*, it is a desperate attempt at establishing some sort of harmony between her old self and the new self that is painfully coming into being. (Verleun, 1985: 622)

By the end of the novel Kate has taken "a long journey" (p. 204) which is mainly an inward journey, in the course of which she repudiates the conventions that have governed her behaviour as a woman. (Greene, 1992: 306)

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing pays great attention to the co-existence of multiple consciousness or realities which she craftily designed to ridicule the absurdity of what society regards as real. She explores the nature of the self and consciousness; she also presents an insight into the gulf between the "inner" and the "outer" state of mind with great emphasis on myth and archetypal pattern of experience.

In this novel, the author suggests a possible "brave new world" in a madman's "inner space." By juxtaposing Charles Watkins's "real" world and his "dream" world, the author criticizes such cultural institutions as hospitals and universities, the society in which the insane lives, the depravity, the insanity and the violence of the time which makes it

almost impossible for one to reason appropriately. The multiple realities in the novel are not just designed for narrative purposes, but to ridicule the absurdity of what the society terms "reality". (Akujobi, 2008: 19)

The crystal in the novel serves as a link of two worlds - the inner and the outer worlds. It is a symbol of man's inner thought. Charles' description of life in the solar provides an imaginary escape for the individual from the constraint of reality.

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing invokes the image of the circle and square which she represents through the Mandala square, this place is in ruin and it is the place chosen for Watkins's spiritual journey which may be commenting on the author's belief that there is a connection between science and spirituality particularly in the domain of literature. C. G. Jung explains this symbol: "the use of a magic circle or mandala, as it is called in the East, for healing purposes is an archetypal idea. When a man is ill the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico make a sand-painting of a mandala with four gates. (Jung, 1995: 138)

Through consciousness, Lessing exposes the inner workings of the human mind and in this case, one can say that consciousness is the nucleus of this journey in the novel. Lessing in this stead shares her major theme - the fragmentation of civilization and consciousness- with a great many modern writers such as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Golding. Possessing what is still too often rare for women writers. (Akujobi, 2008:19)

Lessing suggests that man must embark on voyages of self-discovery which leave him changed. The difficulties of the voyage, and also the difficulties met by one who is successful, are suggested in the "briefing" to which the title of her book refers. (Marchino, 1972: 260)

In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Doris Lessing tries to use another Sufi metaphor-that of the two worlds-to embody the wisdom of the mystic in ecstasy, who says at the end of his spiritual journey: "I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one." (Draine, 1979: 61)

Most readers only see the survivor's three most obvious choices: joining a gang, remaining in the apartment, or slipping into a dream world. In fact, the protagonist assesses the youthful stages of her own development in two ways: she watches Emily move through the common pattern of relationship with the collective life of the city; and she explores the way that such social patterns are formed as she watches the girl's parents imprint collective attitudes on their child in a series of "personal scenes" behind the wall. (Cederstrom, 1980:121)

Unlike the aborted interior journey of Professor Watkins in *Briefing*, the protagonist is not brought back to an ordinary reality in which the cosmic harmonies are forgotten. She is a Survivor of the experience; she remembers it and lives to tell about it so that others can share the experience. As a "Survivor," she has established a new relationship to the world, a relationship based on the creation of vital lines of communication between the ego and the self. She has moved from the world in which she was not the master of her own house, through assimilation of the habits and patterns that had brought her reality to a state of collapse. Ultimately, she has achieved individuation, that condition in which her ego is vitalized by its links with a living symbolic heritage-the Presence who unites the world of time and personal with the other world of the timeless and archetypal. (op.cit, p. 131)

2. Amnesia and inner journey in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*

For the first - and only - time, the protagonist of the novel is male. Structurally, the novel is remarkable by its inversion of chronology and multiple perspectives that reinforce the subjectivity of point of view. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* depends on a basic pattern of

theme and variations: the "theme" is Charles Watkins's deeper psychic urge to heal the schism of his present condition of self-division; the variations include his nostalgia for union and his recognition of separation, envisioned by Lessing through a series of metaphoric or symbolic journeys.

From the beginning of this work, Lessing alerts the reader to the dual schema, as well as to the underlying Sufi inflection of its meaning, by providing a context for the novel on the frontispiece: "Category: Inner-Space Fiction - For there is never anywhere to go but in." Two epigraphs - one from the fourteenth-century Sufi Mahmoud Shabistari's poem *The Secret Garden* and the other from Rachel Carson's *The Edge of the Sea* - describe the macrocosm encapsulated within a raindrop or a sand grain suspended in water. By analogy, the unnamed seafarer of the first pages of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is Everyman, rediscovering through the exploration of the microcosm of his own consciousness the experience of the human race.

The protagonist of this novel is self-divided. As one subsequently learns the stresses of middle age and personal problems have propelled Charles Watkins, a professor of classics at Cambridge, into a mental breakdown accompanied by a temporary loss of identity medically described as amnesia.

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* alternating sections correspond to both ways of perceiving the psychic crisis of the central character: from within and without his own consciousness. The first long portion is narrated primarily from the more immediate and subjective focus of the perceiving consciousness, while the remaining portions are composed of letters, dialogues, and more public communications from members of Watkins's milieu and "reminiscences" provided by Watkins himself. In the first section, the doctors' evaluations are juxtaposed with the directly recorded subjective experiences of the protagonist.

When the protagonist is most awake and aware within his own mental experience, he is most deeply asleep from the point of view of the medical observers. His being is split into two modes: while his body participates in one, his mind participates in the other; they are complementary and mutually exclusive. "Inner" and "outer" spaces become metaphors in the novel of the disjunction between the mental and physical spaces that a person simultaneously occupies.

Watkins is Lessing's most identifiably "schizophrenic" character. In fact, a number of parallels can be drawn between the experiences of her protagonist and the existential phenomenology of schizophrenia proposed by R. D. Laing, not the least of which is a ten-day psychotic journey described by one of Laing's ex-patients, coincidentally named Jesse Watkins. One of Laing's central (and controversial) hypotheses is that the psychotic breakdown manifested in acute schizophrenia is a natural process of mind-healing which, if allowed to run its full course, will be therapeutic rather than destructive. (Rubenstein, 1986: 154)

The Sufis describe man's evolutionary course from the simplest form of matter through vegetable, animal, human, and superhuman states of consciousness, to the achievement of the "total perception of the external phenomenal world." Further, phenomenologists of consciousness document similar motifs in the classical experiences described throughout the centuries in mystical and occult literature, and in the more recent psychedelic (or psycholytic) drug-induced experiences. (op. cit, p. 154)

The collective unconscious manifests itself in similar archetypal images and symbols. Regardless of the catalyst, the unconscious generates patterns which, under certain circumstances, become accessible to the other layers of the psyche. That identity is central to the major motifs of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the first movement of which may be read as the narrative of a spiritual, archetypal, psychotic, or even drug-induced inner journey. The

novel's symbolic meaning is represented by what is reached at the end of this journey and whether the change in consciousness has effects on the personality of the protagonist.

The first long portion of the novel has several levels of meaning. The protagonist initially finds himself "at sea". The protagonist's wanderings express other primary images, including heat, light, and circles. His "anti-clock Wise" direction and his need to experience a birth in reverse suggest the circularity of his journey backward both in time and in the development of his own consciousness as he tries to locate the centre of his being. He is the archetypal seafarer, alternately Jason, Jonah, Odysseus, Sinbad, adrift in a ship that is inhabited temporarily by a strange unearthly light (called the Crystal) that incorporates his shipmates but leaves him behind. One learns later in the novel that during Watkins's war experience he was twice the only survivor in a group of buddies; in this section he is twice left behind by the Crystal.

While the inner space journey traces the narrator's subsequent efforts to reach the Crystal again, it revises the history of life on earth. The protagonist is identified with the first living organisms emerging from the slime as they become land creatures; the psychological and spiritual parallel is the emergence of human consciousness and its growth toward enlightenment and wholeness.

Within his existential reality Lessing's protagonist accomplishes the evolutionary step from sea to land with the aid of a dolphin. Once on land, he establishes an intuitive communication with two gentle cat-like creatures who guide him over an apparent impasse in his upward climb. He arrives at what is at first an uninhabited archaic city. Later the houses are noticeably "turned inwards, to the centre," and the city itself seems to acknowledge the protagonist's presence as if also possessed of consciousness.

At first the archaic Eden-like atmosphere of the surroundings is emphasized, "as if this was a country where hostility or dislike had not yet been born." The protagonist experiences a sense of harmony and unity analogous both to the state of undifferentiated wholeness in the generic individual's personal development, and to the hypothetical primitive pre-ego consciousness in the history of civilization. However, that state is soon interrupted by the appearance of the ubiquitous "enemy" that Lessing has shown consistently as a configuration of the dark side of the mind. (op. cit, p. 157)

The protagonist feels himself under a lunar influence, a reference to the "lunacy" that his rambling monologues represent to the medical staff. On the outskirts of the city he witnesses a ritualistic bloodletting involving several male children and three females whose identities are familiar to him. He realizes that their rite destroys forever some fundamental innocence in nature by their introduction of carnality into the pure world. Just as his imagination had "invented" the city itself, *"now I understood my fall away from what I had been when I landed, only three weeks before, into a land which had never known killing. I knew that I had arrived purged and salt-scoured and guiltless, but that between then and now I had drawn evil into my surroundings, into me."* (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, p. 94). The shadow further manifests itself in two species of ugly, predatory animals – the negative counterparts of the kind beasts that had earlier guided him. From the first appearance of these rat-like dogs and monkeys, the protagonist watches their open warfare, and admits his own complicity in their violence.

During the time he spends on land, the voyager sees as his task the preparation of a landing pad in the centre of the city, in anticipation of the return of the Crystal. Significantly, both the Crystal and the landing area are images of wholeness; in archetypal symbolism crystals and the abstract circle/square configuration often represent "the union of extreme opposites - of matter and spirit." After delays and failures in his effort to prepare himself for this crucial segment of his journey, he finally senses the presence of the Crystal. But, again, he is not ready for it: *"Whatever it was that I could not quite see, but was there, belonged to a*

level of existence that my eyes were not evolved enough to see... Beating out from that central point came waves of a finer substance, from a finer level of existence, which assaulted me, because I was not tuned in to them."(Briefing for a Descent into Hell, p. 106-107). The equation of extrasensory perception with the evolving organs of consciousness described by Sufi mystics underlies the formulations of Watkins's experience. The metaphoric language parallels the Sufi chemist Fariduddin Attar's description of inner transformation: "Every fibre has been purified, raised to a higher state, vibrates to a higher tune, gives out a more direct, more penetrating note." At the same time Watkins's inadequacy makes explicit the difficulty of achieving that elevated level of being. (op. cit, p. 158)

Thus far the protagonist's journey has been on water or land. Now he moves in air, with the help of a great white bird. Finally, the Crystal arrives at the centre of the circle-in-the-square to receive him. His own body becomes "a shape in light" and the city changes correspondingly, "as if the city of stone and clay had dissolved, leaving a ghostly city, made in light." As the boundaries between self and world, inner and outer space, disappear, the light is simultaneously "inner or outer as one chose to view it." The protagonist's inner being becomes harmonious with the macrocosm; he understands that the mind of humanity is also a unified consciousness, of which he is an integral part. Even the war and blood-lust he has witnessed have been essential to his eventual transmutation, providing the "page in my passport for this stage of the journey ... a door, a key, and an opening."

Formally, the movement toward a higher plane of mystical awareness suggests the ascent motif of romance and myth, in which "escape, remembrance, or discovery of one's real identity, growing freedom, and the breaking of enchantment" shape the narrative; the growth of identity through "the casting off of whatever conceals or frustrates it" typifies the positive metamorphosis of the protagonist. Thus Lessing renders the fundamentally ineffable and self-transcending experience of spiritual illumination. The Sufi teachings have it that "when apparent opposites are reconciled, the individuality is not only complete, it also transcends the bounds of ordinary humanity as we understand them. The individual becomes, as near as we can state it, immensely powerful."(op. cit, p. 159)

The description of this process of exploration which takes place in the consciousness of the inner space voyager is periodically interrupted by the medical staff's observations on their patient's mental condition, and their disagreements about appropriate treatment. Doctor X recommends extensive use of drugs and eventually shock treatment, while Doctor Y is more restrained, arguing for a gradual approach with minimal intervention. Watkins perceives the doctors' different sensitivities: while he can scarcely "see" Doctor X, Doctor Y is more "visible," burning with a "small steady light." However, both doctors are primarily concerned to restore their patient to the same orthodox model of "normality." Monitoring his responses to the drugs, they interpret his mental condition through its physical manifestations, concentrating on such behavioural evidence as alertness, coherence, drowsiness, and other physiological signs. The reader, caught between the image of the protagonist as Everyman journeying through the collective unconscious, and Charles Watkins as amnesiac patient, observes the same experiences as described from internal and external perspectives. From the medical point of view, the spiritual experience is a religious delusion.

From deep in inner/outer space the protagonist of this novel has a similar overview of all the earth, with its petty wars, political schisms, social insanities, divisions. Yet the index of his psychic wholeness is his perception of the fundamental unity of all things. The real madness of humanity, he understands, is the failure to remember that unity at the base of all life, instead pursuing the courses of separation and division.

The same identification of microcosm with macrocosm, of inner with outer space, extends still further, as the enlightened protagonist finds himself at a cosmic reference presided over by an illuminated deity (the Sun). There he learns that the troubled planet Earth

is in a state of First Class Emergency. The cosmic spirits - including Merk Ury, Minna Erva, and other refractions of Watkins's intellectual familiarity with the Greek classics - are being "briefed" to carry the easily forgotten message of Harmony to its inhabitants once again before it self-destructs. If the macrocosm and the microcosm are understood as congruent, then the anticipated cataclysm on earth that Watkins observes corresponds to the psychic crisis in his own personality; he discovers the chaos in the outer world that is a projection of his inner state. Furthermore, for the cosmic beings who seek to revitalize the message of harmony and, analogously, for the vision of wholeness in the unconscious that seeks entry into consciousness, the obstacles are great. Even with the "brain-printed" message, the emissaries face a considerable risk of amnesia during their descent into Hell (earth); Watkins's descent into his own inner hell is manifested as amnesia to the medical observers. Symbolically, though each human being is born ("brain-printed") with the experience of harmony and wholeness, subsequent experience erodes that primary knowledge and substitutes division. As he grows older, he is more and more like a victim of amnesia, increasingly self-estranged and forgetful of the knowledge of original unity as the deepest reality of his being. Idries Shah notes in the latter case that in the Sufi dervish tradition, "remembering" is an important aspect of psychic development, beginning with "remembering oneself," after which the function shifts to one of harmony with the greater consciousness."(op. cit, p. 161)

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing highlights the metaphysical characteristic of her fictional protagonists. As Watkins formulates it, "Each individual of this species is locked up inside his own skull," unable to "see things except as facets and one at a time." The Watkins of the second part of the novel and the mind-voyaging protagonist of the first part do not constitute a *conscious* integrated whole personality. His amnesia is a breakdown or disintegration of his roles as husband, father, professor. Forgetting for a time who he "is" for others, he journeys within his own unconscious self in an effort to rescue some deeper knowledge that his ego personality has forgotten. Thus the hallucinations, fantasies, and visions of his inner space journey are unconscious. His larger task is to bring the truths discovered in the collective memory to personal awareness, to weld the split between the generic Everyman of the inner space journey and the individual self of waking life.

In the subsequent parts of the novel the emphasis shifts from cosmic to biological and social time and their corresponding metaphorical formulations. Following the rebirth and his cosmic briefing on Harmony, the protagonist "returns to the beginning" again, this time reliving the primary biological separation of his own physical birth experience:

"Sucked into sound, sucked into sea, a swinging sea, boom, shhhh, boooom, shhhh, boooom... thud thud, thud thud ... one two, and the three is me, the three is me, THE THREE IS ME. I in dark, I in pulsing dark, crouched, I holding on, clutching tight, boooom, shhhh, boooom, shhh, rocked, rocking, somewhere behind the gate, somewhere in front the door, and a dark red clotting light and pressure and pain and then OUT into a flat white light where shapes move and things flash and glitter." (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, p. 201)

His first "personal" memory following birth is his initiation into the drugging of his awareness and the equation of sleeping with being a "good" baby. Both literally and metaphorically, sleep is the norm and spiritual awakeness is the abnormal state.

That the inner journey is itself both a reflection of and an effort to heal the division is the central assumption of the novel. As R. D. Laing has remarked, the "cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed." (op. cit, p. 163) The narrator of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* describes the mental hospitals that house the "millions who have cracked, making cracks where the light could shine through at last."

Like Laing, whose ideology Lessing shares more explicitly in this novel than in any of her other works, the author emphasizes that "mental illness" - manifested as unconventional behaviour or abnormal consciousness - is a cultural label that permits the potential for vision or even self-healing to be drugged by the very institutions that ostensibly promote recovery.

If the first major section of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* shows the "light shining through" the cracked mind of the protagonist, the remainder of the novel provides a partial explanation for the crack.

The narrative organization expresses two kinds of knowledge: the "information" of the external world of social interaction, and its imaginative transformations at the unconscious levels of the protagonist's psyche.

Once Watkins's social identity is established, by means of a photograph found in his recovered wallet, the doctors attempt to reconstruct his former identity for him. Watkins, however, categorically rejects the role and name assigned to him by his former intimates, having found his true centre in the modality of psychic space he has recently discovered. Concurrently, the testimonies from his wife, mistress, colleagues, and acquaintances to the doctors contribute a picture of the social persona that Watkins has given up, and one that contrasts sharply with the illuminated Everyman of the first part of the novel. The commentaries of his familiars emphasize the ways in which Watkins - to *their* perceptions - was always somehow different, abnormal. Impervious to basic social conventions and feelings, he was "the original eccentric oddball" who did not even "pay lip service to ordinary feelings," according to his colleague Jeremy Thorne. His disillusioned former mistress, Constance Mayne, found him "above every human emotion." His wife, Felicity, who might be expected to know him best, seems to know him least, though she does volunteer the fact that he "always sleeps much less than most people." Conversely, Rosemary Baines, a bare acquaintance from one of his lecture audiences, had been so struck by his ideas and his presence that she had written an extraordinary letter, which forms a major section of the narrative, to share with him her ideas on education and other matters.

Though he had initially dismissed Rosemary Baines's remarkable effort at communication, one learns subsequently that Watkins had met her and her archaeologist friend, Frederick Larson, the night before the beginning of his amnesia. Many of the ideas detailed in her letter reappear in altered form as images and events in the inner space journey that he subsequently undergoes. Rosemary discusses the problem of education - the process of indoctrinating children into social norms and thus anaesthetizing their inborn capacity for perceiving wholeness. She describes the psychic wavelength that Watkins's lecture on the topic had struck within her: the feeling of "beings briefly, on a different, high, vibrating current, of the familiar are becoming transparent." Her reflections clearly parallel the experience Watkins himself lives out at the climax of his inner journey, which in turn suggests the elevated awareness of the Sufi mystic.

Moreover, Rosemary Baines retells her friend Frederick Larson's archaeological speculations on the forms of life of earlier civilizations. Observations on the roofing materials of archaic houses resonate with Watkins's discovery of the idyllic city with roofless houses; Rosemary's long discussion of Larson's mid-life crises, set up by the questioning of basic assumptions about one's profession and identity, resonates with Watkins's own breakdown. Like Larson, Watkins has suffered from a stammer that is the symptom of his inner turmoil; like Larson, Watkins is also a student of ancient civilizations, but his intellectual mastery of the heritage of Western thought has failed to develop in him any insight into the larger relationship between the collective past and his personal history. His mind journey of the first part of the novel thus acquires further meaning as a reflection of aspects of the self he has not assimilated into his conscious personality. Ironically, his psychic travels make existentially real his identification with classical mythic figures and motifs from his intellectual discipline.

Though that journey is interrupted by the doctors' efforts to restore him to his pre-amnesiac identity, it is resumed in another form in response to the more sensitive Doctor Y's suggestion that Watkins recall his wartime experiences. The reader discovers that this experience is a pure fantasy, neither "realistic" nor "true." His war buddy Miles Bovey, whose death is described in the account, later confirms not only that he is still alive but that Watkins had never seen action in Yugoslavia, the location of his "recollection." Instead, these events are closer to Bovey's own war experience.

Watkins describes a number of events: a briefing (this time a military one) followed by a descent (a parachute drop into Yugoslavia), and the experience of belonging to a larger collective whole (participation in the partisan Resistance).

In the final part of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Watkins is balanced between the two extremes of his being: the vivid experience of wholeness in its several formulations, and the advice of his contemporaries to resume his former social identity. He is convinced that he must "remember" something that is crucial to his psychic survival, but what he must remember - the reality of unity - is antithetical to what the doctors urge him to remember - the split identity he has vacated. For a time he preserves his suspension between the two, sharing his intermediate state with a young patient named Violet Stoke: "*They say I lost my memory because I feel guilty.... I think I feel guilty because I lost my memory.*" (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, p. 362). Violet's status as a girl who does not want to grow up emphasizes the ambiguity of Watkins's condition.

In this context, one theory of schizophrenia suggests that the condition is the individual's response to "paradox intolerance," particularly as embodied in the antithetical emotions of love and aggression. Because of the pressure of those conflicting experiences, he seeks a "personal paradise": "a hypothetical life situation where each person can creatively express himself openly, directly, and honestly, and come to fulfilment without double-binds, games, hidden agendas, and complexes.... The person who ends up with the appellation 'schizophrenic' is in some way more imbued with the need to find that paradise for himself, that is, he not only needs to, but has to. Such an archetype is more central to his being." (op. cit, p. 167)

Mircea Eliade describes the ambivalence inherent in the desire for paradise within the sacred context, noting that "on the one side, man is haunted by the desire to escape from his particular situation and regain a transpersonal mode of life; on the other, he is paralyzed by the fear of losing his 'identity' and 'forgetting' himself." Man must leave Eden in order to grow - but he may spend the rest of his life trying to return to it. The nostalgia for wholeness is his oldest memory, for unity is located, symbolically, at both the beginning and the end of consciousness. (op. cit, p. 167)

Watkins submits to shock treatment in the hope that it may help him to remember the truth that hesitates like a shadow on the edge of his awareness. His final insight before the shock treatment is his explanation to Violet of the phenomenon of timing at work in the level of human evolution and change:

"It's desperately urgent that I should remember, I do know that. It's all timing, you see... There are lots of things in our ordinary life that are ... shadows. Like coincidences, or dreaming, the kinds of things that are an angle to ordinary life... The important thing is this - to remember that some things reach out to us from that level of living, to here ... all these things, they have a meaning, they are reflections from that other part of ourselves, and that part of ourselves knows things we don't know.... What I have to remember has to do with time running out." (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, p. 378-379)

3. CONCLUSIONS

Despite Watkins's various illuminations, the ultimate prognosis is negative. The shock treatment works with rather than against the split in his personality, and the amnesia of his earlier life merely reverses itself and becomes amnesia of his inner journey. Watkins leaves the hospital, fully recovered but in fact as split as before. His wife and friends confirm the Watkins they had known before his breakdown. The tragedy of his medical "cure" is that he has recovered his former identity only to lose, once again, the meaning of his journey.

However, in this novel Lessing suggests that the fault lies not with his choices but with the establishment itself, for its endorsement of that very state of separateness and inner division as the norm. R. D. Laing has enjoined, "Can we not see that this voyage [into the self] is not what we need to be cured of but that it is itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality?" (op. cit, p. 169)

Lessing more pessimistically implies that in society as it is presently constituted, abnormal consciousness is a mixed blessing, for the self cannot exist without reference to a world. If Watkins reflects the schizophrenia of contemporary life, the cure is no better than the disease. Ultimately failing to overcome his self-division, he hovers in the perilous straits between inner illumination and the external manifestations often identified as psychosis, with no certainty as to which is "real," since the definition of reality is established by consensus. By the latter standard, the effort to relinquish the personal ego in order to embrace transcendence is a pathological one. What distinguishes between the schizophrenic and the mystic or enlightened individual, as Lessing has already suggested, is partly the capacity of unique personality to harmonize its own dissonant elements and partly the judgment of the orthodox establishment that labels it. (op. cit, p. 169)

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