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## The Golden Notebook as Trauma Narrative

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Acta Philologica nr 49, 249-260

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2016

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## ***The Golden Notebook as Trauma Narrative***

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to read Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* as a literary experiment, which struggles to find meaning amid fragmented narratives. Aiming to reflect the structure of the experience of mental breakdown, the novel is abundant with literary strategies meant to enhance the understanding of the Real (in Lacanian sense) experience of the main protagonist. Ultimately, all of the stylistic endeavours are doomed to failure, and the experience which cannot be directly communicated surfaces as traumatic: it escapes both chronology and understanding; it renders the protagonist helpless against reality, which she perceives as full of violence. The reason behind the breakdown is elusive, yet it seems to be grounded in historical reality of the twentieth century. Through its inability to convey a message in a conventional novelistic form, *The Golden Notebook* emerges as a witness to the traumatic nature of human experience of the modern era.

**Key words:** Lessing, trauma, trauma studies, twentieth century history, experience, the Real

*The Golden Notebook* is Lessing's most conspicuously fragmented narrative. Its structure, as the author insists in the "Preface," was carefully thought out to correlate strongly with its central theme, that of a breakdown. It is probably the only novel in which Lessing explores the possibilities of fragmentation to such an extent, bending the narrative form so as to show the experience of mental breakdown in its roughness, before it "has shaped itself into thought and pattern" (8). The idea was to shape the book in such a way that "it would make its own comment about the conventional novel" (13), as Lessing says in an interview:

I wanted to write a short formal novel which would enclose the rest in order to suggest what I think a great many writers feel about the formal novel; namely that it's not doing its job any more. So I thought that the only way to do this would be to write the short formal novel and put in the experience it came out of, showing how ridiculous the formal novel is when it can't say a damned thing. (Schlueter 31)

*The Golden Notebook* thus attempts to embed the readers in the protagonist's raw experience, and encourages them to find "meaning [...] in the shape" (31). Such an inability of narrative to convey the real experience has been given a lot of attention in the field of trauma studies. Studied through the lens of trauma theory, Anna Wulf's experience, which breaks through the shape of *The Golden Notebook*, is traumatic in the way in which it cannot be directly communicated, escaping both chronology and

immediate understanding. What is more, the protagonist is rendered helpless against reality that she perceives as full of violence, which makes the novel an important witness of the twentieth-century history.

Trauma studies arose as a discipline on the verge of such sciences as psychoanalysis, modern psychology, sociology, history and cultural studies. The question of how to respond to the stories of survivors of modern wars, ecological catastrophes, or other forms of life-threatening experiences has become central to “therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike” (Caruth, *Explorations* vii). Modern psychology defines trauma as an experience which occurs “outside the range of normal human experience,” but this extraordinariness does not stem from the fact that such events occur rarely, but rather from the fact that they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life:

Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with death. [...] [T]he common denominator of psychological trauma is a feeling of “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation.” (Herman 33)

As the pathology of the response to such experiences lies in “*the structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it,” critics have been debating the nature of a faithful representation of trauma (Caruth et. al., *Explorations* 4). Literature has been accorded an important status in accessing such experiences as narrative “allow[s] trauma to register in language and its hesitations, indirections, pauses and silences” (LaCapra 122). Similarly, according to Laurie Vickroy, trauma narratives “internalise the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (3), while Geoffrey Hartman argues that it is precisely through the fragmentation of the narrative, and its time-breaching quality that they reveal their “traumatic core” (548). *The Golden Notebook* can be treated as a trauma narrative as it displays such characteristic features both in its language and form.

The fragmentation of Doris Lessing’s novel is complex. Most basically, it is composed of four notebooks, which are enclosed by five chapters of *Free Women*, the novel written by the fictional writer Anna Wulf, and finally superseded by the eponymous golden notebook. Anna sets out to write the four notebooks, more out of compulsion than a well thought-out plan, aiming to reorganise and put in order the various aspects of her life. In each of the notebooks, a theme emerges from “broken scriblings and half-sentences,” establishing one of the artificial divisions of Anna’s life (Lessing 71). These are as follows: “a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf, the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary” (418). The rigour cannot easily be kept, so the narratives from individual notebooks frequently overlap in subject matter. What is more, throughout the book, Anna actually tries to register multiple stories, not only her own, making each volume dense with narrative voices. She experiments with narrative techniques searching for simplicity, but ends up with

a variety of styles, none of which seems to be adequate to reflect the truth. All in all, despite her attempt at ordering and organisation, the notebooks come out more and more chaotic.

The black notebook is Anna's endeavour to deal with her writing career following the success of *Frontiers of War*, her first and only novel, based on the life she led for a couple of years in Central Africa with a group of communist friends. It quickly turns out that even this particular sphere of her life falls into two further divisions: *Source* and *Money*. The heading *Source* attempts to cover the plot of *Frontiers*, as well as possible material from which it stems, while *Money* entries cover all possible practical matters connected with its publication: reviews, meetings with producers, etc. Anna's strong feelings about what it means to write a novel emerges from the juxtaposition of the two perspectives. She realises that, for the sake of art, experience has to be transformed, or given a form, and if it is fitted into the shape of a novel, it drifts away from the truth. What is worse, as soon as something is written it becomes "a property of other people," and as such, it is prone to interpretation or re-working to such an extent that the original event gets lost in the multiplicity of versions (72). And so, the black notebook encompasses the reviews of *Frontiers of War*, which shift perspectives on the subject matter according to what is most relevant to individual reviewers. Further on, the book is completely torn apart by film or television producers who need to make necessary amendments for the sake of their medium. Anna reluctantly observes their ventures to bend the plot of the novel according to their needs: attempts are made to fit the novel into the mode of a TV show, a musical, or a theatre performance. In desperation, she remarks ironically that it might as well be transformed into a comedy. The relation between Anna's memories and the multiple versions that people try to make of her book becomes increasingly strained.

The red notebook takes on Anna's struggle with political ideas. It starts with her decision to join the Communist Party, however, the chronology of entries seems to be initially neglected, as five pages later, Anna simply leaves the CP (152–157). The quitting takes place in a fast-forward manner, however, the shedding of ideas takes over the whole red notebook. The entries are apparently added over the years, and revolve around Anna's political activities, such as party meetings and canvassing, as well as the gradual loss of faith in socialism among the members of the Party, who exchange information about the inexplicable executions of comrades in the Soviet Bloc. Historical events are merely mentioned: the Prague trials, the aggravating atmosphere of the Cold War, the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, the death of Stalin, and finally, the Twentieth Party Congress. The focus is on the atmosphere of disillusionment, and the pointlessness of discussions among Party members about what could be done to improve the state of affairs. The red notebook does not provide direct access to Anna's emotions. It is the most impersonal of all the notebooks; it incorporates other people's voices, as well as other perspectives with dubious comments on the part of the narrator. A couple of embedded narratives present comrades having great faith in the future of socialism and willingness to take it upon themselves to straighten out the ways of the Party. One is the story of a man, who, in his fantasy, simply speaks to Stalin of the mistakes made in terms of international policy; the great leader eagerly listens and incorporates his

suggestions (273–275), which could be read both seriously and ironically; the other concerns a man who spends his time preparing himself for the time when he will be summoned by the Party to help them with his knowledge and capacity, which obviously never happens (462–466). The stories, and all of the political operations, seem to be inconclusive, as is the ending of the red notebook.

The yellow notebook is Anna's exercise book in story writing: she takes events from her life and exploits them as rich material for her fiction. The notebook begins with *The Shadow of the Third*: a fictional account of Anna and Michael's affair, who become the characters of Ella and Paul in *The Shadow*. Ella works as a journalist and her responsibility is to sort letters seeking professional medical advice, she also replies to these for which traditional medicine offers no solution. In one of the embedded narratives the narrator says: "I feel I must write to you in my desperation. I get my rheumatism in my neck and my head. [...] My rheumatism began when my husband passed over on the 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1950, at 3 in the afternoon at the Hospital. Now I am getting frightened, because I am alone in my flat, and what might happen if my rheumatism attacked all over and then I could not move for help" (165). Ella gets hundreds of similar "unanswerable letters," and walks the streets of London aware that behind the window curtains everywhere there are the people who write those letters (168). In her spare time she also weaves her own narrative about a man who makes an unexpected decision to commit suicide, which becomes highly successful on publication. Yet, Ella's five-year-long affair with a married psychologist is the most important, but to her dismay, it comes to an end. After that, Ella easily succumbs to other affairs of this kind, allowing married men to take advantage of her. The narrating voice changes throughout the notebook: the impersonal third-person narrator changes to Anna, and back. Anna reveals herself as the narrating voice, especially when she comes across some technical difficulties such as how to describe the nature of her relationship outside the category of 'a love affair which comes to an end,' or how to write about sex. The end of the notebook becomes a list of ideas which can serve as starting points for short stories and novels: all of them based on Anna's turbulent life.

Out of the frustration that nothing she writes seems to come close to the truth, Anna decides to keep a simple record of events in the form of a diary. In the blue notebook, she determines not to turn events into fiction, but put them down in the most straight-forward manner possible. Here one can find accounts of Anna's daily life with her daughter, Janet, Molly's trouble with her son and the psychoanalytical sessions with Mother Sugar. The notebook turns out to be a complete stylistic chaos. After a couple of entries it becomes a collection of newspaper cuttings, "carefully pasted in and dated" (219). When the personal entries begin again, a particularly long one is crossed out, and replaced with just a couple of sentences describing the same day. They subsequently take the form of factual statements of the kind: "Got up early. Read so-and-so. Saw so-and-so. Janet is sick. Janet is well. Molly is offered a part she likes/doesn't like, etc." (411). They continue until Anna declares the blue notebook the ultimate failure as no pattern and no understanding can arise from the record of pure facts. She continues writing the story of her life, with no dates, later on in passages graphically divided off with numbers and asterisks.

A direct outcome of the prescribed formal arrangement of the notebooks is a disruption of chronology. The novel enters the mode of “negative narratability,” which is Geoffrey Hartman’s term for representations of trauma characterised by such fragmentary and time-breaching quality (548). For the simple reason that Anna tries to keep separate inseparable spheres of life, the order of events is sometimes reversed, e.g. Anna leaves the Party in the red notebook before she has made a decision to do so in the blue one; fictional Paul leaves Ella, before the affair has ended in Anna’s life. The repetition of certain comments, events and emotions is also unavoidable, as the individual lines of thought inevitably connect at one point or another. For the reader, it is all the harder to keep track of events as entries may or may not be dated. The lack of chronology arises not only as an effect of the formal arrangement of the notebooks, but also from Anna’s conscious or compulsive behaviour to write outside chronology, e.g. by drawing asterisks instead of writing dates. All of the notebooks are ultimately failures, each ended with “a heavy double black line” (Lessing 528).

Anna’s dissatisfaction is not only with form, but also with language itself: writing “simply, the truth” proves impossible (77). Lacanian theory of the registers of human experience can elucidate the meaning of the failure of language in the novel. It is the inadequacy of the Symbolic<sup>1</sup> in the face of the Real which is the source of Anna’s frustrations. The Real is what can best be described as an absence within the Symbolic order; it is the experience which cannot be accessed through speech: it is “*that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization” (Fink 25). Trauma belongs to the Real: it emerges as “a blockage or fixation in the process of signification. [It] arrests the movement of symbolization” (Homer 84). Trauma is then a residue of the Real which resists being transformed by the Symbolic.

The inability to convey the Real experience through words is one of the recurring themes in *The Golden Notebook*. Anna is very skilled at detecting artificiality in the stories, conversations, poems or speeches delivered by other people. She sees others as products of the Symbolic, unable to communicate or define themselves outside the realm of language. She is also aware of the power language has over her, and how powerless she is when facing its inadequacies as a writer. The artificiality of language is particularly visible among comrades, for whom official jargon and pathos are a smokescreen against their true feelings of criticism and disappointment. Even in their writing, Anna sees only “flashes of genuine art [which] are all out of deep, suddenly stark, undisguisable private emotion,” but the majority is just “dead stuff” (Lessing 311). Anna notices that, even in political discussions, people’s thoughts can be imprisoned by language: phrases one has heard and press jargon echo within a person’s opinion, determining their political stance (353). Ella’s father’s poetry appears to be a similar construct of quotes from other famous thinkers (409).

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1 The Symbolic, which is the dimension of language based on the Saussurian understanding of signifiers, is the determining register in Lacan’s theory: “Every human being is born to the world of discourse which exists prior to an individual. It is language, that chain of signifiers, which creates our reality” (Fink 5).

Burdened with these observations, Anna finds it more and more difficult to write. She carefully weighs up the meaning of words when they are to be used for characterisation. The words “nice” and “good” are not definite enough to appear in a novel, and yet on the very same page they are used with the full consciousness of their inadequacy (114). However indefinite they seem, language does not offer any alternatives. She looks for a recipe for writing the truth about her affair, yet decides that necessarily all “literature is analysis after the event,” and as such, it will always put events into a certain pattern (210). Ella and Paul’s relationship falls into “the pattern of an affair,” and is seen in terms of how it finished, not in how it developed over the years (210). A variety of literary endeavours do not bring her any closer to the truth: she rejects pastiche, as it is far away from genuine emotion (475), and factual records which appear to be equally false (418). Such dilemmas finally bring her to the conclusion that “words mean nothing” (418). The conclusion echoes in the golden notebook:

Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want. Perhaps better with music? But music attacks my inner ear like an antagonist ... I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of a kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. The people who have been there, in a place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and others won't. (549)

It seems that Anna’s artistic development has completed a cycle, and become stuck in a deadlock: the very first pages of the black notebook began precisely “with doodling, scattered musical symbols, treble clefs that shifted into the £ sign and back again; then a complicated design of interlocking circles, then words” (71). Now, as the language ultimately fails her, the graphic elements represent her disconnection with reality.

Anna has been experimenting with various modes of representation, and acknowledging that language has failed her, she gives up on words and looks for images. She explores the poetics of film with the belief that it could make a more truthful record of the matter of human experience. She recalls her time in Africa as follows:

I see, as in a slow-motion film, Maryrose turn her head, with her terrifyingly patient smile ... I've written the word film. Yes. The moments I remember all have the absolute assurance of a smile, a look, a gesture, in a painting or a film. Am I saying then that the certainty I'm clinging to belongs to the visual arts, and not to the novel, not to the novel at all, which has been claimed by the disintegration and the collapse? (115)

Similarly, deliberating the most accurate ways of describing a love affair, Anna thinks in terms of scenes in a film: “To show a woman loving a man one should show her cooking a meal for him or opening a bottle of wine for the meal, while she waits for his ring at the door. [...] Yes. To be repeated a thousand times. But that isn't literature. Probably better as a film” (210). Finally, she finds the imagery of a film equally lacking in representation of the real life, which leads to the ultimate breakdown and dissatisfaction with both literary and cinematic modes.

[Diary entries] have become [...] not the form into which experience is shaped, but a series of meaningless sounds, like nursery talk, and away to one side of experience. Or like the sound track of a film that has slipped its connection with the film. When I am thinking I have only to write a phrase like 'I walked down the street,' or take a phrase from a newspaper 'economic measures which lead to the full use of...' and immediately the words dissolve, and my mind starts spawning images which have nothing to do with the words, so that every word I see or hear seems like a small raft bobbing about on an enormous sea of images. (418)

The words dissolve into meaninglessness, while the images lose connection: what takes over is the Real which cannot be grasped. When language turns insubstantial, Anna is left incapacitated as a writer. She is afraid that even if the film was made, with the exact people and words they said, even if a director "filmed what was there," it might still not reflect the real experience (462).

The fragmentation of form and the failure of language make it viable to look at *The Golden Notebook* as a trauma narrative. Anna weaves multiple small narratives creating a complex web of experiences in order to reach for something which, nevertheless, remains inaccessible to her throughout the book. Even though she proliferates voices, perspectives, styles, and engages multiple modes of representation to increase the chances of accessing the truth, she feels that something always remains unreachable and unsaid, a kind of "unclaimed experience."<sup>2</sup> The narratives of individual notebooks are broken and interwoven, which subverts chronology, creating a timeless repetitious quality of what is being recorded. The structure of the narrative, in which Lessing meant to reflect the structure of experience, reveals it as traumatic: inaccessible, repetitive, destroying Anna's sense of continuity and putting her in a state of professional and existential crisis.

Laurie Vickroy emphasises the fact that "trauma narratives [...] go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterisation; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works" (xiv). I wish to argue that the narrative strategies in *The Golden Notebook*, such as I have pointed out, incorporate the rhythms and processes of traumatised consciousness to such an extent that the form obliterates the traumatic event as a subject matter. The crises are dealt with during sessions with Mother Sugar, who encourages Anna to 'name' her dreams and experiences. The process of naming is the process of working through, or "talking cure."<sup>3</sup> The woman arrives at the meetings because of being unable to feel deeply about anything – as if her feelings were frozen: "Because I've had the experiences that should have touched me and they haven't" (213). It turns out, however, that they have touched her more deeply than she could acknowledge. In subsequent sessions, Anna admits that "ever since I can remember anything the real thing that has been happening in the world was death and destruction. It seems to me stronger than

2 "Unclaimed experience" is the term coined by Cathy Caruth to refer to traumatic experience (*Unclaimed* 4).

3 "Talking cure" was the term originally used by Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud in their treatment of hysterical patients, to describe the painful, yet successful, process of putting one's traumatic experience into words (Herman 12).



life” (216). Soon she finds herself having nightmares and crying in her sleep. Just as the process of unfreezing begins, Anna temporarily abandons her diary. At one point, starting with the blue notebook, and eventually all of the notebooks, stop as written accounts, and turn into collections of newspaper cuttings. The blue one becomes the first “record of war, murder, chaos, misery” with articles concerning the war in Korea, the advancements of nuclear armament in Great Britain and around the world, or the era of McCarthyism in America (228). Some of the titles are as follows: “KOREA: 371 KILLED, WOUNDED OR MISSING,” “RUSSIA BUILDS A-BOMBER,” “OUR BOMB GOES OFF,” “US TRIES OUT H BOMB,” “STALIN DIES,” “ATROCITIES IN EGYPT,” “REVOLT IN ROUMANIA,” “2<sup>nd</sup> H-BOMB EXPLODED” (220–227). The black notebook for the years 1955, 1956, and 1957 comprises the news items referring to “violence, death, rioting, hatred in some part of Africa” (461). The red notebook for the year 1956 is “stuffed full of newspaper cuttings to do with the Twentieth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, letters from all kinds of people about politics, agendas for political meetings” (394), and then it is taken over by news from “Europe, the Soviet Union, China, the United States [...] about, for the most part, violence” (462). Later on, Anna covers a whole room in her house with newspaper cuttings. She admits to Mother Sugar that whatever violence and terror happen in the world, she dreams of them as if she “were involved in it personally” (228). In Anna’s perception, “It’s just a matter of luck that I haven’t been tortured, murdered, starved to death or died in a prison” (228). She finally acknowledges the destructive impact of civilisation on her writing: nothing she could write seems to have any point in the face of all the terrible things she could read about in the newspapers (229).

The writer’s block is one of the things they aim to work through during the therapy, but what Anna actually suffers from is a compulsion to write accompanied with an inability to come to terms with the literary form. The notebooks are cluttered with Anna’s compulsive attempts at moulding her life into the shape of stories, which she detests: “Why do I never write down, simply, what happens?” (211). Perhaps it is a way to make sense of trauma, or to avoid the bare traumatic content. On the other hand, the multiple endeavours at experimentation expose the sheer terror of trauma. What emerges if she lets her mind go easy on words is the world of darkness: “The terror of this city. Fear of being alone” (71). The first novel was written out of the emotion of “something frightening, the unhealthy, feverish, illicit excitement of war-time, a lying nostalgia, a longing for licence, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness,” which resurfaces again during the sessions with Mother Sugar (77).

When the therapy comes to an end, Anna begins to see more clearly the reasons for her writer’s impasse, and both the psychiatrist and the patient acknowledge the sessions have been successful in working through “the private pain-material” (414). Nevertheless, in conversations with Mother Sugar, Anna openly rejects writing in a way that could “put the pain away, where it can’t hurt, turn it into a story or into history” (414). It seems that what Anna tries to guard against is precisely the “betrayal [...] in the act of telling”: speaking of her private trauma in such a simplistic fashion that would eliminate the force of the structure of traumatic experience (*Caruth Unclaimed* 27). She wants to bear witness to a modern woman’s life not in terms of recurring

myths and Jungian archetypes, but to show it was truly “never lived before” (Lessing 415). The life she lives is unique, the scope of violence goes beyond the imagination of previous generations: “I don’t want to be told when I wake up, terrified by a dream of total annihilation, because of the H-bomb exploding, that people felt that way about the cross-bow. It isn’t true. There is something new in the world” (415). The “something new” comprises both destructive and creative forces. Even though Anna’s testimony is finally written down as fairly conventional *Free Women*, Lessing finds creative potential in the ruins of Anna’s experience. She overthrows the novelistic form in order to bear witness to the unprecedented era in such a way that would reflect the structure of experience rather than name it.

This decision to abandon convention for the sake of the structure of experience, obliterates the traumatic content of the novel, or the precise “pain-material.” Anna lives the life of a free woman in a century of violence, which puts her in several difficult predicaments. A typically female traumatic experience, as a potential origin of Anna’s condition, has been identified by Suzette Henke. As the critic argues, “Anna the author appears to be working through, both psychologically and artistically, the debilitating effects of relational trauma in terms of sadomasochistic liaisons that replicate paternal rejection” (12). If, as Henke implies, Ella shares her biography with Anna, they both suffer because of their inhibited veteran fathers’ “emotional inaccessibility” (12), so “crucial to female development” (11). Such emotional deficiency in early childhood bears on Anna’s whole life and results in symptomatic behaviour of “a classic trauma survivor”: “Anna is intermittently afflicted with flashbacks and vividly recurring nightmares; aggressive outbursts; post-traumatic dissociation, [...] psychic fragmentation, [...] flatness of mood, numbing [...]” (11). The repetitious engagement in toxic relationships, in which men inevitably exploit and abandon Ella or Anna, constitutes a pattern of post-traumatic obsessive-compulsive behaviour. For Henke, Anna’s engagement in politics has sources in personal antagonisms: “a post-traumatic conviction of personal anguish evokes fantasies of political disaster, as she [Anna] emotionally identifies with an Algerian soldier being tortured, a jailed communist in Russia, a revolutionary in Cuba” (14). Thus, the whole traumatic impact is attributed to the act of “Daddy’s denial of love” (12).<sup>4</sup>

Such understanding of Anna’s “pain material” in terms of relational trauma unjustifiably narrows down the perspective to female or feminist concerns.<sup>5</sup> Even if there is a lot of evidence for relational trauma, women characters being emotionally depended

4 Such interpretation seems risky if only for the fact that Henke grounds her whole analysis on the affinities between Ella and Anna. She argues that if Anna can be treated as Lessing’s alter-ego, then Ella is definitely Anna’s, and thus they all share a uniform life-story: namely that their fathers were all former war veterans, and therefore bound to be emotionally crippled and denying love to their daughters. This version of family history, however, can only be fully confirmed as to the character of Ella, whose father was indeed “a silent, hard-bitten man, an ex-army officer in India” (Lessing 175), who, on occasion, admits that blood ties were never real for him (408).

5 As some critics have emphasised, *The Golden Notebook* was initially mistakenly reduced to a women’s movement manifesto in the 1960s – cf. Gayle Greene (19) and Ruth Whittaker (8–9).

on men and consistently abandoned by them, the notebooks also abound in proof of Anna's political activity. I would like to argue that her social engagement is a sphere of life equally charged with traumatic content. The events taking place around the world, which are evoked at different points of the narrative, convince Anna of the danger that was never experienced before.

Apart from this conviction, there is a strong sense of guilt in Anna springing from her political commitment. Historical guilt surfaces when Anna writes about the time of the Second World War in Africa. She notices the "enjoyable ironies" of war in the fact that while fighting "the evil doctrines of Hitler [...] about half the total area of Africa, was conducted on precisely Hitler's assumption: that some human beings are better than others because of their race" (Lessing 78–79). However, the real feelings about this paradox are bracketed off:

(I am again falling into the wrong tone – and yet I hate that tone, and yet we all lived inside it for months and years, and it did us all, I am sure, a great deal of damage. It was self-punishing, a locking of feeling, an inability or refusal to fit conflicting things together to make a whole; so that one can live inside it, no matter how terrible. The refusal means one can neither change nor destroy; the refusal means ultimately either death or impoverishment of the individual.). (79)

Even though she writes of the experience in terms of enjoyable irony, it is evident that a certain degree of irony allows her to keep the real feelings at bay and facilitates denial. In the very bracketing-off of the passage, there is a hint of the denial of post-colonial guilt. If it does not belong properly in the narrative, it means the experience is not successfully integrated into one's life. Anna acknowledges the destructive forces of denial, and these are perhaps the forces that make her sensitive to any human suffering that happens in the world. The complex historical context puts Anna in a position of responsibility towards other less fortunate beings in the world, even though she personally meant no harm, she was a part of the unjust white establishment. Her engagement with communism is one of the ways to work through the experience. When she leaves the Communist Party, the sense of guilt strikes back: "And so I left it, and I was glad to, but I also nevertheless felt guilty because I was so happy not to think about it" (157). When this opportunity for a working-through proves a failure, the only way to deal with the experience is acting out: Anna identifies with the victims of all kinds in intrusive dreams: a tortured soldier, a communist prisoner, conscripts, protesting students and Chinese peasants.

There is plenty of information in the novel which can be treated in terms of traumatic content, yet all assumptions would have to remain in the field of speculation due to the very form of *The Golden Notebook*. Both relational trauma and historical context are seemingly viable sources – all in all, Anna may be struggling with both the personal and social impact of her past. What is important is the outcome of the struggle: Anna's notebooks' and the novel's structure justify the traumatic nature of the cumulative experience of a modern woman; when one realises that what they read are not the volumes themselves, but a printed account of them, this sense is heightened. In the original layout, the graphic elements, drawings, different types of handwriting

and square brackets, which further subdivide and eliminate certain events are actually present. The newspaper cuttings, letters, reports of Party meetings are actually stuck and hanging from the pages. If readers take an effort of imagination to see stuffed thick volumes full of lines, crossing-outs, and scraps of paper, they may visualise the true ruins of experience.

Lessing admits that the whole process of the construction of the narrative, with a fixed plan and a very tight structure, was difficult as “[a]ll sorts of ideas and experiences I didn’t recognize as mine emerged when writing. The actual time of writing, then, and not only the experiences that had gone into the writing, was traumatic: it changed me” (10). However, what the writer managed to achieve through this difficult process is precisely a reaffirmation of the power of literature to reach beyond words and images for the Real experience. She provides a faithful testimony of a life of a woman who “never lived before,” avoiding “the betrayal in the act of telling” by preserving the force of the experience in the structure of the narrative. Lessing’s experimentation with form and failing language is highly informative. She weaves her most memorable and experimental narrative in the spirit and the style<sup>6</sup> of the truly traumatic times.

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6 Harold Bloom, despite criticising Lessing’s experiments with form as “rugged” (4), still acknowledges the importance of *The Golden Notebook* in making Lessing “a representative writer for our time [with] the spirit, if not the style, of the age” (7).

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