
Doris Lessing and the Technology of Survival

CHRISTOPHER LASCH

I've been reading a lot of science fiction," Doris Lessing told an interviewer in 1969, "and I think that science fiction writers have captured our culture's sense of the future." Ten years later, Lessing began to publish "space fiction" of her own; but her recent experiments with this kind of writing—*Shikasta*; *The Sirian Experiments*; *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five*; *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*—merely elaborate a dream of planetary doom and regeneration that has dominated almost everything she has written over the last two decades. The cosmic perspective adopted in these novels—the "long view of planetary maintenance and development"—merely confirms what was already apparent to the victims of personal and political disasters in *The Four-Gated City*, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and *The Memoirs of a Survivor*: that European civilization is finished; that its passing can be regarded, on the whole, without regret; and that in any case the hope of revitalizing it through political action is a delusion, "one of the strongest of the false ideas of that epoch"—our epoch, the Century of Destruction, seen now from an extra-terrestrial perspective that enables us to look "from outside at this planet . . . as if at a totally crazed species."

As the hope of political change recedes, attention turns to the "business of survival, its resources and tricks and little contrivances." Lessing's experience is representative in this respect, and the best of her work continues to command attention because it speaks to the prevailing sense of living in a world in which the

demands of daily survival absorb energies that might once have gone into politics. Like other anti-utopian fantasies, which a society capable of destroying itself has generated in ever-increasing abundance, hers owes its power not so much to its horrifying and ambiguous vision of the future (ambiguous because it can be taken both as a warning and a welcome) as to its ability to capture the feel of daily life as already experienced by inhabitants of decaying northern empires, people fallen on hard times. "Yes, it was all impossible," says the narrator of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. "But, after all, I had accepted the impossible." Like Herman Kahn, Doris Lessing has learned to think about the unthinkable. Once an advocate of disarmament, she now believes that a proper program of civil defense would "protect people against everything but a direct hit." "The expertise is there," she maintains in a recent interview. She rejects "peace-movement thinking," propagated by those who "are equipped with a death wish because they don't want to look at the evidence." She demands "cool consideration of the facts." She insists that "we can survive anything you care to mention. We are supremely equipped to survive, to adapt, and even in the long run to start thinking."

Like other writers of science fiction, Lessing has an ambivalent attitude toward technology. On the one hand, she condemns not merely technology but rational intelligence—"our intellectual apparatus, our rationalisms and our logics and our reductions," which alienate human beings from nature and from the deeper intuitive knowledge founded on a sense of oneness with the natural order. Her critique of technology—and here again Lessing articulates an attitude that has become almost commonplace—confuses technique with any kind of practical activity. For this reason, it can easily coexist with an uncritical enthusiasm for technology, as in her advocacy of civil defense. Both her recent public statements and her recent fiction take the position that technological devastation can be countered not through political action but only through a more advanced technology of survival.

Lessing has arrived at this position over what looks like an improbable route—environmentalism, Laingian antipsychiatry, Sufi mysticism. But it is precisely the merger of mysticism with an exaggerated estimate of the achievements (and dangers) of advanced technology that defines the antitechnological imagination today. A widespread revolt against technical rationality, which took shape in the sixties under slogans like "all power to the imagination," and which continues to inform a variety of movements ranging from crusades against pollution to a revival of Christian fundamentalism, has absorbed many of the features of the very mentality it seeks to overthrow. The convergence of irrationalism and superrationalism, enlightenment and antienlightenment, provides another example of the way in which recent counter cultures, even though they contain the seeds of a new politics, nevertheless reaffirm the culture from which they hope to escape. The contemporary critique of technology shares with the

culture of technology a common body of assumptions and attitudes: a contempt for the practical arts, including politics; a prejudice against interpretive modes of inquiry, which often lead to contradictory conclusions and thus appear hopelessly subjective and relativistic; and a demand for the type of intellectual certainty associated either with scientific proof or with mystical illumination.

It is characteristic of this mentality that conflicting diagnoses of mental pathology, for example, appear to condemn a discipline such as psychoanalysis to the status of a pseudoscience. The inherent imprecision of a science based not on experiment but on observation and interpretation generates a demand for positivistic psychologies resting on quantifiable data and, at the other extreme—the antitechnological extreme of contemporary opinion—a celebration of madness as a higher form of sanity. In an afterword to her novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing reports that she once submitted the story for this book (originally a story for a film) to a pair of experts, a psychiatrist and a neurologist, and asked them for a diagnosis of the mental condition of her protagonist—only to find that “their skilled and compassionate diagnoses, while authoritative, . . . agreed about nothing at all.” Madness, according to Lessing, bears witness to higher forms of intelligence; but the psychiatric profession, unwilling to confront this challenge to technical rationality, seeks only “to use labels, to choose words, to define.” In opposition to “a society organised as ours is, to favour the conforming, the average, the obedient,” Lessing revives the romantic and mystical vision according to which insight into the nature of things comes only to those who break out of the “cage of ordinary life” into the heightened state of “extra sensitivity and perception” we call madness.

The impulse to counter a technological society with an older tradition of mysticism is unremarkable. What is remarkable in Lessing's restatement of this tradition is that it conforms quite closely to the view of personality offered by modern behaviorism. Her quarrel lies not so much with modern science and technology as with interpretive, practical sciences such as psychoanalysis. The higher perspectives of madness or extrasensory, extraterrestrial intelligence—and these come to the same thing, according to Lessing, since madmen can best be understood as visitors from another planet, struggling to remember the world from which they came—merely reaffirm the central dogmas of behaviorism: that people are “manipulated from above (or below) by physical forces that they [do] not even suspect”; that emotions interfere with clear thinking; and that individuality is an illusion held by creatures that “have not yet evolved into an understanding of their individual selves as merely parts of a whole, . . . parts of Nature.”

On a number of occasions, Lessing has insisted that mystical experience, madness, and visionary art lead to the same view of the world attainable through modern scientific instruments. “Earth's new and her soon-to-be invented or re-

invented instruments," through which science observes the structure of atoms, disclose miniature solar systems and thus indicate that the human body, like the universe that appears in our telescopes, consists largely of space—a "faint mist," a "smear or haze of particles on which light strikes," a "conglomerate of vast spaces defined by a dance . . . of atoms." Science reinforces the "new kind of self-consciousness" already attained by mystics and madmen. It dispels the illusion of individuality and selfhood. It teaches us that the "individual does not matter, the species does not matter." It brings us closer to the perspective of the higher beings who guide our destinies from another planet, another sun, and who see us, with their "keener finer sight," not as "individuals thinking themselves unique" but as part of a cosmic design, an "overall plan," a "general Necessity." "It is a strange thing," says the narrator of *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, "to feel oneself part of a whole much larger than oneself, to feel oneself vanishing as one thinks, or talks, dissolving into some core, or essence."

Until recently, Lessing would have us understand, this kind of illumination came only to a few people who plunged for a time into some adventure or extreme situation in which a group has to act with one mind, or again to those who took leave of their senses and in this way attained extrasensory understanding. Episodes involving either madness or physical hardship and danger—partisan warfare in the mountains of Yugoslavia (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*), Antarctic exploration (*The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*)—recur regularly in Lessing's fiction. Such experiences annihilate individuality and lead to an understanding of the point she has made so often in interviews: "I don't think we are as extraordinary as we like to think we are. We are more like other people than we would wish to believe." The hero of *Briefing* imagines himself at one point in his inner travels as a partisan guerrilla, awakened briefly to the "high, vibrating current," the "extra wakefulness" of danger and to the "fine high comradeship of the group." In another psychotic episode, he thinks he is a space traveler sent to earth as part of a mission to awaken the inhabitants to an understanding of their extraterrestrial origin and destiny. He comes to see that "saying I, I, I, I, is their madness"—the principal consequence of their "terrible falling-away" from the knowledge with which they came into the world. The illusion of individuality so common on "Earth, a casualty," makes the "celestial watchers roll with laughter or weep with pity" as they contemplate the suicidal folly of beings who absurdly imagine that the intensity of their emotions—which lead them into deadly competition and wars—somehow distinguishes them from their fellows. Lessing's view from outer (inner) space appears to confirm the chief finding of behavioral science—the vision of human life "beyond freedom and dignity."

We live in "dreadful and marvelous times," according to Lessing; "a great deal of what is going on is not told to ordinary citizens." The certainty that modern governments lie to their peoples and withhold information about

their scientific and military experiments gives free rein to popular fantasies of destruction and technological transcendence, registered not only in Lessing's work but in the whole genre of science fiction. Indeed our entire culture is shaped by the feeling that everyday experience no longer provides a reliable guide to the nature of things. It is this condition of habitual disbelief, this radical loss of confidence in the reality of the world of appearances, that underlies the growing conviction that we are controlled—programmed—by forces outside our knowledge or control, in the first instance by governments armed with sophisticated technologies of surveillance and thought control. In *Briefing*, Lessing notes in passing that “human beings cannot stand up to torture and psychological methods” and that a “peasant” morality premised on the “power of heroism” under adversity serves people poorly in a “technological society,” where the “psychological double-twisting of modern torture” breaks down resistance that can appeal only to obsolete conceptions of selfhood and personal honor. In his fantasy of guerrilla warfare, the hero of this book fears torture by the Nazis, while in real life—in the ordinary circumstances we confuse with real life, according to Lessing—he falls into the hands of well-meaning psychiatrists who use electric shock therapy to eradicate all memory of his deeper self, thereby turning him back into an ordinary unperceptive professor of classics and model citizen. Lessing's point—one that turns up over and over again, in her own works and in recent fiction as a whole, in the folklore of the postmodern age—is that imperial states now enforce conformity by putting people to sleep. Drugs, psychiatry, psychological torture, television, electronic surveillance, and genetic engineering together make up an elaborate apparatus of technological manipulation designed to tranquilize people into submission.

By carrying the logic of domination one step further, Lessing tries at the last minute to rescue hope from despair, without, however, surrendering the conception of technologically controlled behavior that underlies it. If rival empires have divided our world between them, arming themselves with technologies capable of keeping their own populations under control (and of blowing each other to bits), it does not seem altogether implausible, in Lessing's cosmology, to imagine imperial rivalries at a much higher level, conducted with technologies that make our own look primitive by comparison. In Lessing's evolutionary hierarchy, even the Sirians, who have outgrown death, scarcity, and toil, and who look down with pity and horror on “lowly evolved planets” such as our own, find it impossible to grasp the “subtle, infinitely varied, hard-to-see technology” of their rivals and superiors, the Canopeans, or to fathom the cosmic plan—“calculated, foreseen, measured, and this down to the last detail”—according to which the Canopean Empire governs the universe in conformity with higher laws known only to itself. When a Sirian bureaucrat—Ambien II, narrator of *The Sirian Experiments*—begins to appreciate the superiority of the Canopean way of life, her colleagues condemn her as an enemy of the state and send her into “corrective

exile" for psychiatric treatment—the usual fate of visionary nonconformists in Lessing's world. But the primitive technologies of psychiatric brainwashing, indoctrination, and genetic engineering—themselves incomparably more dangerous and efficient than the old methods of torture and coercion—pale in turn beside the "great plan that kept Canopus and her planets and colonies in an always harmoniously interacting whole." Lessing assures us that even the Puttioran Empire—with its criminal colony, Shammatt, the source of evil on earth—will eventually give way to a new order emanating from Canopus. At the end of *Shikasta*, a new golden age rises from the ruins of Earth—"and this will go on for us, as if we were being slowly lifted and washed by a soft singing wind that clears our sad muddled minds and holds us safe and heals us and feeds us with lessons we never imagined."

Empires founded on exploitation—the empires that have dominated the earth ever since the end of the prehistoric golden age, according to Lessing, when a stellar realignment, a "cosmic accident," caused our planet to wobble and tilt on its axis—have "never been able to comprehend that other empires may be based on higher motives." Higher motives—higher, that is, on the scale of evolution—will win out in the end, since evolution obeys laws of its own and suffers only setbacks, never a complete reversal. By appealing to the higher court of evolutionary law, Lessing achieves an effortless antidote to the "morbid thoughts" that often threaten to overwhelm her later writings. Her vision of transcendence, however, offers no alternative or corrective to current ways of thinking; it merely carries them to a more agreeable outcome. If our present technology is self-destructive, a higher technology will save us. If we live under the sway of despotic, decadent empires, we can find peace under a higher imperial order. If we are "conditioned" by external forces, a superior form of conditioning will set us free—to obey a higher necessity. Since imminent disaster is inevitable, in the short run we can hope (a few of us) only to survive, with the assurance, however, that although our Canopean overlords "have in fact destroyed cultures that have become corrupt," they have unaccountably reserved a better fate for us.

The one possibility that seems to lie beyond Lessing's imagination—the technological or antitechnological imagination of our time, so fertile in envisioning planetary disaster and deliverance—is that autonomous human activity may yet find a way to dismantle the machinery of destruction (itself created by human activity) and work out a better way to live. Lessing assumes that autonomous action, like individuality, is an illusion. She can see no alternative to control by the dark powers that control us except a higher mode of control by the "Providers," in "realms administered generally from above." She proposes, in effect, to undo the effects of patriarchal conditioning by reviving an earlier form of conditioning based on the mother, who "holds us safe and heals us and feeds us with lessons we never imagined."

Of course there is much to be said for the proposition that humanity needs

to return to the "feminine" arts of nurture. There is much to be said for the view that people need to rediscover ways of leading "simple lives in balance with the environment, not taking more than they need, not despoiling, not overrunning their geographical areas, or laying waste." Mysticism, however, has always held out the false hope of an easy, painless reunion with the mother, an effortless inner peace achieved by surrendering the self to the care of higher powers—as opposed to the hard-won peace of mind that comes with a struggle against destructive and self-destructive impulses. When those impulses are confused with external forces, and when insight, accordingly, comes to be identified not with mental effort but with a passive state of receptivity to signals transmitted by higher powers, the possibility of real understanding evaporates.

A view of the mind as something programmed, conditioned, brainwashed by external forces can imagine relief only in the form of reconditioning—a mental discipline, however arduous in the ritualistic observances it imposes on itself, that seeks to "tune in" to some higher wavelength, to "pick up" messages from invisible Providers, to "listen in" to their conversations, to "plug into this band" on the celestial shortwave. Both mysticism and modern technology promise a shortcut to enlightenment and spiritual harmony. Lessing has rightly dismissed the cruder forms of occultism—astrology, spiritualism, the drug cult—as a "mirror of the official culture"; but the same objection applies to her own version, which envisions a reconciliation between science and mysticism in the form of a higher technology of the self. Men and women will free themselves from dependence on their machines, according to Lessing, by learning to function as machines in their own right. "A body," after all, is best viewed as "a machine for the conversion of one kind of energy into another."

Doris Lessing's recent fiction helps us to understand, among other things, why the belief that external forces control and manipulate us without our knowledge—a common perception today, captured in the standard joke that paranoia is well founded in fact—so often coexists with a passion for self-improvement according to which new selves can be created through sheer force of will. What has been interpreted as a new ethic or self-indulgence of self-fulfillment is better understood as an ethic of personal survival, shaped—as we can see so clearly in Lessing's later work—by the advanced technology and the technological mentality that appear simultaneously as destructive and liberating. When society is conceived of as a "big impersonal machine," in Lessing's words, the only hope of survival—human or merely personal—seems to lie in the replacement of external controls by inner controls designed to remodel the self into a smoothly functioning piece of machinery and, in particular, to make it invulnerable to ordinary human emotions. Thus Martha Quest, the heroine of *The Four-Gated City*, begins the "creation" of a new self by getting up earlier in the morning, giving up brandy in the evening, and disengaging herself from her lover. "When it's a question of survival, sex the uncontrollable can be controlled." Her new regimen—the "machin-

ery" of personal survival at the "lowest level"—protects her against the "rebirth of the woman in love," that "hungry, never-to-be-fed, never-at-peace woman who needs and wants and must have," and leads her on to higher feats of self-"programming." She goes without sleep, starves herself, strips and sharpens herself, and in this way gets ready to follow her lover's estranged wife into a controlled descent into madness. This "business of charting the new territory" gives her the knowledge to "use her body as an engine to get out of the small dim prison of every day." It provides her with the higher technology with which survivors of the coming "catastrophe"—as we learn in the appendix to this novel, the first of Lessing's apocalyptic glimpses into the near future—begin life over again and breed a higher race of supernaturally gifted children, "guardians" who "include [all of recent] history in themselves and who have transcended it."

Doris Lessing's turn to mysticism and science fiction has alienated many of her followers, especially feminists, but it has brought her work closer to some of the dominant preoccupations of the time. In spite of the uneven quality of her later novels, her adherence to the pseudophilosophy of Idries Shah, and her belief in flying saucers, her books probably reach a wider readership than ever, and with good reason. They speak to the widespread feeling that "it's going to be a bad time," as she has been arguing for years. They reflect the prevailing uneasiness, the growing concern with survival, and the retreat from politics. In some respects this retreat represents an advance over the conventional pieties of the left—a recognition that the "left-wing idea is not left-wing at all," as Lessing told an interviewer in 1966. The doctrines of the French Revolution, doctrines associated with the "rights of the individual," are "no longer revolutionary"; and Lessing has had the courage to face up to the dead end reached by contemporary politics. She has also had the courage to look into the future without resorting to the "commonplace way of thinking that we are the great high pinnacle of all kinds of science." She insists, "on the contrary, that we have lost a great deal of knowledge from the past."

Unfortunately the "need for a new civilization threatens to evoke atavistic feelings against any kind of civilization," as Murray Bookchin observes in *The Ecology of Freedom*. These feelings have become unmistakable in much of contemporary art—even in art, like Lessing's, that claims to originate in a contrary impulse, in the urge to contest the view of "humanity's slide into chaos as beyond our prevention," as Lessing once put it. In an interview conducted in 1973, she praised a fellow voyager in space, Kurt Vonnegut, for "his refusal to succumb to this new and general feeling of helplessness." In the same interview, she expressed reservations about the kind of science fiction that "can see whole galaxies crumble with less emotion than we feel pouring boiling water into an ant's nest."

Yet her own recent work—and much of Vonnegut's for that matter—con-

tributes to this very sense of cosmic detachment and to the sense of futility that underlies it. "The individual does not matter; the species does not matter." In *The Sirian Experiments*, Lessing describes her narrator as "contemplating the destruction of planets, cities, cultures, realms—and flying over large tracts of earthquake-devastated landscape in a frame of mind not far off that used for contemplating the overthrow of termite-queendom, or the extinction of a type of animal for some reason or other." Even if we take this passage as another commentary on the dangers and limitations of such a sensibility, its effect contradicts the intention behind it. Perhaps this effect, this antlike view of humanity, is unavoidable in science fiction, although it might be expected, on the other hand, that an extraterrestrial perspective on human life might lead to a renewed appreciation of its unique value and vulnerability. In Lessing's case, it seems to foster an "objective" state of mind in which the end of the world can be contemplated with detachment, resignation, even with hope, since it will enable a surviving remnant to make a fresh start in a world uncontaminated by the dregs of a doomed civilization.

In *The Sirian Experiments*, Lessing raises the curious objection to science fiction that it unwittingly offers false hope and reassurance, "because the mere fact that sometimes appalling developments had been displayed in print at all seemed to reassure the citizens that they could not happen." If her own work is any indication, this kind of fiction has the effect, on the contrary, of assuring her readers that catastrophe will come, no matter what, and that instead of fretting about the fate of our civilization (overvalued in any case), they had better concern themselves with the exigencies of bare survival. This is a comforting thought in its way, because it absolves them of any responsibility for failing to prevent "appalling developments" while there is still time.