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Doris Lessing's *London Observed* and the Limits of Empathy¹

London Observed (1992) portrays London as a palimpsest which is profoundly different from the urban representations in Lessing's early novels. As opposed to *In Pursuit of the English* (1960), *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the volume depicts the metropolis as a joyful yet visibly controlled space, imagined by an unnamed narrator who is relentlessly wandering in the city. The London it presents hides secreted lives, yet it also requires the repression of empathetic affective responses to the lives of others. As I argue in this paper, the metropolis allows the narrator to enjoy urban life while remaining unaffected by its everyday traumas: she is not a hypersensitive urban observer in this city, but a disillusioned psychogeographer who opts for indifference in order to survive in the metropolis. Instead of offering alternative possibilities, as de Certeau believed in "Walking in the City," walking produces a controlled and indifferent vision of the city in *London Observed*: it appears as an act that re-inscribes new narratives upon repressed stories. When read from today's post-millennial vantage, we might discern how Lessing's collection presciently suggests that the British capital, from the late 1980s onwards, was becoming not only a more visibly gendered and multicultural place, but also an indifferent and apathetic city, habitable at the price of declining empathy.

London Observed (1992) présente la ville de Londres comme un palimpseste, qui diffère radicalement des paysages urbains des premiers romans de Doris Lessing. Contrairement aux textes précédents, *In Pursuit of the English* (1960), *The Golden Notebook* (1962) et *The Four-Gated City* (1969), ce recueil décrit la métropole telle qu'imaginée par une narratrice anonyme occupée à y déambuler sans fin, comme un espace certes plaisant mais régi par une forme de censure. La ville de Londres y dissimule des vies secrètes, mais amène aussi à réprimer toute réaction d'empathie envers l'existence d'autrui. Cet article démontre comment la métropole permet à la narratrice de goûter à la vie urbaine tout en restant indifférente à ses tragédies quotidiennes : plutôt qu'une observatrice ultra-sensible des existences qui l'entourent, c'est une psychogéographe désabusée qui choisit l'indifférence pour pouvoir survivre dans cet espace urbain. Loin d'offrir de nouvelles vies possibles, comme le croyait Michel de Certeau dans « Pratiques d'espace », la déambulation dans *London Observed* conduit à une vision implacable et déshumanisée de la ville : c'est l'acte qui permet d'enfourer des histoires refoulées sous de nouveaux récits. Lues depuis notre point de vue du XXI^e siècle, les nouvelles de ce recueil semblent suggérer comme par

1. This research was supported by the Tempus Foundation, Hungary.

anticipation le lieu clairement genré et multiculturel qu'est devenue la capitale britannique depuis la fin des années 1980, mais aussi et surtout la ville indifférente et impassible exigeant de ses habitants l'abandon de toute empathie.

London Observed, a collection of stories and sketches published in 1992, explores the narrator's affective engagement with the city in ways which have anticipated new directions in diasporic writing. As opposed to Lessing's early post-war London fiction, the volume depicts the metropolis as a joyful yet visibly controlled space, imagined by an unnamed narrator relentlessly wandering across the city. Couples, strangers, broken families, beggars, taxi drivers and the lonely appear, all engaged in interactions which help the reader visualise urban life in the late 1980s. Nothing is permanent: snapshots of the conversation between a beggar and a social security worker, for instance, or the chance encounter of mother and daughter in Regent's Park, allow the reader to engage with serious social and psychological questions while keeping a safe distance from the ghosts haunting the streets of London. The sheer knowledge of the fact that the narrator can walk away any time without having to engage with what she sees offers a false sense of security both to her and to the reader. It is my contention that this problematic security, which allows the narrator to enjoy urban life while remaining unaffected by its everyday traumas, is the result of an unacknowledged strategic refusal to empathise with the city she observes. The *flâneuse* is not a hypersensitive urban observer in this city, as Deborah Parsons assumes (Parsons 225), but a disillusioned psychogeographer who opts for indifference in order to survive in the metropolis.

Lessing's Cities

While Lessing was concerned with urban life from the very beginning of her career, few attempts have been made to explore her novels from this specific perspective. Although critics have noted her involvement with the city, most of them either read London as the antithesis of nature in her novels or focus on the notion of the ideal, mythical city in her fiction (Rose 1983, Sprague 1987), failing to explore the manifold role the metropolis plays in her texts. Mary Ann Singleton, for instance, compares Lessing's work to William Blake's, claiming that Lessing's main concern is the fall from a state of wholeness embodied by the "African veld" (Singleton 34). London is depicted as a space haunted by fragmentation and loss, Singleton argues, and the utopian visions in Lessing's fiction, such as the Ideal City in *The Four-Gated City* (1969), attest to the novel's desire to regain a sense of harmony. This rather reductive view of the city does not only simplify the role that London plays in Lessing's novels, but also fails to do justice to the memories of Southern Rhodesia which abound in the early texts. Details from the place where Lessing grew up appear but

remain disconnected from the London unfolding in her writing, such as the image of a cricket chirping in the veld glimpsed amidst the debris of post-war London in *In Pursuit of the English* (1960). Such images are not only fragmentary but also seem to disturb the narratives ceaselessly. In an early book which explores *The Children of Violence* series (1952-69), Ingrid Holmquist also claims that a binary opposition between nature and culture structures Lessing's writings, and that the "Ideal City" symbolises "a wish to recreate an original state of harmony" (Holmquist 49) associated with the African past overseas. Such binary thinking has been challenged not only by poststructuralist theories but also by Lessing's very narratives—most spectacularly, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), her most experimental novel.² I believe that references to Southern Rhodesia and the African veld do not allude to a prelapsarian state of wholeness in Lessing's London fiction, but rather capture the translocal nature of the urban vision unfolding in these narratives.

Christine Wick Sizemore was the first critic to call attention to the city as more than the simple antithesis of nature in Lessing's writings. In *A Female Vision of the City* (1989), she canonised Lessing as an urban novelist who belonged to a group of women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Margaret Drabble and Iris Murdoch, among others. According to Sizemore, London functions as a palimpsest in Lessing's writings, since the repressed stories of women are hidden behind the surface text, most notably in *The Four-Gated City*, the final volume of her *Children of Violence* series. In this novel, the narrator describes London in relation to the invisible struggles of women, their brains recording "in such tiny loving anxious detail the histories of windowsills, skins of paint, replaced curtains and salvaged baulks of timber" (Lessing 1969, 21), producing "a sort of six-dimensional map which included the histories and lives and loves of people, London" (21). In exposing London as a palimpsest, Sizemore called attention to a feature of Lessing's fiction that Andreas Huyssen subsequently explored in his writings about cultural memory and post-war Berlin (Huyssen 2003) and John Clement Ball also touched upon in his book about London writing (Ball 2004). By claiming that nature and the desire for wholeness lie *within* fragmentary cityscapes, and are not juxtaposed with the grey and appalling metropolis, Sizemore subverted the oppositions upon which Holmquist and Singleton relied. Deborah L. Parsons, too, has argued that London is "a palimpsestic site built from years of history" in *The Four-Gated City* (Parsons 216). Nevertheless, neither Sizemore nor Parsons has fully explored the complex role London plays in Lessing's writings. Although both critics offer

2. As Nick Bentley claims, for instance, "Lessing's speculations on the form and function of the novel as a genre at certain points in *The Golden Notebook* correspond with later theoretical positions associated with postmodernism, and in particular, Jean-Francois Lyotard's discussion of the sublime and the unrepresentable in postmodern aesthetics" (Bentley 45).

more sophisticated readings than found in earlier critical discourse, we might note that the city is by no means the same palimpsest in Lessing's later fiction as it was in her early novels. As I argue in this essay, *London Observed* depicts the metropolis as a palimpsest which *represses* various aspects of female subjectivity. A detached and indifferent urban narrative often unfolds in these short stories, thwarting the empathy with "the lives and loves of people" that often dominated Lessing's earlier writing.

John McLeod has drawn attention to Lessing's engagement with racism, challenging the assumption that her work engenders only a limited postcolonial critique (Hanson 1990, Yelin 1998, Bentley 2009). McLeod claims that *In Pursuit of the English* is an important contribution to the discourse on race in the post-war period, especially the ascendance from the 1950s of racialising notions of blood-lines that came to dominate definitions of British national identity in the subsequent decades. For McLeod, *In Pursuit of the English* presents London as a transnational location "in which dominant models of national identity are being challenged by emergent alternatives that are by no means desirable" (McLeod 75). New versions of older racist attitudes are seen to be forming in the novel, he claims, and he reads Lessing's portrayal of London during this period of instability as a "guarded response to the ossification of the categories of white native and black foreigner effected in the 1950s" (79). McLeod presents *In Pursuit of the English*, then, as an outstanding testimony to the reconfigurations of race and the city in post-war Britain, one which critically anticipates emergent paradigms of national identity. Susan Watkins, one of the most prominent Lessing scholars, also attributes a great significance to the notion of renewal in Lessing's work, though she believes that Lessing's later novels rewrite the legacy of the post-war era. Watkins comments on *In Pursuit's* engagement with femininity, pointing out that the flimsiness which McLeod attributes to its portrayal of race and nation is, in fact, characteristic of Lessing's depiction of women. She believes that *In Pursuit* uniquely transforms the city into an open, transitory space through a number of epiphanic moments: "in the 1960s and early 1970s, Lessing rewrites the experience of loss as potentially creative, productive and transformative. In her vision of what I am calling 'melancholy cosmopolitanism,' Lessing challenges the closed-off, paranoid legacy of the Cold War in the 1950s" (Watkins 54). In other words, the notion of renewal is based on a creative, transformative experience of loss in Lessing's fiction, and it is not *In Pursuit* but novels such as *The Golden Notebook* that engage with the legacy of World War Two in ways that redefine existing paradigms of the city. To my mind, *London Observed*, which Watkins does not include in her book on Lessing, provides a thought-provoking addition to her notion of melancholy cosmopolitanism, since the book rethinks the notions of loss and nostalgia which dominated Lessing's early urban fiction.

London Observed did not receive much critical attention when it was published, which is partly due to the fact that by the 1990s Lessing was

more often dismissed as a white middle-class writer.³ After the release of John Akomfrah's film *Handsworth Songs* in 1987, and the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), urban fiction and film had shifted to explore more explicitly vexed matters of race, gender and multiculturalism. At the same time, some of the first works of literary psychogeography were appearing in Britain, such as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) and Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991). In the midst of this vigorous cultural activity, Lessing's volume appeared unexceptional. However, it is my contention that *London Observed* was actually far more future-facing than outmoded, and anticipated some of the problems of London in the twenty-first century that have come to preoccupy novelists, directors and psychogeographers more recently. Its short stories portray London as a tense translocal palimpsest, profoundly different from the urban palimpsests in Lessing's early novels. They seek to contain the sensitivity and affect which often haunt the margins of the stories. In other words, *London Observed* presents the British capital from the late 1980s as becoming not only a more visibly gendered and multicultural locale, but also an increasingly indifferent and apathetic city, habitable at the price of declining empathy.

London is depicted in the volume as a grand theatre, as Rosario Arias points out, "something to look at and enjoy, as a spectacle and performance" (Arias 6). In the eighteen pieces collected in *London Observed* we see snapshots of interactions between family members, couples, strangers, usually in public spaces, suggesting that the city is transitory and indeed theatrical. In "The New Café," for instance, the narrator admits that she takes pleasure in watching "real-life soap operas" (Lessing 1993, 97), such as the two German girls' uninhibited search for boyfriends, while the narrator of "Storms" attempts to convince a taxi driver that London is a great place to live: "And now I began to tell him how much I enjoyed London, from that ridiculous need to make other people like what you like. It was like *a great theatre*, I said; you could watch what went on all day" (129, italics mine). However, "The New Café" and "Storms," the two short stories Arias explores, depict a more joyful vision of London than many of the other tales. In "Debbie and Julie," one of the most famous stories in the collection, Julie gives birth to an illegitimate child in a shed, an experience by no means pleasurable. Many others portray Londoners as detached observers of the city, suggesting that enjoyment is not the primary sentiment of *London Observed*. While its portrayal of London can seem more optimistic than in Lessing's early work, to my

3. As Deborah L Parsons remarks, even the ideal city Martha imagines in *The Four-Gated City* "is built according to a Western, upper-middle class model" (Parsons 218). According to Clare Hanson, however, it is rather Lessing's critical writings than her novels that are responsible for this reception, since in "A Small Personal Voice" she consciously situated herself in the liberal-humanist tradition (Hanson 63).

mind the sense of enjoyment that appears on occasion masks the disengagement which pervades *London Observed*. Its London is a staged and shallow space that represses sensitive emotional responses. The apparent enjoyment which Arias finds so crucial arguably conceals the emotional estrangement of the characters.

This estrangement is discernible in the characters' activity of walking. *London Observed* challenges the vogue, especially for psychogeographers, for conceiving of walking as a transformative practice. Instead, through acts of walking, the book anticipates a cold post-millennial metropolis. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) has influenced psychogeography in its claim that walking momentarily transforms space. Tina Richardson, for instance, argues that "psychogeography is about crossing established boundaries" (Richardson 2) and critiquing received urban spectacles, just as de Certeau's urban walkers "make use of spaces that cannot be seen" (Certeau 93). De Certeau believes that walking produces powerful alternative stories: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (Certeau 93). Yet in *London Observed* walking constrains rather than composes. Its mobile narrators chart the elision of sensibility and affect which haunts the margins of their tales. Walking erases sentiment by compressing traumatic experiences within more readily acceptable narratives: the *flâneuses* in *London Observed* perform an apparently indifferent quest that helps them control their affective responses. As I shall argue below, the city emerges in terms of this attempt at attaining mastery, prefiguring the over-controlled post-millennial metropolis to come.

The Bonds of Love

My subtitle owes something to Jessica Benjamin's famous book, *The Bonds of Love* (1988), specifically the motif of the female bond. Adrienne Rich has criticised Lessing for "a real failure to envisage [...] any kind of really powerful central bonding of women, even though women get together in her novels and go through intense things together" (Sprague 182). According to Lisa Tyler, "Among the Roses" is an exception in this regard, since in this story Lessing shows "women attempting to create such a bond, although admittedly with great difficulty and some reluctance" (Tyler 170). Tyler is certainly right in pointing out that "Among the Roses" offers a more positive portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship than Lessing's early writings. Yet I think *London Observed* is more concerned with problematising the *lack* of this bond. Although many characters desire some kind of affective connection throughout the volume, there is no real supportive network, or even interpersonal relationship, which would help them overcome their isolation and loneliness. In the three

short stories I wish to discuss—"Debbie and Julie," "Among the Roses," and "The Pit"—female subjectivity remains repressed within the disembodied urban palimpsest shaped by the narratives. The stories I discuss present different aspects of this repression: while "Debbie and Julie" and "Among the Roses" are concerned with the repression of female sexuality and the body, "The Pit" offers a glimpse into the empathic identification that the main characters need to suppress in order to survive in the city.

Perhaps the best-known story in *London Observed* is "Debbie and Julie."⁴ It concerns a pregnant teenage girl in a sky-blue coat, Julie, who is determined to give birth to her child alone. The other key character, Debbie, never appears in the narrative. While the title suggests that there is a strong bond between the girls, the only thing we learn about Debbie is that she offered shelter to Julie when she left her parents' house. The fact that the most concerned and empathetic character in the short story is absent suggests the extent to which intimate and meaningful bonds are broken in this narrative. The shallow encounters the metropolis offers only mask this emotional detachment. In the first episode we see a heavily pregnant Julie on her own grappling with the erratic heating of Debbie's flat as she feels "cold water springing from her forehead, hot water running down her legs" (Lessing 1993, 2), signalling the impending birth of her child. The opening paragraph suggests that the notion of order and stability as opposed to chaos and confusion is the main concern of the narrative: Julie acts automatically, following the instructions of a paperback, in which "everything was so tidy and regular" (2). The desperate need to plan her actions suggests that Julie is trying very hard to cope with the loss of control: "The way she felt told her nothing, except that what was going to happen would be uncontrollable [...]" (3). Except for the dreadful pain, she is unable to identify her emotions, and even physical sensations seem to be confusing: "Everything she had planned had seemed so easy, one thing after another, but she had not foreseen that she would stand at a bus stop, afraid to leave the light there, not knowing what the sensations were that wrenched her body. Cold? Nauseous? Hungry?" (4-5). This most important, and most traumatic, event of her life takes place on the streets of London. She does not wander around happily, lost in the crowd as a *flâneuse*, but moves unsteadily and with utter isolation: "A good thing the weather was so bad, no one was about. She walked boldly through the sleet and turned into a dark and narrow alley where she hurried, because it smelled bad and scared her, then out into a yard full of builders' rubbish and rusty skips. There was a derelict shed at one end" (5). It is the deserted and grey city that witnesses her trauma and isolation. Her desperation to connect with another underscores the empathetic emptiness of her predicament, as

4. The story was anthologised only three years after the volume was published (Charters 1995).

does the futility of her lonely muted cry for help: “‘Debbie,’ she whispered, the tears running. ‘Where are you, Debbie?’ Not necessarily New York. Or even the States. Canada ... Mexico ... the Costa Brava ... South America ...” (11). Through these conjectures around Debbie’s absence we get a glimpse of the world beyond the streets of London, as if these enchanting places offered an antithesis to Julie’s claustrophobic vision, just like references to the Rhodesian veld in Lessing’s early London writing. Julie’s need to connect via a meaningful female bond is associated with a translocal world beyond the walls of the shed and the margins of the city. Such affective spaces haunt both the story and the London it portrays, destabilising the quest for order and exposing the empty metropolis as void of attachment.

“Debbie and Julie” repeatedly shapes images that are associated with emotional connection and its lack. Sounds, places, and objects become endowed with often surprising affective significance. The conjunction in the story’s title already stresses the significance of intersubjective connections. Despite the fact that Debbie never appears, she is the most important reference point for Julie in the narrative. Several apparently insignificant, sometimes even absurd, images underscore both the yearning for and the lack of affective contact. There is a dog in the shed, for instance, that witnesses Julie’s labour, “whining, in sympathy” (7), she believes. The dog’s whining evokes a phantom of much-desired compassion—any sound is better than the pervasive silence of the shed, perhaps. Shortly after Julie gives birth to her child, the depiction of the umbilical cord draws attention to the corporeal, biological bond between mother and child, but one that needs to be cut and erased. The cord is depicted as the epitome of material connection: “the cord came out of the baby, a thick twisted rope of flesh, full of life, hot and pulsing in her hand” (7). The scene is immensely physical: we witness the wet rush of water and blood on Julie’s legs, the baby lying in a pool of bloody water, and the dog eating up the afterbirth “in quick gulps” (9). The scene indexes a realm of emotional entanglement and turmoil, of terrifying loneliness as well as perverse connectedness—signified by the dog and its visceral repast—and of gendered isolation and affective chaos—all the things that are kept out of sight or erased by the palimpsestic presentation of “joyful” London which *London Observed* ironically lays bare.

Exhausted, after cutting the umbilical cord Julie carefully wraps the baby in a towel and leaves the bundle on the floor of a telephone box. This extremely cruel act seems to be discordant with her apparent need for empathy, yet it is the logical consequence of her traumatised actions. Cutting the cord suggests that Julie is cutting all human connections that would upset her sterile, carefully constructed world. As she leaves her child on the floor of the telephone box, she walks towards “the brilliant lights of the pub at the corner” (10)—a crammed, hot and noisy place, the very antithesis of the abandoned shed. Unlike the shed, which is associated with maternity and the female body, the pub is a distinctly

masculine space: music is playing from the jukebox while men are arguing about football. This loud, macho, hollow world spatially confounds and conceals the silent shed and the unspeakable experience it has cradled, and ensures that the physical, corporeal, female “Other” remains hidden within the normative urban masculinist metanarrative. From within this vantage, Julie can observe with clinical detachment the fate of her newly abandoned child, above the street and from a distance: “Unremarked, she went to stand near a small window that overlooked the telephone box. She could see the bundle, a small pathetic thing, like folded newspapers or a dropped jersey, on the floor of the box” (10). Hers is a position which the collection’s narrators frequently occupy: they seek to control and master the spectacle they observe, nullifying sensitive emotional responses. Julie retreats to the window as a means of control, just like the Benjaminian *flâneur* who, according to Deborah Parsons, has “lost the involved sensation of walking” (Parsons 225). She seeks to regain a sense of mastery in order to overcome the trauma she has undergone, yet this gesture erases the very position which would empower a more empathetic, less controlling vision of the city. The spatial and temporal distance which Julie establishes between her safe place in the pub and her abandoned child in the telephone box, cruelly exposed to the unknown and unpredictable city, permits her to remain disengaged. Such disengagement, frighteningly, is the prerequisite of securing one’s place in the metropolis in Lessing’s volume.

The location where Julie chooses to abandon her baby is also significant: a telephone box, the very icon of communication and connection. Julie observes how a young girl picks up the bundle while a young man makes a phone call. Ironically, after cutting the most intimate biological bond, the umbilical cord, the lost biogenetic bond between mother and child is substituted with mediated forms of modern communication. Soon, Julie will see her child again on TV after returning to her childhood home: a woman wearing an artificial smile announces that “At eight o’clock this evening a newly born baby girl was found in a telephone box in Islington. She was warmly wrapped and healthy. She weighed seven pounds and three ounces. The nurses have called her Rosie” (Lessing 1993, 21-22). The news report provides a narrative of Rosie’s abandonment which replaces the trauma of birth with the facticity of discovery. This is the first time the reader learns that the events took place in Islington and that the time when Julie was standing at the window of the pub was eight o’clock in the evening. The news report subsumes lived experience by providing missing data retrospectively; as such, the experience in the shed becomes more and more invisible beneath its staged mediation.

Despite Julie’s desire for meaningful bonds, interactions remain perpetually shallow. After the ambulance takes away the baby, Julie’s “heart plunged into loss and became empty and bitter, in the way she had been determined would not happen” (11). She desperately wants to talk to Debbie, who is inaccessible, so her only other option is to re-establish

the bonds with her parents, which have never been intimate. Returning to her parents' flat after a long absence, Julie feels as if she were a child again: her bedroom is still "pretty and pink" (15), with her toy panda sitting on her pillow. The room, however, despite the fancy colours and toys, hides the very same emptiness that the theatrical city is attempting to forget so desperately. While at Debbie's flat "people shouted, kissed, hugged, argued, fought, threatened, wept, and screamed" (19), Julie's parents sleep in separate beds and refrain from expressing emotions. Debbie has even become Julie's surrogate mother and a latent homoerotic bond has developed between them: unlike her parents, they sleep in the same bed, and experience the kind of intimacy which Julie has never experienced in her life before:

Julie even waited for "something" to happen. Nothing ever did. Just once Debbie put her hand down to touch the mound of Julie's stomach, but took it quickly away. Julie lay entangled with Debbie, and they were like two cats that have finished washing each other and gone to sleep, and Julie knew how terribly she had been deprived at home and how empty and sad her parents were. (21)

The intimacy Julie finds with Debbie is exactly the kind of emotional bond for which she is in search, yet just like the experience in the shed, it is a passing moment with little, if any, transformative agency. Hence, at the end of the story, Julie resolves to leave her parents' house and find her place in London alone, isolated again, reassured by the dubious consolation that if she was able to give birth in a shed and survive, she is able to do anything.

The figure of the mother occupies the centre of "Among the Roses," too, a short story set in Regent's Park, one of the many public places that appear in *London Observed*. The story depicts an unexpected encounter between mother and daughter who have not met for years. Myra and her daughter, Shirley, have spent three years avoiding each other after a disagreement, and the meeting offers a rare moment of reconciliation in the volume. As in "Debbie and Julie," "Among the Roses" thematises issues concerning control and emotional needs. Myra clearly enjoys her sense of control in the park: "There was no greater pleasure than this, wandering through roses and deciding... I'll have you... no, you... no, perhaps..." (117). Walking alone and selecting roses is preferable to stormy human relationships, as Tyler points out (Tyler 165), and the sense of control which the act affords Myra is akin to the authority for which the unnamed narrator of the volume often strives. Myra is disturbed by her daughter's sexuality and is seeking to control her troubled feelings. The first thing she notices about Shirley in the park is her strident scarlet and yellow dress, which "was too tight, and emphasised a body that managed to be thin and lumpy at the same time" (Lessing 1993, 117-118). Myra's perception of her daughter is tinted with jealousy. She recalls how her daughter stood in the garden, "with her hands on her round

hips, her big knees showing under a short ugly dress, her face scarlet with rage—and [...] looked like the common little bitch she was” (119). Myra self-consciously degrades her daughter, seeking to distance herself from her in an act of rejection—of her daughter’s physicality but also of her own bodily nature, just as Julie rejected her child. The very reason of the quarrel between mother and daughter is Shirley’s uncontrolled sexuality: Myra visited her one day unexpectedly, only to see her “having it off on the kitchen table with some man certainly not her husband” (119). Her daughter’s unrestrained sexuality seems to contrast sharply with the orderly rose garden in Regent’s Park. Walking through city spaces affords Myra the opportunity to engage the city as a controlled spectacle in the story, erasing not only bodily pain, as in “Debbie and Julie,” but female sexuality as such.

Most transformative encounters, such as they are, take place in public spaces in *London Observed*. In Regent’s Park, the emotional bond between Myra and Shirley is re-established via the act of cutting roses. Although Shirley has despised Myra for her obsessive interest in flowers and “claimed she loathed Nature except (wink, wink) for a little of what you fancy” (120), she gradually learns to take pleasure in gardening. The characters’ meeting in the park is not without irony, of course, as they attempt to re-establish the most intimate, primary bond in a public space. Yet compared to Julie’s pink bedroom and sterile family house, the park seems to be a preferable, telling choice. Indeed, in Lessing’s early novels nature is often associated with nostalgic memories of freedom (in *The Golden Notebook*, for instance, Anna makes love in nature, feeling “desperately and wildly and painfully happy,” 150): it is an open space where domestic relations can be redefined. Therefore, while the city in *London Observed* functions as a palimpsest that never allows the physicality and the pain of the female body to be fully visible, “Among the Roses” suggests that the city also offers possibilities for unexpected encounters and meaningful, if temporary, intersubjective interactions.

The Limits of Empathy

“The Pit,” contrastingly, is set in a private place: a small flat in London, comprising “two adequate rooms” (138). Sarah, a divorced woman expecting her ex-husband, is arranging flowers, a “final spring of flowering cherry among white lilac and yellow jonquils, in a fat white jug” (138). Both flowers and the “adequate rooms” recall the imagery of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1924), though the main character, Sarah, never really walks in the city. Her age and the problems she is facing also recall Woolf’s novel: she is a fifty-five-year-old divorced woman contemplating the wrong choices she has made. She does not leave her flat, which makes the perspective of the narrative limited; like the shed in “Debbie and Julie,” the room that appears in “The Pit” is a closed place, hidden and detached, suggesting that Sarah’s story is yet another

invisible narrative in *London Observed* which is incompatible with the theatrical spectacle of London ironised throughout the book.

Although the setting makes the narrative perspective limited in “The Pit,” just like in “Debbie and Julie,” we still get a glimpse of the world beyond the walls of the room through a series of references which evoke a more open, translocal world. The reader learns, for instance, that Sarah is constantly on the move: “Because of her work she had lived in Paris, New York, various towns in England, always moving, and good at moving. She never felt she lived in one place more than another” (142-143). The pictures on the wall of the room also let us imagine a less claustrophobic space: “Opposite the end wall with its square of blue sky she had hung a large seascape bought for a few pounds in a street market: in it blue sea, blue sky, white spray, white clouds eternally tumbled over each other” (138). The seascape, a frequently recurring image of intersubjective relationships in psychoanalytic writings (Winnicott 1971, Benjamin 1988), indexes a spatial and psychological openness, while the reference to Sarah’s restless life offers a sharp contrast to the lack of physical movement in the narrative. The title of the story, “The Pit,” suggests that it explores stagnation and inertia. While it refers to the traumatic past of Rose, the woman Sarah’s ex-husband has married and who is a Holocaust survivor, it also suggests that Sarah is struggling to overcome her own distress and describes her concealed, subterranean place in the city. The image of the pit implies, too, that Sarah is dwelling palimpsestically, beneath and below the daily business of London life, cut off from other people and places. Sarah’s story bleakly depicts the repression of empathy as a survival strategy within a cruel metropolis.

George Robert Ellison Marshall and Claire Hooker claim that empathy can be understood as operating spatially, “by the dimensions of different intensities operating across bodies” (Marshall and Hooker 132). It possesses the capacity to “bridge the gaze” (129) and challenge those discourses that produce the city as a normative object of knowledge. But “The Pit” suggests instead that empathy is ultimately inaccessible in *London Observed*. Characters remain emotionally detached, while London seems to leave no room for empathic identifications. Sarah comes from a socially sensitive, altruistic family (after the war her parents helped refugees) and feels “invaded by some understanding” (Lessing 1993, 163) which invites her to imagine the world through the eyes of Rose, her ex-husband’s wife. But she refuses to engage fully with Rose’s story: empathy seems to be too overwhelming, too destructive for the self. Sarah feels she is becoming Rose, literally: “Rose, it’s Rose. Not me, but Rose” (163). Just as in “Debbie and Julie,” Lessing portrays Sarah standing by the window, but it is no longer the city she observes: “Sarah stood by the window in a dark room with her eyes shut, and her perspectives had so far changed that she was almost Rose, she was feeling with her. And what she felt (Sarah knew, in her own bones and flesh) was panic” (165). In other words, Sarah’s empathetic connection

with Rose inhibits her capacity to engage with the city, and she remains trapped within her own urban pit. If, in “Debbie and Julie,” Julie’s controlling gaze functions to contain her traumatic experience and enables her to keep moving, in “The Pit” the inability to repress the experience renders Sarah, and by extension the reader, isolated, arrested and trapped. Ironically, Sarah was prompted to think about Rose by James’s suggestion that the two of them should go on a summer walk: “‘Sarah,’ he said, in a low, intimate voice, with the thrill of recklessness in it, ‘why can’t we two go off again somewhere, this summer, soon [...]’” (149). James’s proposal makes possible an experience which is less confining than Sarah’s “adequate rooms,” and an opportunity to revisit their failed marriage. For Julie, we might remember, walking offered a means to regain the illusion of mastery and control; but Sarah and James never take their walk. As such, “The Pit” explores the loss of control and takes the reader closest to what remains repressed by the city as a palimpsest than any other narrative in the volume. Furthermore, while in “Debbie and Julie” the telephone is an image of connection and female bonding, in “The Pit” it seems to threaten Sarah with disintegration. She imagines Rose’s best friends calling her, followed by a call from Rose herself, and many other calls, “casual, offhand, insulting” (154), either asking for James, or inviting Sarah to tea in a thoroughly decent, yet all the more upsetting way. After imagining these conversations, Sarah receives an actual phone call from Rose’s daughter, leaving her “standing by the telephone in the dark room” (162) and convinced that her only choice is to run away. She withdraws from human relationships, resolving to go on a walking trip to Norway and rewrite the story of her marriage alone, leaving the city behind. The reader is left with the image of the telephone ringing at the very end of story, reflecting on Sarah’s decision to refuse both attachment and empathy.

While London appears as something of a theatrical spectacle in *London Observed*, I do not think that it necessitates a creative transitory space as Arias has claimed (Arias 6). In “The Pit,” Sarah first chooses to read Rose’s grim narrative as a performance, finding her “dramas” distasteful (Lessing 1993, 156), then refuses emotional engagement, deciding to focus upon her own story alone and elsewhere. She closes a door in herself, or rather, refuses to open it (164), which suggests that even though this story takes the reader as close as possible to the repressed layers of the urban palimpsest, it fails fully to articulate them. The gaze of the characters remains controlling in *London Observed* exactly because of the lack of empathy, and the city unfolds as a staged spectacle to be mastered. Empathy would be the means to subvert the controlling gaze which produces the city as an object of knowledge, yet it is too overwhelming for the characters to entertain, who otherwise resolve to contain emotional traumas via the act of walking as part of a repressive psychogeography.

As I have argued, *London Observed* portrays London as a palimpsest which is profoundly different from the urban representations in Lessing's early novels. The London it presents does not only hide secreted lives in the city, but it also requires the repression of sensitive, empathetic affective responses to the lives of others. The volume challenges the assumption that walking is a transformative practice: it appears as an act that re-inscribes new narratives upon repressed stories and traumatic experiences. Instead of offering alternative possibilities, as de Certeau suggested, walking produces a controlled and indifferent vision of the city in *London Observed*. In fact, the city both requires and results from attempts to (re)gain mastery: Julie and Myra struggle to establish control over their bodies and emotional reactions, reproducing the city through apparently indifferent walks, while Sarah's narrative and her decision to walk elsewhere suggest that empathy simply has no place in this metropolis. When read from today's post-millennial vantage, and after the publication of novels such as John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), we might discern how Lessing's collection presciently suggests that the British capital, from the late 1980s onwards, was becoming not only a more visibly gendered and multicultural place, but also an indifferent and apathetic city.

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