Doris Lessing's Strategies:
Reading, Writing, and Feeling in *The Golden Notebook*

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I

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is comprised of fragments of notebooks and several installments of a short novel. The protagonist, Anna Wulf, who has had one novel published and is now struggling to write a new one, produces four notebooks—black, red, yellow, and blue—and a golden notebook which is purportedly an integrated version of the four preceding ones. It is eventually revealed that the short novel entitled "Free Women" is also written by Anna. The black, red, yellow, and blue notebooks consecutively appear four times, and each set follows a "Free Women" installment; "Free Women," which appears five times in the novel, functions not only as the frame of each set of the notebooks but also as that of *The Golden Notebook*, for it begins with "Free Women 1" and ends with "Free Women 5." The golden notebook appears after these four sets, as the penultimate section of the novel. Thus, Lessing's tactical arrangement of these texts accentuates the elaborate form of the novel; yet, at the same time, the fragmented state of Anna's writings is also conspicuous.

Anna's suffering as a writer seems to be related to the fragmented state of the texts. In effect, her attempt to integrate the fragmented notebooks fails, and her writer's block and nervous breakdown are apparently exacerbated. However, Lessing states in her preface that Anna "has to separate things off from each other" because "of fear of chaos, of formlessness—of breakdown," but "now that they are finished, from their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*" (7). Patricia Waugh regards this novel as "a precise chronicle of the time" (133): Anna, involving herself in the politics of the Left, undergoes the crises of communism in the 1950s, such as the Hungarian rising and the exposure of Stalin's tyranny. In this conjuncture, she records her frustrating, thorny experiences in the notebooks. It
is noteworthy that her "fear of chaos, of formlessness," and "of breakdown" has to do with her hard experiences in the time of social upheaval. The essential points of reading this novel are, therefore, how Anna deals with those frustrating problems as a writer and whether *The Golden Notebook* can be regarded as an integrated product that appears after the fragmentation, chaos, and breakdown are overcome or as a solution to the difficulties Anna has to confront.

The present paper aims to elucidate Lessing's strategies, which underlie what she attempts to do through compiling Anna's writings and giving the arranged form to them. As some critics aptly observe, Lessing draws our attention not only to her novel's "sweeping inclusion of issues of social, political, and sexual import" (Rubenstein 71) but also to her "strategies of multiplying and dispersing readings of self" (Martinson 124), which make Anna the writer pursue the fundamental question about her relation to language and to the world. I will examine the protagonist's struggle with language through her literary praxis, and later, in order to estimate the theoretical possibilities of Lessing's strategies, I will compare what she attempts to do through creating the novel with literary theories of Fredric Jameson, Jacques Rancière, and Raymond Williams. In this comparison, especially, of great significance is Williams, who was a contemporary of Lessing's and who assumed a political stance similar to hers as one of the Marxian writers known as the New Left.

II

The meaning of the fragmentation is the starting point of our analysis; the fragmented state, according to an entry of the black notebook, has relevance to the social background of her writing. Anna writes as follows:

The novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, are becoming more and more divided, and more subdivided in themselves, reflecting the world. [...] It is a blind grasping out for their own wholeness, and the novel-report is a means towards it. (75, emphases original)

Because the society and the consciousness of the human beings are fragmented,
Anna's writings are ineluctably fragmented as long as they aim at “reflecting the world,” or at what she calls the “novel-report.” This passage suggests the paradox that being fragmented is a way to the “wholeness,” but the problem arises that Anna regards her attitude about her writing as “a refusal to fit conflicting things together to make a whole [...] no matter how terrible” (79). Anna is beset with this paradoxical or oxymoronic state. Aiming at the “wholeness” or integrity, she tries to integrate her notebooks into the golden notebook and to write a new novel entitled “Free Women”; yet, as the scraps of her notebooks show, her pursuit of integrity cannot help falling into fragmentation, chaos, and breakdown. Thus, she has to be confronted with the dilemma in the course of her pursuit of what Lessing calls “the end of fragmentation” (Preface 7). What we must note here is the aporia, which “hinders the process of self-knowledge” (Barnouw 503) and leads the protagonist to the radical reconsideration of reading and writing, and of her relation to language itself.

Being faced with that aporia, Anna brings her trust in language into question and pays attention to the relation between knowing and the way to put the knowing into words. She says: “I've had these moments of 'knowing' one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. [...] Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want” (549). Although knowledge is substantially constituted with language, words cannot fully convey the knowing because of their precarious nature. Anna's primary reason for writing the notebooks is to attempt to obtain “self-knowledge,” but her attempt is thwarted by the very medium for knowing. Yet, Anna, as a writer, has no choice but to use “words” and has to venture her writing on “even a chance combination” of them; she must accept the unpredictability of the effect caused by such “a chance combination.” She says: “I don't know why I still find it so hard to accept that words are faulty and by their very nature inaccurate. If I thought they were capable of expressing the truth I wouldn't keep journals [...]” (565). The journals, or notebooks, are therefore the loci where she grapples with the difficulties brought about by her awareness of language's “slipperiness and the non-congruence of names and things” (Gardiner 385). “I have been thinking of the novels about the breakdown of language,” Anna writes, and the “expression of the fragmentation of everything” is “linked with what I feel to be true about language,
the thinning of language against the density of our experience" (272-73).

As we have seen above, Anna uses the strange word “novel-report” and parallels the breakdown of language with the fragmentation of the world. As for the “novel-report,” Anna says that “the function of the novel [...] has become an outpost of journalism” (75); this remark seems to imply the idea of socialist realism. Such an idea is, on the one hand, based on the assumption that words should reflect the world as mirrors do; thus the deploration of “the thinning of language against the density of” the events of the world is the corollary, for such a view on language makes literature a subsidiary reflection of the “more real and more important” world outside the text (Miller 8). Literature such as socialist realism is, on the other hand, supposed to prefigure an idealized future. Raymond Williams critically points out that such literature “tends towards a judgment of social events in terms of a hypothetical, future, ‘good society’ [...] or [...] making no judgment at all, exists only as [...] newspaper reports” (Reading and Criticism 105). It is because literature such as what can be called “newspaper report” or “novel-report” is no more than a container of some prefigured ideal or a mere reportage reflecting the real world that words seem to be impotent in comparison with the density of events and experiences in the world. In this view, there is neither tension between language and the subject who uses it nor care about the problem of the referentiality of language. Since Anna is impelled to venture her writing on the contingency of the “chance combination” of words, the projection of prefigured ideals and predictable images of society onto literature is far from what she thinks literature should be. Anna’s difficulties are caused by her struggle to write a new novel under the influence of such literature as socialist realism and by her scepticism of it.

III

Anna’s struggle with the difficulties in her literary praxis leads her to realize how arbitrarily her work is read and interpreted, and makes her reconsider the fundamental relation between reading and writing. In an entry of the blue notebook, we can find a suggestive episode, which is a record of her dream, in relation to the problem of reception of her work. She has a casket, which contains “something very precious,” and she wants to give “this precious object” to some people. However, they won’t open the casket:
Suddenly I saw they were all characters in some film or play, and that I had written it, and [...] I was a character in my own play. I opened the box and forced them to look. But instead of a beautiful thing, which I thought would be there, there was a mass of fragments, and pieces. [...] This, looking at the mass of ugly fragments, was so painful that I couldn't look, and I shut the box. [...] They took the box from me and opened it. I turned away so as not to see, but they were delighted. (229-30)

This episode brings into the foreground the disquieting relations between the writer and the reader, between the writer and the world, and between the writing subject and the text. The casket represents Anna's work, which is not necessarily read as she expects, or whose interpretation is partly at the mercy of the reader. That the people representing the readers of her work turn out to be the characters in it means that the production of the text always already includes the process of reading or being read. Since Anna herself is also a character in her own work, she cannot keep a distance from the objects of her writing: the writing subject, the written objects, and the act of reading and writing are intertwined with one another and constitute a text. As Derek Attridge puts it, a literary work is "an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing [...]" (59). For Anna, literature should not be a mere record or "analysis after the event" but be an "event" itself in order to express what she feels "while living through something" (210).

It can also be said that the episode above presents the object of her writing as alienated self-consciousness; this alienating process of objectification makes Anna perceive her text as "a mass of fragments" and brings her pain, which occasions insight into significant issues about writing. The following passage involves the similar problem:

I was faced with the burden of recreating order out of the chaos that my life had become. [...] I was unable to distinguish between what I had invented and what I had known, and I knew that what I had invented was all false. It was a whirl, an orderless dance, like the dance of the white butterflies in a shimmer of heat over the damp sandy vlei. (538)
The aim of writing, for Anna, is to be creating "order out of the chaos"; yet the product cannot help becoming chaotic and she cannot distinguish what she has "invented" from what she has "known." Moreover, she perceives what she has "invented" to be "false." But, as suggested above, only in the form of alienation can she objectify her experiences and describe them so as to produce a literary work; accordingly, it is inescapable for Anna to take her invention to be false. If she actually saw the butterflies in an African vlei, she had to objectify what she saw onto the alienated image of "the dance of the white butterflies" that is compared to "a whirl" or "an orderless dance"—chaos. Her insight into the process of objectification enables her to think of the inseparability of what she thinks she has "known" from what she has "invented" as a logical consequence and brings home to her the impossibility of distancing herself from objects in the act of writing. The discursive process in which the "acts-events" of the real world cannot be separated from the "acts-events" of reading and writing makes Anna perceive her entanglement with the process to be chaotic; her insight into those important problems concerning reading and writing, as Sarah Henstra points out, is to "inherently require some degree of 'being split'" (11), of fragmentation, and of chaos. It is not until Anna conceives of being "split," fragmented, and chaotic as the required condition of writing about her experiences that she is able to find the way to surmount the predicament of language.

IV

As the episodes examined in the previous section show, the world is not so much described or reflected by language as constituted through the interaction between the subject, the world, and language. The "acts-events" of reading and writing that constitute the world, according to Rebecca Walkowitz, can be understood as the "acts of description, interpretation, appropriation, and exclusion—the acts that make affiliation possible" (223). The subject's relation to the world—"affiliation"—is to be reconsidered by the acts of reading and writing, and, at one and the same time, the subject makes a commitment to constituting the world through the subjective "acts of description, interpretation, appropriation, and exclusion." This argument about "affiliation" is linked with the fundamental problem raised by Lessing concerning the relation between the subjective and the objective, and that
between the personal and the general. In her preface, Lessing observes that “there was no way of *not* being intensely subjective: it was [...] the writer’s task for that time” (12-13, emphasis original). Nevertheless, she writes that “there was pressure on writers not to be ‘subjective’” in communist literary ambience (12); the reason she committed herself to Marxism is that it “looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other” (14). Being subjective and attempting to grasp things “as a whole” seem to be mutually exclusive but they are not incompatible, and Lessing asserts that in order to view the world “as a whole” one should be, or cannot help but be, subjective. She provides us with her insight into this problem as follows:

The way to deal with the problem of “subjectivity,” that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general. [...] (13)

The notebooks are personal records of Anna, a “tiny individual”; yet, because her “personal” act of writing is the very node of her affiliation to the world, the subjective act of writing the notebooks and “Free Women” has the “terrible and marvellous possibilities” and the potential for being at once “personal” and “general.” Thus, being subjective is the very condition for being committed to the world “as a whole”; Anna’s “personal” literary praxis can be conceived of as a “microcosm” of her relation to the world.

It is Raymond Williams who deals with the problem of the relation between the personal and the social as the central theme of his study of literature and culture. In *The Long Revolution*, published in the year previous to the publication of *The Golden Notebook*, Williams makes a clear comment on the same problem as Anna and Lessing confront:

In the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. [...] We know now that we literally create the world we see, and that this human creation—a discovery of how we can live in the material world we inhabit—is necessarily
dynamic and active; the old static realism of the passive observer is merely a hardened convention. (314)

This interrelation between the personal and the social is the very dynamic underlying Lessing's strategies for creating the novel. In her 1957 essay, "The Small Personal Voice," published in Declaration, which is regarded as a manifesto of the New Left (Chun 7), Lessing insists that "the realist novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing" (14); the "realist novel" as she mentions it can be equated with Williams's "highest realism," in which the subject is to "create the world" and not to be a "passive observer." For Lessing, The Golden Notebook should be the embodiment of that "realist novel" which breaks with the "hardened convention" of the so-called realism. Furthermore, the reason Williams regards literary creation as "a discovery of how we can live in the material world" is that the process of literary production based on the materiality of language is analogous to the process of work in which the subject is linked with, produces, and changes the material world. Anna's "small personal voice" is open to the social and the general through her struggle with the materiality of language and through her literary creation.

Lessing says that The Golden Notebook is "more valuable" because it contains "rawer material" (Preface 8). Since Anna is faced with the attenuation of language against the density of her experiences, what is at stake here is the way she overcomes the predicament through her literary praxis, in which she transforms such "rawer material" into the text. When the text does not reach the state of being at once personal and general, the literary act sticks in the mud of the "thinning of language" in comparison with the "density" of its raw material. The transformation is performed by the "acts of description, interpretation, appropriation, and exclusion"—by what Walkowitz conceives of as the condition of "affiliation"; therefore, Anna's "affiliation" is the basis of her literary praxis as well as of her relationship to the world. Fredric Jameson's argument in his seminal essay, "Metacommentary," throws light upon the question concerning the process in which raw material is transformed into literary text. He argues that the transformation "ultimately expresses some profound inner logic" of material or lived experience, and he emphasizes the significance of "feelings and dreams about
work,” which underlie the experience and grant it “a more humane collectivity” (16-17, emphasis original). The “inner logic” is conditioned by the feelings about work because “experience has as its most fundamental structure work itself, as the production of value and the transformation of the world” (17, emphasis original). The theme of work is repeatedly brought to the fore as Anna’s vocation as a writer, her work in the Communist Party, and her plan to work as social worker or schoolteacher, all of which are concerned with “the production of value and the transformation of the world.” Above all, according to Jameson, because it is through the elaboration of writing that “the writer in modern times conceives of concrete work in the first place” (17), Anna’s elaboration—her entanglement and struggle with language—epitomizes the work that is the “fundamental structure” of her experiences. In this respect “more valuable” is The Golden Notebook whose “rawer material” contains the fundamental problem of literary praxis and foregrounds its protagonist’s elaboration of the text.

V

The elaboration of writing essentially concerns the form of the text. We come across the interesting phrase “preserve the forms” in quite important scenes in The Golden Notebook (549; 574). This phrase does not simply mean that the form of the text has to be kept intact. Since the text is produced in the interminable interaction of the writing subject, the world, and language, it is impossible for the form to be fixed or impervious. The “problems of forms,” as Theodor Adorno puts it, embody “[t]he unsolved antagonisms of reality [which] return in artworks” (6): those antagonisms or social antinomies that underlie the raw material of artworks and affect the elaboration remain “unsolved” in the form. Therefore, when Anna attempts to make order out of chaos, the fragmented, chaotic elements besetting her experiences, though she tries to control them, ineluctably “return” to her text as an aesthetic form which is, according to Susan Wolfson, “totalized as an act of ‘ideological formation’” (3). Thus, to “preserve the forms” is to “preserve” the trace of “ideological formation” whereby the antagonisms, contradictions, and antinomies are supposed to be veneered with unifying wholeness; to put it differently, it is necessary to refuse, as Anna remarks, “to fit conflicting things together to make a whole.”
While Anna attempts to grasp her experiences in relation to the world as a whole, she refuses to paper over the trace of the ideological formation with the wholeness that is assumed to solve the "unsolved." Consequently, her endeavour to "preserve the forms" causes her suffering from "being split"; in this respect, fragmentation of the self and her writings is an inevitable consequence. It can be said, therefore, that Lessing, the compiler of Anna's texts, leaves her protagonist's fragmented writings as they are, so as to "preserve the forms" of them. By juxtaposing the fragmented notebooks and the texts which aim at integration, Lessing presents us with the unique aesthetic form that acts out the ideological formation. In this process, as Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* states it, because it is impossible for "the individual subject" to "square the circle of ideological conditioning," Anna's literary praxis "must always involve a painful 'decentering' of the consciousness of the individual subject" (273-74). Through this textual performance, the "reconceptualization of the subject as decentered and dispersed" (Michael 48) is brought into sharp relief, and then the decentered notion of subjectivity is to be connected to the "logic of collective dynamics" (*The Political Unconscious* 284). Thus, the subjective act of writing is at one and the same time "collective" by dint of the form that is given by the writer's elaboration or work, which, according to Jameson, gives experiences "a more humane collectivity."

As to the aesthetic form of *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing remarks: "my major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped" (Preface 13). The novel that is to make a "wordless statement"—this oxymoronic phrase reminds me of Jacques Rancière's stimulating argument about the "mute letter." The "mute letter" is not in advance charged with an intended, stable meaning, and it speaks "to anybody, without knowing to whom it [has] to speak, and to whom it [has] not" ("The Politics of Literature" 14): it is equivalent to words, which Anna perceives as precarious and whose meanings and effect are unpredictable. The "mute letter," according to Rancière, "determines a partition of the perceptible" in the "democratic" regime of writing, in which "the writer is anybody and the reader anybody" (14-15). Therefore, what matters is not the fixed, predictable meanings of words, but the effect of their "chance combination" determined by the linguistic, cultural, and social relations, which condition the "partition" and constitute the democratic
regime of writing. Likewise, Lessing's "wordless statement" is to "talk through the way it is shaped"—through the effect of the textual performance so as "to give the ideological 'feel' of our mid-century" (Preface 11). This "ideological 'feel'" corresponds to the "partition of the perceptible" determined by the discursive process. Literary texts, as Rancière explains, "are committed to doing something else than what they do—to create not only objects but a sensorium, a new partition of the perceptible" ("The Aesthetic Revolution" 140); therefore it can be said that Lessing's textual strategies aim at making her protagonist's writings do "something else than what they do." As we have seen, Anna's texts "create not only objects" in the process of objectification but also the "wordless statement" that enables her to surmount the attenuation of language, which she feels is caused in the alienating process. Rancière recapitulates literary texts' "doing something else than what they do" as the "politics of aesthetics" or as "its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics rearrangements of its space, reconfiguring art as a political issue, or asserting itself as true politics" ("The Aesthetic Revolution" 137). Lessing arranges Anna's texts to "give the ideological 'feel'" by making them function "as true politics" in the aesthetic form, whereby even a "small personal voice" of the protagonist can have political power in the democratic regime of writing.

As Lessing emphasizes the effect of the discursive process by which "the ideological 'feel'" is created, so Raymond Williams, formulating the well-known methodological concept of the "structure of feeling," highlights the effect of the entwined relations that the work of art embodies as its aesthetic form. It is worthy of remark that Lessing and Williams, contemporarily, use much the same terms—"feel" and "feeling"—and stress the importance of the sensorium or the sensuous, which Rancière theorizes as the "partition of the perceptible." Given Marx's emphasis on the significance of perceiving reality as "sensuous human activity" and "sensuousness as practical activity" in "Theses on Feuerbach," in which he famously asserts that "the point is to change" the world rather than to interpret it (3-5, emphases original), Lessing's and Williams's emphases on the sensuous can be regarded as truly Marxian or materialist, and the "feel" and the "feeling" connect their literary praxes to the "practical activity" to change the world. Therefore, as Jameson argues, textual elaboration is the equivalent of work which concerns "the transformation of the world," and the "feelings" about work are to be understood as
the very basis of the experience.

Williams's argument about the "structure of feeling," which appeared in Preface to Film in 1954, gives a key to Anna's struggle with writing about her experiences without indulging in "analysis after the event." Williams argues that when we "separate out particular aspects of life" in the description of our experiences, "this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced" (21, emphasis added). To grasp Anna's experiences in the way "how they may be studied" is to reduce her writing to nothing but the "analysis after the event"; accordingly, Anna's writings should be arranged to be "experienced." The word "experience" as Williams uses it here means what is constituted by the subject's involvement in the textual process, whereby the lived experience is transformed into a work of art and the work is read and judged by its writer him/herself and by its readers. Using the metaphors of "precipitate" and "solution" so as to accentuate the inseparability of any experience from the transforming process, Williams explicates the "structure of feeling" as follows:

We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole. And [...] it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. [...] [W]hen one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the structure of feeling of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole. (21-22)

The lived experience written in Anna's texts constitutes what Williams calls "a complex whole" or "totality." The text that embodies the "complex whole" is not a fixed entity but what is produced and modified in the interminable process of reading and writing. Because the "structure of feeling" is the "effect of the totality," it is not reduced to some "external counterpart" or raw material but conceived of as surplus of the whole. The structure of feeling as surplus corresponds to the "partition of the perceptible" that is also defined as surplus: the surplus is
generated through the process wherein the raw material is transformed by, in Walkowitz’s words again, the “acts of description, interpretation, appropriation, and exclusion—the acts that make affiliation possible,” and makes the text truly political. It is not until the text is experienced—written and read in the unpredictable, democratic situation where “the writer is anybody and the reader anybody”—that the structure of feeling is grasped. Lessing’s attempt “to give the ideological ‘feel’” of the time is to be achieved as the “effect of the totality,” which is constituted by Anna’s fragmented writings but not the sum total of them. Williams states that the structure of feeling is “an experience communicated in a particular form” (Drama from Ibsen to Brecht 12): the form which makes the ideological formation visible and in which “conflicting things” are not amalgamated into a reductive “whole.” It is in the “particular form”—“through the way” The Golden Notebook is “shaped”—that Lessing makes Anna’s “small personal voice” heard and performatively expresses the “feel” or feeling of the time.

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Synopsis of “Doris Lessing’s Strategies: Reading, Writing, and Feeling in The Golden Notebook”

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Both the elaborate arrangement of texts and the fragmented state of them are characteristic of Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook. Anna Wulf, the protagonist of the novel, produces four separate notebooks, which she tries to integrate into a golden notebook and into a new novel. Yet, at the same time, she refuses to paper over the conflicts in order to produce a superficial wholeness; accordingly, her attempt at integration is thwarted and her writings inevitably remain fragmented. Faced with this dilemma, she raises the fundamental questions about reading, writing, and language. This paper aims to elucidate the textual strategies of Lessing, who, as a compiler of Anna’s writings, provides the reader with those fragmented texts and gives this unique aesthetic form to them. The form matters because it at once is given by the elaboration of texts and embodies the ideological formation, which underlies the difficulties that the protagonist undergoes.

Through her literary praxis, Anna notes that language not merely reflects the world but also creates the object to write about, and that the subject, the object, and the world are interrelated to constitute the text. Elaboration concerns those entwined relations in the discursive process; therefore, the personal act of writing is linked with social relations and with the collective act of transforming the world. What Lessing attempts to do in the novel is to give the ideological “feel” of the time; this ideological “feel” corresponds to Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “partition of the perceptible” and Raymond Williams’s methodological concept of the “structure of feeling.” Both Rancière’s and Williams’s conceptions are concerned with the effect of the interrelations in the textual process. Likewise, Lessing, in order to give the ideological “feel,” elaborates the form, which acts out the ideological formation and embodies the effect of the interaction between the subjective and the collective.