In 'The Small Personal Voice', an essay first published in 1957, Doris Lessing argues that the responsible artist should be 'an architect of the soul', a humanist working to strengthen good against evil. She is, and she has. Born in Persia, raised in colonial Rhodesia, her father embittered and mutilated by the First World War, Doris Lessing came to postwar England and found it wanting. Child of violence and of violent change, she creates unsettlingly innocent observers, their perceptions sharpened by unfamiliarity and exile. Lessing maps our most urgent concerns: the collapse of empires and idealisms, the shadow of war and the Bomb, urban disaster and environmental ruin. The blueprints that she tests as remedies for these ills include madness, mysticism, apocalypse, utopia and organic architecture; tests and discards, for she is always moving on.

Doris Lessing was already well known for her short stories and novels when she broke off her sequence about Martha Quest, The Children of Violence, to examine the whole business of writing in The Golden Notebook (1962). As if acknowledging the failure of traditional realism to describe the dislocations of the sixties, she worked them into its very texture. Then, after a perfunctory farewell to realism in Landlocked (1965), she embarked boldly for inner space. In Martha Quest's last story, The Four-Gated City (1969), and in Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971), The Summer Before the Dark (1973) and Memoirs of a Survivor (1974), Lessing enters other states of mind. Here, what the world calls madness becomes a statement of intent and a place to stand. When she draws on R. D. Laing's legitimation of unreason, Blake's visions, Idries Shah's promises
of evolution, Jung's mythic archetypes and Frank Lloyd Wright's blueprints for harmonious cities, Lessing records popular moods of the time.

The imaginative licence of science fiction allowed Lessing to develop her blueprints in *The Four-Gated City* and the five novels of the Canopus archives (1979–83). But recently she has swerved back to critical realism, to prophecy in the sense of describing the world to itself, warning, crying out, appealing to individual responsibility. The apocalypse has already taken place, and it is within. Its signs are the indifference of *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), the stale creeds of *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and the Gothic horrors of *The Fifth Child* (1988). Lessing repeats that the end of the world is nigh, and yet we must act as though 'beautiful impossible blueprints' – the phrase is from *The Golden Notebook* – could still come true.³ Hope lies in our capacity to change with change, as she herself has done. We must bravely discard the blueprint and start again.

To Lessing 'there is a thought around'; the artist 'plug[s] into an overmind, or Urmind' (rather like Jung's collective unconscious), as she says in the preface to *Shikasta*. To tell of these 'thoughts', which arise from the political events and psychological developments of her times, Lessing turns to modern critical theory. She uses the satiric subversion of socialist realism, authorial absence, the fragmentation and montage of modernism, the dream-work and imagery of archetypal theory, the self-consciousness, the intertextuality and playfulness of deconstructionism. Recently she has returned to realism, with its explicit closures of meaning.

Essentially, though, Doris Lessing has always been a critical realist. Her conviction that the political and the personal are inseparable derives as much from literature as from life. In the fifties she had looked back in admiration to nineteenth-century writers who in the line of Darwin, Spencer and Marx wrote of the individual being inevitably constructed by his society,⁶ or what Marx called the 'collective'. Like them, Lessing writes of a deterministic world, epitomised in *The Golden Notebook* by her presentation of individuals as mites under a wide sky, or her Darwinian scenes of nature red in tooth and claw.⁷

If these masters told her of a world without God, Conrad, Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot, Joyce and Woolf sustain her insistence on corruption at the dark heart of empire. For Lessing, too, sex