

the end of human existence (love) is seen to be obtained. In this sense the novel emphasises the *primacy* of work in modern life in opposition to the trend of self-fulfilment and romantic view of love as the means of happiness, or as Vic puts it: 'I'm afraid I have been a bit foolish' (380).

'Tis not all a muddle' then but a very clear structure that reflects the struggle in contemporary society to harmonize the seemingly opposing practices of life and work, while exposing their relationship to the structures that organize these activities. If the concepts of work and love are enacted through the Comic and Romantic emplotments, then the structures of the systems that govern these plot developments are evoked through her ever-present Gladstone bag to another morally committed, but unsuccessful liberal liberation fighter. There is also the fact that we find the economically integrated Vic reading *Culture and Anarchy* at the end of the novel, which suggests that the predestined (and therefore tragic) 'cycle of commerce' might yet be broken. But most of all, the satire is evoked in the amassment of random events and connections, and utter irrationality that brings the story to its happy resolution. When everything else is said and done, Robyn's fate is ultimately decided by Professor Swallow's fortunate and timely discovery of the meaning of 'virement'. There is, indeed, nothing outside the text. Or, rather, as this novel cries out, there are bodies, physical beings, that are victims of the text (systems), but with the ability to momentarily transcend the restrictions and agendas of systems that seem designed to defy the right to the production of the means of existence and human existence *per se* to everyone. For, as the randomness of this novel makes clear, you cannot, as Robyn mistakenly believes, write the text yourself.

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JANINA NORDIUS

Teaching Modern Gothic: Discourses in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen"

The gothic novel, or the novel of horror, is sometimes thought of as a phenomenon specific to the late eighteenth century – a result of the 'gothic revival' which swept Britain in the wake of neoclassicism, and which lent its name to the increasingly popular body of spine-chilling fiction that so famously stirred and thrilled its, largely female, readership. Yet although the heyday of the gothic 'proper' lasted only till about 1830, the genre lives on, if considerably diffused and transformed as we reach the twenty-first century.¹ Modern gothic addresses fears that may at first seem very different from the horrors that faced the heroines of a Mrs Radcliffe or Monk Lewis in the ancient castles or underground dungeons where they invariably ended up confined. But as is often pointed out, a main feature of the genre is its reliance on "a code of iteration,"² and thus certain elements, notably the horrors and fears evoked by incarceration, have continued to be reproduced throughout the ages. In modern gothic, however, the material prison walls and catacombs of the eighteenth century novels have given way to a more abstract threat: to "the sense that there is no exit from the darkly illuminating labyrinth of language," as Fred Botting puts it.³

Referring to language as a "prison-house" has, to be sure, become a postmodern commonplace, in the sense that very few would contest the role of language as such in the process of constituting the human subject. Yet when dealing with the claustrophobia so manifest in certain modern gothic texts, it seems nevertheless fruitful to focus, specifically, on the play of *different* discourses that, in Foucauldian terms, structure and determine the way we think of reality and of ourselves. A discourse, understood in this way, consists of a set of practices (for instance thought practices and speech practices) that rely on certain, more or less hidden assumptions about the world, and which by shaping also our notion of our own self may certainly be seen as imprisoning – especially as dominant discursive structures often serve to maintain existing power relations among groups of people or individuals in society. However, as Sara Mills points out, discourses are not

¹ See Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 13ff.

² Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 1.

³ Botting 14.

⁴ Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1997) 16. Mills' book gives an accessible introduction to the way Foucauldian practices have influenced e.g. feminist studies.

fixed “but are the object and site of struggle”,⁴ and thus, by resisting and re-negotiating oppressive or imprisoning discursive practices, as for instance sexist or racist ones, the individual may achieve at least a relative degree of freedom.

A modern gothic text which brilliantly illustrates the way discursive structures conspire to imprison the human subject is Doris Lessing’s short story “To Room Nineteen.”⁵ Significantly, however, although the heroine’s sense of claustrophobia and discontent in her domestic life as housewife and mother is palpably manifest, readers often have problems putting their finger on exactly *what* the problem is, and *why* it is that the heroine suffers so much in her, ostensibly quite privileged, middle-class family life that she rather spends her days doing nothing in an empty hotel room, and eventually kills herself at the prospect of having to give up this self-chosen solitude. “She went mad because her husband was unfaithful” is one explanation sometimes offered – if not always with great conviction – when the story is discussed in undergraduate classes; another frequent suggestion is that “she should have talked to her husband about how she felt” – a piece of advice which may seem reasonable enough, but which does not, after all, explain the heroine’s failure to do so.⁶ Part of these difficulties no doubt derives from the fact that as readers and potential interpreters we are ourselves likely to be caught in – or at least influenced by – similar discursive structures as those which entrap Susan Rawlings in Lessing’s story. Comments like the ones above may well be seen as drawing on “the same pragmatic ‘intelligence’ the story is intent on subverting,” as Virginia Tiger remarks.⁷ By approaching “To Room Nineteen” from the perspective of discourse theory, however, we may not only get a clearer picture of the nature of the heroine’s dilemma, but also come to grips with some of our own interpretative anxieties.

Moreover, such an approach would both accommodate and provide a deeper insight into a number of other models of explanation frequently offered by students and critics, namely those readings which focus on the repression of emotions as the cause of the heroine’s unhappiness, and those which, from a viewpoint of conventional ideological feminism, see Susan Rawlings as a victim of patriarchal society. A reading such as the latter would seem to disregard the fact that Matthew Rawlings is represented, not so much as an agent of a male conspiracy, as an equally helpless – if

⁵ In Malcolm Bradbury, *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) 150-80. For a brief but perceptive *écriture féminine* discussion of “the role that language plays in imprisoning” the protagonist of “To Room Nineteen,” see Ellen Brown, “In Search of Nancy Drew, The Snow Queen, and Room Nineteen: Cruising for a Feminine Discourse,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13 (1993): 12-13.

⁶ Virginia Tiger notices an identical student reaction in “Taking Hands and Dancing in (Dis)Unity: Story to Storied in Doris Lessing’s ‘To Room Nineteen’ and ‘A Room,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 36.3 (1990): 426. Although she comments on the “diversity of narrative codes” that compete in Lessing’s text, Tiger’s focus is rather on Lessing’s own narration than on her thematising the role of discourses in “To Room Nineteen.”

⁷ Tiger 426-27.

somewhat insensitive – victim of the situation. A reading focusing on discursive practices, on the other hand, might provide a more nuanced picture, since it would locate the oppressive “agent” to structures within certain discourses rather than blaming Susan’s husband or the abstract notion of “patriarchy”.

Among the discursive structures that dominate the thought-practices of Susan Rawlings and her husband at the beginning of the story are those of domesticity and “intelligence” – both traditionally seen by feminists as serving to oppress women in favour of male interests. Of these two, “intelligence” is the one most immediately conspicuous, foregrounded by Lessing’s first person narrator in the opening sentence which announces a story “about a failure in intelligence” (150), and then throughout the story by repeated references (e.g. 152, 153, 154, 155).

“Intelligence” here is not the same as analytical or imaginative brilliance, but a “practical intelligence” (151) – a rational and pragmatic outlook on life that, to the Rawlingses, above all implies being prepared for, and able to cope with, whatever life may have in store for them. Theirs is an enlightened discourse, a twentieth-century secularized version of the “right reason” advocated by English neoclassical writers, and thus providing a discursive setting similar to that which the early gothic of the eighteenth century has been seen to subvert and undermine.⁸ Telling themselves that the pitfalls of married life – the flatness and “dry, controlled wistfulness” they sometimes feel (153), “the hidden resentments and deprivations” that might befall the independent-woman-turned-housewife (152), and even Matthew’s occasional extra-marital affairs – are “natural” (157) and “inevitable” (154), they only seem to reiterate the neo-classical thesis that argues, in the words of Alexander Pope, that “to reason right is to submit.” “Passion” may well discompose the mind (to go on paraphrasing Pope), but to Susan and Matthew, as to Pope, these passions are “the elements of life” and part of the “general [order].... kept in Nature” as well as “in man” – or, as Susan more prosaically puts it, the “nature of things” (155).⁹

Yet from the very outset it is made blatantly obvious that what Susan and Matthew think of as “natural” is, in fact, an effect of discursive structures. Not only does Lessing constantly draw our attention to discourse by framing the Rawlingses’ “intelligent” thought-practices by phrases like “so to speak” (157), “as she said” (156), or “so said Matthew, the intelligent husband” (156), but we are also shown how the Rawlingses, by reiterating the discursive practices of enlightened reason, keep convincing themselves of the validity of this “general order”:

So here was this couple, testing their marriage, looking after it,

⁸ See Botting 3.

⁹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle 1, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1996) II. 164-72

treating it like a small boat full of helpless people in a very stormy sea. Well, of course, so it was... The storms of the world were bad, but not too close... And the inner storms and quicksands were understood and charted. So everything was all right. Everything was in order. Yes, things were under control. (153).

The Rawlingses look upon their marriage as something of their own creation (152) – an “edifice” raised on the foundation of “their intelligent love” (155). But this oxymoron proves a treacherous foundation, as it is exposed by the text to be yet another construct by intelligent discourse – the projection of a logocentric dream of purpose and meaning. For if the Rawlingses’ marriage is “grounded in intelligence” as the opening sentence declares (150), what the narrative reveals to us is in fact the detailed *process* of this intelligent grounding. At the beginning of the story, the Rawlingses are shown groping about for something that would provide “a centre of life and a reason for being,” or “a wellspring to live from” (151-2); but since “there was no point about which either could say: ‘For the sake of *this* is all the rest’” (151), they construct one, by talking, or thinking, themselves into believing in its existence: “Their love for each other? Well, that was the nearest it. If this wasn’t a centre, what was? Yes, it was around this point, their love, that the whole extraordinary structure revolved” (151-2).

However, such logocentric constructions always serve a duplex purpose: meaning and a sense of solid ground is achieved at the cost of excluding otherness or difference. The existential anxiety which made the Rawlingses yearn for a fixed centre in the first place – their feeling that “[t]heir life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail. Matthew’s job for the sake of Susan, children, house, and garden... and Susan’s practical intelligence for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden” (151) – is kept tolerably at bay by their installation of love as foundation; and should they sometimes doubt their own construction, intelligence is immediately there to reassure them: “And if one felt that [their love] simply was not strong enough, important enough, to support it all, well whose fault was that? Certainly neither Susan’s nor Matthew’s. It was in the nature of things” (152). Yet, by suppressing otherness, or colonising it in the name of “nature,” intelligent discourse effectively deprives its subjects of their means to articulate such experiences as will not conform to its norms – that is, experiences of *not* being in control, experiences of *not* being able to cope with emotions, “natural” though intelligence may claim them to be. For “intelligence” bars such sentimental or affective practices as “quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations and tears. Above all, intelligence forbids tears” (155).

It would of course be possible to discuss this taboo on excessive sensibility in psychological or psychoanalytical terms only: the Rawlingses suppress their emotions and therefore they come to suffer in the end. However, whereas such a reading would seem to locate the problem in the

characters’ – and especially, in this case, Susan’s – psyche, a reading in terms of discourse theory will enable us to get rid of some of the “sickness” connotations that so easily accrue to psychoanalytical readings, and instead see the problem as residing in the overwhelming cultural dominance achieved by certain discourses. Seen in this way, then, the discursive “edifice” that Susan and Matthew have raised on the base of intelligence is not only a fortress offering protection from inner and outer storms (153); by silencing – or “barring” – any other discursive practices that might offer an escape from this particular construction of self and world, it is in equal measure a prison, by no means less forbidding than the Otrantos and Udolphos of the early gothic.

“Intelligent” discourse has been perceived as gendered by feminist critics, being the received discourse of power in a society seen as serving primarily male interests. Yet in Lessing’s story, behind the intelligent facade of the Rawlingses’ discursive practices lurks a discourse possibly even more gendered – or at least more easily recognizable as such – namely, that of domesticity. This is the discourse of the good mother and the good wife – the angel in the house¹⁰ – although given a face-lift to better suit the taste of a mid-twentieth-century context (the story was published in 1963¹¹). Using their intelligence to smooth the way for domesticity, both the Rawlingses “knew and agreed” that “[c]hildren needed their mother to a certain age” (153), and so Susan quits her job – even though her “part as mother and wife” (172) is sensibly seen, not as a life-long commitment, but rather as a temporary role until the children are grown and “off [her] hands” (160, 161).

Temporary or not, however, the domestic bargain Susan enters with her husband is stifling. “[H]er part of the bargain [was]... that her spirit, her soul, should live in this house, so that the people in it could grow like plants in water... In return for this, he would be a good loving husband, and responsible towards the children” (168). What this vampiric contract means, in effect, is that Matthew, although loving and responsible, is free to have a life *outside* the narrow circle of home and family, to practise other discourses and thus construct other versions (or, as the essentialist phrase goes, “develop other sides”) of himself, whereas Susan signs herself over completely, as she puts it, “to other people” (157), offering herself up as emotional and spiritual nourishment for her family to feed on. In thus shouldering the ultimate emotional responsibility for other people’s wellbeing, she is shown to internalise the same old self-sacrificing imperatives as western bourgeois culture has celebrated in womanhood for centuries. When Susan eventually reaches the point where she has to admit to herself that “[s]he was a prisoner” (160), it is clearly the confines of

¹⁰ Cf. Eva Hunter, “Madness in Doris Lessing’s ‘To Room Nineteen,’” *English Studies in Africa* 30 (1987): 92.

¹¹ In *A Man and Two Women*.

these internalised imperatives, along with those of intelligence, that she tries to escape from, even though she does so by seeking actual, physical solitude.

At the heart of Lessing's story, then, is the heroine's growing discomfort with the discursive practices she has so unsuspectingly internalised, and her subsequent struggle to break free of them, despite the resistance presented by both intelligence and domesticity. As soon as she begins to question her internalised domestic ideals by acknowledging the feeling of never being quite free (160), Susan is confronted with a grating sense of guilt that labours to obstruct her would-be liberation: she feels "guilty" about her children (160) and "remorseful" about her husband (161). Equally intimidating is the external resistance offered by domesticity, as she plays with the idea of confiding her exasperation at the traditional roles she has to play to the elderly lady she rents a room from in London: since the cultural dominance of domestic ideals is bound to make *any* deviant experience appear incomprehensible or abnormal, she soon realises that this experience is practically incommunicable.

The growing gap that Lessing's heroine experiences between her own gut feelings and what dominant discourses – both external and internalised – *tell* her to feel and experience cannot, then, but affect the sense of identity she has built up during the years. Yet as she begins to question and renegotiate this identity, by far the toughest resistance is offered by intelligence, which has been much more integral to her formation of self than domesticity. When Susan is "pierced as by an arrow from the sky with bitterness" (154) on learning about her husband's first affair, "her intelligence" nevertheless "continue[s] to assert that all was well" (154-55), insisting "that they were very happy, [and] that the affairs were not important" (155). And, again, when her so sensibly planned "emancipation away from the role of hub-of-the-family into woman-with-her-own-life" (156) fails to take place as her children start school, intelligence once more steps in to explain: "All this is quite natural" (157). Yet while intelligence thus offers reassurance, it also, as discussed above, tries to make Susan suppress the sense of panic and emptiness she suddenly finds yawning underfoot (156-7); and it is in this resistance to otherness that intelligence so conspicuously fails Susan, as we learnt to expect from the very first sentence of the story: it allows her no means of acknowledging and accepting those emotions that she actually experiences, and consequently the gap between experience and discourse grows even wider.

This rift is visibly exposed in the texture of the story as Susan's inner monologue becomes increasingly disjointed. Punctuated by reservations – "buts," "yets," and "excepts" (151-5) – it exposes what Ellen Brown calls

Susan's "disease of language" by continually "emphasizing word choice by using italics and adding parentheses around statements to question their validity or to correct them."¹² Thus, the less useful her internalised intelligent practices prove to be in expressing Susan's real feelings, the more she tends to bracket them in her inner thought-stream: "Resentment. It was poisoning her. (She looked at this emotion and thought it was absurd. Yet she felt it.). She was a prisoner. (She looked at this thought too, and it was no good telling herself it was a ridiculous one.)" (160). Still, in communicating with others, no such bracketing of mutual discursive practices is possible; as, beginning to think of her "irritation, restlessness, emptiness" as an "enemy" waiting to invade her (157), Susan briefly contemplates confiding in her husband, the difficulties in trying to escape the prisonhouse of established discourses again appear insurmountable. "No, clearly this conversation should not take place"; such thoughts "were not sensible" (57-8).

It is this compact resistance to otherness that makes Susan, like so many of her gothic forebears, opt for the only escape route she can see at this stage: the well-beaten track of female madness.¹³ But since this route is so clearly represented in the story as a construct of intelligent discourse, it is exposed as being nothing but a cul-de-sac. Having recourse to no alternative discursive register, the heroine can only articulate her experience of otherness in negative terms, that is, as deficiency. Falling for the sickness metaphor offered up by intelligence, she tells herself that she "had to accept the fact that, after all, she was an irrational person and to live with it. Some people had to live with crippled arms, or stammers, or being deaf. She would have to live knowing she was subject to a state of mind she could not own" (162). It is intelligent discourse that suggests that Susan "see a doctor" (158); and it is intelligent discourse that, having once "*diagnosed* her... as *unreasonable*" (166; first emphasis mine), finally labels her as insane: "Yes, she was mad" (166).

To combat the supremacy of discourses which thus resist otherness and, they feel, marginalise the feminine, some feminist critics have stressed the need for alternative discursive practices that would serve better to express what has, then, so far been positioned as unsayable. Yet when Lessing lets her heroine retreat from the blind alley of madness to finally find freedom outside the prisonhouse of dominant discourses, she does so, not by making Susan find a better suited, alternative discourse, but, emphatically, by letting her escape language altogether. It is in the silence and solitude of room nineteen, the cheap hotel room that becomes her long-sought shelter, that the emptiness which Susan Rawlings's intelligent and sensible

¹² Brown 12.

¹³ This traditional labelling of aberrant female behaviour as madness in modern western culture has been thoroughly documented through the studies of Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and others.

constructions of self found so threatening turns into a sense of total freedom: “her mind a blank”, she sits there “feeling emptiness run deliciously through her veins,” treating herself to the soothing absence of all constraints of discourse: she “[s]ometimes talked aloud, saying nothing” (171-2).

Despite Lessing’s fairly unequivocal representation of these scenes as pure bliss, some readers see Susan’s escape from discourse as defeat, thus aligning themselves, if not explicitly with the feminist call for an alternative language, then at least with what Helga Ramsey-Kurz claims to be “the standard interpretation of silence in literature,” that is, silence as “a metaphor of disempowerment.”¹⁴ Such readings, then, would seem to play down the importance of the actual *text* (the gratifying representation of the heroine’s silence) in favour of its extrinsic social *context* (the implications of such silence to real or imagined power relations). Other readers, privileging the text and its intrinsic discussion of discourses, tend to look upon Susan’s silence in positive terms and rather see as defeat the fact that her sojourn in room nineteen is interrupted; the heroine kills herself at the prospect of being dragged back into the prison of intelligence, ensnared by the machinations of a husband who in this case at least, in practice if not in intent, is made to act the gothic villain. While there is certainly something to be said for both these readings, what may be the most important outcome of the ending Lessing provides us with is that it forces us to pay attention to our own interpretative practices and, implicitly, to our own discursive practices.

Representing the human subject as basically “an effect of discursive structures”¹⁵ as I have argued Lessing does in “To Room Nineteen” is, of course, in itself a practice that can be referred to a certain type of discourse – in this case to the domain we now call “poststructuralist,” although the term was not around when Lessing wrote her story, and although she herself would hardly subscribe to this kind of labelling. In poststructuralist discourse, the “essentialist” notion of the subject as a self-contained and self-controlled entity, existing prior to and independently of its exposure to language, is seen as just another construct of enlightened humanist reason. Not surprisingly, then, it is the main spokesman of intelligence, Matthew, who introduces the notion of an essential self early on in Lessing’s story; his wife’s mounting sense of discomfort can be explained, he seems to suggest, by the fact that “the essential Susan” has to be kept “in cold storage” while she devotes her services to her family (156) – only to re-emerge, fresh and intact, when her serving days are over. And as with other ideas suggested by intelligence, Susan at first accepts it: “she agreed that it

was true – she did feel something like that,” – only to immediately go on to question and reject it: “What, then, was this essential Susan? She did not know. Put like that it sounded ridiculous, and she did not really feel it” (156).

Yet in the final analysis, the attitude to human subjectivity seems ambivalent. For as Susan relaxes in room nineteen, what she seems to be welcoming is precisely the reappearance of such a long-lost, essential self, thus falling back upon conventional thought-structures even as she relishes her freedom from them. “Here I am,” she thinks; “after all these years of being married and having children and playing those roles of responsibility – and I’m just the same” (171). Whether we should ascribe this ambivalence to the character only, or extend it to Lessing who may be seen to betray an essentialist position by giving so positive a picture of the heroine’s relief, is, however, a question open to discussion.¹⁶ In a study of the discourses at work in the story, it may be more important to point out that such ambivalence is part and parcel of the way subjects constantly engage with discourses – whether the subject in question is a character in a story, the writer or the reader. As Sara Mills stresses, and as I hope to have shown in my discussion, “individual subjects should not be seen simply to adopt roles which are mapped out for them by discourses; rather, they experience discomfort with certain elements implicit in discourses, they find pleasure in some elements, they are openly critical about others.”¹⁷

What we might learn from Lessing’s story, then, is obviously not that we should throw out intelligence altogether or stop loving our family; rather, it is an awareness that we are all, in some sense, prisoners of discourse – but also that such awareness can be the key to (relative) freedom: by contesting oppressive practices we may gain the liberation denied our gothic foremothers.

¹⁴ Helga Ramsey-Kurz, “Telling Silences: Aspects of Female (In)Articulateness in Some Contemporary British Women’s Novels,” *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, eds. Gudrun M. Grabher, Ulrike Jessner (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996) 161. For a “defeatist” reading of “To Room Nineteen,” see e.g. Brown 15.

¹⁵ Mills 103.

¹⁶ A similar ambivalence in Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* has been noted by Magali Cornier Michael in *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996) 90.

¹⁷ Mills 97.