BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL: A METAFICTIONAL ARCHETYPAL QUEST FOR THE SELF

María del Mar Asensio Aróstegui
Universidad de Zaragoza

Doris Lessing's most famous novel is undoubtedly *The Golden Notebook*. A great majority of the criticism written on her work is devoted, at least partially, to this outstanding piece of writing. Literary critics have paid considerably less attention to her shorter novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, which was published nine years later, in 1971, and was thus measured against the high-quality patterns established by *The Golden Notebook.*[1] All these statements do not intend to underestimate the literary value of the novel. On the contrary, as I will try to demonstrate in this paper, a conscious reading of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is bound to reveal a rich postmodernist narrative, full of archetypal motifs, whose thematic core is almost as old as literature itself but which has been given a highly original modern treatment.

Formally, the narrative may be divided into two clearly differentiated parts. The first one begins at the precise moment when a man, the protagonist of the novel, is brought to Central Intake Hospital apparently suffering from schizophrenia (pp. 11-126). The second part of the book recounts his failure to remember his recent inner experience, which contrasts with the doctors and his family's success in bringing him back again to fit his social identity (pp. 126-250).

This two-fold division is also appreciated at a narrative level. In the first part of the novel, the unnamed protagonist narrates his voyage experiences. His intuitive, sometimes oracular, account is framed either by cold, standardized medical reports, which are apparently the only mode of communication left between two scientists (Doctor X. and Doctor Y.), or by highly ironic dialogues, which repeatedly evidence the impossibility for civilized man to understand the process of individuation that the protagonist is undergoing and reporting.

By contrast, in the second part unmarked dialogues are much more frequent, and although some friction and tension between the protagonist and his interlocutors can be still perceived, Charles Watkins' voice is no longer authoritative or assertive. It has lost its previous independence to become one of the several points of view through which the protagonist's psychic voyage is mediated for the reader and

which take the form of letters written by Watkins' wife, friends, acquaintances, by the doctors, and even by Watkins himself. Besides, for the first time in the novel, we feel the presence of an omniscient extradiegetic narrator who selects the order in which the letters and the dialogues are to be provided (since most of the times they are not chronologically ordered), who overtly produces social criticism and whose ideas are perfectly in tune with those of the implied author who appears thus narrativized within the novel.

Briefing for a Descent into Hell is tightly structured and controlled. Form and contents are firmly joined as it is proved by the fact that the more the protagonist moves away from his psychic world to approach "reality", the more his narrative role is reduced, until by the end of the novel, when he has regained "normalcy", he is shown to us through three short insipid letters, thus emphasizing, as Douglas Bolling (1973: 553) says, "the gap between man's psychic plenitude on the one hand and the impoverishment of 'normal' human consciousness and institutionalized procedures on the other".

Lorna Sage (1983: 68) has accused *Briefing* of being "incomplete and thin" (two adjectives that she also applies to *The Summer before the Dark*, a novel published by Doris Lessing two years later, in 1973, and which partakes of the same thematic concerns). Sage's reading overlooks the novel's formal accurateness and disregards its thematic complexity. She reduces the novel to a single theme namely "the grotesque and cramping inadequacy of the 'identities' people find themselves saddled with in mid-life"(1983: 68) and, although she explains that "[its] nameless protagonist has escaped from his life as Charles Watkins, Professor of Classics, *to embark on his own odyssey in the unconscious*" (emphasis added), she disregards the symbolic potential of her own remark, concluding that "[m]any of the images" used by Doris Lessing, "are tired or token ones: [...] Sinbad, Gulliver, the Ancient Mariner [...] have been this way before. Yet the narrative doesn't acknowledge the fact, except perhaps by its impatience, its offering of tokens as tokens" (1983: 68).

In fact, much more needs to be said both about the formal and the thematic concerns of *Briefing*. Thematically, the novel is a pessimistic attempt to recover modern man's lost psychic inner depths in a society which in the name of progress and civilization alienates human beings and represses their spirit. By pessimistic I mean that the novel does not offer a way out from this situation. On the contrary, we are left with a vicious circle, an endless feeling of impotence. In moments of schizophrenia, man tries to break through the constrictive barriers of society and goes deep within himself in search of his lost being, his true self. However, when this happens he is taken to hospital where he is provided with drugs and electric shock until he is returned to a socially standard "normal" state. As a result, while he is allowed to glimpse the "inadequacy of his identity" for a brief period of time, he is finally forced to forget this illuminating experience and to blindly accept again his socially conditioned role.

In the epigraph under the title, Doris Lessing categorizes her novel as "[i]nner-space fiction. For", she says, "there is never anywhere to go but in" (p. 9). In this way she proposes an archetypal voyage into the core of one's being as the only possible manner of getting to know one's own psychic depths from which authentic freedom and integration can arise. Charles Watkins, or rather his mind, engages in a mythical journey which follows step by step the three stages which, according to Joseph Campbell (1988), conform the adventure of the hero, or hero's quest, that is, departure, initiation, and return.

The term *quest* seems to be very fashionable in literary criticism. It has been applied to a great variety of narratives, to such an extent that it has become an important form in English and American literature. Its pattern is circular, thus suggesting its endless capacity for repetition. Following Campbell, Janis P. Stout (1983) indicates that the essential requisite for labelling any fiction a quest is the existence of a spatial pattern even though it may be small or figurative. A quest is a journey of search, an uncertain but significant journey into the unknown. What is searched for varies considerably from one quest to another; it may be either proximate, a real object, or ultimate, an abstraction. No matter what the goal is, it is related to the self-realization of the quester who, most often than not, finds himself in the course of the journey.[2] Although at the very beginning he may start the journey accompanied by a supporting group, he finally ends it alone. The setting of the quest, its geography, is never the world of reality but a patterned emblematic landscape which becomes a projection of the mind of the quester, in such a way that the outer progression and movement turns out to be a metaphor for the inward search of self-discovery.

Within this general scheme, Stout (1983: 91) distinguishes "a sub-species of the quest developing its tendency toward abstract goal, symbolic action, and the reach toward absolute enlightenment." This is the inner journey of the soul or the night journey which I find particularly illuminating in the case of *Briefing*. Stout describes this type of quest as that in which the loneliness of the hero is emphasized, the dangers he has to face are magnified, a quest which takes the form of a descent into a hell or an underworld. Contrary to what could be expected, the hero's return from that underworld does not entail any reward at all. Joseph Campbell sums up the dimensions of the night journey narrative:

> The usual pattern is, first, of a break away or departure from the local social order and context; next, a long, deep retreat inward and backward, backward, as it were, in time, and inward, deep into the psyche; a chaotic series of encounters there, darkly terrifying experiences, and presently (if the victim is fortunate) encounters of a centering kind, fulfilling, harmonizing, giving new courage; and then finally, in such fortunate cases, a return journey of rebirth to life. (in Stout 1983: 91)

This quotation sums up the thematic pattern which shapes Doris Lessing's *Briefing*. It may be seen as the basic skeleton to which symbolic imagery and social criticism has been attached in order to enrich the inner journey of the protagonist's mind especially in the first half[3] of the novel.

The first page of a novel usually locates the action of the story which is being told. *Briefing* is not an exception in this sense. The reader is presented first with a place, "Central Intake Hospital", then with a date, "Friday, August 15th, 1969." But then a quite peculiar description of the main character is given

Name...	Unknown
Sex...	Male
Age...	Unknown
Address...	Unknown (p. 11)

From this moment on, and during the whole first part of the novel, the protagonist will be referred to as "Patient" and not much more information about him will be provided except for the unconscious experiences he himself reports, and which engage not only the intradiegetic doctors but also the extradiegetic readers in an attempt to discover the identity of this mysterious character. An attempt which mirrors his own quest for self-discovery. The nurse writes that the patient was found by the Police near Waterloo Bridge at midnight. Such an apparently irrelevant sentence gains significance once the reader recognizes the actual symbolic meaning of the patient's words and the archetypal character of the inner journey he has undertaken. This is a device which resembles what Genette (1980: 75) names *advance mentions*, defined as "simple markers without anticipation, even an allusive anticipation, which will acquire their significance only later on and which belong to the completely classic art of "preparation." The previous sentence may seem at first a general remark, a mere fact which is usually recorded as part of a hospital routine. But we may read between lines and see this as an example of the symbolic contents which are so frequent in this text.[4] On the one hand, midnight is a time when the power of consciousness weakens and the impulses and images of the unconscious can pass more easily across it. On the other hand, as J. A. Pérez-Rioja (1988: 361-362), among others, has pointed out, a bridge is a well-known symbol of the transition from a world to another. It also represents a boundary or alliance between two separate worlds. Actually, when the protagonist is brought to hospital, without any document which may give the doctors a clue to his identity, he has already crossed the threshold that separates everyday reality from the unknown world of the unconscious. According to Joseph Campbell's above-mentioned pattern, this crossing of the threshold implies that the hero has broken away, has departed from the local social order and context and is ready to initiate his psychic journey.

No introductory remark will frame the patient's own words which are offered to us for the first time in the second page. His account is a first-person anonymous to match his absence of a name. He is merely an isolated "I" who, through his vivid stream of consciousness, makes us participate in his mental experiences and thoughts. His speech is a quick succession of thoughts and feelings evoked by continuous association of ideas. He is alone, at sea, probably on a raft, and he has lost his compass and his oars. He knows perfectly well where he wants to sail but he does not know how to do so.

This initial situation perfectly corresponds with the feelings which the crossing of the first threshold produces in the mind of the hero. His being alone is the result of his withdrawal, which "consists in a radical transfer of emphasis from the external to the internal world, macro- to microcosm, a retreat from the desperations of the waste land to the peace of the everlasting realm that is within" (Campbell 1988: 17). The choice of the sea as the hero's abode is also of extreme significance. Pérez-Rioja (1988: 287-288) explains that the sea is the symbol of immensity, the origin and the end of life, its renewal and purification. Psychoanalytic theories associate the sea with the collective unconscious because unsuspected depths are hidden under its dense surface.

The patient's account is in the first person which, according to Percy G. Adams (1983: 164) "for many readers [...] is still the archetypal form of the *récit de voyage.*" His entrance into the depths of the collective unconscious explains why all through his voyage he is not given a name. The narrating "I" is not an individual any longer. On the contrary, he has joined all the heroes who have preceded him in his

quest. This is why each time the doctor asks him his name, he gives a different but similar answer thus identifying himself with many a previous heroic quester. First, he is Jason; then, Jonah; then, Odysseus. A variety which is made unity in the following dialogue:

> DOCTOR Y. What's your name? Will you tell me?
> PATIENT. Jonah.
> DOCTOR Y. Yesterday it was Jason. You can't be either, you know?
> PATIENT. *We are all sailors*. (pp. 14-15) (my emphasis).

The direct or indirect references to such sailors as Sinbad, Gulliver or the Ancient Mariner are better interpreted as self-conscious allusions, indeed as overtly transtextual[5] parodic references to the best known quest narratives within the literary tradition *Briefing* belongs to, expressing Doris Lessing's desire to cope with "the difficulty [but not impossibility I would add] of making the old mythic and metaphysical landmarks new." (Sage 1983: 68)

Suspiciously enough, Lorna Sage does not mention any of the heroes which the "nameless protagonist", as she calls our quester, associates himself with, namely Jason, Jonah, and Odysseus.[6] I cannot imagine any reason for her having left them aside because I find them one of the keys for the interpretation of the message conveyed by the novel. The narrative *does* acknowledge the fact that they have been this way before[7]. Furthermore, their relevance to the full understanding of the text lies precisely there. All of them are not only characters inside a fictional text but they are also mythical figures whose particular quests resemble in one way or another the inner voyage undertaken by our hero.

The Greek legend says that, having undertaken a seemingly impossible task, the quest for the Golden Fleece, whose possession would return him his inheritance, Jason called upon the noblest heroes of Greece, the Argonauts, to take part in the expedition. According to the original story, the crew consisted of twelve of the chief members of Jason's own race. On page 21 of *Briefing* we read: "On this voyage there were twelve men on board, with myself as Captain". Number twelve is a symbolic figure. It results from multiplying number three (symbol of eternity, sacredness and unity[8]) and number four (symbol of the physical world[9] and of psychic stability). Twelve is the number of the Apostles, of Jerusalem doors, of the zodiac signs, of the months of the year, etc. The story of the expedition of the Argonauts was known at least as early as Homer and the wandering of Odysseus may have been partly founded on it.

J. A. Pérez-Rioja (1988: 410-411) portrays Odysseus as the ideal navigator and founder of cities. Due to his cunning and sound judgement, Odysseus is the leader of men par excellence (the patient significantly appears as the captain of the crew [p. 21]). He has been one of the most frequently portrayed figures in Western literature. Homer described him as a man of outstanding wisdom, eloquence, resourcefulness, courage and endurance, a variety of human values which have turned him into the universal man, the man who, having seen and experienced everything, becomes the perfect synthesis of a rich millenary experience.

Finally, Jonah was one of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. He was chosen by God to go to Nineveh to preach against people's evil but he was afraid, he tried to escape and he was swallowed by a fish which after three days

threw him to a beach. The parallelisms between this biblical figure and the protagonist of *Briefing* are again obvious. He is one in a group of twelve; he is sent to fight the evil of the world by means of words –a similar task to the one assigned to our hero by the mythological gods; and he is swallowed by a fish which transports him to the shore –our hero consciously asks the porpoise to give him a ride to the nearest shore. Thus he leaves the sea, the water, to enter another of the four elements, the land, the earth, where the second movement[10] begins.

> I was standing on a wide beach of white sand that stretched on either side for a couple of miles before curving out of sight behind rocky headlands. Before me a *thick forest* came down to the sands edge.[...] It was a scene of great calm and plenty and reassurance, but at the same time there was a *confusion of light*. I was pleased to step out from the sand's glare into the cool of the trees. The undergrowth was slow and it was easy to walk. [...] I was looking for a path as I walked *Westwards* under the great trees, and at last I saw a sandy track that seemed to lead to the *high land* in front. (p. 39) (my emphasis).

Having abandoned the sea, the collective unconscious, our hero enters the first stage of the mythical journey, what Campbell (1988: 58) names the *"*call to adventure,*"* which *"*signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polimorphous beings.*"*

All these representations of the unknown are present in the second and third movements where the patient-hero must overcome a series of highly symbolic trials. Thus, the first sight he perceives when he is on the beach is *"*a thick forest.*"* Unlike the sea, the forest stands for our own unconscious and it reflects a deep retreat inward into the psyche. According to Jung, the action of dreams is represented by a forest as an expression of the unconscious in its enigmatic, unknown totality (Pérez-Rioja 1988: 98). Once in the forest the patient walks westwards (going left always implies, in Jungian terms, going deep into the unconscious side of our mind) and, aided by two leopard-like animals, he follows an ascending path which leads to a high land. This high land symbolizes *"*a place of revelation, where transformation and change may take place.*"* (Jung 1978: 361) There, he finds an old ruined, apparently inhabited, city[11] which he starts to explore. After a long time, he realizes that:

> Among the buildings, in what seemed like the centre of the old city, what might very well have been the former central square, was an expanse of smooth stone which was not interrupted by flowers or by water channels. The square was perhaps seventy or a hundred yards across, and in it was an inner circle, about fifty yards across. (p.54)

He immediately recognizes the exact spot where he may expect to be rejoined with the Crystal[12] which had absorbed his companions when they were at sea but had then rejected him. Yet in order to be accepted, he has to face some trials –a *"*chaotic

series of encounters" inside the psyche, "darkly terrifying experiences"– before the arrival of the full moon. First, he has to clean and purify the mandala: "I knew only that this was what I had to do"[13] (p. 54). Then he takes part in a cannibalistic feast. The scene reminds me strongly of the biblical passage when Adam is tempted by Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. The banquet is initiated by three women "their faces, women's faces, [were] all the same, or rather, all variations of the same face" (p. 63). The leading one is called Felicity, which, as we later come to know, is the name of his "real" wife. Despite his first impulse to pull the child out of their way, when "I opened my mouth to shout reproaches, Felicity pushed a piece of meat that had been singed a little, but was still raw and bloody, into my mouth –and I fell on the meat with the rest" (p. 63). The clearest allusion to Adam's fall comes a bit later when he says:

> I *understood that I was naked*. I could not remember when I had lost the clothes with which I had left the ship. Presumably, I had landed naked on the beach off the porpoise's back, but I had not thought once about being naked, but now I needed to cover myself. (p. 64) (my emphasis)

His encounter with the witches leads him to accept his sin. The Crystal descends for a second time but he just misses it because he is asleep, what means that he is not prepared to regain his self yet.

Consequently, the second trial comes as a complement to the first. This time he is not an active participant in the action. On the contrary, he is a passive observer of the incidents which take place among the strange inhabitants of the city, the rat-dogs and the monkeys, whose fights resemble those among human beings. Thus, through the observation of their evil actions, he becomes aware of humanity's sin. Yet, very afflicted by despair, he abandons the city since he feels unable to keep the sacred place, the mandala, clean. And he falls asleep but when he wakes up again (significantly enough by late afternoon), he sees how a great white bird lands beside him on the cliff's edge. As it is well-known, a white bird is the most fitting symbol of transcendence (the Holy Ghost is often symbolized by a white dove). J. A. Pérez-Rioja (1988: 332) adds that the bird is a symbol of spiritual height. Besides, it is a solar symbol (white with a yellow beak and golden eyes) which belongs to one of the "major rhythms of the second movement [which] include the alternating influences on the narrator's psyche of moon and sun archetypes; his loss of innocence and knowledge of evil; chtonic incursions into the psyche; the appearance of the great white bird; and the arrival of the crystal." (Bolling 1973: 559) The bird introduces him into the element of air. It takes him on a flight and shows him the corruption of the world:

> On the cliff's edge I tumbled off the bird's warm strong back, and lay face down weeping. Now I believed that everything was ended, and there was no hope anywhere for man or for the animals of the Earth. (p. 85)

At last he has purged his sins and is prepared to become one with the Crystal. The Bird as his supernatural helper accompanies him to the centre of the city and protects him until the Crystal in its third descent finally absorbs him.

"The third movement begins with the initial experiences of the narrator inside the crystal. [There] he is granted a vision into the workings of reality and a view of earth from his celestial voyage aboard the crystal" (Bolling 1973: 560). The tone of the account here becomes less symbolic but more philosophical, full of Neoplatonic ideas through which the hero experiences encounters of a centering kind, fulfilling, harmonizing, giving new courage.

Finally, the fourth movement prepares his "return journey of rebirth to life." Still in an astronomical mythological tone but in a much more jocular mood, we are presented with the internal higher organization inside the Crystal which turns out to be very similar to the pattern of human societies. As a consequence, a great parallelism is established between the gods' and human behaviour: first, the dialogue between Minerva and Mercury showing jealousy and pride; then the conference of the gods as a means of teaching the protagonist moral lessons; and, finally, a parodic film of the Earth's activities. As it was to be expected there can be no *Briefing* at all because "How could there be? You'd be bound to forget every word you hear now." (p. 124).

The patient's return to "reality" does not put an end to his quest. Joseph Campbell (1988: 216) explains that

> Whether rescued from without, driven from within, or gently carried along by the guiding divinities, he [the hero] has yet to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete. He has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment and good people at a loss to comprehend.

Confronting society is the ultimate task of our hero. Once again his return is not voluntary. First, he is one of the people who are made to descend after having received the gods' secret orders. Second, a process of rescue is also set in motion on the part of society. The "rescue" is carried out in the second part of the novel once the doctors have finally discovered the identity of their patient. His name is Charles Watkins; he is Professor of Classics at Cambridge; he is 50 years old; he is married and has two sons. His personality is then reconstructed through a series of letters which provide different sides of Charles' life, previous to his loss of memory (as they call it), and which are presented from the different perspective of his wife, his mistress, his friends, and his acquaintances. At first he fights against their subjugating repressive attitude –he even engages in two more inner psychic experiences in an attempt to remember; yet these stories are much shorter each time and they are no longer transmitted orally from the flow of the unconscious but they are rather given a mediating written form. However, he finally accepts electric shock and he unwillingly becomes once more an alienated "normal" person.

Both in the title and at the very beginning of this essay, a double reference was made to the paradoxical nature of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. On the one hand, *Briefing* is a conventional novel as far as its thematic core and structure is concerned. As we have just seen, it clearly follows the structure of the inner voyage and develops a symbolic mythical quest for individuation. Yet, on the other hand, it also questions and destroys conventions by means of a number of metafictional[14] devices which I will analyse from now on.

One of the most outstanding features of modernist and especially postmodernist fiction is that it wants to be plausible but precisely by laying bare its conventions and by problematizing within itself the narrative procedures that result in the final product, the text. The conscious attempt at making explicit the artificiality of fiction is what some authors call *metafiction*. The most complete definition of this literary phenomenon is undoubtedly Patricia Waugh's endlessly quoted paragraph:

> Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.[15] (1984: 2)

According to this definition, *Briefing* can be regarded as a metafictional novel because it recognizes its status as a word construct and through this recognition it questions the relationship between fiction and reality. The absence of a linear unitary structure, and the contrastive succession of different literary styles and genres enhance the arbitrariness of conventions. Admittance sheets, medical reports, poetic prose, dialogues, verse, letters, conferences, films constitute some of the material which, given a certain order, conforms the narrative text. The reality of the healthy normal people in the novel and the fictionality of the schizophrenic patient's experiences are equally reduced to language. *"I gotta use words when I talk to you*. Probably that sequence of words, 'I've got to use words,' is a definition of all literature, seen from a different perspective*"* (p. 105). This metafictional comment reminds us that *"*man as the language-using animal is quintessentially a teller of tales, and narration is his way of making experience, or, from another point of view, of *making* non-verbal experience distinctively human.*"* (Alter 1975: 64-65) Moreover, it shows a profound awareness of the novel, and of literature in general, as a mere structure of words, even though the novel proclaims that there is a need of going beyond words to the experiences those words try to convey. The distinction between experiencing and narrating is also made explicit in the following sentence of the novel: *"*Everyone of you in this room has of course travelled extensively inside the System –some of you perhaps outside of it– and you won't need to be told that to hear a place described is not the same as experiencing it.*"* (p.119). The irony in the text constantly and consciously underlines that this is precisely the key for the lack of understanding between the doctors and the patient.

Apart from this questioning of the relationship between fiction and reality, Patricia Waugh signals another very important function of this self-conscious kind of fictional writing:

> Metafiction thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism. It suggests, in fact, that there may be as much to be learnt from setting the mirror up to its own linguistic and representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical 'human nature' that somehow exists as an essence outside historical systems of articulation. (1984: 11)

It is easy to deduce from this statement that metafiction is a paradoxical mode of fiction. By making use of the conventions whose values have already been exhausted, metafiction is capable of conveying a renewed meaning to them; in other words it is able to replenish them. How does it manage to achieve this paradoxical

aim when there does not seem to be a simple way out? Almost all the authors who have dealt in one way or another with the complex phenomenon we call metafiction have pointed out that there are many devices which seem to be common to all those fictional texts. Parody, pastiche, intertextual references, mise en abyme, linguistic playfulness constitute some of these acknowledged devices with which to give a satisfactory answer to the previous question.

When talking about the allusions the protagonist makes to mythical or literary figures, I mentioned transtextuality as one of the metafictional techniques that can be found in the novel. Robert Alter (1975: xi) comments in this sense that

> A fully self-conscious novel [...] is one in which from beginning to end, through the style, the handling of narrative viewpoint, the names and words imposed on the characters, the patterning of the narration, the nature of the characters and what befalls them, there is a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention.

Briefing is set up against an extremely varied background of literary tradition and convention. Apart from the already mentioned allusions, many more transtextual elements are to be found in the novel. Gérard Genette (1982) distinguishes five kinds of transtextual relationships which he names "intertextuality", "paratextuality", "metatextuality", "hyper-textuality" and "architextuality," of which only two, intertextuality and hypertextuality, have a specific weight and a significant role in *Briefing*, as two distinctive aspects of textuality.

Genette (1982: 11-12) understands by hypertextuality "toute relation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerai *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerai, bien sûr, *hypotexte*) sur lequel il se greffe d'une manière qui n'est pas celle du commentaire." Usually the hypertext derives from its hypotext through a process of transformation by means of which the first evokes the second without talking of or even naming it. In our case, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* may be seen as the hypertext of a series of hypotexts which range from literary works such as *The Odyssey*, to theoretical works by such influential authors as Carl G. Jung, Joseph Campbell or Ronald D. Laing among others.

The whole theory of Carl Jung seems to exert a strong influence on this novel. Nevertheless, I have found that Jung's posthumous work, *Man and His Symbols*, which he edited and introduced, is of especial relevance to explain the symbolism of the novel. Particularly M. L. von Franz's chapter, "The Process of Individuation," establishes the symbolic pattern followed by the text.[16]

The influence of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has also been commented on from the very beginning of this essay. We have seen that the pattern of the novel follows step by step what he calls the monomyth or three-stage adventure of the hero. Yet the influence of this book on *Briefing* is also ideological. By the end of the book we read

> In his life-form the individual is necessarily only a fraction and distortion of the total image of man. [...] Hence, the totality –the fullness of man– is not in the separate member, but in the body of the society as a whole; the individual can be only an organ. (Campbell, 1988: 382-383)

This is precisely what, at a diegetic level, Charles Watkins learns in his mental journey and what he is to communicate to humanity, and what, at an extradiegetic level, the author projects over the readers. Many instances could be selected from the text to exemplify this central idea. The following paragraph has been finally chosen because of its metafictional content: reality is constructed and mediated by language and it consequently becomes as much a linguistic construct as any fiction:

> Some sort of a divorce there has been somewhere along the long path of this race of man between the 'I' and the 'We', some sort of a terrible falling away, and I (who am not I, but part of a whole composed of other human beings as they are to me) [...] feel as if I am spinning back [...] towards a catastrophe, yes, that was what the microbes, the little broth that is humanity, was knocked senseless [...] out of their true understanding, so that ever since most have said I, I, I, I, I, I, I and cannot, save for a few, say We. [...] What sent us off centre, and away from the sweet sanity of We?[17] (p. 103)

Ronald D. Laing's book, *The Politics of Experience*, is however the most important ideological influence on *Briefing*. Laing arguments that modern society obliges every newborn child to conform to a set of abnormal rules through a process, usually known as education, which actually destroys his innate potentialities, suppresses his normal instincts, and reduces him to the mechanical social role that he is supposed to fulfill. Such a constraining process is so devastating that the terms sanity and madness become ambiguous. In a society full of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection, etc., *"*no clearcut line can be drawn between the normal people and mental patients: rather there is a continuum with the well-adjusted citizen at one end and the full-fledged psychotic at the other.*"* (Laing 1967: 91) Thus in the chapter called *"*The Schizophrenic Experience,*"* Laing defends that schizophrenia may be a special strategy that a person invents in order to cope with an unbearable situation. In *Briefing*, Charles Watkins' sort of *"*defence mechanisms*"* embark him on a voyage of discovery which follows the same course as an initiation ceremony of death and rebirth, what leads Laing (as well as the novel) to conclude that *"*schizophrenics have more to teach psychiatrists about the inner world than psychiatrists their patients.*"* (1967: 91)

This book's influence on *Briefing* is not merely felt at the level of the ideas. *"*Laing's outline of inner space voyaging (*"*from outer to inner*"*; *"*from life to a kind of death*"*; *"*from mundane time to eonic time*"*; *"*from outside back into the womb of all things*"*) is followed virtually step by step [in *Briefing*]*"* (Bolling 1973: 556). The novel as a whole is also conditioned by chapter seven, *"*A Ten-Day Voyage*"*. For instance, Doris Lessing does not choose the name of his narrator-character at random; the protagonist of the ten-day voyage is named Jesse *Watkins* (1967: 120) and he appears as both protagonist and narrator of his voyage. His behaviour at hospital resembles Charles' very much:

> The nurse told me that sometimes I kept them awake at night by talking. And they –they put me into a padded cell [...] they said [...] you make such a noise you know– talking.[18] (Laing 1967: 130)

Besides he is normally kept on sedatives but just before his return he does not accept any more. Charles Watkins does exactly the same. They stay in hospital for

approximately the same period of time, about three months altogether. The only big difference is found at the end. Jesse Watkins returns to normalcy withouth any need of electric shock. Doris Lessing, in a more pessimistic mood, submits Charles Watkins to such a treatment by means of which he loses all memories of his rich experience.

Genette (1982: 8) defines the second transtextual relationship, intertextuality, as *"*une relation de coprésence entre deux ou plusieurs textes, c'est à dire, [...] la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre.*"* Many of the intertextual elements of the novel have already been at least indirectly mentioned. I explained the extent and function of the allusions to such literary figures as Jason, Jonah and Odysseus, and to the narratives in which they appear. I also referred to the parodic use of Adam's fall in the scene of the forest with the bloody banquet. But there are still some other intertextual allusions to be analyzed. Most of them are again allusions, although much less explicit, to other literary works and their authors. However, there are also two literal quotations, which are the most overt form of intertextuality.

The first allusion I will mention is directly connected with Coleridge and his poem *"*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.*"* No explicit reference is made within the text to either author or work. Yet our anonymous voyager exclaims:

> take me out of this frozen, grinding Northern circuit down and across into the tender Southern-running current and the longed-for shores. (p. 37)

Before the beginning of the poem, in a sort of summary which Coleridge names *"*Argument,*"* the following lines may be read:

> How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by storms to the Cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country. (1978: 186)

The parallelisms between the story of the Ancient Mariner and the one in *Briefing* are so obvious that there is no need of further comments.

The second intertextual allusion is related to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, especially to the fourth part of the book, *"*A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms,*"* where Gulliver finds a strange society composed by horses, always on their hindlegs, and by monkeys which serve the intellectually superior horses. In *Briefing*, the society described is still more bizarre. On the one hand, Rat-dogs, which also walk on their hindlegs, seem to be masters and monkeys are supposed to be their servants; yet there is no intellectual superiority among them. The animals of both species are merely driven by their instincts.

The protagonist of *Briefing* partakes of the same observing curiosity as Gulliver showed in a similar situation. He observes them and describes their shapes, their behaviour. His description has of course a highly ironic purpose and we find that our protagonist, unlike Gulliver, establishes many physical similarities between the monkeys and himself and, most interesting of all, he identifies animals' instinctual behaviour with the negative attitudes of human beings. Thus the irony achieved is double.

Some other intertextual references are more reduced in extent. For instance, on page 15, the rambling patient mentions two works by Ibsen, namely, *Ghosts* and *When We Dead Awaken*, whose function is primarily that of suggesting clues as to the protagonist's intellectuality. In this same line, I would locate the reference to the porpoise, which appears in *"*East Coker*"*, the second of Eliot's *Four Quartets.*

My analysis of intertextuality comes to an end with the two quotations that can be found at the very beginning of the text, on page 7, one page before the title of the novel. The first one is part of a poem called *The Secret Garden* written by the Sage Mahmoud Shabistari, a poet of the 14th century. The second one, very similar to the first in length, is part of a prose book, *The Edge of the Sea*, written by Rachel Carson, a marine biologist of the 20th century. In spite of the differences that exist between the authors (sex and profession), the date in which they were written and the genre they belong to, these two quotations display the same idea: *"*Things aren't what they seem*"* (p. 18), says the deranged patient, because our human senses can only grasp a very small portion of reality. Yet we do not seem to be ready to accept our limitations (doctors treat their patients with electric shock without knowing the exact consequences that may derive from it; archeologists venture absolute truths about lost civilizations on the weak basis of partial foundings).

The function of these two quotations is thus tightly connected with another metafictional device which also has some importance in this novel, the *mise en abyme*. Lucien Dällenbach (1977: 52) defines this device as *"tout miroir interne réfléchissant l'ensemble du récit par réduplication simple, répétée ou spécieuse"*. According to Dällenbach's classification of the different types of mise en abyme, these two quotations may be termed *mise en abyme "prospective"* (1977: 83) *"de l'énoncé"* (1977: 61), that is, an intratextual summary or quotation of the content of a work, set up at the opening of the narrative.

Most of the *mises en abyme* that appear in this text are *"mises en abyme de l'énoncé."* Among them I would like to mention the most obvious ones, which are chronologically the letter written by Miss Rosemary Baines (pp. 147-170), Charles' account of his stay in Yugoslavia during the war (pp. 203-224), and the kind of tale he invents about the honeysuckle spray, the waiting camellia and the breeze (pp. 242-245). All of them are variations of the central theme, the quest for the self in an individualistic egocentric society.

Miss Baines' letter is doubly framed: it is a letter within another letter (Mrs. Watkins') within the novel. This device is frequently used in order to convey the idea of perspective within the narrative.[19] The narrative itself acknowledges its presence:

> Sun can probably be viewed, though for any mortal to think such a thought comes hard, a *lèse majesté* indeed, as an atom on a different time-and-motion scale, having comradeship with other, equal atoms, all being units of the galaxy, while galaxies are units and equals on another level, where suns are as tinily swarming as men (that broth of microbes) are to planets. Russian dolls, Chinese boxes!. (pp. 106-107)

Chronologically this letter was written before Charles Watkins' moment of schizophrenia. However, in the novel it appears just after the account of his mental journey. Thus it becomes a *mise en abyme "retrospective"* (Dällenbach 1977: 83). The

old lady feeling herself as if *"*infused with a new sort of intelligence,*"* (p. 147) after having attended one of the Professor's lectures, becomes aware of her lack of importance as an isolated individual and feels impelled to communicate her inner change. Her transformation and discoveries are much similar to the process that our protagonist undergoes within the Crystal. She even experiences something similar to what Charles felt when he was absorbed by the Crystal:

> I had been, as I've said, half unconsciously looking, watching, trying to find that 'quality' again. The quality to which I'd given the tag 'the wavelength'. For it was like suddenly touching a high-tension wire. Of being, briefly, on a different, high, vibrating current, of the familiar becoming transparent. (p.154)

After the account of her own experiences, she introduces another man, Frederick Larson, who was in a similar state and who has suffered from a stammering attack caused by a long-ago repressed thought that made him doubt of the validity of his job, archaeology (*"*There was no way of knowing an ancient society's ideas except through the barrier of our own.*"*[20] (p. 165)) Once again we come across the device of the Russian dolls or Chinese boxes. Before his nervous breakdown, Charles also suffers from a stammering attack and has to reassure his confidence on his job.

This letter is also interesting as a *mise en abyme "*du code*"* (Dällenbach 1977: 61), that is, a means of making the way the narrative functions intelligible but without being mimetic of the text itself (Dällenbach 1977: 127). Like the novel in which it is contained, and as her author, Miss Baines, herself self-consciously comments, *"*[t]his letter is like a snake swallowing its tail.*"* (p. 147)

Charles' account of his stay in Yugoslavia is also a variation of the central quest. In fact it is also fictional because we are later told that he was actually never in Yugoslavia. This time *"*the *Briefing* was in the C. O. 's tent*"* (p. 203) and not on board the Crystal but again twelve are the men chosen for the mission which significantly lasted for about three months. The Partisan camp, to which he belonged, was on a high mountain, from which a wonderful sight could be seen. The names of many of his companions there remind us of some of his companions at sea (Miles, Vera, Milos). Similar commentaries are made in both of his experiences: *"*to witness a birth is to be admitted into nature's workshop, and there life and death go together.*"*[21] (p. 223)

His last account is by far shorter and more symbolic. It exemplifies once more the general idea conveyed by the novel. The usual process is not carried out by a single person or by several individuals but by two flowers which symbolize the whole of humanity and its endless quests. After a strong effort the honeysuckle finally reaches the camellia and becomes a unity with it but then the breeze separates them and they have to start the process again and again: *"*the element in which this process exists is *"*Time.*" Time is the whole point. Timing."* (p. 245)

The esthetic effect of all these *mises en abyme* is that of giving the impression of largeness and depth, of an indefinite complexity and reflexivity, an impression which is enhanced, on the one hand, by the appearance of lots of intratextual reflections, sometimes represented by internal mirrors as the symbols of reflexivity par excellence and, on the other hand, by the alternance of frames and frame breaking.

Thus a vertical, intra- and transtextual, analysis of this narrative reveals that *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is a multilayered palimpsest of mythical, arche-

typal, psychological and literary echoes through which Doris Lessing has succeeded in creating her own original variation on a universal myth: the quest for individuation.

Notes

1. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, makes the following statement in the frontispiece of the Grafton edition of the novel: "Brilliant, disturbing book –certainly Mrs. Lessing's most adventurous, imaginative experience since *The Golden Notebook*."
2. Doris Lessing consciously engages her hero in a voyage which brings about the discovery of un-known lands since it often symbolizes what Jung called "the process of individuation," that is, the progressive pattern of psychic growth.
3. It is interesting to note that the same number of pages, 126, has been alloted to the first and the second parts of the story. Such a symmetric division reinforces the idea that, although at first sight the first two stages of the quest seem to be harder, the third one, the actual return of the hero and *mainly* his complete adaptation to society is a hard process.
4. Actually the profusion of symbols in the first part is completely necessary because the protagonist is moving in the realm of the unconscious. Jung (1978: 3) defines a symbol as "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us." Moreover, he adds that they are the language and people of the unconscious. Special attention will be paid to what Joseph L. Henderson (in Jung 1978: 146-156) calls *symbols of transcendence*,that is, those symbols that represent man's efforts to attain "the full realization of the potential of his individual self. [...] They provide the means by which the contents of the unconscious can enter the conscious mind, and they are also themselves an active expression of those contents."
5. Gérard Genette (1982: 7) defines transtextuality as " tout ce qui [...] met [un texte] en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes." He then distinguishes five different types of transtextual relationships whose role in the text will be commented upon when talking of the metafictional aspects of this novel.
6. "DOCTOR Y. What is your name today?
   PATIENT. It could be Odysseus?
   DOCTOR Y. The Atlantic was surely not his sea?
   PATIENT. But it could be now, surely, couldn't it?" (p. 29)
7. So does Joseph Campbell (1988: 25) when he affirms that "[f]urthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the heropath."
8. Number three represents the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
9. Number four is the number of the elements of nature –air, water, earth, and fire– and of the cardinal points. Therefore it symbolizes the physical world.
10. Following the example of Douglas Bolling (1973) I will call movements each of the four parts in which the first half of the novel can be divided, according to whether the action takes place in water (first movement), on the earth (second movement), in the air (third movement), or inside the "fire" (fourth movement). The use of the four elements as a structuring pattern in the novel accounts, once more, for the idea of circularity of wholeness that the author wants to convey, and which serves as a formal complement of the thematic search for unity. As M. L. von Franz puts it (in Jung 1978: 214) "symbolic structures that seem to refer to the process of individuation tend to be based on the motif of the number four –such as the four functions of consciousness, or the four stages of the anima or animus."

11. "The 'city on the mountain' is also a well known archetypal symbol that appears in the history of our culture in many variations. The city corresponding in its groundplan to a mandala, represents that 'region of the soul' in the middle of which the Self (the psyche's innermost center and totality) has its abode." (Jung 1978: 361)
12. "In many dreams the nuclear center, the Self, also appears as a crystal. The mathematically precise arrangement of the crystal evokes in us the intuitive feeling that even in so called 'dead' matter, there is a spiritual ordering principle at work. Thus the crystal often symbolically stands for the union of extreme opposites –of matter and spirit." (Jung 1978: 221)
13. From the very beginning of the novel, we become aware that as Stout (1983: 92) says in the "intensive soul journey: the center or hero of the inward journey may persevere through trials as the quester does, but his journey is not so controlled by his conscious volition. He feels himself carried alone by a great undirected force and may be said to endure his journey of trial rather than undertake or pursue it."
14. A very good metaphor for what metafiction stands for is to be found within the text itself. The paragraph I will now quote is connected with Miss Violet Stoke's rebellious attitude which in a sense mirrors within the narrative the author's intentions when writing the book. The metaphor goes as follows:

    In some of Goya's earlier pictures, not those that describe war or madness, but the gay and gallant pictures, there is something that disturbs, but you don't know what it is. Not at first. It is because of any group of those people, the charming, the formal, the pastoral, the essentially civilized, there is always one that looks straight out of the group, out of the canvas, into the eyes of the person who is looking at the picture. This person who refuses to confront to the conventions of the picture the artist has set him in, questions and in fact destroys the convention." (p. 229) (my emphasis)

15. A very similar definition is provided by Robert Alter (1975: x) who refers to this type of novels as self-conscious fiction:

    A self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality.

16. I will not provide any more examples of this influence since they may be easily found all through the essay.
17. Lorna Sage (1983: 69) finds some intertextual relationships between this passage and the ending of "Hunger," an African novella written by Doris Lessing almost twenty years before:

    in the tribe and the kraal, the life of his fathers had been built on the word *we*... And between then and now has been a harsh and ugly time when there was only the word I, I, I –as cruel and sharp as a knife.

18. A comparison may be established with the remark the nurse writes on the admittance sheet: "he was talking loudly. Patient was moved into the small observation ward as he was disturbing the other Patients." (p. 11)
19. In his account of the mental voyage we often find similar double framings. He usually tells us that he has just had a dream (sometimes of his companions, others of real life, or of the rat-dogs) and these dreams are produced by the unconscious mind of the patient who is himself asleep, under the effect of the sedatives he is receiving.
20. In a posterior letter Charles' friend and companion, Jeremy Thorne, writes of an occasion on which Charles' strange behaviour could be accounted for in the light of a similar attack of doubts:

    But to say that everything taught under the heading of Classics is pigsfeed from beginning to end, and never has been anything else, and that we have never had any idea at all of what Plato and Socrates and Pythagoras were

teaching –and, etc., and so on, that kind of thing– well, I did cut him off short more than once during the evening. (p. 190)

21. Compare with the disgusting scene in which one of the female rat-dogs is fighting against two male rat-dogs and at the same time giving birth: *"*She died in a spasm that was as much a birth– and a death-spasm.*"* (p. 85)

References

A) *TEXT*

Lessing, Doris. 1972 (1971) *Briefing for a Descent into Hell.* London: Grafton.

B) *CRITICAL WORKS*

Adams, Percy G. (1983) *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel.* Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press.

Alter, Robert (1975) *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bolling, Douglas (1973) *"*Structure and Theme in Briefing for a Descent into Hell*"*. *Contemporary Literature*, 14: 4, pp. 550-564.

Campbell, Joseph (1988) (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: Paladin.

Coleridge, Ernest Hartley ed. (1978) (1969) *Coleridge Poetical Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dällenbach, Lucien (1977) *Le récit spéculaire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Genette, Gérard (1980) (1972) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method.* Trans. by Jane E.Lewin from «Discours du récit. Essai de la méthode» a portion of *Figures III.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Genette, Gérard (1982) *Palimpsestes.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Hutcheon, Linda (1984) (1980) *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox.* New York: Methuen.

Jung, Carl G. (1978) (1964) *Man and His Symbols*. London: Picador.

Laing, R. D. (1967) *The Politics of Experience.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Pérez-Rioja. J. A. (1988) (1962) *Diccionario de símbolos y mitos.* Madrid: Tecnos.

Sage, Lorna (1983) *Doris Lessing.* London: Methuen.

Stout, Janis P. (1983) *The Journey Narrative in American Literature.* Westport (Connecticut): Greenwood Press.

Waugh, Patricia (1984) *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* London: Methuen.