A Dilemma of Choice

in

Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*

and

Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*
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Introduction

Choices exist all the time for everyone. However, profound choices in life are frequently preceded by a number of events, internal or external, big or small, which combined have led the way to a turning-point of distinction, often with the feeling of “it’s now or never”, the point of no return. Anyone encountering such a turning-point must therefore find themselves within a dilemma of choice, a dilemma which will not cease until a choice of validity has been made. The liability to encounter such a dilemma naturally varies from person to person, but also within each individual life-span, i.e. there are certain stages in life where a crisis (dilemma of choice) is quite in tune with the contemporary view of human nature.

From a literary viewpoint, this type of dilemma must be one of interest, especially for women-writers, all the more since the tradition of women’s fiction has throughout history concentrated on the young woman eligible for marriage. Owing largely to the feminist movement, a development of significance took place in this field after 1960, releasing an flow of “alternative” heroines in women’s literature as a new interest was taken in realistic situations. One early influence in this literary sphere is Doris Lessing, an author with a keen ear for female dilemma, one of the most prominent themes in her The Summer before the Dark, to be studied in this essay along with another such dilemma, present in Hotel du Lac by Anita Brookner. Both contemporary women writers, Lessing often focuses on “women on the edge of new states of consciousness” (Laura Hoffeld and Roni Natov), and Brookner gives her heroines a “displaced person” quality (Shusha Guppy 149). Their preference of study is shown in these novels by their choice of main character.

So, adjusting the field of focus to the world of woman, more specifically the mature woman approaching middle age, a tendency towards crisis may be acknowledged. Apart from the acceptance of entering the second half of a lifetime, which in itself is enough to set off a spark of anguish, in the present day and age of modern society the ageing woman does encounter a specific problem, especially if she has been used to relying on her looks to breeze her through the difficulties of social interaction in a man’s world. Doris Lessing comments: "A young woman finds it very hard to separate what she really is from her appearance.... When you get a
bit older...a whole dimension of life suddenly slides away and you realise that what
in fact you've been using to get attention has been what you look like" (qtd in
Josephine Harper 346). However, in dealing with the mature woman there is a
second element of no less importance, namely one dealing decidedly with role-play,
which is also the core in Lessing's comment above.

In the male-oriented society of this day and age, a middle-aged woman can be
of two general types: married, with grown-up children, or un-married, and
childless. These two very general types are represented by the protagonists in The
Summer before the Dark and Hotel du Lac. As the heroines of both novels are
English, the role-play involved is also an expression of English society, whose
unwritten rules both protagonists are shown to have obeyed.

As a dilemma of choice is present in each of these novels, it is to be the focus of
attention in this essay. Despite apparent differences between the heroines, there
are similarities as regards the question of dilemma. The aim is to show this
dilemma as a main theme, concentrating on the inner journey: the dilemma of the
mind and where it may lead. Thus, the construction of dilemma will be examined
to prove that the final choice made at the end of both novels can justify the
dilemma induced by each author. Of importance is the development of three stages;
pre-dilemma, the dilemma as such, and its outcome. The structure of the essay will
therefore be as follows.

In the first chapter (Pre-dilemma) a study of the main characters will be made
referring to the impending expectation of crisis conveyed by the authors. This
chapter will also deal with the possible influences that inspire a change of mind,
since choice has to do with change. The second chapter (Dilemma) will then focus
on the aspects of the dilemma itself, firstly in The Summer before the Dark and
secondly in Hotel du Lac. Imagery being the most delicate and yet the most
powerful instrument in the art of literature, whether used to convey settings or
internal conflict, the aim of the second chapter is to illuminate the imagery
involved to highlight the emotional stages leading up to a dilemma of choice. How
the dilemma is resolved in both novels will also be considered here along with
various speculations regarding the evaluation of the final choice where the
commentaries of different critics will be compared.
Chapter 1

*Pre-dilemma*

In *The Summer before the dark* Doris Lessing introduces to the reader the concept of a middle-aged woman in contemplation of her role in life, or rather, of her new lack of role, her old one not seeming to fit any longer. To emphasise the general aspect the woman described is not given a name (identity) until after the first few pages. Indeed she is not only unknown to the reader, but appears subject to an alienation also within herself, questioning: "She was really feeling that? Yes, she was. Because she was depressed? Was she depressed? Probably. She was something, she was feeling something pretty strongly that she couldn't put her finger on" (4-5). The identity with which the woman is struggling is that of Mrs Brown, a demure and delightful mother and housewife, so well drilled in her role that she has in part become an automaton, surprising herself by these ever-more frequent lapses of slipping away and coldly viewing this aspect of what she has become.

What has she become then, and why is she feeling so lost? Lorelei Cederstrom states that "Kate Brown is a completely predictable creature incapable of developing beyond the limits of the world which has formed her" (131-32). Could this really be the case? We find Kate desperately thinking, "there must be something I could be understanding now, some course of action I could choose.... Choose? When do I ever choose? Have I ever chosen?" (6). Through Kate’s train of thought and memories brought up and scrutinised by the sense of an on-coming crisis, we learn that she has played the role of the perfect mother for so long, really all her adult life, that she knows no other. Without her role, she *does not know who she really is.*

Not an original insight, but a likely one, considering her age, her grown-up children and her rather distant husband with his great big ego; but in her case particularly emphasised due to her total devotion to be everything to her family, the very essence of love and happiness, "the supplier of some kind of invisible fluid, or emanation, like a queen termite, whose spirit (or some such word - electricity) filled the nest making a whole of individuals who could have no other
A similar supplier of this "essence" or "fluid" in literature is Mrs Ramsey, in To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf. She too, gave all and more, so much so that "there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent..." (53). Here Woolf indicates, like Lessing that the ideal picture of a perfect wife and mother is a near-impossible combination with integrity of self.

Leaving the issue of motherhood, the second general type of woman considered in the introduction can be identified in the protagonist of Hotel du Lac by Anita Brookner. Bearing a resemblance in looks to Virginia Woolf, this heroine has also adopted a likeness to her in choosing a pen-name for her own writing: Vanessa Wilde. She herself, however, is anything but wild. Her real name is Edith Hope, and it is hope she lives on, and also writes about, in her series of romantic novels, where the tortoise wins over the hare in life's mad race for love and "happiness." Identifying herself with the tortoise, as she also expects her readers to do, she owns up to the insight that this is all wishful thinking: "In real life, of course, it's the hare who wins. Every time," she tells Harold, her publisher (27). The intimation of Miss Brookner herself, according to Anne Tyler, is that "it's sort of silly even to run the race, let alone to win it" (31).

Julian Webb writes that "Edith Hope's dilemma is how to live with integrity and without the sustenance of domestic and sexual companionship. She is less disappointed by the behaviour of other people than she is by her own unhappiness" (26-7). This complies with Tyler's observation: "The typical Brookner heroine is intelligent and affluent yet dissatisfied with her life and emotionally incapable of change" (31). Yet dissatisfaction itself is an emotion contributing to a dilemma of choice, and thereby change.

Stipulating that escape from reality is the object of Edith's writing, is there not a similar intention in her presence at Hotel du Lac, stolid and austere, "a mild form of sanctuary" at the end of the season? (14) For, truly, she is now in limbo, cut off swiftly and competently from her ordinary, boring sort of life, not by an act of will of her own, but speeded off to the airport by her friend Penelope, driving "as if escorting a prisoner from the dock to a maximum security wing" (10). Penelope, along with most people she knows, is of the opinion that she should go away somewhere, disappear for a while, until things blow over, situation normal is re-established, and she, Edith, has come to her senses. So sitting in her "veal-
coloured" room in dreary surroundings, Edith Hope, 39, is in fact free as a bird. The only obstacle in sight to keep her from choosing a new direction in life is herself, the tortoise.

Two women then, on the verge of taking off for the unknown, of leaving an all-too-well-known role or phase of life, of reaching what might be called a crisis of middle-age when values are brought out, dusted off, put to the test, and re-evaluated. Are they themselves aware of such a crisis approaching, making way for a dilemma of choice? Edith would certainly appear to be, situated in a calm foreign place to "think things over." But is she really? We learn from her letters that in a sense she has not left at all; she takes the whole business as a space of time in exile, to pacify Penelope and the rest, waiting them all out, to be able to return home and quietly resume her own way of life. Here is another aspect of a dilemma of choice: the dilemma is unexpected and unrehearsed. This suddenness of the realisation that a choice must be made amplifies the strength of the dilemma to be experienced.

Kate, on the other hand, though aware of an inner criticism of herself as Mrs Brown, is very obviously too stuck in her role to be able to focus on any choice of relevance without the aid of a helping hand. The opportunity comes sooner than expected. While still contemplating her state of mind, Kate is offered a chance to do something worthwhile during the summer months, in the shape of a well-paid, interesting job, instead of keeping house for her youngest, who might, just might, be needing her. So well-glued to her post is she that her initial reaction is one of dismay — "But I don't see how I can... Tim is going to be here on and off all summer" (15). He doesn't need her, of course, and the life of Mrs Kate Brown takes quite a dramatic turn. To sum it up in the words of Lorna Sage:

Kate finds herself doing exactly what magazines' agony aunts would recommend: glamorous new job, clothes, hairdo; travel, a new man, and so on. But this cheery prescription doesn't work. The job and the image are variants of what she's sick of, what she's been doing for years....(70)

The internal and external forces having been set to work, the scene is now cleared for the force of inner pressure to shape whatever follows in the lives of both women. Whereas Kate evinces all the outer signs of entering a dynamic process, Edith enters the stage from a reversed angle, experiencing an absence of stimuli
rather than a battery of them. If Kate's life can be likened to an explosion, Edith's rather implies implosion, as she feels herself to be irrevocably cut off from something very necessary to her. On the issue of life without love she explains: "I feel excluded from the living world. I become cold, fish-like, immobile. I implode" (98).

In view of the former proceedings, the variation of sequence is quite logical: a swing of the pendulum from one extreme to the other. Kate is no longer the domesticated animal but is out on her own, trying to find her place in the wilderness of life, whereas Edith, apparently having had her "fling" is now set to meditate in seclusion. The changes in milieu are as drastic as need be to set the clock ticking towards the shrill dilemma of choice. The important factor at this point is that both Kate and Edith are now separated from their former selves, inasmuch as they themselves are the only ones still in contact with their own self-images, in other words nobody in their unfamiliar surroundings knows "who" they are. Evidently this is an interesting, and gratifying phase, opening the door to experimentation in regarding the impact of "self" on others.

Being different individuals, the protagonists in both novels also have different degrees of motivation and awareness of the necessity of change. Kate undergoes a series of insights, surprising herself with the discovery of how much is in her own power regarding the manner in which people react to various put-on aspects of appearance, such as the switching on/off of "motherly" or "available" signals. These effects seem superficially to be the direct result of a sweeping new haircut, a bolder colour, a certain style of dress, but more significantly they arise from subtleties in body language, provoking - unconscious - reactions to whatever she is emanating, depending on intention:

For she was conscious... that the person who sat there watching, shunned or ignored by men who otherwise would have been attracted to her, was not in the slightest degree different from the person who could bring them all on again towards her by adjusting the picture of herself - lips, a set of facial muscles, eye movements, angle of back and shoulders (43).

Totally pre-occupied by this revelation - "It was really extraordinary! There she sat, Kate Brown... her self, her mind, her awareness" (43), - she has no clear
thoughts of her family, other than little pangs of bad conscience quite irrelevant to
the process now taking place within her.

And Edith, with what is she experimenting, if she is experimenting with the
concept of herself at all, or perhaps she is just bored, or slightly depressed, waiting
for something to happen....Somewhere along the line built-up pressure must find
its way out. We understand from her thoughts and letters that what she has been
through would have set the most stable emotions rocking, let alone hers, or she
wouldn't have placed herself in her present position at all. Since human nature
determines social interaction to be anything but static, Edith, the quiet, observing
sort of person, allows herself in turn to observe, speculate, and gradually respond
to the presence of others in Hotel du Lac. Interestingly enough, the people whose
acquaintance she makes, choose her company as one of a good listener, rather than
being interested in who she is or might be. This, too, suits her mood of retaining
the image of self that she has. True, she allows herself a little self-reflection. She
lets Monica persuade her into buying a beautiful blue silk dress for herself,
resolving to put in more effort in "presenting an appearance to the world", but she
is still very much on guard.(44). Her letters to the object of her desire have a
flavour of inevitable acceptance: they are not written to be sent off, but for her own
sake, a focus of her longing. To advance in the writing of her manuscript of Beneath
the Visiting Moon becomes more of an effort than she likes to admit, and she takes
to seclusion in long walks around the lake. Slowly but surely, the distance grows
between Edith Hope and Vanessa Wilde, between herself and what she thinks of
as "her" life.

The similarity of situation so far established between Kate and Edith is
strengthened by the image of another woman which both protagonists carry with
them on their introspective journeys. In each case this is a neighbour, who is also a
friend of sorts, with qualities quite unlike their own. These qualities are brought
up retrospectively, and, more or less consciously, used as a pair of mental scales,
weighing the value of each turn taken and offering an external viewpoint on how
to handle an upcoming situation.

Regarding Kate, Ruth Whittaker appears to view this other female character,
Mary Finchley, as Kate's alter ego: "Mary, as it were, enacts the suppressed
aspects of Kate's personality"(84). This suppression of natural instincts is well
described at the beginning of The Summer before the Dark: "She did not allow her
appearance to bloom, because she had observed early in the children's adolescence how much they disliked her giving rein to her own nature. Mary Finchley opposite dressed as she would have done if she had no children and was unmarried"(7).

Later on in the novel, caught up in events, Kate is still mentally referring to Mary Finchley. On the subject of her lover-to-be she uses Mary as a matter-of-fact voice: "She exchanged in imagination ribald remarks with Mary....Kate was agreeing with the ghost of Mary; she already knew that this lover, if she decided to turn things that way, had chosen – a listener"(61-2). A few pages on, the thought of her husband is doused with a good deal of self-irony through the eyes of the other: "Emotionally? But why should that matter? Mary would have yelled with laughter at the suggestion that it should. (She was thinking more of Mary now than she did when she lived opposite to her)" (66).

But in the long run, the influence of Mary is limited and is outgrown. Mona Knapp writes: "Mary Finchley, the neighbor who does exactly as she sees fit, symbolises the total lack of Kate's need to please. But since this quality is developed strictly on the basis of her sexual promiscuity, she stands only for amorality and not for full-blown nonconformism"(117). Barbara Lefcowitz' comment is much the same: "Mary Finchley...can offer Kate little in the way of genuine rapport"(118). This figure of Mary seems to function as an indicator pointing to the dilemma ahead.

If Mary Finchley is a means for Kate to work some aspect of herself through her system, what can be said of Penelope Milne's relation to Edith? Like Mary, present only retrospectively, Penelope functions more as a symbol of Edith's former life-style, the style of life that had surrounded her, never knowing, or wanting to know of her inner life, her thoughts and dreams. Not that Edith wishes for herself, or even likes Penelope's style of living, as is shown by her reaction to an invitation to one of her friend's "irritating little parties"(57):

'Drinks before lunch next Sunday,' came the inexorable voice over the telephone. 'Now don't let me down. You can work in the afternoon if you want to. I'm not stopping you.'

But you are, thought Edith. Since you are too mean to provide any food, and since I don't care to eat at half-past two or whenever I get back with a splitting headache, my day is
effectively ruined (57).

The figure of Penelope stands for both the named character and a rather undefined group of "friends." Edith has allowed her to take command of the listless part of her life: "She behaved well, as she knew she was expected to behave: quietly, politely, venturing little" (85), going along with more and more since it was easier to give in to their picture of her: "My profile was deemed to be low and it was agreed by those who thought they knew me that it should stay that way" (9).

In so doing she has allowed the lie of her self to take on a life of its own. A passage on beds illustrates Edith's submissiveness. First, her own, "white and plain and not quite big enough," as opposed to Penelope's, "whose own bed would have accommodated four adults and which, when not in use, was heaped with all manner of delicate little pillows covered in materials which proclaimed to the world at large, 'I am a woman of exceptional femininity'" (122). Then follows a deplorable revelation: In choosing the colours and furniture for the marital bedroom she had "fatally, perhaps, invoked the aid of Penelope who had guided her expertly... while discoursing on the ways to please a man" (122). Edith, feeling "apologetic because she found so little to arouse her enthusiasm, and because Penelope seemed so much more involved in the enterprise than she was herself, succumbed at last to her persuasions..." and ends up with a handsome bedroom that she can not visualise herself in, "stuffily authoritative" and absorbing all the light (123). This feeling reflects her instinctive emotion for the would-be groom in question. Having so apathetically allowed Penelope's attitudes to become her own, Edith has been more dishonest to herself than she had realised before. The voice of Penelope has overshadowed her own. "Everyone said how lucky Edith was. Penelope said it with that faintly nettled air that implied that she herself would have been a more worthy recipient" (119).

However, Penelope is far from Hotel du Lac, just as Mary is at an ever greater distance from Kate's new environment. As becomes clear later on, the proximity of these two external female "voices" is not essential to the dilemma of choice itself, though their significance does have to do with the preparation of fertile ground for the sprouting of the seeds of change.

As the above depiction of the background of the novels shows, Lessing and Brookner provide many indications of pre-dilemma. Both protagonists are quite finished with a certain stage in life, one of considerable duration, at least in the
case of Kate, who has passed out of a long spell of being needed by her family. Her greatest difficulty lies in the fact that having had this role all her adult life, she has a hard time visualising herself as anything else. The sensation of not being needed, together with a sudden realisation of ageing, has cast her off and she finds herself floating on a sea of despair. The obstacles encountered on her way out of this maze are seemingly enormous, due to her limited perspective. She envisages great difficulties in changing the attitude of her family towards her, perhaps due to her own possessive attitude towards them and to her intense bonds to the past, where the future has been desperately shied away from. Knapp writes:

Her critical dissection of her own role results not from her desire for analysis and clarification, rather from the embarrassing insight that others now consider that role trite and obsolete. Had her family insisted that she was needed in London for the summer, the crisis would probably have been postponed or averted altogether (118).

To state that the crisis would not have taken place is to belittle the hidden capacity of Kate Brown, but being separated from her family is certainly a main contribution to the influences provoking a dilemma of choice. Other, external influences, are intimately linked with her new surroundings, her work and to the fact that she takes a lover, more than the lover himself. But most of the influences take place inside her, as an eruption of long-submerged feelings of indignation, often coinciding with the influence of Mary Finchley who certainly would always have done otherwise than Mrs Brown.

This last aspect also applies to Edith Hope, who appears to have lost control over her life. Dissatisfied with herself, she has passively allowed external influences to escalate, until "in a flash, but for all time" she sees where she is heading and applies the emergency brakes (129). By pulling clear of the action induced, she thinks she is saved. But her dilemma comes to her as a dawning of insight, that to feel alive she must make choices to regain control over her own life.
Chapter 2

Dilemma

Kate

In dealing with emotional imagery, the two authors make use of different methods. Whereas Anita Brookner depicts the feelings of her heroine in her surroundings, using a palette of various colours along with form and texture (scenic imagery), Doris Lessing works with a wider scope of possibilities, in delving into the unconscious imagination of her main character. Lessing’s novel being the more complex of the two, it is interesting to discover how she allows the imagery of symbolism to take on a life of its own, creating a counter story which functions as a parallel process to the outer structure of the dilemma considered in the narrative of the novel.

Lefcowitz has likened the structure thus formed to a grid where the lines of Kate’s dream life and her conscious life intersect rather than mesh with one another. This self-contained creation emerging out of what appears to be a factual description of events, coincides exceedingly well with the emphasis on the stress of dilemma experienced, a dilemma so strong as to balance on the verge of insanity. In fact Lessing does include the issue of madness in her novel, this phase illustrated with a special type of imagery set apart from the counter story.

The imagery involved in *The Summer before the Dark* is mainly one of dreams, dream-quality being another favourite touch of Lessing’s. In the novel there are actually several different dream-types considered, but the one referred to here – the lead motif as it were – is a recurring dream about a seal. The recurrence with its developing stages coincides with the external steps of the protagonist and thus offers a guideline as to the emotional growth and awareness of the heroine.

As it is of such specific relevance to the development of the story itself, the seal-dream is much discussed by critics, who offer various interpretations concerning the value of the dream in the novel and its symbolic significance. The critical opinions examined range from negative: "A sequential dream about a seal, a device that becomes too predictable and even prosaic, makes up the rest of Kate’s inner life" (Moan Rowe 69), to positive: "The dream is not incidental but central to
the plot; it acts both as a continuing motivating force for the heroine, and as a commentary from her unconscious on her behaviour" (Whittaker 87).

Acknowledging the second quotation to be of greater interest, a more detailed account will be given of each of the seven seal dreams in view of the corresponding stages of reality. But first, the choice made by Lessing of the symbol itself must be considered: what is the implication of the use of a seal as a symbol?

A number of possibilities are offered by Barbara Lefcowitz in her article on dream and action, where the ambiguity of interpretation emphasises Lessing’s choice of a multi-meaning symbol. One drastic interpretation traces the connection of the linguistic seal via the German seele to soul and a few philosophical lines quite beautifully sum up the link to the sea of unconsciousness:

... the seal’s peculiar appropriateness as a symbolic form for the energizing inner self, grounded in the unconscious, linked with a primal state of being, and emerging occasionally from that fluid primacy to spur the conscious self along its journey toward self-awareness(110).

The implication that each subsequent stage of the seal-dream helps Kate to understand who she is and where she is going may now be checked against the novel.

Kate’s first encounter with the seal-dream occurs within a couple of weeks from being at a distance to all she has ever known. She has started her new job, away from not only her family, but also her house, and takes pleasure in the impersonal atmosphere of the room she sleeps in. She now has the opportunity of taking the first objective look at what suddenly lies behind her, and finds in her dream a moaning, helpless seal, which she knows she must get to water(29). Knapp writes: "Its pathetically stunted flippers and utter dependence on her pity make it a symbol for her own chronically dependent, stunted sense of self" (117). In the dream Kate is surprised to find the seal, which shows that she is formally unaware of the bad shape she is in. However, having found this out, she must do something about it. Kate’s awareness is of central importance to Gayle Greene: "this novel confronts the question of change, the possibility of making something new. But Kate’s quest is mainly retrospective, for she is trying to understand processes that have already occurred" (127). Hence the scars and wounds of the seal-image.
The process of understanding is continued in the next seal-dream (47) where two lines of action are taken: firstly she is able to help heal the seal’s wounds by chewing bitter shrubs with medicinal properties and applying the spittle (Kate is now working as an independent woman, a "remedy" to the circumscribing role of housewife), secondly, she comes to a decision regarding direction: she understands she must head north, towards the sea. Since this understanding implies that a sense of direction has now been reached in waking life, what conclusions has she come to there? This dream coincides with her trying out signals as shown in the previous chapter, along with an important insight. It would be easy to stay in a job like the one she has, to act the role of "mother" at various conferences, since "she had been set like a machine by twenty-odd years of being a wife and a mother" (46). Her insight now is that "that person which was all warmth and charm... had nothing to do with her, nothing with what she really was" (46).

The revelation of the northerly direction has its own implications, as Lefcowitz observes: "Lessing seems to suggest that at least in part Kate's imaginative journey has affinities with a journey toward death" (112). As the conventional symbolism of the North is associated throughout myth and literature with death, this seems a likely explanation as Kate's crisis in middle-age also has to do with ageing. However, Whittaker draws another parallel—that of the north and hardships: "We understand the northward journey to be a metaphor for the pain of self-discovery" (89), indicating not only direction but also the climatic chill of the north as is yet to be exposed.

As can be seen so far, the commencement of the seal-dreams has taken place in the phase where Kate is at a distance from her former life, but the underlying drive is due to the retrospective quest she has undertaken in her solitude. At this stage in the novel stronger external influences are introduced, their impact mirrored in each subsequent seal-dream.

Considering the nature of the factual events taking place (Kate has a lover and they go to Spain), perhaps more, and richer, imagery would be expected. But on the contrary, by keeping the tone of the settings on a barren level, Lessing illustrates the futile impact this episode has on the emotional life of the heroine. In fact, the imagery here puts forth a disconcerting sensation of discomfort and alienation:

"the remarkable thing was that just as now, sitting on this moonlit balcony, she was quite aware of her current situation, standing as it
were on a cliff with the north wind blowing straight into her face that would strip her of flesh and feature and colour...she did not leave the balcony until the sun's rim shot hot rays over the sea and into the town" (90-99).

Not exactly romantic images of la dolce vita! No, Kate is not happy, she is more than discontent, what on earth is she doing here, fleeing from the making of any choice of value in her life? In the returning dream the seal is weaker, its dark eyes reproach her, she ought not to have left it. She splashes it with water. The seal needs her, waits for her...

In the village square amongst some dusty trees a fountain trickles "some dispirited water into a basin that had a cracked white china cup, lying on its edge" (111). The unsoundness of the situation creeps steadily on. Illness occurs, first in her "lover", Kate fights with her old sense of maternal responsibility, in her dream she lifts the seal up out of the way from the fangs and claws of wild beasts, then she herself is taken ill. She dreams of snow falling "softly, drifting into the cracks and the hollows of the sharp black rocks." She is carrying the seal northwards, believing "that somewhere ahead must be the sea, for if not, both she and the seal would die" (130). Here the sense of the seal as a self-identity is very strong: "She knew that walking into the winter that lay in front of her she was carrying her life as well as the seal's - as if she were holding out into a cold wind her palm, on which lay a single dried leaf" (130-31). The image of the cold, bleak, north wind prevails, conveying a sense of utter desolation.

The doubtful, yet serious quality of her unspecified illness seems to shock Kate into decisiveness. Summoning all her strength, she boards a flight back "home" on which she is sure she will die, indeed hopes that she will die, "sustained only by thinking of her own bed, her own room, with its flowered curtains beyond which summer branches could be seen sifting sunshine, or cloud light, or moonlight - oh, she could not wait to be back in her own home" (133). The voyage of self-discovery, the dilemma of choice, has proved too much, and Kate is now on the verge of giving up.

Lessing and circumstance wishing otherwise, she is suddenly struck by the impossibility of her intended action realising that "her home was full of strangers" (133). (Factual, not imagined.) She takes in at a hotel, where she collapses. Miserable, longing for her husband, she dreams she is in a pit, she must
get out to find the seal who believes she has abandoned it. Again the quest for self; longing for her husband will get her nowhere.

She wakes up, she vomits, she sleeps, she dreams: "She was in a heavy twilight.... The seal was inert in her arms... it was in a coma, or dying"(145). But she is not yet devoid of mental capacity. In searching for means of wetting the seal's dry hide with salt water she finds a black rock with salt crystals, and a hollow with a little water under the ice. Quickly she makes a saline solution and frantically splashes the animal with the liquid before it vanishes. Saved, for the time being.

As implied earlier, it becomes increasingly apparent that this sequential dream is the focus of mental energy, the centre of activity in otherwise stagnant situations. This too, follows the logic of psychological growth. The picture of the seal-dream as a means of consciousness-expansion is then more to the point than Whittaker's evaluation: "This dream seems to symbolise Kate's youthful marriage, and her subsequent domestic imprisonment, as well as the more subtle incarcerations of ageing"(88). It is also more rewarding to see the dream-sequence as a symbol of growth adapted to factual situations in the novel, where a closer relation to Kate's feelings is made possible through the imagery of the dream.

So far, the emotional range of the protagonist in *The Summer before the Dark* has revealed a good deal of desperation, more or less coloured with a tinge of hope. These are both ingredients for a dilemma of choice almost too strong to bear. And when desperation takes over, Doris Lessing seems to insinuate that a dilemma of this type is enough to drive anyone out of their mind, depending on disposition and circumstances. As insanity equals chaos, so is this section of the book crammed with nightmarish imagery of people seen as animals in waking life: "animals covered with cloth and bits of fur, ornamented with stones, their faces and claws painted with colour"(156). Even Kate's own image is distorted in her mind as a monkey looks back at her from the mirror and the room she is in is "like a dark noisy cave with painfully brilliant vertical streaks of light"(139). The strange and terrible state of mind thus illustrated, where sleep and wakefulness merge with each other occupies a space in time described as "long, slow, underwater"(139) and is in fact not all totally negative. As Knapp points out: "Madness is a "cocoon," a place of self-nurturing and growth"(63). Viewing madness as a retreat, the phase of insanity shows that the pressure of Kate's dilemma was too intense for her to cope
with, consequently, during her mental breakdown the seal-dream does not occur. Having passed through the state of refuge from the dilemma which induced it, Kate is once again present to pick up where she left off and devote her new-found energy to the making of the choice which will lay the dilemma to rest.

Hope has triumphed over desperation, and is symbolised in her re-found seal-dream by "a silvery-pink cherry tree in full bloom" (229). Symbolically, Kate pulls off a flowering twig with frozen fingers and takes it with her into the dark ahead.

That the ending of the "dark" confused stage following Kate's summer in The Summer before the Dark is drawing near, is now apparent to both Kate and Maureen, who at this stage has functioned as a major external influence. Through Maureen, Kate has been able to gain an objective view on two aspects of herself. Young enough to be Kate's daughter, Maureen has more or less unconsciously been applying pressure to Kate's role of motherhood, once so natural it was part of her, but since her break-down increasingly alien. The fact that Maureen is not her daughter makes her resolution not to fall back on the expected role easier. In Maureen's dilemma of choosing which man to marry and her obsession with theatrical outfits in terms of dressing, Kate, as the passive on-looker both recognises herself as a young woman as well as foresees various scenarios for Maureen's future life. The choice of role as a woman in English society must in any case be made individually.

With the insight that the state of existence is an act of choice, roles chosen rather than existing perforce, Kate is now ready to finish the seal-dream and free herself from the dilemma of choice.

In the concluding dream she and the seal no longer identify. She is no longer anxious because "she knew it was full of life, and, like her, of hope" (241). Despite the northern direction, the dream-journey terminates in a spring landscape, symbolising rebirth: the snow melts, spring grass appears along with flowers, the sea reflects "a sunlight sky, blue deepening on blue" – the colour which symbolises eternity. The seal gives her a last look through dark soft eyes, and dives into the sea, joining the other seals already there, at play. The sun is not behind, but in front of her, "a large, light, brilliant, buoyant, tumultuous sun that seemed to sing" (241). For Kate, the dilemma is over and a choice can now be made.

So Kate returns home, for better or for worse. Physically, she is altered after her long spell of being away and ill, she is very thin and markedly older. But her
longest journey has been undertaken within herself and she is not the same as she was. Only one distinct sign of change she presents as a symbol of self-assertion; her hair: "rough and streaky... the widening grey band showing like a statement of intent. It was as if the rest of her... belonged to everyone else. But her hair-no." (244).

Kate's return to home and hearth is not given a favourable reception by some critics of women's literature. "If journeys are but circular, ending only in a return to the familiar, what is the point of setting out in the first place?" says Doris Grumbach, quoted by Lefcowitz (107) who also writes: "Surely, the decision not to dye her hair any longer, while not entirely without significance, is in itself not sufficient to weld what seems an irreparable split between action and imagination at the end of the novel" (118-19). Neither is Greene optimistic: "she has no choice but to return to the home that is the source of her unhappiness, in a closed, circular structure that... severely constrains future possibilities" (25).

It seems strange that these critics should deny Kate's future life the possibility of further expansion now that she is rid of her old restrictive self. For surely this is the other side to the ending of the novel, the counter-story, with its different pattern, summed up by Lefcowitz as follows: "Where the surface journey is circular, the imaginative journey is linear" (108). Neither are all critics are in favour of the dream's ending: "The seal disappears, indistinguishable in an ocean full of identical seals - a bleak outlook for Kate's anonymous future in the suburbs" (Knapp 118). Lefcowitz sees the seal's freedom mirroring that of Kate, who gets rid of "maternal and wifely cares" and abandons the seal "that once served as a means of identity" and now that loss "becomes a potential entry-point into personal freedom" (117). This opinion is also shared by Whittaker: "It is unimaginable that she will revert to the person she was at the beginning of the summer. Having restored her scarred and wounded self from aridity into its element, she can begin anew anywhere she chooses, even in her old environment" (89). Surprisingly, even Greene acknowledges an inner change, and on a spiritual level at that, though without much credit given: "Whereas Kate in her life has drawn boundaries and resigned herself to "the dark," Kate in her dream as the seal merges with the whole and is left staring at the sun: whereas on the external level Kate draws firmer ego boundaries, on the internal level she merges with the cosmic oversoul" (139).
The choice made is true, and wonderful, an ending to the dilemma, as experienced by Kate, who chooses - not a "new life" with a different man, a new job, another identity, but to return to the character of Kate Brown, through with her former phases and ready for new ones.

*Edith*

Whereas the flow of emotion in *The Summer before the Dark* exists as a dream within the novel, Anita Brookner in Olga Kenyon's words, makes use of "the English tradition of mirroring the moods of the protagonist in nature"(156). Kenyon claims that the imagery of *Hotel du Lac* symbolises alienation and Edith Hope does feel alienated from the world. At home she experiences "a sense of inner homelessness"(Kenyon 155) and feels not quite part of her social sphere. This feeling suits her seclusion in a foreign country, staying at a hotel, which is a restrictive image "with elements of sanctuary and prison"(Kenyon 150).

Restriction is also the finding of Martha Bayles, commenting on the opening lines of the novel: "From the window all that could be seen was a receding area of grey"(7). Bayles notes that: "this sentence depicts autumn fog on a Swiss lake, but it also metaphorically focuses the novel on an intensely subjective realm extending from here to the windowsill and no further"(37-8).

Gracefully, Brookner allows the path of life an outer and inner dimension when Edith walks "the soft earth of the path nearest the lake" shivering in the "perceptible chill" rising from the now invisible water, her reflections profound: "Doomed for a certain time to walk the earth"(22). This passage is very appropriate to Hermione Lee's opinion that the novel owns "a twilit, dreamlike inwardness, an austere and circumscribed subject-matter, an infinite melancholy"(22). Not that Lee's comment can be said to illustrate every aspect of the dilemma of choice in *Hotel du Lac*; it rather confirms the solidity of the presentation made of Edith's emotional state of mind. The "dense cloud" descending for days at a time conveys the sensation of heaviness in her headaches, just as the autumnal season signifies withdrawal from a more active phase in life. The autumn fog fills its role in the imagery as the emotions of the heroine seem somewhat hazy and undecided considering her lack of direction.
The most persistent image in *Hotel du Lac* is the "vast grey lake, spreading like an anaesthetic towards the invisible further shore" (7). Here the lake seems to symbolise the grey area between her present standing and that unknown future prospect she, Edith Hope, would like to hope for. An interesting complement to this aspect lies in the dark grey shape, gaining in both outline and volume as the mist lifts from the lake: the mountain, anticipating symbolically the man waiting for her in her near future, Mr Neville. Or who may be waiting: In an interview with Shusha Guppy, Brookner reveals that it was her intention to let Edith Hope marry Mr. Neville, but like her she balked at the last minute! And since Brookner always lets the first draft go to print, the symbol of the mountain remains, if anything strengthening the rather naive and trusting unconscious mind of the heroine.

As yet, the imagery has been restrained, and justly so, for Edith has still not arrived at her dilemma of choice. All the signs given are those of seclusion and Edith is not aware of a significant choice approaching. Holding onto her dream of love as the equivalent of home and happiness, she does experience a jar in her convictions in being subject to the influence of a couple of women at the Hotel du Lac who have dubious attitudes to the image of a husband; and when the main influence on the dilemma of choice takes his place on the scene Edith is almost ready to swallow the bait set out to lure her into making a choice of devastating effect.

With the appearance of Mr Neville the whole tone of the imagery is completely reversed: "An autumn sun, soft as honey, gilded the lake; tiny waves whispered onto the shore" (51), presenting enchantment, and there is even "the green hedgehog shape of a chestnut, split open to reveal the brown gleam of its fruit" (51-2). Edith’s armour of self-defence has cracked, and shining forth is her essence of femininity, a sensation of delight. "Edith closed her eyes momentarily in a shaft of sunlight and tasted pure pleasure" (52). The presence of Mr Neville awakens within her the longing for a man, and feeling confused, she flies to her room to write to her former lover. The sensation increases of a dilemma of choice approaching of a scope too wide to fathom. "Somewhere in the distance a toneless bell struck" (65). A bell of warning? Edith is in an "exhausted state, a febrile agitation, invisible to the naked eye" (66). It is the last day of summer. Now enters "a corrective to the dazzle of the... lake", a castle, "dour, grim, a rebarbative silhouette" (75): the imagery of
threat, though this seems unperceived by Edith, stepping out on to her balcony, where there is a moon, and "the air was like milk...Calm" (77).

The influence of Mr Neville waxes and wanes: "Once again, the mountain was beginning to dissolve into the mist" (89). Logically, Edith can see that he could be a perfect match for her, but her heart says otherwise: "A heartless man, I think. Furiously intelligent. Suitable. Oh David, David." Again she longs for her former lover. As Kenyon observes: "Brookner's heroines long for intellectual and emotional fulfilment through one man" (153). So why not Mr Neville? She experiences a thrill of revelation at his disclosure of the "secret of contentment": "Without a huge emotional investment, one can do whatever one pleases...there is no reason why one should ever be unhappy again" (94-5). Mr Neville knows very well that she dwells on her state of unhappiness and here he is offering a choice to Edith which produces a true dilemma. The setting for his offer, halfway up the mountain, is carefully chosen to amplify its strangeness to the heroine:

The mild and careful creature that she had been on the lake shore had also disappeared, had dematerialised in the ascent to this upper air, and by a remote and almost crystalline process new components had formed, resulting in something harder, brighter, more decisive, realistic, able to savour enjoyment, even to expect it (91).

The choice in life Mr Neville holds out to Edith ("to assume your own centrality may mean an entirely new life" (95)) seems "to accord with the wine, the brilliance of the sun, the headiness of the air," although she senses a flaw which she cannot at once detect, "a flaw in his reasoning, just as there was a flaw in his ability to feel." Despite all her pre-sentiments, "Edith felt the hairs of the back of her neck begin to crepitate", she is drawn to the prospect of being able to change her whole life so radically (100). But the chill of dilemma is upon her "feeling suddenly alone on this hillside, in the cold." Can she bear the allegiance to Mr Neville, whose reappearance is announced by "a steady crunch of gravel" (102)? He tells her: "you are misled by what you would like to believe. Haven't you learned that there is no such thing as complete harmony between two people"? "Yes, I have" says Edith, sombre, and "leans back in her chair, raising her face to the sun, mildly intoxicated...by the scope of this important argument" (97). What Edith needs is marriage, not love, says that "devil's advocate", Mr Neville, and what he offers is not love, but marriage.
Anita Brookner has stated: "To remain pure a novel has to cast a moral puzzle" (qtd in Guppy 161) which is exactly what Edith is struggling with. To the new concept of herself that Mr. Neville has shown possible, morality would have a different meaning and therefore such a marriage appears quite logical. Her inner struggle overwhelms the actual prospect, indeed Mr Neville appears to be "a curiously mythological personage" (160). The issue is not so much marriage as the actual dilemma of choice. More than Mr Neville, she is contemplating a different Edith. Her weak spot is loneliness; "You are lonely, Edith" she is told by Mr Neville (167), and in being lonely, she is subject to great temptation. This is a fact familiar to Brookner, who claims herself to be "one of the loneliest women in London" (qtd in Guppy 164). She implies that to not be lonely, there is a price to pay and Edith appears to accept it.

In her great dilemma she bows to the inevitable choice, the choice which her intellect tells her is the way out of oppression. "At this very late hour, she felt her heart beat, and her reason, that controlling element, to fragment, as hidden areas, dangerous shoals, erupted into her consciousness" (116). She makes the choice she thinks she must, the dilemma unbearable. "And maybe I shall not go home, she thought, her heart breaking with sorrow. And beneath the sorrow she felt vividly unsafe" (117). And sure enough, "when she opened her eyes, it was to the same unvariegated grey that had greeted her on... her arrival," signifying the falseness of her choice to herself.

Mentally, she is entering a stage of winter: "The trees, rigid in the windless air, were beginning to show the skeletons of their shapes; leaves no longer fell but lay curled, sapless, on the fading grass" (136). She sees the grey mist advancing and feels herself begin to dissolve into it, a serious indictment (148). She gives a last thought to what she is leaving by choosing to marry Mr Neville, and sees herself no longer there: "That sun, that light had faded, and she had faded with them" (153). The imagery depicted does not comply with a sense of fulfilment: "The empty lake, the fitful light, the dream-like slowness... Edith, once again, felt unsafe, distressed, unhoused" (159-60). Mr Neville "had forced her on to this terrible boat, this almost deserted and pilotless vessel, from which there was no hope of rescue..." (160).

Back in her hotel room Edith sees in a moment of clarity what is happening: "Its silent, faded dignity would perhaps come to symbolise the last shred of her own
dignity, before that too crumbled in the face of panic, or bravado, or just cold common sense" (171). In anticipation of the tears that would fall if she perseveres in denying her inner feelings the scenic imagery also changes: "the weather had broken, and the mist had dissolved into a mournful drizzle" (171). This turn of events can be rather exasperating to the reader, as critic Adam Mars-Jones declares: "Hotel du Lac works so hard at the limpness of its heroine that it has a perversely bracing effect... the curious combination of urges that might lead a person, say, to take an ice-cold bubble bath" (19). Edith herself does not take an ice-cold bubble bath, but something does happen much to the same effect...

On the issue of being free to make a choice, Brookner herself states: "I don't believe that anyone is free... I think choice is a luxury most people can't afford" (qtd in Guppy 164). However, in Hotel du Lac Edith is allowed a choice implying that there is a means of obtaining this luxury. "You don't win the favor of the ancient gods by being good, but by being bold," is also a statement by Brookner (qtd in Guppy 152). To dare live your own life? On the last page of Hotel du Lac Edith realises: "I should lose the only life that I have ever wanted, even though it was never mine to call my own" (184). Perhaps now she can start to call it her own.

Sally Helgesen observes: "Edith Hope comes to recognise that being a woman is not just a matter of finding the right symbols... the right man, the right life. The transformation she achieves is not material but spiritual" (43-4).

And so, both novels having exhausted the more flippant alternatives of choice, there remains but one task: to justify the apparent ordinariness of the final choice. Has, in fact, a choice of profound significance taken place, or might it be seen as a retreat, with no real choice made? If the latter, the dilemma would still be there, just a little pushed down out of sight, out of mind. If, on the other hand, a choice of value has been made, its significance must lie on a deeper level, and surely bring about changes in the resumed pattern of everyday life.

No great change is conceivable after the dilemmas of choice in the novels since both heroines return to the starting-point. The quotation in Anthony and Cleopatra from which Edith chooses the title of her manuscript; Beneath the Visiting Moon, seems therefore to refer to one side of the "trivial" outcome of Hotel du Lac, and why not even The Summer before the Dark:
The odds is gone
And there is nothing left
remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon (Shakespeare)
But who is to say what is remarkable and what is not?
Conclusion

That which is remarkable in the life of one individual may not seem so to another. Since any personal opinion is subjective it can only be valid to the self involved. In The Summer before the Dark and Hotel du Lac, Doris Lessing and Anita Brookner undertake the task of conveying to the reader the profundity of the final choice made by their heroines, since with this choice made, both novels end, complying with the thesis that a dilemma of choice may be seen as the main theme.

In order to render the ending of the stories plausible, great care must be taken in presenting the initial state of mind of the protagonists, approaching that specific turning-point, where a dilemma of choice must occur, as shown in the first chapter of this essay. The feeling that emerges here is one of dissatisfaction as there is shown to be a gap between what the heroine "is" and what she feels herself to be. The anticipation of crisis is so strong that a range of outer factors could set it off. Those chosen by the authors are shown to function as triggers to dilemma, but they do not have any intrinsic value, i.e., they are exchangeable. Had these external factors not occurred others would have is the feeling conveyed, showing their function to be mainly a determination in time to the anticipated crisis. Consequently the outer factors governing the process of change have been given less attention in this essay.

Maintaining that the focus of concentration is the inner journey and where it may lead, credit must be given to the psychological insight of Lessing and Brookner. The inner change necessary to accept an outer one is portrayed by imagery as described in the second chapter. Through the seal-dream in The Summer before the Dark the reader is intimately connected with the inner life of Kate, emotions not even fully realised by the heroine herself, a device superbly handled by Lessing. By giving the counter-story so much substance the author has in fact conveyed her point of significance. She has created a novel not of the character Kate, but around the theme of dilemma. This may also be true of Hotel du Lac whose message seems to lie on a deeper level than a love story, even if this was one of Brookner's intentions. With her suggestive nature imagery, she too, expertly depicts a certain state of mind, whether inertly drifting or engaged in the turmoil of dilemma.
Considering the final aspect of the novels studied, the return home is in itself an act of strength. Being able to stand on newly-found ground even at the scene which initiated the dilemma is surely the ultimate token of victory. For change comes not from without, but within, and although the only consciousness of change lies in the awareness of the heroines, this inner change will undoubtedly resound in their surrounding relationships. Communication working both ways the interrelations of both women will no longer encounter a mindless persona. By choice, Kate and Edith are really there, participating actively in their own lives, of their own choice. Not that it is easy. As Anita Brookner once said: "you are walking on egg shells every time you make a choice" (qtd in Guppy166). And so the dilemma of choice goes on...
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