Conclusion

I have tried to show throughout my argument that, in spite of a considerable dissimilarity in the writing careers and narrative styles of Woolf and Lessing, they share the same kind of perspective and the same end in writing narrative. My analysis has suggested that we can cultivate a new ground for reading Lessing’s texts by re-examining them through the perspective of Woolf’s work. For both writers, as I have mentioned, not only human subjectivity but also the material and experiential world people are involved in is not confined to one definitive version: the reality of each individual is always in flux, entangled with other humans as well as with their own memory or past; therefore, if collective history is a conglomeration of these individuals, human history is itself always in process – re-constructed and re-interpreted repeatedly, history recurs incessantly in different places and times.

To see it from another angle, if the boundaries between individuals are removed, whatever one experiences could be experienced by someone else in another context; as Lessing insists, “[w]hat can happen to you or to me can happen to many others” (Conversations 67), and so – as referred to in the notes to Chapter 4 – “there are no new people, beasts, dreams, faces, events: it has all happened before, they have appeared before, masked differently, wearing different clothes, another nationality, another colour” (Particularly Cats 10-11). This sense of recursive history has been my main subject throughout the various chapters of my thesis.

In Chapter 1 I discussed Woolf’s narrative strategy in Mrs. Dalloway, which blurs every boundary – temporal, spatial, and individual – whilst, at the same time, a discursive continuum surfaces like a palimpsest through the device of her elaborate
tunnelling process; a new modern strategy reflecting the ways in which capitalism and technology have transformed human perception. Here she searches for fleeting and interactive forms of history by deconstructing linear and chronological reality. Woolf develops another of her narrative strategies in *Between the Acts*, which I examined in Chapter 2, attempting a kaleidoscopic continuity in which the experience of the centred and autonomous self fixed by linear history is made problematic once more. In contrast to the tunnelling process in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she this time concentrates on the surface of the material world – landscape, animals, pictures, music, people’s remarks, and the pageant; through these phenomena she foregrounds the evanescence and interchangeability of human individuals and history.

In Chapter 3, after focusing on the compatibility of *The Grass Is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook*, I have argued that Lessing’s deployment of fragmented writing in the latter is the counterpart of the tunnelling process in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the pageant in *Between the Acts*. All of these narrative devices disclose language’s inability to contain amorphous reality perfectly, rendering ambiguous any static and fixed conception of the individual. Two decades after Woolf’s death, Lessing delineates, in the aftermath of World War Ⅱ, a human reality in which individuals are intertwined with each other, and with their own memories – and so, with history both personal and collective. This is similar to what Woolf does in *Mrs. Dalloway* immediately after World War Ⅰ, and in *Between the Acts* just before World War Ⅱ. Thus Lessing’s narrative is itself one good example of recursive history.

I demonstrated in Chapter 4 how human reality could not be limited to one version in “To Room Nineteen,” and how – by contrast – an individual is shown as always in the process of becoming in *The Memoir of a Survivor*. In the latter the
narrative is set in the near future, and yet the atmosphere of 1960s England often slips into it. Both novels destabilise the authenticity of a singular version of the material and visible world; human reality can never be contained in a rigid framework, but is ever-changing, interpenetrative with that of other people and with past history. It is in *The Fifth Child*, which I looked at in Chapter 5, that this process is revealed through the insertion of a monster-like child, who disrupts the seemingly realistic time and place of the text’s setting. Throwing a Neanderthal-like baby into a Victorian-oriented English family from the 1970s to 1980s, embodying the nostalgia for the British Empire that permeated Thatcherism, Lessing undermines what they believe to be real, essentially British, and their concept of humanity; here what is supposed to be natural is radically relativised and proves to be haunted frequently by history.

What is significant here is that both Woolf and Lessing are always aware of the historicity of their own thought; they know that their ideas have already been repeated throughout history, and that we are simply accustomed in the modern world to see only one version of reality. As referred to in Chapter 4, Lessing is sufficiently conscious of the cyclical nature of history to say that “For thousands upon thousands of years, we – humankind – have told ourselves tales and stories, and these were always analogies and metaphors, parables and allegories; . . . But after three centuries of the Realistic Novel, in many people this part of the brain has atrophied” (*Under My Skin* 28). Therefore, what Lessing writes in the form of metaphor, parable, or allegories is – for her – not original in the strict sense of the word, but has much in common with what ancient people were writing, or rather telling, in their life free from the strictures of clock-time. In this respect, what Woolf and Lessing try to do might be an attempt at recovering this “part of the brain” that has “atrophied.”
Woolf also brought to life this primeval storyteller in her last works. The fixed version of reality represented by Benjamin’s “homogenous, empty time” (Anderson 24) or “clocked, calendrical time” (Anderson 26) is – as I suggested in Chapter 5 – consolidated by printed media such as newspapers and novels. Woolf had a great fascination for the connection between the modern writer and such media; Esty indicates that when writing Between the Acts she conceived of an essay on “Anon” – a concept that, for Woolf, “stands for a pre-aesthetic ideal of authorship submerged into pastoral community” (103) – which dealt with the following themes:

From the aesthetic Eden of common culture to early modern patronage to late modern privatization of artistic production and consumption, Woolf recounts the social and institutional separations that gradually but unmistakably produce the alienated modern(ist) writer . . . With the rise of the book, literature becomes a storable cultural treasure, but it loses its direct and live connection with the audience: “It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon.” At this point, “the individual emerges”; the modern artist develops a signature and a name: the anonymity of premodern cultural expression gives way to personal style (“Anon” 383-85). (Esty 103)

Perhaps Woolf is aware that the shift from “premodern cultural expression” to “personal style” is closely connected to the division between private and public in the modern world. If Woolf thought in terms of “the anonymity of premodern cultural expression,” the anonymous voice in Between the Acts might stand for the “killed” Anon; in this sense, she resuscitates a premodern aesthetic in the modern novel without disposing of the diversity of each individual.

If the individual is a metonym of the collective for both writers, as I have argued
throughout the chapters of my thesis, this implies that the signature and the name of the writer, although not irrelevant, should not be given too much significance. While Lessing admits that she does not understand the region “To Room Nineteen” comes from even if it is inside herself (Walking in the Shade 268), Woolf also professes that “what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir,” and therefore, she sees herself “as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream” (“Sketch of the Past” 80). The concepts of an “immense force,” the “invisible presences,” or the “stream,” that Woolf is conscious of, are almost synonymous with Lessing’s spirit of the time or world-mind. Both writers are poignantly aware of their position in a much larger whole. Lessing states that, recollecting her encounter with Marxists who had inspired her enough to join the communist group, “if I had been born in another place, at another time, I would with equal ease have accepted whatever ‘package’ was the correct one there and then” (Walking in the Shade 349).

Yet they are by no means passive; both writers continue to try to deconstruct what is established as reality and therefore maintain “eros,” to employ the word used in Chapter 2. For them to write narrative is synonymous with the pursuit of maintaining “eros” in modern times – that is, as I defined it in Introduction, “one of history’s most turbulent periods.” Their texts do not just reflect the world but offer a kind of appeal for readers to reconstruct their own reality through the “pleasure of recognition” that allows “a rescuing of the formless into form” (The Golden Notebook 414); or, to put it in Woolf’s words, to experience “the strongest pleasure known to [her]” in the act of “putting it [reality] into words” (“A Sketch of the Past” 72). But this only comes after
dissolving every boundary between individuals, between the individual and the collective, between life and art, or truth and fiction.

If Lessing and Woolf are fishes in the same stream, and in light of their common sense of recursive history, it would be natural for Lessing to inherit unwittingly one of her predecessor’s perspectives: the idea that everyone is not solitary but only one part of a collective whole. Still, it would also seem miraculous that two writers could have the same insight into human reality, and try to describe the same relationship between the “stream” and a “fish” in the modern times, despite their utter difference in every aspect – in the times they lived in, their social background, and in their geopolitical location. Whereas Woolf, who is regarded as a poignantly self-conscious and sensitive writer, grew up immersed in traditional British culture within the upper-middle class of metropolitan London, Lessing – often considered a wild and unconventional writer – grew up submerged in the natural habitat of Africa in a marginal outpost of the British Empire.

In spite of, and at the same time because of, their differences, the connection between these two writers’ perspectives offers a pertinent example of recursive history. It would not be too bold to say that they themselves testify to its existence; they are undoubtedly in the same “stream” and sometimes seem interchangeable with each other, nullifying the temporal and corporeal boundary that exists between them. It is by considering this point that we could penetrate the undercurrent of Lessing’s text. Without compromising in any way their individuality or uniqueness, they sometimes fuse with each other in their relation to the world they belong to. In this respect, I am sure that other Lessings or Woolfs, in a totally different guise and in another context, must exist in other times and other places.